

Luisa Valenzuela – *Strange things happen here*

In the cafe on the corner-every self-respecting cafe is on a corner, every meeting place is a crossing of two paths (two lives)-Mario and Pedro each order a cup of black coffee and put lots of sugar in it because sugar is free and provides nourishment. Mario and Pedro have been flat broke for some time-not that they're complaining, but it's time they got lucky for a change-and suddenly they see the abandoned briefcase, and just by looking at each other they tell themselves that maybe the moment has come. Right here, boys, in the cafe on the corner, no different from a hundred others. The briefcase is there all by itself on a chair leaning against the table, and nobody has come back to look for it. The neighborhood boys come and go, they exchange remarks that Mario and Pedro don't listen to. There are more of them every day and they have a funny accent, they're from the interior. I wonder what they're doing here, why they've come. Mario and Pedro wonder if someone is going to sit down at the table in the back, move the chair, and find the briefcase that they almost love, almost caress and smell and lick and kiss. A man finally comes and sits down at the table alone (and to think that the briefcase is probably full of money, and that guy's going to latch onto it for the modest price of a vermouth with lemon, which is what he finally asks for after taking a little while to make up his mind). They bring him the vermouth, along with a whole bunch of appetizers. Which olive, which little piece of cheese will he be raising to his mouth when he spots the briefcase on the chair next to his? Pedro and Mario don't even want to think about it and yet it's all they can think about. When all is said and done the guy has as much or as little right to the briefcase as they do. When all is said and done it's only a question of chance, a table more carefully chosen, and that's it. The guy sips his drink indifferently, swallowing one appetizer or another; the two of them can't even order another coffee because they're out of dough as might happen to you or to me, more perhaps to me than to you, but that's beside the point now that Pedro and Mario are being tyrannized by a guy who's picking bits of salami out of his teeth with his fingernail as he finishes his drink, not seeing a thing and not listening to what the boys are saying. You see them on street corners. Even Elba said something about it the other day, can you imagine, she's so nearsighted. Just like science fiction, they've landed from another planet even though they look like guys from the interior but with their hair so well combed, they're nice and neat I tell you, and I asked one of them what time it was but didn't get anywhere-they don't have watches, of course. Why would they want a watch anyway, you might ask, if they live in a different time from us? I saw them, too. They come out from under the pavement in the streets and that's where they still are and who knows what they're looking for, though we do know that they leave holes in the streets, those enormous potholes they come out of that can't ever be filled in. The guy with the vermouth isn't listening to them, and neither are Mario and Pedro, who are worrying about a briefcase forgotten on a chair that's bound to contain something of value because otherwise it wouldn't have been forgotten just so they could get it, just the two of them, not the guy with the

vermouth. He's finished his drink, picked his teeth, left some of the appetizers almost untouched. He gets up from the table, pays, the waiter takes everything off the table, puts tip in pocket, wipes table with damp cloth, goes off and, man, the time has come because there's lots going on at the other end of the cafe and there's nobody at this end and Mario and Pedro know it's now or never. Mario comes out first with the briefcase under his arm and that's why he's the first to see a man's jacket lying on top of a car next to the sidewalk. That is to say, the car is next to the sidewalk, so the jacket lying on the roof is too. A splendid jacket, of stupendous quality. Pedro sees it too, his legs shake because it's too much of a coincidence, he could sure use a new jacket, especially one with the pockets stuffed with dough. Mario can't work himself up to grabbing it. Pedro can, though with a certain remorse, which gets worse and practically explodes when he sees two cops coming toward them to . . . "We found this car on a jacket. This jacket on a car. We don't know what to do with it. The jacket, I mean." "Well, leave it where you found it then. Don't bother us with things like that, we have more important business to attend to." More crucial business. Like the persecution of man by man if you'll allow me to use that euphemism. And so the famous jacket is now in Pedro's trembling hands, which have picked it up with much affection. He sure needed a jacket like this one, a sports jacket, well lined, lined with cash not silk who cares about silk? With the booty in hand they head back home. They don't have the nerve to take out one of the crisp bills that Mario thought he had glimpsed when he opened the briefcase just a hair-spare change to take a taxi or a stinking bus. They keep an eye peeled to see whether the strange things that are going on here, the things they happened to overhear in the cafe, have something to do with their two finds. The strange characters either haven't appeared in this part of town or have been replaced: two policemen per corner are too many because there are lots of corners. This is not a gray afternoon like any other, and come to think of it maybe it isn't even a lucky afternoon the way it appears to be. These are the blank faces of a weekday, so different from the blank faces on Sunday. Pedro and Mario have a color now, they have a mask and can feel themselves exist because a briefcase (ugly word) and a sports jacket blossomed in their path. (A jacket that's not as new as it appeared to be-threadbare but respectable. That's it: a respectable jacket.) As afternoons go, this isn't an easy one. Something is moving in the air with the howl of the sirens and they're beginning to feel fingered. They see police everywhere, police in the dark hallways, in pairs on all the corners in the city, police bouncing up and down on their motorcycles against traffic as though the proper functioning of the country depended on them, as maybe it does, yes, that's why things are as they are and Mario doesn't dare say that aloud because the briefcase has him tongue-tied, not that there's a microphone concealed in it, but what paranoia, when nobody's forcing him to carry it! He could get rid of it in some dark alley-but how can you let go of a fortune that's practically fallen in your lap, even if the fortune's got a load of dynamite inside? He takes a more natural grip on the briefcase, holds it affectionately, not as though it were about

to explode. At this same moment Pedro decides to put the jacket on and it's a little too big for him but not ridiculous, no not at all. Loose-fitting, yes, but not ridiculous; comfortable, warm, affectionate, just a little bit frayed at the edges, worn. Pedro puts his hands in the pockets of the jacket (his pockets) and discovers a few old bus tickets, a dirty handkerchief, several bills, and some coins. He can't bring himself to say anything to Mario and suddenly he turns around to see if they're being followed. Maybe they've fallen into some sort of trap, and Mario must be feeling the same way because he isn't saying a word either. He's whistling between his teeth with the expression of a guy who's been carrying around a ridiculous black briefcase like this all his life. The situation doesn't seem quite as bright as it did in the beginning. It looks as though nobody has followed them, but who knows: there are people coming along behind them and maybe somebody left the briefcase and the jacket behind for some obscure reason. Mario finally makes up his mind and murmurs to Pedro: Let's not go home, let's go on as if nothing had happened, I want to see if we're being followed. That's okay with Pedro. Mario nostalgically remembers the time (an hour ago) when they could talk out loud and even laugh. The briefcase is getting too heavy and he's tempted once again to abandon it to its fate. Abandon it without having had a look at what's inside? Sheer cowardice.

They walk about aimlessly so as to put any possible though improbable tail off the track. It's no longer Pedro and Mario walking, it's a jacket and a briefcase that have turned into people. They go on walking and finally the jacket says: "Let's have a drink in a bar. I'm dying of thirst."

"With all this? Without even knowing where it came from?"

"Yeah, sure. There's some money in one pocket."

He takes a trembling hand with two bills in it out of the pocket. A thousand nice solid pesos. He's not up to rummaging around in the pockets anymore, but he thinks-he smells-that there's more. They could use a couple of sandwiches, they can get them in this cafe that looks like a nice quiet place. A guy says and the other girl's name is Saturdays there's no bread; anything, I wonder what kind of brainwashing . . . In turbulent times there's nothing like turning your ears on, though the bad thing about cafes is the din of voices that drowns out individual voices. Listen, you're intelligent enough to understand. They allow themselves to be distracted for a little, they too wonder what kind of brainwashing, and if the guy who was called intelligent believes he is. If it's a question of believing, they're ready to believe the bit about the Saturdays without bread, as though they didn't know that you need bread on Saturday to make the wafers for mass on Sunday, and on Sunday you need some wine to get through the terrible wilderness of workdays. When a person gets around in the world-the cafes-with the antennae up he can tune in on all sorts of confessions and pick up the most abstruse (most absurd) reasoning processes, absolutely necessary because of the need to be

on the alert and through the fault of these two objects that are alien to them and yet possess them, envelop them, especially now when those boys come into the cafe panting and sit down at a table with a nothing's-been-happening-around-here expression on their faces and take out writing pads, open books, but it's too late: they bring the police in on their heels and of course books don't fool the keen-witted guardians of the law, but instead get them all worked up. They've arrived in the wake of the students to impose law and order and they do, with much pushing and shoving: your identification papers, come on, come on, straight out to the paddy wagon waiting outside with its mouth wide open. Pedro and Mario can't figure out how to get out of there, how to clear a path for themselves through the mass of humanity that's leaving the cafe to its initial tranquility: As one of the kids goes out he drops a little package at Mario's feet, and in a reflex motion Mario draws the package over with his foot and hides it behind the famous briefcase leaning against the chair. Suddenly he's scared: he thinks he's gotten crazy enough to appropriate anything within reach. Then he's even more scared: he knows he's done it to protect the kid, but what if the cops take it into their heads to search him? They'd find a briefcase with who-knows-what inside, an inexplicable package (suddenly it strikes him funny, and he hallucinates that the package is a bomb and sees his leg flying through the air accompanied out of sympathy by the briefcase, which has burst and is spilling out big counterfeit bills). All this in the split second that it took to hide the little package, and after that nothing. It's better to leave your mind a blank and watch out for telepathic cops and things like that. And what was he saying to himself a thousand years ago when calm reigned? a brainwashing; a self-service brainwash so as not to give away what's inside this crazy head of mine. The kids move off, carted off with a kick or two from the bluecoats; the package remains there at the feet of those two respectable-looking gentlemen, gentlemen with a jacket and a briefcase (each of them with one of the two). Respectable gentlemen or two guys very much alone in the peaceful cafe, gentlemen whom even a club sandwich couldn't console now. They stand up. Mario knows that if he leaves the little package, the waiter is going to call him back and the jig'll be up. He picks it up, thus adding it to the day's booty but only for a short while; with trembling hands he deposits it in a garbage can on a deserted street. Pedro, who's walking next to him, doesn't understand at all what's going on, but can't work up the strength to ask. At times, when everything is clear, all sorts of questions can be asked, but in moments like this the mere fact of still being alive condenses everything that is askable and diminishes its value. All they can do is to keep walking, that's all they can do, halting now and then to see for example why that man over there is crying. And the man cries so gently that it's almost sacrilege not to stop and see what the trouble is. It's shop-closingtime and the salesgirls heading home are trying to find out what's wrong: their maternal instinct is always ready and waiting, and the man is weeping inconsolably. Finally he manages to stammer: I can't stand it anymore. A little knot of people has formed around him with understanding looks on their faces, but they don't understand at all. When he shakes the newspaper and says

I can't stand it anymore, some people think that he's read the news and the weight of the world is too much for him. They are about to go and leave him to his spinelessness. Finally he manages to explain between hiccups that he's been looking for work for months and doesn't have one peso left for the bus home, nor an ounce of strength to keep on looking. "Work," Pedro says to Mario. "Come on, this scene's not for us." "Well, we don't have anything to give him anyway. I wish we did." Work, work, the others chorus and their hearts are touched, because this word is intelligible whereas tears are not. The man's tears keep boring into the asphalt and who knows what they find, but nobody wonders except maybe him, maybe he's saying to himself, my tears are penetrating the ground and may discover oil. If I die right here and now, maybe I can slip through the holes made by my tears in the asphalt, and in a thousand years I'll have turned into oil so that somebody else like me, in the same circumstances . . . A fine idea, but the chorus doesn't allow him to become lost in his own thoughts, which-it surmises-are thoughts of death (the chorus is afraid: what an assault it is on the peace of mind of the average citizen, for whom death is something you read about in the newspapers). Lack of work, yes, all of them understand being out of a job and are ready to help him. That's much better than death. And the good-hearted salesgirls from the hardware stores open their purses and take out some crumpled bills, a collection is immediately taken up, the most assertive ones take the others' money and urge them to cough up more. Mario is trying to open the briefcase-what treasures can there be inside to share with this guy? Pedro thinks he should have fished out the package that Mario tossed in the garbage can. Maybe it was work tools, spray paint, or the perfect equipment for making a bomb, something to give this guy so that inactivity doesn't wipe him out. The girls are now pressing the guy to accept the money that's been collected. The guy keeps shrieking that he doesn't want charity. One of the girls explains to him that it's a spontaneous contribution to help his family out while he looks for work with better spirits and a full stomach. The crocodile is now weeping with emotion. The salesgirls feel good, redeemed, and Pedro and Mario decide that this is a lucky sign. Maybe if they keep the guy company Mario will make up his mind to open the briefcase, and Pedro can search the jacket pockets to find their secret contents. So when the guy is alone again they take him by the arm and invite him to eat with them. The guy hangs back at first, he's afraid of the two of them: they might be trying to get the dough he's just received. He no longer knows if it's true or not that he can't find work or if this is his work-pretending to be desperate so that people in the neighborhood feel sorry for him. The thought suddenly crosses his mind: if it's true that I'm a desperate man and everybody was so good to me, there's no reason why these two won't be. If I pretended to be desperate it means that I'm not a bad actor, and I'm going to get something out of these two as well. He decides they have an odd look about them but seem honest, so the three of them go off to a cheap restaurant together to offer themselves the luxury of some good sausages and plenty of wine. Three, one of them thinks, is a lucky number. We'll see if something good comes of it.