

## **“Tonight, a Get-Together at Home” by Vicente Battista**

He ran into him one humid November night and was on the verge of screaming. Later, whenever Alejandro Funes thought of that night, the first and perhaps best thing he remembered was that initial encounter: Barreiro in the lobby of a movie theater, alone and carefree. I always imagined I’d run into him some day, Funes had often said, and he had always thought (although this he never did say) that day would be different. It wasn’t. It was the same as any other. With the same people and the same noises; with the same summer heat, and, like other Thursdays, the same get-together at home. The same as any other night. And, nonetheless, something had to be different; he didn’t know how, exactly (he never did know how), but different. Because the man now looking over the show times, that one in the grey suit and the beige hat, is, despite wearing different clothes, the same Francisco Barreiro who years ago, between blows and sessions with the electric prod, gave orders to those who had invented his humiliation; the same man who, one afternoon, told him he was free. And called him “chicken shit.” And spit in his face. Francisco Barreiro, who appears every night (when Funes, alone, has no one to tell his heroic feats to) is now there, in the lobby of a movie theater. Funes knows what he should say: “At last, Barreiro” and walk into the lobby. But, inexplicably, or because of something that would reveal itself that very night, he remains quiet, silent. That he also remembered, later.



*“Marquesinas porteñas” by [Fernando Reis](#).*

“As if it were today,” said Funes, gesturing to Ana Maria to lower the volume on the record player, “but we better not talk about it.”

“Certainly, certainly! In the house of a hero,” someone said, as if by habit, “we’ll let him keep his peace, of course.”

“Unhappy the land that is in need of heroes,” interceded Haroldo, raising his wine glass in a ceremonial toast, “Bertold Brecht rightly said, and I, in that respect, am with Brecht.”

They looked at him in surprise.

“Besides,” he added, “in that respect, the fields Papa owns are also with Brecht.”

Ana Maria had found the volume level necessary for her husband’s story.

But Barreiro has not purchased a ticket. He stood by the ticket window for a while and now he strolls slowly around the lobby as if waiting for someone. God don’t let him, begs Funes. But God does let him: Barreiro walks out, alone, towards Corrientes Ave. Funes begins to follow him; everything becomes easier. He’s often thought of this pursuit. Strange, he never imagined it would be through downtown Buenos Aires, and it never occurred to him before that downtown was better: there would be witnesses. Witnesses for what? Everything that was about to transpire was between him and Barreiro. Barreiro and me, he thought, and stopped for a second: How could he be sure Barreiro was no longer with the Special Unit? He said it a thousand times in his story: “Governments change,” he would say, “but these people remain the same. Before, they were called the Special Unit. Now, DIPA or the Organization; the personnel: the same.” Witnesses for what? he asks himself. And, the idea that Barreiro is armed pops into his head. *Police carry arms*. He tries to convince himself it doesn’t matter; today is the day. But he can’t shake the thought: Barreiro is armed.

Café San Marcos. Barreiro goes inside for a cup of coffee or to use the toilet. Funes waits for him across the street. The men’s room could have been the site of their confrontation. Strange again that he never imagined it happening there; and it’s common enough to run into people in a public restroom. And, although he knows that Barreiro went to the men’s room, he prefers to believe that he merely went inside for a cup of coffee. A restroom is a small, awkward place. Its better if he stays put, waiting across the street for him to exit. *Before I was on the ground: unconscious, at first; arching painfully, later*. He doesn’t want to think about it, but then he decides that thinking about it helps.

“Not on the head, you animal! You could kill him,’ I heard him say with the first blow. I must confess,” Funes said, “I was afraid.”

Funes sat in the middle of the couch and, except for the music, there was total silence.

“I would have just died,” Ana Maria commented as she ate a cream-filled Danish; she was about to say something more, but instead made a face. “This cream is sour,” she added.

“But it is possible to resist,” Funes continued, “there comes a moment when it is possible to resist.”

Silence once again. He had told his story so many times that, perhaps without having intended it, he had created a system of pauses, soft-spoken phrases and, at times, short, sharp cries. Even tonight (despite his encounter) the system worked: at this point, a pause; someone will ask how it is possible to resist.

“How is it possible to resist?” someone asked.

And Funes, looking at his audience, began to explain.

Now Barreiro walks again along Suipacha, turns on Corrientes Ave. and stops in front of the Opera Theater to look at the show times. Funes had often dreamed of it this way, at the movies. Barreiro would be seated in the row in front of his, and he in the seat immediately behind him (like right now), his eyes would be locked on Barreiro’s head (as they are right now), not paying the slightest attention to the movie. Silently watching. And suddenly, softly, he would tap Barreiro’s shoulder. Then Barreiro would turn around and Funes would stare into his eyes and, without saying a single word, he would spit in his face; not once, but several times. Barreiro would hurriedly get up and leave; he’d be almost running. Or perhaps he would stay put, turning back around to face the screen. Or he would wipe the spit from his face and apologize. It would all take barely a few seconds. Later, when he awakened, Funes would feel satisfied and at peace.

Now the movie is over. Like strange dolls that stir to life as the lights come on, the people, so many of them, get up from their seats. The first cigarettes are lit. Then, the exodus: two compact groups, one through each door, drown their footsteps on the carpet and converse in hushed tones. Someone laughs. It all has an odd, ceremonial feel to it. Alejandro Funes advances among them. His attention is focused on a beige hat and a grey suit walking a few meters ahead of him. The carpet, the ritual and the air conditioning come to an end, a wave of hot air hits him and, suddenly, he’s out on the street. For a split second, Funes feels something like rage: Barreiro has disappeared from sight. He curses all who walk along Corrientes and takes a look at his watch: ten past one; this is when the get-together at home starts to get good, he thinks.

And again he feels that something that could be rage: the beige hat is next to a newsstand and about to board a trolley.

At daybreak, the mood was right for Truth or Dare. The heat was intolerable, even with the windows open. The whiskey had run dry. A single lamp lit the table and the sofas. The rest of the room was in semi-darkness: “the dark light” as Ana Maria liked to call it. Even so, the heat was intolerable. The men had taken off their suit jackets and loosened their ties. Two or three women fanned themselves with whatever they had on hand. Rather than sitting, they were sprawled out on the sofas, in various poses. The mood was indeed right for Truth or Dare. But Funes had yet to tell them how it was possible to resist. He lit a cigarette and gestured to Haroldo.

“It’s possible ... ” began Haroldo, accustomed to his cue.

“ ... to play Truth or Dare. That’s exactly what I was about to suggest,” finished Funes, smiling.

Then, Ana Maria’s indignant insistence.

“Please, Alejandro, they’ve come to hear your story,” said Ana Maria, and she truly appeared to be indignant, “and you crack jokes.”

Funes apologized with a gesture. Then, in a serious tone, he said:

“There comes a moment ... ”

Another interruption was pending.

“Excuse me, Alejandro, but not everyone knows how things were,” said Haroldo, with a complicit gesture. “I suggest you walk us through it, step by step. I believe we all have time.”

It was now his turn to refuse, but not too adamantly.

“But I’ll bore the lot of you.”

The response would come quickly: a “never,” “but please,” or “to the contrary.”

“To the contrary,” a woman said. It was her first get-together at Funes’.

Now a request.

“Very well, I’ll tell you in exchange for a good cup of coffee.”

Ana Maria and Haroldo’s wife went into the kitchen.

Funes softly caressed his lips and began his story:

“‘You are familiar with the methods the police have to make people talk,’ is what he said to me after the interrogation. I made a face to show I didn’t understand and said no. ‘You’d be better off never knowing them,’ is all he said. You have to be tough to withstand a beginning like that. And I assure you: that’s the end of your friends, your comrades and all that. There’s none of that; you are alone. And you have to simply decide not to do it. It’s the only way; commit to not saying a single word. Be strong, in other words. And, see here, I can assure you that one doesn’t do it to protect others; they, all of them, when you are taken: *bon voyage*, you’re on your own; it almost makes you want to talk. That’s why I say it’s kind of like a fierce whim; a promise to yourself: not a single word. So you don’t talk. For me, at least, that’s how it was.”

He looked at each one of his guests. Then, as if deep in thought, his eyes half closed, he raised his head up. The silence was authentic. Today, even Haroldo seemed interested in the story. A brief pause, and then Ana Maria would speak. He was wrong; it was the woman, the one visiting his home for the first time, who asked the question she shouldn’t have asked.

“But, did you really not say anything?” she asked.

*Nothing, friend, not a single word. I swear: I endured it all. See these marks? That's because I held up. I don't know why they let me go, I swear I don't; because I put up with it all. And it would have been so easy to talk, you should have seen how it easy it would have been: just a name, or two, or three, and they stop hitting you. You see how it is? They'll stop hitting you. But I didn't give them a single name; see these bruises, I didn't give them a single name. Or maybe I said one: Roberto Dubner, 230 Trelles Street, but only so they wouldn't hit me here ... See? Here, where I don't have a bruise. And then one more: Rubén Vela, 115 Las Casas; they were coming at me with the electric prod, you know, and it's tough to hold up against the electric prod. I just said: Horacio Fresenza, 314 Azara, and that was that; they left me alone and even gave me some water. I swear, I didn't even realize I was saying them, the names came out with the water: Raúl Sesarego, 1011 Olavarría, and Aída Bruzzi, 34 Patagones; and a bit more water and no more hitting. See? There isn't a mark here. That's thanks to Saúl and Jorge Bellini. Do you remember the Bellini brothers? They lived at 2136 Nazca. Thanks to them there is no mark there; I always loved them, and I knew they would help me out. It's so easy. You give them a name: Antonio Franco, and another immediately follows: Arturo Taicar, and then another: Susana Fuentes; they are your friends, they are helping you so you won't get hit anymore. And you don't want to leave anyone out, so you say them all: Pech, Ríos, Chari, Robles, Pérez, Tokar, Brinman; all of them. They all helped me, my friends. Guillermo Bornik. Is that your name? And you live at 213 General Hornos; thank you, you also helped me.*

“Nothing, madam. The trick is to not say a single word.”

“It must be just awful to tolerate that, no?” Ana Maria said, raising her voice and embracing all present with a gesture.

“Terrible,” said the first-timer.

*The terrible thing is the fear, my friend. When you know you are all alone, and you begin to realize that a name and an address—You see how simple it is? Nothing more than that: just a name and an address—equals two minutes without the electric prod, or a kick or a punch. That kick that you know is for you, that you are going to have to take, and that only you will feel the pain. When you begin to realize that you can't take anymore, that your initial resistance has been broken with each increasingly more powerful jolt of electricity. When the words of those around you, but that you feel are faraway, yet there they are, at your side; when even the words begin to hurt and scare you, when you know that you can end it with just a name or two: the words and the kicking and that horrible electrical current, and then the water, or a cigarette; when you know all that, when the fear or the pain, or both together, make you forget those afternoon fundraisers, those secret meetings, those impromptu speeches at factory doors; when you know you can't bear a single blow more, I swear, everything piles up on you, you try to ask for forgiveness, and you begin to talk ...*

*God damn you, Francisco Barreiro.*

“Yes,” he said, “but you can resist. It's all a matter of realizing that a man's strength has its limits. Well then, pain, too, has its limits. When you know you can withstand it at that limit, that's it, it can't hurt more than that. The thing is to resist up to that point; after that, it's easy.”

“Easy! I wonder what the torturers would say to that,” someone interrupted.

Funes, with a laugh, allowed himself to fall against the sofa’s backrest, and said, “That’s something you’d have to ask Francisco Barreiro.”

“Who is the bearer of that name?” asked Haroldo; he had never heard it mentioned before.

And Funes heard himself respond.

“The one who oversaw the torturers,” he said. “In a word, the boss.”

In a whisper, the first-timer commented to her husband on the calmness with which Funes told certain things. “Terrible things,” she said aloud. But it was her husband who, with an inquisitive look, asked:

“Sorry, but you know his name. Did you ever think of tracking him down? For revenge, I mean, or something of that sort.”

“I always imagined I’d run into him at some point,” said Funes, “but it never occurred to me to seek him out.”

He said it with a grin of wonder on his face, as if surprised by what he just said; then, he looked over at Ana Maria. Ana Maria turned off the record player and went to fetch more coffee.

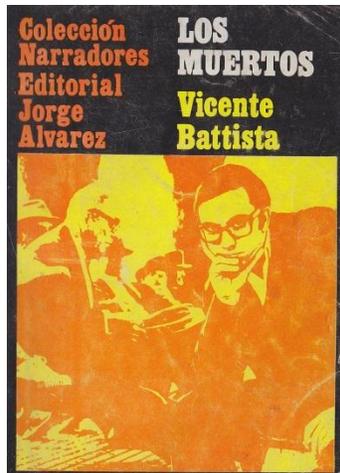
And now this was his last chance.

An old woman wearing a hat with green feathers has sat down next to Funes. In front of him, two girls, also wearing hats, are having a lively conversation. Her daughter and her daughter’s friend, he thinks, looking at the old woman out of the corner of his eye; no doubt they are returning from a wedding. Barreiro is seated in another row, five seats up. A conductor with a purple nose and a sleepy face hands him a ticket. *Then they took me into a room. And that’s when I saw you. And I heard you: the same voice that had ordered them to up the voltage. Your voice, Barreiro, informed me I was a free man, that I had nothing to complain about, I didn’t have a single mark on my body. Do you remember? You got in my face and told me I was weak, that you knew from the moment you saw me that I wouldn’t be able to resist. Do you remember what you said? “You were as white as a ghost, you little faggot.” That’s what you said; you said it with a mocking grin on your face. Then, in a very deep voice, you shouted at me: “Chicken shit!” And you spit in my face. Do you remember, Barreiro?* At Constitución, the old woman and the two girls step off. Funes, not knowing why, looks at the ticket in his hand. Type: palindrome.<sup>1</sup> *Because one day I’d find you. You see how simple it is? And I’d follow you. Do you know why? To spit in your face, nothing more than that, Barreiro.* 33533. The heat is unbearable and practically no one is left on the trolley. Giddily, Funes comes up with three different ways to confront Barreiro and, although he’ll never actually go through with it, he decides on one: when Barreiro stands up, he’ll do it right then and

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<sup>1</sup> In Argentina some time ago, passengers taking public transportation would buy a numbered ticket from a conductor. If the number on the ticket was a palindrome, it was considered good luck.

there. Of course, Barreiro will recognize him, he thinks, those bastards have the memory of elephants. He also thinks that Barreiro is armed. A couple steps off. *And he'll say he did it in self-defense; that'll be his excuse. But tonight is the night; I have to do it.* The conductor chats with the motorman and, except for the old man all the way in the back, Funes and Barreiro are the only ones left on the trolley. *He'll recognize me, and his kind shoot to kill.* The old man gets off. I have to do this now, Funes says to himself, and he stands up; but he returns to his seat when the conductor steps into the aisle. He looks out the window and sees that the street is completely wet, the cobblestones giving off a strange, phantasmagorical shine. He sees two parked gasoline trucks. A couple hurries past, almost running. He reads: "No smoking and spitting." He begins to rationalize why he didn't scream at first, in the theater lobby. *After all, what good would it have done me? I wouldn't have been able to get close to him.* The conductor goes back to chatting with the motorman. *When he sees me, he'll recognize me, and then what? Play the hero for myself? What does that get me?* The gasoline trucks are left behind; now there is only the street. *Honor and three bullets in the gut. Because shoot me is what he'll do, no doubt about it.* He reads: "Capacity: 36 passengers" and convinces himself that after all everyone has the job he most enjoys. Like that man hands out tickets, that other one drives, and that one over there sells newspapers, Barreiro does what he does, and they pay him for it. He reads: "Do not stick your hands out the window." And then he almost jumps out of his seat: Francisco Barreiro, a few rows up, has gotten to his feet. Funes' eyes lock onto his back. He begs for him to please exit out the front; on trolleys, you're supposed to exit out the front, and besides it's the only way Barreiro won't see him. But Barreiro finds it more convenient to exit out the back, and, as he places his hat on his head, he is standing directly in front of Funes, who is unaware of this because a few seconds earlier he decided to turn his face to the window, to the wet street outside, with its strangely shiny cobblestones. He also doesn't realize that Barreiro walked past without even looking at him; he does hear him, though, walking toward the back, and he pictures him stepping off the trolley. He reads: "Nosmoking36passengersoutthewindow," closes his eyes and, grinning, murmurs, "He didn't recognize me." Funes is happy. He is alone and smiling, and he's got quite a few blocks to go before he'll get off, and then, impatiently, he'll look for a cab in a deserted street. The clock in the Santa Felicitas convent will ring out twice and Funes will imagine that all those gathered at his house will be worried about his delayed arrival. New people are expected at the get-together that night and, just like every Thursday night, he'll be expected to tell them how he resisted being tortured at the hands of the Special Unit. But before all that, there is still a good 30 minutes to go.



Translated by Dario Bard from “Esta noche, reunión en casa” as printed in *Los Muertos*, published by Editorial Jorge Álvarez, out of print. The original Spanish version is available [here](#).

Vicente Battista is a writer from the Barracas neighborhood of the City of Buenos Aires. He was a staff member of the literary magazine *El Escarabajo de Oro* (1961-1974), which published his first stories. His first short story collection, *Los Muertos*, won prizes in Argentina and Cuba, and was published in 1968. In 1970, he founded the literary magazine *Nuevos Aires* together with Mario Goloboff. In 1973, he relocated to Barcelona, Spain, where he had been invited to work on a series of screenplays. Due to the military coup of 1976, he delayed his return to Argentina until 1984. Over the course of his career, he has written several short story collection as well as novels, theatrical scripts, screenplays and essays.

His latest book, [Enlaces y cabos sueltos](#), an anthology of essays and stories, was published by Editorial Desde la gente in 2013. In this video, he discusses his latest novel, [Ojos que no ven](#) (2012), on the radio program *La Libroteca* (in Spanish):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qAqwPMTgRlo>