

GUILLERMO ARRIAGA

SCREENWRITER OF THE FILMS *AMORES PERROS*, *21 GRAMS*, AND *BABEL*

a novel



The

NIGHT

NIGHT

BUFFALO



TRANSLATED BY BLAN PAGE

The Night Buffalo

Also by Guillermo Arriaga

Un dulce olor a muerte/The Sweet Smell of Death

Escuadrón guillotina



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New York, NY 10020

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For Jaime Aljure, Julio Derbez, and Eusebio Ruvalcaba

“The flashes of his eyes suddenly revealed to me that we men do not belong to one single species, but to many, and that from one species to another, within mankind, there are impassable distances, worlds irreducible to a common term, capable of producing—if from one world, one were to look into the depths of one facing him—the vertigo of the other.”

—Martín Luis Guzmán

I decided to visit Gregorio on a Saturday afternoon, three weeks after his most recent release from the hospital. It wasn't easy for me to seek him out. I thought it over for months. I was afraid of meeting him again, almost as if I were anticipating an ambush. That afternoon I walked around the block several times not daring to knock on his door. When I finally did, I was nervous, restless, and—why not say it—feeling a little cowardly.

His mother opened the door. She greeted me affectionately and then led me straight into the living room, as if she'd been awaiting my return. She called her son. Gregorio emerged on the stairs. He slowly descended the steps. He stopped and leaned on the banister. He studied my face for a few seconds, smiled, and walked toward me to give me a hug. His vehemence intimidated me and I didn't know how to respond to his gesture. I didn't know if he had really forgiven me or if we'd forgiven each other.

His mother said something meaningless and excused herself to leave us alone. We went up to Gregorio's room like we used to. We walked in and he shut the lockless door. He lay on the bed. He looked relaxed, at ease. There was nothing in his face to make me suspect he was faking it. It looked as if he'd finally regained some peace.

I sat in the usual place—the director's chair Gregorio had at his desk—and started the conversation in the stupidest and most obvious way possible:

“How do you feel?” I asked him.

Gregorio straightened up and arched his eyebrows.

“How do I look?”

“Fine.”

Gregorio shrugged his shoulders.

“Well, then I’m fine.”

W E SPOKE FOR HOURS, small talk. We needed to get a sense of the territory again. Especially me: I didn't want to walk back to the edge of the abyss. Out of luck, respect, or maybe just mere courtesy, he didn't ask me about Tania, even though I'm sure we both thought of her in each of our silences.

We said good-bye well into the night. We gave each other a prolonged hug. We said we'd see each other soon, for lunch or a movie. I left the house. A cold wind was trailing a vague rumor of voices and the rumble of cars along with it. It smelled of burned garbage. A streetlight flickered, intermittently lighting the sidewalk. I closed my eyes. I couldn't walk away from Gregorio. His friendship was indispensable. Even when he threatened me and hurt me, I couldn't leave him.

F OUR DAYS LATER the phone rang. I answered: mute breathing. I thought it might be a joke or one of the stupid girls who wanted to talk to my brother and were too shy to ask for him.

I was about to hang up when I heard Margarita's weak voice.

"Hello...Manuel?" she mumbled.

"Yeah."

"Manuel..." again, and was silent.

"What happened?"

"My brother..." she whispered. I heard her tense breathing again.

"Margarita, what happened?"

She said nothing else and hung up.

M ARGARITA TRIED, but was unable to tell me the news that subsequent phone calls would confirm: Gregorio had shot himself in the head. They'd found him agonizing in a puddle of blood, with his left hand still gripping the revolver.

The boarded windows and iron bars, the lockless door, the patience, love, sedatives, shock therapy, all those months spent in mental hospitals, the pain. The pain. All useless.

Gregorio died on his mother's lap, stretched out on the backseat of the car his father feverishly drove to the hospital. He killed himself with the same gun we'd stolen years ago from a cop guarding the entrance to a convenience store. It was a rusty .38 Brazilian revolver; we'd doubted whether it worked at all until we decided to test it on a stray dog. On the first shot the mutt collapsed with its muzzle blasted to pieces. From then on until the day he died, Gregorio learned how to hide the gun in several places, avoiding the detailed searches carried out wherever he lived.

Gregorio wrapped the gun in a plastic bag—loaded with six hollow-point bullets—and buried it in a flowerpot with budding red geraniums. When we pieced the suicide together we deduced that he took the revolver out of its hiding place while pretending to tend to the plants in the garden—an activity his doctors recommended for a speedier recovery. Gregorio took the gun, hid it under his shirt, and left his work in a hurry, leaving a trowel, a spade, and a bag of fertilizer behind.

Resolute, he went up to his room. He pushed the desk against the door and entered the bathroom. He cocked the revolver, looked at himself in the mirror, held the muzzle to his left eyebrow, and pulled the trigger.

The bullet crossed diagonally through his brain, bursting through arteries, neurons, desires, tenderness, hatred, bones. Gregorio collapsed on the tiles with two holes in his skull. He was about to turn twenty-three.

JOAQUÍN, HIS YOUNGER BROTHER, took care of everything related to the burial as well as the police department's interrogations and requirements. His mother, exhausted, fell asleep on the living room sofa without even changing her bloodstained blouse. His father holed up in his son's room in search of clues to help him understand what happened. Margarita, who first focused on informing family and friends, surrendered to her impotence and fled to the house of one of her cousins, where she sank into a rocking chair, drank Diet Coke, and stared at the TV.

I went with Joaquín to the funeral home. We both chose the coffin: the cheapest and simplest one. It was all the family savings could afford, drained by Gregorio's countless medical and psychiatric expenses.

The body arrived at the funeral home at three in the morning. Luckily, a distant uncle—a somewhat prestigious lawyer—dealt with the paperwork to avoid an autopsy and to expedite the body's release from the morgue.

An employee from the funeral home asked us to go identify the body. I offered to do it: Joaquín had gone through enough.

The man led me down some stairs to a basement. Halfway there I stopped, regretting my offer. How could I face Gregorio again? Especially, how could I face him in death? Dizzy, I brought my hand to my head. I had trouble breathing. Wasn't a brief description enough? The man took me by the arm and ushered me on. In an effort to console me, he said a quick glance would be enough to finish the procedure.

We walked into a windowless room lit by tubes of fluorescent light. Gregorio, or what once was Gregorio, lay on a metal table, a white sheet drawn up to his chest. Death had given his face a light, slender expression. There were no

remnants of his cold, challenging demeanor. A bandage on his left brow covered the suicidal orifice. A purplish hematoma colored his forehead. His hair, smeared with blood, looked as if it'd been slicked back with gel. His unshaven beard gave him an air of exhaustion, a kind of tedium. I stared at him for a few minutes; he looked less intimidating dead than he had alive—much less.

“It’s him, right?” the man asked hesitantly upon seeing me engrossed.

I looked at Gregorio’s body one last time. How to say good-bye? Say it, just like that, or squeeze him and cry beside him? How to explain to him that his death hurt and infuriated and humiliated me? How to say all this to a quiet, a stupidly quiet, corpse?

“Yes, that’s Gregorio Valdés,” I said, and turned to leave.

T HE WAKE WAS sparsely attended. Even once the news spread, few dared to give their condolences: The body of a suicide is always upsetting.

Gregorio's family wandered aimlessly through the chapel. His mother napped with her grief in isolated corners. His father digressed in the middle of his sentences, leaving them unfinished and sunk in exasperating silences. Margarita babbled nonsense and Joaquín, swollen with fatigue, clumsily tried to stay awake.

The parents endured everything: gossip, furtive glances, fake mourning. Though atheists, they allowed a priest (for whose services the funeral home opportunely charged under the pretext of a donation) to conduct mass. They even allowed in a cheap tabloid reporter who spent his time shamelessly snooping around.

A T FIVE O'CLOCK in the afternoon, the funeral cortege set out. Only four cars followed the hearse to the graveyard. Thanks to a dispensation obtained by the lawyer uncle, Gregorio was cremated. I shuddered while watching the blue smoke surging from the crematory's chimney. Even in the small amphitheater I'd still felt Gregorio close to me: palpable, human. Now the smoke spirals signaled his definitive death.

I didn't wait for them to deliver the urn. Crying, I snuck out a side door to the cemetery. Since I didn't have any money for a taxi or a bus, I decided to go home on foot. I walked down the streets without noticing the countless stalls of street vendors, the tumult outside the metro station, the traffic, the car exhaust—sometimes also blue.

I arrived home. My parents were waiting for me, worried about my being late. They'd only quickly stopped by the funeral home. They couldn't even take five minutes of the hopeless atmosphere.

We ate dinner in silence. When we finished my mother took my hand and kissed my forehead. I noticed her eyes were swollen.

I went up to my room. I grabbed the phone and called Tania. Her sister told me she was already asleep. Moody, she asked me if I wanted her to wake Tania up. I said no, that I'd call her later.

Tania neither wanted to go to the wake nor the cremation. For her, Gregorio wasn't dead just yet. She'd told me in the morning.

"He's still plotting something," she assured me. "Gregorio won't leave just like that."

She sounded anxious, agitated. I scolded her for being so childishly afraid of him.

“Don’t forget he was the King Midas of destruction,” she pronounced.

“Was,” I pointed out.

“He always will be.”

She said it wasn’t a coincidence that Gregorio had committed suicide a few days after seeing me, or that he’d specifically chosen the twenty-second of February to blow his brains out.

“It’s his way of getting his own, can’t you see? The son of a bitch is smearing his blood on us.”

I wasn’t able to calm her down, much less convince her to come with me to the wake or burial. Her attitude seemed petty and unfair; the dead don’t deserve to be left alone.