

'The worthy successor of Borges,
Sabato and Bioy Cesares'

Le Devoir

**MARTÍN
KOHAN
SCHOOL
FOR
PATRIOTS**



Martin Kohan was born in 1967 in Buenos Aires, where he now lives. He is a novelist and writer of essays including one on Walter Benjamin. He teaches in Patagonia at the University of Trelew. A previous novel, *Seconds Out*, was published by Serpent's Tail in 2010.

Praise for *Seconds Out*

'An untypical book ... It's the kind of intricate construction which in less skilful hands could become merely an academic exercise, but Kohan is no ivory-tower professor'
Richard Lea, *Guardian*

'This is a subtle, complex book. At its heart is the fight itself or more precisely the fall of the champion whose essence is analysed in a virtuoso, slow-motion cut up into moments that crystallize an epoch. Finally, a novel that is not a film-script disguised as a novel from which a script is to be taken. A new generation of Argentinian writers, Martin Kohan and Rodrigo Fresan in the forefront, are showing that they are the worthy successors of Borges, Sabato and Bioy Casares' *Le Devoir*

School for Patriots

MARTIN KOHAN

Translated from the Spanish by Nick Caistor



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School for Patriots

1

In the past, the National School of Buenos Aires was an establishment for boys. In those distant days when it was known as the School of Moral Sciences, or in the even more remote era when it was called The Royal College of San Carlos, things must have been more straightforward, more orderly. It's simple: exactly half of the world it now contains weren't there. The half made up of jumpers, hairbands, ribbons and hair-slides, the half that required the installation of separate toilets in the school and separate changing rooms on the playing fields, once, a long time ago, in the days of Miguel Cané, or Amadeo Jacques, simply didn't exist. The school was a single entity, all boys. In those days, all the school activities must have taken place in a much calmer atmosphere. Or at least this is what the class assistant for the third year class ten thinks, as her mind begins to wander near the end of the second afternoon break. Everyone knows her as María Teresa, unaware that in the evenings, at home, she is known as Marita. This is what she, the teaching assistant for the third year class ten, is thinking absentmindedly, although she is apparently paying close attention, when more than eight minutes of the ten-minute break have already gone by. She thinks this without realising that, if the conditions from those days of the school's splendour still applied, she herself would not be able to occupy the position she currently occupies at the school, because just as there had been no girl pupils, there had been no female teachers, and no female assistants. Contrary to the present situation, in those days this world was not split in two: the main aim back then, as can be seen from the school's literary classic called *Juvenilia* (which the current crop of students, out of ignorance or spite, insist on calling 'Juvenilla'), was probably something quite different: to ensure the peaceful co-existence of boys from Buenos Aires with those from Argentina's interior provinces. This mix often gave rise to disturbances, even unseemly brawls which ended in cuts and bruises, and yet none of that was anything like what it takes to keep a close eye on this other reality of males and females in close proximity. After all, for boys from Buenos Aires to fight provincials was nothing more than the expression of a deep-seated truth about Argentinian history. It served to demonstrate that the school was already what it had been intended to be: a select microcosm of the entire nation. Had not Bartolomé Mitre, the school's founder, happily defeated Urquiza, from Entre Ríos province, at the battle of Pavón? Had not the federalist tyrant Juan Manuel de Rosas kept the school closed during the dark period of his rule that had afflicted Argentina for so many years? Had not Domingo Sarmiento, born in San Juan province, unsuccessfully tried to enrol at the school? And did not the boy from Tucumán, Juan Bautista Alberdi, succeed where Sarmiento had failed, giving rise to a feeling of resentment that lasted throughout the remainder of Sarmiento's life? The fights between pupils of Buenos Aires and the provinces were part of the school's history because the school itself was part of the nation's history. Miguel Cané writes about this openly in *Juvenilia*. No matter that today's pupils talk about the book as if they had never heard of it; in reality, they have all read it and are well aware of the significant fact that the school made no distinction between students from the northern provinces and those born in Buenos Aires. Ensuring the peaceful co-existence of these two groups was perfectly possible for a master like Amadeo Jacques, who was born in

France, or for a Headmaster like Santiago de Estrada. But the school then had been only for boys. María Teresa is merely letting her mind wander rather than making comparisons, but she knows her job as an assistant is very different nowadays. She has no illusions that she can cast herself in the same mould as those illustrious male predecessors; as she stands in the playground gazing blankly around her she simply allows one thought after another to slide by, and in this daydream imagines what the more homogeneous, more harmonious version of the school that existed in the nineteenth century, in another age, must have been like. The sound of the bell, which the others usually calculate precisely, startles her out of her daydream: the end of break. The bell rings – firmly but not stridently – for exactly fifty-five seconds, just short of a minute. Everyone is aware of this. There is a very precise reason why they should know this, and for their timing to be as exact as the sound itself instead of allowing themselves the rough approximation of a minute. That is because the moment the bell stops ringing (and without its echo being considered part of the process), all the pupils must line up, in total silence and in ascending order of height, outside their classroom door.

Third year class ten lines up in front of the penultimate door in the quad. Quite often, footsteps, a shoe scraping against the ground, sometimes even a laugh can be heard after the bell has ceased to ring, and then it is the assistants' job to step in.

—Silence, ladies and gentlemen.

After this warning, there ought to be no noise at all. If the earlier sound was a sign that someone was slow to respond, the assistants have to make sure that following this carelessness the pupils are absolutely quiet. If, on the other hand, there was the more serious offence of a laugh or the suggestion of laughter, they have to try to identify the joker (who in all likelihood would persist in their misdeed), take him or her out of the line, and proceed to punish them. The culprits usually gave themselves away by staring at the ground.

More often than not, however, the order to be silent is strictly obeyed.

—Step apart.

A single voice echoes all round the quad. Because of the height of the roofs or the thickness of the walls, the sound seems to rebound and multiply, but despite this, everyone knows nothing has been repeated, that orders are given only once, and that this is enough.

Stepping apart is a fundamental part of teaching the pupils how to behave properly. Even though they are now in lines, and even though they correctly position themselves from smallest to tallest, until they have stepped apart, the pupils still look disorderly, grouped but not formed up. They look untidy, and that is intolerable. Once they have stepped apart, however, the double line has an orderly, structured appearance, creating an appropriate symmetry. To step apart the pupils must raise their right arms – without of course bending the elbow – and rest their hands (even better if it is just the tips of their fingers) on the right shoulder of the classmate in front. Since by definition this classmate is smaller than the one behind, each arm makes a perfectly straight line but slopes gently downwards. That is how it is and always has been. The girls form up in front, the boys behind. Although she tries to do so discreetly, María Teresa focuses her attention on the most problematic link in the chain, the point where the two smallest

boys follow on from the two tallest girls. In general, the smallest boys are those who still look like smooth-cheeked infants, whereas the tallest girls are always the most mature. When instructed to step apart, those two boys (who in third year class ten are Iturriaga and Capelán) have to place their hands – or better still, the tips of their fingers – on the shoulder of the girls in front (in third year class ten that means Daciuk and Marré). The shoulders are quite far away, and are higher than them, so the boys almost have to stretch in order to reach them. María Teresa examines the point of contact closely. Of course, her concern is not the height difference, or that by stretching out their arms Iturriaga or Capelán might lose their posture. It is not that, nor is it the vigorous gesture their arms make as they straighten and aim upwards. No, it is something else. María Teresa has to pay particular attention to what happens to those boys' hands on each girl's shoulder for as long as this stepping apart lasts – and this is something which, unlike the bell for the end of break, does not go on for a fixed, predetermined length of time, but depends on the personal decision of Señor Biasutto, the supervisor of the team of assistants.

—Stand to attention!

It is only when Señor Biasutto has given this order that the pupils' arms drop and contact between them ceases. By now, all of them are in their rightful place, at the required distance from each other, and they may now be allowed to enter the classroom. And yet it frequently happens that Señor Biasutto delays giving the order and allows the moment of contact to drag on. This may be to make sure that the line for each year is properly formed up, or to give the assistants he is in charge of time to detect any possible irregularity among the pupils. If there is the slightest sign that this delay is making them impatient, Señor Biasutto will not hesitate to prolong it.

—I'm in no hurry, ladies and gentlemen.

On an earlier afternoon, at the end of first break, María Teresa noticed, or thought she noticed, that Capelán's right hand was resting *excessively* on Marré's right shoulder. He had stepped apart from her as required, but perhaps had gone further than that. It was one thing to use her shoulder as a marker to take distance from; it was another altogether to grasp the shoulder, touch it, cup it in the hand, to give Marré a sensation that was neither fleeting nor innocent.

—Are you tired, Capelán?

—No, Miss.

—Is your arm heavy, Capelán?

—No, Miss.

—Perhaps you'd like to leave the line-up, Capelán, and have a little rest in Señor Biasutto's office?

—No, Miss.

—Well then, step apart in the proper manner.

—Yes, Miss.

There is nothing suspicious about the way Iturriaga steps apart from Daciuk. Capelán is the one María Teresa needs to pay close attention to. Ever since her warning to him the other afternoon, which only by a miracle did not lead to Señor Biasutto being involved, Capelán has become very subtle; perhaps too subtle, which is

also a nuisance. He is no longer touching Marré with the palm of his hand, but with his fingers, which is good; in fact, only with his fingertips, which is better still. He does not even rest those fingers, or the tips of them, on her shoulder: they simply hover, almost without touching, as they might do with a door he had to half-close, or close without a sound. But in that lightest and apparently so circumspect of movements, María Teresa sees, or thinks she can see, that Capelán is caressing rather than touching the girl. Capelán is no longer pressing too heavily on Marré's shoulder, but appears instead to have openly replaced that misdemeanour with another: he is brushing against her. Scarcely touching her, as though he wanted to tickle or startle her.

—What's the matter, Capelán, are you feeling weak?

—No, Miss.

—Then step apart in the proper way.

The hovering hand, the aerial, deceptively innocent hand Capelán is stretching out as if thoughtlessly, moves towards Marré's shoulder, towards that reassuring, solid part that follows the curve of the blue school uniform pullover. But because it is a hesitant, vague gesture, suspiciously obedient of the warning not to press down, the hand hangs there and seems to feel rather than touch, to caress almost like a blind person would do, so that before it reaches Marré's shoulder it might (or at least this is the impression María Teresa has) brush against Marré's neck: the sky-blue collar of her school shirt, or worse still, the neck itself, the skin on Marré's neck, in other words, Marré herself.

—Are you feeling ill, Capelán?

—No, Miss.

—Is your hand trembling, Capelán?

—No, Miss.

—Are you sure, Capelán?

—Yes, Miss.

—That's good.

This is the first year, as autumn slowly gives way to winter, that María Teresa has worked as an assistant at the National School of Buenos Aires. She started in February, when the weather was still hot, three weeks before the March exams, and six before the new school year began. She had a first interview with the Head of Discipline, who decided to take her on. This was followed by a fifteen-minute interview with the assistants' supervisor, Señor Biasutto. He informed her, amongst other things, of the best attitude to adopt to keep a close eye on the pupils. It was no easy matter to achieve what Señor Biasutto referred to as 'the ideal stance'. The ideal stance to keep the closest watch. An attentive gaze, taking in every last detail, would mean that no misbehaviour or violation of the rules escaped her. But precisely because she was looking on so attentively, this would serve as a warning to the pupils. The ideal stance required a gaze that surveyed everything, but which itself was able to pass unnoticed. The teachers were well aware of this; that was why, whenever there was a written test, they stood at the back of the classroom, so that they could see without being seen. Any sideways glance inevitably betrayed a pupil attempting to copy from a neighbour. The school assistants had to acquire a similar expertise if they wanted to be as relentlessly alert. Not 'staring into space' as an absent-minded person might do, but seeing

everything while giving the impression of not looking at anything.

María Teresa follows this detailed advice from Señor Biasutto at the end of each of the three afternoon breaks: at the moment when the pupils line up, and when they step apart. She uses it to keep an eye on that idle-looking boy Capelán. Apart from Iturriaga, all his classmates are taller than him. That is why he is the first boy in the line. Marré is directly in front of him. He can touch her: it is allowed. More than that: he is obliged to do so. He must put his hand on her shoulder, or better still, place the tips of his fingers on her shoulder, so that he can step apart from her. So María Teresa pretends to be looking at nothing in particular: not looking nowhere, which would be taking things too far, but a look not focused on anything in particular. Of course, in reality she is concentrating on what is going on between Capelán and Marré's shoulder: between Capelán's hand, or fingers, and Marré's shoulder. She is pretending to look all round her, but in fact her eyes are trained on that tiny detail. She wears glasses, and straightens them now. She sees, or thinks she sees, Capelán moving his fingers slightly. Possibly he has stroked Marré's shoulder. Imperceptibly, María Teresa focuses even more intently to scrutinise the expression on Capelán's face. It looks as innocent as the expression on the face of Iturriaga, who alongside him has stretched out his hand without even appearing to notice how close Daciuk is to him. But María Teresa is well aware that this vague expression proves nothing. The pupils brazenly practise the art of dissembling. She takes a slow, deliberate step forward. Now she is no longer level with Capelán, but with Marré. The face she is secretly studying is Marré's, not Capelán's. She notices, or thinks she notices, a slow closing of Marré's eyes: something akin to a blink, but in slow motion. María Teresa interprets this as she thinks she is meant to interpret it: she sees a gesture of annoyance in this lowering of the eyelids. She cannot be certain, but there is no time for her to wait to be certain that this is what it means.

—Is something wrong, Marré?

—No, Miss.

—Are you sure? I thought it looked as if you felt ill.

—No, Miss.

—Are you sure?

—Yes, Miss.

—Good.

At that moment Señor Biasutto gives the order for them all to stand to attention. The pupils lower their arms and stare at the nape of the neck of the classmate in front of them. Whatever the weather outside, the light in the quad is always that of a cloudy day. The walls are covered halfway up in green tiles: beyond that they are bare. The order is given for the pupils to enter their classrooms.

That night, María Teresa's sleep is strangely disturbed. Without intending to, she dreams of Marré's face and the fleeting expression she caught there. She remembers almost nothing of her dream apart from that image, but it is very vivid: the face of the girl at school whose name is Marré. She is still in a daze even after she has woken up, made her bed, brushed her teeth, hung her clothes in the wardrobe, kissed the rosary, put her hair up, and opened the curtains. Then she dons a faded housecoat and buttons

it all the way up to her neck. She goes into the kitchen, where her mother is waiting for her with breakfast. The radio stands beside the table. The news bulletin is on as they say good morning to each other.

—Did you sleep well?

—Yes.

Her mother does not sit at the table with her. Possibly she has already had breakfast, or does not want any. She is busy boiling something for lunch; the smell is unpleasantly pungent and sweet for this time of morning. The mother watches the water bubble as if there is not enough heat or time for it to come to the boil properly. The two women do not talk: the only voice to be heard is that of the newsreader. Today's news: the skies over Buenos Aires will be cloudy, the lakes in Palermo Park are to be refurbished, there has been a drop in cinema attendance, early snowfalls in Mendoza province, two Dutch scientists have proved that animals dream, the temperature in the capital will not rise above thirteen degrees.

—What's making that smell?

—In the pan, d'you mean?

—Yes.

—Beetroot.

On the radio, the news has given way to adverts. A jingle about wrist watches that keeps ending then suddenly starting up again is followed without a break by an aspirin commercial.

—Don't you like beetroot?

—I don't know.

—What do you mean, 'I don't know'?

—Just that, I don't know.

—Don't start getting fussy, Marita, you've always liked them.

An unopened envelope lies on the table under the vase stuffed with imitation flowers. María Teresa spots it and asks what she already suspects, what in fact she knows deep down: if the letter is from her brother. The mother says it is. And that this time she has decided not to open it because of what always happens whenever she does: as soon as she sees her absent son's handwriting, and even before she starts reading what it says, she bursts into tears. She prefers Marita to read the letter and tell her what is in it.

With two fingers María Teresa tears open a top corner of the envelope. She slides the knife she has not yet used for the butter or cheese into the slit. Her mother does not look at her as she does this. Strictly speaking, it is not a letter, only a postcard. Francisco likes his little jokes. In fact, he is not very far away; he's only in Villa Martelli. If the two women chose to travel to Avenida Pacífico and catch either the number 161 (the red sign) or even better the 67 (any sign), they could be at his regiment's front gate in less than an hour. They do not do so because there would be no point: even if they went there, they would not be allowed to see or wave to Francisco. But he is still quite close, on the outskirts of Buenos Aires. He loves to play the clown, sending them a postcard as if he were a long way off. He must have

borrowed or bought it from one of his colleagues from the provinces who collects them to send one by one to his family back home. A lad from the south, or perhaps from Formosa in the north. María Teresa takes the postcard from the envelope. It is of Buenos Aires. An aerial view of the Obelisk in bright sunlight, with dense traffic encircling it on the world's widest avenue. At the edges she can make out a line of not very tall buildings of uneven height.

María Teresa turns the postcard over and discovers that her brother has written only: 'I can't seem to make friends'.

María Teresa glances at the picture a second time: a red bus she did not notice before is driving round the Obelisk. She puts the card back in the envelope and replaces it under the plastic vase. The flowers, also made of plastic, have drooped so far they no longer resemble real flowers at all. María Teresa tries to make them stand upright, but without success: as if they were capable of remembering or having preferences like human beings, the plastic stems flop back to their previous position.

The mother meanwhile has covered the pan on the stove again. She turns and leans against the table edge. She is holding, or rather clutching, a tea towel decorated with red hearts.

—Tell me what your brother says.

María Teresa puts her knife down on the plate, among the breadcrumbs, next to the used teabag.

—Francisco says he is fine. That he misses us, but that he's fine.

2

Better he had died, says her mother, crossing herself because she knows what she is saying is sacrilege. Better for him to have died than to be sent God knows where. At least that way there would have been a piece of paper, some sort of certificate, and that way poor Francisco could have avoided all his suffering from the cold draughts, the unhealthy food served on aluminium plates. For the three or possibly four weeks of his basic training, he is allowed no passes or leave. Only once, at seven in the morning as day is breaking on an as yet undetermined date, will he be given permission to come to the gate on Avenida San Martín to say hello to his family standing outside.

The mother cries at least once a day. Sometimes María Teresa hears her from the bedroom; sometimes, even though she cannot see or hear her, she can sense her mother is in tears. She often cries when she listens to the radio news, when they give the temperature and say that the weather is turning cold: and there is news on the radio every half hour. At first María Teresa would stop whatever she was doing and try to comfort her mother, but she is one of those people who do not want to be comforted and so will not allow it to happen. In the end María Teresa decided to let her cry and unburden herself as much as possible.

Because the pupils who have afternoon school start at ten past one precisely, the teaching assistants have to be there by half-past twelve. Several of them work mornings and afternoons, but not María Teresa. She works afternoons only, and lives half an hour away from the school, provided there are no delays on the metro. So as not to be in a rush, she leaves home at a quarter to twelve. Often her mother is still crying when she goes out.

Occasionally, usually when the Head of Discipline decides he needs to see Señor Biasutto and his team of assistants, her starting time can be an hour or two earlier. Since María Teresa has worked as an assistant, there have been two such meetings. The first was devoted to the problem of the pupils who were in school out of hours. There are some curricular activities, such as using the physics or chemistry labs, or going for swimming lessons in the basement, as well as extra-curricular activities like visiting the library to study, which the pupils need to attend out of their school hours. Yet that is no reason, the Head of Discipline emphasised, fingers raised and the tic in his eyebrows beating furiously, that is no reason for them to be strolling round the corridors or running up and down the staircases without any good reason. The assistants had the authority and, more than that, the obligation, to stop any pupil they saw wandering around the school and demand their identity card, so that they could check the photograph, name, and whether they were enrolled for morning or afternoon sessions, and if an afternoon pupil was in the school during the morning, or a morning pupil was there in the afternoon, they should demand an explanation. After being granted permission by the Head of Discipline, Señor Biasutto then insisted that only clear, direct explanations should be considered valid. Señor Biasutto is held in high esteem at the school because everyone knows that a few years earlier he had been the person chiefly responsible for drawing up the lists. It is generally expected that at some point, in accordance with the dynamics of administrative appointments, he will one day become Head of Discipline.

The second meeting which meant María Teresa had to come in early to school was called to clarify exactly how far geographically the assistants' authority extended. The school regulations cover not only the interior of the building, as well as the sports facilities which are located in the port area of the city, but stretch to two hundred metres beyond the actual entrance to the institution. This includes the entire block where the school stands, including the part outside San Ignacio church, as well as the next block towards Plaza de Mayo (the block stretching from Calle Alsina to Calle Hipólito Yrigoyen) and the one opposite, which goes from Calle Moreno to Avenida Belgrano: in other words, the whole block mostly occupied by the school buildings, which is widely known as the 'Block of the Enlightenment' in the city's history. All this area is governed by the norms and penalties set out in the school's regulations. In other words, on the street corner or round it, or indeed on the pavement opposite, the assistants are on duty and should pay attention, for example, to whether the boys are wearing their blue ties askew, or have the top button of their shirts undone, whether the girls no longer have their hair in a hairband, or are not fastening their blue blouses with the regulation twin blue ribbons. In addition, the behaviour of all students from the National School of Buenos Aires should be strictly exemplary at all times and wherever they might be. This means the assistants are required to intervene whenever they detect any misconduct, wherever it may occur, and report it as soon as possible to the school authorities, whether this be the Head of Discipline or Señor Biasutto. An oft-quoted example of this is the case of the fifth year class five pupils punished at the end of the previous school year for having behaved in a very inappropriate manner in Calle Florida, perhaps the busiest street in the city, without realising that a school assistant who happened to be passing by had seen and noted their unruly behaviour.

As someone new to her position, all these requirements have led María Teresa to consider, and indeed to correct, a tendency of hers since childhood (as her mother still reminds her, and as her father never tired of telling her): that of becoming easily distracted, of letting her mind wander far from the matter at hand. Now, however, she is learning to stay alert, and is even trying out different physical or mental techniques to help rid herself of the ingrained habit of allowing her mind to stray. Now she pays attention: as much as she can and for as long as she can. She does this above all at school, in the quad during break-time, and in the classrooms during the few minutes it takes the teachers to arrive once break is over. She also concentrates hard in the street, as the Head of Discipline has urged them to do, on the street corner or in the metro, as well as at the newspaper kiosk and the flower stall near the school.

This is how, as she strolls apparently casually on one of her preventive forays along the pavement where the pupils congregate five minutes before going into school, she suddenly comes across a flagrant example of unacceptable behaviour: she sees Dreiman openly leaning against Baragli. Until that moment everything seemed so normal, innocent, and peaceful that María Teresa almost succumbed to her worst defect: she very nearly let her attention stray. Then all of a sudden, just when it seemed that everyone's ties were properly tied, and the girls' ribbons correctly laced, she sees something that should never have happened and she should never have seen: Dreiman openly leaning on Baragli. She was leaning against his chest as she might have done against a wall, a bus-stop pole, or a lamp-post. It was not a wall or a post she was

leaning on though, but Baragli, and what might have led to a quiet reprimand for untidiness, or for boys being boys, now seems to María Teresa like an out-of-tune note played in the middle of a harmonious concert. Despite being so shocked, or perhaps because she is so shocked, María Teresa reacts at once, and hurries over to where the scandal she wants to put an end to is going on. This is not something that demands a subtle approach, but decisiveness. It is not a case of Capelán perhaps brushing against Marré, the tension between watchfulness and stealth she is faced with every afternoon at the end of break. It is not that, it is Dreiman *clearly* leaning against Baragli, openly pressing her whole upper body against him, without the slightest compunction. There is nothing for María Teresa to consider or establish: she simply has to intervene, and in the most decisive manner possible.

—Dreiman: stand up straight.

Dreiman reacts in a suitably intimidated way. She lowers her gaze at once, and in a sort of automatic reflex doubtless born of her sense of shame, smooths down her grey pleated skirt with both hands. She was not expecting to see the assistant out here on the pavement, under the tree branches by the roadside, and her surprise means she reacts instantaneously. María Teresa even imagines she sees Dreiman blush and swallow hard. She is not so sure that her intervention has been as successful as she would have liked, however, because unlike Dreiman, Baragli seems to find the whole affair highly amusing or even encouraging, and certainly not as a reason to feel ashamed of himself. He looks the assistant steadily in the eye, and seems about to smile, although he does not actually do so.

María Teresa decides to ignore Baragli and concentrate on Dreiman. After all, she was the one she reprimanded, and she was the one she had undoubtedly succeeded in impressing.

—Don't ever let me catch you doing that again, d'you hear?

Dreiman concurs. She somehow manages to keep her head down and yet to nod in agreement. Beside her, however, Baragli is still staring, almost defiantly, at María Teresa and is stifling a smile, or pretending to do so. María Teresa prefers to regard the incident as closed, and so walks away without giving the pupils any chance to think she is hesitating or being weak. However, something about the incident leaves her preoccupied or sad, so that a short while later, in the assistants' room, she chooses her words very carefully and raises the matter with Señor Biasutto.

Although he does not let go of the headed forms he has been studying, Señor Biasutto listens to her carefully and is obviously concerned.

—Do you know what? I'd really like us to discuss this matter later in a more relaxed manner.

María Teresa is gratified by his answer, although she is unsure whether Señor Biasutto is implying they should talk about the matter some other day, that week or the next, or whether he means a little later the same afternoon. In any case, it is impossible for her to discover what exactly Señor Biasutto was proposing, or for how long he wishes to postpone their conversation, because shortly after their exchange of words the school's normal daily routine is completely disrupted. It appeared to be a day like any other and, to a certain extent, it was. If there is anything the school guarantees

above all else, it is this normality. Sometimes, however, things take such an unusual turn that, just as when rivers overflow their banks, they start to flood and invade even the most sheltered nooks and crannies. Nothing untoward ever happens at the school, and yet today, shortly after the second break, an urgent meeting is called of all the assistants from every year and class. And it is not Señor Biasutto who calls it, nor even the Head of Discipline – who María Teresa happens to catch a glimpse of hurrying towards the ground floor in an obviously agitated state. No, it is the highest authority in the school: the Deputy Headmaster, who has been acting head since the tragic death of the Headmaster.

More than thirty assistants are gathered in the main quad. To avoid showing how nervous they are, none of them glances up at the big clock with Roman numerals that presides over the courtyard, alongside the starched Argentinian flag and the austere bust of Manuel Belgrano, the creator of that flag and another former pupil. Nor do they exchange glances. They have formed a tight semi-circle, without necessarily being aware it was Señor Biasutto who encouraged them to do so. By the same token, this is the most appropriate way for them to hear what the Deputy Headmaster has to say without him having to raise his voice. The Head of Discipline is waiting to one side, and María Teresa forces herself not to look at his eyebrows, in fact not to look at him at all. At last the Deputy Headmaster arrives. Outwardly at least he appears calm. There is no need for him to raise his voice, something which in any case he never does. He reminds María Teresa of the parish priests she knew as a child in Villa del Parque: he knows how to convey the same sense of profound, protective calm. He is by no means skinny, however, and in that sense looks more like a bishop or a cardinal; nor has he ever been known to smile. But he has the same way of standing, as he is doing now, with both hands crossed in front of his body, and the same slow, deliberate way of speaking, as if delivering a sermon. All this gives him a venerable air that María Teresa noted the very first time she saw him. The sense of authority displayed by the Head of Discipline is quite different: he is the one who ensures that not so much as a piece of chalk is dropped in the school without him immediately becoming aware of it. Señor Biasutto's air of authority is different too: to everyone on the staff he is a kind of hero, because he is rumoured to have drawn up the lists, something of which everyone is aware.

The Deputy Headmaster by contrast is a father figure, although like the priests he is a symbolic rather than a real father: the virtual paternal figure of someone who has no children and has never known a woman. When the Deputy Headmaster begins to speak it is with the same sense of measured wisdom. He makes hardly any gestures:

—Ladies and gentlemen: as Deputy Headmaster of the National School of Buenos Aires, I regret I have found it necessary to remove you from your usual daily duties. I had no alternative. At this moment, outside here – in the street, I mean – there are reports of disorder. Nothing that should worry us or oblige us to interrupt the normal course of our lessons. However, until the authorities succeed in re-establishing calm, which will doubtless occur in a very short time, we need to take preventative measures here within the school. I have to inform you that we have closed the main doors. By that I mean the ones which give on to Calle Bolívar. In consequence, after they have completed the timetables and activities scheduled for this afternoon in a normal

fashion, the pupils are to leave school through the exit on Calle Moreno, which the Head of Discipline will indicate to you in due course. You should tell the pupils in your charge that they are at all costs to avoid the area of Plaza de Mayo. They will object that this is where they catch the metro. That does not matter: they must all, without exception, avoid going anywhere near Plaza de Mayo. As I have said, they are to leave by the Calle Moreno exit, and should head at once towards Avenida 9 de Julio. Be sure to tell them not to run, but not to loiter either. They are to leave as quickly as possible, but without running. Once they have reached Avenida 9 de Julio, they are to catch any bus that will get them out of this area, even if it does not take them directly home. Do not forget, ladies and gentlemen, that adolescents are by nature both curious and rebellious. Warn your pupils that they must on no account go near Plaza de Mayo, but be careful that in doing so you do not arouse their curiosity. What you must instil in them is fear, not curiosity. Tell them it is dangerous for them to go anywhere near Plaza de Mayo at the moment. If we evacuate the school calmly but quickly in the opposite direction, we will avoid any problems, and there will be no regrettable incidents.

At this, the Deputy Headmaster pauses. There is complete silence beneath school walls that are as dense as its history.

—Does anyone have any queries?

Nobody has any queries. Just in case, the Deputy Headmaster cups the smooth outline of his pallid chin in his hand, waiting for possible questions. What he expects is not that there will be any, but that there will be none. And nobody asks a question.

—No queries then. Perfect. Follow your instructions and have a good afternoon.

Third year class ten has Latin as the last period of the day. They are trying to scan some lines of verse: in a reluctant, uncoordinated chorus they stumble over rhythms in that essential but long-dead tongue. Their Latin master Mr Schulz beats the stresses with two fingers on the edge of his wooden desk, but this help either does not get through or is insufficient. Straight lines mean long syllables, cupped ones are short, but even though the rules for reading Latin verse out loud seem simple enough, there is no way that the tuneless chanting of the third year class ten pupils is going to sound harmonious. Listening to them out in the corridor, María Teresa is once again reminded of going to morning mass at the Villa del Parque church as a young girl. The distressing sound has something of the Gregorian chant about it, but completely misses the meaning of the verses: none of them, and perhaps not even Mr Schulz, realises that somewhere in the thick of all this is Dido, and that Aeneas is searching for Dido, and that Aeneas is being written by Virgil, Mecenás is directing Virgil, and Mecenás himself is being controlled by Augustus, Emperor of Rome.

The bell goes for the end of lessons. Before they can leave, however, it is time for the lowering of the national flag. Strictly speaking, those doing this are the sixth-year pupils, already lined up in the central quad. Although the others – those in first, second, third, fourth and fifth years – stay in their classrooms and so are not directly involved in the ceremony, they know it is taking place, and this knowledge means that to some extent they are also taking part in the solemn act. The loudspeakers which play classical music during break times are now broadcasting the national anthem ‘Aurora’. Standing to attention beside their desks, looking straight ahead at the

assistants gazing back at them, every pupil in the school sings:

—This is the flag! Of my homeland! Born of the sun! That God has given me! It is the flag! Of my homeland! Born of the sun! That God has given me!

Today they are not leaving by the exit on to Calle Bolívar. Señor Biasutto coordinates his team of assistants, who in turn have already given instructions to the pupils so that this unusual procedure can be executed properly. In third year class ten, María Teresa manages to conceal her nervousness. Standing in the classroom doorway, she awaits orders. The classes file out one by one. Forms seven, eight, nine: finally it is her turn.

—All of you, follow me, Señor Biasutto instructs them.

To begin with, they take the usual route inside the school. Until they reach the big marble staircase leading down to the ground floor, nothing is any different to normal. But once they have left this behind – a procedure which demands they keep strictly in line – instead of carrying straight on and heading for the main entrance, they turn once again and reach the stairs leading down to the basement. These stairs are narrower and less well-lit, and until now María Teresa has never had to take them. The basement houses the gym, music room, the school canteen, as well as the swimming pool and a small cinema. Rumour has it that somewhere down here, perhaps beyond the gym, or in a passageway leading off from the cinema, there are secret tunnels that date back to the colonial era, when the National School was still the Royal School of San Carlos. The tunnels apparently led first to San Ignacio Church, and then on to the Plaza Mayor fortress, or as it is today, to the presidential palace at the far end of Plaza de Mayo.

When her group reaches the basement, María Teresa feels a certain apprehension. Even though this low-ceilinged world is only slightly gloomier than the rest of the cloisters and annexes, when she tries to make out where the tunnels might begin she has the sense of something sinister. Señor Biasutto's voice snaps her out of her troubled thoughts.

—Quickly, down this way.

The door out on to Calle Moreno is small and scarcely noticeable in the greyish wall of which it is part. Perhaps it is secret as well, like the hidden tunnels that give rise to so much speculation. In fact, it is never opened or used, except on rare occasions like today.

—Until tomorrow, ladies and gentlemen.

The pupils launch themselves into the street like parachutists falling from an aeroplane: scared but aware there is no going back. They will do as they are told: leave the area without stopping, but without rushing either. They will go home. Once their tasks for the day have been completed, the assistants will also go home. At half-past six in the evening, they fetch their belongings and hasten to leave the school. It is only then, when she realises they will all have to return to the basement, that María Teresa understands that the instructions the Deputy Head gave, and which they faithfully passed on to the pupils, also affect and include them. She also has to leave by the side door on to Calle Moreno. She also cannot take the metro where she normally gets it. She also will hurry (but without running) towards Avenida 9 de Julio. There she also will take the first bus that comes, even if she will then have to get off and change to

another that goes to her home. She does not know either what exactly is going on, although she behaves with the determination of someone who does. She has no real inkling.

The street looks calm. Too calm, in fact: that is what is odd about it. This is the rush hour, and yet here, right in the heart of Buenos Aires, only one or two vehicles pass her by. The pedestrians seem to María Teresa to have just emerged from cellars, as if they were scurrying from one shelter to another along the streets of a city under attack from the air. They are taking advantage of an all-clear, but still have a stunned look on their faces. Of course, María Teresa might have the same expression on her face, but she cannot see herself. If she had to distinguish a sign that hinted at what was happening, she would be unable to do so. Yet there can be no doubt that the sky above the city has darkened, that as night approaches a heavy pall has fallen. Impossible to tell precisely where this sense of foreboding comes from, but it is as palpable as the air itself.

María Teresa finally reaches Avenida 9 de Julio. She wonders if it can be true that it is the widest avenue in the world. She looks left and right, trying to spot a bus she can catch. When she looks right, she sees the Obelisk, and this reminds her of the postcard her brother sent. Remembering that image leaves her thinking of him.

3

Servelli repeats his well-known habit, that of bursting out laughing for no reason at all; but this time he does so at the worst possible moment. This inane laughter, which so delights his companions, and has to be reprimanded, is due either to nerves, to a wish to seem guileless, or to the fact that he is always slow to understand jokes or sarcastic comments. It is a laugh which usually provokes more mocking guffaws from his classmates. This time, however, the circumstances are so obviously awkward that the laugh explodes and subsides all on its own, foundering in a general atmosphere of scandalized silence.

The Head of Discipline is going round all the afternoon classes to say a few words to every pupil. When he comes into the room, they should all stand up and stand quietly to attention by the side of their desks. They also do this when a teacher comes in, but then they sit down again for the start of the lesson, whereas now they have to stay on their feet, eyes to the front and arms by their sides, until such time as the Head of Discipline has finished speaking and taken his leave of the classroom.

His words are few, but carefully chosen and delivered with an emphasis that lends them conviction. They refer to what the National School of Buenos Aires means to the history of the Republic of Argentina, and consequently what it means to be a pupil there. They refer to the past: the school's foundation in the year 1778 by Viceroy Vértiz (the second viceroy of what were then the United Provinces of the Río de la Plata), the man who became known to posterity as the Viceroy of the Enlightenment (partly because he inaugurated the first street lighting in Buenos Aires, and partly because he established the pillars of Enlightenment belief, such as the Royal School of San Carlos). The Head of Discipline goes on to outline a brief roll-call of famous former pupils from the era when the school was known as the School of Moral Sciences, among whom undoubtedly the most illustrious was one of the nation's founding fathers, Manuel Belgrano, member of the 1810 independence junta, victor at the battles of Salta and Tucumán, and, inspired by its clear blue skies, the creator of the flag of Argentina. The school, he reminds them, was successfully refounded in 1863, now to be known as the National School, thanks to the foresight of Bartolomé Mitre, another founding father of the nation; the first president of modern-day Argentina, an outstanding soldier, a considerable historian, a born journalist and a practised translator. Mitre founded the nation, but also the newspaper *La Nación*, the written history of the nation, and the National School. Later still, towards 1880, the school was the cradle for the most brilliant generation in the history of Argentina, as revealed by Miguel Cané in his now classic *Juvenilia*: yet again, the school played a decisive role in the unfolding consolidation of the Argentinian state.

The Head of Discipline declares that in this short overview he has clearly demonstrated that the history of the fatherland and the history of the school are one and the same. This demonstration leads to the inevitable conclusion that each and every pupil at the school (from the mere fact of being one) is uniquely committed to being a patriot, more so than any other Argentinian (those Argentinians, he stresses, who are worthy of the birthright). When the fatherland calls, the most rapid, most reliable response will come from the pupils of this school.