# Javier Cercas, “The Motive”

## Background:

Álvaro is a lawyer and writer. He is working on a new novel, about a young couple experiencing sudden financial hardship, who decide to kill their elderly neighbor and steal the money he keeps in a safe in his apartment. The characters are based on Álvaro’s neighbors, the young couple Enrique & Irene Cesares and the elderly Señor Montero. For inspiration, Álvaro has been listening in on his neighbors’ conversations, which he can overhear from the bathroom of his apartment.

Meanwhile, Enrique Cesares is laid off from his job, and he asks Álvaro whether he has any legal grounds to contest the layoff. Seeing an opportunity to get more insight into his characters, Álvaro agrees to help. The following excerpt discusses Álvaro’s work on the case and his subsequent discussion with Enrique Cesares:

For some time, the writing of the novel was put on hold. Álvaro spared no effort in studying Enrique Cesares’ case. He obtained all the relevant information, examined it carefully, studied it, revised it several times, checked the case against other analogous ones. He arrived at the conclusion that, in effect, it would be possible to appeal against the [layoff], with a virtual guarantee of success. In the worst case, the severance pay the company should be obliged to provide if the dismissal was carried out was almost double the paltry sum his neighbor had been offered.

One the situation was clarified, he reflected cautiously. He considered two option:

a) If he appealed the dismissal it was very likely Cesares would manage to keep his job or, at least, that the damage would be far less—on the hypothesis that the company might choose to resort to a paragraph of the law which stated that they had no obligation to readmit a dismissed employee to his post. In this case—Álvaro continues—I will have won Cesares’ gratitude, but I will also have lost time and money, since I have no intention of sinking so low as to charge him a fee.

b) If he allowed events to take their natural course, without intervening in them, he would still gain his neighbor’s friendship and appreciation, given that he would understand and respect all the disinterested attention Álvaro had devoted to his problem. Besides, Álvaro wouldn’t charge him a cent for all the time generously spent on it. On the other hand, it was certain that the loss of his job—their only source of sustenance—would have repercussions on the couple’s relationship, which might deteriorate in such a way as to make possible that he, Álvaro, might be able to expect to hear, from his surveillance post by the ventilation window, the vicissitudes of that process of deterioration, which he’d undoubtedly be able to use in his novel. This would facilitate his work enormously as he would enjoy the possibility, so long nurtured, of obtaining from the couple the material he needed to proceed with and conclude his work.

He arranged to see Cesares. He explained the steps he’d taken, his investigations at the ministry and the union, illustrated the situation with analogous examples, clarified the various juridical details, added data the factory had supplied. Finally, he invented interviews and lied coldly.

He concluded, “I don’t think there’s the slightest chance they’ll accept the appeal.”