Excerpts from The Discreet Hero (Mario Vargas Llosa)

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Felícito Yanaqué, the owner of the Narihualá Transport Company, left his house that morning, as he did every morning Monday to Saturday, at exactly seven thirty, after doing half an hour of qigong, taking a cold shower, and preparing his usual breakfast: coffee with goat's milk and toast with butter and a few drops of raw chancaca honey. (p. 2)

He thought his good physical condition was due to the morning qigong exercises his late friend, the storekeeper Lau, had taught him. It was the only sport he'd ever engaged in besides walking, if those slow-motion movements that were, more than an exercise for the muscles, a distinctive, scientific way of breathing, could be called a sport. (p. 5)

Felícito had gone to bed with her a couple of times, almost without realizing it, on two nights of carousing and cane liquor. He did it because he could, because she was there and was a woman, not because he wanted the girl. Nobody wanted her. Who'd want a broad who was half cross-eyed, slovenly, and always smelled of garlic and onion? As a result of one of those two fucks without love and almost without desire, Gertrudis became pregnant. That, at least, is what she and her mother told Felícito. The owner of the boardinghouse, Doña Luzmila, whom the drivers called the Boss Lady, filed a complaint against him with the police. He had to go and make a statement and acknowledge before the police chief that he'd gone to bed with a minor. He agreed to marry her because it bothered his conscience that a child of his might be born without a father and because he believed the story. Afterward, when Miguelito was born, the doubts began. Was he really his son? He never got anything out of Gertrudis, of course, and he didn't talk about it with Adelaida or anybody else. (p. 42)

The announcer said that a new method for stealing cars was becoming popular with thieves in Lima. They took advantage of a red light to throw a live rat

inside a car driven by a woman. Overcome by fear and revulsion, she'd let go of the wheel and bolt out of the vehicle, screaming. Then the thieves would take it, very calmly. A live rat on their skirts, how indecent! Television poisoned people with so much blood and filth. Usually, instead of the news, he'd put on a Cecilia Barraza record. But now he anxiously followed the commentary of this newscaster on 24 Horas, who stated that crime was on the rise all over the country. "You're telling me," he thought. (p. 44)

"I told you that going to a psychologist was very dangerous," Rigoberto reminded Lucrecia. "I don't know why I ever listened to you. A psychologist can be more dangerous than the devil himself, I've known that ever since I read Freud." (p. 94)

When they saw Rigoberto come in they rose to their feet: "Hello, uncle." "Damn stupid custom," thought the master of the house. He didn't know why, but he was exasperated by the fashion, widespread for some years among Lima's younger generation, of calling family acquaintances and older people "uncle" or "aunt," inventing a kinship that didn't exist. (p. 114)

"Pastors are needed; there are more than enough intellectuals, Ears. You're mistaken if you think it's difficult for me to do what I do. Parish work interests me a great deal, it plunges me headfirst into real life. In libraries, one sometimes becomes too isolated from the everyday world, from ordinary people. I don't believe in your spaces of civilization that set you apart from others and turn you into an anchorite, but we've already discussed this." (p. 144)

"Not on your life," said Father O'Donovan, making the sign of vade retro. "We don't want sinners as refined as you in the Church, Ears." (p. 146)

He had to turn off the phonograph and sit still, his eyes closed, listening to the beating of his heart with a brackish taste in his mouth. "In this country not even a tiny space of civilization can be built," he concluded. "In the end, barbarism demolishes everything." And once again he told himself, as he always did whenever he felt depressed, how mistaken he'd been when, as a young man, he decided not to emigrate, to remain here, in Lima the Horrible, convinced he'd be able to organize his life in a way that, even though he'd have to spend many hours a day submerged in the mundane noise of upper-class Peruvians to earn his daily bread, he'd really live in the pure, beautiful, elevated enclave made of sublime things that he would create as an alternative to the everyday yoke. (p. 180)

Of course it interested me a great deal when I was young. But one day I lost my faith and never got it back again. I think I lost it as soon as I began to think. To be a believer, you can't think too much." "In other words, you're an atheist. You believe there isn't anything before or after this life. That's being an atheist, isn't it?" "We're getting into deep waters," exclaimed Don Rigoberto. "I'm not an atheist, an atheist is also a believer. He believes that God doesn't exist, isn't that so? I'm more of an agnostic, if I'm anything. Someone who declares that he's perplexed, incapable of believing either that God exists or that God doesn't exist." "Neither fish nor fowl," said Fonchito with a laugh. "It's a very convenient way to avoid the problem, Papa." (p. 182)

"I knew it, Adelaida. I never had any illusions. Why do you think I always chose to look the other way and never asked what else Mabel was up to? But I never imagined she'd get involved with my own son!" "So now maybe he's your son?" the holy woman chided him mockingly. "What difference does it make who she got involved with, Felícito. How can that matter to you now? Don't think about it anymore, compadre. Turn the page, forget about it, it's over. It's for the best, believe me." (p. 237)

At first, when they were newlyweds, when they had just started living together, he believed his wife was late because of a simple dislike or contempt for punctuality. Because of it they argued, lost their tempers, quarreled. Gradually, by observing her and reflecting, Don Rigoberto realized that his wife's dallying when it was time to leave for any engagement wasn't something superficial, the negligence of a pampered woman. It was a response to something deeper, an ontological state of mind, because without her being conscious of what was happening to her, each time she had to leave a place (her own house, the house of a friend she was visiting, the restaurant where she'd just had dinner) she was seized by a hidden anxiety, an insecurity, a dark, primitive fear of having to leave, go away, change where she was, and so she invented all kinds of excuses (getting a handkerchief, changing her handbag, finding her keys, making sure the windows were locked, the television or the stove turned off, or the telephone not off the receiver), anything that would delay for a few minutes or seconds the terrifying act of leaving. (p. 246)