

It was a cold and starry Night. The swans were thinking:

After my graduation from high school I took a clerical job with a Buenos Aires insurance company. The job was extremely unpleasant and I found myself among some pretty annoying people with whom I had nothing in common, but as I was barely eighteen years old, I didn't much care.

It was a ten-storey building served by four elevators. Three of them were assigned to the personnel in general, without regard to rank or position. But the fourth elevator — which was carpeted in red and had three mirrors and special décor — was reserved for the exclusive use of the company president, the members of the Board of Directors and the general manager. This meant that only they could ride the red elevator, but this would not prevent them from using the other three.

I had never laid eyes either on the company president or the members of the Board of Directors. But, every once in a while, and always from a distance, I caught sight of the general manager, with whom, nevertheless, I had never exchanged a single word. He was a man of about fifty years of age, and had a "noble" and "lordly" bearing. I considered him to be a sort of cross between an old-time Argentine gentleman and a thoroughly incorruptible magistrate of some supreme court. His graying hair, his neatly-trimmed mustache, his conservative suits and his affable manners had made me — and I detested all my immediate bosses — feel some degree of fondness toward don Fernando. That is how they addressed him: don plus his given name and without the family name, a form of address somewhere between what might seem like familiarity and the veneration owed to a feudal lord.

The offices occupied by don Fernando and his retinue took up the entire fifth floor of the building. Our section was on the third floor, but, since I was the least important employee, they would send me from one floor to another to run errands. On the tenth floor there were only some ill-tempered old men and ugly women who always seemed to be enraged about something or other. Up there a kind of dossier was kept active in which, five minutes before leaving the premises, I had to — without fail — leave a bundle of papers containing summaries of all the tasks carried out in our section that day.