

ON THE MORNING of the 31st of December, the Pagaldays visited the apartment they already owned in the building under construction at 2161 Calle José Bonifacio, along with Bartolo Sacristán Olmedo, the landscape gardener they had hired to arrange plants on the two broad balconies, front and rear. They climbed the stairs littered with rubble to the middle level of the edifice: like the other apartments, the one they had acquired occupied a whole floor, the fourth. Apart from the Pagaldays there were only six other owners, all of whom made an appearance on that last morning of the year to see how the work was coming along. The builders were conspicuously busy. By eleven, there were people everywhere. It was in fact the day on which, according to the contracts, the apartments should have been ready to move into; but, as usual, there had been

a delay. Felix Tello, the construction company's architect, must have gone up and down fifty times, allaying the owners' concerns. Most had come with a tradesman of some kind: a carpet layer to measure the floors, a carpenter, a tiler, or an interior decorator. Sacristán Olmedo was talking about the dwarf palms that would be arranged in rows on the balconies, while the Pagalday children went running through rooms, which still had no flooring, doors or windows. The air conditioning units were being installed, ahead of the elevators, which would have to wait until after the holiday. Meanwhile materials were being hoisted up through the shafts. Perched on their high heels, the ladies were climbing the dusty stairs scattered with pieces of rubble; since the banisters had not yet been fitted, they had to be especially careful. The first basement level was to be used for garages, with ramps up to the street, which had not yet been covered with their special anti-slip surface. The second level was for box rooms and storage space. On top of the seventh floor, a heated swimming pool and a games room, with a panoramic view over rooftops and streets. And the caretaker's apartment, which was no more finished than the rest of the building, but had been inhabited for some months by Raúl Viñas, the night watchman, and his family. Viñas was a reliable Chilean builder, although he had turned out to be a prodigious drinker. The heat was supernatural. Looking down from the top was dangerous. The glass panels that would enclose the whole terrace were not yet in place. The visitors kept their children well away from the

edges. It's true that buildings under construction seem smaller before the windows, doors and flooring have been put in. Everyone knows that; and yet somehow the opposite also seemed to be true. Domingo Fresno, the architect in charge of the interiors on the second floor, was walking anxiously through that capacious labyrinth, as if across the sands of a desert. Tello had done his job well enough. At least the building was standing firm on its foundations; it could have melted like an ice cream in the sun. No one had come to see the first floor. The Kahns, an older couple with two young daughters, were on the fifth floor with their decorator, the extraordinary Elida Gramajo, who was calculating aloud, working out the quantities of fabric required for drapes. Every detail had to be taken into account. And no detail could be specified without measuring both the space it would occupy and the surrounding space. Consequently, that big concrete cage was measured exhaustively, in three dimensions, millimeter by millimeter. A woman in violet was catching her breath on the stairs between the sixth and seventh floors. Others didn't have to make an effort: they floated up and down, even through the concrete slabs. The owners were not bothered by the delay, partly because they didn't have to make the last payment until they took possession, but also because they actually preferred to have a bit more time to organize the furnishings and fittings. The measurements were expanding the space that had been shrunken by illusion; similarly, the duration of the move was expanding. Besides, there would have been

something violent about taking possession on the last day of the year. On the sixth floor, Dorotea and Josefina Iturbide Sansó, two girls aged five and three, were kicking up cement dust with their little sandaled feet while their parents chatted placidly with Felix Tello. Tello excused himself to greet the woman in violet and accompanied her up to the next floor. They met the Kahns coming down from the games room and introduced themselves. Meanwhile the Pagaldays looked out from their balcony at the large plane trees growing in the Calle Bonifacio. Although not yet fitted with security grilles, the balconies with high balustrades were, for the moment, the safest place for children. It was a morning of high childishness. Everything belonged to the children. The expansion produced by the measurements and the feeling of contraction that goes with fear were overlaid by the world of childhood. The real universe is measured in millimeters, and it is gigantic. Where children are present, dimensions are always mediated, scaled down. The decorators were crafting miniatures. Besides, all these powerful people and this profitable business were operating for the benefit of the children; if not for them, the parents would have chosen to live in hotels. Horrible and half-naked, the builders came and went among them. The frontier between rich and poor, between human beings and beasts, was a line in time; the space occupied by one group would soon be taken over by the other. In spite of its symbolism, the 31st was a crude and obvious allusion to this state of affairs. It was also indisputably true that the poor

had a right to be happy too, and could even exercise that right. The mediation between large and small sums of money is effected by use and especially the diversity of users; possession, on the other hand, is as transitory as the gathering that was taking place that morning on the building site. Fresno was planning to put as many plants inside as Olmedo was putting outside. In a way, they were all landscape gardeners. And indeed, for the time being, the whole site was outside. The building would be finished when it all became an inside. An intimate, armor-plated little universe. Felix Tello himself would vanish like a puff of dust blown away by the passing years. The children would grow up here, for a while at least. The López family, who would occupy the first floor, had small children; they were in their square patio at the back, where the red paving stones had already been laid. The owners of the third floor, who arrived at midday, were the parents of the lady in violet who was going to live up on the seventh; they arrived with her children. There could hardly have been more children; each would have a private landscape, one on top of the other. Ms Gramajo had spent three hours taking notes, writing down figures extracted from space. Mrs De Itúrbide said she had seen a horrible fat monster like a sumo wrestler. He was from Santiago del Estero. A tray with buckets on it was rising up the elevator shaft, hoisted by a little motor. Around one, as the owners were leaving, there was an impromptu meeting on the first floor, where it was cooler. From the top floor you could see into the yard of the police station,

which was around the corner, on the Calle Bonorino. An old gentleman, the López's cabinet maker, had measured various walls for bookshelves and cupboards. Since the owners had bought their apartments off a plan, they had all preferred to have their cupboards specially built. The construction company had suggested a firm of cabinet makers who were looking after four floors: their workshops would take orders directly from the decorators. Downstairs, while the parents were talking, various kids watched the workmen filling a big metal dumpster in the street with rubble. They were wheeling their barrows up a sloping plank that was blocking the sidewalk; women coming back from the supermarket on the corner with their trolleys full of provisions for the New Year's Eve feast had to go onto the road, a manoeuvre they accomplished reluctantly. Domingo Fresno was talking with a bearded young architect, an acquaintance of his, who would be doing the interiors on the seventh floor. The moment for swinging into action was, they felt, dizzyingly imminent: although the building seemed utterly incomplete and provisional, with so much rubble and empty space, any day now it could be finished. Elida Gramajo, who had already left, was thinking the same thing. Less mindful of what lay ahead, the owners were thinking something else. But if anyone should have been imagining the disappearance of the builders, seeing them vanish into thin air, without a trace, like bubbles bursting soundlessly, it was them. The electricians stopped working at one on the dot, and left. Tello spoke for a moment with

the foreman, then they went to look at the plans, which kept them busy for a good quarter of an hour. Putting in the wiring wouldn't take long at all; the power points and all the rest could be finished off in an afternoon. The parents of the lady in violet climbed up with the children to see the games room on top and the swimming pool, which was already lined with little sky-blue tiles. An extremely thin, badly dressed woman was hanging washing on a line, in what would be the patio of the caretaker's apartment. It was Elisa Vicuña, the night watchman's wife. The visitors looked up at the strange, irregular form of the water tank that crowned the edifice, and the big parabolic dish that would supply television images to all the floors. On the edge of the dish, a sharp metallic edge on which no bird would have dared to perch, three completely naked men were sitting, with their faces turned up to the midday sun; no one saw them, of course. On the fourth floor, the Pagaldays were leafing through the contents of a large oblong portfolio, listening to Sacristán Olmedo's explanations. The children wanted to express their opinions too. Generally, though, what the children wanted was to look out from the balconies: wherever they came from, the difference in height was exciting. Even if they were moving from one third floor to another, there was a difference. What you could see from that height was different. The children were coming up with strange and sometimes illogical ideas about where they were. They resumed their races through the rooms, over the bare cement floors. Light penetrated to the

farthest corner. It was as if they were in partitioned fields, raised to a certain height. After exchanging congratulations and best wishes for the year to come with a family that was about to leave, Felix Tello expressed his justifiable confidence that "they would be happy in their new home."

The owners of the apartments had their own idea of happiness; they imagined it wrapped in a delay, a certain developmental slowness, which was already making them happy. In short, they didn't believe that things were going to proceed as planned, that is, quickly. They preferred to think of the gentle slope of events; that was how it had been since they paid the deposit and signed the settlement a year earlier. Why should they adopt a different attitude now, just because the year was coming to an end? True, they knew there would be a change, but at the last moment, beyond all the moments in between. It wouldn't be today, or tomorrow, or any day that could be determined in advance. Like the spectrum of perception, the spectrum of happening is divided by a threshold. That threshold is just where it is, and nowhere else. They were focusing on the year, not the end of the year. Needless to say, they were right, in spite of everything and everyone, even in spite of right and wrong.

The union of the year and the moment was like the ownership of the building. Each owner possessed a floor, a garage and a box room, but nothing else: that was all they could sell. And yet at the same time they owned the whole building. That's how a condominium works.

Standing still on the dumpster's higher side, in the street,

was a builder, a young man named Juan José Martínez, with an empty bucket in his hand. He had been distracted by something that had happened on the corner. There was nothing special about the corner or about him. An ordinary sort of guy, who wouldn't normally merit a second glance. Various people looked at him, but only because of where he was standing, perched up there, motionless, looking toward the corner, holding that position for the sheer, childlike pleasure of balancing all on his own in a high place (he was very young). The only unusual thing about him was that stillness, which is rare to see in a person at work, even for a brief spell. It was like stopping movement itself, but without really stopping it, because even in those instants of immobility he was earning wages. Similarly, a statue sculpted by a great master, still as it is, goes on increasing in value. It was a confirmation of the absurd lightness of everything. The people distracted by the sight of him, as he was by the sight of something a certain distance away, knew that future moments of daydreaming would be nourished by the poetic argument they were absorbing, an argument about eternity, about the beyond where promises are set.

The worst thing is the way they lie, Felix Tello was saying, but to judge from the broad smile on his face, he wasn't worried in the least. The architect's words met with a most attentive reception. Such attentiveness is not unusual when the lies of a third party are at issue. Tello was referring to the builders and by extension to the proletariat in general. They lie and lie and lie. Even when they're telling the

truth. Enthusiastic up-and-down jerking of heads, to signal assent. Felix Tello was a professional from a middle-class background. From a certain point on in his career, he had associated almost exclusively with two opposite fringes of society: the extraordinarily rich people who bought parts of his sophisticated buildings, and the extremely poor workers who built them. He had discovered that the two classes were alike in many ways, and especially in their complete lack of tact where money was concerned. In that respect the correspondence was exact. The very poor and the very rich regard it as natural to extract the maximum benefit from the person they happen to be dealing with. The middle-class principle, natural to him, of leaving a margin, a ghostly "buffer" of courtesy, between the asking price and the maximum that could be obtained, was foreign to them. Utterly foreign. It didn't even cross their minds. Having associated with both groups for so long, and being both intelligent and adaptable (if that is not a pleonasm), he had learned how to mediate with a fair degree of efficiency. He took advantage of the perfect trap that the rich and the poor had set for each other. Once he had secured the means to sustain a respectably comfortable way of life, all he wanted was to live in peace. The only thing that surprised him, when they confronted each other with their home truths, wearing those stupid expressions, was the sincere perplexity on both sides. It was like the episode in his favorite novel, *L'Assommoir*, in which the heroine, Gervaise, stops paying back the money she owes to the Goujets: "From

next month on, I'm not paying you another cent," and soon she even starts charging them for the work she does. What a rude surprise for the bourgeois reader! How could this good, honest, hardworking woman refuse to pay a debt? So what? Why should she pay, just because of some moral obligation? But what about manners? No, manners didn't even come into it, in her situation; she was poor and had an alcoholic husband, and all the rest. That Zola, the man was a genius! (But with this expression, which Tello formulated silently, claspings his hands and lifting his eyes skyward, as if to say "Even I couldn't have come up with that," he unwittingly confessed that he was fifty thousand times more bourgeois than those who were scandalized by the behavior of the pretty laundress with the limp.)

Except for the oldest couple and the youngest, all the others had embarked on their second, that is to say, definitive, marriages. Which is why they had invested in comfortable, pleasant dwellings, where they could settle down and live for years. That was Tello's style: sensible, child-friendly, family-oriented design. And good business sense, of course.

The little group hanging on his words, those remarried couples with their shared project of happiness, had been infiltrated by two individuals, two naked men covered in fine cement dust. They were listening too, but only as a pretext for bursting continually into fierce, raucous laughter. Or not so much laughter as vehement, theatrically sarcastic howling. Since the others didn't hear or see them, the conversation continued at its polite and leisurely pace.