



Cellophane

A Novel

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Acknowledgments

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Beware of the man
who says he can see
the truth of your life clearly.

His eyes cannot see
the heart of your heart
for all the light of the Sun.

—*Inca proverb*

*For Jon,
who sees the heart of my heart*



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Prologue

Don Victor Sobrevilla Paniagua always knew that he would die as he was born: in a bustling metropolis, surrounded by doting women, far from his paper, the trees, and the rush of a great, dark river. He had come into the world on an arid coast in the prosperous city of Trujillo and he would leave it on the same coast, in Lima, the teeming capital of the Spanish American continent, but his days would spool out in a greener place, in an uncharted corner of the universe, in a life marked by chance and destiny. How could his mother have guessed—when she sent him from one city to another to pursue an education—that he would go on to spend the better part of his life in the Amazon jungle? Even as a child, in the grip of a vivid imagination, he had not dreamed of so far-fetched a possibility. It wasn't until his eighteenth year, as he waited for a streetcar to take him down Avenida Tacna to Lima's School of Engineers, that he recognized his fate in the window of the SKF Company sales office.

The display was simple, showing the full range of the product for which the SKF Company was famous. Three trays lined in icy blue satin cradled the highly polished spheres in graduated sizes, ranging in neat rows from left to right—from the first, which was the diameter of a walnut, to the last, no larger than the head of a fruit fly. A metal plaque, painted blue and white, made the following assurances: *SKF. Swedish ball bearings. For the discriminating engineer.*

Victor had always wanted to be an engineer: a builder of mills, a virtuoso of machinery, a maestro of paper. Even as a child, he had carefully snipped bits of paper from family letters, gathered up litter from city streets, tucked his loot into his pockets, feeling the nap with his fingers. He began to delight in making paper—cooking it in his mother's kitchen, rolling it into sheets in the servants' quarters, hanging it in the bathrooms to dry. For as long as he could remember, he had been fascinated by the stuff. He had come to the School of Engineers in Lima with all the appetite of an obsessive, and now he was learning the science of it: the chemistry of parchment; the physics of its manufacture; the design and production of machines, down to the tiniest of components. *Swedish ball bearings.*

Each morning, Victor would hurry from his room on the fourth floor of a student hostel to arrive early for the streetcar so that he could study the smooth steel orbs, laid out like glittering moonstones. From time to time the old sales agent, whose name—RODRIGO URRUTIA, INGENIERO—was inscribed on the window, would lift his owlish eyes and register the boy: tall, gangly, sallow, a mass of untended curls like an amber halo, a sharp jaw with a scattering of unshaven hair. As weeks passed, the old man would set out other inducements: replicas of bridges, puzzles of pyramids, brochures of engineering feats in faraway places, fanciful inventions. One such invention became the object of considerable fascination for Victor, who had little to occupy him save his books, his studies, and Señor Urrutia's displays. The miraculous device appeared one morning in the window, flanked by two panels of cardboard, with a sign printed in neat calligraphy: URRUTIA'S PERPETUAL-MOTION MACHINE.

It consisted of a tiny train track—the sort sold in toy shops alongside railroad cars made by Gilbert or Hornsby or Marklin, imported miniatures for rich men with mechanical fancies. The track was set out in a perfect circle, a catena of curved segments on a pitched rectangle of wood. A Ping-Pong ball painted silver sped around it, skimming the rail. Around and around the track it went—in the morning, as Victor awaited the streetcar, and into the night, as he slouched home under the weight of his books. Day after day, week after week, Victor stood in front of that office on the Avenida Garcilaso de la Vega and pondered how a ball could travel in circles with nothing to secure or propel it. He

would make a point of coming at odd times—on Sundays, when the office was closed—but the ball was always in motion. Once, he slipped out of his hostel at two in the morning, thinking he would take it by surprise, but there it was, even at that hour, riding an infinite circuit.

One day, as he peered through the SKF window, his eyes fell on the engineer at the worktable. Hunched over a precision scale, pincers poised, Señor Urrutia was weighing the tiniest of his steel balls and placing them carefully into marked boxes. Just then, a fat fly lifted off his shoulder, circled his bald head, bounced off the gooseneck lamp, and made straight for the window. But a most extraordinary thing happened. As it flew over the old man's invention, the fly suddenly spun off course and reeled into quick retreat. What caused that radical change of direction? Victor stepped to the right of the window and then to the left, pressing his head against the glass, trying to see behind the panels that flanked the track. All at once, he understood Señor Urrutia's genius. The racing ball wasn't self-propelled at all—that was the brilliance of the illusion. Behind the left panel, just beyond view, sat a fan. Victor couldn't picture it, couldn't see it, but he knew it was there. A rush of air was driving the ball, and the fly had flown into the current. The physics was elementary: What had applied to the fly in an instant was meant to apply endlessly to the ball. The pitch of the platform, the vector of wind, the velocity of flow, were such that the ball was pushed with enough momentum to loop the full length of the track.

The young man snorted with satisfaction. He put his hands on his hips and surveyed the shop, looking for Señor Urrutia, but his eyes fixed on something else, every bit as compelling as the bug and the ball. A large poster loomed over the old man's worktable, pinned flat against the wall by four shiny tacks. It was the black-and-white photograph of a massive house fashioned entirely from metal. The iron structure rose from the dirt so that the gleaming columns and bolted walls seemed to jut from nature. A veranda ran the full length of the second floor, girding the house like an ornate bracelet. Standing in front of that monument to modernity was a rain forest Indian, naked in all essentials except for the feathers that sprang from his head and the paint that rib-boned his chest. From his wrists, knees, and ankles hung little fringes of straw. Beneath the photograph was a caption, printed in bold block

letters: AFTER THE SUCCESS OF HIS FAMOUS TOWER, GUSTAVE EIFFEL DESIGNED AND CONSTRUCTED THIS IRON HOUSE FOR THE 1898 PARIS EXHIBITION. TODAY, IT GRACES THE CAPITAL OF THE AMAZON. And in smaller print, barely legible at that distance: *If Paris can come to Iquitos, so can you, intrepid voyager!*

Victor had never really studied the inside of the shop, so fascinated had he been by its window, but now he found himself transfixed by the poster, as streetcars rushed past behind him, as the fat fly paced the veranda of Monsieur Eiffel's magnificent construction like a haughty, impatient guest. He wondered at the audacity of it: How could that iron behemoth have been built in a primitive jungle? How could technology have penetrated that distant beyond?

As he stood there, lost in contemplation, Señor Urrutia appeared before him, rapped his bony knuckles on the glass, and startled the youth from his reverie. The old engineer pointed sharply toward the avenue. At least a dozen trolleys had rattled by on Garcilaso de la Vega, headed for his school and the Plaza de San Martín. Victor smiled politely and nodded, then took a deep breath, puffed out his cheeks, blew, and pointed to the perpetual-motion machine. Señor Urrutia seemed surprised—even offended—drawing himself to his full height and clutching the lapels of his suit. But then the old man's features softened. He put a finger to his lips and winked.

Victor Sobrevilla Paniagua returned to that window in the following days, not to study the ball's barely perceptible variations of speed as it whirled around the track, but to look at the photograph of Eiffel's triumph in the Amazon. There was something about the way the house fastened to land—something about the Indian's shining eyes that made the three-story structure behind him magical. He came again and again, barely glancing at the ball, even after Señor Urrutia had replaced it with another invention: a mechanical robot that plucked steel balls from a box labeled CANNON FODDER and dropped them, one by one, onto a miniature roller coaster. The balls slid up and down, around and around the delicate bearings until they came clacking back again. A neatly printed sign in front of the new display read NAPOLEON'S ARMORY. But, as much as that gadget might have inspired other fantasies, it did not engage Victor's imagination. He returned day after day to reread the

words on the wall—*iron house, capital of the Amazon, intrepid voyager*—until, one morning, Señor Urrutia became so irritated at Victor's lack of interest in Napoleon's armory that, as the boy mounted the steps of the streetcar, the old man yanked the poster from the wall, tacks flying. "Insufferable boy!" he yelled. When Victor walked past the shop on his way home that night, he saw Eiffel's palace in a rumpled heap in the corner.

It didn't matter. By then, Victor had learned all he could about the Iron House in the library at the School of Engineers. Its history had been well documented. Anselmo del Aguila, a rubber baron in the Peruvian interior who wanted to flaunt his new wealth, had bought it from Eiffel himself before the turn of the century. He had had it dismantled, every wall plate and crossbeam crated with corresponding nuts and bolts, packed with detailed drawings, and shipped on a slow boat to Lisbon. From there, the boat had crossed the Atlantic and navigated into the mouth of the Rio Amazonas, past Brazil's Ilha Grande de Gurupa, toward the great jungle city of Manaus. Reloaded onto three barges, for its weight was prodigious, the metal house had crossed into Peruvian territory and pressed on toward Iquitos, where it was reconstructed on cleared land in the heart of the Amazon forest. The rain forest Indians had never seen land free of trees, much less anything like that three-thousand-ton structure. How could they appreciate the generations of science that had built it? Even Victor, who had studied under Peru's distinguished engineers for more than a year now, struggled to understand the magnitude of such a feat.

In his single-minded pursuit of that understanding, Victor Sobrevilla Paniagua learned a good deal about the Amazon: The river was the heart and blood of the jungle. There were no roads, no rails—water was the only byway, and the dense green walls of the rain forest the only landscape a navigator could see. Under that towering canopy, man was just another animal. Tapping the jungle's treasures demanded ingenuity. Surviving the jungle's perils was a bold game of chance.

He wanted to go there. More than his obligation to return to his family in Trujillo, the allure of the Amazon, the notion that to build there was to best any engineer in Paris, began to consume him. Eventually, he

found the initiative to stride into Señor Urrutia's sales office and offer to buy the crumpled poster. But the old engineer scratched his head, shrugged his shoulders, and said, "Too late, boy. The ragman already relieved me of it." He pointed to a photograph of a black Model T unveiled at the St. Louis Exhibition. Although Victor admired Henry Ford's automobile, it could not erase the image of the house. He longed to stand in a place untouched by man—more remote than Iquitos—and, despite all adversity, raise leviathans out of the earth.

His professors encouraged him. Doctor Laroza, an engineer who had studied in Paris and designed a factory in Marseilles, began guiding him to miracles of construction erected in the most merciless of environments: The Inca fortress at Sacsayhuaman, made of one-hundred-ton boulders that had been transported—no one knew how—across the cordillera of the Andes, then cut and fit perfectly, with no evidence of mortar. Egypt's Great Pyramid of Khufu, a tower of stone perched on acres and acres of treacherous sand. Nebuchadnezzar's spectacular gate of Ishtar, built on the ashes of Assyrian plunder. The Rajputana dam in the pastoral fields of India, the first of its size, constructed entirely of marble.

Little by little, Victor Sobrevilla Paniagua began to realize that he could merge dreams with ambition—combine his passion for paper with a desire to build marvels in the jungle. "Why not?" his teachers exclaimed when the student expressed his idea tentatively. "Of course paper can be milled in the jungle!" "There's water, isn't there? And trees!" "There's no challenge on earth a well-trained engineer can't overcome!"

The idea seemed so logical. The Amazon was rich in cellulose, possibly the only land on the planet so extravagantly endowed with botanical possibility. He began to read everything he could on the subject: from the colonial diaries of Padre Abad to the travelogues of adventurers who had combed its tributaries, hunting cannibals. Victor had listened to any anecdote a professor might offer, pored over rude maps published in travel journals, scoured museums for any mention of the river's extremities—the Ucayali, Urubamba, and Palcazu.

Four years later, in 1913, when he graduated from the School of Engineers, the genial young man secured an apprenticeship with Emilio

Calderón, a papermaker with a factory just north of Lima's port of Callao, where he saw, for the first time, the concrete realities of his destiny: the grinders and threshers that broke down the fiber, the boilers that dissolved the wood into pulp, the beaters that whipped that paste into a fine pudding, the metal screens, the Fourdrinier shakers, the felt belts, and the cylindrical calenders that ironed the wet mass into crisp, dry sheets. As it happened, Emilio Calderón told him, his cousin Gabriel ran a modest paper establishment in the interior. By the time the warm season was over and the *garua* slipped into Lima, choking the capital with a thick gray fog, Victor was making his way to Quillabamba, a highland town on the brow of the jungle.

Scraping together the money he had earned, and with a small stipend from Gabriel Calderón, he took a boat from the port of Callao to Mollendo. He walked the rough rock of those southern beaches for a day, marveling at the dense clouds of migratory gulls that cast long, melancholy shadows on the sea. There was nothing to tempt him save a clutch of drunken hags who serenaded him from the porch of a tumbledown whorehouse as if they were mermaids beckoning Ulysses. He waved at them and grinned, but turned his back and rode the rails to Arequipa, stopping for an afternoon before he boarded the rails to Cusco. He lurched along in the company of noisy villagers, gripping his seat as the iron snake coiled across the spine of the Andes. By the second morning he could see the snowcapped peak of Nevado Ampato in the distance, piercing the turquoise sky. The train took a sharp turn at Lake Titicaca and, as it roared past, Andean geese skittered away in alarm, stippling the calm water with their feet.

For the first time in his life, Victor encountered serranos, tiny Indians with huge barrel chests who swarmed on at every station, peddling their boiled corn, peanut candies, skewered meats—tugging his sleeve and pressing their goods on him with such heartrending sweetness that he hardly noticed how many coins he was giving them. By the time he reached Cusco, he barely had money for a bed in an inn and a mule for the remainder of the journey. After a sleepless night on a fetid mattress, thinking his heart would burst from the altitude, the innkeeper, a kindly Aymara, took pity and waived the fee. He accompanied Victor through the cobblestone streets, held his elbow to steady

him, and pointed the way to a hovel with a corral, where a mule driver was feeding his animals. By the end of the following day, Victor Sobrevilla Paniagua had made the one-hundred-kilometer descent from the Andes to the Amazon on the back of an ancient donkey—marking the trajectory of snow as it melts, then rushes, from the hyaline of the nevada to the warm, damp gills of the jungle.

In Quillabamba, Victor mastered the paper trade. By the time he was twenty-two, he was chief engineer of Gabriel Calderón's factory. By the time he was twenty-three, Victor Sobrevilla was standing before an altar exchanging vows with Mariana Francisco Paredes. She was long-legged, large-breasted, with a pretty face and a striking secret deformity. That same year she delivered their first child. The baby was obstinate and ornery, flinging one arm into the birth canal, refusing to move her head into position. Although, in the midst of that crisis, Mariana had the Christian fortitude to pull out her rosary and her prayer cards, the midwife called for a rain forest medicine man to help with the labor. The witchman took one look at the failing mother and immediately understood the situation. He pushed a smooth gray stone into her vagina until it touched the baby's fingers, then mumbled a prayer to the owl spirit who governs all matters of the head. Within an hour, the child responded. She pushed out the stone, making it roll from her mother's labia as cunningly as any ball in Señor Urrutia's shop window. The next thing they saw was a plump little fist, followed by an arm, and then the round dome of her head, launching toward life like a warrior.

The witchman was all happiness, crying out with the mother as she flung her arms wide to praise the sainted Virgin. That was when he saw the accumulation of flesh that dangled from Doña Mariana's underarm—a strange growth that looked for all the world like a hand with five fingers, except that it had no bone. The medicine man pointed to the monstrosity, his face twisted in terror, but she only shook it at him and grinned as if it were a fringe on a mantilla. When he took his magic stone and ran off, chattering incomprehensibly, Victor and Mariana Sobrevilla could only laugh, so delighted were they at the sight of their magnificent daughter, who gazed back with intelligent eyes. Victor suggested they name her Belén, because the word meant

Bethlehem as well as bedlam and therefore captured the spirit of the moment. Mariana smiled radiantly and agreed.

Their second child was born two years later, just as Victor, who had transformed the Calderón factory into a model of efficiency, was offered an opportunity to realize his dream. The grandson of an American railroad tycoon, a jolly, rum-loving playboy named William Randolph Meiggs, had decided on a hunch to grow sugar in the Amazon and ship it downriver to Brazil. Hearing about the brisk production of the factory in Quillabamba, which was making paper out of hemp and sugar cane, and about the young engineer who had made a name there, he decided to call on Victor Sobrevilla Paniagua in person. Meiggs explained to Victor that he was looking for an adventuresome man willing to oversee the construction of a sugar factory in Pucallpa, a town on the banks of the Ucayali River he knew someday would be the terminus of a highway from Lima. As Victor and Mariana sat with the bibulous American on their sunny patio and raised a third glass of añejo, her water broke. She ran to the bedroom, calling for the maid to go fetch the midwife, and Meiggs tottered giddily away—but not before shaking Victor's hand and handing him a fat wad of cash.

Another female child was born that night, presenting her own complications. The baby was perched on her mother's cervix, pressing her head against the maternal heart. The midwife was helpless to do anything about it. Needing no further motivation, Victor went running for the witchman. He found him standing in front of his hut, hacking a long green arm from a giant sansevieria plant. Recalling the woman with the growth on her underarm, the Indian refused to come at first, but the young father seemed so distraught that he relented, bringing a sprig of *uña de gato* to ward off the evil eye.

The medicine man danced at the foot of the mother's bed and rattled a gourd strung with eight beaded skeins that symbolized the eight legs of a spider. When the child pushed into life, she came hips first, and two lemony limbs flopped from her mother's gates so nimbly that the midwife was able to use them as tidy handles. The shaman brimmed with joy, leaping up and down like a cat, proclaiming the baby a natural-born dancer. Mariana, weary by now of the Indian's antics,

and feeling that the pressure of the girl's head had taken a toll on her heart, drew herself up and leaned her head on her husband's chest. When he looked into her face and said, "Such an agile child, *querida*, should be given a graceful name," she sighed and whispered, "Graciela!"

The births of Belén and Graciela taught Victor Sobrevilla Paniagua something about rain forest magic. He was sure that the little gray stone and the gourd with eight legs had eased his wife's labors, although he couldn't see how. Perhaps, as with Señor Urrutia's perpetual-motion machine, an explanation lurked in the wings. Events only seemed miraculous—one had to look for the science behind them. The witchman's medicine worked. Unruly babies were born. An unaided ball flew impossibly around a track. Someday he would trace all these circuits and see the truth of the world clearly.

Their third and youngest child was born six years later, when the little family had already settled in Pucallpa. Mariana braced herself for a difficult labor and, because she continued to be a good Christian, because she put no faith in rain forest medicine, she took out her prayer cards again and propped them on the bed table so that the saints could see her through the ordeal. She climbed into her big brass bed, a hulking piece of furniture Victor himself had designed. (The metalworker had adorned it with such a multitude of shiny knobs that it looked, for all the world, like a monument to ball bearings.) When Mariana announced she was ready to deliver, Victor rushed down the road, elbows swinging, to look for both midwife and witchman. He came back with the first, but not the second, which relieved his wife but launched him on a long chain of worry. When a boy was born easily—headfirst and smiling—Victor understood that good fortune came not only with stones and skeins but with the prayers of Christian believers. The magic might be a saint's card, it might be an object proffered by a witchman, but from that day forward, he thought of all grace as one.

The child was handsome, a thatch of black hair on his large, proud head. He exited his mother easily, slipping into mortality like a well-oiled fish. His umbilical cord was looped around his ankles so that when he slid into the midwife's hands he brought his afterbirth with him as swiftly as a freight train, with a little caboose behind. When Maruca the Gypsy heard of it—for Graciela, her dance pupil, was six by

then and a gossipy little girl—the gypsy joggled her bangles and proclaimed Jaime destined to escape a difficult fortune: A baby who left no trace in his mother's belly would grow into a man who could fool the gods.

Victor and Mariana named him after the sturdy saint who was said to be the brother of Jesus. Jaime's sunny good humor so pleased his father that he hardly noticed the physical change in his wife. Mariana often said she hoped to rival Victor's mother by bringing eleven strong lives into the world, but, for all the connubial joy in their big brass bed, the boy with the ready smile was its last filial consequence. She would bear no more children.

Mariana Francisco Paredes de Sobrevilla made up for it. She invested the mothering of eleven children into her population of three. And just as surely as she raised a fine, God-fearing family in the wild splendor of the jungle, her husband raised a metal behemoth from the bare earth of Pucallpa. He fulfilled the brash vision inspired at Señor Urrutia's window; he brought technology to the distant beyond. And he satisfied William Randolph Meiggs's every whim.

By the time Jaime was four and Graciela and Belén were ten and twelve respectively, the factory in Pucallpa was a whirling fount of sugar, shipping its sweetness as far away as Arequipa. But his dream of building a paper factory in the jungle persisted. By the time Jaime was five, Don Victor built a separate structure that made paper from cetico, a slender tree whose roots had the power to purify rainwater. The people of Pucallpa were stunned to see a tree they revered emerge from the other end of his factory in dry rolls of paper. Victor Sobrevilla Paniagua became known along the Ucayali as "the shapechanger," a man who could transform one earthly substance into another.

When Jaime turned six, a great depression ripped through America, and William Randolph Meiggs, now bankrupt, drifted out on his yacht from a port in Rhode Island and drove a steel bullet into his brain. Shortly thereafter, the shapechanger, who answered now only to God and dreams of the impossible, decided to take the orphaned factory downriver, deeper into the jungle—to somewhere between Pucallpa and Iquitos, to an uncharted place where the caoba, the stately mahogany trees, grew in proliferation. He dismantled all of Mr. Meiggs's machinery—the threshers,