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## Carlos Fuentes

(b. 1928)

Born in Mexico City to a career-diplomat father, Carlos Fuentes was educated at the National University of Mexico where he received an L.L.B. and in Switzerland where he was a graduate student at the Institute des Hautes Etudes Internationales. A prolific Mexican novelist, short-story writer, playwright, and critic, he has served his country in several political and cultural capacities as well. Beginning as a member of the International Labor Organization in Geneva, Switzerland, he became secretary of its Mexican delegation in 1950. Later, in Mexico City, he served as an administrator at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as secretary and assistant director of the cultural department of the National University of Mexico, and in 1975 was appointed Mexico's ambassador to France. He has taught literature and creative writing at the University of Mexico, University of California at San Diego, University of Concepcion in Chile, University of Paris, University of Pennsylvania, and Columbia University. Among his honors are a Centro Mexicano de Escritores Fellowship, a Woodrow Wilson Institute for Scholars Fellowship, and the Romulo Gallegos Prize for *Terra Nostra*. In discussing his preoccupation with Mexican history during an interview, Fuentes has commented:

Pablo Neruda used to say that every Latin American writer goes around dragging a heavy body, the body of his people, of his past, of his national history. We have to assimilate the enormous weight of our past so that we will not forget what gives us life. If you forget your past, you die.

Among Fuentes' novels that have been translated are *Where the Air is Clear* (Ivan Obolensky, 1960), *The Good Conscience* (Ivan Obolensky, 1961), *The Death of Artemio Cruz* (Farrar, Straus, 1964), *Aura* (Farrar, Straus, 1965), *A Change of Skin* (Farrar, Straus, 1968), *Holy Place* (Dutton, 1972), *Terra Nostra* (Farrar, Straus, 1976), *Hydra Head* (Farrar, Straus, 1978), *Distant Relations* (Farrar, Straus, 1982), *Old Gringo* (Harper & Row, 1986), and *Christopher Unborn* (Farrar, Straus, 1989). A number of his short stories are collected in *Burnt Water* (Farrar, Straus, 1980).

## THE COST OF LIVING

To Fernando Benítez

Salvador Renteria arose very early. He ran across the roof terrace. He did not light the water heater but simply removed his shorts. The needling drops felt good to him. He rubbed himself with a towel and returned to the room. From the bed Ana asked him whether he wanted any breakfast. Salvador said he'd get a cup of coffee somewhere. The woman had been two weeks in bed and her gingerbread-colored face had grown thin. She asked Salvador whether there was a message from the office, and he placed a cigarette between his lips and said that they wanted her to come in person to sign.

Ana sighed and said: "How do they expect me to do that?"

"I told them you couldn't right now, but you know how they are."

"What did the doctor tell you?"

He threw the unsmoked cigarette through the broken pane in the window and ran his fingers over his mustache and his temples. Ana smiled and leaned back against the

tin bedstead. Salvador sat beside her and took her hand and told her not to worry, that soon she would be able to go back to work. They sat in silence, staring at the wooden wardrobe, the large box that held tools and provisions, the electric oven, the washstand, the piles of old newspapers. Salvador kissed his wife's hand and went out of the room to the terrace. He went down the service stairs and then crossed through the patios on the ground floor, smelling the medley of cooking odors from the other rooms in the rooming house. He picked his way among skates and dogs and went out into the street. He entered a store that occupied what had formerly been the garage to the house, and the elderly shopkeeper told him that *Life en Español* hadn't arrived yet, and he continued to move from stand to stand, unlocking padlocks.

He pointed to a stand filled with comic books and said: "Maybe you should take another magazine for your wife. People get bored stuck in bed."

Salvador left. In the street a gang of kids were shooting off cap pistols, and behind them a man was driving some goats from pasture. Salvador ordered a liter of milk from him and told him to take it up to number 12. He stuck his hands in his pockets and walked backward, almost trotting, so as not to miss the bus. He jumped onto the moving bus and searched for thirty centavos in his jacket pocket, then sat down to watch the cypresses, houses, iron-grilles, and dusty streets of San Francisco Xocotitla pass by. The bus ran alongside the train tracks and across the bridge at Nonoalco. Steam was rising from the rails. From his wooden seat, Salvador saw the provision-laden trucks coming into the city. At Manuel Gonzalez, an inspector got on to tear the tickets in half, and Salvador got off at the next corner.

He walked to his father's house by way of Vallejo. He crossed the small patch of dry grass and opened the door. Clemencia said hello and Salvador asked whether his old man was up and around yet, and Pedro Rentería stuck his head around the curtain that separated the bedroom from the tiny living room and said: "What an early bird! Wait for me. I just got up."

Salvador ran his hands over the backs of the chairs. Clemencia was dusting the rough pine table and then

took a cloth and pottery plates from the glass-front cupboard. She asked how Anita was and adjusted her bosom beneath the flowered robe.

"A little better."

"She must need someone to look after her. If only she didn't act so uppity . . ."

They exchanged glances and then Salvador looked at the walls stained by water that had run down from the roof. He pushed aside the curtain and went into the messy bedroom. His father was cleaning the soap from his face. Salvador put an arm around his father's shoulders and kissed him on the forehead. Pedro pinched his stomach. They looked at each other in the mirror. They looked alike, but the father was more bald and curly-haired, and he asked what Salvador was doing out and about at this hour, and Salvador said he couldn't come later, that Ana was very sick and wasn't going to be able to work all month and that they needed money. Pedro shrugged his shoulders and Salvador said he wasn't going to ask for money.

"What I thought was that you might be able to talk to your boss; he might have something for me. Some kind of work."

"Well, yes, maybe so. Help me with these suspenders."

"It's just . . . well, look, I'm not going to be able to make it this month."

"Don't worry. Something will come along. Let me see if I can think of something."

Pedro belted his pants and picked up the chauffeur's cap from the night table. He embraced Salvador and led him to the table. He sniffed the aroma of the eggs Clemencia set before them in the center of the table.

"Help yourself, Chava, son. I'd sure like to help you. But, you know, Clemencia and I live pretty close to the bone, even if I do get my lunch and supper at the boss's house. If it wasn't for that . . . I was born poor and I'll die poor. Now, you've got to realize that if I begin asking personal favors, Don José being as tough as he is, then I'll have to pay them back somehow, and so long raise. Believe me, Chava, I need to get that two hundred and fifty out of him every payday."

He prepared a mouthful of tortilla and hot sauce and lowered his voice.

"I know how much you respect your mother, and I, well, it goes without saying . . . But this business of keeping two houses going when we could all live together and save one rent . . . Okay, I didn't say a word. But now, tell me, why aren't you living with your in-laws?"

"You know what Doña Concha's like. At me all day about how Ana was born for this and Ana was born for that. You know that's why we moved out."

"So, if you want your independence, you'll have to work your way. Don't worry. I'll think of something."

Clemencia wiped her eyes with the corner of her apron and sat down between father and son.

"Where are the kids?" she asked.

"With Ana's parents," Salvador replied. "They're going to stay there awhile, while she's getting better."

Pedro said he had to take his boss to Acapulco. "If you need anything, come to Clemencia. I've got it! Go see Juan Olmedo. He's an old buddy of mine and he has a fleet of taxis. I'll call him and tell him you're coming."

Salvador kissed his father's hand and left.

Salvador opened the frosted-glass door and entered a reception room in which a secretary and an accountant were sitting in a room with steel furniture, a typewriter, and an adding machine. He told the secretary who he was and she went into Señor Olmedo's private office and then asked him to come in. Olmedo was a very small, thin man; they sat down in leather chairs facing a low, glass-topped table with photographs of banquets and ceremonies beneath the glass. Salvador told Olmedo he needed work to augment his teacher's salary and Olmedo began to leaf through some large black notebooks.

"You're in luck," he said, scratching his sharp-pointed, hair-filled ear. "There's a very good shift here from seven to twelve at night. There are lots of guys after this job, because I protect my men." He slammed the big book shut. "But since you're the son of my old friend Pedrito, well, I'm going to give it to you. You can begin today. If you work hard, you can get up to twenty pesos a day."

For a few seconds, Salvador heard only the *tac-tac-tac*

of the adding machine and the rumble of cars along 20 de Noviembre Avenue. Olmedo said he had to go out and asked Salvador to come with him. They descended in the elevator without speaking, and when they reached the street, Olmedo warned him that he must start the meter every time a passenger stopped to do an errand, because there was always some knothead who would carry his passenger all over Mexico City on one fare. He took him by the elbow and they went into the Department of the Federal District and up the stairs and Olmedo continued, telling him not to let just anyone get in.

"A stop here, a stop there, and the first thing you know you've gone clear from the Villa to Pedregal on a fare of one-fifty. Make them pay each time!"

Olmedo offered some gumdrops to a secretary and asked her to show him into the boss's office. The secretary thanked him for the candy and went into the boss's private office and Olmedo joked with the other employees and invited them to have a few beers on Saturday and a game of dominoes.

Salvador shook hands with Olmedo and thanked him, and Olmedo said: "Is your license in order? I don't want any trouble with Transit. You show up this evening, before seven. Ask for Toribio, he's in charge of dispatch. He'll tell you which car is yours. Remember! None of those one-peso stops; they chew up your doors. And none of that business of several stops on one fare. The minute the passenger steps out of the car, even to spit, you ring it up again. Say hello to your old man."

He looked at the Cathedral clock. It was eleven. He walked awhile along Merced and amused himself looking at the crates filled with tomatoes, oranges, squash. He sat down to smoke in the plaza, near some porters who were drinking beer and looking through the sports pages. After a time he was bored and walked toward San Juan de Letrán. A girl was walking ahead of him. A package fell from her arms and Salvador hurried to pick it up, and the girl smiled at him and thanked him.

Salvador pressed her arm and said: "Shall we have a lemonade?"

"Excuse me, señor, I'm not in the habit . . ."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be fresh."

The girl continued walking ahead of him with short hurried steps. She waggled her hips beneath a white skirt. She looked in the shop windows out of the corner of her eyes. Salvador followed her at a distance. Then she stopped at an ice-cream cart and asked for a strawberry ice and Salvador stepped forward to pay and she smiled and thanked him. They went into a soft-drink stand and sat on a bench and ordered two apple juices. She asked him what he did and he asked her to guess and began to shadowbox and she said he must be a boxer and he laughed and told her he'd trained as a boy in the City Leagues but that actually he was a teacher. She told him she worked in the box office of a movie theater. She moved her arm and turned over the bottle of juice and they both laughed a lot.

They took a bus together. They did not speak. He took her hand and they got off across from Chapultepec Park. Automobiles were moving slowly through the streets in the park. There were many convertibles filled with young people. Many women passed by, dragging, embracing, or propelling children. The children were licking ice-cream sticks and clouds of cotton candy. They listened to the whistles of the balloon salesman and the music of a band in the bandstand. The girl told him she liked to guess the occupations of the people walking in Chapultepec. She laughed and pointed: black jacket or open-necked shirts, leather shoes or sandals, cotton skirt or sequined blouse, striped jersey, patent-leather heels: she said they were a carpenter, an electrician, a clerk, a tax assessor, a teacher, a servant, a huckster. They arrived at the lake and rented a boat. Salvador took off his jacket and rolled up his sleeves. The girl trailed her fingers in the water and closed her eyes. Salvador quietly whistled a few melodies as he rowed. He stopped and touched the girl's knee. She opened her eyes and rearranged her skirt. They returned to the dock and she said she had to go home to eat. They made a date to see each other the next evening at eleven, when the ticket booth closed.

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He went into Kilo's and looked for his friends among the linoleum-topped, tubular-legged tables. He saw from a distance the blind man, Macario; and went to sit with him. Macario asked him to put a coin in the jukebox, and after a while Alfredo arrived and they ordered chicken tacos with guacamole, and beer, and listened to the song that was playing: "Ungrateful woman, she went away and left me, must have been for someone more a man than me." They did what they always did: recalled their adolescence and talked about Rosa and Remedios, the prettiest girls in the neighborhood. Macario urged them on. Alfredo said that the young kids today were really tough, carrying knives and all that. Not them. When you looked back on everything, they had really been pretty dumb. He remembered when the gang from the Poly challenged them to a game of soccer just to be able to kick them around and the whole thing ended in a scrap there on the empty lot on Mirto Street, and Macario had shown up with a baseball bat and the guys from Poly were knocked for a loop when they saw how the blind man clobbered them with a baseball bat. Macario said that was when everyone had accepted him as a buddy, and Salvador said that more than anything else it had been because of those faces he made, turning his eyes back in his head and pulling his ears back; it was enough to bust you up laughing. Macario said the one dying of laughter was him, because ever since he'd been ten years old his daddy had told him not to worry, that he'd never have to work, that the soap factory was finally going well, so Macario had devoted himself to cultivating his physique to be able to defend himself. He said that the radio had been his school and he'd gotten his jokes and his imitations from it. Then they recalled their buddy Raimundo and fell silent for a while and ordered more beer and Salvador looked toward the street and said that he and Raimundo always walked home together at night during exam time, and on the way back to their houses Raimundo asked him to explain algebra to him and then they stopped for a moment on the corner of Sullivan and Ramón Guzmán before going their own ways, and Raimundo would say: "You know something? I'm scared to go past this block. Here where our neighborhood



ends. Farther on, I don't know what's going on. You're my buddy and that's why I'm telling you. I swear, I'm scared to go past this block."

And Alfredo recalled how when he graduated his family had given him an old car and they had all gone on a great celebration, making the rounds of the cheap nightclubs in the city. They had been very drunk and Raimundo said that Alfredo didn't know how to drive and began to struggle to take the wheel from Alfredo and the car had almost turned over at a traffic island on the Reforma and Raimundo said he was going to throw up, and the door flew open and Raimundo fell to the street and broke his neck.

They paid their bill and said goodbye.

He taught his three afternoon classes, and when he finished his fingers were stained with chalk from drawing the map of the republic on the blackboard. When the session was over and the children had left, he walked among the desks and sat down at the last bench. The single light bulb hung from a long cord. He sat and looked at the areas of color indicating mountains, tropical watersheds, deserts, and the plateau. He never had been a good draftsman: Yucatán was too big, Baja California too short. The classroom smelled of sawdust and leather bookbags. Cristobal, the fifth-grade teacher, looked in the door and said: "What's new?"

Salvador walked toward the blackboard and erased the map with a damp rag. Cristobal took out a package of cigarettes and they smoked, and the floor creaked as they fitted the pieces of chalk in their box. They sat down to wait, and after a while the other teachers came in and then the director, Durán.

The director sat on the lecture platform chair and the rest of them sat at the desks and the director looked at them with his black eyes and they all looked at him, the dark face and the blue shirt and maroon tie. The director said that no one was dying of hunger and that everyone was having a hard time and the teachers became angry and one said that he punched tickets on a bus after teaching two sessions and another said that he worked every night in a sandwich shop on Santa María la Redonda and another that he had set up a little shop with his savings

and he had only come for reasons of solidarity. Durán told them they were going to lose their seniority, their pensions, and, if it came to that, their jobs, and asked them not to leave themselves unprotected. Everyone rose and they all left, and Salvador saw that it was already six-thirty and he ran out to the street, cut across through the traffic, and hopped on a bus.

He got off in the Zócalo and walked to Olmedo's office. Toribio told him that the car he was going to drive would be turned in at seven, and to wait awhile. Salvador closed himself in the dispatch booth and opened a map of the city. He studied it, then folded it and corrected his arithmetic notebooks.

"Which is better? To cruise around the center of the city or a little farther out?" he asked Toribio.

"Well, away from the center you can go faster, but you also burn more gasoline. Remember, *you* pay for the gas."

Salvador laughed. "Maybe I'll pick up a gringo at one of the hotels, a big tipper."

"Here comes your car," Toribio said to him from the booth.

"Are you the new guy?" yelled the flabby driver manning the cab. He wiped the sweat from his forehead with a rag and got out of the car. "Here she is. Ease her into first or sometimes she jams. Close the doors yourself or they'll knock the shit out of 'em. Here she is, she's all yours."

Salvador sat facing the office and placed the notebooks in the door pocket. He passed the rag over the greasy steering wheel. The seat was still warm. He got out and ran the rag over the windshield. He got in again and arranged the mirror to his eye level. He drove off. He raised the flag. His hands were sweating. He took 20 de Noviembre Street. A man immediately stopped him and ordered him to take him to the Cosmos Theater.

The man got out in front of the theater and his friend Cristobal looked into the side window and said: "What a surprise." Salvador asked him what he was doing and Cristobal said he was going to Flores Carranza's printing shop on Ribera de San Cosme and Salvador offered to take him; Cristobal got into the taxi but said that it

wasn't to be a free ride for a buddy: he would pay. Salvador laughed and said that's all he needed. They talked about boxing and made a date to go to the Arena Mexico on Friday. Salvador told him about the girl he'd met that morning. Cristobal began talking about the fifth-grade students and they arrived at the printing plant, and Salvador parked and they got out. They entered through a narrow door and continued along a dark corridor. The printing office was in the rear and Señor Flores Carranza greeted them and Cristobal asked whether the broadsides were ready. The printer removed his visor and nodded and showed him the broadsides with red-and-black letters calling for a strike. The employees handed over the four packages. Salvador took two bundles and started ahead while Cristobal was paying the bill.

He walked down the long, dark corridor. In the distance, he heard the noise of automobiles along Ribera de San Cosme. Halfway along the corridor he felt a hand on his shoulder and someone said: "Take it easy, take it easy."

"Sorry," Salvador said. "It's very dark here."

"Dark? It's going to get black."

The man stuck a cigarette between his lips and smiled, but Salvador only said: "Excuse me." But the hand fell again on his shoulder and the fellow said he must be the only teacher who didn't know who *he* was, and Salvador began to get angry and said he was in a hurry and the fellow said: "The S.O.B., you know? That's me!"

Salvador saw that four cigarettes had been lighted at the mouth of the corridor, at the entrance to the building, and he hugged the bundles to his chest and looked behind him and another cigarette glowed before the entrance to the print shop.

"King S.O.B., the biggest fucking sonofabitch of 'em all, that's me. Don't tell me you never heard of *me!*" Salvador's eyes were becoming adjusted to the darkness and he could now see the man's hat and the hand taking one of the bundles.

"That's enough introduction, now. Give me the posters, teacher."

Salvador dislodged the hand and stepped back a few paces. The cigarette from the rear advanced. A humid

current filtered down the corridor at the height of his calves. Salvador looked around.

"Let me by."

"Let's have those flyers."

"Those flyers are going with me, buddy."

He felt the burning tip of the cigarette behind him close to his neck. Then he heard Cristobal's cry. He threw one package, and with his free arm smashed at the man's face. He felt the squashed cigarette and its burning point on his fist. And then he saw the red saliva-stained face coming closer. Salvador whirled with his fists closed and he saw the knife and then felt it in his stomach.

The man slowly withdrew the knife and snapped his fingers, and Salvador fell with his mouth open.

*Translated by Margaret Sayers Peden*