

THE BLACK

MINUTES



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Novel
by*

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The Black Minutes

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Martín Solares

Translation by Aura Estrada
and John Pluecker



Black Cat

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Residents of Paracuán, Tamaulipas

The Paracuán Police

- Rosa Isela, a beautiful girl doing her social service work at the Paracuán police headquarters
- Camarena and Rodrigo Columba: young graduates of the police academy
- Joaquín Taboada, El Travolta, current chief of Paracuán's municipal police
- Ramón Cabrera, also known as El Macetón (the Big Flowerpot)
- García, Taboada's predecessor
- Lolita, secretary
- Rufino Chávez aka El Chaneque (the Goblin): Taboada's right-hand man
- The forensic expert, Ramírez
- Jarquiel, El Profe (the Professor), police officer
- Wong, El Chino, police officer
- Salim, El Beduino (the Bedouin), police officer
- Zozaya, El Evangelista (the Evangelist), police officer
- Tiroloco (Crazyshot), police officer
- Mena, Gordolobo (Fatwolf), police officer
- Luis Calatrava, El Brujo (the Wizard), checkpoint guard
- Dr. Ridaura, forensic doctor and respected biology professor
- Vicente Rangel González, detective
- Jorge Romero, El Ciego (the Blind Man): Rangel's *madrina*, i.e., his lackey
- Emilio Nieto, El Chicote (the Whip), receptionist, prison guard, car washer, and courier
- Cruz Treviño, chief of the judicial police, previously a municipal police officer

The Locals

- Bernardo Blanco, a young journalist
- Don Rubén Blanco, Bernardo's father
- Johnny Guerrero, *nota roja* (crime-beat) reporter for *El Mercurio*
- La Chilanga, photographer
- René Luz de Dios López, imprisoned for killing four girls
- Fritz Tschanz, Jesuit priest
- His Holiness the bishop of Paracuán
- John Williams, influential businessman in the port, owner of Cola Drinks
- John Williams, Jr., called Jack
- Tobías Wolffer, local congressman

- Rodrigo Montoya, director of the Paracuán archives
-
- Lucilo Rivas, Bar León manager
 - Raúl Silva Santacruz, witness
 - Juan, El Chimuelo (Gaptooth) and Jorge, El Chaparro (Shorty), butchers
 - El Lobina, fisherman
 - Don Isaac Klein, restaurant owner
 - El Profeta (the Prophet), ice-cream vendor
 - Lucía Hernández Campillo, Inés Gómez Lobato, Karla Cevallos, Julia Concepción González, Daniela Torres, the victims of the Jackal

The Visitors

- Lieutenant Miguel Rivera González, legendary policeman from Paracuán
- Mr. Traven Torsvan, writer
- Dr. Alfonso Quiroz Cuarón, internationally renowned criminologist
- Rigo Tovar, singer
- El Rey de los Marcianos (the King of the Martians), alien
- Cormac McCormick, ex-detective for the FBI
- El Albino, crime-beat photographer

The Narcos

- El Chincualillo (the Little Pain), wholesale drug dealer
- El Cochiloco (the Crazy Pig), leader of the Colombians
- El Chato Rambal (the Flat-faced Rambal), head of the port cartel
- Vivar, the Paracuán cartel's lawyer
- Mr. Obregón, the Paracuán cartel's leader

The Politicos

- Licenciado Echaverreta, president of Mexico
- Juan José Churruca, government minister for the state of Tamaulipas
- José "Pepe" Topete, influential politician
- Daniel Torres Sabinas, Paracuán mayor at the end of the seventies
- Agustín Barbosa, Ciudad Madera's first opposition mayor
- Edelmiro Morales, leader of the professors' union in Tamaulipas

The Invaders

- The officers from the Federal Security Administration

I had the most important nightmare of my life so far while traveling in a bus down a highway flanked by pine trees. I haven't been able to figure out what it means, at least not entirely.

It was nighttime, but I couldn't sleep. Every time I started to nod off, the headlights of oncoming cars or the jolting of the bus jarred me awake. I knew I was finally asleep when I couldn't hear the engine drone anymore and the headlights turned soft and blue and stopped bothering me.

I was having a pleasant dream, one that was even, in certain respects, a musical one, when I sense that a sarcastic person, someone who knew me fairly well, had moved into the seat behind me. The visitor waited until I was used to his presence; then he uncrossed his legs, leaned forward, and, breathing down my neck, said:

*Isn't it true that in the life of
every man there are five
black minutes?*

The idea frightened me so much I woke up, and since there was no one in any of the seats around me, I spent the rest of the night drinking water, watching the moon, and trying to calculate if I'd already reached my quota of black minutes.

That's what I was doing when I pulled in to Paracuán.

BOOK ONE

**YOUR MEMORY
HAS A THOUSAND GAPS**

The first time he saw the journalist, he reckoned him to be twenty years old and he was wrong. The journalist, from his perspective, reckoned the plaid-shirted rancher to be around fifty, and he guessed right. They were both traveling south. The journalist was on his way from the United States, after quitting his job; the man in the plaid shirt was coming back from a job in the northern part of the state but he didn't say what it was. They knew they were getting into Mexico because the air on the bus was too thick to breathe.

When they crossed the Río Muerto, they saw a two-jeep convoy. As they got to Dos Cruces a pickup full of *judiciales* passed them, and at Seis Marias they ran into a checkpoint inspection by the Eighth Military Zone. A soldier with a lantern signaled the driver to pull over; the driver took the bus down a dirt road and stopped it in the beam of a huge floodlight, between two walls of sandbags. On the other side of the highway was a big canvas tent with a set of radar machines, and farther down three dozen soldiers were doing calisthenics. During the search of the bus, the journalist turned on his reading light and tried to read the only book he had with him, *The Spiritual Exercises* by St. Ignatius of Loyola, but just a minute into it he felt deeply uncomfortable and looked in the direction of the trenches. Just beneath him, behind the sandbags and the thicket of palm trees, two soldiers stared at him, full of resentment. He wouldn't have cared, if it weren't for the high-caliber machine guns they had trained on him. The rancher said he'd probably look the same, if he had to spend the night at the mercy of the mosquitoes, in hundred-degree heat, crouched behind a bunch of sandbags.

The inspection was carried out without incident. The sergeant who looked them over did it only out of duty and scrutinized the luggage lazily. Meanwhile, the young journalist took advantage of the wait to drink a yogurt, and he offered another to the rancher. In exchange, the fifty-year-old offered him some *pemoles*, the cornmeal cookies they eat in the Huasteca. The rancher asked if he was a student, the young man said no, he'd already finished his studies, in fact had even quit his first job, as a reporter for the *San Antonio Herald*. He was thinking of taking a year off and living down at the port, perhaps later he'd go back to Texas. He showed the rancher a picture of a blonde woman with her hair pulled back. The rancher remarked that she was very beautiful and said he shouldn't have left such a job. The journalist responded that he had his reasons.

The young man examined his fellow travelers: they looked to him like rough, uncultured types. There was the plaid-shirted rancher, shirttail untucked to hide his gun; a somber smoker, who traveled with a machete wrapped in newspaper; and, toward the back, one who seemed worst of all: a mustachioed giant who was eating oranges without peeling them. The young man was still looking them over when it came time for the second inspection.

Ever since he saw the pickups parked on the broken white line of the highway, he'd had the conviction that they would be rude and arrogant, but he hadn't guessed the half of it. They were pulled over by an officer with a walrus mustache, who raised his badge and his gun in the same hand. Behind him, the whole squadron was drinking beer, leaning against the trucks. They all wore dark glasses, even though it was not yet morning, and were dressed in black, despite the oppressive heat. For some reason their poise troubled him more than the arrival of the soldiers had. Keeping his devotional readings to himself, he thought merely, The world is so round and has so much room, and in it there are so many and such varied people. Soon enough he'd realize that the only thing pure about these souls was the white initials of the judicial police printed on their shirts.

The chief gave instructions, and a fat fellow climbed into the bus. He was followed by a kid with a AK-47. Neither of them was older than he was; the second didn't even shave yet. The journalist got

the impression that this was the first bus they'd searched in their lifetime. The fat man displayed his badge as if he were going to bless them with it and requested that nobody move: they'd be doing a routine inspection—though it didn't turn out that way for anyone.

He walked the length of the aisle and looked twice at the other passengers, as if he couldn't believe he detected so many wanted individuals. He was a fat man of little faith and didn't even think of hauling them in. Then he brought in a German shepherd that sniffed at them one by one. As soon as the dog was on the bus, the journalist noticed a stirring in the back. Without a doubt the smoker was concealing the machete, the rancher was hiding his gun, and the guy with the mustache was tossing something out the window. All in vain: it was an extremely intelligent dog. It went to the very back of the bus, passed all the other passengers without pausing or doubting once, and stopped in its tracks before the young man who was reading *The Spiritual Exercises*.

“Get off the bus!” the fat man ordered.

They took him off at gunpoint, they searched him as if he were a member of the Paracuán cartel, they mortified him with raunchy cursing, and when he said he was a member of the press they made him take off his jacket—ah, so you're a reporter—and searched him for drugs. Then they emptied his suitcase on a table and the fat man began to rummage. The tape recorder and clothing grabbed his attention, but what he liked most were the sunglasses. The journalist said he had an eye condition and needed to wear them on doctor's orders, but the agent took them anyway. The kid with the AK-47 opined aloud, “Fancy-ass little prick,” and spat in the direction of the journalist's shoes. The rest of them smiled.

“Here we go,” boasted the potbellied officer, “now we've got the truth.”

He waved a marijuana cigarette in his hand. The rancher, from his seat on the bus, shook his head.

“The cigarette is not mine,” the journalist protested. “I saw when he put it there.”

“No way, asshole,” the fat man shot back.

When he figured the abuse was only going to get worse, the rancher said to himself, That's enough and got off the bus. He walked straight to the judicial police chief, who was drinking a beer and leaning on his pickup. As soon as he saw him, the chief gave a noticeable start.

“Fuckin' Macetón, you lose something around here?”

“Screw you, Cruz, he's just a pup.”

“He's old enough to vote.”

“He's traveling with me.”

The chief gave a distrustful grunt and yelled at the journalist, “What're you going to the port for?”

“Huh?”

“What're you going to the port for?”

“That's where I'm going to be living.”

“Get out of here.”

They put his things back in the suitcase, except for his jacket and the sunglasses. When he reached for them, the kid with the AK-47 blocked him.

“These stay here. And hurry it up, or the bus'll leave without you.”

As the bus took off, the young man saw the fat guy trying on the sunglasses and the other had put o

the jacket. Plus a thousand pesos were missing from his wallet.

“It’s your lucky day, sir,” the rancher said, “that was Chief Cruz Treviño, of the judicial police.”

The journalist nodded and clenched his jaw.

Just before they reached the river’s edge, two gigantic billboards welcomed them to the city: the first was an ad for Cola Drinks and the second showed the president with arms open wide. Both he and his campaign slogan were riddled with bullet holes. Where it read, A GOOD LIFE FOR YOUR FAMILY, the light shone through the perforations.

As they crossed the bridge, the rancher thought it strange that the journalist stared at the river with such curiosity: there were the same little boats as ever, and, in the distance, the immense cranes moved their dinosaur necks at the cargo port.

Once at the bus station, they made their way to the taxi stand and bought their tickets. As they waited their turn, the rancher observed, “If ever you want to transport weed, put it in a shampoo bottle wrapped in a piece of plastic. Don’t even think of putting it in a coffee can; that’s where they look first.”

The boy insisted that they’d planted the drug among his things; he didn’t even smoke tobacco. The rancher said he owed him and he’d like to thank him. A bit awkwardly, the plaid-shirted man handed him his card: AGENT RAMÓN CABRERA, MUNICIPAL POLICE. The boy looked at him dumbfounded, and the rancher insisted that he get in the next available cab.

After the car had turned the corner, he noticed the portrait of the blonde fluttering on the ground: it must have fallen out when the boy paid. Cabrera picked it up and put it in his wallet, without knowing what for.

He thought he’d never see the boy again, and again he was wrong.

For Agent Cabrera the case began on Monday, January 15. That day Chief Taboada had a meeting with the best member of his force, Agent Chávez. According to the secretary, they argued, and it seemed Chávez raised his voice. Halfway through the meeting, the chief peered out through the thick blinds that separated his office from the main room, looked over the officers who were present, and picked out the only subordinate who, in his opinion, could still be trusted. That is to say, Ramón “Macetón” Cabrera.

Cabrera was chatting with the social service girls when he was told the boss was ordering him to report. At the moment he entered the chief’s office, Agent Chávez was leaving and jostled him with his shoulder. Fortunately, Cabrera was a peaceable sort, so he didn’t strike back as he reported to his boss.

“Drop whatever you’re doing and look into the deceased on Calle Palma for me.”

He was referring to the journalist who’d been found dead the morning before. Sunday afternoon, some hours after the body was reported, Agent Chávez had managed to detain El Chincualillo in a lightning operation, with enough evidence to lock him up for fifteen years. To Chávez’s mind, the guilty party had acted alone and the motive was robbery. But Chief Taboada wasn’t satisfied.

“I’m missing information: find out what the journalist was doing over his last few days. Where he was, who he saw, what they said to him. If he was writing something, I want to read it. I need to know what was he up to.”

Cabrera knew El Chincualillo was a dealer for the Paracuán cartel, and so his chief’s request raised a problem of professional ethics. “Why doesn’t Chávez do it?”

“I’d rather you took charge.”

Cabrera hesitated. “I have a lot of work.”

“Let the new guys help you.”

Cabrera said no, that wouldn’t be necessary, he could do it himself. He couldn’t abide the new guy.

“One more thing,” the chief added. “Go see the deceased’s father, Don Rubén Blanco, and stand in for me at the funeral. It’s essential for you to report to him, and for him to know you’re going on my behalf, and for you to keep on the lookout until everything’s over. It’s at the Gulf Funeral Parlor, but hurry up; they’ll be burying him at twelve. Don’t you have a suit coat?”

“Not here.”

“Have them lend you one. Don’t show up like that.”

“Anything else?”

“Yes: discretion. Don’t let anybody know what you’re up to.”

Cabrera went back to his desk and asked the social service girls to hunt up the autopsy report. The girls, who didn’t have that much work to do, squabbled over who would take it to him. Who brought it was Rosa Isela, a girl in her twenties with emerald-green eyes, who leaned on the desk and, after handing over the report, didn’t take her eyes off him. Cabrera smiled, flattered, until she remarked that he reminded her of her father. When she observed the detective’s discomfort, the girl became all smiles.

“I brought you a present.” It was a ruled notebook.

“What’s this for?”

“So you can get rid of the other one.”

She meant the notebook he was using at the time. Cabrera’s notebook was so full by now that he sometimes wrote over pages he had already filled at least twice before, a real palimpsest, as it’s called in legalese. And it’s true that he had had a lot of work the last few days.

“*Gracias, amiga*. Could you get me some coffee?”

Isela fulfilled his darkest desires and left the beverage on his desk. It should be noted that he brought his own coffee to brew at work, since he found the headquarters pot disgusting. Ten minutes later Camarena, one of the new guys, came in to chat with the social service girls. Camarena was a tall, cheerful young guy, successful with the ladies. That day he was flaunting at least three lipstick marks around his mouth: one of them could be Rosa Isela’s. Camarena made himself some decaf and went to his desk. Cabrera wondered how anybody with half a brain could possibly like coffee without any coffee in it.

It was a hot, muggy day. He tried to study the report but couldn’t concentrate and was reading through it unattentively when another rookie interrupted him.

“Hey, where’s the concrete room?” He was wearing dark glasses in the office. These new guys know zip about the venerable institution of dark glasses, Cabrera grumbled to himself. Wearing them in the presence of a superior shows a lack of respect, and Cabrera’s tone of voice was a reproach.

“What’d you lose in there?”

“Nothing.” The young man lowered his glasses. “I was sent to look for mops. Your coffeemaker is leaking.”

“Take the one in the closet, at the end of the hall; there’s nothing for you to do in the concrete room, understood?”

His car leaked oil, the coffeemaker leaked water, what was next? Was he going to have prostate trouble, as his doctor had warned him? Perhaps, at his age, he should drink less coffee and more plain water. But could he live without coffee? After some depressing thoughts (a vision of a world without caffeine, the world as a long and boring blank space), he finally managed to concentrate on the text.

The report indicated that they’d sliced the journalist’s throat from ear to ear, collapsing the jugular and then extracted his tongue through the orifice. In other words, he told himself, they’d given him a Colombian necktie, so there’d be no doubt about who had committed the crime. Ever since the people of the port had been associating with the Colombian cartel, these things were happening more and more often. . . . He was thinking this over when, as he began to reread the report, he felt a burning sensation in his gut. Damn it, he said to himself, what did I get myself into?

When he was almost through reading the report, his stomach growled again and he told himself it was a sign that he shouldn’t take the case. But his sense of duty was stronger than he was, and he went out to look for Ramírez.

In the entire headquarters there was only a single person who could have lent him a suit coat in his size, and that was the forensic expert, Ramírez. Not that Cabrera was fat, it was just that he was very broad-shouldered. As for Ramírez. . . .

In the port city that we’re discussing, when people get upward of forty they face a dilemma: either they find something interesting to do or they take up eating, with the universally acknowledged outcome. The expert Ramírez belonged to the second category. He had not a double but a triple chin,

and his belly spilled out over his belt. Cabrera went in to say hello and noticed a young man wearing glasses typing on a computer at the desk in the back.

“So who’s that?”

“My assistant, Rodrigo Columba.”

Ramírez had no idea what they wanted from him. In the journalist’s house not a manuscript was found, no drafts, nothing. Only a notebook, of no real interest.

“Let me see it.”

“Handle with care. . . .”

“Yes, I know.” They had found Cabrera’s fingerprints at a crime scene once, and since then no one let him off without a good ribbing.

Ramírez handed him the evidence and Cabrera examined it with gloves and tweezers, so as not to worry his colleagues. It was a black notebook: a journal, which at first glance revealed nothing of importance: two or three dates, a poem about Xilitla, and a name, Vicente Rangel. . . . Cabrera felt his gastritis flare up again. Son of a bitch, this can’t be happening. He read the poem, which he thought terrible, but found no other written mark. How strange, he thought at last. He couldn’t imagine a journalist who took no notes . . . a journalist who didn’t write. And that name, Vicente Rangel. He said nothing to the forensic expert, but taking advantage as he looked away, Cabrera tore that page from the notebook and put it in his pocket, under the astounded eyes of the young agent. It wasn’t the first time he’d had to “erase” a little evidence. Cabrera completely ignored the young man’s look and spoke to fat Ramírez.

“Did he have a computer?”

“Did he have a computer? Strictly speaking, yes, he owned one, but we can’t access it. It requests a password, and there’s no way of guessing it.”

“Get a technician.”

“That’s what my colleague Columba here is doing; he’s the next generation of policemen—not like you, Macetón, still using a typewriter.”

The young man in glasses smiled at Cabrera, who looked away.

“And cassettes? Did you find any?”

“Audio cassettes? No, we didn’t.”

“No, not audio cassettes but, like, cassettes to save information.”

“They’re called diskettes,” Ramírez said, “or CDs.”

The specialist bent over the evidence, pulled a diskette from a plastic bag and in one sweeping motion handed it over, more gracefully than Cabrera would have expected.

“This is what we found. Let Columba help you.”

The young man in the glasses inserted the diskette in the computer. On the screen an empty window appeared. “It’s blank.”

“Let’s see it.” Cabrera looked at the blank image. Yes, the diskette had nothing on it.

“Or maybe it’s not formatted for a PC. I’d have to look it over on my Mac. If you want, I’ll examine it later, with another operating system.”

Cabrera answered with a growl. “Give me a photocopy of that notebook, butthead,” he ordered the kid. “And wear gloves.”

“Hey”—it suddenly dawned on Ramírez—“why are *you* working on the journalist? Wasn’t this El Chaneque’s case?”

Cabrera motioned for him to lower his voice. They went out to the hallway, and Cabrera said, “Chief’s orders.”

Ramírez heaved a deep sigh. “If I were you, I’d get out of it; this smells very weird.”

“Why? Or what? What did you hear?”

“Haven’t you ever wondered if the chief is just using you?”

“What are you trying to say?”

At that moment another colleague came in to ask for a report and Ramírez took the opportunity to end the conversation. “I’ll hunt down what you asked me for later, OK? Right now I’ve got a lot of work.”

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