Zapatos

T. Coraghessen Boyle

HARPER'S, October 1988

THERE IS, ESSENTIALLY, one city in our country. It is a city in which everyone wears a hat, works in an office, jogs, and eats simply but elegantly, a city, above all, in which everyone covets shoes. Italian shoes, in particular. Oh, you can get by with a pair of domestically made pumps or cordovans of the supplest sheepskin, or even, in the languid days of summer, with huaraches or Chinese slippers made of silk or even nylon. There are those who claim to prefer running shoes—Puma, Nike, Saucony—winter and summer. But the truth is, what everyone wants—for the status, the cachet, the charm and refinement—are the Italian loafers and ankle boots, hand-stitched and with a grain as soft and rich as, well—is this the place to talk of the private parts of girls still in school?

My uncle—call him Dagoberto—imports shoes. From Italy. And yet, until recently, he himself could barely afford a pair. It's the government, of course. Our country—the longest and leanest in the world—is hemmed in by the ocean on one side, the desert and mountains on the other, and the government has leached and pounded it dry till sometimes I think we live atop a stupendous, three-thousand-mile-long strip of jerky. There are duties—prohibitive duties—on everything. Or, rather, on everything we want. Cocktail napkins, Band-Aids, Tupperware, crescent wrenches, and kimchi come in practically for nothing. But the things we really crave—microwaves, Lean Cuisine, CDs, leisure suits, and above all, Italian shoes—carry a duty of two and sometimes three hundred percent. The government is unfriendly. We are born, we die, it rains, it clears, the government is unfriendly. Facts of life.

Uncle Dagoberto is no revolutionary—none of us are; let's face it, we manage—but the shoe situation was killing him. He'd bring his shoes in, arrange them seductively in the windows of his three downtown shops, and there they'd languish, despite a markup so small he'd have to sell a hundred pairs just to take his shopgirls out to lunch. It was intolerable. And what made it worse was that the good citizens of our city, vain and covetous as they are, paraded up and down in front of his very windows in shoes identical to those he was selling—shoes for which they'd paid half price or less. And how were these shoes getting through customs and finding their way to the dark little no-name shops in the ill-lit vacancies of waterfront warehouses? Ask the Black Hand, Los Dedos Muertos, the fat and corrupt Minister of Commerce.

For months, poor Uncle Dagoberto brooded over the situation, while his wife (my mother's sister, Carmen, a merciless woman) and his six daughters screamed for the laser facials, cellular phones, and Fila sweats he could no longer provide for them. He is a heavyset man, my uncle, and balding, and he seemed to grow heavier and balder during those months of commercial despair. But one morning, as he came down to breakfast in the gleaming, tiled expanse of the kitchen our families share in the big venerable old mansion on La Calle Verdad, there was a spring in his step and a look on his face that, well—there is a little shark in the waters here, capable of smelling out one part of blood in a million parts of water, and when he does smell out that impossible single molecule of blood, I imagine he must have a look like that of Uncle Dagoberto on that sun-struck morning on La Calle Verdad.

"Tomas," he said to me, rubbing his hands over his Bran Chex, Metamusil, and decaffeinated coffee, "we're in business."

The kitchen was deserted at that hour. My aunts and sisters were off jogging, Dagoberto's daughters at the beach, my mother busy with aerobics, and my father—my late, lamented father—lying quiet in his grave. I didn't understand. I looked up at him blankly from my plate of microwave waffles.

His eyes darted round the room. There was a sheen of sweat on his massive, close-shaven jowls. He began to whistle—a tune my mother used to sing me, by Grandmaster Flash—and then he broke off and gave me a gold-capped smile. "The shoe business," he said. "There's fifteen hundred in it for you."

I was at the university at the time, studying semantics, hermeneutics, and the deconstruction of deconstruction. I myself owned two sleek pairs of Italian loafers, in ecru and rust. Still, I wasn't working, and I could have used the money. "I'm listening," I said.

What he wanted me to do was simple—simple, but potentially dangerous. He wanted me to spend two days in the north, in El Puerto Libre—Freeport. There are two free ports in our country, separated by nearly twenty-five hundred miles of terrain that looks from the air like the spine of some antediluvian monster. The southern port is called Calidad, or Quality. Both are what I imagine the great bazaars of Northern Africa and the Middle East to have been in the time of Marco Polo or Rommel, percolating cauldrons of sin and plenty, where anything known to man could be had for the price of a haggle. But there was a catch, of course. While you could purchase anything you liked in El Puerto Libre or Calidad, to bring it back to the city you had to pay duty—the same stultifying duty merchants like Uncle Dagoberto were obliged to pay. And why then had the government set up the free ports in the first place? In order to make digital audio tape and microwaves available to themselves, of course, and to set up discreet banking enterprises for foreigners, by way of generating cash flow—and ultimately, I think, to frustrate the citizenry. To keep us in our place. To remind us that government is unfriendly.

At any rate, I was to go north on the afternoon plane, take a room under the name "Chilly Buttons," and await Uncle Dagoberto's instructions. Fine. For me, the trip was nothing. I relaxed with a Glenlivet and Derrida, the film was *Death Wish VII*, and the flight attendants small in front and, well, substantial behind, just the way I like them. On arriving, I checked into the hotel he'd arranged for me—the girl behind the desk had eyes and shoulders like one of the amazons of the North American cinema, but she tittered and showed off her orthodontia when I signed "Chilly Buttons" in the register—and I went straight up to my room to await Uncle Dagoberto's call. Oh, yes, I nearly forgot: he'd given me an attache case in which there were five hundred huevos—our national currency—and a thousand black-market dollars. "I don't anticipate any problems," he'd told me as he handed me onto the plane, "but you never know, eh?"

I ate veal medallions and a dry spinach salad at a brasserie frequented by British rock stars and North American drug agents, and then sat up late in my room, watching a rerun of the world cockfighting championships. I was just dozing off when the phone rang. "Bueno," I said, snatching up the receiver.

"Tomas?" It was Uncle Dagoberto.

"Yes," I said.

His voice was pinched with secrecy, a whisper, a rasp. "I want you to go to the customs warehouse on La Avenida Democracia at ten a.m. sharp." He was breathing heavily. I could barely hear him. "There are shoes there," he said. "Italian shoes. Thirty thousand shoes, wrapped in tissue paper. No one has claimed them and they're to be auctioned first thing in the morning." He paused and I listened to the empty hiss of the land breathing through the wires that separated us. "I want

you to bid nothing for them. A hundred huevos. Two. But I want you to buy them. Buy them or die." And he hung up.

At quarter of ten the next morning, I stood outside the warehouse, the attache case clutched in my hand. Somewhere a cock crowed. It was cold, but the sun warmed the back of my neck. Half a dozen hastily shaven men in sagging suits and battered domestically made oxfords gathered beside me.

I was puzzled. How did Uncle Dagoberto expect me to buy thirty thousand Italian shoes for two hundred huevos, when a single pair sold for twice that? I understood that the black-market dollars were to be offered as needed, but even so, how could I buy more than a few dozen pairs? I shrugged it off and buried my nose in Derrida.

It was past twelve when an old man in the uniform of the customs police hobbled up the street as if his legs were made of stone, produced a set of keys, and threw open the huge hammered-steel doors of the warehouse. We shuffled in, blinking against the darkness. When my eyes became accustomed to the light, the mounds of unclaimed goods piled up on pallets around me began to take on form. There were crates of crescent wrenches, boxes of Tupperware, a bin of door stoppers. I saw bicycle horns—thousands of them, black and bulbous as the noses of monkeys—and jars of kimchi stacked up to the steel crossbeams of the ceiling. And then I saw the shoes. They were heaped up in a small mountain, individually wrapped in tissue paper. Just as Uncle Dagoberto had said. The others ignored them. They read the description the customs man provided, unwrapped the odd shoe, and went on to the bins of churchkey openers and chutney. I was dazed. It was like stumbling across the treasure of the Incas, the Golden City itself, and yet having no one recognize it.

With trembling fingers, I unwrapped first one shoe, then another. I saw patent leather, suede, the sensuous ripple of alligator; my nostrils filled with the rich and unmistakable bouquet of newly tanned leather. The shoes were perfect, insuperable, the very latest styles, au courant, a la mode, and exciting. Why had the others turned away? It was then that I read the customs declaration: *Thirty thousand leather shoes,* it read*, imported from the Republic of Italy, port of Livorno. Unclaimed after thirty days. To be sold at auction to the highest bidder.* Beside the declaration, in a handscrawl that betrayed bureaucratic impatience—disgust, even—of the highest order, was this further notation: *Left feet only*.

It took me a moment. I bent to the mountain of shoes and began tearing at the tissue paper. I tore through women's pumps, stiletto heels, tooled boots, wing tips, deck shoes, and patent-leather loafers—and every single one, every one of those thirty thousand shoes, was half a pair. Uncle Dagoberto, I thought, you are a genius.

The auction was nothing. I waited through a dozen lots of number-two pencils, Cabbage Patch Dolls, and soft-white light-bulbs, and then I placed the sole bid on the thirty thousand leftfooted shoes. One hundred huevos and they were mine. Later, I took the young amazon up to my room and showed her what a man with a name like Chilly Buttons can do in a sphere that, well—is this the place to gloat? We were sharing a cigarette when Uncle Dagoberto called. "Did you get them?" he shouted over the line.

"One hundred huevos," I said.

"Good boy," he crooned, "good boy." He paused a moment to catch his breath. "And do you know where I'm calling from?" he asked, struggling to keep down the effervescence in his voice.

I reached out to stroke the amazon's breasts—her name was Linda, by the way, and she was a student of cosmetology. "I think I can guess," I said. "Calidad?"

"Funny thing," Uncle Dagoberto said, "there are some shoes here, in the customs warehouse—fine Italian shoes, the finest, thirty thousand in a single lot—and no one has claimed them. Can you imagine that?"

There was such joy in his tone that I couldn't resist playing out the game with him. "There must be something wrong with them," I said.

I could picture his grin. "Nothing, nothing at all. If you're one-legged."

That was two years ago.

Today, Uncle Dagoberto is the undisputed shoe king of our city. He made such a killing on that one deal that he was able to buy his way into the cartel that "advises" the government. He has a title now—Undersecretary for International Trade— and a vast, brightly lit office in the President's palace.

I've changed too, though I still live with my mother on La Calle Verdad and I still attend the university. My shoes—I have some thirty pairs now, in every style and color those clever Italians have been able to devise—are the envy of all, and no small attraction to the nubile and status-hungry young women of the city. I no longer study semantics, hermeneutics, and the deconstruction of deconstruction, but have instead been pursuing a degree in business. It only makes sense. After all, the government doesn't seem half so unfriendly these days.