

DONADEU

A Tale of Fantastic Reality

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CHAPTER 1: The Thermodynamics of Mud and the Owner of the Police Station

There are two ways to measure a nation's wealth: economics books talk about Gross Domestic Product, interest rates and capital flows; the Santiago del Estero backcountry, by contrast, measures it in pesos per kilogram, in how much mud you must wade through to obtain a bucket of water in the middle of the night, and in the suspicious silence of siesta time.

The first time I stepped on Donadeu I understood that thermodynamics is not a branch of physics, but a state of mind.

We arrived at sunset. In 1993, Donadeu was not a point on the map; it was a bump in space-time. There was no electric light, there was no running water, and the mosquitoes had the size of medium sparrows and an aggressiveness that suggested they read Marx. In the middle of that dim furnace, a sharp whistle broke the air of the mountain. It was the locomotive. It was not a modern train, but a monster of black metal, fed by steam and firewood, which dragged tank wagons as if it were a thirsty iron god crossing the green desert.

Then the ritual began.

The people of the village did not wait for the train to stop at all. They were rushing over the wagons with buckets, levers, empty naphtha drums and dented pans. It was not an organized cast; it was a consensual assault, a choreography of chaos. Around the cistern, the spilling water was immediately mixed with the dry land, creating a colossal, slippery and lukewarm neighborhood. Men, women and boys would skate, fall from mouth to mouth, laugh with their eyes full of wet soil and continue fighting for the jet.

I made a quick mental calculation, professional deformation of my industrial engineering career: seventy percent of the water was lost on the ground before touching a bucket. That was pure entropy. Dispersed energy that did not generate useful work, just a community game of rolling in the mud under the sparks and the wood smoke that spit out the locomotive's chimney. For the Santiagueños, however, the water train was not a failure of infrastructure; it was a pagan party, the only time of the day where the whole town joined in a survival and mud ceremony.

With the days he would discover that the people had other liturgies just as mysterious. At the time of nap, when the thermometer was brushing at forty-five degrees in the shade and common sense dictated to remain motionless, Donadeu

recorded what I called “Strange Movements”. From the adobe houses they began to come out, with a stealth of felines, men and women carrying a neatly bent loin under their arm. They walked in a hurry, without looking, and went into the thickness of the mountain. They would not do, nor seek firewood. They would surrender to love on the tarp, protected by the only witness capable of keeping a secret in Santiago del Estero: the impenetrable Chaqueño forest. That was the triumph of biology over extreme heat.

"Welcome to your inheritance, baby," said the warm wind of the north.

My old man and my old lady were two professional dreamers. They had a blind faith in the future, of that kind of faith that first buys the passage to the moon and then sees if they invented the rocket.

In the early 1970s, my old man — who was an agronomist engineer — was walking through Santiago del Estero trying to raise a fridge. One day, a colleague brought him a gift bundle of elephant grass. To anyone, that was a tall yuyo; to my old man, it was a mystical revelation. He saw that grass and visualized a cattle empire where the rest of the world saw only thorns and lizards. He found out who those untamed lands were and came to the name of the original owner: the Old Donadeu.

The history of the province explained the town. In colonial times, Santiago del Estero was the Chicago of oxcarts. The royal road linking Buenos Aires with Upper Peru demanded timber capable of surviving journeys of several months along impassable tracks, and Santiago supplied the raw material: quebracho, lapacho and itin. Each wood had its own role in the anatomy of a cart. But that colonial road was merely a cleared line twenty meters wide through the backcountry; beyond it, nothingness reigned.

In the early 1900s, the railway changed the game. Old Donadeu was granted thousands of hectares of public land so that he could supply railway ties. The man built an empire: he founded the town, constructed an enormous 111-room general store, and laid narrow-gauge Decauville tracks deep into the forest to bleed the trees dry. Then Perón arrived, imposed labor laws and workplace order, and Old Donadeu, wounded in his pride as a timber baron, decided that he would rather set the world on fire than pay a year-end bonus. He sold everything he could as scrap, abandoned the town to its fate and cleared out.

That's where my old man came in.

We did not have a weight. We lived in Caballito, and my old man had just bought a new house to make us a new one. Without hesitation, he sold the land, paid

half the fields to Old Donadeu and remained owed the other half, trusting that the universe would provide. And the universe provided, under the dictatorial form of General Onganía.

In those years, the military government decreed that Mendoza's vineyards had to shift from overhead trellises to vertical trellising. Suddenly, every vineyard in Argentina needed hardwood stakes to support its vines. And which wood can withstand the damp soil of Mendoza without rotting? Carob. And who had millions of carob stakes standing in the backcountry, waiting to be cut? We did.

With those sticks we paid for half the field that was missing and, from yapa, we bought a beautiful house in Barrio Norte. There, my mother, Ruth Benzacar, would continue a story that seemed to be taken out of a novel by spies and bohemians.

Years ago, my old man had been an extremely wealthy man thanks to a fridge with which he exported horse meat to Europe. At the height of his fortune, his sister became a bride with a Communist Party militant. At that time, to finance himself, the PC sold works of plastic artists identified with the left: Antonio Berni, Lino Enea Spilimbergo, Juan Carlos Castagnino. My old man, to support his sister and to be able to marry calmly, began to buy those paintings in quantity. This was how our house was filled with masterpieces while my mother was engaged in child pedagogy.

But the wind of fortune in Argentina changes direction without warning. My old man faced a giant competitor in the horse meat sector who planted a mafioso ultimatum:

“You either export under my brand, or you don’t export anymore.” My old man, who had the pride as hard as the gorge, told him to go to hell. And we stopped exporting.

We went from having five imported cars parked at the door to moving all in a modest Renault Gordini. But we had a treasure left: the walls of the house were covered with

Bernis and Spilimbergos. Also, during his years of fat cows, my old man had “adopted” and protected several Spanish painters who had escaped the dictatorship of Francisco Franco. Thanks to them, at home he did not eat the classic Argentine roast; he ate paella, surrounded by artists who discussed politics and aesthetics between the aroma of saffron and the smoke of cigarettes.

When the crisis hit, my mom tried to sell some of those paintings to support the family economy. One of those exiled Spanish painters watched her negotiate with collectors and said with her peninsular accent: "Ruth, you have a unique talent for this. Why don't you dedicate yourself professionally to selling art?"

That was the divine spark. Thus was born the gallery Ruth Benzacar, which in time would become the beacon of contemporary art in Argentina.

But the bonanza in this country is never a straight line. The vine sticks ceased to be business, the sleepers we sold to Alfonsín were buoyant in a limbo of lack of payment from the state that almost melted us, and we ended up making dishes for roasting and chopping tables for supermarkets.

In 1993, my old man was diagnosed with lung cancer and I had to take the post. At that time he was a prolific industrial engineer, material resource manager of Chingolo, a giant roof distributor with fifty-four branches across the country. He handled millionaire budgets, precision logistics, trucks arriving on schedule. He was comfortable.

Until my old lady psychopathed me with that mastery that only mothers — and especially moderate-minded gallerists in the art market — possess.

"Your father left his life on that mountain, baby. You can't let everything go. You have to go.

And I went.

What I found when I took over was a disaster that billed, hopefully, \$6,000 a month. The factory was standing, the debts were accumulating and the cadastre of the province of Santiago del Estero proved to have the same scientific rigor as a horoscope.

One Monday morning, while trying to figure out how to pay for the fortnight by selling fence posts, I heard the noise of an old van braking in front of the factory office. A kind of wrinkled grey suit came down, with a worn leather briefcase and the unmistakable aura of the state bureaucracy.

He was the inspector of rents in the province.

"Good morning, engineer Benzacar," he said, fitting his glasses with one finger. "I am here for the property tax on the urban plots of Donadeu.

I looked at him without understanding.

"What urban plots?" I asked.

The guy opened the briefcase and pulled out a yellow cadastral plane, full of stamps and coffee stains.

"All this," he said, pointing with a dirty fingernail. "The people of Donadeu are within the scriptures of their field. Therefore, you are the holder of the register. And you owe the property taxes of the last few years.

I followed the inspector's fingernail over the plane. I felt the floor moving.

"Wait a minute," I said, rubbing my temples. "Are you telling me that I own the public school?

- Yes, sir, it's in your name.

- And the health post where the rural doctor attends?

- Also.

- What about the police station?

— Technically, yes. And of the three social housing plans that the State Housing Institute built last year. Everything is inside its land registry. So you have to pay the property tax of the whole town.

I looked at it. The situation was so desplendent, so spectacularly absurd, that I felt a sudden wave of feudal pride. I owned a police station. If I wanted to, I could charge rent from the sheriff or send to the dungeons that I liked. But the bill the inspector presented to me had too many zeros for my famous six thousand dollar box.

I supported the elbows on the table, interlaced my hands and looked at it with my best face as a corporate manager from Chingolo who just discovered a legal vacuum.

"Look, officer," I said, lowering his voice as if he was revealing a state secret to him. "You guys have a crazy luck that I'm a guy with a clear civic conscience and a decent guy.

The inspector blinked, bewildered.

- Why do you say that?

"Because if I were a son of a bitch, I take this land register, I go to a court in Buenos Aires, I ask for the immediate eviction of the school, the police station, the doctor and the fifty families living in the homes of the state, and I am arming the province with the largest political quilombo in its history. They will be

published in newspapers all over the world: "Terrant from Buenos Aires evicts the police from their own people."

The guy was wiped from his bureaucratic face. The gray suit seemed to shrink two sizes. He looked at the plane, looked at me and swallowed saliva.

"But...but the tax must be levied..." he snooped, without conviction.

"Let's do one thing," I suggested, patting him on the shoulder. "Take this file of Rents, take it back to the capital, and put it well, but well down to your desk. At the bottom of the deepest drawer you have. So we save ourselves an international geopolitical conflict. Do you think so?"

The Renta Inspector looked at me as if he had just saved his life. He kept the cadastral plane at lightning speed, closed the briefcase with a dry click and said goodbye with an almost school shyness.

We never heard from Rentas de la provincia again.

I looked out of the office window toward the backcountry once more. Outside, the noon heat made the horizon tremble. A lumberjack walked slowly past, an axe over his shoulder and a crumpled photocopy sticking out of his work-shirt pocket: a letter signed by Governor Juárez that he guarded like a sacred charm against bad luck.

I smiled. It was clear that in this place the laws of the traditional economy did not apply. If I wanted to transform this hardwood stock into real wealth, I would have to invent my own rules of play.

And to do that, I first had to learn how to tame white quebracho.

CHAPTER 2: The Alchemy of Making Do

According to my book *Wealth, the Beginning of the Journey*, wealth is not what you have accumulated underground, but what you are capable of doing with it before it rots or twists out of shape. Stock is passive; transformation is active, noisy and, in Donadeu's case, dangerously entertaining.

To transform the Santiago del Estero backcountry into something civilization was willing to pay for in pesos per kilogram, I had two choices: spend three million dollars I did not have on Italian technology, or become the Dr. Frankenstein of industrial engineering with my only two allies—the lathe operator and the blacksmith.

We chose the path of scrap and glory.

It all started with a call from Don Gil, the soul-mater of the North Supermarkets (long before the French of Carrefour came with their Excel sheets to buy everything). Don Gil was an extraordinary type, from which they no longer come: a businessman with street that defended the national industry not with speeches, but with purchases.

In the midst of the surge of indiscriminate import in Argentina, Don Gil had brought a whole container of wooden hangers from China. He put them in the supermarket shelves and they were exhausted in a week. As we already provided him with the chopping boards and the roasting plates, the guy smelled the business and quoted me in his office.

He put an imported wooden hanger on my desk. I had soft curves, a chromed metal hook and a perfect sanding.

"Benzacar, what do we do with this? Can it be made here?" he asked, looking over my glasses.

I took the hanger, weighed it, looked it up and down, analyzing the veins.

"Look, Don Gil," I said, "seriously." This is not born from trees. This is a hanger, but behind this there is an entire factory that does not exist today.

The next day I went back to his office.

"Don Gil, I have the answer. Every hanger is going to come out with a million dollars.

The old man almost spits out the coffee.

"How much is a million dollars, Benzacar? Are you crazy?!"

"The hangers are not made alone, Don Gil. I have to build the factory from scratch and I don't have a handle. So the first hanger will cost me a million dollars. Now, if you have patience, I promise you that the first hangers I give you will not be the most beautiful ones in the world, but they will fulfill the function. Tell me how much it costs you that Chinese hanger put on the supermarket door, and I will hand it over to you at that same price. But you have to bank the development.

Don Gil stared at me. "In his eyes I saw the same spark of romantic con man my old men had."

- Deal, baby.

The first problem of my new life as a hanger manufacturer was that the technology market wanted to charge me \$3 million for a "key in hand" plant with state-of-the-art Italian machinery. I went to see the representatives of these companies, studied their satin brochures and looked at the drawings of the machines as one who looks at a treasure map.

That's where I got the engineer's lamp on.

I realized that the secret of the whole factory balance was not in the aerodynamic design of European machines, but in something much simpler: the cutting speed of tools. The productivity of the system depended on the speed with which the metal devoured the wood. And the wood I had to work with was the white crack, a substance so hostile that it seemed designed by the devil himself to challenge the laws of physics.

"If the secret is in the tool and not in the casing," I told the lathe operator and the blacksmith, "we're going to buy the best tools on the planet and put them in the bodies of the oldest and cheapest machines we find.

I went to the Wood Industry Fair in Buenos Aires. While the big business people were looking at the numerical control computers, I went to the cutting tool stand. I bought the most advanced that existed: hard metal inserts (vidia), high speed strawberries and space grade zirconium sanders.

Then I went out hunting for scrap. I bought early-century machines, 1910 cast iron monsters that weighed tons and had survived two world wars. With the lathe operator and blacksmith we gutted those armatostes. We modified the speeds to the "dolls" of the tools, adapted modern engines and grafted their vidia teeth.

The result was a scary, scary steampunk aesthetic. Machines roared like fighter planes and spit sparks and sawdust at delusional speeds.

One day, some Italian investors who had bought a neighboring field dedicated to wood came to chusmear our factory. When they entered, they grabbed their heads. They came from bringing machinery from Italy that did not work for them because the Santiago del Estero backcountry broke them. They looked at our hybrid spawns with a mixture of panic and admiration.

"Madonna holies!" said one, gesticulating with his hands. "This is illegal in Italy! You come within three meters of a machine and the laser safety sensors turn it off completely.

Here you are, you'll be careless and beheaded by a vine strawberry at 10,000 revolutions!

But when they looked at the production sheets and saw that we manufactured ten times more than they did with an investment of \$300,000 instead of \$3 million, they dropped their jaws on the floor. We had defeated European technology with imagination, boldness and absolute disrespect for the European Community's safety standards.

The second enemy to defeat was the temperament of the broken white.

White quebracho is a beautiful wood, but it suffers from an unbearable helicopter-propeller complex. You cut a perfectly straight board, leave it to dry outdoors and, the moment you turn your back, its inner fibers begin pulling in opposite directions. A week later the board has twisted so badly that it is useful for almost anything except making a hanger or a chopping board.

The physical cause of this rebellion is the lignin and the tremendous hygroscopicity of wood, which retains water as if it were a treasure. To tame this indomitable tree, we had to resort to an express kidnapping.

My old man, in one of his visionary booties, had bought a rusty autoclave years ago with the idea of making a creosote plant (a treatment so that the light poles do not rot underground). The autoclave was there, lying at the bottom of the site, like a rusty pocket submarine.

"We're going to do an exorcism," I proposed to the boys.

We would put the newly cut wood inside the autoclave and put it into a hyperhydration process. Basically, we would drown it under pressure to relax the fibers. Immediately afterwards, we would flush it out and put it into a

violent dryer. But violent seriously, a thermal torture that would extract water in a week, a process that in any normal forestry manual in the northern hemisphere would tell you that it takes between one and two months.

Under that extreme pressure, the wood suffered a collapse of personality.

The gorge forgot its natural tensions, surrendered to our will and remained meek, upright and flat forever.

Thanks to this “psychiatry treatment” of wood, we make indestructible plates and chopboards. Today, fifty years later, I go to friends’ houses in Buenos Aires and still serve the roast on the crack boards of Donadeu, intact, without a single crack.

The most ironic thing about all this is that, while we were doing this thermodynamic miracle in the middle of nowhere, the University of Santiago del Estero had a model forest department. The state was sending teachers to Germany to do doctorates and equipping them with NASA technology that cost millions of pesos. Do you know how many doctors or university researchers ever came to Donadeu to see how the fuck we did to dry the broken white in seven days without it being destroyed?

They preferred to continue discussing the theory of Bavarian forest in their air-conditioned offices. Shameful, but typically Argentine.

The climax of our alchemy of rejunct came the day we had to make the hanger-copying machine.

To give the wood the exact shape and the cut down, we needed a copying machine that followed a mold. Imported machines cost a fortune. We were with the lathe operator and the blacksmith scratching our heads in front of a mountain of scrap, looking for a solution.

"I'm an engineer," said the lathe operator, a quiet guy who spoke only when physics demanded it. "I have a Citroën 3CV pallet lying in my house. What if we use that?"

I looked at it as if I was proposing to travel in time.

- A palier from Citroën?

“Think, engineer. The pallet has a fixed joint point. If we fix that point, the wheel mass moves by imitating the motion of a suspension when it grabs a well. If instead of a wheel we solder a ten-millimeter iron sheet with the exact profile of the hanger designed on the edge, we can use a palpator. As the palpator runs

through the planchula, the pallet transmits that exact movement to a high-speed mill that is carving the wood.

I was dumb. I did the geometric calculation in the air with my fingers. It was an absolute genius. A pure cinematic solution worthy of MIT, but resolved with spare parts of the cheapest car in Argentine history.

We got to work. I went to Donadeu for a week. I was carrying the materials, engines and sophisticated tools I bought in Buenos Aires, and we locked ourselves in the workshop. There were no plans, there were no computers. There was a motor, an improvised terraja, a Citroën axle, a lot of old iron and three guys discussing mechanical vibrations.

The blacksmith had a mystical ear. When we lit a prototype and the machine started to vibrate at a rate that threatened to disintegrate the roof of sheet metal, the guy was slowly approaching. He was leaning his palm over the cast iron chassis, listening to the lament of the metal, grabbing a heavy hammer and giving it three dry blows ("tag, tac, tap!") in seemingly random places. At once, the machine entered into perfect harmony, the buzzing stabilized and began to spin with the softness of a Rolls-Royce engine.

Sometimes I spent hours looking for an imported terraja to make a specific thread and went crazy with the technical specifications. The lathe operator looked at me with a glance, grabbed an old iron that had the like thread, soldered it with another piece of scrap, passed it through the lathe and in ten minutes I put the finished piece in my hand.

- Ready, engineer.

I looked at him, I looked at the perfect spawn he had just created, and I didn't know whether to hug him or insult him.

"Son of a great whore!" he said, laughing. "Let it be the last time you think of a better solution than mine, you understand?"

The kids were laughing and they were inflating their chests with pride. They didn't understand the theoretical physics or the laws of thermodynamics that I read in the light of oil lamp at night, but they understood the matter. We were playing in two different dimensions that were perfectly coupled thanks to mutual respect and to the work side by side. They had gained infinite confidence in me, and I in them. We knew that, if we fell a meteorite on us, probably the lathe operator soldered a Citroën axle and put it to make hangers for outer space.

When the homemade copying machine began to run, spitting out perfect hangers at a frantic pace before the astonished eyes of the Tucumán and Santiago del Estero workers, I understood that the province's structural poverty was not a geographical sentence. The stock of timber was there; we were inventing the transformation capacity ourselves, out of scrap.

CHAPTER 3: The Photocopy Wizard and the Phantom Asphalt

The heat in Santiago del Estero backcountry is not a climate issue; it is a hallucinogenic agent. Forty-seven degrees in the shade, the air vibrates so much that cows seem to float ten centimeters from the ground and the cracked trees stretch and shrink as if they were becoming desperate. In that state of thermal trance, it is very easy to confuse bureaucracy with black magic.

In Donadeu, the great magician of the kingdom was Governor Carlos Juárez.

Juarez had been ruling the province for so long that people no longer remembered whether it had arrived before or after the universal flood. It did not rule with decrees or budgets; it ruled with paper amulets. Its most powerful spell was the signed photocopy.

A month before the elections, I found Ramón, one of our burliest lumberjacks—a man capable of knocking down a tree with a head-butt—kneeling beside the factory boiler. He was not praying; he was contemplating a grayish sheet of paper with a devotion bordering on mysticism.

"What is it, Ramon? Did the light come to you?" I asked, although light in the village was not yet there.

"No, engineer," Ramón whispered, not looking at me. "He wrote the Tata to me. He personally. He knows that my wooden box was broken and he promises me that he will send me some zinc sheets.

I bent over to look at the sacred document. It was a cheap, rough sheet of paper, like sandstone, which had a standard text printed: "Dear fellow, I know of your effort and your loyalty...." At the foot, Carlos Juárez' signature looked blurred, run to the right and with that characteristic ash grey color that only produced the spent toner cartridges of state photocopiers. It was a copy of a copy of a signature printed in the capital of the province a decade ago.

"Ramón," I said softly, trying to appeal to his common sense, "this is a photocopy. Juarez doesn't know who you are. He put an original paper into a machine in Santiago, he pressed a green button and pulled out ten thousand equal sheets to distribute it on the mountain. The envelope has your name because it was written by a pointer with a ballpoint pen.

Ramon looked at me with a mixture of pity and condescension, as one looks at a porteño who does not understand how the universe works.

"You are an engineer, Don Ariel, but you know nothing about this," he said, bending the paper with extreme delicacy to keep it in the pocket of his shirt of graffa, right on the side of the heart. "The Tata's signature is here. If I touch it, I feel the heat of his hand. He has me written in his great notebook.

I didn't insist. In Santiago del Estero, the faith in the photocopy was harder than the gorge. The paper had no legal value, it couldn't be exchanged for food in any warehouse, but it acted as a mystical shield against misfortune. If you had the Tata letter in your pocket, you felt that the mountain respected you a little more, that the vipers didn't bite you and that eventually, the water train would stop five more minutes at the station just to greet you.

The climax of the magic season came with the ritual of voting. A few days before the elections, the local pointer of the match appeared in the factory. He was a short guy, with a sloping straw hat, an open shirt that showed a scapular of the Virgin and a gold tooth that shone every time he smiled with itchy.

"Ingeniero Benzacar, how are you doing?" he said, supporting a elbow on my desk. "How nice is the mountain, isn't it? Look, Sunday is the election and the people want to celebrate the triumph of the Tata. We were thinking it would be a very patriotic gesture on their part if we were to be slaughtered by a cow from their fields to make a community barbecue.

In Donadeu there were no courts of peace or the gendarmerie, and I was legally the owner of the entire village, including the houses where the voters lived. Refusing to donate the cow would have been like declaring war on a goblin: a stupid thing that would end with the broken factory saws or tires of my truck mysteriously tamped by elves with knives.

"Choose a bull," I said. "But one that is not of the champions, please."

On the Sunday of the vote, Donadeu became a carnival worthy of an Italian comedy. Around the train tracks, under a sun that melted the stones, a colossal smoke was burned. My bull was spinning over a giant stake improvised with a pipe of water, while the fat fell on the coals and generated a mystical smoke that seemed to numb the rationality of the people.

The gold tooth pointer handled the voters' row with the precision of an orchestra director. The incentive distribution system was a work of art of Creole sting:

The lumberjacks who lined up in front of the school (which was technically mine) were given a left shoe by the pointer. One single one. Blue canvas, brand new.

"Go and vote for Tata, my son," I said, patting him on the back. "When he comes out with his envelope on the urn, he passes back here and I give him the right one.

It was a miracle of electoral podiatry. The guys would go into the dark room with a single shoe on, vote with Juárez's face lighting them up from the ballot, and they would go out happily to find their other half so they could go eat a piece of my roasted cow. No one would complain; on the contrary, it seemed to them a system of the most just and fun. Entropy and disorder were the background music of an eternal party where everyone would dance barefoot in the mud.

Meanwhile, I spent the nights in the gallery of my wooden house, burning spirals to chase mosquitoes the size of helicopters and suffering hallucinations caused by heat and isolation.

On my most extreme delusional nights, I imagined the factory phone ringing and a carrastic voice, from an ultra-tomb, would say to me:

"Benzacar?" Juárez speaks. Stop screwing around with the wooden hangers and come to the capital. I heard you are an industrial engineer. Tell me how we put this province in production.

In my fantasy, I was traveling to Santiago, I was going into his office — which I imagined was full of dusty files and ceiling fans that were turning half-machine — and I was throwing a map on the table.

"Look, governor," I said, pointing out the map with a rule. "This province has fifteen million hectares and barely nine hundred thousand people. It is a fertile desert! We have two spectacular rivers, the Dulce and the Salt. If we made irrigation canals and reservoirs instead of paving the same route twenty times a year, here would come seven million livestock heads.

All people could live well, have houses of material and running water! Why do we continue to live in the nineteenth century?

In my delusion, the old warlord would settle in his leather armchair, look at me with a sphinx smile and answer me with an ancient witch wisdom:

"Oh, Benzacar... you see numbers, but I see souls. If I make them irrigation channels, if I give them cows and running water, people will become independent. They will start to earn their own money, they will buy their own shoes and they will stop needing my photocopied letters. And you know what happens when people don't need the Tata? They become rebellious. They start to think. And a people who think is a quilombo to rule. The mud and the need are the glue that keeps this province together, engineer. Don't want me to fix the physics of power with their little forms of Buenos Aires.

The hallucination was cut dry when a giant toad fell from the ceiling on my table, reminding me that I was in the middle of the Chaco backcountry and that the only lights in ten kilometers round were the sparks of my hanger factory's boiler.

The reality of public works in the province showed that my imaginary Juarez was right: the disorder was perfectly planned.

Near the countryside they tendered the paving of a provincial route. I, with my mentality of ex-logist of Chingolo logistics, sat on the edge of the road to see the state road machines work. It was a magic illusionist spectacle. They threw a layer of asphalt so ridiculously thin that it looked like a feta of cheap mortadela on the ground.

"This doesn't last three months," I told the foreman of the play.

The guy winked at me, he put his hat on and said nothing.

In fact, at three months, the Santiago sun melted the asphalt as if it were chocolate and the trucks loaded with wooden rolls destroyed the road, leaving some wells where a family of Yacares could have peacefully inhabited. The following year, the miracle repeated itself: the government again tendered the same route, the same machines came, they took fortunes and threw the same feta of ghost asphalt again. Twenty times the same work was done instead of doing it well once. It was the perpetual reconstruction of nothing.

In our hanger factory, however, quebracho left no room for make-believe. You do not fool around with white quebracho: do the job badly and the wood takes revenge, twisting until it breaks your machines.

One day, the lathe operator brought me a piece of discard, a strip of white quebracho that had been cracked during the express drying in the autoclave.

"Ingeniero, this is not for hanger. Shall we throw it into the fire?" he asked.

"There is nothing to throw away, Roberto," I said, taking the heavy and noble piece of wood. "Here we are not the government of the province to waste the stock. Cut it in the middle, pass it through the disc of vidia and transform it into handles for roast knives. Everything that enters this factory has to be transformed into value, even if it is to puncture a chorizo.

The lathe operator laughed to death, took the wood and at two hours brought me a polished knife handle that shone like marble.

We were winning the battle against the mountain and against the absurdity of the province, perch per plate per plate. But to keep growing and to fulfill Don Gil's gigantic orders for North Supermarkets, we needed something that in Donadeu seemed like a fantasy of science fiction: constant electric energy.

CHAPTER 4: The Electron Tamer (and the Resurrection of Light)

If white quebracho is a wood with personality problems, the Santiago del Estero electron is an outright anarchist. In Donadeu during the 1990s, electricity was not a public service; it was an urban legend. The province's power grid was like Juárez's promises of paved roads: it existed on paper in the capital, while in the backcountry the only available energy came from the sun, melting your neurons at noon.

But producing hangers at scale required power. The carbide tools I brought from Buenos Aires spun at aircraft-turbine speeds, and trying to feed them with a pickup-truck battery was like trying to move an ocean liner with a plastic oar. We needed a power plant.

And Donadeu's story, once again, pointed the way.

During his years of forestry glory, before Perón imposed labor laws, Old Donadeu had built a brick thermal power station to light his 111-room general store and the homes of his managers. But when Peronism offended him, the old man decided that progress was an unnecessary luxury for lumberjacks. He dismantled the dynamos, sold the copper windings as scrap and left the plant empty. By the time we arrived, the old station was a brick skeleton inhabited by owls and bats.

"The mystic of the place is intact," I told the boys, standing in front of the ruined shed. "We will raise the power plant in exactly the same place. Old Donadeu's ghost will have to give us permission.

For this crusade we added a new member to the factory triumvirate: our foreman, Don Justo.

Don Justo was Santiago del Estero through and through, the kind of man nothing could surprise. If a flying saucer had landed in the middle of the forest, he would have strolled over, greeted the Martian with a polite 'Good afternoon, sir,' and asked whether he happened to have some wire for tying up the pickup's tailgate. Don Justo had no engineering degree, but he held a doctorate in 'human geography.' He knew exactly how fast each lumberjack worked at every temperature, how to end a knife fight with two well-chosen words and, above all, where to find useful pieces of iron within a fifty-kilometer radius.

"Ingeniero," Don Justo told me one day, chewing a twig of itín. "In the field of the background we have the old Deutz tractor. The engine is impeccable, but the transmission has passed to a better life. It does not walk or push it downhill.

My eyes opened like roast plates.

- And the engine starts, right?

"If we show you a bottle of diesel fuel, it starts with pure corajudo, engineer.

- We took the transmission out and took the engine.

Don Justo adjusted his hat, looked up at the horizon as he sought inspiration and dropped the second clue:

"In a neighboring village, passing the edge of the mountain, there is an abandoned generator in a railroad shed. The engine of that group is melted, but the giant bronze alternator is healthy. The owner left it there because he says it is useless.

That was the holy grail of the criolla thermodynamics. We had the stock: a Deutz tractor engine with a healthy heart but no legs, and an electric generator with legs but no heart. The miracle of the transformation consisted of marrying those two rusty monsters in the ruins of the old power plant of Old Donadeu.

The transfer operation was an epic worthy of Fitzcarraldo. With Don Justo at the head, the lathe operator and the blacksmith, we loaded the giant alternator into a coupler pulled by our only useful truck. The bug weighed tons. We crossed dirt roads that looked talcum, dodged wells and low branches, praying that the alternator would not get fired and ended up crushing the cabin.

When we had both pieces in the generator shed, the magic began.

I was traveling to Buenos Aires and returning with the bags loaded with technological smuggling for the control board: high voltage ceramic fuses, pocket cutter keys that looked like Frankenstein levers, copper wires of the thickness of an arm and amps with analog needles.

Meanwhile, in Donadeu, the lathe operator and the Blacksmith worked without plans. lathe operator manufactured a perfect coupling flange to connect the Deutz engine shaft with the abandoned alternator shaft. Blacksmith, for its part, welded a double iron T profile base so that the whole did not walk out through the village due to vibrations.

On the day of the inauguration, the generator shed looked like the laboratory of a mad scientist. The home electric board we had built shone with its polished bronze cutting keys. Don Justo stood next to the tractor engine, gave him two barleys with the manual pump and looked at the blacksmith.

"We'll give you, engineer?" asked Justo.

- Give him some rope, Fairy.

Don Justo started it. Deutz engine sneezed black with diesel fuel smoke, the whole shed trembled, the owls came scared off the roof of sheet metal and suddenly the engine started roaring with a constant, heavy and brutal heartbeat: tacata-tacata-tacata!

The giant alternator began to turn. The straps squealed like souls in sorrow. On the control board, the voltmeter needles jumped and stuck into the 380 volts with a digital precision that made us scream with joy.

The blacksmith approached the violently vibrating monster. He leaned his hand on the double iron structure T, closed his eyes, heard the buzz of the electrons and, with his heavy hammer, gave two dry taps to a nut at the base ("tag, tac!"). Immediately, the squealing of the straps disappeared and the power plant entered a harmonic, almost peaceful purring, as if the Deutz engine and the abandoned generator had been waiting all their lives to meet in that corner of the Santiago Chaco.

"Let it be the last time I have a better power station than they do in Germany!" I shouted at them over the noise, hugging them.

The kids were laughing, we had tamed the electrons with tractor scrap.

The homemade power plant did more than bring the hanger-copying machines and autoclaves to life; it transformed the social physics of the town.

Donadeu was still in the total darkness of the mountain, but we now owned the light. And since we were not Juarez, we decided that the energy was not kept: it was shared.

On Saturday nights, or whenever there was an important occasion—a wedding, a baptism or the wake of a respected neighbor—Don Justo ran an overhead copper cable from the factory to the town's main street. We tied hundred-watt bulbs to the branches of the carob trees, and Don Justo walked to the power-plant switchboard and raised the Bakelite lever with a solemn smile.

"Let the light be lighted!" the lever seemed to say.

And in the middle of the impenetrable blackness of the Chaco forest, Donadeu lit up. The hanging lamps of the trees shone like domestic stars, illuminating the storehouse of general bouquets and dry land. People came out of the ranches with their eyes wide open, amazed to see their own shadows projected on the adobe walls. The boys ran under the lights trying to hunt the thousands of night butterflies that were piled around the hot glass, and the lumberjacks uncovered beers and put chamame in a pass directly connected to our improvised network.

The happiness of those people dancing under our homemade lamps, fed by a broken tractor and a resurrected generator, was worth more than any export balance. It was the empirical demonstration of our theory: the stock of discard, transformed by the will and the ingenuity of four types, had generated the purest wealth that exists: the dignity of having light in the middle of the night.

Of course, this demonstration of Creole energy sovereignty soon reached the ears of the bureaucrats of the capital. A few months later, when the province finally decided to inaugurate the official electric power line for Donadeu with drumbuses and saucers, the last and most ominous duel against the logic of Santiago populism was waiting for us.

But that's another story.

CHAPTER 5: Chiqui's Nest and the Transmutation of Meat

There is a moment, after three o'clock in the afternoon in Donadeu, where heat ceases to be a physical magnitude and becomes a spiritual presence. Air weighs so much that it can chew; the horizon is deformed and the Chaco backcountry begins to murmur things that no industrial engineer would dare admit to an international congress.

In that absolute solitude, besieged by fifty-degree heat beneath the factory's corrugated-metal roof, I read treatises on agricultural economics and surrendered to hallucinations.

The local sorcerers—who in Donadeu were more abundant than the engineers—were looking at me with a glance. For them, I was not simply the owner of the land or the porteño who was making indestructible wooden hangers; I was a sorcerer of the city who tried to tame the matter with strange metal noises and formulas. And they were not entirely wrong. In my eagerness to fulfill my father's old agricultural dream, I decided that it was not enough for us to transform the white quebracho into hangers for the fine costumes of Buenos Aires. The mountain demanded life. And I decided to give it to him in the form of the fastest, most absurd and prehistoric creature on Argentine soil: the rhea.

Thus the factory dispatch area became a biological transmutation temple.

The final stage of making the hangers required precision and delicacy. After the lathe operator and blacksmith cut and shaped them with the Citroën axle mechanism, the hangers moved to the finishing area. A group of young women from the town applied the final coat of paint and protective lacquer, then passed each hanger through a machine that wrapped it in heat-shrink plastic. An electrical element shrank the plastic around the wood, sealing it forever against the dampness of the outside world.

In the middle of that sector, surrounded by varnish vapors and the hum of the heat-shrink machine, I installed my last madness: an artificial incubator for rhea eggs.

Breeding rheas in captivity is a delicate science. The secret lies not in feeding them, but in the thermodynamics of the egg. For the chick to develop without sticking to the shell, the eggs—giant pale-green spheres that look as though they fell from another planet—must be turned with clockwork regularity, several times a day and with extreme gentleness.

"This is a female job," I decreed, looking at the roughness of my lumberjacks' hands, accustomed to tame broken axes. "If I give this to blacksmith, he makes me dinosaur tortillas in five minutes.

I entrusted the sacred task of incubation to the Chiqui.

Chiqui was one of the girls in the packaging sector. She had a weaving patience and a attentive look that did not miss any detail. She accepted the position of "Nest Guard" with an almost religious solemnity. While the heat-shrink machine machine wrapped hangers with a constant hissing, the Chiqui approached the incubator, wearing cotton gloves and, egg by egg, performing manual rotation with the same delicacy with which my mother, Ruth Benzacar, accommodated a Berni sculpture in her gallery in Barrio Norte.

The contrast was a purely surreal postcard: on the one hand, industrial scrap spitting hangers for the big supermarkets of the capital; on the other, the Chiqui pampering giant rhea eggs under the controlled heat of an electrical resistance that we ourselves had connected to the Deutz power plant.

The witches of the village used to stand at the door of the shed to look at the incubator. They did not understand thermostats or embryo rotation, but for them, the Chiqui was performing a technological fertility ritual. They said that dead wooden hangers transmitted their secret strength to the rhea eggs, and that out of that machine no common birds would come out, but swift monsters capable of running faster than the water train.

But the real magic miracle, which transformed Donadeu's biology itself, did not occur within the incubator, but in the food dishes of our workers.

When we opened the factory, we hired many young children from the village and the surrounding places of the mountain. They were boys of eighteen or twenty years old, but they had languishing bodies, shoulders fallen and that meek and dull look that produces the structural malnutrition of the Argentine north. In their homes, the usual diet was pure carbohydrate: flour, noodles, cooked mate and, hopefully, some dried vegetable. Protein was a luxury of science fiction. They were shadows that moved slowly by heat, adapted to spend the least amount of energy possible to not consume inside.

But with the factory running and collecting its fortnights in hand, the great transmutation occurred.

For the first time in their lives, these kids had the ability to buy. And the first thing they did was not buy clothes or radios; they started buying meat. In Donadeu's little town, cow meat was started to be eaten regularly, every day.

The midday barbecue behind the factory became an obligatory ritual. Smoke from fat burning over white-quebracho embers mingled with the smell of lacquer from the hangers. The young men devoured the cuts of meat with an ancestral hunger, as if their bodies understood that every mouthful of protein was fuel they had been denied for generations.

The physical transformation of those young men was astonishing, almost biological. Within months their shoulders broadened. Skin once dulled by dust and malnutrition acquired a healthy glow. Arms as thin as dry carob branches filled out with hard, fibrous muscle. Even the speed of their movements changed: the heaviness of the eternal siesta gave way to electric energy and noisy vitality. They shouted, roared with laughter while operating the hanger-copying machines, and challenged one another to see who could lift the heaviest log.

The sorcerers of the mountain contemplated this phenomenon with bewilderment and reverential fear. They were going to see the foreman, Don Justo, to ask him for explanations.

"The engineer Benzacar is putting a spirit inside the changos," they said, pointing to the young men who were carrying the trucks with a huge force. "These are not the sons of Mrs. Maria. Those are iron men who make the machine.

Don Justo, chewing on his itin twig, smiled sideways.

"It is no spirit, gift," he replied. "It is the flesh. The engineer pays them with real silver and the pigs eat cow. The strength was already inside them, they only lack the fire to light it.

It was the exact definition of wealth from my book, applied to human flesh. The stock was the genetics of those young men from Santiago del Estero—naturally strong but dimmed by poverty; the transformation capacity was the factory wage converted into protein on their plates. The result was measured not only in pesos per kilogram of hangers shipped, but in centimeters of muscle and in the health of a generation that was finally ceasing to be a malnutrition statistic and becoming the engine of its own destiny.

Meanwhile, in the packing area, Chiqui continued turning her rhea eggs under the warmth of the heat-shrink machine. The first chick was about to break through its green shell and, as I sat in my office beneath the slowly turning ceiling fan, I felt that thermodynamics, biology and the magic of the backcountry had finally come into perfect harmony.

CHAPTER 6: The Birth of the Creole Velociraptors and the Pharmacologist Sorcerer

In Santiago del Estero backcountry, natural selection is not a theory that is studied in books; it is a live show that takes place while you try not to melt the engine of the truck. And when you decide to get into a breeder of prehistoric fauna in the middle of a hanger factory, evolution directly goes crazy.

At last, the giant eggs Chiqui guarded in the packing area decided they had received enough warmth from our heat-shrink machine. On a Tuesday morning, amid the hiss of plastic and the smell of varnish, we heard the first cracks.

Five were born. Five rhea chicks that, from their very first second, displayed the insolence of a street hustler and the curiosity of a tax inspector.

Any biologist will tell you that the rhea is a timid, fast-running plains animal. But our five chicks were not raised on the pampas; they grew up among cast-iron machines from 1910, carbide-tipped saws spinning at delirious speeds and burly, tobacco-chewing lumberjacks. The result was that the creatures emerged completely immune to fear.

For them, the deafening noise of the copier with Citroën axle was his mother's ruckus, and the white sawdust, his soft mattress.

Within a few weeks, the five rheas were already the size of a medium dog, thin and fibrous legs, and an unexplained prideful attitude. They walked through the shed as if they were the true owners of the public limited company. As they were sovereignly bored of seeing how we transformed wood into hangers, they were engaged in harassing the lumberjacks.

His favorite game was the larceny ant. A lumberjack was concentrated lining a white-quebracho plank in front of the saw, with a pack of cigarettes or a carpenter's pencil coming out of his graffa shirt pocket, and suddenly a long, grayish neck appeared like a periscope.

Zac! With a surgical precision pick, the rhea snatched the booty and ran out of the corridor at full speed, dodging the transmission belts with the agility of a left wing of fut—Son of a big slut, return the lighter to me!" Ramon shouted, running behind the bug with a stick in his hand, as the rhea looked at him with a glance at him with those round, cynical eyes, biting the plastic of the lighter as if it were a delicacy.

They would bite our legs, steal the nuts that the lathe operator left on the table and, if you neglected, stand beside you and stare at you, blinking slowly, as if wondering why it took you so long to finish the hanger. The boys at the factory adopted them as sacred pets. They were our “Creole velociraptors”, living proof that in Donadeu even the birds became industrial.

But while we were dealing with the spread of our domestic dinosaurs, the social reality of the province hit us again with a slap of crude realism. And it did so through the health of the daughter of our main sawmill.

The baby had serious growth problems. She was weak, weak, with that sad paleness of the boys who seem to have no strength or to play. The sawman, desperate because doctors who came from time to time from the capital to the official health post gave her no solution — besides signing control sheets and prescribing some useless ointment—, decided to cross the village next door.

A town called Agustín Olivari.

There lived a very famous healer. In Buenos Aires, the word “witch” evokes a guy in a robe making sacrifices of chickens under the full moon; inside Santiago del Estero, a witch is usually simply the only type of department that uses his head to observe nature rather than to obey orders from a ministry.

The sawman took his daughter to see the sorcerer of Agustín Olivari. The man looked at the baby, touched her joints, asked her what she was drinking and what she was eating, and gave her diagnosis with the solemnity of a shaman. He gave her a bottle with a thick liquid.

"Give her this every day, three drops in the morning," she said. "And the changuit is going to start stretching like the carob. The sawman did a little bit of work. Three weeks later, the baby was another. She started to recover the color, to be hungry, to run through the ranch yard. The growth that had been stagnating for years was as if by magic.

When the sawmill told me the story in the factory, with wet eyes of gratitude to the “miragrero witch”, I asked him to show me the jar of the mystical remedy. I wanted to know what kind of secret grass on the mountain had worked the miracle.

The home label was written with a ballpoint pen, but the original container was translucent below.

It was an ordinary industrial polyvitamin, B complex, iron, calcium and zinc.

I stared at the jar and felt a mixture of deep admiration for the sagacity of the sorcerer and a quarrel that burned my stomach against the official system.

I had an explanation of engineer: in Donadeu and Agustín Olivari there was no water from the net. People gathered rain in water tanks and tanks; it was a water poor in minerals and, combined with an equally poor diet, could aggravate the deficiencies of the children. The witch needed no German laboratory to suspect that something elementary was missing there.

Agustín Olivari's sorcerer, without ever stepping on a medical school, had observed the surroundings. He knew that food was not the only problem; water lacked "force." So he went to the city pharmacy, bought commercial polyvitamins, changed the label to keep his aura of mystery and prescribed them to the boys.

He was a genius in pragmatic medicine. Instead, the doctors of the state health post, those who came with impeccable dustguards financed by the government of Juárez, passed through the town once a month, filled their folders with malnutrition statistics to justify their salaries and returned to the capital without any of them being crossed by the neuron the basic idea of prescribing a polyvitamin or mineral supplement to compensate for rainwater. For the State, malnutrition was a statistical fact; for the sorcerer, it was a problem of stock and transformation of nutrients that was solved with three drops a day.

I was so fascinated by the lucidity of the character that I decided to go to meet him. I needed to see my "competitor" closely in the market of rationality applied to the mountain.

I got in the truck and drove to Agustín Olivari. To avoid raising suspicions that I was going to audit him with eyes of Buenos Aires engineer, I invented a terrible back pain, supposedly due to having loaded some planks of crack.

I arrived at his ranch. It was a neat adobe construction, with a dirt yard swept with obsession and the generous shadow of a giant carob. The sorcerer welcomed me. He was an indecipherable old man, with tanned skin like guayacan leather and dark, very lively eyes, who read the patent of the car before you finished greeting.

He made me sit on a wooden bench.

"I am hurt down here, don," I said, touching my lumbar area with a face of suffering. "I bend over to check the machines and then I cannot straighten myself. I was told that you have a good hand for the pains.

The old man stared at me for a whole minute. He did not make any magical pass, he did not pull out any feather fetish. He studied my posture, looked at my clean engineer hands and smiled just, with a subtle irony that made me realize that the guy knew perfectly who I was and that my back pain was as fake as the asphalt of the Juarez routes. He turned around, poked through glass jars and prepared an infusion. He gave me a jar of hot can.

"Take this, engineer," he said, accenting the title with a delicious intonation. "They are the yuyos of the mountain. They will loosen the tension of his back... and also the tension of his head, which has it very full of numbers.

I took tea quietly under the shade of the carob. I was warm, bitter and had a vague taste of wild mint and pole. While I was drinking, we stood looking at the mountain. We did not talk about physics, or trace elements, or the sawman's daughter. There was no need for it. There was an implicit pact of mutual respect between the two types of the department who understood that to survive in this corner of the world it was necessary to transform matter with intelligence, whether generator or a Citroën axle or a bottle of camouflaged vitamins.

I left Agustín Olivari with a relaxed back and a slightly calmer soul. The sorcerer of the mountain had given me the last lesson I needed for my survival economics treaty: wealth does not require great German laboratories or ministerial budgets. It simply requires the sagacity of looking at the water your people take and having the decency to return to it the minerals that the sky forgot to put in it.

When I returned to the factory, the five rheas welcomed me running to the side of the truck, stretching my neck to see if I had brought them something to eat from my trip. I looked at them and laughed alone. In Donadeu, among witch doctors, kids who became giants eating roast and dinosaur lighter thieves, we were building the happiest and most delusional empire in the whole province.

CHAPTER 7: Paper Versus Wood (The Mystique of the Buenos Aires Financial District)

In thermodynamics, energy is not lost, it is only transformed. In the Argentine economy of the 1990s, wealth was not lost either: it was coming out of the sweat of the Chaco backcountry in the form of perfect hangers and evaporated into the air conditioning of the Buenos Aires financial district in the form of interest rates.

Once we had turned Donadeu's young men into protein-powered athletes, persuaded the autoclave to leave the quebracho docile and senseless, and set our five velociraptor rheas patrolling the factory to guard the carbide tools, we came up against the true bottleneck in the formula for wealth. And that bottleneck was not in Santiago del Estero.

It was a thousand kilometers away, in the marble and red carpet offices of Buenos Aires.

The finished hangers, wrapped by Chiqui in heat-shrink plastic, were loaded onto trucks that challenged the phantom asphalt of the provincial roads. The freight traveled through the night toward the branches of Supermercados Norte. Every hanger was a piece of hyper-transformed matter: hardwood stock worth pennies on the forest floor, now converted into a noble design object for fine suits and worth a small fortune in pesos per kilogram.

But in Argentina, the road between production and collection is a maze of black financial magic designed by economic ministers who seemed to have studied at Hogwarts more than at Harvard.

The heat shock of getting out of the truck in Buenos Aires was brutal. In Donadeu, the heat was honest: it burned your skin and forced you to drink water. In the center of Buenos Aires, the heat was a wet and nervous mass of people in grey suits running behind a dollar that quoted one by one with the weight, under a sun that bounced off the cement and smoke of the collectives.

I went from hearing the vibrations of a copier with my blacksmith to sitting in front of the young financial analysts at the supermarket. Twenty-five-year-old, impeccable guys with celestial shirts and imported ties, who had never seen a broken white tree in their life, and didn't know that wood twists like a propeller if you let it dry badly.

"The boarding is very good, Benzacar," one said, checking the sheet on his green phosphorus computer. "The hangers flew out of the supermarket shelves. Don Gil is a pussy. Here you have the payment.

I slipped through the desk a rectangle of wallpaper. I grabbed it with my hands, which still had remains of chaco sawdust under their nails.

I looked at the date of collection and felt the law of gravity was altered.

"I asked," I said, rubbing my eyes. "Today is March 10th. This check says I can charge it on October 15th. It's seven months. Are you charging me?

The analyst smiled at the sufficiency of the master of occult science.

"It's chain policy, Benzacar. Payment deadlines have been stretched by the liquidity of the market. But be assured, the check has the firm's backing. It's safe money.

"Secure plate?" I asked him, supporting his fists on the desk. "Tell me, how do I pay Ramón, Don Justo and the lathe operator on Saturday with a paper that says they will be able to buy meat within two hundred and ten days? Donadeu has no bank branches, kid. People eat there today, not in October. Do I tell the butcher in town to trust Ramón with a roast showing him the signature of your supermarket?

The boy shrugged, alien to the drama of real physics. In its dimension, money was an electronic flow on a screen; in mine, money was the biological fuel that transformed the body of my lumberjacks.

That was where the real sangria began, the anomaly of the Argentine financial system that my book

Wealth, the beginning of the road denounces on each page.

Since I could not pay for the fortnight with spring promises, I had to enter the circuit of the asphalt vampires: the banks and the "caves" of the Buenos Aires financial district to exchange those deferred checks for constant and sounding cash.

Entering a city bank in the nineties to discount a check was like voluntarily handing Dracula his neck. Interest rates charged to you for pre-empting a seven-month check was a thermodynamic delirium. The financial system was not serving you; it confiscated your transformational capacity.

I did the check in the van, back to the hotel, and I dropped my soul to the floor: I ended up paying more money in financial interest to change the supermarket checks than I paid on the total payroll of the entire Donadeu factory.

It was an intolerable absurdity. The lathe operator, the blacksmith, the packing women, Don Justo and I spent entire weeks battling the hardest wood in the world, resurrecting Deutz tractor engines, inventing copying machines with Citroën axles and drying quebracho in homemade autoclaves to add value to matter—while a man in a gray suit, sitting in an office on Reconquista Street and tapping three keys on a computer, kept more value than the entire factory produced, simply for giving us the physical banknotes needed to pay the fortnightly wages.

The Argentine financial system acted as a black hole of entropy. It sucked all the energy of the productive sector and dissipated it in speculation.

I had the dream of continuing to automate the factory. I had seen at international fairs some German milling heads that would have doubled our cutting speed, and some pneumatic feeders that would have prevented the boys from having to bring their hands to the vidia saws at 10,000 revolutions. I had the planes on my head, the lathe operator was ready to couple them and the blacksmith was already relaming himself thinking of tuning in the sound of the new machines.

But the transformation capital was taken away by the finance ministers and their friends from the banks.

Every time we managed to put together some profit weights to invest in a new engine or an improvement for the autoclave, there was a new run, a change of rules, or a stretch of payment terms that forced us to burn that money in the financial caves so as not to leave the town without eating the weekend. We were not exempt from national madness. We were an island of rationality in the middle of the mountain, yes, but the ocean of speculation that surrounded the island was too big and stormy.

In my book I explain that when a society is not clear about the concept of wealth — when it confuses the real value of things with the value of wallpapers — the economy becomes a destructive pendulum. One day you go to one side, the other day you go to the other, and in the middle you destroy the capacity for transformation that so much it cost to build.

Back in Donadeu, I got out of the tired truck, with the dust of the road stuck to my face and empty pockets of German automation dreams, but filled with the cash I had had to rescue from the claws of the city.

Don Justo was waiting for me at the door of the generator, chewing his twig of itin. Next to him, one of the factory's young men, with wide shoulders and the healthy shine of protein in his eyes, carried a white-quebracho plank with a fuzzy ease. One of the rheas came up jogging slowly and stung his pocket from the shirt to the kid, looking for a ghost lighter.

Don Justo looked at the bags with the money for the fortnight, looked at me and realized that the city had charged me the usual toll.

"A lot of thread in Buenos Aires, engineer?" he asked me with his gentle tone.

"A lot of paper thread, Justo," I replied, leaning on the hot hood of the truck. "They throw harder than the white crack, but they don't produce a match.

"And yes," said Justo, looking at the hangers that were accumulating in the reservoir. "They don't know what it costs to leave wood in the wood. They believe that things are born from trees.

I smiled. Justo was right. In Buenos Aires they believed wealth came out of computers and ministries of economy. They did not know that the only real wealth is measured in pesos per kilogram, kneaded into existence by a lathe operator, a blacksmith, a Citroën axle and a nest of rheas in the middle of nowhere.

CHAPTER 8: The Solitude of the Oil Lamp (The Birth of an Ignored Theory)

There is a kind of loneliness that has nothing to do with the absence of people. During the day in Donadeu, I was surrounded by the roar of copying machines, the shouts of lumberjacks, the hiss of the heat-shrink machine and the brazen trot of our five rheas. But at eight at night, when we shut down the power plant's Deutz engine to save diesel fuel and the town sank once more into the thick darkness of the Chaco forest, loneliness changed its nature. It became an intellectual loneliness, an unease of the spirit that pierced me more deeply than the heat.

I would sit on the veranda of my wooden house, surrounded by books brought from Buenos Aires, in the light of a kerosene lamp flickering in the north wind. I read Adam Smith, David Ricardo, Keynes, Marx and Friedman. I searched desperately through the history of economic thought for someone who spoke the language I was living each day.

But I couldn't find anyone, and that disconnect was driving me crazy.

All the economic literature on the table told me about abstractions. They talked about supply and demand curves that crossed in a perfect vacuum, macroeconomic variables that settled on their own with a rate of interest, "market forces" that operated as incorporeal ghosts. They were theories written by guys who had spent their lives in libraries in London, Boston or Paris, where water came out of a canilla and trees were ornaments in a public park.

None of those heroes of economics explained what the hell to do when your raw-material stock is an indestructible wood that twists like a propeller if left to dry. None explained how to balance a factory when the banks discount seventy percent of the value of a seven-month check and your lumberjacks need meat today to have the strength to lift a quebracho log tomorrow.

He was alone in a world of flesh and blood, of pulleys and sawdust, trying to understand wealth as capital theorists discussed the sex of financial angels.

It was during those nights of lamplight and sweat that I began to conceive my own book, *Wealth, the Beginning of the Journey*. I did not write it out of academic ambition; I wrote it out of sheer mental survival, to keep from going mad in the middle of nowhere. I needed to put into order what my eyes witnessed every day.

I discovered that traditional economists were skipping the most important step in physics. For them, “wealth” was a flow of money. For me, coming from the industrial engineering and logistics of Chingolo, wealth was an elementary thermodynamic equation:

Wealth = stock + processing capacity.

Stock is what nature gives you: the fifteen million hectares of Santiago del Estero, the white quebracho growing wild in the forest, the water of the Dulce and Salado rivers. But stock alone is worth nothing. A quebracho log lying on the ground is merely an obstacle for the cows. Wealth appears when you apply energy—the strength of Donadeu's young men—to transform that stock into something useful, measured in pesos per kilogram: a finished hanger, a barbecue platter, a polished knife handle.

But why was the province still miserable if it had surplus stock?

That's where I crashed into the wall of the theory of social mandate. I understood that for the capacity to transform to activate, society has to want it. There has to be an invisible agreement that punishes vagrancy and rewards production. But in the province of Juárez, the only social mandate that power fed was that of dependence. If you transform matter, you become free; if you become free, you no longer need the signed photocopy of the governor to have zinc sheets. Caudillismo had to keep the stock intact and the capacity to transform into zero. Structural poverty was not a problem of lack of resources; it was a perfect political design to prevent the thermodynamics of wealth from getting underway.

I wrote all this with an almost feverish urgency, filling spiraled notebooks as the night butterflies burned against the glass of the oil lamp. I felt that I had discovered the powder, that I had in my hands a protocol of growth and development so clear and rational that any government with two fingers of front would immediately apply to transform the reality of the Argentine north.

How naive I was.

Let's be honest: the world gave a shit about my book.

When I finally published it and tried to discuss these concepts in Buenos Aires, in the forums of economy or with the politicians in turn, I found myself with a wall of absolute indifference. City economists looked at me like a weirdo, a “wood engineer” who intended to put physics and thermodynamics into their long financial speculation sheets. For them, the real economy—the one to put

wood in an autoclave to leave it stupid—was something dirty, ordinary, that had to be delegated to peripheral countries while we were playing one by one with the dollar.

The academic world systematically ignored me. They preferred to continue discussing their abstract theories in international conferences with air conditioning, charging state salaries to write papers about poverty that no one in the mountain would ever read. No one was interested in a protocol that would solve the distributional bid and give a productive north, because the disorder—the creole entropy of the ghost asphalt and paved roads twenty times—was the business that fed them all.

That ignorance hurt, I will not deny it. To feel that you have the solution for the hunger of thousands of children and that those who make the decisions prefer to look the other way so as not to lose their electoral privileges is a very bitter form of loneliness.

But one night, back in Donadeu, while I was putting my notebooks under the oil lamp, I heard a soft noise in the wooden gallery of the office. I looked slowly.

There was Ramon, our archer, sitting on the edge of his step. He had wide shoulders, strong arms full of veins marked by work and the health that had returned the daily roast protein. He was polishing with a piece of sand a knife handle of crack that he had rescued from discard. He did it slowly, with an almost artistic concentration, imitating the care he saw in the lathe operator's workshop.

Next to him, one of the rheas slept with his head hidden under his wing, alien to the laws of the world economy.

Ramon looked up, saw me and showed me the wooden handle. He shone in the light of the *chaqueña* moon as if it were a piece of jewelry.

"Look, engineer," he said, with his gentle tone. "This crack was well-mannered. It will not bend any more. It will serve for life.

I looked at it and understood everything.

The world of capital and the university doctors could give a shit about my economics book. They could ignore my surname and my formulas of industrial thermodynamics forever. But there, in that lost corner of Santiago del Estero backcountry, the matter had been transformed. Ramón was no longer the languished shadow that waited for a photocopy of Juárez to survive; he was a

strong man who knew how to tame the hardest wood in the world with his own hands.

The stock had been linked to the capacity for transformation, and the result was not on a green phosphorus screen of the Buenos Aires financial district. It was there, shining in the hand of Ramón, meek and straight for life.

INTERLUDIO: Where the facts jump the gate

So far, everything was born of Donadeu: from mud, machines, checks, rheas, oil lamp and memory, which always exaggerates a little when it is hot.

From this point on, reality takes a run, jumps the gate and becomes a fable. Bambara is not on any reliable map. Their problems, however, are in too many.

CHAPTER 9: The Emissary from the Savanna

An unwritten law of physics says that energy accumulated at a point of high pressure always seeks an outlet, however narrow. My book, *Wealth, the Beginning of the Journey*, had been cheaply printed in Buenos Aires, serenely ignored by the economists of the financial district and filed away by the academic bureaucracy. But the thermodynamic truth it contained was charged with the pressure of the Chaco forest. It needed only a crack in the map through which to explode.

And that crack opened thanks to my mom's art gallery.

One afternoon of those that only happen when a story decides to continue walking alone, a diplomat from the embassy of a West African country — let's call him Bambara, a Mediterranean nation, hot as an oven and rich in impenetrable forests — entered the Ruth Benzacar Gallery in North America. I was looking for contemporary paintings to decorate the official residence. While my mom showed him a spectacular Berni, the diplomat saw on a mouse table a dusty copy of my book, which I had left to my old lady to make a bundle.

The diplomat, a guy educated in the Sorbonne but with his feet well tucked into the mud of his land, looked through the book out of curiosity. He read the formula: $\text{wealth} = \text{stock} + \text{capacity for transformation}$. He read about the tarried creek, about the deficiencies the sorcerer was fighting with his jar and about how the “social mandate” of passive survival destroyed the future of nations.

He dropped his jaw on the floor, bought the Berni, but took the book under his arm like a shipment of plutonium.

Three months later, I was in Donadeu's office, trying to convince the lathe operator not to use a lawn mower piston to fix the boiler, when I heard a noise that did not belong to the forest ecosystem. It was the roar of a double-wheel drive truck from the embassy, impeccable, opening its way between the talcum of the road.

He stopped in front of the shed. A very tall man came down from the cabin, black as the ebony, dressed in an immaculate white linen suit that contrasted savagely with the Santiago dust.

His name was Musa, he was the Minister of Industrial Development of Bambara.

The cultural shock in Donadeu was immediate, excruciating and beautiful.

Musa came down from the van with a crocodile leather case and, before he could say “good morning”, one of our five speedy rheas approached him on the trot, stretched his neck and took away with a precise pickle the golden pin with the flag of his country that he was wearing on his lap.

"Hey!" cried the minister, trying to run the bug, which was already running 40 kilometers an hour, dodging the quebracho logs.

"Don't worry, Excellency," said Don Justo, leaving the shop with his twig of itin in his mouth. "That's the "Punter", the most Peronist rhea we have. He likes the things that shine. Then we trade it for a piece of roast.

I had Musa come to my wooden office. We had no air conditioning, just the ceiling fan that turned making a terrible noise. I served him a glass of rainwater (this time with the sorcerer's polyvitamin already dissolved, in doubt) and the guy supported my book on the desk, spent so much reading it.

"Ingeniero Benzacar," he said, speaking a perfect Spanish with a French accent. "I have read his treatise. In my country we have exactly the same problem as you describe in Santiago del Estero. We have fifteen million hectares of indomitable jungle, colossal rivers and a tree we call mopane, which is so hard that it breaks the axes and twists when it dries. We have an infinite stock, but our people are starving because we don't know how to transform it. The French want to sell us factories of three million dollars that we can't afford, and the University of Paris sends us doctors who talk about abstract macroeconomic theories while the children have nothing to eat.

He supported his huge hands on the book.

"Your book is not economics, engineer. Your book is an industrial guerrilla manual. You invented the thermodynamics of survival. And I come to ask you to come to Bambara to help us apply your protocol. We want to stop exporting logs to begin exporting value. We want to leave our wood bogged down.

I looked out the window. Outside, the lathe operator and the blacksmith were trying to convince the rhea to return the gold pin generatorg a shiny nut as bait. I thought of the indifference of the Buenos Aires bureaucrats, in the city's seven-month checks, in the state doctors who did not give vitamins and in the ghost asphalt routes of Juarez.

"Musa," I said, smiling. "Are you telling me that in your country there is a social mandate of prosperity waiting to be lit up?

"The people of Bambara are ready, engineer. We only need matches.

I got up from the couch and opened the shed door.

"Just! Robert!" I shouted at the foreman and lathe operator. "Prepare the wooden bags and gather all the tools we have. We are going to Africa.

On Sunday before leaving, the entire African delegation sat down to eat in the courtyard. My mother, Ruth, who had traveled especially from Buenos Aires to say goodbye, prepared a colossal paella for twenty people, honoring the tradition of the Spanish painters that my old man had adopted.

Musa, the minister of white linen, ate rice with seafood with his hands beside Ramón the lumberjack, which he pointedly explained how the roast had widened his shoulders. Blacksmith played the guitar and the rheas were spinning around the table, seeking to steal some unsustained prawn.

"This is the transmutation of matter, Musa," I said, lifting up my glass of wine. "We started with a yuyo of elephant grass and ended up crossing the ocean.

"We don't have rheas in Africa, Benzacar," Musa replied, laughing loudly, "but we have ostriches. They are bigger and run faster. We're going to teach them how to steal tools at the Bambara factory.

We raised our glasses beneath the stars of Donadeu, lit by bulbs hanging from the carob trees and powered by our Deutz generator. For the first time in many years, I did not feel the solitude of the oil lamp. I felt that the invisible protocol of wealth was finally going to have its revenge. Santiago del Estero's quebracho had trained us for the hardest battle; now we were ready to conquer the world with intelligent scrap and a will of steel.

CHAPTER 10: The Million-Dollar Game (and the Transmutation of Bureaucracy)

When we landed in Bambara with Don Justo, the lathe operator and the blacksmith, I immediately understood that replicating the hanger factory would be the easy part. Mopane, an African wood as hard as iron, quickly surrendered to our homemade autoclave; it emerged as docile, senseless and tame as Santiago del Estero quebracho. The real challenge was not technological. The real challenge was that Bambara, like Santiago del Estero, was trapped in the spell of bureaucratic inertia.

In the villages of Bambara we discovered something much simpler than any five-year plan: people wanted the community to join together on weekends to sing and to make the kids grow up happy. All the wealth we generated had to buy time, food and tranquility so that that song would not be extinguished.

But to align the state with that mandate, we had to clean the nest of the public administration heads first.

Musa, the minister, had prepared a round of meetings with all the politicians in Bambara: the new ones, the old ones, the retired ones and those who aspired to steal in the future.

"Ingeniero, you have to interview them all," Musa asked me, a little resigned. "If we don't integrate them, they'll throw stones at us in the gears."

I knew that, from a technical point of view, listening to the speeches of these bureaucrats was sovereign to the fart. Everyone repeated the same phrases made that they had learned in European universities or in the manuals of local populism. But as an industrial engineer, I understood that social friction is reduced by integrating the parts. I sat patiently listening to them all. I let them speak, I fed them some mates (which looked with mystical distrust) and, when they finished tasting themselves in their own abstract theories, I told them:

"All right, gentlemen, I've heard your blackboard diagnoses. Now we're going to make a selection of personnel for the new state administrative board. But we're not going to take multiple choice tests."

I gathered all the public employees of the ministry in the packing shed, right next to where the local ostriches—which had already learned from our Santiago rheas—tried to peck the buttons on the shirts of the ordinances.

I stood on a mopane wooden platform. On my right hand, I raised a bundle of giant papers that I had myself sent to print in the capital. They were perfect replicas, but cartoons, of a green bill.

"Attention, everyone!" I cried. "Here I have a million dollars. It is not real money, but for today's exercise we will pretend that it is. Which of you is willing to give me your full day, to do exactly as I command you, in exchange for this million dollars? I promise you that you will not be physically abused, but my word will be your only law.

The crowd of employees looked at each other. The silence lasted five seconds, until I located the guy with the most suspicious face in the entire ministry in the background: a manual screw, of those who sign the entry sheet and go for coffee for six hours. I had rogue eyes and a smile of "I saved myself from this."

"You!" I pointed out. "Come here. What's your name?"

"Ibrahim, engineer," he said, climbing the stage with his chest inflated.

"All right, Ibrahim, take your million dollars. It's yours. Now get on that plane on the runway. We're going on a trip.

What Ibrahim did not know is that I had rented a bimotor from the governorship. We flew to the deep south, crossed the continent and, thanks to the logistical contacts that had remained from my time in the distributor Chingolo, we managed to land on a scientific base on the eternal ices of Antarctica.

We got off the plane. The polar wind blew at forty degrees below zero, lifting a white snow curtain that would freeze your eyelashes in a second. Ibrahim, dressed in his fine linen Bambara office suit and holding his \$1 million-dollar girdle against your chest, began to tremble like a carob leaf.

At fifteen minutes, the guy had blue lips and tears were freezing on his cheeks. He was on the edge of hypothermia. The million dollars of paper was useless to him at all in the middle of the white desert.

I approached slowly, sheltered in my high mountain thermal jacket. I took out a small, ordinary and cheap wooden box out of my pocket.

"Ibrahim," I said in my ear, to beat the wind. "I see you cold. I propose a business. I will trade you this matchbox for half your million dollars. Five hundred thousand for three wooden chips with phosphorus on the tip. Do you accept?"

Ibrahim did not doubt it for a second. He rolled half of the wad over me, grabbed the box with his hands frozen and lit a match to feel the miracle of the royal fire at the tip of his fingers.

Within the other fifteen minutes, the cold shrunk again. Desperate to keep the flame on, Ibrahim began to use the other five hundred thousand dollars of paper as fuel. He burned the effigy of the printed procers, one by one, feeding a miserable fire that lasted a breath in the immensity of the pole. When the paper was finished, he looked at me with panic eyes, knowing that he was dying.

"Ingeniero, please get me out of here," he snorted, shivering.

I got a contract out of my inner pocket.

"Sign this \$20 million debt document for the plane ticket back, and enter the heated cabin right now.

Ibrahim signed with his shaky thumb, stamping his footprint with blood from his frozen nose, and jumped into the plane.

Back in the tempered shed of Bambara, with Ibrahim already recovered and having a hot tea in the front row, I stood in front of the assembly of public officials who waited for us with their eyes as dishes.

"Well, gentlemen," I asked, walking around the platform. "What happened here? Why did Ibrahim, who was a millionaire three hours ago, now owe me twenty million dollars and burn all his fortune on the ice?"

The silence in the shed was so thick that the fluttering ostriches were heard outside. Slowly, the employees began to raise their hands to risk answers. And as they spoke, I would write their names down on a slate, classifying them according to the mental structure of their responses.

The first to speak were the Conductors.

"The cold has changed the rules of exchange," said one young analyst. "Ibrahim reacted to the stimulus of freezing. To fight the cold, the marginal utility of phosphorus outstripped that of paper money. It is a matter of stimulus and biological response.

"Very well," I noted on the board. "You understand the mechanics of the day to day. You understand the processes, gears and immediate incentives. You are the Conductors. Without you, the machines in the factory do not start on schedule and the trucks do not load.

Then the structuralists spoke.

"No, engineer," interrupted a middle-aged woman, head of planning. "What happened is that the global financial system is designed to strip the producer of its real value. The million dollars is a fictional fiction created by central banks, while phosphorus represents real energy, physical stock. By isolating Ibrahim in Antarctica, you destroyed the market context that gave value to paper, forcing it into an asymmetric distributional bid where the issuer of the debt—that is, you—always wins. The only way to fight against that is to change the structural rules of Bambara's foreign trade.

"Bright," I said, noting his name. "You see the forest, not just the tree. You understand the macro objective, the structure of power, and where the ship has to go to fulfill the social mandate. It is the structuralists. Without you, the factory produces hangers but the country remains a colony.

But then, the real miracle of the game occurred. At the bottom of the shed, a veteran employee, who had been filing dusty papers in an office without windows for thirty years, rose slowly. His eyes were lit with almost mystical clarity.

"Benzacar engineer," he said with his trembling but firm voice. "What happened in Antarctica is that we forgot who we are. The million dollars made us believe that wealth was the role. But Bambara's real wealth is not the money we borrow from outside, but the ability we have to light our own fire with the wood of our trees. Had Ibrahim known how to rub two branches of mopane to warm up, you would not have been able to charge him five hundred thousand dollars for a match, nor could he have been able to borrow it for life for the return trip. The only way to fight against the paper scam is to tame our own stuff.

I was dumb. lathe operator and blacksmith looked at each other with an ear-to-ear smile. Don Justo nodded slowly, giving Musa a dumb elbow.

"You..." I pointed out with my finger, feeling a chill that had nothing to do with Antarctica. "You have the ability to fuse the technique of the conductist with the vision of the structuralist. You can grasp the abstract idea of prosperity and knead it with the mud of reality until you turn it into a motor to march. You are an Apostle.

That day the new administrative board of Bambara was born.

We did not select officials by political accommodation, or by kinship with local leaders, or by pompous degrees from foreign universities who did not know

what an axe was. We selected them by real attributes: the Conductors to manage logistics and quality control of hangers; the Structuralists to design industrial protection laws and marketing channels; and the Apostles—those few madmen capable of melting ideas—to lead ministries and to bring the fire of transformation to every corner of the country.

The Bambara bureaucracy ceased to be a graveyard of records to become a social power plant. For the first time in West Africa's history, a state was organized not to meet the goals of the Monetary Fund, but to ensure that the social mandate of its people was fulfilled.

The weekend after the reform, the plant used to run the mopane factory in full, feeding the copiers who spat hangers for the entire African continent. But at six o'clock in the afternoon, we turned off the vidia engines.

The silence of the African mountain was immediately occupied by a colossal sound. The entire community of Bambara gathered in the village square. There were giant bonfires fed by the discards of the tarnate wood. The young, strong and with bright eyes for the protein that now abounded in their dishes, ran chasing the domestic ostriches under the light of the lamps that we had hung ourselves from the trees.

And then people began to sing, a polyphonic, powerful, rhythmic chant that vibrated the red earth of the savannah and that rose to the starry sky as a monument of pure transformed energy.

Musa came up to me with a local beer jar and patted me on the shoulder.

"Do you feel that, Benzacar?" he asked me, with wet eyes. "That is the social mandate of my people. It is working.

I looked at the fire, looked at the happy kids, heard the harmony of singing and remembered my old man, my old Ruth, the Sunday paellas in Barrio Norte and the nights of oil lamp in the mud of Donadeu. We had closed the equation. The world stock had joined our capacity for transformation, and the result was not measured in the sheets of the banks of Buenos Aires financial district.

It was measured in pesos per kilogram of pure human happiness.