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LARRA

VICENTE
REINAMONTES



AL SUR DE LA ALAMEDA

Diario de una toma

EKARÉ
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LOLA LARRA

ILUSTRADO POR

VICENTE REINAMONTES

EDICIONES
ekaré
SUR

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Que voulez-vous la porte était gardée
Que voulez-vous nous étions enfermés
Que voulez-vous la rue était barrée
Que voulez-vous la ville était matée

Que voulez-vous elle était affamée
Que voulez-vous nous étions désarmés
Que voulez-vous la nuit était tombée
Que voulez-vous nous nous sommes aimés.

Couvre-feu
PAUL ÉLUARD



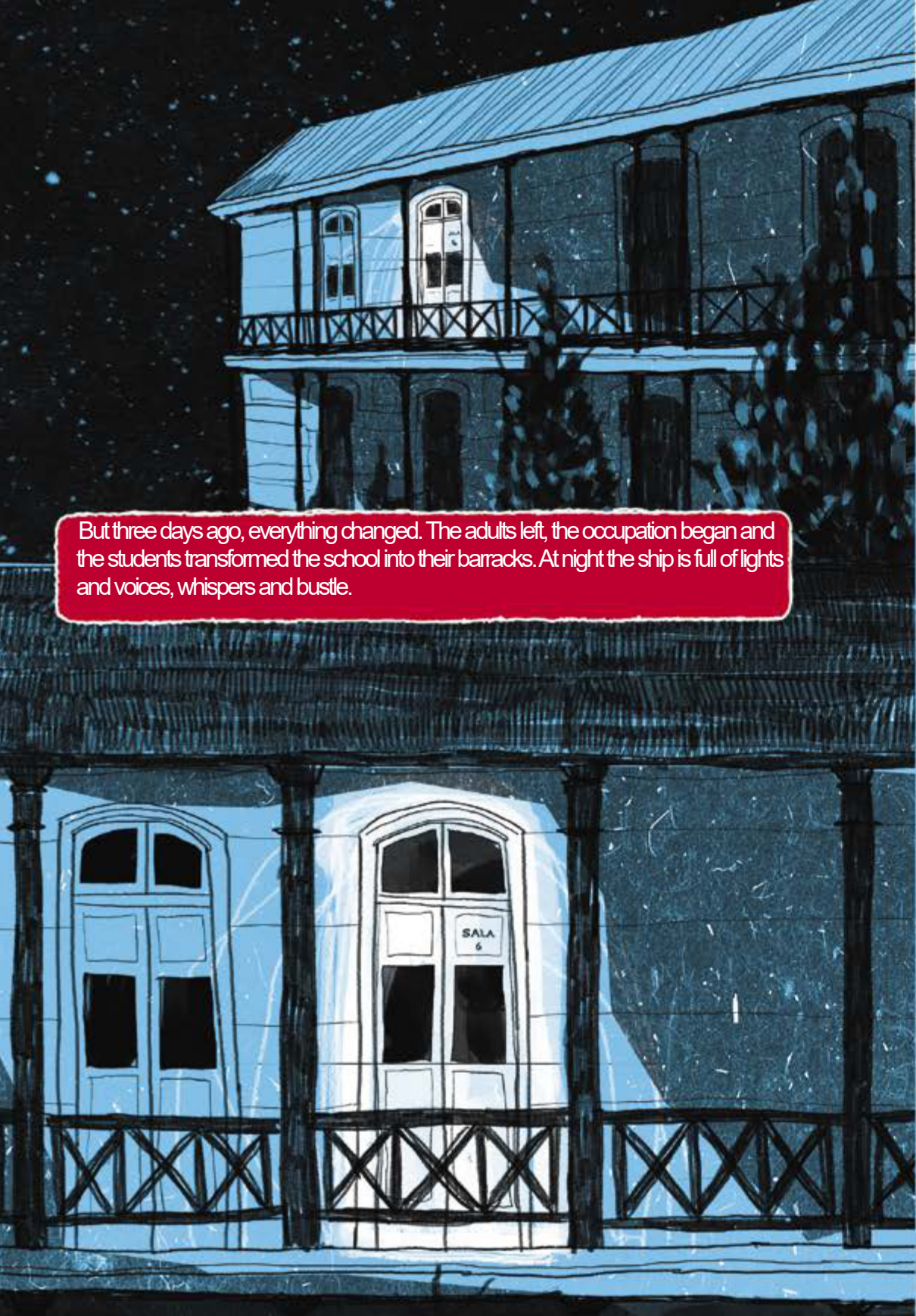
From my window I can see most of the city.
But I lost interest in the city a long time ago.



I keep myself entertained watching the school next door. The same routine everyday. At 8, the ruckus as they all come in; at 10 the breaktime chaos;



The calm during lessons, the eager rush out of the doors at three. Then silence. At night, the school looks like a big, abandoned ship.

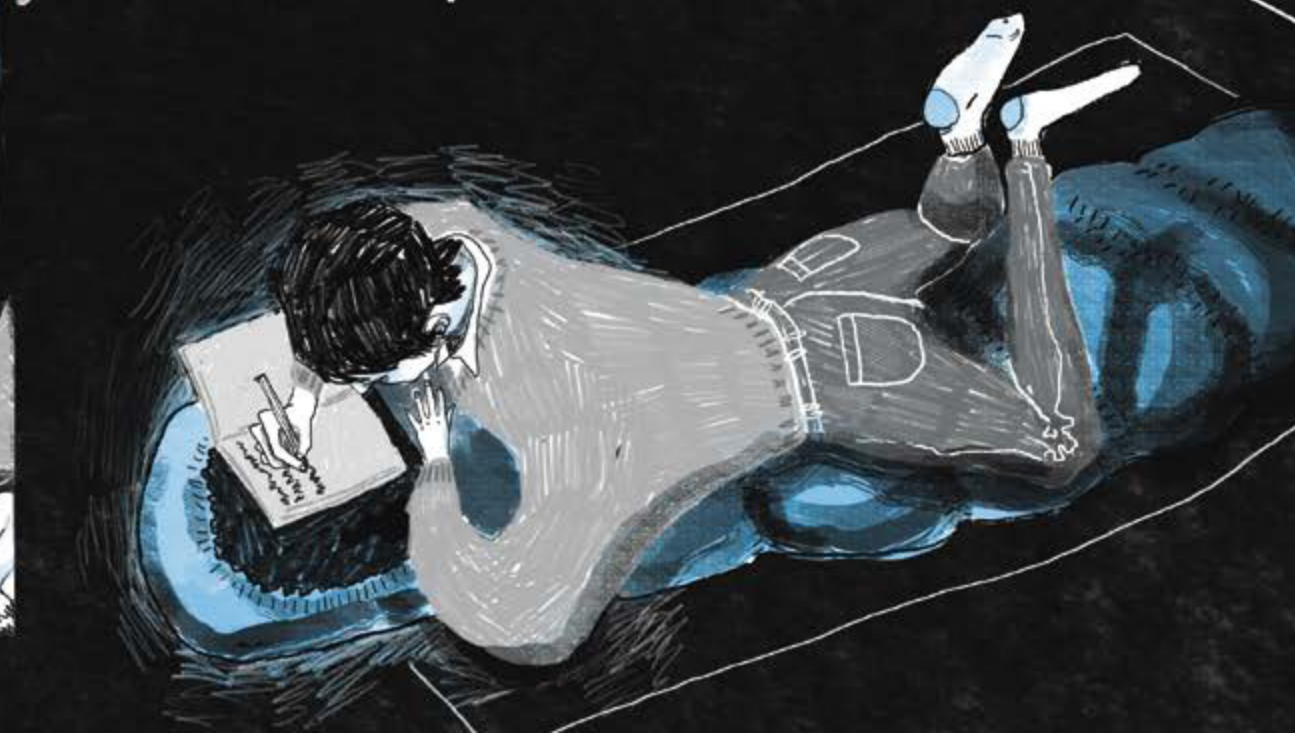


But three days ago, everything changed. The adults left, the occupation began and the students transformed the school into their barracks. At night the ship is full of lights and voices, whispers and bustle.





And there's one, Nicolás, who wanders alone, as though he's lost. And writes. Right now I can just make him out in room 6 with his notebook open.



Friday

Day 3 of the occupation



We've just come out of today's final meeting. We spend the whole day in meetings; it's a sort of sickness that I don't know if I'll be able to bear. I'm writing this in my sleeping bag, in room 6 on the second floor. It's calmer here than down there, where most of them sleep squeezed together in room 2, in between the "kitchen" and the "sickbay". Or, in between the rooms they've decided to use to prepare food (pretty scarce and crappy at this point) and to treat the sick and injured (of which there haven't been any).

In these three days of the occupation the school has changed, and the students have too. Chairs are piled up outside, desks pushed up against the windows, sleeping bags on the floor. And although most people are still wearing uniform, they look different, or they do to me.

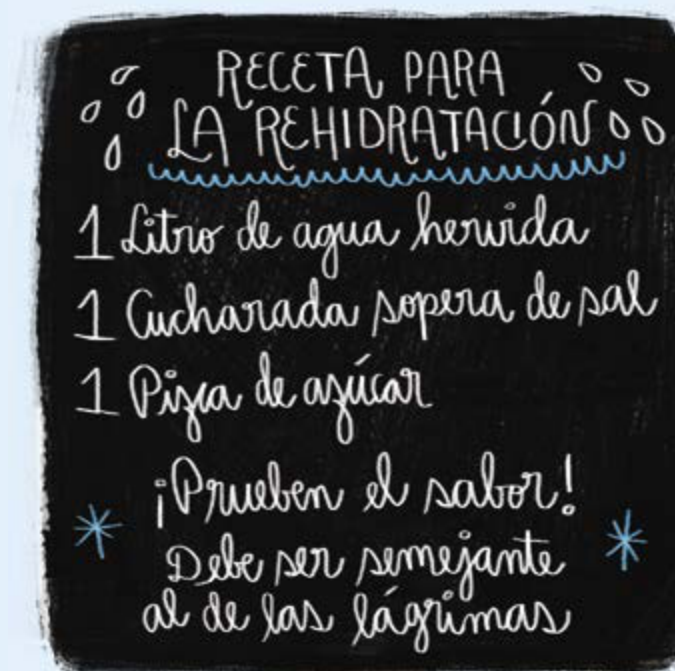
The kids from the Student Centre prepared for the occupation, and spent last week secretly bringing in sacks of rice, packets of pasta, tins of tuna and tomato sauce. But reserves are dwindling and there's not enough to feed us all. We could improve our diet if we had access to the school canteen.

I'd give anything for a few chocolate biscuits or cereal bars. Or just a sachet of sugar. Petrosi, who's in charge of the kitchen, overlooked this detail: we don't have a single grain of sugar.

However, the canteen is locked and barred. Loads of us, after this evening's miserable dinner, suggested again that we break the padlock and go inside. "No looting," the Student Centre said. "Not yet," they added, to placate us. "We have to look irreproachable," they concluded. Rumour has it that as Aldo's dad is head of the canteen, and since Aldo is also part of the Student Centre leadership team, they don't dare give the order. But it won't be long, I say under my breath, hungrily.

In the "sickbay", there are two year 11 girls who spend the whole day there, painting their nails and doing their hair. They give each other braids, they dye their hair and give themselves makeovers. They've offered their services to the other girls, but so far they're the only ones whose locks have turned from dark brown to a weird greenish red. The kids from the Centre keep telling them we can take turns, that it doesn't have to be them keeping guard at all hours. But they scoff at the idea: they reckon since they're going to study medicine they're the best people for the job. They write instructions on the blackboard: "before treating a wound, wash your hands with alcohol." Or mysterious phrases like "You never know what an injured person might have".

My favourite is the Recipe for Rehydration written on one side of the blackboard, which they never rub out:



Recipe for Rehydration

1 litre of boiled water

1 tablespoon of salt

1 pinch of sugar

Try to taste!

It should taste like tears

I don't think we'll get dehydrated. We're well into autumn now and the temperature's dropping every day. Especially at night. They'd be better off giving us a recipe for hypothermia. I'm sure it's only going to keep getting colder. The walls of the school are damp and the tiled floor is icy.

We've already spent three days shut up in here and it looks like this thing's going to go on for a while. That's what the Student Centre just told us. That we have to resist, that we're going to get what we want, that we have to stay united. But some of us, the younger ones, are worried and say they want to go home.

Valentín, the president of the Centre, seemed tired this afternoon. More nervous than usual. He spends the whole day going from one place to another for meetings, inside and outside the school. The kids from the Centre are the only ones who take trips outside. And Valentín goes out more than anyone. He meets with other student leaders, with representatives from the Coordinated Assembly of Secondary Students. He even meets with journalists.

It's funny about Valentín. Up until last week, as far as my friends and I were concerned, he was an imbecile. Always speaking up in class with his over-loud voice, reciting long quotes from memory, staying back to talk with the teachers after the bell rang for the end of class. Always getting good grades, even in P.E. because he's a pretty passable athlete. Always so well-dressed and groomed, not taking his tie off even now, in the occupation.

Above all, Valentín is president of the Students Centre, but who would've cared about that a few days ago?

Now, though, Valentín is always surrounded by people. Everyone asking questions, waiting for Valentín to tell them what to do, what to say, how to behave. Now Valentín's even in the newspaper; we saw him today in an article in *El Mostrador*, with a photo and everything. Valentín gives lectures and speeches every time he opens his mouth. Valentín took over the staff room, and

used it to establish his Base Camp, as he calls it. As if we were scaling Everest.

From one day to the next, he's gone from imbecile to leader of the school. That's how quickly things change in here.

There are thirty-five of us in total. From different year groups, although most of us are from 11th or 12th grade.

None of my football teammates stayed. So here I am without Domingo, or Fernando, or Rafa, my best friends.

I don't know what they're thinking about me.

They must think I've gone mad.

I'd be thinking that too.

A week ago, I would never have imagined that I'd be here.

A week ago, when the protests began and the school occupation was decided, I thought, like my friends, that all this crazy talk from the Student Centre had nothing to do with us.

Now I don't know what I think.

It was all Paula's fault.

Paula, *la francesa*.



From here I can see Paula in one of the corridors. I've heard that they call her *la francesa*. They used to call me *la ronca* back in the day, when the assumption was that one didn't pick scapegoats or favourites. But none of that matters to me now. This year, Paula is my favourite.







Paula looked at me with her black eyes as I was walking through the school door towards the street, ready to leave:

“Nicolás” she called to me without raising her voice. “Are you leaving?”

I stopped, disconcerted. I looked at her, without answering. Then, she said that thing about how you can’t always watch life from the safety of the goal. This chick has no idea about football, I thought, never mind what it means to be a goalie. Being a goalie isn’t about being safe or secure. Being a goalie isn’t about watching life like the spectators in the stands. That’s what gave me the nerve to correct her. “I don’t like watching the team play from the outside, I never do,” I told her. And I turned around. And walked back up the stairs and into school. And she smiled at me for a few seconds, and then carried on trying to convince those who were leaving, in a tight, impatient queue, that they too should stay for the occupation.

Before I crossed back through the school’s door I could see the astonished faces of Domingo, Fernando and Rafa, who stayed on the street watching as I went inside, waving at me, shouting something I couldn’t quite hear.

That was three days ago. When all the teachers left, the head too. And when most of the students left as well. When the thirty five of us who are in here officially began the occupation of the school.

I’d heard about demonstrations and occupations, and to be honest, I thought it was different from this. I never talk about it, but in the mid-eighties, before I was born, my parents spent their whole lives in protest and barricades.

Especialmente mi mamá, a quien yo nunca llamo mamá. En casa todos la llamamos María José. Y María José siempre fue la primera en salir y confrontar a los pigs. Eso es lo que Ernesto, mi papá, dice. Más de una vez ella fue golpeada y llevada por la policía. Mi abuelo fue y la sacó de la comisaría, “antes de que le pasara”, como él le gusta decir. En ese momento mi abuelo tenía un contacto que era un oficial de la policía, aunque eso es una historia que mi mamá prefiere no contar. María José y Ernesto se conocieron en una protesta, como se puede esperar. Ernesto ya estaba en la universidad y mi mamá seguía yendo a la escuela. Se fueron juntos, se fueron a vivir a un apartamento en el centro de la ciudad y se casaron en secreto dos meses después, cuando mi mamá cumplió dieciocho años. Casi le dio a mi abuelo un ataque al corazón, o eso dice mi abuela. Y ahora apenas hablan con mi papá. Solo dicen hola, siempre usando el formal “usted”, y se intercambian unas pocas gruñidas en las pocas ocasiones que se encuentran en una habitación juntos. Tres veces al año, para ser precisos. En Navidad. En mi cumpleaños. Y en el cumpleaños de mi hermana Javi.

Así que he oído una y otra vez la historia de las protestas de los ‘80, durante la dictadura. La policía lista para atacar, el cañón de agua disparando un chorro furioso de agua, los gases lacrimógenos, los golpes que venían de la izquierda y de la derecha, los ojos que se resquebrajaban, la garganta hinchada que solo podía ser calmada chupando limón, y también los amigos que los policías se llevaron y que a veces nunca volvieron.

Nada de eso ha pasado.

Esta es la ocupación más civilizada que podría haber imaginado.

First, on Tuesday, we staged a half-hour strike, in solidarity with the other schools where occupation was left the classrooms and sat down in the courtyard. There were students with banners, and some chanted slogans. Everyone likes missing the odd lesson, so there was a big turnout. After rallying for a while we went back to our classrooms.

But on Wednesday morning the guys from the Student Centre called a general meeting. They read out a manifesto and said that the school was under occupation.

A few blocks from here are the state-run schools that are more typical of the city, more tenacious and combative. Nacional. Aplicación. We've always known about them, but they have no idea that we even exist. Until now, because we're one of the few private schools that has joined the protests and occupations happening all over Chile.

When Valentín finished reading the Students Centre manifesto, the teachers left. And the head locked his office door and left too, after telling us all to be very careful and giving Valentín a few pats on the shoulder. And most of the students left, happy to have a few days' enforced holiday. And we were left, the 35. The doors were closed, and the windows were boarded up with pieces of wood and sticks.

On the gate leading to the side street we placed tables and chairs with the legs facing out, like a huge sculpture made of metal and wood.

The next day, in the morning, we had a visit from a delegate from the Coordinating Assembly. Valentín

introduced him as Cachorro Salazar, practically grovelling to him as he led him to the meeting room. Salazar was tall and well-built and looked about eighteen or twenty even though he was wearing a school uniform. He stood in front of us with his hands behind his back and the first thing he did was congratulate us on the occupation. Everyone out there was very proud that a school like ours had joined the student strike, he said. Because, he added, it meant that all the students in the country, rich and poor, were on the same page. It was an excellent consequence, he continued, of this symbolic occupation (and the way he said "symbolic" sounded forced to me, since it wasn't exactly a compliment).

"The Chilean education system has become just one more way of propagating the enormous inequality in our society. He who is born poor, in a community without resources, has no choice but to go to a poor state school where the education is of a very low standard. It's true that when we started protesting nearly a month ago, we only asked for free school transport and for the leavers exam to be free too. But as we've been discussing our situation, we've realised that we need much more than that. Education needs structural changes, urgent changes need to be made to the LOCE, the Education Law, to put an end to municipalisation.

And we can make a difference. Movements like this have proved it —" at this point Salazar paused for several seconds, as if he'd lost the thread. "Everyone says we're a lost generation, we're selfish, 'we're barely even there'... I'm sure you've all been told a thousand times that you're just a bunch of spoiled brats who only care about dressing well, listening to bad music and

going out and getting drunk on the streets...”

I looked around me. Everyone was very focused and attentive listening to Cachorro Salazar, who struck me as a poser. If Rafa or Fernando or Domingo had been there, we’d have exchanged looks and without saying anything we’d have known we were all four thinking the same thing: that was exactly what Cachorro thought, that we were total losers compared to students like him.

“Because we are one, because together we can achieve our common objectives. That’s why it’s so important that we are united for the march on Tuesday 30th...” Salazar went on, but I made my way towards the door and went out into the playground. That Thursday morning in the meeting room full of people, the atmosphere was loaded, suffocating. I wanted to breathe. And that moment was the first time I thought about how alone I was in the occupation, without any of my friends to laugh and joke around with.

“Where are you, dumbass?” Fernando had asked me on the phone the night before. I’d just switched my mobile on after charging it, and there were loads of missed calls.

“Here, in school.”

“What are you doing there, dumbass?”

“In the occupation.”

“You’re such a dumbass.”

As you can see, Fernando has a very broad vocabulary.

“Is there a problem?”

“No, nothing...” Fernando was quiet for a long while,

like two minutes.

“Have you spoken to Domingo or Rafa yet?”

“My phone was dead. I’ve only just switched it on. Mangueras lent me his charger.”

“Hey, only 16 days to go!” Fernando religiously counted down to the beginning of the football World Cup. “We must place the bets. I say 10 lucas per head; otherwise where’s the fun? After a hard-fought and emotional battle, Chile had been knocked out in the heats. That’s why everyone ended up with their second choice: Fernando went for Italy, Domingo for the host country, Germany; I took France, because Colombia, my other favourite team, had also been knocked out. And Rafa, just to be contrary, decided he was going to support Ghana. Ghana!

“And... is everything OK there?” Fernando went on when he saw I wasn’t going to reply.

“Yep, all calm.”

“OK.”

“Well, I’d better call home. They must be worried that I haven’t come back to eat.”

“Yeah, OK. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Yup. Chao.”

In my house, it was my little sister who answered. Javi’s always hanging around the phone, waiting for one of her admirers to call, even though she’s still a baby in year 7. She picked up and screamed hysterically, calling for my mamá. I know she couldn’t believe I’d joined the occupation. She told me my parents already knew what

was going on, that she'd taken care of it.

"Pass me to María José," I said. And I heard my mother's footsteps running down the wooden floor of the hallway.

Although she tried to hide it, my mother's voice sounded excited.

"Are you OK, Nicolás?"

"All good, María José."

"Have you got something warm to sleep in?"

"We've taken the mats from the gymnasium and there are sleeping bags too."

"Great. Good idea."

"And we've got food as well."

"I can see you're very organised. If you need anything, I can help you. You can count on us for whatever."

"How's Ernesto?"

"Your papá's still in the office, but he knows what's happening."

"Well, I haven't got much credit so we'd better hang up."

"Of course. I'll call you next time."

"Great."

"Nico," my mamá cleared her throat. "I want you to know that I'm very proud of you. That you're fighting for what you think is right."

Life's a funny thing.

I've saved more goals than any goalie in the interschool

league. I've managed to stop seven penalties in championship matches and I don't know anyone my age that can say the same. But that was the first time my mamá had told me she was proud of me.





Gadys!
Salvador!
Nevado!
Manchi!
Bruno!
Hortensia!
Celeste!

Dinnertime!



It's a miserable autumn day. A miserable morning, grey and cold. The kids must be frozen.

