

## Six Times Six

---

*Norberto Luis Romero*

*Translated by H. E. Francis*

**P**ura. Concepcion, perfectly pure, like the Virgin. His aunt makes no noise moving about the room, walking barefoot in the dark, surefooted, scarcely brushing the wooden floor, carrying the spiral, just lit, in her hands. "In Buenos Aires you can't live with so many mosquitoes. And the spirals no longer affect them. My arms and legs are covered with bites." He hears her murmuring as she sets it apart on the floor, in a small plate, so the ashes won't fall near his bed.

For four crazy days  
that we are going to be  
we'll live with no mosquitoes  
with spirals Fuyi.

He sings the jingle that he hears every afternoon between the episodes of Tarzan, sitting in the hall with one ear glued to the radio, turned low, while his aunts sleep the siesta, and he wonders if there are mosquitoes in the jungle like in Buenos Aires.

From his bed he can see a tiny red dot, the embers of the spiral, and immediately smells the penetrating odor of burnt weeds that comes in little clouds and suffocates him till he gets used to it. Pura kisses him and says goodnight, goes off to her bedroom next to his, and before sinking into sleep he hears her chatting with Aunt Isabel. The streetlights pour weakly through the Venetian blinds, horizontal strips of still light vaguely outlined on the wooden floor. A mosquito buzzes near his ear and he covers his head with the sheet, but in no time he feels the heat, the humid heat of Buenos Aires, where he has come to spend the summer, and he

throws the sheet off hoping the spiral has driven the mosquito away.

Often the firemen's siren also sounds from around the corner, and he wakes up in the middle of the night—he knows because he hears the clock in the hall, its striking overriding the siren. Fires are caused without warning, and he wouldn't like to be a fireman and have to get up at any hour. He has never seen a fire. He has seen the firemen go by now and then in their red truck, sounding the piercing siren so all the autos will let it pass, when he was playing in the yard gathering snails that hide under the calla lilies and at the foot of the Santa Rita bush, and, racing, he reached the iron gate and, climbing the grating, he mounted the wall and from there, hurling handfuls of snails, he applauded them because they are good and save people from the flames and always arrive on time to keep the fire from spreading and destroying everything. When the siren wakes him he can't go back to sleep again, and he amuses himself gazing at the red spot reflected on the waxed wooden floor. Now there are no mosquitoes, but as soon as the spiral is consumed and the strong smell of palo santo and piretro has dissipated, they will come through the cracks in the doors and windows, buzzing again about his ears in search of tender skin and his sweet red blood.

"Purita, when are you and your sister moving to Cordoba?" the curious fat diabetic patient asks.

"When we retire, God willing, in a few months. This coming fall."

"And the house, how's it coming along?"

"Slowly. We're building it little by little, but my brother-in-law, Alberto, wrote and said it's getting there, they'll be putting on the roof soon."

"And won't you miss Buenos Aires?"

"No. We love the mountains and Alberto's there, and our nephews. Our dream's been to move and enjoy the mountains and the children, *although some are not so good in arithmetic.*" And she looks at him and smiles, winks, as she brushes cotton soaked in alcohol over the puncture in the patient's arm as if for a mosquito bite.

For four crazy days  
that we are going to be,

we'll live with no mosquitoes  
with spirals Fuyi.

High up, glued to the corners of the ceiling, which almost no smoke reaches, like hardly perceptible dark dots, are the mosquitoes with their sharp stingers ready, waiting for the spiral to burn down before darting down in search of blood. So fragile, but painful, despite their inoffensive appearance.

Slowly, in the stillness of damp early morning hours, the spiral burns down, following its implacable circle as it approaches the live ember, until it dies out, its dark green core hardly a thread in the corner of the tin. For a long time he lies watching the ember coiling imperceptibly like the hands of the clock in the penumbra, reflected, symmetrical, on the waxed wooden floor. And the following morning he gets up and looks at the consumed spiral in the plate, where its ashes maintain its form intact. He touches it and it dissolves under his fingers. He runs with the plate in his hands, reaches the kitchen where his breakfast is already awaiting him, separates the metal plate at an angle to preserve the unconsumed tip of the spiral, tears it free, and throws it with the ashes into the trash.

During the sultry weather of the siesta Tarzan appears, screaming like a siren, announcing his fleet arrival on a vine, climbing the distorted trunks of gigantic trees, crossing rivers infested with crocodiles. He arrives just in time to save the good ones, like the firemen, and the radio sound is lost among whistles, dies out, inaudible. He adjusts the dial again and the voice of the jungle resurges triumphant. During his lethargy, Pura arrives, yawning and brushing her hair back. With one hand she protects her eyes from the light. She looks at him and smiles. She asks how the program is and if he has studied his multiplication tables.

"Tarzan's caught in a trap the Indians set for him," he tells her. And she hugs him and pinches his cheek till it hurts.

"Today he saved a girl from the lions, he scared them away with a cry."

"Oh? And what else?"

"Then he talked to them, because he talks with animals, and he convinced them to go away and not bother them anymore."

The doorbell rings. "They're here already," Pura says. "That must be Dona Rosario coming for her insulin." And she opens the

door. In the sunny rectangular opening the fat woman's charred silhouette appears. She says hello and sits down to wait for his aunt to sterilize the syringe. She's almost too big for the chair. She complains of the heat and humidity, breathes heavily, and asks, "It won't be long before you move, will it?"

"A month and a half. In April, God willing. . . ."

"I'm sorry that I'm going to have to look for other nurses to give me my shots."

"I hope the fat one bursts," he thinks, because she often comes early and interrupts his radio program, he can't hear because she talks. And at that very instant the harsh sound of the siren from around the corner begins and he goes running out to the yard to see the firemen go by and applaud them.

**H**e suffers the summer in Buenos Aires—suffers humidity and bloodthirsty mosquitoes, consumed spiral ashes, and interrupted radio programs of "Tarzan, King of the Apes"—and goes back to the sierras to his father and brothers and sisters, laden with gifts and with the last kisses his aunts gave him still fresh on his cheeks.

"**M**y dear Sister-in-law,

If all goes well and it doesn't rain, this week we're going to work on the roof and lay the tiles. I enclose a photo so you both can see how it's coming along. . . ."

Pura, perfectly pure Concepcion. She's retiring and she's coming with Aunt Isabel to live in the sierras and enjoy herself after so many years of work, so many injections and so much first aid. Near her brother-in-law, and them, the nieces and nephews she loves so. They're coming to rest from so many behinds and so much sickness and so many patients waiting with their arms bared: There you are. It hurt. You see? It wasn't anything, a little prick, like a mosquito's. To breathe this pure air and sleep without mosquitoes, without the fear of being awakened by the firemen's siren or by the doorbell at the strangest hours of night: Pura, please, my father's sick. I'm coming. And off to prepare the syringe, boiling it for a good while, the cotton, the fine alcohol, then hurrying out. Now Isabel and I are going to enjoy our retirement, we'll live in the house we're having built beside theirs, my brother-in-law's and nephews', we deserve it.

And so on that day so long awaited everybody goes to the bus station. At eleven a bus arrives direct from Buenos Aires, and at eleven-twenty another. They're always late. Anxious, they peer out the Santa Maria entrance, toward the curve where the bus will appear. One arrives. Some passengers, mostly tourists, retired old couples undone by the humidity who come for the sun and air of the sierras, fleeing from the mosquitoes of Buenos Aires, but his aunts do not get off. One more wait to see if on the next one. . . . Be still, child! He cannot stop leaping and laughing, crossing the street to look up the sidewalk ahead so he can see the curve better. He sees the bus, white and blue like the flag, round the curve, and he runs across the street shouting, Here they come, my aunts are coming! And he can't stop laughing and jumping up and down. Pura, Purita!

He sees them standing in the aisle of the bus, looking out, anxiously looking for them among the other people waiting, waving with their hands open wide.

"Aunt Pura! Aunt Pura!" he shouts excitedly, tears leap to his eyes, and he wants to board the bus and hug her without waiting for them to get off, but his father holds him back with one hand. They descend, he slips free of his father, hugs her, she lifts him in the air and presses her face to his.

"Aunt Pura, what'd you bring me?"

"Toys. Lots of toys."

His father and his brother carry the suitcases and head toward the house. His aunts talk and talk to his father and his brothers and sisters. He walks ahead of them all, running to be first to open the front door for them. Pura's aphonic laughter seems to spring from around the corner like a minuscule siren of good firemen; she laughs and says what joy it is to be with her own in the sierras where there are no mosquitoes or patients interrupting the siesta. Tomorrow the truck with the furniture will arrive.

And from those enormous suitcases spring like miracles airplanes with springs and rubber bricks to build houses and a frying pan that doesn't stick and a very modern potato peeler and a pullover for you, Alberto, who had to look after the work on the house and haggle with the bricklayers. And you must see how beautiful the house turned out.

Here, in Santa Maria, there are no mosquitoes, they can sleep peacefully with the windows wide open, but there are ants. How





Pura, who sews and shortens trousers and makes an old, long skirt into a shorter, up-to-date one, and he practices multiplication tables: six times six is thirty-six. And Isabel trims the hedges along the fence and puts out poison for the ants, which eat up everything. Here there are no mosquitoes, but millions of ants.

One morning Pura's left hip hurts and she limps, and his father says it doesn't look good to him: surely it's arthritis or something old age is bringing on. And she laughs, as always, with that aphonic laughter that delights him and is contagious.

Pura. Perfect Concepcion enjoys herself embroidering at the window. Now she seldom leaves her little house, free of the smell of boiling syringes, the scare of firemen's bells or sirens, the need to set out spirals . . . because there are no mosquitoes in the sierras, because this hip I'm worried about hurts so and I'll have to go to the doctor. Pura makes gifts for him because he's the youngest, and she coats the underside of the white snails with glue while he sticks them to the top of the box.

"When we go to Buenos Aires I'm going to bring you the car I saw in a store window, it has lights and everything."

"What are you going to Buenos Aires for?"

Isabel interrupts. "To finish off a little business, about retirement. . . ."

And Isabel takes her to the heat and humidity of Buenos Aires. Surely the mosquitoes are waiting, ready to suck our blood.

At seven, when night has almost fallen, they go to say good-bye to them at the bus stop. He sees the bus go off into the distance around the curve, blue and white like the flag.

And they go back home, climbing the crest. His father and older brothers and sisters say almost nothing. From time to time his father shakes his head.

"Why'd my aunts go to Buenos Aires?" he asks.

"You go play with your friends."

"Can I go to the playground?"

"Yes, but I want you here for supper. Do you know your multiplication tables?"

"Yes," he answers, and he goes to play ball with the kids, and to collect more white snails too, because he hasn't enough to finish the sewing box.

A letter comes from Isabel. His father reads it in silence.

"When's Aunt Pura coming back?" he asks.

"We don't know, child."

"Is she going to bring the car with lights she promised me?"

"Yes, child."

And he waits, sitting on the bench under the peach tree, pasting snails one by one on the wooden box for Pura's needles and thread, shaping borders and flowers in relief, as he recites the sixth table by heart.

But his aunts do not return from Buenos Aires, and from there Isabel writes a couple of letters close together. The two of them will surely return together when they have finished all their affairs. And Pura will arrive all music and flowers, laden with gifts for everyone, and toys, bringing him that car she told him she'd seen in a shop window, she'll come and sit beside the window to embroider and knit pullovers while he says his tables. He knows she won't miss Sunday dinner, he'll sit next to her, and he'll give her the sewing box decorated with snails.

Instead of Pura the mailman comes with a telegram that his brothers and sisters don't want to show him. Nelly covers her face with her hands.

"I'm going to Buenos Aires," his father says.

"Why?"

He doesn't answer.

"I'll leave tonight."

And his brothers and sisters burst into tears as he races toward the garden because he hears his friends calling him to play ball.

For four crazy days  
that we are going to be. . . .

The auto will have lights and the motor will make noise like the real ones. He'll play while Pura sews facing the window. He'll look up at the corners of the ceilings at night to see if there are any mosquitoes and if he sees any she'll light a Fuyi spiral to kill them.

And between sighs he listens to his brothers and sisters talking, whispering in the afternoon, sitting around the table, not smiling, holding back their tears. And they go down to the village to wait for the bus his aunts will return on. He carries in one pocket the



box he made with his own hands, wrapped in many-colored paper and tied with a red ribbon and a bow. It is cold this morning, and cloudy. His hands are stiff and a pain in his chest keeps him from jumping and laughing. The bus stops by the sidewalk and he sees his father and Isabel in the aisle, but nobody greets them with open arms, or smiles, and they get off in silence. They all embrace them and cry.

Quiet, he looks at the package with the box made of white snail shells and imagines the siesta in Buenos Aires: Pura in that house flooded with sunflowers, gliding along in the dark with a Fuyi spiral in her hands, embroidering beside the window, listening to Tarzan during the siesta, or wrapping the little toy car as a gift, while the killer mosquitoes watch her from above, and he chants softly:

Six times one is six.  
Six times two is twelve.  
Six times three. . . .

