

Aristides, the demon hunter.

Aristides' life was marked by tragedy. When he was just a child, his father was arrested to cover up the crimes of a wealthy loan shark, the owner of the company where he worked as a driver. One afternoon, he was caught in the car with a suitcase full of banknotes, the proceeds of a poorly planned theft between his employer and a police chief. The justice system declared him guilty from the outset, without the judge even seeing his face.

Without the sole breadwinner, the landlord tried to abuse his mother by blackmailing her with the threat of eviction. When she refused, she was beaten, and the next day, her few belongings were thrown out onto the street. They were reluctantly taken in by some aunts, who, in exchange for scraps of food, forced his mother to do all the chores in the enormous house. Crammed into an uncomfortable room, mother and son remained there for a couple of years, dirty and hungry. One day, she fell ill after being bitten by a rat and died after a slow, agonizing decline.

The aunts tried to hand the little boy over to an exploiter who lived off the labor of several homeless children. Aristides decided to run away with no fixed destination. He wandered the streets for several days, surviving thanks to public charity; his bed was the hard floor of whatever corner overtook him. In that life, he met Esteban, a eccentric street kid nicknamed "**El Cobijas**" (**The Blanket**) because of his unusual attire of multiple serapes and blankets.

This bottle collector, with a compassionate soul, adopted him and took him to his home: a shack made with metal sheets of political propaganda, belonging to a candidate expelled from his party after a love scandal.

The sweet abode of "El Cobijas"

Contrary to Esteban's untidy image, his house was clean and welcoming: vases adorned with branches of cilantro, chamomile and epazote; a mysterious new and immaculate mattress; pictures of saints and a pitcher full of fruit water collected at the market.

"El Cobijas" was a man of few words, limited to phrases like: "let's go to sleep," "let's eat," "give me charity," or "sell bottles." Arístides soon gave up trying to talk to him, since the only possible exchange was a fixed and kind gaze, sometimes accompanied by a strange laugh, more like the growl of a ghost.

Esteban adopted a paternal role: he fed the boy several times a day and got him toys from the garbage dumps. Life with "El Cobijas" was pleasant, except for the nights when he would wake up with terrifying screams, claiming to see the Virgin of Guadalupe who scolded him and threatened to drag him to hell. After that vision disappeared, the tender image of a child would usually appear, cradling him to his chest while crying inconsolably.

Aristides grew up strong and healthy alongside his adoptive father. He found temporary jobs that improved his living conditions and dreamed of owning a real house to care for Esteban in his old age. However, one afternoon, upon returning home, he watched in horror as a

municipal backhoe demolished his humble dwelling. The land was to be transformed into a modern shopping center, owned by the mayor's family.

Amidst shouts, he tried to stop the demolition and search for Esteban, but only managed to be detained for a few days in a temporary holding cell, where he was informed that his adoptive father had been committed to a psychiatric hospital. He spent a long time trying to locate him without success. After this new setback, his heart filled with indignation, anger, and a thirst for revenge and justice. He was never seen in those parts again.

"The night of our lives holds more mysteries than answers."

Michel, the heartthrob of mirages.

With his impeccable smile, the scent of French deodorant, and gentlemanly manners, Michel was the object of fascination for the mature women who gathered at the *La Vida en Rosa* café, next to the grand Hotel de México. Elegant ladies with settled lives sought a youthful love with whom to share a trip to Venice, to Rio de Janeiro... or perhaps the rest of their lives.

Necessity often trumps experience. They all knew the risk: a romance could turn into a scam, ruining not only their finances but also their self-esteem. Even so, each felt unique, convinced she possessed a charm capable of bringing any young Valentino to his knees.

Michel—whose real name was Timoteo—knew his hunting grounds well. With his handsome face, he squeezed every last jewel and banknote out of his victims, then abandoned them amidst insults and threats. His dark soul reveled in seeing them humiliated, keeping intimate portraits filled with cruel adjectives, shattering their self-esteem.

This was the case with Minerva, a 52-year-old woman whom Aristides found in a residential park, weeping for the salt that could find no liquid for her tears. Gently, he got her to confess her sorrow and comforted her with wise words, those of someone who knows misfortune from the depths of despair.

Days later, the newspapers announced the shocking news:

"They killed him for being handsome, and they even deflated his cheeks."

- Do you think he's handsome, Malena?
- Yes, but it didn't last at all... she had a very ugly soul.

Tamara, the sinister girlfriend of the neighborhood.

Tamara was an unruly young woman, a gang member from one of the city's oldest neighborhoods. A drug dealer and devotee of a Santería sect that actually operated as a gang of muggers, she felt protected by those thugs, whom she supplied with pills and hallucinogenic herbs. Proud of her power, she enjoyed causing a scene and assaulting anyone who crossed her path.

His "pranks" were acts of blatant irreverence: urinating on a saint's statue, breaking a disabled man's crutches, smearing car grease in a schoolgirl's hair, or destroying a street vendor's

merchandise. The entire city was his playground, and he always had one or more guardians nearby, who celebrated his misdeeds and silenced any complaints.

Vulgar was a mild adjective to describe her way of speaking. She was also the lover of a high-ranking public prosecutor, who appointed her to manage a clandestine warehouse for stolen goods. During one of these thefts, she and her accomplices were caught by the owner of a car who tried to stop them from stealing a wedding dress. The woman was beaten, stripped naked, and left for dead. Aristides, a witness hidden behind a nearby windshield, couldn't intervene because of the criminals' superior strength, but eventually he approached to cover the victim with a raincoat and take her home.

Days later, at a party mixed with satanic ritual, Tamara appeared dressed as a bride, wearing a tiara adorned with horns. After a day of excess, everyone fell asleep except her, who decided to leave alone. In the dark alleyways, a shadow followed her steps. Suddenly, she fell face up, her body stretched out, her face a mask of fatal astonishment.

The news soon appeared:

"The devil sucked her off dressed in white"

- Have you seen Zosimo? So young and already on the wrong path.
- That's why she married the Devil.

Morbid curiosity and sensationalist scandal.

Founded in 1963 by Carlos Samayoa, at a time when regulations on the public use of images, language, and discrimination were virtually nonexistent, this magazine was highly regarded among the working class. It offered a glimpse into shocking images of accidents and crimes, accompanied by sensationalist texts that emphasized the tragedy.

With a circulation of up to two million copies, and before the arrival of mobile phones, it was, along with other low-cost reading material like Chanoc, Lágrimas y Risas, or TV Novelas, the companion that entertained all salaried and informal workers. It was a constant companion during their commute on the subway or the buses called dolphins or whales, a name that served as an allegory for the waters that still flow beneath the surface of the Mexican capital.

Although he mocked the life and death of any character who was touched by scandal or misfortune, regardless of their social class, such as Juan Gabriel or Luis Donaldo Colosio himself, his stories showed the unfortunate daily life of the marginalized population.

Alarma was the publication that spoke what others kept silent about, whether out of shame or ethical constraints. It spoke with the starkness and simplicity of any laborer, bricklayer, or seamstress. It provided information to enliven conversations among neighbors, relatives, or factory workers, who offered their opinions on bloody events or despicable conduct—those in which they would never find themselves involved, due to their strict adherence to morality or the protection afforded by divine justice.

In a society where comedy is mixed with the profane, some of its headlines were examples of cruel humor:

- "Abduct her, rape her, and kill her with a gun."
- "He was run over by the train"
- "The heat killed him"
- "He died from laughing so much"

Many intellectuals, even those famous for their sarcastic humor and liberal views, described this magazine as morbid, sadistic, and vulgar. They criticized it for reducing tragedy to cheap entertainment.

Elena Poniatowska **pointed** out that publications like *Alarma!* reduced human tragedy to cheap spectacle. Vicente Leñero **criticized** the style of the sensationalist press, including *Alarma!*, for turning violence into a commodity.

However, Carlos Monsiváis saw it as a symptom of the uneven modernization of Mexico City, a place that offered what people wanted to see.

For Carlos Fuentes, the sensationalist press in Mexico was a symptom of cultural inequality and urban morbidity; he also pointed out that literature should be narrated both from its myths and legends as well as from its contemporary tragedies.

For journalist Armando Huerta, *Alarma!* was "the most criticized magazine, but also the most read and sold." He highlighted its role in reporting crime news without filters. Some university studies pointed to its visual and narrative impact on popular culture, as an "urban cultural circuit," where crime news became part of collective memory.

Perhaps the most controversial coverage in this magazine was the case of *Las Poquianchis*, which became known in the 1970s. It recounted the murders of women committed within a prostitution ring by the González Valenzuela sisters in Guanajuato, with texts and photographs that were considered excessive, such as:

- "The Poquianchis! Murderous sisters of Guanajuato"
- "They killed women and buried them alive"
- "The Sisters of Evil: More than 90 victims"
-

This case inspired the film *Las Poquianchis* by Felipe Cazals and the novel *Las muertas* by Jorge Ibargüengoitia.

In 1986, as part of a "crusade against pornography," the Ministry of the Interior banned the magazine. It was accused of setting a "bad example" for society.

This type of press was, at the time, the only outlet that showcased the everyday violence and misfortune of those living in poverty, while for the rest of the media, these alarming events only mattered if they occurred in the world of the elites. The pain and wickedness of the common people were considered significant from the heights of political, economic, or cultural power, whether to elicit compassion, display shameful virtues, fuel a fascination with

folklore, or express contempt: feelings similar to those of an adult toward a naive child, whom one must dress up or whose instincts must be reprimanded.

Alarm, rustic map of Mexican values.

Besides the crimes of passion, the bloody events and the domestic violence present, this magazine was attractive for the precision with which it captured the values of the vulnerable society, as if it were an efficient fishing net.

Sexuality was frequently an inherent cause of crime. In the case of women, it was a punishment for indulging desire or for their disobedience to the modesty and demure conduct expected of their gender. In the case of men, it was for their perversity and unhealthy ambition for pleasure.

The above did not prevent the appearance in its pages of women showing provocative parts of their bodies with erotic invitation gestures, along with a description that characterized sexuality as dangerous, linked to sin and death.

His favorite topic to exemplify sexual perversion was news stories involving homosexuals, whom he pejoratively called "little women," portraying them as transgressors, deviants, and criminals by nature.

At the heart of every crime of passion were infidelity, jealousy, shamelessness, and often, the family's lack of control over these disorders.

Examples of these headlines were:

- **"Secret Feasts of Inverts"**
- **"Disgusting sexual depravity"**

The family was exalted as a sacred nucleus, but also as the stage for tragedy. The most detestable acts occurred within the walls of the home. It was the place where a bad father abused his daughters or stepdaughters, a wicked wife cheated on her hardworking husband, ungrateful children stole from or mistreated their parents, or where parents exploited and harmed their children.

Family ties were a fragile thread that snapped in the face of impure desire, ambition, or the evil nature of its members. Crimes where spouses killed or wounded each other, siblings engaged in bloody feuds, or the repressive violence of parents culminated in disaster.

"Compassion is a thread that should never be broken."

The only way to avoid these outcomes was strict obedience to social norms and sexual conduct, fruitful work, and adherence to the Christian faith.

The mother was seen as a self-sacrificing woman, a protective figure, almost always a victim of the man who accompanied her and sometimes of ungrateful children.

The private lives of families are one of the most captivating spectacles of tabloid journalism; there's always a character who succumbs to or rebels against their oppressor. It allows

viewers to see themselves reflected in these sufferings and to savor a taste of justice on their own. In other cases, the news viewer may have a more benign reality or even live in a moral paradise, exempting them from the sad end of broken families.

Examples of these headlines were:

- **"He killed his wife out of jealousy!"**
- **"He dragged his whole family down with him!"**
- **"Neighborhood drama: mother sacrificed!"**

The young people were portrayed as impetuous, reckless, rebellious, and even threatening. Their transgressions were seen as a danger to their families and communities. They were gang members and the cause of all traffic accidents, but also fragile beings, capable of breaking like the thinnest glass.

Their tragedies are a punishment for disobedience, for failing to heed the calls of their elders and for defying community values. The image of their lifeless or martyred bodies is seen as a warning and a call to gain experience, but at the other extreme, it evokes a pious lament for a life cut short at an early age.

Examples of these headlines were:

- **"Boy dies in illegal street race!"**
- **"Teenager kills his father!"**
- **"Young gang member kills out of jealousy!"**

Faith and religion appear as a manual that warns us against tempting divine punishment. It emphasizes that higher will that decides our future. Alarma reminded us that death and suffering were dictated by a higher order.

Its pages were filled with the invisible presence of God, the Virgin Mary, and the saints. Judges to whom one could turn for forgiveness or a miracle, regardless of the petitioner's brutal nature. However, the divine and its court would determine the sincerity of the accused.

There are those who are habitual transgressors, full-time sinners, those who could only obtain exemption from punishment by turning their lives upside down. These are: women of easy virtue, effeminate men, and the unfaithful.

The magazine Alarma didn't rely solely on divine intervention to find architects of misfortune; it also featured specters or the souls of the dead, thirsting for revenge. It also had goblins or witches, who disrupted the peaceful lives of earthly beings.

Examples of these headlines were:

- **"Miracle of the Virgin in the pantheon!"**
- **"Saint Jude saved him from dying!"**
- **"God's punishment for his sin!"**

The government and the state were implicitly seen as corrupt entities, incapable of guaranteeing peace, tranquility, and justice. They were seen as indifferent actors, yet sometimes perpetrators. This justified lynchings and taking justice into one's own hands.

The censorship against this magazine revealed the moral hypocrisy of the authorities, who pointed out the crude use of words, while many of their politicians were ruthless actors or, at best, unmoved by the responsibility of guaranteeing peaceful coexistence.

Governments in every nation are always the most brutal transgressors of values, norms, reason, and compassion. They are charlatans who seek to conceal the bloody reality so that no one sees it spilling onto their hands.

Examples of these headlines were:

- **"The police arrived late... again!"**
- **"He was run over by the train... and the government didn't even notice."**
- **"They killed him in front of the judge and nobody did anything."**

Leobardo, the beast of the road.

There are mature men who never truly leave adolescence behind; that was the case with Leobardo. Well into his thirties, the world was a racetrack for him, where daring and boldness earned him self-esteem and the praise of his peers.

He lived surrounded by all the symbols of power, audacity, and intimidation: a high-powered motorcycle with a pair of horns on the handlebars, leather boots and vest, a bracelet with sharp points, and the Nazi swastika emblazoned on his back.

His gang was proud to display terror and power on the tracks, encouraging with aggressive maneuvers the possibility of an accident for anyone unlucky enough to cross their path. Leobardo took in the infamous pleasure of driving his vehicle, running over any defenseless animal he encountered, something he boasted about with strident expressions.

Sometimes, he would hang the corpses or injured bodies of these creatures, dragging them along the road to watch them be torn to pieces. On one occasion, he dragged a female and her cubs from their den to subject them to this cruel fate while they were still alive, but that was his worst mistake.

A serious, thin man watched the events unfold from a small roadside inn. A short time later, while adjusting a tire on his motorcycle in a desolate spot, a powerful blow to the back of his head knocked him unconscious. When he awoke, he found himself tied to a rope, slowly descending into a yard filled with ferocious, hungry dogs used for clandestine dogfights. Despite his terrified screams, no one came to his aid.

This is how his end was described in the news report:

"They swallowed him alive, like a dog."

- Look Zosimo, at least the puppies had some food.

- Poor things! They were so thin.

Congressman Andrade and his tricks.

No one is more untouchable than the gang members who control public funds and public resources. Their pride binds their necks, and their flattery leads them to replace the image of the supreme God with his portrait next to the votive candles on his altar.

Such was Congressman Andrade, for whom his favorite moment in Roman films was when Caesar raised his hand to decide the life of a gladiator. He adored the image of those monarchs surrounded by the slaves of their harem, who satisfied their most perverse desires.

One of those desires was for very young women, practically teenagers, against whom he constantly found it impossible to suppress a perverse gaze. Destroying innocence was the dream that woke him, causing him to search for liquor to quench the thirst of his tongue.

What was stopping him from acting on his fantasies? That's what he thought that day when the president congratulated him with a firm handshake, after hailing him as a noble example of rectitude and love for the people. The kind gesture from the most powerful among the powerful was, for him, a blessing to unleash his twisted instincts. No one would dare condemn the one anointed by such power.

He did everything to achieve his goal. He gave money in exchange for fresh bodies, bribed heartless parents, used the deception of gifts, and lived a life of wickedness with impunity, confident in his great power.

However, rumors spread throughout the district, and parents, aware of their disadvantage against the monster, redoubled their protection of their little girls. The gossip became so widespread that one day it reached the ears of someone it shouldn't have.

As the governor opened envelopes of misappropriated public funds, one caught his eye. It was different from the others and had the word "Fragile" written on it. Upon seeing its contents, a flicker of rage flashed across his face, and he slammed a photograph onto his desk—a picture of his little girl trapped in the clutches of a beast.

The body was found in a vacant lot, naked and with his genitals placed in his mouth.

The press reported on the tragedy:

- **"The attack against Congressman Andrade causes public outrage"**
- **"Mourning and a demand for justice. Unheard-of end for the congressman."**
- **"He liked them small, but they've left his mouth completely bare."**

—Her pleasure didn't last long, did it, Malena?

—And so he left, caressing his misdeeds.

Aristides in the Alameda.

One Sunday afternoon, I was idly gazing at the fountains in Alameda Central. That park always reminds me of the strange courtship of a couple from the countryside that, back in the eighties, drove me to despair.

After a short walk, I approached a newsstand to read the headlines. Struck by the misfortune of Deputy Andrade, I overheard a conversation between a thin man and an elderly woman.

"Poor thing! They put his things in his mouth," the woman exclaimed, deeply moved.

"Do you feel pity for that wicked man, who owed so much to the world?" his interlocutor asked.

"I didn't know him, and that's for the best. That way I'll never lose compassion; without it, we'd all be wicked," the lady replied.

After that, I looked the man in the eyes, who answered me in the same way, and I said to him:

—At what point did you lose compassion?

—How do you know?

—See, I am an old man.

—It's true, in their eyes I'm an open envelope.

—Like the one who kept a secret life?

—Yes, like that one.

The end of the most read and banned magazine.

Retracing my steps, seeking peace of mind in the garden's coolness, I reflected on whether justice truly has the power to calm the demons that dwell in our minds. Punishment seems to only serve to end vengeance. We are the worst species to have received the gift of intelligence. It evolved beyond the instinct for survival. It's best to abandon the fantasy of paradise; no human will ever become an angel.

Days after that encounter with the hunter, in 1986, *Alarma* published its last issue. From then on, society became more cautious with its words. An attempt to soften a reality that, paradoxically, is now more brutal and bloody than in the days of that rag.

Today, censorship is like a general whose gun has been stolen: the harshness of the world has rendered language incapable of containing it. There is no longer a newspaper to guide our outrage or our forgiveness. Today, the pinnacle of social values is fought over in a war of opinions. Here, no one is stronger, and finally, dictatorships have an avenger stalking them in the darkness of the internet.

"The sound of a fountain can silence a scream, but in its waters, we can always see our face reflected."

Living exposes us to tragedy.

Nothing is closer to us than tragedy: it appears when we step into an open drain, in the phone call announcing the death of a loved one, in the foreclosure of a house, in a doctor's diagnosis, or in a judge's sentence. Tragedy has accompanied us since the origins of humankind, especially in the fear of being devoured. It is no coincidence that horror stories are populated by macabre beings with sharp teeth and long nails: symbols of fear that warn us of impending doom.

We wake up each day believing it will be the same as, or better than, the last, but something will inevitably happen to shatter our peace and our smiles. The news reminds us that someone, near or far, has fallen victim to misfortune. In those moments, a wide range of emotions surface: compassion, fear, or even joy. The prevailing sentiment in a nation defines its level of barbarity.

Excessive exposure to violent images can lead to morbid consumption, where tragedy becomes spectacle. Magazines like *Alarma* exploited this fascination: explicit photographs, scandalous headlines, blood commodified. Psychology explains morbid curiosity as a mixture of curiosity, fear, and a need for control: looking at the pain of others reminds us of our own vulnerability, but it also gives us the illusion of being prepared to anticipate risks and strengthen our self-protection. The problem is that this consumption, instead of generating empathy, becomes collective voyeurism, where suffering is trivialized and transformed into entertainment.

It is common for destructive feelings and collective pleasure derived from pain to take root in the personality of a society. This occurred in Nazi Germany, when the self-proclaimed superior race applauded the expulsion of Jews from their homes or celebrated the atrocities committed by its youth in beating an elderly person. It also happened during the French Revolution, when the "oppressed" people exclaimed their joy each time the guillotine blade fell.

Today it happens when a woman is stoned in public or a homosexual is hanged in some Muslim countries; also when an entire square cheers and vehemently applauds the fatal blow against a tortured bovine.

Mexico, land of angels who will not go to heaven.

Mexico prides itself on being a sensitive and heroic society in the face of others' misfortune. It demonstrates this in times of great disasters, though it also displays selfishness and sadism in the face of repression or aggression toward those who do not elicit sympathy. We are a community prone to lynching, whether for reasons of faith, politics, or mere rumors. Perhaps for this reason, the world identifies us as a violent nation, and it is not wrong.

There are paranoid cultures that see the enemy in their different neighbor: the Native American, the Black person, the Muslim, the Christian, the Tutsi, the communist, or the Tibetan. We Mexicans, on the other hand, tend to become our own worst enemies. Morbid

curiosity incites us: it's a topic of conversation over coffee, a reason to read a news story and look at the accompanying images. We are like children, trusting that the misfortune of others will never touch us, and that illusion makes us vulnerable.

Apathy prevents us from acting to stop these tragedies from happening again. I dare say that, among Western nations, we are a fragile and unprepared people, clumsy and barbaric in the face of outrage. We live under the belief that, as long as it doesn't happen to me, the world can keep turning. We are a nation of indifferent angels, walking alone through the flames of hell.

The world keeps turning, as does the inherent evil in humankind. Perhaps that's why we shouldn't be so subtle in naming it: we must point it out in all its starkness, to remember that it's there and to understand just how terrible it is.

A poison is what its name says: more than a toxic substance, it is a warning that prevents us from drinking it.