This is not my story. This is José Perez's story, and he is gone. Anyone who lived in Mexico in the town of Mal Agüero, in the state of Veracruz could tell you about him. (They won't. They'd prefer to make believe this never happened.)

We called him el Judio because that is what he was, a Jew, the only one in town. How did we know? Well, in time he would tell us, but even if he hadn't, one senses these things. He arrived one day dressed in a suit, carrying a suitcase and wearing a hat. Now, no one ever wears a suit in Mal Agüero unless they are going to church. In fact, few people visit Mal Agüero unless they were born here and are returning in disgrace. There's not much to visit: the military outpost, the sugar fincas and oil refineries, and one or two banana plantations.

But José Perez's arrival coincided with the War years, and we were more likely to expect the unexpected then. We'd read in the papers of a German submarine spotted off the port of Veracruz; of a Nazi spy ring, of foreigners detained in the town of Santa Rosa, and of ships loaded down with refugees turned away.

By the time he arrived, he had already chosen the name we knew him by, 'José Perez,' a name as common as coffee. There must have been over a hundred in Veracruz alone. "He doesn't look like a Perez," people would murmur. "Does he?" And yet the new name made sense. No one in Mal Agüero could have pronounced his real name anyway and his real name would have made him even more of a foreigner than he already was.

Years later he'd tell me: "Where I came from my name was Yossef Perestrokovsky but Perestrokovsky made too many mistakes. Maybe Perez will be a wiser man. What do you think?" and he'd wink. I could understand that— his not wanting to be who he had been. Who could blame him? He'd lost a wife, his family, a small business, his home, his identity... "I will never marry again. Never," he told me. "I have enough trouble taking care of myself."
The first time I saw him was on a Saturday, 1942, 1943 maybe. I know it was Saturday because we were playing chess under the laurel trees in the main square, just as we always do on Saturdays. He walked by carrying a suitcase. He stopped to watch and placed it on the ground.

I beat both Prieto and Carranco—they were no match for me. "¿Quiere jugar?" I asked.

He shook his head back and forth. "No hablo español."

So I pointed to him, to myself and to the chessboard. Carranco offered him his seat. The Jew thanked us with a nod, took off his hat and proceeded to slaughter me—twice. I beat him the third time around. (I'd like to believe I was starting to understand his strategy, although years later he'd grin and say he'd let me win on purpose: "I was really hoping you'd buy me a beer, maybe a taco. I'd had nothing to eat since the night before.")

The next time I saw him he was sitting on a chair in the Zocalo reading the local paper and consulting a foreign language dictionary. On the bench beside him were a straight razor, scissors, a white smock and a comb. At his feet a sign: Peluquero. No one seemed to care that he'd set up in the main square. We already had a shoe shine boy and a newspaper vendor, and every Sunday a scribe arrived with a typewriter and installed himself in front of the church, so why not a barber? Up until then everyone had a wife or a tía who cut their hair. (My sister, Paquita, cut mine.) But a barber? Why not? At the beginning we thought it a bit of an extravagance to pay for something we could get for free—and there were those who said a Jew would always take advantage. But for feast days and weddings we could all afford the one peso he charged. And he did a good job.

Within a year he'd set up a barber's chair in the corner of the market, away from the food stalls and in time purchased a small house in town. He lived on the upper floor, opened a small shop below, and soon after, arranged for the delivery of a barber pole from the state capital. His was one of the first short wave radios in Mal Agüero, and on our way home from work we'd drop by to hear the news and chat. In his quaint Spanish he'd fill us in: Aleman's election in '46, the war in Korea, the sugarcane workers' strikes, the 1957 earthquake in Mexico City, sporadic campaigns against the syndicates…

Sometimes, after the others had drifted home, I'd remain behind. Like him, I had no wife to return to, only my sister Paquita who worked as a secretary at the military garrison. José and I would climb the steps to his rooms and sit at his kitchen table. He'd pour some rum, place some
lemon quarters and a few handfuls of unshelled peanuts on a plate, and we'd talk—about politics mostly and chess, a bit of local gossip, perhaps — and, though rarely, about Yossef Perestrovsky.

"Everything I had was taken away from me, everything, like someone picking up a chess board and turning it upside down in the middle of a game," he told me.

One night, after the two of us had emptied the bottle, he started pacing the kitchen floor and wiping his brow with a balled-up handkerchief. (He always carried a handkerchief.) "Even if I'd had a place to return to, I could never go back. They came to pick me up, and I convinced them they had the wrong man and sent them to my brother. Of course I never thought…” He started to cry. I avoided asking him anything personal after that.

At times, he would ask the questions. "I respect you, Alvaro," he told me on more than one occasion. "You are a teacher, a man of culture. So explain this to me please. How is it possible everyone knows exactly who is to be president months before the elections?" Or he'd consult me on local customs: "The police constabulary has asked me to contribute to their local vigilancia fund. This is the practice?” Occasionally someone, usually a sugar cane worker, once an opposition party candidate, would go missing. "My God. This is terrible Alvaro. Are you sure the police are working on it?"

The day Jaime Carranco's mutilated body was found sprawled across the sidewalk down the block from his shop, José, still in his bathrobe and bedroom slippers, intercepted me on my way to school. He was out of breath and perspiring heavily. "Alvaro, Carranco's dead," he cried. "They've shot him. What in God's name is happening?"

"Ah, José. I know. It's a tragedy. But surely you must have known Carranco was involved with the syndicate. It was only a matter of time before the government took matters into their own hands."

"Then we must do something," he cried.

I threw my arms around him to keep him from running off to report the incident. "You want to be the next corpse lying in the gutter? Think how easy that would be. You're a foreigner, José. You have no family, little money and—to make matters worse—you're a Jew."

José disengaged himself from my embrace. "A friend is killed and you're asking me to do nothing?"
"Believe me. There's nothing you can do. The military, the police, they know all about this. That's just the way it is here."

But most of the time nothing much happened in Mal Agüero. Oh we'd hear of an occasional land dispute, a cantina stabbing. One of my students left town precipitously with the mayor's fourteen-year-old daughter, and the new priest started joining us for chess in the main square on Saturday afternoons.

"I am very fortunate, Alvaro, to have stumbled across this fine place," José told me shortly before he disappeared. "Think of it. I might have ended up in a town where no one played chess. Or worse yet, in a place where everyone, including you, could beat me."

The military base where Paquita works is a low slung concrete structure on the edge of town. The front windows are papered over; the back window faces a courtyard where pocked cacti and a few hardy geraniums crouch along the edge of a high wall crowned by shards of glass. According to my sister, sometime in September of 1959, her boss, Navarrete, the chief commander of the garrison, received a visitor, someone important enough to arrive in a chauffeur driven sedan.

The two men greeted each other with a handshake and a hug. Ordinarily, the drone of the ceiling fan would all but muffle their conversation, but today an electrical short had caused the fan to convulse and die. The two huddled around a desk in the corner.

"They asked me for coffee and an ashtray," Paquita, told me.

The conversation went something like this: "So, tell me compadre, what brings you all the way out here? Although I think I know…"

"Ha ha! There's no fooling you, is there, Navarrete? El Gallo Perez brings me here. I've heard the news. You've had him picked up, haven't you?"

The commander probably smiled, shrugged his shoulders, puffed on a cigarette.

"Come on, Navarrete. You know who he works for, don't you?"

"If I'm not mistaken, he works for the same man you do, Don Paco. The second most powerful man in the state— after the governor, of course."
"Well, tell me then. What do you intend to do with him?"

"What do you think? Our friend José Perez, is a notorious pistolero. I have my orders. Going all the way up to the presidencia, I might add."

The visitor may have gazed thoughtfully out the window, played with his watch chain. "Yes, no doubt you do. Unfortunately, he's also a blackmailer. I can see where his...ah, disappearance, could have very unfortunate consequences. Over the years my boss has, on occasion, had to work with him. Naturally, this is strictly confidential."

"Naturally." Navarrete sipped his coffee.

"If anything threatens to get in his way, El Gallo would never be as discreet as I know you will. He will reveal his connections with my boss and he, in his own way, is a powerful man. We can't afford to let that happen."

"I'm sorry, Don Paco. My orders come from the top. They want José Perez out of the way."

"Of course they do. But remember, they want a man named Perez out of the way. They want you to write a report to the effect that José Perez was taken into custody and died while resisting arrest. Why, they may even want to see a body."

Perhaps a goat champed at the sparse patches of grass beyond the window or a rooster crowed. The office would be silent except for the faint staccato of typewriter keys.

"Look, Navarrete, if I promise that El Gallo Perez never steps foot again in the state of Veracruz, I think we can find an agreeable solution to our little problem. We would, of course, be more than eager to demonstrate our gratitude and support you in any way we can."

After a long pause, the commander responded. "I see. What exactly did you have in mind?"

Don Paco rose from his chair, patted the comandante on his shoulder and said: "Come. Let me buy you a drink and tell you everything you need to know about José Perez— the other one."