

**LAS FABULOSAS AVENTURAS DEL
PROFESOR FURIA Y MR. CRISTAL**

**(The Fabulous Adventures of
Professor Fury and Mr. Crystal)**

by César Mallorquí

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The translation of this sample
has received a grant from Acción Cultural Española

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[Dedication]

This novel is dedicated to the memory of Cassie, Steven, Corey, Kelly, Matthew, Dan, Daniel, Rachel, Isaiah, John, Lauren, Kyle, and William, victims of the horror at Columbine High School.

Present day

The reporter arrived at the coffee shop at six-fifteen. They had agreed to meet at six o'clock, but he got stuck in the Christmas traffic downtown.

Jaime—that was the reporter's name—stepped inside and looked around. There was a Christmas tree by the door, wreathes over the bar, and fake snow on the windows. Jolly holiday music was being piped in from somewhere. The place was packed, which was a problem, because Jaime had never seen the person he was there to meet; the two had only spoken briefly over the phone. He took a few steps forward and craned his neck, hoping to miraculously identify the stranger.

“Are you Jaime Rivas?” asked a voice to his right.

The reporter turned and saw a young man approaching intently; he was tan, with an average build and a short, patchy beard.

“Yes, hi, that's me. Sorry I'm late. The traffic was terrible.”

“It's fine. I've been sitting over there. Join me?”

They sat across from one another, a pedestal table between them. Jaime asked the waiter for a coffee, then turned to the man in front of him. If his sources were correct, he ought to be a few days shy of his twenty-fifth birthday. He had tossed his large, flat messenger bag on the empty seat beside him.

“So,” the man said, “you're investigating what happened at Anne Frank High School.”

“That's right.”

“Why? That was years ago.”

“About ten years.”

The young man nodded. “Ten years exactly on January 8th. So why are you digging it up now?”

“For a few reasons. The story really affected me at the time, you know? It got under my skin. I couldn’t wrap my head around something so terrible. I was twenty-eight and I’d been working as a journalist for a while, so I tried to follow up on the Anne Frank story. But almost everyone involved was a minor, so the court redacted their identities. R.J.R., J.S.C., G.R.A., D.C.P., A.M.S. Alphabet soup. You can’t do much reporting on that. But now, a decade later, all the kids are of age.”

“That’s it? You just want to know who was there?”

Jaime shook his head.

“I know who was there. I want to know what happened.”

“Everyone knows what happened. It was all over TV, the newspaper, the radio. You couldn’t get away from it.”

“But some things were never cleared up. For example, who fired the shot?”

“Lots of shots were fired in the school that morning,” the man replied, raising an eyebrow for effect.

“I’m talking about the last shot, the one that put an end to all the madness. Who pulled the trigger?”

“A teacher.”

“Are you sure?” Jaime asked, furrowing his brow. “I’ve been investigating this for months. I’ve talked to former Anne Frank students, including a few of the kids who were held in the classroom, though obviously they’re not kids anymore. And you know what? Their story is very different from the official account. The version they tell has a lot to do with you.”

“You shouldn’t believe everything you hear.”

The reporter frowned.

“What actually happened at Anne Frank that morning?” he asked. “From what I’ve learned, the only person who can answer that question is you.”

The young man considered this for a moment.

“And you’re writing an article on this?”

Jaime nodded. “Maybe a book, too.”

The waiter placed a coffee on the table and quickly walked away.

“You really want to hear the story?” the young man asked. “It’s not pleasant.”

“I’d guessed as much. Three people were killed. Almost forty were injured.”

“All right, if that’s what you want. I hope you don’t have other plans tonight. It’s a long story.”

“Don’t worry about me. I’m a journalist, I know how to listen.”

The young man tilted his head and gazed out the window. For a few seconds, his eyes were dull and unfocused, as if he were looking inside of himself; then, his features relaxed and he smiled faintly.

“I guess...” he trailed off. “I guess it all started the day Julián Echevarría taught his first class at Anne Frank. He was drunk. Did you know...”

Ten Years Earlier

September

The day he taught his first class at Anne Frank High School, Julián Echevarría, the new Language and Literature teacher, was drunk. Early that morning, shortly before leaving for work, Julián downed three shots of whisky as fast as he could, without water or ice, as if it were a bitter medicine and he didn’t want to taste it. Only then, after the third shot, could he summon the resolve to face yet another school year. It was the first day of classes.

Fortunately, no one noticed he was inebriated. Julián had gotten good at hiding it: he concealed his alcohol-induced clumsiness and stupor behind a stern, distant demeanor and chewed strong breath mints to cover the smell. When the bell rang at the start of class, Julián distributed a worksheet for the students to complete; he knew that would keep them quiet and buy him at least thirty minutes of peace, so he leaned back in the chair behind his desk at the front of the room, unfolded a newspaper, and began reading halfheartedly, drifting off to the sound of pens scratching paper.

Half an hour later, he was already craving another drink. For a few seconds he considered going to the restroom and sneaking a swig from the flask in his jacket pocket, but he immediately dismissed the idea; he had a limited supply of alcohol and it had to last him the entire morning. With a barely audible sigh of resignation, he put down the newspaper and gazed at his new students. A room full of fifteen-year-olds: sixteen boys, awkward and pimply, and fourteen girls, growing into adult figures in fits and starts. It was the same faces as always, the same voices, the same names, the same questions and answers. Every school year was a photocopy of the one before it.

There were still a few minutes of class left when the final stragglers turned in their worksheets. Julián had no interest in speaking, so he pretended to scrutinize the papers the students had placed on his desk, trusting he could sustain the farce until the bell rang. But after a few minutes, the class's silence gave way to a growing murmur of whispers and giggles. Julián grimaced, took a deep breath, lifted the stack of worksheets and slapped them against his desk, silencing every voice in the room. He sat up straight, glared at his class and, slowly, so he wouldn't slur his speech, said:

“As the more perceptive among you may be aware, this subject is called ‘Language and Literature.’ Clearly all of you already know what ‘language’ is, since I just saw you using it with gleeful abandon. But how many of you, I wonder, know the meaning of the word ‘literature’? According to the latest statistics, in approximately half of your homes, there is nothing to read but the phone book, and these days, maybe not even that. As for the remaining fifty percent, if we scoured your houses, we might find a few best-sellers, and perhaps two or three coffee-table books making their way through the Christmas regifting circuit. But there is a chance, albeit a remote one, that one or two of you may actually enjoy reading—though I would certainly be shocked if that were the case. Shall we find out? Can anyone here define ‘literature’ for me?”

After a few seconds of stony silence, Julián glanced at the list of students and chose a name at random.

“Mr. Martínez, could you tell me what literature is, in your opinion?”

Antonio Martínez, a lanky, freckly teenager, scratched his head as he scrambled for something to say.

“Uh, literature is, um,” he hesitated. “It’s like books and poems and stuff...”

A rose garden of giggles bloomed among the desks. Julián closed his eyes and took a deep breath; he needed a drink, badly.

“Like books, and poems, and stuff,” he repeated wearily. “Narrative and poetry are, of course, key forms of literary expression, that much is undeniable. But I have to say, Mr. Martínez, that when I asked for your opinion, I was hoping for a response somewhat above the special-ed level.” He glanced at the roster again. “Miss Borrás, would you kindly expand upon your classmate’s insightful definition and tell us what you think literature is?”

Natalia Borrás’s cheeks turned very red. She looked at her feet, and in a barely audible voice, answered:

“Literature is an art form that uses language as its means of expression, as well as the body of written works of a given culture, period, or genre.”

Julián responded with slow applause.

“Congratulations, Miss Borrás, you’re able to recite the definition from the textbook with remarkable precision. Incredible performance. Boy and girls, we now have our class mascot: Miss Borrás, the bright red parrot.”

Of course, this just made Natalia blush even more, and she shrank far into her desk, presumably hoping to melt into it completely.

“Come on,” the teacher continued. He was thirsty for something besides water, and it was putting him in a bad mood. “Are any of you capable of a little originality?” He glanced at the roster again. “Miss Montes. Would you care to enlighten us as to what, in your inestimable judgment, you consider to be the purpose of literature?”

Alicia Montes stood. She was an attractive girl, with red hair, blue eyes, and sun-kissed skin, though at that particular moment she seemed more befuddled than beautiful. She opened her mouth to speak after a few seconds’ hesitation, but just then a voice interrupted:

“Becoming a different person.”

Julián turned towards the speaker, a boy who looked a bit more childlike than his classmates.

“At last, we have a volunteer. What’s your name?”

“Daniel Castro.”

“And would you mind repeating your answer, Mr. Castro?”

“That the point of literature is to make you a different person.”

“I’m sorry, I’m not sure I understand. The purpose of literature is to make you a *better* person?”

“No. A *different* person.”

“Right, right. A good book can change who we are inside. That’s pretty cheesy, don’t you think, Mr. Castro?”

“Yeah, really cheesy, but that’s not what I’m saying. I mean a book makes you someone different, even if it doesn’t change you.”

Julián stared at the boy, taken aback; something was off about this kid. He was skinny, average height, fragile-looking, with brown hair and a pleasant face. But his eyes were his most striking feature: they were large, dark, and intense, and behind his serious expression, Julián sensed a touch of irony that was disconcertingly adult in someone so young.

“All right, Mr. Castro, I give up,” he said at last. “Would you mind elaborating on your enigmatic response?”

Daniel shrugged. There were a few stifled laughs and Julián decided to put this particular student out of his misery.

“Quiet down,” he ordered, turning to face the entire class. “This preliminary exchange has given me bleak insight into the severity of your ignorance, which the worksheets you just turned in will no doubt confirm. If education were Mount Everest and you were a team of mountain climbers, right now you would still be napping at base camp. My task, then, is to shake you awake and guide you along your ascent. I don’t know which of you, if any, will reach the summit, but that, ultimately, is up to you. Ah! Excuse me, this is a metaphor; please do not bring ice axes to class tomorrow. We have nine long months to get through the syllabus. Perhaps by the end of that time, one or two of you will be able to tell me what the purpose of literature is, although personally I find that highly improbable. For tomorrow’s class—”

He was interrupted by the bell. The students hurried to their feet and Julián, without finishing his sentence or dismissing the class, gathered his papers and left the room. He was also in a hurry, to lock himself in a restroom stall and take a long pull of whisky.

That is what happened when Julián Echevarría taught his first class at Anne Frank High School; it barely lasted fifty minutes, but that was enough time for him to ensure he was hated by all of his students.

Except one.

16 September

Doctor Ortiz told me I should start journaling. “It’ll help you organize your thoughts,” she said. “Not to mention, writing can help your most intimate feelings rise to the surface. It’s like opening a window to your subconscious.”

Doctor Ortiz, my psychotherapist (that’s what she calls herself and what it says on her door) is kind of corny. But she’s also really nice and I like her, she tries hard. So I’m going to listen to her. She said the start of the school year was a good time to start journaling, and today was the first day of class, so here goes:

Dear Diary: Today was my first day back at school after summer break. I saw all my old pals again, and I met my new teachers...

Alright alright, I'm joking. I just feel kind of dumb. Is anything that happens in my life worth writing about? Actually, something sort of interesting did happen today... Maybe the whole journaling thing isn't the worst idea. I should take this more seriously.

PERSONAL JOURNAL OF DANIEL CASTRO

At school today, after two and a half months off, I reconfirmed my ability to become invisible. I went completely unnoticed by all the kids and teachers. Everyone Lockheed straight through my body, like I didn't exist. That's good: my special skill still works. I'm a superhero: "Mr. Crystal, the invisible boy." The only downside is that my superpower isn't selective: when I disappear, I'm invisible to everyone. Including Alicia.

Actually: today I was a real knight in shining armor and saved my princess from the clutches of a dragon. The princess was Alicia and the dragon was a new teacher. His name is Mr. Echevarría and he asked Alicia to explain the purpose of literature. She had no idea (of course she didn't—how is anyone supposed to answer a question that stupid?), so I decided to create a diversion by speaking up in class, drawing the dragon's attention away from her and onto me. I just said the first thing that came into my head.

For a few short minutes, Mr. Crystal became visible, and that can be very dangerous. Fortunately, I was barely touched by the dragon's fury and emerged from combat unscathed. Alas, Alicia didn't even realize I did it for her. But that doesn't matter. Mr. Crystal wages his battle against oppression from the shadows.

Now we're going to talk about dragons. I thought the new literature teacher was... interesting. In my opinion, there are three kinds of teachers: annoyingly enthusiastic, stubbornly ineffective, and clinically depressed. But Mr. Echevarría doesn't fit into any of those categories. He's different, because really he's just very, very angry. Today, at the beginning of class, it seemed like he didn't even notice us. He didn't look at anyone—it was like, instead of thirty individual students, we were one single creature, a monster he had to keep at bay using hostile indifference. Then, when he finally deigned to talk to us, he was totally snotty about it, like he didn't even care what we thought of him. He was giving off such bad vibes that they were probably interfering with the cell signal within a one-kilometer radius.

It was fantastic.

At first I wondered if we might have a supervillain on our hands. He is a dragon, after all, and “Professor Fury” is a great name for a supervillain...

Mr. Crystal vs. Professor Fury

(outline for an original comic by D. Castro)

ILLUSTRATION #1

Professor Fury, wearing his black supervillain cape, has kidnapped the Princess and has her tied up in his lair. Above, a net containing hundreds of books is hangs from a rope. The flame of a candle is dangerously close to the rope. If it burns through, it would spell certain death for the Princess.

Professor Fury: Confess! What is the secret purpose of literature? Tell me, or you will be squashed beneath the collected works of over six hundred Nobel laureates!

Princess: I don't know! I don't know the secret! Let me go, please!

ILLUSTRATION #2

Fury continues to threaten the Princess as the flame begins to singe the rope. Just then, Mr. Crystal appears; because he is invisible, we see only his silhouette.

Professor Fury: Whoever learns the secret purpose of literature will rule the world! Tell it to me, or be crushed beneath the megaton of Nobel laureates!

Princess: Please, no! Not the Nobel-prize winners!

Mr. Crystal (thinking): This looks like a job for Mr. Crystal...

ILLUSTRATION #3

Mr. Crystal bends over and whispers something in the Princess's ear. Her eyes light up. The rope is moments from splitting.

ILLUSTRATION #4

The Princess turns towards Professor Fury and hisses:

Princess: You want to know the secret purpose of literature, you lowlife? I'll tell you: literature exists so pathetic instructors like you can earn a salary teaching it!

ILLUSTRATION #5:

Professor Fury's face contorts and his eyes grow wide. Meanwhile, Mr. Crystal blows out the candle just before the flame burns through the rope's last remaining thread.

Professor Fury: O Yoknapatawpha the Dark! I thought I was Master of the Universe, when all I am is a miserable, insignificant cog in the Education System!

ILLUSTRATION #6

Unable to bear the discovery of his true nature, Professor Fury flees. In the foreground, Mr. Crystal, always invisible, unties the shell-shocked Princess.

ILLUSTRATION #7

Now free, the Princess brings her hands to her heart and gazes at the heavens with a tender smile.

Princess: This must be the work of the mysterious hero who always protects me... Oh, Mr. Crystal, I don't know who you are or where you come from, but I love you...

ILLUSTRATION #8

Mr. Crystal's translucent silhouette fades into the shadows. At the bottom of the illustration, a caption reads: *"WITH HIS MISSION ACCOMPLISHED, MR. CRYSTAL - THE TRANSPARENT AVENGER - IGNORES THE VOICE IN HIS HEART AND BIDS THE PRINCESS A SILENT FAREWELL, HEADING WHEREVER JUSTICE CALLS."*

Actually, I don't think I can picture Mr. Echevarría as a supervillain. He's more like a superhero who starts out on the wrong path but teams up with the good guys later, like Wolverine or The Steel Claw. Or maybe he's a superhero who still doesn't know what he is, like Rogue and the other mutants before they joined the X-Men. But

now that I'm thinking about it, I don't think he has enough energy to be a super-anything.

Still, he's interesting. And not just because he's so incredibly angry, but because of something very, very, very unusual: Mr. Echevarría came to class drunk.

That's right: wasted, plastered, sloshed, smashed, trashed, loaded, hammered, and that's all the synonyms I can think of. I could tell from his eyes and the way he moved and talked so slowly. Plus I have a good sense of smell, and when I walked past him after class, his breath smelled minty. Mr. Echevarría doesn't seem like the kind of person who would chew breath mints without a good reason, like, for example, covering the smell of alcohol. Anyway, no one else noticed, because Mr. Echevarría is good at hiding it. And to get good at anything, you need to practice. He must be drunk a lot.

Elementary, my dear Watson.

But I do keep wondering: What kind of teacher shows up drunk on the first day of school...