

# THE FIFTH GROUP

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A STORY FROM SAN DESVELO



THILO WILTS

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*“We paint what remains when something disappears.”*

Colectivo La Línea Perdida

## PROLOGUE

# Inside the Wall

•

Celia Ríos didn't awaken from a boom. It was a woman's voice that stirred her, and just her peace made it difficult to push herself back into the dream.

The voice came from the back of the house. There lay the laundry room, the narrow yard, and the concrete room, which Celia for years only called Caseta because no one had a better name for it. Through the wall they heard five digits. A pause. Five more. The sound was not loud; it possessed that clear, patient pronunciation with which numbers used to be repeated on the phone earlier.

Celia lay still.

The clock on the small table read 2:17. The red light cast a faint border around the water bottle beside it. Nothing moved in the house; only the ventilator had ceased since midnight, having dried out and whistling with each rotation. A late motorcycle approached—first the engine, then a short shudder over the loose cover of the drain. After that, the voice was alone once more.

"Five two four eleven," she said.

Celia sat up. The sheet slipped from her knees. The garúa had cooled the night, without binding the dust. At the lower edge of the window, there were tiny droplets. She took her cardigan from the chair and went into the hallway.

On the wall hung a picture of the Señor de los Milagros. In the red light of the kitchen, the frame looked askew. Celia didn't straighten it; she knew the house in the dark: three steps to the door of the former nursery, four to the kitchen, then the step lower than the others. Behind the kitchen a metal door led into the yard.

The voice spoke further.

"Zero three eight two one."

She didn't sound like a radio from the neighborhood. Celia knew how voices wandered through the houses of Las Palmeras. Music came through roofs, messages through open windows, football through entire streets. This voice lay in the concrete; it was dry and close, without the tinny echo of a speaker.

In the yard hung a musty smell of damp earth and the color in the sealed buckets. Celia flicked on the lamp above the door. Her yellow light barely illuminated the Caseta.

The house had grown around the room. When Celia moved in at the beginning of the nineties, the caseta already stood there: a low, windowless box, three steps wide, four long, with a metal door and a ventilation opening under the roof. Later, on its left was added the laundry room, and on its right her son's room. The room remained. Things were stored in it that weren't good enough for the house and too useful to end up in the trash: folding chairs, two defective fans, paint buckets, a bag of tiled remnants, and a procession figure whose hand needed repair.

Over the metal door hung the chain. The padlock was secured.

"Seven three zero four four."

Celia didn't go any closer; she merely noted that the voice was indeed behind the door, not in the neighboring house, not on the street, but behind it.

"One one two seven eight."

Then came a pause longer than the others, when not even a breath stirred through the ventilation grille. Celia heard her refrigerator jumping in the kitchen.

"Repetimos."

She went back into the house.

It was neither a bold nor a fearful decision. Celia had learned in her life that not every nocturnal disturbance diminished by immediate opening. A water pipe could wait until morning if it did not drip. A stray dog continued wandering if not fed. And a locked door remained so at first.

In bed, she pulled the sheet over her knees once more. The voice repeated the groups. At the last, Celia wasn't sure if she had heard five digits or just recognized the rhythm. Afterward, the concrete remained silent.

In the morning, she brewed coffee water, swept the hallway, and carried a bag of empty bottles to the courtyard. The garúa hung bright above the rooftops. On the black water tanks, droplets remained, too tiny to move anywhere.

The metal door of the Caseta was open.

Celia stood on the step. The chain and lock hung through the eyelet. The lock was wedged in place. The door stood half a hand-width from the frame, as if the metal behind it had thickened.

She set the bag aside and pushed the door wider with the handle of the broom.

In the room the folding chairs stood in their place. The fans lay stacked atop one another. The figure of saints leaned against the wall, its gaze fixed upon a paint bucket. Dust lay on the floor.

A fresh straight line traced through the dust. It started at the wall where the cut cable pipes were, and ended at the door.

Celia watched long enough to see that neither mouse trails nor shoe impressions were present beside her. Then she closed the door, checked the chain, and carried the bottles outside. At breakfast, she did not mention the occurrence.

At around nine, her neighbor Rosa arrived to fetch a water tank. Celia assisted her in loosening the lid. While they stood in the yard, Rosa looked at the caseta.

"She said, 'The door was open.'"

Celia placed the lid on the barrier. "No longer."

"I thought you removed the chairs."

"No."

Rosa went to the vent, but remained outside the shadow of the air intake. "My radio made that noise again at night."

"Their radio has been rumbling since Christmas."

"Nor shall we proceed until the bus departs to the north."

"Thereafter, repair the bus."

Rosa smiled and took the container. She said no more. In Las Palmeras, many conversations revolved around things mentioned without immediately turning them into shared concerns. Celia was relieved by this. Had Rosa questioned about figures, she would have had to respond.

Later, Celia swept the yard once more. The clean line could not be entirely erased. There, the concrete retained its brightness, as if some older dust had been pushed aside. Celia placed a paint bucket there. Not to conceal the trace. Just because the bucket had to stand somewhere.

In Las Palmeras there were other matters to address in the morning. A water wagon arrived tardily, and on the approach road a lorry had scattered sand. Further along two individuals searched for the mototaxi's key.

The wall was silent.

CHAPTER 1

## Sensor Three

.

The red Toyota took the last turn below the Cerro Vigía in second gear. The garúa lay close above San Desvelo. From the city, only the orange main roads and the red lamp atop Radio Desvelo's mast could be seen, far north of El Faro. The sea was completely absent.

In the glove compartment, a wrench struck against plastic with each ground vibration.

"It goes in the pocket," said Inés.

Rafael held the thermos between his feet. "She wanted to drive."

"Tool won't have anything."

"It's akin to using measuring instruments then."

Inés switched back a gear. The engine grew louder. "Sensor three has been reporting zero commas for two hours."

"Perhaps there's no wind."

The branches along the roadside brushed against the passenger door.

"Might be," said Inés. "Then the entire Cerro moves for another reason."

The weather station consisted of the low white main building, two containers, and the mast with measuring instruments. Salt sat as a light crust on screws and edges. On the older container, only the year 1998 remained of a sign; PROGRAMA COSTERO DE VIGILANCIA could be discerned if one knew what had been there.

Rafael opened the gate. The latch stuck at the same spot as the previous week. He stood against the frame rather than against the latch.

"Very accurate," said Inés from the car.

"He's open now."

"It wasn't my question."

"You had none."

Inside it smelled of cold coffee, dust, and warm electronics. Sensor three stood as a red line on the right monitor. Supply normal. Connection normal.

Measurement zero. Inés opened the diagnostic program while Rafael took tools and test devices.

The fault lay not in the sensor. The rotor spun, the casing was dry, and the contacts held fast. Rafael relayed the findings from the mast. Inés echoed each confirmation with a brief "yes," as if filing them away.

After twenty minutes, she found a hanging question mark. She concluded the process. The reading leaped to 3.8 meters per second, dropped to 2.9, and rose with the next gust.

Rafael came in and wiped his hands on a cloth.

"Software."

"Software," said Inés.

"For that, we've been brought up here."

"No. We've checked if it's software."

Rafael poured coffee into the thermos can's lid; it was already cold. Next to the shelf stood a grey transport box from the old container. They had opened it in the afternoon because Inés sought a replacement for the faulty data logger. Inside were a rain sensor without a holder, two rolls of brittle cable, a small analog recorder, and a multi-band receiver whose housing at the corners was now bare.

"Let's break that down," said Rafael.

"No today."

"I said not today."

"You placed it on the table."

The receiver stood beside his notepad. Rafael had connected a repaired power cable and routed its output through a small converter to the computer. The scale was inaccurate; two buttons lacked labels. He didn't need the device for Sensor Three, but devices stored in boxes for years did not improve if left untouched.

Inés wrote the report. Rafael adjusted the volume control. Noise filled the room. He selected each area in turn, inspected the scale illumination, and struck once against the side wall. The noise grew darker.

"Inés said, 'Technical method.'"

"Contact check."

"By hand?"

"Very versatile device."

At 2:16, the weather station automatically switched to the next storage block. On the monitor, the timestamps shifted up by one line. Outside, a loose cover struck the mast twice.

Rafael turned the tuning knob slowly back. The hiss narrowed for a moment, then widened again. For a fleeting second, he caught a high-frequency

carrier signal. Then silence returned, only the faint hum of the network persisted.

The digital clock on the table sprang to 02:17.

A woman said: "Cinco dos cuatro once."

Rafael released the button.

Inés stopped typing. The voice emerged from the receiver's speaker, calm, professional, and devoid of the gentle singing tone of local advertisements. Each digit stood alone; after the fifth, there was a pause.

"Zero three eight two one."

Rafael drew near the notepad. The pen lay beneath the cable. He ripped it free and wrote.

52478.

The voice already spoke the second group. Rafael crossed out the number. He didn't know why he had written it. The first group had been 52411. He placed it beside it.

"Nine nine two one seven."

Inés grasped the recorder. She turned it on, placed it before the speaker, and murmured the time. Rafael wrote down 99217.

"Seven three zero four four."

73044.

The pause before the final group was extended; the receiver hissed. Outside, a breeze swept across the barrier.

"One one two seven eight."

11278.

"Repetimos."

The voice began from the front. This time Rafael read along, unmoving his lips. After the third group, the speaker crackled. The voice dropped out for two digits before returning, as if it had passed through a closed door.

Inés did not touch the receiver. She glanced at the level on the recorder.

After the repetition, a deep tone emerged. It lay beneath the murmur, not very loud, but stable enough for Inés to open the spectroanalyser. Before the display appeared, the sound abruptly ceased.

The receiver hissed again as usual.

Rafael waited. "You heard it."

"Yes."

"All?"

"One female voice. Five groups. Repetition."

"FIVE GROUPS WITH FIVE DIGITS EACH."

"I'll check that at the take."

Rafael indicated his block. "Here."

Inés looked first at the five groups and then at the crossed-out number.

"What is 52 478?"

"Wrong."

"Why?"

"Because she said 52 411."

"Didn't mean that."

Rafael put the pen down. "I've made a mistake."

Inés copied the recording to her computer and then to a second storage device. She left the original file closed, opened the copy, and played the first twenty seconds. The voice was understandable though not as clear as in the room, but still present.

They severed the receiver from the network. The voice did not echo back. Rafael placed the device on his worktable without pressing the tuning button. Inés measured at the output, checked the audio jack, and compared the recorder's clock with the station computer. The recorder showed seven seconds behind. She jotted it down.

"When someone sends down?" Rafael asked.

"Therefore, we require a means by which this device could intercept it."

"Antenna."

"What ones?"

The receiver was connected via a short cable to an old socket in the container. Not marked on any current plan, it was unoccupied. Rafael followed the cable channel up to the wall. Outside, a thin coaxial cable ended at a rusted distributor under the roof. From there, one cable led to the mast and another into the ground.

"It wasn't for the weather sensor," he said.

"Nothing's activated yet."

They photographed the course. Rafael wanted to open the distributor. Inés first had it checked for supply and grounding; both inconspicuous. Behind the lid lay moisture, salt, and two disused branches. On a ceramic mark "N-5" was scratched. The signs could also mean N-S if they were rotated by ninety degrees.

Rafael turned his head.

"Not the world," said Inés.

"Only the Model."

"Neither do they. We photograph both orientations."

The wind drove Garúa against her jackets. Below, San Desvelo was nearly entirely concealed. Only the lights of Centro and a red dot above Radio Desvelo remained visible amid the gray.

"If it were the old station," said Rafael, "someone must be there."

"Or another transmitter along a similar route. Or scattering. Or recording at the station."

"Do you have one?"

"No."

"Thereafter, we have four explanations without findings."

"We have a voice with findings and four open possibilities."

Rafael did not like the sequence; he knew it was correct.

"So no radio show that only we remember," said Rafael.

"Didn't say that."

"Not yet."

Inés opened the report from Sensor Three. Noting it, she wrote: *unidentified interference; audio recording attached*. Then she specified the device, connection route, and timestamp.

"What frequency?" Rafael asked.

"No reliable."

"The controller stood-"

"On an uncalibrated scale of a device from a box."

"Approximately."

"Approximately, there's no frequency here."

Rafael looked at the receiver. The scale light remained steady. "Then we'll hear it again tomorrow."

Inés saved the report. "We'll check the device tomorrow."

"I said that."

"No."

She wound the microphone cable. Outside, the garúa had obscured the window.



**Fig. 1 · An old multiband receiver on the worktable at the Cerro Vigía weather station, 02:17. Photograph from the test archive, 2026.**

As Rafael later extinguished the light, the receiver's scale remained momentarily illuminated. It was merely a capacitor discharging. He knew that. He still waited until the last line had vanished.

CHAPTER 2

# Five Groups

.

In the following night, the voice said nothing.

Before they waited, Rafael and Inés disassembled the first reception into work steps. This was Inés' condition for not only remembering the event. They photographed the receiver from all sides, transferred the still legible inventory stickers, and checked the power cord. Rafael cleaned the contacts without altering the position of the knobs. Inés affixed thin markings to the scales; each touch received a time.

The signal generator showed that the scale did not deviate evenly in any area; at one point it was close to the target, a few centimeters further several units were beside it. Moreover, the same audio tone appeared on two different settings. A defective mixture within the device was more likely than two transmitters.

"We cannot specify a frequency with this," said Inés.

"We can set the button configuration."

"Yes."

"That's almost a frequency."

"No."

Rafael still drew the position. Not as a value, but as a form: a notch on the button, a scratch in the lacquer, the edge of a bleached band. On the back of the receiver lay the sticker 8421 under dust and glue. Next to it was the remnants of another label, bearing only N-5.

They had an electronics technician from Centro check the receiver without playing it back to him. He found aged condensers, an added audio jack, and a repair where two wires might have been swapped. Nothing explained an external voice. Everything explained why the device was unsuitable for precise frequency information.

The electronics turned the knob and delivered a short sermon for a few seconds, then played music, followed by the sound of a driver's radio. "These

old ones record what they shouldn't," he said. "Sometimes even the workshop lamp."

"What numbers?" Rafael asked.

"When someone sends numbers."

Inés also wrote this down. Rafael noticed that a banal explanation did not lose its force merely because it was incomplete. He nonetheless wished the man had offered something more certain.

Rafael sat at the work table until 2:31 AM, despite his shift having ended at two. The multiband receiver was connected via a separation transformer. Inés had compared the scale with a signal generator at three points and attached a note next to it: *Difference not linear. Read no frequency*. Rafael read the sentence every time he moved the button.

The station supplied wind, humidity, and temperature readings. The old receiver emitted static. Around 2:17 AM, a truck rumbled down the coastal highway. Its engine surged in three stages before settling once more.

Rafael wrote nothing down.

On the third evening he waited at home. At 2:17 he heard the neighbor's fan through the wall. The bearing struck four times, paused, then struck a fifth time. He stood up, turned on his own fan and heard both rhythms until neither could form a group again.

On the fourth evening he drove back to the Cerro.

"You're free," said Inés on the phone.

"I will retrieve the grey device."

"At two thirty."

"There's no traffic then."

She remained silent for so long that Rafael heard the buzz of the station lighting.

"She says, 'You don't switch anything alone.'"

"I shall procure an apparatus."

"Rafael."

"Yes."

"There was nothing to confirm that."

He sat at the table. "Then come up."

Inés arrived at two o'clock exactly, twelve minutes prior. She brought two cups of coffee and placed them in front of Rafael, omitting the addition of sugar.

"You're late," he said.

"I bring coffee."

"Changing the time doesn't alter anything."

Inés looked at him. "You noticed that."

They set up the experiment together: receiver, recorder, second recorder at the other end of the room, time source from the main computer, no change in

the tuning after 2:10. Inés photographed the position of the controls. Rafael sealed a switch with thin paper tape.

At 2:17 the murmur remained undisturbed.

At 2:19 came the voice.

"Three three one zero seven."

Rafael wrote the group before Inés touched the recorder.

33 107. Then 77 092, 44 158, 00 933, 55 120.

The second series. They didn't know her yet under that name. For Rafael it was just different. The breaks were shorter, and the pronunciation remained the same. After 55 120, the voice did not say *Repetimos*. It started again with 33 107.

The recorder at the table indicated readings. The second one remained almost flat.

"Cable," said Rafael.

"Wait."

At the repetition, Rafael heard five groups. Inés raised his hand after the fourth. The voice still said "55 120", clear enough for him to write down each digit. Then the transmission ended.

Inés first played the distant recorder. Static, a chair, Rafael's pen. No voice.

On the tableware, there were four groups: 33 107, 77 092, 44 158, and 00 933. After the last noise, 55 120 was missing.

"You heard her," said Rafael.

"I have heard four."

"You held up your hand before the fifth."

"I raised my hand because the repetition ended."

Rafael turned the block to her. The five groups stood in a row.

"I penned it as she spoke."

"I do not deny that."

"What then are you denying?"

"Nothing yet." Inés drew on the second headphones. "I am separating three things: the recording, my memory, and your note."

You heard the file again; four groups.

Rafael jumped to the beginning. At the second playback the pause sounded longer after 00 933. He knew that the last group had been there. Knowledge did not fill the void.

Inés wrote in her protocol: *Four groups clearly recorded. R. reports five. I. remembers four.*

"You can say that I heard 55 120."

"I did."

"Without Initial."

"No."

Rafael set the pen aside. Above the table in the cable channel, cooling plastic ticked. Five short movements, followed by a longer pause.

"Do you hear that?"

Inés waited. "Cable channel."

"The Cadence."

"Heat."

"Nothing excludes the cadence."

"Leitet es sie."

Rafael looked at the crossed-out number from the first evening, 52478. Below it he had written "02:17" and "8421" during transfer. The second number came from the inventory sticker on the receiver; he adopted it since it was one of the few characters that remained legible.

Inés drew the page to herself.

"8421," she said.

"Inventory."

"Maybe."

"Maybe now you would say."

"Because Ana has a card marked 02:17 in the test file at Radio Desvelo."

Rafael knew the envelope. Ana had divided five open findings from the old transmitter's documentation: the time, differing time announcements, a dry room tone, a deep note, and post-2004 maintenance entries. None indicated transmissions continued past that year.

"Radio Desvelo has broadcast on 103,7", he said. "Not here."

"I know that."

"The receiver shows something different."

"He shows nothing reliable."

"Why then Ana?"

Inés pointed to his side. "Because two bad figures together don't yet yield a good result. But they could be the reason to have a third person take a look."

Before calling Ana, they compared the two recorders under everyday conditions. Inés set up one in the main room and one in the old container. Rafael walked around the building outside, opened a car door, knocked against the mast, and spoke from different directions five groups of invented digits. Both devices took it in, but not simultaneously. In the main room, the automatic level control swallowed quiet beginnings. In the container, the wind made individual digits look like pauses.

"There can be a group missing," said Inés.

"But not on the recorder and in your memory at the same time."

"Yes, if I've been watching the recorder."

"Do you?"

Inés thought. "Maybe."

Rafael wrote the word not down. It troubled him that uncertainty sounded like care to her and like error to him, though he knew they were handled equally by her.

On the way back they stopped at the Mercado. Dealers pulled boxes over wet concrete; water ran in repaired channels, and from a small radio came a morning voice reciting prices. Rafael stood there. The voice read kilogram numbers and delivery quantities. There were no five-digit groups. No discernible rhythm either.

They sipped coffee at the outdoor counter. Rafael jotted down the bill total on a napkin, unaware of his action. As he set the pen aside, Inés caught sight of the figure.

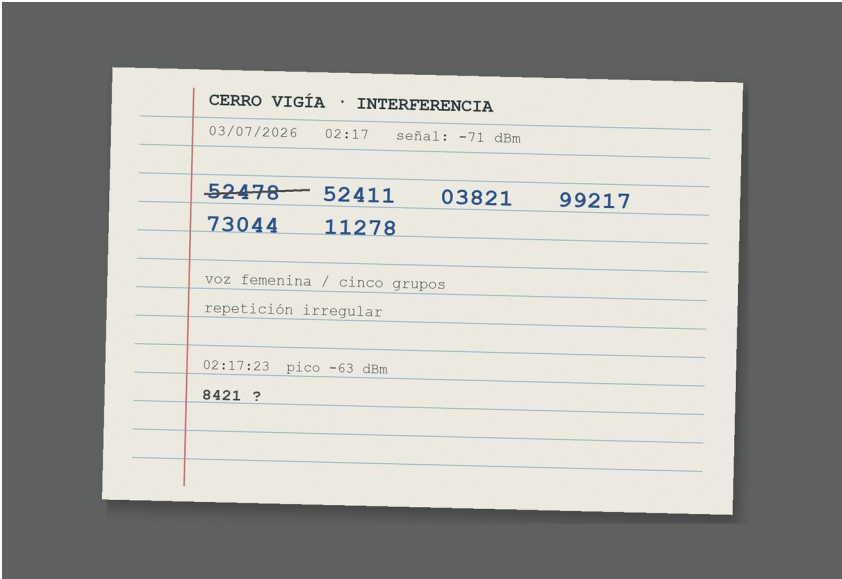
"Do you require them?"

"No."

He folded the napkin, placed it under the cup and left it there. It was still a small decision then.

Rafael took the block back. The five blue groups stood cleanly together. Over the first group, the mistake had been crossed out. He did not draw a link between 02:17 and 8421.

Not yet.



**Figure 2 · Rafael's first copied transmission. Error 52478 was corrected during reception to 52411.**

On the return journey, the Toyota's ventilator operated at level two. At level three, the flap vibrated in the glove compartment. Rafael heard five beats, despite the road being smooth.

He said nothing.

CHAPTER 3

## Test File

.

Ana Belén Vargas heard the recording three times before she opened a file.

The first time she wrote only what was undoubtedly on the file: female voice, Spanish, five-digit groups, noise, interruption. The second time she marked the dates. The third time she compared Rafael's copy to the voice. The first group was clearly 52 411. Of 52 478 nothing remained on the recording.

Inés sat opposite her at the desk of the Municipal Archive. Rafael stood by the window, as two bound volumes of *El Costero* lay on the third chair, and Ana did not claim she could remove them swiftly.

The archive felt warmer inside than it did outdoors that morning. In an inner courtyard, someone was scrubbing metal mesh. Each brushstroke passed through the open skylight. Ana took the envelope marked TEST FILE RADIO DESVELO from the cupboard.

"She said, 'The station was finished in 2004.'"

"We know that," said Inés.

"I say it because the proximity of two things likes to pretend to be a cause."

Rafael turned from the window. "That's also what Inés says."

"She's right then."

"She also says that."

Inés smiled not. Ana saw it nonetheless.

The tab lay between two acid-free leaves. On the front were pointers to a nocturnal program track. On the back, in different script: 02:17 / *Paso Norte*. Ana had not been able to securely attribute this entry during her radio documentation. Paso Norte could refer to a route, a technical pathway, or merely a reminder of a broadcast.

She also placed the report on the deep rumble. One fragment contained roughly 60 hertz, while another was under 40. Differing devices, varying years, no secure link.

"Not the same thing," she said.

"Similarly," said Rafael.

"Similarly permitted."

Ana withdrew the copy of the program sheet where once faintly EMISIÓN ACTIVA had been printed. A second copy did not reproduce that line. Rafael examined the three paper versions.

"Copyists," said Inés.

"Probably," Ana said. "But what specific mistake could not be repeated?"

"And that's why it is here."

"That's why it's separate here. Not as proof, but as an open finding."

Rafael nodded. He handled the leaves with care. His impatience was not aimed at the material itself, but at the time required for it to work.

Ana looked at her copy again. Not the numbers, but the arrangement reminded her of something: the wide distances, the headline above, two color rows. She opened the picture catalogue of the municipal hall and searched for the exhibition *Lo que permanece*. The Colectivo La Línea Perdida had not submitted a complete list of works; there were twelve photos, three short texts, and an invoice for nails.

On the seventh photo, a sheet hung from a stained wall.

Ana magnified it. The numbers blurred. Above, there was something like Tx 8421.

"Wait," she said.

In the cultural inventory lay a shallow cardboard box containing the collective's materials. It wasn't stored as designated in the catalogue but alongside uncollected exhibition signs. Ana discovered two wooden fragments, a plastic bag with rusted nails, a crumpled poster, and between corrugated paper the number sheet.

She laid it on the spare table.

*Tx 8421 - Weak intermittent signal.* Among them: *Frequency: 1,718.309,225 Hz.* Date: 03/07, Time: 02:17 a.m.

The blue groups repeated themselves over the leaf: 52 411, 03 821, 99 217, 73 044, 11 278. In the lower half stood red 33 107, 77 092, 44 158, 00 933, 55 120.

Rafael stooped over the table. Ana raised her hand before he drew near.

"No touching."

"I don't touch anything."

Inés stood up. Her gaze first turned towards the frequency indication.

"That's approximately 1,718 gigahertz," she said. "No classical shortwave history."

"Can the old receiver handle that?" asked Ana.

"No. Not as a standard reception. The number could be a device value, mislabeled or part of a sequence. I won't claim it's a usable frequency."

Rafael pointed to the center of the page. Between two blue rows stood 52 478.

Ana placed his transcription beside it.

The same mistake. Not only the same digits, but the same jumble from the start and end of the main series.

"What do you know about this leaf?" she asked.

Rafael did not answer immediately. He looked at Ana, then at Inés. "Not at all."

"Were you at the exhibition?"

"No."

"On the website?"

"There might be on the side of the collective. Not this image. I would recall the numbers."

"Why?"

"Because I'm writing down numbers."

Inés said: "He does."

She recounted the series of measurements Rafael had transmitted, despite the computer having already recorded them. It did not happen surreptitiously or solely since the signal. This helped him to discern irregularities, or to impose some semblance of order where there were none.

Ana photographed both leaves using a scale and color chart. Afterwards, she covered the original.

In the afternoon, she checked the path of the leaf. The cardboard was taken from the municipal hall in 2017, along with material from three clubs and a theatre group. The handover list simply called it "paper works, Línea Perdida," without specifying quantities. Ana compared staples, dust edges, and corrugated cardboard to old exhibition photos. The number sheet had been in this box since at least the takeover; no more could be said.

Teresa Val Val brought her the access books. Rafael was not registered at the municipal hall in 2017. His name only appeared years later during technical work on the building. Inés could show his then service plans. The exercise was unpleasant but necessary: before an identical error became puzzling, ordinary ways had to be excluded.

"You're testing my alibi for a piece of paper," Rafael said.

"Checking contact options," Ana said.

"And?"

"None occupied."

"It sounds worse than no contact."

"But that's even truer."

Ana did not examine the manuscripts like an expert. She collected comparative material: Mateo's inscriptions from exhibition boxes, Lucía's notes on photo cases, and Tomás' material lists. The blue title resembled Mateo's handwriting, while the red groups were Lucía's. Individual numbers varied

within the same color; at least two people had written about it. The error 52 478 was in blue ink between correct rows, not as a later correction.

Inés laid down a transparent scale over the numbers. "The intervals do not repeat."

"Handwriting," said Rafael.

"Or someone wrote as they listened."

"So like me."

Ana scanned both sides. The old error and Rafael's crossed-out number were not identical in form, but their sequence matched. That was sufficient to continue questioning. Not to preface with a response.

"She said, 'The collective was founded in 2014. The leaf could be older or have been created from old materials. We need the origin, a photograph, and handwritten documents.' "

"And 8421, said Rafael."

"Yes."

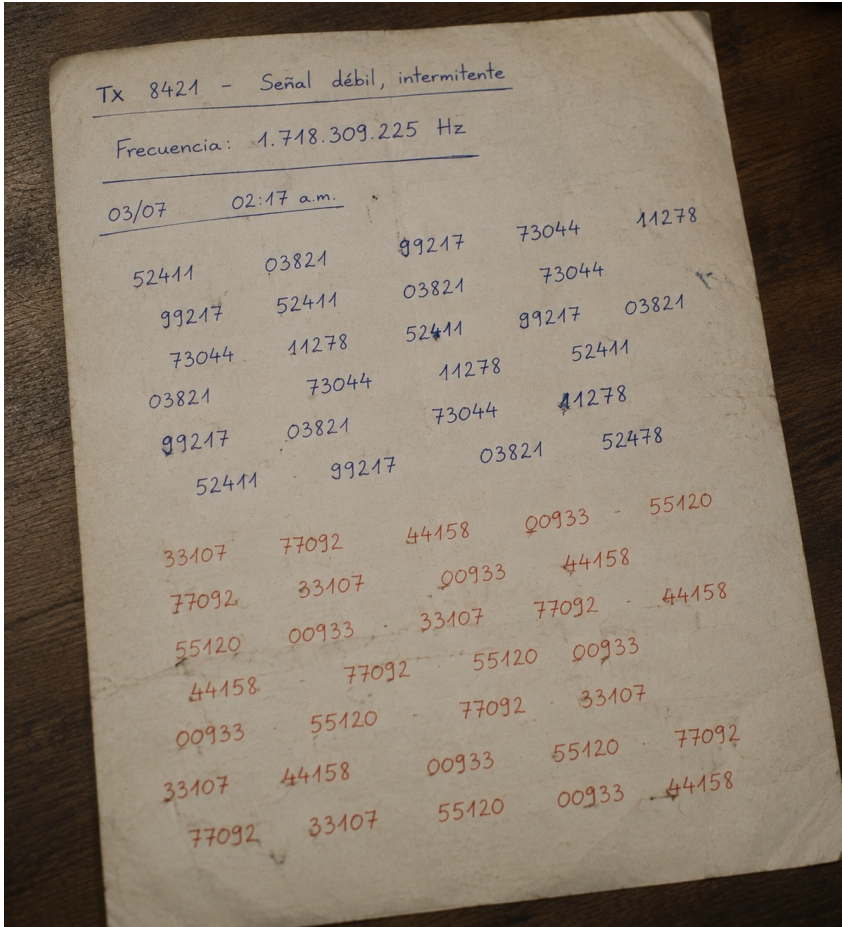
"And the frequency."

Inés looked at him. "The number."

"Frequency indication."

"That's what we can call them."

Ana wrote three separate work questions. No line connected them.



**Figure 3 · 'Tx 8421 - Weak intermittent signal. Number sheet from the inventory of Colectivo La Líne Perdida.'**

Later, as Inés replayed the recording again, the initial repetition showed only four groups. Ana was certain she had noted down five during the first listen. She compared her timestamps; between 00:31 and 00:37, there was a period of static.

"Copy?" Rafael asked.

Inés checked the checksum. "Identical."

"That's when we miscalculated."

Ana glanced at her note. Behind the fifth group stood a question mark that she didn't recall having placed.

"Thereupon we shall write precisely as stated," she said, "we counted variably."

Rafael took his block. He wrote none.

## CHAPTER 4

# Weak, Intermittent Signal

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Mateo Salazar said over the phone that the leaf was likely his. When he saw it, he said the blue script might have been written by him.

They encountered him in a former carpentry workshop behind Centro. The Colectivo did not occupy the space continuously; two canvases rested against the wall, despite Mateo's assertion that nobody worked there. A calendar still displayed the preceding month.

"We need a calendar," said Mateo, turning the page. "I've been saying that for twelve years."

Ana presented him the photograph of the number sheet. The original remained in the archive.

"The headline is possibly mine," he said, "but the numbers aren't all."

"How did they end up on that sheet?"

Mateo rubbed paint from his thumbnail, which was long dry. "Tomás brought a receiver. Lucía had a tape. Or vice versa."

"What was printed on it?" asked Inés.

"One voice. Numerals. We penned along."

"What is it: a band or a receiver?"

"Is this different?"

"No."

Mateo glanced at Ana. "That's why I prefer to talk to archivists."

"She will ask the same question," said Rafael.

Ana stared at her.

Mateo could determine the place: an empty room behind a workshop, one of the first meeting points of the collective. The year remained uncertain, probably 2014 or 2015. They had worked with old photographs and sounds. Tomás set up a receiver whose scale was not illuminated; someone ran a cassette. The numbers came into groups.

"The fifth group came later," said Mateo.

"Later than what?"

"As the others."

"How long afterward?"

Mateo smiled tiredly. "If I had known, I would have had a calendar."

Lucía Arce received her that afternoon in a room over a closed *Ferretería*. Old photographs were in labeled envelopes. The inscriptions were more accurate than those of the collective but less precise than Ana's archive.

Lucía recognized the red script at once.

"My," she said. "The blue one is Mateo."

"He's not certain."

"Matthew seldom feels secure when uncertainty sounds more intriguing."

She recalled a cassette with no label. A female voice had spoken the red groups. The blue ones were already printed on the page.

"Were you the one who wrote the frequency?" asked Inés.

Lucía took off her glasses and held the photograph closer. "Tomás. Probably. He liked numbers that looked like explanations."

"1.718.309.225 Hertz doesn't seem like a good explanation."

"It fits him then."

Also spoke Lucía, who said the fifth group arrived later. On inquiry, she described no break in the recording process, but rather a second evening. The leaf had already been hanging on the wall. Upon her return, the final red group was standing alongside it.

"55 120," said Rafael.

Lucía looked at him. "If you say so."

She found a contact sheet with six exhibition photos. The image in the urban catalogue had been cropped. On the uncropped negative, at the right edge, was a partially rolled coastal map. Around San Desvelo were five points and identifier SD-5. Further north, almost outside the frame, PE-2 could be seen.

Ana asked for the negative, but Lucía did not produce it immediately. She placed cotton gloves on the table and opened a flat box containing strips divided by year and project. The contact sheet lacked any dating information. On the adjacent image, Mateo stood partially outside the frame, facing a poster advertising an event in the community hall. Ana recognized the design and later discovered the date: July 2015.

"Then the leaf is from at least 2015," said Rafael.

"The photo," Ana said. "The page could be older."

Lucía scanned the negative with high resolution. On the map more details were visible: coast line, small dot groups, and a legend whose right half had been rolled. SD-5 did not appear next to San Desvelo's name but alongside a geometric grouping. PE-2 lay outside the known city area.

"Perhaps this is an artistic map," said Inés.

Lucía shook her head. "We didn't do it."

"How do you know that?"

"Because she's ugly."

Ana waited.

Lucía added: "Our lines were traced with coal. These are technical ink. And the paper had a scent of the Depósito."

"How does the Depository smell?" Rafael asked.

"dust, oil, damp cardboard."

"So many camps reek."

"Then she smelled of many bearers."

On the last image of the strip, the number sheet was no longer on the wall. The map remained hung. In the center of the brighter dust patch, a straight line extended to the ground. Ana magnified it. It could be a cable shadow, a cord, or a trace in the plaster.

"Lost Line," said Lucia.

"Do you refer to them like that now?"

"Now."

Ana also noted this. A later name could not be transformed into an earlier memory without notice.

"What brought this map?" asked Ana.

"From an archive of faded blueprints."

"What box?"

"Tomás's Case."

Tomás Yupanqui now worked in a farm in El Faro. Metal pieces were arranged by size, though he denied doing so. A gust of wind caused thin sheets to flutter against a cord; they struck irregularly.

Tomás regarded the photograph of the exhibition.

"The receiver wasn't attached," he said.

He later showed them the location of the action at that time. The former workshop had been divided; in the front half lay a stack of foam roller cushions, while behind remained a narrow room with a stained wall. Two dowel holes matched those seen in the exhibition photo. Hanging from the ceiling was still the same fluorescent tube, now without its cover.

Tomás placed an old wooden chair where the receiver had been positioned. "Here. Maybe."

Inés measured the distance to the socket. A cable from a device would have sufficed. Tomás reiterated that it hadn't been connected.

"Why do you set up a receiver you won't be connecting to?" Rafael asked.

"We did a job about reception."

"What from?"

"On things that had been in the room."

"It's not a technical response."

"I am not a technician."

Under a later layer of paint, Ana discovered a small red line. It could have come from the number sheet or any other work. Lucía recalled that the sheet had hung there for weeks. Mateo remembered three days. Tomás said that time was a bad unit of measurement at exhibitions because no one stuck to opening hours.

Inés went to the socket and inspected it. It had been retrofitted. Behind the cover lay older veins, dead and severed. One of them pointed toward the outer wall.

Rafael held the contact microphone there. Street noise, a saw from the padding plant, the deep rumble of a bus. No voice.

"No measurement," said Tomás.

Inés turned to him. "Where do you know this phrase from?"

"From you. Just in the yard."

She hadn't said it to him. Ana was certain of that. Rafael looked away from the line.

Tomás did not smile. "Then from another person."

Ana noted the statement with the timestamp and attendees. On her way out, she photographed the bare wall. Without a number sheet, it appeared smaller. At the outermost edge, the old map hung no more. Tomás did not know where she had gone.

Inés had not asked a question yet.

"Matthew says you brought a receiver."

"Yes."

"Lucía reminds of a cassette."

"Also possible."

"What brought those figures into existence?"

Tomás pointed to the photo. "Open to the paper."

Rafael stepped closer. "Did you hear them?"

"Four groups."

"Others say five."

"The fifth came later."

Inés placed her hands on the table. "All three use the same sentence."

"Maybe because he's right."

"Or because you know him from one another."

Tomás nodded. "That too would be a connection."

Rafael asked for the map. Tomás reminded him from the Depósito Norte or during a communal eviction. He had noticed interesting lines with their goals abruptly terminated. The identifiers held no meaning for him.

"And 8421?"

"On a device. Or on a crate."

"What device?"

Tomás looked into the yard. "The receiver wasn't connected."

"That doesn't answer the question."

"It is the answer I have."

On the way back, Rafael remained silent. Inés drove. Ana held the case with the uncropped photograph on her knees. The garúa had descended in late afternoon and settled as a fine moisture on the windscreen. The windscreen wiper distributed it more than it removed.



**Fig. 4 · Uncropped photograph of the former exhibition room. At the right edge, a coastal map shows SD-5 and a faint PE-2 identifier.**

"She makes uncertainty into a substance," said Inés.

Ana looked out the window. "This is her work."

"Our isn't."

"No."

Rafael said: "The Fifth Group arrived later."

Inés looked at him in the rear-view mirror. "Don't repeat it just because they do it."

"I heard it after you."

"You heard her when the recording wasn't."

"Exactly."

"There's no proof in her statement."

"There's also no evidence against it."

Ana flattened the photo. On the map, the dots did not form a straight line; four were at expected locations-coast, Centro, north, and Cerro. The fifth was in Las Palmeras, between later houses.

She hadn't said it yet; a map along the border of an art photograph wasn't a place designation.

At night, Rafael did not wait at the weather station; he lay at home and heard a vehicle rumbling through the street. The return warning signal comprised five tones. On the third repetition, the final tone was absent.

Rafael counted on until he arrived.

## CHAPTER 5

# The Fifth Point

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8421 first appeared in an inventory without an object.

Ana found the number in a list from the old coastal warning program. The page was part of a bundle containing rain gauges, batteries, and sirens. Between UNIDAD 8419 and UNIDAD 8423, a line had been crossed out with a black pen. Under oblique light, the faint impression of the text remained: *ENLACE N-5 / UNIDAD 8421*.

The note next to it read *trasladado - Las Palmeras*.

The journey to this line had taken three days. Ana began with the inventory numbers of the warning program and ended in a cabinet containing documents about municipal phone charges. Terms shifted with each administration: *enlace, puesto, repetidor, alarma*. Some leaves referred to the same object by function, others by location. N-5 could mean North Five or Node Five. Only one distribution line connected these terms: *N-5 / unidad 8421 / apoyo costero*.

On the second day, Ana drove to Depósito Norte. The building stood behind Las Palmeras on an old service route. Inside were empty shelves and marked areas from the last inventory. She compared wall numbers with photographs from the nineties. On one picture, beside outsourced radio technology, a grey connecting box lay. The inscription was cut off; only ...421 remained.

A second photograph revealed the same corner to be vacant. On its backside was written *traslado LP*. LP could refer to Las Palmeras, or it might denote *línea principal*. Ana noted both possibilities without erasing either.

Teresa eventually discovered a folded sheet nestled among the maintenance bills. Five units were marked as points rather than forming a network. Two lines terminated at the edge of the paper; one pointed toward Cerro Vigía, while another pointed in the direction of El Faro. The fifth point remained unnamed.

"This is the map of the exhibition photo," said Rafael.

"A map of the same arrangement," said Ana.

"How many more do you need before you call them the same?"

"One with the same curl, the same label, and the same material."

They compared notes. The significant kink traversed both along the coastal line. A minor damage at SD-5 matched. The map had ultimately departed from the archives and reappeared through the collective. Who had issued it remained unknown.

The date was lost at the edge. The previous entry dated from 1998, the following one from 2001. Ana did not write "1998" on her card. She wrote "between documented entries 1998/2001" and continued searching.

There were several units with four-digit numbers in the stock of the Depósito Norte. Pump parts, batteries, a tape recorder, two connection boxes. No systematics remained the same over all years. A list listed 8421 as *unidad de enlace*, another as *material comunicación*, and yet another only as *N-5*. On a handover sheet, it read *sin equipo emisor*.

"No transmitter," said Inés, when Ana showed her the copies.

"Or no transmitter in the test archive."

"It's not the same thing."

"Thus I say both."

Rafael sat at the opposite end of the archive table and laid transparent paper over a city map. He hadn't worked that night, despite having woken up at 2:17. Inés observed the dark circles around his eyes but said nothing about it—not yet.

The older plan showed five technical points: weather station, municipal distributor, radio connection, and Norte. The fifth point was merely a small square north of Centro. On the newer cadastral map, there was an area labeled as a plot in Las Palmeras. The house had been gradually expanded; behind the present building structure remained a rectangle that did not appear in any living space description.

Ana shifted the transparent paper three millimeters.

"In you hit the nail on the head," said Inés.

"I configure the coast line."

"The old copy is distorted."

"That's why I need three reference points." Ana placed small crosses on the Municipalidad, the old quarry, and the radio plot. "If they're correct, the fifth one lies here."

Rafael bent over the plans. "Celia Ríos."

"Do you know her?"

"She used to work on vehicle electrics. I've been there twice."

"Do we have a concrete room?"

"There are many concrete rooms in Las Palmeras."

"Three by four meters, older than the house, no living area."

Rafael pondered. "Blue door in the yard."

Celia opened them in the afternoon. She wore an apron, though she wasn't cooking, and studied Ana's ID card for a longer period than Rafael's measuring device.

"This is not an official operation," Ana said. "We request clearance to examine an old room."

"Thereupon, the ID card is merely decoration."

"Today, yes."

Celia gave it back. "Good. Official missions take longer."

The yard lay behind a narrow passageway. Laundry hung between the laundry room and an unplastered wall. The caseta was smaller than the plan made it appear. The metal door bore several layers of blue and grey. Over the ventilation opening stood ceramic insulators, none of which carried a pipe.



**Figure 5 · The older Caseta on Celia Rios's property in Las Palmeras. The residential building was later expanded to include the concrete room.**

"What was she for?" asked Ana.

"When we arrived, the previous owner called it telephone. Someone else called it alarm. A man from the Municipalidad called it Norte Cinco." Celia pulled a key ring from her apron pocket. "To me, it's a storeroom."

The chain hung loosely. The lock was new enough not to fit the room. Celia opened it, but not the door.

"In some nights it counts in the wall," she said.

Rafael looked at her. "Since when?"

"Since many nights."

"What time is it?"

Celia pushed the door open. "Had I seen the clock, I would have told you."

Inside it smelled of dust, dried paint, and the oil of old fans. Five cut cable paths led into an adjoining wall. Underneath the paint, nothing could be read. Rafael switched on his device. Inés stood beside him, not behind him.

"Only passive measurement," she said.

"I know."

"I say it for the record."

The room lacked an active power supply. The conduits from the house distributor were separated from the Caseta. Rafael checked the field strength levels, Inés captured a spectrum, Ana photographed doors, vents, and cables. The readings did not vary from those on the yard or street.

"No measurement," said Inés.

Celia nodded, as if that constituted a satisfactory reply. "Then I can put the chairs back in front."

In the evening, Rafael and Inés drove through Las Palmeras with two receivers. Not because the Caseta had transmitted a signal, but because Rafael suggested a change of direction and Inés conducted a controlled comparison. They selected three fixed positions, recorded each halt, and allowed Ana to determine the route so that Rafael did not inadvertently head for the expected location.

At the first point, near the northern entrance, there was only broadband static. At the second, a thin ripple appeared, too faint for audio. On the third, two streets from Celia's house, they detected the deep tone.

Rafael put his hands from the device. "There."

Inés scanned the spectrum. "There's something."

"Toward the Caseta."

"Towards Southwest."

They retraced a parallel street. The dip receded. On the road in front of Celia's property, it rose once more. The indication remained minor but repeatable. Inés had Rafael shut off the engine and repeated the test using battery power. The tone persisted.

They repeated the route in the opposite direction. Ana sat in the back and only mentioned the points when they were reached. At a house with a running welding machine, the entire spectrum rose. Inés marked the value as a local disturbance and omitted the point. Before a bodega, a refrigerator produced a narrow tone at one frequency, but another frequency suppressed it. At the Caseta, the same low rumble appeared three times within half an hour.

A resident came to the street and asked if they were seeking electricity thieves. Inés explained the measurement as a test of old communication routes. The man indicated the cable bundles on the concrete mast.

"There are enough old paths here."

"Do you hear a voice at night?" Rafael asked.

Inés looked at him. The question wasn't part of the plan.

The man mused. "The neighbor listens to telenovelas."

"Numbers?"

"Invoices. When it complains about the current."

He returned to his house. Ana made no note of her observation regarding the signal. Rafael apologized to Inés before she spoke.

"No questioning during a blind route," she said.

"I know."

"Now."

They finally set the receiver on the sidewalk, marked its alignment with chalk and stepped back three meters. The level did not change as a mototaxi passed by. It was only when Inés pulled the cable out of the old antenna socket that it began to fall, and rose again once she held it only to the outer metal sleeve.

"Screen coupling or mass coupling," she said.

"On a passive line."

"On any ladder in the vicinity."

It was the first small technical bridge between sender and location. It explained neither voice nor group. But it made Rafael's direction more than a mere wish.

Rafael smiled not. This troubled her more than a triumph.

"Now you finally believe me," he said.

"Therefore, we must cease."

"What?"

"For today." Inés saved the measurement and pulled the cable off. "We have a direction. If you proceed now until a number appears large enough, you won't be measuring anymore. You're seeking consent."

Rafael saw the blue door in the courtyard; it wasn't visible from the street. Only the upper ventilation opening was hidden behind a wall.

"A further passage."

"Tomorrow. With a firm plan."

On the way home the receiver remained quiet. Rafael nonetheless heard the voice repeating itself in the joints of the road: five short tire impacts, a momentary pause, then five more. He knew that roads were prone to such repetitions and also that the ad had risen above Celia's house.

For the first time, he was not calmed by knowledge.

CHAPTER 6

# Caseta 8421

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The day inspection began with a list of things that had not been there.

No power supply. No speaker. No transmitter. No battery. No shielded technical room. No new line. No indication that anyone had used the Caseta in the past few weeks for anything other than a warehouse.

Celia brought a tin can containing old keys. None of them fitted the metal door; the lock had been replaced after a break-in at the neighboring house. Between the keys lay two ceramic plaques and a bent pin bearing the number 5.

"Away from the room?" asked Ana.

"Away from the house."

"When since?"

"Ever since a key no longer fitted."

Ana photographed the can not. Without a discovery path, it was just everyday family life, no proof.

Celia remembered men who checked the ventilation opening twice a year at the end of the nineties. One wore a weather service jacket, another arrived in a telephone car. They had never worked for long. After 2004, only one person came; they crossed out a number on a list and said the room could remain closed.

"What number?" Rafael asked.

"If I had known them, I would have told you about them yesterday."

"Has anyone mentioned Radio Desvelo?" Ana asked.

"No. Radio Desvelo was Radio Desvelo. This was the caseta."

The separation was so self-evident that Ana literally noted the sentence. No later riddle was permitted to transform Celia's memory into a secret station.

Rafael discovered a brittle cable tie with a piece of blue paper in an alcove. Only *Línea 5* was written there. The paper might be several years older than the wire. Inés nonetheless placed it in a casing and marked the discovery spot.

"Now we have a fifth line," Rafael said.

"We have a tag," said Inés.

"At the fifth line."

"Near a cable tie."

Celia glanced back and forth between them. "Both of you need more time to say the same thing."

Inés read the list aloud. Rafael double-checked each point. Ana photographed the object arrangement before Celia removed two folding stools.

"We need them on Sunday," she said. "If the device needs them, it can count another day."

Rafael crouched behind the stacked fans. Beneath the connection strip, multiple layers of paint lay. He did not loosen any screws. With a soft brush, he removed dust from a spot where an edge was discernible.

Four digits emerged beneath the pale blue.

8421.

Ana took the photograph first, then placed a measuring stick next to it. Inés wrote down the time and her pace.

"Five cable routes," said Rafael.

The connecting strip consisted of ceramic parts, corroded contacts, and old cables that vanished either above the ceiling or within the walls. Four pathways ended visibly cut short. The fifth traversed a pipe close to the floor. Whether the pipe led to where it went could not be determined without opening the wall.

"That could be the old house connection," said Inés.

"Or the line on the plan."

"Or both, if the connection was later repurposed."

Ana found an almost obliterated sticker on the inside of the door, only *puesto de alar-* remaining legible. Celia recalled a small siren mounted on a mast that had been removed long before the construction of the laundry room.

"Had it worked?" asked Ana.

"When someone knew when it was supposed to work."

Around noon, the room grew warm. The garúa was torn open, and a bright stripe of sunlight lay on the ground. Celia brought Chicha Morada in four different glasses. Rafael drank in the courtyard, keeping the blue door from his view.

"Wake up when?" Inés asked.

"Today."

"How long?"

"Enough."

"That's not a timeframe."

"Now you understand why I prefer numbers."

She sat on the low wall. "Three hours?"

Rafael didn't answer.

In the early afternoon, he placed a contact microphone at the metal pipe of the fifth path. At first, he heard friction from the adjacent house, then a fan, and finally something dividing into five parts. He handed Inés the headphones.

"Pipe noise," she said.

"Hear the cadence?"

"I've heard a fluctuating water level."

Later on the recording lingered a deep scratching sound. No voice.

Inés reported the discovery to the local authority that same day and requested a technical classification. At 16:40, a white off-road vehicle pulled up in front of Celia's house. It bore no logo; only a small inventory number was visible on the windscreen.

The man introduced himself as Ingeniero Adrián Valver. He was in his mid-fifties, wearing a bright shirt and shoes where the dust from Las Palmeras was immediately visible. He showed an ID card from a communications agency. Ana read the name, the number, and a department designation that she didn't recognize.

The ID was not improvised; hologram, embossed stamp, and laminated edges appeared authentic, only the photo dated from before the man in front of them. Ana asked to note down the number. Valverde held the card steady, without the customary gesture of someone expecting no one to scrutinize it closely.

His vehicle contained no eye-catching equipment. Through the open tailgate, Rafael saw two empty transport crates, measuring cables, warning vests, and a folded plan. On one box, removed labels overlapped each other. The top adhesive residue formed a rectangle matching the size of the sticker on the old receiver.

"Who informed you?" Ana asked.

"The technical message was passed on."

"What part of San Desvelo are we referring to?"

"To the responsible party."

"What is this?"

Valverde designated a Regional Directorate and an area for antiquated facilities. Inés wrote down the designation. Rafael noticed that Valverde didn't look at the Caseta while speaking. He evidently already knew her location.

"How long have you been driving here from there?" Rafael asked.

"It hinges on the outset."

"And today?"

"Today I was closer."

It wasn't an evasive reply; it merely withheld nothing. Valverde took no dramatic stance. He swept dust from his writing surface and requested Celia's

permission to enter the courtyard. This formality did not diminish his awareness of the number.

"You opened Caseta 8421," Valverde said.

No one had mentioned the number to him.

Inés positioned herself so that the door was behind her. "We inspected an old storage room on private property."

Valverde smiled politely. "Of course. The terms sometimes remain longer than their function."

"What function?" Ana asked.

"Atmospheric Overlap on Old Alarm and Communication Routes. Coastal Proximity, Humidity, Passive Conductors. Such Old Components Have a Test Procedure."

"Can this produce a distinct voice?" Rafael asked.

Valverde looked at him. "You can hear very clear things in superimpositions when the audio device strengthens them sufficiently."

"Not that question."

"It was the answer I could account for."

Ana noticed he used the same syntax as an experienced administrative employee. He did not threaten. He did not request a data carrier. He requested access, inspected the room without touching anything, and photographed the connection strip using a small service telephone.

"Norte Cinco," said Celia from the courtyard. "That's what it was called."

Valverde did not look surprised. "One of several historical designations."

"What else?" Ana asked.

"Link point. Auxiliary repeater. Alarm post."

"And SD-5?"

For the first time, a pause emerged that didn't quite align with his courteous flow.

"A possible regional inventory identifier," he said.

He announced a formal examination for the following morning. On a form, he confirmed that nothing would be removed until then. Ana photographed the sheet before placing it in a folder.

"In a copy stays here," said Inés.

"Yes, of course."

Valverde added a second page, his script small and neat. Below the heading was *Zona Costera IV*.

Before leaving, he handed Rafael a business card with only the regional headquarters and a direct dial listed. Rafael called from the courtyard. An automated voice announced business hours and requested a four-digit extension number.

"What yours?" he asked.

Valverde said: "It's 8421."

Rafael looked at him. Valverde kept his gaze steady, then he corrected himself: "Excuse me. 8214."

Rafael entered the numbers. The connection terminated following two freewords.

"Old system," said Valverde.

"Number Twisters?"

"Coming."

He did not return the map. Later, 8214 led to a general postbox. According to the central office, the 8421 branch had not been allocated.

As he departed, the dust from his car remained standing over the road.

"Atmosphere superimposition," said Rafael.

"That's possible," said Inés.

"In a leitura-less strip."

"Electrical coupling does not necessarily require local power supply."

"And continuation? Error? Different groups?"

"No."

Ana slipped the copy of the transfer form into a casing. "He knows the room. That's the first finding."

Rafael went to the door again. The metal made no noise. As he pressed his fingertips to the pipe, he sensed a faint tremor.

"In vehicle on Main Street," said Inés.

The motor was heard two streets away.

Rafael took his hand away; the vibration lingered for one final moment before ceasing.

## CHAPTER 7

# The Fifth Line

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Valverde did not appear the next morning.

At nine, a woman from the regional administration called Inés and asked which position the examination had applied for. By ten, the same woman stated that the jurisdiction would be clarified. By eleven, she requested a copy of the form. By noon, she no longer responded.

Ana sealed the Caseta. Two strips of paper ran over the door and frame, numbered, photographed, and countersigned by Celia. Celia signed with a firm movement.

"When I need to reach the chairs, I call," she said.

"Please."

"What if it starts counting again?"

Inés gave her a phone number. "Do not open. Note the time. If possible, record with the phone from a distance."

Celia tucked the note into her apron pocket. "I did this the first time without a note."

Two recorders with separate memory cards; a portable receiver; a contact microphone attached to the connection strip; and a spectrum analyzer in the yard. Three watches, set apart for comparison at the start. No one alone in the room; no changes to the line without mutual announcement. Notes were taken after each step before anyone spoke.

Inés conducted a blind test in the afternoon. Ana compiled ten audio files: street noise, old radio broadcasts, fans, a spoken number sequence, and the recordings of prior occurrences. She assigned neutral names. Rafael and Inés listened separately.

Rafael recognized the first recording from the weather station. He marked a cadence in two pure fan files. Inés marked the same cadence once. Rafael counted five groups, though Ana had used four with an attached repetition. Inés counted four.

"Expectation," said Inés.

"And you had the same on file seven."

"Yes."

"It's then that we're both unsuitable."

"We are both human beings."

Ana recorded the evaluation. The test did not contradict the voice. It merely demonstrated how prepared the hearing had become, arranging pauses as boundaries and noises into sequences.

Rafael proceeded to the Mercado instead of the Caseta. He purchased batteries from a vendor who marked each package with an expiration date. The receipt listed five entries. Rafael folded it, not adding the amounts.

In the late afternoon, he slept on the archive sofa for an hour while Ana prepared the equipment cards. When he woke, he wasn't sure for a moment if the voice had woken him. It was only Teresa who dropped a folder in the hallway. Five loose leaves glided over the tiles.

"You can cancel the test," said Ana.

"Can you?"

"Yes."

"Wills you?"

"When a person cannot anymore partake cleanly."

Rafael sat up. "I can participate cleanly."

Ana gave no reassuring nod. "You'll hold to Inés' decision to quit, even if you hear more than she does."

"Just then," said Rafael.

It was a promise he almost broke in the Caseta.

Inés persisted at the final point.

"She already influences herself enough," she said.

Rafael read the list. "You mean the signal."

"I mean us."

Ana added: *Separately retain the count of the groups.*

"And if nothing comes?" Rafael asked.

"Determines then," said Inés.

"No measurement."

"No reproduction transmitted."

"Longer."

"Exact."

At 1:25 they arrived at Celia. Las Palmeras was almost silent. On the main road, a truck occasionally drove north. In a house, a TV ran behind closed curtains. The garúa sat on cables, gates, and the Toyota's roof. She was too fine to fall, but sufficient to mark everything touched.

The seals on the Caseta were unharmed. Celia brought them coffee and remained in the house. "If you need the chairs, you know where they are."

Rafael opened the door under Ana's camera. Inés read the seal numbers. The room remained as before: colour buckets, fans, and figure. The dust line from the first morning had been obliterated by her footsteps during the day inspection. Ana had only seen it in Celia's description.

Recorder A rested on a folding stool within the room, while Recorder B stood in the courtyard behind the threshold. The receiver operated solely on battery power. The contact microphone was positioned atop the metal bracket of the connection strip. Rafael arranged the cables so that nobody would have to step over them.

At 1:52 they made a control tone. Both recorders captured it. Inés knocked five times against the outer wall, with irregular intervals. Ana noted four beats, crossed out the number and wrote five.

Rafael saw it. "Even without a signal."

"That's why we monitor," Ana said.

At 2:05, they closed the door except for a gap. No one spoke anymore. The caseta smelled more strongly of warm paint, though none of the buckets was open. The receiver hummed softly. The spectrum showed network contributions from neighboring houses and a fluctuating intensity from traffic.

Rafael sat to Rafael's left by the connection strip. Inés stood at the door, and Ana was in the courtyard. They could see one another.

At 2:14, a refrigerator flipped on somewhere. At 2:15, a dog barked. At 2:16, a motorcycle passed the crossroad and played a cumbia, which was muffled by the engine.

The three watches did not indicate 2:17 simultaneously. Initially, Rafael's digital watch, followed by Anas' phone two seconds later, and finally the Recorder.

The voice began as none of them had spoken yet.

"Five two four eleven."

She didn't emerge from the receiver.

Rafael looked at the speaker. The level there remained almost unchanged. The voice lay in the room, dry and close, neither seeming to emanate from the ceiling nor the connecting wall. Ana stepped back halfway, until she pressed against the courtyard wall.

"Zero three eight two one."

Recorder A showed signs of rashness. So did Recorder B, albeit faintly. The contact microphone highlighted a narrow, elevated section above the base tone.

Rafael wrote nothing. His hands rested on his knees. The restraint was tangible. Every gap between the groups tugged at his fingers, as if an unfinished task lingered.

"Nine nine two one seven."

Inés raised her hand. The agreed instruction: make no changes.

"Seven three zero four four."

The pause arrived.

Rafael awaited 11 278. During the pause, he heard the five digits without the voice saying them. He knew it was anticipation. Then the woman said:

"One one two seven eight."

"Repetimos."

Inés waited until the beginning of the second round. Then she said softly: "Preparation for a separation test."

They had prepared the intervention solely for the contingency of a clear signal being available. The fifth cable route terminated at a removable terminal. Rafael had tested it without voltage during the day. Now he rechecked, first without contact, then at the designated points. Zero.

"No tension at the measurement point," he said.

"Inferred," said Inés.

Ana noted the time. The voice reached 99 217.

"Unlock five," said Inés.

Rafael put on the isolated key. The screw was corroded. He moved it around a quarter turn. Nothing. Another. The cable gave way.

"Seven three zero-"

The voice broke.

Not after a group. In the middle of the number.

The room was so still that Rafael could hear the friction of his jacket as he set down the key. On Recorder A, the level dropped. On Recorder B, there were two short jolts.

"Line disconnected," he said.

Inés glanced at her wristwatch. "Wait."

One minute passed. The deep sound lingered in the contact microphone, fainter than before. No voice emerged from the wall.

"In again," said Inés.

Rafael screwed the cable into the terminal. There was no spark at contact. He tightened the screw.

Recorder A broke.

"-cuatro cuatro, said the woman.

She resumed where it had been interrupted.

Ana closed her eyes, for just a moment. Inés didn't move. Rafael felt the urge to release the cable once more, merely to verify if the voice would repeat itself.

"One one two seven eight."

Then a group not part of the known line.

Rafael heard 84 210.

He took the pen and wrote the numbers. The voice did not repeat them. Instead, the red sequence began: 33 107, 77 092, 44 158.

Ana raised five fingers. Inés four. Rafael didn't understand if they were referring to the number of groups since reconnection or within the series. He continued writing.

00 933.

The voice paused.

55 120 didn't arrive.

Rafael heard her nonetheless. Not as a reminder, but in a faint breeze along the exposed cable conduit: five-five-one-two-zero. He jotted down 55 120 alongside the others.

Then the voice said another group. 52 478.

Rafael was sure. The same wrong group, spoken this time.

Inés said: "End."

She didn't turn off the receiver. She went to Rafael and took the pen from his hand without touching the block.

"The transmission is running."

"No."

"Hear."

"I hear the contact tone and the road."

"She said '52 478.'"

Ana was still standing in the courtyard. "I heard nothing definitive after 00 933."

"55 120," said Rafael. "Then 52 478."

Inés pointed to Recorder A. The level was flat. "We're listening now. Not here."

"When we turn off, we lose-"

"Rafael."

He saw her hand with his pen. His fingers remained poised. He lowered them.

They completed the test as planned. Photography of the cable position followed. Seals were affixed. Memory cards were detached separately. Each wrote their group number on a folded piece of paper.

Rafael: eleven since the start, two after the end of the red sequence.

Inés: Nine.

Ana: Ten, one uncertain.

In the house, Celia played her phone recording. She had placed it on the kitchen table. The first three blue groups were then clear. Then came a fridge noise and a pause. After the separation time, the file contained *cuatro cuatro*, though the kitchen was separated by two walls from the Caseta.

"That's the wall," said Celia. "It matters more if someone listens."

Inés also copied this file. "We don't know what 'better' means."

"More" said Celia.

"Nothing necessarily more correct."

Shortly before four they sat in the weather station. No one wanted to open the files on a private device. Recorder A contained the voice until the separation, then silence, then the exact sequel. The red series ended at 00933. No 55 120. No 52 478. No 84 210.

Recorder B recorded 73 047 instead of 73 044 upon reconnection. Inés heard the last digit three times and kept it as a seven. On Recorder A, it showed four.

"Two devices, the same room," said Rafael.

"Two microphones, two positions, two signal paths," said Inés. Her voice was quiet, but she held the coffee cup with both hands. "That explains differences. Not this one."

The contact microphone contained the deep tone and, while the line was severed, a faint cadence devoid of intelligible speech. Five peaks. Pause. Four peaks.

Ana unfolded her notated notes. Beside the number ten was written: *five minutes later?* She did not strike through the question mark.

Rafael placed his side beside it. 84 210 and 52 478 stood only with him.

"You believe I augmented it," he said.

"I doubt they're on a clear shot," Ana said.

"That's not the same thing," said Inés.

"No," Ana looked at Rafael. "And we must prevent it from becoming the same."

Rafael took back his note. "52 478 stood on the old sheet before I knew it."

"This makes your entry significant today," Ana said, "not automatically sent."

He stood up and went to the window. The garúa broke up over the first streets. From here above, Las Palmeras and the northern entrance were only discernible as gray areas.

"She cut it off," he said.

"Yes, said Inés."

"And the connection went on."

"Yes."

"Is that all for you?"

"It's enough not to reconnect the line."



**Figure 6 · Connection bar in the Caseta. The fifth transmission route has been resolved for the controlled separation test; under the color, 8421 is revealed.**

At the end of the report, Inés did not write *Source identified*. She wrote: *Acoustic transmission interrupted by separation of the fifth cable route; signal path and origin unexplained.*

Rafael read the sentence. He was correct.

He didn't reassure him.

CHAPTER 8

# Interrupted

.

Valverde came at 8:10 AM, as if there hadn't been any unconfirmed jurisdiction the previous evening.

This time a small municipal transporter drove behind his off-road vehicle. Two technicians got out: one carried a toolbox, the other a roll of barrier tape. Both showed valid service cards from the Municipalidad. Their order was to secure an old deactivated component. As their client, there was a regional office whose stamp on the copy was too faint.

Ana arrived at the same time as Inés. Rafael arrived five minutes later by Toyota. He had slept in the weather station, sitting for less than two hours. Inés noticed this in the crease of his jacket.

"She won't be driving afterwards," he said.

"I'm just driving."

"That's why I'll say later."

Valverde greeted Celia first. He explained that the connection strip couldn't be guaranteed to stay in place due to her state. Celia listened and pointed to the folding stools.

"Stay."

"Yes, of course."

"And the figure."

"We're only taking the technical strip and the loose section of line."

Ana photographed every movement. The technicians removed the ceramic backing from the wall. Behind her, a dark rectangle remained with five openings. Four of them terminated shortly after a few centimeters within the masonry. The fifth opened into a pipe that vanished beneath the floor.

Rafael knelt beside it. "Where is it headed?"

Valverde looked at the opening. "Probably an old passive way to the northern distributor."

"Probably?"

"The inventory plans are incomplete."

"She knew the Caseta."

"A key is not a blueprint."

Rafael disliked him for that.

As the strip was placed in a lined box, Valverde held a form from a writing pad. Ana stood close enough to read the heading:

*ENLACE PROJECT 8421 / UNIT CONTROL - COASTAL AREA IV.*

Four lines beneath.

PE-2 - INACTIVA.

SD-5 - INTERRUPTED.

SI-4 - ESTADO PENDIENTE.

PL-6 - NO RESPONSE.

"Why was it interrupted?" asked Ana.

Valverde put down his pen. "Because the line was interrupted."

"Not decommissioned."

"Would be a different status."

"What are the units PE-2, SI-4, and PL-6?"

"Historical regional identifiers."

"What from locales?"

"On units."

"What for?"

Valverde closed the cap of the pen. "Mrs. Vargas, these forms were designed for technical handovers. Their terms are not always as clear-cut as they appear."

"Them seeming pretty clear."

"It's one of theirs."

Ana photographed the sheet. Valverde allowed it; his thumb lay beside SD-5 rather than above it.

| PROYECTO ENLACE 8421                  |                  |
|---------------------------------------|------------------|
| CONTROL DE UNIDADES - ZONA COSTERA IV |                  |
| PE-2                                  | INACTIVA         |
| SD-5                                  | INTERRUMPIDA     |
| SI-4                                  | ESTADO PENDIENTE |
| PL-6                                  | SIN RESPUESTA    |

Recepción técnica: componente retirado

Firma / cargo: \_\_\_\_\_

RECIBIDO

**Figure 7 · Transfer Form “Proyecto Enlace 8421 / Control of Units - Coastal Zone IV”. Photographed before transporting the connection strip.**

He signed with A. Valverde and an abbreviation that looked like DRC-IV. Celia received a copy. The technicians did not seal the five openings, but covered them with a bolted metal plate. Rafael requested a passive measurement. Valverde agreed immediately.

No discernible deviation. No muted note. The field strength meter displayed only the familiar environmental values.

“No measurement,” said Valverde.

Rafael looked at him. “You know that phrase.”

“Nor is he uncommon.”

After departure, the Caseta remained open. Everyday objects appeared larger due to the absence of the connection strip. Celia placed the folding chairs against the dark corner of the wall.

Rafael helped her carry the heaviest fan to the rear. He saw the five threaded openings once more. The new metal plate was painted in zinc. In the center, the technician had marked the date with a pen. Rafael forced himself not to read the digits as a group.

“You have taken what has counted,” said Celia.

“The strip.”

“Those are my words.”

“The voice could have come along the line route.”

“He's still in the wall.”

Rafael turned off the fan. Celia looked at him, not worried, but rather probing. "You still hear it."

"Not here."

"Thereafter, proceed to the place where you cannot hear it."

It was the simplest counsel he received during those days. He could not heed it as the location shifted.

Before leaving, Inés conducted a second zero measurement. They set up the device in the yard, in front of the property and on the transverse road. All values lay within the previous environmental fluctuations. The noticeable deviation had vanished. A welding unit two houses away produced again wide disturbances. When it was switched off, the spectrum returned.

"Practically finished," said Ana.

"Locally interrupted," said Inés.

Rafael saw the street where Valverde's car had vanished. "Taken away."

All three formulations described a part. None addressed what transpired during the night.

They drove to the weather station to copy the memory cards into the test archive. On the Cerro the garúa was so thick that the city vanished. Rafael did not open the file of the separation attempt. He sorted cables, labeled batteries, and placed Recorder A in the closet.

From Recorder B suddenly came a female voice.

Rafael turned around. Inés held the device in her hand. Her thumb rested on playback. The file had been inadvertently launched.

"-sept trois zéro quatre sept, "dit l'enregistrement.

She halted her.

"Seven," said Rafael.

"On this device."

"Four were in the room."

"On the other device as well."

Ana wrote the difference in the file list. Rafael did not remove his block. The mismatched digit persisted in his mind. She took her place beside the correct one until both versions sounded equally familiar.

Inés closed the closet. "No further evaluation for today."

"We are tired."

"Since Fatigue is a measurement error we already know."

Ana drove Rafael to Centro. He parked the Toyota at the station. On the passenger seat, he dozed off before reaching the quarry. Ana noticed his fingers twitching, as if gripping a pen. Then they lay motionless.

"Now it's a bearing again," she said.

Ana went to the archive and began making phone calls. The Dirección Regional de Comunicaciones - Zona IV, mentioned on Valverde's ID, had been

dissolved in 2004 and transferred into two other areas. A successor post knew the form layout but lacked any current order. Another found an Adrián Valver in an old staff overview, with no second family name and no status. Yet another asked Ana to describe the ID before stating that these cards would no longer be issued.

She conducted each conversation in the same order: position name, date of message, form number, engineer's name, and order to remove an old component. She did not mention any voice or numbers. Yet, the tone shifted as soon as she said *Enlace 8421*. Some employees requested spelling assistance; others continued speaking before she concluded her sentence.

A retired clerk remembered the name *Zona Costera IV*. He had managed several programs in the nineties: weather reports, telephone reserve, sirens, and mobile radio points. Whether 8421 was a project or a unit, he did not know. He did, however, remember the status terms.

"Interruption was not the same as inactivity," he said. "Inactivity meant an individual unit was not working. Interruption meant the pathway was incomplete."

"Could it be restored?"

"When both ends still existed."

"What endpoints?"

The man laughed quietly. "That's exactly the question we had bad plans for."

He didn't know Valverde. When Ana read out the ID number, he said it wouldn't fit with the card format prior to restructuring. Then he requested that his name be kept off any publication. Ana clarified there was no such publication. He remained silent.

"Then write: telephonic classification, not verified," he said.

"I would have done that as well."

The cost office for the municipal order led to a collective security account. The clearance arrived electronically in the morning before the pickup. As sender, an abbreviation appeared that did not correspond with any current department. The order was valid because the amount, performance type, and signature verification matched. Its organizational origin remained unspecified.

Teresa considered the expression. "Functional forms can sometimes be more difficult to explain than incorrect ones."

Ana placed it beside Valverdés photograph. "Because someone has to pay for it."

"Or because an old system still knows how."

"Forged?" asked Inés.

"Real and old is also possible," said Ana. "Or a position reused old templates. The municipal technicians had a valid assignment."

"By whom?"

"There is only one cost centre in the field."

When Ana attempted to print the photograph of the form, the copy was missing from her workbook. The cover remained in its original position; the zippered closure had been securely fastened. No one in the archive recalled moving the folder.

Ana checked her camera; the photo was still there.

She printed three versions, numbered them, and placed one in the vault. On the prints, SD-5 was clearly marked as *INTERRUMPIDA*.

Rafael sat in the cafeteria near the Mercado, ordering coffee but not touching it. Over the counter, a television flickered silently. Subtitles appeared in irregular blocks-five words each. A pause followed, then five more words.

He averted his gaze.

A juicer whined with each half rotation. Outside, a motorcycle taxi kept its engine running. Behind the counter in the refrigerator, a loose bottle rattled against the glass.

All three sounds found the same rhythm.

Rafael took the ballpoint pen from his shirt pocket and placed it on the table. He did not open the block.

Inés found him there at half four.

"You weren't driving home."

"You said I shouldn't go."

"I said afterwards."

"It's after."

She sat down. Rafael pushed her cold coffee. "Without sugar."

"Since when is he standing here?"

"He's cold."

"None of that was a time reference."

He smiled briefly; then the fridge vibrated. Rafael looked at the wall.

"What?" asked Inés.

"Nothing."

"You can still hear it."

Rafael didn't answer.

Inés took the pen from the table. "No night shifts alone until further notice."

"Because I hear something you also heard in the Caseta."

"Because you're not sleeping and you hear it now in the fridge."

"The bar is gone. That doesn't mean the line is gone."

"Possibly."

"And yet you bring me out."

"Exactly because of that."

Rafael glanced at her hand with the pen. "That sounds like concern."

"Service planung."

"Good."

"And care."

The fridge ceased its vibrations. In the ensuing silence, Rafael precisely knew when the next blow ought to have struck.

He didn't come.

## CHAPTER 9

# It No Longer Needs the Radio

•

Rafael worked reliably that day.

In the first week after the Caseta, he devised his own rules, which he never shared. No numbers written on loose sheets of paper. No recordings began after midnight. He did not activate any device a second time simply because nothing had happened during the initial attempt. When a sound comprised five parts, he had to name three other sounds that coexisted simultaneously.

At Mercado, it was the rolling of the metal grilles, a knife on a wooden board, and the call of a merchant for limes. In El Faro, it was a compressor, a radio, and the seagulls over the coastal road. On the Cerro, it was wind, fans, and the loose wires at the fence.

The exercise helped, because it did not diminish ordinary things. It imparted a sense of weight against the rhythm.

Rafael visited his mother for lunch. She lived at the bottom of El Alto and placed a plate in front of him before asking why he appeared thinner. He explained that the layers had been unsettled.

"Then eat in peace," she said.

In the courtyard, someone pumped water onto a roof. Five knocks echoed through the pipe. Rafael set down his spoon.

"The pump has been doing this since April," his mother said.

"What?"

"This knocking. You look like you're trying to fix it."

"Possibly air in the pipe."

"There might be soup on your plate."

He continued eating. His mother did not ask again. On the way home, Rafael noticed that she had heard the five beats but made no connection out of them. That seemed to him both admirable and beyond his reach.

At work, Inés did not surreptitiously check if it was functioning. She asked plainly for sleep, coffee, and focus. Rafael responded initially with jests,

followed by hours. Four. Five. Three and a half. Six. The numbers were needed again.

"When you're under four, no outside work on the mast," she said.

"It's not an official border."

"Thereafter, complain to my unofficial department."

"Zona Costera Five?"

Inés stared at him for some time. "That wasn't good."

"No."

He didn't apologize for the joke, but he didn't repeat it either.

Ana only called once to inquire about a factual matter: whether the N-5 label on the receiver had been visible prior to cleaning. Rafael said, partially. She did not seek out new perceptions. He was both grateful and angry simultaneously.

In the evening he took the folded paper from his pocket with Ana's numbers and placed it in a drawer. The number 8421 was printed on it. He closed the drawer. After ten minutes, he opened it again, turned the sheet with its blank side up, and closed it once more.

It wasn't a victory; just another position of the paper.

He replaced two porous cable fittings, calibrated the humidity sensor, and drove with Manuel to a distributor in Los Pinos, where the door had become stuck after the last rain. He jotted down the times, values, and materials. His entries were smaller than usual; no margin remained for additional numbers.

Inés did not assign him any tasks where he remained alone on the Cerro. She justified every change technically. Second-person perspective for field service. Four-eye principle for data backup. No shift after midnight until the end of the evaluation. Rafael did not object the first time and afterward no more.

Sleep, however, came only in fragments. When he closed his eyes, he heard no voice. He heard the pause before the fifth group; it was worse because his head filled it.

He transferred all the pencils from the bedroom to the kitchen. On the second night, he discovered a pencil on the bedside table. He wasn't sure whether he had taken it himself. The paper beneath showed no numbers, merely five short lines.

In the morning he did not throw the leaf away. He folded it and put it in his pocket. Halfway to work he stopped at the Mercado, bought bread, and left the leaf in a public waste basket. Afterward, he walked three steps further, turned around, and checked that it was still there.

That was the moment he realized Inés was right.

Not about the cause, but about the cessation.

He told her the same day that he wouldn't be sleeping at the station over the weekend. Inés merely nodded.

"You can also come," she said later as she packed the test device.

"Only to document my sleeping times?"

"Yes."

"Too quick."

"I've prepared."

He slept in her small guest room in El Alto. The lower rooftops of Centro were visible through the window. A black water tank stood beside the neighboring house. At 2:17, his pump activated; the pipe in the wall struck five times.

Rafael sat up.

In the hallway, lights came on. Inés stood at the door, her hair still flat against one side from sleep.

"I heard the pump," she said.

"Fives knocks."

"Yes."

"You've counted them."

"Because I knew you counted her."

"It's then within you now."

Inés leaned on the frame. "Or I know my water tank."

The pump continued evenly. Rafael lay down again. "Do you enter it in the protocol?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because it's a pump."

On Friday he had to check an open cable path in the old container of the weather station. A new data line was to be laid. The work was scheduled during the day, Inés in the adjoining room. Rafael removed a cover. Behind it were two old, cut veins and a newer empty pipe, emitting cool air.

The wind outside was warm.

Rafael held a strip of paper to the opening. He moved inward. A slight vacuum, likely through the cable channel to the other container. He then called Inés.

"Inward draft," she said. "We're testing the route."

They went to the old container. The empty pipe ended behind a shelf, open and unconnected. The paper strip moved there too. A temperature difference between the rooms could explain the flow.

Rafael closed the cover. The snap of the spring sounded like a numeral.

On Monday the Garúa came back closer. Sensor three reported fluctuating wind from southwest. At 18:40 the network connection failed. Rafael and Inés

went up together. The error lay in a damaged plug of the old container. An ordinary repair: switch off, secure, replace plugs, check.

They were ready by 21:10. Inés exported the failed data. Rafael put away his tools. The rain gauge, which rarely had anything to measure, clacked once in the wind.

"We're driving," said Inés.

"Fifteen minutes."

"What for?"

"Final Control."

"Done."

"Cable channel."

She looked to the open cover. "Five minutes."

The cable channel was empty except for two dead veins. Rafael checked passage against earth. Found nothing. He put down the measuring device.

"Finished," said Inés.

The voice came from the open pipe.

Not loud, not complete; just the last digit of a group, then a pause.

"-Eight."

Rafael froze. Inés stood two meters away, raising her head.

"Do you-"

"Yes."

Rafael removed his phone and began the recording, as no recorder was functioning. The main receiver lay sealed in the archive; no one had activated a single recorder.

"Cero tres ocho dos uno," said the woman from the empty pipe.

Rafael placed the phone on the table. The voice was weaker than in the Caseta. The rhythm remained the same.

"We're going," said Inés.

"Now record."

"We pick up and walk out of the room."

"If the position-"

"Phone remains. We go."

They entered the main room. Through the open door, they saw the telephone on the table. The voice continued with 99 217. Then came 73 044.

The pause before the fifth group arrived.

Rafael knew the recording was running. He knew Inés was standing beside him. He also knew something within him was easing, as the sequence would finally be fully restored.

"One one two seven eight."

He stepped toward the door.

Inés did not hold him. "Rafael."

"Only the phone."

"Wait."

"Repetimos" said the voice.

On the second pass, she was quieter. Rafael heard the first group not through his ears, but in the rumble of the computer fan. 52 411. The fan died, and the voice from within the container said 03 821.

"She doesn't need the radio," he said.

"There is an open cable route here."

"Didn't mean that."

"I know."

Rafael went to the control cabinet and flipped the switch for the old container. Inés stood next to him.

"What are you doing?"

"Tearing apart."

"The cable route is passive."

"It makes no difference then."

"That's why it's not a clean attempt."

He lowered his hand. The voice reached 73 044. Again, the pause.

Rafael took a cable tie and closed the cover over the empty tube. The voice did not become softer. He placed his hand on the metal sheet, and in the resonance, five strikes could be felt.

"One one two seven eight."

After that she said nothing. No *Repetimos*. Only the deep tone.

Rafael sat down on the floor, his back to the cupboard. Fatigue did not come gradually. She was suddenly the weight she had been all week.

Inés picked up the phone, and the recording lasted for three minutes, twelve. She did not listen to it; she sat on the chair opposite.

"We remain here until you can sleep," she said.

"It's a weather station."

"Good observation."

"You wanted me not to sleep here."

"I fine-tune the plan to match measurement values."

Rafael closed his eyes.

When he woke up, it was 3:04. Inés sat at the computer and had copied the recording. On the table lay a sheet from his notebook. There, in his handwriting, were written:

*IT DOESN'T NEED THE RADIO ANYMORE.*

Among them five numbers, crossed out so firmly that the paper was torn.

"Had I written that?" he asked.

Inés turned around. "I haven't seen it."

"You were here."

"I was in the adjacent room for five minutes to fetch water."

Rafael set the sheet aside. "Is the sentence on the recording?"

"No."

"Had you heard everything?"

"Twice."

He looked at the closed cover. "Then it's my note."

"Maybe."

"You might say."

"Yes."

Inés placed a transparent cover over the sheet. Not as evidence against him, nor as proof for the voice. Just to ensure it would be the same sheet later.

They drove down at dawn. Rafael sat in the passenger seat. As the Toyota bounced over the ground ripples at the quarry, the pliers in the glove compartment struck against the plastic.

Four times.

Rafael waited not for the fifth knock.

## CHAPTER 10

# No Measurement

.

The recording from the old container contained a single voice.

It contained 03 821, 99 217, 73 044, and 11 278. The first group was missing; in its place lay the hum of a computer fan. Rafael's action had not been recorded. The deep tone ceased five seconds before Inés loudly announced the time.

Eulogio came to the Cerro the next day and examined the two dead veins, which were not marked on any current drawing, with a lamp. The closed distributor was located in the shaft beneath the station floor.

He had grown older since Ana spoke to him for the radio documentary. His hands moved slowly, though always with no hesitation at a klemme.

"Warning program," he said. "Or telephone. At that time everything ran where there was still space."

"Norte Five?" Rafael asked.

Eulogio looked at him. "This is a name people use when the plan is missing."

"Do you know Enlace 8421?"

"I recognized many numbers."

"This one?"

Eulogio flickered a light into the shaft. "Maybe on a crate. Maybe on a form. If I say 'yes,' make that an echo of memory. If I say 'no,' make that a whisper of secrecy."

Ana, who stood behind them, noted the sentence. Eulogio noticed it.

"Can you write that?"

They tracked the veins up to a walled execution. Behind it lay the older container. No route was visible leading to Las Palmeras. An inductive test revealed no continuation. Rafael wished to raise the base plate, but Inés refused until a permit and a plan were forthcoming.

The approval came four days later. Beneath the plate was sand, a severed cable stub, and a plastic label with the faint inscription SAT 98. There was no 8421. No fifth line.

"No measurement," said Rafael.

"No running cable line, corrected by Inés.

"Longer."

"Exact."

They tried to reproduce the reception in three nights, not just with Rafael alone but with changing teams. On the first night, Inés and a Municipalidad technician sat at the station until 2:40 AM. The receiver stayed in the archive; they heard nothing. On the second night, Ana and Inés monitored an old container with two recorders. A truck on the coastal road produced a deep tone around 2:16 AM, which could be attributed to wind over distance and timestamps. By 2:17 AM, only wind remained.

On the third night, Rafael remained at home.

He boiled water at one o'clock, placed his phone in the kitchen, and sat down in the living room without any paper. The fan was turned off. Through the window came the city: a dog, a motorcycle, music far below in El Alto. At 2:17 he heard nothing.

The absence of the voice was initially relief. After a minute it became anticipation. After five minutes, it had transformed into a task he couldn't solve.

Rafael stood up and washed the cup. He dried it. He put it away in the closet. Then he went to bed.

In the morning, his phone displayed a recording starting at 2:13 and ending at 2:26. He did not recall initiating it. The file included scenes of the kitchen, water pipe, and closet door. At precisely 2:17:08, faint beats could be heard.

He didn't immediately bring the file to Inés. He waited until noon, and this wait was his first conscious decision against the signal-don't hide, don't interpret, don't call at night. He ate at Mercado, helped a dealer lift a clamping scale out of a box, and then drove to the station.

Inés heard the five beats. "Pipe or cupboard."

"Yes."

"Why did you record?"

"I don't know."

"Do you reckon you wrote?"

"No."

"Good."

"That isn't a measurement."

"No. That's good."

Rafael resumed working alone during the day. Night services were divided for two weeks. He slept longer, initially four hours, then six. The cadence did not disappear completely; a fan could still produce five beats. A traffic light control could set five relay clicks. What differed was that Rafael no longer waited every time for the continuation.

Ana organized the test stock meanwhile.

She created five files, not because five had become a neutral number, but because the sources demanded it.

Firstly, objectively recorded voices and numbers.

Second: old documents and the art sheet.

Thirdly, field and cable inspection results.

Fourthly, different perceptions and recordings.

Fifthly, regional identifiers without a verified connection.

In each folder came a cover sheet detailing the contents' boundaries. The photograph of the Valverdere form appeared in the fifth. The original of the copy had vanished. Celia's phone recording was found in the first and third folders, accompanied by references rather than duplicate files.

"You've set up a network," said Rafael, as he surveyed the arrangement.

"No. A register."

"Five folders."

Ana pushed the cover sheets to him. "If the number troubles you, I'll number them with letters."

"There are still five."

"Right."

He read the limits. In the divergent perceptions stood this: *A further group cannot be confirmed technologically nor dismissed as mere imagination. Expectation, memory, and signal were not cleanly separable in the current occurrences.*

"It sounds like I'm part of the device," he said.

Ana didn't answer immediately. "It sounds like we need to document your perception as such, not as a measuring instrument."

"And if it alters the signal?"

"Thereupon, we lack a measurement for this."

Rafael leaned back. Before the archive, a mototaxi stood parked. The driver attempted three times to squeeze into an uncomfortably tight space, stepped down, surveyed the gap, and tried again.

"No measurement has become your favorite sentence."

"She is honest," Ana said.

Inés wrote the technical report. She labored over the formulation of the result for two days, rejecting every draft that drew cause and effect too closely together as the data permitted.

Before release, she had each involved person read only what they could testify to. Celia confirmed voice, door, and dust line, but not the number of groups. Ana confirmed discovery paths and documents. Rafael confirmed device construction, separation process, and his own transcriptions. The two municipal technicians alone confirmed the expansion of the bar. No one was

allowed to become accustomed to a more complete memory by the formulations of the others.

They met in the small meeting room of the Municipalidad. The ceiling fan turned too slowly, pushing warm air across the table. Teresa conducted the protocol.

"The door was open in the morning," said Celia. "The chain and lock were closed. I am not saying it was unopened. I am saying as I saw it."

Ana altered a sentence.

"What a line in the dust?" Teresa asked.

"Right from the wall to the door. No photo."

"Then a statement, not an object finding," said Ana.

Rafael read the section on night measurement. "It says here that the voice was perceived in the room. It was there."

"Witnessed by three persons and two devices," said Inés. "This is in the next sentence."

"Why not audible?"

"Because it sounds as if the room itself were a measuring device, even though there are no listeners to hear it."

"It measured better than Recorder B."

Teresa lifted her gaze. "This doesn't make it into the report."

Rafael crossed out the note on his copy. The scratching of the pen on the paper brought back memories of 52 478. He did not begin anew.

At the Valverde section, Celia asked why the man had more space than her. Ana explained the open jurisdiction. Celia thought over it.

"He was courteous," she said. "Otherwise people might picture a man sneaking into doors at night."

Ana added: *Cooperative demeanor; access with the owner's consent.*

The report became no less mysterious. It was now more exact.

After two hours, they stood up. On the table lay four differently marked copies. Teresa gathered them. Rafael retained only the cover sheet. In the hallway, Celia asked if anyone could bring the folding chairs back on Sunday.

Rafael said in agreement. It was the first meeting with the Caseta, which bore no relation to 2:17.

The final summary read:

*Between July 3 and 17, 2026, unidentified acoustic and electromagnetic disturbances were documented at the weather station Cerro Vigía and in a historic connection caseta in Las Palmeras. At least two events contained understandable five-digit number groups. A controlled separation of the fifth line path in Caseta 8421 interrupted an acoustic transmission; after reconnection, a continuation was recorded on at least one device. Records and witness counts sometimes diverged.*

*After removing the connection bar, local reception could not be reproduced under controlled conditions. Technical origin: undetectable.*

Rafael read the text on her screen.

"You haven't written that it's over."

"Because I can't measure that."

"But locally, nothing comes through anymore."

"Under the tested conditions."

"Longer."

"Exact."

She added the appendices below: devices, time sources, files, checksums, weather data, switching states. No chapter on classical number transmitters. No theory about 1.718.309.225 Hertz. Just a note that the figure did not fit within the frequency range of the employed historical devices.

"You could say that the number doesn't have to be frequency," Rafael said.

"That would be an interpretation."

"You could say she might be one."

Inés saved. "Then I would have to enumerate everything she could possibly be."

A week later Rafael went with Ana and Inés to Celia again. The metal plate over the pipe openings held fast. Celia had re-ordered the Caseta; folding chairs were placed to the right, fans to the left. The repaired hand of the figure was painted in a lighter shade.

"It hadn't mattered since then," said Celia.

"Nothing at all?" Rafael asked.

"The ventilator occasionally counts, but he did that earlier."

She handed him a paint bucket. "If you're already here, put it back."

Rafael carried the bucket into the room. He paused before the metal plate. Nothing vibrated. He did not touch the surface with his hand.

In the yard, they sipped coffee. A boy pedaled a bicycle with a flat tire through the alley. On a rooftop, a black water tank filled to capacity. The pipe struck twice and fell silent.

Ana asked Celia if she was agreeable to naming her name in the test file.

"If you write that it's my storeroom."

"I write that."

"And not that I believe in voices."

"You've heard this one."

"It's something else."

Inés nodded. "Yes, yes, yes."

On the way back Rafael drove. Inés sat next to him, Ana behind with the folders. At the northern entrance a colectivo waited for two passengers. Above

the windshield was SAN DESVELO. The names of the stops were written in white color. Under LAS PALMERAS remained an empty place.

"Valverde," said Rafael. "Do you think he'll return?"

Ana replied: "His application is genuine enough for a municipal pick-up to occur. His position remains ambiguous. These are two distinct findings."

"Not that question."

"I know."

Inés looked out the window. "When he returns, we'll get an up-to-date phone number."

Rafael chuckled. "That will trouble him."

At Cerro Vigía he replaced the cover of the cable channel on the following morning with a new one. He labeled it with the date, the material, and his abbreviation. No number that wasn't necessary.

Sensor three reported a speed of 4.2 meters per second from the southwest. The value fluctuated according to the wind.

In the evening, they met at the small Chifa near the Mercado. It wasn't a celebration. Ana brought the final numbered folder, Inés the signed report, and Rafael brought an appetite. They ordered too much rice and a jug of Chicha Morada.

"What happens to the recipient?" Rafael asked.

"Secure stock," said Ana. "Do not attach without a new test plan."

"And Valverde's crotch?"

"Unknown custody location."

"It sounds bad."

"It sounds unfamiliar."

Inés did not place the report on the table. "We have serial numbers and photos. If it appears in an official inventory, we can identify it."

"What then?"

"Then not."

A waitress set down three plates. Rafael pushed the soy sauce towards the side. On the bottle, there was a batch number with five digits. He spotted it but did not read it aloud.

Ana told us about a market record where Stand 28 had been stored for 28 years before Stand 17. Inés reported that the rain sensor on the Cerro had finally measured a drop on a dry day, probably from cleaning water. Rafael listened. Everyday life did not look like a return to something smaller; it was the material that the city had always been made of.

When paying, they didn't split the amount precisely. Ana placed a note, Inés' coins, and Rafael contributed the remainder. No one jotted down the figures.

Outside, the garúa had grown stronger. The light from the Mercado lay soft in the air. A mototaxi halted, allowing a passenger to disembark and continued its journey. Its engine stumbled momentarily in a pattern that sounded almost familiar.

Rafael continued before it was fully complete.

At 2:17, Rafael was not at the station. He slept at home. On the worktable, the computer continued running and automatically recorded the measurements in a file.

Between 2:17:00 and 2:17:30, there was no missing line.

EPILOGUE

## Outside San Desvelo

.

Ana opened the regional map only after the local test file had been completed.

It was a bright morning. The garúa stood over Centro, but in the archive yard, a rectangle of sunlight began to appear on the tiles. Ana wrote on the cover of the new envelope:

*ENLACE 8421 / OFF-SITE REFERENCES OUTSIDE OF SANTO DESVELO / UNVERIFIED.*

She first placed Valverde's form sheet photograph inside. PE-2, SD-5, SI-4, PL-6. Then she inserted the uncropped exhibition photo. On the rolled-up map, SD-5 was clear and PE-2 could only be discerned if one knew what to look for.

San Desvelo does not occupy the spotlight. The coastal line meandered beyond the edges of the canvas to the north and south. The five points of the city formed just one grouping amidst others.

Ana searched in public maps for the shape of the coast, not for the identifiers. PE-2 could lie north but did not have to; the old map was rotated, warped, and rolled at its edge. A point that looked like Puerto Esperanza could also be a technical reference outside the city.

She placed weather data from the nights of the current transmissions beside them. Garúa, humidity, and wind showed no single pattern. Two receptions occurred under dense humidity, one during cracked Garúa. This aligned with Valverde's general talk about atmospheric superposition and thus failed to confirm it.

In the radio stock Ana found an old driver list of Ruta Nocturna. Nicolás Lujans' name did not appear on it, but his workshop in Puerto Esperanza had supplied spare parts for two vehicles. A bill bore the same stamp colour as the sheet in the new box, making the path of the paper plausible. The route of the pencil note remained unknown.

Ana wrote down three possible next steps: Ask Diego about the handwriting. Compare workshop manuals from Puerto Esperanza. Search for

the code PE-2 in regional warning program files. Then she drew a line beneath it and added: *not before the conclusion of the local protection periods.*

Rafael's name did not appear in any document of the regional folder. His deviating groups belonged to the local audit inventory. Inés' report remained internal. Celia's address was shortened on working copies at Las Palmeras. Restraint was not only scientific; it was a way of not extending an open case.

In the evening Ana took the envelope home because a line was repaired in the archive. She did not place it beside her bed but on the table in the front room. At 1:53 she woke up, not due to any voice. A truck braked on the Avenida, and its compressed air system released four short bursts.

Ana didn't look at the clock until the fourth chime had fallen.

The fifth was missing.

She waited for a minute, then switched off the lights. In the morning, she didn't note down the occurrence. Not every concordance drew her attention to its source.

Ana took transparent paper and recorded only the identifiers, not the presumed locations. Beside PE-2, she wrote *possibly Puerto Esperanza*. Beside SI-4 and PL-6, she left no notes. An empty designation was more precise than a plausible name.

In the afternoon, Diego Luján brought a small box from his late uncle Nicolás's workshop. Ana knew the box. Inside it lay the cassette that marked the beginning of her documentary on Radio Desvelo. Diego had discovered invoices hidden beneath a mislabeled foundation during the last sorting.

"Replacement parts," he said, "nothing interesting."

"You've been saying that ever since the cassette."

"The cassette was unremarkable too. You brought it to interest."

Diego stayed while Ana saw the first half. He recognized the stamp of his uncle and two types of bill blocks. The backs had often been used in the workshop for phone numbers, measurements, and departure times. Nicolás wrote with a pencil when fat was on his hands because ballpoint pens then slipped.

Ana didn't show him the note yet. She asked him for comparison pieces first. Diego found on another bill: *bus 4 / 06:20 / falta una correa*. The four, the six and the small 'a' resembled the PE-2 line, but not sufficient for a safe assignment.

"Could this be his writing?" Ana finally asked and turned the page over.

Diego repeated the sentence. "Could."

"What does PE-2 mean in the workshop?"

"Perhaps a vehicle. My uncle had codes for clients."

"And four groups?"

"Part deliveries came in groups. But no one would have written that the fifth did not arrive. Rather *falta caja* or the name of the part."

"01:53?"

"It's too late for a regular pick-up, but not too late for a bus."

He took out his phone. "I can ask my father."

Ana placed her hand beside the sheet, not on it. "Not yet."

Diego looked at her. "Why?"

"For I must first know which question I pose. If I read the entire line to him, perhaps he will recall the line rather than the workshop."

Diego put the phone away. "That sounds tiring."

"It is."

"What if it matters?"

"It'll be the same note tomorrow."

Ana wasn't sure if that was true. With the artwork and the recordings, sameness had proved less reliable than paper and files suggested. She therefore photographed the invoice in Diego's presence, had him read the file name along with her, and generated a checksum. Ordinary care was no protection against everything. It was merely the limit of what one could responsibly answer for.

They viewed bills for V-belts, fuses, batteries, lamps, and workshop hours. Most originated from Puerto Esperanza. A few lacked a year stamp. Ana sorted them by document type, postmarks, and the few dated entries.

On a receipt's backside, there was a pencil mark.

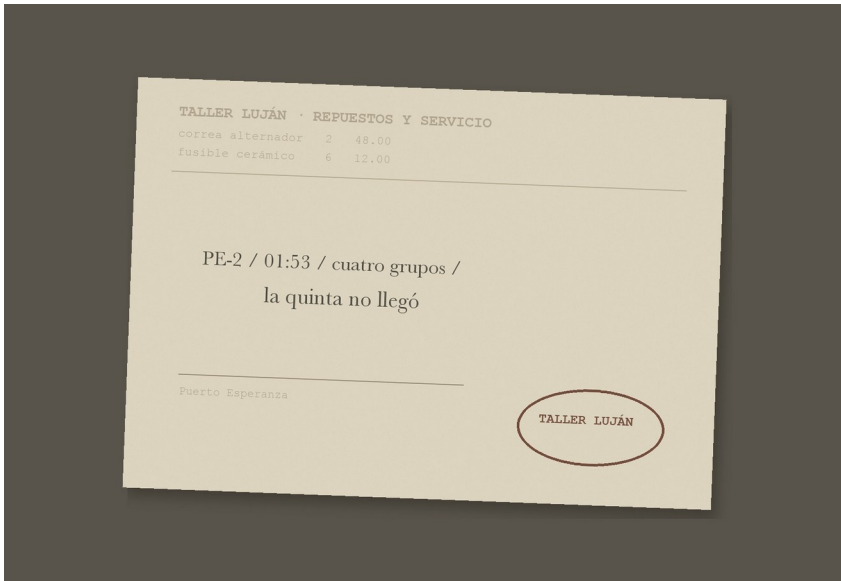
The writing was faint. Front-page replacement text-rows appeared to have pierced through the paper. Ana turned the page under the lamp.

*PE-2 / 01:53 / four groups / the fifth one did not arrive.*

The fifth was missing.

Ana didn't call Diego back, despite having written his number on a note. She also didn't dial Puerto Esperanza; a workshop note neither confirmed a voice nor indicated any phenomenon. PE-2 might have been a vehicle, unit, or track. 01:53 could refer to either a time or a duration. Four groups could signify numbers, parts, or deliveries.

But the words stood there.



**Fig. 8 · Backpage of an invoice from Nicolás Luján's Caseta in Puerto Esperanza. Handwritten note: 'PE-2 / 01:53 / four groups / the fifth one did not arrive.'**

Ana photographed both sides, notated the discovery route, and placed the original in a protective casing. Afterwards, she slid it into the envelope containing the unverified clues.

She compared 01:53 with the time data from San Desvelo. The difference to 2:17 amounted to twenty-four minutes. On the coastal road, there was no safe place to define within those twenty-four minutes; traffic, road conditions, and direction rendered the number meaningless. Nevertheless, Ana did not mark any distance on the map. A time difference still lacked a movement.

In the Radio Desvelo test book lay the card *02:17 / Paso Norte*. Ana took it out, placed it beside the workshop bill, and observed how easily two leaves claimed a story when they shared the same table. She did not photograph this arrangement. Afterward, she returned the card to its own envelope.

PE-2 remained regional. 02:17 remained local. 01:53 was a note from a workshop. Only when a source linked them firmly could they become more.

On an empty sheet, Ana began drafting a request to the archives of Puerto Esperanza. She wrote "Subject," followed by the time frame and the term *unidades costeras*. Before sending it, she erased her initial draft. A mere request was not yet a journey, but it could prompt others to seek out a story whose question Ana herself had yet to articulate clearly.

She would wait. Not from fear of what lay beyond San Desvelos, but in respect for the distinction between a trace and a case.

In the archive courtyard, the rectangle of sunlight vanished. Garúa swept over Centro once more, thin enough to reveal the rooftops. Ana closed the window, inspected the envelope's inscription, and placed it on the shelf. It neither belonged with the completed documents nor the ongoing inquiries. She pushed an empty spacer beside it—not as a signal for a second volume, but to prevent any other inventory from mistakenly occupying its spot. Afterward, she washed out the coffee cup and dimmed the light in her workspace.

Rafael didn't tell her anything about it that day. Not because he lacked trust in her, but precisely because he understood how dependable his focus could be when an episode remained unresolved.

Inés received a short message: *Regional identifier again. No current need for action.*

The answer came a minute later: *Was built as an identifier or as a phenomenon?*

Ana wrote: *As a reference.*

Inés replied: *Good.*

Ana did not seal the envelope. She merely bound the tape around it, first lengthwise and then crosswise. Then she placed it in the compartment beside the Radio Desvelo test stand, not inside.

From Mercado, metal lattices, crates, and the shouts of the dealers pierced through the open window. A bus headed north; its horn sounded twice short, once long.

San Desvelo was not marked on any map's center. It was merely the sole location where Ana had now identified five points.