

Speech to Accept the WOLA-Duke Human Rights Book Award

Ladies and Gentlemen:

My name is Héctor Abad, and my father's name was Héctor Abad. He was a great advocate for human rights; I am not, nor have I ever been. That's why I've always used a line from Quevado to define myself that goes like this: "Un cobarde con nombre de valiente," or in English, "A coward, with the name of someone courageous." I know very well that I don't deserve this award, and that it is being given posthumously to a man with my same name: my father. I accept the award with this fundamental clarification: the WOLA-Duke Book Award is not for the author of this book but for its protagonist.

So that you understand in fact how much he does deserve this award, I want to begin by telling you all a story from my adolescence that I forgot to tell in *Oblivion*, but which seems important to share with you now. One day, in the middle of the 1970s, the library in my house was suddenly invaded by a bunch of cardboard boxes. Inside the boxes were paper packages tied up with a string, and inside each of these packages were 100 identical pamphlets. My dad had printed, using his own funds, five thousand little green booklets, all with the same title and the same content: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

These small, skinny booklets reproduced this fundamental documentation of the world's moral progress, and from that day my dad gave them away to visitors of the house, and whenever he could he distributed them on the streets of the city.

The text was the same text approved by the UN in 1948, when after the carnage of the Second World War (70 million dead) many were convinced that it was necessary to have some kind of Lay Ten Commandments of Universal Law, that would bring together in a few rules, the most basic principles of agreement in order to build a better world for all mankind, a world that would be more just and less oppressive and violent. When my father did his silent and peaceful

protests in the streets of Medellín, he would distribute these small booklets as someone might hand out some subversive, revolutionary pamphlet. And in some sense they were: The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, if taken seriously and applied rigorously, is a document that could destabilize many governments, many regimes, and many political, economic, and religious abuses in the world today.

I want to clarify, nonetheless, that when I wrote the story about my father, my intent was very modest, even personal and intimate. I didn't set out to write the biography of a human rights defender, but instead I wanted to relate the family and public life of a good man. Initially, I did it with just one objective: since my children hadn't gotten to know their murdered grandfather, I wanted them to get to know him at least through the memories that the words evoke. *Oblivion* was written, initially, so that two adolescent readers, my children, would learn about the history of our family before their birth.

In this book about oblivion, against oblivion and in spite of oblivion, I wanted to tell them, my son and daughter, what the world, my world, had been like before they were born. I wanted them to understand why I'm afraid of moles, of illness and of motorcycles driven by young men fresh from the barber's; why I seem like a crazed fanatic when I talk about the difficulties in getting visas for first world countries, like Spain or the United States; why in our family stories there are dead people who have as much or more presence in our words than the living do.

You will all have had this experience too: when a person gets married or starts seeing someone, there is a moment in the relationship that's like a return to childhood. I don't mean by how infantile people become when they fall in love, but the stories the other person tells us about what their life was like before we met them. Their other love affairs, their childhood, their parents and grandparents. And you'll have noticed that in this tale of the life of the person we're getting to know, there are some fundamental presences, beings who emerge strongly, with a presence, no matter how absent they may be.

Presencias, presences: as the Colombian philosopher Fernando González explains, there are dead who conserve their presence. I was born one month after the death of the archbishop of Medellín, Joaquín

García, and he has always been present in my life, and therefore in my books, I think probably with more force than if I'd known him. And he has been present not only because of this lovely name I've been lumbered with – Héctor Joaquín – but because since I've known myself, he has been kept alive in the heart and words of my mother and also in household miracles. How many cheques and lost keys have reappeared, how many fevers and illnesses have been cured thanks to his blessed supernatural intercession!

So anyway, what I wanted to do with this book (among many other things) was a very simple rescue operation of certain family figures, of some fundamental and unforgettable presences in my life: my sister who died and my murdered father. I wanted the two of them to also be present in the lives of my children. I wanted my son and daughter to know them. I created a private portrait of my family, just as painters have always done. During the Renaissance, for example, tired of painting duchesses, kings, popes, cardinals and princes, some evenings at home they'd paint a family portrait, a picture of their wife, their father, their mother-in-law or son. They did so lovingly, and maybe that's why they came out very well and their domestic paintings are still hanging on the walls of many museums all over the world, the almost living face of those family members still fighting against death and against oblivion.

This was, then, my private reason for telling this story. Why then, if it's so private, did I publish it? Why turn one's own gratitude and resentment into a book? Why commit the immodesty of exhibiting one's own guts in public, of showing one's stark love and red-hot rage? There is at least one motive. I am fed up with being treated, everywhere I go in the world, for the simple fact of being Colombian, as a drug trafficker, as a terrorist, as a hitman, a paramilitary, a guerrilla, or a delinquent. That's not what I am, that's not what we all are. In Colombia, there has been and still is intolerable violence. But we ourselves have been the first to suffer from it. Colombia is terrible, but Colombia can also be magnificent. Medellín has been terrible, but Medellín is not the worst hole in the world. In the mafioso Pablo Escobar's Medellín, five hundred police officers were murdered in the year nineteen ninety-one, and seven thousand other people. But in my

friend Mayor Sergio Fajardo's Medellín, when his mandate came to an end in 2007, those seventy-five hundred murders had been reduced to seven hundred and fifty. Improvement is possible; in this tragic book I also want to say that progress is possible.

Oblivion can be read in two ways. One is a bitter, angry reading, which I myself, perhaps, have committed the mistake of encouraging when I've said that it's a very sad story. But it can also be read radiantly, happily: in an ordinary, run-of-the-mill, middle-class family in Antioquia, there was a person full of love, a decent, honorable, good person. Lucky for me, we were very close relatives. We are not the scum of the earth. We have hope as a people and as a country because there in those sad tropics, in America's backyard, there can also be a person as complex, as complete and as good as the protagonist of this book.

My friend Alberto Aguirre, who died two months ago, one of the people my book is dedicated to, wrote to me when it was first published: "For me it's not a sad book, much less a very sad book. Perhaps you were sad while you were writing it, but *Oblivion: A Memoir* excludes all sadness. When a man of such integrity appears, and when the integral relationship that man has with other men, with other humans is shown, what the spirit feels is exultation. Gratitude that on this earth a being of such quality and such strength existed. One feels justified as a human being."

Forgive me for quoting these phrases that praise the book, but I want you to interpret them as they should really be interpreted, that is, as praise for the protagonist, that namesake of mine who was killed twenty-five years ago, on Argentina Street in Medellín. Yes, on Argentina Street. And as those of you who have read the book already know, that man who was murdered carried two documents in his pocket: one was a document of wickedness and brutality; the other was a document of beauty and intelligence. The first was a list with names of people that were to be killed; on that list was the name of my father. The other document was a poem, attributed to Jorge Luis Borges, a sonnet, which goes like this:

Already we are the oblivion we shall be—

the elemental dust that does not know us,
the dust that once was red Adam and now is
all men, the dust we shall not see.

Already we are the two dates on the headstone,
the beginning and the end. The coffin,
the obscene decay and the shroud,
the death rites and the dirges.

I am not some fool who clings
to the magical sound of his own name.

I think, with hope, of that man
who will never know I walked the earth.

Beneath the blue indifference of heaven,
I find this thought consoling.

By putting these two pieces of paper together, a threat and a poem about death, my father left us one last message: I know that they are probably going to kill me, but I face my death with serenity. Even if I am forgotten, it doesn't matter, because I have done my duty and all of us are in some way going to die and be forgotten. In writing this book, I wanted that oblivion which we will all become to be postponed a little. I wanted my children, and later other readers, to know about the decent, beautiful life of a good man, both its private and its public aspects. By giving the award to this story, and above all to the protagonist of this book, you are helping me ensure that this life, which was sacrificed to defend the human rights of us all, is remembered for some years more and in an area that is bigger and more important than just my own country. My father didn't leave me his bravery as an inheritance, but he did leave me his optimism: I believe that humanity can improve, and in fact I believe that it has improved. Since the centuries of tortures, duels of honor, slavery, discrimination against women and homosexuals, the burning of heretics, and the hanging of the unfaithful, we have taken many steps forward. When we remember the fight of men like my father, who defended their causes even at the risk of their own lives, I believe that we are helping humanity continue on its path toward a world that is less unjust. Thank you all.

