

The Wanderers. Carlos Sisi

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Carlos Sisi

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I

By the time Susana finally decided to return to the apartment, it had been a while since night had fallen. It was a cool, clear night and the air didn't bring the unpleasant smells of the outskirts. This sole detail filled the young woman's heart with joy as she briskly walked through the inner hallways of the building.

Her guard had been uneventful. The *wanderers* rarely approached the iron fences, although many could still be seen in the distance, silent, dragging their feet while slowly yet continuously drifting along. Not all of them walked. Susana could have sworn that one of them, located next to the decrepit newsstand, had been still for weeks, with spread legs and extended arms, observing the moon with frowning concern, or the sun with apparent indifference.

Actually, Aranda's ideas had produced good results. It was he who suggested creating a second encampment, much more illuminated than the first. Following his instructions, multiple sound systems were installed, attracting the wanderers' attention like insects to light. They came in hordes, and they would surround it, never withdrawing, in the attempt of intrusion; ripping their flesh on the fences, decaying in the acid mire, to be finally blocked by the walls and trucks that served as barricades. Since then, the real encampment enjoyed much more peace. Having the dead pursue the wrong place was psychologically positive for all of the survivors. Most of all, freeing themselves of the noises had worked wonders on the hearts of these men and women solely preoccupied with survival. Noises of death and ruin; the slow, muffled taps on the walls, with no trace of rhythm. Or the muted sound of bodies brushing against each other in the dark. Occasionally, the abominable gurgle of a throat filled with a swampy paste of dry blood and dirt. All of that had finally ceased. The dead were stalking the fake encampment.

Susana walked the distance to her bedroom, entered and secured the door with multiple locks and bolts. She then turned to face the darkness of her little apartment. That was when she closed her eyes and breathed deeply, preparing to enjoy alone the remaining hours of the day. Time for herself that no dark thoughts could violate. Then she would undress, freshen up and lie on the bed. She liked to stay quiet, concentrating on not thinking, at least until sleep would overcome her. It wasn't often that she could empty her mind; images and memories would quickly interpose. Most of the time her subconscious had other plans for her, and would insist on going back, time and again to the past. To the beginning. Even before that... to when life was normal and people died, and stayed dead.

II

Julio was twenty-one when he first saw a corpse. It wasn't a horrible corpse, it wasn't decayed, nor had any wounds. It was just white, as white as snow. It looked that way

because it had just been taken out of the bottom of the beach. He had drowned.

The police naturally didn't let anyone get close, but Julio and the others had a good view from the top of the breakwater. It was said that a German woman had found him while taking a walk at dawn; the tide had dragged him, naked and stiff as an old log, to the shore. The police had taken pictures, talked with the German lady and written many notes. They had examined the corpse and finally covered it with a sort of dark canvas, with the shine and texture of plastic. Julio had seen all of it from his privileged position.

Just ten minutes later, while the judge and the police exchanged documentation, the cadaver shook so hard the canvas slid off to the side. Everyone turned to look. Julio watched with fascination; the sun bathed his white, moist skin, giving it a soap-like appearance. Clumsily, the drowned man began to sit up while making grunts and harsh gurgling sounds. His arms trembled; it looked like he was going fall head first into the sand at any moment. Two of the policemen, finally coming out of their state of shock, ran towards the man and held him by the arms to help him stand up.

But then... then the drowned man attacked one of the police officers with unmeasured violence. He tackled him on the sand while his partner still tried to determine what was happening. His head was a like a hammer; going up and down in a crazed dance while biting in to the policeman's face, who was trying to protect himself with his arms. Unsuccessfully; because soon his arms were also full of blood. Finally, a few men threw themselves on the drowned man to hold him down. The scene was splattered with screams.

Julio and his companions were petrified. Blood gushed out of one the officers on the ground, while the other held his arm in pain. The drowned man fought on, possessed by some kind of primary and brutal dementia. Finally one of the policemen pointed at him with his gun and shot him in the leg. The false drowned man fell to the ground, but the wound didn't bleed. The sunken flesh was a black and ominous cave; the drowned man got back up without showing any pain at all, and his look was full of ruthless tenacity.

Julio unconsciously stopped breathing. His stomach had contracted until it hurt. A second shot made him shiver from head to toe. It was the same leg. Tiny, horrifying blood clots flew out of the back of his leg, but he didn't stop. The policeman hesitated and then shot a third time, this time somewhere near the collarbone, but not even then did he stop.

Prey to panic, the policeman fired a fourth shot. This time the impact reached his jaw and made bits of flesh and teeth fly off in each direction; and not even that stopped him. There were screams of terror. Someone had picked up a rickety stick and was hitting the drowned man from behind. The missing jaw now oozed a dense black mass that dropped in clumps on his bloated chest, but his white hands still desperately reached for the policeman.

A fifth shot hit the drowned man over his right eye. The impact entered cleanly and made him retreat two steps. There, he squinted in confusion and finally fell flat on the ground, without flexing his knees or stretching his arms.

Julio found himself on his feet. All of them had stood up and withdrawn several steps. The hazy four o'clock sun dyed the scene with golden tones, and the drowned man's skin reminded Julio of fried chicken. The fallen policeman was finally being attended: he had lost consciousness and his face was a repulsive sight of blood, flesh and exposed muscles. His nose was an unrecognizable stump. Several men dazedly

stared at the drowned man's corpse, their mouths covered by trembling hands. Their eyes went over the open wounds, but hardly anyone said anything.

"What the hell happened?" bellowed one of the men while he erratically moved from one place to another. "What the fuck happened?"

And then, as if they had been triggered into action, the others started reacting and hastily interacting.

"Fuck... fuck...fuck..." repeated another man.

"...yes my partner's hurt...No, no, it's over... at the Cala beach, at the entrance, an ambulance... babbled the policeman on his radio.

"... fuck... fuck..."

"He's dead."

"...my God, someone call..."

"Fuck, he's dead!"

"...shit!"

In the middle of the racket, Julio knew that the police officer on the ground had died. His blood had darkened an enormous amount of sand underneath his immobile body.

"My God..." Alberto, one of his companions, suddenly said. "That was intense."

"Ho... ly... shit..." mumbled another, making sure he accentuated each syllable.

"That son of a bitch..." said Alberto "Damn!"

"...the mouth, the teeth..." murmured Flavio while he rubbed his growing goatee with disconcerting persistence.

Julio on the other hand, didn't yet dare to join his peers, who were gesturing more and more with their comments. Something was worrying him greatly. Something, about the whole scene was completely *wrong*. It screamed, denouncing that *something* wasn't working the way it should have been, and the feeling was so strong that Julio heard a high pitched noise droning in his ears.

"But he'd drowned..." Flavio said all of a sudden.

"How the hell was he drowned, man? You saw that son of a bitch ... bet he was dealer and when he got caught he went ballistic..." said Alberto.

"Yeah, right smartass. He was as a doornail, I swear..."

"Sure, asshole, we saw how dead he was; you're nuts... didn't you see what he did to that cop? Alberto retorted, in a visibly angry tone.

"Well he was dead, white as a sheet..." Flavio looked at the ground, trying to find some coherence in his own words.

Finally Julio spoke, in a clear voice:

"He *was* dead, but then he wasn't."

There were a few moments of silence. In their heads, they weighed Julio's words like you would taste a red chili pepper; afraid to bite, to assimilate the news in all of its meaning, because of what it would imply. Their gazes now turned, concentrating on the scene that was happening on the beach. Most of the men there were talking hurriedly: among each other. Some of them were bent over the corpse of the false drowned man, and a woman with long red hair pointed at the head wound with rapid gestures. The policeman was still talking on the radio, apparently agitated.

"This is fucking amazing." Flavio said.

At that moment another patrol car arrived. The two police officers got out of the car and easily descended the rocks that separated them from the beach. There were many

gesturing hands, trying to explain what had happened, and in the meanwhile, as the news spread, more and more inquisitive people came from La Cala and La Araña; two small towns nearby. A few moments later, the patrol car that had just arrived left with its siren on.

“Look at him” said Alberto, pointing at the policeman. “He won’t stop talking on the radio”

Julio looked. The truth is he hadn’t put the device down yet. He listened for some time while moving from place to place, turning quickly.

“What about the ambulance?” some voices asked him. The policeman pleaded them to stay calm with his hands.

However, the ambulance never arrived.

Thirty-two minutes later, the amount of people crowding around the scene was overwhelming. Julio, Alberto and Flavio had managed to stay in front, following the developing events with morbid fascination. Around them, the onlookers shared every possible type of story. A lean, grey haired guy, once a truck driver, who lived in one of the old little houses that used to belong to the fishermen of La Cala –before tourism reached its peak and permanently changed the town- assured that his brother-in-law, who had been a fisherman his whole life, had once seen several humanoid shapes diving at full speed underneath his boat, on a good night in June, one day after full moon. It was clear to him that there was a population of pale, and bloodless beings without pulses capable of violence beyond comparison, living the in the abyssal trenches of La Cala. Two chubby ladies who were chattering next to him were positively scandalized that someone, in the middle of that situation, would let himself get carried away by such nonsense.

But the unequivocal and fascinating reality of a drowned man, already pale and bloated by the salty water, who had been officially declared as dead, and left underneath a plastic canvas, who had risen to partially devour a police officer, was on the tip of everyone’s tongue.

Approximately one hour after the police officer had died, a wave of screams sprouted from an undetermined spot on the beach, and it relentlessly extended, like a foul and furtive fart, to all of the people present. The reason was the old plastic canvas that was now covering both bodies; that of the defaced policeman and the false drowned man. It was moving. Yet again.

III

At Carlos Haya Hospital’s morgue, in Malaga, the main person in charge of the mortuary, Antonio Rodriguez, could appreciate the costs of undocumented immigration differently than other government employees did. At the time he had to face a severe overload due to a shipwreck that had been found to be the final resting place of six dozen immigrants.

Rodriguez opened the door to the refrigeration room, where the corpses where stored. It was impossible to make way through it; there were so many bodies on the

floor, shrouded with the hospital sheets they had been wrapped in or still dressed with the clothes they died in. The cadavers were piled around the walls, two for each cell. In a second refrigeration room the cells were narrower, and for this reason Mr. Rodriguez only had one horrible alternative; to pile the bodies on top of each other, which would result in crushing their faces, or leave the bodies outside, in the lobby, where refrigeration was non-existent. Mr. Rodriguez was opposed to deforming the bodies, and that was the reason why a couple of cadavers had been left outside, on stretchers, behind a curtain. The smell of decay was not very strong, but it was sharp.

“Is that all?” asked one of the assistants.

“Yes, that was the last one...” he answered, visibly upset. He was looking over a list and writing some information on it. Tomorrow the ones that are leaving will have to be embalmed; I think they’ll be traveling for more than seventy-two hours.

Rodriguez took a moment to look at the cadavers that they had arranged. He knew it was a temporal solution until tomorrow, but he felt very bad for not being able to give the bodies a better accommodation.

“We should leak this to the press, so they’ll finally enlarge the damn place.” he distractedly commented. His eyes were fixed on a birthmark on one of the bare feet, it was heart-shaped. “Send them a fucking picture of this shit; you know what I mean...”

“If you’re going to do it I’ll give you my digital camera.” answered the assistant, without taking his eyes off his list.

“This is not acceptable man.”

“No, it’s not.”

“It’s...”

At that moment, Rodriguez’s calm and monotonous life changed forever. There were going to be no more beers after work at Oña cafeteria, nor would he ever celebrate the traditional “Friday Night DVD Sale” again. Nor was he ever going to have stew at his mother’s house, or drink that Russian vodka with his friend Paola on Christmas Eve again. And that full stop arrived with the tremendous spasm of one of the cadavers. It shook with such force that one of the bodies next to it rolled and heavily fell to the ground with a muted thump.

Rodriguez sharply started.

“Shit!”

For a few seconds, he and his assistant were silent; the humming sounds made by the neon lights and the gigantic refrigeration chambers filled the air. But finally, similar spasms started going over several more bodies. And then they began to get up.

Rodriguez couldn’t believe it. He looked around, resting his gaze on each body that sat up, with more or less difficulty, their eyes white and mouths open. The sheets fell to the side, arms lifted and hands shaped into claws and closed fists. While sitting up, most of them were rasping horribly, or making terrible gurgling, muted guttural sounds, and a woman with frizzy hair vomited a blackish liquid paste.

“What...What...?”

“My God, what...? He-help...Help!”

The young assistant quickly approached the first man. Rodriguez couldn’t move. He found himself watching how his assistant held the man by his shoulders and asked him if he was all right. “Are you all right?” he asked, “Are you all right?” And the colored man, with generous lips and hard features, looked at him as one awakening from a deep

sleep, and little by little, his features changed from perplexity... brutal stare full of hate. "Rooted" thought Rodriguez, incoherently. "He has hate rooted in his eyes." He wanted to warn his assistant, but he was unable to saying a word.

Suddenly, although he couldn't really say how, his assistant was stupidly smiling at one of the boys, who had crawled to his leg and now held it with both hands. The other man moved his head between spasms, trying his best to open his mouth. This was apparently very difficult for him. The rest of the men slowly evolved, moving as a wave. Some squinted at the ceiling; others moved their hands in strange gestures, as if they were trying to reach an invisible goal in front of them.

"What... what are you doing? Come on, let go...mister... mister let go!

Rodriguez wanted to close his eyes. He sensed what was going to happen. He *knew* what was going to happen. He saw it in the watery, dead eyes of all of those people. But he still wasn't able to react.

"Let me goooooo!"

When the man who held his assistant's leg sank his teeth into it, the latter screamed. And he was still screaming when the man he had attended sank his face into the curve of his neck and stayed there among continuous and horrible gushes.

IV

Nobody exactly knew how it had started. The world had destabilized much before any scientist could have given any explanation, theory or hypothesis. No television program lasted long enough to theorize about the problem. At first you could see it on the television. It was talked about...very little at first, but afterwards more and more; on trashy night shows, on the night shows with highest audience ratings, until nothing else was talked about, and the *biggest news of the year* drowned everything else out. The first images were shown on the program TNT –or so Susana recalled- and the words "living dead" were pronounced for the first time. But at the time the whole subject wasn't very different from UFOS or the faces of Belmez¹, and you could still smile with self-sufficiency and feel far away from all of those hoaxes. Even when they showed enormous amounts of horrifying images of crazed people attacking other human beings on the Channel 2 News, and later on they stopped showing documentaries, yet continued talking about the incidents. Yes, that's when you would worry. Strange incidents at a morgue in Madrid... in a hospital in Saragossa, in Huelva. Everywhere. In one hospital, in five more. A car pile up that ends in butchery when one of the victims violently attacks one of the emergency service boys and cleanly rips out a piece of his throat with his teeth. A suicide that spectacularly falls from a twelfth floor terrace and starts to shake inside his body bag sixteen minutes after a judge had declared him dead. But after a few days, you knew that things were really bad because you saw it on the streets. A crashed ambulance, abandoned on a busy street, or a police officer who turns

¹ Translator's note: the faces of Belmez are famous apparitions in the shape of human faces on a cement kitchen floor in a house in Belmez de la Moraleda, Spain. Some parapsychologists consider it a legitimate sign of paranormal activity, although others call it a scam.

you off when coming from Cartama, because apparently, some vandals are causing problems in the San Miguel Cemetery. But you know they aren't vandals. You could see it in their faces.

The psychological blow of the dead coming back to life was swiftly accepted once twenty-four hour emergency bulletins were broadcasted on every television. By then, the cities were already somewhat immersed in disorder due to the fact that each person that died came back to life from an hour and a half up to two hours later. The cemeteries, hospitals, churches... and the dark and humid basement of some retirement home were controlled as soon quickly as possible, although by then, numerous problems had already been registered.

It turned out that Malaga was hiding corpses in the least expected places. Any given day in October, the Calypso gas station in Mijas Coast, was the scene of a macabre spectacle of cannibalism and mass infection when none less than seven cadavers abandoned the refrigeration chamber of a restaurant cover-up business, run by a Dutchman who worked trafficking weapons for the mafia. The seven cadavers broke out in the sunlight on Monday, at eleven forty in the morning, and cut a nineteen year-old North Korean girl named Yhin Un's throat, and attacked the gas station, ending the lives of four Swedes and two Spaniards who were at the time inside shopping.

At one twenty, a spasmodic horde of wanderers was blocking the national highway number 340, causing accidents. At a quarter past three, twelve living dead, dressed with Gaspar's Movers work clothes, were in a nearby chalet, chewing slowly and delightedly on the lifeless body of an old woman suffering from osteoporosis.

When such scenes repeated themselves in different points of the same city, mobile phone communications began to suffer considerably. After a few hours, it was even impossible to communicate by landline. An automatic elocution informed that the landlines were overburdened. "Please try again later." Checking CNN on the Internet to see how the rest of the world was affected was becoming a veritable utopia.

Susana lived in a brick building right across from the Carranque sports center, about six hundred meters away from the Carlos Haya Hospital. The day hell broke loose the area was immediately affected by the chaos. It started at about ten thirty, when Susana was going home from shopping for a few things at the supermarket. An ambulance had stopped at the entrance of the emergency ward, and two policemen were conducting a man who fought with unusual force to free himself. There was blood on his face and on his tensed fists, and the multitude started to crowd around him.

"He came in the ambulance..." a lady commented to the group of people around her. Just then, a nurse came running out of the emergency ward towards the police, yelling something that Susana, who was on the other side of the street, could not hear. The policemen looked at each other, confused, and visibly fighting with much exertion to contain the convulsive detainee. Finally, with the help of a couple passer-bys, they introduced the detainee into the police car and after locking the door, they followed the nurse, running to the interior of the health center.

But almost everyone continued watching, in silence, the police car. It was shaking with intimidating violence due to the passenger's persistent blows. From the distance, Susana could see a storm of arms and legs senselessly attacking the sides and windows, while the car rocked from left to right, front to back.

And then, a strong, abrupt shot was heard, echoing among the building's towers.

Taking a hand to her chest, a woman emitted a muffled scream that was followed by and intense silence, only interrupted by the sounds of the prisoner inside the police car. By the time all of the heads were directed to the source of the sound, the hospital building, a muted murmur started coming *in crescendo*, a noisy clamor composed of voices and shouts blended with a new chain of shots. It was then when Susana understood what it was. Shots were being fired.

Some of the onlookers stumbled, withdrawing without looking back, while a large group of people hurriedly exited the hospital. There was anguish and terror on their faces. It was at the moment when Susana felt a wave of panic; an overwhelming feeling that started in an unspecific spot near her stomach that was rising like a boiling spring, up to the base of her brain, where it exploded like a hair-raising alarm. "It's happening" she thought, "It's happening here and now. It's really happening here right-at-this-very-moment". She had seen it on television, it was talked about at the cafeteria, and in the waiting room of her health center, but now it was right there. It was happening, it was right there, and it had surprised her with two blue and white plastic bags in her hands.

She felt the uncontrollable urge to run; run far away from there. If she could turn the corner, she wouldn't have to see any of it. If she could just turn the corner, the hospital would vanish from her sight, and she could get back home. She would spend the whole morning working on her computer, and it would all pass. After lunch, it would be over.

But when she turned the corner mixed with the people running in both directions, crossing the detained traffic, she knew that something had forever changed. She smelled it in the air. She saw it etched in people's faces. She felt it in her own skin. She speedily walked to her building's entrance and locked herself in the safety of her home. There she drank two big glasses of water, and took a third to the large windowsill in the living room, that overlooked a wide, four lane avenue, with the sports center on the other side. From there, the perspective was a little better. The people, either ran, or stood still in groups, where they exchanged comments and pointed in several directions, gesturing exaggeratedly with their hands. The cars formed a great traffic jam, and many of the drivers had exited their vehicles to span the distance. Many of them pointed towards the hospital.

Approximately an hour and thirty minutes later, two patrol cars arrived. One of them was dented and had one side completely scratched. They advanced slowly as the curious got out of the way, due to all four lanes being collapsed. The four police officers got out of the cars and were lost from sight once they turned the corner in the hospital's direction. Out there, in the distance, Susana heard sirens, shots, and a deafening din of cries and shouts.

The scene continued without varying much for five more hours. In that time, the traffic jam barely dispersed, yet hardly any cars passed. Many of the drivers had mounted the sidewalk and had left walking, but at the end of the street, Susana could still distinguish many cars in line, empty, with open doors. By then there were hardly any bystanders on the sidewalks.

During that whole night, far away, the occasional columns of black smoke, a fire's glow or the constant come and go of sirens denoted that Malaga was enduring slow agony. When she looked out the window again, she saw that her neighbors were also looking from their own windows, and on each floor she observed that her neighbors talked among each other behind half-opened doors, ready to lock themselves in the

safety of their houses. But nobody went outside, if they could avoid it. Through those veiled conversations, full of rumors and gossip, Susana found a few things out. It was being said that the hospital area was sheer madness. There were policemen, wounded people, and big trucks where the violent ones were locked up. They had also cut traffic and sealed the building.

Television was not much help either. On Channel 1, there was talk of a wave of international violence. Scenes that showed fires, commotion, and harrowing attacks jumped on the screen in an upsetting succession. In Madrid, Barcelona... but also in Beirut, London, Libya. In one of the images, a uniformed officer fired at point-blank range at another officer whose shirt was ripped. On Canal Sur 2², the unexpected sight of cartoons made her blink for a few moments, trying to understand. It later changed... Antena 3, Telecinco... Canal Sur. On every channel, they spoke in terms of irrational attacks, a situation of generalized chaos, an uncontrollable wave of terror.

Susana watched the images for twenty minutes, unable to react. Later, she abruptly turned the old television off, and walked for a long time throughout the house.

Later, on that same day, the electricity started to fail.

At first, the electricity flow came and went. Some areas were more affected than others, but it wasn't long until the electricity didn't turn back on. By then, nobody went to their respective jobs. The roads were empty, and the night air brought strange noises that didn't seem to come from anywhere. This made the new reality harder for them all, because nobody knew what to do or how to face the situation. Susana had seen almost everyone leave. Even last night, two families hurriedly ran along the wide avenue carrying sizeable suitcases, and finally disappeared down the garage ramp. They told no one where they were going. But she stayed at home. She was folding summer clothes, and carefully putting them in their new covers until it was too dark to see. Every once in a while she would lean out of the terrace to look at the distance. It was disquieting to see how silent the avenue in front of her had become. The newsstand downstairs stayed closed, causing her much uneasiness, because it wasn't Wednesday. Nobody walked on the wide sidewalks, and Susana had the terrible feeling that everyone had already left. That everyone was elsewhere, except for her, and that the city was going to swallow her if she didn't do something soon.

But Susana still had not wanted to face the problem. She still unhooked the telephone every little while, trusting that she would be able to speak to someone once the technicians at Telefonica fixed the breakdown. The surrealism of the scene, the monotonous and decelerated message "please try again later" had become a future promise, and Susana called and called. She fell asleep at six-thirty in the morning, wrapped in turbulent dreams. At a quarter past ten, an ugly nightmare woke her with a start. She got up to drink water, but much to her dismay, she discovered that the faucet was dry. She spent the rest of the day trying to get a signal from the telephone. Nobody invited her to try again anymore.

At the end of the afternoon, when the dark was already devouring the eastern sky, she finally saw them. They appeared on the corner that led to the hospital. One wore a white lab coat. The other one was big and muscular, but he moved as if he were suffering from painful spasms. They walked together, slowly advancing through the halted traffic. They

² *Translators note: Canal Sur 2 and Canal Sur are both regional television channels from Andalusia, in the south of Spain. Antena 3 and Telecinco are national channels.*

crossed the street in an awkward manner, torpidly, dragging their feet with exasperating leisure, and finally disappeared behind the corner of the buildings on the other side. Susana watched them with incredulous fascination. They were *those things*. The ones on television. They were dead people, or so she thought. Dead things. The living dead. Now she had seen them. They were down there. That was the reason why the avenue was full of abandoned cars. That was the reason why everything had stopped working. Why there was no running water. The reason why her dreams were plagued with wet claws covered in clotted blood.

Shortly after ten, muted knocks on her door shook her out of her detachment. Susana ran to open it, as if the solution to that whole inconceivable situation were on the other side. But the languid and pale face of her neighbor, who awaited her wrapped in a cream colored shawl, discouraged her once again.

“You’re still here...” commented her neighbor with a neutral tone. Susana didn’t know if it was a question or an affirmation. The flattened hair on her forehead and the ashen color of her face gave her a disheveled look. Her faded eyes, revealed that, somehow, she had transgressed some time ago the limits of her ability to adapt to the new circumstances.

“Yes.”

They stared at each other for a few moments, uncomfortable, on the floor landing.

“Don’t you want to come?” finally asked her neighbor as if it had just occurred to her. “We’re leaving. We’re going to leave.”

“Where are you going?” asked Susana, doubtful.

“Well...somewhere else. In the car... someplace where there are people. There’s no electricity here, nor water...”

But at that moment, Susana *knew*. The certainty that going somewhere else was as useless as cutting water with a knife became so clear, that its comprehension almost fit in her mind with a sonorous *click*. She slowly refused, and something in her gesture made her neighbor understand the truth in her negation. She retreated two steps, watching her with bleak eyes, and disappeared down the hall without another word.

V

On the seventh day at dawn, things had gotten much worse. The bathroom gave off a consistent stench of feces and urine, so penetrating that when she opened the door she felt nauseated. She had to resort to a rag drenched with alcohol to be able to continue using it. In the kitchen, the provisions had run out. The dishes were piled up in rows on the counter and the sink. The candle reserves were all finished, and the consumed wax had been scraped from the ashtrays in a meager attempt of reusing it.

Susana looked outside, to the street. She still heard an incessant and monotonous murmur, blend of voices, some high screams, and far and deafened resounding similar to heavy machinery. But with exception of some car that cautiously passed in an unknown direction, the street remained mute and still.

She sat on the couch, facing the fact that she had to go down to the street. She was

thirsty. She had drunk all of the juice, the wonderful syrup that conserved canned peaches, the milkshakes and all of the milk. She still had butane gas but there wasn't anything left to warm up. The pasta, legumes, all of the stored rice... was gone, slowly devoured during the long hours of senseless and anguished waiting. The last meal had been yesterday night, and it consisted of an insipid can of mussels that were similar to buttons on a little communion suit in size and color.

She was on the landing, in front of the door. All of a sudden she came up with scores of reasons why she shouldn't abandon the safety of the house, but she convinced herself that it would be best to do it soon, before she became consumed with weakness. And so, with a rapid movement, she finally opened the door. The darkness of the floor welcomed her.

She scrutinized the exterior. It was dark and inhospitable; it did not remind her at all of the warm and familiar environment she had called home. Turning her head produced the same unpleasant sensation: she suddenly realized that her house was like a dark mouth, an unfamiliar pit. Motivated by that new awareness, she began to descend the stairs. One hesitating step, then two... and soon she was trotting down, until she finally reached the outside.

She inhaled the cool October air. The sky was a beautiful landscape of blue and grey hues, brimming with details and volume. From afar, the first rays of sunlight burst into orange streaks among leaden clouds. From the street level, Susana could contemplate the spectacle that she had been observing from the windows of her house in its whole magnitude. She remembered a scene taken from a catastrophic movie: abandoned cars in all four lanes, on the median strip, on the sidewalk, even with open doors; newspapers and bits of paper dragged by the wind, a shopping cart had fallen on of what looked like a bundle of clothing. Looking to the right, from a distance, Susana saw an enormous trailer stopped in the middle of the immense roundabout. And over the buildings that surrounded her, the air was fouled, as if the wind were to heavily drag the last traces of an extinguished fire.

She slowly made her way to the north, being sure to avoid getting close to any of the cars. She did not like them; so abandoned and still, they denounced that everything was wrong. Nevertheless, her short walk was occurring without surprises, and she almost started to feel better, when she turned the corner, and faced a scene she wasn't prepared for.

The hospital's access area was cornered by an irregular barricade of white and brown sacks. There were several trucks that appeared to belong to the army, they were dark green and had large open bodies covered with green canvas. There were also police cars, on one of them, the siren lights, almost extinguished, yet still flashed. There were boxes, piles of sheets and white clothes, a large desk that was partially destroyed, several chairs, and some large abandoned shelves piled on the side. Also, on the ground, there were cans, bottles, magazines, cardboard boxes, plastic containers, and more varied trash. And she hadn't yet assimilated this tremendous jumble, when she also saw the dead bodies on the ground. They were piled in a little garden, forming a horrifying amalgam. There were also a few limp bodies in several other places: next to the barricade, on the entrance stairs, in the middle of the ramp. One in particular, was no more than a naked torso in the middle of a hair-raising puddle of black blood. To complete the scene, most of the windows along the whole façade were broken.

Susana observed the cadavers with growing aversion. She knew perfectly by then what had caused that whole situation. And by that stage she could imagine why the hospital had become a battlefield; it was where people had gone once they got hurt, or when they had started to feel sick. And they died there either because of their wounds, or being attacked by the *things* that were already there. She thought about all of the sick people in their beds, in the morgue, in the autopsy room. So many corpses that suddenly came to life. And consequently, so many people that came back to life after dying, in turn infected others...

She shook her head, horrified, while imagining the halls infected by the living dead. Dead people visiting the beds, where the sick had not been able to escape or defend themselves. Then she suddenly broke down, bitter yet silently sobbing, which she muffled with her hands covering her contorted face. She finally wept, after a week of mute horror, surrounded by the defeated remains of a fight for life. And her tears were good... they partially dissolved a malign and swollen knot that had sprouted inside her during the whole journey. Twenty minute later, a discarded piece of paper which flew with the wind from one place to another, found Susana in the same place, still leaning against the wall, her countenance was altered; serene, and her eyes absent.

VI

A few weeks before Susana finally cast out her little demons, a corpulent Moroccan with an aquiline nose, beautiful sparse beard, and sharp features walked at a resolute pace through Beatas street, right in the middle of the city center. It was a pedestrian only street; even before most of the streets in the city center were made inaccessible to cars, but at that time, at dusk, it was too empty. All of the streets were empty, because those were not good times, although the winds of Moses' life had never blown any different.

Since he was fourteen years old, Moses had tortuously navigated through the black channels of addiction. Soft drugs, hard drugs, designer drugs. He had taken heroin, pot, LSD... and he had drunk himself unconscious with alcohol almost daily. Addiction turned his life on and off like a switch. When it let him be, he earned his way scheming, like the rest of his friends. Then he worked hard, no matter what type of job it was; but when his disease brought him down, he ruined everything again. He would spend the night dragging himself through the street, or sleeping on a street corner drenched in urine, poisoned by hallucinogens or alcohol. And he spent daybreak shivering, feeling that his soul was getting cold.

He had been in the *clink* once, and he learned more there than he would have liked to know. And not all of it was good. The first six months were the hardest. He didn't understand a thing: jail talk, the codes for human relationships. He had to learn who could be spoken to and who could not. He learned to listen to up to ten conversations at the same time without opening his mouth, while wearing his poker face. But most of all, he learned who feigned to be a friend, and who really was.

There he met Cripple.

Cripple was mostly obstinate. Life continuously showed him an ample range of

horrible miseries, and he insisted on smiling, shrugging his shoulders, and continuing on. And the procession started early on. The same capricious yet idle pursuit had desired, at age two that his father, who was stuffed with barbiturates drenched in alcohol, would want to smother him. He still remembered the soft suffocating feel of his own hot breath inside his mouth, uselessly open as wide as he could. He didn't remember why his father stopped; why he never finished what he had started. But from that day on, his mother and he lived somewhere else, and he never again saw or asked about him. Thirty years later, when his mother was exhaling her last breath, she looked up and whispered, "There's another." Cripple did not immediately know what she was referring to, but he gave it thought, because it seemed to him that words said while slipping into the oblivion of death, must be important. He conjectured that it might well be a sibling; his mother's life had been very unorganized when she was young, but it could also be another father, a biological father. He didn't care much either way; his family environment had not helped him value blood ties, but in several occasions he surprised himself toying with the idea of having a brother, someone like him. Someone who understood the inherent darkness of his genetic legacy that was so hard for him to control.

"I may have a brother." He told Moses one day in the jail patio. "Out there, somewhere."

Moses reflected on his words for a few moments.

"A brother is a brother," he finally answered. "Don't even think twice about it, and look for him when you get out of here. Look for your brother."

Cripple nodded without lifting his gaze.

"I think that's what I'll do."

The two of them were silent for a good while. Cripple gave himself to the sweet daydream of thinking where he would start his search: his mother's old neighbors, the old neighborhood, and the old friends who were lost in the bends of life. He was outlining the draft of a plan, and it produced a warm feeling inside him, and he smiled, unknowingly, with small, absent eyes. Moses on the other hand, was thinking about how much he would have liked to have a family. Even if it were only a sibling. A cousin. Someone.

A few weeks later, freed from his sentence and sitting on a step in San Juan street, at about three thirty in the morning, Moses found Jesus at the bottom of a cheap bottle of wine. In fact, it was strange because after that night, Moses didn't ever feel the need to take any more drugs. He released himself from the *jones*; he stood up clean, feeling clearheaded and well. He told himself that he had finally made peace with the Boss.

When it was Cripple's turn to get out of jail, Moses was waiting for him. The ex-convict immediately detected the change: something about his tidy appearance and smile brought him promises for the future. Moses helped Cripple get back on the social train: a rent, a job, and responsibilities. He found him a job as a salesman at a well-known fabric store, and he kept him off the streets. It was there, shrouded by the dark night and evolving like dull ghosts, where that type of people moved.

As Cripple adapted to his new existence, Moses started to think about the search for his lost brother. He begged to God for him to exist, to be able to find him, and for him to be a good example for his companion, someone that would make sure that Cripple would not make another descent on the rapids of life's sewers. It took him several

months, but he finally found out that Mrs. Vaello had given birth to two sons: Alejandro and Josue Vaello, better known as “Cripple”.

He ascertained that mama Vaello had Alejandro when she still was not of age. He turned out to be a chubby and healthy baby with beautiful, round blue eyes. She was a drug addict and a human ruin in addition, so her parents trusted the child to their Argentinean side of the family, who were rapidly captivated by him. The couple, which could not have children, took him with them and cut ties. However, she didn't miss him until, many years later, she was pregnant again. The father wasn't a bad guy, at least not in the beginning, but the baby's arrival worked an important change in him: he turned intransigent, foul-tempered, and selfish. Whenever he approached the child –which on the other hand didn't happen often- every alarm went off. Something in the way he looked at him was frankly wrong. She felt it in her skin, in her pores, and on a cold January morning, she left.

When she looked at Josue, dressed in those precious little white threaded suits the Church would give her, her heart persistently went back to his brother, but Argentina was as unreachable for her as the Martian satellite Deimos, so she contented herself with taking care of her son as well as she knew how and could. His genetic legacy was not as good as his brother's, and Josue turned out having a deficient meniscus. His right femur was also shorter than the left and, consequentially, Josue had always limped.

Once he discovered all of that, he spoke to Cripple.

“You were right... you do have a brother.” he let out one night, during dinner.

Cripple lifted his head and studied his friend's face. He was holding the spoon with which he was devouring a garlic soup.

“You've been...investigating?”

Moses nodded.

“Have you seen him?”

“No. They took him to Argentina, before you were born.”

“What's his name?”

“His name is... Alejandro. But maybe his new parents changed it. Your mother never gave him his biological father's last name. She was a minor back then, and had problems with drugs, economic troubles... I don't think she knew who his father was either, so he was Vaello, like you.

Cripple moved, thoughtfully, the pieces of bread around his bowl of soup.

“Argentina...”

“I was looking on the Internet, but I didn't find anything. Vaello's a common name. I...I couldn't find anything else” he whispered. He had made a great effort, he had inquired, asking many people, searching the official registers in the province, but now he felt that he actually had very little conclusive information to offer his friend. He was feeling such a physical sense of frustration that he noticed his hands tingling. Finally, feeling that he should add something more, he ended with some words of apology.

“It's funny...” said Cripple after a while, this time without lifting his gaze, while slowly sipping his soup.

“What's that?”

“You were looking for my brother, but this whole time, I had already found him.”

“What?” asked Moses, without really understanding.

“You helped me in jail, and you helped me outside of jail. You helped me find

employment. You gave me a new life. You spent every weekend with me for months, so I wouldn't feel the temptation to back to the street. Do you think I haven't noticed? And now I find out that you spent I don't know how long trying to find a brother for me...

Moses, quiet, listened enveloped in a myriad of sensations.

"You know...? I say who needs him. You're my brother now, man. My family."

There was a short silence while Moses assimilated everything his friend had told him. Cripple, on the other hand, concentrated on eating the soup, with his head almost in his bowl.

"Well, well." said Moses finally. "Let's not suck each other's dicks."

They laughed heartily for a good while, and then they laughed again. Sitting in the small kitchen, vaguely illuminated by a drab, yellow neon ceiling light, both experienced an inner joy that was completely unknown to both of them: it was the invisible and intoxicating warmth of feeling part of a family.

The day the Hell closed its doors and ceased to let any more guests in, Moses was making deals at the flea market. He found and sold stuff, mostly things people didn't want any more: knick-knacks and small electronic devices found in the trash that he later fixed, but also magazines, decorative objects, furniture and, really, anything that could awaken someone's interest enough to be bought. He had a very good deal with a trucker kid who worked for the Operative Services of Mijas' Town Hall, and when there were interesting things to pick up, he would call him. It was outrageous what people threw out in upper class urbanizations such as Calahonda, Elviria or Cabopino. From working computers and related devices, to refrigerators in perfect conditions and even top of the line furniture sets.

"What some throw away, others sigh for." said Moses when the pieces were good.

On that luminous Sunday in September things had started getting complicated from the start. The local police cars, the municipal police and the Spanish Civil Guard continuously went from one place to another with their sirens on, and it had been a while since the two couples in charge of security had been summoned elsewhere. Ambulances and a fire truck also drove by.

"What the matter today?" asked the African man who attended the contiguous stand to Moses'.

"No idea..." he answered with his eyes half-closed, like he always did when he was thinking about something.

"Everybody crazy today, friend?"

"The world's always crazy..."

Moses continued placing the boxes of merchandise.

"This morning I hear problem, you know?" continued the African man.

"What problem?" Moses went on placing the boxes, without looking at him.

"In Madrid, in Madrid there be big problem. A persona, many persons, make attack to...building where people die, you know?"

"Hospital? A Hospital?"

"Nono, no hospital, when you die, you go from hospital to that place..."

"A...mortuary? A morgue?"

"Yes my friend, a morgue...that place. They really attacked it...I saw it on TV early today, yes...Something incredible!"

His gaze was absent, as if he were remembering the images he had seen in the

television. Finally, he shook his head and said a few words in Portuguese, to himself: “*A ruína de uma nação...*”

Moses briefly thought about what the African had just told him.

“And what the hell would someone want to attack a body deposit?”

“I don’t know, yes? But veeery very violent, friend, very strong that attack police, everything, everything...and then it cut off, yes? The TV was cut off all of a sudden,... and then a woman appear that talked from some other place and then you couldn’t see how they attacked, I think, that very strange, because television always always put most violent images, and most hard, yes? And that now today no police here? Today? This very strange, very strange...”

Moses felt a hint of concern. He looked around. To tell the truth, were there not few people there? He studied the faces of the people who walked from stand to stand, picking something up; looking at it with certain interest and putting it back down. There was a teenage couple that was joking about some sort of a bright red heart-shaped plush toy. The sun filtered through the trees and brought out beautiful sparkles in her hair. They were smiling, and their eyes were lit with the excitement of a first love. That image convinced him that nothing was going on, that it was Sunday, that the day was still long and beautiful, that life was wonderful, and that everything was finally good.

Some hours later, Moses was going back home in his old Renault van. Sales had not gone well, even worse than he had expected, but it would be enough to last the week. He could also drop by the Arcade and see if Paco, the manager, would pay him an afternoon or two; it all depended on the movie listings. With that he should have enough to last him until next Sunday.

He parked and went up to the little attic where he lived with Cripple. He found him there, hooked on the small red fourteen inch television set they had found some months ago.

“Afternoon... I’m here.” he said, letting himself fall onto a seat.

Cripple turned around, as if he had just noticed his presence.

“Hell, Mo...man you don’t know what’s happening.”

Those words awakened a deep feeling of alarm in Moses. It hit him fast, like a true bullet, accompanied by a siren that wailed like a devil. Deep down, he had felt it the whole morning; he felt it in his entrails, at the base of his neck. It was a sixth sense that he had forged throughout his life, and it was a sixth sense he trusted in. And God, how it *screamed* on that placid Sunday. It screamed that something was so wrong that he had better get some clean underwear and jump straight out of the damn planet. He held tightly onto the seat’s arms and considered running away. He didn’t want to hear it. He did not want to hear it from Cripple’s mouth. He didn’t want anything to change.

Cripple stared at him with his eyes wide open. He could not recall having ever had seen that expression on his face. “Jesus” he thought, “he looks like an unshaved version of Munch’s The Scream”. He cowered in his chair, like one expecting a bomb to fall on him. “Here it comes. He’s going to say it...”

“There are dead people coming back to life.”

Boom.

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