

At the Mercy of Another

My mind is a confusing and dark place, but the resolve and dedication to duty that I have self imposed offer a clear brilliance among all the shadows, and that is the main reason why I have not yet surrendered to adversity, despite the many mishaps that I have suffered. I have endured many blows, but I have always gotten back on my feet afterwards ready to confront the next, because I am convinced that what I do is necessary. It is a lonely, sad and ungrateful mission at times, but someone has to do it, and that one is me.

I finish my training panting and sweaty, and while my body goes back to normal I approach the window, whose blinds are half lowered, and beyond the curtains and the grille I can make out the quiet and motionless street, with no sign whatsoever of human activity over the asphalt lit by orange-colored streetlights. Nothing strikes me as uncommon, but I am distrustful by nature and it was long ago that I learned that looks are deceiving: that is one of the lessons that has kept me alive so far. The forces that pursue me, even darker than my inner self, are many and very able, and their inventive tricks may well include following my trail to this place and silently lying in wait. There is nothing out of their grasp.

More relaxed, I take a cold shower and put some clean clothes on. After a brief inspection all over the flat I get in the kitchen and get ready to make dinner. None of the safe houses that I have inhabited these years were too big, but they were all fully equipped. You have to look after yourself in order to continue fighting.

When I am done, I clean everything up and go over the situation again. I have stayed in this place for too long, and it is time to relocate, especially after the last events. In a few hours, before the sun rises, I will gather my handful of personal belongings—that lie already packed inside suitcases and bags

on the floor of the foyer—and flee the premises like I have done so many times before, to settle in a new town. Keeping on the move is the best assurance to stay safe, much more than the robust door or the reinforcements on the windows.

I take a few steps towards the bedroom, ready to get some hours of sleep, and right at that very moment the doorbell rings. I stand frozen, fearful. This is not a good sign. I am not expecting anybody, and as far as I am concerned my neighbors are not aware of my existence: I live like a ghost. I wait some seconds, and the person on the other side of the door insists. The best choice, I decide, is to pretend I am not at home and wait for him or her to leave. It is too late already to let something go wrong. Moving slowly and silently I approach the door, to try and take a look through the peephole, but my leg hits the corner of a cupboard producing a sharp and loud thud. Pain and anger overwhelm me as I curse my bad luck: it is useless to keep pretending now. And indeed, the stranger rings again, more persistently than before.

“Who is it?” I ask, while taking a look outside to see the small outline of a middle-aged woman, holding a folder and a pen, standing on the well lit landing.

“Good afternoon! I’m the president of the homeowners’ association. Sorry for bothering you at such a late hour, but there’s been a flood in the basement, where the storage rooms are, you know? And I’ve got to ask you for the key to yours, as we think the leak is inside that one...”

The woman smiles and talks in a sincere way. Even so I dislike the situation. I ponder my options, as I do not want to disrupt the safety of my shelter or change my plans, but if I do not attend to her request it could arouse suspicion and mean a problem, which would be worse in the long run. I cannot think of an alternative. Besides, helping out others has always been my weak spot.

“It’ll only take a moment, you don’t have to go down, I’ll bring it back to you in a jiffy.”

I hate being put in this circumstance, as setbacks annoy me as much as human contact does, but she is not going to magically vanish if I stay still and do nothing. A quick observation of her appearance, her facial expression and

behavior does not reveal anything that could signify a threat. It seems I am going to have to trust her. My storage room is empty anyway. I raise my hand to the drawer where I keep the keys, and unlock the many bolts of the door, before opening it.

A moment later, there is an abrupt fade to black.

What feels like an eternity goes by among a sea of nebulous daze, tainted in equal parts by random visions of past moments, and some flashes of clarity in which the world stops spinning around me. Bit by bit everything settles down and I regain consciousness, taking control of my body while an image progressively achieves consistency before me.

It is a hospital room.

I blink to clear my drowsy eyes. I feel now more tired than ever before, as if I had just slept over a century and still was not enough. Around the bed in which I am prostrated, apart from diverse medical equipment, there are several people looking at me. Two of them appear to be doctors, while the others are strangers with clothes as dull as their faces are earnest.

“How are you feeling?” questions one of those in a white coat.

They check my pulse, inspect my pupils with a flashlight, and glance over the data displayed on a monitor connected to a wristband in my arm. They ask me basic stuff to determine how well my head is working. They are kind to me, but the rest remain guarded, and when the doctors are finished with the check-up they make a gesture to indicate that everything is in order and that I am all theirs. Straightaway they walk off, leaving me alone with them.

“Mr. Martín, what is the last thing you remember?”

Good question. Truth is, I cannot tell. I was in the flat. Somebody rang the doorbell. The woman...

“You suffered a blackout and bumped your head. Craniocerebral trauma. You’ve been in a coma all this time.”

The head. I move it a little, clumsily. I feel very, very tired. It is hard to think...

"Mr. Martín, we are policemen. We have a few questions for you. We would appreciate if you cooperated with us, if possible."

A lightning bolt inside my skull. The police. That was it. The henchmen of this oppressive state I challenge day after day, hoping to eventually be able to destroy it. I have been captured, they have finally caught me. I should have never opened the door. It had been nothing but a trap. The memories of that instant spring to my mind, slowly, as I find hard to focus. My senses come and go, I have never felt so disoriented, as if half of my brain was still off. My head, my poor head.

"We'd like you to tell us everything about the Beatriz González case, if you please. We'd want to know the whole truth."

Her. The spy. One of their minions. She had followed and cornered me, but luckily I acted faster. There is no room for hesitation with these people, a single mistake and you are dead. If they really think that I am going to tell them anything, to cooperate, then it is them who have bumped their heads. I am their enemy, and as soon as they pry the information out of me, they will make me disappear. And I must stay alive to carry on with the war against this conspiracy controlling our lives. I can still escape from this. There are very few of us left standing up to them. Laboriously, because I struggle to move my tongue, I deny knowing what they are talking about.

"There is no need for you to worry, Mr. Martín. Whatever you tell us will not have any legal consequences. It all happened a long time ago. All the crimes have expired. We just want to close the case and learn the truth. And Beatriz's family would also want to move on, but they have the right to know everything."

I stare at them, skeptical. A long time ago? This was all a couple of weeks ago. How long have I...?

"We're sorry to tell you this, but you've been almost forty years in a coma."

Nobody speaks. Even the machine that monitors me seems to go silent. Forty years in a coma. Forty years lying on this bed, while out there the world

kept twirling around. It cannot be. All this time, forever gone to waste. Forty years.

“Take all the time you need. It is hard to take in, we know.”

I am not sure what distresses me more: having lost half my life plunged in the darkness, or all the harm they must have been doing unhampered. It is too mean to believe. No, it cannot be true. It is just another trap, one of their tricks, and so I tell them.

As the only answer, after exchanging a look, they help me up carefully and take me to the bathroom. They turn the light on and we approach the mirror. Laden with awe I see the image it reflects.

The face that it shows is the one of an old man. My face. The wrinkles cover my pale skin, that the passing of time seems to have treated badly. There are bags under my eyes, sagging, some warts. My gaze has lost all its sparkling energy. The hair has turned gray, at least in the areas unaffected by baldness, which I touch incredulous with an also creased and shaking hand. These forty years have transformed myself into an ailing elderly man, and there is no turning back. I am tired, very tired. My legs lose their strength and they have to grab me so I do not collapse. They carry me, sobbing, back to bed. For quite a while nobody says anything.

“It’s a great shock for you, having to accept all this. But you must consider that it could be even worse. You could still be in a coma... or dead. Now you have a second chance.”

My youth, my life has slipped through my fingers while I was not looking. Forty years...

“All that is part of the past, but the case is still open. When you showed signs of going to wake up, they warned us and we recovered your file. That is why we are here. If you can tell us anything about the whereabouts of the missing girl...”

I can barely think, and I sink into depression. The best decades of my life, forever gone. My youth, my energies. Nothing that used to worry me is of any importance now. I had never felt so alone, so tired, so miserable, so... so...

So...

Aching?

“We beg you to consider...”

I make a decision. Yes, now I see clearly what I must do. I raise my head and tell them everything they want to hear, where they must go look for. With enthusiasm, they jot everything down, make some calls and, after thanking me and wishing me a complete recovery, they leave, satisfied. The doctors come in again, and while one of them re-checks my status, the other offers me some pills and a glass of water.

“Take this. It will make your head feel better.”

I recognize the chlorpromazine tablets at first glance; that insidious, brain-washing poison that they have tried to make me take on several other occasions. I put the pills in my mouth and hide them under the tongue while pretending that I swallow them without protest. Pleased, the doctors leave, not before sticking a tube into the intravenous line, filling my organism with what is undoubtedly a sedative. I spit the pills, rest my head on the pillow and close my eyes.

When I wake up, I am not sure how much time has passed, but it does not seem too long. Certainly, not forty years. I feel in high spirits and I have gotten some of my vigor back. With care, I sit up and unplug the wristband, which apparently does not raise any alarms. I disconnect the IV, and a little blood comes out of it. I move stealthily to the bathroom, where I tear off some toilet paper and keep it pressed against the skin for a couple of minutes.

Afterwards, I look at myself in the mirror. It is incredible, absolutely incredible. Or rather, it is as credible as it could be. The talent and wittiness of it all imply that I can do nothing but admire them, they have done a really magnificent job. Slowly, I remove from my body all the make-up and prostheses they have used to turn myself into a decrepit old man. This action takes me a lot of time, as there are many changes to undo. When I am done, my looks are not exactly as I remembered, because they have shaved part of

my head and there are dark circles under my eyes, but at least they are not as pitiful as earlier.

I approach the room's only door. As the drugs clear off my body, my strength and vitality get restored. I will yet have to wait a few days for the mental blur to fully dispel, but I am no longer a helpless geezer. I put my ear to the door and listen, but I am able to hear nothing apart from the typical hospital murmur. I open it just an inch and peek out. Just as I suspected one of them has stayed behind to make sure I do not escape. He is with his back to me, bored, hands in the pockets. That favors me. I cannot face him in a fight, but I search around the room and grab a metallic waste container, blunt enough to knock him out. After waiting for the hallway to be clear of other people, I open the door fully and hit him hard on the back of the head. He falls backwards like a sack, and with promptness, I pick him up and drag him inside, closing the door. All this stuff leaves me winded, and I must sit down and wait some minutes, breathing heavily, till the dizziness goes away.

I search him. He is not carrying a gun, as they probably thought it would be too dangerous with me around. The only things I consider useful are the money in his wallet and a pocket knife. I pick them up and take his clothes off, as I will draw too much attention if I get outside in the hospital gown. I do not need the cell phone: I have no one to talk to and it would be easily tracked. I tie him up and gag him using some shreds torn off the bed sheet, and then I lock the doorknob from the inside before going out.

Hiding behind corners and pillars, and dissimulating as much as I can, I get outdoors through a fire escape that is left open to allow the personnel go out for a cigarette. Once on street level I try hard to control myself and not start running, although I would not be able to either, as my legs are still very tired. And my knee still hurts.

Ah, the knee. They had planned everything beforehand, but there is no way they could have anticipated that. The bump I received yesterday after the woman rang my doorbell still bothers me a little, and hurts to the touch, though it left no bruise. Damn, I still have a lot of stiffness from the push-ups I did before dinner. The medication they used to weaken my body and mind served their purpose well, but ultimately, due to this small detail, their

whole plan has gone to waste. I almost feel sorry for them, they had lied out everything with great ingenuity. They are a fierce enemy.

Several blocks farther I sight a bus stop in the middle of a long avenue. Public transport will be my best option: discreet, anonymous, and I am still very tired. I will feel safer after leaving the area, as sooner or later they will realize that I have fooled them and sent them on a false trail, and then they will try to contact the man they left on watch, to no avail. It is a matter of time before the alarm is raised, and I have to pick up my things and leave the city.

I sit on the bench to wait. The information display says that the next bus is due in five minutes. I meditate on everything that has happened, but a few moments later my thoughts are interrupted by an intruding figure.

It is a child, a little boy. I watch him out of the corner of my eye, while he crosses the street and comes towards this same bus stop, with no attempt at concealment. My instinct warns me of the possible threat, and memories of a similar situation two weeks ago, with that other girl, come to my mind. He approaches the bench and sits on it, just a few feet from me. He has a very good disguise, he is even carrying a brightly colored backpack. He stares at me.

"Hi," he says, his face lit up with a big smile. I greet him back acting all normal, keeping a neutral expression.

"You goin' to class too?" he goes on, cheerful.

It is exasperating. I see no end to this harassment. I look at him and he smiles, HE SMILES back at me, as if I did not know already he is one of them, another spy, just when I could almost taste freedom. These people are amazing, I tell myself. Their tenacity borders on the perverse. I look forward while I close my eyes and sigh, and I caress the knife in my pocket, thinking about how much work I still have to do.

