Don't Turn Off the Light

Eleven Stories

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Prologue

Almost everything that truly frightens waits for you to go still.

It doesn't break down the door. It doesn't scream. It doesn't chase anyone down a hallway. It knows it doesn't need to. It's enough to wait for you to turn off the television, for the street noise to fade, for the house to settle into that silence you thought was yours. It's enough that you're alone for the right amount of time.

You don't need monsters if fear already lives with you.

The eleven stories in this book bring no monsters from outside. The ones here were already within, in the places where one doesn't look because one believes them safe: the bed where you sleep, the hand that writes for you, your own voice, your own face, the person others believe you to be, the dead you love. Not one of them needs the night. They only need you to pay them attention. And once you do, they don't leave — because to look at one of these things is, almost always, to show it where you are.

There are no explanations here. Don't look for them. What is explained stops being frightening, and these stories don't want to comfort you: they want to walk with you until a certain hour and leave you there.

The title is not a metaphor. Read them during the day, if you can. And if you read them at night, as you almost certainly will, remember when you close the book that the last page doesn't turn anything off, that the house will be just as quiet, and that you'll still have to cross the hallway to your room.

Just in case.

Don't turn off the light.

1

The Man from the South

When Richard Hale died, in October of 1998, more than three hundred people attended the funeral. He was forty-six years old. Three gas stations. A yacht. A gun collection he showed off with pride to anyone willing to look. He liked being known. He liked people knowing his name before he entered a room. The police never found the body. Only the black Mercedes, stopped in the middle of a county road at four in the morning. The driver's door open. The keys still in the ignition. The engine still warm. And the marks of bare feet in the mud of the roadside ditch, advancing three steps, four, and stopping. Nothing more. Going nowhere. As if whatever had been walking had simply ceased to have weight midstride. His wife wept for years. His son stopped asking questions. Life went on. As it always does.

Twenty-two years later, the freelance photographer Gabriel Mercer was sent to southern Alabama to document allegations of labor exploitation. He had buried his father in March. They hadn't spoken in six years. And the strangest thing, the thing that genuinely kept him awake some nights, was that he could no longer quite remember why. There had been an argument. There had been a phone that stopped ringing. Then the habit of not calling became easier than the reason that had started it, and the reason, simply, was erased. He loaded his equipment into the car. He drove nine hours south. It seemed a blessing to have something to look at through a pane of glass. The cotton farm was legal. At least on paper. The workers were men and women with no documents, no medical records, no names on any list. The foreman, a thin man who never removed his sunglasses during either of the two hours, told Gabriel he could photograph whatever he liked. He said it without concern. He said it the way someone points at a wall. The heat didn't move. It hung over the fields like something solid, thirty-eight degrees at eleven in the morning, and yet not one of those men was sweating. That was the first thing he noticed. Dry shirts. Dry foreheads. Bodies bent over the plants in rows so straight they seemed drawn. They picked at the same speed. No one got ahead. No one fell behind. Gabriel raised the camera and shot, and the sound of the shutter was the only thing heard across the entire field. Not a cricket. Not a bird. Not the wind. At noon a bell sounded somewhere he couldn't see. Everyone stopped. At the same instant. Not a second later, not a second before. The same instant. They ate standing, looking at the ground, tin spoons scraping tin plates. No one spoke. No one raised their eyes toward the stranger with the camera, not even with the

animal curiosity of looking at something that moves. A woman ate with her bare feet sunk in the mud. Gabriel thought, vaguely, that someone should give her some shoes. He didn't think about it again until much later. He took hundreds of photographs. He filled two memory cards. He left before sunset because, without being able to explain it, he didn't want to be there when it began to get dark.

It wasn't until two days later, back at the motel, reviewing the images on his laptop, that he dropped his coffee cup. He enlarged one of the photos. Again. Again. The man with the straw hat. The nose crooked to the left. The scar above the right eyebrow. The jaw that had at some point been broken and never healed right, giving the face an asymmetry that no chance resemblance could reproduce. It wasn't a resemblance. It was him. Richard Hale. Twenty-two years later. Older. Thinner. The skin cured like leather forgotten in the sun. But him. Gabriel's first impulse wasn't to call a newspaper. It was to reach for the phone to call his father, who had been a policeman in the county for thirty years, who had every old case in the whole region committed to memory. He dialed three digits before he remembered. And he hung up. And he sat on the edge of the bed, in a room that smelled of dampness and cold tobacco, holding a dead device in his hand.

The following morning he drove three hours to New Orleans. He found Susan Hale. The widow. Seventy years old. Arthritis in her hands. A Bible lying open face-down across her lap, like a resting bird. She studied the photograph for a long time. She didn't cry. She didn't shout. She looked away slowly, toward the window, toward the street, toward anything that was not that face. —It can't be. —Susan, look at him. —No. —It's Richard. —Richard died. —Then who is that? The woman took several seconds to answer. When she did, her voice came out small, from somewhere deep inside. —I don't know. —It's your husband. —My husband had a name. —She closed the Bible. —That thing there has nothing. And then she began to pray, in a low voice, without looking at him again, until Gabriel understood that the visit was over.

He published the story. Other newspapers rejected it. The forums filled with mockery. Fake, Photoshop, a man in mourning searching for ghosts in every old face. Two years passed, but Gabriel couldn't let it go. He went back. The farm had disappeared. Not closed, not in ruins. Disappeared. Empty land, tall grass, not a single structure standing. Where the barracks had been there was not a plank, not a nail, not the mark of a foundation. The people in the nearest village swore it had been abandoned for more than fifteen years. There were no recent property records. No work contracts. No aerial photographs showing anything. Gabriel looked for his own, the satellite images, the cadastral maps. In all of them, the same vacant lot. In all of them, empty. Except for one thing. On the edge of the old property there was a wooden Baptist church, painted white a long time ago; peeling, its windows boarded up. Inside, by the light of some candles, a Haitian elder was cleaning the melted wax from an altar someone had built from fruit crates. She must have been ninety years old. Perhaps more. Gabriel showed her the photograph of the man in the straw hat. She showed no surprise. She asked nothing. Her fingers, above the candle, trembled slightly. —Did you know him? —Gabriel asked. The old woman shook her head. —No. —Then what is this? —It's sad. —Who is he? She raised her eyes. They were very pale, almost without color, like dirty water. —No one. —He has a name. His name is Richard Hale. —Had. —What does that mean? The old woman studied him at length. And for the first time in the entire conversation she seemed frightened. Not of

the photograph. Of Gabriel. —Why are you looking for him? —Because I want to know what happened to him. She closed her eyes. —The living always want to know. —Tell me what he is. —What for? —Because it's impossible. —Gabriel's voice broke. —A man can't go on looking the same twenty-two years later. He can't be in a field that doesn't exist. It's impossible. The old woman crossed herself, slowly, without stopping to look at him. —No. Her voice was barely a breath among the candles. —What would be impossible is if he still remembered who he is. She put out the candle with two fingers. —Go home. And don't look at that photo at night.

Gabriel went home. He stopped investigating. He tried to convince himself it was all a mistake. A coincidence. A resemblance. A crazy old woman in a smoke-filled church. Anything. But three years later, finally emptying the boxes of his father's things that had been in the garage since the burial, he found a photograph. A party. Miami. The back said, in his father's handwriting: 1997. In it was Richard Hale, one year before his disappearance, smiling with a beer in his hand, alive, whole, master of the world. And behind him, almost out of frame, there was an elderly woman. Small. Dressed in white. Not looking at the party. Not looking at Richard. Looking at the camera. Gabriel recognized the face instantly. It was the old woman from the church. The same woman. Exactly the same. Twenty-three years before. Without a single additional wrinkle. Without a single wrinkle fewer.

That night he didn't sleep. He sat in front of the computer. He scanned both photos. He placed them side by side and enlarged until the faces filled with grain. He compared the eyes. The mouth. The way she held her hands clasped over her belly. It was her. He opened the drawer. He took out the photograph of the man in the straw hat and placed it beside the party photo. And then he understood something. Something that made him get up and vomit in the bathroom sink. Because until that instant he had been asking himself: what did they do to Richard? But there was a worse question. One he hadn't dared to frame. If Richard was still alive twenty-two years later. If that woman hadn't aged in all that time. If both appeared in places where no one had seen them enter. Then the question wasn't what. The question was since when. And at the bottom of the pile, at the very bottom of his father's box, there was a third photograph. Smaller. Black and white. The corners eaten away. A group of young men in front of a car, laughing. Gabriel recognized his father among them, twenty-something, thin, a whole life ahead of him. Behind the group, out of focus, there was a small woman dressed in white. Looking at the camera. On the back, in the same handwriting, it said: Miami. June 1971. And below, in darker ink, written much later, a single sentence: I will never speak again of what I saw that night.

Gabriel went very still. The house was quiet. And suddenly he recognized the silence. It was the same silence as the field. The silence without crickets, without wind, without anything. The silence that had gotten into his car that afternoon in Alabama and that now, he understood, had been waiting for years in some room of his own house. He looked again at the photo of his father, from 1971. The woman in white no longer seemed to him to be looking at the camera. She seemed to be looking, slightly off to one side, toward the right. Toward a point outside the frame. Toward whoever held the photograph. Toward him. His father had seen something on a night in 1971 and had chosen to be silent forever. And because he was silent, he lived, and aged, and died still being someone with a name that fit on a gravestone. Gabriel, on the other hand, had looked. Had asked. Had spoken. He

wanted to say his own name aloud, just to hear it, to make sure it was still there. He opened his mouth. And for one second, just one, he couldn't remember why he had stopped speaking to his father. Nor the name of the street where he had grown up. Nor the face of his mother. The second passed. Everything came back. But Gabriel remained sitting in the darkness, with three photographs on the table and his heart pounding, understanding at last why the old woman had been afraid of him and not of the photo. Because he was the new one. Because he still had something to lose. He turned off the screen. He did not turn off the light. That night he didn't dare sleep.

2

The Hollow

The house smelled the same.

That was the first thing, and it nearly undid her. Thirty years, and the entryway still smelled exactly the same: of old-wall dampness, of the furniture wax, of something sweet that Marta had never been able to name and that was, simply, the smell of her mother.

She had come back to help empty it.

Her mother was moving to a smaller apartment, more comfortable, closer to everything. The house was being sold. Forty years had to be packed into boxes, decisions made about what to keep and what to throw away, and fond arguments had to be had about dishes no one had used since a wedding in the seventies.

Marta had a good memory.

She always had. It was almost a point of pride. She remembered the crack in the bathroom ceiling shaped like a river. The third stair that creaked. The pattern of the kitchen tiles, which she had counted so many times as a child that she still knew exactly how many there were. People would recount episodes from their own lives and she would correct them, and she was almost always right.

So when they moved the wardrobe, she didn't understand.

It was the wardrobe from her old room. A huge piece of furniture, in oak, that had been there since before she was born. The two of them pulled it away from the wall, panting, to wrap it in blankets.

And behind it there was a door.

Small. White. At a child's height. With a simple latch, the kind you open with two fingers.

Marta stood staring at it.

She had slept in that room until she was eighteen. The wardrobe had always been pressed against that wall. She would have seen it. A thousand times. Ten thousand times. A door doesn't hide itself for an entire childhood.

There was no door.

There had never been a door.

—That was always there —her mother said.

She said it from the hallway, without coming closer, without alarm, in the easy voice of someone commenting on the weather.

—Mamá, there was no door here.

—Of course there was. —Her mother kept wrapping a plate in newspaper, without looking up. —That's where you used to play. You'd spend hours in there, don't you remember? Writing on the wall with your pencil. There was no getting you out.

She said it tenderly.

Like a fond memory.

Marta let out a laugh that didn't come out right.

Her mother shrugged and went back to her plates, without insisting, without defending herself. She wasn't lying. She wasn't arguing. She simply remembered a different childhood from Marta's, one in which there was a door, and a little room, and a happy girl who wrote on walls.

Marta knelt down.

She pushed the latch open with two fingers.

And she opened it.

Inside, the air was dry and old, the air of many years sealed away, and it touched her face like a breath.

It was a small room.

No windows.

About the size of a built-in closet, perhaps a bit larger. Bare walls, bare floor. There was nothing.

Nothing except the writing.

All four walls, as far as the little light coming through the door reached, were covered in words written in pencil. Hundreds of times. Thousands. Two words, repeated until they filled every centimeter.

DON'T OPEN.

DON'T OPEN.

DON'T OPEN.

Marta entered on her hands and knees, because she couldn't stand upright, and followed the lines with her eyes.

Up near the ceiling, the letters were large, round, careful. The handwriting of a girl who is making an effort, who respects the line even when there is no line.

Further down they became quick. Crooked. The same hand, but in a hurry, as if writing slowly was no longer enough.

At the baseboard, in the corners, the last ones were made by a hand so small and so rushed they could barely be read. Nervous marks, cramped, layered one over another.

And all of them, every one, was her handwriting.

Not similar.

Hers.

That odd way of closing the letter A, the one her teacher had tried without success to correct. The R that always came out lopsided. It was her hand. The one from then and the one from now. She recognized it the way you recognize your own face in an old photograph.

Without realizing it, she did what she used to do as a child when she was frightened.

She put the pencil in her mouth.

And only then, with the soft wood between her teeth, did it occur to her.

She didn't remember having brought a pencil.

Marta went very still, on her hands and knees, in that airless room.

And she began to understand.

Because at first she had read it the way anyone would. A frightened girl writing to herself. A strange game played by a lonely child. The easy question, the one that almost brought tenderness: what kind of child writes that, to herself, a thousand times?

But the warning wasn't in the past.

It didn't say "I didn't open." It didn't say "don't you open it, you who will come to play later."

It said DON'T OPEN. Now. Imperative. Directed at someone who would be standing, or on her hands and knees, in front of the wall, with a hand on a latch.

Directed at an adult woman.

At her.

The girl wasn't playing. The girl knew. She knew that one day, many years later, she would come back transformed into something else, into someone grown who would no longer remember her, and that this someone would find the door and open it. And she had spent hours. Hundreds of hours. Thousands of repetitions, until her fingers gave out, trying to reach across all those years to stop this exact moment.

This one.

The one happening now.

And she had already opened it.

She was inside. Reading the warning. Too late.

It was then that she saw it.

Down near the floor, among the hundreds of strokes faded by time, there was a different line.

Darker.

Fresh.

The graphite still gleamed a little, the way pencil looks when it's been written recently, days ago, weeks at most.

And this was not a child's handwriting.

It was adult handwriting.

Firm. Large. With the odd A and the lopsided R, but the steadiness of an adult hand.

It was her handwriting from today.

DON'T OPEN.

Marta didn't remember having written it.

She backed out, not standing, scraping her knees, not daring to turn her back on the wall.

In the kitchen, her mother was humming.

—Did you find anything good in there? —she asked, without turning around.

Marta didn't answer.

She picked up her bag. She said she'd lost track of time, that she'd come back another day to continue with the boxes. Her mother kissed her and told her to drive carefully, as she always did, as if nothing at all had just happened.

She drove the two hours back without turning on the radio.

And along the way she told herself things.

That her mother was getting old. That old people's memories invent things, fill in gaps, soften edges. That as a child one forgets entire rooms, entire houses. That the fresh graphite was nothing, a trick of the light, a smudge. That she had a good memory, the best, and if she didn't remember that room it was simply because it hadn't been important.

By the time she arrived home, she almost believed it.

Almost.

A few days passed.

Her apartment. Her life. Her things in their places. Her name, Marta, on the mailbox, on the bills, on the mug someone had given her that she used every morning.

She was in the kitchen, making the shopping list. Milk. Bread. Something for dinner. A pencil in her hand, a piece of paper stuck to the fridge.

She glanced up for a moment toward the window.

When she looked back down, her hand had carried on by itself.

Below the milk and the bread, in round, careful, deliberate letters, a girl's handwriting making an effort, the paper said:

DON'T OPEN.

DON'T OPEN.

DON'T OPEN.

Marta didn't remember having written that.

She didn't remember lowering the pencil.

And then, slowly, the way cold water rises up your legs, she understood about the fresh line.

The one in adult handwriting, down on the wall, near the floor.

She had written it herself.

Not as a child.

Recently. Weeks ago. On a visit to that house that she was no longer able to remember having made.

She had been inside the room before, already as an adult. She had read the warning. She had added to it one more time, with her adult hand. And she had left. And she had forgotten everything, the door, the room, the entire trip, the way she couldn't remember right now having written on the paper on the fridge.

Each return erased the one before it.

The wall was the only thing keeping count.

The only thing that knew how many times she had already entered that room, and come back out with a little less of herself.

She looked at the paper on the fridge.

She looked at her own hand, which was still holding the pencil, and which seemed to her, for an instant, smaller than it should be.

She tried to let go of the pencil.

Her hand didn't let go of the pencil.

And Marta, standing in her kitchen, two hours from her mother's house, knew she was already on her way. That she would go back. That she always went back. That somewhere in that wall there was still a small empty space, low to the ground, at floor level.

And that the space was waiting for her for one more line.

3

The Weight

Amalia was widowed at fifty-four, on a Tuesday, without warning.

Julián went to bed well and didn't wake up. Like that, cleanly, the way those who don't want to be a bother depart. She woke up beside a body that was no longer him, and that was the first thing she learned about death: that a person's place stays occupied a while after the person has gone.

The funeral, the paperwork, the children who came and left, the casseroles from the neighbors that spoiled in the fridge. All of that happened.

And afterward the bed remained.

Her side and his side. Thirty years of sleeping each in their half, until the mattress had sunk into two hollows, one for each body, with a ridge in the middle that no one crossed.

Amalia kept sleeping in her hollow.

His stayed empty, cold, still holding its shape, like a glove.

The first time was a few weeks later.

She was on the verge of sleep, her back to the empty half, when the mattress sank.

Behind her. On his side.

The weight of a body lying down slowly, carefully, so as not to wake her, pressing the spring exactly where Julián had pressed it for thirty years. Then, the warmth. That warmth a person gives off through the sheets, which isn't the warmth of a heater, which is something else, alive. And then, very low, a breathing.

Amalia turned to stone, her eyes open in the darkness, staring at the wall.

She didn't turn over.

She didn't know why she didn't turn over. She was frightened, of course, a fear that rose up her back like a hand. But beneath the fear there was something else, older and stronger, and that other thing told her: don't look.

Because if she turned over and there was nothing, she would lose Julián again, that very night, forever.

And if she turned over and there was something.

She didn't want to know what, either.

So she lay still, with her back to the weight, the warmth, the breathing, and little by little, without understanding how, she fell asleep. The way she hadn't slept since Tuesday.

It became the rule of her life, though she never said it aloud.

Never look.

The weight returned the following night. And the next. And every night. It arrived when she was already on her back, about to cross into sleep, and lay down with the same care as always, and warmed the entire room.

Amalia organized her widowhood around this, in secret.

She didn't change the mattress, though the springs squeaked. She didn't move the bed away from the wall. She never slept in the guest room, nor on the sofa, nor at her daughter's house at Christmas — she said she slept terribly anywhere but home, and it was true, only the opposite of how they understood it.

She never went out with anyone again. Why would she.

Her children worried from a distance. Mamá alone in that big house. They suggested a nice care home, a nearby apartment. She said no with a stubbornness they couldn't account for.

She was not going to leave Julián sleeping alone.

And if it wasn't Julián, she wasn't going to leave alone the only company that Tuesday had left her.

She never told anyone. Who would she tell? What was she going to say, that the mattress sank at night? She kept it to herself for twenty years, the way you keep what is most intimate, which is almost never what is most beautiful but what is most strange.

Twenty years with her back to her own bed.

She never looked.

She noticed it when she was already old.

Seventy-something, her back bent, the nights longer and harder, that thin sleep of the old that breaks at nothing.

One night, waiting for the weight as one waits for the last bus, it seemed to her that the mattress sank a little less.

Barely. A finger's worth less. She put it down to the mattress, to tired springs, to her own bones that no longer felt things the same way.

But the following night, the same. And a month later, less still.

The weight was diminishing.

She tracked it in secret, the way she had tracked everything. The hollow that formed behind her each night was a little shallower. The warmth, fainter. The breathing, which had never been strong, was becoming a thread, and then less than a thread, the idea of breathing.

Whatever was lying down with her was growing lighter.

Year after year, it became less heavy. As if whatever weighed there, whatever it was, was being used up, evaporating, going somewhere.

And Amalia, in the darkness, as always on her back, began to have a new question, worse than the fear of those first nights.

What would happen when the weight reached zero?

She thought it was Julián, finally going. That the dead last a while and then are spent, like a candle, and hers had lasted twenty years but was also coming to an end, and that soon the bed would be entirely hers, cold all over, and she would be truly alone for the first time since that Tuesday. She cried about this on some nights. A second bereavement, in slow motion, millimeter by mattress millimeter.

Until one night she understood she had been wrong.

That the weight was not fading the way a candle fades.

The weight was not disappearing.

It was setting something aside.

She understood it all at once, old, awake at four in the morning, with that terrible lucidity that sleeping houses sometimes give. The weight was not him. The weight was the shape. The borrowed body. The disguise that thing had needed at the beginning, right after Julián's death, when she could still get up, change rooms, look, leave. In those first years everything had been necessary: the exact weight, the exact warmth, the exact breathing, so that she wouldn't turn over, so that she would stay, so that she would make the rule of not looking and keep it.

So that she would become accustomed.

But none of that was needed anymore. Amalia was old. She had spent twenty years on her back. She wasn't going to get up, she wasn't going to leave, she wasn't going to look, she wasn't going to tell. She was its. Domesticated by habit and by grief.

So that thing, slowly, without hurry, with the patience of two decades, was setting aside the weight. The shape. The man's body it no longer needed to pretend to have.

What remained beneath had no weight at all.

And what has no weight doesn't have to stay on its side of the mattress.

On the last night, the mattress didn't sink.

Amalia, on her back, waited for it and it didn't come. No hollow formed behind her. No warmth on Julián's half. No breathing.

For an instant she felt both things at once, the relief and the wrench: it's over, it's gone entirely, I'm alone.

And then she felt it.

Not behind. Not on his side.

On her side. Her own. In her own hollow, sharing her pillow, a thin coldness spread the length of her entire body, weightless, without bulk, like an extra sheet, like a second skin laid over hers.

For twenty years she had turned her back on a weight on the other half of the bed.

There was no more weight. There was no other half. Nothing remained on the other side to avoid looking at.

Whatever it was, it was now on her side, without a body, pressed against her, level with her face.

And Amalia understood, at last, why for twenty years that thing had let her believe it was Julián.

So that tonight she would still be here.

She kept her eyes closed.

It was the only thing she had left, all she had ever had: don't look, don't look, don't look. But now the coldness was at her eyelids, very thin, waiting on the other side of her lashes, with a patience that had no bottom.

And Amalia knew, with the heart of an old woman who needs to sleep, who cannot stay awake all night, who is eighty years old and has tired eyes, that she was not going to be able to keep them closed until dawn.

That there were hours until the light.

That sooner or later, that night or the next, she was going to have to open them.

And that it knew this better than she did, and was right there, weightless, against her lashes, waiting.

4

The Call

It was a Tuesday with nothing to it.

Nora had arrived home with wet clothes, because it had started to drizzle and the car was far away. She took off her shoes at the entrance. She put water on to boil. She turned on a lamp, the small one, the one on the table, because the ceiling light felt like too much for a night like this.

The apartment was quiet. Its usual quiet, the good kind, the quiet of being alone and safe.

The phone rang.

She had it in her hand. She had been looking at it a moment before, with nothing to see on it, and still it rang, as if the call had come in through the back of the screen.

On the caller ID there was no name. There was no number.

There was a word: Nora.

Her own name, calling her.

She thought of an error, one of those scams where they clone your contact. She answered only to make it stop ringing.

—Yes?

And the voice that answered was hers.

Not similar. Not a good imitation. Hers, with the cold she had today, with that roughness in her throat that the rain had left half an hour ago. It was like hearing herself in a recording, but live, answering her back.

—Nora. Listen to me. —The voice spoke quickly, quietly, with an urgency that raised the hair on her arms. —It's you. Ten minutes from now. I don't have time to explain, you wouldn't believe me anyway. Just listen to this, just this.

Nora couldn't say anything.

—Don't open the door.

A silence with breathing behind it.

—Whatever happens. Whatever you hear. Don't open the do—

The line cut off.

Not the beep of hanging up. The flat silence of there having never been anything.

Nora lowered the phone from her ear with her hand trembling.

She looked through recent calls.

Nothing.

Not that one, not any. The last entry was from the morning, her mother, twelve minutes. After that, empty. As if the device had never rung, as if she had dreamed it while standing in her own kitchen, with the water starting to boil at her back.

She told herself reasonable things.

That she was tired. The rain, work, she had fallen asleep for a second and dreamed it. That modern scams use recordings, that they would have pulled her voice from some video, that there was a boring explanation and she would find it tomorrow, in the light of day, laughing.

But her voice doesn't laugh.

Her voice, the real one, knew two things no recording could know.

It knew she was at home.

It knew she'd had a cold since half an hour ago.

She turned off the burner. The water had stalled halfway, neither cold nor boiling.

She glanced at the oven clock without meaning to.

And waited, because there was nothing else she knew how to do.

Three minutes.

The buzzer sounded.

Nora jumped in a way that left her plastered against the counter, both hands gripping the edge, her heart somewhere it shouldn't be.

The buzzer again. Normal. Polite. Two short tones, the way anyone knocks.

She stayed still.

"Don't open the door."

She had told herself this. Ten minutes from now. Meaning herself, after what was about to happen right now had happened. Herself, who had already lived through it, who knew how it ended, and who had done the impossible, the thing that can't be done, called backward in time, to prevent it.

If that voice was her, she had to obey.

But.

But maybe the voice wasn't her. Maybe the voice was the trap. Maybe what the thing on the call really wanted was precisely that, that she not open the door, that she stay inside, locked in, alone, while the real thing, whatever was truly meant to save her, waited in the hallway outside and left.

Trust it, or not trust it.

Herself.

And there was no way to know. There was not a single piece of information in the world to tip the balance, because both voices, the one inside and the one knocking at the door, were exactly the same.

There was a knock with knuckles.

And then, from the other side of the door, someone spoke.

—Nora. Open up.

Her voice.

—Please, open up. I'm you. The one who called lied to you. —It sounded on the verge of tears, frozen, utterly familiar. —It wasn't me, it was something else with my voice, don't listen to it. I'm out here and it's cold and don't leave me here, please. It's me. I'm the real one.

Nora covered her mouth with both hands.

Because it was true.

That was her too.

She didn't open the door.

She didn't know why she chose that and not the other. It wasn't bravery, or calculation, or faith in the first voice. It was that her legs wouldn't carry her to the door. It was that she stayed pressed against the counter, trembling, while the voice outside pleaded with her in her own throat, reminded her of things only she knew, cried, struck the door, begged.

Until it stopped begging.

The voice went out like a candle.

And the quiet returned.

But it was no longer the good kind. It would never be the good kind again.

Nora stood in the kitchen for a long time, not looking at the door, not looking at anything, listening to her own pulse, which was the only sound left to her in the world.

And inside that silence, slowly, she began to understand that it wasn't over.

Because the voice on the call had said ten minutes.

And only seven had passed.

She looked at the oven clock.

She looked at it directly, this time.

And she understood that it was her turn.

That it had always been her turn. That this was what happened at ten minutes: that she, still alive, still not knowing what was outside or whether she had done right or wrong in not opening, would have to call backward. To the woman from ten minutes ago. To the one who still had the good silence, the small lamp lit, the water not yet boiled.

And warn her.

Not because she knew the truth. She didn't know it. She was never going to know it.

But because that was what someone had told her, and the warning went in circles, from Nora to Nora, without beginning and without bottom. A woman passing her own fear to herself forever, and no one, at any point in the circle, ever knowing who had been waiting behind the door.

She picked up the phone.

It surprised her how steady her hand was. She had been trembling all night, and now she wasn't. Because fear needs an outlet, and when it has none left it goes still, cold, halfway through, like the water she had turned off before it could boil.

She dialed her own number.

She knew it by heart, of course. It was hers.

It began to ring.

And somewhere, ten minutes back, in a kitchen with a small lamp lit, Nora heard herself answer.

—Yes?

She opened her mouth.

The rough throat. The cold from the rain.

—Nora. Listen to me. I'm you. Ten minutes from now. Don't open the door. Whatever happens. Whatever you hear. Don't open the do—

5

The Passenger

Esteban had been driving at night for eleven years.

He liked it, or he had convinced himself he liked it, which amounts to the same thing when you've been doing something for eleven years. The city at the small hours was a different city, cleaner, quieter, without the ugly hurry of the day. And the car was his, his cabin, his low music, his thermos of coffee.

The only thing that had been wearing down over the years was the passengers.

Before, they talked. They'd get in and tell him about their lives, the night they were coming from, the woman who had left them, the business that was going to make them rich. Esteban listened. He was good at listening. For many people, he had been the last person they spoke to before arriving at an empty house.

Now they got in with their earphones already in. They said the address while looking at their phone and didn't look up again. They paid through the app, without touching him, without looking at him. They got out. Like packages that deliver themselves.

Esteban had a daughter in another city who called less and less.

He had an apartment where the only voice, upon arriving, was the refrigerator.

He was fifty-nine years old, and he had started to notice that entire nights went by without anyone saying his name.

That night he picked him up at a corner with nothing on it, around three in the morning, a man in a long coat who raised his hand the old way.

—Good evening —the man said as he got in.

And something inside Esteban came loose in his chest, because it had been weeks since anyone said good evening to him.

They talked.

He couldn't reconstruct what about. About the city, about how it had changed. About how nobody converses anymore. About growing old. The man had a calm voice, unhurried, and a way of

asking questions that made you want to answer honestly. He asked about Esteban's daughter. Esteban told him things he didn't tell anyone, right there, watching the road, the two of them reflected in the mirror and the other one in the darkness behind.

It was the best hour Esteban had spent in a long time.

He dropped him off where he'd been asked, another empty street, not a single lit doorway.

The man stood for a moment beside the open window, before leaving.

—Thank you for the ride —he said. —It had been a long time since anyone talked to me.

And he walked off into the dark, slowly, until Esteban could no longer see him.

Fleet regulations: interior camera, audio and video, running for the entire shift.

Esteban almost never looked at it. That night he did, at home, before sleep, because he wanted to see the man in the coat again, to put a face to him calmly, to revisit the conversation.

He skipped forward to around three in the morning.

The car stops at the corner with nothing on it. The rear door opens. It closes.

And the back seat is empty.

Empty for the whole hour. The seatbelt unbuckled, the leather smooth, no one. The car pulls away on its own, drives, stops at traffic lights, turns, while Esteban, in the driver's seat, talks.

Talks to the empty seat.

He smiles. He nods. He listens. He laughs at something. A whole hour of a man alone conversing with no one in a moving car.

But the audio.

The audio had both voices.

Esteban's, and the other one, the calm one, perfectly clear, answering, asking about his daughter, saying good evening. He turned the volume all the way up. It wasn't an echo, it wasn't his own voice altered. It was another man, speaking, clearly, in a seat where the camera swore there was no one.

And at the end, distinct, the last sentence, directed at an Esteban who on screen was completely alone:

—Thank you for the ride. It had been a long time since anyone talked to me.

Esteban didn't delete the file.

He kept it.

And that night, before sleep, he listened to it again. Just the audio. With his eyes closed. The way you put on a song a second time.

He came back.

Not that night, nor the next, but he came back. The same corner, the same hour, the same calm voice getting into the seat that no camera could fill.

And Esteban, who should have been frightened, who at first had been, stopped being frightened.

Because it was good company. Because the conversation was real even if the man wasn't. Because in eleven years of late nights, that voice was the only thing that asked how he was doing and waited for the answer.

He learned the corner. He learned the hour. He started being there, around three in the morning, with no fare, waiting. He turned off the app during that window so no other rides would come in, the real ones, the earphone-and-silence ones. Why bother. He had someone to talk to.

The world, all around, went on thinning, and he grew happier with each night.

His daughter left a couple of messages he didn't answer, and then stopped leaving them. The dispatcher asked him once, carefully, if he was okay, that they'd seen him making a lot of empty loops, that he seemed to be talking to himself on camera. Esteban said yes, he was fine. And it was true. He wasn't alone. He stopped dropping by the bar where the other drivers gathered. Why bother.

The man in the coat, little by little, stopped asking about his daughter.

He asked instead that they take another loop. That the night was lovely. That he should stay a while.

And the rides grew longer, heading nowhere.

One night, any night, Esteban understood what the man in the coat was.

Not a dead man. Not a demon. None of that.

The loneliest thing on the whole road. Something that had once driven at night, or waited at night, or lived through nights, until the world stopped looking at it. And that now wandered from corner to corner, looking for the next one, the loneliest of all those still awake, to keep it company.

Because company was the only thing it knew how to give.

And by giving it, whether it meant to or not, it was making him the same as itself.

The phrase, the one that the first night had seemed like the passenger's sadness, Esteban finally understood whose it was.

"It had been a long time since anyone talked to me."

It was not the man in the coat's past.

It was Esteban's future.

The last time he looked at the camera it was out of habit, no longer expecting anything.

He skipped forward to around three in the morning.

The car moved through the empty city, slowly, looping toward nowhere, stopping at red lights even though there wasn't a soul to hit.

The back seat, empty. As always.

But this time the front seat too.

The driver's seat, empty. The steering wheel turning by itself on the curves. The entire car driving itself through the small hours without a body inside, not in the back, not in the front, not a single one.

And the audio, full.

Both voices. The man in the coat's, calm. And Esteban's, happy, alive, talking, laughing, asking to take another loop because the night was lovely.

Two men talking through the night, at ease, in each other's company.

And no one, absolutely no one, in the car.

Esteban watched the screen for a long time.

He didn't feel horror. That was the worst of it, that he no longer felt horror. He felt something close to arriving home.

Because there was no longer anyone in the world who could see him. And he didn't mind. He had someone to talk to. He would always have that now, the two voices alone in a car going nowhere through a sleeping city.

He turned off the screen.

He went down to the garage.

He sat behind the wheel, in the darkness, and waited for three in the morning, the way you wait for a friend.

And when the calm voice said good evening from the back seat, Esteban, for the first time, answered with the whole sentence.

—Thank you for the company. It had been a long time since anyone talked to me.

And he started the engine.

6

The List

The first appeared on a Thursday, stuck to the fridge with the pizza place magnet.

Buy milk. Call Mom. Pay the electricity bill before the 15th.

Daniel read it twice, coffee in hand, and what surprised him wasn't the list.

It was the handwriting.

It was almost his. The slant, the size, the way the letters were joined. But he crossed his sevens, a lifelong habit, a little slash through the middle, and the sevens on the list were uncrossed. A minimal detail. The only one, but sufficient. That list had been written by a hand imitating his very well, and failing in one single thing.

He lived alone. No one had a key. The door had been locked all night.

He bought the milk, because he needed it anyway. He called his mother, because he had owed her a call for days. He paid the electricity bill on the 14th.

Only that night, in bed, did he realize he had done all three things.

The next morning there was another one.

Same handwriting, same uncrossed sevens. Pick up suit from the dry cleaner. Change the bulb in the hallway. Return the drill to Suárez.

His things. His errands, real ones, that existed in his head and nowhere else.

This time Daniel decided to test it.

He wasn't going to pick up the suit. Deliberately. To break the list, to prove to himself it was nothing.

That afternoon, coming home from work, he ran into the dry-cleaning shop owner on the sidewalk, who was already closing, and who said to him, upon seeing him: oh, thank goodness, I was about to leave, come in and I'll give you your suit, I'm off tomorrow. And she gave it to him. In his hands. Without him having sought it out.

He mentally crossed off "pick up suit" with a new kind of cold.

He tried the bulb. He didn't change it. That night the one in the bathroom burned out and he had to replace them both.

He tried the drill. Suárez knocked on his door to ask for it back.

What was on the list happened. With or without his cooperation. If he didn't do it, the world rearranged itself until it was done, by another route, without asking his opinion.

The list didn't command him.

The list knew.

On Monday, between "buy bread" and "renew ID," there was a new line.

Kill the neighbor in 4B.

Daniel stood in front of the fridge for a long time, the bread he was no longer going to buy forgotten in his mind.

The neighbor in 4B was Mr. Pombo. Seventy-something, a widower, who watered some plants in the hallway and said good morning with a formality from another era. Daniel hadn't exchanged more than ten words with him his whole life. He wished him no harm. He wished him nothing.

But he had spent five days learning that what appeared on that list occurred.

And for the first time the list said something that he, with his whole soul, with every cell, was not going to allow.

He was going to break this one. This one that mattered. Whatever it cost.

He decided to protect Mr. Pombo. To spend the day watching over him, to pull him out of any danger, to keep watch. If the list wanted the man in 4B dead, it was going to find Daniel in the way, whole, alive, decided.

He went up to the fourth floor in the middle of the afternoon.

He knocked. With urgency, with fear, with too much force.

Mr. Pombo opened the door in his slippers, surprised.

—Daniel? Is something wrong?

—Mr. Pombo, you have to come with me. You have to get out of here, you can't stay today, something's going to happen to you, I—

He heard himself. Stumbling, sweating, already grabbing the old man's arm to pull him out of the apartment, to bring him to safety, away from windows, away from the gas, away from whatever it might be.

Mr. Pombo was frightened.

Of course he was frightened. A neighbor he barely knew, out of his mind, talking to him about death, pulling him by the arm toward the stairwell.

—Let go of me. —The old man pulled back. —Please let go of me.

—No, listen to me, it's for your own good, you have to—

Pombo yanked his arm to free himself, with the clumsy force of fear, right at the edge of the landing, where the steps of that old building began, steep, worn marble.

He lost his footing.

And Daniel did the only thing you can do when someone falls. He lunged to catch him.

He caught him. He had him, for an instant, by the shirt and by one shoulder.

And the old man's weight, and Daniel's momentum, and the inertia of two bodies tangled in the worst possible place, did what they had to do.

The one who fell down the stairs was not Daniel.

It was Mr. Pombo. Down the entire flight. To the landing below, where he lay still, in a position the living don't choose.

Daniel's hands still smelled of the old man's shirt.

He had killed the neighbor in 4B.

While trying to save him. With his own two hands. Exactly as the list had said.

It was ruled an accident.

An elderly man, a marble staircase, a bad step. It happens every day. No one asked why Daniel had been there, and he didn't say, because what was he going to say? That a list on his fridge, written in his handwriting but not his, had announced it?

The next day, the list had grown.

And it kept growing. Every morning, new lines. Small things and large things, mixed together, all in that almost-his handwriting. And all of them, every one, came to pass, not because he obeyed them, but because every time he stood his ground to prevent one, his way of preventing it was the precise path by which the thing arrived.

Warning pushed. Evading provoked. Standing still also counted as choosing, and stillness had its own way of fulfilling the line.

Daniel understood the entire architecture, and it was perfect.

The list didn't need to command him anything. It wasn't an order. It was a mirror of what his own resistance was going to produce. It only needed to write the truth and let him, free, fight against it. The fight was the mechanism. His will, intact, lucid, his own, was the instrument with which each line was fulfilled.

He never knew if the list read what was going to happen.

Or if it wrote it, and only needed someone to read it for it to start being true.

Both possibilities left him in the same place.

This morning the list has a single line.

No verb.

Before it told him what to do: buy, call, pay, kill. Not today. Today it has stopped mattering what he does.

Just his name.

Daniel.

And beside it, a time.

21:40.

It doesn't say what. It doesn't need to. He has learned that all verbs lead to the same place, that it doesn't matter what he chooses, that warning and evading and standing still are three doors to the same room. That if he tries to survive past 21:40, his way of trying will be, as always, the path. And that choosing not to try to survive is not within his power, because no one can truly choose not to step aside from their own death. The will to live is not optional. And it is, precisely, what the list has been waiting to use.

It is half past nine at night.

Daniel is sitting in front of the fridge, looking at his name and the time, with every light in the apartment on and the door locked with two turns, knowing that locking the door is one choice, and leaving it open is another, and that getting up is one and not getting up is another, and that one of them, whichever it may be, any of them, is the one that takes him there.

For the first time in his life he is completely free.

He can do whatever he wants.

Ten minutes remain.

7

The Silence

Tomás bought the headphones to silence the world.

Not to listen to music. The opposite. To stop hearing.

He lived on a fourth floor with thin walls, in an old building where everything could be heard: the pipes, the lift, the television from the neighbor's flat, the cars, the electrical hum that never seems to come from anywhere in particular and appears to emanate from the air itself. And beneath all of that, the city, which never goes quiet, not even at the small hours.

Tomás had always lived inside noise. As a child, a house full of people. Then shared apartments, offices, streets. Silence was something other people had, in their detached houses, in their villages, far away.

All he wanted, at the end of the day, was a little nothing.

The headphones were good ones, the expensive kind. The review promised active cancellation, "absolute silence." They arrived in a white, elegant box. That first night, already in bed, with the light off, he put them on without playing any music.

And the world went away.

The pipes, gone. The neighbor, gone. The city, gone. The hum from the air, gone.

For the first time in his life, Tomás heard nothing.

It was beautiful for a few seconds.

And then, inside the nothing, there was something.

At first he thought it was the headphones themselves. That the noise cancellation had its own sound, a background hiss, the murmur of electronics at work.

But it wasn't a hiss.

It had rhythm.

It came in and went out. Slowly. Long. A thing that filled and emptied, filled and emptied, with the patience of something asleep.

A breathing.

Tomás went very still, listening to it, his heart beginning to hurry. He thought: it's mine. Of course it's mine, you can hear yourself breathe when everything else goes silent.

To make sure, he held his breath.

He stopped breathing altogether, lungs still, mouth closed.

And the breathing continued.

In and out. Slowly. Long.

Without him.

He ripped the headphones from his ears. The world came back all at once, the pipes, the neighbor, the city, everything at the same time, scandalous and alive.

There was no breathing.

He sat on the bed, sweating, with the headphones in his hand, hearing only his own heart, which was his at least, which was his he could feel.

A fault in the device, he thought. It has to be that.

And because it had to be that, he put them on again.

It was there.

It had been waiting for him.

It wasn't that it started again when he put them on. It was that it had been going on the whole time, on the other side of the silence, and the headphones didn't create it: they only took you deep enough to hear it.

Because headphones don't make silence. They remove sound. And when you remove enough sound, what's left beneath is not nothing. There is a floor, below everything audible. And on that floor something was breathing.

It came from behind.

Not from the speakers, not from inside his head. From behind him. From a point at his back, at the level of the nape of his neck, as if someone were standing beside the bed, leaning over, watching him sleep.

Tomás turned around.

The room, empty. The wall, empty. The usual darkness.

But with the headphones on, when he turned, the breathing was still behind him. He turned again, quickly, to the other side. Still behind. No matter which way he looked: it was at his back, in the exact spot a body cannot see of itself.

That night he slept with the light on and the television running. Without headphones.

And he heard nothing.

And because he heard nothing, he didn't sleep.

He should have thrown the headphones away. He thought about it. He put them in their white box, put the box in a drawer, closed the drawer.

But he already knew it was there.

And knowing it was there, and not hearing it, was worse than hearing it. Because in every small silence of his day, now, he found himself straining his ears without meaning to. In the lift. In the kitchen at three in the morning. In that instant when the fridge finishes its cycle and goes quiet, and the whole apartment seems to hold its breath.

In that instant, right there, he thought he heard, very faintly, without headphones, a thread of that breathing.

The opening didn't close.

He had opened it once, all the way, and now the silence knew the path to him.

So Tomás did the only thing he could think of. He filled his life with noise. The television on day and night. A fan. A white-noise app on his phone, rain, the sea, static, whatever it offered. He slept with small earphones in, playing water sounds, to block the silence before the silence could unblock him.

It worked for a few weeks.

He lost weight. He stopped answering calls. At work they asked if he was all right and he said yes, that he was sleeping badly, nothing more.

What he didn't tell anyone was what he had discovered the last night he dared put on the good headphones.

That when he held his breath to listen better.

The other one also stopped.

And waited.

And started breathing again when he started breathing again.

It was listening to him. With the same attention with which he was listening to it. Both of them, each on one side of the silence, attending to the other. And to hear it, he understood, had been the same as letting himself be heard. Now it knew he was there. Now there were two.

The blackout came one winter night in the small hours.

The power went out in the whole building, the whole street. Around three in the morning. Tomás woke because something had changed, and it took him a second of sleep to understand what.

The television, dead.

The fan, stopped.

The phone, drained hours ago, the fake rain exhausted.

The fridge, silent.

Everything, all at once, off.

And for the first time it wasn't the headphone silence, which removed sound but left something. It was the other. The real one. The total one. The deepest Tomás had ever been in, deeper than any

device, because now there was absolutely nothing turned on for kilometers, not a hum, not a thread.

The floor of the world, entirely uncovered.

And on it, the breathing.

But no longer behind him.

Beside his neck. So close he felt it warm. Slow. Long. Patient. With the patience of something that has waited an entire lifetime for a man to finally go quiet enough.

Tomás didn't turn on any light, because there was no light to turn on.

He didn't move.

He did the only thing left to him, the thing an animal does when the only thing it can do is not be found.

He held his breath.

He pressed his lungs, closed his mouth, turned to stone in the darkness, to not make a single sound, to erase himself, so that in that absolute silence nothing of his remained to hear.

And at his back, warm against his neck, the other breathing also stopped.

And waited.

The two of them in the darkness, without air, motionless, listening.

To see which of them breathed first.

8

The Book That Rewrites Itself

Elías had never in his life left a book half-finished.

It was a matter of principle, almost of honor. The good ones and the bad ones, those that bored him and those that wounded him, he finished them all. Closing a book without completing it felt to him like a small betrayal, leaving someone talking to themselves.

So when he entered the abandoned library, he was already lost. He just didn't know it yet.

It was the old wing of a shuttered seminary. They had let him in because he was going to photograph the ruin for an archive, and he found himself alone among the rotting shelves, in the grey light of a dirty high window and a silence of wet paper. The books were falling apart. Fungus, damp, burst spines.

Except one.

It sat on a table, in the center, clean, without a speck of dust, as if someone had just set it there. No title on the cover. No author.

Elías opened it.

It wasn't fiction. It was a biography. The life of a man, told from birth, with the dry, assured prose of serious biography. A man born in a provincial city, son of a schoolteacher, a reader from childhood.

It rang a bell. Vaguely, it rang a bell.

He read for an hour on his feet, without feeling the cold. The life of that man was ordinary, neither heroic nor miserable, but it was written in a way he couldn't let go of. When the light from the high window began to fade, he marked the page with his finger, closed the book for a moment to rest his eyes.

And when he opened it again, the page had changed.

It wasn't the same sentence where he had left his finger.

He thought he had made a mistake about the page. He went back. He went forward. No: the text was different. Where he had read that the man's name was one thing, now it was another. Where the

mother had been a village schoolteacher, now she was a schoolteacher from a city. Elías's city. The city of Elías.

He closed the book entirely, with both hands, his heart beginning to hurry.

He opened it again.

The name of the mother in the book was now the name of Elías's mother.

He closed it. He opened it.

The man in the book had had, as a boy, a dog that shared the name of the dog Elías had had as a boy, and that only Elías and a handful of dead people could remember.

Each time he closed it and opened it, the book corrected itself. It drew closer. It crossed out the stranger from the beginning and wrote Elías in his place. Chapter by chapter, his life was entering those pages the way water enters sand.

He should have left. Anyone would have left.

But it was his life. And he had never, never, left a book half-finished.

Least of all this one.

He read all night, by the light of his torch, sitting on the frozen floor.

And he discovered what was truly frightening.

It wasn't that the book told his life. It was that it told it worse.

Every episode he recognized was twisted toward its dark side. That time, as a young man, when he had been on the verge of doing something petty and hadn't done it: the Elías in the book had done it. That friendship he had saved with a timely phone call: the Elías in the book hadn't called, and had let it die. That grief he had survived: it had crushed the Elías in the book forever.

The man in the pages was him, exactly him, at all the forks where the real Elías had chosen the decent thing, the cowardly-but-clean thing, the forgivable thing. The one in the book had taken, one by one, every exit he had avoided.

It was the worst possible Elías. The one he would have been if at every crossing he had turned toward the worst.

And the book wrote it with his name, his mother, his dog, his secrets. Things he had never told anyone appeared on the pages, done, consummated, fixed.

You can't argue with a biography. A biography doesn't opine. It only reports what happened.

He began searching for the page.

The fork. The exact point where the life in the book diverged from his, where the worst Elías was born from the good one. If he found it, he thought, he could point to it, hold it, say: here, here it wasn't me, here I chose differently. Prove to himself which side he was on.

But the book was rearranging itself.

Every time he closed it and opened it to look back, the chapters had changed position, and the fork was never where he had left it. He spent the hours, the days, he no longer knew how many, in that library, hunting a page that moved.

Until one night he opened the book and read, in the present tense, a new chapter:

He spent whole days in the ruined library, barely eating, searching for the page where his life had gone wrong. He didn't understand that looking for it was already part of what was written.

Elías looked up.

The book had caught up to him. It was no longer telling his past, worse. It was telling his present. It was at his pace.

And when he lowered his eyes again, it was a little bit ahead.

He began to observe himself from the outside.

Thoughts he didn't recognize as his own passed through his mind, and shortly after he found them on a prior page, attributed to the Elías in the book. He made a gesture, a small, quiet cruelty toward the seminary guard who came to ask if he was all right; a gesture that wasn't like him, that belonged to the other one. And when he opened the book, there it was, already written, in ink that seemed still wet.

The membrane between the two Eliases was thinning.

He no longer knew whether the book was correcting itself toward him, or whether he was correcting himself toward the book. Whether the pages were copying his life, worse, or whether his life had begun to obey the pages. Both possibilities left him in the same place, which is what always happens with this kind of thing.

The only certainty was that he couldn't stop reading.

Because it was his life. Because it was getting worse. Because he had to know. Because no one in the world is capable of closing the book that tells, page by page, what they are becoming.

The last time he opened it, the page described an abandoned library.

The dirty high window. The dust. The cold. A table in the center and, on it, a book without a title. And a man on the floor, with a torch that was almost spent, reading a book whose story changed every time he closed it and opened it.

He read that it was his life, and that it was worse. He looked for the page where it had gone wrong and didn't find it, because the going wrong was this, it was now, it was the act of reading.

Elías read that sentence just as he was living it.

And below, the page continued. There was more. Lines he hadn't yet reached, waiting for him, running ahead, with the ink gleaming fresh in the light of the dying torch. What he was going to do next. Worse. And after that, more, writing itself a few centimeters ahead of his eyes, always ahead, impossible to catch by reading, impossible to stop without stopping reading.

He thought about closing it. About dropping it and running out and not finishing it, for the first time in his life.

He looked down to gather strength.

And he read:

He thought about closing it. But he didn't close it.

And it was true.

He didn't close it.

He kept reading, downward, toward what was coming, while somewhere the worst Elías and he finished, without any perceptible moment, being the same man. And the last sentence he managed to read, there on the floor, with the light about to go out, said that the last sentence he managed to read had not been written by him.

9

The Perfect Crowd

Mauro had always been one of those who watch.

At parties, against the wall. At meetings, quiet, reading the room. He liked to understand a system before entering it, and almost always, by the time he understood it, he no longer wanted to enter. That was why he went to the concert and stayed at the back, on the edge of the floor, where the tide of people hadn't yet closed in.

From there he saw it.

That the crowd didn't move at random.

Forty thousand people in that field, and still the movement had a shape. Waves crossed through the mass, just as through water, just as through a wheat field in the wind. One zone would compress, releasing the pressure sideways, and the wave would travel, clean, to the far end and back. When one sector raised its arms, the next one followed with an exact delay, always the same, and the gesture moved across the field like a current.

Mauro knew the name for this. He had seen it in starlings, in schools of fish, in simulations: each individual only attends to its nearest neighbors, matching its speed, keeping its distance, and from those three simple rules, without anyone in command, a single creature of forty thousand bodies is born.

He thought it was beautiful.

He smiled, with that small pride of one who sees the structure others don't see.

And, to see it better, he took a step inside.

By the third step he was no longer at the edge.

The floor had swallowed him without his having quite decided it. The air turned hot, thick, made of other people's breath. Bodies surrounded him on all four sides, and the ground was no longer his: when the crowd swayed, he swayed, not because he chose to, but because there was no space to do otherwise.

He decided to leave. Just to try. He wanted a beer, he told himself, though he didn't want one; he wanted to check that he could.

He pushed his shoulder toward the left, toward where he calculated the exit to be.

A pressure wave came from that same side, gentle, without violence, and returned him to his place. Like a fish that turns wrong and the current of the school corrects it. It wasn't even a rejection. It was a correction.

He tried again, harder, digging his feet in.

A surge came, one of those large compressions, and lifted him. For a second his feet didn't touch the ground. The mass carried him half a meter and set him down, upright, a little further along, facing another direction. He hadn't walked. He had been steered.

Mauro felt the first prick of fear, cold, in the middle of the heat.

He couldn't leave. Not because anyone was stopping him. Because there was no anyone. Only rules, neighbors, distances, and from rules you don't exit by pushing.

He decided to rebel in a small way.

If he couldn't move where he wanted, he could at least move something useless. Something the crowd didn't need. A minimal assertion that inside there was still a Mauro in charge of, at the very least, his own hand.

Everyone was raising their arms on the kick drum. On the one.

He decided to raise his on the offbeat. On the and. Out of step, deliberately, against the pattern, purely for the pleasure of going against the grain.

His arm went up on the one.

With everyone.

He watched it go up. He felt, at least, that the impulse had come from him, that he had wanted it. But the arm obeyed the drum, not his whim. Had he decided, at the last instant, to capitulate? Or did the pattern have a gap shaped exactly like an arm right there, and his arm, which was already part of the pattern, went to fill it?

He couldn't tell the difference.

And not being able to tell the difference was worse than any shove.

Then he began to anticipate.

He knew, two seconds ahead, that a compression was coming from the right. It came. He knew the wave would bounce and return down the center. It returned. He knew which way the mass would tilt on the chorus before the chorus arrived, and the mass tilted that way.

At first this served him. He anticipated, he accommodated, he wasn't jostled. For a moment he felt clever again, felt like the one who understands the system.

Until the question opened a hole in his stomach.

Was he predicting the crowd?

Or was the crowd's next move forming inside him because he was already one of the places where the crowd was calculating its next move?

The half-second that separated his thought from everyone's movement began to shrink. Thinking "now to the left" and the left arriving stopped having order. They were the same thing. His anticipation and the collective movement had synchronized, and a thing synchronized with another doesn't know which of the two began.

He searched for a thought that was only his.

Something from inside, private, that the mass couldn't have. A memory. Someone's face. His own childhood. He reached toward that interior place where one keeps what belongs to oneself.

And the gesture of reaching inward also had rhythm. It also kept time. Even his way of searching for himself pulsed to the tempo of the bodies.

The edge disappeared.

He stopped knowing where he ended and where the person next to him began. The foreign skin against his stopped being foreign, stopped being skin, became only the blurred boundary of a large body of which his body was a cell. His will to move and the movement of the mass became indistinguishable, not because the mass was crushing him, but because there were no longer two things to distinguish.

The last thing he recognized as his own was the panic.

The wanting to get out. The no, the please, the I am one, the let me go. That scream was his, intact, lucid, whole, shouting outward with everything he had left.

But the scream had no lever anymore.

Because the body screaming on the inside was, on the outside, swaying. Raising its arm on the one. Stepping when everyone stepped. Singing, with its mouth open, lyrics it had not decided to sing.

The song reached its highest point, and the forty thousand became, at last, a single perfect creature.

Through the floor crossed the cleanest wave of the night, without a single body out of phase, without a single turbulence, without anything rubbing against anything. Magnificent. The thing Mauro had admired from the edge, now complete, finished, without fissures.

And somewhere in that perfect wave there was a man who inside was still himself, awake, terrified, ordering his arm to come down, his feet to stop, his mouth to close, screaming at himself to stop, to get out, to be one again.

His arm went up on the one.

His feet stepped with the rest.

His mouth sang.

Not a single surface remained, in all that magnificent creature, of anything pushing in another direction.

And it would never be known, not even by him, whether a mind had awakened among the forty thousand and was eating them from the inside out.

Or whether never, none of them, not Mauro nor anyone, had ever moved of their own accord, and the only false thing about the entire night had been the sensation of watching from the edge, believing oneself apart.

The wave reached the far end of the field.

It bounced.

And came back, perfect, to find him.

10

The Forgiveness

The first was an older woman, in the bank queue.

She approached slowly, her eyes already wet, and placed her hand on Lucía's arm the way someone does who has been rehearsing the gesture for a long time.

—I forgive you —she said. —Truly. I'd been wanting to tell you for years, and today, seeing you, I thought: now is the time.

Lucía smiled out of politeness, confused.

—I think you're confusing me with someone else.

—No, Lucía. —The woman said her name with a certainty that froze her neck. —I'm not confusing you. I know perfectly well who you are.

Lucía looked at her. She had never seen her before. She was absolutely certain she had never seen her before.

—I'm sorry, but I don't know what you're talking about. What did I do to you?

Something passed across the woman's face. A shadow. She looked at her for one more second, with a different sadness, deeper.

—Don't make me say it here —she said, in a low voice.

And she left. Lighter. Like someone who at last puts down a stone they've been carrying for years.

Lucía stood in the queue, with her arm still warm where the woman had touched it, and a cold that had no name.

Lucía was forty-three years old, with a small, clean life.

She worked at an insurance company. She lived alone, without drama. She had a good memory and a quiet conscience, which is the only wealth you truly notice when it's gone. She owed no one anything serious. She had done no harm, the kind that gets forgiven, in her entire life.

That's why she filed the woman from the bank under what she seemed: a poor woman who confused faces.

Until the following week.

A young man, in the supermarket parking lot. He stopped in front of her, keys in hand, looking at her the way you look at something that hurts.

—I want you to know that I'm not angry anymore —he said. —It took me a long time. But I forgave you. For what you did.

—For what I did?

—Yes.

—What did I do?

The man clenched his jaw.

—For my brother.

—I don't know your brother.

And then the man's face changed. The sadness became something else. Disgust.

—Still? —he said, his voice cracking with rage. —After everything that happened, you're still going to stand there and say it wasn't you?

He got in his car and left, slamming the door.

Two times is no longer a confusion.

Two times is a world that knows something about you that you don't know.

She began to pay attention, and once she paid attention, she saw it everywhere.

People knew her.

People she had never seen in her life stopped when they crossed paths with her. Some looked at her with that worn-out sadness of forgiveness already spent. Others, the majority, with fear, old resentment, a pain that she hadn't caused and that yet, for them, had carried her face for years. A woman burst into tears in a café and left without finishing her coffee. A gentleman crossed the street to avoid passing near her. The cashier at the corner pharmacy, where she had been shopping for ten years, one day stopped looking her in the eyes.

Everyone knew who she was.

Everyone except her.

She was famous, to strangers, for something she had never been introduced to.

And every time she asked what, what had she done, tell me what I did, the answer was always the same shadow on the other person's face, the same step back, the same phrase: stop pretending. As if asking were the proof. As if only the real monster, the one who did it and feels nothing, could stand there, with that coldness, and pretend not to remember.

Her innocence, for everyone, was exactly the shape of her guilt.

She searched for her own name. What anyone would have done.

And she found it.

Her name. Her face, a photograph of her, younger, real, hers without any doubt. Attached to something from many years ago. A loss. Someone who was no longer there, and a story, told by witnesses, by names, by dates, in which she, Lucía, had done it.

Whatever it was. That thing.

She read every word with her heart stopped, waiting for the mistake, the other Lucía, the homonym, the confusion that would explain it all.

There was no mistake.

It was her face. It was her name. They were the years in which she had been alive, in that same city, with that same face. Her real life, the clean one, the one she remembered whole and without stain, occupied exactly the same years, the same streets, as the life of the other one, the one who had done that thing.

And there was no seam between the two.

She looked for the point where they diverged, the moment where her good life branched off from the bad one, and it didn't exist. There was no fork. There was one woman, one face, two stories on top of each other, and only one of the two carried the act.

The world was perfect, smooth, coherent, without a crack.

She was the only thing in the entire world that didn't fit.

And a single piece that doesn't fit, in a world that fits entirely, is, almost always, the wrong piece.

The worst began afterward, inside her.

She began to feel the guilt.

Not the memory of the act. That was still missing, no matter how much she looked for it. But the weight of guilt itself, without content, floating, looking for something to cling to, and clinging to her, because the certainty of so many people weighed more than her one single no.

She found herself apologizing for small things, to strangers, for no reason. She found herself looking down when she passed people, the way a guilty person does. She began to avoid mirrors, the way others avoided her, because the face they returned no longer seemed to her entirely the face of an innocent person.

And one day she noticed the most terrible thing of all.

That she wanted to be forgiven.

That the forgiveness, which at first had frozen her blood, had begun to seem like a relief. That to be forgiven would mean stopping swimming against a current in which she was the only one swimming.

And wanting forgiveness was already, in some way, having pleaded guilty.

The last was another woman, one ordinary afternoon, on a bench in the plaza.

She sat down beside her without asking. She recognized her, of course. They all recognized her. But this one had no rage. She had the tired face of someone who has cried a great deal and has no

strength left even for hatred.

—I know it was you —she said, without looking at her. —It was so long ago. I'm so tired of hating you.

Lucía opened her mouth to say what she had said a hundred times. That no. That she was mistaken. That she had never done anything.

And it didn't come out.

She was exhausted. She had spent weeks alone against an entire world, and the entire world never grows tired, and she did.

So she said something else. The only thing she had left to try.

—I'm sorry —said Lucía. —Forgive me.

And it fit.

The words slid into place with a soft, precise click, like a key in a lock that she had sworn was not hers and that opened on the first try.

The woman closed her eyes. Her chin trembled. And across her face passed an immense and genuine relief, the relief of setting down a weight that had been carried for years.

But Lucía's relief was equally genuine.

That was the last thing she understood, and the thing she could no longer undo. That feeling relief when asking forgiveness for that thing meant having accepted it completely. That in that instant, at last, no Lucía remained inside her who had not done it. The last voice that said no had gone quiet, had taken the side of the others, and the others were all of them.

She would never know whether she had been an innocent whom the entire world, through sheer certainty, had finally made guilty.

Or a guilty woman who had at last stopped lying to the only person who still believed her.

And, cleanest and most cruel of all: no one would ever be able to know.

Not even her.

She sat on the bench, forgiven, in the sun, feeling for the first time in weeks exactly what everyone had always known she was.

11

The Visitor

Her father had spent months without knowing her name.

Sofía had accepted this the way you accept these things, which is not all at once but a thousand times over, each visit a small and new loss. She drove the forty minutes to his house on Saturdays, filled the fridge, threw out what had spoiled, cut his nails, listened to him tell for the third time in an hour the same story about a dog he had as a child.

Aurelio was eighty-one years old, and he had an illness that was turning off the rooms of his memory one by one, the way someone moves through a dark house closing doors.

He had closed the door on Sofía some time ago.

On Mateo, no.

—Your brother came last night —he told her that Saturday, happily, while she prepared his soup. —We played. He beat me again. He was always better than me with the knights.

Sofía put down the spoon for a moment.

Mateo had died seven years ago.

At first she had corrected him. Gently, but she corrected him, because it seemed cruel to let him believe. Later a nurse explained to her that no, that with this illness you don't correct, you don't argue, you don't drag the patient through a grief he'll have to live through entirely each time. That you accompany and that's all.

So now she only said:

—Oh really? And how is Mateo?

—Fine. —Her father smiled with a peace that pierced her. —Same as always.

In the living room, on the small table, stood the chess set. The one they had always had, wood, with a chipped black pawn. Aurelio had taught Mateo to play on that board, as a boy, the two heads bent together under the lamp. Sofía had never been as interested. Mateo had been. Mateo became good, very good.

The pieces were arranged mid-game.

Sofía didn't remember having left them like that.

The first time she thought he was moving them himself.

It made sense. A lonely old man, restless hands, fiddling with the pieces without knowing what he was doing. She would gather them, arrange them in their squares, white below, black above, ready to begin.

The following Saturday, mid-game again.

And the position was not the muddle of clumsy hands. It was a real game. The pieces were in conversation: a bishop pinned a knight, a rook threatened along the open file, the pawns advanced in chains. Someone who knew how to play had been there.

Her father no longer knew how to play. The illness had taken that from him among the first things. He couldn't follow the rules, he didn't remember how the queen moved, she had watched him try and give up.

But the board woke each Saturday a little further along in a clean, coherent, good game.

She began to photograph it. Before she left on Saturday night, one photo. When she came back the following Saturday, another. Between one and the other, seven nights, and the game had always advanced. Five, six moves per side. As if someone came to make one move a night and then left.

She decided not to wait until Saturday. She installed cameras.

She told herself it was because of the illness. In case he fell, in case he wandered out into the street in the middle of the night, in case he left the gas on. That's what she told herself. She bought three, placed them in the living room, in the hallway, in the bedroom, and connected them to her phone.

The first night she stayed awake, watching the small screen, her father's room in grey, her father asleep.

At quarter past three, he got up.

On the video, Aurelio crosses the living room slowly, in his pajamas, without turning on the light, like someone going to a familiar place. He sits down at the small table. In front of the board.

And in front of him, in the other chair, there is no one.

Her father smiles. He moves his lips. Sofía had no audio that first night, so she could only watch him talk, nod, laugh at something, that whole laugh she hadn't seen in him for years, the laugh from before, the one belonging to the man he had been.

He moves a white piece. He advances it with two fingers. And waits.

He looks at the empty chair with the fond attention of someone listening to another person think.

And then, without any hand touching it, a black piece slides one square.

By itself.

Her father nods, as if to say good move, son, and it's his turn again.

Sofía watched the video fourteen times that night. In slow motion. Frame by frame. The black piece didn't wobble, didn't jump the way a trick of editing would. It moved smoothly, deliberately,

the way a hand not present would move it.

At quarter to four, Aurelio stood up, said good night to the air, tenderly, and went back to bed.

By morning he would remember nothing.

What took Sofía longest to understand was the thing about the games.

Because she began to reconstruct them. In the morning, with the photos, she wrote down the moves, worked through the development. She knew just enough to follow them; Mateo had taught her as a teenager, during the dead afternoons, though she had never risen above mediocre.

The early games, from the first weeks, were badly played by black. Clumsy. Hesitating, losing pieces carelessly, opening badly. Like someone who is learning. Like someone who remembers that a game exists but not quite how it is played.

Then it improved.

Week by week, black played better. It stopped giving away pieces. It began to set traps. To sacrifice a pawn to open a diagonal, the kinds of things that don't occur to a beginner.

And one Saturday Sofía recognized something on the board that left her cold.

Black had opened with the Sicilian defense, closed variation, and had maneuvered the knights inside in an odd, old, awkward way that she had seen before. That she had seen her whole childhood. It was Mateo's way of playing. The style her father had put in his head as a boy, under that lamp, the mannerisms, the knights inside, the queenside pawn early.

Black was no longer playing like a stranger who is learning.

Black was playing like her brother.

The board was a transcription. Night after night, someone was sitting across from her father and learning to be Mateo, move by move, and each week was doing it better.

The thing about quarter past three she discovered while looking for something else.

She was sorting through her father's papers, the old ones, the ones he could no longer manage, and among them appeared the hospital envelope. Mateo's report. The one from the night of the accident.

Time of death: 3:15.

Sofía sat on the floor with the paper in her hand for a long time.

She had never told her father. The exact time, no. By the time Mateo died, Aurelio was already too far gone, already closing doors, and she had spared him that detail the way you spare someone the details that only serve to hurt. Her father didn't know at what hour his son had died.

The visitor came at that hour.

At that one, and no other.

She didn't look for an explanation. She had already understood that the story she was living had no explanations, only facts that didn't fit with being alive. She wrote down the hour in her notebook, below the moves, and didn't tell anyone, because there was no one to tell, because who was going to believe her about a chess board?

The question arrived one ordinary midday.

During the day. In sunlight. With nothing strange in the air.

Sofía was buttoning up her father's shirt, and Aurelio was looking out the window, absent, nowhere in particular. And then, all at once, Aurelio came back.

It's not easy to explain to someone who has never cared for a person like this. But sometimes, for a second, they return. The eyes focus, the face composes itself, and for an instant the whole man is there, the one from before, looking at you for real.

Her father looked at her for real.

He recognized her. She knew it because his eyes filled the way only a father's eyes fill.

And he asked her, with an immense gentleness, without reproach, almost gratefully:

—Why don't you come anymore at night?

Sofía didn't answer.

Because she had never visited him at night. Never. She came on Saturdays, during the day, forty minutes of road, the soup, the nails, the fridge. Never at quarter past three.

But her father was speaking to her as to someone who did come. At night. To sit with him.

And in that second, before he faded away again, she understood everything, and it was not a relief, it was the opposite of a relief.

The cameras hadn't caught anything.

They had taught it.

Looking had been letting herself be looked at. Every night she had stayed watching the screen, every morning she had reconstructed the games, every time she had leaned over that board trying to understand who was playing, she had been, without knowing it, revealing herself. Teaching it her face. Her devotion. Her schedule.

The thing had started with Mateo because it was Mateo her father kept.

But for months it had been studying her.

The one who came back. The one who always came back, Saturday after Saturday, the most faithful of all the visitors. For her father, by now, the daughter who came by day and the one who came by night were beginning to be the same person.

The next face it learned to wear would be hers.

That night Sofía didn't stay to watch the screen.

She turned off her phone. She forced herself not to watch quarter past three.

And it served no purpose, because she knew the visitor had come anyway, punctual, gentle, and her father would have played, and laughed with the laugh from before, and would have been, for a while, happy. Happier with the thing than with her.

And she knew she would go back on Saturday.

That she would open the photos. That she would lean over the board to read the new game, to see how much it had learned, unable to stop herself, the way you can't stop yourself touching a wound.

That love is also this: returning, even when it doesn't serve you. Returning always.

And that something, in that house, at quarter past three, had understood this better than anyone.

Sofía would never know if it was her brother, loving her father from wherever it is that you love from after you die.

Or whether it was something else, something that had found the only mind that could not give it away, and had sat down to learn, with infinite patience, in front of a chess board, how you make someone love you.

She was never going to know.

And because she would never know, she was going to go back.

Which was exactly what they were waiting for from her.

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