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*Spoken Portrait*

I didn't spot him until the moment he took hostage the only empty table at the café. I had just sat down as well, but in a pretty lousy spot: right in the middle of the hall with my back to the door. Every time it opened, a current of air pummeled me while I gripped my cappuccino and cursed under my breath. Outside, New York remained dirty after the most recent snowfalls. Great chunks of coldness lay everywhere unmelted. Hard, darkened gray slush resisted futilely the incessant footsteps. I had been wanting the whole afternoon to write a poem about this city that always managed to horrify me yet beckoned me to return. I had walked around in search of a magical place, one of those unknown spaces that suddenly stay with you forever. After a few hours, what I had were chapped lips, a deadened nose, and an anvil of clothing that my body wasn't made to hold up. I was dreaming in Latin American that a good cup of coffee would cure all of my ailments and would allow me to open up a parenthetical space amidst the havoc of all that is material and souls, a havoc that could not sit still even when the temperatures had plummeted and the evening news was forecasting another winter advisory.

I had entered the café in the wake of a streaming crowd. Almost all of them approached the counter, ordered their drinks to go, and disappeared. When it came my turn to order, I hadn't made up my mind yet and thus, in a way, had exposed myself: only a true foreigner could take the luxury of wasting the employees' time (probably political science, philosophy, or film students), the great names of tomorrow who needed patience today because the stranger required a few extra seconds to think even though behind him the line as a consequence grew, and the waiting customers went out of their minds. I think I mentioned before that I sat in a bad spot. More than a table, it was a round chessboard held up by one central leg. Someone had taken one of the chairs. Without it, the board looked huge, desolate, like I could never be entertaining a guest across of it.

People came and went, opened the door; I froze. I took a glance around the area in front of me, an inaccessible paradise made up

of little square tables with their average, run-of-the-mill chairs. A woman read the paper. Two men laughed quietly and eyed distantly the movement around them. A group of Hispanics attempted to make themselves comfortable amidst large shopping bags. I felt the impulse rising to write a poem once again. I scribbled down a couple of lines, but finally I crumpled up the page and dedicated myself to languor, one of my guiltiest pleasures. A few seconds (or centuries) later, the Hispanics began the rite of leaving. The instructions that they gave each other delayed even further the already lethargic process of bundling up for the cold. First, you had to put on the puffy jacket, close an endless number of buttons, and zip up zippers. Then came the scarf, which was to be worn snugly around the neck but not tightly. In order to achieve perfect scarf placement, it became necessary to unbutton the coat and start over again. The earmuffs followed, then the wool cap, and then the hat. Finally, the gloves. Once ready to leave, after making sure that all was done exactly right, they picked up the bags and began to walk between the tables like astronauts atop the lunar surface. "Excuse me," they said with an unmistakable accent. "Excuse me," they repeated as people moved to let them through without looking at them or abandoning their solitude.

At that moment, a ferocious face crossed in front of me. It spoke to the last of the departing Hispanics, but perhaps the Hispanic didn't understand him. The young man's face spoke again, this time pointing at the table that they had just left but that was still occupied by bits of their meal. The tired Latino attempted to summon his friends for help, but the look projected by the young man with the ferocious face didn't give him any sort of an opportunity. He argued something in broken Spanish and English, put his bags beside him, and began to pick up the cardboard cups and wipe the table clean with a napkin. Immediately after, the young man began to take possession of the place: he put his backpack on one chair, his coat, hat and gloves on another, he gave the table a final going over, and he sat down. He was tall and black, with pale eyes and wild hair. He had a sharply featured face and long hands with which he began to extract utensils from his backpack: a block of paper, pencils and pens, a magazine (actually, a clothes catalogue). With great care, he laid out each object within the limits of his territory. Then, he forgot about the world. Or at least that's what I thought.

I supposed that he studied design. With his left hand, he kept the catalogue open; with his right he drew long strokes, focused on certain details, created forms that I could in no way see. I decided that he was enrolled in Pratt and that he was a regular MOMA stalker. Five nights a week, he would bartend in a bar, he went to the gym on an almost daily basis, and he read mostly terror novels, a genre that was so in right now after September 11, 2001. He would reside in Brooklyn, around the corner from school, or better yet, on the Lower East Side, which was closer to SoHo and the Village, not quite as artsy but with far more reasonable rent. His apartment would be located in a building built in the nineteenth century. It had to be minuscule, cramped with stuff, with posters inching all the way up to the ceiling, and it would have some chic detail. He would sleep alone (when he had no other choice) in an eternally unmade bed. He would eat at drastically different times every day, would usually consume more vegetables than meat and usually more pasta than vegetables. He would drink coffee to vanquish sleep and wine to regain it. He would feel like the king of the world. The rest was all about waiting for luck.

Once in a while he lifted his head, looked around without really watching, and didn't notice my impertinence in observing him even though I shamelessly followed his every move. I could get into trouble, but honestly, how often does one find a wonderful, wild face? They don't abound even in a city with limitless possibilities, like New York. The guy studied his sketch with much satisfaction, touched up a couple of details here and there, and then proceeded to tear the page out and crumple it into a perfect ball, which he then placed on the top right corner of the table. He opened up a clean page, caressed it gently with his hand, and this time, really and honestly looked around to notice his environment. For a second he seemed to lay his eyes on me, although actually, he was giving his utmost attention to something situated a bit further. Over my shoulder, to be exact. I turned to look at the cold that was coming and going without consideration, the cold that was beating my back and reminding me that I was but one more loner in New York. That's when I discovered the young girl who was huddling to keep warm under a light winter jacket. Her face was long and frazzled as if she had slept little. A small suitcase at her feet revealed her trav-

els. The girl began taking off her winter wear, took out a cell phone from her purse, and began making some calls.

“Hey, Mike,” she said the first time. “I waited for you at the airport for over an hour, and I haven’t stopped looking for you since. I’m at the coffee shop in Union Square, but you’re not here either . . . well, you promised to pick me up, Mike, remember? Let me know when you get this and come get me . . . oh and would you mind bringing my black coat? Love you, love you more.”

She waited for a few minutes, perhaps with the hope that Mike had been home and simply couldn’t make it to the phone on time. But Mike didn’t call, and there were no available tables at the café and wouldn’t be any until much, much later. So the girl dedicated herself to calling friends over the phone. She asked everyone around if they knew where Mike was, if they had seen him, oh my God would he be all right . . . yes, a long trip, she explained, but she was back now. No, they had had no problems landing . . . do you know anything about Mike? She didn’t even want to consider the possibility that he had stood her up. Again. This time it would be worse because she didn’t have the keys to the apartment . . . he had gone to Kelan’s in D.C. abruptly . . . always running toward the same arms . . . actually, my private life is not up for discussion, I apologize, I’ve made a mistake bringing Mike up, sorry about the inconvenience.

The draftsman with the fierce face was working again. Inspired by the newcomer, I supposed, he slid his pencil frantically over the page. The movements seemed automatic, like copying spoken words. He no longer traced delicate lines; he now scribbled with anxiety, perhaps not to lose the essence of the scene. Page after page of the clothing catalogue began to close, and I could have sworn that it slid toward the corner where the crumpled first attempt lay forgotten.

The girl left Mike three phone messages. She then conversed with a so-called Rob. She looked insecure, uncomfortable, although Rob didn’t ask for any explanations. Briefly, she told him that she couldn’t get into her apartment and that she maybe needed a place to stay for the night. She thanked him profusely: “you’re a true friend,” she said, hiding her anguish. Then she gave him directions to the café and they agreed to meet in ten minutes.

Almost immediately after, a table became available in front of the guy with the undoubtedly wild face. The girl took it, went to get

something to drink, and in a second a man arrived whom I assumed to be Rob. He was a little blushed by the rush and he had a paper bag with him. They greeted with a kiss on the cheek and sat down to talk.

She looked like she was about to cry, so Rob took her hand and held it in a significant way until the girl freed herself with a quick drawback of the hand, quick, but not so strong. At some point, the girl took out her phone. Rob let her check her messages but didn't approve of her making any new calls. In any case, the calls were short and actually depressed the girl even further. At that moment, Rob took out a box from the paper bag and put it in front of the girl. She hesitated, said a lot of things, but Rob didn't accept any excuses. He pushed the box toward her, asking her to untie the bow and look inside.

There was an orchid inside. The girl, reacting as anyone would, regarded it doubtfully, held it up before her eyes, and was about to hold it tight against her chest. Like her, I would also have had a lot to say about such a gift. I would have liked it if they made up a story for me, because actually, the worst one would be that Rob was saving the orchid in the fridge and had malevolently taken advantage of having it to overcome the girl's resistance. No, Rob, I'd rather you tell me that you hung up the phone, put your coat on in a hurry, and ran out to the street since you had only a few minutes to find something beautiful and make it to the café on time without risk of raising suspicion. Lie, say that you were cold, that you slipped on the ice and didn't notice the aggressive cars or people around you. There was a flower stand at the corner, behind it a little store with *norteño* music playing. You talked to the flower shop owner and she slipped to the back to find the most expensive flower in stock, a small, delicately lavender orchid. The woman brought the flower cupped between both of her hands like an offering. You didn't understand anything, Rob, but you thought that *norteño* music was the perfect accompaniment to the display of such a beautiful object. The song vaguely reminded you of some Germanic tunes that an ancient love used to play loudly on your stereo, which is why you asked the storeowner what the lyrics meant. "It talks about the strawberry harvest of the South," she explained. "It's about the people that roamed like gypsies around the Bible Belt and didn't know how to read or write, neither in English nor in Spanish." Reality

has no right to spoil your evening, Rob. You reacted apologizing, but the woman was still impassive, trying to decipher in your eyes the reason behind so particular a flower on this winter night. "Are you in love?" she asked you. You stepped out into the cold without answering, with the orchid hidden inside a paper bag, shaking your head at the error of your ways, at the error of speaking too much to Hispanics. The important thing was the flower, that same flower that the girl now slowly caressed.

When the girl and Rob actually got up, they could barely hide their smiles. They both helped each other put on their coats and they left walking very close together although they didn't even touch hands. When they walked past me, she described something she had seen in a museum in Washington, and Rob was carrying her bag. An eternity had traversed in front of me and I hadn't even noticed. By then my cappuccino was basically iced. Other people had left the café, so a few empty tables now encircled the guy with the unkempt face. I saw him perform the last frenetic strokes upon the page, and then he fainted on top of his project. In a very disciplined demeanor, he left his pencil to the right of the block of paper, he unmade the crumpled-up ball that was at the corner, looked at it, added a little color here and there, and crumpled it up into a tiny ball again. He looked satisfied . . . no: exalted. He was so sure of himself and his excellent luck that he sort of carelessly left the table and went to the bathroom without looking back once. Of course I was there, vigilantly watching his every move, but he didn't have to know that. He also didn't have to know about the opportunity he was laying before me. The guy with the wild face would be back in a couple of minutes, but that was enough time for me to go up to his table and take a peek at his block of drawings.

When I approached the table, I found the blueprint of a comic in which a young girl left New York but before leaving she met up with a lover in a tiny city café. In their conversations there were no complaints, but there were torrential tears á la Lichtenstein. At some point the male lover gave her an orchid that he had stolen. Thanks to the character's revelation (and a note at the margin), I learned that the lover was being sought after by some "Hispanics" who were going to make his debt payable through a beating. The conflict started to develop around the flower, the girl's fear and her urgency toward getting on that train. As the frames progressed,

the drawings lost detail until they became merely squares with scribbles. At the same time, there were more and more unattached phrases, merely suggested dialogue, and questions about what was yet to come.

It was then that I felt an urgency, a certainty that burned at chest height: the guy and I could run around that city all night until we turned the other one—the one awaiting the next winter storm—into a wondrous world of graphite and paper. I felt it so strongly that I abandoned Rob and the girl to follow the couple of lovers made desperate by separation, threat and self-prejudices through those comic streets. I felt so close and immersed in their lives that I let time run free. Instead of awaiting the young artist's return, I looked for more clues about the lovers' destiny. I finished leafing through the block of paper; I quickly leafed through the clothing catalogue. Then I noticed the forgotten crumpled-up ball that was resting upon the right corner of the table. Without a moment's hesitation, I opened it.

I found a story previous to the two lovers fleeing into the night. When but a few steps separated its creator from me, a drawing of a man sitting at a small, round table which looked like a chess board emerged from the wrinkled page and stared at me. The model was so shamelessly facing the spectator that it made a strange thrill rush through my body. Loose phrases and secret ideas encircled the sketch. And it was standing like so, with my eyes transfixed upon my paper self, that I heard a whisper over my shoulder, a sweet and fierce voice that asked me if I could help him find the ending to this story.

*Translated from the Spanish by Nadia Reiman*