

"Behind the Door"

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How pretend to be calm? I don't understand anything, I have no idea what the devil I'm doing here! Explain it to me clearly and slowly. I've never been so lost. For the first time I come into this place and those white clouds of gas have me all confused. I'm more worried, though, about the fact that I can't see you. I can guess your presence behind the curtain, but you give the impression of lacking both face and body. However, that's impossible. What could this gas be? Look here, I also feel as though I exist and yet I don't. I hear my voice, but I seem not to exist. I try to look at my arms and legs but I can't break the illusion produced by this gas. Where is it coming from? What kind of establishment is this? It's possible for my memory to fail me. Sometimes they tell me at the "office that I'm absentminded. But I can give you the complete facts: Jose Luis Figueroa. August 2, 1962. Graduated with honors in Accounting, presently working as an assistant in a publishing concern." Does that seem correct to you? How do you know so much about me? Surely the people in the office must have brought you all this stuff. What more do you want to know? What I did during the last hours? That's really difficult. A Thursday at work doesn't especially produce events to remember. Although... yes, there were three things that vaguely come to mind. First, the oppressive heat all day long. Second, the director told us the reports were urgent and we decided to work overtime. Third, some joker knocked at the door, I opened it, and no one was there. If you want me to talk about that I'll be glad to, although I don't understand why you are so interested in such a puerile event.

It happened this way. We were in the office (the door was closed to the public, we had taken off our coats and ties, shirts were unbuttoned, the women had the fans turned up to the max), and the bell was ringing insistently. The receptionist had gone, so I offered to open. There was no one on the other side of the door. I was going to close it when I noticed some strange things: a dog ran out of the narrow street that separates our building from the house across the way, and some kids came after it. At the other end, near the front door to the house, our neighbors were gesticulating. I don't know them very well, and I didn't think they were looking for me, so I shut the door and went back to work. No, wait, something else happened: something like fireworks going off. Since this isn't the month for celebrating anything, I thought, "Those are gunshots."

But that's ridiculous. Who would be shooting in the middle of a street lined with decent houses, on a Thursday, at five o'clock in the afternoon, with so much light? I heard the explosions, closed the door,

and came back in. The people were working away without any problems and I convinced myself that my conclusions were foolishness. I finished up a small detail before leaving for home.

But I didn't leave. That's strange. It wasn't my day for going to see my girlfriend, and it wasn't the right time of day to run errands. Now that I stop to think about it, I didn't even finish my work. Plus, now I realize that my companions weren't very calm. There was a moment of shouting, but I didn't shout, I couldn't. It seems to me, though, their shouts were on my behalf . . . but there was no reason for them to be shouting unless something might have occurred and the shouting had something to do with my part in the occurrence.

Now that I think of it, I went back into our building, but not into the back. I didn't get past the lobby, and they all came out there shouting. Now I remember, they were talking about shots, about an armed robber. So then it wasn't fireworks I heard at first, I wasn't mistaken. Let me put the facts together; our building is always in the shade, the only way to know if there is light is by going out and crossing to the other side of the street. See? That's how I found out it was a sunny afternoon, that was how I was able to see the people who were gesticulating so clearly. I must have been so scared by the gunshots that in a couple of jumps I reached the entrance and slammed the door. Now I remember the dry jolt on the wood, and that's why they all came running from the back and asked, "Was that a gunshot, Jose Luis?" A little after that, when they were trying to get me up, someone explained, "It was a stray bullet. ." Get me up? Yes, that's true, now I get it, that detail had escaped from my memory until just now. How do you explain that? The only way is this: I heard the shot (or shots), I retreated quickly—I remember I stepped backward—I must have bumped into the table with the magazines because I fell on my back and it struck me.

That dry sound was not the door but the table at the moment it shattered. That's why all my friends came, the neighbors, the police, and the nurses, and like an extended echo I heard the explanation, it was a stray bullet, Jose Luis, it was a stray bullet, Judge. It was a very strong blow, it almost knocked me out completely. I saw everything in a constant coming and going, a lot of sentences I didn't manage to understand. I do remember that Anita held my head on her lap while I was covering my stomach because I felt hot and... my skin was in shreds...But now I see it all clearly: I went out to the street at the moment of the shots, the stray bullet was not an anecdote nor a distant peril, it was close, so close that it managed to reach me, shoving me backward. Anita told me, as a consolation, "There was a burglar in the house opposite, when they discovered him someone knocked at your door looking for help, and that's when he started shooting." That was why the dog and the kids were running. When I went out they tried to warn me with their gestures not to, but I exposed myself, and a stray bullet got to some of

my organs and . . . The police came. Anita was crying hysterically, the rest of my companions were looking at each other with long faces . . . The ambulance arrived but they didn't pick me up, they just covered my face with a piece of cloth. Anita was talking with someone they called "Judge." They ran a piece of chalk around me. When they got me up no one bothered to give me blood or oxygen. I ended up in the back end of a very dark van, wrapped in a bag.

But I still wasn't in any condition to understand. I assumed that I would wake up in the hospital, surrounded by Anita and the rest of my friends, my parents...But here I am, and you aren't answering. Have I remembered everything well enough? Because if that's the case, explain to me what I'm doing in this place, why didn't they take me to the hospital I Tell me what happened to my body, what am I doing here, what am I now?

Translated from the Spanish by Leland H. Chambers

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