

Joaquín Ortega

Bang

A monologue in one act

In front of a rickety TV set, a solitary chest of drawers receives indirect light from a single window. Some lights sweep the stage pendulously. The flickering light from the TV becomes intermittent. The stage goes completely dark. Library shelves and a long kitchen table complete the apartment's furniture, very tasteful, where Salvador lives. After a few seconds, the lights resume their zigzagging and we see a middle-aged man sitting on the chest. Salvador talks to the TV, as though he was in a real interview. The TV won't emit a sound, but its lights seem to talk to him, in some type of code-- to this professional killer, who now reflects on his phase as a crepuscular male. His tone is in turn violent, feverish, cynical, and joyful.

Salvador: This is not a Mormon's belly. It's years of beef and scotch. When I have killed it's been for money or for fun. Sometimes both...

Yes...

Sometimes... You have to choose the weapon, as if it was a career. If you're a stabber, you'll be the best stabber. If it's with a gun, the best gunman. Even though coming up with new forms of dying can be entertaining.

The first guy who bought a one-way ticket to hell from me liked to drown cats. He would put the kittens in buckets filled with water... or he would smother them in cement at the bottom of flowerpots. One brick on the head was enough to send him to the other world, to walk those kittens. Presuming there is another world... and that that bastard stopped sinning there.

Once I killed a Portuguese man. He was a butcher who left his shop late one night...

And he was strong...

That's why the woman, who was planning an early widowhood, to go with a younger man, warned me that whatever I was going to do with him, it should be from a distance.

I didn't listen to her and put six in his chest with a .38... point blank.

Once I bought a racetrack set. Old-style, for little kiddies, with two cars: one red and one blue. I knew it would come in handy one day. And that day arrived, and I took a customer to an office I had rented in a run-down building...

If he won, I would let him go, he could forget about me. In the end, I won. And because the guy was a creep with little girls, I chose to do my bit to help my community.

Another one, a little weirder, was known as The Elegant. He dressed terribly... always mismatched colors, socks...

Sometimes people told him he dressed very elegantly, in order not to get in trouble with him. That candidate for death was uncomfortable to a lot of people. Bad at home and bad on the streets.

It wasn't easy to get rid of him...

At the end of a night of partying, booze, and coke, I took him out of the VIP room in a club where he was with two girls. I waited for him to get sober. Fizzy wáter and some stale canapes helped...

Then I took him to an abandoned basketball court and ordered him to kneel, to remember that he'd been no saint, and before putting a bullet into him, said,

"Close your little eyes 'cos you're leaving"

And he left.

Because, as an evangelical dude from Trinidad used to say (*imitating the Trini accent*) "Ah helps lil' pipol mah wey, ent?"

I...

Make them kick the bucket...

Buy the farm...

Say the Big Adios...

Close the umbrella...

End belly up...

Bite the dust...

Meet Charon...

Check out...

Cross the Jordan...

Have dinner with Marylin, Renny¹, and Gardel...

I cover their little noses and tell them: "relax, relax, walk towards the light, seek the light, look at your granpas, run, run, your granpas are waiting for you there"

As you can see, I don't kill everybody.

You can relax with me. If I know you, I won't kevork you. As they used to say. Which I stopped saying. Because now the times and the jokes are different.

I'm not aggressive...

Not even with annoying neighbors. Not even if they hit their woman. That's their business. That's their karma. And my job is outside my house, never near where I get my paper or buy my bread

...

1 Renny Ottolina was a very popular variety show host in Venezuela during the 60s and 70s

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If you ask it that way... I'd say that hatred has no sex. Women hire me to kill men, women, even children. Those jobs I don't accept. A kid, no matter how bad he may be, always has a moment when as a grown-up he can choose between the gun and the hearth. A man knows how to live with fire, but some turn to a crisp outside... others boil inside.

Men can kill for any reason, especially money. Few like to get their hands dirty... or rather, get **my** hands dirty, for a feeling like love. Women know how to get revenge, and never confess if they're caught. Unless they kill with deep anger or deep love. Then what they tell comes with all kinds of detail.

When women order the death of women, they ask for lots of details. Evil details. I say yes to everything to get the job, and then I do what's accepted in the profession--the fastest and the best. That level of gratuitous sadism is not for me.

There are weird jobs. Once, a friend... of a friend... of a friend got me a job. They wanted me to kill a donkey. It belonged to a school. They had grown fond of him, but one day the donkey could not stand on his legs, and suffered; with a raspy breathing and kicking as if he had Alzheimer's...

Erm, no, sorry, Parkinson's.

I didn't have access to a vet to give him a shot. They said an accurate shot it was cheaper than an expensive injection. I did the job, just one shot. With a different gun of a different caliber than I use for my regular jobs. It was with a rifle that is in my living room only when it needs cleaning. That rifle has never done a number on human flesh

But let's get back to the donkey, sure...

One thing led to another, and the next day the principal, the one who didn't want to spend too much on an injection, gave me the address of his wife and her lover. I waited for a long time...

Some would say too long even...

But they got to the hotel, walked in, followed them, let them finish and left them there, one bullet on each head, enough to let them stay where they were... forever.

That I'm sick?... Oh!... you think I'm sick?

I'm not even half as sick as some people you see around. Sometimes I dream. Pretty dreams...

And some nightmares. The nightmares are short but very irregular. I dream with zombies, I ignore them and they don't turn to look at me when I ignore them...

And they go on eating people, while I silently find a house and lock myself in... as I count the bullets I brought with me.

There are always forty-something bullets. I don't know why I count them and why I never finish counting them, because suddenly I wake up. But I know there are more than forty. Not exactly, but more than forty...

In one dream, it was the zombies who started running away. I started screaming obscenities at them and they looked at each other, then I would shoot at them and they would run away. In my dreams, zombies don't die. I know they're already dead, but you get me. I fill them with lead, and they tell me "don't be

abusive, that hurts”

Unusual things?...

Once I killed an office boss, on request. And this time I did what they requested. I forced him to type on? an old typewriter, send faxes, make phone calls and apologize when he'd been rude. I gave him stale coffee, a full liter in an afternoon. Once, in front of his desktop, I had him take dictation. And when he was done, I ordered him to erase everything and start over. I had to be a bit sadistic this time, you're right. It's not my fault. Sometimes some people deserve it. And this guy's resume was a beauty. But I won't tell you more about this gentleman, because it's a professional secret.

Here and everywhere, reputation is everything. If, once you die, nobody remembers you with half a smile, then you're not going to the good place. You would have to go down more stories... and if Hell exists, I sent many people there...

...

...

The worst part is the wait. For the target to arrive. For time to go faster. That nobody will show up at the last minute to screw up the original plan...

To wait to strangle is the pits. When you strangle somebody, you have to be careful, because the sphincter opens. You get a big flood, and you end up splattered and stinky from all bodily fluids...

...

I know how to use anything that fires bullets. Automatics, revolvers, a pure powder one, even one fresh from the market. You have to control the weight, know what you need it for. Automatics are for insecure people. They want many shots, just in case, but fear makes them chicken if the gun jams.

Many times you have to go undetected. But for some jobs it's the other way around.

Don't laugh...

I have dressed as a woman, a clown, a mariachi, a pregnant Black woman, a nun, a priest. But dressed as a graduate has been the best disguise. You put on a cap and gown. You do the deed: Rat-tat-tat, you rat! And when you take off your disguise, you're somebody else.

I had to whack a dentist once. I had to study him, follow him, but he was irregular. So, in order to do the job, I made an appointment. He fixed my tooth. I dispatched him on the third appointment... I was waiting for the fluoride coating. I didn't get attached to him, he was a good dentist, but I'm a professional above all.

When I get home I like to watch cartoons. I watch the old ones. The new ones I don't get, too much screaming and too little imagination. In some, nothing even happens and there's nothing to laugh about. I laugh with the Roadrunner and the Coyote. When I fall asleep I dream with Fred Flintstone as if he was a mark [a target?], Wilma pays me and I off the fat one. The other cartoon, the yellow one...

Homer...

That one completely fails to do anything worthy of attention.

Time is merciless. I get fewer calls, they don't knock on my door as they used to. I watch more TV and feel

that I'm losing strength.

Angry? Never.

Unless it's a personal thing. A friend of mine had to collect a debt from back in prison, and he got the right blade. I found his victim, and watched over him while my pal waited.

"Get out of my way, this is my territory", said the loudmouth

(With a Colombian accent, and a sharp tone) "And this is a stab so you won't fuck again with a Colombian, you triple sonofabitch... what you do here, you pay here".

...

And that stab cut through jeans, belt, flesh and entrails. The mess and the screams were epic. My friend the *paisa*² looked like he had come out of a fridge, as if he had carried a cow's carcass. Wet, red, and tired.

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And back in a cardboard box, some kittens went: "meow"

...

(Resuming his usual serenity) I'm getting old

And I think I'm shorter... although I've kept my weight... well, I try.

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The girls...

Before, they all liked me, now only some. Less work also means less cash. You save, but you spend and there is no pension for retired killers. I miss the simple things: climb up the stairs, go to supermarkets to study targets... I can't overdo it on Chinese food, plus you end up dependent on blood pressure pills.

With age come new targets... bank tellers who steal the pensions of old people... my favorites...

...

There are more criminals among the higher-ups, no doubt, but I can't touch politicians! That's another *target*,³ as they say nowadays. There was this bank teller..

I had him dead to rights so I followed him. He caught the subway, got off about 10 stations later, then got on a *camioneta*.⁴ There he behaved badly, not giving his seat to pregnant women or the elderly. I just waited. When he was alone and nodding off, I shot him twice on the chest. With silencers, life is more enjoyable [pleasant?]. And I left him, as if he slept. By himself, on the seat he never offered to others.

Now my breakfast is granola and yogurt, how boring! No more eggs and bacon or *arepitas*⁵ with pork rinds.

² *paisa*, a Colombian from Medellín

³ In English in the original

⁴ A van where passengers share a ride. Usually the fare depends on distance travelled

⁵ A round bread made with cornmeal, typical of Venezuela, usually fried or grilled

My diet is what beauty pageant queens eat: lettuce, pineapple juice without sugar, and whole wheat bread. When I started to eat like this, I had a different case...

One day I had to smoke a hairdresser; to top it off, he was a tranny. A woman paid me because her husband had left her for him (or her); he was the stylist of both of them, and I don't know how to call him, if "chick dude" or "dude chick." What's worse, the wife caught something... a disease. And well, the wife did the math "2 plus 2 equals queer" and there it was: responsible for both things was this character.

This was a lot of work, because I had to pursue him through debris and bushes. He was done for, but he freed himself from the cable I had tied him up with and went off. If I shot him, I would alert some nearby hshacks. Farther down the road, a police car was doing the rounds. The dogs had already smelled us. So I had no option but to run after him. Meanwhile, he was screaming at me: "I cut your hair, I helped you stop losing hair, gave you advice on your beard, and that's how you pay me!!!"

If I answered I couldn't keep his pace. Thankfully, he hit an old flowerpot and stumbled. There he laid, his noggin split open by some metal rods, from some car wreck, apparently. To make sure, I shot him twice in the nape of the neck.

Carefully, so he wouldn't look too ugly in the coffin.

...

There are things I've stopped doing, of course...

With all this heat I can no longer eat ice cream. I treated myself once, disguised as an ice-cream vendor. I was waiting for a teacher who had betrayed her lesbian lover for a doctor, out of a soap opera.

I wasn't going to move until the last kid left the premises. I was watching the ice cream and enduring the sun. To top it off, I didn't have enough coins for the change.

I waited until all the kids left...

My idea of a good life is no trauma, too bad I can't rule the world. When the teacher was alone at last, I came in through a fence I'd fixed the previous night. I walked in through a long hallway full of photos and trophies and found her necking with the woman who'd hired me. The two turned around when they heard the door close behind me.

The woman told me to leave, that she had changed her mind, but us professionals don't accept takebacks. I left them, one on top of the other, having aimed at heart and forehead. Without a ruckus...

What a gorging of ice cream afterwards, bro!

Lately, I look at myself in the mirror, and tell myself that I'm still the best in the game, I've never been caught, and I sleep without a worry.

A normal life of a real man. Without a woman, but with lady friends who don't mock my old-man habits. I have some money in my wallet, and the occasional job that keeps me in the trade. In that way, women don't see me as a vagrant or a pauper.

Yes... certainly...

Now...

I'd like to watch more cartoons, with fewer screams... I'd like to eat more ice cream and not dream with zombies quite so much, but wishing it don't make it so, and miniseries are not soap operas... And I have neither a taste for nor money to watch cable TV.

Elegantly, Salvador picks up a .38 caliber revolver

Salvador: That life is long or weird?... Don't ask me things nobody knows the answer to. You do what you can, when you can. When it's my turn to talk with the other world, I'll know if there is another world...

...

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For now, I have six channels in my hand that I can still choose from... and I have the strength and determination to turn everything off... or slowly lower the volume...

The TV seems to be blinking faster and faster. The white noise volume increases and the zigzagging lights converge on Salvador, who fills the chambers of the gun one by one. The light appears to fail and music fills the theater. Salvador's voice is heard, half of his face illuminated.

Salvador: shhhh, shhhh...Close your little eyes 'cos you're leaving...

Curtain. -

Translated from the Spanish by Henry Georget