

The Wanderers

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I

When Susana finally decided to go back to the apartment, it had been a long time since the sunset: it was a clear, clean night, and the air didn't carry the pestilence of the outer borders. This little detail was just enough to fill the young woman's heart with joy, as she walked in double time through the building's corridors.

Her guard turn had been really quiet: the *wanderers* rarely approached the barbed wire, although many of them could be seen in the distance, silent, slowly dragging their feet in their continuous strolling. Not all of them were walking. Susana could have swear that one of them, standing just by the rickety kiosk, had spend the last weeks completely motionless, legs spread and arms extended, watching the moon while frowning with concern, or the sun with obvious indifference.

In the end, Aranda's ideas worked as a charm. His was the suggestion of creating the second base camp, way brighter than the first one. Following his instructions, a lot of sound sources were deployed to attract the *wanderer's* attention like moths to a flame. They came in waves and milled around without giving up in their attempt to breach in; ripping their flesh in the barbed wire, melting in acid bogs and, finally, being blocked by the walls and the barricade of trucks. Since then, the camp was way more peaceful. Having the undead rambling the wrong side of the camp was really beneficial, psychologically, for the survivors. But most importantly, the absence of sounds worked wonders in the hearts of the men and women determined to survive: sounds of death and ruin like the slow, dragging and muffled slaps over the wall, with no pace or cadence at all; or the whisper of the bodies sliding against each other in the darkness. From time to time, the hideous clucking of a throat filled with a thick paste of dried blood and dirt. All of them were gone. The undead were lurking the wrong camp.

Susana walked to her room, entered and closed the door with plenty of locks and planks. Then, she turned to the darkness of her small apartment. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, ready to enjoy the last hours of the day in solitude. Hours for her, free of grim thoughts. Then she stripped herself, took a shower and lay over the bed. She used to remain silent, concentrated on not thinking at all, at least until she fell asleep. But few times was she able to empty her mind, besieged by pouring images and memories. Almost every time, she unwittingly went back to the past, time and time again, to the very beginning. Even before... when life was normal and people died and stayed dead.

II

Julio was twenty-one when he saw his first corpse. It wasn't a nasty looking one, wasn't rotten and had no injuries. It was just white, white as pure snow. It was white because it had been dragged from the bottom of the beach. It drowned.

The police, of course, wasn't letting anyone come close, but Julio and the rest had a very good view from the top of the breakwater. It was said that a German tourist found it during her morning walk: the tide dragged it, naked and stiff as an old log, to the very shore. The police took photos, talked to the German woman and took a lot of notes. They examined the corpse and covered it with a black canvas that had the polish and texture of plastic. Julio saw it all that from his privileged position.

Ten minutes later, while the judge and the cops were exchanging papers, the corpse started twitching so intensely that the canvas he was covered with slipped to a side. Everybody turned to take a look. Julio stared at it with a sense of fascination: the sun was bathing his white, moist skin, giving it a soapy look. Then, clumsily, the drowned started to stand up while groaning and emitting harsh chokes. His arms shivered and he looked like he might topple to the ground at any second. Two cops who managed to overcome the shock ran to the drowned man and held his arms.

But then... the drowned attacked one of the cops with overwhelming violence. He took him down to the sand while his partner tried to figure out what was happening. His head has like an out of control jackhammer, going up and down in a frenzied dance while biting the cop's face off, who tried to protect himself with his arms, which were quickly covered in blood. Finally, a few men swarmed the drowned to hold him. The scene was filled with screams.

Julio and his friends were petrified. The cop on the ground was bleeding like a stabbed pig while his partner held his arm in pain. The drowned was struggling, possessed by a primary and brutal madness. Finally, a cop pointed a gun at his leg and shot. The drowned fell to the sand, but no blood came from the wound. The flesh, sunken, was a black and ominous cave. The drowned stood up with no signs of pain and merciless tenacity in his eyes.

Julio stopped breathing, unconsciously. His stomach contracted to the point of pain. A second shot made him shiver from head to toes. It impacted on the same leg. Tiny and horrible clots sprayed from the back of the limb, but that didn't stop the drowned. The cop stumbled and shot a third bullet, this time to the clavicle, but it had no effect.

Panicked, the cop shot a fourth time. The bullet smashed the jaw, sending pieces of flesh and teeth flying in all directions, but that didn't stop the drowned. People started screaming in terror. Someone grabbed a rickety stick and hit the drowned from behind. The missing jaw dripped a dense, blackened paste that fell, curdled, over his bloated chest, but his white hands were still looking to grab the cop.

The fifth shot landed cleanly right over the right eye, making the drowned

take two steps back. Then, his eyes crossed in a confused expression and, finally, toppled to the ground, without flexing his knees or extending his hands.

Julio found himself stood up. All his friends stood up after him and retreated a few steps. The misty afternoon sun tainted the scene with golden tones, making the skin of the drowned look like fried chicken. The police on the ground was finally being treated: he lost consciousness and his face was a hideous mess of blood, flesh and exposed muscle. The nose was an indistinguishable stump. Few men were looking the corpse of the drowned in horror, covering their mouths with trembling hands. Their eyes looked around the open wounds, but no word was muttered.

—What the fuck happened? —yelled a man while walking erratically like a headless chicken —. What in the holly fuck has happened?!

Then, like activated by a spring, the other men started reacting and talking hastily.

—Fuck... fuck... fuck... — repeated another man.

—...yeah, my partner's hurt... No, no, it's over... at the Cala beach, in the entrance, an ambulance —mumbled the cop at his radio.

—... fuck... fuck...

—He's dead.

—For God's sake, someone call...

—Fuck! He's dead!

—... shit!

In the middle of the commotion, Julio knew that the floored cop was dead. His blood darkened a lot of sand under his motionless body.

—Christ... —suddenly said Alberto, one of his friends —. That's wicked.

—Ho... ly... shit... —murmured another one, emphasizing each syllable.

—That motherfucker... —said Alberto —. Now that's fucked up.

—The mouth... the teeth... —whispered Flavio while rubbing his incipient goatee with disconcerting tenacity.

However, Julio did not join his mates, whose gestures and commentaries were getting more pronounced each time. Something troubled him, big time. Something in that scene was completely *wrong*. Something inside of him yelled, at the top of his lungs, that something was not working as supposed, and the feeling was so strong that Julio felt a sharp whistle in his eardrums.

—But he was drowned... —suddenly said Flavio.

—Drowned my ass, man, have you seen the motherfucker? He was some kind of drug dealer and he snapped after getting busted —answered Alberto.

—Hey, look at Mr. Smartass here. He was as dead as my grandma, I swear...

—Yes, of course he was, moron. You tripping... you saw the cop, didn't you? — groaned Alberto, clearly angry.

Julio finally spoke clearly:

—He was dead *before*, but then he wasn't.

A few seconds of silence passed. They all thought about Julio's words like handling a chilli pepper: afraid to bite, to assimilate the news with all its implications and its hideous meaning. The looks were then concentrated on the beach, at the scene that was taking place down there. Some people were reclined with fascination to take a better look at the non-drowned and a red haired woman was making fast gestures at the wound on the head. The cops were still talking to the radio with concern.

—This is the shit —said Flavio.

Right then, another police car arrived. The two cops got down of the vehicle and swiftly walked through the rocks that separated them from the beach. A lot of gestures and waving arms tried to explain what happened; meanwhile, as the news started to spread, more and more curious from the small towns of La Cala and La Araña arrived. After a few moments, the police car went away with the siren on.

—Look at that one —said Alberto, pointing at the cop—. He won't stop talking to the radio.

Julio looked at the man, who didn't separate himself from the device. He was listening while walking erratically, changing directions with fast moves.

— What about the ambulance?! —some people said. But the cop told them to remain calm with hand gestures.

However, the ambulance never arrived.

Thirty-two minutes later, the sheer amount of people surrounding the scene was astonishing. Julio, Alberto and Flavio managed to remain in the front row, following the events with morbid fascination. The people around them were telling all kind of histories. A short, grey-haired guy, a former truck driver currently living at the old fishermen's houses at La Cala —remains of a past time, before the touristic boom that changed the town forever — assured that his brother in law, a long time fisherman, saw a bunch of human-like figures swimming underwater, right under his boat, a fresh night of June, just after full moon. He was convinced that the deep abysses of La Cala were home of a population of white, bloodless creatures with no pulse, capable of ruthless violence. Two chubby women that were talking by his side were horrified by the fact that, in such an atrocious situation, someone could talk such nonsense.

But everybody was talking about the unmistakable, fascinating fact that the drowned man, bloated and white by the effect of the salty water, officially dead and under a plastic canvas, stood up and partially devoured a cop.

Approximately one hour after the cop's death, a choir of screams could be heard from an undetermined point of the beach. It spread relentlessly, like a disgusting miasma, through the crowd. The cause was the old plastic canvas that covered the two bodies: the faceless cop and the drowned. It was moving. Again.

At Malaga's Carlos Haya Hospital's morgue, the lead responsible of the mortuary chamber, Antonio Rodríguez, could relate the cost of the illegal immigration from a different point of view than the rest of the state workers. They were having quite an overload due to a recently found piece of wreckage that was being used as a heaven for six dozens of immigrants.

Rodríguez opened the gates to the big cold-storage chamber where the corpses were held. It was impossible to move through it, as many of the corpses lied on the floor, covered by sanitary sheets after being undressed or with the same clothes they were found with. The corpses were piled up around the walls, two for each niche. Since the niches were tighter in the second cold-storage chamber, Rodríguez had a single, frightening choice: to pile up the bodies, one over another, squashing their faces, or leaving them in the outside, in the hall, with no refrigeration. Rodríguez refused to deform those dead bodies by the pressure, so he putted two of them outside, over stretchers and behind a curtain. The smell of decadence was not very strong, but it was clear.

—Is that it? —asked one of his assistants.

—Yes, that was the last one... —answered another one, clearly affected by the situation. He was checking a list and writing something on it —. We will have to embalm the ones that will leave tomorrow, because they are going to be about seventy two hours on transportation.

Rodríguez took a moment to give a quick look to the corpses. He knew it was just a temporal solution until the next day, but he was really concerned by the fact that he couldn't provide them a proper place to rest.

—We should leak this to the press, see if that way they make this fucking place bigger —commented absentmindedly. His eyes were set on a heart-shaped birth mark in one of the bare feet—. Send them a fucking photo of this shit; you know what I mean....

—If you're really going to do it, I'll give you my camera for free —answered the assistant without taking his eyes from the list.

—This isn't normal, man.

—No it isn't.

—It's...

In that very moment, Rodríguez's monotonous and peaceful world changed forever. No more beers at the Oña café, no more Buy A DVD On Friday Night. No more stew at his mother's house, no more Russian vodka with his girlfriend, Paola, on Christmas Eve. The very end came with a huge twitch from one of the corpses. It began shaking so violently that one of the bodies beside it collapsed over the ground with a deaf noise.

Rodríguez reacted with a scream.

—Fuck!

For a few seconds, he and his assistant remained silent; the air was filled

with the buzzing of the neon tubes and the giant freezing chambers. But finally, the rest of the bodies started twitching the same way. Then, they began to stand up.

Rodriguez was speechless. He looked around, looking at the corpses one body at the time as they stood up with some effort, their eyes white and their mouths opened. The sheets fell to a side, their arms pointed forward, their hands clawed at the air and clenched into fists. Almost all of them coughed horribly while standing, other proffered hideous chokes and deaf guttural noises; a woman with crisped hair puked some kind of blackened goo.

—What... What?

—For God’s sake, what the...? H-help... Help!

The young assistant closed the distance hastily with the first of the men. Rodriguez couldn’t move. He found himself looking at his assistant as he grabbed the man by the shoulder and asked him if he was fine. “Are you OK?” he inquired, “are you ok?” Then the black man, of generous lips and strong features, looked at him like waking up from a deep sleep that slowly turned from a face of perplexity... to a look of brutal hate. “Drilled”, Rodriguez thought, incoherently, “he has hate drilled in his eyes”. He wanted to warn his assistant, wanted to yell at him, to scream, but he was speechless.

Suddenly, before he could tell how, his assistant was smiling in a really dumb way at one of the boys, who crawled to his leg and grabbed it with both hands. The other man’s head was twitching in a clear attempt to open the mouth, which was causing him severe difficulties. The rest of the men became to life slowly, moving like a wave. Some of them were staring at the ceiling; others waved their hands in strange moves, as if they were trying to grab an invisible object.

—What... what are you doing? Come on, let go... sir... sir, let go!

Rodriguez wanted to close his eyes. He expected what was going to happen. He *knew* what was going to happen. He saw it in the dead, aqueous eyes of the dead. But he couldn’t react.

—Let go!!!

When the man who grabbed the leg sunk his teeth on it, the assistant screamed. He was still screaming when the one closer to him put his face over the curve of the neck and stayed there, letting go hideous and continuous gargles.

IV

Nobody knew how everything started. The world fell into chaos way before any scientist could provide an explanation, theory or hypothesis. No TV programme lasted enough to theorize about the problem. At the very beginning, you could see it on TV: they spoke about it, a little bit when it started, more as

time went by; at gossip programmes, at audience-favourite late night shows, until there was nothing left to talk about but the *news of the year*. The programme TNT was the one – that Susana remembered – that coined the term “living dead”. By that time, the matter was not very different from UFOs or the Bélmez faces, so you could smile with self-sufficiency and feel safe from all that bullshit, even when they showed tons of footage of demented people attacking other human beings at the news before ditching the usual documentaries and keep talking about those incidents. Then you started worrying. Some quite strange incidents took place at a morgue in Madrid... in a hospital in Zaragoza; in Huelva. Everywhere. At a hospital; at five. A car crash leading to a bloodbath as one of the victims violently attacked one of the emergency guys and ripped clean a chunk of flesh from his neck with his very teeth. A suicide who falls from an eleventh floor and starts twitching in his bag sixteen minutes after the judge declared him dead. But a few days later, you knew that the shit was really hitting the fan because you saw it on the street. A crashed, empty ambulance left in a busy avenue, or a police that makes you take another route when you come back from Cártama because it looks like some people is vandalizing the St. Michael cemetery. But you knew they weren't vandals. You saw it in their faces.

The psychological shock of the concept that the dead were coming back to life was accepted relatively fast once the news channels started sending emergency broadcasts twenty-four hours a day. By then, cities were living some turmoil due to the fact that every person came back to life an hour and a half or two hours later. Cemeteries, hospitals, churches... and the dark, moist basement of a geriatric were checked as quickly as possible, but by that time some serious troubles have been dealt with.

Malaga had hidden corpses in the least expected places. Some day of October, the Calypso gas station, at Mijas Costa, was the scenery of a hideous spectacle of cannibalism and mass infection when no less than seven corpses left the freezing chamber of a faux restoration business, led by a Dutch mobster and gun trader. The seven corpses showed at broad daylight at a quarter to twelve in the morning, ripping the throat of a nineteen year old Korean girl called Yhin Un and crashing into the gas station killing three Englishmen, four Swedes and two Spanish that were shopping at that moment. At twenty past one, a twitching horde of wanderers blocked the 340 road, causing car crashes and run-offs. At quarter to three, twelve undead dressed in Mudanzas Gaspar's working suits were slowly gnawing the dead body of an osteoporotic old lady who lived in a nearby house.

When scenes like these started to take place in various points of a same city, the cell phones began to act up. After a couple hours, it was even impossible to communicate this way: an automatic message informed that all lines were saturated. “Please, call later”. Trying to watch CNN through the Internet to know about the rest of the world was just a utopia.

Susana lived in a block just before the Carranque sports centre, six

hundred meters from the Carlos Haya hospital. The day the madness break out, the zone was immediately hit by the chaos. It started at half past ten, when Susana came back from shopping at the supermarket. An ambulance stopped at the entrance ramp of the emergency zone and two uniformed cops were taking a man who struggled violently to break free. There was blood in his face and in his clenched fists, and people were starting to gather around him.

—He came in the ambulance... —stated a woman from the surrounding people. Then, a nurse came out from the emergency door and ran to the cops, screaming something at them that Susana, who was just at the other side of the street, couldn't hear. The cops looked at each other while trying their best to keep the twitching, arrested man under control. Finally, with some help from two of the bystanders, put the men in the backseat of a police car, locked the door and followed the nurse at full speed to the sanitary centre.

But almost everybody kept looking at the police car in complete silence. It was shaking with terrible violence from the endless struggle of the passenger. From the distance, Susana could see a storm of arms and legs striking aimlessly at the doors and the windows while the car trembled from left to right, back and forth.

Then, a loud, banging noise echoed through the towering buildings.

A woman took a hand to her chest while drowning a scream that was followed by an intense silence, interrupted only by the man's bumps inside the police car. When every head turned to the source of the sound, the hospital building, a buzzing crescendo started to grow, an ever growing mess of voices and screams mixed with another series of blasts. It was then when Susana realized what kind of noises they were. They were shots.

Some of the curious started stumbling while running away without looking backwards while the hospital poured a big group of people, angst and terror in their faces. It was then when Susana felt a wave of panic, an overwhelming feeling that was born from an undetermined place near her stomach and climbed like a steaming geyser to the base of her brain, where it exploded like a frightening siren. "It's happening", she thought, "it's happening right here, right now. It's really happening right-now". She saw it n TV, she talked about it in the café and at the waiting room of the hospital, but it was taking place right before her eyes. It was happening, right there, and it took her by surprise with two blue plastic bags in her hands.

She felt the unstoppable urge to run far away from her. If she turned the corner, she would see none of it. If only she could turn the corner, the hospital would disappear from her sight and she could return home. She would spend the morning working on the computer and everything would end. After dining, everything would end.

But when she turned the corner, surrounded by the people who ran in both directions through the stopped traffic, knew that something was changing forever. She smelled it on the air. She saw it written on the people's faces. She felt in on

her skin. She walked hastily to the portal and locked herself into the safety of her home. Then she drank two big glasses of water and took a third one to the living room's window that led to a wide, four-lane avenue and the municipal gym on the other side. From there, the perspective was a bit better. People either ran or stood still in groups, chit-chatting and pointing in various directions while waving their hands. Cars formed a huge jam and a lot of the drivers got out of the vehicles to take a good look at the distance. Most of them were pointing at the hospital.

An hour and a half later, approximately, two police cars arrived. One of them had a big hit while the other had a side completely scratched off. They advanced slowly through the walkway, since the four lanes were saturated, while the curious let them pass. The four cops got out of the cars and disappeared around the corner, heading to the hospital. There, at the distance, Susana could hear sirens, shots and a deafening mess of screams and voices.

This scene kept going without much variation for five hours. In that time, the traffic jam kind of ended, although there were almost no cars. Most of the drivers parked their cars over the walkway and went walking to the end of the street, near the hospital. Susana could still distinguish a lot of caravanning cars, with their doors opened but empty. At that time, there were almost no pedestrians on the street.

That night, at the distance, an occasional column of black smoke, the bright of a fire or the coming and going of sirens revealed that Malaga was suffering a slow agony. When she peeked through the window one more time, she noted that their neighbours were also looking outside and, at street level, groups of women chatted with the doors slightly opened, as if they were ready to lock themselves in the safety of their homes. But almost nobody dared to go outside, if they could avoid it. Susana learned a thing or two by hearing at those conversations: it was said that the hospital zone was a complete mess. There were cops, wounded and big trucks where they put the aggressive ones inside. It was closed to traffic and cordoned off.

The TV wasn't of much help either. At La Primera, they talked about a wave of violence of international scale. Scenes of fires, mobs and terrifying attacks popped on the screen in shocking succession. It was happening in Madrid, in Barcelona... but also in Beirut, in London, in Libya. One of the scenes showcased a uniformed cop shooting point blank at another agent with a thorn shirt. At Canal Sur 2, an unexpected cartoon episode made her blink a couple times, trying to understand. Then she changed the channel... Antena 3, Telecinco, Canal Sur. Every channel was talking about irrational attacks, general chaos, and an overrunning wave of terror.

Susana watched the images for twenty minutes, unable to react. Then she switched the old TV off with a rude movement and walked around the house for quite a long time.

Later that same day, the lights went off.

At the beginning, the power kind of came and went. Some zones were more affected than others, but it didn't take long until the lights went completely off. By that time, nobody went to work. The roads were empty and the night air brought weird noises that seem to come from nowhere. That made reality a bit harder for everybody, as nobody knew what to do or how to handle the situation. Susana saw almost everybody flee. The night before, two families ran through the wide avenue until disappearing at the garage ramp while carrying some heavy luggage. Nobody told her where they were going. But she remained at home. She folded the clothes for summer and putting them delicately in their new slips until it was too dark to see. From time to time, she peeked through the balcony to take a look at the distance. The quietness of the avenue that extended before her eyes was really frightening. The kiosk was still closed; something that made her feel uneasy, as it was not Wednesday. The wide walkways were empty and Susana had the horrible feeling that everybody had left; that everybody was already on the other side, everybody but her, and that the city would swallow her if she didn't do something fast.

But Susana didn't want to face the problem. She still handed the phone from time to time, hoping to speak with a technician from Telefónica so he could handle the line. The scene was so surrealistic that the monochord and slow message of "please call later" turned into a promise for the future, so Susana kept calling. She fell asleep at half past six in the night, surrounded by gloomy dreams. At ten fifteen, an ugly nightmare woke her up with a start. She tried to have a glass of water, but found that nothing came out of the tap. She spent the whole day trying to get a signal from the phone. Nobody invited her to call later.

At the end of the afternoon, when darkness was swallowing the sky from the East, she finally saw it. They emerged from the corner that led to the hospital. One of them was wearing a white coat. The other was big and muscular, but moved like suffering from horrible twitches. They both wandered together, walking slowly between the traffic. They crossed the street with clumsy movements, slowly, dragging their feet without stopping and finally disappeared after taking the corner of the buildings on the other side. Susana watched them with horrified fascination. They were *those things*. They were the *ones* from the news. Dead people, or that she thought. Dead things. Living dead. She saw them. They were at the street. They were the reason why the avenue was full of abandoned cars. They were the reason why everything stopped working. The reason why there was no water. The reason why her dreams were full of moist claws, dripping blood.

After ten o' clock, someone knocking at her door took her out of her thoughts. Susana ran to open, as if the solution for that inconceivable situation was right at the other side. But the pale, sad face of her neighbour, dressed with a creamy shawl, saddened her again.

—You're still here... —said the neighbour in a bland tone. Susana didn't know if it was a question or an observation. The flat hair over the frown and the

blackened dirt on her face made her look quite scruffy. Her alarmed eyes, denounced that, somehow, she was long from being able to adapt to the new circumstances.

—Yes.

They looked at each other for a few moments, uneasy, at the hall.

—Don't you want to come? —finally said the neighbour, like the idea popped right from nowhere —. We are leaving. We're leaving right now.

—Where are you going? —Susana asked, dubious.

—Well... somewhere else. With the car... somewhere where there are people. There is no light or water here.

At that very instant, Susana *knew* it. She realised that going anywhere else was as useless as cutting water with a knife; so clear was the idea that it clicked in her mind with a clear sound. She slowly moved her head from side to side and something in her gesture made the neighbour realise the truth in that negation. She walked two steps backwards, still looking at her with dying eyes and disappeared through the hallway without saying a word.

V

On the morning of the seventh day, things were way worse. The bathroom reeked of waste and urine and the smell was so strong that she gagged every time she opened the door. She had to use an alcohol-soaked piece of cloth to keep using it. The kitchen had no foot left and the dishes were piles in lines over the table and the sink. The reserve of candles was empty and she tried to reuse the wax by scratching it from the ashtrays.

Susana looked outside, at the street. She could still hear the constant, plain buzzing sound, a mixture of voices, some distant screams and a loud jackhammer, like a piece of industrial machinery. But apart from the occasional car, driving carefully to an unknown destiny, the street was mute and silent.

She sat on the sofa, facing the need of going to the street. She was thirsty. She drank all the juice, the wonderful syrup from the canned peaches, the shakes and the milk. She still had some gas left, but there was nothing to heat. The pasta, the legumes, all the rice... everything was gone, slowly eaten during the hours and hours of meaningless, dreadful waiting. She ate her last meal the night before, consisting on a tasteless can of mussels, the size and colour of a kid's suit's buttons.

She stood before the hall, in front of the door. She suddenly thought a dozen reasons not to leave the safety of her house, but she convinced herself that the sooner the better, before the weakness started debilitating her. So finally, she opened the door with a swift movement and was greeted by the darkness of the hallway.

She peeked at outside. It was dark and grimy; and it didn't remind her of the warm and known place she used to call home. Turning her head back made her feel the same uneasiness: she suddenly felt that her house was a dark maw, a completely strange pit. Moved by this new feeling, she started going down the stairs. A first, a dubious step, then two... and in a matter of seconds she was running over them, until reaching the end and going outside.

She inhaled the fresh air of October. The sky was a beautiful landscape of grey and blue tones, full of details and volumes. Far away, the first rays of the sun projected orange beams between the dense clouds. From street view, Susana was able to contemplate the spectacle she observed from the windows of her home in all its magnitude. It reminded her of a scene taken directly from a disaster movie: abandoned cars in all four lanes, over the median strip and the walkway, even with their gates opened; newspapers and magazines moved by the wind, a shopping cart over what looked like a big pile of clothing. Looking at her right, Susana saw a huge trailer stopped in the middle of the big traffic circle. The air was rancid over the buildings that surrounded her, as if the wind was slowly carrying the last scents of a finally extinct burning.

She slowly walked to the North, trying not to get close to the cars. She didn't like them; abandoned and still, denouncing that something was wrong. However, the little walk went fine and without surprises: she was almost starting to feel better when, after turning a corner, faced a scene she was not prepared to see.

The access zone of the hospital was under siege by an irregular barricade of white and brown sacks surrounded by trucks which looked like army, painted in dark green with bug roofs of green canvas. There were also police cars and over one of them remained the light of a siren, almost extinct. There were boxed around, lots of white sheets and cloths, a partially destroyed desk, a wide array of chairs and big libraries, ravaged and piled away. Over the floor there were all kinds of rubbish: cans, bottles, magazines, cardboard boxes and plastic cases. She was starting to assimilate that whole disaster when she also found corpses on the ground. They were piled in a small little garden, making a horrifying mess. There were also some more scattered around, everywhere: next to the barricade, on the access stairs, in the middle of the driveway. One in particular was nothing more than a naked torso in the middle of a sickening puddle of fresh blood. The icing of the cake was the fact that most of the windows in the front were broken.

Susana watched the corpses with increasing aversion. She knew exactly what caused that whole thing. And, by then, she could imagine that the hospital became some kind of battlefield; it was the place where the people headed after being wounded or when they started to feel sick. It was the place where they died due to the wounds or after being attacked by the *things* that were already there. She thought about the sick in their beds, in the corpse depository, in the autopsy room. So many corpses that came suddenly back to life. And, as a result, so many people that, after dying, came back to life to infect many more...

She shook her head in horror while imagining the hallways of the hospital infected with the living dead. The undead visiting the beds of the sick that couldn't escape or defend themselves. Then she let go a silent but horrified scream, that she muted by covering her face with both hands. She finally cried, after a week of silent horror, surrounded by the remains of life's defeat for survival. And the tears were good... they partially dissolved the malignant and stale knot that was growing inside of her during that period. Twenty minutes later, a tattered piece of paper that the wind was making fly all over found Susana in the same place, still against the wall, with a serene look and absent eyes.

VI

A few days before Susana beat her little demons, a long-nosed, heavy-built Moroccan, with a handsome beard and strong features, walked with confidence through Beatas street, in the centre of the city. It was a pedestrian crossing; it has been that way since before the works of the city turned many streets this way; but it was empty by that time of the afternoon. All streets were empty because those weren't good times, but Moses didn't ever know any other kind of times.

Moses walked the tortuous and black ways of the addiction since he was fourteen. Soft drugs, hard drugs, design drugs. He tried heroin, snow, dope, LSD... and drank alcohol until falling unconscious almost daily. The addiction switched his life on and off like an interrupter. When it left him in peace, he earned some cash by dealing drugs, like all his friends. Then he worked hard, without caring about the kind of work; but when the serrated tooth of his sickness was down, it ruined everything. He spent night after night lurking the street or sleeping at a piss-stinking corner, poisoned with hallucinating drugs or booze. Later, he consumed the mornings shaking, feeling his soul freeze.

He once hit the Big House, where he learned more than he ever wanted to know. Not everything was good. The first six months were the hardest ones. He understood nothing: the prison argot, or the human relationship codes. He had to learn who could he talk to and who couldn't. He learned how to listen at ten conversations at the same time while having a straight poker face. But most of all, he learned who looked like his friend and who really was.

There, he met Cripple.

Cripple was, most of all, an obstinate man. Life insisted in showing him a complete array of horrible miseries and he just smiled, shrugged and kept on walking. And the exposition started early. Those same capricious avatars wanted that, when he was two years old, his father, blinded with booze-soaked barbiturate, tried to choke him. He still remembered the suffocating, soft feeling,

the heat from his own breath in his mouth, uselessly open wide. He didn't remember why his father stopped; why he never finished the job. Since that day, his mother and he lived in another place, and he never saw his father again or asked about him. Thirty years later, when his mother was exhaling her last breath, she looked upwards and said: "there's another one". Cripple didn't know immediately what was she referring to, but he gave those words some thought, since it seemed like the last words of a dying person must be important. He hypothesized that she could be talking about a brother: his mother's life was pretty chaotic when she was young, but she might be talking about another father, a biological one. He didn't care much, however: his family wasn't exactly helpful in making him value blood ties, but in numerous occasions he found himself thinking about having a brother, someone like him. Someone who understood the inherent darkness of his genetic legacy, that was so hard to stand.

—Maybe I do have a brother—he told Moses one day, out of nowhere, at the prison yard—. Somewhere, out there.

Moses thought about it some time.

—A brother is a brother—he finally said—. Don't think about it and go find him when you get out of here. Go find your brother.

Cripple nodded without looking up.

—I think that's what I'm going to do.

They both remained silent for a moment. Cripple started daydreaming about how his search would start: his mother's old neighbours, the old neighbourhood, the old friends, long forgotten in the corners of life. Drawing the sketch of his plan made him feel warm, and he smiled unconsciously, with small absent eyes. Moses, however, thought about how much he wanted a family. A brother, at least. A cousin. Someone.

Some weeks later, free from his sentence and seated on a San Francisco street step at three o'clock in the afternoon, Moses found Jesus in the bottom of a cheap bottle of wine. It was really strange, since after that night, Moses never felt the need of taking drugs again. He was free from the addiction; he felt clean, free and fine. He told himself that he was in peace with the Most Highest.

When Cripple got out of jail, Moses was waiting him. The ex-convict took notice of the change in an instant: something in his happy-go-lucky aspect and his smile brought promises about the future. Moses helped Cripple to get into society once again: a rent, an employment and responsibilities. He got him a job as a sales clerk in a well-known fabrics store and kept him out of the street where people like him, cloaked by the night, evolved like dull, unsubstantial ghosts.

While Cripple was getting used to his new existence, Moses started thinking about looking for his long-lost brother. He begged to God for his existence, wanting to find him and hoping that he was a good role model for his partner, someone who could keep Cripple far away from the rapid waters of the sewers of life. It took him months to do, but he finally discovered that Miss Vaello gave birth to two children: Alejandro and Josué Vaello, also known as "Cripple".

As far as he discovered, mom Vaello gave birth to Alejandro when she was still a minor. He was a chubby, healthy baby with a pair of beautiful, round, blue eyes. She was a junkie and a human mess to boot, so her parents gave his child to a couple of Argentinean members of their family who quickly fell in love with the boy. The couple couldn't have children, so they took him away and her mother forgot about him. She didn't really miss him until getting pregnant again. The father was not a bad guy, at the beginning at least, but the baby changed him dramatically: he turned intransigent, angry and selfish. When he came close to the baby – something wasn't that frequent – all her alarms started to scream. Something in the way he looked at him was truly wrong. She felt it on her skin, in her very pores, and a cold January night, she left.

When she looked at Josué, dressed with those little white clothes the church provided her with, her hearts looked back at his brother, but Argentina was as far from her as Deimos, the Martian satellite, so she had to conform to take care of her son as well as she could. His genetic legacy wasn't as good as his brother's, and Josué suffered a meniscus deficiency. His right femur was also a bit shorter than the left one so, as a consequence of all this, Josué spent his life as a cripple.

Once he knew all that, he talked to Cripple.

—You were right... you do have a brother —he suddenly said during a dinner.

Cripple raised his head fast and studied his friend's face. He was holding the spoon he was using to take garlic soup.

—Have you been... investigating?

Moses nodded.

—You see him?

—No. They took him to Argentina before you were born.

—What's his name?

—His name is... Alejandro. But maybe his new parents changed his name. Your mother never gave him your biological father's surname. She was a minor back then and had drug issues, no money... I don't know she even knew who the father was, so his surname is Vaello, just like yours.

Cripple stirred the bread floating in his plate of soup.

—Argentina...

—I looked on the Internet, but found nothing. Vaello is a very common surname. I... I couldn't do more —he quietly said. He worked his ass off, he investigated, talked to a lot of people, made calls, looked on the province's official registries, but he felt like he had very little to spare with his friend. He felt such a physical frustration that his hands tingled. Finally, feeling the need to say something else, he finished an apology.

—It's funny... —said Cripple after a while, without looking up, slowly drinking the soup.

—What?

—You were looking for my brother, but during that time, I have found him.

—What? —said Moses, without really understanding.

—You helped me in the jail and out of it. You helped me get a job. You gave me a new life. You spent months right beside me during weekend nights, so I didn't feel the need to return to the bad life. Do you really think I didn't notice? And now I find out that you have spent I don't know how much time looking for my brother, just for me.

Moses listened in silence, feeling a horde of sensations.

—You know what? Who needs him? You are my brother know, man. You are my family.

There was a short silence while Moses assimilated everything that his friend just said to him. Meanwhile, Cripple ended the soup, almost putting his face right against the plate.

—Well, well... —finally said Moses —, let's not suck our dicks already. They laughed for quite a long time and then laughed a bit more. Seated in a small kitchen, vaguely illuminated by the yellowish neon on the ceiling, they both felt an inner happiness completely unknown for both of them: the invisible and intoxicating warmth of the family.

When Hell closed its gates and stopped accepting hosts, Moses was dealing with all kind of junk at the market. He was an expert in getting stuff, most of them from people who didn't want it: junk, little electro domestics taken from the garbage that he latter repaired, but also magazines, decorating objects and, quite frankly, everything that could be found by someone interested on buying it. He had a nice deal with the young driver of the town's hall operative services, so when he found something interesting to pick up, he gave him a call. It was uncanny what people threw away in the high class neighbourhoods of Calahonda, Elviria or Cabopino: from computers to peripherals in good condition, near mint coolers and complete sets of high-end furniture.

—Bad for the rich, good for the poor... —Moses usually said when the pieces were fine.

That bright Sunday of September was hard right from the beginning. The local police cars, the municipal guard and the Guardia Civil passed by endlessly with their sirens on and a couple of cops who usually patrolled the area where called to somewhere else. He also saw ambulances and a fire-fighter's truck.

—What's up? —asked the African that worked right by Moses.

—No idea... —answered back, like every time he thought about something else.

—Eve'body crazy today, mah friend?

—The world is always crazy...

Moses kept piling the boxes.

—This mornin' I hear trouble, you kno'? — kept saying the African.

—What trouble? —Moses asked without looking at him, still busy with

the boxes.

—In Madrid, in Madrid, big trouble. A person, lotsa person make an attack to... buildin' were people die, you kno'?

—Hospital? A hospital?

—No, no... no hospital, if you dies, you go from hospital to buildin'...

—A morgue? A corpse depository?

—Yeah, mah friend! A co'pse depository... that place. They attacked... I truly mean, they did... I watched on TV this mo'ning, yeah... incredible! —his eyes were absent, like remembering the images he just saw on TV. Finally, he shook his head and said something in Portuguese for himself —: *A ruína de uma nação...*

Moses thought about what the African just said.

—Why the fuck would someone attack a corpse depository?

—I don' know, no? But everythin' reeeally violent, mah friend, very violent they attack da police, everybody... and then it cuts, you kno'? The TV suddenly cuts...and then a woman that speaks on the otha side and you don' see da attack, and that very weird, and I think, very weird because TV always shows more violent images, more gru'some, yes? And why not police here today? Know? This very strange...

Moses felt a strange feeling of uneasiness. He looked around. Know that he noticed... weren't the streets a bit empty? He studied the faces of the people who walked around his shop, looking at something with a bit of interest and putting it in the same place. A couple of teenagers joked about a red-haired, bright plush heart. The sun filtered between the branches, putting beautiful shines in her hair. They smiled, and their eyes sparkled with the happiness of the first love. That image convinced him that there was no reason to alarm, that the Sunday was a beautiful, long day, that life was great and that everything was all right.

Some hours later, Moses came back home in his old Renault truck. The sales were average, a bit worse than expected, but enough to pay the weekly bills. He also could go to the arcade to see if Paco, the owner, wanted to pay him an afternoon or two, depending of the movies on show. He could work his way until the next Sunday with that.

He parked and walked up to the ceiling where he lived with Cripple. He found him glued to the small, 14 inch, red TV they got months before.

—Hi, I'm home —he said, letting himself fall over the couch.

Cripple turned, like he just knew of His presence.

—Shit, Mo... man, you can't imagine what's going on.

Those few words were more than enough to make Moses feel a deep uneasiness. It came fast, like a speeding bullet accompanied by a siren that screamed like a demon. He had that feeling during the whole morning in the guts, in the back of the head. It was a sixth sense that he forged during his life, a sixth sense he really trusted. And by God, how did it *scream* on that bright Sunday

morning. It screamed that something was son wrong that he better grab a couple of clean underwear and jumped out of the friggin' planet. He grabbed the arms of the sofa and thought about running. He didn't want to hear it. He didn't want to hear it from Cripple. He didn't want anything to change.

Cripple looked at him with his eyes wide open. He didn't remember watching those eyes never before. "Christ", he thought, "he looks like an unshaved version on Munch's *Scream*". Then he moved in the sofa like waiting for a bomb to explode. "There it comes. He's going to drop it..."

—Dead people are coming back to life.

Boom.