

THE NIGHT FACE-UP

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*And they went out in certain seasons to hunt
enemies; they called it 'la guerra florida.'*

Halfway down the hotel's long corridor, he thought, it must be late, and he rushed out to the street and took his motorcycle from the corner where he had permitted the doorman to guard it. The clock on the corner showed ten till nine; he would arrive to where he was going with time to spare. The sun filtered through the tall buildings downtown, and he - to himself he had no name, he went on thinking - rode the motorcycle, savoring the ride. The motorcycle rumbled between his legs, and a fresh breeze toyed with his pant cuffs.

He passed the ministries (the red, the white) and the string of businesses with brilliant windows on Central Avenue. Now he entered the most pleasant part of his trajectory, the true ride: a long street, lined with trees, with little traffic and plenty of villas that let their gardens grow to the sidewalks, barely separated by low hedges. Perhaps a little distracted, but speeding to the right as he was directed, he allowed himself to be lifted by the transparency, by the light edginess of that hardly-begun day. Perhaps his involuntary relaxation impeded him from preventing the accident. When he saw that the woman who was stopped on the corner launched out into the intersection despite the green lights, it was already too late for simple solutions. He braked by foot and by hand, running off course to the left; he heard the woman's scream, and together with the blow he lost his vision, as if knocked out.

He came to sharply. Four or five young men were pulling him from under the motorcycle. He tasted salt and blood, his knee hurt, and when they lifted him he shouted because he couldn't stand pressure on his right arm. Voices that didn't seem to belong to the faces that were suspended over him encouraged him with jokes and assurances. His only relief was in hearing confirmation that the right of way had been his. He asked for the woman, trying to hold down the nausea that was advancing on his throat. As they carried him face-up to a nearby pharmacy, he saw that the perpetrator of the accident had nothing more than scrapes on her legs. "It barely caught you, but the crash made him fly off the bike on his side . . ." Opinions, accounts, slowly, bring him in on his back, that's good, and someone with a white coat who brought him something that dulled the pain, in the half-light of a small neighborhood pharmacy.

The ambulance arrived in five minutes, and they lifted him into it on a soft stretcher on which he could lie as he pleased. With all lucidity, but knowing that he was under the effects of a terrible shock, he signed at the policeman who accompanied him. His arm almost didn't hurt; blood from a cut on his eyebrow dripped

blood all over his face. He licked his lips a few times to taste it. He felt good, it was an accident, bad luck; a few weeks of keeping still and nothing more. The officer told him the motorcycle didn't look too wrecked. "Naturally," he said. "As if I was tied on top of it . . ." The two laughed, and arriving at the hospital the officer gave him his hand and wished him luck. The nausea was slowly coming back; as they wheeled him in on a stretcher to a wing at the far end of the hospital, passing under trees filled with birds, he closed his eyes and wished he was asleep or put under. But they finally brought him into a room that smelled of hospital, where he filled out a record, took off his clothes and put on a long grayish gown. They carefully moved his arm so it wouldn't hurt him. The nurses joked the whole time, and if it hadn't been for the stomach contractions he would have felt very good, almost content.

They carried him to the radiography room, and twenty minutes later, with the already-damp sheet placed over his chest like a black tombstone, he moved to the operating room. Someone dressed in white, tall and thin, approached him and examined the radiography results. Feminine hands accommodated his head, and he perceived that they were moving him from one stretcher to another. The man in white approached him once more, smiling, with something that glinted in his right hand. He patted his cheek and gave a signal to someone standing behind.

It was a curious dream because it was full of smells and he never dreamed smells. First the smell of a swamp, since at the right of the road lay a marsh, quagmires from which no one ever returned. But the smell stopped, and in its place came a dark and complex fragrance like the night, through which he was fleeing the Aztecs. And it was so natural, he had to flee the Aztecs who were on a hunt for men, and his only chance was to hide himself in the densest part of the jungle, taking care not to separate himself from the narrow road that only they, the Motecas, knew.

The smell tortured him most, as if even in the absolute acceptance of the dream something rebelled against it which was not habitual, which until now hadn't participated in the game. "It smells like war," he thought, instinctively fingering the stone dagger that was stuck in his belt. A sudden noise made him duck and left him immobile, trembling. To be afraid wasn't strange, fear abounded in his dreams. He waited, covered by the branches of a bush and the starless night. Far off, probably from the other side of the large lake, they would be burning bonfires; a reddish gleam rose in that part of the sky. The noise didn't repeat. It had sounded like a broken branch. Maybe from an animal that had escaped the smell of war, like him. He straightened slowly, sniffing the air. He heard nothing, but the fear remained like the smell, that sweet incense of the guerra florida. He had to continue, to get to the heart of the jungle avoiding the swamps. Cautiously, ducking at every instant to touch the ground that was harder than the road, he took a few steps. He wanted to break into a run, but the quagmires pulsed at his side. Following the path in shadows, he slowly resumed the flight. Then he was hit by a blast of the horrible smell he feared most and desperately leapt forward.

"He's going to fall from the bed," the nurse said from his side. "Don't jump so much, friend."

He opened his eyes and it was late, with the sun already low in the windows of the large room. While he tried to smile at the person next to him, he peeled himself almost physically from the latest vision of the nightmare. His arm, casted, hung from an apparatus of weights and pulleys. He was thirsty, as if he had been running for miles, but they didn't want to give him much water, just enough to wet his lips and have a gulp. The fever was slowly worsening and he would have been able to sleep once again, but he enjoyed the pleasure of staying awake, eyes half open, listening to the dialogue of the other patients, responding from time to time to a question. He saw a small white trolley arrive that they placed beside his bed, a blonde nurse rubbed the fronts of his legs with alcohol and they stuck him with a fat needle connected to a tube that led to a bottle filled with opaline liquid. A young doctor came with a leather-and-metal apparatus that he adjusted on his arm to verify something. Night fell, and the fever softly dragged him into a state in which things had a relief as if seen through opera glasses, were real and sweet and at the same time lightly repugnant; like watching a boring movie and thinking that nevertheless the street would be worse; and there he remained.

A marvelous cup of golden soup arrived, smelling of leek, of celery, of parsley. A slice of bread, more precious than an entire banquet, crumbled bit by bit. His arm didn't hurt anymore, and only his eyebrow, where they had stitched, sizzled at times with a short, hot, shooting pain. When the windows in front of him became stained with a dark blue, he thought that it wouldn't be difficult to sleep. But when he passed his tongue over his hot, dry lips he tasted soup, and he sighed with happiness, abandoning himself.

First there was confusion, and for a moment all his senses were dulled or mixed. He understood that he was running in total darkness, though the branch-crossed sky above him was less black than the rest. "The road," he thought. "I left the road." His feet sank into a mattress of leaves and mud, and he couldn't take a step without the twigs of the bushes lashing his torso and legs. Panting, knowing himself to be cornered despite the darkness and the silence, he lowered himself to listen. Perhaps the road was near, with the first light of day he would see it again. Nothing would help him find it now. The hand that clutched his dagger without his knowing rose like a scorpion from the marsh to his neck, where an amulet hung. Barely moving his lips he murmured the corn-prayer that brings good moons, and he begged to the Most High, watching over the good Motecas. But he felt at the same time that his knees were slowly sinking in the mud, and his wait in the thicket's strange darkness became unbearable. The guerra florida had begun with the moon, had already passed for three days and three nights. If he could find refuge in the depths of the jungle, abandoning the road for the swamps, then maybe the warriors wouldn't follow his trace. He thought of the many prisoners they would have captured by now. But the number didn't matter, only the sacred time. Everything has its number and its end, and he was in the sacred hour, on the other side of the hunters.

He heard the shouts and straightened up with a jump, dagger in hand. As if the sky had lit the horizon on fire, he saw torches moving amidst the branches, close by. The smell of war was unbearable, and when the first enemy jumped to his neck he almost felt pleasure in sinking the stone blade into his chest. The

lights already surrounded him, the exuberant shouts. He reached to cut the air once or twice, and then a rope trapped him from behind.

"It's the fever," said the one in the bed next to his. "It happened the same way to me when they operated on my duodenum. Drink some water and you'll sleep well, you'll see."

Compared to the night from whence he came, the room's tepid shadow seemed delicious. A violet lamp watched over him from the top of the back wall like a protecting eye. He heard a cough, some hard breathing, at times dialogue in lowered voices. All was pleasant and secure, without that pursuit, without. . . But he knew he shouldn't keep thinking of the nightmare. There were plenty of things to entertain him. He devoted himself to viewing the cast on his arm, the pulleys that so comfortably sustained it in the air. They had put a bottle of mineral water on his nightstand. He drank straight from the bottle, greedily. Now he could distinguish the forms in the room, the thirty beds, the cabinets with windows. He must have no longer had such a fever; his face felt cool. His eyebrow hardly hurt, as if the pain were a memory. He saw himself leave the hotel once again, taking the motorcycle. Who would have thought it would end like this? He tried to focus on the moment of the accident, and it made him angry to realize that there was only a hole, a space he couldn't manage to refill. Between the crash and the moment in which they had lifted him from the ground, his fainting or whatever it was allowed him to see nothing. And at the same time he sensed that this hole, this nothing, had lasted for an eternity. No, not even for time, it was more as if he had passed through something in that hole or covered immense distances. The shock, the brutal hit against the pavement. By all means he had felt something near relief when he left that black well as the men lifted him from the ground. With the pain in his arm, the blood from his parted eyebrow, his knee contusion; with all of this, a relief upon returning to the day and feeling supported and attended to. And it was strange. He would ask the doctor sometime. Now the dream was beginning to gain on him, to throw him slowly down. The pillow was so soft, and the freshness of the mineral water was feverish in his throat. Maybe he could truly sleep, without the accursed nightmares. The lamp's violet light from above darkened little by little.

Since he slept on his back the position in which he found himself didn't surprise him, but instead the odor of humidity, of damp rock, caught his throat and forced him to wake up. It was useless to open his eyes and look about; absolute darkness enveloped him. He wanted to straighten up and felt the ropes around his wrists and hands. He was fastened with stakes to the ground, on an icy, damp, stone slab platform. The cold won over his exposed back, his legs. With his chin he clumsily sought contact with his amulet, and he realized that they had taken it from him. Now he was lost, no prayer could save him from his end. From far off, as if filtering through the guardroom's rocks, he heard the celebration drums. They had taken him to the temple, he was in the dungeon of the temple to wait his turn.

He heard a scream, a hoarse scream that rebounded off the walls. Another scream, ending in a groan. It was he who screamed in the shadows, screamed because he was alive, all his body defended itself with that scream from what was to come, from the inevitable end. He thought of his companions who would be filling other cells, and of those who were already ascending the sacrificial steps. He screamed again, suffocatedly,

he almost couldn't open his mouth, his jaws were stiff yet at the same time rubbery and they opened slowly, with an interminable effort. The squeak of the bolt struck him like a whip. He convulsed, writhing, he fought to free himself of the cords that sank into his flesh. His right arm, the stronger, lashed about until the pain became intolerable and he had to cede. He saw the double-door open, and the fumes of the torches reached him before their light. Barely vested with the ceremonial loincloths, the priests' acolytes approached him glaring with despise. The lights reflected off their sweaty torsos, off their black hair full of feathers. They eased the ropes, and in their place they clutched him with hot hands, hard like bronze; he felt himself be lifted, always face up, dragged by the four acolytes that carried him to the passageway. The torch holders went ahead, vaguely lighting the damp-walled corridor and its roof, so low that the acolytes had to duck their heads. Now they carried him, they carried him, it was the end. Face up, a foot away from the ceiling of hot rock that at moments was illuminated by the reflection of a torch. As soon as the roof gives way to stars, and the great stairway lit with screams and dances rises up before me, it will be the end. The passageway never ended, but still would end, and again he smelled the fresh air, full of stars, but still no, they went on carrying him endlessly in the red half light, tugging him brutally; and he didn't want them to, but how they had impeded him by taking the amulet that was his true heart, the center of his life!

He passed with a jump back to the night of the hospital, to the sweet high ceiling, to the soft darkness that surrounded him. He thought he must have screamed, but those around him slept silently. On his nightstand the bottle of water had developed some bubbles that looked translucent against the bluish shadows from the windows. He gasped, searching for relief for his lungs, searching to forget those images that remained pegged to his eyelids. Each time he closed his eyes they re-formed instantly, and he straightened out, terrified but at the same time elated with the knowledge that he was awake, that his wakefulness protected him, that it would soon be morning, with the blessed deep sleep that is meant to be had with that hour, without images, without anything. . . It was difficult to keep his eyes open, the drowsiness was stronger than he. He made one last effort, with his good hand he weakly reached toward the bottle of water; he wasn't able to grab it, his fingers closed around a space that was again black, and the passageway went on interminably, rock after rock, with sudden reddish flares, and he, face up, groaned dimly because the roof was ending, it lifted, opening like a shadowy mouth, and the acolytes straightened and a waning moon from above fell on his face where his eyes didn't want to see it, desperately he closed them and opened them hoping to pass to the other side, to discover again the protective ceiling of the room. And each time he opened them it was the night and the moon once again, as they climbed the stairway, now with his head hanging down, and at the top were the bonfires, the red columns of perfumed smoke, and suddenly he saw the red rock, brilliant with dripping blood, and his feet, the swinging of the feet of the sacrificed, which they dragged in order to throw him rolling down the stairway on the north. With one last hope he parted his eyelids, groaning to wake up. For a second he thought he had achieved it, because once again he was immobile in his bed, safe from the swinging with his head propped up. But it smelled of death, and when he opened his eyes he saw the bloody figure of the high priest that came toward him with a stone knife in his hand. He was able to

shut his eyelids once more, but now he knew that he would not wake, that he was awake, that the marvelous dream had been the other, absurd like all dreams; a dream in which he had ridden the strange avenues of an astonishing city, with red and green lights that burned with neither flame nor smoke, with an enormous metal insect that buzzed beneath his legs. In the infinite lie of that dream they had also lifted him from the floor, someone had also cut him with a knife in his hand, with him lying face up, face up with his eyes shut in the midst of the fires.