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A Line Through The Night

Sebastián Villagra¹

I was in the garden, the cellphone screen shining in my right hand. I read the message; I read it again, read it many times. It said the neighborhood church had collapsed and I should go and see it. Inside my house father insisted with the phones and mother had started to fill bottles with water. I went to the kitchen and told her I was going out and wasn't coming back till the next day, and she said I was cruel, something she had been saying since many years ago, and I left.

But it was already the next day. The tremor had occurred when we were sleeping, that is, when we were still in the day before. And the silence, the silence of the TV and the other devices, and their paralysis, made it difficult to accept that time was still running, that life continued. I thought it that way, and left with the purpose of walking through the silence, walking through the immobility and feeling them.

And I walked through them. I was a ghost, and also the crying I heard as I crossed the street must've been a ghost. I heard the voices. The voices seemed distant even though their owners were trying to talk very loud, in the same way my parents and I had tried to talk very loud after the movement had stopped (but the contrast of our voices against the silence of the machines must've impressed us or made us feel ashamed, because immediately we wanted to moderate the volume).

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The sound of the voices was sharp; some of them sounded as if they were behind my neck. And I could understand every word: “is she right?”, “where are the batteries?”, “does that shit have batteries?”. But everything was distant as if it came from within me. Later I would think it was because I had been taken out of a dream -though I didn’t remember having any dream- and because there were no faces for these voices. I realized that lights, TVs, the eternal buzzing of the current, had been, in other nights, the faces of those voices.

I haven’t made this walk since when? I asked myself and tried to remember. I used to bicycle in that direction. We bicycled around the block when we were kids. We started in my street, entered one of the alleys and came out in the street where the chapel and the park were. There we would dismount and play or wander around the park. Later, when we got older and we passed through the last years of school and our teenage angst was at its peak, we would do the same route but on foot and would waste time on the park drinking and talking. Did I ever tell César about these things? I hadn’t told him about those walks, about the importance that route and those places had for me, and had told him very little about how much I remembered those friends with whom we had lost contact. In the same way, he hadn’t been able to tell me many things about him, I thought.

The volume of the voices had been diminishing as I walked. They are relaxing now, I thought, people are resigning themselves to the darkness and the isolation. The worst part must be adapting to the sleep of the machines, I thought, because I had started to feel the weight of that sleep before going out. The voices of the people were now truly distant: only murmurs, confusing and undistinguishable from each other. But one last voice sounded sharp and loud into my ear:

-Andrés!

I turned back and saw Manuel standing in a corner. I stopped as he walked in my direction. I could smell the odor of alcohol in his mouth when he was only some meters away.

-What the hell are you doing here? Are you fine?

He told me the tremor had surprised him in a party, and he was walking home when by chance looked up the street and saw me. He asked me what was I doing there and I told him César had sent me a message telling me the chapel had fallen down.

-The one back there? –he asked-. I was around there and didn't hear a shit! Well, I heard everything, but everything was...

He noticed he was talking loud and immediately tried to speak more softly. He said he had felt afraid because of the empty streets. He passed in front of a house where someone cried desperately, and the immediate thought he had was that someone had died in there. He thought many had died, but looked at the houses and they were still and untouched and weak lights glared behind the windows.

-I forgot to call my parents and my cell is off. Can I use yours?

-Sure.

I was going to take it off my pocket but he said:

-Later, later.

-I don't know if it is working. I tried before I left, but you can send a message.

We walked. I walked in silence; Manuel couldn't stop talking. He repeated what he had said before: how he heard the noise of everything and felt afraid, but now tried to describe and distinguish the elements of that everything: the cries of the people, the bottles and glasses falling off the tables and breaking against the ground, the music suddenly interrupted, the explosions of the power lines as the electric cables clashed against each other. And the voices. The voices asking, the voices trying to comfort, the voices encouraging. A girl had thrown up and now cried. Everyone approached her and said the same: that the worst had already happened and everything was fine, everything was going to be fine. Then the people trying to call to their houses and blaming the telephone companies and the internet providers for the inutility of so many machines.

I turned on the next alley and Manuel turned with me. I asked him if he wasn't going home, and he said he wanted to go with me to see the chapel.

He didn't say anything after that; we both walked with our mouths shut. There was when I had an inspiration and turned into another alley. He didn't notice that we were going in the wrong

direction or didn't want to tell it. He hasn't made that walk in years either, I thought. I made him stop in front of Belén's house. Only then he noticed that we had been walking to another place:

-What are we doing here?

-I sent her a message and she didn't answer. I need to know how she is.

-Who? –I pointed the house and he looked at it-. Belu? I thought you weren't seeing her.

I shouted her name. A light moved behind the tall bushes that covered the fence and soon her figure appeared in front of the gate. I saw first, in a white circle, her bosom and her hands. She aimed the flashlight at my face and the white circle disappeared in the flash of light.

I heard the squeak of the gate and took my hand off my eyes. Now the white circle cut a part of her legs and a portion of the ground. I couldn't see her face clearly till she left the shadows of the bushes and came closer to me. I wanted to ask, but couldn't say anything. She started to talk, faster than usual. She said something about her grandmother and about a cupboard, but I didn't pay attention to it: I looked at the white light that trembled over our feet with the movement of her hand as I tried to find the words to ask her how she was.

-You smell of rum –she said.

-It's not me, it's Manuel.

She looked at him and kissed him in the cheek. She hadn't seemed to remember him till I said his name. Then she asked both of us:

-Are you alright? -and to me-: how are your parents?

She asked for cigarettes but Manuel didn't have and I had quit smoking. She said she was going to buy a packet.

-You think you are going to find cigarettes in this night? –I said.

-The old man of the liquor store would sell even if it were the end of the world. Are you going with me?

I said yes and so did Manuel. We left her alley and turned to the opposite direction from our original destination. She didn't ask why we are here because she thinks I came to see her, I thought, but she is going to inquire what Manuel is doing with me.

-Were you partying? –she asked.

-I was –said Manuel.

-I was going to César's. Do you know the chapel –I pointed in its direction-. It fell down. It's completely destroyed, priest and everything.

“Do you know...”. It was stupid to ask that. I thought it was stupid at the moment I formed the words in my mouth. Obviously she knew it; she would also play in the park next to it when she was a kid, she would also get drunk in that park (in fact thus how I'd met her). She even must have made her first communion there, as I and César did, I thought. But I didn't know that. I have never asked her, I told to myself, I have never asked her and I should do it soon.

The liquor store was closed, but she decided to shout, and Manuel joined her. I walked away till I couldn't hear them, and sat on the curb to wait for them. She shouted: hello! and then both of them, at the same time: hello! They laughed. A light appeared behind the iron bars through which the owner attended. I heard the voice of the old man telling them that the store wasn't open, that it was mad of them to want to buy drinks that night. I looked at my feet and started to whistle a random melody. But though I whistled enthusiastically, still I heard her said, with a disconcerting cheerful voice, that they were very nervous and afraid, that they needed something to relax.

-Look at our friend –Manuel added, and though I wasn't seeing him I pictured him pointing in my direction with a half-smile on his face-. He is suffering a terrible episode of post-traumatic stress.

They approached me. Manuel sat on the curb at my side. He had a bottle and a pack wrapped in a black nylon bag between his legs and Belén was lighting up a cigarette. She expelled the first stream of smoke and handed me the package with the lighter.

-Did you forget I quit smoking?

-You hadn't told me.

-I told you last week.

-I hope you didn't quit vodka.

Manuel put a plastic glass in my hand. Belén crouched down and took one glass from the nylon bag. I put my hand on her waist and she shivered and one of her shoes slipped a little. She touched my face with the back of her hand. I touched her waist till I felt the flashlight in her jacket and took it. She moved her hand abruptly from my face and grabbed the glass which Manuel was still filling. A stream of the liquid fell to the ground. I turned the flashlight on and the white circle appeared against the wall next to the store. An eye. A black pupil, glittering. For one second I was in blank as one would be in front of an eye that has suddenly appeared from the shadows in a wall. I moved the flashlight and the white circle made visible the nose, the mouth, the beard, the signature. It was the face of a local kid who had been killed years ago. Their friends had made him a tribute by painting this mural. I moved the light, looking for wrinkles in the portrait.

-Turn it off, you're wasting the batteries.

I aimed the light at her face. She didn't cover her eyes but only moved them to one side and half-closed them. They were yellow under the light and I noticed the eyelids were red. I turned the flashlight off and put it on my pocket. I took the glass and drank.

-Are we going? –said Manuel. He had finished his drink and was crushing the plastic glass.

-Do you still want to see the church?

Manuel nodded as he tried to redo the shape of the plastic glass.

-The church! –Belén exclaimed- let's go!

-Let me finish it –I said.

I finished my drink and felt dazed as I got up.

Everything seemed calm again. The houses that surrounded our walk were silent. They're acting as if it were just another night, I thought, but if I weren't drunk I would notice the details that show that simulation: the dim lights behind the curtains, the whispers; and if I –if we- weren't drunk they would have it difficult to simulate: our loud voices and our laughs must make them feel when we pass outside their homes that it is just another Saturday night.

As we walked I wanted to ask Manuel if he remembered when we bicycle around those streets, if those memories came by themselves or if he looked for them before closing his eyes and sleeping, and if he had ever felt the need of leaving home one night and walk and find if things had changed or were still the same. But I knew the answers to these questions were of no use. They were of no use if what I really wanted to know was if things had had for him those colors, those sounds and those odors that they had for me.

She was telling him about the 1985 earthquake, about how that day her mother had prepared soup and it has splashed out of the plates staining everything; nothing broke that day, she said, but the walls, the curtains, the carpet and even the white ceiling were a mess. I didn't even exist then, she said, but I've heard it a hundred times so that it is as if I had seen it. And this night her grandmother had retold it one more time.

She'd been crying and I wanted to know if it was because of the tremor. I was only hearing her voice; I didn't look at her as we walked. I would have needed to look at her to ask her, and looking at her meant remembering her leaving me last year, visiting my home when I wasn't living there, and appearing at the end of winter, when I had come back, as if nothing had happened.

We walked slowly as we approached the open space in which the chapel and the park extended. When we were almost at the end of the alley, we ran.

-I don't see anything. Do you see anything?

She was jumping. Manuel laughed and gasped. It felt as if we were ten years old and were seeing fireworks in New Year's Eve.

We could see the façade and one side of the chapel. We went around it by the park; Manuel was at the head and was the first who could see the other side. He shouted: here it is! Belén and I rushed and saw it: a line, quite straight, cut the wall on that side. In the dark it seemed a perfect and well-defined tracing, as when one draws a line between the opposite angles of a rectangle. The line had made the structure collapse on that side, especially in the middle of the roof.

-We should climb –said Belén, grabbing the bars of the fence that surrounded it.

-It can be dangerous –I said.

-Do you have my flashlight? Light it up.

I took the flashlight and turned it on. The white interior of the broken concrete was visible, and the reflection of the light on its color highlighted it against the red painting and the darkness. In the middle the line widened at the point of making possible to see the beams that sustained what was left of the roof.

We should've felt disillusioned, but no one of us showed it: I'm sure nobody expected a huge devastation. Plus, disillusion had been there from the beginning: since when we were first carried to mass in an evening of our childhoods, probably on Christmas day, and the chapel resulted a plain building which resembled more a storehouse or the small schools to which we were sent, and not the gable-roofed church with a cross on the top that we had in our minds. The cross of this one was outside, along the entrance, and we weren't able to find it that night. Disillusion had been there from the beginning: since we noticed how our houses started to be surrounded by fences and our parents began to distrust each other. I thought about that, I thought about that as we walked to the benches and I illuminated the path on the park. We sat on the benches and drank.

- I feel sleepy –she said.

-Should we go home?

-I should go and see César.

We crossed the street to César's house. I shouted his name. He shouted back: he said it was open and we could come in.

On the table were a bowl of snacks, dirty glasses, a laptop and two big candles of the kind that is used in churches.

-I see you already started the sacking –I said as I entered and noticed them.

-Who is with you? –he half-closed his eyes trying to see Belén and Manuel who were behind me in the doorstep- Manuel?

He hugged him. I knew they'd not seen each other in at least two years. And though he said hi to her, it seemed he didn't recognize Belén till I said her name.

-How are you? Is everything fine? –he asked us.

He told us that his parents were away in the south and he had been trying to get in touch with them during all of the night. At first he was surprised we had brought alcohol but immediately took one of the dirty glasses from the table and started to fill it. I wanted to tell him it was incredible we have been meeting each other in other places or had kept in touch through chat, when we were both still living one hundred meters away from each other, but I just told him it was nice to see him fine and served myself another drink thinking that would help me to talk. He asked:

-Did you see the church?

-Yes.

-You don't seem much impressed but you should've listened to it. The noise. I saw it, I didn't hear it. How do you call it?

-What?

-When you see a sound.

-I don't know.

-Anyway. I saw an egg cracking. Only one line, in a delicate zig-zag. And then I got outside and it was like a crack in an egg. I laughed. I laughed when I saw the image and when I saw the real thing. I suppose I wouldn't have laughed if I hadn't been alone.

He invited us to sit and the three of us occupied a sofa.

-I didn't know you were going to come –he said.

-Synesthesia –whispered Belén.

-What?

-I should've texted you back.

-That was the word.

-I thought you would think it was a joke. In fact it was a half joke –he said.

-I took it very seriously. We took it very seriously.

He had taken the computer from the table and put it on his lap. A fast music in low volume started to sound when he opened the computer. I saw his face illuminated by the white light of the screen.

-Could you see the news? –asked Manuel.

-The modem died at the beginning. I don't know why I insist.

We talked. There was one moment at which César and Manuel started to catch up with each other and I looked at Belén, who was sat at my left. I thought she had fallen asleep, but when I looked at her she raised her eyes and sat up. Her skin was of a darkish orange under the dim light of the candles and her hair casted shadows over her face. She put her head on my shoulder.

-Were you afraid? –she asked.

-I don't know.

-I was.

-You cried

She took my hand. Hers was cold.

-So the three of you knew each other from childhood –she exclaimed suddenly.

-Yes –said César-. And the three of us made our first communion on that lame building.

-And Manuel was even preparing there for his confirmation, till he changed it for the church of black metal.

-But you were the one who wanted to be a saint. He knew the gospels by heart.

-I didn't know them, I only knew the song of the songs.

I remembered and tried to recite: “I will rise now, and go about the city in the streets, and in the broad ways I will seek...”, but I did it so quietly they didn't hear it, and they weren't able to see the movement of my lips either.

He said we could sleep upstairs in his room. Belén asked if she could take the laptop with her because she wanted to keep listening to music. Manuel lay down on the sofa. Upstairs, she displayed her habit of never listening to a complete song; she couldn't listen to one song for more than a minute before she changed to the next one. Why can't you leave a complete album playing? But I didn't say anything this time. For some reason –perhaps the red line at the bottom of the icon of the battery, which predicted the death of the last working machine in that house- it seemed right that songs passed fast.

I closed my eyes and felt the daze. I heard she asked me something, but I didn't answer, and when I opened my eyes and looked at her she had fallen asleep. I wasn't able to sleep. Till dawn I heard César trying his cellphone every other time till he was able to communicate. I heard his monosyllables; by what I got his parents were fine.

I saw the progress of the day in the borders of the green curtains; the blue light first, then the grey, then the white, finally the complete transparency of a summer day. It was still silence. And with the daylight I could appreciate that silence in a different way : it weighed less, or had lost some weight. Then I heard a car, the first car since before the tremor. And birds singing. I got up and looked out of the window. The yellow and green leaves of the peach tree in the backyard. It seemed as if nothing had happened, but a lot of thing had been required through the night for that nothingness to happen. I felt the need of walking, of seeing how the rest of the world looked. I

thought of waking her, but she seemed so relaxed and I knew she was a heavy sleeper: if I disturbed her she would get angry.

I left the house. I walked to the chapel and noticed the crack was much more impressive under daylight. One could see perfectly through it and the amount of debris heaped around the base of the building. Now I could see through the windows -in the night we had seen reflections of the light only-: I saw the top of a candle. It had been the only candle without lights in the whole city, I thought. I liked that idea.

I started to walk back home. I didn't see any people; it was early and they were probably recovering from the sleepless night. The only sound was an occasional car and the singing of birds which seemed to come from everywhere. How much time do we have to wait for it to stop being pleasant and become irritable or invisible as the sound of electricity? I asked myself. When I turned the corner of my street, I saw my father walking. I noticed he was dressed in his working uniform. He smiled and looked at me.

-Where are you going? -I asked.

-To work.

-Why?

Because he had to. I would have wanted to tell him that he didn't have to, that what had happened was a disaster; when the whole city was without water and light, people don't go to work. I pictured other people leaving their houses and their families because they had to work. And when they arrived at the supermarket, the supervisor wouldn't dismiss them, because he needed their help to tidy up and clean the mess, though what the supervisors really wanted was some people to protect the supermarket from the sacking their superiors feared.

He said good bye, and I just stood there as he walked away. I thought of walking with him, in silence, but keeping him company; I thought of going back to César's house, to the bed where Belén slept deeply, but I walked home. I noticed her flashlight was still in my pocket; I had forgotten to turn it off, or it had turned on by my movements: the batteries were dead.

Father would return at midday with three big water bottles and a walkman -a relic he found in the storehouse- in which we listened to the narration of the destruction, immediately degrading into commonplace by the sentimentalism, sensationalism and bad diction of the journalists, till it wasn't so different of the static, the static that is permanently hiding the debris that surrounds us.