

A Suspicious-Looking Man

Nineteen-year-old Ball State sophomore Nick Barnes suffered from an as-yet undiagnosed illness: trying to impress people who would forever be incapable of finding someone like him impressive. He was ordinary in every other way; there was nothing else wrong with him. His only defect was this nagging need, the need to be perceived as a somebody by people who would always see him as a nobody.

Nick's so-called friends, Roderick and Masterson, whose talents for "living it up" on this spring-break trip into the heart of Mexico pushed everyone else in their group of seven into weak supporting roles, were exactly the kinds of people he was endlessly trying to impress. Tall, svelte, tanned and entitled, they never doubted, and were quite pleased with, their place in the scheme of things. (At semester's end, Roderick was going to take over his father's business, CarpetWorld, the exclusive U.S. importer of a Peruvian hardwood.) Drinking and dancing by night, perpetuating desultory conversations from lazily swaying hammocks with other spring-breakers by day, they managed to remain perched high above the daily goings on of this colonial capital as if the airplane they had flown in on had never descended. They seemed to have no ambitions, and, paradoxically, to have all their ambitions fulfilled effortlessly. At the other extreme was Nick, who desired to go so deeply into the psyche of this place that he would lose himself. He wanted this trip, his first excursion outside his country, to catalyze a permanent change

inside him. Somehow the idea had gotten into his head that there was some experience to be had here that would make him a more authentic human being. Stripped of its apparent grandness, this idea could be revealed as just another symptom of his secret illness, just another of the myriad ways his dark need would try to get itself fulfilled.

“Imagine,” Nick said to his so-called friends just now, during breakfast, just the three of them, at a quiet café near the hotel, “you’re sitting at a bench in the *zócalo* and you see a man, a creep, looking at you . . . And looking at you. . . .”

They weren’t impressed.

“The next thing you know,” he went on, “the guy comes up to you and opens his bag just enough so that you can see he’s got a gun in there. A silver nine-millimeter.”

They glanced at each other and smirked.

“And you say, ‘Go ahead, take me, but you’re going to have to be quick about it, because I’m going to give you a hell of a fight. I’m going to give you all I’ve got.’ And you realize he doesn’t understand English. But something in your tone tells him that he doesn’t want to fuck with you, that he’s made a mistake.”

They let out a hay snort and resumed their breakfast. He’d done better. The entire group had seen the headline on the front page of the newspaper in the hotel lobby that morning: “Kidnappings on the Rise: Near and Far from the Border.”

Roderick said, “So he decided you weren’t worth the trouble, huh?”

“You know what, Nick?” Masterson said. “Just once, I’d like to see you actually get into some shit. Just once I’d like to see you come back here with some cock-and-bull story that was actually true. I really would. I want that. For your sake.”

This was what bothered him most about his inability to make a name for himself amongst his so-called friends: They seemed so dumb, but they weren't. He could never get anything by them. An example of their not-dumb dumbness: A "cock-and-bull" story, by definition, was one made up entirely of falsehoods. So how could he fulfill their request and come back with a true one?

But try telling that to them: They'd just say you knew what they meant.

And they'd be right.

The rest of the day Nick searched for cases of kidnapping victims who stood up for themselves. He filled pages of notes on the few heroes he found, absolutely mesmerized by their fortitude. If he could cloak his reportage of his own encounter with his fictional kidnapper in just a few of the details of these victims' heroism, his so-called friends would have to believe him. Of course most of the cases he was reading did not turn out so well, and the accounts from Alberto Sanchez's *Historias de Secuestros* were especially haunting. His shame in obsessing over the intricacies of their suffering was assuaged only by the necessity he felt in sharing them with his friends.

Meanwhile his buddies were always out of sight or just heading somewhere without him.

When he'd step out for a break from his research, a young indigenous woman—one of those hard-soled, compact women who, with children in tow, peddled *chicles* until two a.m. in the *zócalo*, whose facial expressions were from the age when people didn't smile for cameras—caught his attention. Why? What did he see in her? He didn't know, he just wanted to find out what she knew. About kidnappings? No, about life. What did she feel

about being a nobody? Did she feel sorry for herself? What was her dream? What did she want from life? Or, more to the point: how did it make her feel that no one on earth gave a shit what her dream was and what she wanted from life? Would it make any difference to her to find out that *he*—Nick Barnes, nineteen-year-old Communications major on spring break from Muncie, Indiana—cared?

At dinner in the evening of that second day, Roderick brought up Nick's latest fabrications, which, he added, were especially over the top, even for Nick, and Nick could have dealt with it if Cassie and Jordan hadn't joined them. Well mannered and well educated, they usually found some excuse not to hang out with Roderick and Masterson, but it wasn't so much their disdain for the Vikings (their name for the burly duo), as it was their absolute indifference to what the Vikings' thought of them, that entranced Nick the most. For some reason, though, this night they'd agreed to come along. Nick wanted to believe it'd had to do with his being there, and he was pleased they were seeing him in his fun shirt, the Miró-like fish-print one with the open collar. Cassie and Jordan were intelligent and decent, and, balancing his need to impress Roderick and Masterson with his need to impress them, he had been working on making them true friends all semester. The best thing about them was that they still seemed to think Nick was capable, in spite of himself, of sharing with them interesting, important truths, rather than just being someone who *wanted* to be important or interesting. He wanted to believe that they understood his need in its true light, which was that, at heart, he just wanted to be recognized for who he truly was. Tonight they'd replied to Roderick and Masterson's mockery of Nick's kidnapping story in this way: "Okay, granted, he might not have the

heroic qualities that you two are capable of demonstrating, but he does have something we think is just as important, and that is a heroic *sensibility*: the ability to recognize the heroic in others.”

The bright American family at the table next to theirs, which had seemed so charming, now seemed to taunt him with smirks.

“You know what?” he said. “Thank you for that, Cassie, Jordan. But that’s fine. I’m out.” He put the tablecloth down and excused himself from the table. On the street he looked left and right and then started walking under the street lamps. After a few blocks he realized he was looking for the Indian woman. Of course she was nowhere to be seen.

He was glad he didn’t see her. He decided the next time he saw Roderick he’d lay down his trump card: “You don’t seem to realize that, if you lived here, your whole life would be pointless: No one uses carpeting.” But then Roderick’s would-be retort rang in his ears: “Au contraire, amigo, you’re forgetting about our fine selection of Peruvian hardwoods. You fucking douche!”

And he realized he’d just lose to them again. And again and again.

Then he saw Jenny, another of the seven, from a block away. She was alone. Why wasn’t Megan, her best friend, with her? He decided he wouldn’t flee from her. She wasn’t as bad as they made her out to be. She’d lost fifteen pounds in the run-up to her departure from the United States, and at least three since, and she was aching to put her new curves to use. On this trip, her long-incisored smile had lost its timidity, and she had even begun to draw in the reins on her fake stupidity—“Thank you, Roderick, I *know* what Coco-Loco means; I was only kidding”—to appeal to a higher grade of man. (If

Nick recalled correctly, she had even made eye contact with him, Nick, as she'd said this.)

He'd let himself follow her to whatever bar she wanted to try. If the night went well, he'd call it his reward; if it went badly, he'd say he was serving his penance. Either way, whatever happened, he'd deserve it.

When he followed her into their third bar, he glimpsed on the sidewalk the Indian woman's oldest boy, maybe eight years old, almost as tall as his mother, carrying his baby sister in the *rebozo* around his back. He was the man-boy of the family, the spouse-child. Scavenging and resourceful, a survivor of hunger, a survivor of indifference.

Nick's mind seemed to stay out there with the boy, so he only half-heard Jenny's tale about talking this afternoon on her way into a gift shop to a graffitist full of conspiracy theories about the government, about the photos she'd taken with him and his graffiti—a spray-painted image of a man in huaraches and the peasant's pants, shirt and sombrero, hunched over vomiting, next to his head the words, "Vomiting the System"—about how she'd already posted her photos of it online and gotten two comments.

Because he had committed himself to following his night with Jenny through to its foregone conclusion, he never let on that he just wanted to go to the hotel and be alone. Maybe instead he let her believe that he wanted to take her to bed. And so, after they'd walked back to the hotel where the seven of them were staying, Nick followed Jenny through one last door: hers.

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When Nick closed the door to Jenny's room behind him, after tripping over the wicker chair in the middle of the room and almost waking her up, he stepped extra carefully past the dark clay pots in the shadowy garden courtyard. He assumed Cassie and Jordan had tucked themselves into bed by now in the room next to Jenny's, and wondered if they'd heard anything. He hoped they had, because he thought he and Jen had sounded good—not so odd, was it? And if they'd heard, they could pass it on to his buddies. He couldn't be the one to tell them.

Out on the street, things had changed. Although it was less than an hour later, the temperature seemed to have dropped ten degrees. It brought to his lungs a cleansing coolness it had been carrying since the sea, through the dewy mist of the coastal mountains, and onward across the central valley to the city. The second change was that it seemed all the previous people in the street had been traded out for a new crowd—the late-night revelers and the lonely hunters and those with nothing else to do but wander the streets until sunrise. There was an edge to the air that he hadn't felt yet there, and he walked out into it boldly, as if daring it to slit him open once and for all, freeing inside only God knew what.

A bumper sticker on a truck read, "Oaxaca wants peace," and something Jenny had said came back to him. "There is so much angst here, there is! It's just beneath the surface. That graffiti guy? He told me they lit some busses on fire, and some buildings too. He said they're always protesting this and that. But nothing ever changes. He said the thing about life here is that if you had money yesterday, you will have money forever. If you were poor yesterday, you will be poor forever."

There was something about this diagnosis that rang true for Nick personally, but whatever it was seemed to lie just beyond his grasp.

Before he left the well-lighted promenade for lanes less inviting, he'd finally run into the Indian woman. It had happened of course after he had lost hope of ever encountering her, at a moment when she was the furthest thing from his mind.

He saw her sitting in a low, stone windowsill of a cheap jewelry shop, with her legs stretched out across the sidewalk. She was stitching up an old traditional blouse. Her face wasn't so hard like the others, and her two long braids had bright ribbons in them. Her feet were resting on top of her shoes. He was disappointed to see they were simple jellies, factory-made. Her boy was sprawled out beside her, taking up the rest of the sill, dirty as hell, in soiled shorts and no shoes. He was sleeping. Maybe he wasn't her boy. He didn't look like hers; his hair was thicker and longer and he was all disheveled as if he were practicing to be a drunk.

Because Nick approached her without anything realistic to talk about, like wanting to buy something from her or to give her money, she assumed he wanted to sleep with her. He was pestering her about what her items of clothing were named in Zapotec, and, instead of answering (she wasn't Zapotec), she motioned to a man across the street with a piece of cardboard under his ass, and said that was her husband. Nick looked over; the man was playing an accordion. He gave no sign that she belonged to him. She was lying, Nick thought, to protect herself.

“He plays nicely,” Nick said. “I always wanted an accordion.”

She said her husband hated playing it, maybe he'd sell it to him.

“Oh, yeah?” Nick said, then: “No, I couldn't do that.”

She gave him a price for it.

He said, “No, that’s okay. How much for the candy bar?”

She told him, and also the price of the cigarettes, which cost more.

He said, “No, no, that’s okay. I don’t smoke.”

She looked away, bored.

Her skin was so smooth the baby fat hadn’t even grown out of it. She must have been about his age. Her eyes were round, and yet their melancholic hope for a stranger’s hand-out, was, like the baby fat, but a holdover from her youth: It might have still been visible in her face, but it didn’t mean anything. He stood up, having lost the nerve to pursue the real thing he wanted from her: answers to questions she would be incapable of comprehending, much less formulating responses to. He walked away admonishing himself for forgetting to say bye to the boy, whom he’d awakened with his disturbance. He decided the boy looked nothing like her or the accordion man, whom he just now passed without dropping a coin into the can which a little girl, who did look like her, had come running up to him with. He pretended he didn’t see her: a second-floor window of the colonial-era law school building had become of sudden interest.

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The mugger looked like Emiliano Zapata, the agrarian revolutionary leader of the southern forces, whose face Nick had been seeing on a poster all over the *centro histórico*. The poster was advertising a new artists’ meeting space and gallery, and Zapata was its namesake. Or maybe the man’s face just made Nick think of that poster. Because, really, he didn’t have much of a mustache, and although probably forty, Zapata’s age at

his death in 1919, he already had a hunched tiredness bowing out his short legs. Dirt was holding him up. If you'd shaken out his workman's jacket, jeans, boots, you'd have had 10 kilograms of native dirt. His eyes were black and red and glazed over, as if the first layer of his eye-skin had melted into the second. His hair was as black and fine as a black cat's, his lips cracked open. The sun was still burning in them, stored sunlight gone bad. His fingers were sage bush branches, his fingernails broken turtle shells. (For in such quasi-poetic imagery was how Nick saw him.) The man was made out of the land; he was hardly separate from it. Nick could imagine him out there working the earth under the sun, and yet barely a separate thing from the earth. This small man rounded over a furrow in a field must have looked from above like an already graying leaf with its imperceptible gyrations as a team of ants worked beneath it, breaking it down to take piece by piece into the soil.

He was from somewhere far away, somewhere just beyond the limits of Nick's imagination, driven out of his homeland to find work, or to commit a crime where no one would recognize him—whichever came first—then slip back to be himself again in daylight.

Nick would have believed whatever sounded best, but he probably was indeed a migrant worker who had never committed a crime in his life until his machete broke and drove him mad enough to justify stealing the hundred pesos he'd need to buy a new one. Nick knew he was on the right side of history, of justice, by letting himself lose to the man. He felt that so strongly that he wondered if *this*, this mugging, wasn't just what he'd been after when he'd booked his flight to come here. He believed in the man, if his belief was based only on the look in the man's red-beetle eyes. Just as so many poor folk had

believed in Zapata—despite any ungodly act he may have committed in their name, despite that the changes he'd attempted to provide for them had come to naught—Nick believed in this worker of the land. As he'd watched the man pass him on the other side of the street, Nick didn't think he was suspicious-looking whatsoever, and that must have been the strangest thing about the fact that he was mugging him right now with the dull, broken blade put up at first menacingly, then kept up benignly, between them.

What Nick wanted above all, as he handed his money over without looking at it, looking instead as intensely into the man's eyes as he could stand, was that the man remember him, that he see, in memory, weeks, months, even years from now, something more in Nick's eyes than fear, naïveté, and a perverse indulgence in the thrill of his Mexico mugging experience, of which no currency exchange rate could ever get an accurate measure. He wanted the man to see that he had chosen Nick for a reason, and that reason was that he had recognized Nick as important in some way, as worthy of this encounter; that he was capable of imbuing this exchange with the depth of meaning that it deserved, or, that is, that he was capable of *recognizing* the meaning that it already possessed. If the man could only do this for him then in no narration would Nick ever need to substitute huaraches for the boots or put his buddies in the scene a few steps away or thin the wad of bills he'd taken out of his pocket, or insert, God help them, some dialogue.

All of this and nothing less Nick wished the swirl of exuberance in his eyes was carrying across the divide and into the flat black discs of the man's.

But what was this? This man, so crucial to Nick's metamorphosis, was just going to leave? As if nothing at all had transpired between them?

Once the man had the money, it was clear he had not picked up on any one of Nick's desires, epiphanies, or needs. It was as if he had not seen Nick at all, as if he had simply picked up the wad of bills from the sidewalk.

With the transaction, as far as he knew, concluded, his only intention now was to continue on his way. The problem, he was surprised to discover, was that the boy's hands had the lapels of his jacket. He struggled to pull himself free, but Nick's double-fisted grip was too tight.

Nick yelled into his face. "HOW ABOUT A LITTLE FUCKING GRATITUDE?"

The man did not understand. To a part of Nick this seemed entirely natural. Of course a man like this could not be expected to know English. To another part of him, however, the man's inability to comprehend him to the slightest degree was unacceptable.

And so, when the man, against his own interests, turned the blade to him, both of these parts of Nick were narrating events simultaneously. As the rusty blade penetrated the sophomore's special shirt and the flawless skin of his abdomen, these two thoughts competed for his attention: *When all alternatives have been exhausted, violence stands alone as the only possible solution*, and, *Who does this nobody think he is to commit such a transgression against me?*

The first emerged as an expression of empathy with the man, who had clearly never intended Nick any bodily harm. But, now mingled with the second, it became a call to action.

And so that more magnanimous part of Nick could only watch as his hands turned the blade on his mugger, and pushed until it was well into his gut.

The deed done, the suspicious-looking man scurried away as expeditiously as any overzealous predator that had gotten in over its head with an unpredictable prey.

Meanwhile, the farmworker, machete protruding from his middle like an ossified limb, fell to one knee on the spot. The blood pouring out of his abdomen saturated his shirt and began dripping onto the pavement. Then the other knee came down on its own.

The suspicious-looking man ducked into an alleyway, returning to a single narrative: This is it, the real deal.

The mugger put one hand to the machete's handle, and the other to its point of entry.

Nick did the same: Several paces away, around the corner, he put his hand to his wound. He was frightened, but he was also exhilarated, for he had just gotten what he had been looking for all along, and he knew it. The change in him would be so evident, he would never have to utter a single word to convince anyone of its authenticity.

The man who Nick had originally mistaken as an echo of Emiliano Zapata struggled to his feet, one hand fixed to the handle of the machete and the other gripping the now bloodied wad of bills, on flagrant display to bait help.

In some parallel world, where intentions were not so easily turned inside-out, that help would come from Nick.

Nick looked at the blood on his hands, and cursed to himself. He wiped his hands on his jeans and took his cell phone from his pocket and called the first person that came to mind.

It never occurred to Jenny to chastise him for calling so late, or for leaving without saying goodbye. To the contrary, she couldn't conceal how pleased she was by

this sudden, heightened need for her that her new lover seemed to be expressing. His breathing was so heavy, his words so blunt, she couldn't believe it.

Upon hearing her voice, however, there was just something about the eagerness in her tone that rubbed him the wrong way. He grew offended, and fearful, that she might forgive him before she even knew how repulsive and permanent his sin was. Unbidden, she began to thrust upon him her complete misreading of the nature of his change, selfishly attributing it to *herself*. And at the same time *forgiving him for it*. By placing this call to her, instead of consecrating his transfiguration, he had set it up for instant dissolution. His exuberance gave way to disbelief, then to disgust. How unfairly his achievement had been robbed from him!