

CATATONIA

By Ray López

The snow hit the windshield faster now. If it had been this fierce when Aaron left his house he may have endured his wife Amy's caustic temperament until the morning. Flurries of snow ripped through the purple night sky and dusted the dark lonely road. Aaron's clouded mind was mesmerized by a feeling of space travel as he stared glossy-eyed through the icy windshield at flurries of snow emerging from the ink black sky.

"I sho-o-ouldn't be driving," thought Aaron; so drunk that even his thoughts slurred.

"Just a couple more miles and I'll be there," the comforting thought soothed his anxiety. His cell phone screamed, Amy's name appeared on the screen taunting him. Even in her absence she was getting under his skin, tormenting him like worms in a dog's ass; if only he could gnaw her off so easily. Nothing would get him to answer that phone; no matter how many times she called, and text, he would not give that banshee a platform to screech from.

For December the snow was exceptionally thick. The moonless night lent angst to the premature cold. In defiance of winter's bite, Aaron dared not turn on the soothing warm air of the heater. The cold kept him as sharp as the ice sickles it spawned on the branches of the pines that lined the winding road. He needed every edge he could hone if he wanted to keep his car rubber side down. That night he hit the bottle hard, and it hit him right back. His eyes blurred turning each snowflake into a molecular flurry of its own.

"Focus, I can't afford another DUI," mumbled Aaron acting as his own nagging back seat driver.

His phone's robotic ring was an unneeded distraction and bitter reminder of the harpy that would be awaiting his return. He violently flipped the switch that silenced the ringer and tossed the damned thing into the cup holder with utter disgust for its existence. The vibration of the phone against the plastic cup holder was equally tormenting.

"Fuck you phone!" he snatched the phone from its perch and threw it on the floor. His glossy eyes burned with hatred as he stared at the placid device which lay on the dusty mat unfazed and unaware of Aaron's fury.

The ringer was reactivated by the impact as if the phone was defiantly mocking his attempt to abuse it. He tried his best to ignore it.

"God damn whoever invented ringtones."

He needed to focus, his eyes grew heavy with liquor. The streets were desolate; there was nothing to hit when Aaron drifted from lane to lane unknowingly. Nights like this kept the intelligent at home and fools adrift in their own mayhem. Luckily he appeared to be the only fool released into that particular night.

The phone rang in mockery once more. He had to shut it up. Aaron reached for the phone as it slid on the passenger's side floorboard; he swerved.

The phone evaded his clutch like a freshly caught fish; he swerved.

It flew from his fingers and landed in the crevice between the seat and the door. Swerving was no longer a factor; he drove down the center of the highway making the whole road a stage for his one man rodeo.

“Mo-o-o-ther fucka-a-a!” yelled Aaron; it rang from its unreachable nest.

Aaron refocused on the road as his car shook from trampling the raised lane dividers. His hands snapped to ten and two; his face crept so close to the windshield he could smell the leather on the steering wheel.

“Fuck, tha-t-t was clos-s-se,” mumbled Aaron as beads of sweat burst from his clammy forehead in defiance of the cold. A cocktail of intoxication and adrenaline shook the balance from his voice.

The phone erupted with its jubilant ring tone.

“Fu-u-u-u-uck!” he dove for the phone.

Brilliant light flooded the interior of the car as glittering glass rained in slow motion onto Aaron's wide eyed face. He moved his hands through the falling glass like a child catching snowflakes. The deafening sound of asphalt peeling the roof from his car ripped through Aaron's head. Darkness flooded the car like water through the compromised hull of a sinking ship.

The chill from the snow that gathered on Aaron's face revived him. The inconsolable cries of a grieving mother ripped through the night air piercing his heart with the blade of cruel reality. He crawled from the smoking car through a gauntlet of broken glass; his hands and knees slipped

clumsily in his own blood. The phone rang; laughing in the face of his misery. He shook glass off the broken screen of his phone and answered.

“What, w-w-who is this? Ca-a-a-all an ambulance,” his voice trembled with drunken horror.

“Hello, hello, hello,” static was his only response.

He threw the phone into the tree line. It rang; its last breath used to torment its terrified owner.

The cries of the grieving widow drew his attention. The blood soaked hair of a young blond woman dripped onto the cold lips of the lifeless body of her beloved husband. Only moments before those same lips passionately sang his love to her as he looked into her warm bright eyes; only briefly being distracted from the road which he thought to be his own. It wouldn't have mattered if he had stared at the road as intently as Aaron had only moments before; he couldn't have seen Aaron's unlit car careening down the dark and twisted road. The young couple's newborn baby joined her father as she burped blood into the cold hands of her trembling mother. Her cries intensified ten-fold. Aaron was in tears but did not dare to walk to where she lay in front of her overturned minivan which doubled as a tombstone for the father and child who lay dead in front of it.

The tears would have frozen on his face if the flowing blood from his scalp hadn't warmed them. Aaron raised his hands to wipe his face, they were numb. He didn't realize how much glass was imbedded in them until he felt the sting of it as it sliced his icy cheeks. He tried to pluck the pieces with his numb, trembling fingers.

The mother screamed; she realized her baby had left her and was not coming back; her life was now a burden of suffering that she could never shed.

Aaron thought he must console her. Even in the fog of intoxication he knew it was his fault that her family was dead. Maybe she should have died too; suffering such loss was far worse than death. He walked towards her. The snow covered ground raced towards his face. Darkness.

The bright light in Aaron's face inspired panic in his heart. Was this that white light he learned about via bad movies and near death experience documentaries? He regained his sense of reality when the face of a white haired man wearing a surgical mask appeared through his forced open eyes. Aaron looked around the room with deliberate scrutiny. He was in a hospital bed which meant he was alive. The flood of relief that rushed his body was damned by the realization that two uniformed police officers stood near the door. One of the Officers was a portly man with a flat top of white hair and a weed of a mustache. The other was young; his uniform hung off him like a child's thrift store Halloween costume. The young officer held a stack of papers in his hand.

"At least it's papers and not handcuffs," thought Aaron.

"He's awake," said the doctor with little effort to hide the disgust in his voice.

"Mr. Aaron Dickson, correct?" asked the young officer.

The white haired officer spoke sternly over his partner's routine yet ridiculous question, "You are very lucky to be alive. Unfortunately for them, and yourself, two out of three people in the van you hit weren't so blessed. In matters like this we are required to do a blood draw to check your level of intoxication. We both know it is quite high, you know because you are aware that you drank a lot, and I know because I can smell the alcohol emanating from your breath and person from all the way over here."

Aaron recognized the words that followed as his Miranda rights. He knew it was time to keep his mouth closed; he was no stranger to the process.

“Fill out this statement Mr. Dickson,” ordered the gray haired officer as he sat a clipboard on Aaron’s lap.

Aaron did not feel it touch his thighs, he could not move his hand to retrieve it.

“Ahhhhhh! What the fuck!” panicked Aaron’s disoriented mind. He intended to scream but his voice disobeyed. He realized he could see, he could hear, but that was all that his body would do for him. He was a prisoner to his own unresponsive being. Darkness ended his terror.

Aaron’s eyes opened, or were they open all along. He couldn’t feel anything besides the strangulation of his own fear. He was in a different room now; a room filled with people wearing baby blue scrubs. They talked about the latest episode of a TV show they all apparently watched the night before. Their laughter stopped when they noticed he was awake. A flood of people enveloped Aaron. He could see them, he could hear them, but he still could not move.

“Aaron, Aaron. I’m Doctor Jackson,” said an attractive woman who appeared too young to be a doctor.

“Aaron, it appears you are suffering some paralysis from an injury to your spinal cord sustained during the crash. We are doing everything we can to help you so don’t panic. You also appear to have quite a heart condition so again I strongly emphasize that you don’t panic. You have already lost consciousness several times from your rise in blood pressure. If you keep this up you could suffer very severe consequences.”

“Don’t panic!” screamed Aaron in his head.

He couldn't move which was horrifying in itself. Now he was just told he may die from the very fear that his condition inspired; and he is not supposed to panic. What world did this doctor live in where that made sense? Aaron couldn't feel his heart beat but it was so violent he could hear it pounding in his chest; darkness.

Aaron awoke in his bed at home. Was this all just a bad dream. His TV which hung on the wall turned on; news of a terrible car crash which killed two people flashed across the screen. The daylight which shone through his open bedroom windows dimmed; it dimmed until hallow darkness flooded into the room. The ceiling began to tremble; his bed was next. It shook violently; he struggled to hold on with all the strength of a man fighting for his life. The roof crumbled on top of him; the sky was a void of black and purple soup. The walls of his bedroom stood in ruins around his dancing furniture. He held on and screamed in terror.

His wife Amy calmly walked into the room through the crumbling walls, "What have you done," she asked as she held her arms out towards him.

In her hands there was a small baby; it melted into ooze around her fingers then dripped onto the floor; Amy's brown hair fell out and long blond hair spewed from her skull like grass growing in a time lapse film.

Amy's face was replaced by that of the grieving widow, "What have you done," she asked as she tried to scoop up the remnants of her child from the floor.

The floor crumbled and Aaron rode his bed into a pit of blackness void of all but misery.

Light shone into Aaron's eyes. Doctors scurried like roaches around the room.

The sting of sweat dripping into Aaron's eyes distracted him from the sound of his thundering heartbeat. At least he wasn't completely void of sensation; the pain was life affirming.

"He's back." The silence was broke.

"You are very lucky, Aaron. We lost you in your sleep. You need to remain calm; your heart can't take this stress," the young Doctor again asked too much of Aaron.

"A dream, thank God it was only a dream. But what a fucking nightmare it was. I nearly died from the fear of it after all. What the Hell am I going to do? I can't sleep; if I do I may have to endure that Hell again and may not be lucky enough to wake up next time. What did I do to deserve this?" Aaron thought deeply upon his own misery; he wondered if he was crying.

Aaron resolved to not sleep. It was a torment unto itself to stay awake entombed in his own body; but the alternative of dying from another dreadful nightmare was worse. He endured the misery for hours. The world came and went around Aaron. Amy came and cried over his body; she pounded his chest and begged him to return to her. If he knew she had such love for him he would have put down the bottle and held her that night and none of this would have ever happened.

Day gave birth to night which in turn spawned day. It had been a cycle of pain to see the change of light through the open blinds covering the windows; he wished the nurse would shut them so he could at least be unaware of how much time had passed. He was tired; the kind of tired that a man could hardly fight under even normal conditions. These conditions were far from normal; he could not walk around, drink an energy drink; or take a cold shower. He laid helplessly and drifted to sleep.

Aaron awoke. "Where am I," he thought. He appeared to be in a small bedroom; but it was swaying. The floor was moving. He looked at his clothes; they were not his own. He was dressed like a sailor; that's the source of the sway, he was on a boat in the cabin. The sway grew legs and became a hop. The room rose and fell with a violence that caused his head to strike the overhead then the deck repeatedly. The sound of wind swirling and waves breaking against the hull became overwhelming as they echoed through the cabin.

Vomit spewed from Aaron's mouth; a fountain of vomit that resembled water erupting from a broken fire hydrant. The acidic liquid became chunks, which turned red with gore; Aaron gave oral birth to his entrails onto the deck. In panic he desperately attempted to pick up the slippery gelatinous globs of meat and swallow them. The few he successfully gulped down shot violently from his anus back onto the deck. The bulkheads now cried tears of sea water as they gave way to the intrusive ocean. The room filled around him; he held his floating lungs like a raft as he attempted to swim to freedom. This cabin had no exit; although it seeped water into itself like a fish does through its gills, there was no escape. The water slowly replaced the last of the air in the room. His body filled with water, he choked, he gurgled, he swallowed more, and more until he was more water than flesh. His cold corpse mirrored the cold of the water as it floated in the thirsty chamber.

Light broke the veil of darkness. Aaron once again saw a colony of medical personnel hovering around him. He didn't have to be told this time; the panic in their sullen faces told the story. He had fallen asleep and died again only to be miraculously revived. He would not let himself sleep again. Night fell to day. He knew he could not stay awake forever. He knew he would eventually lose his struggle; but he had to try, to hope the doctors would find a way to help him.

Two days passed like kidney stones. The misery was too much to bare, each waking moment was a Hell unto itself. No torment could match what he was enduring, no pain could pierce as deep into his very soul as this fear which touched every layer of his consciousness. He stared into the night sky through the blinds. He joined the darkness.

He awoke. He was in a desert. The sand hugged the toes of his bare feet. The warmth of the sun on his naked body came with such relief after being trapped in numbness for so long. The vast emptiness that surrounded him was only interrupted by rolling hills of red sand. He embraced the sand with his toes; it embraced him back. It felt incredible until its grasp grew in strength. The slight pull on his feet became a colossus of suction. The sand around him, then the sand in its entirety, began to whirl in a counter clockwise motion. He felt as if he was being flushed down the toilet into a litter box. The sky soon joined the sand; his world spun in a blur around him mixing like paint on a pallet. Aaron struggled to pull free from the sand but only screwed into the Earth faster. What use was it to struggle when the whole world around him was being sucked into the same hole? The sand brushed his chin then climbed into his mouth. Its gritty texture filled his nose and lungs momentarily suffocating him before he fell from the underside of the hole he was pulled into.

He stood naked on a jagged stone floor that cut his feet like a rug of razors. The heat of the air bubbled his skin with blisters and shriveled his eyeballs like raisins in his skull. The screams of men, woman, and children flooded his ears accompanied by deep resonating maniacal laughs. His bubbling skin split then peeled from his bones like over grilled meat; the stench of death and burning flesh caused vomit to pour from his nose and mouth. Aaron's body fell to the ground searing on the hot stone like a steak on a griddle.

Before him a man approached. He was what looked like a hundred yards away then upon him in a second. He stood before Aaron in a suit of black leather. A leather that still bore the nipples and wrinkled eyelids of the men whose flesh it was sown from. His shirt was red, a red so rich that it pained the eyes to stare at it no less than staring at the sun itself. His long black hair framed his ridged face. The light of divinity framed his form. He was a handsome man, yet his eyes were as black and shiny as those of a rodent. Aaron couldn't look at his face, the inhuman nature of the creature awakened a primal fear deep within his soul.

It spoke, a hollow, guttural voice propelled by breath saturated with the smell of rotting flesh in the summer sun, "Aaron, this is the part of our journey together where I inform you of the role you play in our little game. You see Aaron, you killed your own kind with your careless disregard for their safety. Soon after, you died a remorseless death in the hospital condemning yourself to this fate. You spent your final moment's only thinking of your own pain; never did you take responsibility for the pain of others or concern yourself with their misery. What you have endured since, in both your waking and dream states, has been just the beginning of an endless cycle. You see Aaron, you will awake from this dream and think it was just that, a dream in which you died and were revived; just like you believed the other times. You will fight sleep again and eventually fail, at which point you will again dream, and yes, die. This is your new existence, Aaron. This shall be the pattern you repeat, day after day, night after night, death after death. Aaron, I am your God now, welcome home my child."

The man's long black fingernails carved then cartelized deep scratches into Aaron's face as he clenched Aaron's cheeks like a parent scolding a child. The sharp smell of seared meat and singed hair filled Aaron nose.

Aaron awoke soaked in sweat. Doctors swarmed on him like ants on a dropped, saliva saturated, piece of candy. Aaron was relieved to be alive and awake. He swore to himself that he would fight even harder to stay awake this time. He knew if he could stay alive long enough the doctors would eventually cure him.

The End