

The Incident

The roof lodgers woke up at night. First, Ben could hear the noises somewhere within his dreams. Then the squeaks got louder, dirty pointy nails scratching the *jatobá* wood on the ceiling. Finally, they started running from corner to corner, squeaks and screams together as in a nightmare chorus. Ben opened his eyes.

“Oh, no... Again!” He thought, sweating alone in the king size bed. The AC was turned off.

He reached for the iPhone: 3:23 AM. He knew it would be difficult to go back to sleep, the anguish was already taking over, as it always happened in that house in the small hours. It was raining outside and the rumor of thunder plus the animals, sheltered between the roof and the ceiling, took turns torturing him.

The room started to smell bad the day before. The housekeeper was sure they were not bats. She mentioned their names and species, some tropical pests. Ben could never remember. What was the difference? They were all despicable, like most of what he saw in that place. He ordered two complete roof cleanings months before, but the beasts always came back, like thieves going back to the crime scene.

Ben dragged himself to the bathroom, his eyes still half closed. He thought the beasts could follow his itinerary between the rooms. As he flushed the toilet he remembered the incident. The chill on the bottom of the spine came again, his throat was suddenly closing off, an anticipated suffocation passed by as fast as the raindrops reached the sidewalk outside.

He peered through the large bathroom window. He took a deep breath, trying to remind himself he was safe. The night guard passed by riding his bike. He could just see the dark long raincoat illuminated by the dim street lamp. Why street lamps were so cheap, and light was so pale in this condo where everybody was so rich? Why he never felt safe in this place built to be a fortress, immune to violence and anything ugly or inadequate? He thought about it while turning the bathroom lights off and heading back to bed. In the small hours the silence in that forgotten coastal town was just broken by the roars of the Atlantic, deep and dark under the silver moon. The whitewashed sixteenth century churches, the Portuguese colonial houses around the square, lined by mango trees, they were all as quiet as stone. Quiet, but never peaceful. The signs of danger, of something going terribly wrong, were always in the air at night.

Ben's room was quiet in the darkness, but it didn't take long for him to hear sounds inside the walls, like thousands of ants marching up and down.

“I am going mad”, he said to himself.

Scenes from the afternoon came back to his mind as in a fast forwarded movie: the road with potholes, the rocks hitting the car, broken glass, shortness of breath, the blood on Clara's nose. Finally, in a flash, Ben saw the gardener's face. A man in Ben's position shouldn't be afraid of a gardener, a man who didn't know how to write his own name, who came every morning through the gates to trim bushes, mown the lawn, and – knees on the ground – deal with the pests who chewed Ben's precious hydrangeas. Leo was his name, but there's something about him that terrified Ben, like the noises at night. He was a small man, short and thin, his skin the greenish color of malnutrition. From behind the trees Ben started to notice Leo looking at Clara while she walked by the pool in bikini; or spying when the family sat at the breakfast table, noticing the variety of food that came from the market every morning. There was always a mysterious dart in his eyes and Ben could feel it as a needle piercing his belly.

“This guy doesn't do anything, he just pretends he's working. Why don't we fire him?” he asked his mother one more time the next day over breakfast.

“Ben, he has a family, two kids. We can't just fire somebody because he looks strange. He is odd, it's true, but we are trying to make him understand he can make some progress. Can you pass me the pineapple please?”

“Sure, mom. But if I go to my job on Monday and my boss thinks I should *understand* the whole idea about it, I am out in a minute.”

“We are different”, said the mother, and she almost swallowed the whole pineapple slice in one bite.

Clara yelled from the kitchen.

“I can’t believe you talk like that, mom. Do you listen to yourself?”

“Clarita, honey, you can’t pretend a person like your brother, who went to college abroad with a Master’s Degree is not better at understanding concepts than the gardener, who can barely speak clearly and has spent his whole life in this village, working just for food and the basics. It’s another planet.”

“He has this life because he didn’t have opportunities, who are you to consider him inferior? What do you know about his life?” Clara stopped stirring her scrambled eggs and waved the spoon while she talked, her voice getting louder.

“Isn’t it obvious? I didn’t say he was inferior, just different”.

Her mother didn’t change her tone of voice and reached for a second slice of pineapple with smooth gestures, as she was in a Tai Chi Chuan session.

“These are so sweet, aren’t they Ben?”

Clara didn’t give him a chance to answer: “Mom, you’re such a snob.”

“Clara, I’m not! I know better.”

“Yes, you are!”

“OK, ladies, end of the discussion”, said Ben. Let’s finish breakfast and go for a walk on the Parrot Trail.

“More coffee?” The housekeeper came from the back of the kitchen and that’s when Ben realized she was listening to all the discussion.

“No, Ada, no thanks”.

Ada left as quietly as she came, almost invisible, and Ben could listen to the water running in the sink, the plates being washed and placed aside, the food scraps given to the birds or tossed into the trash.

“They are hungry, they are just hungry, everything will be fine”, said Clara, breathing so fast her voice almost couldn’t be heard.

“We knew this part of the road was not safe, but at this time of the day? Who could ever tell?”

Ben was trying to drive a little faster to escape the crowd, but he saw more and more people running towards the car, men with no shirts, squalid and sweaty torsos, angry faces. Through the mirror he noticed one of them holding a wooden stick and that’s when his hands started to shake on the steering wheel. The man’s face was dusty with deep wrinkles. He saw Leo, the gardener, in each one of those faces.

“They hate us. They will kill us just because we have a car and we went to the market to buy food”, said Ben, wishing he could just blink an eye and disappear.

A second rock hit the car, this time smashing the window on his sister’s side. He turned and saw blood on Clara’s face and that’s when he lost control. His hands were so sweaty he couldn’t keep them steady on the wheel. It all happened fast. It was the gray hour of the tropical day when everything changes. The sun goes down quickly and it takes just a blink to realize it’s too late.

Earlier, Ben and Clara had decided to buy groceries at a market fifty miles away. They miscalculated the time and darkness caught them still on the road, while all the tourists and owners of the nice houses were already at home, drinking cocktails by the pool and waiting for dinner to be served.

“Everyone says this road is dangerous, Clara”.

“We will be fine, it’s just ten minutes until we reach the exit.”

“I’ve heard horrible stories. People attack cars with rocks to rob the drivers and leave them without any clothes to walk home. They also fake car accidents to make you stop. So, if we see anybody we don’t stop”.

“Ok”, said Clara. “But you are exaggerating”.

That was the last thing she said before the rocks hit the car and blood covered her face. Ben tried to control the car but ended up hitting a tree beyond the road shoulder. Clara was not sure he fainted because he hit his head or because of the panic. Ben was very sensitive and got scared easily since they were children.

In her confusion she tried to reach for his cell phone, but saw a few men running towards the car from the back. In a flash she decided to pretend she was unconscious, maybe they wouldn’t do anything to her. She silently prayed.

“God, don’t let Ben wake up now, it will just make things worse”.

She closed her eyes and heard their muffled voices through the window:

“Let’s get the stuff and go. Fast!”

One of them opened Ben's door and took the car keys from the ignition. Then she noticed action back in the trunk and concentrated on moving no muscle.

Clara could never tell how long it lasted. Her head was in pain. She heard a motorcycle. Voices. Then, just silence and darkness. She was still shaking with fear, but tried to reach for the phone in Ben's pocket. It was not there. She looked for it on the floor, in her bag, in the glove compartment.

“It's gone”, she thought. “Of course they would take the phone, he probably found it when he got the car keys to open the trunk. How am I going to call the police now? How do we get out of here?”

Clara felt something wet blurring her vision. Blood was running down from her forehead. She checked on Ben, trying to move him away from the airbag. He was breathing, there was just a cut on his lip. They needed a doctor. She decided to walk and find a house or a shop, but she saw a bike coming. A cold shiver went through her spine: “What now?”

The light from the bike was pale and its metallic squeaks sounded more like a complaint to its owners from many years of suffering and mistreat.

She got out of the car and made a sign as she was getting a cab.

“Please, we need help!”

The bike slowly stopped and she noticed two people riding it, a man and, in front of him, a boy not older than six. The sight of the child calmed her down.

“We had an accident and we were robbed. My brother needs a doctor. Is there a place where we can find a phone?”

“There’s no phone around, young lady, but you can come with us, we live just on the corner, in the village, and two families have cell phones, I am sure you can use one of them.

“Clara, Clara!”

“That’s my brother, he woke up”.

Clara ran to the car. Ben was dizzy; he seemed not to remember what had happened.

“I can take your brother to my house”, said the man.

Clara had no time to think. Suddenly that small figure with an old white T-shirt jumped out of the bike, came closer and lifted Ben from the seat, as a man would hold his bride on their wedding night.

“Follow me, it’s not far, just out of the main road.”

He looked at the boy:

“Tato, you bring the bike and follow us”.

The boy obeyed and didn't say a word.

A minute later she saw a blue hut with a single room. On a corner there was a wood stove, a small table with 4 different chairs and a TV on the other side, its blue lights flickering and filling up the darkness. On the floor, a low bed with a thin mattress and a small sleeping bag beside it. The man placed Ben on the bed and spoke to his wife in a complicated accent that Clara couldn't understand. It seemed they didn't speak the same language although she knew they did. Different planets in the same country.

“Come with me to Martin's house, you might be able to use his phone”.

“Oh...That's ...”

“Don't you want some water, dear?”

Clara turned and saw the man's wife, a short and heavily pregnant woman with dark long hair. She was offering her a small glass of water. Clara held the glass and drank it in one gulp, without even wondering where the water came from.

The husband, whose name was Hugo, followed her to the neighbor's house for the phone call. Ten more minutes later the police arrived.

It took them more than an hour to reach the closest hospital in the police car. Clara thought about the pregnant wife, imagining what would happen when she was in labor. Maybe she would have to walk the long road in the dark to give birth at the clinic. Would she make it in time?

Ben didn't say a word. Later they cleaned his wounds and asked a few questions before releasing them. The policeman also ordered them to organize the car's removal from the road and to come back later to press charges. Their mother, Dina, finally arrived, ready to drive them home.

“All of this freaking damage just for a few pounds of meat, some canned dessert, beer. Outrageous! The car will take weeks to get ready!” complained Dina over and over on the way back, her eyes inflamed with indignation, her voice louder.

On the next morning, they pressed charges and took the car to the mechanic, but never heard back from the police. Two more days and the scars were healed. Ben and Clara started to go to the beach again. The pineapples from the garden were exceptionally sweet that year.

(Ines Rodrigues, 2020)