

None of this passed through my mind as the old car moved forward. The driver only opened his mouth to ask questions directly related to the route: "Right or left?" When I responded, he threw out phrases like "Very good, sir," or "At your service." Six blocks from my house, on a narrow street where a military officer lives, the guy asked me a very strange question, but not even this activated my precarious alarms.

"So, what . . . Should I turn around?"

"No, keep going straight."

"Ah, I thought I had to turn around." This last sentence was even stranger, and only now do I perceive that it was pronounced with anxiety. I had always seen the street where the soldier lives closely monitored, but this time it was empty. At the end of the block, in front of a dark square with pretensions of being a park, there was a reduction in speed, the kind that we refer to in Colombia as "sleeping cops." The driver stopped there, simulating that the car had stalled on him. In that instant I clearly saw what was approaching, but it was already too late. Two burly men rushed toward the back doors of the car and were inside before I could recover from my surprise.

Breast Beating

The first thing that the man who seated himself to my left did was give me a slap in the center of my face that still burns. The other grabbed my hands and ordered me to slide over on the seat. The taxi driver turned his face to me for the first time, and what I saw seemed vulgar: the man was chewing gum with a self-assurance that wasn't theatrical, calculated to intimidate, but absolutely spontaneous.

The yell that I let out was also spontaneous, a loud moan that aggravated my neighbor to the left. With a new slap on the neck that made my eyeglasses fly through the air, he indicated how he wanted me to behave from that moment forward: no revealing noise, no giving myself over to sharp, loud crying so that someone would hear me. But since my weeping had nothing to do with strategies and came instead from physical terror, there was no way to control it, not even with the brutal pedagogy of slaps across the face. The man on the right, chubbier

The Drive-by Victim

ALBERTO SALCEDO RAMOS

I TOOK A TAXI FROM DOWNTOWN at nine o'clock at night. Excessive trust—without a doubt a holdover from my rural upbringing, removed from paranoia—did not allow me to see this as an indiscretion. When I gave him the name of the barrio to which he should drive me, the driver asked me which way we should go and I told him to take Thirtieth Street.

"Where do you want me to pick up Thirtieth?" he inquired in a friendly tone.

I responded that we should take Twenty-sixth, and it didn't make me uncomfortable that he spoke without looking at me, or that his car was so rundown. As I write, I think that hailing a taxi on a Bogotá street at night—or even during the day—turns us into Russian roulette players: that the only defensive maneuver we have left is hoping, sometimes with ingenuousness, sometimes with arrogance, that the fatal shot doesn't hit us. The many decent and honorable taxi drivers still left, who also risk their lives without any armor besides the need to earn some money and a picture of the Virgin, must think something similar.

than the others, crushed his rough hand to my mouth and told me he'd had enough child's play. If I kept crying, he said, they wouldn't hit me anymore: they would be forced to kill me.

"Okay, you son of a bitch"—intervened the ruder one—"I want you to close your eyes. I'll kill you if you open them."

"The thing is that these *gonorrreas*"—said the fat one, with a tone of visceral hatred—"come here to snoop around and aren't even good at that."

"Not even good at that," repeated the driver, as if he were approving the greatest statement he'd heard in his life.

I understand very well what they were saying by calling me "snoop": I had not only defied their empire by taking a taxi on the street on a Friday night—I had also done it in the most ostentatious manner possible. I was wearing a leather jacket that any designer would have rejected at a glance, but that in their eyes must have lent me the bearing of a magnate's heir who had gotten separated from his bodyguard. It would have been pointless to explain to them that I had bought the jacket on sale, that the watch, like every watch I have had in my entire life, had been a gift, and that I don't make cell phones but only use them for work. The pen, a lustrous Mont Blanc, was another story, although I'd also received it as a gift. It made me seem, and not without reason, someone who exhibits himself cruelly with his useless but expensive trinkets in front of a gallery of humiliated people.

So it was my fault. Did I think that I could trick them by acting like I had old-lady syndrome? The only thing that mattered was that I was there, in that dilapidated taxi, looking like a presumptuous animal that didn't know the laws of the jungle. If I wasn't rich but merely a poor copy, all the worse for me, not for them. Bad luck for me if I came to snoop around and am not even good at that, because, as can be deduced from his bitter reproach, a snoop should have at least a pistol to defend himself, instead of crying like a girl.

Let's Be Clear: This Is a Robbery

Before informing me that it was a robbery, they asked my name and profession. The taxi driver took in the information with a triumphant exclamation: "Those reporters make money!"

The fat one then asked me if I had a savings account and, when I said yes, he told me that if I gave them the code and behaved myself, nothing bad would happen to me. The neighbor on the left seemed to judge the consoling tone of his friend's advice as inconvenient: "What do you mean nothing bad will happen?" he thundered, spattering my face with his strench of *aguardiente*. "This son of a bitch is going to die! I'll kill him myself if he doesn't cooperate!"

I told them they could relax if the only reason to kill me was if I didn't cooperate. I whimpered, I mentioned God, I invoked my children, and in the darkness I was surprised that that voice, my own voice, didn't sound so weak, as if it came from a mouth less frightened than my own, that it would try to save me at the last minute, organizing the pieces of my sentimental arguments and letting them tumble out. The vile exclamation that the driver let out after my speech reminded me that none of them planned to be moved: "Bingo! He's got kids!"

"And what are their names?" asked the one on the right. "What?"

"Your kids. Didn't you just say you had kids?"

I said the first names that came to mind without hesitation.

"Oh, man," responded the fat one, "sometimes really bad things happen to kids. Especially to the girls. That's why good daddies stay out of trouble."

A new blow from the left smashed against my face. It didn't take me long to discover the motive.

"Close your eyes, you son of a bitch!"

The neighbor on the right also became impatient and punched my shoulder. "What are you doing, you, bastard? Are you thinking of spying on us, or what? Open your eyes again and you die."

While they lifted me off the seat to take my wallet from one side, a voice seeking the exact address of my house came from the other. When I gave him the information, one of them said: "Okay, we're going to make a note of that."

"And the phone number?" asked the driver.

Once again, the information was provided, and I heard the syllable-by-syllable repetition of what he was apparently writing down. Then the fat one spoke. He did it in a reflexive, intimate tone, as if he were alone in the car. "This guy isn't wearing any jewelry at all."

"You don't like gold?" asked the driver.

I said no and then begged them to go to the automatic teller soon so that they could let me go. The guy on the right spat out a compassionate answer, with a little laugh that seemed more than ironic and didactic to me. "This guy doesn't want to understand that this is a robbery. He's wondering why we don't do things when he says to!"

A Manual for the Unarmed

Suddenly, the guy on the left took me by the shoulders and sunk me into the seat, speaking to the driver. "Drive, boy, hit the gas hard! Harder!"

Four hands pulled my jacket by the neck and covered my face with it. I felt like they were snapping my head off instead of just covering it. I felt drowned, reduced. I felt that even death itself couldn't be worse than that overwhelming asphyxiation. And they kept pulling on the jacket. Their voices sounded anguished.

"Quick, dumbass!"

"You move, you die!"

"Don't open your eyes!"

"If there's a shoot-out, the police won't suffer. You'll be the first to take a bullet."

"Faster!"

"Okay, man, don't hound me so much! That taxi's one of ours."

"Are you sure?"

"Can't you see it?"

"Yes, yes, that's El Indio."

"And we were so scared we almost suffocated the poor guy."

"Okay, let's lower the jacket so he can breathe."

When they finally took the jacket away, the air came back. I breathed it in with urgency, with gratitude, and I told myself that as long as I had air to breathe, being alive wasn't so bad.

"It's just that there are lots of nosy drivers around and you have to be careful," noted the fat one, once again assuming his role as intellectual spokesman for the group.

"They think they're the law, damned *gonorreas*."

The less talkative of the three, my neighbor on the left, then re-

moved from his sleeve a poisoned ace on whose presence I hadn't been counting.

"Well, friends, let's see if he'll repeat his address."

"But there's nothing in the house that could be of any use to you!" I exclaimed, terrified.

"We're not interested in going there," explained the other. "We're doing this in case you suddenly turn on us and squeal to the cops."

"What do you mean we're not going to go?" intervened the more violent one. "We'll go there and kill every one of the sons of bitches. Wait and see."

I said they could do whatever they wanted to me and pleaded that they not involve my family. I added that I was so ready to cooperate with them that I had given them my address.

"Yeah, and we wrote it down," observed the driver. "But we want to be sure."

"Repeat it, asshole!" screamed the guy on the left.

Since the address that I gave them at that point didn't coincide with the one I'd given them earlier, they unleashed their most varied repertoire of punches.

"Ah, no, man," said the one on the left, irritated as usual, "this guy's screwing with us."

"We're going to have to kill this son of a bitch."

"Ah, and on top of everything else, the *gonorrea* is looking at me!" Using one of his fingers as a dagger, the man gave me a brutal blow. He didn't hit the open eye, as he had tried to, but he left me with a scratch on the left eyebrow. And he hurled the nth threat, his breath smelling like distilled alcohol in the sewers: "Next time I'll take it out, bastard."

The most painful part of the drive is the darkness that weighs on your eyes and makes you feel humiliated. When you close your eyes, the executioner shatters your chance of calibrating his intentions, of trying to manipulate him. With diminished strength and your arms tied down, they have you at their mercy. They only leave you a pair of ears that, as you can imagine, are not a weapon against them but against yourself, because they magnify the horror of every word that you hear in the shadows. The option of using your own words to defend yourself remains. Sometimes instinct will speak for you. Sometimes the brain

I think that if the lunatic on the left hadn't gotten out of the car, his two accomplices wouldn't have used their consoling tone, which offered me some kind of comfort.

"Do you know why we are doing this?" asked the driver. "Because they hurt one of the guys in the gang and we have to get together three million pesos tonight."

"We're all unemployed!" said the other.

That was the most dramatic moment of the evening. But it was also the most cynical. That cynicism became evident when the fat guy put his hand in my shirt pocket and told me to take ten thousand pesos so that I could take a taxi home. I told him I was afraid that the next taxi driver would rob me as well, and his answer, which was supposed to be tender, turned into a legitimate jewel of black comedy, even though he didn't want it to be:

"Nooooo, how can you even think that? We're gonna write down the son of a bitch's license plate number!"

Then he placed a cold object in my right hand.

"What's that?"

"Your glasses, asshole. Had you already forgotten that you wore glasses?"

Taking advantage of such camaraderie, I asked them to leave me the pack of cigarettes, as I remembered that I had three left.

"Ah, no, not that. We can't lose even one. We smoke, too."

I should state with absolute frankness that I don't ask for any pity for them today. But when they let me go, on Thirtieth Street, toward the south side of the city, I felt a great gratitude toward them. If I didn't shake their hands and invite them to breakfast the next day, it was because I wasn't brave enough. Standing on that lonely street, unhappy and cramped, I knew very well that it wouldn't be prudent to declare victory. I cried again. It didn't occur to me to look at the moon. And I thought that we are so screwed in this country that the only option left to us in the end is thanking the thieves.

TRANSLATED BY KATHERINE GOLDMAN

Translator's Note

* *Gonorrhea* (literally, gonorrhoea, the disease) is generally a pejorative term, used among men as a type of informal address.

will. In any case, it is worth clarifying that you have no interest in identifying or turning in anyone, nor impeding the robbery, but only in living. If you're a convincing stiff, it's possible that when your eyelids come apart in panic, you'll only be left with an ugly line across your eyebrow rather than a missing eye.

The Last Option

When I gave them the address and phone number again, I had already learned the lesson: I had to memorize the details so that I wouldn't make another mistake. The man on the left got out of the car to happily help himself to my card at an automatic teller. The fat one warned me that if I tried to escape he would blow my brains out, since he had stayed alone with me in the back of the car. I didn't sense that they were armed—not then, not before, not afterward. But I am absolutely certain that they didn't need to be. The relief I had felt when the most hostile behavior ended had already vanished. When the other two started to drive me around, I understood that once they had the card and the code, my life was no longer worth a nickel to them. If they let me live, I thought and said in a low voice, it would be a favor for which God would reward them. I asked them: why they were keeping me in the car if their partner had already gotten out.

"Because we aren't assholes," responded the driver. I cried, said I wanted to die, that if I was saved from this I might end up hanging myself. The driver spoke again. "No, old man, it's not like that either. That's the problem with people like you. You start complaining before you even know what abuse really is. You haven't seen anything, son."

"We're thieves, man, not killers," said the fat one, in a tone of offended dignity. "The only ones who die are the ones who don't cooperate, and you've behaved well."

"We're almost finished," observed the driver. "Don't cause any problems at the last minute and you'll see that nothing will happen."

"But if you're finishing up, where are you taking me?"

"Look, man, are you trying to piss me off?"

"We have to leave you in the middle of nowhere. What if we take you to a neighborhood full of people and you turn on us or start to scream?"