



A Loaf of Bread

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The moon was barely visible in the sky over Melilla, foreshadowing heavy rain. In the harbor, waves crashed violently on the rocks, and when a few drops splashed on the body of the boy sleeping behind them, a vicious cold crept in and woke him up. He opened his eyes and looked back at the ship he had been waiting for before he dozed off. As soon as he saw it anchored in the port, he leapt to his feet, shaking off the remains of sleep in one move. He bent closer to the water and splashed his face, then wiped it with the sleeves of the long coat that was too loose and heavy for his small, shrunken frame. The Moroccan boy was all skin and bones, and his features revealed how rough fate had been to him. His narrow forehead was covered by a wave of curly black hair, and his skin had spots and deep scars. Thick layers of accumulated dirt covered his neck, and he looked filthy. He fumbled in the pocket of his pants and pulled out some cigarette butts he'd collected from coffee shop corners before going to sleep. Checking them over, he found most of them were wet. When he moved his pants slightly and felt water stream down his legs, he realized that his body had not withstood the cold and that he'd peed his pants. He wiped at the butts that weren't completely covered in urine, and then lit one with much difficulty. After one or two puffs it died, so he tossed it away and watched the ember until it burned out and vanished in the darkness. He grabbed the long rope he'd used as a pillow and headed toward the back of the harbor.

The nature of the land contributed in large part to the port's design. The land was high and

flat at the back, making the harbor look like a huge hole with a drop of nearly 100 yards. It was enclosed here by a fence interspersed with iron posts. The boy tied the rope to one post and tried to squeeze his body between it and another. As usual, he shoved his right foot first, followed by his left, and then his body, until he got his head out last using extreme caution. After sliding down the rope to the harbor with the agility of a cat, he looked right and left, hunched over like an old man, and sprinted between the trucks that were idling in the harbor. He reached a rusty truck container that had been abandoned for years, the place he went every time he was lucky enough to get into the harbor. He slipped into the container, closed the door behind him, and sat in the corner, pulling his knees to his chest to relieve some of the hunger pangs that struck him every now and then. He sat still in the darkness.

The container was absolutely black and smelled of rotten fish guts and heads, mixed with the odor of feces that were scattered all over. Minutes passed while the boy remained in his place until he was sure his entry had gone unnoticed. He opened the door and watched the ship's security guard who happened to be in his field of vision. Oh, how disappointed he was when he saw the guard sitting next to the anchor line, which the boy had hoped to climb as usual. He went back inside, closed the door behind him, and surrendered to the deadly silence. Time passed slowly and heavily as he sat in that corner alone, isolated, with no company but his own misery. He would open



the door from time to time and look for the guard, but as soon as he saw him stuck on his chair without moving, like a statue, he would go back and throw himself into the corner. He stayed that way for a long time. At some point, he felt so hungry that it made his head spin. It had been a whole day since he'd last tasted food. He remembered he had some dates in his pocket from the morning, so he pulled them out, hoping they hadn't undergone the same fate as the cigarettes. He took them out and rolled them between his fingers, realizing that urine had indeed reached them, but hunger got the best of him. He pinched his nose with his thumb and forefinger to block the bad smell and swallowed them one by one. Three dates later, he spit out what was left in his mouth, threw the ones in his hand to the ground, and surrendered to a fierce cough. He placed his hand over his mouth to cover the sound, then spat out dark red blood, after which he threw up. A rotten, foul smell spread around, nastier than the smell of dead bodies. Unable to stand it any longer, he opened the container door and filled his lungs with air, then went back inside and left the door open. Still, the cough did not give him any relief. He kept coughing intermittently, and it was only a matter of minutes before he heard a voice and footsteps approaching. A large figure appeared: a tall, fat, extremely blond Spanish cop who had a receding hairline and a thick, long, mustache. He aimed his flashlight into the container and saw the boy in the corner, his head stuck between his legs from the cold and hunger. The cop entered the container, went toward the boy and kicked him. "You pig!" he said. "What are you doing here?"

The boy raised his head and looked at the cop without saying a word. The cop continued in Spanish:

"Can't you hear me? I said: What are you doing here?"

The boy didn't answer; he didn't move; he remained still, looking into the cop's eyes.

This infuriated the big Spanish guy, who gave the boy a violent shove that landed him on his side. But the boy got up and rearranged himself, looking at the cop without saying a word. The boy's looks were confusing. Rage swept through the cop's body, constricting his face. He lowered the flashlight away from the boy's face and examined his dirty, loose clothes. He wore a threadbare coat that was torn at the shoulders, long pants with holes that revealed his small thighs, and the big toe of his right foot was peeking out from the beat-up shoes. The boy's shabby looks ignited a ferocious animosity in the heart of the cop. He spit in the boy's face and said:

"Are you deaf? Aren't you going to answer me, you dirty little thing? Are you trying to deceive me, you little demon?"

The boy didn't answer. He just wiped the spit off his face with his coat sleeve before fixing his eyes on the cop. The Spaniard went crazy from the rage that had been building up inside. The boy's looks held mysteries that scared and confused him. He pulled his gun and pointed it at the boy's forehead. But the distressed Moroccan boy never broke eye contact with the cop. He was so miserable that everything around him seemed insignificant, even his own death! The cop put his gun back in its holster, kicked the boy in the chest and slapped him hard, causing dark red blood to run from his nose. Even so, the boy didn't react, but stayed as still as a body without a soul. He held back all of the words in his throat, but he didn't have the strength to hold back the tears that streamed down his cheeks and blended with his blood in a scene to shake the cruelest heart. The cop went silent for a while. He paced inside the container with his hands behind his back as if he were trying to remember something. Then he began to speak intermittently without looking at the boy:

"You are such a stubborn little boy! Why are you so quiet? Are you really deaf?"

The cop went up to the boy and squatted in front of him, examining the face covered in tears and blood. He asked:

“What the heck is wrong with you? Say something, boy! Don’t keep quiet like this!”

The boy was crying hard, violently, but no one could hear him. His sobs were destined to remain buried behind his eyelids. He cried in silence, the sort of silence that echoes deep inside. The cop’s features started to relax a little, his tone changed, and he calmed down a bit as he started feeling sorry for the boy.

“Your nose is bleeding,” he said. “Aren’t you going to do something about it? Do you want to die like this?”

The boy stayed still, as if nothing had happened. He was listening to the cop, but not understanding a word he said. He was completely overwhelmed by his misery. The cop pulled out a white handkerchief and wiped the boy’s nose. Running his hand over his face, he said:

“You are such an odd boy! I think you need food. You look like you haven’t eaten in a long time.”

He stopped talking for a moment and gave the boy’s hand a gentle squeeze.

“Okay, I’ll get you some food. Stay here and I’ll get you something to eat.”

With a lingering look full of pity, he headed toward the door, leaped to the ground, and

then stopped for a moment. He seemed deeply touched.

“Don’t move”, he said. “I’ll find a way for you to migrate to Spain too.” Then he was gone, out of the boy’s sight.

The cop returned a few minutes later holding a bag. He pulled out a baguette filled with tuna fish and gave it to the boy. Before he left, he caressed the boy’s face and said:

“What a miserable little boy! I’m going right now to find a way to get you into Spain. Trust me. May the devil take my soul if I don’t get you on that ship tonight.”

The cop let out a sigh that rang throughout the entire container, then he hurried out. Once the cop was out of sight, the boy grabbed the bag with the sandwich and jumped out of the container. In small, slow steps, he headed toward the fence. Holding the bag between his teeth, he climbed the rope out of the port and headed toward the large rocks that lined the back of the harbor. He jumped onto a wide, flat rock where the rain had not yet dried, then sat on the edge and gobbled down the sandwich, his feet swinging in the air. He was overwhelmed with happiness, his eyes filled with joy, and life returned to his heart. Minutes later, he heard the ship’s warning signal before it set out. As the ship made its way into the heart of the sea, the boy followed its silhouette until he could see it no longer.



Photocomposition by Giulio Pitroso.

