

The Blockade

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*And her time is near to come, and her days shall not
be prolonged.
(Isaiah 13:22)*

1 On the third night sleeping in the small apartment of a recently constructed building, he heard the first noises. He was usually a heavy sleeper, and even on waking was slow to enter into the new day, confusing remnants of dream with fragments of reality. So he didn't immediately give much importance to the vibrating windows, putting it down to a nightmare. The darkness of the room helped to reinforce this fragile conviction. The commotion was intense. It was coming from the upper stories and sounded like floor planers. He turned on the light and looked at the clock: 3am. That was strange. The condominium's regulations didn't allow for that kind of work to take place in the middle of the night. But the machine stuck ruthlessly to its task, the noise increasing along with Geryon's annoyance at the estate agents, who had assured him the building was excellently managed. Suddenly, the noises stopped.

He fell back to sleep and dreamed his thorax was being sawn into. He awoke in a panic: a powerful blade was exercising its teeth on the topmost floors, cutting through very resistant material, which splintered as it came apart.

At intervals he could hear dry explosions, the nervous movements of a jackhammer, the steady pounding of a pile-driver. Were they building something or destroying it?

He hesitated, torn between fear and curiosity, between trying to find out what was going on and retrieving his most valuable possessions and making his getaway before the eventual collapse. He preferred to run the risk of going back to the home which he'd left in a hurry due to family troubles. He got dressed and looked out onto the street through the trembling windowpane. It was a sunny morning and he wondered if he would ever see another.

As soon as he opened the door, the rattle of various drill bits reached his ears, shortly followed by the snapping of steel cables coming apart and the lift tumbling as it plummeted down the shaft, before smashing into the ground with a violence that shook the entire building.

He retreated in terror, locking himself inside the apartment, his heart beating erratically. This is the end, he thought. In the meantime, however, silence had almost returned and all that could be heard were distant, intermittent cracking sounds, the irritating scraping of metals and concrete.

By the afternoon, peace had returned to the building, prompting Geryon to go out onto the balcony and examine the extent of the damage. He found himself under open sky. Four floors had disappeared, as if meticulously cut away, their steel frames worn down, beams sawn off, slabs of concrete disintegrated. Everything reduced to a fine powder piled neatly in the corners.

There was no sign of the machines. Maybe they were already far away, moved on to another construction, he concluded with a sense of relief.

He was heading down the stairs, feeling relaxed and whistling a popular tune, when he felt the jolt of disappointment: from the floors below came the full range of noises he'd been hearing throughout the day.

2 He called down to reception, but didn't hold out much hope of receiving a satisfactory explanation for what was going on. It was the apartment manager himself who answered the phone:

"Routine work. We apologise, especially as you're our only tenant. For the moment, of course."

"What kind of bloody routine has you tear down the entire building?"

"Within three days it will all be over", said the manager, and hung up.

"All be over. Damn." He went into the tiny kitchen, which was mostly taken up by empty cans. He prepared his dinner with little enthusiasm, sick and tired of eating from a tin.

Would he outlast these cans? He gazed sadly at his stock of provisions, meant to sustain him for the week.

The phone rang. He put down his plate, intrigued by the call. No one knew his new address. He'd subscribed to the Telephone Company and rented the apartment under a false name. A wrong number, surely.

It was his wife, to add to his sorrows:

"How did you find me?" He heard a giggle on the other end of the line. (The fatty must be munching on sweets. She always had some within arm's reach.)

"Why did you abandon us Geryon? Come back home. You won't be able to live without my money. Who'll give you a job?" (By that point Margarerbe would already be licking her chocolate-smearing fingers or wiping them on the patterned bathrobe, which was of course red, her favourite colour. The pig.)

"Go to hell. You, your money and your fat."

3 He became temporarily oblivious to the noises, sinking into despair.

He searched his pockets for a cigarette and was disappointed to discover he only had a few left. He'd forgotten to renew his supply. He swore.

With his hand resting on the phone, which he'd placed back on the receiver, Geryon pulled a face on hearing it ring again.

"Daddy?"

He cracked a sad smile:

"My little girl."

"You really could come home you know, and read me that story about the green horse."

The rehearsed section having come to an end, Seateia began to flounder:

"Daddy... We'd really like you to come, but I know you don't want to. Don't come, if things are better there..."

The line went suddenly dead. He'd suspected from the beginning, and then become certain, that his daughter had been coerced into phoning him in an attempt at emotional blackmail. At that moment she was probably receiving a walloping for not having followed her mother's instructions to the letter.

Nauseated, he lamented the failure of his escape. He would once again have to share a bed with his wife, squashed, her body taking up two thirds of the mattress. The snoring, the flatulence.

But he couldn't allow the hatred Margarerbe felt towards him to be passed on to Seateia. Through his daughter, she would resort to any form of torture to get even with him.

4 The initial intensity of the noises had been lost. They receded, then stopped altogether.

5 Geryon made his way down the stairs, unsure of the need for his sacrifice.

Eight floors down, the stairway abruptly ended. One foot dangling in mid-air, he retreated, overcome by fear, and fell backwards. He was sweating and his legs trembled.

He couldn't get back up. He was nailed to the stair.

It took him some time to recover. Once his vertigo had passed, he saw the clear ground below, which gave no indication of ever having supported a construction. There was no trace of poles, bits of steel or bricks, just a fine powder piled carefully in the corners of the lot.

He returned to his apartment, still shaken by the fright he'd received. He collapsed onto the sofa. Unable to return home, he experienced the pleasure of pure solitude. He was aware of his selfishness in excusing himself from his daughter's future problems. Perhaps he only cared for her because of the natural obligation for parents to love their children.

Did he care about anyone? He redirected his thoughts, a convenient tactic for evading the watchful eye of conscience.

He waited patiently for his wife's next phone call, answering, when it arrived, with a sadistic gleam in his eyes. He'd been waiting a long time for the chance to exact sweet revenge on

Margarerbe for humiliations accumulated while at the constant mercy of her whim, for having branded him, at all hours and even in front of the servants, a good-for-nothing and a parasite.

He'd selected his adjectives carefully, but never got the chance to use them: a luminous beam destroyed the phone line. For a few seconds a fine coloured dust hung in the air. The blockade was closing in.

6 After a few hours of absolute silence, it would return: noisy, gentle, sharp, soft, shrill, monotone, dissonant, polyphonic, rhythmic, melodious, almost musical. He became lost in the memory of a waltz he'd danced many years before. Harsh sounds startled this adolescent image, which was replaced by that of Margarerbe, which he himself drove away.

He awoke late at night to a terrible scream reverberating through the corridors of the building. He lay paralysed in bed, in agonized anticipation: could the machine emit human voices? He preferred to believe he'd been dreaming, because in reality all he could hear was the monotonous sound of an excavator carrying out its tasks on floors very close to his own.

Reassured, he went over the events of the previous days, concluding that at least the noises had become more dispersed and his nerves were no longer being so harshly assaulted by the sawing of steel and wood. Skittish and irregular, the sounds moved quickly between floors, bewildering Geryon as to the machine's objective. Why just one machine and not various, carrying out diverse and autonomous tasks, as he had originally believed? Faith in the machine's oneness had become entrenched in him without any apparent explanation, yet it was unshakeable. Yes, singular but multiple in its actions.

7 The noises drew nearer. They became less hurried and more consistent, leading him to believe they would soon fill the apartment.

The crucial moment was drawing nearer and he found it hard to restrain the impulse to go in search of the machine, which had lost much of its former vigour or else was taking its time over the task, refining its work, savouring the final instants of destruction.

Alongside his desire to confront the machine, to discover the secrets which made it so powerful, was his fear of the encounter. He became absorbed, however, in his fascination, straining his ears to capture the sounds that were at that moment arranging themselves into a chromatic scale in the corridor, as the living room became penetrated by the first beams of light.

Unable to restrain himself, he opened the door. There was a sudden halt in the crescendo of noises and he heard the echoes of clicks and cracks as they disappeared rapidly down the staircase. In the corners of the wall a fine grey powder had begun to accumulate.

He repeated the experiment, but the machine persisted in concealing itself. He wasn't sure whether this was from simple modesty or because it was still too soon for it to reveal itself, laying bare its mystery.

In the comings and goings of the destroyer, it was its constant flights that heightened Geryon's curiosity. He couldn't stand the wait, fearing that the machine would continue to delay his annihilation or forego his destruction altogether.

The coloured lights continued to filter through the cracks, weaving and unweaving a continuous rainbow in the air: would there be time to contemplate the fullness of its colours?

He locked the door.