Tony No One

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1. Killing the king

Afterwards I remembered I had already seen him, from the air, as I flew from one trapeze to another. I had spotted his eyes, absorbed in my flight, in my sure hands, in the glittering costume that flashed before his eyes, silenced by my flight, by my body suspended in the air, by my body suspended in time. He was sitting beside the Arab, but he looked like he wanted to rise into the air with me, because he was stretching his neck as though he, too, were trying to fly.

His whole life he was like that. It always seemed to me that as he took one step, he was trying to take the next one. That's why he walked strangely and that's why he looked cross-eyed: because he was looking beyond what lay in front of him. That is, into the deepest depths of himself and into no place at all. Just like on that icy night, that night when he was sitting tight in the stands of the circus watching my trapeze act and he wanted not to be sitting there but flying, suspended in air and time, and that's why he lifted his neck and stretched his back and opened his eyes, to feel closer to that something that both fascinated him and sapped him of all hope, which I thought was my flight, but was in fact me myself, or the memory of me.

The following morning the Arab appeared, wandering between the wagons with the boy by the hand. I was washing clothes in the bucket, in the tent that I shared with my cousins, and from there I heard the stranger ask, in poor Spanish, for the head of the circus. Fátima went out to see who it was and then came back. "It's a guy who looks like an Arab, she told me, a bearded man with a big nose. He was at last night's show with a little kid, did you see him?"

I remembered the boy then, and hurried outside.

The Arab was speaking with Malaquías Garmendia, who was tugging on his moustache, unable to understand. I went to his side and snuggled between his arms so that he would let me hear what they were talking about. After a while I worked out that the stranger wanted to sell something to Malaquías.

"I think he wants to sell you a book".

I said this very softly to our Señor Corales[1], but the Arab must have heard me because he pointed his finger at me as if to signal that yes, this was exactly what he had been trying to say; and as he did so, the little boy, who up to then had been absentmindedly gazing at the big top, followed the invisible trajectory of the Arab's finger and looked me straight in the eye. I don't know whether or not he recognised me as the one who had flown before him the previous night, but he continued to look at me strangely, as if while he was looking me up and down he was in fact somewhere far away, as if he were no more than a ghost, who

[1] In Chile, the ringmaster of a circus is always known as Señor Corales, after Juan Corales, founder of the first Chilean circus.

urgently needed to communicate something to the living in order to disappear once more. That boy produced in me a sense of curiosity, but also a touch of sympathy, or fear.

The Arab suddenly produced from his bag the books in question and showed them to Malaquías Garmendia. There were two of them, large and old. As Malaquías opened them, I caught a waft of a scent that also seemed very old, from another time and another place and other people; special people who had read these books in other times and in other places, different from ours, but without doubt more wondrous. I wanted to smell it closer up, but Malaquías held them in the air, out of my reach, while replying that he had no money to buy books; he had recently bought a lion from Europe and still hadn't paid off even the second instalment.

"And anyway, no one here knows how to read," he said, shrugging his shoulders and spitting on the ground. "We're just circus folk."

I looked at the books then, flying between Malaquías' hands just like me on the trapeze, and managed to read the title in my head, then repeated it out loud.

"One Thousand and One Nights" I recited fluently.

The Arab pointed at me again, but this time with the palm of his hand open, looking at Malaquías with a gaze that might have been amused or questioning or defiant. Malaquías looked at me in surprise.

"Aunt Magdalena has been teaching me," I confessed, unnecessarily.

Then I lowered my head, waiting to be reprimanded. The little boy looked at the books and then looked at me. I smiled at him shyly and he produced something resembling a half smile in return. Malaquías Garmendia leafed through the books, as though wanting to give them a chance.

And something strange happened. Strange like the Arab, and the boy, and the books. Strange like that whole day, which would twist forever the humble path of our circus: the Arab started speaking Spanish almost fluently, as though enveloped in an invisible flame, and to our surprise he began to tell a story.

The strange story of a king and a princess.

His Spanish was now so clear, and his voice so deep and mellow, that Malaquías either couldn't or wouldn't interrupt him to repeat that he had no interest in the books nor any means to pay for them. So we listened to his whole tale without saying anything.

It was the story of a king who killed women and of a princess who told him stories.

Even though I knew, from the moment I started listening, that I was witnessing something extraordinary, something that would change forever the life I had lived up to that point, and even though in the years to come I would read the stories in that book many times simply for pleasure, I would not begin to tell them myself until nine years after the visit from the Arab stranger. It was around that time that the Gran Circo Garmendía's years of success began, in the way that most transformative things do begin: purely by chance.

At least that's what we thought. It so happened that during a rehearsal, nine years after the Arab's visit, I fell from the trapeze and fractured an arm. I was told I could not perform until I had recovered. So I spent the day watching the others and helping my aunt Magdalena and my aunt Hilda with the food and that sort of thing. I was seventeen by then and I was bored. Since I didn't know how else to fill my time, I set to reading the only book we had in the circus, and which I already knew very well.

I don't know at what point I made the decision to memorise its more than two thousand pages. In all probability I did no such thing. The truth is I no longer believe that I decided anything, ever. But at that time I still believed that my life was my life and that I had power over it, and that things like falling from a trapeze could be called accidents, and that efforts to memorise two thousand pages of stories could be called decisions.

But what's certain is that I did it, or at least I started to. And as we sat around the fire one evening, after the third or fourth show for which I was officially in charge of the ticket office, replacing my uncle Arístides until my arm healed, Fátima started to tease me in front of everyone, for spending the whole day walking around with my book, reading out loud.

"You look like a mongoloid" she told me, but I didn't get angry because I didn't know what mongoloid meant.

I told her I was reading the book because I was going to memorise it.

"What for?"

"To be like Scheherazade."

And then someone asked me who Scheherezade was and I took a deep breath and started to tell the story the Arab had told us nine years earlier.

The story of a king and a princess. Of a king who killed women and of a princess who told him stories.

When I finished there was a long silence, during which the only noise was the crackling of the fire, like the echo of the Arabian fire. Then, someone asked for the rum. There was none left.

They started talking about other things, circus things. The pantomime we had put on for the aftershow hadn't worked. They said we needed to make people laugh again. They worried about the spirit of the circus. Some said that people in the north laughed less. Others said that we were the problem. Some of my uncles proposed that we should take a break for a few weeks, live off our savings. It was a matter of recovering our strength, the others agreed. It was a matter of recovering the mystique of the Garmendia family. Of honouring the name. That's what everything came down to, in the end.

"What savings are they talking about, those idiots," Malaquías muttered, but nobody answered, because his comment wasn't addressed to anyone.

"It's Fátima's fault, she sent everyone out of the tent," said Milagros.

"That's a lie," my cousin Fátima replied.

"I saw you."

"Liar."

"Don't fight," my aunt Magdalena cut them off, and everyone sank back into silence.

The fire and the conversation died away and there was no more firewood nor rum, but nobody went to bed. I knew they were waiting for me to continue the story of the king and the princess, and I also knew they weren't going to ask. So I said nothing more.

It was Malaquías, some while later, who raised the subject again, remembering, I guess, the suggestion that same Arab had made to him years before.

"You have to stand in the ring and tell the story you told just now," he ordered me suddenly, without looking at me but pointing at me with his finger, the index finger on his massive hand. "You're going to tell the same tale that you told just now and you're going to do it instead of the pantomime that didn't work. Nice and loud. In tomorrow's show. We're doing a show tomorrow, damn it. And any shit-for-brains who thinks about clearing people out of the tent will get a whipping from me."

Everyone nodded and I did too, although not so much because I agreed – I did – as because I suddenly knew, in the way one does know something irrefutable, that I was coming close to

something: to myself, a thousand years earlier or later. But I didn't know that at the time, I was just beginning to remember.

In the show it transpired in the same way as it had around the fire. The audience, usually loud and enthusiastic, fell silent as Scheherezade's story went on. Nobody looked at me. It was as though the tale was taking place in the air that separated me from the eyes of the audience. The story appeared and I began to fade away, or become transparent, like a ghost. It was as if everyone: the audience, the characters, I myself, were suspended in time, or rather, as if no such thing existed.

Nobody clapped when I finished. There were a few seconds of silence, of held breath, of waiting, as though the hands of the clock were being forced to stand still, not to move forward yet, not to break the silence.

The silence of the thousand years that separated us from Persia.

A woman in the audience asked, without raising her voice:

"And then what happened?'

I answered calmly that Scheherezade told only one story per night.

"Then it will continue tomorrow?" Someone else in the stands wanted to know.

I wasn't sure, so I said nothing. But Malaquías Garmendia took advantage of the pause and appeared suddenly on the upper ring, announcing that Scheherezade's stories would be continued in the following night's show.

We thought the glory years had begun, and we were right.

We thought we were immortal.

We were wrong.

The story I told by that fire and in that show was almost exactly the same one that the Arab had told us nine years before, the icy morning when the *Thousand and One Nights* arrived at the Gran Circo Garmendia, when I was eight years old and the boy barely two or three. One minute the Arab spoke in broken Spanish and the next he spoke it perfectly and began to tell the story of a king and a princess.

He said that in the ancient Persian kingdom there lived a king named Shahryar, who took up the habit of marrying a new maiden every night. During the wedding night, the king would take first his new wife’s virginity, then her life. This ritual was repeated every night, for a long time, until the day arrived that in the whole kingdom it was practically impossible to find young virgins to marry the monarch. Concerned by the scarcity of women, King Shahryar asked his vizier to find him a beautiful young lady for that night. The vizier trembled, as he knew that he wasn’t going to find another maiden, and he knew even better that to contradict the king was to defy death. He was greatly distressed and hung his head – the head that would surely be rolling down the steps of the kingdom the following day. His

older daughter, the young and beautiful Scheherazade, found him crying and asked him what was wrong. The vizier explained his anguish.

“Marry me to the king,” Scheherazade demanded after listening to her father.
Terrified, the vizier tried to refuse such a request, but Scheherazade’s fierce determination and fear for his own head were stronger and he ended up conceding amidst terrible tears of humiliation.

That same night, said the unknown Arab, King Shahryar and Princess Scheherazade were joined in marriage. When they arrived at the marital bed, the king took possession of her for several long hours and then prepared to kill her. Then she asked him, as a last request, that he allow her younger sister, Dunyazad, to come and visit so that she could bid her farewell. The king reluctantly agreed, only moved to do so by Scheherazade’s great beauty. But when the princess’s sister was in the royal chambers, she said, before making her farewells and making way for the notorious crime, that she would love to hear one last time one of her dear sister’s famous stories, as Scheherazade knew many. The king hesitated for a few seconds and eventually agreed to hear a story to amuse him for a while. So Scheherazade began to tell the story of a fisherman, but the story turned out to be so long that, before she could finish it, dawn was beginning to enter through the windows of the king’s chambers. King Shahryar decided that he could not kill the princess until he had heard the end of the story, and he pardoned her life for that night. The monarch worked that day, he issued decrees, he judged matters of the kingdom and when night fell he returned to his bed so that the princess could finish her story. When she had finished, thought the king, he would put her to death, as was customary and just.

But what the king didn't know was that Scheherazade's stories had no ending, they nestled one inside another, inside another, inside another, like an eternal Russian doll. Within each narrative, thousands more tales grew in its shadow, and the princess gathered the stem of each one to begin telling new stories, and dawn would arrive and the king could not kill her because he was waiting for an ending that would never come.

"And so" the Arab told us beneath that timid winter sun, transporting us to another world through his impossible tale, "Scheherazade lived on for one thousand and one nights of stories, sex and sunrises, in constant tension with the approach of death, which never came, just like the end of this book which I offer to you today, don Malaquías, this book that contains many of the stories that Scheherazade told to stay alive, but not all of them, because they are infinite, like this book that will forever remain unfinished, señor don Malaquías, so that this little girl, for example, this little girl who knows how to read can learn the stories of the Thousand and One Nights and can share them with you all each night like the beautiful princess Scheherazade.

I don't know why the Arab suggested that I tell the stories. I didn't think Malaquías would have taken him seriously – I could barely put two letters together – but he must have listened to him, because nine years later the Arab's words still floated in the air of the circus and they ended up coming true.

At the show of the night that followed my debut as Scheherazade, when I was seventeen years old and my arm was still broken, the circus filled up to hear the end of the story I had started the night before. But instead of finishing it, I opened a new tale within the one I was already telling, so that the first one remained unfinished.

There were five shows in a row where the circus was full, and I suspect there could have been many more. But the circus acts couldn’t reinvent themselves as quickly as the stories and people were already starting to slip up. So we went to another town, and I picked up the story where I had left off, without worrying about the fact that this was a totally new audience. I only briefly explained the reasons for which Scheherazade told her stories.