

El lector a domicilio by Fabio Morábito
Home Reading Service by Fabio Morábito, translated by Curtis Bauer
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FIRST PART (excerpt)

I never knew if the Jiménez brothers had been married before. The thing is that now, as old men, they lived together like bachelors. They lived in a single-story home and judging by the long hallway that connected the living room to the rest of the house, it must have had a lot of rooms, or at least I imagined it that way.

Luis, the one who looked a little dimwitted, was crippled and seemed to be the older of the two. It was difficult to know if he really was a dimwit or not. While I read out loud, he sat stiffly in his wheelchair, without speaking or looking at me. As for the sensible-looking brother, Carlos, everything about him annoyed me: his smarmy gestures and that sarcastic little smile sewn across his mouth. The servant, an indigenous woman, always opened the door for me, and then she disappeared down the long hallway and never showed her face again; I was never offered a cup of coffee or a glass of water in that house, ever. The two brothers would arrive immediately, Carlos pushing Luis in his wheelchair, and they'd position themselves about ten feet away from me, an absurd arrangement that made it necessary for me to raise my voice while I read to them. When I asked them, on my first visit, if they could move a little closer, Carlos told me that Luis couldn't stand the proximity of other people and that such a distance was necessary to keep him from getting nervous. The dimwit ignored me, like I said, looking out the window the whole time or at his brother, who never took his eyes off me, and I tried to look at

the two of them as little as possible.

When I finished reading, I took out the paperwork they needed to sign to document my visit. It confirmed that I was completing a specified number of community service hours. It was the only time Luis came out of his trance-like state because, as a kind of concession, Carlos allowed him to sign the form; Luis looked proud as his trembling hand traced his rudimentary scrawl; meanwhile Carlos studied me as if he wanted to know what crime I had committed.

They had chosen Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* for me to read, and it was in the middle of our third session when Luis unexpectedly opened his mouth to tell me: "I've realized that you're not paying any attention to what you're reading."

I raised my head suddenly, because it was the first time I had heard his voice. "What did you say?" I asked him. After three reading sessions, in which I hadn't heard him speak a single word, I would have sworn he was not only a dimwit but mute as well. "You don't pay any attention to what you're reading," the old man repeated, not looking at me, but at the window.

"Luis, stop that, will you?" his brother scolded, but Luis continued, without taking his eyes off the window, as if speaking to it and not to me. "You come to our house, you sit on our sofa, open your briefcase and with that magnificent voice of yours you read without understanding anything, as if we didn't deserve your attention."

"Please Luis, we've talked about this! Don't be difficult," Carlos told him. "I'm not being difficult. You know I'm right," said Luis, who apparently was neither mute nor a dimwit. However, he didn't show the slightest sign of anger, and the incongruity between his face and what he said, coupled with the fact that he spoke looking at the window, as if he didn't consider me worthy of his attention, made his reproach even more offensive. "Let the young man continue reading, will you?"

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“If you want to keep listening to him, go ahead,” Luis replied, “but it’s clear that we don’t interest him in the slightest. Have you noticed that he’s always looking at his watch?” So Luis, who seemed to ignore me, was actually aware of every movement I made. I did in fact look at my watch all the time, because reading in that house was agonizing, starting with that absurd distance the brothers put between themselves and me, forcing me to strain my voice. The dimwit who wasn’t a dimwit went on the offensive again: “Why don’t you admit that I’m right?”

He asked without turning to look at me, as if, instead of speaking to me, he was repeating the words someone was whispering in his ear. I had a hunch and looked at Carlos’s mouth. While Luis spoke, Carlos’s mouth moved almost imperceptibly. My heart beat faster. I realized that the one who had spoken the whole time wasn’t Luis, who was indeed mute and a dimwit, but Carlos, his brother, who was a ventriloquist and whose lips trembled slightly when Luis opened his mouth.

They must have spent hours rehearsing this so they could entertain themselves at the expense of their guests.

I closed the book, opened my briefcase and put the book inside.

“What are you doing? Aren’t you going to continue reading?” Carlos asked me. I looked at both of them, at Carlos sitting in his worn-out armchair and at Luis in his wheelchair, one beside the other. Now I understood our ten-foot separation. They needed it for their ruse to work. As I removed the visitation form they needed to sign from my briefcase, I said to Carlos: “You’re right, when I come here I don’t understand anything I read. You could have told me directly. Or do you always use your brother like a puppet to tell your visitors what you think of them?”

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I stood up and he recoiled slightly, afraid perhaps that I would hit him. He must have remembered that I was serving my probation by doing these home readings, and he was afraid of me. But I had stood up only so his dimwit brother could sign the form and I could leave. “You still have twenty minutes left,” he told me.

“Sign it,” I told Luis, shoving the paperwork under his nose. The two brothers looked at each other, then Luis drew his dull scribble and I ripped the form out of his hands. “I’ll file a complaint with your superiors,” Carlos snapped, as I was placing the form in my briefcase.

“File your complaint; I’ll tell them that you treat your brother like a circus puppet, and the people on the city council aren’t going to be very happy about that.”

I turned and walked towards the door. When I opened it, Carlos told me: “We know what you did.”

I turned my head and looked at both of them.

“We know everything,” Luis added with his puppet voice, not looking at me, but at the window.

It was thanks to Father Clark, my sister Ofelia’s confessor, that I was given the home reader job. He was the head of a Christian association that helped senior citizens; the organization was funded through private donations and was connected to the local government. Since he knew the mayor personally, he pulled a few strings and, instead of cleaning bathrooms in a hospital or prison, I got assigned the job of reading books to the elderly and infirm, visiting them in their

homes. My

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university experience worked to my advantage, and my “beautiful manly voice,” as Father Clark called it, was ideal for this line of work.

He was a tall, heavy-set man and he gave the impression of having chosen the wrong vocation. It was hard to imagine him crammed inside a confessional, listening to the sins of the devout who attended mass on Sundays. His forceful voice, with a thick American accent, didn't seem to be the most suitable for conveying soft words of admonishment or consolation. Ofelia held him in high esteem, and I suspected that she was also in love with him. In the interview we had in his office, he made a few recommendations, the main one was that I should not accept anything to eat or drink in the houses I visited as a home reader, except a glass of water or cup of coffee.

I was assigned seven houses; most of the people were elderly and retired. With the elderly I was on familiar ground, because I lived with my father, who had bone and prostate cancer. My mother had died seven years before and Papá never fully recovered. His cancer did the rest. Celeste, his caregiver, lived with us and was essentially the only person who could communicate with him. I tried to have breakfast with him and give him updates about family and friends, though I made most of it up. Between his hearing loss and the onset of senile dementia it was hard to know how much of what I told him he actually understood. He used a walker to get around and spent his days sleeping in bed or in front of the television. Ofelia took care of the house expenses, was the one who bought his medication and took Celeste to the supermarket. I was in charge of the furniture store. In charge is one way of putting it, because the one who did

all the work was Jaime, our one employee, and I reviewed the accounts and orders with him.

Every now and then we took Papá out for a drive. My driver's license was suspended indefinitely after the accident, so Ofelia would drive on such excursions. Those were the few times

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that she and I talked, while my father sat in the front passenger's seat. We would take the old highway to Tres Mariás, where there were several open-air restaurants that sold quesadillas. We ate in the car, because for some reason Papá seemed to hear better in there and we could have a more fluid conversation. Those moments of coexistence were the best our family had. In the middle of that pine landscape, the fog coming down from the hills and the black smoke smelling like burnt oak rising from the kitchens, Ofelia and I left our squabbles aside and Papá enjoyed his squash blossom and corn smut quesadillas. One day, however, he had to take a shit and we needed to get him out of the car and find a secluded place among the trees. Holding on to me and Ofelia, he pushed in vain and ended up insulting us, accusing us of not knowing how to help him. He was right, neither of us were any good at that. He slammed into the wall of our inexperience, and it was as if we belonged to some other species altogether. We never needed Celeste more than we did then; she knew what words and tone to use with him to get his bowels working. I felt useless and hated Ofelia for it; it was unfair, but I expected her to have some skill I didn't, as if by being a woman, she should possess the particular skills our caregiver had. We ended up fighting right there instead of helping my father out of his fix, and it was then that he, finding himself entrusted to such clumsy hands, decided to take matters into his own, intensified his concentration and let go what he had to let go, as if he were reproaching us for the totality of our immaturity and selfishness. It was, in a way, a lesson in dignity, extracted from the most

undignified part of his body, and it was also his farewell as our father, because after that excursion he seemed to have given up on us. Like an iceberg emerging from the frozen continent to emigrate to its dilution, he began to treat us from then on with a subtle, almost smiling indifference, and only had eyes for Celeste.

Before we hired a caregiver, Ofelia and I had thought of putting him in an old-age home, nursing homes as they are now called euphemistically. The City of Eternal Spring is bursting with

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them, and over the course of a few weeks my father and I visited half a dozen. The idea was that Papá would be there during the day and return to the house to sleep, so he could meet people and not spend the whole day watching TV. The promotional pamphlets for these homes usually show a couple of smiling old people on the cover, almost always with European or North American features, and the pictures of the interior suggest a sense of comfort and elegance. Old age is presented as a permanent vacation, full of social and recreational activities, and there are impeccable lawns, the indispensable pool, rooms with fireplaces and smiling nurses. But when you entered one of these establishments, there was a different reality. The impeccable lawns weren't missing, nor the pool or the rooms with fireplaces, but what seemed like a cheerful hotel, was really a hospital in disguise. The smell of ammonia on the floors gave it away, the perfectly geometrical placement of the sofas and armchairs, as well as an air of isolation that wheezed through the corridors. The old-timers didn't meet amicably like the photos attempted to make us believe but milled about by themselves, most of them didn't even leave their rooms. The recreational activities consisted of an invited clown or singer once or twice a week, and there was also the ever-present craft workshops for painting, ceramics and papier mâché. The script was repeated almost identically in all the homes we visited. It's not for you, I'd tell Papá as we were

leaving, and he would ask me if it was because of the price. No, the price is fine, but it's a mortuary, I'd respond, and he would be quiet and dissatisfied, as if he thought that the shimmering blue pool and the green the grass were all he needed to feel at home. After the fifth or sixth visit, I decided that Papá would die at home, far from the smell of ammonia and rooms with fireplaces. It was the best I could do for him and that same afternoon I started to look for a full-time caregiver.

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When Carlos Jiménez talked with Father Clark to accuse me of ending my session twenty minutes early and having forced them to sign the visitation form against their will, the priest asked me to meet him in his office, where he scrutinized me with those eyes that were as celestial as they were expressionless. I told him that I had indeed left the Jiménez brothers' house twenty minutes before concluding the reading session, requesting that they sign my exit form, but it was a lie that I had forced them to do so.

“And do you mind telling me why you ended your reading twenty minutes early?” I told him that the lucid brother had criticized the way I read, not by facing me head-on, but by using his mute brother, who was also mentally retarded. Father Clark didn't understand what I was talking about and I had to explain what happened in detail.

“Señor Carlos is a ventriloquist and he spoke to me as if it were his brother who was speaking. The brother, who is mentally retarded, moves his lips like a fish, while Señor Carlos speaks through him. The retard doesn't understand a thing, because if you speak to him, he doesn't even look at you.”

The priest stood up suddenly, pushing his chair back and hitting the wall where there was already a mark in the plaster, an indication that this was his usual way of getting out of his chair, and he walked to the window with his hands clasped behind his back.

“Eduardo,” he said in his gringo accent, “you should have reported everything that you are telling me when it happened. Now you find yourself at a disadvantage, because there is a complaint against you, in which you are accused of aggressive behavior. I’m going to have to take matters into my own hands.”

He looked outside. He was clearly excited, and I thought that behind his bland appearance he hid a belligerent side. It must have been this that made him so attractive in Ofelia’s eyes.

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However, as organized as she was, I had my doubts that she would tolerate her house filling up with marks on her walls, like those the priest left when he got up from his swivel chair. “I’m going to talk to the Jiménez brothers, to see if I can convince them to withdraw their complaint,” he told me. “You were lucky they spoke with me and not with the people on the city council. A formal complaint wouldn’t look very good for you right now, Eduardo.” He put out his hand to signal that the meeting had ended, and he told me that he would keep me informed. I thanked him and left his office. At the entrance to the building I ran into Ofelia. I asked what she was doing there, and she told me she had come to see Father Clark. If you wait for me I’ll drive you home, she told me, and I asked for her car keys so I could wait for her in the parking lot. Inside the car, seeing that she was taking a while, I started it up. I hadn’t started a car engine since my driver’s license had been taken away four months before. The place was empty, so I put it in first gear and let out the clutch. I drove one lap around the parking lot in second, then another one, and continued making laps in second gear. I thought that my own life seemed to be stuck in

second gear; I hardly saw anyone and spent my mornings in the Sanborns restaurant in Piedra chatting with Gladis and the other waitresses. My few friends had distanced themselves from me, or I had distanced myself from them, that wasn't clear yet. In a way, I took pleasure in that distance and sought to extend it, because I hoped to transform myself in some way that would surprise them when we saw each other again. However, since I hadn't received the slightest indication from them that they wanted to reconnect, I started to believe that their separation was real, not feigned like mine, and that I was really going to end up alone, going in circles, the way Ofelia found me when she appeared in the parking lot. I stopped and got into the passenger seat so she could take the wheel. Since she didn't ask me anything about my interview with Father Clark, I suspected that he had told her everything already, which annoyed me.

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"Why didn't you ask me what we talked about instead of asking the Father?" I said.

"I didn't ask him anything," she snapped.

"I bet he told you about the Jiménez brothers."

"He only told me that they were canceling your readings."

"And did he tell you why?"

"No, I was going to ask you that."

I didn't know if I should believe her, so I kept quiet.

"Aren't you going to tell me?" she asked.

Instead of answering I asked, "How can you like him?"

"Who?"

"Father Clark."

She blushed:

"Who told you I like him?"

Her eyes were shooting fire and for an instant I saw the Ofelia of my childhood, when we got along really well.

“It’s obvious, because of how you talk about him.”

“That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard!”

We didn’t speak to each other the rest of the drive home. She stayed for dinner because she had to look over a few bills with Celeste and, while we ate, I recounted what had happened in the Jiménez brothers’ house. I did it hoping I might entertain my father with an interesting story, but even though he watched me the whole time, his face remained absent and I doubt he followed a single word I said. Celeste was the most impressed; she didn’t know that such a thing as a ventriloquist existed. Ofelia and I explained that these people are capable of speaking with their

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stomachs and we gave her a little demonstration, me taking the role of the ventriloquist and Ofelia the puppet that opens its mouth, but it turned out so bad that Celeste ended up more confused than before. Papá didn’t laugh even once and when we finished our demonstration he nodded to Celeste that he wanted to go to bed.

Once the cancer set into his legs, he suffered severe pain that was even more acute when he made certain movements, like getting into bed, and on this occasion Ofelia and I heard him moan in agony. The TV was on so we concentrated on the screen, waiting for Papá to stop moaning.

“This is no way to live,” I told her.

“We can’t do anything about it.”

“There has to be some way to end this.”

“Sometimes I get frightened when I hear you talk,” she said.

“You come two or three times a week, you stay for a while and then you leave; I’m always here, I hear him when he whimpers because of his bones or when he can’t shit, and then he starts to insult Celeste. Every day it’s the same. After all that moaning he stops being your father and turns into something else.”

“So, you’d be able to do it,” she said.

“He’d thank me for it, but I don’t have the nerve.

We sat in silence, not taking our eyes off the TV. Then I reminded her about the cat.

“What cat?”

“The one they set on fire,” I told her.

We were kids and I had found the cat in a vacant lot close to our house, beneath some rocks, hairless and in agony, its skin dark and translucent from the burn, its pure white teeth

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contrasted with its partially charred body. It hardly moved, though it was still incredibly alive after the torture it had received, most likely at the hands of some terrible kids in the neighborhood. They had thrown gasoline on it, because the place smelled like it, and I thought they must have been the ones who had hidden it under the rocks, because the sight of the animal writhing in its last spasms of life must have scared the hell out of them. Don’t look, Ofelia had ordered, and I moved back a few steps, obeying her, the way one obeys a goddess. She picked up the biggest rock she could find, lifted it with both hands, and I heard the crinkle of its skull when it broke; then she put the rock back in its place, sealing that rudimentary grave, and for the next several days I’d walk by the lot and stop for a few seconds, long enough to make sure that the little mound of rocks was still there.

“How can you compare that with this? Sometimes I think you’ve lost it,” she said without looking at me.

I didn’t say anything, knowing that the memory still tormented her just like it did me, and because of that neither of one us could ever have a cat.

After she separated from Rodolfo, her husband, she’d had an attack of Catholic fervor that led her to join a Bible circle, and since then she carried a Bible with her everywhere she went, and she’d open it at the slightest excuse to read one or two passages. Since you’re so hooked on that book, you should let me read it when you’re done with it, I would say, mocking her. She started to read passages to Celeste, who listened attentively to her explications. If there’s one thing I can’t stand it’s when someone lectures another with the book open in her hand, while the other listens with her head lowered, and seeing Ofelia given over to that labor of proselytizing made me sick to my stomach. Where had the intrepid Ofelia gone, the one who had meant the world to me, who was more important to me than my father and mother? Don’t look, she had told me that morning

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in the abandoned lot, moving me away so I wouldn’t see the animal as it continued breathing, and part of me still adored her for doing that. Since her marriage we had become two strangers, and her divorce, instead of bringing us back together, had pushed us further apart. Bible circles infested our city as much as, if not more than, swimming pools, which we had more of than any other city in the world, as we had been told since we were children with a certain sense of pride, as if it were some honorary title. Bibles and swimming pools were the two bastions of our desolately uncultured community.

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