

A cool place

Since when he was a boy Gabriel had a natural predisposition to come up with ingenious ways of dealing with things. If a friend needed to get his bicycle mended, he didn't take it to the repair shop: Gabriel put his long bony hands to work and fixed it in no time, and was happy to be paid with some loose change, or even a stick of liquorice. If someone needed to acquire an attention-grabbing hat or bow-tie that might win over a particular girl, but didn't dare ask his parents, it was Gabriel who found a solution, in return for a modest sum of money or simply a packet of chewing-gum: like a budding young tailor, in no time at all he fabricated admirable hats or neckties from pieces of cardboard or odd remnants of fabric discovered in a cupboard at home. Meanwhile the years were passing by but Gabriel did not further his talents: he didn't become a professional creative, a great inventor or even a successful huckster, one of those "expert" jacks-of-all-trades so well acquainted with the workings of the human mind they could even sell cameras to the blind. Instead he had succumbed to his parents' wishes, attending ordinary schools and eventually qualifying as a bookkeeper. After his father's early death, he remained a bachelor, sharing a small suburban apartment with his mother Martha and working as a clerk in the local registry office. His life took on a monotonous flow not unlike the production line in a fruit juice bottling plant. Nothing happened at random: set in stone were the times of meals, the day of the month when Gabriel visited the post office to collect his mother's pension, the game of dominos on Sundays, the visits to Aunt Joan, Martha's sister, on each occasion brought to a close with modest little glass of mint liqueur. But in the unfathomed depths of Gabriel's mind there still lingered the inventive flair he had demonstrated as a boy; he still felt the need to put his ingenuity to the test, and was simply waiting for the right occasion.

The opportunity materialized when, late one June afternoon, Gabriel arrived home from the office and found his mother prostrate on the sofa, her eyes wide open: it quickly became apparent that she was dead, struck down by a heart attack or a stroke. His grief, while enormous, did not get the better of him and he immediately made a thorough assessment of the situation. One thing was particularly clear: had he reported his mother's death to his colleagues at the registry office, he would have instantly lost his right to draw her widow's pension. This was something he could not contemplate: although Gabriel had no obsession with money, his wages as a lowly civil servant were undeniably meagre; without the contribution made by his mother's pension he would no longer have been able to afford those little extras – cigarettes, cinema, a new jacket, occasional eating out – that added an occasional glimmer of light to the endless tedium of his everyday life. The only way he had of continuing to receive the pension was to conceal what had happened, and to do this he needed to hide his mother's body. But how could this be done without rousing suspicion among the neighbours? Where could it be concealed in the height of summer?

After thinking things over for a few hours in the quiet of the night, one of his brilliant ideas – long dormant – suddenly sprang to mind. While emptying the fridge, Gabriel gave heartfelt thanks to his mother for having decided to buy such a large one. When he'd finished he approached her and, after taking her shoes off, dragged her over to the appliance and shoved her inside, there and then.. "Sorry, Mum", he said as he tried to settle her in the most dignified position possible, "I hope you won't be uncomfortable in here". And he immediately convinced himself that she would not have felt at all uncomfortable: after all, she was still in her own home, close to her much-loved son and to

the objects she had been fond of. In any case, this place was much better than a damp, smelly, anonymous cemetery; what's more, it was completely free.

About a month and a half later Aunt Joan was beginning to get concerned. How could it be that her sister was no longer coming to visit her? Why did she always send Gabriel with all sorts of messages, and never even call her on the phone? He did his best to convince her that, while still in good health, his mother was going through what was – let's say – a quiet period, one of those times when our greatest need is for solitude. But old Joan was not easily dissuaded. Although somewhat shaky on her legs, she at last decided to visit Martha herself, to find out how she really was. It was almost eight o'clock on the evening of August 6th when she rang the doorbell; maybe, arriving at that time, she thought her sister would ask her to stay to dinner.

Gabriel invited his aunt to sit down on the same settee where he had found his mother passed away, a few weeks earlier. He was feeling uneasy, to say the least. He loved his aunt, almost as much as he had loved his mother; through the years he had never hidden anything from her; she knew this and trusted him completely, so much so that she too had given him the job of going to collect her pension each month (like her sister she was a widow); she also got him to carry out various errands involving the bank and money matters, medical needs and household shopping. However, the new situation had meant that Gabriel had had no alternative but to lie to her; but now, face to face with this decrepit, deaf, shrivelled looking old lady, who was nonetheless determined not to be deceived, he felt he owed her a frank explanation. "Perhaps", he thought, "if I were able to prepare the way, very gradually get her to come to terms with what happens, sooner or later, to all of us, then I would even reveal the truth to her this very evening... ". So after offering her a drop of vermouth, he started to talk to her with all the love and affection he could muster.

Not seeing her sister in the breakfast room either, his aunt immediately asked whether she was perhaps in bed. He avoided giving a direct answer and instead launched into enthusiastic praise for holiday locations, those agreeable places where the air is always cool and where people of a certain age, in particular, can rightfully restore their spirits when the summer heat is oppressing city-dwellers. At this point however his aunt cut in: "Are you trying to tell me Martha is away in the mountains somewhere?". Gabriel didn't feel he could tell her more lies but still lacked the courage to bluntly come out with the truth. Cleverly twisting the sense of her question, he observed how nowadays even the most highly considered mountain and seaside resorts are invaded, overrun and spoiled by hordes of undesirable tourists. "It's increasingly important ", he added, "to choose one's place of rest with care, ideally picking small locations known to few, and opting for unexpected, unusual corners. And there's no need to go to the other side of the earth to find them: sometimes there are places like this very close by...".

After two hours of exhausting attempts to keep his aunt's growing impatience at bay, while preparing her as delicately as possible for what was about to be revealed, Gabriel was almost at the end of his tether, ready to abandon all caution and confess everything. Suddenly however a thought sprang to mind, one of those brilliant ideas that went down so well with his childhood friends. Words – he realized – often hit harder and cut deeper than a weapon; so what if, rather than tell her

the truth, he showed it to her instead? Yes, this was the way to go: after all, if truth is confronted with courage and without disguise, it causes no-one harm. But to put this into practice he needed a pretext. Since it was a while since the old lady had touched her glass, Gabriel asked: "Would you like a little ice in your vermouth?" Without hesitating she said she would, and thanked him. The refrigerator was right opposite: he jumped up from his chair and flung open the door.

As he stood holding the door of the appliance wide open, he heard a strange sound: a creaking noise followed by a crack, like a bursting drum. In a flash he turned around: his aunt was lying on the floor, her eyes bulging, struck dead. As he let the door close Gabriel felt an 'almost' overwhelming pang of grief. But he couldn't help thinking that, with a fridge that size, she could comfortably fit in too. The two sisters would happily keep one another company: they could chat till the end of time, and might well comment positively on the judicious action of their son and nephew who had decided not to give away their pensions to the State.

The truth in the mirror

The moment he realized he was trapped in the elevator, Luis started banging his hands and feet against the steel door. Maybe someone would hear him; and in fact, someone did. Even though it was three in the morning, Ferdinando was sleeping lightly as ever; it didn't take much for the noise to overflow his subconscious. Just as he was, in his striped pajamas, he made his way to the landing and approached the elevator, asking who was stuck in there. "My name is Luis Maldonado," the man inside responded; "could you call someone to free me from this mouse trap?" "Well, at this hour I don't know who could help you, Mr. Maldonado," Ferdinando replied in his usual phlegmatic manner, "but please remain calm, it's just a question of time..." "How much time?" the other man shouted back. "I can't just wait here, tomorrow at seven I have to catch a flight for Copacabana." "Alright, I'll see what I can do, but please, refrain from making those sounds you were making a bit before..."

Having said this, Ferdinando returned to bed; for some minutes he made an effort to focus on the problem, and then, overcome by a sudden attack of vexation, he fell asleep.

As time went on and no one came to help him, Luis Maldonado, the famous cabaret artist, felt an increasing anxiety. Was it possible that that idiot he'd spoken with hadn't yet budged? Was it so difficult to call the police? On top of everything else, inside there the air was becoming much too warm, suffocating, unbreathable almost...

Luis, however, was not without resources; the hypnotist's art required steady nerves and a will of steel. Fixing his gaze on himself in the mirror that took up an entire side of the elevator, the man decided upon exercising his hypnotic power on himself in order to instill calm.

No sooner had he begun to stare at himself in the eyes, however, than he had the strange impression that it was not his own face looking back at him, but the face of someone else: an unfamiliar, scowling man. Luis determinedly went on looking because he knew that only anxiety could warp the precision of his sight; if he were successful in applying the usual power of his gaze, "the other" would slacken and fall under his influence: and at that same instant, his own mind would be set free, at peace, relaxed. In reality the other man seemed to have no interest at all in conceding: the more the artist persisted in his effort to dominate him, the more the other seemed to become practically ferocious, and certainly more powerful than him.

Suddenly a subtle sense of foreboding began to flow through the hypnotist's veins. He would not dare look at the other man, yet he felt that he, in absolute silence and purely through the force of his gaze, was giving him a clear order: "It is you who must loosen your hold. The world you're living in is entirely false. Leave it, and come with me, to this side of the mirror." Luis knew very well that this order made no sense, and yet he was unsettled by the impudence with which the other man had issued it from the depths of his eyes. He had to resist at all costs: the shameless one must be brought down to size, returned to obedience. Searching for all the resources of energy that he could still hope to find in himself, Luis intensified his gaze to the nth power. Only one movement betrayed his anxiety, his fear of losing the confrontation with the other: the trembling in his right hand, which had taken hold of his yellow pocket handkerchief, and with which he was wiping his perspiring brow, not for an instant taking his eyes off the mirror.

Some hours later, near dawn, Ferdinando woke with a start, and the thought of the man imprisoned in the elevator struck him like a blow. Straight away he ran to the phone and called the porter. At that hour, he knew, Signora Teresa was already at her post, starting off her day as usual with blows from the brush and broom, so seriously did she take the spotlessness of the atrium. In brief, thanks to the efficiency of this woman, an elevator repairman soon reached the landing and made himself busy trying to open the stuck door. Teresa and Ferdinando both watched the operation with passionate interest. The strange thing, for all of them, was that from inside the elevator cabin emanated not even the faintest sound. Could Maldonado have fallen asleep? Maybe he passed out? Could he even have... At this most pessimistic thought, Teresa and Ferdinando both felt a shiver pass through them, and for the man, this feeling was compounded by an awful sense of guilt.

After an endless half an hour, the door surrendered. Opening it slowly, the repairman was the first to peer inside. Immediately he pulled back, leaving the man and woman to take turns looking within: no one was inside the elevator. On the floor there was only a little yellow pocket handkerchief.