

The Extreme Hour

The boy is sitting on the sofa in the living room watching TV. But he knows that in just a few minutes he won't be anymore. At nine thirty on the dot, although this is a nebulous idea for him, his mother comes to whisk him off to his bedroom. A kiss on his cheek, sweet dreams darling, and darkness.

He lies there motionless under the blanket listening to the sounds that escape from the TV over the frontiers of the living room. When it finally silences, he presses his ear to the darkness. In the room next door, the baby deserves full attention; in the garden, the inaudible slowness of the snails; in the street, not a single car. And like this, keeping watch without seeing palpable things, the boy finally drifts off to sleep. When he wakes up the day will be in full swing, and that is all he knows of the moods of light, of the brightness-darkness of the world.

The most impressive spectacle he has access to is twilight, which he finds daily in the vacant block next door. It is a slow, sad thing, like a kind of multi-colored shipwreck, and reminds him of the image of one beast eating another beast. His musings on the nature of twilight are always cut short by his mother's nonnegotiable call and the aromas of dinner.

But the boy's dream, the biggest of all, his heart's deepest desire, is to one day see midnight. He nurtures a veiled admiration for it, as it is the most famous of all nocturnal hours and because it only offers itself occasionally to human eyes—to his, for example, never. He imagines it to be pitch black, the tarry heart of the nocturnal body whose color fades at its extremities. He imagines that it is a narrow path between two abysses. Or the moment when all creatures hold their breath, only to, immediately afterward, continue on as if nothing has happened. He dreams so much of midnight, and it may well be that it has already brushed past his window outside, unnoticed, while dreamed by him.

Back in bed again, sweet-smelling sheets, nice blanket. The baby cries a little through the thin wall, but his mother and father are listening out. There is also a cousin of his mother's who is spending some time with the family until she finds a job. Crumbs of TV sounds reach his bed in the form of indistinct dialogues interspersed with music. Suddenly, his bladder full, his foot touches

the floor. He opens the door slowly, without turning on the light, and disintegrates into the corridor to reintegrate only ten meters later, already in the bathroom.

On his way back, relieved, he dares to take a detour and peeks into the living room: deserted, the TV is keeping up the only dialogue in the house on its own. His father, mother, and cousin must be getting ready for bed. He hears the bathroom door close. Curiosity; a desire to raid the kitchen and steal the hours on the clock over the china cabinet. But he decides to avoid the risky maneuver and jumps back into the corridor. He opens and closes his door in a second, without waking up the room that remained sleeping without him, leaving behind the lit, palpating rooms. He hides his desires under the sheet and lies there resigned until sleep comes. It is quick because, in spite of all his restlessness, the boy isn't used to the infinite waits of the night, its hours loose and without reference, like an invertebrate. Perhaps, wandering about lost in these marshmallowy hours, he would become nostalgic for the day, with its precise skeleton, its well-defined architecture, and then begin to miss himself.

During the night, his desires tucked under the sheet become a plan, the first plot woven out of the hitherto loose threads of his spirit. Thus, when he breaks his fast before the plastic bowl prepared and served by his mother, the boy is no longer so innocent.

As the day goes on, he secretly rests between the beats of his skipping heart, saving his energy. He snoozes for two seconds while his mother soaps up his back, snores covered by the sound of the cutlery, makes use of commercial breaks to get on with the dreams that he won't have time to dream later.

At nine-thirty, his mother flips the switch and the shadows in his room race to hide under the furniture. His mother smooths the sheet and blanket over his chest and leaves. The cousin clears her throat in the living room. Why does the TV volume go up in commercials? His own dry cough shakes his abdomen and, seeking to relieve his bladder, he heads into the corridor again.

All the lights in the house are on; he feels as if life is going on behind his back. At midnight there must be a big celebration, with people hugging one another and talking in loud voices and the digital clocks blinking a peculiar 0:00. On his way back from the bathroom, relieved, he quickens his step to the kitchen, where a kettle is boiling alone, and steals the old alarm clock with noisy hands, which tread on each second as if in high heels. He returns to his room without messing up the dark and holds the alarm clock to the window so that

the light coming in from outside, from the lampposts and half moon, helps him follow the work of the hands. It is ten twenty-eight.

In one eye, the descent of the big hand, in the other, the surprise of the garden clothed in shadow, as he has never seen it before. The rose bushes almost unrecognizable, confused with the fence. This, in turn, mixed with the walls of the neighboring houses. The houses transfigured by the streetlamps. And everything dissolving into the black air. All of the contours memorized during a lifetime—nine years!—are lost.

The wind shakes everything, but the dark shadows don't fall, they appear to be nailed to objects. The boy is left agape, obliged to rest his gaze on branch after branch until he relearns each color and shape. Suddenly, he gets a fright like a pinch, the sort his mother gives him: he brushes his pajama sleeve on the clock and it topples from the window ledge! But the sound of it meeting the ground coincides with the boy's cough. An ugly cough, like a dog behind a closed door. His mother tends to him, already back in bed, with honey and watercress cough syrup, a hand on his forehead, smooths the blanket on his chest once again and leaves. The cough crosses the night, scattered through the wee hours.

It was ten forty-six the last time he saw the clock, which now rests broken under the blanket with him. Sensing that the danger of his mother is already distant, he takes it to the light of the window for assessment. There is the big hand, inert, while the small one still struggles, trying in vain to continue its barely begun climb. The hand pulses, advances in the space of one minute to then return to where it was before, bogged in.

The boy doesn't know how much time has passed since the fall, but he borrows the school material that was holidaying in his backpack and sets out scribbling a careful operation in multiplication in a notebook. Talent in mathematics. Struggling against the seconds that now pass in absolute silence, and in the small light from the window, he concludes that he will have to count almost until five thousand!

Back under the covers with the old alarm clock. Eyes closed. 331, 332, 495, 517 . . . Proudly: I am faster than the seconds! Little by little, however, the quick march of time that he invented himself begins to stumble and lose itself along the dark path. In the darkness reality strays. He imagines his body outside the walls of his room. He imagines the plants in the garden inside the room. What was the distance between his bed and the wardrobe again? What if a filthy

rat were about to brush past his pure cheek? He rolls onto his side, accommodating his two long arms together between his knees, as if seeking shelter in himself. Comfort on the fat pillow, the smell of fabric softener on the blanket, his father's familiar snore. And thus the same process as almost every night takes place, when his arms slide from his chest and his slack fingers let the thread of his Ave Maria slip. A little fear of hell. But what nice darkness, what delightful night, and how the rumbling of a car engine in the street below caresses him.

He wakes up with the high light of the morning, the kitchen already awake for hours, the murmuring of the pressure cooker, the sound of water in the sink. With his eyes closed, he gazes through the curtains at the garden he knows, with the rose bushes bathed in sunlight and the clothes drying on the line. In his school backpack, slumped as it waits for the books yet to be bought for the new school year, he hides the broken clock. But how to explain its absence in the kitchen? His mother must have noticed already, since all of the morning's tasks are authorized by the hands of the clock.

To his surprise, however, his mother says nothing over breakfast, although the empty space over the china cabinet is evident. The radio supplies the measurement of time necessary for the organization of the domestic tasks. The boy is not sure whether to put the clock back in its place or not. He mulls the matter over for a few minutes, in silence, as he watches the mixture of milk and cereal flakes disappear from the bottom of the plastic bowl. He finally decides to decide nothing, getting up from the chair in an impulse and racing out to the yard, with the sound of a motor car on his lips.

The boy takes advantage of the day to prepare: a fifteen-minute nap on the foosball table during halftime; a minute longer lying in the grass after being fouled by his invisible opponent in a simulated soccer game; a couple of hours of meditation in the attic, among dust and old magazines, where he also finds refuge from any investigating his mother might want to do.

At night, at the end of the second soap opera, realizing that the moment to leave the living room is nigh, and trusting that his mother is entertained with the baby, he turns to his father and asks what time it is. He wants to know what to do. Nine twenty-five, says his father in a loud, clear voice. Is his mother, in silence, an accomplice? At this exact moment, the baby quiets down and his mother takes him into their bedroom and nestles him in the cot next to the double bed, where he will sleep as long as he wants, until he feels hunger, thirst, a

fright or the discomfort of a wet diaper. He will wake up whenever he wants, reflects the boy about his little brother, and this can even mean at midnight, he thinks, feeling relegated to an exiguous limbo, squeezed between the free world of babies and the permissive universe of adults.

The creaking of the wooden floor announces that his mother is coming and he asks his father again: it is nine thirty-three.

He brushes his teeth counting, good night to his cousin, his mother's kiss in the bedroom, the blanket, but the counting doesn't stop. He is alone in the dark, juggling numbers and the holy words of his prayer. Religious obligation fulfilled, and having counted to 867, he goes over to the window, the sill at nose height, leaving his mouth submerged. He stretches his body then, in an effort to commit all of his senses, and there he stays, among numbers that are increasingly grand, stratospheric, and the mesmerizing sight of the shapes in the garden, modified by the night.

The day is always on the move, the sun winks without stopping, putting in appearances, then leaving, restless, fickle, and colors transform constantly. But nothing compares to the night, with its unmoving, or almost unmoving, tones that only change very subtly, and it is precisely this variation in texture, as a counterpoint to the passing minutes, that the boy seeks, with his two hands resting on the windowsill and his chin resting on top of them.

He sniffs the air carefully, looking for signs of the midnight that approaches. Will it be blacker, whiter, colder? Will the outrider that announces its arrival be a big din or a solemn pause? Or a siren heard from afar? Will the animals and plants in the garden hold a big demonstration, a march past the now unused, ownerless clothesline, or will they merely observe it in respectful silence? There is also the possibility of a ghost parade, as they say usually takes place at midnight, and with this thought goose pimples kiss the back of his neck. Ghosts, hauntings, lost souls, what color will they be? Some say a dense white like milk, others that they are transparent and, in this case, they must take on the background color, meaning black. Or they are like gases and smoke, which are a rarefied color, and tend to become thinner as they drift into the air. He should be prepared, should souls appear, in the event that the soul of his dog, buried in a corner of the garden, at the foot of the wall, accompanies the procession.

He has so much going on: the counting, now at a height hitherto never dared; the goose pimples that clung to the back of his neck and stayed there; the martyrdom of his elongated body; his breath fogging up the glass; but, above

all, there is the sleepiness that is insinuating itself through the cracks in his concentration. And, at the vertiginous number of 3,976, against all odds, he falls asleep.

He awakes with a start. He dreamed that the morning was coming through the window and that he could do nothing to stanch it, and soon the murmuring coming from things going on in the kitchen began, the water, pots and pans, his mother clearing her throat. But now he realizes that the night is still there. The hard part is figuring out which night it is that parades motionlessly in front of him. A night without a clock is like a creek without a paddle.

There is no point resuming his count now. It is evident, however, that the landscape on the other side of the glass hasn't presented any apparent change. Branches and leaves lulled by the wind, points of yellow light on the lampposts, the half-closed white eye of the moon. There is no reason to believe that midnight has passed while he nodded off, because he couldn't have tolerated that uncomfortable position for so long. He is thus possibly on the outskirts of midnight, mindful of the texture of the sky and the composition of the air, which soon, soon will begin to transform until they are unrecognizable.

Time passes.

More time passes and nothing happens. The day has its own production of moods and states of mind, while the night is a monolith.

The boy leaves the bedroom, taking care not to make the wooden floor growl under his footsteps, groping the furniture, controlling the tickle in his throat. On tiptoes, he goes into the kitchen and finds the radio, which he turns on at a low volume. The radio is an old model, the kind that doesn't show what time it is, but only reveals it in words, in the breaks between one song and the next. At the moment there is no music playing, but an endless yackety-yacking, a long dialogue whose content he can't discern at that volume, and so he must wait. What he hears appears to be a question-and-answer game. Then comes the nightly news.

Then the radio finally says what time it is: eleven forty-eight. He immediately starts a new count, like in boxing rounds and basketball games. This time, the pulsing of the numbers in his head is accompanied by the beating of his distressed heart. He heads for his room slowly, forced to be careful, the rhythm of his footsteps in disharmony with the rest of him. He reaches the window and contemplates the night that remains blank, making him doubt what the radio just said and what any clock would say. Then, kneeling on a chair, he starts to

open the window, impatiently but slowly owing to his lack of strength, softly sliding the windowpane up until it clicks, while the night begins to light up his room, with its cool wind, its aromas and firefly lights. There is only one minute left. He feels a shiver, no doubt explained by his innate fondness for nature, because he too counts branches, dew, leaves, and stones. He starts counting more slowly now, drunk on the smells from the garden, and sixty long seconds later, he understands that midnight is the secret hour in which snails and jasmines get together to exhale. Somber colors explode in a vibration not perceptible to diurnal creatures. The silence outside superimposes the silence inside, being a cooler silence, disturbed by sounds that are always unpredictable, while the silence inside is stagnant, oppressed between his father's roars and the baby's sighs—only his mother has learned the art of sublimation even when unconscious. Invaded by the silence, by the fragrance and the blackness of the night, the boy's room no longer belongs to the house; it has been annexed by the world. Midnight is, in fact, the hour of extreme night.

But midnight only lasts a second, or a minute, and he needn't wait for the small hours to unravel their yarn. Then, with his face caressed by the cordial wind of the deciphered enigma, he slides down the windowpane and returns his body to immobility under the warm covers. Deep down, he knows that night really is a statue, unchanging from eight until five. He sleeps peacefully.

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