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Translated by Thomas C. Meehan

The Return

In 1965, I was twenty-three years old and was studying to become a high school language and literature teacher. An early, September spring was in the air, and very, very early one morning, I was studying in my room. My house was the only apartment building in that block, and we lived on the sixth floor.

I was feeling sort of lazy, and every now and then I'd let my gaze wander out the window. From there I could see the street and, just beyond the sidewalk across the street, the manicured garden of old Don Cesareo whose house occupied the corner lot, the one which was cut off diagonally at the corner; hence, his house had the shape of an irregular pentagon.

Next to Don Cesareo's stood the beautiful home of the Bernasconi family, lovely people who used to do nice, kind things. They had three daughters, and I was in love with the eldest, Adriana. So, every once in a while I cast a glance toward the sidewalk across the way, more out of a habit of the heart than because I expected to see her at such an early hour.

As was his custom, old Don Cesareo was watering and caring for his beloved garden which was separated from the street level by a low iron fence and three stone steps.

The street was deserted, so my attention was unavoidably drawn to a man who appeared in the next block and was advancing toward ours along the same sidewalk that ran in front of the homes of Don Cesareo and the Bernasconis. Why wouldn't my attention be attracted by that man, since he was a beggar or a tramp, a veritable rainbow of dark-colored rags?

Bearded and skinny, his head was covered by a yellowish, misshapen straw hat. Despite the heat, he was enveloped in a tattered, grayish overcoat. In addition, he was carrying a huge, dirty sack, and I assumed he kept in it the alms and remains of food he collected.

I continued to observe. The tramp stopped in front of Don Cesareo's house and asked him for something through the iron bars of the fence. Don Cesareo was a mean old man with an unpleasant personality; without acknowledging anything, he simply made a gesture with his hand as if to send the fellow on his way. But the beggar seemed to be insisting in a low voice, and then I did hear the old man shout clearly:

"Go on, you, get out of here, and don't bother me!"

Nevertheless, the tramp again persisted, and now he even went up the three stone steps and struggled a bit with the iron gate. Then, losing his meager patience completely, Don Cesareo pushed him away with a fierce shove. The beggar slipped on the wet stone, tried unsuccessfully to grab hold of a bar, and fell violently to the ground. In the same, lightning-flash instant, I saw his legs splayed upward toward the sky, and I heard the sharp crack of his skull as it struck the first step.

Don Cesareo ran down to the street, bent over him, and felt his chest. Frightened, the old man immediately grabbed him by the feet and dragged him out to the curb. He then went into his house and shut the door, in the certainty that there had been no witnesses to his unintentional crime.

The only witness was me. Soon a man passed by and he stopped next to the dead beggar. Then came others and still others, and the police came too. The panhandler was put in an ambulance and taken away.

That's all there was to it, and the matter was never spoken of again.

For my part, I was very careful not to open my mouth. I probably behaved badly, but what was I to gain from accusing that old man who had never done me any harm? On the other hand, it hadn't been his intention to kill the panhandler, and it didn't seem right to me that a legal proceeding should embitter the final years of his life for him. I thought the best thing would be to leave him alone with his conscience.

Little by little, I gradually forgot the episode, but every time I saw Don Cesareo, I experienced a strange sensation on thinking that he didn't know I was the only person in the world aware of his terrible secret. From then on, I don't know why, I avoided him, and I never dared speak to him again.

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In 1969 I was twenty-six years old and had my degree in the teaching of the Spanish language and literature. Adriana Bernasconi hadn't married me but some other fellow, and who knows whether he loved or deserved her as much as I did.

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Around that time, Adriana was pregnant and very close to delivery. She still lived in the same beautiful house as always, and she herself looked more beautiful every day. Very early that suffocating, December morning I was giving private grammar lessons to a few young high school boys who had to take an examination, and, as usual, every now and then I would cast a melancholy glance across the street.

Suddenly, my heart - literally - did a flip-flop, and I thought I was the victim of a hallucination.

Approaching along exactly the same path as four years before was the beggar whom Don Cesareo had killed: the same ragged clothes, the grayish overcoat, the misshapen straw hat, the filthy sack.

Forgetting my students, I rushed headlong to the window. The panhandler was gradually shortening his steps, as if he were already near his destination.

"He's come back to life," I thought, "and he's come to take revenge on Don Cesareo."

However, now treading on the old man' s sidewalk, the beggar passed in front of the iron fence and continued on. Then he stopped before Adriana Bernasconi's door, pushed down the latch, and entered the house.

"I'll be right back!" I said to the students, and, mad with anxiety, I took the elevator down, dashed out into the street, crossed on the run, and went into Adriana's house.

Her mother, who was standing by the door, as if ready to leave, said to me: "Well, hello there, stranger! You ... ? here ... ? Will miracles never cease?!"

She had always looked favorably on me. She embraced and kissed me, but I didn't understand what was going on. I then learned that Adriana had just become a mother, and they were all very pleased and excited. I could do no less than shake my victorious rival's hand.

I didn't know how to ask, and debated whether it would be better to remain silent or not. I then reached an intermediate solution. With feigned indifference, I said:

"Actually, I let myself in without ringing the doorbell because I thought I saw a panhandler with a big, dirty bag slip into your house, and I was afraid he might be getting in to steal something."

They looked at me in surprise: panhandler? bag? to steal? Well, they had all been in the living room the whole time and didn't know what I was talking about.

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"Then I must surely be mistaken," I said.

They then invited me into the room where Adriana and her baby were. In situations like that, I

never know what to say. I congratulated her, kissed her, looked at the little baby, and asked what name they were going to give him. They told me Gustavo, like his father; I would have liked the name Fernando better, but said nothing.

Back at home, I thought: "That was the panhandler whom old Don Cesareo killed, I'm sure of it. He didn't return to take revenge, though, but rather to be reincarnated in Adriana's child."

However, two or three days later, my hypothesis seemed ridiculous to me, and I gradually forgot it.

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And I would have forgotten it completely if it weren't for the fact that in 1979 an incident made me remember it.

Further on in years now and feeling capable of less with each passing day, I let my attention touch lightly on a book I was reading next to the window, and then I allowed my glance to wander here and there.

Adriana's son, Gustavo, was playing on the flat roof terrace of his house. That was certainly a rather immature game for someone his age. I thought the boy must have inherited his father's scanty intelligence and that, had he been my son, he would doubtlessly have found a less insipid way to amuse himself.

He had placed a row of empty cans on the dividing wall and was trying to knock them over with stones thrown from three or four yards away. Naturally, almost all the rubble was falling into the neighboring garden of Don Cesareo. It occurred to me that the old man, absent at the time, was going to have a real fit when he discovered a large number of his flowers destroyed.

And just at that moment, Don Cesareo came out of the house into the garden. He truly was very old and walked with extreme unsteadiness, putting down with great caution now one foot and then the other. With frightful deliberateness he walked to the garden gate and prepared to descend the three steps that led down to the sidewalk.

At the same time, Gustavo - who didn't see the old man - finally hit one of the cans which, as it ricocheted off two or three juttings of the walls, fell with a loud racket into Don Cesareo's garden. The latter, who was in the midst of the short stairway, started at hearing the noise, made a sudden brusque motion, slipped wildly out of control, and shattered his skull on the first step.

I saw all of this, but neither the child had seen the old man, nor the old man the child. For some reason, Gustavo then abandoned the flat roof terrace. In a few seconds, a lot of people had already gathered around Don Cesareo(s corpse, and it was obvious an accidental fall had been the cause of his death.

The next day, I got up very early and immediately installed myself in the window. Don Cesareo's wake was being held in the pentagonalshaped house; there were several persons smoking and conversing out on the sidewalk.

Those people stood aside with revulsion and uneasiness when, a bit later, out of Adriana Bernasconi's house came the panhandler, once again with his rags, his overcoat, his straw hat, and his bag. He passed through the group of men and women, and slowly, gradually disappeared off into the distance, in the same direction from which he had come two times.

At noon I learned, to my sorrow but not to my surprise, that Gustavo was not found in his bed that morning. The Bernasconi family initiated a desperate search which, with stubborn hope, has continued to the present day. I never had the heart to tell them to give it up.