SHORT STORY

The Helicoid

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"Muerte" by Segio Pozo Martín

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The Helicoid, Caracas

0800

“Look at me, *papá*,” the pair of bright rounded eyes beckoned, full of the kaleidoscope of the afternoon horizon under the shadow of a tall samán tree.

Armando ran his own long fingers across his son’s malleable and jagged fingernails, drawn by a sharp line of black soil. His son climbed up. Armando could see how his arms reached out around the branches ensuring that his little boy would not fall. The last of the day’s blue light filtered through the entwined leaves of the trees. He could *almost* feel the vertigo of looking upwards, his back and neck overstretched.

“Nothing to fear,” he told himself. “It’s only vertigo.”

He smiled at Ignacio’s porcelain face. His son was younger, a toddler, waddling into the water. The crisp morning sand, minute beads of fleshy carbonate, nested inside the crevasses between the soft toes, oil binding them to his skin. It would take days to vanish the grains from the clothes and shoes. But it was too much of a temptation for a little boy. Armando had no choice but to oblige.

“Ignacio, hijo! Please be careful! Don't run too fast,” Gabriela would plead with their son, her voice echoing from the distance. His wife was so beautiful. Armando’s hand could search for the concave curvature traced from her shoulder to the crest of her hips if he stretched his self-delusion far enough. Their child’s rounded feet crashed with the surf, the white foam bubbling under the wind. Gabriela smiled, head tilted to the side, her arms grasping for him in the devastating emptiness. He was gone.

“There… It is not so bad. Just a bit dizzy,” Armando’s mind returned to his imprisoned body. “Don’t breathe in… diffusion will kick in soon enough. Relax your legs and shoulders. It’ll take less oxygen. Move your diaphragm up and down a little so that your body doesn’t think you are holding your breath…”

But he flinched and tensed up; his legs coiled around his chair for balance. He was trying to ignore the hissing sound coming from behind — an aerosol can spraying one more time into the black garbage bag a G-2 Agent had put over his head. He closed his eyes to avoid the chemical burn from the noxious gas. It stung the flesh, seared the membranes, and engulfed his brain. When he could no longer withstand the sense of asphyxiation, he took a long gulp of air that tasted like the Helicoid prison, a cocktail of cypermethrin and fipronil. The sudden inflow of chemicals triggered uncontrollable coughing and wheezing. He finally vomited

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inside the bag. Sour fermented smells and the dampness of undigested food scraps on his face sent another wave of sickness up his burning throat. Still, the agonizing minutes of heaving, forceful contractions, mouthfuls of liquid could not bring out any more food from his empty stomach. He tried to stand up, but a baton barreled down the back of his neck.

Light from a secret citadel — one lying underneath, inside, lost to all others, and, even to Armando — crept in once more. When his son tugged into his fingers, he followed without resistance.

A pair of hands seized Armando's shoulders from behind. They pulled him up from his forearms, constricted together by a rope behind his back, from which he had been suspended the night before. The acute pain made him stand up from his chair on the balls of his feet. It did not take too much force to move him around; his body had cannibalized most of his muscles. His torso preceded his legs, as they projected outward from the hands of his captor. His body inexorably progressed toward the wall. Each muscle had memorized the geography of the room, even if his eyes had not seen it. Despite being disoriented, Armando maneuvered his shoulder to move forward and avoided a collision with his head. Viscous phlegm-like bile dripped out down his neck and back, making the plastic bag cling tighter to his clammy skin.

Armando smelled the sea from decades before. A long row of aragüaney trees were in full bloom in the distance. Strong ocean winds tore off thousands of golden petals and flung them down the cobblestone path that led to his grandfather's home. The old man was unfolding a cloth *güaldrapa*. Armando could hardly wait. He would not put it away until he was sent back to school. His mother had taught him how to keep his balance and not to bounce while trotting on horseback. Armando had been so fearless. Fall after fall, his shoulder blades would lay against the warm sands. His eyes would close, but the intensity of the sunshine would make the emptiness glow orange.

He could feel the warmth spread across his cheekbones and laughed out loud, the way he did every time he came down, tumbling on his back.

A pair of hands pulled his body from the floor. This time the aim was much more direct. His forehead and nose bounced against the wall. Their first impact was full of flashes of light. Then, the second impact. Then five more.

The counting detached his mind from the inevitable. They had already broken much more sacred parts of him before.

"You know better than letting them take you there. There are other places."

But stubborn memories liked to return uninvited.

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It was that last time he walked by the ocean with Gabriela, and the lull of the palms bending in the breeze was melodic. There was something sublime and unbearable about their shared silence. A voice inside whispered that such happiness could only be ephemeral.

And so it was.

The image of the barrel of an MP-443 Grach rammed inside his child's mouth, his pink face streaked with tears, the little terrified eyes searching for his father.

The small fingers let go, and so did Armando's knees. There came the first kick — from behind and into his ribcage. The second kick landed squarely into Armando's kidneys. This time the pain radiated from his back into his intestines and legs. His body coiled into a small shell.

And then more kicks. He leaned on his shoulder, trying to find a better spot. Maybe he could rest for a minute. Perhaps it was the end.

"*Papá*…" The large eyes — eyes forever closed, forever gone — ushered Armando to cross the gates of the underworld, which opened for him as they had so many times before.

Only the pain from his injuries kept him tethered to his body.

"*Endure. Abstain.*"

Armando had made it a whole week where there had not been blood in his urine. That was about to change. It didn't matter. The doctor in charge of reporting human rights violations was well compensated to remain colorblind. Blind in any way that mattered. Every man at the Helicoid could have tumbled to the bottom of the Tarpeian rock, and the good doctor would have claimed that they were in perfect health. If nothing else, his disregard for the Hippocratic oath was systematic.

"There is nothing left." Armando closed his eyes and ran his fingers over his son's small soft head covered in silky brown curls. "I'm almost there. I am coming to you."

So much toiling and so many defeats... the years had eroded the institutions that once stood impervious and invulnerable. As all their deeds, democracies were as impermanent as the humans who built them.

His country was now a ruin. Eradicated. Erased. Extinct. Such a brief instant in time to compress the life of a whole people. Armando's body, too, had been reduced to a crumbling edifice of torn tendons and shattered bones.

His head rolled to the side. He could taste metal in his mouth. Past and present melded together into a seamless shroud as he drifted in and out of consciousness.

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“Armando!” screamed Gabriela from an outside window. “Wait for me, my love. Wherever you live, I shall live,” she whispered to herself and found another clearing where she could see the prison. It was her third lap around the massive complex. “Are you there? Armando!”

There was nothing. Only emptiness. Had he died? Had they finally killed him? She could not allow herself to think that way. It was what they did. She would not fall for their games. The guards made it a habit to move her husband from cell to cell. It did not matter. She would find him. Even if it was for the last time.

“Gabriela!” a guttural shriek finally echoed from the distance. “Gabby!”

“Armando! I can hear you! I can hear you! I love you! They won’t let me in!”

“I love you, Gabby!”

“I’m here. I’ll always be here. They can only win if we surrender!”

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July 5th, 2019

La Lagunita, Caracas

The door of the elevator opened onto the third floor of his father's hospital. Armando took one short uncertain step and paused. His heart was racing. He had rushed through the legal proceedings, skipped the thanks to his lawyers, and postponed the celebrations. Now, standing by the propped door of Gabriela’s office, he was having second thoughts.

He reached for the door handle to steady himself.

She was finally in front of him. He was not trying to deceive his fading consciousness that her body laid next to his, as he had so many nights when he drifted into sleep.

“Armando? I —” stammered Gabriela. “I was too afraid to believe that they would let you go.”

His arms wrapped around her waist, lifting her lithe frame off the ground. The scent of her hair was warm, sweet, layered with decades of instants and absences. He dried her quiet tears and blew a few loose strands of hair over her nose.

“I will always come back to you.” Of all things within an uncertain world, of this he held no doubt. Even if it were only in his memories, he would always return to find her.

“Let me see you!”

“Just not too closely! The looks of this old man might scare you away!”

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He had lost all his hair during his years in prison. But the losses went far beyond the surface damage. His jailers had left little behind before setting him free — only enough to avoid turning him into a martyr.

When he had first walked the dark corridors of the Helicoid, he had been keenly aware of what they wanted for him to see: how the building itself reduced all men to caged, deranged primates. Rows of shadows pushed against improvised cells — some old offices, some rooms that had once been meant for businesses, some staircases — none of them intended to hold forgotten bodies as they moved into the next circle of hell. Prisoners pounded themselves against the rusted bars as Armando was paraded down the main track; their muscles bulged against the metal. Jeers, insults, and excrement flew toward all targets. The G2 agents wanted Armando to know how they would strip each layer of his sanity and humanity away as he descended into a more literal death. Their political prisoners would forever remain captive.

He had come to terms with the many deaths he would face. He might fall victim from the injuries from torture, gang violence, and diseases that spread rampantly within the thick miasma of the communal cells. He might leave the Helicoid in a hospital stretcher and die slowly on the outside. Or he might go on to recover physically, but never in his mind or soul. What death he would meet was not in his control.

With each step toward his airless cell, he had extricated himself from all sensations and dove deeper and deeper into his mind – a vault more impenetrable than any that could be built with solid walls. It was only there where he let his dreams wander, daring to hope that there would be enough life left in him for one last season with the woman he had loved every instant for thirty years. It was best to believe that God was capable of mercies.

Gabriela was truly there. And in her eyes and her mind were all the fragments of self that he had lost.

“I love you,” said Armando.

He reflected on the old questions. Could one love before accruing experience, before being tested, before gaining a reference frame? He had no evidence that would prove that youth precluded love, for all the trials had never shaken his resolve to love her. There had been other promises — vows, in fact — perhaps more sacred and more solemn than the ones he had made the day he knelt by her side for the first time. But they had been variations on a theme. He had loved that girl entirely since that first afternoon when he held her in his arms.

The woman before him was engulfed in an enormous white coat, the fabric of the black slacks underneath draped over her hips. Her eyes were larger than he remembered. A

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stethoscope and badge hung down Gabriela's long slender neck. A few rebellious wiry gray strands escaped her coiling braid. Her glasses had been the culprit; they slid down from the top of her head to the bridge of her small nose. There was little money for frivolities; hair dye or new glasses would cost several months of wages.

Armando ached to make amends to her for the many years of forced separations, the risks, and the privations. For what they had lost, for *who* they had lost. Yet, time — either gone or beyond reach — argued against any hope that he ever might.

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"May I hold you?" Gabriela asked as Armando sat on the treatment table, arms crossed, one leg climbing on the threadbare green vinyl.

Her memory of him was so consuming that it overrode his physical reality as she kissed the paper-thin skin on his temples and his skeletal fingers. The runaway rush of emotions was delicious. His body was pliant as she revisited the territories once conquered in her youth.

But years had passed.

He loosened the knot off his tie and took off his crisp blue button-down shirt. His white undershirt stayed on.

She glanced at Armando, her gaze between playful and reproachful. "You know the drill. Lift your shirt up for a moment. Let me have a look." She knew every hesitation and every unsaid word in his mind.

"Do we have to do this now?"

"I know that this is not dignified."

She helped him get his undershirt over his head. He could not lift up his own arms.

Acromioclavicular joint sprains, she noted in her mind. She would have to add it to the catalog of injuries in his chart. His shaking torso was covered by layers and layers of crisscrossed black welts, open sores, and masses of deformed calloused flesh. There were half-repaired stabbing wounds on his side and stomach. She had felt the bruising and swelling when she had held him. Her helplessness welled up to the point that it was difficult to tame.

"I was so embarrassed that you'd think I was a bad dancer," Armando reached out and touched Gabriela's fingers, his sheepish gaze fixed on them. "Remember? The night before our engagement party?"

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"Fishing for compliments?" Gabriela grinned at the memories and continued working. “It was me who was at a disadvantage.”

It had been so long ago that she felt as if it had all happened to a different person, and yet, a glorious sensation, part surprise and part thrill, washed over her. She had managed to make Armando fall in love with her. For an instant, he was the same invulnerable eighteen-year-old who held her trembling hand as they walked across a crowded ballroom. He was still the man to whom she had pledged her life.

But she had pored over his medical chart. The reality of his ribs protruding from his naked back as he hunched over motionless, a man who had been so strong and so powerful, was devouring her initial elation. His belabored breathing confirmed that one of his lungs had collapsed. Gabriela guessed that he had several broken ribs. His kidneys, too, were failing from repeated trauma during torture, dumping protein into his bloodstream and urine.

She leaned on her empty storage cabinet and peeled two layers from a package of gauze and soaked it in an iodine and alcohol solution before bracing herself. There were no medications to alleviate the agony of cleaning the stabbing wounds, raw and smelling of infection. Armando flinched but nodded. She cradled his head into her shoulder as if he was a small child. The thought that she could have easily repaired the wounds incensed her. Gabriela could have him prepped and anesthetized in a couple of hours. In another two, she could’ve patched things up. But it was a different world. There were no antibiotics. A few pairs of sterile gloves. She had been operating under the flashlight of her cell phone.

Armando took both of her copper-stained hands into his own. He leaned his head over them reverently.

A flush of embarrassment overtook her; the last round of human rights talks had left her so anxious that she bit through her nails, tore deep into her flesh, stripping long strings from her fingers. News of the torture and killing of Naval Captain Acosta had almost done her in.

“You do know that I’m not leaving the country.”

Her red eyelids could no longer contain her dense tears nor his ineffable silence. She needed to hear his voice.

“Ignacio is here,” he finally said. “So is our son. I cannot leave them behind. I cannot let anyone take away my promises.”

Gabriela had rehearsed so many things to say when this confrontation arrived. Now, as the words were hanging in the air, there were so many other pressing needs.

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Her hands trembling ever so slightly, she dressed the wound. It was not sterile, but at least the tissues had been cleaned.

"There, that's better," she said. The years had taught her how to work through the fog of emotion. “Any more gross hematuria?”

“Yes. But getting better.”

She could not work up the courage to allow him to look into her eyes. He was lying. But she needed to pretend she had believed him.

“You cannot possibly consider staying.” Her voice broke.

Gabriela searched for logical arguments, but it had been long since she had exhausted her reserves of wisdom. She had been disappointed so deeply, hurt so brutally, abandoned so wholly, that anger seemed like an abysmal investment of precious instants. Quarrels were for lives that promised more days ahead than behind.

“It is easy to be blind when you believe that you are working for something bigger than yourself.” She lowered her head, trying to stay composed.

Armando paused and looked at her with his silver-green eyes, which glimmered with the same glacial intensity as they had thirty years before. He wiped off her tears, kissed her forehead, and wrapped both his arms around her neck.

“I am not blind, my love.” His words were soft, rhythmic, and indomitable. “I would have to be blind not to recognize that this is where I’m needed. I am not addicted to hatred or trying to settle scores. I am a man of the law. I believe in justice. Neither retribution nor impunity. We ought to bring justice back to this land.”

Armando’s fire blazed through the ice encased all around her, like the furnace in the interior of a red star: ancient, constant.

Gabriela whispered, “Wherever you live, I shall live. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God.”

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