

Terminal

Daniel was agitated, looking at the old town mill, which was lying on the ground like the shadow of an old titan. He kept playing with his gloves, while all sorts of doubts wandered around his head. The small wooden carriage in which he was the only passenger stopped for almost twenty minutes, and the surroundings were not especially endearing. Just a few tiny houses painted with lime and a cracked well next to an almond tree. It's been fifteen years since he came south, and he knows well that each little piece of Castilla looked the same. Brownish-yellow fields and azure hills far away. Besides, he missed the capital, the vast buildings, and the noisy rooms where he used to give classes. Silence was something the man believed did not exist when he was young, like a mythical creature that can't be found outside of books. But it was here, waiting for him, in the empty Iberian steppes.

The wood squeaked as the kid driver climbed back into the vehicle. He had bought a loaf of bread and a piece of cured ham from the local woman who wandered the road. A quick whip and the horse started moving. He felt as if he should avoid talking to this boy since the moment the scrawny kid revealed he lived in Tomarre, the last stop of the road, and the town he had to help. Attachment was something the retired doctor and now professor was trying to avoid, even more after all those years in his profession, being surrounded by the dead of those he appreciated.

The landscape passed by, Daniel looking out as the carriage trundled off. Just fields full of unharvested hay, plowed land and dried shrubbery on the lines that separated the different parcels. From time to time, an aged plow stood abandoned on the side of the road. That land was one of the main producers of food of the reign. A dry, empty land.

Unfortunately, there was too much time to think. They would not reach the cursed village of Tomarre till evening. Why did he decide to come again to help this town? Rather, why was he still fighting? The feeling of being condemned to suffer had always been there since his first patient died, accompanied by the anguish of dedicating his life to a hopeless profession. Most doctors were just satisfied by trying their best to make other people's lives easier, by killing the pain and creating remedies. But that was not enough for him. That's why he started teaching. It was an unwinnable run. He couldn't save everyone.

The small timber window that separated the back of the carriage from the driver's seat slid slowly. The skinny, tanned hand of the young boy offered the man the complete loaf of bread.

"Is everything fine sir? Can I do something for you?" said the boy, with a gloomy smile on his face. After that, he returned his gaze to the road. He was around fifteen years old, one of the boys who was born in Tomarre during the bad days.

Daniel accepted the bread and said "All good. I'm a little concerned about you. I didn't know kids your age still worked here".

"I used to study. The teacher left town one month ago." The teacher was intelligent then. "And my father is not able to move from bed right now, so I'm trying to do his job until he gets better. My mother is not with us anymore, so I need to help him".

The doctor put the bread in a section of cloth where he used to store other food. It stayed in the little space between him and the end of the seat.

"Helping your family. That's brave, especially in these times. Glad to hear that. What symptoms does your father have?"

“At first, my father stopped eating. Apathy took him over. We thought he might be suffering from fatigue due to working too much. Some days after, he started waking up at night and was unable to get back to sleep. We tried asking him what was happening but he stopped talking. Since then, he just stares at the ceiling”. Daniel knew his father was probably infected with the disease, would not move from that bed again.

“He will be alright. Don’t worry boy. As you said, it might be fatigue”. Even if lying feels bad, the truth will do no good. The cases had been few. But when Daniel was working as the town doctor, it was similar. The government confined the town for now. Still, everyone knew that was not a real solution for the epidemic. People need to live, eat, work, and exist. But they didn’t remember how things were in the past because all who caught the plague were now dead.

The boy looked back and offered Daniel a piece of ham, which rested on his lean hand. “You should eat, you will need energy”.

Daniel was beginning to turn pale. “I already had lunch and I have some food for dinner, so don’t worry. You should eat that ham”.

“I’m not hungry. Take the ham.”

Daniel looked at the bread, covered by cloth. The complete loaf of bread. The kid hadn’t eaten anything in the whole journey. Had he caught the disease from his father?. “Have the ham, please”, begged the old doctor.

Only clacking of the timber wheels could be heard.

“Doctor, will the town survive again?”

The terminal asthenia was a long-term outbreak. The first cases would only be a warning of what would come. His university colleague, Professor

Cruz, used to refer to towns as organisms formed by multiple independent living particles, as bodies are made by cells. And this was the disease that finishes any creature's life.

Only a simple “Yes” came from his mouth, like a short breeze of cold air.

Sweat drops started to fall on Daniel’s legs. Why had he decided to return? He was not able to fight death. Yes, in the past the town hadn’t completely died. The ones who were isolated since the beginning survived, and, after a few years, everything returned to order. Daniel got his position in the university council as an expert in contagious affections. Although he felt like an expert, it was only in misery and death. Nothing more. That’s why coming back was the only way of living he knew. He never felt like a saviour, only like a temporary solution for something inevitable. But it was the only thing he really knew. The town’s bell tower came into sight a few miles away, illuminated by the orange rays of the sinking sun.

“Finally in Tomarre. I hope everyone is fine, they will be so glad to see you. They all know that with a real doctor all is gonna be good” said the kid.

When Daniel was asked again to return, he didn’t think about it, just accepted. He even felt proud that among all the experts on the matter, he was the one who received a summon request letter. But now he was just a fool in his wooden coffin, traveling to his grave. A selfish doctor who wanted money and fame, not to risk his life, though. Even this kid had more courage than him, accepting his fate, and working for his family. And where was Daniel’s family? Why did he fight for it? A position that he did not deserve? A life that is only futile? White and blue houses with low stone roofs started to appear in the distance.

He needed to reflect. This couldn't be his last stop. The boy must turn back, even if he had to stay in the carriage more long hours.

The streets of the town were empty. Wild plants grew from the amber soil on both sides of the road. Pigeons were eating garbage in the streets. Some doors were open, and the wide patios and tiled halls inside of them were visible. And in them, people were resting in dull beds, with pale skin and staring at the ceiling. Numb. As the carriage crossed the town, crying and laments came out of the humble houses. It was too late.

The carriage suddenly stopped.

"Kid, I'm sorry. I..."

"Sir, you were the doctor of this town many years ago, right? I want to thank you. That's why I decided to be your driver".

"You don't have to thank me for anything".

"Yes, I need to. My father told me that when my mother gave birth to me, she had complications. I was going to die, but you saved me. Even if my mother didn't live, I'm here. And I thank you".

"I'm not sure if I will be able to save you again, kid. I'm not sure if I will be strong enough to do anything at all".

"Sir, even if you can't save this place, people will have something to believe in. Even if they don't live that much, the habitants of this place won't be hopeless, they will know that at least someone cared about them. Don't be ashamed of not being enough when you didn't even try. Thank you, sir. Good luck."

Daniel stepped out of the carriage.