

Toñito, The Ugly Night Watchman¹

Luis Miguel Aguilar*

He guards the cars at a parking lot next to the house, but, after 7 p.m. and for a not-so-symbolic fee, he also keeps an eye on the cars in the neighborhood, including ours. His Spanish is as strange as the way he tells us something has happened.

“Some unrestless young fellas took away your car’s radio antenna.”

“How was it they did that, Toñito?”

“Well, they were unrestless. In love with trouble. They’re from the junior high school next door. They twisted the antenna until it broke and then they took it with them. But they’re only doing it for fun because, what good is it to them?”

“But you saw them. Why didn’t you stop them?”

“No. They were just kids. I have my gun here.”

“But, Toñito, you saw them. Why didn’t you say anything to them?”

“No. Nobody steals cars here. I have the gun. The other day some crooks came around and were shooting. Didn’t you hear the shots? They broke that window. They were after my boss. I don’t know what he owes them. But I didn’t go out. He wasn’t here. There was no need to go out. Nobody steals cars around here.”

“No. I didn’t hear anything. But now I don’t have an antenna. Why didn’t you stop them?”

“Yes, they were the friends of trouble. The antenna is no use to them. It was just fun.”

“Well, it’s not the first time, Toño. The other night a friend who came to visit parked his car here, and they stole his stereo.”

“No. I have the gun. Don’t be afraid. Nobody steals cars here.”

“And the other day I came out and the alarm on my car had a clothes hanger sticking out of it. Somebody tried to force the alarm and couldn’t. And you didn’t even notice.”

“No, if they want to steal the car I have the gun. Nobody steals cars around here.”

“But they steal antennas and radios and they force alarms. And look at the dent the car has here. I’ve been wanting to ask you about that dent. I didn’t make it.”

“No. The ones who took the antenna were just some unrestless young guys. I have the gun.”

“I’m not asking you to shoot at them. I just want you to tell them to go away if you see them at it.”

“No. I watch them from here. I have the gun.”

“So you’ve left me without an antenna.”

“No. It was the unrestless kids.”

“You should at least have told me about it so that I could say something to them. It was 8:30 at night.”

“No. Nobody steals cars around here. I have the gun.”

“Good night, Toño.”

“Right. Good night.”

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The Heraclitusian Taxi Driver



You get into his taxi and tell him the address you're going to. He says that you should tell him the way. So, you say, "From here on, straight ahead and we're there."

He says, "You don't say? There was no way we'd get there if we went backwards."

Instead of insulting him, you say, "I mean that this street takes us directly to Mazatlán Avenue, which is where I'm going."

"You don't say? I thought you were going in the cab. Ha, ha."

Instead of smashing his head against the windshield, you sit in fuming silence. That is, useless silence.

"Oh, I've figured out where we are," says the cab driver suddenly. "It's here."

"No. It's not here. This is Tamaulipas. I said that straight ahead we would get to Mazatlán."

"Well, we'll fix that right away. What's the problem? All these streets have islands in the middle. The island that goes that way comes back the other way. In the end, all streets meet."

"You don't say?" you say, given the minimal opportunity of pre-Socratic vengeance. "That is to say, if you're going down one street, you'll come to another?"

"So, it got your goat. It got your goat, young man. But you see that anybody who gets burned, dies from it. There's nobody here who won't get a head of steam in a fire."²

At the next corner he makes a U-turn.

"You see? Without even asking directions we got there. Nobody's lost forever."

"Let me out over there by that grey car. The grey car. You passed it."

"That's what I tell my old lady. Give me three yards in reverse and I'll open up a road to heaven. Don't you think? Sometimes we only move forward by going backwards. If everything in life were only like losing your way. You see? Mazatlán and Tamaulipas are not two different streets like you said; in the end, they're the same street. Everything returns. Everything is together. We've arrived, haven't we?"

NOTES

¹ The title of the short story on page 117 alludes to the Graham Greene novel, *The Ugly American*, which was translated into Spanish as *El americano impasible*, or "The Unfeeling American". Therefore, the original title of this short story in Spanish would be literally translated "The Unfeeling Night Watchman." [Translator's Note.]

² In Spanish, "getting burned" includes doing something silly, and the original text has the person dying from the burns, "el ardor", which also means ardor.

Both stories are fragments of Luis Miguel Aguilar's short story "Nuevos tipos mexicanos," in *Nadie puede escribir un libro* (Mexico City: Cal y Arena, 1997).

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