

Noche Buena
Curt Eriksen

“Esta puta vida,” Severo grunts, sinking into the easy chair. He reaches for the pack of cigarettes on the little round table that supports the telephone and the reading lamp that no one reads by. Severo grabs the pack of cigarettes and the cellophane crinkles in his fist. When he readjusts his weight in the chair, the deformed cushion of the seat sighs. Snorting, Severo shakes one cigarette loose and sticks it in his mouth.

“Nena,” he shouts. “Bring me my lighter!”

His wife is busy in the kitchen, and she’s as hard of hearing as he is. So Severo shouts again and he curses life, calling it a whore—for he would know—as he tries to lift himself out of the chair.

Once he was young and strong, just like any other man. But now there’s nothing left to suggest that this was ever so. Severo’s gut has been getting in the way for decades. He can’t even remember what it’s like to look down while he pisses and see what he holds in his hand.

“Goddamn woman,” he mutters, blaming her for the misplaced lighter. He finally gets to his feet and shuffles into the bedroom. The radiators are on full blast and it’s hot in the apartment and the only way to lower the temperature is to open a window. But instead of doing that Severo wanders around in a pair of boxer shorts that keep slipping off his bony hips, and a white sleeveless undershirt stretched across his flaccid chest.

He flicks on the light in the bedroom and squints against its glare. His eyes are going too, have been for some time now. But he knows—he can remember this much—

where the lighter might be and he goes to the bedside table and grabs it, knocking the ashtray aside and spilling ash and stained butts that roll onto the floor. Severo starts to bend over to pick them up but instead he turns around and, walking out of the room, curses life again.

Although his memory has faded with his physical strength, one thing Severo can never forget is the hunger. It's no longer a sensation or even an excuse for overeating or berating his wife. After all, she didn't starve the way he did. She grew up in a village, on the Castilian plane, where life was bearable. But in Madrid there was no animal more miserable than the orphaned son of a Republican hero.

Not that Severo's father had been a hero, but he might as well have been. He was sent to the same camps, where the rations of chickpeas and bread crusts might have kept him alive. But it wasn't the hard labor that broke Severo's old man; it was his bitterness in defeat.

Severo shuffles into the kitchen and says something to his wife. She doesn't hear him. She's bent over the stove, stirring with a wooden spoon. Severo looks at her and sucks on his cigarette. He's about to repeat what he has just said but he forgets what it was, thinking instead of how you'd never know that she had once had a figure. Now he can't remember why he's come into the kitchen. So he looks at the clock on the wall. He doesn't know when they are going to arrive, and he isn't even sure which of the grown kids are coming. It used to be that all five of them would return for dinner on Christmas Eve, crowding around the feast at the table, just like any other family. But now they have their own kids, and more excuses to stay away.

Severo returns to the salon and drops into the easy chair that has long since adapted itself to accommodate his weight and shape. He scratches his belly and puffs on the cigarette, staring at the television screen, where endless queues of cars jam the exit lanes of every way out of the city. No, Severo can never forget the hunger. He smashes his cigarette in the ashtray on the table that supports the reading lamp. He grabs the remote control and raises the volume.

The neighbors often complain about the noise. Especially the woman on the sixth floor—two up. That bitch. His wife badgered him about the hearing aid until he finally tried it. It was frightening, and humiliating. Especially when he ate. He couldn't breathe through his nose so he breathed through his mouth. He felt as if he were inside the jaws of a dinosaur, that's how loud the chewing was. It sounded like bones were being crushed. Severo couldn't believe he made such sounds and he threw the damn thing away. He didn't care what anybody had paid for it.

His wife trundles into the salon and says something to him.

“What?” he croaks.

“They should be here by now,” she shouts. “They should have called.” She stands there with a towel in her hands, wiping them dry. “I said they should have called.”

“Damn it woman, speak up!”

“They should have arrived by now,” she says, shouting just as loud as she shouted before. “Maybe they had an accident.”

“What'd you say?”

She turns around and returns to the kitchen.

A man can't get any peace around here. Severo grabs the pack of cigarettes and lights one. He waited as long as he could before he retired from the job at the printing press. He had always needed somewhere else to go. A woman was a good thing to have, as long as she stayed out of the way. His wife kept a tidy house and that was good to come back to. Even a fool could see this.

The telephone rings. Severo grabs it and barks, "Diga!"

It's his daughter, the youngest one. She asks to speak to her mother.

"She's in the kitchen. Nena," he shouts, without covering the mouthpiece with his hand. "Nena!"

He has a gruff voice that used to carry but now he can no longer get enough air into his lungs. The doctors have told him that his lungs are full of holes and there's a special word they use for this, empha-something or other.

"She's in the kitchen," he wheezes, dropping the receiver onto the table and rocking himself to a sitting position. Then, pushing against the armrests he manages to lift his weight off the chair and get to his feet again.

"Esta puta vida," he scowls, shuffling down the hall and into the kitchen.

This time his wife sees him and she raises her eyebrows and says, "What now?"

"The phone."

The ash is falling onto the floor and his wife reproaches him with a sour look so he cups his free hand beneath the cigarette. She tries to walk past him but he's standing in the doorway. He steps back and strikes the part of his back that hurts the most against the doorjamb.

"Goddamnit, it's that daughter of yours!"

“Let me get by.”

Severo backs into the hall. He used to be light on his feet. They used to go dancing, he and his wife. In the beginning, during the brief courtship, before the first of the five was born. After that he sought and found his entertainment elsewhere. By then the work was getting steady and his wife was always ragging at him about one thing or another. That’s what kept him away. But he’s always prided himself on never having loved another woman. Which wasn’t to say that he had ever loved his wife. But once he had believed that he had cared for her. Which was more than he could say for the women he bought.

Severo shuffles into the salon and stands there watching his wife talk on the telephone. He starts to listen to what she’s saying, but he quickly grows bored. It’s too much bother, trying to hear what people say. Besides, he’s heard it all before. Nobody can tell him anything he doesn’t already know. And most of what he’s learned he learned the hard way, in the street, when his gut used to rave with the hunger.

He’ll never forget that. That’s one thing his daughter, the hippy, can’t understand. His wife doesn’t even understand it. They never starved, not like he did. They didn’t know what it was like to listen to your stomach nagging you all the time, when there was absolutely nothing you could do about it. That’s what made them so different, so incomprehensible. It wasn’t that *he* was hard to understand. If you understood hunger, you could understand Severo.

His wife hangs up the phone and walks past him. Severo turns and starts to say something, but he can’t remember what it was. He goes back to his chair and sits in it. He grabs the pack of cigarettes and shakes one out before realizing that he still holds a lit

cigarette in the other hand. The doctors have told him that he has to go cold turkey, or else. Or else! Severo snorts, grinds the lit cigarette in the ashtray and fires up the other one. What do the doctors know? The rich bastards. They've never starved, not like he has.

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