

The Late Miguel Romero

All voices are the same person.

Three beeps: pressing numbers on a phone.

'You have one new message. To listen to your messages, press one'.

Beep.

'First new message. Received on, Sunday, at, 9.22pm'.

VOICE: *(in Spanish)* Hello. You don't know me, but I have some terrible news. I'm a friend of your father. I'm sorry to tell you he passed away. He'll be buried on Tuesday at twelve o'clock, at the Church of St. Stephen –

Beep.

'To replay your message, press –'

Beep.

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A busy tube station.

A train is gliding and clanking its way towards the station, and squeaks to a halt.

TANNOY: Mind the gap. Mind the gap.

TRAVELLER: *(thoughts)* Mind your hooves on my shoes – you horde of bulls –

TANNOY: Mind the gap.

Fade out. Just before the fade completes, hard cut to:

*

Interior of train. Loud rhythmic rattle.

TANNOY: The next station is Camden Town – High Barnet Branch. Upon arrival, the last set of doors will not open. Customers in the last carriage –

TRAVELLER: *(thoughts)* Oh, shit –

TANNOY: – please move towards the front doors to leave the train.

TRAVELLER: Excuse me – ex – excuse me –

Fade out. Just before the fade completes, hard cut to:

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Main concourse, London Euston.

TANNOY: ...Platform 3, the 8am from London Euston. Will passengers intending to travel on this service / please join the train now, as it is ready to leave. Platform 3, the 8am from London Euston...

TRAVELLER: *(thoughts)* Move, move... Get out of the way...

Fade out. Just before the fade completes, hard cut to:

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Hard cut to the sound of rapid beeping. The interior of a Pendolino. The beeping continues.

TRAVELLER: *(thoughts)* Close the doors. Close the doors, will you?

The slide and click of the train door closing.

Now go. Just go.

Smooth hum of the train moving off. Whisper:

Gracias a Dios.

Fade out. Just before the fade completes, hard cut to:

*

Interior of the Pendolino. Continuous hum. Two chimes.

TANNOY: Welcome to customers who have just joined us here, for this service calling at...

TRAVELLER: *(thoughts)* No, no, no – just, hush, hush, hush, hush...

Fade out. Just before the fade completes, hard cut to:

*

Interior of the Pendolino. Continuous hum. Nothing else for a while, just relax into the rhythm.

Eventually:

TRAVELLER: *(thoughts)* Stop the clocks and cover the mirrors.

Close the windows, and draw the blinds.

And wait, by the grace of God, in a dark and silent earth...

The hum of the train gradually fades out, like falling asleep.

Silence.

From out of the silence, gradually fade up a light ticking. It approaches, as though he is holding it up to his ear: a watch.

Still ticking.

And not yet unwound. Through how many hours now? Or is it days? A million tiny orbits. Tick, tick, tick, tick...

Swiss. Like a tank.

Tide tracker, compass, thermometer, calendar, email, Bluetooth, silicone, sapphire. Scratch-resistant, water-resistant, shock-absorbing, anti-glare, GPS, calfskin –

Pause.

No...

Spanish guitar.

Calfskin?

What is it?

I remember

What is it?

A man...

Yes.

I remember a man... from Pampaneira, with tiny hands and too many teeth, who fixed the town's watches by gaslight, because, he said, he 'liked the old ways'. His eyes were two clenched fists, searching for wheels and springs, coiled, blind and savage... but that was the way, back then, when something got fixed.

'Never buy new', he always said. First consult the barbarian priest: butcher, barber, blacksmith, all-in-one. 'The man from Pampaneira – he knows best. He was raised in the mountains by wolves, you know...'

The ones who knew him longest said he butchered orphaned calves to mend the straps. The tiny ones the bulls don't want. The ones that couldn't rut or fuck well. Hacked up for leather. *Novillo. Novillo.*

No wonder, when the town clock's hands fell off, that day... from out of nowhere... they all gave praise to God. For the man from Pampaneira could stay another year, patching up time, like turning back the sea.

And killing all the calves.

That's how I remember it. That's how I remem

Suddenly, sound of mobile phone ringing. Sound of interior of the Pendolino returns.

And titanium. A strap made from titanium. Like a missile.

The phone keeps ringing. Beep. He cuts it off.

TANNOY: We will shortly be arriving at the next stop. Next stop, five minutes.

Pause.

TRAVELLER: 8.15 and forty-three seconds. Forty-four seconds. Forty-five seconds...

Fade out.

*

Voicemail:

VOICE: (*in Spanish*) This is your father's friend. I hope you're on your way. Maybe you can't get a signal on the train. But call me if you get lost.

Cut.

*

Interior of the Pendolino. Continuous hum.

TRAVELLER: (*thoughts*) How long now?

How long now before the herd arrive?

I see them all.

Small men, dressed in memories of themselves: dark polyester... kipper ties... something bought from Scope. Sue Ryder. Anywhere. Black or tan... snuff-coloured socks... uniform respect. Shorten the arms, and let out the waist. That'll do.

Two chimes.

TANNOY: Customers are advised that the shop, located in coach C, is now open... selling drinks, crisps, / chocolates, magazines...

TRAVELLER: (*thoughts*) And how long now, before the kitchen creaks with chorizo, morcilla, croquetas, cecina, and something chilled, from the cellar, for the Priest – a few more mentions at Mass, a closer seat to God?

But keep the blinds drawn, and the sun out. Or the feast will never last.

Train sound fades out. Fade in sound of people chattering, a gathering:

And how long now before they say, 'Is that his boy?'

'Where?'

'There – with his father's neck?'

'His father had a bull's neck and heavy bones.'

'Then who is that?'

'Where?'

With the big watch and Italian shoes.

'I don't know.'

Maybe he's a diver, or an astronaut, / or

'A cousin of a cousin. Maybe he hasn't arrived yet. They said he had to catch a train.'

'Why doesn't he drive?'

Sound of the gathering fades out. Fade in the sound of the interior of the Pendolino.

And you. Who do you see here, among these pilgrim crows? This infectious flock, who've come to check you're dead? Something half-remembered... hidden in the mirror... like the story, of a story, of a man from Pampan

Sound of mobile phone ringing, two and a half times. Beep. He cuts it off. Pause.

Ten o'clock. Half way there.

Sound of the train.

Cut.

*

Voicemail:

VOICE: There aren't many people here. Maybe there'll be more at the church. Remember, twelve o'clock at the Church of St. Stephen. Hope to see you there.

Cut.

*

Fade up interior of the Pendolino. Continuous hum.

TRAVELLER: (*thoughts*) Is the world moving, or am I? Who is running from who?

An exodus of hills and trees and painted stations... all flash past.

What do they *know*? Is there some great plague ahead?

What could scare trees who have seen kings die, or mountains that were born from the earth?

What have they seen that makes refugees of fields, rivers, bridges, abbeys, castles, farms, and coves?

Pause.

Nothing. They will all be there tomorrow.

It is I. Waiting to arrive. Or to have left.

I wonder if they'd notice if I just stayed here? And stopped waiting. And just became ancient, like them?

Or was I doomed the moment we left the sea? And grew legs. And saw a horse. And built a ship. And rode a train. And made a car. And

Suddenly, the sound of a car engine revving.

Yes.

What?

A car.

Yes.

I remember.

Yes.

I remember a car.

Yes.

I remember that SEAT.

Yes.

The sounds of car and train have faded. Silence.

I remember that SEAT 600 we had. Four-cylinder, four-stroke, 21 hp. I wanted a Barreiros. Dodge Dart. Six-cylinder, leather trim, like JFK. That gave a man a name, like a statue or an arch: Tough. Untouchable. Not like every backwards *paleto* and

meat packer in the 600. But you lacked the wit to think big – even your hands and feet were small – you had those wooden blocks glued to the pedals, like a child – dispensing your limitations to everything you touched. As though you liked the idea of breaking down.

‘Never buy new’ – like some thick peasant dogma buried in blood – a memory of a memory of a memory. Transmission parts, brake hose, switches, joints. The whole thing was held together by duct tape and hope, spread out like an accident across the kitchen floor.

I dreamt of the Dart. Of driving out, like the big men, to Zaragoza, wine and pinchos on the way, swerve through Logroño, kick up dust through Burgos, then back to Madrid. Where at least you could be someone.

And I remember that day best of all.

The 600 rattling through the streets, bumping the suspension up and down your spine like an earthquake.

It was a hot day, and you were late for something, and... if only you could make it on time... for a job, a few pesetas... but something was wrong with the fuel filter, the third time that week, and the engine sawtoothed along, going bump, bump, bump...

And the sun was getting high by now, baking the chassis and boiling the seats, and everything felt like treacle, and your hands were burning on the wheel, and your eyes were squinting in the sun, and you were getting angry, because you’d only just fixed the fuel filter, last night, with your own hands, and you thought... if I only I can get there on time, if only I can earn a few pesetas...

And as curtains of heat rose up from the ground, and the road shone like a mirror...

And as your heart raced, and time ticked on...

And as you looked at your watch, and you didn’t see the calf...

And as you swerved the calf, and hit the boy

Sound of mobile phone ringing. Sound of interior of the Pendolino returns.

That’s how I remember it. That’s how I’ve heard it told.

Beep. Cuts off the phone.

Four voicemails.

Pause.

11.32.

Pause.

Come on.

Fade out.

*

Voicemail:

VOICE: *(in Spanish)* Sir, the cars are leaving. Maybe you should go straight to the church.
You can get a taxi from the station. You have 30 minutes. 30 minutes.

Cut.

*

Sound of an organ playing an elegy.

Sound of the interior of the Pendolino rises over it, dominant.

TRAVELLER: *(thoughts)* So. Having waited in time, time now waits in us.

Two chimes.

TANNOY: We will shortly be approaching the next stop. This is the final stop – all change.
Final stop in five minutes.

TRAVELLER: *(thoughts)* 11.55. Just in time.

Sound of 11 beeps – keying in a number on the mobile phone. It rings out.

Sound of the Pendolino cuts out.

Sound of the elegy becomes dominant. A phone rings – classic Nokia ringtone – in an echoey church.

A VOICE answers it.

VOICE: Diga?

TRAVELLER: *(phone)* You've been calling my phone. You don't really know me. But I want to tell you something.

The sound of the interior of the Pendolino. The elegy can be heard through the phone, in the background.

Is that okay?

VOICE: *(phone)* Si...

TRAVELLER: It's not a very long story, but it's a true one.

Pause.

You see, I knew this man, from Tierra de Campos. He wasn't an old man, but he wasn't born young either. He worked the land his family had worked for many years, even though the river was dry, and his farmhands had left for the city. He liked to think of the old days, and remembered them for bigger than they were, and that kind of thing can turn a man hard, you know?

But he knew he had to eat, so he turned to his hands, which God had made small, and easy to bend, and began to fix tables, and chairs, and then socks, and then shoes, until nothing was left to die, and yet nothing quite managed to live.

TANNOY: Final stop in three minutes, three minutes final stop.

TRAVELLER: He drove, one day, to fix a molinillo, which is a type of whisk the Aztecs used, but hit a child instead, which died. And after serving time, instead of coming home, he sent a man whose skin was grey and eyes were fists, and then, like a ghost, was gone. And never looked back.

They say he'd lost his name by the time he reached Pampaneira, a twelve day walk through shapeless towns, wild, like a devil from nowhere. Only his hands looked human, they said, but he must have been raised by wolves.

TANNOY: Two minutes, final stop, two minutes.

TRAVELLER: That's the way I've heard it told.

You left a message on my phone, to say he's dead, and I could see him buried today. I think I might be late. You see, I took the train as far as I could. How far away could I get by twelve? Where could I be when it was happening? And now I'm here, where have I arrived?

TANNOY: Final stop, one minute. Final stop –

TRAVELLER: In mountains, and rivers, and the sea... scratch-resistant, shock-absorbing,
and never looked back – because you should not expect to see –

Sound of the train suddenly screeching to a stop: emergency breaks. The elegy disappears.

No...

What?

So close.

Look.

Grey skin, and too many teeth...

What?

Eyes like fists...

It would take something extraordinary.

Look in the window.

It would take something *extraordinary*.

Look in the window.

It would take something –

Like a ghost of a ghost.

Two chimes. Slight pause.

TANNOY: We would like to apologise to passengers travelling on this service.

Our colleagues tell us there is a bull on the line ahead.

Pause.

We will wait here for further advice.

THE END.