

Beirut

SCR Series in Latin American Translations

The neighbors on my street were dogs. The mastiff in the house on the left was named Thor; the bulldog on the corner was Lola. I knew the names of the pets on the block without knowing their owners. I didn't care, either. They were anonymous beings who raised the electric garage doors and disappeared in their cars. The only time my mother bothered with them was when an alarm would go off, and, frightened, we'd go outside. When she realized it was a false alarm, we'd return home.

On the Sunday of the robbery, no alarm sounded, no dogs barked. The calm oasis that was our street was disturbed a few seconds later by the shouts of a girl who rang the doorbell. My mother ran to the door and opened it automatically, without any caution, removing the security chain that reduced the identity of messengers to a sliver of their face. The girl gasped for breath and led a younger long-eared boy by the hand. I recognized them immediately. Both were part of the silent and boring scenery of my mornings. Two siblings in blue uniforms who, on the other side of the lane, waited with sleepy eyes for the bus to pick them up. Sometimes Ruth chatted with the housekeeper escorting them and carrying their backpacks. They talked about the new guard on the block, the sudden absence of the gardener, the times when the bus to Manchay was empty. I thought of the dog that lived in that house shaded by vines. An old cocker spaniel with a whitish snout that walked the same hour as Mota.

"What happened? Are you OK?" asked my mother.

"They broke into the house," said the hyperventilating boy.

"What are your names?"

"I'm Daniela and he's Bruno. Juan Canesa is our dad. He sent us here. He went to chase them."

My mother locked the door and led them into the garden. Daniela took a deep breath and told us that they were coming back from the movies that afternoon. Her dad pushed the garage remote control and when the wooden door lifted, they saw a station wagon

parked inside. She managed to make out a man with a gray mustache placing a television in the trunk. She told us that scene might have lasted five seconds. As soon as the thieves saw them, the man with the television jumped into the station wagon and they backed out and drove off at full speed.

“Macarena, give them water to drink. I’m going to call the police,” my mother said, walking toward the front door.

When we got to the kitchen, the boy wouldn’t stop crying; he was wiping his tears on the red polo shirt that he was wearing. I looked for a soda in the cupboard and poured it into two glasses without speaking, unable to focus on anything but Bruno’s despair. Sergio appeared in the kitchen kicking the swinging door back and forth like an FBI agent. He approached the boy and held his shoulder.

“Quiet. Nothing is going to happen to your dad. The thugs have run away, they’re sisters,” he said.

“Dad is going to be fine. You know he’s crazy. He’s going to be fine,” Daniela snapped as she handed her brother a glass of soda. The orange liquid shook as if it were in the hands of a Parkinson’s patient.

“I’m not worried about him . . . but Beirut?” asked Bruno, choking on a fit of hiccups. His words held irrational fear. I felt the urge to confirm that my own dog was home. I pushed open the door and found Mota sprawled by the long dining room table. I stroked his belly and listened to his snores. When I returned to the kitchen, Daniela told her brother to be brave. She said Beirut was a smart dog. She was certain they would hug him very soon. That when the thieves arrived, the dog had surely hidden under the sofa in the living room to blend in with the furniture. His curly hair was the same shade as leather. When Bruno tried to interrupt her, Daniela shushed him up. The girl did not allow questions and shook her head. She rubbed her eyes compulsively, to prevent tear ducts from filling, like someone who believes that hiding the symptoms makes the disease disappear. Daniela described other so-called hiding places, behind the washing machine, the bicycle shed, the garden full of flowers and herbs where Beirut buried bones. Mom suddenly appeared and her words interrupted the discussion.

“Kids, I just spoke to security. Your dad is already coming back. Go upstairs with Macarena. Sergio, you come with me.”

I led Daniela and Bruno to my room. To reduce the tension I turned on the television, but they chose the picture window that transformed my room into a perfect observatory of the street. As a child, I would place my desk against the edge of the window and pretend that my room was a spaceship undocking from the house to float between the hills of the district. I wanted to see how others lived. Our district was green and blue. An artificial sham of the Earth made of pools and gardens. The crew consisted of stuffed animals I

received on my birthdays.

Daniela and Bruno's father got out of the car and rang the bell. His face was contorted and his shirt was untucked. My mother and Sergio were waiting for him outside the door. The three of them began to talk under the threshold. In a matter of minutes all the residents on the block approached—men and women who had remained by their windows, waiting for the outcome like the protagonist of that Hitchcock film. Daniela and Bruno's father explained that he had chased the thieves through the town, skidding in his car, driving on the sidewalks until their station wagon slammed into a wall near the guardhouse. He recounted that the front of the thieves' vehicle contracted like an accordion from the impact. That he got out of his car ready to kick the thugs to death. That nobody took anything from him. As he spoke his voice turned into a scream full of rage.

"I was this close to catching them. This close," he said, putting his fingers together. "But those bastards backed up and sped off in their falling-apart car."

Daniela and Bruno's father cut off his monologue when he saw the security guard approaching from the corner. He was a scrawny boy, who with any luck was twenty. I didn't know his name, but I knew his routine. Every day he walked around the block carrying a portable radio glued to his ear. From time to time he would go into the guardhouse to read a sports paper. He stayed there as little as possible. It was a claustrophobic box, made of makeshift material, like a garden shack no dog wanted to inhabit. Daniela and Bruno's father stared at the boy and started screaming.

"Where the hell were you while they robbed my house?"

He repeated the question over and over, with increasing intensity and fury. The boy didn't respond, but when he finally did, his nervous words dissolved into thin air. The next thing I heard was the siren of the patrol car parked in our garage and the indecipherable racket caused by the voices of the neighbors talking on top of each other.

Bruno turned around and settled on the edge of my bed.

"Surely they stole Beirut," he said, staring at the cabinet that contained my oldest stuffed animals. Bears, giraffes, and dogs I refused to donate because I could still find my childhood self in them. I only had to touch them and close my eyes for a light to glow in my chest, each time a little more dim. Daniela looked at her brother and took him by the arm.

"Beirut is going to be fine. He's in the house. Stop saying that or I'm going to hit you," she threatened.

"What are we going to do if he's been stolen?" Bruno responded, punching my duvet.

"Shut up!"

Every time Bruno mentioned Beirut, he remembered the dog more clearly. Or perhaps he recalled Beirut sharper and brighter from the love held by a suffering master. Beirut walking in the neighborhood with a blue leash around his neck. Beirut scratching his

back by squirming in the grass of other people's gardens. Unlike Mota, Beirut let anyone pet him. My mother's voice drew me to the window. I found her standing in the middle of the garden, still wearing those weekend flip-flops she had unintentionally exposed to the entire neighborhood.

"Macarena, Daniela and Bruno's father has arrived. Tell them they can come down."

When we got to the door not a single neighbor remained. Daniela hugged her father and then Bruno did. The man told them that the police officers had made sure that no intruders were left in their home. The garage door rose like a tragic curtain. The remains of the looting were scattered all over the garden. I could make out a microwave with a cracked door, and a shattered flowerpot in the path leading to the front door. The pottery was in pieces, the plant dead, the dirt scattered, thanks to the rough footsteps of thieves. Bruno walked through the garage in despair. Something in that courtyard set off true alarms. Then I saw a blue cord. It looked like Beirut's leash. Bruno lifted the cord as if he had just found the leg of a corpse. Daniela and her father ran to him. The man looked at my mother and grimaced. Then he shut the garage door.

Sergio came with me to my room and turned on the television. He tuned into a music channel and started playing with a tennis ball, bouncing it against the wall. That was his way of being with me. A ritual that had begun in childhood when he fought with my mother.

"Do you think Beirut was stolen?" I asked, staring blankly at the screen.

On it, the Argentine host announced that a Marilyn Manson song had climbed five points in the weekly rankings. Sergio placed the ball on my bed and sighed.

"I don't know. Let's wait a bit to see what happens," he said without looking at me. From time to time we looked out the window. The security guard walked down the street. He came and went without understanding what was happening or where he was going, just like a hamster on a wheel. Sergio told me that they would surely fire him. We fell silent and returned our gaze to the TV. Mota jumped onto my bed despite his dirty paws, laid his head on my legs, and fell asleep. Sergio left my room as soon as the music countdown finished on the TV.

The darkness brought a deceptive calm. Every Sunday, not wearing their uniforms, employees returned to their artificial lives. Periodically, barking dogs broke the silence and made me think of Beirut. Ever since I was a child, I believed these lonely barks were the way dogs communicated with each other. It was a myth spread by movies that I decided was true. I liked to think that there were inaccessible things, pure states that we could never change the course of. It was also said that dogs had the ability to predict earthquakes, but that night when Daniela and Bruno's father slammed the front door and walked towards the guardhouse, Mota was sleeping with his legs stretched out. I rose and stood by the

window. I didn't call Sergio or my mother. I just watched, absorbed, as the man punched the guardhouse. The security guard appeared and instinctively covered his face with his arms. The enraged man grabbed his sweater and pushed him against a wall. Then he entered the cubicle and began to throw things into the street. A heavy coat, paper plates, old newspapers, the portable radio. The only one who spoke was Daniela and Bruno's father. He told the boy he would see to it that he never returned to our neighborhood again. That if he had something to do with the robbery, he would find out. That he had contacts in the police. The boy just nodded and stared at him. I wanted to call my mother, but I was afraid that she would be hurt in a sudden fit of courage. I wondered if another pair of eyes watched the scene. I prayed with all my might they were brave eyes. Daniela and Bruno's father kicked the bottom of the guardhouse and started to walk home.

When I thought it was over, he briefly paused, like a person who realized he had forgotten a very important package. He returned and stopped in front of the guardhouse, kicking it like a crazy person. He kicked all four sides, until he split the prefabricated wood. Trembling, I closed the curtains and turned away from the window. In the distance, I heard my mother's television. The raspy voice of the Sunday show host announcing a story on diabetes. The next thing I heard was a slammed door announcing that Daniela and Bruno's father had returned to his territory. I went back to the window and looked out at the street. The security guard was picking up his jacket from the path. His figure barely outlined against the yellow from the streetlights. He was moving around trying to retrieve every object that Daniela and Bruno's father had thrown into the air. I took my Discman and lay down. I told myself that everything would be fine, and covered my entire body in sheets until I fell asleep, lulled by the pop group of the moment.

Ruth appeared in my bedroom as I finished pulling on my green uniform stockings. She left a tray on my bed with two pieces of toast and a papaya juice, then drew the curtain. I observed that the driver who picked up Daniela and Bruno every morning was parked on the other side of the street. I knew this was a turning point. The children's faces would tell me if the thieves had stolen Beirut. However, the children did not appear. Only an employee came out, who gestured the bus to drive on.

"Your mother says that you shouldn't let Mota go out to the garden. At least for a while," Ruth said, folding my pajamas. In seconds, the garage door rose. Bruno and Daniela's father got out of his car and ran into the house. He returned carrying a dog bed filled with several plastic toys. There was also the dog leash. The man opened the trunk and placed the items next to a black bag. I felt dizzy. No need to confirm what happened. I imagined the cocker spaniel dying on the parquet, foaming at the mouth. Daniela covering her face in denial. Bruno bent over his pet. A stab went through my chest. Daniela and Bruno's father slammed the trunk, got into the car and disappeared. He closed his life with the

touch of a remote control, while a few meters away the guardhouse stood in shambles. In front of it, a new guard was receiving instructions from the supervisor. He jotted them down in a notebook as he adjusted an old cap. I wondered if it was the same cap Daniela and Bruno's father had trampled without remorse.

"Genaro was a good boy," Ruth mused, waiting for an answer. Not knowing what to say, I just looked at her. I decided to wait in my room for my driver to arrive. When I heard the honk, I grabbed my backpack and ran out the door. I got into the car without looking at the street, although my mind was still trapped in the night before. The screams of Daniela and Bruno's father, Genaro's figure picking up pieces of the portable radio one by one without any of us knowing his name.

Translated by Susan Ayres