

MÁS ALLÁ DE LA ESPERA

Man, it's 04:18

And life's just a thing that he does
He rolls over, cold pillow, warm body
At the end of his tether, as usual, he breathes softly
He burrows down deep, and he closes his eyes
And he thinks, "Is this really what it means to be alive?"

Pictures on a screen. Kate Tempest

I.

It was a day like any other day, filled with dread, quiet anxiety and that strange feeling that all of this had happened before, but worst of all that it kept being completely pointless, nonetheless. Like a kid repeating the same grade, over and over again, and not learning anything new in the process.

David sat in his balcony longing for that warm purposeful ritual of death that is smoking a cigarette. The cars ran down on the street, busily going nowhere, rapidly accelerating, loudly honking their horns, filling the air with that background noise that all cities have. The noise of people who aren't home.

He took another imaginary puff at the memory of smoking, perfectly timed with a shift of the wind that brought the burnt scent of death of someone else in the building, on another balcony, who was doing what David was missing, living with the furious purpose of dying.

Michelle's voice came through the living room, announcing that she would be ready in five minutes so they could leave. Her melodious voice, sweet, warm, passionless, as always miscalculating both the time it would take her to be ready, and how much he really cared about it all. For all it mattered, it could be five or fifty

minutes, in the end the result would be the same, time in traffic, nonsensical small talk with some acquaintances that pretended to be friends, drinks, dinner, gossip and goodbyes. But mostly gossip, that fundamental pillar of human interaction, the refuge of those who have nothing essential to talk about. Without it, the whole illusion would come crashing down and we would be left with nothing but our naked ugly truths.

-Almost done- floated through the living room sometime later. Another shift of the wind, another vicarious puff, another knot in his chest. And to think that all in all, David was happy.

II.

The days have lost their meaning, if they ever had any. They have become devoid of any type of sense or purpose. This is more accurate, David thinks. Life has never had any meaning, but at least we have a purpose. Now, are all screens in our hands and quietly withering away. We have become less, while reaching for more.

The loop of waking up, brushing your teeth, running around in traffic to experience the same existential crisis that everybody else experiences in a traffic jam, has become so mundane, so despairing, that it has lost any type of power over him. There used to be some sort of comfort in the knowing that the pain came from feeling the pulse of the world beating. But not anymore. The pain gave way to the wasted lands of despair and apathy.

The days used to have some sense, follow some sort of logic. Mondays sucked, Fridays rocked, holidays were a mixture of fun and dread. Christmas used to be a rollercoaster of alcohol and emotions filled with the angst of meeting the family, the promise of not arguing this year and the joy of belonging, even tangentially, to something. But not anymore.

Today, David is sitting in his boxers staring at a blank wall, not quite knowing if it's the 23rd, the 27th, or the 5th. Michelle is somewhere inside fixing one thing or the other. On the one hand his phone keeps calling him, showering him with stickers, memes and posts of other worlds. On the other one a gun for the senses, a joint, a drink, or a TV controller. It all depends on, and changes with each blink. The TV is on somewhere, streaming something he must watch while some type of Alexa is in the background playing some music he must listen to. Michelle is telling him about something very important that he must know. The sensory overload has killed any ability to feel, to react, to understand what's happening. Something inside David takes a part of him aside and brings forth an image of Bob Gedolf's as Pink in The Wall, sitting alone in that dark room, only it wasn't dark, it is bright, shiny, loud and maddeningly glistening.

"David! David!", Michelle calls.

"You remember that we must... aunt Gloria's house... to..."

"Yes, of course."

The words kept going back and forth. Another show to watch along with the rest of them. What day is it today? David thought while lifting his phone. December 23rd, 27th, or the 5th.

III.

She wouldn't write back. David hated this new normality of waiting for the other person to write first. Of not showing in a clear and transparent way that one was interested in continuing a conversation. The time kept ticking away on that tiny clock at the top of the screen. Each minute a drop in the bucket of anxiety, each drop another battle lost to the generational devil of waiting for the other shoe to drop.

But what can he do but wait.

Nothing...

But...

Wait...

It is the same thing that happened when they got together in person. She kept looking at her phone and living inside of it just participating tangentially in the conversation she had started.

It reminded him of the scenes from Lain, the phone reflected on her glasses, information, pointless data, gossip going up her eyes directly to her pleasure center. She had requested this meeting, she wanted him to be there, she needed him to be there. And yet... she wasn't.

IV.

Happiness'.

He was happy. At least that's what everybody else kept telling him. He had done what he was supposed to do. Went to college, got a couple of masters, found a good person, got married, and was kind of successful at his job too.

And still... the noise didn't calm down. The sense of being out of place, living someone else's interpretation of his life, wouldn't leave him alone.

It's been months since the last time David had a full night's sleep. Everything has become a blur where the impostor's syndrome doesn't allow him to enjoy whatever little success he may have.

It rains outside, but for real this time. The drops are sliding down the windows. Windows that don't open. Another one of the little things that made him feel trapped. In his desk sits a cup of cold coffee and a million emails demanding his attention. Everything is important. -Everything must be done now... or else. Or else what? Nobody knew, but the fear hanged in there like Damocles' sword just waiting for you to move, or else...

The phone rings. Another thing that feels urgent. Voices outside the office are a prelude to more things waiting to become important, urgent. More meetings that amount to nothing more than greasing the cogs so the whole machinery can keep on moving, clickety clack.

He takes a deep breath, and a sip of cold, disgusting, coffee, things start to settle down. The sword disappears, the million emails become a couple, the phone just stops ringing and the voices outside the door dissipate.

VI.

Parties are the hardest. You walk around with the mask of happinesses, showing up and prancing around, smiling, drinking, going up and down the stairs of conversations that are about a lot of nothing, filling up the empty places between sips of a type of alcohol that is never quite right. Going to the bathroom looking at the face on the other side of the mirror, that older face looking at you, pretending to be you, judging all the decisions that you've made, that brought you here, asking you for how much longer you will keep sinking into the same hole of despair.

Theres a knocking on the door, one moment please... sighs. Where did I leave the mask of happiness? Did I piss it away? One, two, three... lets go. And the party continues.

Parties after your 40s are weird. They are either a desperate attempt to hold on to the youthful vigor and detachment that is clearly not there anymore, or they are halfway between sophisticated affairs and shinier copies of your parents' get togethers. We haven't quite figured it out yet. They all feel so... fake, out of place, like the recreation of a party done by someone who has never been to a party but has heard stories of them. Anyways, the clock is ticking, the year is ending and is time to kiss Michelle and hope for a better year... we are always hoping for a better year. FIVE, FOUR, THREE, TWO, ONE... HAPPY NEW YEAR!!!

VII.

He has come to tell us once again about how wonderful everything in his life is. How much money he is making, how fantastic his family is, how amazing his married life is going, how absolutely fucking everything has gone the way he wanted it to be. And David is so fucking happy for him. Why wouldn't he be. But there is a weird sensation about it, like he wants David to know, to feel proud of, to acknowledge that he is doing better than him. Like a sort of reverse envy. He keeps emphasizing how wonderful everything is, how he made it, and there is nothing much more to do from here on than to ride the wave of success.

But there's something dark behind it, something morbid. What's the point of being successful at all, if people don't know it. If his people, don't know it. He wants, no, he needs the validation of those who grew up with him, of those who saw him before who he is now. He is the triumphant son coming back home, the prodigal son returning, but nobody is expecting him at the airport. There is no parade, no medals, and no flowers. For him there is only silence. And that, David thinks, is his pain. In the end we are all looking for someone else's recognition, validation, the warm touch from beyond oneself that reminds us, that makes us believe that we are not alone in this maddening experience.

Humanity can withstand a lot, but it cannot exist without other humans to serve as witness of it all.

VIII.

How are you leaving? Arriving is easy, it is almost natural, like the raindrops that fall from the sky. But leaving is against the most basic instinct. It is like that same raindrop trying to return to its cloud, there is no way it can go back unchanged; it must be changed, transformed into something else before it can become one with its point of origin.

There is no leaving without being destroyed in the process. And so, leaving is impossible. The one that leaves is never the one that arrives. First you must die, be changed to such a fundamental degree that you are not you anymore. You are someone else. You are never the one who leaves. So, you never leave. At least not you who arrived. The one who leaves is not the raindrop. The raindrops are no more. You are no more. The only way to leave is to stop being the person who arrived and become the one who left. And that is a whole different type of person. Leavers are not arrivers. They are the opposite of them. You can't start to begin to become a leaver, until you have renounced your arriving nature. You can't reach the sea until you renounce the river.

IX.

Michelle likes gardening. Or the idea of it at least. They don't have a garden, very few people do anyways. But she loves the idea of it. She keeps sending David pictures, videos, articles and every other form of media content she can find about gardens and gardening. But she doesn't really want to. She is in love with their idea, but she could never become engaged enough with what it means to have one. Plato was right, ideas are where the truth resides. Ideas are where the world begins and ends.

David had told her on multiple occasions that they could find a way to carve up some space on the balcony and put a couple of plants. That they could even set up one of those standing raised gardens. But she didn't really want one. Having a garden involves taking care of it, tending to it, talking to the plants and spending time with them. It implies transforming the idea into something material, dirty, less than. She doesn't want that type of commitment to reality. She just wants to like the idea of it, how pretty it would look, how fresh the produce would be, how smelly the house would be, how perfect everything is in the world of ideas.

David didn't understand it, like so many other things. Michelle didn't understand it either, for her it was such a mystery. But the pull was there. Strong, deep, primal. So, she kept sending him pictures, videos, and any type of media she could find about how awesome it would be to have a garden, and he kept doble clicking on it and giving them a heart.

X.

The time has come at last to go on vacation. Fourteen days packed with activities. Every minute, every second, filled with an activity that will ensure that they will have the best time possible. David just wants to rest. To disconnect. To forget. Escapism, they call it.

But they, the royal they, have some other plans. For the royal they, vacations must be filled with activities. Like summer camp when they were kids.

David thinks that's bullshit. But he doesn't say it. He only thinks about it. Always quietly. Never out loud. Never to be shared. Because, what's the point? What could be gained, he thinks, by starting an argument? Look how well it went for my dad. Poor dad. Always a victim of an extremely lively wife. Always unhappy.

Mother was always the life of any activity; David thinks with resent. Nothing says well-adjusted like throwing a coat of paint on one's owns past.

XI.

The world in which David grew up had changed. He had changed. He remembers reading about some guy who wrote an article and got misinterpreted, something about our time being the time beyond the end of history or something like that. And David agreed. Without ever reading the article or knowing who the writer was, but with the idea. He felt deep in his bones that things had changed much more dramatically than what people tended to know. He felt deep down in his soul that the time of waiting had ended, that we were living somewhere beyond.

He thought all this while his drink was waiting to be refilled. Whiskey, 12 years, neat. 12 years sounded like a lot in whiskey time, but in his life, it was merely a blink. It was yesterday. He could still remember the world of possibilities that he had ahead. The mistakes that hurt others, oh the mistakes. Those were the ones who hurt the most.

He heard an old fisherman say one time that the best time to be alive was the time beyond the waiting, *más allá de la espera*, as he had said. Because there, everything that lay was just clear, clean, pristine. The anxiety of hoping for a better tomorrow dissolved into the shining light of reality. The blinding light of hope was dimmed by the dark truth of what lay beyond today. Nothing survives the time beyond the waiting.

Allá, al otro lado de la espera, lo único que queda es lo que hay. Beyond waiting, nothing remains but what is. And with his basic understanding of reality the fisherman was able to capture the whole problem of our days.

XII.

David kept on thinking about the fisherman. About how he could not stop thinking about what was on the other side of waiting. How could he stop wanting? But he couldn't. For him it was just too late. No matter what the social media kept on selling. No matter how lonely, empty people kept on screaming from the loneliness of their own waiting. There comes a time when, as the fisherman had said, one must stop waiting for. There is time to stop. To be quiet. To lie down next to the river and feel the breeze welcoming the idea of becoming ocean mist.

XIII.

He would love to be able to escape. He would love the idea of his whole life to be part of some silly simulation. David would love to believe that he is the main character of some idiotic video game that he is playing in another reality. He would love to believe that at some point, the lights would go on, and he would have the chance to start it all again. But the fisherman, the 12 years of whisky, the empty seat next to him and the empty space on his bed next to his wife, tells him otherwise.

David doesn't know the classics. He doesn't know that he belongs to a human tradition that spans generations. He ignores that his struggles are the same struggles of many before him. He doesn't understand that what makes him unique is not what makes him special. To be alive is to channel the universe, to be given one opportunity to make a dent in however long eternity lasts.

To be, has weight. It changes the way the universe exists. It changes the way it behaves. It changes it all. But it doesn't change for us. It is never for us. And that is what human experience is all about. That nothing that we do is for us, is for those that come after.

That's why the fisherman waits, because he instinctively understands that whatever purpose he may find he won't find it with whatever he has done today, he understands instinctively that meaning can only be found on the other side.

In the meantime, Michelle's words float through the house letting him know that she will be ready in five minutes so they can leave.

While David misses his neighbor, the one who used to smoke, he stares at the shining lights of the city while hoping that at some point he too can exist más allá de la espera.

-The End-