

*The Moment of Danger* by Miguel Ángel Hernández

Translated by Rhett McNeil

1

The first thing I saw was the shadow. Motionless, fixed, eternal, projected onto a small, semi-ruined wall that rose no taller than a meter and a half from the ground. Then I turned my attention to the landscape in the background, the horizon, the forest, the bare, slender trees that went beyond the borders of the image. Nothing was moving in the scene. Nothing could be heard. For a moment, I thought that the file was defective or that my internet connection wasn't working properly. But I soon noticed the progress bar was advancing. Time was passing, even though the objects in the scene weren't moving, even though everything was still exactly the same after a few minutes. The shadow, the landscape, the wall, the shot. All movement seemed to have been frozen, as it is in a photograph.

This is how this story starts off, dear Sophie, with still silhouette of a man projected onto a wall in the middle of the forest, with the motionless motion of an image in black and white on my computer screen.

It's possible that I'd opened the file even before carefully reading the content of the email and verifying the sender's legitimacy. "Anna Morelli. Artist. Remembrance through the memory of others." Those were her words. And what I'd started to watch belonged to one of the five 16mm reels she had found by chance at an antique shop in New Jersey. Anonymous, dated between 1959 and 1963, and exactly identical to one another. Forty-six minutes of running time that showed, without any apparent difference,

the same shadow, the same wall, the same forest, the same fixed camera shot, the same motionlessness in every single second filmed.

The films were part of an art project that Morelli hoped to create at the Clark Art Institute the following year: “*You All Were Me*, remembering stories that no one remembers anymore.” The point of the email was to invite me to collaborate with her.

She had read the short essay I’d written about images of memory, as well as my novel about the art world. And she said that that sort of writing, halfway between genres, would fit in perfectly with her project. But, above all, she had thought of me because she knew I had been a fellow at the Clark Institute and supposed—though she couldn’t have imaged how much so—that I’d like to return to the forests of New England, even if only for a short spell.

The fellowship period was an entire semester, from February to June, the honoraria were more than sufficient, and my part of the project didn’t seem too difficult: writing, anything at all and in whatever form I preferred. The found films lacked a story. My task was to try to provide them with one.

I don’t think I even finished reading the email. “I accept,” I replied. Immediately. I didn’t give it much more thought than that. I didn’t even take much interest in the sender’s identity and did little more than hop on the internet for a moment and find her webpage.

She existed.

That was enough.

It was all I needed.

At least at that moment.

I told her yes, without hesitating. And that was the beginning of all of this, the origin of this book, which I have finally decided to write for you. To do this because of everything that happened. But especially because I finally went back, because I returned to the place where I'd been happy. Despite what the song says. Despite many, many things.

I'd like to be able to tell you that I went back because I could no longer take it or because, deep down, I needed to. But no, Sophie. It wasn't like that. I went back there the way people return to their past, by pure and simple chance. Things happen when they have to happen, not before or after. A letter always arrives at its destination.

It's probable that a few weeks earlier the email would have gone unnoticed. But on that day I replied. I said: "I accept." Without thinking much about it. And I did it because a part of my world, the part that began with you in the place that is again appearing before me, had started to sink and was taking on water from all sides.

"Martín, you didn't get certified."

The dean of the college had seen the evaluations from the National Quality Agency, and the news couldn't have been worse. My term as interim professor was coming to an end. But there was more. My colleagues, all of whom had started after me, had been successful. Certified. One after another.

"I don't know if I'll be able to do anything for you," he said. "You missed your chance. You got lazy."

Everyone of his sentences was a reproach. A way to transfer culpability from the system onto me. I was the one who hadn't known how to play the game. That was the

problem. I'd written the things I'd wanted to write and not the ones I should have written. "Other achievements. Not calculable." That's where my novel, my op-ed pieces, and my book reviews fell. Perhaps they were good for my ego, but not my academic CV. Everything else was lacking. "What I had to do": go to conferences, publish in major journals, edit teaching materials, supervise academic work, and, above all, "help out with paperwork." Serve on committees, fill out reports, surveys, forms . . . "be involved with the university operations." This "item" was completely blank.

"You knew the rules of the game."

This is what it was all about, at bottom. A few rules, a game. And I didn't know how to play it. While I read and wrote in my world, others were filling in every single box on the game board. That's why they'd been certified. That's why the coming term would be for someone else, and I wouldn't even be able to get into the fight. That's why I only had one last semester of classes at the university.

"You had everything . . . and you missed your chance," he said again.

Yes, I had everything, Sophie. And not just at the university. Perhaps the university was the least of it. I had everything. And it had all disappeared. All of it at once. Overnight. Even though that night had lasted a few years. Even though when things finally collapse, it's because they started to crack and crumble long before.

"You know that it's not the best ones who make it here, it's the cleverest ones."

And I was still trying to find something to say.

"My hands are tied," he continued. "I already stuck my neck out once before over that stuff with . . . that girl."

“The stuff with that girl.” Can you believe that I almost couldn’t remember her name? I wrote to you to tell you that. You know I regretted it. To the very end. But we all make mistakes, we all fall. And for me, it was the first time I’d done it. I should have known that that hadn’t been erased entirely and that sooner or later it would catch up with me. There are no friends here, Sophie. Just bosses and subordinates. That’s why, when I heard those last words of his, I stood up and said:

“I’m sorry too.”

And as I said it, I clenched my fists hard.

All of that talk only had one real intention: to make me feel guilty, to make me think I was the one who had let him down, let down the university. I was the one who hadn’t known how to do things the right way and who should have to say “I’m sorry.” Me, not the bureaucratized system; the same system that, after all these years as a fellow, as a perpetual adjunct, as interim lecturer, after all these years of making a pittance and never getting a moment’s rest, was now tossing me aside for not knowing how to meet their demands.

“These are bad times,” he concluded. “This crisis . . .”

Of course, the crisis. Sooner or later that had to make an appearance. The perfect excuse. The excuse they use so that only those who are a faithful image of the machinery of these new times remain. The rest of us are impurities, stains that should be metabolized, foreclosed upon, or spit out. Something had started to change, Sophie. I had sensed it coming long before. And when I left that office I was aware that the change had finally arrived. The university had ceased to be a place of knowledge and had become a mirror of the bureaucracy.

Perhaps now you can better understand why I immediately replied to Anna Morelli's email. I hadn't known how to play the game, that's true. But chance—or synchronicity, or God knows what mysterious force—was now giving me a curious opportunity. An opportunity to get up and leave behind that cracked and run-down building that my life had become. A building that, among other things, was also collapsing because it had lost its cornerstone, its only source of support during all that time.

Lara.

In the end, things just hadn't turned out right. The model marriage, the unbreakable bond, the perfect couple, the harmony we'd had for so many years . . . all of it had gone to shit. Because of a moment, a short and insignificant moment. After everything else we'd been through.

Sometimes an instant turns everything upside down.

The days were numbered for everything I had left to do. When I accepted the invitation, I sensed that by the end of the semester I'd already be out on the street. And I wasn't wrong. I spent the end of the year on strike. I had to give the January exams without a contract. It was my final responsibility to my students. And I couldn't even sign the document with the results. The university sometimes seems eternal, but when things change, everything speeds up. Saturn devours his children. Without any sort of mercy.

I had to start packing my suitcases to realize what it meant to return to Williamstown. A leap backwards. A twist in time. Going back to the past to find the future. Because to go back to that small town in the middle of the forest was to return to

the place where an illusion was born, to a paradise where dreams, now broken, had been conceived. You know it well, dear Sophie. There, we dreamed of another world. We changed everything, including that which we believed to be immovable. And we never thought about the future—even though we never stopped dreaming. But the future kept on arriving. And nothing, absolutely nothing, has remained in the same place.