

No Call of the Wild

The dog had stayed behind. Maybe he wasn't called Buck, although that one didn't ever read the newspaper either, so he didn't suspect anything. The house was closed up and the garden stopped behind a two meter-high fence, covered with stretches of vine. The dog was standing at the doorway, vigilant, with his ears perked, waiting. From the street you couldn't really make him out. From the little windows of the street bus you could see not just the dog, but also the official seal that secured the house.

The dog was white, with a few dark patches on his chest and sides, short-haired and shiny, well cared for. For the first few days he stayed at attention on all four paws, sure and arrogant. He didn't sniff the wind nor did he move, he simply waited. The house was one of the old-fashioned ones in the Vedado neighborhood. Nevertheless, the garden was still green, and the foliage seemed to have been pruned in recent times. The breath of neglect that would take over all of its nicks and crannies had not yet erased the memory of the hands that had attended it.

After a number of days, the dog remained in the same position, just to the side of the front entrance. Without a doubt he didn't want to move, so that he could be the first one to notice the return of the people he identified as having the right to enter the house and take back up their lives, the only life he had ever known. He kept to his spot, with the same proud gaze, sure of himself, although his beautiful coat started to look a little shabby. You might think that he would be getting impatient by now, that he had lost the thrill of the game, that the joke wasn't funny any more.

A week after, the dog was clearly perplexed. What was going on? What could he have done wrong? Why hadn't his owners, his gods, not come back? He stayed standing and staring fixedly toward the exact point where he had seen his family for the last time, but by this time with a certain disquiet and fatigue, and most certainly hungry and thirsty. He didn't care that much, to tell the truth, about the lack of food. Neither did he worry about not being able to get into his favorite cubbyhole, curl up, sigh, and go to sleep with his heart at peace. His entire little brain was concentrating on understanding the reason behind that punishment that he didn't think he deserved.

The dog had never even heard of Buck, so he didn't feel like a hero. He had never seen the snow, or toboggans, or ice fields, or anything like the environs of the Klondike. Nobody had ever hit him with a stick. When he walked through the neighborhood they took him on the most comfortable leashes, which made him feel protected more than anything else, and he hadn't the faintest idea that other dogs like himself could kill each other with their teeth. This was the house where he had always lived, since they brought him there as a puppy. Behind the sealed door were his hideaways, his water bowl and his pan full of food. Although that was the least of it. Why had they abandoned him?

Fifteen days out he was still standing, resigned, like the victim of some incomprehensible mistake. But his exhaustion ended up getting the better of him, and he found himself unable to keep from leaning against the door. His eyes drooped and he dreamed. He dreamed that his family had come back, that the house was full of voices and familiar sounds, the windows were open to let in the morning sun, and he woke up delighted, giving a bark that fell into silence and then into wrenching rage. He felt betrayed, furious, once again it was there, the nightmare of the house closed up, the garden that was drying out as was his own body. No longer did he ask himself what he had done wrong, he only wanted the punishment to end.

After a time, he began to look ragged, although he continued to gaze out at the same spot. His ears sticking up were the last vestige of his alertness of the first few days. His body was gaunt and sunken in, his coat gummy and his stare like glass. His wait was coming to an end, and something akin to pity, to forgiveness, came into the dog's loyal heart. They, his gods, surely knew why they had done it.

Hortensia, Julia's mother, lived on the top floor of the building next to the dog's house. The stairwell didn't have any light bulbs, and Hortensia had started to lose her sight, so she never went out and just sat in her balcony to listen to the sounds of the street. Hortensia, like Buck, didn't read the paper. She would have liked to listen to the radio, to her soap operas, like Julia said, but it had been broken for a hundred years. Patches had kept her company, before she had died. Hortensia would tell her good morning, scold her, and once in a while, tell her everything that weighed on her mind. Patches had made her existence seem almost fun. Hortensia missed her so much, but what could she do about it, if she couldn't even take care of herself anymore, you tell me, how was she going to take care of another dog. Her neighbor who helped her now and then never said much of anything, she had her own troubles, and at least she came to air out the house and to bring her groceries from the store. Hortensia felt bad for bothering her and hated to even ask her to please read to her the letters from her daughter that, from time to time, arrived from Argentina. When Julia would send her one of those packages with soap and her heart medication, Hortensia would give away the soap to the neighbor. She would have liked to hear Julia's voice too, but, blessed Mary Mother of God, you see how expensive those calls to far off places are. And the years went by, and the years kept on passing, waiting that better days would come. Thank the heavens that she never ran out of soap or medicine. And, as luck would have it, she was just about blind, so she couldn't make out the dog.

A month after the fact the dog was gone. He hadn't been defeated by the snow storms, or the wolves, or his hunger, but rather the immense sadness that kept him from doing anything but continue to guard the house and wait, alone, their return.

Translated by Sara E. Cooper