

A Commercial Transaction

By Jorge Salavert

(Translated from the Spanish by the author)

Friday

She got on the bus, cancelled the trip on her ticket and strode up the aisle. She recognized his face as soon as she saw it; yet she did not wish to engage in any conversation with him, even less to feel contact with his devastating desolation. So she found a distant seat, and told herself she should not turn her head at all for the thirty-odd minutes the trip would take to reach the city centre.

She knew he had seen her; he must have recognized her. She recalled the last time she had talked to him in one of the supermarket aisles where she was working; she could remember his voice, shattered by pain. She had then felt some embarrassment when she found herself in the predicament of having to justify her presence at the supermarket. (The well-known logo on the shirt in fact left no doubt as to her status as an employee). Wasn't it a bit sad? Having achieved permanent residency in the country thanks to a postgraduate course (an MA, no more, no less) that cost her parents thousands of dollars, she was now working as a supermarket checkout chick.

At the very moment she recognized him she recalled the time when he had walked away down the canned foodstuffs, spices and cooking oils aisle, tears of insufferable grief showing in his eyes. She quickly thought she had to avoid such disconsolation that morning, no matter what.

On that seat, on that bus to the centre of a city and a country where she was always going to be an alien, she could feel even safer as at the next stop a blondish woman got on and took the seat available on her right. She did not need to have contact with that man so full of pain, a man whose eyes seeped sadness wherever he went. Some sort of relief made her feel more comfortable. The trip would soon be over, her day would go on, as if nothing had happened.

Saturday

He had filled the basket already with the few things that were left on his shopping list: fish, some salami and coppa, bread, tofu, the shower spray. So he headed for the express checkouts. Three were open, and he picked the middle lane, where no one was queuing at the

time. But the checkout boy was told just then to go to the main checkout, and he gestured him to move to another lane, the one on the left.

There she was, the same woman he had seen on the bus the day before. He was convinced she had seen him and had consciously avoided saying hello. The same girl with whom he had been sharing lecture and tutorial notes from the postgraduate course at the national university, barely four or five years before. The same person who, another Saturday morning, hardly seven or eight months ago, he had told in a broken voice that he was not well. How could he be well, having lost his 6-year-old daughter, who had drowned on an island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean? She did not know, she said. She never read the papers, she explained. She stammered some words, an absurd attempt to give impossible comfort, and he had walked away down the aisle while cans and spice jars were silent witnesses to the incomprehensible, inconceivable scene.

He arrived at the checkout. She greeted him, as she had been instructed by the customer care managers, and she appeared to do so with a greater degree of niceness that she would use with other customers. He did not say a word, he did not look at her. One after another he started getting the items out of the shopping basket. This is no more than a commercial transaction, he told himself.

After he put the last item on the cashier's conveyor belt, he dropped the basket on the ground, he put his hand on his back pocket and took his wallet out. Carefully, without a word, he took out the plastic card that symbolizes the consumer's stupid loyalty: the card of the program that gives you frequent flyer points and discounts at the petrol station. He left it on the counter, near the scanner. She took it, scanned it and returned it, again muttering her thanks. He neither reacted nor said a word: he waited until she finished scanning every item; then he took his credit card out of his wallet and he slid it down the card reader with the magnetic strip on the correct side, which was the side opposite with the card reader machines at the other supermarket.

When the machine told him to, he pressed the credit button and prepared himself for the compulsory signature procedure. He did not look up at any time. He waited until she offered that ridiculous piece of paper where he must sign. He scrawled his signature, returned the pen without a word, without looking her in the eye, unhurriedly. Steadily, wordlessly, he picked up his bags. He finally walked away from the checkout, feeling somehow content that he had completed that awkward commercial transaction without a word, without saying a word of thanks.

Yes, a commercial transaction, at the end of the day. A silent one.

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