

night shift

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Original title: Gaueko txanda

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When the head of human resources informed him about the change, Bill nodded in agreement. He didn't say the usual quick "yesyesyes" he uses to express his complete agreement.

"You understand it, right, Bill? The plant is now owned by another company. They're going to bring in expensive demolition machines, and security is essential. And you're going to enjoy having some company."

The person in charge is wearing a small gold cross around her neck, dotted with emerald droplets, and it swings like a pendulum every time she tops up Bill's plastic cup with water. Without stopping smiling, and within three minutes, she will propose two measures that will transform Bill's daily routine. The first was that he would now work his night shifts with a new colleague. Until now, he had always been alone in the cabin, custodian of the silent nights at the decommissioned nuclear plant. Well, not completely alone.

"We also need to talk about Max."

The second change is retiring the dog, Max. According to the trainers, it's not advisable for security animals to work past the age of twelve.

"They'll tell us when the replacement dog is ready. You should give him some final cuddles!"

And she smiled at him again.

The human resources office had recently been redecorated with the company's corporate colours. Grey walls, like the desks and chairs, but the latter in darker shades. A stiff mustard-coloured armchair in the corner, who knows when to sit in and what to read. A golden coffee capsule tower. A standing lamp and some shelves painted fluorescent yellow. In Bill's opinion, cheap and flimsy furniture, unlikely to hold much weight. In his thirty years working for the company, he'd hardly ever set foot in the office. He's used to working alone, being part of a well-coordinated but invisible team. His nights, his reflections, his cabin. A brief chat with the workmate arriving for the morning shift, passing the baton, and then home. But that's over now. He drinks his water in one gulp and leaves the office with clumsy steps, dragging his feet across the grey carpet.

The setting sun fills Bill's car with light as he drives to work. He puts the sandwich his wife had made for him on the passenger seat. As usual, the sandwich is tucked inside a plastic bag with the logo of the town's hair salon: a curly lock of hair and a pair of scissors whose finger-holes form the letters "O" and "A" from Olga's name. She also put in a can of alcohol-free beer. He'd be getting in to work earlier than usual today; it's before ten. Most nights he listens to the 10 PM radio bulletin in the parking lot before entering the cabin, but today he's turned off the radio as soon as he got into the car.

He is driving quickly, as if running from an unpleasant hunch. He flicks the indicator to take a right. As he drives along the wide road over the river, there it is again, the nuclear plant that had once been deemed strategic for the region, a giant concrete cube standing in the middle of the river's wooded meander. It has a tall chimney beside it, and an extensive electrical installation that for a long time now has been humming as loudly as a swarm of cicadas. Now real cicadas can be heard among yellowed grass that has grown in unexpected places. The summer rays of sun cast a long shadow over the building, covering the entire parking lot.

Bill's face tightens when he sees that his usual spot in the parking lot has been taken by a white BMW. After making a few awkward manoeuvres, he parks his Focus three spaces away from the white car.

Even with the engine off, he doesn't immediately get out. Five to ten. He pretends to search for something in the glove compartment, rifling through pieces of paper. There are his sleeping pills, headache pills, some honey caramel, and an old diary with phone numbers.

The driver's door of the BMW is open. Inside it he sees a young man with his left leg outside, looking down at his phone. He doesn't even glance up at the Focus's arrival. Three minutes to ten. Bill sighs, closes his eyes and gets out of the car. Carrying his bag from the hairdressers, he goes up to the BMW.

"Good evening! Are you the new guy? I'm Bill."

The young man raises his head, stands up and holds out his right hand. They're both wearing the same black company uniform, though the young man's is a few sizes smaller.

"I'm Raul. Bill, you said?"

"Well, yeah..." Bill gets ready to explain his nickname for the thousandth time, with a smug smile. "My name is Alberto, but back in the day when I started here, my friends nicknamed me Bill, because of Chernobyl."

Bill laughs, but Raul doesn't. He raises an eyebrow. Bill counts back the years mentally, suddenly feeling old. Could this Raul really be so young, or was he just that old?

"Cherno-Bill. The plant that exploded in Ukraine. It was a long time ago," Bill explained.

"I get it."

Raul has blue eyes, and he looks at his workmate like someone who knows they have blue eyes. Crooked teeth and short-cut hair. Bill feels a twitch in his stomach.

"I'll show you around."

Switching the bag to his other hand, Bill starts to walk toward the plant, not daring to look directly at Raul, and waiting for the sound of his footsteps behind him. After grabbing a small backpack from the BMW, the young man follows, walking along the white lines in the parking lot.

As they approach the building, Bill begins to speak while staring at the fence surrounding the plant. He doesn't make any effort to close the distance between them; his legs are ordering him to carry on.

"There are seventeen cameras in total. Almost all the angles around the outside of the plant and the main entrance are covered. There used to be eighteen, but one of them is broken. Maybe with the new owners the company will get its act together again."

"Got it," the young man replies. The sinking sun highlights the muscles in his arms beneath his uniform. He stares at the plant as if nothing, not even its size can impress him. He pulls out his iPhone, types something, and puts it away again. When he notices Bill watching him

he gives a half-smile and gestures with his hand to ask for more explanations. But they continue walking in silence for a while, following the fence along the river.

“There’s another camera there, and another over there.”

“Got it.”

“Irresponsible people, I’ve told them a thousand times, but nothing gets done. They don’t have anything to do, and...”

“Have you ever had any scares?”

Bill goes pale. He hadn’t expected such a question so soon. That’s not just any old question for a night security guard. You have to be young and frivolous to ask that. He felt his palm grow damp in contact with the plastic bag.

“Just small stuff. A couple of stoners, and couples looking for a place to hook up, nothing else. Since they closed the place, it’s been pretty quiet.”

His heart is about to burst from his chest; it’s going to rip open his company-logoed shirt and run off into the hills. Raul doesn’t ask any more questions. The clicking of his phone keys fills the silence, and its light the dusk. The sun has set behind the trees.

Max has his own fenced-off area near the main entrance, enough room for him and his kennel, a real roof and all, and large water and food bowls, everything the right size for him. He starts barking when he hears two men’s footsteps, his Alsatian ears up. As soon as Bill opens the gate, Max bounds out, full of energy. He runs a couple of circles around Bill’s legs, then heads straight for Raul, sniffing the stranger he had scented on the breeze half an hour before. Max begins by inspecting Raul’s trousers, his tail wagging side to side. Raul stands stiffly, and Bill chuckles to himself. Max sniffs all the way down to Raul’s shoes. Smelling the laces, the soles, the socks. Giving a whine of disappointment, Max walks away, swaggering the way big dogs do. He lays down next to the cabin where the two guards are going to spend the night, his tongue out, next to the red-and-white barrier.

The entrance area is cluttered with equipment from the company that is going to demolish the plant, all packed in large crates. One says HELMETS – MASKS in red letters. BOOTS is written on another one. They have brought two more sheds for the workers. There are also some other heavy green containers, all numbered: 03879, 03857, 03865. “What are they going to do?” Raul asks, going up to the containers.

“The dirty work,” Bill replies. He wishes he could be in the cabin now, turn on his radio, scratch Max’s neck, and be alone. But Raul looks around the equipment.

“We’re not allowed to touch anything,” Bill reminds him from beside the cabin.

"Take it easy!" Raul calls back from a distance.

Bill sighs and follows him, still holding his sandwich bag. Max follows along at his side. "Who hired this guy?" Bill wonders. "Who knows in which mall he was trained at."

He doesn't like security guards from those places, the ones who ask women to open their bags. Early in his career he had been assigned to guard a supermarket for a year, and he was immensely grateful when they transferred him to this plant without him even asking, although his mother hadn't liked the idea; the first years she used to soak her son's uniform in a bucket before putting it with other clothes in the washing machine. "If some misfortune happens, Alberto, you are going to be the one who dies first" she used to tell him. But his mum died first, and since then he has lived with his wife, who washes the clothes in a single batch, work clothes and regular clothes.

He finds Raul behind the box that says GLOVES, wandering around and lighting his way with the flashlight on his iPhone .

"Are you interested in the nuclear world?"

The young boy laughs and turns off the flashlight.

"I want to know what I have to cover"

He looks more muscular in the dark, more mature, his eyes no longer blue.

"If I only knew!", Bill replies. "It's all changed. The workers coming tomorrow are all new, the machines too. They'll empty all this. They'll start with the fuel pool and finish with the reactor, who knows when. I'll retire then."

"Have you ever seen it? The pool and all that stuff."

“When the plant was working we looked after the inside installations too. Now we only guard the perimeter. The rest is monitored by the owners.”

Raul stands staring at the large cube-shaped building. Then he pulls out his phone again and types something else, turning his back on Bill.

“The reactor is inside here”, explains Bill, pointing to the large cube. “It would take a great artist to demolish this.”

Although he's saying stuff that has to be said, he feels that he's talking too much, as if Raul's silence were dragging the words out of him. Enough.

“What does the pool look like?”, asks the boy.

“Blue”.

And Bill heads towards the cabin, with Max besides him.

“What is a void? There is no easy answer to today’s question, dear listeners. A void. Is it a feeling? A place? If I have an empty glass, and I pour some milk into it, and it will no longer be empty. But what about an existential void? Can that be filled? I don’t know. I only know that when we received this text we couldn’t think of anything else.

Good evening, Maria and friends. For me a void is what I felt before knowing about your programme. A big hug for all the castaways at the Lightning House.

A hug for you too. As you already know, in our programme we always look at every meaning of every word. To do that we're going to interview some guests and also take time to look at your messages. We'll be filling the void of the following hours together at the Lightning House, starting at two o'clock. Welcome.

Nobody help me, I’m not cold, I’m empty. Somebody heal me, hold me...”¹

When the clock strikes two he opens his bag and takes out the sandwich wrapped in tin foil. Spanish omelette with ham. He offers the first piece of bread to Max, as

1: This quote was originally written in English. It is from the song “Empty fields” by Depedro.

usual. The dog wolfs it up from the floor and waits for more, his eyes bright. When he opens the can of beer, the one looking is Raul. "It's alcohol-free."

They've been silent for a long time. Bill explains how the computer works quickly. How to see the images from each camera, how to move the viewfinders. Which button to press to open the gate. Where the toolbox is, a more professional flashlight than the iPhone in case he wants to use it sometime. And a few more things. "Sit and get bored", Bill told him.

The boy takes two tupperware containers from his small backpack. In one there is a simple, undressed salad. Grilled chicken breasts in the other. Finally, a protein-rich drinkable yoghurt. He eats staring at his phone, watching short videos one after another, watching Bill biting into his sandwich. A red-haired girl in a bikini, the crossfit lifts, the best goals of the week, a quick recipe for carrot cake, the inside of a Maserati. In the order that the algorithm had suggested. On the top of the screen he gets some messages from someone called Car. "Is it finished then?" Bill was able to read. The young man's left index finger drags the messages and the videos up to keep them temporarily in the mist of things you don't want to read, but his face darkens and he breathes heavily through his nose, his mouth full of chickens and rushes.

"Do you like basketball?" said Bill, with an unexpected feeling of pity.

"Yes. I used to play when I was little."

"Celtics are playing Orlando Magic today."

Bill moves the screen so that Raul can watch the game. Gigantic long armed men soon appear on the left and then on the right, all in line, the ball and the baskets and the game track itself small for them, but still wearing loose clothes.

Before sitting down to watch the game he makes a coffee. He presses the button on the machine and hears the puncturing of the capsule.

"Can you make me an espresso, please?", Raul asks him.

“Sure.”

Half past two. 8:30 PM in the Boston Celtic stadium. Bill has calmed down, relieved. Maybe this old cabin will not change as much as he thinks in the years to come. “Loneliness hardened you, Bill”, he says, surrounded by the smell of coffee.

Max is asleep on the floor in the tranquillity of the warm summer night; he sighs occasionally, as he has in sorrow over the last few days.

Outside, the trembling of the trees and the rumbling of the dam is all that can be heard. The big cube is silent, the chimney holding its breath. The concrete, embarrassed by noise from so many years, now wants to be part of the night landscape of the river side. I'm an alder, I'm a duckling, I'm a trout; I've always been here.

The white light coming from the guards' window has attracted a couple of moths. Their mooneyes have separated two men in front of a screen, their faces wet in the blue lights, the elder serene, and the younger man looking downwards, touching another bright device with his fingertips. Lucky them, the owners of the rays and the chimney, always on the same side of the light, open the windows, you damned people!

“You'll have to explain it to us in a way that we earthlings can understand.

I'll try to.

Do we live in the middle of a great void?

Yes and no. When we talk about cosmic void, what we mean is that the universe is largely empty, with less than one atom per cubic metre on average. But it is also a space full of planetary and galactic life, and we live in such a space.

And how does this void affect us?

Well, according to one theory, this void is going to destroy the entire cosmic web. I mean, it will swallow us up.

You'll scare the listeners. It's going to take billions of years, don't worry. Thank goodness. Most of the universe is made up of dark energy. Science invented this concept in order to understand a phenomenon that's still unexplained: what causes the accelerated expansion of the cosmos.

Is it dark energy that causes it?

We think so. And, according to one study, the source of this dark energy may be the void itself. As matter attracts matter, the gaps in the voids grow and grow.

Frightening.

I think it's beautiful.

That's why you're an astronomer and I'm a journalist."

Bill has noticed a movement in the third camera shot. It's the lights of a car going into the car park. A red Ibiza. He's never seen it here before.

'Who the hell is it?' he rises from his chair, nervous. He's enlarged the image on the screen.

'Don't worry. I'll go,' Raul has one leg out of the booth before Bill knows it.

'Wait!'

The young man makes a sign for Bill to take it easy.

'I'll be right back.'

Bill is at a loss as to what to do. It's been a while since they've had cars come here at this time. Max, ears perked and intuition ready, follows the young man, but stops when he reaches the fence. He does not bark.

Bill has followed the car's movements on the CAM 3 screen. The Ibiza has parked between his Focus and Raul's BMW. He can't make out the driver's face because the lights are on.

Raul's rigid silhouette moves from the sixth to the fifth, from the fifth to the fourth, and from the fourth to the third camera, calmly, until it gets into the same frame as the car. That's when the car's two headlights go off. The driver's door opens and a young woman, dressed in a black summer dress, with her hair wrapped in a tight ponytail, gets out. She scowls. Raul grabs her arm and starts to say something to her, which she doesn't seem to take very well, pulling her arm away sharply. She starts talking to Raul with her mouth wide open and her

2-3: From "Empty fields" by Depedro.

eyebrows raised. She prods his chest with the index finger of her right hand and then points to the car, then to the ground, and then to her chest, three times, and then to Raul's chest again. She tucks in her index finger and, with her outstretched hand, pushes him back. Now she bursts into tears, her arms hanging down, her hands still. Raul hugs her and slowly lead her to the car. They sit in the driver's and passenger's seats, and close the doors. The girl is still crying. She pulls down the sun visor, wipes her eyes, looks in the mirror, and then puts the visor up again. Raul speaks to her from his side and moves both his hands slowly, palms upwards. The girl shakes her head, resting her left elbow on the window and her fist on her chin. Raul puts his arm around her and kisses her on the head. Her shoulders show that she is sobbing. He moves her left and right, like a small boat inside the car. They do that for half a minute. Then the boat stops and the water settles. Her mouth begins to search for his, her lips going up and up on his chest, which she had wanted to stab with her fingers and fingernails. Raul stops, stone-faced, as her head pleads and slides back. He looks at the camera in the parking lot.

Bill, frowning, continues to stare at the screen. He has zoomed in on the image. The interior of the Ibiza is full of flesh, hair and steam. Gradually his astonishment reaches his belly, at first mixed with fear, then with anger. Restlessness now. He undoes his seatbelt and closes the cabin curtains to prevent the seventh camera from filming him straight on.

“Like a lonely tree in an empty field, full of unneeded things, waiting for a real sign to reach paradise...”²

“Good evening, castaways, don't you think that many people feel empty? Why? We haven't gone through war or hunger. We live in good times, we are connected, we have a lot of resources, and yet many people feel empty. Isn't it strange? I'm Txema, from Aragon. All the best.”

Watching the seasons pass, all of these years, now alone...³

“Hello, good evening everyone. What happens when something you liked no longer satisfies you? I used to write and it made me happy, but not anymore. I gave it up. People don't understand it, but I'm better. Has something like this happened to you? Greetings from La Rioja, I'm Inma.”

You've done it again, breaking your happy home, like a brand new toy in your hand...”.⁴

The Ibiza's lights come back on. Raul walks away from the car as he fastens the buttons on his shirt; he doesn't look back. Bill sees him move from the third camera to the fourth. He crosses the whole shot with a downcast face, fixing his hair with his fingers. He returns. He has entered the range of vision of the fifth camera. He walks at a slow pace. Bill has opened Facebook on the computer screen so that he has somewhere to look as he ponders what to say to Raul. The image of the young man has left the fifth shot. Bill's chosen camera is the sixth. He hasn't arrived yet. He must be coming quite slowly. Bill looks again at the fifth camera. Raul isn't there anymore. Bill jumps to the seventh. He's not there either. Max, alone, by the fence, looks away.

His hands are shaking. He enlarges the images from the entrance cameras again, one by one, 3-4-5-6-7. Nothing. Hardly able to control his fingers any more, he chooses a panoramic view of the building in which eighteen boxes appear on the screen, all his eyes. Plants blown by the wind, solitary lampposts laden with insects, the fence; there is nothing else on the perimeter. 'You are alone', his eyes tell him, all except one, CAM 16, which gives him no signal on the black square, showing everything that could or might not exist.

Bill leaves the cabin gasping for breath.

The most frequent meaning of a void is probably that of absence. A void left by someone. Our next guest feels it in her own body. She lost a friend. Lost and never found. Welcome, Julia.

Thank you, Maria.

Tell us, who was Quim?

Well... a good friend of mine. We met when we were teenagers, and we were both going through a rough time. We helped each other a lot.

In what way?

Well, listening to each other. Quim didn't have a good relationship with his parents. He would often sneak out of his house and hide in the park, near my house. I met him that way, walking with my friends in the park. My friends laughed, but I... I don't know, I knew we would understand each other.

Bill runs to the back of the power station, followed by the sound of Max's paws. His vocal cords have tangled up and each scream tightens in his throat.

'Raul! Raul!'

There is no answer. The roar of the dam grows louder and louder as he gets close to the sixteenth camera. Bill sees the dam steam up as it always does when he goes up to it.

Arriving in front of the camera, he pauses to observe the immense stream of water that can be so heavy, so loud as to make the brain explode from the inside. The thirst of this power station was no small matter, and they had taught the river how to feed it, where to go through the veins of the concrete cube, what to cool and when to evaporate, without saying a word. They also showed it how to return to its course after having seen so many nooks and crannies and so many divers in the bowels of the power station. And the enthusiasm of that return was hurting the plankton and the fish in the reservoir and everything else that came his way, which his acquaintances opposed to the power station, reproached him for using words learned from a very few ecologists. Those groups had frightened him with their nightly actions because they could appear at any moment, with their angle-grinders in hand, cutting the power station fences, or chaining themselves to the ground to start a day of starvation. Security at night was tough, and it got tougher then. Anyone trying to attack the power station could endanger everyone's lives.

'Raul!

No sign of him. Bill looks up at the sixteenth camera in panic, as he had on that night.

'That summer I got my driving licence, and Quim and I drove around in my father's old car, smoking weed and listening to music. In the village nearby there's a nuclear power station and we thought we'd go around it, down by the river. I remember we talked a lot about life.

What did Quim say to you?

Well... he mainly asked me questions. About my plans for the future. Where would I want to live? I told him Italy, I don't know why. He hadn't been able to choose a country. I repeated the conversation of that night several times and then I noticed that there was a sadness in him that I hadn't seen at first. He said he wanted to get some air and got out of the car. I... I don't know, I fell asleep and woke up after an hour or two.

And he didn't come back.

He didn't come back, no.'

As they entered the interior of the power station, he was about to leave Max outside, but he didn't dare. The door slammed shut behind them in a gust of wind.

The yellow emergency lights just illuminate the entrance and the large earth mosaic, the glowing symbol of an atom inside the palm of a large hand. Bill switches on the torch on his belt and moves left and right in search of a shadow. Its beam reflects on the glass of the office next to the stairs. He had only been in the room once before, but he not forgotten that picture of blisters hanging on the wall and he looked at it while holding back tears. There had been an emergency meeting between the security company and the owners of the plant. He was shown for the first and last time what the sixteenth camera had picked up on a small computer.

CAM 16: A slim young man appears with a cigarette in his hand, looking at the dam. A few seconds later, Bill appears behind him, legs shaking, gun in hand, shouting something to the boy. The frightened young man climbs over the fence with the speed of a roe deer. Before he knows it, he is on the other side, running along the narrow edge of the dam. Before

Bill can get out his walkie-talkie and call for help, the boy stumbles and is swallowed up by the waterfall.

From then on, he only thinks of the poppies in a green field with seven red flowers painted in oil paint, and around him the murmur of his bosses' voices, we are going to delete the video, the police's main hypothesis is suicide, each poppy has eight black seeds inside it, we deactivate the camera and say it has broken down, the last thing we need to lose our licence for good, on the poppies you can also see pinches of stems, with fine strokes, all right, then, take it easy, Bill, take a few days for yourself.

Bill and Max hurry up the steps and through the adjoining building, down a long corridor, Bill nervously, with his hand on his chest, the dog's tongue out, glancing up at the man from time to time, unable to guess what danger he has sensed is.

Ahead of them appears a covered tunnel with a plastic entrance. 'Short stay zone. Risk of radiation and contamination', says a sign, among many other symbols and exclamation marks. The man and the dog walk on, ignoring everything, partially illuminated by the nervous light of the torch.

'How would you define the void he left you?

Phew. I don't know. Like night.

Bill has pushes open a door with a prohibition sign and they stop running. In this room there is still the sound of machines, unlike in the rest of the building, as well as the noise of a radioactivity measuring device. Looking at the calm water, Bill tries to catch his breath.

There is a giant pool in front of them. Inside it, at a depth of about ten metres and under an iron net, the shielded boxes are arranged in a circle, and inside them the fuel rods used when the plant was operating at thousands of degrees. It's like a black tunnel to the other side of the world.

Bill and Max climb onto the yellow structure above the pool and look down at their reflection in the mirror-clear water surface. The old man and the old dog. The water flows continuously to balance the temperature level and limit radiation. Bill checks the panel: Air temperature: 21 degrees. Water temperature: 32 degrees. He wipes the sweat from his forehead. All is well.

He sits with his legs dangling over the pool and his face hidden in his hands. He feels his skull beneath his fingertips, ever more present after his skin had shattered. Narrow forehead, prominent chin. One day those bones that have grown accustomed to always being in the dark will see the light, and the coffee, his yellowed teeth, the wear on his left knee, and the imprint of having broken his elbow as a child, will sum up Bill's life. For the moment he is dressed in flesh, although radiation has begun to progressively perforate his cells and these cell fragments will perforate other cells, today he is covered in veins and muscles, and when he closes his eyes he can see the red of the blood on his eyelids, an increasingly intense red because of the light injected through the fingers on his hand.

When he opens his eyes, he thinks he sees a shadow under the water, but it immediately fades into the light. A white lightning bolt from the depths has clouded all his senses, to the point of not hearing the worn-out clicking of the gauge, of not seeing the red lights above the doors or the temperature changes on the panel, to the extent of not smelling old Max's intentions, as he has leapt from the structure and launches himself directly into the search for the light, piercing the surface with his front legs.

"The lighthouses go out at dawn. Many thanks to all the castaways who have been with us tonight. We will continue talking about the void, convinced that there is someone on the other side. See you tomorrow.

I'm drowning up my sorrows, there's rules I'll never follow, pretend there's no tomorrow. I wish there was no tomorrow".⁵