

the man not loved by light

ENEKO BIDEGAIN

translation:
Igone Aldalur
Ainhoa Defois

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Original title: Argiak maite ez zuen gizona

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Every two seconds, clink, clink. Every two seconds, one fell into the box; one for every egg laid by a certain species of African termite. Clink. Every two seconds, a one-euro coin. Clink, clink. In one minute, 25 coins were collected. In one hour, 1,500 coins. 1,500 euros per hour. Clink, clink. Somewhere, a box was filling up, clink, clink.

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He loaded the wheelbarrow with firewood, carried it as best as he could, wobbling along the narrow, earthen path in his worn-out shoes and dirty trousers. Winter was approaching; this would be Karlos's second winter since he had begun living in that half-collapsed hut. In a secluded corner of the forest, as far from the town centre as possible, he had withdrawn, isolated himself before those around him could fully cast him out.

A strange affliction had seized his body a year and a half before. Wherever he went, music fell silent, screens dimmed, lights went out, elevators stood still, automatic doors locked, and medical equipment went quiet... In other words, the power was cut off. His ailment was so mysterious that even the doctors couldn't diagnose it, writing their conclusion on a piece of paper: intolerance to electrical networks. But according to Karlos, it was the other way around: electrical networks were intolerant of him.

Life at home had become unbearable: the stove wouldn't heat up, the radio no longer broadcasted the news, and the once-romantic charm of candles had become a heavier burden with each passing evening. His family didn't dare to blame him for anything (Poor man! He was already suffering enough!), but this illness had frayed his children and wife's patience. When the lights went out, tempers flared, angrier each time.

If life at home had been difficult, outside it had been no easier. He couldn't go to work; when he did, the air conditioning wouldn't cool the air, and computers became nothing but black, blankscreens... He was driven out of shops, pubs, museums, and cinemas... Even the cash machine turned him away: it swallowed his card and dispensed no cash...

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One day, returning home with his head hung low, he heard a commotion as the lights suddenly went out. It sounded as if a chair had fallen over or someone had bumped against a table. Then murmuring there was. He heard more noises from outside, and through the

kitchen window he saw a man stark naked, running through the garden with his clothes in his arms...

He understood everything. His wife had a lover; it was simply that – his wife had a lover.

So he began looking for a spot as far from any house or power line as he could, and there he found the abandoned hut. At least it had a fireplace, and the stream wasn't too far away. He fenced off the area, planted a vegetable garden, and raised a few hens.

He arrived, sombre, with his loaded wheelbarrow. Last winter had been tough, and he didn't know whether he would survive another! The fire warmed his skin, but the loneliness chilled his heart. And that loneliness felt harsher, more terrifying when the sky darkened early and the ground froze.

He heard footsteps quite far away, and grew anxious. They weren't the steps of a deer or a wild boar... They were slow, weary steps, but clumsy enough to make it clear that they belonged to two wide feet beneath two long legs. Over that year, his hearing had sharpened. And he knew this wasn't the time or place for such footsteps.

He hid in the hut, positioning himself by the window with a stick in his hand. He surveyed his little republic around the old shack – it was small, but still his republic – feeling it was in danger. Let nobody take his vegetables, his eggs, or his hens! Let no one drive him out of his hut! Let no one step inside to try to take over!

At last, the threat appeared between two trees. Ragged and dragging himself along, wearing a thin wool jacket and trousers that were half-fallen, threadbare and torn, with holes in his boots...he was all skin and bone. From hollow eye sockets, like those of a corpse, fear had dimmed his gaze. The last thing he wanted was to encounter another wretch, and Karlos's challenging stare struck him down.

Literally. He was utterly shattered. Only he knew what it took to get there, and how long it had been since he had last swallowed a morsel. When he saw the man collapse, Karlos felt a wave of relief wash over him. His little republic was safe; that pitiful creature wouldn't be the one to conquer it.

Slowly, he edged closer, keeping a firm grip on his stick, as if the man lying on the ground were a subdued wolf that might still bite. With the tip of the stick he prodded the man's arm to check if he was still alive. The man shifted slightly, and Karlos retreated into the hut.

It took the man a few minutes to reopen his eyes. A dark haze clouded his vision. He didn't know where he was or what had happened to him. Through the murk, he saw a shadow – a large shadow – only a quarter of a metre from his eyes... Even the sounds around him were muffled by this black fog. A constant, unpleasant buzzing was the only noise that penetrated his awareness. Bit by bit, a distant echo drew nearer and became clearer:

'Are you alright?'

And the fog began to lift. Right before his eyes was the man who had startled him, now holding a glass of water up to his lips. His face looked friendlier this time.

The stranger slept from dusk until the next afternoon, completely out for the count. Karlos gave him his bed and slept on the floor himself. He didn't get much rest and rose at dawn with a stiff back.

It took them several days to exchange more than a muted 'Hello'. Initially, despite his suspicions, Karlos looked after the newcomer with great care. During those first few days he served him hot broth cooked over the fire, and on the third day he treated him to an egg omelette. When the man finally managed to get up from his bed unaided, Karlos looked at him warily from the corner of his eye. Surely he wouldn't turn on him after being fed by hand and now that he had regained his strength!

On the seventh day, Karlos asked, 'What's your name?'

The man responded with his head bowed, as if intimidated by Karlos. The question probably came off as rather abrupt.

'Me? ... Karlos' he murmured, almost too softly to hear.

'Karlos? Just like me!' Karlos exclaimed, a wide grin spreading across his face as he held out his hand. 'That makes you Karlos B, and I'll be Karlos A!'

That day, they didn't talk any more. Karlos B began helping Karlos A in the vegetable garden. Karlos A made dinner, and they ate in silence, keeping quiet afterwards. Karlos picked up a hefty book he had salvaged from the rubbish and began reading by the firelight. Meanwhile, Karlos B lay on the bed, feigning sleepiness. He closed his eyes, unsure of what else to do. Although his eyes were shut, his mind refused to be still. Thoughts swirled in his head: ghosts from the past and dreams of the future. He longed to drift off to sleep with comforting thoughts, but these imagined scenes kept him wide awake. Maite came to mind – Maite from before the divorce – snug in bed, those lingering caresses, morning pieces of toast, and the twins, Haizea and Ane, bustling about before school... What he wouldn't have given to be back with them!

However, everything took a turn for the worse, and dark thoughts overwhelmed him. Divorce. Needing to rent a place for himself and struggling to cope with skyrocketing prices... A precarious job, and inflation, making things even harder for the workers... His bank account was running on empty, and the bills kept piling up. That's when he started missing a few payments.

They made their way to the dump, which was a kilometre away, in search of an old mattress. Karlos A thought it was time to reclaim his bed, but he felt it would be cruel to leave Karlos B on the hard ground. Along the way he asked a few questions; he was eager to learn more about Karlos B, but Karlos B remained tight-lipped about himself. He spent most of the day in silence. Was it because Karlos A was acting like the boss? Because he was the one calling the shots? Or had Karlos B unwittingly slipped back into the role of the oppressed and downtrodden worker, as if that label were stitched into his very being?

Karlos A overcame his initial fears. He saw no threat in that frail man as he regarded him as his servant. He recounted his misfortunes without any worries.

When that strange illness first appeared, numerous investigations were carried out into its origin. Since the doctors had failed to provide any answers, they consulted their regular electrician, but he couldn't offer any rational explanation either. They even brought in an exorcist, convinced it could only be a curse. The devil had taken possession of his body, so they needed to drive him out... but to no avail.

'But I knew exactly when it all began...'

However, people around him weren't so sure about that. To tell the truth, they couldn't remember when those odd things had started happening. They didn't immediately realise that the reason for the power outage was Karlos himself. They thought it was due to issues at the electricity company, or that there had been a major problem. It never crossed their minds – nor Karlos' – that similar problems were happening elsewhere.

Karlos drew up a backward timeline and stated which day the anomaly had first taken place in his home. His wife was not convinced, as the power had gone out before, and she was not ready to bet on Karlos's hypothesis. There was no basis for it.

Karlos said he had become that way due to a major power cut that had taken place at the hospital. The origin of that powercut was never clarified: a lightning strike, a radioactive wave, a solar storm...

'I realised, yes, that my wife and children were looking at me as if I were mad. When they told me I was just talking nonsense, other people who were in the hospital that day didn't have any problems like that... What did they know, anyway? Did they even think of asking the others?'

'And did you go and ask them?'

'How could I know who else was in the hospital that day?'

'And what were you doing in the hospital?'

'I was having a minor operation...'

Karlos B knew what a powercut was, but not in the same way. Power didn't go out wherever he went. He had had his power cut at home because he wasn't paying the bills. Karlos A didn't mention money, but he had no financial worries.

'And what do you do for a living?'

'I was the owner of a company... I am...'

Karlos A didn't dare say which company it was. It would have been comical if it weren't so tragic.

'Now I realise who you are,' and Karlos B's appearance suddenly changed. He dropped his frightened voice, straightened his hunched back, and fire flashed in his eyes. Karlos A was left speechless, gripped by fear – a new kind of fear, not the initial mistrust he had felt.

Back then, Karlos A's mysterious misfortune had been all over the news; it filled the newspaper headlines, and there were reports about it on shows about the paranormal. By then, Karlos B's electricity had been cut off, and he had also been served an eviction notice.

'You know what? You deserved nothing less.'

Karlos A had turned porcelain-like, as still as he was pale. He wasn't a believer, though he did go to mass; he put no stock in superstitions and could hardly bring himself to think he was under some sort of spell. But now, of all times, he wished he could believe. He wanted to believe in God, if only to pray this curse away. First, though, he'd needed to make amends for going to church as nothing but a hypocrite, atheist as he was. He would have liked to have faith in God but found himself believing in the devil instead. He felt he was losing his grip. He had never imagined he'd come face-to-face with someone who relished his suffering! A chill ran through him. What's this wretch doing here? How much more do I have to suffer?

This time, Karlos B had overpowered Karlos A, who looked as distinguished as a President of the Republic. The President shrank back in his bed, trembling, as if the devilish Karlos B had come to deliver the final blow. With a face as crushed as a frightened dog, he watched every time Karlos B came near...

But Chales B lovingly prepared his meals, carefully tended the chimney, fed the chickens when they needed food, and kept the house tidy. And that was precisely what frightened Karlos A. Wouldn't he poison him?

'We all thought you were dead...'

Karlos B decided to break his silence of several days. After learning that Karlos A had vanished, an anonymous group had released a document some weeks later revealing the truth.

‘You know, Karlos? It wasn’t witchcraft. The doctor who operated on you wasn’t who you thought. A covert organisation kidnapped your doctor just minutes before the operation, and it was someone else who entered the operating theatre. He was a doctor too, but not from the hospital. And he implanted a microchip in you. That chip is the source of all the problems you’ve been having with electricity.’

He knew he had enemies. He knew that when he gave orders from the top of his ivory tower, when he supervised money matters, or when he played on the stock exchange, even if the lament of the common people did not reach his ears, that pain existed. He was quite angry all the same! He easily forgot the easy laughter he had enjoyed with other businessmen and political leaders at meetings, cocktails, dinners and so on three or more times a week. He was the chairman of the electricity company, or he wasn’t anymore... he couldn’t tell. Someone was cut off? So what? The law was on his side. All they had to do was pay the bills! Although he himself didn't know where to spend all his money...

‘They cut off the power because of your decisions’, –Karlos B continued.– ‘You filled your pockets nicely, at the expense of the underprivileged...’

With those last words, he bade farewell to Karlos A. And off he went, to live life elsewhere.

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A pound coin drops into Karlos A's bank cash box with a clink, and two seconds later another makes a similar sound... For two years now, the euros had been piling up, clink after clink, and he couldn't take a single one out of the box. There was a room filled to the brim with coins, practically overflowing...

Meanwhile, on the other side of the world, a businessman from another multinational stepped into the shower. The water that came out was black, as dark as coal and laden with sugar from what he sold as a fizzy drink...