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Symphony in A Minor

by Matías F. Travieso-Díaz

In the last movement, Mahler described himself and his downfall or, as he later said, that of his hero: “It is the hero on whom fall three blows of fate, the last of which fells him, as a tree is felled.” — Alma Mahler, quoting Gustav Mahler on his Sixth Symphony.

Fortunato stood in front of the door of his apartment, unable to gather the nerve to step out despite his predicament. Perhaps due to his anxiety over the state of things in the country, his heart rate had been abnormally high for several days, and his physician had prescribed a beta-blocker to prevent a possible heart attack. He had ordered and paid for the medication over the phone, and the filled prescription was waiting for him at the local outlet of the CVS Pharmacy chain. He just needed to go pick it up.

However, the pharmacy was located in the town’s main shopping center, and there had been two well-publicized raids by immigration control agents at the center in the last couple of weeks, seeking to seize and detain foreign-looking individuals for potential deportation. Fortunato certainly looked like a foreigner; he was a mestizo with light brown skin, straight black hair, a broad face, prominent cheekbones, and a broad “Roman” nose. He was afraid to show his face at the center.

He had entered the world in this very town, but his parents had been illegal immigrants who had come from Honduras in the 1970s, fleeing the Melgar Castro regime’s persecution of its political opponents. He had been a native-born citizen of this country for fifty years, longer than the ages of most of the immigration control operatives who were making the rounds. But these days, neither lawfulness nor advanced age shielded people who looked like him from seizure and imprisonment. Mistakes kept being made and, as alarming press reports made clear, once you were deported there was no coming back.

Moreover, there were efforts by the country's rulers to revoke the citizenship status of those born in the country if their parents had not been legally admitted, and other steps were being considered to revoke the citizenship status of naturalized citizens who opposed the current regime. Removal of citizenship status made a person eligible for deportation without due process and other legal protections.

In short, if Fortunato drew the attention of any of the hounds sniffing around for victims, he could be picked up and sent to Honduras, a country he had never even visited and with which he only had tenuous heritage links. And it was not a nice place to start life over: the current government of Honduras, while not a classic military dictatorship, engaged in the persecution of activists and journalists and committed other human rights violations; the country was also very poor and plagued by institutional weakness, pervasive corruption, and gang violence.

"If they catch me, I might as well be as dead as if I had suffered a violent heart attack," he thought. "But if I don't get that medication, I might die here in my room."

* * *

Fortunato had never married, had no siblings, and at this point in his life his few friends were either dead or had moved away. So, he had nobody he could ask to go to the pharmacy, pick up the prescription, and bring it to him.

He had called the pharmacy to inquire if they had a way to deliver the prescription to him. He was told that they had a service that would provide same-day prescription delivery, but his neighborhood was a high-crime area where carrier deliveries were not made, so delivery would have to be via a shipping option of two business days.

Fortunato was not willing to wait that long, nor to take his chances with a mail delivery service that could lose or delay the arrival of his prescription. He would have to get the medication in person.

* * *

Fortunato gathered enough courage to open the door and walk out to his car. He drove to the shopping center and, in looking for a place to park, selected a spot near the public library. He reasoned that an institution devoted to learning would be an unlikely place to attract the attention of immigration agents, who would focus on locations where people went to satisfy basic needs, such as food and clothing.

The CVS outlet was on the other wing of the complex, and he did not dare risk the five-minute walk in the open, so he sat in his car and waited.

Not long afterward he spotted what he was looking for: a blond teenager in scruffy jeans and a baggy T-shirt walked by, listening to something on his phone. Fortunato lowered his car window and called out: "Hey, kid, come here!"

He had to repeat his summons, for the kid was engrossed in his music. At last, the boy turned to him and replied with a scowl: “What do you want, perv?”

Ignoring the rude remark, Fortunato asked quickly, fearing the kid would walk away: “Can you run a little errand for me? I’ll give you ten bucks!”

“What kind of an errand?” The boy narrowed his eyes.

“Nothing hard or illegal. Can you just go to CVS and pick up a prescription for me?” He took out the receipt and waved it in the air.

“Why can’t you do that yourself?” was the wary response.

“I have a bad leg cramp and can’t walk up to there.”

The kid was still suspicious. “Twenty?”

Fortunato sighed. “Fine, but please hurry. The pain is killing me.”

The boy sneered and approached the car. Fortunato handed him the receipt.

“Where is the twenty?”

“You’ll get it when you bring me the prescription.”

“OK.” The boy snorted but seized the receipt and walked away.

* * *

As he waited, Fortunato was accosted by a memory. He was an accomplished trumpet player and derived his modest income from teaching the instrument, performing with ad-hoc bands in wedding receptions and other parties, and playing with the local community symphony orchestra in cases where the works being performed required extra trumpet parts to add bombast to fanfares at climatic moments.

Fortunato recalled his recent engagement with the orchestra the night it played Gustav Mahler’s Symphony No. 6. That work is dubbed the “tragic” symphony because of its A-minor key and the heroic, martial, and often terrifying character of much of the music. He had been hired to play as an extra fifth trumpet to reinforce the sonic impact of the full orchestral tuttis, especially those leading up to and immediately following two shattering “hammer blows” at the end of the work.

The powerful, sustained chords and dramatic fanfares underscored the sense of overwhelming fate and tragedy, and remembering how he played those chords instilled in Fortunato a vague sense of despair.

He came out of his reverie when he saw the kid, a package in hand, sashaying along in his direction to the rhythm of the music on his phone. The boy turned the corner and was approaching Fortunato’s car when, out of a fast-food restaurant, emerged a trio of adolescents of about the same age and similar scruffiness as his messenger. They approached his boy and struck a loud conversation that soon became an argument; Fortunato could hear the angry voices, though he could not make out what was being said.

Suddenly, one of the boys threw a punch at his messenger, who riposted one-handedly, still holding on his other hand the bag with the prescription. Fortunato got out of the car, alarmed. He was starting towards the group when out of the restaurant emerged two men, attracted by the commotion. One was a security guard; the other wore a black polyester hoodie with the word “IMMIGRATION” emblazoned on the front in white letters.

The four kids dispersed, running in all directions. Fortunato’s messenger ran towards the street behind the shopping center, leaving the bag with the prescription lying on the sidewalk.

Fortunato’s heart began pounding in his chest as he approached the site of the fight and bent over to pick up the bag. “Scuse me!” he pleaded to the two men and, as his hand closed on the bag, he heard a commanding voice behind him: “Hey, you! You are under arrest on suspicion of being illegally in this country!”

Fortunato replied in a whisper: “Wait, I am a citizen!”

The agent shot back: “Do you have proof of citizenship, like a passport?”

“Yes, but not on me—”

“Let’s go to the station!” commanded the agent, drawing out a pair of handcuffs.

Fortunato felt his knees weaken and experienced intense pain in his chest and neck. He crumpled to the ground, and his mind filled with the “fate” theme of Mahler’s Sixth Symphony, the A Minor motif symbolizing utter defeat and the triumph of tragedy. *It’s all over*, his mind lamented.

As he lay on the ground, the music dissolved slowly in his head.

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