

Give Way

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His grandmother's phone was full again, so at a quarter to five in the morning Nacho sat at her kitchen table and deleted forty-one photographs of the same cat.

The cat, a grey tom who belonged to nobody and ate at four flats on Calle Blanco, watched him from the windowsill. From the bedroom came the light, even snore of a woman who would deny it at breakfast. The marraquetas he had brought up from Brito's were still warm in their paper, and the kitchen smelled of them, and of gas, and of the sea, which in the Plan you could smell even with the windows shut.

He cleared her messages. He cleared the memory of a card game she swore she did not play. Then, because the phone was nagging, he opened Cauce to let it update, and the update wanted her to confirm her settings, and he scrolled down to tap through them for her, and stopped.

Ceder el paso. Give way. The switch beside it was green.

Under it, in the small grey type the city used for things it was obliged by law to say:

If an event leaves more people in the Plan than the stairs and ascensores can lift in time, Cauce may give you a later or less certain route, so that someone else can have yours. You will not be told who. They will not be told it was you.

Active since 14 March 2034.

He read it twice. Then he read the date again, because in March 2034 his grandfather had been dead for five weeks, and Elsa had still been setting two cups out at once and putting one of them back.

Everyone in Valparaíso had Cauce. It came with the phone the way the hills came with the city. It listened to the pressure sensors on the seabed off Quintero and Algarrobo, and when the ground moved it worked out, faster than anyone could think, where the water would go and how long it would take to get there. Then it worked out where you should go. Not everyone: you. Which street, which stair, which car of which ascensor, which minute. A city of narrow stairs cannot send everybody up the same stairs at once, so Cauce spread them, the way a good conductor spreads a crowd across the doors of a tram. Twice a year there were drills, at eleven on a Sunday morning, and the whole Plan walked uphill holding its phones out in front of it like candles.

In eleven years of drills Elsa had always been given the refuge. The old customs house on Plaza Wheelwright, reinforced, a blue wave painted by the door, four storeys of concrete that the engineers swore would stand. Nacho had always thought it was her hip. The machine looked at an old woman with a bad hip and sent her somewhere flat and close, which seemed sensible, and a little insulting, and very like a machine.

He sat there with the phone in his hand and the cat looking at him.

He could wake her. She would come out in her quilted gown with her hair flat on one side, and he would hold up the phone, and she would say: that is mine, leave it. And he would say: abuela, it means if the sea comes they send you to the building that might flood so that some stranger gets your seat. And she would say: I know what it means, I can read. And then it would be an argument, and the argument would reach his mother in Santiago by lunchtime, and his mother would phone him from her office and cry in the voice she used for crying at work, and

in the end Elsa would do exactly as she liked, as she had for eighty-three years.

Or.

Her PIN was the date of her wedding. She had told him when her eyes got bad, the way she had told him where the gas tap was and where the money was in the tin of buttons: practical information, for afterwards.

He typed it. 0712. The switch went grey.

Thank you for the years you gave way, said Cauce. *You can change this at any time.*

He put the phone on the charger beside the bread. He ate one marraqueta standing at the window, watching the first trolleybus come along Avenida Brasil with its lights still on, and he told himself that it was the sort of thing you did for people you loved, and that it had been easy, and that easy was not the same as wrong.

He worked nights at the container terminal, on the lashing crew: the people who walk the stacks in hard hats and harnesses and unlock the twistlocks so the cranes can lift. Ten at night to three in the morning, then the long walk along the port fence to Calle Serrano, where Brito opened at three for the port.

Don Héctor Brito was sixty-eight and floured to the elbows. He had been opening at three since before Nacho was born, for the drivers and the crane men and the women who cleaned the ferry terminal, and he had a knee that he wrapped every night in a bandage the colour of tea.

"The knee says rain," he said, as he said most nights, and slid the paper bag across.

"The knee was wrong yesterday."

"The knee is never wrong. It is early." He nodded at the bag. "Two extra. For the señora. Tell her the grey cat comes here too, the traitor. Tell her he says hers is better."

The bakery was a single room with a counter, a wall of trays and an oven older than the state. It was the warmest place in the Plan at three in the morning, and the men from the port stood in it longer than they needed to, talking about football with their hands around the bags.

In the weeks after the kitchen table, Nacho found he had started looking at people.

He looked at them on the stairs. Valparaíso is built on its stairs, hundreds of them, painted and broken and steep, and in the mornings old men stopped on the landings with one hand on the rail and their breath going in and out. He looked at the women queuing for the ascensores, the old wooden cars that crawl up the cliffs on their cables, and he wondered which of them had a green switch in their pocket. He wondered whether they had told anyone. He thought probably not. It was not a thing you said in a queue.

“Joaquín,” he said once, on a break, up on the stacks with the harbour black below them. “You have that setting? In Cauce. Ceder el paso.”

Joaquín laughed so hard he had to hold the rail. “I have three kids, hermano. If the sea comes I am taking the first stair I see and two old ladies with me under my arms.”

And one night at the bakery, because he could not stop himself:

“Don Héctor. Do you have it switched on? The giving way?”

Brito tapped the bandage. “With this? Mijo, I am the one they give way to.”

Elsa never mentioned the switch. She did not mention the cat photographs, either, though she must have noticed they were gone, because the next week there were fifty more.

The sirens came at seven minutes to three on a Thursday in May.

Nacho was on top of a stack of reefers, four high, with his hands on a twistlock, when every phone on the quay screamed at once. Then the

steel under his boots began to sway, slowly, the whole stack leaning like a tired man, and the cranes along the quay groaned on their rails, and somewhere a container door that nobody had latched swung open and shut, open and shut, banging like a fist.

It went on for a long time. It went on for so long that he had time to think, very clearly, that it had not stopped yet.

When it stopped, his phone was already showing him his route.

IGNACIO RIVAS. Walk. Gate 3, Calle Blanco, Escalera Cienfuegos. Do not use Gate 1. 11 min. Water expected 03:14.

A blue line on a map. A little walking man. The lashing crew came down the ladders faster than they had ever come down them, and at the bottom the foremen were not shouting, because there was nothing to shout. Everyone was looking at their own screen and turning in different directions. It was eerie: two hundred men leaving the quay in silence, peeling off like a flock.

He was through Gate 3 and running up Calle Blanco before he thought to call her. She answered on the second ring.

“I’m dressed,” she said, before he could speak. “I’m in the street. Don’t shout.”

“Where are they sending you?”

There was a pause, and he heard, under the sirens, her shoes on the pavement and a dog barking somewhere and her breath.

“El Peral,” she said. “The ascensor. Car one, the front. Three minutes past.” Another pause. “That’s strange.”

“Go, abuela.”

“Eleven years they never once...”

“Go.”

He ran. Escalera Cienfuegos was already full of people climbing with their phones held out, but not crushed, never crushed: they came in from the side streets in pulses, the way Cauce let them in, a dozen at a time, and nobody had to push. A man carried a child asleep on his shoulder. A woman in a cleaner's tabard was holding a birdcage with a sheet over it. At the third landing he passed an old man sitting with his head between his knees, and a teenager crouched beside him saying, "It's fine, it says you have time, it says you have time."

He came out on Cerro Alegre with his lungs on fire at nine minutes past three and ran along the paseo to the top station of El Peral, and stood there with his hands on his knees, waiting for the car.

It came up out of the dark with its windows lit, rocking a little on the cable the way it always did, and when the doors opened she was the first one out. She had dressed in the dark. Her cardigan was buttoned one hole wrong all the way down, so that one side hung lower than the other, and she was holding her handbag in front of her with both hands.

"There was nobody in the booth," she said. It was the first thing she said. "I didn't pay."

"Abuela."

"Thirty-one years in that booth, and I never once rode it without paying." She looked back at the car as if it had done something improper. "I've never been up it at night. It's pretty."

Then she let him hold her, and they turned together and looked down.

From the paseo you can see the whole bay. They watched the sea go out. It went out like a held breath, a long dark slope of mud and rock appearing where the water had been, fishing boats tipping onto their sides in the port, a strange silence under the sirens. Then it came back. It did not look like a wave. It looked like the sea had decided the land was its own and was walking in to take it. It went over the quay and the railway and Avenida Errázuriz, and the streetlights of the Plan went

out one block at a time, from the water inwards, like someone walking through a house switching off the lights.

Elsa said nothing for a long while. Then she said, quite quietly, “Calle Blanco.”

Her flat was on Calle Blanco, on the ground floor.

“You’re here,” Nacho said. “That’s what matters.”

Four people died in Valparaíso. The water stood a metre deep in the streets of the Plan, deeper by the port, and it went back out by morning and left the city painted brown to the height of a man’s belt. The city published the names on the Saturday, as the law required.

Héctor Brito Saavedra, 68, was the second.

They had found him on the steps of the old customs house, the refuge, with the blue wave painted on the door beside him. The doors had been open. The people inside had been calling. He had been eleven steps short and sitting down, the newspaper said, as if he had stopped to rest his knee.

On Monday Cauce published its report, as the law also required. Nacho read it at the kitchen table in his own flat on Cerro Alegre, while Elsa slept in his bed and he slept, when he slept, on the sofa.

During the event of 9 May, demand for routes to high ground in the Plan exceeded the capacity of stairs and ascensores within the warning time by 212 people. Of these, 171 had chosen to give way. 41 were assigned later or less certain routes without having chosen it. Cauce does not, and cannot, disclose which.

He read it a great many times. He did the sum, which was not a sum, because nothing in it was that simple. The routes were not a queue. Nobody had stood in line behind Elsa. There was no single seat that had passed from one person to another; there was a city of moving water and moving people and a machine moving them all at once, and one switch, among hundreds of thousands, had been grey instead of green.

But it had been one switch. And there had been forty-one, and not forty.

He went down to Calle Serrano on the Tuesday. The shutter of the bakery was down, a tidemark across it at the height of his belt. Somebody had taped a sheet of paper to it with the name written in marker, and people had left candles in jam jars along the step, and among the candles, absurdly, loaves of supermarket bread still in their plastic, because what else do you leave for a baker.

He did not know Brito's daughter well. She came out of the flat above to sweep the mud from the doorway, saw him, and leaned on her broom.

"You're the one from the port. Two extra for the señora."

"Yes."

"His phone gave him the customs house," she said. She said it without being asked, the way people say a thing they have said already fifty times that week, to make it smaller. "He would have been fine on the ascensor. They had him on the third run of Reina Victoria in the drills, always, because of the knee. This time it gave him the refuge. The flat way." She looked down at the broom. "I asked them why. They said it doesn't work like that, there isn't a why. Everything moves everything."

"I'm sorry," Nacho said.

She nodded and went on sweeping. He stood there a while longer, then walked up the hill, and it was the longest walk of his life, and it was eleven minutes.

Elsa stayed with him for three weeks, while the flat on Calle Blanco dried out and the men from the municipality came to look at the walls and shake their heads. She did not sleep well in his bed. She was not used to the height, she said, or the quiet, or the cat not being there to complain. Most nights he heard her get up and go to the window.

One night, near the end, he got up too. It was three in the morning. She was sitting in the dark with a blanket around her shoulders, looking down at the Plan, where the lights were back on in patches and the

port was working again, the cranes moving under their floodlights as if nothing had happened.

“Brito would be opening now,” she said.

“Yes.”

She did not turn round. “Eleven years of drills,” she said. “Twice a year. And every time the refuge. The customs house. I used to sit in there with the same five old ladies and we’d play cards until it said we could go home.” She pulled the blanket closer. “Then the one night it matters, they give me car one. The front window. I’ve never ridden at the front in my life. The front seat is for tourists.”

He did not say anything.

“Give me my phone, mijo.”

It was on the table between them. He gave it to her. She held it close to her face, the way she did now, and he watched the light of it on her cheek while she found the place. She knew where it was. She did not have to look for it.

She looked at the grey switch for a long time.

“You know my PIN,” she said.

“Yes.”

“Your grandfather would have liked that you remember it.”

She did not ask him why. That was the worst of it. He had prepared a hundred answers, lying on the sofa every night for three weeks, and she did not want any of them. She knew why. Everybody always knew why. It was the reason nobody could argue with, and she was too old and too tired to try.

“Abuela, I couldn’t...” he began.

“I know.” She touched the switch, and it went green, and she put the phone face down on the table. “Do you know who it went to? Whoever they moved, for me?”

“It doesn’t say. It never says.”

“No,” said Elsa. “That was the part I liked.”

The cranes swung down in the port. A ship’s horn sounded once, very low, the way they did at night so as not to wake the hills.

“I didn’t do it for strangers,” she said. “Do you understand? I’m not a saint. I don’t love strangers. I did it after your grandfather, because I sat in that refuge with those five old women and I thought: if it ever comes, really comes, I don’t want to find out on the stairs what kind of person I am. At my age you don’t want to find out a thing like that. You’ve seen what people are like on stairs.” She shrugged under the blanket. “So I decided in the kitchen. On a Tuesday. With a cup of tea. And then I didn’t have to decide any more.”

“That isn’t...” He did not know how to finish. “That isn’t the same as being brave.”

“No,” she agreed. “It’s better. Brave you have to be on the night. This I only had to be once.”

She got up, slowly, with one hand on the windowsill and the other on his shoulder, and stood a moment while her hip decided whether to allow it.

“Héctor had a bad knee,” she said. That was all. She did not say anything else about it, then or ever. She went back to bed.

Nacho sat on at the window. The Plan glittered below him, patched with dark where the streets were still without power. Somewhere on Calle Serrano the shutter of the bakery was down, and the candles had all burned out, and the men coming off the night shift would walk past it with their hands in their pockets and nowhere warm to stand.

He took out his own phone and opened Cauce and scrolled down past his route, his blood group, his emergency contact, which was her.

Ceder el paso.

He was twenty-nine. He could run the Cienfuegos stairs in eleven minutes with his lungs on fire. If the sea came again it would cost him less than it had cost her, and less than it had cost a man with a knee the colour of tea, and he knew it would not reach Brito. It would not reach anyone he would ever know. It would go to a stranger, on a night that had not happened yet, someone who would climb into a lit car at the top of the cliff and think, how lucky, the front window, and never once wonder why.

He switched it on.

Thank you, said Cauce. Nobody will know.

He sat at the window until the light came up over the hills and the first trolleybus came along Avenida Brasil with its lights still on. Then he put the phone back in his pocket, where it was warm, and where it weighed exactly what it had before.

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