

Kept

Oxi Mancer

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The lamppost on the corner of Calle Cedro and the Cablebús stairs has a brass button the size of a ten-peso coin, and in the eleven years you have sold tamales under it, nobody has pressed it. On some corners of this city the button is worn pale as a spoon: outside the cantinas, outside the schools at going-home time. Yours was brown and dull, with a spider's thread across the rim. On Tuesday you pressed it at twenty-three minutes and forty seconds past six in the morning, and now it is Friday and you are sitting on the fourth floor of the Fiscalía in Iztapalapa with a box of tissues placed in front of you so exactly that somebody must have measured.

"Before you sign," says the licenciada, "you watch it. All of it. Article four."

Her name is Patricia Ugalde. She has a grey cardigan on the back of her chair and a paper cone of pepitas, which she eats one at a time, cracking each with her front teeth and putting the shell on a saucer. She told you in the corridor that she has sat in this room with maybe four hundred custodians. You are number four hundred and something. You are a custodian now. It is printed at the top of the form.

"I know what's on it," you say. "I was there."

"Everybody's there," she says. "That's the trouble with it."

The law calls the posts *testigos*, witnesses. Everybody else calls them *los olvidadizos*, the forgetful ones, because forgetting is what they mostly do. Each post watches its corner and listens to it and holds the last ten minutes, and as each new second comes in, the oldest one goes, all day and all night, like a man who eats without stopping and never gets fat. Nobody can make a post keep anything. Not a policeman, not the mayor, not a judge with a warrant. Only a person standing within thirty paces, with their ID in their pocket, putting their own thumb on the brass. Then the ten minutes are kept for good, and the name of the one who kept them is kept with them, and that person must sit in a room like this within seventy-two hours and say why.

The form is three pages. The post has already filled in most of it: location, time, *Custodian: Reyna Ocampo Lira, 54, vendor of prepared food, Colonia Santa Cruz Meyehualco*. One box is empty. *Reason for keeping (Article 11)*.

You practised it on the bus. *Because Jonás Pineda is a good boy and I wanted the truth to protect him*. It is true. It fits in the box.

“Ready?” says the licenciada, and the screen on the wall wakes up.

There you are.

The post looks down at an angle, a little curved at the edges, like looking into a spoon. In the corner of the picture the time: 06:13:40. Your cart, your blue tarp, the big steel pot breathing steam into the cold. You are smaller than you thought, and wider. You are wearing the brown cardigan your sister says makes you look like a sofa. You are splitting bolillos for guajolotas with the bread knife and you look, from up there, like a woman who knows exactly what she is doing, which you do. Eleven years.

The bolillos come from Don Fermín’s on Ermita, who opens at three for the men who drive to the Central de Abasto, and you collect them at half past four, still too hot to bag. The first Cablebús cabins start at six. By a quarter past, the queue at your cart is six deep with people going

down the hill to work: green tamales, rajas, a sweet one for the boy from the hardware shop, atole de guayaba in the paper cups that burn your fingers. You don't look up. There is no time in that quarter of an hour to look up, except at the green numbers on the pharmacy sign across the street, which you check the way a sailor checks the sky, because the cabins come every forty seconds and your customers want to know if they have time for a second one.

On the screen, at 06:14 and a few seconds, an old man comes into the picture from the left.

You look at the box of tissues.

You know what happens. You have told it eleven times since Tuesday. To Jonás's mother, crying on her step. To Doña Chela from the hardware shop. To your sister on the phone in Puebla. To the woman from the patrol car, who wrote none of it down. Each time it came out a little smoother, like a stone you keep in your pocket and turn.

An old man asked you for the 27. You said, There's no 27 any more, señor, it stopped years ago. He said thank you. He went on down the street. You thought, somebody's grandfather, and you went back to the rush, because there were six people waiting and the cups were burning your fingers. That is all. What came later was nothing to do with you. What came later was Jonás.

"Señora," says the licenciada mildly. "The screen is over here."

"I know this part," you say. "I'm waiting for the boy."

She looks at you for a moment, cracks a pepita, and lets it run.

Jonás Pineda is seventeen and lives above the hardware shop. Most mornings he carries your pot down from the van in exchange for a sweet tamal, and talks the whole way about the cabins: how the cable is spliced, how the grips let go at the station and catch again, how they test them with sandbags at night. He wants to fix them. He goes to the

technical school on Ermita and he is, you would tell anybody, a good boy, which is a thing you can say about very few people aged seventeen.

On the screen, at 06:17, Jonás comes out of his door with his school backpack on one shoulder and stops on the far kerb. He looks at something to the left of the picture, the way the old man went. Then he crosses.

You watch this part. You have watched it in your head every night since Tuesday.

He catches up with the old man at the edge of the frame, by the stairs. He touches his elbow. You can't hear what he says, the post only hears clearly near itself, but you can see him bend his knees a little to make himself shorter, which is something you have seen him do with his grandmother. The old man turns. His face does something. He pulls his arm away and his mouth opens wide, and the post catches one word of it even from there: *¡Ratero!* Thief.

Jonás holds up both hands. The old man swings at him with a closed fist, slowly, the way old men swing, and Jonás catches the wrist, gently, then the other wrist, and they stand like that for a second like two people about to dance. Then the old man throws himself backwards out of the boy's hands with everything he has, and the kerb is there, and he goes down. At 06:19:05 the back of his head meets the edge of the bottom stair.

You do not look away from this. You owe it to Jonás to look at it.

He is on his knees before the old man has stopped moving. He gets both his hands under the man's head, and he keeps them there, and he starts shouting, and on the screen you, Reyna, the sofa in the brown cardigan, turn round at last, and drop the bread knife, and go.

You called the ambulance. That is on the screen too. You stood over them with your phone and gave the address twice. People came out of the stairs and out of the shops. Doña Chela, in her apron, saw the boy

kneeling and the old man's blood on his sleeves and said, loudly, to the whole corner, "The boy pushed him. I saw."

She didn't see. She was in her shop. But she said it, and the patrol car came before the ambulance did, and the officer who got out had already been told by four people what had happened, and the four people had been told by Doña Chela. They took Jonás's arms off the old man's head. Somebody else knelt and held it. They put Jonás against the car with his hands on the roof, and he kept saying, "Ask the señora, ask her, I was helping," and you understood that you had not seen it either. You had been splitting bread.

That was when you looked up at the post.

On the screen you walk to it. You stand under it, close enough to touch it, your thumb over the button. You stand there for a long time.

"Four minutes," says the licenciada.

"I was thinking about the boy," you say. "What it would show. If he had pushed him, if I kept it and it showed that, I'd be the one who put him in prison. You understand? Me. With my name on it."

Doña Chela, on the screen, comes over and puts her hand on your arm. The post hears her perfectly, because she is right under it. *Don't, Reyna. You don't want to be in it.*

That is what people say in this city. *No te metas.* Don't put yourself in it. It used to mean: don't get involved. Now it also means the other thing.

On the screen you look across the street at the pharmacy clock. Then you press the button. 06:23:40. The picture stops.

"The family has asked to view," says the licenciada. "You're allowed to refuse."

You don't refuse. You think you have no right to.

Silvia Zamudio is perhaps fifty, in a raincoat with a school lanyard still around her neck, as if she came straight from a classroom and forgot.

She has the look of someone who has not slept properly for three nights, which is the look of half the people in this building, but hers is the kind that comes from sitting next to a bed. She shakes your hand. Her hand is cold and very firm.

“He’s awake,” she says, before you ask. “Eleven stitches. His wrist. He doesn’t remember any of it. He remembers the Metro. He rode it all night, we think. He left our flat in Tacubaya at two in the morning and the door sent me a message and I didn’t hear it.” She sits. “He was a typesetter. Forty years at a printer’s in Tacubaya. The 27 used to stop outside. He thinks they’re waiting for him to start.”

“I told him it stopped,” you say.

“Yes,” she says. “It stopped in 2031.”

The licenciada wipes pepita salt from her fingers and picks up the remote. “Since the señora didn’t watch the beginning,” she says, to nobody in particular, “we’ll start from the beginning.”

You understand then that she saw you looking at the tissues. That she has seen four hundred people look at the tissues.

06:13:40. Your cart. The steam. The sofa. 06:14, and the old man comes in from the left.

This time you look, because his daughter is looking.

He is wearing a good suit, brown, too warm for the hour and too thin for the cold, and only one sock. His jacket is buttoned one hole wrong all the way down, so that one side hangs lower than the other like a gate off its hinge. That is the first thing you noticed on Tuesday. You remember noticing it. You remember thinking: there is a man nobody dressed this morning. And you remember, very clearly, deciding not to think anything after that, because there were six people in the queue.

He comes right up to the cart, close to the post, where it hears everything.

Señora, disculpe. ¿El veintisiete?

No hay, señor.

That's all you say. Not *it stopped years ago*. Not *señor*, even, in the way you remember saying it. Just *there isn't one*, to the bread.

I'm late. They'll start without me. I set the type, you see, they can't start the run without me.

He puts his hand on your sleeve.

On the screen, without looking at him, you pull your arm free. Not hard, exactly. The way you'd shake off a wasp. Fast. Your arm goes up and out, and his hand comes off it, and because he was leaning on that hand more than either of you knew, he steps backwards off the kerb into the road, and his arms go out sideways like a man on a boat. He doesn't fall. A car slows and goes round him. He stands in the road with his arms out.

You have already turned to the next customer. On the screen you are saying, *¿De qué?* What kind? And laughing at something the customer says.

He gets himself back onto the pavement. He stands next to the cart for nine seconds. You counted them on Tuesday night, lying awake, without knowing you were counting them. Then he goes away down the street, towards the stairs, towards the boy.

At 06:14:52, on the screen, you look up. Not at him. At the post. Straight into the eye of it, for perhaps a second, the way you would look at a neighbour who had seen you drop something in the street. Then you look down again, and split another bolillo.

You did not remember looking up at the post. You would have sworn you didn't.

Nobody in the room says anything. The clip goes on. Jonás crosses. The dance. The stair. You find you can't watch the stair a second time, and

you look at the daughter instead, who watches all of it without moving her face, and then at the licenciada, who is watching neither the screen nor the daughter but you.

06:23:40. The picture stops on you under the post.

“Can you show me the time again,” says Silvia Zamudio. “When he spoke to her.”

The licenciada takes it back. 06:14:05. *Señora, disculpe.*

Silvia looks at it for a while. You will find out later that she teaches mathematics at a secondary school in Tacubaya, but you could guess it now, from the way she does the sum: with her lips, not bothering with her fingers.

“Ten minutes back from when you pressed,” she says. “If you’d pressed at twenty-four minutes and six seconds past, he wouldn’t be talking to you. That bit would have gone. And my father falling would still be in, until nineteen past plus ten. Twenty-nine past.” She looks at you. “You had five minutes where you could keep the boy and not keep yourself.”

“Most custodians press late,” says the licenciada, to the saucer of shells. “We have a word for it here, in the office. We say they step out of the frame. It’s not illegal. The law says ten minutes. It doesn’t say which ten.”

“You were looking at the clock,” says Silvia. “On the screen. You looked at the pharmacy clock and then you pressed.”

“Yes.”

“So you knew.”

You think of telling her about the sailor and the sky, the cabins every forty seconds, how you have read that green clock ten thousand times a year for eleven years and can’t stop. That you didn’t know. It would be easy. It would fit in the box.

“I knew,” you say. “I stood there and did the sum. I count change all day, señora, I can take ten minutes off a clock. I knew at twenty-three past I had a minute left. I thought, wait. Just wait one more minute and it’s only the boy, and you can say you kept it for the boy, and it’ll be true.”

“Then why didn’t you wait?”

You have not said it to anybody. Not your sister. Not yourself, in words, on the bus.

“Because then I’d be the only one who knew,” you say. “And I know myself. I’ve had three days and I’ve already made it into a story where he said thank you. In a year I’d have believed it. In two years I’d have been telling it as the morning I helped call an ambulance.” Your voice does something you don’t like. “The post doesn’t do that. It’s the only thing on that corner that doesn’t. So I let it keep me.”

Silvia Zamudio says nothing for a long time.

“He asked other people,” she says at last. “Between two in the morning and the time he got to you. He told us in the hospital. He remembers them, he doesn’t remember you. A man at a petrol station on Tlalpan. A security guard at a Metro station, he doesn’t know which. A woman at a bus stop who gave him a sweet. A taxi driver who told him to go home.” She turns the lanyard over in her fingers. “Nobody pressed anything for any of them. They’re gone. Whatever they said to him, whatever they did with their arms. I’ll never see any of them.”

She stands up and pulls her raincoat straight, though she never took it off.

“You’re the only one I’ll ever see,” she says. “I don’t know yet if I’m going to thank you for that.” And she goes.

The licenciada pushes the form across the table, and a pen, and then the box of tissues, half a centimetre, exactly.

You cross out what you practised. You write in the box, in capitals, because the box is small: *SO THAT I WOULD NOT BE THE ONLY ONE WHO REMEMBERED IT*. Then you sign.

Jonás was released on Tuesday afternoon, before you had even reached the Fiscalía, because the officer who had put him against the car was the first person to open the kept file, and watched it in the car, and drove back to the corner to say something to Doña Chela that she has not repeated. Jonás couldn't have pressed the button himself. You asked him, later, if he'd thought of it. He held out his hands. They were under a man's head, he said. Where was he supposed to put them?

Thirty days after a case is closed, a kept clip goes on the open record. That is the other half of the law, the half people forget until it is their turn. There is a channel that collects the good ones. Yours got its own title, which Jonás read out to you from his phone, embarrassed, at the cart: *Boy helps lost grandpa, tamale lady doesn't even look*. Two hundred thousand people watched it in the first week. They cut it so the part with your arm came just before the boy, so that you could see the difference.

Some customers stopped coming. Some came who had never come before, and bought one green tamal, and looked at you while you made change, the way you look at a famous building. A young man filmed you with his phone held low at his hip, as if you wouldn't notice, and you sold him a guajolota anyway and gave him the right change. Doña Chela still buys a sweet one every morning and has not mentioned it once, which is her way of being kind, or of being ashamed, you can't tell, and it doesn't matter.

Jonás still carries the pot. "People are stupid, Doña," he said, the first week, as if you might need telling.

"No, mijo," you said. "They're watching the right minute."

In the third week of December, a girl came up the stairs from the cabins in a school uniform from some other colonia, holding her phone up the way they do when it has stopped knowing where it is, and asked you

for a street you had never heard of. It was the rush. There were five people waiting. You heard yourself start to say *no sé*. You put down the bread knife instead and asked Doña Chela to watch the pot, and you walked with the girl, down Cedro and along the market and up two wrong streets and one right one, until she saw her aunt's green door and ran.

It took you twenty minutes to get back. The steam was still going. Doña Chela had sold four tamales and given the wrong change for three of them.

Above the cart the post was looking down at the corner as it always does, holding its ten minutes, letting go of each second as the next one came. Nobody had pressed it. Nobody ever would, for that. Somewhere in the minutes it had let go of there was a woman in a brown cardigan walking away from her cart with a stranger, and it had already forgotten her, the way it forgets nearly everything, and you found, looking up into its small dark eye, that you did not mind at all.

That one was not for keeping. That one was for the girl.

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