

BRANDON ROMAN

Restraint

Early each Tuesday morning when he woke to bring the dog outside the dream lingered in his mind. And each time the same dream, his house of thrumming flesh, a damp architecture of skin, the landscape of shed scalp, cold-bone plumbing latticed through the walls and the same pleasant, rancid smell permeating the red sky. Rolling from belly to back on his own moist sheets, gulping in greedy fistfuls of the soured air, Mateo would ache to call out to his younger brother for comfort, but he, Fermin, snoring breathlessly in the room's other bed, was fifty-five with a mild, hostile Argentinian accent and a practiced impatience, and Mateo knew better than to wake him. He would rise, round the corner to the bathroom, splash his face, and click his tongue in the direction of the office, out of which the dog would leap excitedly.

Fermin was an independently-employed trainer, raising service dogs to sell online to interested parties. His was a lucrative business. His dogs were clean and still and pure of motive. He himself was gruff and secretive but well-known in select circles and he lived together with his brother, his only family, in a tiny farmhouse at the base of a wide valley in

the middle of Pennsylvania. At one point a third had lived with them—a woman of an impetuous, impulsively religious nature named Grace. She was Fermin’s ex-wife, short and pale with hair the color of bleached oak, and her stay in the house was marked by tension and an intense misdirection of love. It wasn’t until she left that Fermin started working as a trainer.

This time the dog was a shepherd, an Aussie of about thirteen months with black-flecked fur. It was large for its age and its quick taking to tricks forebode a vicious intelligence. Its toenails were cut always to the quick to prevent it from scratching the floors or whoever was in the house, so it trotted silently past Mateo, through their hallway, dining room and kitchen, and into the yard. Mateo returned to his room briefly to change, then followed the dog out as far as the porch, no further. He watched the animal squatting in the near distance, the odor of sweat still swimming around his head. He wore slacks and trainers, a tie, and a large red polo shirt with the price tag still stuck to the front. He was balding but wore the hair he had left long, the loose curls spreading out into a fan that framed his face. The damp breeze blew these wisps around, in and out of his eyes, in and out of his mouth.

Inside, Fermin had dressed and walked into the kitchen, where he was preparing a breakfast for the three of them. He put thick-sliced tomatoes and feta on toast, set the coffee up. He threw the crust-ends into a bowl with some rice, then placed it onto the ground. He heard the back door open and saw the dog bound in first, followed—blithely, he thought—by Mateo. The dog walked to Fermin with a pleading look, then padded

over following his gesture to the bowl, where it snuffed at the food listlessly—ungrateful.

From the small CRT television on the kitchen counter, the only set in the house, the brothers could hear reporters discussing various local crimes, including the names of suspects and the status of their investigation. A man broke the window of a Panera Bread and climbed in without stealing anything. Two cars, racing along route 22, overturned and caused a large pile-up. A domestic dispute escalated when the woman's brother came to the house with a gun. The victim was shot but is in stable condition at the county hospital, the reporter said. Truly her survival is an act of grace.

Fermin scooped a stray bit of feta onto the floor. He watched Mateo flinch at the word grace, a smear of tomato juice dribbling down his chin. "You just love all that, don't you?" Fermin said. "That's the kind of action you're looking for, you dolt. A good, honest business isn't enough for you, right?"

His older brother swallowed, wiped at the juice. "I didn't say anything to you. I'm just listening to this crazy news."

But indeed, Mateo was enraptured. Fermin knew he was trying to imagine himself in these roles, taking charge, shouldering both the action and its consequence. There was a certain kind of satisfaction in criminality, they both knew. It was a narrative whose limits were defined and whose conclusion was concrete, would not fade away. Crime was nothing like their life together, which divulged nothing and yet expected them to listen, to wait expectantly for it to resolve itself, nor was it like

their job, which was just a means to an end and really had nothing to say at all. The dogs came and went.

The coffee maker began to percolate. Fermin nodded to the dog. "It's his time. Someone's coming today, in a few minutes, maybe, to pick up the dog. I know you like this one but he's got to go. Don't make it hard for everyone with those faces you make whenever they arrive."

"Yes, Fermin."

"I want you to practice your kind face. I want to see a face of pleasant resignation. Can you do that for me?"

"I can try," he pouted, looking down solemnly at the dog, which was finished with its meal and rolling now, back and forth, on its spine. He leered at it for a few moments, then grinned and bent over to scratch its ears with enthusiasm. How simple the demands of dogs and the dull, Fermin thought, and, like children, how easily met. He walked to the home office with a plate of food and a mug of water, leaving the two others sweeping the floor of the dining area with their backs. He sat down with a sigh at the desk and began to sort through his email.

Mateo could make today a dream or a test, he thought, depending on his mood, depending on the weather, depending on the look of the new owner. He considered this. Their parents had died when they were both young, in their teens, and in a Carnavalesque kind of reversal it was Fermin, the younger by four years, who took on the role of caretaker for what was left of their family. They were not the kind of children with relatives nearby and Mateo, newly nineteen, was in no position to do anything more than scratch his ass and glue buckles onto purses at his

factory job. Things stayed this way for a few years, the two of them out of school and working, until Fermin met Grace and she moved in. There, they formed a reluctant family unit: Mateo at the center of these two young people trying their hand, clumsily, at marriage. Two amateurs bookending an oafish brute, Fermin the brains and Grace the brawn (or, at least, the coercive presence). Despite all her charisma and her fanaticism, and despite her husband's protests and own outbursts, she was always kind to Mateo, teaching him...

Eventually, the door rang. On the porch, through the window, Mateo could see a figure. Fermin stood to answer the door but by the time he'd made it to the living space Mateo had already let her in. He was shaking hands with her—strikingly tall, middle-aged and with graying brown hair. She wore a knit sweater and a pair of running tights all under her open trench, meant to keep out the spring chill.

“Oh,” the woman said, “sorry. Which one of you is Fermin? I’ve just been shaking your hand, I don’t have a photo...”

“Hello,” said Fermin, “that’s me.” He pushed Mateo away with the back of his palm and then extended the front of it to her. “You’re here for the dog! Faith!”

“You know it,” said Faith. “And I’ve driven here all the way from Raleigh, so I’m ready to pick him up.”

“Yes, yes, of course, it’s right over there—” he was gesturing to the ground, where the young dog was, but there was only Mateo lying idly on his side, picking at a scab on his elbow. “Mateo!” he said. “Go get off the ground and fetch the dog, wherever it’s gone.”

Mateo said, "He's just in the bathroom, I saw him walk in."

Fermin furrowed his brows and opened his eyes wide at him. Mateo rolled onto his stomach and grunted, pushing himself up. He sulked over toward the bathroom.

"So, s'that your 'life partner' in there? Or a roommate, or..." Faith trailed off.

"Life partner?" Fermin scoffed, appalled. "No, absolutely not. He's my brother. We live together. He helps me with some small chores for the dogs, nothing more, to be honest. In fact, as much as he's home he barely helps out at all. Not a surprise, I should tell you, him being as dumb as he is. Poor thing hasn't left the house in a decade."

"Oh," Faith said.

"Yeah, as dumb as he is. 'He's so slow and simple he's almost Christ-like.' That's what our mother used to say. Of course, she being the one who loved him, she was bound to find some way to make his dumbness sound like a blessing. She knew how to take stock of him. And he's taking his sweet time as always. But, anyway, you probably want to know about the dog. Well, he's an Aussie, as the Craigslist bit said, about two years old, now, large, strong jaws, quick reflexes..."

In the bathroom Mateo stared at the dog. It was resting on a shag bath mat in front of the toilet. He watched its chest expand and contract. He looked at its thin ears, its tiny paw pads like black beans. He took a deep breath to stop his chest from sinking. He thought of Grace and her gray-brown hair, her kind smile and her Bible words. When she and Fermin first divorced, the brother was despondent. Grace had been a

safe bet, a promise of outward companionship that extended beyond the one-person network of family he currently had—and what’s more, it allowed him to escape Mateo entirely at times, because their relationship was exclusive. But Fermin was a cruel lover. He was greedy and desperate, had made demands he couldn’t reciprocate, needed the love more than she had. So when she announced her plans to separate, Fermin approached his brother. You’re my flesh as much as I am yours, he said. He said, I need you to do something and that is to make Grace stay. You know how to love, don’t you? And so, for a month, out of pity and obedience and a sense of duty—he was bound to his younger brother, really, shackled—Mateo for a year courted Grace, tried to love her in his brother’s stead. It was a kind of incest, he felt, but he took to the task with zeal, finding himself a keen distributor of love. He ordered flowers to the house, cooked meals, called her when she left the house. And without a job, without money, she had no way to escape, and so was forced to endure and even accept, obliquely, a bit of this affection. Theirs was a love like restraint, a reining-in of true desire in the face of inevitable circumstance. They never touched, but their sympathy and mutual helplessness became a form of intimacy all its own. But Grace left, eventually, about ten years earlier, and Mateo was left alone again with his brother, his only tie to the world now tying him down for good.

“Mateo!” Fermin screamed, then lowered his voice. “Bring the dog in already. Faith wants to get going.”

He led the dog by the harness, from the bathroom out into the living space, and ordered it to sit. The dog complied. Faith bent over, peering into its eyes and ears, pawing at its paws.

“He looks so young,” she said.

Fermin laughed. “That’s only because he’s so healthy!” He delivered a few pats to the head of the dog, which sat unresponsive. “You’ll see him grow slowly into his age. When he’s five he’ll seem two. When he’s ten, five. And fifteen, well... He’ll still be sprightly, that much I can assure you.”

“Well, that’s swell. You seem fairly confident, Mr. Sosa. I’m pleased with what I see.”

“I’m happy to hear that. If you’d like, we can start wrapping things up and get you back on the road, heading home, as soon as possible. This is a good dog.” He grinned. “Why don’t we get him packed up for you? Mateo, bring him outside.”

Mateo’s pulse quickened. Out past the porch on the grass was somewhere he’d not been for so long. But now was a chance for broadening and for change. He was lacking in nothing, and now he had more than he could need. He had faith, begetting grace. He grabbed the dog’s leash and shepherded him outside.

Fermin sat with his back to the window. He watched Mateo take an uneasy step, and then another, onto the ground, then hop a few times. He closed his eyes and pointed at a few leaves of paper on the living space’s coffee table. “Here’s the papers for him, ma’am. Just sign what you see and the dog’ll be all yours, to do as you wish. Make him fight if

you want, for all I care. Ha ha! A joke, of course.” He handed Faith a pen, which she regarded for a few moments before bending over the table to flip through the paperwork.

From the corner of his eye, Fermin could see a small commotion outside. The dog was in the back seat of Faith’s Impala and Mateo was at its rear, lifting up the trunk. He watched as his brother tossed his trainers in and then, with great effort, begin to hoist himself in as well. He rolled in and lay on his back, swatting his arm toward the trunk door a few times before connecting with it and pulling it shut.

Fermin blinked twice. He looked at Faith and smiled. “Perfect. This has gone smoothly. Your payments will be due in installments, as we’ve discussed, of course.”

“Yes,” Faith said. “It’s been so easy doing business with you.”

Fermin said, “Is there anything you need to know?”

“I did have one question. What do you call the dog?”

“Oh, we call him for dinner.” He closed his eyes and laughed. “Just a joke. But honestly? We don’t call him anything.”

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