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A Light That Went Out

Ricardo Piglia
Translated by Erik Noonan

Ricardo Piglia (Buenos Aires, 1941–2017) is considered a classic author of contemporary Spanish-language literature. He published five novels, including Respiración artificial *(1980;* Artificial Respiration*, 1994) as well as collections of stories and criticism, and received numerous prizes. The following work is from his first book of stories,* La invasión *(1967, 2006; The Invasion), now translated in its entirety and seeking a publisher.*

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For Juan Carlos Scarpati

The passageway over the street, and the sign: *Bed and Board. La Emilia*. Halfway around the plaza, and I found it. Two months' deposit, shared room, breakfast extra, lunch at 12:30, dinner at 9:00, if you don't show up, you don't eat. I had 1,500 pesos left over when I went to explore the city center. Buenos Aires swimming in light, always full of people, people everywhere. And I walked and walked to get used to it, get acquainted. To know how to reach every part without asking, confident as anyone, looking straight ahead. To go to the café, and say to the waiter, "The usual," and he nods, and everyone knows you and listens to you. To have porteño friends, take them to my town, Bolívar, some

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weekend and introduce them to Nilda: "My girlfriend. My friend," and to my family: "A friend from Buenos Aires." And I'll be from Buenos Aires too, a porteño, with a room close to Constitución. That's why I was happy with my room, the first night, when I arrived, tired, but happy to be lying down facing the ceiling, thinking of the enormous number of people who live there, in Buenos Aires, all jumbled up, and they're the ones you have to fight against, or do something anyway, and then they began to strike me in the head, my skull was a drum, everything was a drumbeat all around, Buenos Aires, Corrientes, Constitución, everything banged, moved, rhythmically, one, two, one, two, jumped, all blue, a jumpsuit that said POMPEYA, white towel on the neck that jumped, white and blue, blue and white, high in the sky, a warrior eagle. He was jumping rope at six in the morning when I first met him.

"So you're sharing the room with me," he shouted as if he were greeting me, jumping. Jumping. And what can you say to a guy who jumps rope dressed in blue at six in the morning in a boarding house room, as if it were a plaza full of trees?

I thought for sure it was a dream, when he didn't stop jumping rope to shout at me about training, "because I'm not going back to the gym, but you don't win and go on to the semifinals without the guys remembering, because the guys have to remember," and I looked at him from the bed without speaking, and he went on jumping on the floor from one side to the other. At first I thought it was a joke, but he didn't stop moving and stretching, doing pushups, until noon and again in the afternoon, the next day, every morning. Sometimes I escaped. I walked around nearby, or went to the movies. But sooner or later, I had to go back, sit on the bed looking at the ceiling, and hear him breathe hard and throw punches at the mirror. I wanted to tune him out, ignore him, his jabs, his jumps aren't real, I'm alone, relaxed, but it seemed like he was right on top of me, he looked at me and I smiled back at him, or looked at the floor, and every time I lifted my head, he was looking at me and sometimes, without stopping jumping, he would say: "Do you know how long I've been in the game?" and I looked at him distracted, "How long?" "Seventeen years, what do you say to that? After fifteen I was already middleweight, and in '56 I was runner-up for the Golden Gloves. I lost the title bout with Ansaloni, who was the Argentine champion then. Now I'm doing kind of badly, but they'll see. I'm thirty-two years old, I'm a kid. Archie Moore is over forty, I can almost start all over again . . . " "Oh yeah?" . . . What else can I tell you? If you were in my place, speaking for me, if you were talking to this blue guy, looking at himself in the mirror, crouched and dodging the air, jumping, breathing hard, this would be all that interested you. What would you know about life? That's why I could never find a way of speaking to make him understand why I was in Buenos Aires, why I had come. Like when I told him "I'm from Bolívar, and I came to Buenos Aires because I want to do something,

in Bolívar there's no chance, but if you get clear about things, you won't sell yourself short, that's why I came. Besides, if you're not in Buenos Aires, there's no way to do anything in this country." I said it to you slowly to see if you understood. And the only thing that occurred to you to say was: "So you're from the sticks." And I am not from the sticks, I was born in Bolívar, in the Province of Buenos Aires, three hundred thirty kilometers from here. That's why I'm saying there's no way to make myself understood to you. You haven't done anything but jump and lie in bed with your eyes open. So the best thing for me to do was to sleep, never get up, sleep and sleep all day long, until they called me from Duperial at last, like Estebán promised. Sleep and sleep, but at six in the morning the room was full of jabs and jumps, and the day never ended. I stayed in bed, trying not to look at you, not to look at your stiff sweaty face; I nailed my eyes to one side of the room, the drawing on the wall, and stayed that way for hours, watching the way it changed shape and started to look like an airplane, a tree.

Sometimes, suddenly, I choked, I couldn't take it anymore, and then I was the one who looked at you and smiled; I talked to you about any old thing, even if you weren't listening, I still talked to you, about sports, boxers, any old thing, just as long as I forgot about the week of silence, with nothing else except "Please pass the salt." "The night train on the second, aisle seat if possible." "A pack of San Diegos and a book of matches." And all at once, you need to speak. One Thursday, remember? Three days without being able to leave the room, everything afloat in this sour heavy odor, and sweat. That's why I began to talk to you about anything at all. Whatever. "For me, when I was a kid I liked to build boxing figurines. I still remember some of them. César Brion. Do you know César Brion?" He was stretched out on the floor, muscles smashed across his face, opening and closing his legs, and every so often he looked up at me from down there without speaking. "Besides, I have an uncle who's crazy about boxing. When Gatica was in Bolívar he wanted to bring me to see him. In the end I couldn't go, because my father said boxing was for brutes. But then I saw Gatica on the street. He seemed like a maniac. Do you know Gatica? They say he supported Perón." He moved his legs, pedaling the air without answering, and I went on, happy that he hadn't interrupted me. "And what do you say about Lavorante? Coma for six months. When I think about these things, honestly, boxing is a slaughterhouse. Didn't you ever see how they end up half crazy? Didn't you ever want to get out, leave it all behind, start a business, live in peace?" He moved his legs, lying on the floor, redfaced, so focused that, even though he didn't answer, I thought he was listening, convinced. That's why I went on talking, almost without thinking. "You're already thirty-two years old. You told me you were thirty-two, right? I don't know how you don't realize you have to get out, if you don't want to

end up useless, or ruined for good. Like the ones who end up begging, panhandling or selling knickknacks, turned into rag dolls . . ."

Suddenly he stopped moving his legs, remained lying down, body tensed, face contorted, looking at me. "Listen," he said. His voice seemed to leap through the floor among the table legs. "Listen, you black pinhead, and the slut who gave birth to you, why don't you mind your own business, and leave me alone? I was in this room first. I was all by myself, it was the best. I entertained myself calmly, no one was watching me all day long. I have to win, get it? Cut that shit out, mind your business and cut that shit out."

"But, buddy . . ."

"Don't 'buddy' me . . . pinhead . . . Or don't you understand you're eating me alive?"

I'd sat up in bed and felt a chill, a void in the pit of my stomach, and he went on stretched out on the floor, lying between the chairs and the bedside table. I could see a part of his face and feet, and his voice came to me strangely, hoarsely, from below.

"You people eat us alive. You come out of the muck, and spread yourselves all over the place, and on top of that you want to sound off and make trouble. Perón's only mistake was letting you in. Now we're the ones who have to put up with you. I was born in Pompeya, and I can't have a room to myself. Do you realize what you are?"

He'd sat on the floor, and moved his arms with more and more force as he spoke. Suddenly, he fell silent, then seemed to notice me again, and said he was fed up with my looking, I was always looking, what was I up to?

"Huh? What are you up to?" he shouted, and stopped propping himself up by his hands on the floor, bending one knee. "Now you're leaving, is that clear? You're leaving, and you're not going to show up until I'm finished. Is that clear?" And everything got mixed up, the heat, the humidity, his body against the bed; and the drizzle outside, the asphalt full of light and the people pushing, and there's no way to stop anyone to explain to them what's happening to me, to explain to them that I can't go back to Bolívar, and he's always in the room and then I have to walk, go around in circles there and sit in plazas or ride buses and go all over, on the routes, through the suburbs, through these narrow streets, just like the ones in Bolívar, empty, low small houses without any people. Until at last I returned at night, tired, certain he would be asleep so I could get into bed, cover my head, quiet and still, content to have the whole night to myself, certain in the darkness, as when it rains and we're riding in a car and everyone is running and it seems like we're floating, sheltered, watching the rain through the windows. I was waiting for the moment, always ready to speak, to tell him the truth once and for all, so you get it, so you don't confuse one thing with the other. Or do you think I don't know you're not going to defeat anybody, you'll go on acting the bully even though you don't have a pot to piss in? I see you when you

get back, with your face swollen and your lip purple and your eyebrow split open. I see you cling to the ropes, in bed, with your face covered in sweat looking at the ceiling. You trained every day. "I'll win and go to the semifinals again." You even put on cologne to fight. "I'm not finished. I'm thirty-two, I'm a kid." I see you, naked in bed, hanging on the ropes. "I lost, get it? I lost because this bonehead was left-handed. That's how he beat me, but they'll see . . . If the guy is left-handed you have to change the whole plan and I was out of breath and my legs were killing me. But I'm not finished. What are you laughing at?" "Me? I wasn't laughing." "What are you laughing at, pinhead? Huh? Answer me," and he softly poked at me with his fingertips, "Who do you think you are?" He gently pushed me, the two of us in the middle of the room, "Huh? What are you up to?" I backed up, slowly feeling my way along the floor, until suddenly I felt the wall against my back, he put himself against me, his face full of scars, he grabbed my arms, "I lost because he was left-handed and I was out of breath," the swollen face, he clung to me, he said he was out of breath and began to move again and box, and when he pushed me I left, I left. I went down the stairs, I went out into the street, I don't know what time it was, I had nowhere to go, I can't leave the room, I paid for two months up front, I'm almost out of money, waiting for work at Duperial, I don't want to go back to Bolívar, I don't want to be here, against the wall with him on top of me, the broken face, that's why I escaped, tonight, and found myself again in Buenos Aires full of people, always covered with strangers who don't look at you or greet you, but cut you off, I walked from one end to the other without knowing where I was going, lost, astray, I wanted to climb a tree, hide in the treetop and watch them pass, see what they're like without me among them, snuggled up against a tree in the bright city, and suddenly there he was, right in front of me, among the people, enormous, he walked along wobbling, I saw him, unmistakable, I started to follow him, it was him, I followed him, I'll explain, I'll tell him, the nape of his neck smashed like a board, there in front of me, in the midst of all the people who come up and walk into you, pushing, and make you want to shout, I stopped, the elbows, because now we're on Esmeralda, I see him, he goes down the stairs into the subway, I start running, it doesn't matter if they turn around and stand in profile, watching me, because one of the two of us is leaving, is leaving, you get it, if not, something's going to happen, on the platform, he was there, on the platform, facing the tiles, the face swollen, one eye purple and a bottle of wine in a paper bag, "Red wine. Good stuff!" he said to me, and took a sip, and with that, he was getting on the subway almost without a sound, "You can't go on like that," I said to him while all the doors opened at once with a soft hiss, stifling heat, it was like scratching an anthill, they got on and off, people who got on and got off, I took his arm, "You'd better quit," I said, and he mumbled something, said something, "To the canvas,"

something like that, "To the canvas," and then he shouted, got on the subway, made his way, the doors are automatic, a soft hiss, and suddenly I remained on the empty platform, he was in the traincar, on the other side of the glass, in the midst of a bright light, he went off, fainter and fainter, a heavy figure, the pallid face, in the midst of the light, on the subway, ever fainter, a light, a light that went out.