



Seeing the Clock Work

by Renato Escudero

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Note to self: she keeps asking me why am I in so much competition with him? "Pero, doctora," I protest, "he's a bum who doesn't have a job, and he's always loitering around the store."

Twigs hang from his matted hair, like he's been sleeping on the grass again. Right there on the College Avenue median, beneath a cluster of park benches, where the freshman coeds take their Tupperware lunches and paint their toenails black. How tired I get of watching them outside my window, feeding him humus wrapped in strips of pita bread, resting their bare feet on his sketchbook or flattening his fisherman's hat. These are the same girls that come into my game store to buy *Guillotine* cards for their boyfriends' keg parties.

Damn Cartwell, not a care in the world, mingles with anyone, smooches from everyone. When he's not napping, he lies at their feet and draws their bikini figures till the time they have to squeeze into their short shorts and go to class. There isn't one among them who hasn't been imaged nude in his pad. They think it's cute; some even say he's very close.

Note to self: la doctora said it was mean of me not to let him use the toilet in my store. And I said, "Mire usted, since when is it my responsibility to pick up the scum off of the streets? Do you think I enjoy slaving behind the counter all day while he's having fun out there?" She just tapped her pencil on her notebook, swiveled in her chair, and told me society needs to clean up its own messes, and me myself personally, I should go home and take care of the family growing inside my wife's womb. Ay doctora sabelotodo, thinks she knows everything.

Tonight Cartwell looks like a clown. The coeds made him up again: Renaissance white powdered over his dirty face, rosy cheeks that look like breasts, and an annoying button of a nose, the red and squeaky kind. From my vantage point, deep in the corner of my booth, I can see how Cartwell's runny nose has dried up under the red knob; the stuff is caked on solid. Suddenly the apricot syrup over my crepes makes me sick. Half moons of brown makeup cover up the bags that bulge out beneath his eyes, pockets of translucent skin filled with an amber liquid. Hell no, there's no way I can eat this now. Not that I need it anyway. Some guys go down the street to drain Cuervo and beer, dump their sorrows on their local bartender. I myself, you'll find me at the neighborhood International House of Pancakes. But the real scary part is what they've done to his eyes this time. They've gone and splattered a tube of mascara on his lashes. If they are usually long and webby things that capture gnats and fuzz and sleep, right now they are these overused painter's brushes, stiffened into ruin. How they blink at me, flaking, reaching into my corner invasively, as if trying to paint my face.

Time to call the wife. Get away from this bum, who is drinking my coffee, asking me if I'm done with my food.

Note to self: self, cálmate. It's too early. She's not done being mad at you for getting in her hair and fussing about her stretch mark ointments. Such a petty thing, pero la doctora urged me to give the woman the space she deserves. When the babies arrive, maybe she'll calm down.

I slide my plate over to Cartwell, who's busy on his sketchpad. Take it, take it all. Just don't come any closer. You stink, man. As I pull my cell phone out of my shirt pocket and hold it tight, Cartwell grabs a crepe with his left hand, crumples it and stuffs it in his painted, dirty face, never releasing the pencil that glides across the page in his right hand. He's drawing a caricature. It's supposed to be me. Misty black eyes popping out, dark circles under them, a lipless smirk of frustration.

Órale, un momento por favor –maybe's he's drawing a self-portrait, because Cartwell and I are nothing alike. De ninguna manera. He's a skinny bum and, let's face it, there's nothing skinny about me. Do I have bags under my eyes? Pinche Cartwell. La doctora will remind me to be nice to him. Ha! I'm gonna ask her, "Who works all day, gets thrown out of the house he's paying for, and has to buy dinner for the guy who lounges in the azaleas? Carajo, doctora!"

A ringtone prompts me to call my wife. "Do you miss me yet," I say and she whispers back violently, "Oh no, don't bother coming home tonight, you bum." I can picture her kicking off her slippers across the floor. But I had only wanted to listen to José José's *15 Éxitos de Oro*, while rubbing aloe on her belly, singing along in her ear. Where's romance nowadays? Okay, okay, no singing, but does she have to yell whenever I try to touch her? If she wasn't pregnant with my babies, would she think Cartwell's cute? Would she cuddle with him, like the coeds do?

Cartwell keeps leaning over the table, closer and closer to my corner. He takes the coffee jar. Here, man, shall I pour you a cup? Why don't you wait here while I pay the tab? I wander off on University. A starry night, unlike your typical California night. The air is brisk, not cold really, just a crisp breezy air, the kind of Bay Area air that requires a sweater, maybe a scarf, maybe your woman swaddled to your side as you both try to walk in a straight line under the street lights. Instead, I have The Pink Flamingo Motel in front of me again, and fuck me kindly, I've been followed, too. I bid Cartwell good night as I ring Marvin's bell, but Cartwell waits beside me, his fisherman's hat wrinkled and stained on top of his head, his sketchpad under his arm. At least he took off that ridiculous clown nose.

Marvin gives me the key. Good Marvin, he goes back in the office, deposits his dentures in a glass and picks up the crossword. I like Marvin, he minds his own business. Cartwell walks me to my room, as if I didn't know the way. I open the creaky door. Cartwell says nothing and does nothing. Fucking Cartwell, at least he's quiet. We stand side by side, looking in at my mildewed suite with two double beds.

La doctora says there's always someone worse off than me. She'd be proud of my generosity now. Me myself, I'm not so proud. I can't stand a man who won't pay his own way. No tiene nada en el coco; he doesn't care he's a fucking bum. He's like totally blank.

Cartwell turns on the little corner TV that hangs low on a metal swivel arm. A little too low. One would be wise to turn on the light before going to the bathroom. Cartwell pulls out a carton of Camels hidden in his pants and lights up. Jackpot, huh, Cartwell? Someone must be really nice to you.

"You can't smoke in here," I say when he goes for his third cigarette. I'm trying to rest my aching head on a sticky pillow.

He stops for a little while. When the smoke clears out enough so I can smell the mustiness of the mattress and bedspread, I fall asleep. How many hookers have shared fluids with drunks in these sheets? Nothing but raw humanity here. Home. Why am I not home, sleeping with my wife? Okay, fine, sleeping on the couch.

Soon enough, the smoke returns to rouse me, along with Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. A tinny keyboard at that, upbeat and assiduous. I ask Cartwell to turn it down. I guess I doze off. Then the TV gets loud again, and I wake up to see a young Malcolm McDowell dancing with a woman in a leotard. No, they're not dancing. They're struggling with a very large penis. A white ceramic penis almost as big as the actors. He's taunting her with it. Even in my groggy state I can tell it's supposed to be a fucking vaudeville routine. Not funny. The woman strikes him with a bust of Beethoven, and a few seconds later, Malcolm McDowell shoves the great big phallus into the woman's mouth with all his might. Who watches this stuff? It looks disturbingly familiar. Disturbing is what it is.

Wait a minute, my papi took me to see this movie on men's night out years and years ago. Boy, he hadn't realized it would turn out to be a bona fide ode to violence. Papi and mom had really liked Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Me, I thought it was boring. Clearly not a prequel to this monster of cinematic hostility. He wanted to get me out of the theater, but I told him I could handle it, that the boys all in white with their canes and hats and Pinocchio noses were just being silly. I vaguely remember saying that their shenanigans didn't faze me. This time, though, with a bum dressed as a clown smoking in my room, I see the movie with new eyes. They refuse to even blink. I ask Cartwell to turn it up and bum a couple of his Camels.

So, the hooligan played by Malcolm McDowell gets caught, goes to jail, and he signs his way out of prison to be the proud recipient of this new kind of "treatment" that will make him a sweet, docile and fully functional member of society again. Poor idiot, doesn't realize he's just signed life as he's known it goodbye. Watch out, Malcolm, or your higher powers will brainwash you. Squeaky clean, too! The sore sight of Malcolm McDowell strapped down, his head helmeted with wires and eyes pried open by metal claws, is significantly more salient than whatever images of destruction he's being forced to watch from a noisy projector - Hitler, concentration camps, human sacrifices, one after another, faster, faster, black and white images flickering on the screen, Beethoven reverberating, louder, louder. No, these images only take up a few seconds of screen time. The money shot is right on Malcolm McDowell's face, eyes stretched out, unrecognizable. And that persistent hand that squeezes the little glass dropper, baptizing his eyeballs with droplets of reform water. Scary shit. Poor guy.

Note to self: no, pobrecito yo! Like the actor on the TV screen above my head, I have no choice but to view the images that are being fed to me. Maybe el niño de ayer didn't stir by them. El adulto must be more sensitive. Maybe they were never really forgotten. Pinche Stanley, you're hurting my feelings. Ay doctora, how I wish my papi's popcorned fingers were covering my eyes now.

My eyes are moist and irritated, as if someone has been prying them open forever. As if I've been crying. Maybe it's the smoke in the room, or the fact that Malcolm McDowell the sadistic criminal has become Malcolm McDowell the hapless victim, or maybe it's the reminder that there weren't many men's nights out with my papi after we saw this movie. Feeling quite helpless like Malcolm McDowell all bandaged up in the hospital bed where he ends up, I scream

“AHHHHH, I’m going to be a father, Cartwell –me?” and jump up to turn off the TV. But I’m just too eager to get immediate results, like I could fail to turn it off on my first try, and I do fail because before I can reach the button pop goes my nose against the swivel arm holding the TV. I see a blanket of black blood falling over my face. This is what the semen of the big ceramic phallus looks like, and it feels warm, tastes salty, metallic.

Papi didn’t know what he was doing. I can’t blame him for it. Would I be satisfied to cover my own son’s eyes and say, “It’s not real?” Por dios, I can barely handle the fakeness now. La doctora will want to process this for weeks. She’ll ask, “Was the movie rated X in Mexico, too, when your dad took you to see it?” We all make mistakes, papi. But why did you stop taking me on men’s night out?! Why did you just stop? “Stop smothering me,” says the wife. Wasn’t I taught to respect a person’s boundaries? Ay mi mujer, she’s got to be the boss. I need to help her with the dishes and the laundry, set a right example para los babies.

I’m not in pain exactly, but I am getting lightheaded. The blood grows warmer as it runs down my face. Cartwell yells out, “Fuck dude, lie down. We gotta do something about the bleeding.” I’ve never heard him string so many words together.

El cabrón de Cartwell, a stray pup with nothing better to do than draw pictures about the things he sees. And smoke in other guys’ motel rooms when he’s not surrounded by coeds. This is when la doctora would do her ‘carefrontation’: “What makes you the judge, so high and mighty? What would you be doing if you weren’t trapped in that stuffy little store all day? Wouldn’t you rather be, and I quote, ‘frolicking outside with Cartwell’s harem of coeds’ too?” Me lleva la mierda. Me myself, I should have stayed home tonight. I know someone who’s gonna stand upside down on her eyelashes if she finds out I’ve been smoking. No, mire doctora, la verdad es que I’d hang out with my wife. She needs me. And if I get off my ass and finally finish the nursery, she’ll let me rest an ear on her belly to listen to their heartbeats.

My heart. It’s beating fast. I can’t see very well, with the liquid darkness that’s descended upon my eyes, but it looks like Malcolm McDowell’s coming after me. No, it’s Cartwell. He’s taken his shirt off and is going to swat it at me. He presses the spicy golf shirt against the bridge of my nose. He stays there awhile, applying pressure. It should smell like smoke and sweat, but humus wins out over everything else.

“Mexicano saved from bleeding to death by a shirtless bum in a motel room.” Hell, stranger things have happened. Just watch a Stanley Kubrick picture show.

Cartwell goes into the bathroom, comes back with some band aids, rips them into little pieces and pinches adhesive butterflies to my wound. Now that the bleeding’s under control, he mumbles something about my being lucky not to need stitches. He goes to open the door, let the smoke out. I look at Cartwell through the hazy crimson air. When he turns back to me, I don’t see the bum from outside my window; I see a half-naked Malcolm McDowell smirking at me, mascara splashed around his eyes.

“Man, Cartwell, looks like you could use a shower. Why don’t you let me buy you breakfast after that?”

I'm nine years old, and my father's taking me to the movies tonight, but I'm not supposed to tell mom that we're going to see a film for grownups, or she won't let us go. Ay qué buena onda. Maybe it's a scary movie! I don't get scared anymore. Papi tells her not to worry, that it's men's night out. He drives like no one's business. If a cop approaches our Caprice Classic at a light or when papi drives on the sidewalk, he turns right back around as soon as he spots the Gobernación plate in the windshield. It's big and it proudly shows the eagle and the flag colors against a black enamel background. Papi works for the government. "That's right," Papi chuckles, "go mind your own business, Officer." He smiles at me, scratches at the hairy V on his vest, and pinches his nose. It's a smooth ride with him. The car is silver with a padded burgundy roof, and I'm in charge of the eight tracks. We're late – papi's always late to everything– but if we speed through all the yellow and red lights we might just make it. He slows down under the gold angel on Paseo de la Reforma and opens the windows from the panel at his door. We can't smell the blankets of smog anymore; the night's pulled them away. He tells me to eject José José already, that he feels like Los Rolling Stones, but José José is The Prince of Song. The compromise is Santana's *III*.

As we park in someone's driveway, because there's never any parking in México City, papi says that this movie is a real treat for us in México, that the producers themselves took it out of all the cinemas in England because of some riots or something. "Esos ingleses, m'hijo, are extremists." He tells me it won't be anything like the Disney matinees with the cats and dogs at the Disneylandia Theater. The Disneylandia lights up just like the Disneyland castle in the United States.

The movie is weird. It's all a blur of swearing, brutal beatings and Beethoven. They make me listen to him at school. Papi keeps telling me we should go home. Does he think I'm going to start crying? No, I reach for the popcorn. It's men's night out, and I'm a big boy now. But, we agree to tell mom that we went to the Disneylandia instead.

Renato Escudero, born and raised in México City, finds his inspiration in his native Spanish and from the people -la raza- who share his roots. Ironically, however, he can express himself most fluidly in English. He holds MFA and MA degrees from San Francisco State University, where he has also taught creative writing. Winner of the 2011 *Florida Review* Editors' Prize in Fiction and the 2008 John Steinbeck Award for the Short Story, he has written fiction that has appeared in *The Blotter*, *Fiction International*, *The Florida Review*, *Fourteen Hills*, *Reed Magazine*, *Roanoke Review*, *Saranac Review*, *Slab*, and other publications. He is working on a collection of stories about the joys and pitfalls of life in a Mexican-American barrio. Renato lives in the Bay Area with his wife and their two children.

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