You Are Alright

Elena María Calero Gómez

Your alarm stomps your dreams to dust, and you open your eyes on the morning of the 10th of October at 4:15 am. You are confused, but it quickly falls onto you why you are awake when it is still dark outside. You like the thought of being faster than the sun today, and with this in mind, you get out of bed, bloom out of your pajamas, and get dressed. You put on a hoodie and jeans. Better to keep it simple for now. You will have time to experiment with your clothes once you reach Edinburgh.

Your last night self thought of tidying the room in the morning so that Nora does not get to know the messy side of you. This morning, you think that the room is not that bad and that Nora won't mind. This morning's thoughts win over last night's, so you go downstairs and have some breakfast. Being able to flow around the house within the ruling darkness makes you realize that this house that you've called home for only two months is more familiar to you than you thought. You're still not really used to the light switches being so high up the wall, and to every inch of the floor being covered by the carpet. As if the floor is flooding with fabric. You still don't entirely understand its purpose, but you like the feeling of it under your feet. Moving around while being aware that your roommates are asleep makes you conscious of your every step. And this morning, you perceive the sound of running water and the beeping of the microwave as traitors to your silence.

Before stepping out of the velvety darkness of the house and into the swallowing darkness of the outside, you check for your wallet and passport and get your backpack. As you step outside, you put up your hood. The night is not enough to hide your long hair. It is not that cold, but the puffer jacket seems to be the right

thing to wear: you look more corpulent in it.

It is 4:35 am when you set foot outside. Last night, you checked how much an Uber from your house to the airport would be. And your wallet –suddenly a climate action activist– decided that the best option would be to walk to the center and get a bus to the airport there.

You have a forty-five-minute walk ahead of you. Last night, you felt so intelligent creating this little plan; you were going to save so much money. This morning, facing the endless endlessness of Blarney Street, you don't feel that intelligent. Still, this morning's thoughts win over last night's, and you start walking.

The brown leaves at the feet of the naked trees surprise you. You were not able to contain the pale rays of sun in your hands and its warmth in your caramel skin, and now Autumn is here. You decide not to wear your headphones; you prefer to listen to your surroundings this morning. Ignoring how stupid you can seem, you start taking bigger steps to try to appear tougher than you are. You look back to check if someone's there. The dim city lights don't touch anyone but you. The shadows on the ground only belong to the cars parked on both sides of the street. There's no one. Continue walking. Silence is not your best friend, so you start calling Nora because you know that she is awake in case you need something.

Nora: Hey, is everything okay? Are you out of the house already?

You: Yeah, I got out like five minutes ago. I just thought I could use some company while I walk. Are things with Mira better?

Nora: Right. Yeah, not really, I don't know how to handle this anymore, I don't know what to say to her. She gets all defensive every time I try to explain myself.

You: Yeah, it's been so long since I last talked to her that I forgot how she can be during arguments. What was it that started the

argument this time?

Nora: Nothing really. It's always nothing. I've been so busy with uni and work that I've not been able to see her for a couple of weeks. And you know she takes it personally. She thinks I don't want to hang out with her specifically.

You: Hmm... yeah... And what have you told her?

Nora: I explained to her how my social life has been nonexistent since uni started last month. But she went on to say how I must not be that busy if I have time to go and meet with you in Edinburgh for a few days.

You: But this trip has been planned for months now, Nora.

Nora: Yeah, you try explaining that to her. I don't know why I still bother. Nothing I ever say–

You: Wait, Nora, a man is coming towards me.

Nora: Who?

You: –a man. A fucking man is crossing the street towards me.

Nora: What is he doing? Is he bothering you?

You: –

Nora: Hey! Are you okay? Is he bothering you? What's happening?

You: He just collapsed.

Nora: Huh?

You: He collapsed. The man just collapsed behind me. He passed right by me. And then he tripped trying to get onto the pavement and fell to the ground practically at my heels.

Nora: What? Is he okay?

You: –

Nora: Hello? Answer me!

You: Yeah! ... I don't know. I got as far away as fast as I could. I'm sorry. I'm sorry, I was scared to help him. He's trying to get up now.

Nora: It's okay... It's okay.

You: –

Nora: Are you okay?

You: He's getting up, Nora.

Nora: Okay, try to walk fast.

You: He's up. The man is up, Nora, on his feet.

Nora: –

You: Nora, he's coming my way.

Nora: Don't look back! He probably doesn't even know where he's going and hasn't noticed you.

You: How couldn't he?

Nora: –

You: Talk to me! Say something!

Nora: Yes, I'm sorry, I don't know what to say. Is he close?

You: I'm not looking back. I don't hear him. I don't think I hear him.

Nora: –

You: I'm looking back. He's gone. He must have turned left.

Nora: Oh my god, thank god. Are you alone? Isn't there anyone else around?

You: No, I'm alone. Jesus, what even was that? Oh my god. He just collapsed behind me. I didn't even see him coming up to me. I thought he was going to grab me.

Nora: It's okay, everything's fine now. You're alright.

Nora: How long until you're at the bus stop?

You: I'd say like thirty minutes? This fucking street seems to make itself longer to trap you in it.

Nora: Okay... I'm leaving the house now, but I can keep talking to you while I'm in the taxi.

You: No, it's okay. I forgot to charge my phone, and I'm running low on battery. I'll call you if I need something, and I'll let you know when I arrive at the airport. Let me know when you get there.

Nora: Are you sure? Are you sure you are okay?

You: Yes, yes. I'm hanging up now. I'll let you know if anything else happens. Keep your phone close to you in case I need anything, please.

Nora: Okay, please be careful!

You hang up.

You remind yourself that you are supposed to be taking big steps. Reign this side of the street. There is still half of Blarney Street left for you to walk. Blarney Street, the longest street in Ireland and the fastest route from your house to the center. You don't know how many times you have walked up and down this route in the past two months since you moved here. It's wild to you how there's only room for one car to drive down this two-directional street. During your walks, you enjoy watching drivers figure out how to make the situation work. They always look to you like kids who mess up the choreography at a school's Christmas recital and try to quickly get back to it as if nothing has happened. It looks a bit messy, but they make it work. You look back to check if someone's there. None of the windows let any light out behind you. There's no one. Continue walking.

Tonight, walking around feels like the biggest hide-and-seek game is taking place all around you, and you have just become

aware that you're part of the game too. You try to distract yourself. It's funny for you to think of how this street makes you feel differently depending on who you are walking with and what time of the day it is. How it seems to shrink into a five-minute walk when you are coming home with your roommates, gossiping about the night's events. And how it seems to grow into an insulting endlessness when you walk all alone under the rain, carrying bags full of groceries.

You like that it is mostly houses on each side of the street. Mostly windows and doors. You can't help trying to imagine the kind of people who live in each house after analysing the patterns on their doors and the arrangement of their living rooms. You can't help taking a quick look at their interiors when you pass by. Your favorite peekings involve a cat sitting on the window, studying the exterior as you study the interior.

Some of the people living in this street express a part of themselves through the decorations on their window sills. Going from the action of superhero battles to the lifelessness of a bowl of plastic pieces of fruit. By now, you already know how much of the street is left, depending on the figurines that look back at you through the other side of the glass. Spiderman lets you know that you have 7 minutes left to reach the end of the street. Fifteen minutes left to reach the bus stop.

Being surrounded by people, even if they are asleep, makes you feel a little better, a little safer. A scream would reach them if needed. You just need to keep walking. You think of Nora on her way to Madrid's airport in a comfortable and warm taxi.

At the intersection of Blarney Street and Shandon Street, you see an old man going down the street on your left. You continue walking in the direction you both seem to be going to: towards the bridge. The cold that the water brings to your exposed face would not be unpleasant any other night. You would prefer not to have to share the pavement with anyone. Before you have time to

reconsider your options, the old man catches up and approaches you. Try to appear bigger. It's okay. He's old. You're stronger than him. Here we go.

Old man: Excuse me, young lady, would you mind helping me get to my house? It is right across the bridge.

You: I'm sorry sir but I'm kind off in a rush...

Old man: It surely won't take you long! My legs are not what they used to be... But my house is right there! You can see it from here. Look! It's the one with the dolls in the windows!

You: Okay, sure...

Old man: God bless you, kid. I'm Craig, nice to meet you! Mind if I grab you by the arm while we walk? My knees are sadly not those of a footballer anymore.

You: Of course.

Craig: I thought I could go for an extra-long walk tonight, but it seems that I overestimated my body.

You: –

Craig: I like to go on walks when the city is undisturbed. That's the time when it has more secrets to tell. Plus, all the noise that the day brings to the streets gives me massive headaches.

You: I can understand that, I think.

Craig: Maybe it is an old people thing.

You: –

Craig: But anyways, where are you going with that enormous backpack at 4 in the morning, kid? Are you running away from home?

You: Oh, no, no. I'm actually twenty-one. A bit old to be doing that. But that's a nice theory, though. I didn't know I looked that rebellious.

Craig: I'm sorry, kid. Twenty-one? I can never tell these days. This youth confuses me.

You: It's okay! It confuses me, too, sometimes.

Craig: Part of the problem is that I should be wearing my glasses, but I find there's a certain charm in not being able to see everything that's there for you to see.

You: I suppose you are right. I would try that too if I were a bit braver.

Craig: Bravery came to me with age, kid! You're alright.

You: Yeah... I'm actually on my way to the airport. I'm meeting with a friend in Edinburgh, and we're coming back to Cork afterwards so that I can show her the city.

Craig: That's lovely! I lived in Edinburgh for a couple of years. Too many ghosts for me, though.

You: That's one of the reasons I'm going!

Craig: And it is a really good reason.! They are nice if you're just there for a few days.

You: –

Craig: Well, this is me, kid.! I hope you enjoy Edinburgh.! Thank you for helping me out. It's not that common to get help nowadays.

Craig lets go of your arm and shakes your hand. Its bony feeling does not match its warmth. He goes through what looks like an incessant amount of pockets to find his keys, and when he has them, he opens his door. His childhood-like liveness but wrinkled face disappearing behind it.

The bridge is now past you. You still have to walk ten minutes to reach the bus stop. You are already in the center of the city, but you don't yet know whether that makes you feel safer. There are still people on the streets: leftovers of the nightlife. You check your

phone just to see that the bus is getting to your stop in forty-five minutes. The idea of having to wait thirty-five minutes for it while standing by yourself on the stop makes you want to laugh hysterically.

The closest human being around you is an old woman carrying around a shopping trolley. The fact that she is alright somehow makes you alright. You are alright. You do not have any reason to think this is a night that asks for violence.

There is a group of guys at the end of the street. It does not look like they are moving anytime soon. You stop and pretend like suddenly there is something you need to check on your phone, like your life depends on it. What if it does?

You think of what to do. Of what your options are. You are still thinking of the man on the ground. What did you think he was going to do to you? Why do you always have to think so negatively of people? Do you have to think so negatively of people? Do you expect the worst?

You know you do not want to walk past these guys. You do not even have a specific rational reason as to why that is.

You get a text from Nora saying she is already at the airport. And you want to be at your respective airport too. You miss the elusive security of having walls surrounding you. Of blinding fluorescent lights falling all around you, policing the shadows. This morning's thoughts win over last night's. You unlock your phone and open the Uber app. It is done. You can see the driver's location getting close to you on your screen. You haven't met him yet, and you already know his full name and his license plate. You look up from the screen every ten seconds to look at the group of guys at the end of the street. They laugh, but the joke does not reach you. It's starting to rain, but that is not your problem anymore: the Uber is here.

You leave the backpack on the floor of the taxi and collapse into

the backseat. You recognise the latest pop hit playing on the radio. You are alright.