



BLACK WHITE

Microstories, Vol. 2

Luis Alvarez & Raphaël Relat

- 3 -

NOIR

(raphaël relat)

- 4 -

BLANC

(luis alvarez)

- 6 -

SUBWAY

(luis alvarez)

- 7 -

HOPE

(raphaël relat)

- 8 -

SHADOW

(raphaël relat)

- 9 -

LUX

(luis alvarez)

NOIR

The fridge is humming softly in the half-light of the room. With the summer heat like a weight on everything, the ceiling fan struggles to bring a hint of freshness about. Outside, the hot winds sprinkle red dust on the windows.

Cat waits. In a few hours it will be night, and time to roam around, as she does every night. Patience and routine, it's all there is to it. She knows there's food available at all times in the kitchen, but she also knows that sometimes, getting it by herself feels much more rewarding. Plus, a girl's got to keep herself in shape. Tonight? She doesn't know yet.

In the meantime, she sits by the window, thinking. A storm's coming, and it might not be wise to stray too far. Probably not more than a couple blocks. What a bummer, after all this time locked inside, she would like nothing more than to stretch her legs and run to the forest nearby, it's so much fun... But she didn't get to her position by being careless. The forest is also dangerous. She had a close encounter with a bear once, on an evening not so different as this one, and boy she remembers.

No, tonight it will be a city walk.

Moving away from the window, she plays nonchalantly with a piece of paper, wondering what to do next, then decides that the window upstairs might be a better option to monitor the situation outside. And it's open! The caretaker must have forgotten to close it before leaving earlier. There is already a small pile of dust inside, which she carefully avoids. Sitting on the window sill, she's about to resume planning her evening when a movement catches her attention. Something in the grass. She tenses immediately, locking on it like a missile on its target. Looks like a calico got lost in the wrong neighborhood, she's never seen her before. She hasn't seen her and is quietly exploring the garden... She's good, if she'd been striped she'd be pretty much undetectable, camouflaged in the tall grass.

Note to self, track and chase, she thinks. It took her ages to teach the neighborhood cats her garden is off-limits, but she still needs to teach the rookies. After a good scare, she'll never come back.

She might not, actually, since she just ran away like all hell broke loose, scared off by an incoming car. Amused, she remembers she had a similar experience with a city bus when she was much, much younger. To this day, she still has an irrational fear of buses.

The car's engine complains loudly as the driver shifts gears to turn into the driveway. She recognizes both the car and the driving style now, it's the caretaker coming back from whatever errand he left for earlier. She gracefully jumps from the window sill back into the house and runs down the stairs to wait for him.

He sees her and smiles, leaves the groceries on the table then kneels down to scratch her ears.

"Hey, Kitty Cat, what are you up to lady?"

Cat purrs, licks the friendly hand, and lets the caretaker pet her, but not too much. She's a lady after all. She jumps out in the tall grass, a ball of black fur on her way to roam her kingdom.

* * *

BLANC

The day is sunny and some fat lazy clouds roll by, ever so gently pushed onwards by the wind – the only respite in the hot weather. Down below a city lies alive with activity. People walking north, south, east, west and any other direction, rarely stopping to catch their breath. Vehicles, big and small, follow the course of traced city streets, sometimes the harsh brass of a klaxon bounces off from skyscraper walls. A loud place for restless people.

Silence is for those who bide their time, not hurry to their grave. In a narrow alleyway, shadows drape it in a mute gloom. A landscape dotted with metal trashcans, abandoned cardboard boxes and wooden crates, even some garbage strewn across the alley's floor.

The silent hunter does not care. Paws fall like a whisper on the ground, one by one, as the hunter edges ever closer; prey has been spotted ahead. A small brown mouse, oblivious to the danger, grooms its whiskers. Thinking itself safe in the hush of the back alleys away from human eyes. Yellow eyes narrow into dark slits as muscles tense in anticipation for the attack.

A flash of white fur followed by squeak of surprise and fear. Droplets of blood fall quietly on the ground. The cat munches on its prey until it is all but gone, then proceeds to briefly groom itself before continuing its way across the city. Today was a good day.

The cat has not taken even ten steps when a loud growl from behind makes him turn around suddenly, its senses flaring in alarm. Larger than it – twice the size, in fact – a dog stands several meters behind, its fangs, yellow and decayed, bared for the white cat to see. Its low growl rises to a vicious bark and it dashes forward. Its eyes showing plain their intention: kill.

At the very last moment, the cat jumps to the side, barely missing a bite from the dog, and darts off in the opposite direction. Loud barks are heard not too far away along with the scraping of claws over the hard ground coming closer; the hunter becomes the hunted.

Hunter and hunted dash deeper into the alley, each lost in their single purpose, when a door ahead opens from a building. A harsh voice is heard calling out, and a large round man with thick hairy arms comes out, a bloody apron covers his large belly, a sharp machete held firmly on his left hand. Quicker than thought, the cat darts between the human's legs and hears a shout and a yelp behind him. Turning ever briefly, it sees the man lifting the dog from the ground, his large, brutish hand squeezing its neck.

"Fucking mutt, I finally caught you!"

The dog struggles against the grip, but the hand holding is stronger, and its body flails helplessly. The cat stopped to look at this new development with curiosity, but keeping away from the human's sight.

"You thieving sonuvabitch, you're the one whose been stealin' meat whenever we got a new shipment. Hey, Lou! I caught the bastard who been stealin' from us fo' the last week!"

"Really? Shit, yeah!", another loud voice replies from inside the building, "Chop it up, one less doggy to piss on about."

"Yeah, might as well. Gonna clean this chopper afterwards reaaaal good", the man with the bloody apron guffaws and slams the dog onto the ground, making it yelp in pain. Fear in its eyes.

Looking at it more closely, the cat notices how despite its large size, the dog is actually closer to skin and bones. Like him, he's a survivor. Doing nothing more than what's necessary. Slowly, the cat starts to turn away to leave when the dog begins to whimper. "Hold still you fuckin' mutt, I'm gonna chop your tail first!"

All cats understand the tongue of humans, but they prefer to play dumb most of the time. It's never good to let them know how much cats understand. The words right now are more than clear to it. The man is not killing the dog to survive, but out of malice and revenge. Hunters kill their prey clean, not let it linger in suffering, the white cat knows it well. Closing its eyes and hissing softly to no one but itself, it runs back to where the butcher is and jumps with a loud yowl.

"What the fu-" is all the man can say before the cat latches on with all of its claws on to the man's face.

"Aaaaah! Get off, get off! You fucking cat! Lou, help! Aaaaah, aaaaaaaah!", the cat feels strong hands grabbing on to it, squeezing painfully, trying to pry it from the grip on the man's face. A bark, then a growl, then a loud scream and the cat is flying, barely landing on its feet. Quickly turning around, it sees the dog running towards it and then past. Back at the doorway the man's face is full of claw marks while he rubs his left calf which is bloody. The dog bit him in an attempt to help him. There is no more time to lose as the one called Lou comes out with another cleaver in hand. Both cat and dog are quick to vanish into the darkness of the alleyway.

After several minutes of hiding behind some garbage cans, the cat very slowly emerges from his hiding place and is surprised to find the dog sitting in front of him. A sheepish, but placid, look on its face. Slowly, the cat comes close, then adopts a sitting position in front of the dog. Both hunters stare for the longest of times, then finally, the dog begins to wag its tail and stick its tongue out, panting. The white cat understands and purrs softly. After a moment the dog stands on all four and walks away, looking once back at the cat, then continuing on its way. The cat for its part grooms itself a bit, then turns to the opposite direction and walks away. Today was a good day after all.

* * *

SUBWAY

The subway flows to the shuffling of steps. Slow, quick, heavy or soft, they are background noise to my drowning. The cart is full of bodies, pressing and squeezing one another, and all eyes are looking everywhere but each other. This is a bad tale of missed opportunities, but the jolt and screeching of the subway makes us human sardines tilt sideways. I am drowning in a sea of quiet bodies, only the rustle of cloth over cloth, the occasional creaking of leather breaking this aural monotony. A child – pretty much a baby – stares at me as his mother holds him up in her arms. Curiosity lights up his face, I smile back. Grateful to distract myself from the discomfort of someone's elbow drilling into my spine. The baby gives out an excited squeal in response to silly faces I make: I am a subway clown. Better than being a transient nobody. The mother turns around unexpectedly and we lock eyes as I was sticking my tongue out to her child. Embarrassed by the frown she gives me my tongue slowly retreats back into my mouth and I stare down at my shoes. The subway screeches to a stop and they get off at the station. I resume my drowning among indifferent bodies.

* * *

HOPE

"Hope is a lack of information."

Heiner Müller

The upper part of the mast slowly vanished in a last flow of bubbles, and from that moment the only sign there had been a boat there was a bunch of debris floating lazily on the surface, drifting away from the raft. A few hundred meters to her left, she could still make out a reddish shadow underwater, a last glimpse at the semi-submerged container that had put such a dramatic end to her round-the-world cruise. Steel vs. laminate was never a fight a sailor wanted to witness, especially on a solo cruise. But what had happened had happened, and the container had struck her boat, and her boat had sunk, and that was that.

She quickly surveyed the contents of the raft, more in an attempt to keep busy than anything else as she was a professional and had kept current on her gear and procedures. There was enough water and dried food rations to survive for a few weeks, the raft was in good state, she had a little hand-cranked flashlight, a solar radio, and the raft was sound. As the sun set on the indifferent sea, she prepared herself a cup of tea, and as one last souvenir recovered one last object: the life jacket that had been hanging from the aft stanchions near the wind generator, that somehow had been jerked free when the boat went under. Then, having taken care of the basic necessity of staying hydrated and fed, having no screen to watch and no book to read, she took a last look at the stars and at the waters, then closed the raft's watertight hatch for the night. Tomorrow would come soon enough, and with it the difficult task of getting her bearings, and the even more difficult one of getting noticed. There had been no time for an emergency broadcast, but the ELT was working and the emergency light was on. Tomorrow would be uncomfortable, and the following days too, and she would get to stay in the Pacific for a bit longer than she had anticipated, and get to come home a bit sooner than she had hoped. Tomorrow, or soon after, someone would come by and pick her up.

She never considered the possibility that she might be wrong.

* * *

SHADOW

They say that ghosts do not exist. That they are just figments of our feverish imaginations, remnants of nightmares from when we were young, and scared, and lost. But I'm here. I watch you. I follow you. I go into your home. I search your car.

I pick your pockets.

I was an orphan when they picked me up. They didn't give themselves a name but they did not need one, for everyone knew better than to name a shadow. People are simple. Give them discomfort and they ignore you, pretending you do not exist as they clutch their purse and hurriedly push their kids in front of them, covering their eyes with trembling fingers.

These fools are afraid of the dark but they don't realize they are looking the wrong way. As they pass in front of me, worried, monitoring the dark, empty park bordering the street, I'm there, innocently bumping into them to lift their wallet.

When they're home watching the telly, all lights on, I'm there right next to the couch taking their watch off their very wrist.

Sometimes I help myself to the snacks too, just for kicks.

I was an orphan when they picked me up, and they taught me well, for I grew to be the best of them all, patiently collecting all the tricks up my sleeve to get the jewelleries off yours. Ghost, thief, I've been called many things indeed. But that flicker at the corner of your eyes, that's always been my favourite.

I'm the shadow in your footsteps, and you will never see me.

* * *

LUX

Close your eyes and clear your head. It's pretty dark there, no? It is as if all the light in the World was swallowed in one moment and left you in darkness. Well, that is how things once were a long, long, quite long time ago.

Dark as it may be with your eyes closed, it was nowhere near as dark in that distant past before even Time itself had a name. There was no night or day, no stars, no moon, no nothing. Only the pure black inkiness of perpetual darkness. Yet if there is one certainty about the universe is that things never stay the same. A bright light, dancing with fire and life, erupted forth from that vast nothingness, shattering the monochromatic domain of the color black. This wee light is but an infant, and in its birth there came a sibling, or shall we say siblings?

Light gave way to shadows. Far more than any could ever count even in a hundred lifetimes, they encircled the tiny light at the edge of darkness' domain, writhing in fury and hunger as the light made them aware of existence, an unpleasant thought, for darkness needs not the meanderings of life to be perfect. This light had, after all, fragmented that union and now it hungered to consume the tiny infant.

The tiny light knows it is the only one of its kind, surrounded by darkness and its hungry shadows all over, it knows fear. The darkness knows its shadows need just bide their time when the light begins to falter to swallow it whole once and for all. Alone as it is, the light feels it cannot hold the endless cold and darkness at bay indefinitely. The tiny light begins to dim.

Little by little its light dulls a bit more, and the shadows come closer. Their hunger driving them mad, as darkness creeps back where the light has lost its hold. Just as the light if but the smallest of sparks, barely clinging to life, the shadows howl and fall upon it, desperate to extinguish its brightness forever.

That is when a second light popped into existence next to the fading first light. The shadows barely have time to scream in fear as they retreat back with the darkness who recedes from the terrain it had regained and then some. The tiny light no longer alone is nurtured by its sibling's fire and it shines brightly soon afterwards. They both dance in joy as the shadows watch with fury.

And just as with the first and the second, a third light pops into existence.

Then a fourth, and a fifth... and many, many, many more, sending the darkness with its shadows screaming off into the furthest corners of the endless void. There are now so many lights, all huddled together, forming a gigantic light that shines with a brightness so fierce there is no shadow could resist it.

The tiny light, the first one to come into being, dances happily with all of its newfound siblings. Happy to not be alone anymore, happy to be surrounded by the warm light of others. Yet as it is dancing, something catches its attention. Something in the far distance. Briefly, it pauses to peer out into the void, and then softly gasps, amazed. A tiny blue planet is visible in the distance, already showing patches of brown and green land on its surface.

* * *

