

Excerpt from *The Grill* by Adolfo Pardo

Translated by Scott Spanbauer

Outside, a red pickup waited for us. It was an old Ford with hardware for attaching a canvas top. I needed help climbing up because my pants were so tight on me that I couldn't raise my legs. Half the neighborhood was watching, and the dark-skinned one comes and yells:

"Get inside you old biddies!" And the old ladies got scared and shut themselves back in.

With all this going on, I say *I can't climb up* and the young guy came, the blonde-haired one, and helped me, taking me by the arm, but very gently. Once I was up there, I went and sat down on the bed, next to my grandfather.

"Grandpa," I said, taking his hand, "don't worry, nothing's going to happen, we'll come back in a while.

"Hey, none of that talking," the dark-skinned one scolded us. "Nice and quiet, the both of you."

At that moment, the blonde guy climbed up in the truck.

"I'm sorry baby, but I'm going to have tape your mouth."

"What for?" I asked him, laughing.

"It's just better."

Suddenly the head guy shows up.

"No," he says, "don't tape her up yet."

So, everybody climbed on. The blonde guy and another three up front, and in back, with us, the dark one, the lumpen, and another with a square head, tall, really tall, who kneeled next to the cab where my grandfather and I were riding. And the other two, also kneeling, but at the back end. We turned at the corner of Huérfanos and Brasil, and in front of the fire station we stopped and the dark-skinned one came over to cover my grandfather's eyes and mine with tape.

"Ready" he yelled, and we started off again.

I tried to open at least one eye, and I started counting the streets, calculating where we were going through.

"Are you looking?" they asked me.

"No."

In fact I couldn't see anything because I didn't dare look. I didn't want to open my eyes, but later I started to work at opening an eyelid and I could see on one side, although I got lost when we hit the Panamerican Highway's potholes. I was too afraid. I was afraid they'd see that I'd opened my eyes, or one eye that is, and that's when I lost track.

Finally, we came to an alley, or maybe that was the impression I got due to the narrowness at the moment I got down. I had to hang on to a guy on each side. When we started walking again I tried opening my eye and, although I was only able to see the ground, I could tell that it was an alley.

We came in in the middle of a big military operation. Men running here and there, yelling and calling each other Buddy, Pal, Soldier, and so on. We passed alongside of a black metal gate, of that I'm sure, and went through a series of hallways where the fear started creeping back into me again, until they left me standing somewhere there. A lady that I got a look at later on came and stayed next to me for about five minutes, guarding me, I suppose, until they moved me to a little room where there was a table and an easy chair. They offered me coffee and then all of a sudden the blonde guy popped in.

"Do you know who I am?"

"Yes."

"Who?"

"The one with the blonde hair?"

"Ah," he said, "you recognize my voice."

"Yes," I replied.

"OK baby," he continued, "we're going to talk right here and make sure there are no problems, and, if you talk you'll be heading home just like that."

And it started.

"Where's your brother?"

"I don't know."

And I began to realize that I was surrounded by people, guys I mean.

"But how could you not know? It's for his own good. Otherwise it'll be worse."

"I don't know, I really don't know," I lied, because I did know where to find him.

"Who are your brother's friends? Who does he meet up with? Give us names!"

“I don’t really hang out with him,” I kept pretending.

“Why?”

“Because we don’t get along, we fight.”

“And his friends?”

“I don’t know. They’re pretty crazy.”

“Ah, they’re pretty crazy?” he said and pounded the table with his fist.

“Where is your brother?” he yelled. I jumped.

“I don’t know” I said, and started to cry.

“Give us your brother’s friends’ names! I’m sure they go to your house.”

“I don’t know... I don’t hang out at home.”

“Don’t give me that! You must know more than one of them!

I didn’t know what to do and I told him: “There’s one named Jorge... he was one of those Fatherland and Liberty guys, but a good friend of my brother’s, they still are.”

“Where does he live?”

I don’t really know, but he lives in the neighborhood, around San Pablo and Riquelme.”

Actually, he lived near Riquelme and Santo Domingo, but I was scared they’d get more things out of me because of my fear of contradicting myself and them catching me.

“What other friends? Who does he get together with most? Classmates...”

I named two classmates that I knew had nothing to do with anything. One of them totally in love with me and a total right-winger.

“Who’s his best friend?”

“A guy who went to the United States.”

“Who is he?”

I told him the name because he won’t be coming back, and had nothing to do with anything anyway.

He kept asking questions.

“What does your brother do?”

“Interning. He’s doing his internship.”

“Tell us everything that he does, starting from when he gets up.”

“I don’t really know. I go to class in the morning.”

“But you go back for lunch?”

Suddenly someone says: “To the doctor, take her to the doctor.”

I didn’t understand what for, I mean I never thought I’d end up where I was.

They took me down a padded tunnel. At least the entrance must have been very low, because they told me to stoop down, I didn’t listen and hit my head. I went in and since my tears had loosened the tape quite a bit I could see a huge guy with a white apron and a nice face, wearing glasses. That big guy looked out of place in such a tight space.

“Are you nervous?” he asked.

“Yes,” I told him.

“Why?”

“Because I don’t understand any of what is happening.”

You just need to be calm, cooperate with my friends, you won’t have any problems.”

“Yes, but cooperate on what, if I don’t know anything about what they’re asking me.”

“OK, but stay calm.” And he starts asking about my state of health. How was my nervous system, and the first thing he asked about was my heart.

I told him that I’d never had any problems.

“And your nervous system.”

Now we’re talking, I thought, I’ll play the victim.

I told him: “My nerves are shot, actually. I’m in treatment.” I laid it on thick. And I went on: “I don’t know how long I’m going to be here and I didn’t bring my medicine and need to take them, so I feel really nervous and sick.”

“What medications do you take?” he asked.

“Lexotanil,” I answered, “and Diazepam.”

I wasn’t taking Diazepam, but I knew that they gave it to my grandmother for her nerves.

“We’ll see if we can take care of that” he told me.

Then he made me open my mouth, he looked at my tonsils, he poked his contraption here and there, gave me a super-quick checkup, wrote down my name, my age, and boom.

“Get her out of here!” he said.

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I went back to the place where they had interrogated me.

“Know who I am?”

“I don’t know,” I said, pissed as hell.

The blonde guy slammed the table again.

“Oh, so you don’t know who I am?”

Now that scared the crap out of me.

“The guy with blonde hair” I said.

“Ah, see what a good memory you have? You remember me and you’re not going to forget any time soon.

And right away he started in with the thing about my brother.

“I don’t know! I don’t know! I don’t know! Leave me alone, I don’t know anything!”

The the guy got up and left. It was about ten minutes before he came back.

“You fucking bitch” he screamed and slapped my right across the face. “You dicked us around. Know what I was doing upstairs? I went to tell them to let you go.”

“Take her away,” he shouted.

And another guy who was just coming in...

“It’s ready.”

It was the boss, who was holding the letter and all the items that were in the packet that my brother had left me.

“Ready” they repeated, and left the room.

I was left alone, trying to look all around. Again you could hear random footsteps, running and scuffling, banging and voices giving orders. In a while they came back, and the blonde guy said: "Get out and leave me alone with her."

Shit, he's going to rape me, I thought.

"Close your eyes," he said. "I'm going to take the tape off."

And he uncovers just the one eye I could see with and shows me an ID.

"Do you know this dude?"

I didn't know whether to say yes or no.

"Yes. Yes I know him."

"Who is he?"

"A classmate of my brother's."

"Where from?"

"From elementary school, high school, years ago..."

"And what does this fucker do?"

"Nothing, I don't like him 'cause he's a pothead." Instinctively, I tried to brush him off, not knowing that you could even do something like that, I'd never...

"What do they call him?"

"His name is Gonzalo."

"And do you know a Chalo?"

"No, I don't know him," I said. I shook my head no.

That was a lame question, because he, in the interrogation, said that they called him Chalo and because of that contradiction with me they hit me one hell of a beating. I realized that later on, but in that moment I said no, to me he's Gonzalo and that's that.

After that, they came in with my brother's ID. They cover the name and show me the photo. I jumped.

"No!"

"Who's this fucker?"

“My brother.”

They put the tape back on me. They took me out to the hall and left again standing next to a wall. Then comes a huge bunch of guys, I look down at the floor and I recognize my brother’s shoes. He was coming in at that moment. Where I was standing there the hallway took a ninety degree turn and on one of its sides was the little interrogation office. I started to cry: my brother, my brother, my brother. And the lady guarding me—the same one as at the beginning—gave me a wallop in the stomach.

“Don’t be fucking around here. Stand up straight and turn around toward the wall.”

I turned around and kept crying. My brother, my beautiful brother.

But the worst thing of all is what I started to hear, because they started to hit him right away.

“So you’re a motherfucking commie!” wham, a smack.

I felt him fall and how they were kicking him and I remembered what he had told me about the package and the dudes that would never leave that evening, and I was thinking why the fuck couldn’t I have told them to leave... maybe all of this could have been avoided.