

La Lechuza / The White Owl

During the course of our lives, transcendental moments come along, and we are forced to sit up and take notice. Everybody has their moments. We all react differently.

It is difficult to figure out how to begin retelling the story of any one of those moments. Presumably, it is up to each person to do their best to convey the transcendence felt, and for each listener to absorb it as their own.

In this instance, all I can do is begin by telling you that, yesterday, for around a hundred minutes, I was dead.

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Sometime between five and five-thirty in the afternoon, yesterday, Friday, October 27th, in broad daylight, a White Owl circled above our house. My friend Jonathan watched it from the balcony. I never saw it. Hovering completely still, he said, 50 feet above his head, it had been staring straight at him for several minutes. Yet in the split-second it took him to come into the house, tell me to come out and see it, and step back outside, The White Owl had disappeared. Jonathan was aghast. He felt I wasn't meant to see it.

As we considered the meaning of it all, my cell-phone rang. It was my friend Diablo, the crime reporter. In other words - I later realised - the Devil was calling me up to remind me of my fate. He immediately asked if I was okay. A foreign journalist had been shot in the city centre. Said he thought the guy's name was Andrés. I didn't know anyone by that name. "Call Victor," said Diablo, "he's down at the scene."

So I called Victor. It was a bad line. In bad english, he told me the guy's name was Bradley. Bradley Roland Will. Bullet in the chest. Died on his way to hospital. Worked for Indymedia. Only Jonathan standing next to me could describe my expression when I heard the news. Bradley. It was Bradley. Brad! Brad, who I had met the week before when we coincided at a lynching of a group of drunken youths who had assaulted a young couple. We had both been filming. It was the first time I had met a foreign journalist since I started filming the uprising in Oaxaca. Of course, we spoke, exchanged details, shared a few jokes, agreed to swap footage, and I set him up with a few people where he could film. Real nice guy. Real, nice, honest guy doing his best to record events in this fucked-up situation in the hope of a few crumbs of attention from the world's news consumers. Brad, you called me the morning of Friday 27th October, your last day on earth, to ask where you could rent a motorbike. Now, you're gone. You're the first foreign casualty since the region was plunged into this living hell. The 13th casualty in all. And, sadly, probably the most important of all.

Naturally, my first thought was, "it could have been me". And, for a while, it was me.

I tell Victor to wait for me at the office, then grab a small digital camera, jump on the bike and head straight down there. As the sun went down, the world grew dark.

I decide to detour to the scene of the incident, but it was very hard to get through. The barricades were being reinforced. Trucks unloaded tons of earth to block the streets at strategic points. I spoke to some APPO people (Newsspeak: "leftist protesters"; State prosecutor: "urban guerrilla terrorists"), the same people who had tried to keep Brad from passing out after he got shot and had bundled him into the back of a VW bug to take him to a private hospital (he died en route), the same people who set up barricades to protect themselves and their neighbourhoods from criminals and paramilitary hitmen who in recent weeks have restarted their drive-by shooting campaign.

What you will not be told by most media, especially in Mexico, is that the three hitmen that attacked the barricade where Brad and other journalists were, have been identified as local policemen. They wielded AR-15 rifles and various pistols and fired indiscriminately into the crowd. Brad was probably not targeted (even though state radio (Radio Ciudadania: 99.1 FM - pirate government radio broadcasting from unknown location) is saying Brad "was an armed terrorist, and there is more to this than meets the eye" and "Indymedia is a branch of the APPO"), but he was the unlucky one, hit full in the chest, right in the solar plexus, by a 9-mm wide pellet of steel travelling at around 1000 meters per second.



What you probably won't hear either is that the APPO people do not carry any firearms. Their only weapons are rocks, clubs, molotov cocktails, and the occasional home-made fireworks mortar. To my knowledge, in 5 months of protests, they haven't fired a single shot from a firearm. All the casualties have been on the side of the 'protesters', either APPO or teachers. (The fact is, the APPO probably does have an array of firearms, but have taken a brave political decision not to use them).

Dropping a few names, the APPO lets me through the barricades and I arrive at the neighbourhood of El Bajio where Victor was waiting for me. I know a lot of people in the area. A group of local journalists have a dingy office here, in a concrete block that stinks of urine. A police blotter, Noti Roja, run by crime news godfather El Chiricuto, is based upstairs. And, next door, Diablo has a bare spare room with a mattress where I sometimes stay the night. I often come here to hang out, get information, check out any new footage and photos, have a beer. Chiricuto, Victor, Bermudez, Teo, Zurco, Diablo, Chavez: I have known them all for about three years. And, I'm a tall white guy with a

rat-tail, so the whole neighbourhood knows me, even if I've never spoken to some of them.

When I turn up, at around 7:00pm, there are about 20 people gathered in the street. Some are crying. As I pull up on the motorbike, I call out to Chiricuto. Seeing me, his face drops. He looks angry. "Yon! Is that you, Yon?!" The others turn to look at me, aghast. I realise they are all drunk. But they look like they have all seen a ghost. In fact, they are staring straight at one.

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"Fuckin' Yon, get off the bike!"

I still don't get it. As I turn off the engine and dismount, Chiricuto approaches slowly. He pinches my arm. "Yon!" he exclaims, wrapping his arms around me. Teo cries out, totally wasted:

"I fuckin' told you! I told you so! Yon, only I really believed!"

Chiricuto: "Yon, you were dead! We all thought you were dead!"

Everybody on the street gathers around, frantically hugging me.

Chiricuto is overwhelmed. "My son! My son! He is still alive!" He

pulls out the camera and starts clicking away. Everybody wants a picture with the dead guy. People start flooding out of their houses.

Teo: "They said your name on the radio! They said you had been shot and killed! Zurco said he saw your body in the back of a VW bug! You were foaming at the mouth! He has been crying ever since. You need to go and see them! (Referring to the people at the barricade three blocks away where I had been filming) They all think you are dead."

Chiricuto comes back with a 5-litre plastic tub of mezcal. "This is for you, you have to pour everyone a drink. It is Mezcal for the Dead." As I start to pour out little shots for everybody, he tells me he had been crying. "There could be ten dead... but not Yon. If Yon goes down, I swear the governor is next." The wiry little Chiricuto, talking like a revolutionary tiger. I spill a drop of mezcal on the floor before downing the shot, in recognition of my fate. Between crying out to people to come out onto the street, spreading the news and taking photos of us all, Chiricuto goes on: "We were about to go and pick you up from the morgue and were going to hold a wake for you... all of us here... in the centre of the graveyard over there." (We were standing a block from the gates of the city cemetery; the street here is called Caminito al Cielo - "Little path to the sky.")

I had arrived at my own wake. Tears welled up and rolled down my cheek. For them, my 100-minute flatline was over.



I celebrated my own resurrection with them for about half an hour. I explained to them that the guy who had been killed was a friend of mine and that I had to take care of a few things. I had a lot on my mind: I had to contact Zurco; I had to find Brad's body - because I figured I might be the one to identify him - which also meant going to the city morgue - no easy task; I had to contact the embassy - both the US embassy for Brad, and the UK embassy for me: if my name had gone out over the radio, what if the embassy got wind of it and tried to notify my parents? (I don't even want to think about that possibility...). But, I had no phone numbers. What I did have with me was that minor miracle called a cell-phone. I fished it out and flicked through the contacts list.

First, I decided to call Pati, a wonderful young girl who stoically manned the roadblock Zurco was in charge of. Her friend Olga picked up, who I also knew. As soon as I said "it's me, John", she flipped out. All she could say was "Yon? is that you, Yon? Yon, is that really you?!" She must have said it twenty times, until all I could do was shout: "Olga, it's me! It's me! Calm down! I'm on my way over there!"

I jumped on the bike and headed to the roadblock, which was 300 yards away. As I approached, I noticed the scene felt much more sinister than on previous nights. This time, they had assembled around a dozen public buses to block off the ten streets that make up this major intersection. Fires raged all around: burning tires, sofas, telegraph poles. All electric lights were off. I turned off the lights on the bike as I drew closer (standard practice). They flashed a huge floodlight in my face, shouting "No hay paso! Date la vuelta!" ("There is no way through, turn around!").

"It's me, John!" I shouted back.

"Yon?! Is that you, Yon?!" Olga and Pati screamed like little girls and rushed over to me, hugging and kissing me. "Thank God you are ok! My mum hasn't stopped crying! We heard on the radio that you had been shot and killed! Zurco said he saw your body in a car!" The rest of the barricade crew ran over. There must have been a hundred people circled around me. They hugged me and shook my hand and patted me on the back. One old lady wouldn't let go of my arm. The big man Zurco came over and crushed me with a big hug. His wife was in tears. I was overwhelmed. All I could say was:

"Gracias, gracias, I'm fine, I'm fine. I've been at home. It was a friend who was killed, not me. I knew him a bit." They asked me about Brad and I told them what I knew. They thought about his family and hoped that the USA would now apply pressure on the Mexican government to resolve the situation here. "Now, the governor really has to go." And, today, Saturday, federal forces are again gathering at the airport military base, arriving in 6 massive troop transport planes. The operation is allegedly scheduled for 2:00am tonight. (Stay tuned)

Wrenching myself away, apologising, saying I had to take care of some things for Brad, I walked to the end of the block and pulled my phone out again. First, I called Daniela at the Anglo-Mexican foundation in Mexico City, who I knew had close ties to the British embassy. "Just tell them if they hear that I'm dead, it's not true." She also gave me a US embassy emergency number, which I dialled after hanging up.

Some embassy operator guy answered. "My name is John Dickie, I am a British journalist in Oaxaca and I'm calling because an American journalist was just shot and killed here." The guy's tone of voice immediately pissed me off.

"Who do you work for?"

"What does it matter who I work for? ITN, for fuck's sake."

"So, who do you want to talk to?"

"You tell me, man! Whoever the fuck you think I should talk to about a dead American journalist!"

Robert Zimmerman, the deputy head of the press office, came on the line. He was more helpful. I told him the story. Gave him Brad's full name. They had not received word yet.

"There is no authority in Oaxaca right now," I said "so you probably won't hear anything. I am sending you the word." He was sceptical because I hadn't seen the body. Fair point. But I had spoken to witnesses and had seen the photos already.

"I'm on the way to the morgue. Call me in half an hour."

Then I called the US consul in Oaxaca - an aloof prick - and left a message. Then I called another friend who knew Brad, to accompany me to the morgue. Victor and Bermudez, two local journalist friends, came also. We left the roadblock in a convoy of motorcycles. This wasn't too clever considering paramilitary hitmen ride around on motorbikes, so the APPO is very wary of groups of bikers. Plus, we were going to have to negotiate our way through the city centre. Victor led us along a safe route. We did not see a single car.

Arriving at the morgue, where I know some of the staff, we went over to greet the head forensic doctor - Dr Muerte, they call him. He let us in to see Brad. (I won't describe the operating theater). Once inside, standing next to the cold stone slab, which I had so often filmed for a documentary the year before, I was now faced with a body I had known in life. Every crime journalist's nightmare. I nodded gently. It was, indeed, Bradley Roland Will. His brown eyes were wide open, staring straight through me, into infinity. His chest was sown up, but the bullet hole was obvious. I didn't linger. Dr Death put his arm around my shoulder (sinisterly) and escorted me outside, where he showed me the two 9mm bullet tips he had removed from Brad's chest. I wondered why he had them in the pocket of his white coat.



Outside, roommate of Brad's, an Indymedia colleague, a Spanish photographer, and a Human Rights worker were gathered. We all spoke for a while. They had been with Brad at the time. A pick-up truck had burst through a barricade and several men had opened fire on the 'protesters'. Brad had been at the front of the pack, hit from around 30 metres away. They had also been fired at from rooftops. The gunmen

have since been identified as local police from press photographs and video stills and have supposedly been handed over to the 'authorities'. (They weren't smart enough to cover their faces; that said, in Oaxaca, when you are the law, impunity is a sport.)

The morgue people told us they could not do an official identification without Brad's passport and the consul present. We decided his roommate would take care of it in the morning.

At around midnight, we rode again through the night streets, back to the barricade. I stayed up for another couple of hours at the roadblock before heading down the street to Diablo's spare room. Before going to bed, Chiricuto and I watched the news. Televisa showed uncut footage of the shootings and of Brad's death. It was gruesome to watch. But the most gruesome part was listening to the presenter saying the shots were fired by neighbours who are tired of the conflict and who have turned against the APPO. In Mexico, the extent of political influence is unbounded.

Sixteen hours later from when the White Owl appeared, I stood on the balcony with Jonathan and we recalled a local saying:

"Cuando la lechuza vuela,
El indio muere."

"When the White Owl flies,
The Indian dies."

The White Owl had appeared at exactly the time of Brad's death. No doubt, we would never see it again. Because there was no White Owl, and now there is one less Indian in the world of the living.

As for Brad and me, our destinies divided. I stayed here. He was called back. In the page below are two images that portray our different paths. One is joyful. The other is joyless. Only scroll down if you are willing to embrace light and dark.

At least it looks like Bradley Roland Will's death may help bring an end to this conflict, because, after 5 months of complete apathy, the federal government looks like it has been moved to act, finally sending in the federal police to restore public security. Did George W. have a quiet word with Fox? Probably. And for helping set off this chain of events, Brad and his family can be proud. However, whether a sudden federal incursion will solve the problem remains to be seen. Tomorrow we might know. The APPO won't move until the governor is removed from office. But the everyday folk of Oaxaca deserve to at least be allowed to live in a secure environment, regardless of their allegiance. What is certain is that the rotten apple that is local government culture in southern Mexico needs to be ripped clean from its throat. It will doubtless take several generations.

Finally, the question has to be asked: does a gringo always have to die for the world to act?



This was the Third Misanthropium Missive from Mexico.



text by john dickie

photos by cesar bermudez and chircuto