

THE PRISONER

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EDICIONES

Index

Synopsis

Paris. Infinite love

1. Before. Iraq. The inevitable
20. Present time. Houston, Texas. Søren's despair
2. Before. Iraq. What do psychopaths dream about?
21. Present day. Houston, Texas. The Plot Thickens
3. Before. Iraq. Socrates was right
22. Present time. Houston, Texas. Landa's dialectics
4. Before. Iraq. Merry Christmas
23. Present time. Houston, Texas. The Myth of the Cave
5. Before. Iraq. a. G. / d. G.
24. Present Time. Houston, Texas. Is everything relative?
6. Before. Iraq. So wander, fatal and cursed
25. Present Time. Houston, Texas. Bouquets of roses
7. Before. Iraq. 80/20
26. Present Time. Washington. Contempt
8. Before. Iraq. Room service
27. Present Time. Washington. Remembering Abraham
9. Before. Iraq. Planned obsolescence
28. Present Time. Washington. Los ojos del Sapo
29. Present Time. Washington. Inside the cave, without the myths
10. Before. Iraq. The price of fame
30. Present Time. Washington. Inglorious Basterds
11. Before. Iraq. The greener grass
31. Present Time. Washington. Dance of the agents
12. Before. Iraq. The infinite distance

32. Present Time. Washington. Love of the Sophists
13. Before. The doors of perception
33. Present Time. Washington. "The Human Stash"
14. Before. Texas desert. Chain of conscience
34. Present Time. Washington. The eternal comeback
15. Before. The opportunity
35. Present Time.. The aesthetics of survival.
16. Before. Towards the White House
36. Present Time. The Shadows of the Cave are Real
17. Before. IUN
37. Present. Kafka's circular oblivion
18. Before
38. Present. A loose end
19. Before. Right before
39. Present

Biography

Credits

Synopsis

Paris, November 13, 2015. You love your wife so much that you decide to prove it to her by spending a romantic weekend in Paris together. After a magical day of museums, Bohemian neighborhoods and accordion music, you have dinner in an equally magical restaurant where food is served in the dark. You decide that the perfect day will culminate in a rock concert by her favorite band in a famous Parisian venue, the Bataclan.

Days later, Paul Hébert, a French journalist covering a story in Iraq for an American newspaper, tells in first person the circumstances of his abduction by a jihadist group. Kneeling in a row of prisoners, the terrorists are about to behead him. Paul is facing the last seconds of life as he tries, desperately, to find a way to escape the inevitable.

With his wits and his vast knowledge about cinema as his only weapons, using his sense of humor as his main source of strength, Paul strategizes an absolutely insane plan to build a fantasy around the jihadists and escape from certain death.

Three months after, Paul wakes up safe and sound in a hospital; however, he does not remember anything about what happened during his captivity. The public has followed his kidnapping and Paul has become a celebrity. But the circumstances of his release are a mystery. On his cell phone, Paul finds a video where he sees himself hooded and dressed as a terrorist, proclaiming the threat of a devastating bomb in the heart of the United States.

The threat is real, to deactivate the bomb Paul will have to follow his own footsteps and rebuild his insane plan of escape. However, with every discovery of his forgotten past, he will find a new threat in the present. It is the beginning of a psychological odyssey, filled with obstacles that will take Paul from Houston to Washington, and finally to Paris, to the very night of the ISIS attacks where he will understand that his fate is tragically linked to that of the couple in love.

The fact is that nothing and no one, not even himself, is what it appears to be.

With a surprising end, *The Prisoner* is a novel built around an ingenious delirium, with the mechanics of suspense that will surprise the reader again and again and will force him to plunge into the dark depths of the human soul where love, hate, desire for revenge and the fight for survival are revealed as the real engines of history.

Paris Infinite love

You have dinner in absolute darkness, and it is such a strange feeling not being able to even see your fork while it stabs the meat of a mouth-watering whisky marinated steak. Its smell envelops you even before it reaches your palate.

“Ding ding,” say the utensils when they touch.

Sparkly laughter from the table next to you.

“Mmmmm,” you hear from the front.

That’s the voice of your wife.

“I guess you like your food.” you say, smiling, however invisible your smile is in the darkness.

Your wife laughs, she is enjoying herself. Listening to her laughter from the other side of darkness is too wonderful to put into words.

“A lot,” she answers, and her voice makes you shiver just as before.

That’s precisely the idea, in complete darkness, in full obscurity (you prefer the term obscurity to darkness, as obscurity seems to be way darker than darkness) senses sharpen, the meat tastes better, the salad, even the drink, although what you really feel sharpening is the feeling of love, love that overwhelms you when you hear your wife’s voice, even more sensual when you cannot spy her with your eyes.

The mushroom cream... What’s the point of talking about it? Who could even imagine that such an amalgam of flavors could divest from simple fungi?

Your wife, however, has opted for the chicken with pasta, more Italian, more Mediterranean. You, tonight at least, especially after such a day, feel fascinated by eating your food as French as possible.

That said, you have to be very careful not to spill the glass of wine whenever you want to take a sip of your Pinot Noir Bourgogne.

It has been a wonderful day, and this evening is simply delicious. Today was not the first day that you spent in Paris with your wife, but it is certainly the best, by far.

You arrived around noon to the proud, vast, and crowded East station, where, lulled by the echoes of the birds, the sun slips in and curves, as if to caress the place from the inside, after a train ride of a couple of hours, which passed in a breeze of cafe latte and waiters that were so polite that sometimes your wife, who is not French, had to contain her laughter.

A taxicab took you to the magical, bohemian district of Montmartre and it did indeed hold its magic. It was hiding behind every corner, waiting for you to cross it to be utterly amazed by it, and both of you cruised every street from one to the next, the narrow and the winding and those uphill, until you reached the neighborhood where the street painters were crowded together. Among paintings and the sweet aroma of coffee, you spied the Eiffel Tower from the top of a mountain.

The story goes like this, when they inaugurated the Basilica of the Sacred Heart, crowning this magical Montmartre district, many people were outraged, and the owner of Moulin Rouge went up running to the Church, yelling “There lives the devil! The Devil!”

To what some people answered, “Actually, dear gentleman, the devil is at the Moulin Rouge!”

It was these streets on which you brag about your love that Picasso walked — that’s precisely what you thought as you reached the Tertre square. Once there you’d like to have run with all those pictures, but you understood that, in reality, you were taking them with you, for they were illuminated by the smile of your wife, who walked among the painters as the best work of art that had ever been completed on that miraculous hill.

You walked with her, and her words sounded like the murmur of water, and you felt that you were orbiting around her eyes. You thought about kissing her but you had something better in mind, a perfect kiss at

the end of the day, when your wife would feel completely overwhelmed by the memory of a day in Paris.

Right after that, you dived under the City of Light riding the subway, catching the line that would take you to the Seine station, and inside that underground train a short man that you figured had bad breath, played enthusiastically a tune by Edith Piaf, so typical as it was French, as decadent as wonderful. No one looked to the man, only your wife; you could not stop staring at her, feeling her fascination at every note, every feeling.

*She does not regard the floor
and her loving eyes
and her long and strong artist fingers
reach your soul.*

When you were a child you used to make fun of the accordionists in the subway, but this afternoon you felt blessed by the presence of that short man, with grey hair and a receding line.

You were so happy inside that subway that you even wondered who you were. Were you really you, or were you playing a role to hold on to happiness? Were you really so in love with your wife or were you trying to convince yourself that you were just to maintain the illusion of an untouchable, perfect happiness? You remembered then that your tendency to overanalyze makes you miss real life, and this was a day to reflect on afterwards, not as it occurs, and you remembered also that in the company of your wife you don't pretend anything, you don't play any kind of role, in fact, it is only with her that you feel like you can act on autopilot, and the you that moves by itself should be, by logic, the closest thing to the real you.

That's it —you concluded— we are who we are when we don't think, when we don't notice ourselves, when we don't pay attention to who we are, or what we are doing, That is so much the ultimate truth that, afterwards, we are unable to remember ourselves, as if what happened

happened without us, that's maybe the reason why it is so hard to be oneself, because trying is failing — and with that last thought you decided to stop thinking and devoted yourself to live the day from within, not from the outside.

So you left the subway with your arm over her shoulder as you arrived to the San Michel station, right in Paris downtown, next to the Seine river, where you came across the green kiosks, with used books, books that have gone from one Parisian hand to another. Some are so old that they very well might have been read by the misaligned eyes of Sartre, and they may treasure a wisp of smoke from his very pipe; around those very books, as ornaments, postcards, and replicas, all of them next to the calm waters of the river, waters without memory, waters that ran bloodstained too often, they were always able to flow into their own oblivion, those same waters where Grenouille, the main character of *The Perfume*, was able to capture scents that came to him as a dull echo from the river mouth on the English Channel.

Then you had time for a couple of hours visit to the d'Orsay museum, two hours that were two seconds with Monet, with Renoir, with Degas...

... with Van Gogh...

And you both spent half an hour in front of your favorite painting, *Bal du Moulin de la Galette*, a painting by Renoir painted precisely in the Montmartre district, where you had been a few hours ago, and looking at the painting, enraptured, you believed that you could hear the waltz music that had captivated its characters and put smiles on their faces, smiles that are happy at times, smiles that carry a heavy burden of melancholy at others, and you found a face that you didn't remember having seen before, and your wife found yet another, and together you made up a story for both of them. Those were stories filled with rhetorical devices, synesthesias, hyperbatons and, of course, hyperboles.

“And now,” you told her, as you stepped out of the museum, “we will have dinner in a very special place.”

Your wife, simply, raised her eyebrows and tightened her lips, expectant.

“The restaurant Dans Le Noir,” you told her, “where food is served in complete darkness, in complete obscurity.”

“In the darkness?” She answered, with the smile of a little girl.

“That’s right, before you enter the dining room they let you check out the menu and order your food but, when you go in, lights out!”

And that’s how you ended up having dinner with your wife in the shadows, guessing how her smile looks, among ding dings, among whispers... They say lovers are never hungry, but this steak doesn’t need hunger for you to lose your head about it.

Even the silence is delicious, a silence that you would love to cut with a knife—a simple slice of silence—and bite into it, or save it for later, when you need it.

You want to kiss her, but you feel that the perfect moment hasn’t arrived.

“Sweetheart,” you tell your wife then, “How would you like to finish the day off with a bit of rock and roll?”

You cannot see her face, but you imagine her smile on the other side of the shadows.

“Ok, honey, where do you want to go?”

“You wouldn’t believe who’s playing here in Paris, tonight.”

“Who?”

“Eagles of Death Metal.”

“Are you kidding me? Where?”

“In a very famous venue, it’s called Bataclan.”

And you remember that it is Friday, the day of Venus, the aphrodisiac day, and that it is the 13th, and that thing about Friday the 13th bringing bad luck in Anglo-Saxon cultures, but you are not an Anglo-Saxon, nor is your wife.

* * *

So you get to the Bataclan venue and the expectation is immense and you are amazed that there are so many people, and that so many Parisians

even know about one of your favourite rock bands, a band, you thought, that few souls knew about, and those few souls were supposed to be American.

Wrong!

It is a beautiful venue; it looks like a cabaret, with those boxes on the second level, and the red light bulbs — they seem like lights from a Circus — red as the blood that the Seine River forgot about. Many times you have wondered if your wife simply pretends to like the bands you like, to simply agree with you, but then you see the expectation in her eyes and you understand that she likes to vibrate with rock music as much as you do.

You find Eagles of Death Metal fascinating because they are literally what you have come to expect from a damn rock and roll band, without experiments, without any desire to save the world, without voice harmonies and not even the slightest intention to revolutionize popular music. Its only intention is to rock the house with songs that are every damn thing they feel like making a song about. One of those bands that are sadly so rare these days.

They start the show with one of your favourite tunes —I Only Want You— that always reminds you of Prince, but with a faster tempo.

“This is like a droided up Prince,” you tell your wife. You don’t know if she got the joke or not, but she is exultantly smiling.

You are in the third row, a mere seven *fucking* feet from the stage. *I Only Want You* ends explosively.

“Ladies and gentlemen, are you having fun?” screams Jesse Hughes, the singer.

“Tonight, if you are willing, you could be possessed by the spirit of Rock and Roll! Are you willing? I love you all so fucking much!”

Complexity begins, that’s a song from their latest album, your wife is literally screaming the lyrics. Tomorrow she will have a sore throat, you think and you smile.

Fuck —you think, and the truth is that you cannot stop thinking, in spite of your own advice—. A couple of hours ago I was listening to Edith Piaf and now I am in front of fucking Eagles of Death Metal.

And so it goes, among people jumping up and down, in the middle of this garden of happiness, one song comes after the next. A perfect day in the heart of Paris, crowned by a memorable gig together with the person you love the most in this world.

This is, hands down, the happiest day of your life.

* * *

When the first gunshots start ringing in the Bataclan venue, in the middle of that instrumental section of the song “Kiss the Devil”, there is a moment of perplexity. Your wife looks at you, confused. What is that sound? Fireworks? Problems with the sound system?

You look in all directions. Eagles of Death Metal stop playing, and the only thing you can hear from the stage is a distressing, confusing silence.

Confusion is not that bad, certainty is a lot worse.

Your imagination resists about one or two seconds more than most of the others. Even when you see the first Kalashnikov you still entertain the possibility of everything being an elaborate set up, part of the show. Even after the first screams and the first gunshots.

However, when you see the blood cruising through the air, and the first people around you falling to the ground like flies, free falling, as if the floor had opened under them, then you know that Death is dancing around you, anxious to touch you and hug you into its darkness.

“iAlah Akbar! iAlah Akbar!», — screams one of the armed men as he shoots at the crowd indiscriminately.

As if new holes opened up on the floor, more and more lifeless bodies fall around you, stabbed by the bullets.

Your eyes set for a second on the sound control panel located in the rear of the venue, and you see buttons from the mixing deck flying in the air, inscribing parabolas through the smoke, crashing with blood that also flies through the air, through the smoke.

You look to your right and see a big man, his arms around a group of people; he is making a human shield to save the lives of a few youngsters.

You would do the same for your wife. That's when you understand that you have been frozen for two eternal seconds, as if your feet were nailed to the floor. It is right then when, cheered by a new burst of gunfire, you go into action.

It is called survival instinct — your subconscious takes control over your body and you don't decide anything anymore. It is as if an invisible force has taken over your muscles, thinks at the speed of light and makes sure to save your life. You just let it do its work.

You give yourself over to your subconscious, even more when you corroborate that, yes, your subconscious loves your wife better than it loves you. Your wife, who you had forgotten about for a long second, looks overwhelmed by the absurdity of the situation. You grab her arm as you sense another body collapsing next to you. Its life gets away and you pull your wife, tugging her arm as if she were a rag doll and you run frantically towards the stage.

You slide like a cat, running and ducking, your wife is still next to you, your right hand tight around her arm, she is screaming. Gunshots, gunshots, more shots, as a blanket of Death expands around you.

The fact that she is screaming is quite wonderful, because her screaming means that she is alive, you will worry about the humidity you feel in your stomach later, it could be your blood, but it can also be the blood of other people.

Another man dies under the bullets as he shields two people from them. Another act of love right in the centre of Hell.

More gunshots break in like the barks of Death as you duck in front of the stage, and you get away behind a group of young people through an emergency exit, on the left side of the stage.

You find a flight of stairs and finding them and going up them is the same event. More than ever you feel that, more than going up the stairs, an invisible hand holds you under your shoulders and pulls you up.

a door,

a hall,

another door,

Blood running on the floor, smoke and dozens of faces, dozens of subconscious that, just as yours, try to keep their bodies breathing.

You see it in every face. Those people are not people, they are a pure, condensed desire to survive and if they do survive, they will never be the same people they were before. All these young people are not and will never again be worried about their studies, their professional careers, or how their boss is an asshole, all these faces are now primitive, these are prehistoric men and women running from a mammoth, running from beasts, jumping from one branch to another, curling up deep inside a cave. They are only willing to die saving the lives of others.

Die for other lives.

A door opens.

Seconds after you are inside a dressing room, with two dozen people as hysterical as they are quiet. A forty-something year old lady is bleeding to death; a boy, that could very well be her son, is putting pressure on her wound, another teenager is holding a bottle of champagne as a weapon. Some are making a barricade with chairs in front of the door. You hear the rapid breathing of them all, but no one says a word, they have developed a community as solid as lead, and no words are needed to get organized, you remember right then that these men and women are primitive.

Gunshots come and go from the outside; it is then that you understand that you are all doomed, because there is no exit from that dressing room other than the door through which you came in, the door through which shots are heard. You look at the others, not at their faces but at their very eyes, and your message without words is this; when those savages break into the dressing room, we will reduce them flesh to flesh, jumping over them as if we were armoured, some of us will die to save the rest, but curdling down in a corner of this room will only guarantee a sure death for all of us.

You see that the kid that was helping the lady by putting pressure on her wound is hiding behind a curtain. A distant explosion makes the floor tremble. We will crush them is the answer you read in those eyes, and you allow yourself to contemplate a glimpse of hope in your heart. You will

very likely end up dead, but you will keep your wife behind this mass of people and you will save her life.

Your wife will survive.

Right then you look for her gaze and you find it rigid, almost empty, as if it were made of glass, holding on to a thin blade of life, and now you understand that the humidity on your stomach came from her blood.

Life evades her as a trembling flame in the wind, and you wish to enjoy now one of those slices of silence that you wanted to save a couple of hours ago, but your wife does not leave in peace, she is dying among nervous breaths and echoes of gunshots.

Her death is so inevitable, so irremediable, that you don't even ask her to hold on to life, you simply let her go with the sweetness that you are able to make up as you don't know how to say goodbye. You wish you could find the words to tell her that you worship her, that your love for her is infinite, that if she wouldn't go, you could, both of you, overcome any obstacle, win any battle, that today you fell in love with her half a dozen times, that you wanted to eat her lips in the museum, that you inevitably smile even when you text her, that you wanted to caress her hair when the sun pulled out those very well-hidden red tones from it, when you were coming out of the station, that you spend your days dreaming about your nights with her...

But words don't come out of your chest. And she goes, your wife, your lover, and your spouse, as a half poem, as a verse without an end.

Night is all that is left for you, but not the kind of night under the stars, only that Night that ends but there is no sunrise.

It is now, when you feel the weight of her lifeless body in your arms, that you realize that you haven't kissed her all day.

1
Before. Iraq
The inevitable

I am about to snuff it.

I wonder what kind of stupidity got over me when I thought it a good idea to take a job as a reporter in Iraq. My name is Paul Hébert. I am 40 years old. I am a journalist and a writer (well, the writer part is debatable, especially when the people arguing about it are the only three readers that bought my novel on Amazon and who have given it one star with less than kind comments, but that doesn't matter anymore...) It is amazing how many things you don't give a fuck about when you are about to die.

I am going to die. I don't want to die. Please.

For years I have been afraid of the emptiness in life, of not having anything to give to the world — some kind of legacy, a reason to live — but of course I have a reason, fuck. Sure there are reasons to live. Now, in fact, I would be just fine living a bearable life, without glory or ceremony, without leaving any legacy, or even leaving a mark, without luxuries. I would have enough just breathing and going back to a day just like the one before, without big revelations, without great anything, just staying alive.

How can I ask these guys for mercy? I would if that would do anything, but I have seen prisoners begging like children and the only thing they got back was even tougher treatment.

I have to set the record straight — I have been kidnapped by a terrorist group in Iraq.

To be precise, these are terrorists of the so-called ISIS or Islamic State. Sure, you have heard of them, they are those nice jihadists that make Al Qaeda seem like a group of naughty schoolgirls. If you are one of

those who think that your college teammates were cruel to you, or that your boss is cruel, or that life has treated you with *cruelty*, you should spend some time over here. These guys are cruelty personified. I will give just one example. When I was in Mosul doing an interview, I met a mother who had traveled there to retrieve her son, captured by the terrorists of the black flag. It was an old Kurdish woman who requested an audience with the terrorists of the Islamic State to beg them for the life of her son, kidnapped months ago. The Islamists invited her to sit and have some rest. Then they offered her tea, rice and meat. When the mother asked again about her son, they laughed and blurted out: “You just ate him!”

I’m lucky they will *only* cut my neck. It could be worse, I guess. Some prisoners are buried alive, others are burned to death.

I am together with the other five lucky ones, in a row, kneeling on the dusty ground under a scorching sun, in the middle of a desert spilling beyond the horizon in all directions. We wear an orange pullover just taken from the dry cleaner (seriously, everything is filthy dirty here, but these garments they have brought us are pristine). Why so much hassle about the costumes? The answer is that we are going to be on TV. Behind every one of us there is a hooded individual, dressed in black, like a ninja. Each one of the hooded men holds in his hand a nice curved sword that would be the envy of any weapons collector. In front of us, one of the terrorists strives to mount a camcorder on a tripod. The guy seems quite disappointed with the light of the sun on our backs. In fact, the backlighting challenges faced by our personal Spielberg are buying us a few extra minutes of life.

These guys take scenery quite seriously. There are other two cameras, one on each side (three cameras in total) —this is not like the video you make of your dog with your iPhone and a trembling hand. This will be produced, with background music, and will be edited with shot changes, zooms, and before you know it, you will get a travelling in slow motion. The only thing left to do is to have one of the cameramen adjust the microphone on one of these killers.

“Hold on, don’t kill him yet, I am still not convinced about the angle of the light.”

You are probably wondering how it is that we are so calm, all five prisoners, waiting to have our heads chopped off like someone who is waiting for a haircut. How it is that we do not yell, or cry and make a fuss? Do we have nerves of steel? Are we the most courageous guys in the universe? Not really. Truth is, when the show started, one of the prisoners did just that: he cried and made a fuss. And that didn’t sit all that well here. They threw him out of the row, ground him to a pulp and then they burnt him alive. In front of us. So, after all, having your head separated from the rest of your body is not so bad compared to being burnt alive. Just ask Marie Antoinette.

You may be also wondering whom the fuck am I telling all of this to. It is a hobby I have. Call it professional deformation, or call it craziness. As a writer, there is a voice inside me that is narrating everything that happens to me. Not always, of course, but when there is something that is worth telling. I tell myself hey, this could be good material for a novel, and I start to narrate it in my head. I guess this sort of voiceover also helps me withstand difficult times. Seeing everything with perspective, as if it has already happened. Or as if it was all fiction. My personal narrator not only accompanies me in the fucked up moments —also during the good times. It has become a sort of a habit. When I met my wife and we made love for the first time, there was the radio announcer in my head narrating it all for posterity. My theory was that good moments were worth narrating, but the truth is that the narration ends up spoiling the whole experience. I can’t help it; it’s like living in a movie.

I wish this were just a movie. Looks like our Spielberg has managed to filter out the excess light. Joy! The guys with the Kalashnikovs overseeing the shooting are all smiles. Light, camera, action!

Shit. I don’t want to die.

Seen from a broader perspective, this was going to happen sooner or later. Dying, I mean. Apparently no one ever, with or without head, avoids ending up six feet under.

So I try to downplay the issue. But, fuck; dying at forty is not fair. I am in the middle of life. I wonder what kind of absurdity came over me when I thought that accepting a job as a reporter in Iraq would solve all my problems (although, of course, my problems will end *now*). My life was crap, but it was wonderful crap. It was ruined —about to lose my house for not paying the mortgage and my wife was about to divorce me. I guess my heavy drinking and my behavior over the course of those last few months didn't help much. Ok, I was bitter. My failure as a writer was consuming me. What did you just say? Failing as a writer is not that serious? Hold on. Spend three years of *your* life writing a novel —fifteen hours a day, reviewing your work, documenting, while your wife makes all the money by working another fifteen hours in a restaurant as your debt increases every day. Finish your novel after three years of grueling work and spend a fortune printing hard copies and send them to each and every one of the publishing houses in the United States. Wait for an anguishing month for a reply. Make complex probabilistic calculations to understand why no editor answers. Reach the conclusion that, in all likelihood, the probability of the USPS losing your package(s) *times* the probability that the surviving manuscripts (after the mismanagement by the USPS) get lost in the known bureaucracy that pervades the big publishing houses is unbearably high. Should you go personally and give each and every manuscript to its respective destination? It would cost you a fortune in travelling expenses and it would take you an eternity. So go ahead and print a new set of hard copies of the manuscript (500 pages, double spaced, single sided) and resend all of those packages, this time send it via certified mail (double the cost). And, just in case, include some publishing houses in France, Germany, Spain, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden. Wait for another month without getting any response. Take the criticism from your wife, who believes that you have already wasted enough time and that it is time to find a proper job (uh— writing is a proper job, ask Stephen King). Decide then that you're going to give a good lesson to all those pushy publishers who haven't even had the decency of reading your manuscript (because obviously they have not read it, or they would have

succumbed to its charms). They will learn when you auto publish your book as an ebook. You can't wait to see them coming to you at last, pleading for a copyright contract when the ebook has sold a million copies at Amazon. Self publish. Spend a small fortune promoting your Facebook page after uploading a few hundred posts with stunning excerpts from the novel. Check the Amazon sales board (no anxiety, with indifference, once an hour at the beginning, then check every five minutes). Celebrate with a small party when the first sale takes place. Celebrate the second sale with a small party. Celebrate with a small party when the third sale takes place. Realize in utter amazement how sales stop. Wait anxiously for enthusiastic comments from your readers, the comments that will attract further readers. A week after, you get the first reviews. They go like this:

1.0 out of 5 stars **Terrible** October 1st

by Matt

Terrible. I couldn't read past page 50.

1.0 out of 5 stars **Nonsense** October 1st

by Peter B

The plot is absurd, delusional, and that could be cool (I guess) if the main character wasn't a petulant egocentric. One star.

1.0 out of 5 stars **Booring** October 5th

by John M

So boring. The synopsis anticipates an action novel but the protagonist spends pages and pages looking at his belly button and talking about himself. Dude, who the hell cares about the problems you have with your underwear?

Litigate unsuccessfully with Amazon so that they withdraw the comments. At sunset, drink a bit of whiskey to withstand so much injustice. Have an argument with your wife about the state of your checking account. Drink a bit of whiskey to withstand so much injustice. Send resumes to all the newspapers in the country begging for a job (remember, I'm journalist). Expect a response that does not arrive (hey, I am starting to think that there is a problem with snail mail in this country). Listen to your wife (who you love and whose support is the only thing that keeps you sane) as she tells you that she cannot stand it anymore and she is about to leave you. Get then a job offer (OMG!) to be a

war correspondent in Iraq. The destination was going to be a theoretically safe area. The salary for a month of work amounted to a year's normal salary. What could go wrong?

I must have been drunk when I accepted the job (ok, yeah, I was). But it seemed like the only way out of all my problems. Money to get by one more year. I wanted my wife to be proud of me again (when we met she was my first reader: short stories, a young adult novel — I think that was what made her fall in love with me). But things were not turning out the way we dreamt they would. We didn't even have any children yet. I had to fix it all, no matter what.

So, yeah, as you can see, I was fucked up. I would give anything to go back to being that fucked up. Marvelously fucked up.

These individuals around us are shouting the latest instructions for the staging. The sun has descended and begins diving into the horizon. There is something beautiful in that orange sky that makes me cry. Or perhaps it's just the damn desert sand has gotten into my eyes.

We need to hurry up, Spielberg, or we will be left without natural light.

The orange color of my clothing brings to mind something that happened in my childhood that has been tormenting me my whole life. I was twelve years old and my mother had the happy idea of buying me some ridiculous orange pants with little pictures of moles. They look like pajamas more than trousers. My mother insisted on bringing me to school with those pants on. I was a shy kid, and I started being harassed almost immediately. And the harassing kept going for long after that day. For a preteen that was already beginning to pay attention to girls, it was terrible. A trauma by the book. Years later, I still wake up sweating in the middle of the night. In my nightmares, I'm not walking down the street in my underwear, as the rest of the world dreams, I'm wearing my ridiculous orange pants with little pictures of moles. Fuck. Believe me when I say that until recently I was worrying about that episode. But now that I am seconds away from dying I have overcome the trauma. I want to laugh at myself for having spent my life burdened by memories like that one. When

everything is going to end, what does it matter if a few kids mocked me when I was a child? Hold on, I have more traumas. I can take this as a chance to overcome them all. When you are facing death, even the toughest humiliation has no importance. I guess I just discovered a foolproof method to overcome all traumas (hey, psychologists of the world, put a knife to the neck of your patients).

Don't think I resent it to my mom. She is a charming and beautiful lady who lives in a small house in Reims, near Paris. Besides our disagreement about the outfit, she has always been a wonderful mother. I'd like to talk to her before dying.

When I was a child, if something seemed to be going wrong, I simply did not accept it, I closed my eyes tight and quite often my problems managed to solve themselves, as if only because I had not accepted them.

So I close my eyes tight. This can't be happening. This can't be happening...

I still hear the rough voices around me, giving instructions in Arabic, finalizing the details of our macabre staging.

Another one of my strategies as a child to get out of unpleasant situations was imagining an alternative reality where everything was as I wanted it to be. I guess that is where my passion for writing comes from — from my desire to shape reality. Fiction has always held every answer — there are always solutions in stories. What would Uma Thurman do if she were in my place, caught in a similar situation in a hypothetical alternate version of Kill Bill? What would Tom Cruise do in this situation in a Mission Impossible movie?

Each and every problem has a solution. There has to be a way to escape. In a movie I would manage to untie myself (I have my hands tied behind my back), I would beat up the guy behind me, taking his knife and stabbing it in the chest of the terrorist in front of me. I'd snatch his Kalashnikov rifle, shoot the rest of terrorists, clear the way towards the Jeep, find the keys, and get the hell out of here.

Hollywood: your scripts suck.

Then, what? Beg for mercy? For these guys compassion belongs to the fourth dimension.

Ok. I think I have found a way out of this.

* * *

Present time. Houston, Texas
Søren's despair

The good news is, this must be heaven, or the after world, or the *before* world, or whatever it's called, because dead I am, oh yes. There is a deathly silence, and, contrary to what you might think, it's not dark, but clear, white, and bright — a solar luminosity invading me from all angles.

So death is not darkness, it's only silence. Ok. And thus, floating in this sort of white cloud, I wonder, how long am I going to be?

Right then I hear something, a cacophony of metallic, almost rhythmic sounds, and a diffuse rectangle is taking shape amidst the watery brightness on the other side of the light. As the sounds rise in intensity, and the rectangle begins to take shape and grow, I feel painful stings in my back, arms, inside my neck.

Did I say pain in my back, in my neck? That can only mean one thing!

Am I alive?

I am alive!

God! I do not know what my situation is, but my happiness for being alive overtakes any fear. I am alive, somehow, but fuck, I'm still alive! I still have the memory of death touching my neck, but I'm still alive!

Hold on. I have to calm down; I need to focus, to better understand what is going on. Perhaps, although alive, I am just dreaming. Let's see, I'm lying down, that is my position at least, and the gentle pressure I feel over my body are... sheets.

I look forward. The rectangle that once seemed diffuse is now perfect, I try to focus my eyes and... Is that me inside the rectangle?

The metallic sounds I heard are... music. A pop song. The Beatles?

“You’re awake! Paul!”

That’s the voice of Beatriz, my wife, I have her next to me. A vase of flowers on the table, a window, the door of what is surely a bathroom. A whiteboard. A television hanging on the wall, Beatriz kissing me. God, I cannot express the joy that feeling the touch of my wife brings me.

I begin to understand that I am in a hospital in the United States, safe and sound, with my wife hugging me like crazy and my own face on the TV set — Paul Hébert, released from ISIS — on a strip which indicates the stock market share values.

I am *seriously* alive.

That’s everything I need to know, I escaped death. I was about to die and I had an idea, now I remember, I had an idea, something that opened up the possibility of my survival.

Beatriz is still hugging me and a sharp pain strikes me in the back. Blessed is the pain! I can tell that I feel my thighs, my knees, my toes. Luckily, I’m not paralyzed (less than a minute ago I was happy to be out and out alive, and I am already starting to be demanding, picky, so I don’t want to be paralyzed. It is incredible how spoiled human beings are).

When Uma Thurman wakes up from the coma in Kill Bill, she stares at her hand and somehow concludes that she’s been in the coma exactly four years.

“Beatriz,” I manage to murmur. My voice sounds hollow and distant, as if someone else is speaking for me.

It is so wonderful to have my wife with me again. I look at her and the butterflies in my stomach come back, I could simply look at her for hours.

Beatriz has a rounded forehead, if you look at her from the side, you see that her hairline starts when her skin is almost horizontal. It is something too precious to explain with words... What a sorry excuse for writer I am — I am not capable of expressing the most elemental feeling! I remember how I felt looking at her when barely knew each other, when we traveled to Paris together for the first time, when the sun was reflecting on her hair. I was enthralled watching her, as she was leaning on the railing of

the bridge, over the river Seine. That magic that had been waning over time comes back to me with an intensity that almost hurts.

A doctor bursts into the room — a middle-aged guy, with black hair and a goatee so perfect that it looks like velvet. I stare at his goatee like an idiot. I have always wanted to grow a beard, but my beard grows like barbed wire, it's too uncomfortable.

“Mr. Hébert, it's such a joy to find you awake!” exclaims the doctor
“You are making my day.”

I simply smile behind my tears. I'm so excited that I can hardly articulate a word. Beatriz hugs me again.

“I'll leave you with the doctor,” she whispers in my ear. I look at her, perplexed “Don't be a fool, love, I am just going to the cafeteria.”

“My name is Usnavy, I am your doctor,” the man tells me when Beatriz has left, and he extends his hand. For some reason, I can hardly give him mine, though shakily, I manage.

Usnavy is the name of the doctor. Now I hear his Cuban accent. He is a funny looking, quite peculiar guy, because he moves as in phases, and stays frozen between those phases. I wonder if he breathes when he is in the middle of those pauses.

“You don't worry about nothing, my friend,” he tells me, there's no doubt that he has realized that I'm trembling with emotion. “You are very well, let me tell you, I understand that these three months have been very hard...”

Did he say three months?

The doctor stops sharply, as if he had hit the brakes on his tongue. He reflects for a moment and asks me a question.

“Paul, what do you remember?”

I don't know what to say.

“All right,” he tells me in a conciliatory voice, nodding gently. “You should know what your name is, right?”

“Paul Hébert.”

“How old are you?”

“Forty.”

“Tell me about your captivity.”

The word captivity resonates in my mind, but for some reason it does so in French — *captivité*.

Captivité.

The word creates a cell in my mind, a cell that is built with earthy bricks that block the sunlight... and suddenly, they come to my head. First, the images that I connected with the term *captivité* when I was a child, like *The Count of Monte Cristo*, then I see that the walls of the cell, narrowing as they grow around me, and I remember my own *captivité* in Iraq. Now I remember, I was prisoner, a prisoner in the hands of terrorists.

“I was about to be killed.”

And right then I fall back into the center of an infinite desert and I feel the knife pressing my neck, about to tear it. I feel a void deep in my stomach.

“That’s right,” says doctor Usnavy, nodding again. “You were about to die. Do you remember what happened next?”

I feel the tears running down my cheeks uncontrollably, I am unable to speak. I simply shake my head, the eyes of Dr. Usnavy riveted on me.

“Mr. Hébert, you were apprehended by members of ISIS,” the doctor insists almost in a didactic tone. “You were kidnapped for three months. After your release...”

“I was released?”

“That’s right. You were found here, on American soil. You were freed and somehow you came here, to America. Don’t you remember how? Don’t you remember what happened?”

I don’t remember what happened. There is some sort of a hole in my mind. For some reason, I can’t look up, I have to keep my gaze down, staring at these sheets, at my left hand.

“You may be suffering from traumatic amnesia, Paul,” the doctor says. “It wouldn’t be unusual after such an experience as the one you have gone through. Your mind could have blocked some unbearably harsh experiences.”

Dr. Usnavy scratches his chin as he squints his eyes and pins them on the ground. The guy has some gray hair already, he must be around my age, although people around my age always look to me like they are much older than I. I wonder how I look like right now. I feel that I am freshly shaved without even touching my face.

“Why were you looking at the palm of your hand, Paul?” he asks me, keeping his meditative expression.

“Dunno, I was wondering how much time it’s been.”

“I do not understand you,” he answers, shaking his head gently.

“There is this movie I like... the main character awakens from a coma after a long time and she is able to tell her age by looking at the palm of her hand.”

The doctor can’t help displaying a friendly smile that nearly becomes a laugh. He raises his eyebrows and relaxes all of the muscles in his face.

“Paul, what is happening to you is quite common,” he tells me with an overly affectionate tone. “You have undergone a highly traumatic experience, which would explain your amnesia, which is precisely that: a traumatic amnesia.”

I still hear the music of the Beatles, I can’t hear what they say about me on TV. Is that the cover of my book? Dr. Usnavy realizes that I am aware of the television.

“Your abduction has been in the news for weeks, Paul. Right now you are a sort of national hero.”

In a different situation, absorbing all of this information would have left me stunned. Now, this data overload seems insignificant compared with the simple fact that I am still alive.

“Your physical condition, on the other hand, is enviable. There’s nothing broken, apart from some superficial bruising. We have done a complete check-up, and you are healthy as a horse, Paul. I’m considering letting you go once we have completed a psychiatric evaluation, so possibly tomorrow.”

He takes a deep breath. I do the same. He looks at me as if he wants to ask me many more questions, but he doesn’t.

“Well, I’m going to let you have some rest.”

The doctor leaves as Beatriz comes back in, and in her presence I once again feel my heart raising with joy. We hardly have any time to tell each other anything because right after her, a nurse comes into the room and checks my pulse and my blood pressure. Five minutes later another nurse comes in. They all keep asking me if I’m well, including Beatriz, I don’t mind responding the same way a dozen times: “I’m ok. I’m ok.”

And that’s when the clock really starts turning. For dinner I have some boiled chicken with mashed potatoes, which taste so delicious that I wonder if they have brought it from a 5-star restaurant. The nurses are all super friendly, they look at me, I notice, as if I am someone famous. I do not know how the hell I recognize the feeling.

Shortly after my wife falls asleep on the couch for visitors. I spend a good part of the night watching the news with very low volume. They don’t stop talking about me. At one point I see myself kneeling in the desert while, right behind me, a hooded individual is sporting a big knife. There are other four prisoners at my side, also kneeling, also with a hooded man behind them. Cut to another shot and I see snapshots of my colleagues on the sand, I read the same under each picture: *Deceased, Deceased, Deceased...* they are all dead now, all but me, they chopped their heads off as if they were animals. I experience a sharp, cold feeling inside my chest – some kind of inexplicable self-revulsion. I hear the words but I am not able to understand them, as if they are spoken in a language unknown to me. The ones I do understand are the *breaking news*:

Breaking News: Paul Hébert has regained consciousness.

Which is rather ironic, considering I just lost consciousness, once again.

* * *

I wake up, startled, in the middle of the night, holding on to a dream that I cannot remember. My first feeling in response to the silence is that of unease. There is no Beatles music in the background. I love the dark,

but I abhor silence, the silence I find behind each melody, silence is the music that death has composed for all of us.

I'm still in the hospital, and I am still alive. The lights and the TV are turned off. I hear Beatriz breathing as she sleeps, a sound that brings me back to life. I love to listen to it, even if it's just her breathing, in the semi-darkness, the more obscure. I hear the sound of my body rubbing against the sheets. I take a deep breath. My head doesn't hurt, my body doesn't hurt, nothing hurts.

I haven't felt better in my life.

There is a digital clock displaying neon numbers on the table. It's three in the morning.

Moonlight sneaks through the window, through the glass and the curtains.

I try to, once again, remember what happened when they were about to cut my neck. But everything is dark.

I have the feeling that I did something that saved my own life, but I don't have the faintest idea of what it might have been. I got rid of my captors and escaped? Did the American Army rescue me at the last second? On TV, in the news, they said that the jihadists who kidnapped me released me on American soil. Why would they do that? Is it that the government paid a ransom for me? Why was I released but not my companions? Did the Americans arrive right when I was the only one left to kill? In that case I do not know why the doctor Usnavy would say that I was some kind of national hero... in that case I would be more like the luckiest person in the nation.

Once again I see flashes of the faces of my companions.

Deceased

Deceased

I try to stop thinking and relax. I attempt to go back to sleep, but more than once I end up looking at the nightstand beside the bed, as if something there was calling me. Is that my iPhone?

I stretch my arm to get it — I have to disconnect the cable, Beatriz had plugged it in to charge.

It is my iPhone, the same phone that I took to Iraq. I took it to Iraq and it came back? How did it end up at my bedside, in the hospital?

“My God,” I think to myself “Are there pictures inside? Is there any photograph taken during those three months I don’t remember?”

There is nothing, indeed, only the pictures from *before*. My wife’s nephew’s birthday. A photo in a restaurant. In the Photo Stream we share, I find pictures that were taken by my wife in my absence. There are barely a dozen. There’s a selfie where she is crying.

I check my email. I am hoping to find mountains of emails but, rather curiously, there is only one. A single email in my Inbox. Received twelve hours ago. Sender: Unknown.

I take a deep breath.

There is no text in the email, just a link. I click on it. It asks for my iCloud password. I type it in.

The link opens a video. Everything happens so fast that I feel like I am falling over a waterfall. My heart is racing like horses over a hill.

Play.

The video begins with an image of the Capitol in Washington, DC, in the middle of a day with a cloudless sky. A reverse zoom takes place and I see a hooded man, dressed as those ISIS guys right on the front of the Capitol! A terrorist from ISIS in the United States capital? The man, who stands tall, haughty, begins to speak. The sound is somewhat distorted by the wind, but I understand what he says.

“Obama, your time has come. The next massacre will take place right in the heart of your country, in your capital city, in DC. Obama, withdraw your support to the rebels from Syria or your hands will be covered with the blood of thousands of Americans.”

Despite the distortion, the voice sounds familiar. The hooded man removes his mask and I see his face.

No wonder his voice is familiar, it is my voice. That’s my face, I am the man.

Shit.

2

Before. Iraq **What do psychopaths dream about?**

While I am still kneeling in the sand of the desert, bound, helpless, and ready to get my head chopped off my body, I have a crazy and desperate idea, and as it is the only thing that I have and I am about to die, I go ahead with it. How could it get *worse*?

The first thing I do is scream. I don't know what was I expecting to come out that scream, but it serves to draw the attention of the terrorists who are in charge. All those bearded guys turn their heads, stick their psychopathic eyes in my direction and I can guess what they are thinking of doing next (it is not that hard: beating the crap out of me with sticks and burning me alive) because I spoiled their show, right when they were ready to start recording our small martyrdom for their cause.

"I'm CIA, fuck, I'm CIA!" I shout in French "I can give you secret information!"

Okay, maybe it is not the best escape plan in the world, taking into account that I am not a CIA agent and I have no knowledge of any secret information, but, shit, do you have a better idea?

One of the jihadists, a guy with the face of a rat that seems to be the big shot in this gang, is the one who looks at me with the most hatred. My God, these guys are scary. Seriously, I'm about to crap on my pants, again.

"I'm CIA! An undercover agent!" I keep screaming in French. "If you don't kill me I can provide confidential information!"

Rat Face is walking towards me, and cordially invites me to shut the fuck up by kicking my mouth. It hurts. But it's nothing compared with what they could end up doing to me.

“Dude, I have what you want!” I say face to the ground. I think I’ve lost a tooth and my mouth bleeds, but I hope he understands what I have to tell him.

Bear with me for a minute and let me tell you some things about Rat Face. It turns out that the guy is French. As French as I am. The son of bitch speaks a melodic and perfect French without a trace of foreign accent. I know this because I’ve heard him talking to another jihadist. Considering how fluent he is, I would say that he was born in France and that he belongs to that second or third generation of disenchanting, young Islamic men who hate their parents’ host country and end up becoming radicalized and joining the ranks of the jihadists. In my opinion, we haven’t done anything to them to make them hate us as much as they do. These guys are part of that small percentage of psychopaths that lurks in any given society but go unnoticed until extraordinary events happen, like a war. It is then that their psychotics skills make them the most privileged in a horrific scenario. These are the same kind of sadistic psychopaths who emerged among the Jewish prisoners in the Nazi concentration camps, those chosen to watch over the other prisoners and ended up showing infinite cruelty towards their fellows. In fact, many of these “capos” had the time of their lives in the concentration camps, and very often were harder on the prisoners than the German guards themselves; they beat them with even more cruelty than the SS.

The point that I want to make is, after I was captured in Mosul, and before I was brought here, I spent an entire day tied up in some sort of warehouse. There were two individuals guarding me. One of them was Rat Face. The other (who I will call Stinky because of his stench) also spoke French. I spent an entire day lying on the ground with my hands tied behind my back. The walls were made of bare concrete blocks and the floor was basically irrigated soil with glass pieces scattered around. It smelled of excrements and urine, mine and those of others who had been there before me. To kill some time they had beat me a little, not much (only a few kicks in the ribs and a particularly painful one right in the crotch) I was literally and metaphorically scared shitless. In the distance, I

could hear the echoes of bombs and machine-gun bursts. Of course, I knew to expect the worst, but I still had hopes of survival. If you are a soldier and you have the misfortune of falling into the hands of ISIS, you can consider yourself very well fucked. They used to decapitate soldiers at first, now it has become fashionable to burn them alive. All neatly recorded in HD with a staging that lives up to Hollywood standards. Crazy killers. Click bait for the internet.

But I was no soldier, I was a journalist, and that's what I held on to then: journalists are more profitable. Although mad and killers, these guys are not idiots and they know that governments are willing to pay big money to free a journalist and avoid the noise of the media and public opinion. Kidnapping with a happy ending. That was the hope I held on to at the time, as I was lying in that stinky room. After kicking me a bit, my two guardians stopped paying attention to me. The rest of the day passed quietly with me lying on the ground while they sat in front of a small TV that broadcast programs in Arabic. From time to time they exchanged comments with each other in French. It was when I heard this perfect South French accent that I realized that these two were no Iraqis, they were French, at least by birth. A small flame of hope was stoked within me. We were compatriots, dammit. We spoke the same language. We could understand each other. If I told them my story, if they got to know me as a person, they would have mercy on me for my situation. Hey, I'm not an evil American. I'm just a poor French journalist. Surely we could understand each other. Hey, guys, I'm here to report on the injustices that the imperialist evil are infringing over the Iraqi people. Hey, I just am an impartial observer. I am the voice for your stories. Let us work together, guys. I will be witness of your tragedy and will show it to the whole world...

I guess I said something like that, more or less. When he heard me, Rat Face rose from his chair and headed towards me. I dared to look into his eyes for the first time since I had been captured. He had grey and cold eyes, the kind that can freeze your blood. He knelt beside me and stared at me.

“You sure are a journalist,” he told me, with hatred distilling from his eyes, but with the warmest voice and a perfect French accent. “You and those who are like you have mocked us for years. You, the French, are the worst of all, without no God but your earthly pleasures. You and other journalists like you have laughed at our prophet. You’ve laughed at the sacred. For this reason you’ll suffer the purifying punishment of the knife.

Then I realized that, right now, these guys hate a French journalist more than they hate a U.S. soldier. Charlie Hebdo. The cartoons of Muhammad. Shit.

I dared not say another word. The look in Rat Face’s face froze my blood. It was clear that they would not negotiate a ransom for me. Being a journalist and being French was enough to condemn me to the purifying punishment of the knife even more than being an American. At least, he had not mentioned the purifying punishment of fire. If I got to choose, I’d much rather dying by the knife than being roasted alive. I could not stop sobbing for a while. Those two kept watching TV like nothing was happening, collapsed in their chairs, with the same relaxed posture you have when you are watching a football game at home. I imagine then that our trivial Western-type conversations, like: “Honey, I had such a great day at work today, our company project is going really well,” would translate in this reality to something like “Dude, those westerns sure screamed their lungs out when we were chopping their heads off.” Those two guys were flipping channels, relaxed, chatting and laughing as they watched loud Arabic shows. Then suddenly, my guardians began to utter angry insults, just like hooligans when the referee makes the wrong call against their soccer team. The reason for such unexpected change of vibe was that President Obama showed up on the TV screen. They screamed all kinds of insults at him: he was a pig, he was going to burn in hell, they would piss and crap over his daughters. When their voices started to crack from so much yelling, they calmed down and started talking in a much softer volume. However, I was able to make out what they said, in French.

Rat Face: “We have to teach them a lesson that don’t forget.”

Stinky: “Al Qaeda hit them where it hurt the most.”

Rat Face: “Al Qaeda is like a lion that is losing his teeth — old, and about to be removed from the circus. They got lucky with 9/11, but then what? They killed Osama bin Laden while he was hiding in his house behind his wives, without a fight. It was a humiliating death. Al Qaeda has not stopped making mistakes. In a few years Al Qaeda will be only in the history books. Only the Islamic State will prevail.”

“And they were on the right track,” I thought to myself. Before I was captured, I heard stories about members of Al-Qaeda who enrolled in ISIS and left horrified. Yes sir, these guys are so ruthless that they terrorize other terrorists!

Rat Face: “But the Americans will always fear them more than they fear us. We need our own 9/11 so that they never ever forget us.

Stinky: “What we have to do is crashing a fucking aircraft into the Capitol,” he said as he hit the palm of his left hand with his right fist.

Rat Face: “That’s impossible. They have learned that lesson. Aircrafts cannot be kidnapped anymore, there is too much security”

Stinky: “Then a bomb, an atomic bomb.”

Rat Face: “And how are we going to set a bomb in the United States? That’s just as impossible.”

Stinky: “There must be a way.”

Rat Face: “I wish there was, but there is too much surveillance, after the Boston bombing no one has managed to pop even a small backpack.”

Stinky: “We have to find a way then.”

Rat Face: “Do you think that I don’t have that very dream myself? I do, but I’m telling you, it’s not possible.”

What do psychopaths dream about? I don’t know, but I know what Rat Face dreams about: detonating a huge bomb in the United States.

That conversation has been playing over and over in my head since they placed me in this row to chop off my head. And it is precisely that conversation that has given me an idea that may save me from certain death. Or maybe not.

“I am a CIA agent,” I tell Rat Face looking desperately for his eyes. “I want to make a deal with you. Let me live and I’ll tell you how to plant a

bomb in the United States. I know how the security works. I know the weak points. I know how to do it. Let's make a deal. You let me live, and I will make your dreams come true."

I gulp. It is now when this son of a bitch should spray me with gasoline and set my body on fire. Or something worse.

* * *

Present day. Houston, Texas The Plot Thickens

I have watched Kill Bill (both parts) dozens of times. It is something I wouldn't admit lightly nor I would tell just anyone, especially since I was harshly criticized as a writer for my "Tarantinesque outbursts" in one of the few comments that my novel generated on Amazon. I like all the films by Quentin Tarantino (yes, including Jackie Brown and Django Unchained). I admire how Tarantino is able to recreate tiny details, such perfect correlation between cause and effect, and, above all, I admire the depth of his characters. They are very simple characters, and that's not bad from a literary point of view. All human beings follow a few primary instincts, and emotions can be condensed into six.

An area where I am not capable of emulating my favorite movie director (and it is something about his movies that I love), is the way in which he plays with time, those wonderful time jumps, flashbacks, flashforwards — particularly in Pulp Fiction — where the pieces of the story's puzzle are told without following the chronological order of events. But they are not arranged without order; rather, they follow an emotional order of discovery designed for the delight of the spectators. It is a brilliant idea. If your story told chronologically does not excite the emotions of your viewers, try to scramble the scenes until it does.

I will say it again, I love that unchronological way of narrating, but as a writer I was not blessed with the talent of playing with time so masterfully. And being here, lying on this bed, in the middle of the night, watching a video in which I pose as a terrorist, although I do not remember anything of what happened during the three months that I was

kidnapped, makes me feel terrible. Not remembering makes me feel like a spectator watching a movie out of order, but it's one thing to watch a movie and something very different being in it; and I feel that I'm in a Tarantino film, with the viewers laughing at my expense.

What the hell does this video even mean? What am I doing, dressed as a terrorist, with that beard, in Washington, threatening President Obama? What is this madness?

“Obama, your time has come”.

Shit, shit, shit.

Merde.

I watch it several times and I realize that, despite the distorting effect, I'm forcing an American accent in the video, which makes no sense. Why trying to hide that I am French and then uncovering my face?

I decide to then do the obvious, what anybody would do — I get on the internet to find information about myself. Ok, perhaps not so obvious, but I searched my name so many times to find out if my novels were becoming popular that googling myself has become an old habit. I should add that I've never found myself, I always find other *Paul Héberts* whose merits, according to the learned opinion of that algorithmic intelligence that is Google, are way more relevant than mine.

Google search: Paul Hebert (no accent mark) —enter.

Oh, wow... the first thing that surprises me is that as the first results I see a row of pictures of my face.

Images —enter.

There are pictures of me as a kid, photos of my parents... Images of the covers of my book...

I take a deep breath.

In the news section: Paul Hébert is awake (accent mark included).

I see then that I even have an entry in Wikipedia. Fuck.

Paul Hébert (Journalist and Writer)

This article contains new information that could change at any time.

Jump to: [Navigation](#), [search](#)

Paul Hébert Personal Information	
Born	Paul Jean Hébert August 5, 1976
Nationality	French, American
Alma máter	Université de Paris
Professional Information	
Occupation	Writer, journalist
Employer	Les Nouvelles
Media	Journalism
Religious Beliefs	Catholic
[edit with wikidata]	

Paul Jean Hébert (Reims, France, August 5,1976) is a French and American journalist and writer.

Hébert works for the French news company Les Nouvelles. On December 13, 2015, while serving as a reporter in the North of Iraq, he was captured by the Islamic Sate of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS). However, and despite his appearance as a prisoner about to be executed in a video showing the beheadings of others abducted, Hebert was released and found unconscious in Washington DC, on February 24, 2016. After going into a coma, he woke up on February 26. He was admitted to a hospital whose location has not been reported to the media.

Paul Hébert is the author of the novel “The Human Stash”, a thriller that takes places in the world of the Colombian drug traffic... blah blah blah...

I start clicking on the news entries — “Paul Hébert is aware” pops up everywhere and in all languages.

Paul Hébert is conscious.
 Paul Hébert est conscient.
 Paul Hébert è sveglio.
 保羅·赫伯特是清醒的。

I look for old news.
 Click.
 A French journalist, among the prisoners of ISIS.

Click.

A new video of the execution of ISIS, 5 decapitated American prisoners.

Click.

One of the prisoners that appear in the last video of ISIS, Paul Hébert, could have been spared his life. Paul Hébert, a journalist of French and American nationalities, disappears from the long take of the video showing the executions of American journalists.

Click.

Analysis of the executions video reveals the last words Paul Hébert uttered before disappearing from the shot.

Click.

“Je suis un...” — “I am a...”

I am a...? I am a what? ... an innocent man? ... a Muslim? ... an imbecile?

Click.

Psychiatrist analyzes the last ISIS video. After analyzing his facial expressions frame by frame, concludes that Paul Hébert was in a state of extreme distress before screaming: “Je suis un...”

Extreme distress? They didn't need to consult a psychiatrist for that! Are you kidding me? How would you feel if they were about to chop your head off?

Click.

Analysts agree, Paul Hébert might have suffered an even more violent death than the other five journalists, as a punishment for having cried while the executions were going to take place.

Click.

Paul Hébert presumed dead.

Click.

Paul Hébert shows up alive in the USA.

Click.

Paul Hébert is conscious. Whereabouts still unrevealed, but he could be in a Hospital in Los Angeles.

Morning surprises me while I am still reading tons of information about myself. There's even an interview with my mother that I am not able to read. God, I have to contact her ASAP. I *guess* she already knows that I am awake.

I'm about to dial her number when a nurse bursts into the room.

"Mr. Hébert, you have a visit"

My wife opens her eyes and sits up.

"How are you, Paul?" She asks me.

"Well, I suppose," I answer, although I feel strange. It is quite odd to have a piece of your life wiped out from your memories, I feel as if they had stolen a lottery ticket from me and I am living with the doubt about whether it was a winner or not.

Right after the nurse two men in suits enter the room, and when I say in suits I mean that rather than having put on those suits this morning, it looks like these two have grown into their suits.

"Michael Mitchell, CIA Special Agent" says the first, a guy with a big hipster beard that doesn't match the suit he's wearing.

"Robert Kimball, CIA Special Agent" says the second, so well shaven that his face shines as if it was bathed in oil.

I notice their look of distrust as they extend their hands. Distrust? What the hell? And then I remember the video in my cell phone, where I pose as a terrorist, and a cold sweat runs down my back. Have they seen it? Unconsciously, I slip the phone under the sheet.

“P.. Paul, nice to meet you,” I answer, forcing a smile.

“You will be discharged today, right?” says the shaven one, his body is frozen, he only moves his head on that petrified block that his shoulders have become.

“That’s what they say.”

The bearded one smiles, but his eyes don’t even notice the smile. His body also looks stiff, as if he was tightening the muscles under the suit.

Beatriz gets closer to me. She kisses me on my cheek while the other hand caresses my hair. I close my eyes and for a second I feel my love for her as an intense vibration that makes time and space shiver in a flash of light. As Beatriz leaves the room, the two agents and myself are left face to face.

I feel so helpless, half-naked, covered by a sheet, with two grumpy-faced men carrying guns. I don’t know why, but I have this urge to cover my balls with my hands, under the sheets, as if these two big boys are going to kick them.

“Mr. Hébert, I have to cut to the chase,” says the bearded one, tipping his head and looking at me from the side. “The first thing that I should tell you is that what we have in our hands is a matter of national security. At this moment the media doesn’t know your whereabouts, but they will find out throughout the day. More than half of the staff in this hospital knows of your presence, and, although strict orders have been given to all personnel to not say a word about you being here, someone will say something to her husband, his wife, a friend and the news will inevitably reach the media. I say all this because, when that happens, you will get loads of offers for interviews, but you should not say a word to the media, not a comment, much less give interviews, at least for now.

“Ok,” I answer without understanding anything, the guy looks at me quite seriously, but his facial expression seems relaxed.

“Mr. Hébert,” says the other “your doctor has told us that you suffer from traumatic amnesia and you do not remember anything about what happened. But please clarify something, you don’t remember anything, starting when?”

“The last thing I remember is that I was going to be decapitated.”

Both men look at each other. If they tightened their bodies a little more they would burst a vein.

“Shit. How convenient.” the bearded one whispers.

Merde?

“You see, Mr Hébert,” says the shaved agent, nodding slightly “We are here to try to clarify the circumstances of your release. We need your help.”

“My help? Ok, what do you need?”

“We want you to tell us everything you saw and heard while you were a prisoner.”

“As I said, I don’t remember anything. See, I was working on a story in Mosul, I was going to meet with a group of Kurdish rebels, and then they attacked the convoy in which I was travelling. They were jihadists from ISIS. When they saw that I was a foreign national and a journalist they captured me. I was tied up for a day in some sort of warehouse, that I remember perfectly.” I close my eyes with a shudder. I remember two individuals speaking in front of a TV, I remember the threats and being scared shitless. “Then, the next day, I was pulled outside and I was settled in a row of prisoners. We were going to be executed, I remember that also. They were about to behead me. And then nothing.

“Nothing?”

“You don’t remember anything at all?”

“No, it’s like a void.”

“You don’t know how you came back to the United States? You don’t remember how you were released?”

“You mean you don’t know that yourselves?” I ask, astounded. “Wasn’t I released by you? Not both of you personally, of course, you wouldn’t go to Iraq in those suits... I am referring to the CIA, the army, the security forces...”

“No, Mr. Hébert... Lord, Hébert, our Intelligence Services did not play a part in your release.

“So, how was I released then?”

“Exactly! How? That’s what we want to know. That is why we are here, we need you to remember.”

3

Before. Iraq

Socrates was right

Good news. I am still alive.

Bad news. I am still a prisoner.

My God. My bluff worked. Just as I had hoped, the mere possibility of squeezing some information from a CIA agent was much too tempting for Rat Face. The bad news is that I am no CIA agent and I won't be able to tell him what he wants to know, so my masquerade won't last very long. I've just won some time (Days? Hours? Minutes?) There is hope as long as there is life.

For now they pulled me off the execution row and I have been taken to a sort of cell, so dim it's almost black. The smells, they are intense, repugnant, but they bother me less and less. However dark, I realize that I am not alone. I hear breathing and laments. When my eyes settle to the darkness I manage to see three human forms lying on the floor. Prisoners. Because of the painful note in their breathing, I have the horrible impression that they have been tortured.

I feel the wrinkled wall surface with my fingers. This cell must be about 15 feet wide and another 15 across, and there are no windows. The door is made of wood, but when I try to push it open I realize there is a solid lock on the other side. What were you expecting, Paul? To get away by pushing a door?

My attempts to push it open only serve to let a diffuse beam of light get in the room through a crack in the frame, allowing the room to avoid absolute darkness.

“There’s no escaping, my friend, we are fucked” says a cracked voice with an American accent, and a very notable lisp, probably as a result of a few missing teeth.

The voice comes from one of the men lying on the ground, whose silhouette I can barely distinguish. In the opalescent darkness, thousands of specks of dust dance at their leisure through the air.

“There must be a way,” I answer, after a few seconds, without much conviction in my voice.

“What group do you belong to? I had never seen you — persists the voice on the other side of darkness.

“What do you mean?”

“There’s no need to keep pretending. They can’t hear us now. They aren’t smart enough to hide microphones in here.”

“I don’t understand” — I reply, confused.

“I heard them talking when they brought you. You are an undercover agent”

“I... ah... yep,” I utter shakily as I look around. I am not so sure that there are no microphones or that they aren’t somehow listening to us, and am not going to spoil my hoax. “I’m SOG,” I tell him.

“That much I know, but what is your taskforce?” he asks me.

The truth is that I don’t know what to answer. The worst thing is that when Rat Face cross-examines me I will not know what to say either, and then I will be well fucked.

What do I know about the CIA? Bits and pieces, not so much. As it turns out, my novel is a thriller that features a CIA agent. In order to write the book, I read some things about the inner workings of the Agency. Basically what I know is that the Special Activities Division the SAD, belongs to the Clandestine Service, which is a group within the CIA responsible for carrying out covert operations known as “special activities.” In the heart of the SAD there are two distinct operating groups: the Group of Special Operations (SOG) for tactical paramilitary operations, and the Political Action Group (PAG) for covert political operations. SOG is the Internal Department within SAD, responsible for

the collection of information from military intelligence in hostile countries, and also from all of the highly dangerous military operations with which the United States Government doesn't want to become involved with. Luckily for me, its agents do not carry objects or clothing associating them with the American government. Just like in the Mission Impossible movies, if the operations are blown and/or they are caught, the government of the United States can deny all knowledge. This also means that the agents are abandoned to their fate.

So it's clear to me that if I was a CIA agent and was on a secret mission in Iraq, that would mean that I belonged to the SOG, but there is little else could I tell the terrorists. However, it seems that luck is again on my side (no, of course not, not really, damn it) and I have a real CIA agent before me (or what's left of him, anyway). Maybe I can find out some things from him to make my fake identity seem more genuine.

"What's your operating group?" I ask him.

"MK 205"

"I am AX 700," I answer.

"Did you work with Arthur Block?"

It is clear to me that I am being put to the test. There's no way that I just made up AX 700 and that not only it exists, but this guy knows someone that works there.

"There is no one by the name of Arthur Block," I tell him.

"And there is no group called AX 700. Why do you lie? Is it that you think that I'm a double spy?"

"I trust no one."

He gets up, painfully, and approaches me, limping. My eyes are now used to the dim light and I manage to distinguish his facial features. I'd much rather not be able to see anything. I jump backwards. His face. My God. How to describe it? The only thing that comes to mind is a minced meat pizza with too much tomato sauce. The right arm hangs inert like a rope. My God, is it possible that the elbow is at that angle? What have they done to this poor guy?

"You are not from the CIA. You're a fucking pretender," he tells me.

“No, I’m not CIA” I admit. I suppose that it makes no sense to try to pretend something that I am not against someone that is.

“Then why did you tell them so? Are you’re nuts?”

“To stay alive. I told them that I had secret information about the CIA’s operations in Iraq. They will not kill me because they want to find out what I have to tell them.”

“And what you think will happen when they interrogate and you don’t have anything to give them?”

I shrug my shoulders. I feel my stomach tighten. I just want to shrink, disappear.

“They will torture you, asshole. And you won’t be able to say anything because you don’t know anything!” He laughs quite unpleasantly, spraying out some blood. I can see now that the guy doesn’t have many teeth left in his mouth. “I would give anything to have had my neck cut!” he screams at me, mad. “And you go and tell them that you are a spy!” he screams at me, and then starts laughing crazily. In truth, I don’t know what is so funny. “Do you know what they have done to me? Do you know what I’ve had to suffer here? You could be dead already, idiot! You have no idea how much you will regret what you have done!”

He starts crying now. He goes back to his corner and lays down like a ball. I let myself fall on the floor, with my back to the cold wall. Shit. I really fucked up. Ten minutes ago, not dying was the only thing I cared about. When those psychopaths outside begin working my body, dying will be the only thing I will want.

“I can fool them,” I say. You are a real agent. Tell me stuff. Tell me what I have to say so that they believe me.”

“Do you think that I have endured everything they have done to me without saying a word to now revealing my secrets to you so that you can tell them?”

“Only some little things, not the important stuff. I need to buy time.”

“Time for what?”

“To escape.”

“Are you going to dig a tunnel, Andy Dufresne? We are in a fucking dead-end hideout and tomorrow those guys will be delving into your guts.”

I try to not get carried away by my own despair, but I feel like a runaway ocean current is dragging me like a ragdoll into a nightmarish, dark hole. My heart beats so strong that I feel that it is going to break my ribs. I’ve never understood those people who enjoy watching horror movies. They must not know how it is to actually be a part of one.

There is something in the texture of this silence, in the darkness around us, that makes me think that night has fallen. The only sound I hear is that of the choppy breaths of my companions. Besides me and my CIA “colleague,” no one has moved. I know that those two are alive, because I hear their groans and moans. They seem quite annoyed. I estimate that sometime tomorrow I will be just like them.

It is fucking hard, facing torture, I assure you. If only I could stop time. Stretching these seconds in which I am infinitely better than how I will be tomorrow. But tomorrow will come, and it will. Time does not forgive. The minutes and hours that I will suffer a horrible agony will happen. And then I’ll be dead.

Let’s see, sooner or later I was going to die. People in the Middle Ages had a life expectancy of thirty years. If I were forty then, I would be a kind of venerable, old, elderly man. Why do I complain?

What if, say, I was doomed to die, one way or another, exactly tomorrow? Let’s assume that I have not come to Iraq. I am in an alternate parallel reality, in my house in Pasadena, enjoying a great evening filled with bitterness and alcohol. The next day, tomorrow, I get in my car to go to work and I die in a horrible car accident. But I do not die immediately. My body remains trapped between the steel wreckage for hours until emergency services rescue me. I die between agonizing spasms before arriving at the hospital. It could very well happen. In fact it does happen. I am positive that precisely tomorrow someone, on some road in America, will die exactly like that. What if I was predestined to be that victim had I not come to Iraq? In that parallel reality, at this very moment, I would be on my couch quietly drowning my bitterness in whisky, blissfully unhappy.

In both realities, I would be equally doomed to die. The only difference between my situation and my hypothetical death in a traffic accident is that in this reality I know that I will die while my alternate self doesn't know that he will die. Here, I'm about to collapse in despair while my other self spends his evening carefree, ignoring his destiny. So, why not taking the rest of the night with the same apathy?

I begin to understand the torture of a death row inmate. Since the verdict takes place, his life is a hell from which he cannot escape. Maybe the judge who has delivered the sentence ends up dying before the condemned (cancer, traffic accidents, a bullet in the head), people die all the time, however, that judge will live the rest of his time happy because he doesn't know how close he is to dying, while the convict who survives him spends every second in distress.

So I guess I should lie quietly and let the time come and pass.

Socrates: "Ultimately, the harrowing awareness of death is what makes us human. Without that, nothing would distinguish us from animals."

Paul: "What do you mean?"

Socrates: "A cow that will be sacrificed cannot feel anguish before the imminence of death. It is impossible to make that animal understand its own death. Animals lack the abstract awareness of death. That's what sets us apart and separates us humans from beasts.

Paul: "I suppose that what you mean is that the death of an animal does not have the same value as the death of a person because the beast has no awareness of its own death. But, don't animals feel pain like we do?"

Socrates: "Thus it is. Animals do feel pain, but can that pain be comparable to a person's suffering? I say it can't. For humans, pain is transcended by the awareness that pain leads to death, and is this awareness that actually transforms pain into something unbearable. It is our interpretation of the suffering that changes how we experience it. Pain can be dominated by our intelligence, while a beast could never do such thing."

Paul: "Pain is pain, and I don't see how I can change it with my mind."

Socrates: “I’ll explain to you with a parable. If every day, at the same time, you would feel a terrible pain in the stomach, a free, unexplained pain, a pain that you could not avoid or mitigate, surely that pain would make you feel very unhappy. You would go through every day of your life fearing that time of day in which your pain would assail. You would reach a point, after many days, in which you would only live to escape the pain, and your whole life would lose meaning. But now, imagine that that very pain came from an injection of a medicine that would prevent a fatal cancer to develop inside you. The medicine bringing that pain would be saving your life, and that daily sting would allow you to live and lead a normal life. The pain would have the same intensity that when it had no explanation, but now that it would have a purpose you would incorporate the pain and it would not be so terrible. Quite the opposite, in fact, you’d anticipate the moment of pain with utter joy, because that pain would mean more life. The intensity of the pain would be exactly the same in both cases. However, the first scenario would lead you to complete unhappiness, while in the second you could lead a full, happy life. Then, does it all depend on how we take things or not?”

Nietzsche: “The most suffering animal on Earth invented laughter for himself.”

Buddha: “Pain is inevitable but suffering is optional.”

Socrates: “Who the hell invited you two to this conversation?”

I suddenly wake up. Apparently I’ve been asleep. Or, rather, I have been delirious. It’s been forty-eight sleepless hours since I was kidnapped, and my ideas travel in all directions while my heart pumps blood with a force I have never felt before. What brought me back from my delirium was an enormous roar, as if a bomb had been dropped over us. Hey, that’s exactly what has happened to us. A bomb just exploded on top of us!

I hear cries and machine-gun shots. Dust floats around me like a thick fog. When I manage to stand and focus my eyes, I realize that the explosion has made a hole in our cell. Great news, if not for one small problem: the hole is on the ceiling, 10 feet over our heads. Shit.

I look at the hole as a castaway looks at a desert island. I even imagine a wisp of fresh air that comes from the outside, from the night, from freedom. My three companions, moving very slowly, end up standing around the opening in the roof, looking up as if they were contemplating a deity. We can see the stars, and the overwhelming peace that they radiate.

I fixed my gaze on the rest. They look like dead souls, living in grief, just like the Jews when reached the metaphorical category of “Muslim” in the Nazi concentration camps. How ironic it is to now be a “Muslim” in the hands of Muslims. They can barely stand — they must have been prisoners for weeks or even months. From their visible wounds, it is obvious that all three have been tortured. They all have dislocated joints and fractures, as well as raw skin in many places. They are dressed in rags and one of them carries his arm in an improvised sling made of pieces of fabric. Another’s body is curled in on itself, as if he were suffering for an acute pain or a wound in the chest. I, however, am perfect, at least health wise. All they have done to me amounts to little more than a nice scare.

Almost automatically, we try to reach the hole, I try to go up there first, jumping as high as possible, but the hole is unreachable.

“Help me out” I tell them “We have to do this now”

My comrades walk towards me and position themselves under the whole, the moment I try to have them lift me up, they scream in pain, their shoulders are dislocated, some arms are broken. Trying to go up there with their help feels like going up a cracked (and complaining) ladder.

I make a decision in seconds. I interlace my fingers, with the palms of my hands up, and I bow to my three new friends, offering them help.

“I will lift you up,” I say. “Come on, we don’t have much time.”

All three of them look at me perplexedly.

“I will lift you up, all the way to the hole,” I say in a cajoling tone “Maybe you can escape once outside.”

“And how will you get out?” asks my colleague from the CIA, who is the first to understand what I am proposing.

“I’m obviously the only one with the strength to lift others” I tell him. “If you get away, you can find help and come back to rescue me.”

One of them puts a foot into my hands and grabs my shoulders. I lift him without much difficulty until half his body crosses through the hole. The guy disappears to the other side of the roof. I repeat the operation with the other one. When it’s my CIA colleague’s turn, we look at each other square in the eyes.

“Please, do not forget about me.” I tell him.

“There is a commando of marines just three miles from here. I know the coordinates. They are trained to perform surprise raids. We will reach them.”

Then he climbs my shoulders and disappears into the ceiling. When he is above, he looks at me through the hole.

“I owe you one. We will come for you,” he says before he disappears.

Silently, I wish him best luck escaping, with all my heart. He is my only chance. Then I curse my luck. Bombs are still falling around us. We are probably under a successful bombing of jihadists locations. I pray for a bomb falling right on my head.

“God, may one of those bombs fall on my head.”

My guess is that all of the other guys around here are praying to Allah for the opposite outcome.

“Allah, may none of these bombs fall on our heads.”

God and Allah must be engaged in a heated discussion about now.

Don’t think that I am devoting my time to imagining this bullshit without doing anything. While I digress in my head, I am jumping with all my strength, trying to reach the edges of the opening in the ceiling. Believe me, I know this is so pathetic that I shouldn’t have told you about it. I am 5’11. With my arms outstretched I guess I can reach maybe seven and a half feet give or take. The roof is at about ten feet from the ground, like a basketball basket. That means that I would have to jump about twenty-eight inches to barely touch it, and at least three or four inches more to be able to grab the edge and maybe be able to pull myself up. We are talking

over thirty inches. My ability to jump is quite less than that. Still, I try. Everyone has heard about that mother who lifted a truck to save her son, right? I'm going to see if it is true. But it's not. I take a couple of strides, run, jump. My fingertips are about ten immense inches short from touching the ceiling. I keep trying over and over again. I look like an idiot.

Didn't someone say that the fear of death makes a man run faster than possible, jump higher than possible? Not so much, it seems to me. I guess God and Allah are laughing their asses off watching my pathetic gymnastics, and they have forgotten to send a little bomb this way.

Suddenly, it's all silence. The bombing has ceased. I stand in the middle of the cell, exhausted, my leg muscles sore from so much jumping. It is clear that I will not make it up there. My only hope is being rescued. They know where I am. I just need to gain some time.

The cell door bursts open. On the other side I see Rat Face. His bright and evil eyes run through the inside of the cell. I await his rage when he discovers that the other three escaped, but I see some relief on his face when he sees that I'm still here. I don't think that his relief means that he is becoming fond of me in any way.

"Come on! Out!" he orders.

"This room is fine with me. Leaks don't really bother me" I say, while pointing, unconcerned, to the hole of the ceiling. "What time do you serve dinner?"

Then my biggest fear comes true. Two other guys enter the room and grab my arms as they tie my hands behind my back. They cover my head with a hood and I get shoved out of the cell. In the darkness, I trip as they make me go up some kind of platform made of sheet metal. I feel the vibration of an engine that starts off. I am inside a truck. We are moving away. When my CIA friend comes to my rescue, he is going to find a deserted base.

I should think that my chances for survival have increased. Now the CIA knows that I am a prisoner, and they will come to rescue me. I have saved the life of one of its agents. I deserve to have at least the 4th Infantry

Division to come find me. There is a silver lining to all this: I'm still alive and my chances of staying alive increase every minute I am still alive.

I also contemplate something more pessimistic. After all, not everything can be joyous. You see, I cannot forget Rat Face's look of relief when he discovered that I hadn't escaped. The dude truly believes that I am a CIA agent. He didn't seem concerned about the real CIA agent's disappearance. I guess he had already tortured him enough and was planning to kill him soon anyway. Now he has a brand new agent to torture from the beginning and from whom he can potentially get all kinds of information. You will be wondering how much pain I will be able to resist before confessing. I assure you, very little. The problem is that I have nothing to confess. So he is going to think that I can withstand great pain. Ergo the pain will increase.

I better think of something new or I am in for a really hard time.

* * *

Present time. Houston, Texas
Landa's dialectics

Inglorious Basterds, Quentin Tarantino's sixth movie, takes place during World War II. In spite of the adjective in the title, there are plenty of glorious scenes in the movie, and there is one that I find specially remarkable: the scene in which Colonel Landa, a Nazi officer known as "the Jew Hunter," visits a French farmer by the name of Perrier LaPadite. The farmer lives in a cozy wooden house in an idyllic wasteland in the French countryside, and he has three beautiful daughters. Colonel Landa is a brilliant and unscrupulous man, whose mission in France (as indicated by his unofficial name) is to find and capture hiding Jews. He suspects that the farmer LaPadite is either hiding or knows the whereabouts of his Jewish neighbors. LaPadite, on the other hand, is no fool. When he sees the convoy of Nazi motorbikes approaching he throws water to his face to prepare himself, like a boxer before a fight, for the interview with the implacable Colonel Landa. It is obvious that he has heard of Landa, and he is aware that he is coming to get information from him, but little does he know how far the diabolic intelligence of Landa is able to reach. During the interrogation, inside the house of LaPadite, a battle of wits very much like a game of chess takes place. The viewer believes that Landa is pushing LaPadite to reveal his big secret —that he has his Jewish neighbors hidden beneath the soiled floorboards. But not so much, and this is the best part: Colonel Landa knows from the beginning of the scene, not only that LaPadite had hidden the Jews, but the exact place where he is hiding them. How does he know? Landa had knowledge of LaPadite before the interview, something that is revealed in

several details (he knows that he likes to smoke a pipe, he knows that he speaks English) and feels that it won't be so easy to get him to confess. But he also knows that the farmer has a weak point: his daughters. When the Colonel enters LaPadite's house, his daughters are inside. Instead of indicating that they should leave the house immediately, Landa allows them to stay a few minutes and observes them with maximum attention. The poor girls are, understandably, very nervous in the presence of a Nazi Colonel, and one of the girl's gaze deviates to the ground a couple of times. Right there is where the genius of Tarantino blows my mind. Tarantino makes sure that on one of those occasions where the girl looks down to the ground, the viewer can see Landa looking at the girl's eyes as she looks down. Right at that moment he knows where his coveted Jews are. He could go ahead and have them shot but, obviously, he is not going to miss the opportunity to enjoy beating up LaPadite with his interrogation. The game is won from the beginning, of course; in a chess game, Landa would have taken LaPadite's Queen in the first few moves. The problem for LaPadite is that he does not know that. Landa invites the daughters to leave the house and begins his interrogation, first with extreme kindness and courtesy. Then he changes his tone, gradually becoming more somber until he breaks the farmer down to the point that LaPadite, humiliated, simply points out the exact place where the Jewish family is hiding.

My current situation reminds me of LaPadite's, only that, instead of a family of Jews under my floorboards, I am hiding a mobile phone under my sheet, containing a video in which I appear posing as a terrorist. And I don't know if these two CIA agents who have come to ask me questions already know about the existence of the video, in the same way that Colonel Landa already knew the whereabouts of the Jews before the interrogation.

"So, Mr. Hébert, the last thing you remember is that you were going to be decapitated. Your memories stop exactly at that time," says the shaven agent.

"Exactly," I answer, neither too solemn nor too friendly, at the exact point of gravity, right between the "I understand that this is very

important” and “I understand that this is not the end of the world.”

The agents look at each other. They seem frustrated.

“We want you to watch this video, Mr. Hébert” — says the bearded one and puts an iPad into my hands.

I feel a twinge of anxiety mixed with suspense. Are they going to show me the same video that I have found in my phone, a video in which I am a bearded terrorist who threatens President Obama? I immediately see that it is not the case.

Play.

I see myself again, in the middle of a desert, dressed in an orange suit. By my side, in the video, there is a row of four other prisoners. The shaven agent has turned off the sound on the iPad, but I see jihadists pointing to the front with their knives; no doubt they are saying, in English, that Obama is a bastard, and that our blood is on his hands. I look strange from this point of view and I feel my stomach turn.

“We know that this is unpleasant,” says the bearded agent, “but you should watch what happens next.”

Although the image was taken at a distance, I can distinguish my facial features. I remember perfectly that moment of anguish in the face of death, I remember it not because I am watching the video, but because the experience is still in my head — I haven’t forgotten that part. And then there is a transformation. I see it in my face. It is as if I was looking at something unseen by others (those body language experts analyzing this very video missed it, for sure). It is the face of someone who has had a revelation, the face of someone who has transcended his circumstances and faces his destiny with a seamless resolution. The face I see on the screen appalls me, because that is no longer me, it’s the person I have forgotten. That Paul Hébert that I can’t remember opens his mouth, as if he is crying.

Je suis un...!

“The terrorists cut off the recording right at that point,” indicates the agent without a beard. “It is clear that you shouted something, you can see

how everyone else turn their faces towards you. Then comes the part we cannot make sense of.”

When the image reappears, instead of five prisoners there are only four. I have disappeared from the scene.

“Watching this must be very hard for you,” the bearded agent says. “I’m very sorry to put you through this.”

“Well,” I answer him “at least I made it out of there alive. The others were not so lucky”

“Believe me, Mr. Hébert,” intervenes the other, “Agent Kimball and myself have several friends who have had very harsh war experiences, and we understand how difficult this is for you, and how hard it will continue to be in the future.”

“Well, I am sure the doctor has informed you of that part,” says the bearded one.

“What do you mean?” I ask him.

“Agent Mitchell is right,” the other responds. “But that is a strictly medical issue between your doctor and yourself, I apologize for bringing it into the conversation.”

I look at them with puppy dog eyes, I burn with curiosity over what they are talking about.

Agent Kimball, finally, breaks the silence.

“See, Mr. Hébert, and I am not speaking as a doctor, of course...”

“Of course!” I reply, urging him to keep with his explanation. For the love of God, what is he talking about?

“You feel now that you are well, euphoric even, simply because you are still alive, but those horrific episodes will return to you for weeks, months, maybe years... it is called PTSD.”

“Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder” I think to myself.

“In fact, it is possible that your amnesia has emerged as a defense mechanism, to protect your mind from those traumatic memories.”

“I understand.”

“What we would like to ask you is a massive favor, Mr. Hébert, but we must remind you that this is a matter of national interest.”

I nod. They talk in turns, as if they are playing tennis.

“If you feel the memories coming back, try not to, so to speak, avoid them. You must try to remember if you can, however painful it may be, and as soon as you remember something, you must call us, immediately.”

I nod again.

“Do we have your word?”

“Of course, in fact, I want to show you something.”

I guess it’s time to show them the video that I found in my iPhone.

* * *



Juan Gallardo. Almería, Spain, 1973. High school teacher. Before becoming a fiction writer, he was best known for his musical background as well as his music and film reviews for the Spanish online magazine *IndyRock*. He approached literature researching historical info for previous novels by Rafael Avendaño. His career as an educator as well as his experiences as a European in the United States have proven to be invaluable source of inspiration for his fiction work. He is the co-author of *Todo lo que nunca hiciste por mí* (Grupo Planeta, 2014) and *Las flores de otro mundo* (Grupo Planeta, 2016). *The Prisoner* (Grupo Planeta, 2016) is his first novel published in English.



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The Prisoner

Juan Gallardo - Rafael Avendaño

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