

The Spectacle of Freedom

by J. E. Cammon

It had been almost a week since the “last time.” That’s what he had shouted at Eduardo after they had returned the boat, after they had watched the mother walk free onto the mainland, childless. The authorities had caught up with them unusually quickly, flashed their sirens and lights, and asked their questions. Gabriel told his story, well rehearsed like he had done it a dozen times. The men in their uniforms had stomped above and below decks anyway, unbeknownst to them, that a woman was struggling in a closet to keep her baby silent. Gabriel understood; he remembered when he would have done almost anything, as well. But smothering the child had been a mistake. In the short trip towards Miami, all of them had imagined the baby boy growing up, not born a free child, but growing up a free child.

Since then he had been driving the speed limit, walking between the lines at the cross walks, and turning off the faucet while he brushed his teeth, like maybe his string of good luck had ended. When he entered the gallery under cover of night, going around the back and using his key, he had called loudly twice to make sure he was alone, then he locked the door behind him. The show would be opening in a three days, and he hadn’t finished all the installations and hangings. As he walked through the art gallery, Gabriel brought up the lights that would assist him best at mounting the art work, but left the rest dim. Gabriel toured, slowly, with his hands out in front of him like maybe he was holding a wine glass and a plate with fine cheeses and expensive crackers. In each room, he tried looking at the art already hung from the corners of the space, from the center, imagining himself as an onlooker shrugging between groups of others, trying to gain a vantage point from which he could see one piece, then move onto the next. Occasionally, he would move over and lower a piece, or raise it, slide it sideways or tilt it.

Finally, he walked back to his workshop, which was doubling as a storage area, filled with finished pieces that needed to be installed.

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He slid the steel door open, and stopped when he noticed the man standing in the midst of all his work, silently with his back turned. Gabriel swallowed, looking behind him at the back door.

"Buenas noches," the stranger said with an American accent. "Good evening," he repeated, turning around slowly. He was wearing a black suit with a white shirt and a black tie, and his hair was slicked back, and reddish. He had been standing in front of the bronze casting that had to be installed in the center of the foyer. The small bronze boy, Freedom, hand-less and draped in the American flag was staring straight forward with dead eyes, perhaps at the man's belt buckle, which Gabriel assumed was US government issue.

"Hello," Gabriel said, finally standing to his full height. The door was too heavy to slam or throw open, fifteen feet of old steel hanging from rafters to allow for sizable pieces. It closed off the ugly utility of his shop from the beautiful richness of the gallery, yet when the door was completely open, Gabriel thought some of both spilled through in both directions. Halfway open, it gave him hope that he could slide around the side and run for the front exit. How had the man accessed his shop? "How did you get in here?" he asked, deciding not to know why the man was there.

The stranger turned around fully, and faced him, staring with keen eyes.

"You come here early on weeks that you have an opening," he started. "Unless you absolutely need the help, you always install the work alone," and he stepped off to the side, towards a table saw covered in dust. The man put his hand up as if to touch the tool, but then dropped it. "Why is that?" Gabriel considered his options. He had people depending on his income and influence. Eduardo's disappointed face back on the boat, lit by the moon, came to mind.

"I don't understand," he stalled. Did the man have a gun? Of course he has a gun, Gabriel thought to himself. The government types were not always like they were in the movies, but some things were based on reality. The stranger frowned, turning his head on his shoulders strangely.

“Am I not using the correct words?” he asked. He posited a series of questions in a Spanish that became strangely more fluent as he went. “This is where you make your work, yes?” he asked in English again. “This is where it is all planned, yes?” the government man said, more confident, as he stepped forward. Gabriel looked at his world, the mallets and chisels, the saws and hacks, the brushes and pallets, and turned his back and ran. He was close enough to the front door to reach out and grab the handle when the pain began in his back. There had been no loud gunshot, just like in the movies. As he fell to his knees, in the reflection of the glass he could see the government man walking up behind him. For a moment, Gabriel thought he saw something else.

When sensation returned, he felt a coldness against the back of his head, shoulders, and ribs. His fingertips touched steel; he was laying on his back. Above him was darkness, and Gabriel could hear foreign voices that were terrifying and soothing. He tried to move, and found himself unrestrained. Sitting up slightly, he could see that he was on a table in a circular room. Between his shoes was the door, freedom. Movement at the corner of his eye made him glance away from the door. Something was walking up to him from his right.

Gabriel went slack-jawed at its inconceivable eyes and impossible skin. Hands that were unlike human hands held a device that Gabriel saw last, and by then it was too late. It was wet against his ear for a moment, and then his whole body convulsed at the invasion, like his mind was being forced to swallow poison. He must have screamed.

When he awoke again, he was in a detainment room. His hand went first to his ear, inspecting the lobe with a thumb and forefinger, then dabbing with the pinky into the cavity gingerly. His other hand inspected the flat top of the table, and then the underside, his chair and clothes. He was wearing prisoner's orange.

The door to the cell opened, and in walked the red-haired man who had shot him in the back. The man closed the door behind him, and stood for a moment, inspecting the walls of the room.

“Can you hear me?” he asked finally. Gabriel squinted at the man, something like memory making him suddenly turn his head quickly, as if something were hiding in the periphery. “Are you in pain?” the stranger asked. Gabriel stopped his searching and focused on him again, standing up for effect.

“Why am I here? Where is here?” he asked. The man's reply was to tilt his head sideways and look at Gabriel's feet beneath the table. Gabriel looked down and noticed, too, that he was still wearing his tennis shoes he was wearing at the gallery. He imagined that prisoners wore similar shoes, but didn't know what they wore exactly. They were trying to distract him. “I am an American citizen, with rights,” he said, looking back up. The red-haired man put his hands up, palms facing forward.

“I know. I understand. And we're sorry,” he admitted honestly. “But this is very important, you must understand. Otherwise, we wouldn't have taken you,” and his eyes were strange and piercing for a moment. Gabriel frowned, like he was trying to remember his favorite song and couldn't recall the words, but had a faint reckoning of the rhythm.

“What's this about?” he demanded. Gabriel didn't want to give anything away. “I didn't kill anyone,” that was technically true. He hadn't smothered the child; he had only put its mother in the situation where she had no other choice.

“Please,” the government man gestured at Gabriel's chair. “Have a seat,” and then he stepped over to the table. First, as Gabriel cautiously eased into his own chair, he seemed like he would stand. Then, when he decided that he, too, would sit, he reached beneath the table and pulled a chair out from under it that hadn't been there before. Or maybe it had been. Again, something flitted at the edge of his vision and he turned his head sharply to the left. “I'm not interested in the death,” the stranger said, which turned Gabriel's head back around. That meant he was interested in all the others, the children and fathers and sisters. “Earlier,” the man said, pausing, “you asked me why I was in your shop, and I think you misunderstood,” he said. Gabriel's mind raced. Would they resort to

torture? He hadn't talked to Eduardo in days. It had never occurred to either of them that it would be such a fragile operation. Yet he had known that freedom was a fragile thing. The red-haired man reached down at his feet and retrieved a mound of clay. He held it in one hand, impossibly and set it on the table. It didn't fall apart or crumble; it looked wet, like before it begins to set. "Here," he said, and gently pushed the mass across the table at Gabriel without smearing.

"What," Gabriel started to say, more confused than anything. Looking at the lump of clay on the table, glimmerings of memory drifted back to him. He brought a careful hand up to his ear and again found it undamaged. He stared into the face of the other man.

"Who are you?" he asked. The man put his eyes down for a moment, a bit sad. He sighed.

"I don't know if I can tell you," he replied. "I don't know if I should," he looked around the room, at the dungeon walls and stoic table, Gabriel's orange jump suit. "Please," he gestured again at the slab of clay. "work with this," and he pushed it a little closer to Gabriel. They just wanted a sculpture?

"If I do this for you," Gabriel bargained. "You will let me go?" he asked. The red-haired man pursed his lips in thought, his eyes taking on a faraway look.

"Maybe," he said finally. "Work first," he said. Gabriel felt the features of his face harden. He had heard similar things before, before he had escaped himself, putting aside pieces of wood and bits of food for years, gradually building towards something that would take him and his brother away. He had been hungry and tired for almost ten years, and his dreams had been plagued by men kicking in the door to his mother's house. But that did not compare to being angry for one's whole life. It was the sort of thing that clung to the spirit. Gabriel reached out and touched that place in himself, and grabbed at the lump of clay. Asserting himself, he allowed his hands to sculpt.

Eventually, he forgot about how odd the room was and the government man, even the clay, which stayed wet with no water, and

did not come away on his hands. But he remembered his crimes of liberty, for which they'd build a jail just to put him under. He had been free for only ten summers before he had discussed with his brother how they might come together and help others. Even after twenty-five years, it was not perfect science. Gabriel forgot the red-haired man and his strange eyes, the room and its one, locked door. He remembered the mother of that frightened children, who had looked so much like his mother from his memories.

When he was done, the clay had become a grasping hand, with defined lines deriving from age and strength. The pose was tenacious and violent, in the throes of pain but still hopeful, like some immortal soul was climbing up out of the table. Gabriel regarded it, turning it this way and that, almost as if seeing it for the first time. He looked up at his jailer, whose face was twisted in befuddled consternation.

"Here," Gabriel said, remembering why he had been detained. "Now, will you let me go?" he asked.

"How did you do that?"

"What?" Gabriel asked, frustration creeping up in him. "What do you mean?"

"This," the man pointed as if the hand were moving. "This is synecdoche. A part standing for the whole. A part for a person for a people," he talked as if reading from a book, his voice becoming stiff and robotic. Gabriel had never heard the word before. Gabriel wiped his face with his hands. Maybe it was a dream, he thought.

Between two of his parted fingers, he watched the red-haired man's face sag and droop, like maybe it was a mask that was melting. The door to the room leaned to the side and the lines between the bricks composing the walls waved like in a steamy room. Gabriel pushed his chair backwards and tried to rise, but found his wrists caught against the arms of the chair. His feet were also pinned. As his jailer focused on him again, every other detail about the room became instantly rigid with a cold finality.

"I truly am sorry," the man said. "I had hoped with you here, with us watching, it would become clear," he said, and then stopped explaining, listening for a moment. He nodded to someone Gabriel couldn't hear. "You will have to stay," he said.

"What are you going to do to me?" Gabriel asked, as if he didn't already know. They would parade him like a specimen, an example to those who would try and defy them in the future, like all great tyrants. He did not know their faces or their names, but he knew that much.

"There are two ways to more closely examine a phenomenon," his jailer said, standing up from a chair that wasn't there. "Through magnification or multiplication," he stopped, listening again. "We believe you to be unique, or at least that any copy would produce similarly frustrating results if any results at all. And so," he stepped forward, not around the table but through it, impossibly like in a dream. No, Gabriel thought, a nightmare. Just over the man's shoulder he could see the door; he did not know what was on the other side, but knew that this time it would be nothing as simple as Castro's soldiers.

As the red-haired man approached, a noise that was apart from the other signals being fed into his mind made him look at the floor. The sculpture had fallen from the table that wasn't a table, pushed by his jailer's movements. Still moist, it had landed solidly, almost becoming one with the floor with the fingers reaching towards the handle of the closed door, or maybe the ceiling. It belonged to the outstretched arm of some man who had been killed, but who would not be conquered.

"Gird yourself," the jailer cautioned. "This will be unpleasant," but Gabriel had known that.

The pain was radiating, like from a furnace. He could feel the outside of his hands, and the insides, exposed to cold air, stretched, contorted and reformed. The invasion of his mind from before returned, this time plunging deeper with a destination in mind. His nasal cavity became crowded, and the pain coalesced into a hot

knife that had been buried in his forehead and left to cool. Time became slippery. Gabriel screamed, and then fell silent.

When sensation returned, he could tell he was in the circular room again. He was on the floor also, level with lights that emanated between the space where the walls became the floor. Gabriel could hear no voices save for his breathing and groaning. He tried to move, and found his movements brought more discomfort. He was sore everywhere, his lips chapped and his throat dry. Gabriel noticed something tall and rectangular, interrupting the lights, maybe a door, freedom.

“Can you hear me?” the man asked, who had red hair. He wore a black suit, a white shirt, and a black tie though Gabriel could not see him. Unlike the times before, his jailer was speaking to him through the air. “Are you in pain?” Gabriel could think of nothing to do right then but laugh. He moved his fingers idly, and felt the cold steel beneath them. Something had changed. The steel was like the clay had been, mutable. Gabriel experimented, dipping a finger into the floor like it was thick dough. Maybe it was a dream, he hoped. Other lights came on, forcing him to shield his eyes.

Between two of his parted fingers, he could see that the beams were focused on the object blocking the light from before. His door turned out to be a huge chunk of black material. Gabriel suspected it wasn't clay. “Please,” the man who was not a man said, his voice coming from within Gabriel's own mind, “work with this,” he said. Gabriel felt the presence leave his mind like a person walking out of a room.

Then he cried for a time, his only witness the huge slab of material, imposed upon by spying light. In the hours to come, Gabriel would see the two of them as similar. In the days to come, he would find himself with the ability to work without tools: his fingers were as chisels and his palms as brushes, his fists as hacks. Gabriel would think back to the hand he made, resting on a floor somewhere perhaps only in his dreams, and he would cry no more.

