

Patrick Pfister

## THE SHELTER

Sixth sense or slight sound, Luis could not say which, but some hint of danger awakened him. In the next instant he was floundering about in a chaos of darkness and collapsing cardboard. An iron hand clamped onto his wrist and dragged him out onto the sidewalk. Laughter and shouts rang around him. One of the attackers kicked him in the ribs. Coughing, Luis flailed his arms and tried to kick back. A neighbor shouted from a third floor balcony.

“Leave him alone! I’ll call the police!”

Gasping for breath, Luis caught a glimpse of three men, still laughing, retreating around the corner. “Squatter!” the last one shouted.

Luis pulled himself onto his knees. His right cheek stung and his ribs ached. His shopping cart had tipped over and plastic sacks had burst open, scattering socks and t-shirts across the sidewalk. Groping in the mess, he could barely string two thoughts together. One thought was something about safety. Two months ago, maybe three, someone had offered him a secure place to sleep. Why had he refused? He couldn’t remember and now he was crawling around on the sidewalk in pain.

Rising to his feet, he told himself, “First what’s first.” Like any other day he had to hunt for food and supplies. He disassembled what was left of his cubicle and threw the cardboard sheets into a trash container. As he packed his plastic bags back into his shopping cart, the first rays of light sparkled on rooftop antennas. Cars and motorbikes began to roar past on their way uptown. A moment later a police patrol car pulled up at the curb. Two Barcelona Metropolitan police officers, a man and a woman, got out. Their young faces wore concerned looks.

“*Señor,*” the female officer said, “we have received a report that you were the victim of an attack.”

Luis eyed her nervously. Why did the police always talk like robots and call him *Señor*?

“Could you describe your assailants?” she asked.

“Three men,” Luis answered carefully.

“But can you describe their physical appearance—would you recognize them if you saw them again?”

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“Maybe.”

He wasn't used to so much talking. It made his head hurt worse than the attack. The female officer asked if he required medical attention and he said *No*. Then both officers took turns addressing him. They asked if he had ever heard of “The Shelter.”

“Maybe,” Luis answered again. That was the thought he had had about safety. Someone had called The Shelter a “secure place.”

“You'd be safer there,” the male officer said, “especially considering the recent wave of attacks.”

“Wave?”

“You could eat one hot meal every day. You'd be warm in winter.”

The female officer reminded him that the Spanish constitution guaranteed a home to every citizen. It was his right to have a roof over his head.

Luis told them he would think about everything. When they finally left, he pushed his shopping cart downhill toward the sea. He didn't remember much about The Shelter but he guessed that “safety” meant locked doors and the stench of other men. A roof over his head might be good but could he step outside at night and stand beneath the sky? That was probably why he had refused, but maybe it was time to reconsider.

As he pushed his cart through the medieval Jewish quarter, his body still trembled. Since he had lost his job as a gardener four years ago luck had seldom been his friend, but he had never before had enemies. Today, besides food and supplies, he had to find a weapon.

Along the way he foraged in trash containers and dustbins. He came upon a copy of *La Vanguardia* newspaper, a cigarette lighter, half a croissant and an umbrella. The umbrella no longer opened and several spokes were missing, but its thick wooden handle provided a solid weight. He swung it twice like a club and packed it into his cart.

When he arrived at the beach, the public toilets were open. Normally he refrained from observing his weather-eaten face in a mirror but now he stared at a red welt on his cheek the width of a cardboard edge. Wincing, he patted a soap bar against it. Afterwards he inspected his bald head and stubby frame in the glass. He had once been resident gardener of the Teknon Clinic and had shaved and dressed in front of a mirror every morning. He had worn a green uniform to work. Now he still shaved but no longer wore a uniform.

The crisp morning air soon grew warm and the aroma of coffee

changed to whiffs of paella and grilled chicken. Luis parked his cart beside a wooden bench and looked out over the shimmering sand. His thoughts drifted away from the attack and he relaxed. On the beach people swam and kicked balls, built sandcastles and hurled Frisbees, and the blue sky stretched as wide as it had above his garden. If only he could live there, he wouldn't have to make the journey each day, but the beach police were less friendly than the city police. They claimed he was bad for tourism. They always said, "Please move on, *Señor*," and one time an officer had prodded him with a stick.

A breeze moved over the sand, fluttering the yellow and green parasols. Luis looked to the sea. He loved to watch the windsurfers glide across the waves, muscles so taut, long hair flowing. Watching them, he still kept half an eye on the showers where tourists stretched their sunburned necks up into the splashing water. As the lunch hour neared, the tourists left the showers and Luis stripped to his underwear. He gasped lightly in the downpour of cold water, aware that several sunbathers now observed him with disapproval. City streets rendered his presence invisible but the beach revealed him. Still, it was the best place he knew and even now when his ribs ached and his cheek stung, the fresh breeze and burning sun delighted his flesh, and he felt the caress of the elements as he had in his garden.

He rinsed off and dressed again in the same clothes. Later, as he watched a volleyball game, a tall blond woman came up and handed him a Pizza Hut brownie on a paper plate. She spoke several words in a foreign language. Unable to reply in her tongue, Luis murmured, "*Gracias, señora.*"

He ate the cake in slow bites. Maybe his luck was not so bad after all, but the afternoon was passing and he shouldn't dally on the beach much longer. He had never feared darkness but now he recalled the phrase *wave of attacks* and the thought of the coming night filled him with unease. He pushed his cart along the promenade above the Olympic basin, past the moored yachts and motor launches, and then through the seaside community of Barceloneta. He stopped to forage in familiar spots but soon found himself veering off toward the Arc de Triomf. Twenty minutes later he stopped in front of a three-story stone building. A sign above the front door read, "The Shelter."

Luis chewed his cracked lower lip. The building didn't look so bad. The windows were clean and unbroken. The door was wooden and well varnished. Of course, things might look different on the inside. All the same, it wouldn't be that bad for one night, just until he found a new place to sleep. If darkness fell and he was still wandering the streets, more problems could arise.

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He waited until traffic cleared and then pushed his cart across the street, where he discovered that the building's ground floor windows were not only barred, but sealed. Next to the door, there was a list of rules and conditions. Before entering The Shelter, all "guests" were required to show their identity cards and fill out an "Entrance Permission Form." If they had lost or no longer possessed their identity cards, assistance would be provided. Doors were locked from midnight to seven o'clock in the morning. No one was permitted to enter or leave during those hours. Shopping carts could be parked in a secure yard behind the building. No carts were allowed in The Shelter itself. More rules followed but Luis had already turned away.

He pushed his cart along the sidewalk, trying to put his thoughts in order. First what's first. His current neighborhood in the Gothic Quarter was too close to the beach, he had to admit it, too close to the clubs and discos and afterhour drunks who sometimes looked for trouble. So he pushed farther up in the city into the modern Ensanche neighborhood with its elegant streets and Modernist architecture. By the time he arrived, dusk had fallen. The rumble of rush hour traffic diminished to a hum and metal shutters rattled down onto sidewalks. He passed Concepción Church and braked his cart by a pharmacy. Chewing his lower lip, he studied the sidewalk. It was wide and would allow pedestrians to pass by without bumping into his cart. The large Modernist balcony above the marble threshold would protect him from rain. A roof over my head, he thought.

Farther on there was a curb fountain and a market. At that moment a Pakistani workman came out of the market carrying a few boxes. Luis left his cart and arrived at the corner trash container just as the workman deposited the boxes. Luis took hold of a box and found double-ply corrugated cardboard with a smooth paper finish.

This is good, he thought.

He broke down and unfolded three boxes, then placed the cardboard sheets onto the pharmacy's threshold. He worked with quiet resolve, paying no attention to the cars and pedestrians. He raised walls and affixed a roof. Before long the shoppers disappeared and traffic thinned. Darkness came on and Luis wondered if he had made a mistake. One night at The Shelter might have been a good idea.

He ate a dinner of paella leftovers and an apple. Ants were always a danger during the night so he washed his fork and Tupperware bowl at the fountain. He opened *La Vanguardia* and tilted the Sports page toward the street lamp but the dim light emphasized the encroaching darkness. He set the newspaper aside and tried to think more pleasant thoughts.

He recalled how every day in his garden terrace above the city he had trimmed bougainvillea and evergreen bushes, clipped hedges and watered shrub palms. The air in the garden had been as fresh as the air on the beach. Even now, years later, he could remember the mixed fragrance of roses and hyacinths.

He unpacked blankets and a sofa cushion from his cart and crawled inside the cubicle. A fitful breeze moved the cardboard walls. He closed his eyes. The touch of the heavy umbrella handle against his palm was reassuring but sleep would not come. Car tires thrummed asphalt and his cheek stung. Conscious that enemies prowled the night, he felt small and helpless. He gripped the umbrella handle and stared out through a crack at the street.

Hours later, a masculine voice spoke into the cubicle. Luis awoke with a start, brandishing the umbrella. Trembling, he poked his head out and found two police officers, both men, accompanied by a woman dressed in a white blouse and blue jeans. Luis stared at the trio. More talking, he thought, but how had they found him on the other side of town? The police knew everything.

The woman said her name was Anna and she was a social worker. She gave the same speech the female police officer had given that morning, explaining how safe he would be in The Shelter. She described the warm meal all the guests enjoyed in the evening and said that in the morning he would be served a muffin and a cup of coffee.

“Hot coffee?” Luis asked. It had been a long time since he had sipped a heated beverage.

Anna handed him a pamphlet, which contained photographs of cots with sheets and blankets, a dining facility, a kitchen and smiling people. Luis flipped the pamphlet over to the back cover and found the same list of rules he had seen at the entrance to The Shelter. His eyes moved over the rules at the bottom of the list, the ones he had not read that morning. Frowning, he declared: “This is where I am.”

After the police and Anna had left, he considered their visit in a better light. If the police were now his friends, his enemies might think twice before attacking again. But how long would the police remain friendly if he refused to go to The Shelter? Every time he drifted off into dreams, a motorbike’s backfire or the cry of early morning revelers woke him. Immediately he grabbed the umbrella and peeked out through the cracks.

He slept in fits and starts, ten minutes here, twenty there, and finally entered a state somewhere between a memory and a dream. He was outdoors in the crisp morning air, digging weeds out of the earth, damp

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soil under his palms, hot sun on his bald head, sky all around, but then a motorcycle roared past and he gripped the umbrella, shaking.

More sleepless nights followed and his days turned long and hard. At the beach the patter of the African snack sellers and the Thai massage girls sounded like car tires trundling over a bumpy road. The aromas of sun lotion and paella struck his nostrils at the same time. It made him nauseous. Dizzy with exhaustion, he dozed on a bench beneath the flaming sun. The catnaps replenished his strength but also deprived him of the critical hours he needed to forage for food and supplies. He awoke awash in sweat, blinded by sunlight. He read the pamphlet describing The Shelter and thought about the morning cup of coffee. Then he remembered the barred windows and threw the pamphlet in the trash.

That night he once again set out cardboard sheets onto the pharmacy's marble threshold. After dinner he read the newspaper. When the bells of Concepción Church tolled midnight, he went to bed. Later a voice sounded. He no longer knew if he was dreaming or just remembering dreams. Through a crack in the cardboard he espied three men coming down the sidewalk. For a second, he couldn't find the umbrella; then his fingers curled around the handle. One of the men pointed toward the cubicle and another laughed.

Luis pushed his eye closer to the crack. As he readied himself, a low growl escaped his bared teeth, but suddenly his eyes enlarged and he trembled violently. He had been wrong about his enemies. They weren't men. They were teenagers. Three teenage boys with T-shirts and floppy hair, just like the windsurfers on the beach.

When the attack started, Luis jumped out of the cubicle and swung the umbrella. He had hoped it would drive off his enemies but it only infuriated them. They pounced on him from all sides. He managed to crack the umbrella against one head but then he fell to his knees: fists and feet pounded him. "Squatter!" one boy shouted. Sinking into blackness, Luis knew he had lost.

When he awoke he was in a bed in a room with three other men. He glimpsed Anna the social worker walking out the door and guessed he was in The Shelter. He slept and awoke and ate warm food and slept again. Gradually, he began to realize that he was in *Hospital Clínic*, the central hospital in Barcelona. Doctors and nurses spoke a language—"concussion, contusion, hemorrhage"—as obscure as the foreign tongues on the beach. Every morning he was served a croissant with hot coffee. He had a white dressing gown, a shaving kit and pills to stop his headaches. At night he dreamed of hyacinths and curling waves.

The police visited twice and called him *Señor* each time. They said that his enemies had been captured and would be punished. Anna the social worker told him she had been officially assigned to his case.

“My case?” Luis said.

“It means that from now on I’m your friend.”

She explained that a charitable organization affiliated with The Shelter had issued him new shirts, pants and underwear. They had also given him a pair of shoes and a used suitcase. Anna said that his shopping cart had been returned to its rightful owner, Caprabro supermarket. She handed him the same pamphlet describing The Shelter.

The following day Luis was released from the hospital and he walked out the main exit with his suitcase in hand. *First what’s first*, he thought. He felt insecure without a cart to push so he immediately acquired one from Super Estalvi market. It lacked the inner basket of his previous model but had stronger wheels. That evening, he pushed farther up into the city and the wide boulevards of the Ensanche barrio soon merged into narrow lanes. He finally stopped in front of a flower shop, already closed for the night. Chewing his lip, he studied the area. A pile of cardboard boxes stood behind a nearby liquor store. Not far away, there was a bakery and a fountain, food and water.

This is good, he thought.

He began to unfold the boxes, hoping for better luck this time. He had never had enemies before so maybe he would not have them again. Now he slept farther from the beach but he had new clothes and his new neighborhood was safer. He still had the sky over his head.