

The long way home

by

József Kiss

- Oh, my God! Look at NewsFlash's main page now! Hey, are you listening to me? Do it right now, Will! - Christina's sudden clamor shattered the tranquility of the afternoon, which normally filled the office after lunchbreak. There were usually three people in the room, but that day Veronica went out to have lunch with a friend, which usually took a good while longer, so only Will was there to listen.

- Yeah, what's the big deal? Don't tell me that it is another cute cat video you've just found, I have already had my dose of them for the day - He did not look up from his phone as he was quite sucked into his new favorite game he was playing. As he did not get any response whatsoever, he looked at her and when he saw the disturbed expression on Christina's face, he realized that there was something serious going on this time. "Gosh, what did the government announce this time?" He could not imagine anything important enough to disturb the afternoon siesta. Reluctantly, he opened the website. He immediately understood what Christina was talking about. The headline article had quite a sensationalist title: "Breaking news! Possible bio-attack in Paris? Two got killed in police assault." "Damn, another terrorist attack?! But why did they label it 'bio' this time?", he thought, while he was skimming through the article. There were some general pictures to support the claims of the article concerning the events that had taken place just an hour earlier, showing a Parisian street with commando units and firefighters guarding a car shot to wreck, from the large crowd of curious citizens. One can see similar pictures almost every day on the news. But one of them was a bit unusual: it showed a guy in a full-body hazmat suit with a blood-red biohazard symbol snarling from its yellow back. This picture sent an unconscious chill down his spine, and his palms started sweating.

- Well, you don't see those hazmat guys around any average shoot-outs, that's for sure - he said out loud to himself, not realizing that Christina was nervously awaiting his reaction, staring at him with eyes that begged for some reassurance. Obviously, this remark did not ease her tension, but fortunately, Will quickly recognized his slip of the tongue and added: - Oh c'mon, this doesn't mean a thing, it's standard procedure I guess." - Seeing that Christina has instantly managed to ease up a bit after hearing this, he continued: - I hate that the news always jump to conclusions like this. They only know that one of the bad guys had a suitcase with some glass jars in it. So what? Apparently, there

was nothing in them, or at least they do not know it yet. Why cry terrorist already? It's stupid and irresponsible." He realized that he was also speaking to calm himself, which he found to be quite unsettling, but suddenly he could not come up with a new topic to divert the discussion, which was otherwise his forte.

- You want to have a cigarette? – he asked finally after a minute of silence that seemed like hours, knowing that she sometimes smoked as well. After a moment of hesitation, she nodded. Without saying anything else, they stood up so quickly that seemed like jumping, and they walked to the gallery.

In the designated smoking area, they bumped into another colleague, Adam, who, being a chain smoker, would spend most of his time there. The two did not like him much as he always dominated the conversations during smoke breaks. This time they welcomed the fact that he was there. If he was good at something, it was avoiding awkward silences: he started blabbering instantly, as expected.

- Hey guys, what's up? You look like you've been spanked by the boss, heh! Well, I guess you've heard the news as well, huh? Incompetent morons, that French police! How can they let these things happen, right? And those damn terrorists, now they managed to hit rock bottom with this bio-terror bullshit. What did they use, I wonder? Anthrax? The government has vaccines for those, I'm sure. Guess I'm just happy to have cancelled that meeting in Paris next week. Got enough work on my hands as it is, you know. Well... what do you think? – It was quite unusual for Adam to ask the opinion of his "listeners." This, besides the fact that he spoke even faster than usual, had given away that he was upset, but of course he had to keep up appearances. The others just kept nodding while they avoided eye contact, and were startled by the sudden need to respond. After looking at Christina and seeing that she was not going to answer, he managed to squeeze out a reply.

- Yeah, I mean, they don't know anything yet. It's useless to start panicking so soon. I think... I think we should get back to work, – Adam was swift to agree.

- Sure, yeah, the boss is expecting my charts anytime now, and I'm still not quite done with them. See you later, huh? – He went the other direction, but almost forgot that he still had his cigarette in his mouth, and since he was not allowed to bring it inside the building, he had to walk back to the ash tray where they talked. But by the time he turned around, the others were already gone. "Talk about awkward chats, huh?", he thought, while he put out his cigarette.

It was 6:37 in the evening, the dusk was already settling outside. Inside the office building it was quite dark already, the lights were turned off everywhere. A little illumination came from the flickering colorful screensavers of the monitors that were carelessly left on by the employees. Only one small

desk lamp was still on in Will's office. Now it was all peaceful, and Will really appreciated it, especially after the insane afternoon they had. He would usually not stay this late at the office, but now he almost did not realize how long he lingered. He was alone in the office – probably alone in the whole building, except for the desk clerk and the security guys downstairs. The cleaners could arrive any time, but fortunately there was no sign of them yet. It was time to wrap things up and go home, as Sam, his cat was probably very hungry already. There was no work left either as Will had finished up a good while ago with everything and has only been drooling over the internet in the last couple of hours. He was not looking for anything in particular; his only preference was to avoid news sites.

He logged out of the computer and stood up to get his coat. Leaving the small sphere of light of the desk lamp, he was startled by his completely changed surroundings. He could hardly see anything in the dark. It took a few seconds for his eyes to adjust to the low level of light but he finally walked up to the hanger and frantically put on his coat. He looked at Christina's desk and suddenly started to worry about her.

Christina was already on edge after that smoke they had, but Veronica, their roommate really did a number on her nerves with that episode when she returned from lunch. The two of them were trying to find peace working on some assignments without talking about the dreaded topic of the terrorist attack. And it almost seemed to work. But then Veronica barged in through the door like a mad person in her silly bright red coat, asking them why they were still sitting there like morons when it was time to pack up and flee. They just stared at her without being able to say anything. She did not wait for any answers, just rushed to her desk and collected a few things in a matter of seconds. Then, when she turned around and saw that they still did not move or say a thing, she started shouting "ARE YOU DEAF?! YOU WANT TO *DIE* HERE?! MOVE, YOU IDIOTS!", which drew the colleagues from the adjacent rooms to the door. Veronica looked at the others who were peeking inside with a sense of great annoyance, then again, looked at her co-workers again. For a second it seemed like she was going to grab Will and Christina by the hair and try to drag them out, but then a sudden relief came in the form of her cell ringing. She picked up the phone instantly like she had been waiting for that call anxiously, and started talking with someone – probably her husband –, not realizing that she was still shouting. She marched out, completely forgetting about her colleagues and the ones who were peeking inside, had to jump out of her way or otherwise she would have bumped into them.

It took a minute for Will and Christina to recover from the shock that was caused by the crazy scene. Then they looked at each other and started laughing, but it was only a short and weak laugh. In fact, their eyes were not

laughing as they did not find this funny at all. There was no adequate way for them to react. In the next few minutes, however, they overheard that others started making hasty phone calls to family members, to other colleagues, and finally to the boss. Christina joined in on the others and called her brother, then her mother. What they figured, the boss was not very happy about the fact that instantly everybody wanted to go home, and after the first honest attempts to reason with the terrorist attacks had failed, everybody started claiming that they did not feel well, so instead of asking for permission, they just *announced* they were leaving for the day. In half an hour, most of them were already gone, except for Cristina and Will.

Christina was a very dutiful person who thought it to be very irresponsible to leave without permission, but she was already struggling with her fears when she spoke to her brother, who demanded that she left for home immediately. By the time she spoke with her mother tears were streaming down on her face. In the meantime, Will has not done anything. Will did not make nervous phone calls, did not start trembling or crying: he just sat there with a mildly stupid expression stuck on his face. Who was he gonna call? His parents were on the far side of the globe in Japan, enjoying the money they saved up throughout the years, and there was simply no way to contact them as it was nighttime over there. He had no siblings, no girlfriend, and he did not care to call any of his drinking buddies either. He only had a cat named Samuel. That thought brought him back to the present. He realized he had been standing there, in the now completely dark office for minutes, surrounded by shadows of office equipment that seemed harmless during daytime. But now they resembled the shape of monsters that kept growing and creeping around him like silent stalkers.

His thoughts still remained with Christina, as he rushed through the empty offices towards the corridor that led to the stairs. What a fool he was for not offering to accompany her on the way home at such a dangerous time! She was still there with him when they heard the sirens from the streets, and when they looked out through the window they saw people running in all directions and dropping their belongings, as they hurried towards a place they thought to be safe. "How absurd," he thought "these people really believed that there would be any safe place to hide in the case of a real bio-terror attack." Christina was weeping uncontrollably by then. When he tried to touch her shoulder, she almost jumped in fear as she was completely absorbed in her thoughts. She apologized for the overreaction, but Will felt he could do nothing to help her. He thus warned her to take extra care on the way home and stared at the door where she disappeared.

As he hurried down the corridor he passed the door that led to the boss' office. It was left open, which would never be the case under normal circumstances, but now it seemed almost natural. Darkness crept inside; the door was like a big mouth that was trying to swallow him up. As he glimpsed inside, he suddenly became frightened from realizing the emptiness of the building that used to be filled with loud noises and people racing about like ants in the hive. He cursed himself for being so stupid to stay this late as he jogged down the stairs with unusual swiftness. Even his boss had sent an email out a few hours earlier, releasing all staff and asking them with fake concern to take care of themselves.

But he just couldn't leave. Not with all that chaos that was going on in the streets, with all those ambulances racing madly and those commandos running in formation and people shouting in fear. No, the office was a safe haven free from all madness, so he decided to stay. He was fortunate enough to live just a couple of blocks down the street from the office, so he figured that if things would become heated he could be at home in a few minutes. He also thought that in case of a serious situation, security would come and escort him out; but this time they didn't. As he reached the front desk he realized why: they had left already. The place was completely abandoned.

Finally, when he stepped outside he saw that the street was completely empty as well. No sirens, no horns, no people running around. Only the wind was howling occasionally, bringing the cold chill of autumn. The pavement was littered with all sorts of junk: mostly the contents of dropped bags lay on the ground – pieces of papers, lipsticks, even clothes – but there were pieces of glass, steel and plastic from cars that ran into each other. Fortunately, none of the cars seemed to be in a serious accident, but he tried not to look thoroughly at them anyway in fear of seeing someone trapped inside. One of the wrecks caught fire which lit up that section of the street, covering the scattered items in a warm yellow light and making their shadows dance around like some sort of *danse macabre*. It also generated a line of smoke filling the air with poisonous fumes, so he tried to steer clear from it. He preferred not to be seen from a mile away either by stepping into the light.

Arriving at a junction, he was able to see how things were in other directions. He saw a cordon in the distance accompanied by some police cars, but there was nobody inside them. So far, nobody seemed to be in the vicinity. Seeing the remains of the turmoil that took place earlier he thought it to be a wise decision to wait until it was over after all. As he crossed the street, something in the corner of his eye alarmed him. He slowed down, then came to a halt and turned his head in the direction. A surge of genuine fear ran through his body from head to toe when he saw a dark silhouette of a person lying on the pavement, only a few meters from where he was standing. This was the first human being he encountered in the last couple of hours, but he did not expect to find anybody

that way. He stared at the person anxiously for a few long seconds, waiting for any sign of consciousness, but the person did not move a muscle. It was a bit difficult to make out the features, but she seemed to be a woman lying there face down. "She must be a drunk homeless! She will be fine.", he thought, still trying to find a comfortable explanation to the things that disturbed him.

Drawing strength from the plausibility of the ordinary explanation, he resumed his walk towards home. He felt well-justified hate towards homeless people as they always seemed to pick him out from the crowd with the usual "just one small favor to ask" which of course always meant asking for money. On a particularly good day he would give them some change, but on most days he did not even slow down to hear them finish their annoying plea. But drunken homeless laying on the ground unconsciously with a thin stream of urine flowing from them were the worst sight, and he always kept as much distance from them as possible. After taking a few steps, he slowed down again, feeling uncertain about the situation. "What if she *needs* help?" He couldn't really help an injured person given he had no idea about treating anything more serious than a papercut but at least he felt obligated to check if there was a problem, homeless or not. He turned around, and with uncertain steps walked up to the person lying on the ground. He saw something glittering in the dark near her head, reflecting the cold white light of the street light above. It was black and still, and had an irregular shape; some kind of fluid. He wanted to reach down and touch the woman's shoulder but he froze halfway as he realized that it was most probably a pool of blood around the woman's head. He jerked back as he could not stand the sight of blood at all. Thank god it was so dark, he thought, otherwise he might have fainted from seeing that much of it. Feeling a sudden sense of nausea, he gathered all his strength and started poking the woman's back. There was no response; he tried calling her, whispering at first, but then trying a bit louder, but still no reaction. He heard his blood beating in his ears, his pulse was racing. He finally gave up and started walking away, quickly speeded up to running, just to get away from the woman on the ground.

He did not dare to look back until he reached the next junction. He felt already exhausted from anxiety and the short sprint. Panting, he looked back to the deserted street where he just came from, searching for any sign of movement but he saw none. It seemed that even the fire went out from the car crash, leaving most of the street covered in the obscurity of the night. He turned around the corner and in a minute he was in front of the house he lived in. His heart jumped in shock; as for a second, he could not find his keys and the possibility crossed his mind that he might had to go back to the office.

Fortunately, he only put them in the other pocket. He quickly opened the gate and slipped inside.

The hallway was pitch black as it had no windows or automated lights, but since he was used to this, in a few seconds he was able to feel the switch on the wall. There was no sign of disturbance here, everything looked perfectly normal. He felt a great relief: the sense of security filled his heart, making the last couple of minutes distant and unrealistic, almost like they had been just a bad dream. Although he lived on the third floor, he never used the elevator as he considered climbing the stairs a good exercise. He had to go past the elevator, and his sense of tranquility quickly escaped when he saw a pink suitcase stuck between the doors of the lift, sticking halfway out. The automated doors struggled to close but being obstructed the pneumatics released the pressure, only to make another futile attempt at closing in the next second. He knew that suitcase, it belonged to a little girl, the daughter of a neighbor. He could not resist peeking inside the elevator as he went by, but fortunately there was nothing – and no one – inside. He could still hear the pneumatic doors trying to do their job even when he was two floors above. It crossed his mind that he probably should have removed the bag from the door. “No problem though, as no one would want to leave now anyway”, he thought, finally arriving at the doorstep of his flat.

Sam, the big furry red cat greeted him anxiously when he stepped inside, meowing and purring loudly, like he was asking where Will was for so long. Will talked to the cat in a warm, welcoming tone as he was scratching Sam's back, then he took his coat off and washed his hands in the bathroom, – particularly the one with which he touched the woman who was lying on the ground. Finally feeling clean enough, Will turned on the TV. There was some recording playing that showed the prime minister addressing the people directly. Will did not really want to listen, he was desperate to find some ordinary TV show that could supply him with a sense that everything was normal. He tried to switch channels, but all of them showed the same recording. Will gave up the search with a sigh and chose to pay as little attention as possible. Then he went to the kitchen to fetch dinner for the cat. He could still hear the recording, as the prime minister asked the people to stay inside their homes, remain calm, given that there was no imminent danger according to the Chief Medical Officer. The PM also warned everyone that rioters and looters would be prosecuted. Then he continued by stating the facts that he had learnt about the coordinated attacks not only in Paris but in many capital cities around Europe. Will had the impression that the government did not really know anything, apart from the fact that there was in fact some sort of virus involved. “Next, he will suggest that we cover ourselves in a white blanket,” he thought with bitter irony.

As he looked down to open the can of cat food, he heard a flat thud from the direction of the table. He looked down and saw a small dark spot on the bright yellow cover, becoming bright red as it spread. Then another black drop fell right next to it. He touched his head, and felt something warm and slimy coming from his nose. He looked at his fingers covered in dark red blood. He kept staring at it with empty gaze. He just stood there staring at his hands, unable to decipher the meaning of what he was seeing. After a while, the cat who watched him from a distance walked up to him and rubbed himself against his leg, letting out a curious meow. This had finally broken his trance. He blinked a few times then got a handkerchief which he tore to smaller pieces and stuffed them in his nostrils, then he stiffly walked to the kitchen tap and washed his hand. But without any conscious thought, he carefully avoided using his clean hand to rub off the blood. This took longer but at least he did not have to *touch* the blood.

Sam almost knocked the bowl out of Will's hand as he was putting it on the floor for him. At least the cat's worries have disappeared once he dove into the bowl. Will collapsed into his comfortable armchair feeling faint and tired, and he realized that he had already heard what the prime minister was saying on the recording: it was a looped transmission that kept playing over and over again. Fed up with the empty lines, he turned the television off. He felt completely numb and couldn't really think clearly. His sight was becoming a bit blurry as well. Suddenly, he got a good idea: he reached out for his laptop. He remembered that it was game night when he usually played shooters with his online friends. It seemed like the only logical thing to do at that moment: escaping into a world that he could control. Hastily, he went online and then started the game. But when he tried to log in, an unexpected message appeared on the screen: "*Server connection failed. The system servers are currently offline. Please try again later.*" He tried several times, with no success to log in. As it was very unusual, first he was relatively calm, but after five attempts, he erupted in anger and smashed his laptop on the ground. Sam ran behind the couch in fear, then he crawled out when he heard some unfamiliar noise. Will was crying. He finally seemed to understand. Sam jumped next to him and meowed like he was worried. Will started petting him. For a while, they just sat there in silence, only the warm purring of the cat filled the air with peace. It seemed to have worked as Will managed to ease up a bit. Even a small half-smile appeared on his face, as he finally looked at the cat and said:

- Well, pal, it really seems like it's the end of the world now. But don't you worry. At least it's not zombies that got us, like we all expected.