

AN OBLIGING * ROBBER *

By

MIA COUTO

A short story from The New York Times Magazine's Decameron Project.

Translated by David Brookshaw from the Portuguese.

There's a knock on the door. Well, "knock" is one way of describing it. I live far away from anyone, war and famine are my only visitors. And now, in the eternity of yet another afternoon, someone bombards the door with his feet. I run over. Well, "run" is one way of putting it. I drag my feet, my slippers creaking over the wooden floor. At my age, that's all I can do. Folks start to age when they look at the ground and see an abyss.

I open the door. It's a masked man. On noting my presence, he shouts:

"Six feet, keep six feet away!"

If he's a robber, he's frightened. His fear unnerves me. Frightened robbers are the most dangerous ones. He takes a pistol from his

pocket. He points it at me. But it's a funny-looking weapon: It's made of white plastic and emits a green light. He points the pistol at my face, and I close my eyes, obedient. That light on my face is almost a caress. To die like this is a sign that God has answered my prayers.

The masked man is softly spoken and has an affable look. But I'm not letting myself be fooled: The cruelest of soldiers always approached me with an angel's demeanor. But it has been so long since I had any company at all that I end up playing his game.

I ask the visitor to lower his pistol and take a seat in the only chair I have left. It's only then that I notice his shoes are wrapped in some sort of plastic bags. His intentions are clear: He doesn't



want to leave any footprints. I ask him to take his mask off, and assure him that he can trust me. The man smiles sadly and mumbles: These days one can't trust anyone, people don't know what they're carrying inside them. I understand his enigmatic message, the man thinks that

underneath my wretched appearance, there lies hidden a priceless treasure.

He looks around, and as he can't find anything to steal, he eventually explains himself. He says he's from the health services. And I smile. He's a young robber, he doesn't know how to lie. He tells me his bosses are worried because of a serious illness that's spreading like wildfire. I pretend to believe him. I almost died of smallpox. Did anyone visit me? My wife died of tuberculosis, did anyone come and see us? Malaria took my only son, and I was the one who buried him. My neighbors died of AIDS, and no one wanted to know about it. My late wife used to say it was our fault because we chose to live far from where there were any hospitals. She, poor soul, didn't

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know that it was the other way round. It is hospitals that are built far from the poor. It's just the way hospitals are. I don't blame them. I'm like them, hospitals I mean, I'm the one who harbors and tends to my own illnesses.

The lying robber doesn't give up. He refines his methods, though still in a clumsy way. He tries to justify himself: The pistol he pointed at me was to measure my fever. He says I'm well, announcing this with an idiotic smile. And I pretend to breathe a sigh of relief. He wants to know whether I have a cough. I smile disdainfully. A cough is something that almost sent me to my grave, after I came back from the mines 20 years ago. Ever since then, my ribs have hardly moved, and nowadays my chest just consists of dust and

rock. The day I cough again, it will be to attract St. Peter's attention at heaven's gate.

"You don't seem ill to me," the impostor declares. "But you may be an asymptomatic carrier."

"A carrier?" I ask. "A carrier of what?" For the love of God, you can search my house, I'm an honorable man, I hardly ever leave home."

The visitor smiles and asks if I can read. I shrug. Then, he places a document on the table with instructions on how to maintain hygiene, along with a box containing cakes of soap, and a small bottle of what he calls "an alcohol-based solution." Poor fellow, he must imagine I'm partial to liquor, like all lonely old men. As the intruder takes his leave, he says:

“In a week’s time, I’ll come by and see you.”

At this point, the name of this illness the visitor is talking about dawns on me. I know the illness well. It’s called indifference. They would need a hospital the size of the whole world to treat this epidemic.

Disobeying his instructions, I advance toward him and give him a hug. The man resists me vigorously and wriggles out of my arms. Back in his car, he hurriedly strips off. He frees himself from his clothes as if he were stripping himself of the plague’s own attire. That plague called poverty.

I wave goodbye and smile. After years of torment, I am reconciled with humanity: Such a bumbling robber can only be a good man. When

he comes back next week, I’ll let him steal that old television I’ve got in my bedroom.