Donald Barthelme’s

**Game**

Shotwell keeps the jacks* and the rubber ball in his attaché case and will not allow me to play with them. He plays with them, alone, sitting on the floor near the console hour after hour, chanting “onesies, twosies, threesies, foursies” in a precise, well-modulated voice, not so loud as to be annoying, not so soft as to allow me to forget. I point out to Shotwell that two can derive more enjoyment from playing jacks than one, but he is not interested. I have asked repeatedly to be allowed to play by myself, but he simply shakes his head. “Why?” I ask. “They’re mine,” he says. And when he has finished, when he has sated himself, back they go into the attaché case.

It is unfair but there is nothing I can do about it. I am aching* to get my hands on them.

*One of the jacks is a brand-name product, the other is a rubber ball.*

Shotwell and I watch the console. Shotwell and I live under the ground and watch the console. If certain events take place upon the console, we are to insert our keys in the appropriate locks and turn our keys. Shotwell has a key and I have a key. If we turn our keys simultaneously the bird* flies, certain switches are activated and the bird flies. But the bird never flies. In one hundred thirty-three days the bird has not flown.

Meanwhile Shotwell and I watch each other. We each wear a .45 and if Shotwell behaves strangely I am supposed to shoot him. If I behave strangely Shotwell is supposed to shoot me. We watch the console and think about shooting each other and think about the bird. Shotwell’s behavior with the jacks is strange. Is it strange? I do not know. Perhaps he is merely a selfish bastard, perhaps his character is flawed, perhaps his childhood was twisted*. I do not know.

Each of us wears a .45 and each of us is supposed to shoot the other if the other is behaving strangely. How strangely is strangely? I do not know. In addition to the .45 I wear a .45 and if I behave strangely Shotwell is supposed to shoot me.

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**JUEGO**

Shotwell se guarda las tabas y la pelota de goma en el maletín y no me deja jugar con ellas. Él juega con ellas, solo, sentado en el suelo al lado de la consola, una hora tras otra, canturreando “una, dona, tena, catona” con una voz precisa, bien modulada, ni tan fuerte que moleste, ni tan baja que me permita ignorarla. Le indico a Shotwell que dos pueden sacarle más diversión a jugar a las tabas* que uno, pero a él no le interesa. Le he pedido una y otra vez que me deje jugar a mí solo, pero él simplemente me menea la cabeza. “¿Por qué?” pregunto. “Son mías”, dice. Y cuando ha terminado, cuando se ha hartado*, otra vez se las guarda en el maletín.

Es injusto pero no hay nada que yo pueda hacer al respecto. Estoy que me reconcomen* las ganas de ponerles las manos encima.

Shotwell y yo vigilamos la consola. Shotwell y yo vivimos bajo tierra y vigilamos la consola. Si en la consola se dan determinadas circunstancias, nosotros hemos de insertar nuestras llaves en las ranuras apropiadas y girar nuestras llaves. Shotwell tiene una llave y yo tengo una llave. Si giramos nuestras llaves simultáneamente el pájaro* vuela, se activan ciertos conmutadores y el pájaro vuela. Pero el pájaro nunca vuela. Hace ciento treinta y tres días que el pájaro no vuela. Entretanto Shotwell y yo nos vigilamos el uno al otro. Los dos llevamos un .45 y si Shotwell se comporta extrañamente se supone que yo tengo que pegarle un tiro. Si yo me comporto extrañamente se supone que Shotwell tiene que pegarme un tiro. Vigilamos la consola y pensamos en pegarnos un tiro al otro y pensamos en el pájaro. El comportamiento de Shotwell con las tabas es extraño. ¿Es extraño? No lo sé. Quizá no sea más que un cabrón egoísta, quizá tenga la personalidad trastornada, quizá su infancia fue difícil. No lo sé.

Cada uno de nosotros lleva un .45 y se supone que cada uno de nosotros tiene que dispararle al otro si el otro se comporta extrañamente. ¿Cuánto extraño es extraño? No lo sé. Además
have a .38 which Shotwell does not know about concealed in my attaché case, and Shotwell has a .25 caliber Beretta which I do not know about strapped to his right calf. Sometimes instead of watching the console I pointedly watch Shotwell’s .45, but this is simply a ruse*, simply a maneuver, in reality I am watching his hand when it hangs* in the vicinity of his right calf. If he decides I am behaving strangely he will shoot me not with the .45 but with the Beretta. Similarly Shotwell pretends to watch my .45 but he is really watching my hand resting idly* atop my attaché case, my hand resting idly atop my attaché case, my hand. My hand resting idly atop* my attaché case.

In the beginning I took care to behave normally. So did Shotwell. Our behavior was painfully normal. Norms of politeness, consideration, speech, and personal habits were scrupulously observed. But then it became apparent that an error had been made, that our relief was not going to arrive. Owing to an oversight*, owing to an oversight we have been here for one hundred thirty-three days. When it became clear that an error had been made, that we were not to be relieved, the norms were relaxed. Definitions of normality were redrawn* in the agreement of January 1, called by us, The Agreement. Uniform regulations were relaxed, and mealtimes are no longer rigorously scheduled. We eat when we are hungry and sleep when we are tired. Considerations of rank and precedence were temporarily put aside*, a handsome concession on the part of Shotwell, who is a captain, whereas I am only a first lieutenant. One of us watches the console at all times rather than two of us watching the console at all times, except when we are both on our feet. One of us watches the console at all times and if the bird flies then that one wakes the other and we turn our keys in the locks simultaneously and the bird flies. Our system involves a delay* of perhaps twelve seconds but I do not care because I am not well, and Shotwell does not care because he is not himself. After the agreement was signed Shotwell produced the jacks and the rubber
ball from his attaché case, and I began to write a series of descriptions of forms occurring in nature, such as a shell, a leaf, a stone, an animal. On the walls.

Shotwell plays jacks and I write descriptions of natural forms on the walls.

Shotwell is enrolled in a USAFI course which leads to a master’s degree in business administration from the University of Wisconsin (although we are not in Wisconsin, we are in Utah, Montana or Idaho). When we went down it was in either Utah, Montana or Idaho, I don’t remember. We have been here for one hundred thirty-three days owing to* an oversight*. The pale green reinforced concrete walls sweat and the air conditioning zips* on and off erratically and Shotwell reads Introduction to Marketing by Lassiter and Munk, making notes with a blue ballpoint pen. Shotwell is not himself but I do not know it, he presents a calm aspect and reads Introduction to Marketing and makes his exemplary notes with a blue ball point pen, meanwhile controlling the .38 in my attaché case with one-third of his attention. I am not well. We have been here one hundred thirty-three days owing to* an oversight*. Although now we are not sure what is oversight, what is plan. Perhaps the plan is for us to stay here permanently, or if not permanently at least for a year, for three hundred sixty-five days. Or if not for a year for some number of days known to them and not known to us, such as two hundred days. Or perhaps they are observing our behavior in some way, sensors of some kind, perhaps our behavior determines the number of days. It may be that they are pleased with us, with our behavior, not in every detail but in sum. Perhaps the whole thing is very successful, perhaps the whole thing is an experiment and the experiment is very successful. I do not know. But I suspect that the only way they can persuade sun-loving creatures into their pale green sweating reinforced concrete rooms under the ground is to say that the system is twelve hours on, Llevamos aquí ciento treinta y tres días por un olvido. Aunque ya no estamos seguros de lo que es un olvido, de lo que es un plan. Quizá el plan para nosotros es quedarnos aquí permanentemente o, sino permanentemente, por lo menos un año, trescientos sesenta y cinco días. O, si no un año, un número determinado de días conocido por ellos y no conocido por nosotros, como doscientos días. O quizás ellos están observando de alguna manera nuestro comportamiento con sensores de algún tipo, quizá nuestro comportamiento determine el número de días. Puede ser que estén contentos con nosotros, con nuestro comportamiento, no en todos los detalles pero sí en general. Quizá todo vaya muy bien, quizá todo esto sea un experimento y el experimento vaya muy bien. No lo sé. Pero sospecho que es la única forma que tienen de persuadir a las criaturas amantes del sol para que se metan bajo tierra en sus cuartos verde pálido de hormigón armado rezumante, es decir, que el sistema está doce horas conectado y
twelve hours off. And then lock us below* for some number of days known to them and not known to us. We eat well although the frozen enchiladas* are damp when defrosted and the frozen devil’s food cake is sour and untasty. We sleep uneasily and acrimoniously*. I hear Shotwell shouting in his sleep, objecting, denouncing, cursing sometimes, weeping sometimes, in his sleep. When Shotwell sleeps I try to pick* the lock on his attaché case, so as to get at the jacks. Thus far I have been unsuccessful. Nor has Shotwell been successful in picking the locks on my attaché case so as to get at the .38. I have seen the marks on the shiny surface. I laughed, in the latrine, pale green walls sweating and the air conditioning whispering, in the latrine.

25 I write descriptions of natural forms on the walls, scratching them on the tile surface with a diamond. The diamond is a two and one-half carat solitaire* I had in my attaché case when we went down. It was for Lucy. The south wall of the room containing the console is already covered. I have described a shell, a leaf, a stone, animals, a baseball bat. I am aware that the baseball bat is not a natural form. Yet I described it. “The baseball bat,” I said, “is typically made of wood. It is typically one meter in length or a little longer, fat at one end, tapering* to afford a comfortable grip at the other. The end with the handhold typically offers a slight rim, or lip, at the nether* extremity, to prevent slippage.” My description of the baseball bat ran to 4500 words, all scratched with a diamond on the south wall.

30 Does Shotwell read what I have written? I do not know. I am aware that Shotwell regards my writing-behavior as a little strange. Yet it is no stranger than his jacks-behavior, or the day he appeared in black bathing trunks* with the .25 caliber Beretta strapped to his right calf and stood over the console, trying to span* with his two arms outstretched the distance between the locks. He could not do it, I had already tried, standing over the console with my two arms outstretched, the distance is too great. I was moved to comment doce horas desconectado. Y entonces nos encierran abajo* un número determinado de días conocido por ellos y no conocido por nosotros. Comemos bien, aunque las enchiladas congeladas se humedecen al descongelarse y el pastel congelado de chocolate está rancio* y desabrido*. Tenemos el sueño agitado y agresivo. Oigo a Shotwell gritar en sueños, objetar, denunciar, maldecir a veces, llorar a veces, en sueños. CuandoShotwell duerme yo trato de abrir la cerradura de su maletín, para hacerme con las tabas. Hasta el momento no lo he conseguido. Tampoco ha conseguido Shotwell abrir las cerraduras de mi maletín para hacerse con el .38. He visto las huellas en la brillante superficie. Me reí en el retrete, las paredes verde pálido rezumando y el aire acondicionado sibando, en el retrete.

Yo hago descripciones de formas naturales en las paredes, arañando la superficie alicatada* con un diamante. El diamante es un solitario de dos quilates y medio que llevaba en el maletín cuando bajamos. Era para Lucy. La pared sur de la habitación que contiene la consola ya está cubierta. He descrito una concha, una hoja, una piedra, animales, un bate de béisbol. Soy consciente de que un bate de béisbol no es una forma natural. Pero lo describí. “El bate de béisbol”, dije, “normalmente está hecho de madera. Normalmente mide un metro de largo o un poco más, es grueso por un extremo, estrechándose para permitir un cómodo asimiento por el otro. El extremo del mango normalmente presenta un ligero saliente o reborde en la punta inferior, para evitar que se resbale”. Mi descripción del bate de béisbol ascendía a 4.500 palabras, todas arañadas con un diamante sobre la pared sur. ¿Lee Shotwell lo que he escrito? No lo sé. Soy consciente de que Shotwell considera mi conducta escritora un poco extraña. Pero no es más extraña que su conducta con las tabas o que el día que apareció con un bañador negro con la Beretta calibre 25 atada con una correa a la pantorrilla derecha y se plantó frente a la consola, intentando abarcar con los dos brazos extendidos la distancia entre las ranuras. No lo consiguió; yo ya lo había intentado: plantado frente a la consola con los dos brazos extendidos; la distancia es demasiado grande. Me sentí impulsado a...
but did not comment, comment would have provoked counter-comment, comment would have led God knows where. They had in their infinite patience, in their infinite foresight*, in their infinite wisdom already imagined a man standing over the console with his two arms outstretched, trying to

30 span* with his two arms outstretched the distance between the locks.

Shotwell is not himself. He has made certain overtures*. The burden of his message is not clear. It has something to do with the keys, with the locks. Shotwell is a strange person. He appears to be less affected by our situation than I. He goes about his business stolidly*, watching the console, studying Introduction to Marketing, bouncing his rubber ball on the floor in a steady, rhythmical, conscientious manner. He appears to be less affected by our situation than I am. He is stolid. He says nothing. But he has made certain overtures, certain overtures have been made. I am not sure that I understand them. They have something to do with the keys, with the locks. Shotwell has something in mind. Stolidly* he shucks* the shiny silver paper from the frozen enchiladas*, stolidly he stuffs* them into the electric oven. But he has something in mind. But there must be a quid pro quo*. I insist on a quid pro quo*. I have something in mind.

I am not well. I do not know our target*. They do not tell us for which city the bird is targeted. I do not know. That is planning. That is not my responsibility. My responsibility is to watch the console and when certain events take place upon the console, turn my key in the lock. Shotwell bounces the rubber ball on the floor in a steady, stolid, rhythmical manner. I am achings* to get my hands on the ball, on the jacks. We have been here one hundred thirty-three days owing to an oversight*.

I write on the walls. Shotwell chants "onesies, twosies, threesies, foursies" in a precise, well-modulated voice. Now he cups* the jacks and the rubber ball in his hands and rattles* them suggestively. I do not know for comentárselo pero no lo comenté, comentárselo habría provocado un contracomentario, comentario que nos habría llevado Dios sabe dónde. Ellos en su infinita paciencia, en su infinita previsión*, en su infinita sabiduría ya habían imaginado a un hombre plantado frente a la consola con los dos brazos extendidos, inten
tando abarcar con los dos brazos extendidos la distancia entre las ranuras.

Shotwell no es él. Ha hecho algunas propuestas. La idea central de su mensaje no está clara. Tiene algo que ver con las llaves, con las ranuras. Shotwell es una persona extraña. Parece estar menos afectado con nuestra situación que yo. Él se ocupa de sus asuntos imperturbablemente, vigilando la consola, estudiando la Introducción al marketing, haciendo botar la pelota de goma sobre el suelo de forma constante, rítmica, concienzuda. Parece estar menos afectado con nuestra situación de lo que estoy yo. Él es imperturbable. No dice nada. Pero ha hecho ciertas propuestas, se han hecho ciertas propuestas. Yo no estoy seguro de comprenderlas. Tienen algo que ver con las llaves, con las ranuras. Shotwell tiene algo en mente. Él pela imperturbablemente el brillante papel de plata de las enchiladas* congeladas, imperturbablemente las mete en el horno eléctrico. Pero tiene algo en mente. Pero debe de haber un quid pro quo*. Yo insisto en un quid pro quo. Tengo algo en mente.
which city the bird is targeted. Shotwell is not himself.

Sometimes I cannot sleep. Sometimes Shotwell cannot sleep. Sometimes when Shotwell cradles me in his arms and rocks me to sleep, singing Brahms’ “Guten abend, gut Nacht”*, or I cradle Shotwell in my arms and rock him to sleep, singing, I understand what it is Shotwell wishes me to do. At such moments we are very close. But only if he will give me the jacks. That is fair. There is something he wants me to do with my key, while he does something with his key. But only if he will give me my turn. That is fair. I am not well.