

A Lifestyle by Fernando Sorrentino

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In my youth, before becoming a farmer and cattleman, I was a bank employee. This is how it all came about:

I was twenty-four years old at the time and had no close relatives. I was living in this same little apartment on Santa Fe Avenue, between Canning and Araoz.

Now, it's well known that accidents can happen even in such a small space. In my case, it was a tiny accident; when I tried to open the door to go to work, the key broke off in the lock.

After resorting in vain to screwdrivers and pliers, I decided to call a locksmith shop. While waiting for the locksmith, I informed the bank I would be coming in a bit late.

Fortunately, the locksmith arrived quite promptly. Concerning this man, I remember only that, although he looked young, his hair was completely white. Through the peephole I said to him: "My key broke off in the lock."

He sketched a quick gesture of annoyance in the air: "On the inside? In that case, it's already a more difficult matter. It's going to take me at least three hours, and I'll have to charge you about ..."

He estimated a terribly high price.

"I don't have that much money in the house right now," I replied. "But as soon as I get out, I'll go to the bank and pay you."

He looked at me with reproachful eyes, as if I had suggested something immoral to him: "I'm very sorry, sir," he articulated with instructive courtesy. "But I am not only a charter member of the Argentine Locksmiths' Union, but also one of the principal framers of the Magna Carta of our organization. Nothing has been left to chance in it. If you should have the pleasure of reading this inspiring document, you would learn, in the chapter dedicated to 'Basic Maxims,' that the perfect locksmith is prohibited from collecting subsequent to the conclusion of the work."

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I smiled, incredulous: "You're joking, of course."

"My dear sir, the subject of the Magna Carta of the Argentine Locksmiths' Union is no joking matter. The writing of our Magna Carta, in which no detail has been overlooked and whose various chapters are governed by an underlying moral principle, took us years of

arduous study. Of course, not everyone can understand it, since we often employ a symbolic or esoteric language. Nevertheless, I believe you will understand clause 7 of our Introduction: 'Gold shall open doors, and the doors shall adore it.' "

I prepared not to accept such ridiculousness: "Please," I said to him. "Be reasonable. Open the door for me, and I'll pay you at once."

"I'm sorry, sir. There are ethics in every profession, and in the locksmiths' profession they are inflexible. Good day, sir."

And, with that, he left.

I stood there for a few moments, bewildered. Then I called the bank again and informed them I probably wouldn't be able to come in that day. Later on I thought about the white-haired locksmith and said to myself: "That man is a lunatic. I'm going to call another locksmith shop, and, just in case, I'm not going to say I have no money until after they open the door for me."

I searched in the telephone directory and called.

"What address?" a guarded feminine voice asked me.

"3653 Santa Fe, Apartment 10-A."

She hesitated a moment, had me repeat the address, and said: "Impossible, sir. The Magna Carta of the Argentine Locksmiths' Union prohibits us from doing any work at that address."

I lit up in a flame of anger: "Now listen here! Don't be ridic..."

She hung up without letting me finish the word.

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So I went back to the telephone directory and placed some twenty calls to as many locksmith shops. The instant they heard the address, they all flatly refused to do the job.

"O.K., fine," I said to myself. "I'll find a solution elsewhere."

I called the janitor of the building and described the problem to him.

"Two things," he answered. "In the first place, I don't know how to open locks, and, in the second place, even if I did know how, I wouldn't do it, since my job is cleaning up the place and not letting suspicious birds out of their cages. Furthermore, you've never been too generous with your tips."

I then started to get very nervous and carried out a series of useless, illogical actions: I

had a cup of coffee, smoked a cigarette, sat down, stood up, took a few steps, washed my hands, drank a glass of water.

Then I remembered Monica DiChiave; I dialed her number, waited, and heard her voice: "Monica," I said, feigning sweetness and nonchalance. "How's everything? How's it goin', honey?"

Her reply left me trembling: "So, you finally remembered to call? I can tell you really love me. I haven't seen hide or hair of you in almost two weeks."

Arguing with women is beyond my capacity, especially in the state of psychological inferiority in which I then found myself. Nevertheless, I tried to explain to her quickly what was happening to me. I don't know whether she didn't understand me or refused to hear me out. The last thing she said before hanging up was: "I'm nobody's plaything."

I now had to carry out a second series of useless, illogical actions.

Then I called the bank, in the hope that some fellow employee could come and open the door. Bad luck; it fell to my lot to talk to Enzo Paredes, a dimwitted joker whom I detested: "So you can't get out of your house?" he exclaimed abominably. "You just never run out of excuses not to come to work!"

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I was seized by something akin to a homicidal urge. I hung up, called again, and asked for Michelangelo Laporta, who was a little brighter. Sure enough, he seemed interested in finding a solution: "Tell me, was it the key or the lock that broke?"

"The key."

"And it was left inside the lock?"

"Half of it was left inside," I replied, already somewhat exasperated by this interrogation, "and the other half outside."

"Didn't you try to get out the little piece that's stuck inside with a screwdriver?"

"Yes, of course I tried, but it's impossible."

"Oh. Well then, you're going to have to call a locksmith."

"I already called," I retorted, suppressing the rage that was choking me, "but they want payment in advance."

"So, pay him and there you are."

"But, don't you see, I haven't got any money."

Then he grew bored: "Man, Skinny, you sure have your problems!"

I couldn't come up with a quick reply. I should have asked him for some money, but his remark left me baffled, and I couldn't think of anything.

And so ended that day.

The next day I got up early to start making more phone calls. But - something quite frequent - I found the telephone out of order. Another insoluble problem: how to request the repair service without a telephone to place the call?

I went out onto the balcony and began to shout to people walking along Santa Fe Avenue. The street noise was deafening; who could hear someone yelling from a tenth floor? At most, an occasional person would raise his head distractedly and then continue on his way.

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I next placed five sheets of paper and four carbons in the typewriter and composed the following message: "Madam or Sir: My key has broken off in the lock. I have been locked in for two days. Please, do something to free me. 3653 Santa Fe, Apartment 10-A."

I threw the five sheets over the railing. From such a height, the possibilities of a vertical drop were minimal. Wafted about on a whimsical wind, they fluttered around for a long time. Three fell in the street and were immediately run over and blackened by the incessant vehicles. Another landed on a store awning. But the fifth one dropped on the sidewalk. Immediately, a diminutive gentleman picked it up and read it. He then looked up, shading his eyes with his left hand. I put on a friendly face for him. The gentleman tore the paper up into many little pieces and with an irate gesture hurled them into the gutter.

In short, for many more weeks I continued making all kinds of efforts. I threw hundreds of messages from the balcony; either they weren't read or they were read and weren't taken seriously.

One day I saw an envelope that had been slipped under my apartment door; the telephone company was cutting off my service for nonpayment. Then, in succession, they cut off my gas, electricity, and water.

At first, I used up my provisions in an irrational way, but I realized in time what I was doing. I placed receptacles on the balcony to catch the rain water. I ripped out my flowering plants and in their flowerpots I planted tomatoes, lentils, and other vegetables, which I

tend with loving and painstaking care. But I also need animal protein, so I learned to breed insects, spiders, and rodents and to make them reproduce in captivity; sometimes I trap an occasional sparrow or pigeon.

On sunny days I manage to light a fire with a magnifying glass and paper. As fuel, I'm slowly burning the books, the furniture, the floorboards. I discovered that there are always more things in a house than are necessary.

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I live quite comfortably, although I lack some things. For example, I don't know what's going on anywhere else; I don't read newspapers, and I can't get the television or radio working.

From the balcony I observe the outside world and I notice some changes. At a certain point the trolleys stopped running. I don't know how long ago that happened. I've lost all notion of time, but the mirror, my baldness, my long white beard, and the pain in my joints tell me that I'm very old.

For entertainment I let my thoughts wander. I have no fear or ambitions.

In a word, I'm relatively happy.