

Matias F. Travieso-Diaz
4110 Faith Ct.
Alexandria, VA 22311
(703) 472-6463
mtravies@gmail.com

3415 words

Gronks

by Matias Travieso-Diaz

The two most powerful warriors are patience and time
Leo Tolstoy

Preludio

The general election had been held under the pall of a virus outbreak that had killed millions of people worldwide. The incumbent U.S. government had applied all its resources to the search for an effective anti-virus vaccine and, in the summer, had announced the development of such a vaccine, which should be available to the public before election day. Unfortunately, it was soon discovered that vaccine recipients developed severe depression, amnesia, and fatigue, ultimately rendering them incapable of independent rational thinking.

Use of the vaccine was discontinued once its side effects were identified, but the reasons for the recall were kept confidential to avoid alarming the public. The opposition candidates from the radical Patriotic Combine made the withdrawal of the vaccine their main election issue and, through a web of lies and accusations, managed to capture the White House and win majorities in both chambers of Congress.

Shortly after the transfer of power, the Combine distributed thousands of doses of the withdrawn vaccine to its own laboratories for mass replication. The new government then issued a directive requiring all persons residing in the country to be vaccinated. Concurrently, the

Combine implemented measures to muzzle the press and quash the opposition in Congress. Elements of the prior administration and large segments of the armed forces rose in arms against the Combine regime, and a long-lasting civil war erupted.

Siege

The loud banging continued. There was little chance that the reinforced steel rolling door to the laboratory would yield to the pounding and hammering by the gronks, but the attackers persisted without letup.

The lab technicians, brothers only a few years apart in age, cowered in a corner of the room, as far as they could get from the rattling door. Brandon, Dr. Stern's young assistant, stood near them, rendered mute by apprehension.

"We have to do something!!" wailed the less courageous of the brothers.

"But what, Doug? Do you want us make a run for it?"

"No, Mandy. We need to find a way to sneak out! Dr. Stern, is there any other exit to this lab?"

"Not that I know" replied Stern.

"I'm too young to die!" whimpered Doug.

"Aww, shut up!" replied Mandy. "They aren't going to kill you, just process you."

"But I *don't want* to be processed!!" continued Doug, bawling.

Dr. Stern tried to calm his charges. "They will put you to sleep and then inject an anti-virus vaccine in your arm. You'll wake up a couple of hours later feeling little or no pain or discomfort."

"But the me that wakes up will be different than the one that went to sleep!" protested Doug.

“So, we are in a bind,” acknowledged Stern. “We are unarmed. We have no food and little water. Sooner or later, they’ll figure a way to cut our ventilation off, or will bring explosives to blow the door open. Either way, it is only a matter of hours before they get us. We need to decide how we handle ourselves when that happens.”

Stern took the keys of the Subaru out of his pocket and handed them to Mandy. “You two are young and fit. In the event you manage to get out of here without being captured, you should take my car and go away from Washington ASAP. In the glove compartment of the car, you’ll find a couple of credit cards and my ATM card. Use them to get as much cash as you can, but don’t do it after a day or two, since they could track you through them.”

“What about me?” asked Brandon.

“You should go with them if you can.”

Escape

The banging suddenly ceased, to be replaced by the unmistakable whine of an electric drill at work. “They are drilling into the door lock to break it” warned Mandy. Brandon started to tremble.

“Let’s prop that table against the door!” urged Doug.

“They may come in shooting!” warned Stern. “Grab chairs or anything else that can serve as a shield!”

There was a loud screech as the rolling door lifted, followed by a cacophony of orders, screams and grunts. Moments later, men and women barged into the room. They were gronks led by a female quadron brandishing a pistol. “Nobody move!” she directed.

Without hesitation, Mandy thrust his chair at the woman, caught her off-balance, and wrestled the gun from her hand as she tumbled to the floor. Waiving the gun in the air, he

screamed at the group: “Make way, or I’ll shoot you!” Then, turning to his brother, he ordered “Follow me, Doug!” Brandon attempted to join them, but a couple of gronks interposed themselves and held him back.

The brothers rushed through the now open door before the intruders could recover. They were last seen disappearing through the building’s main door into the parking lot.

The crowd inside the lab started to give chase but the quadroon, getting slowly to her feet, countermanded them. “Let them go! They won’t get far! Anyhow, we got what we came looking for!”

Capture

“Which of you is Dr. Stern?” asked the quadroon. Stern nodded, color draining from his face. “And you are...?” she went on, turning to Brandon.

“I’m Brandon Reese, a researcher at the lab.”

The woman smiled broadly. “Two for the price of one! My octoroon will be pleased.”

Without more, they handcuffed the pair and led them out onto the street and into a paddy wagon.

Inside, Brandon whispered, panic in his voice: “What did she mean by pleasing her octoroon?”

“There must be an octoroon in charge. Quadroons, sambos and gronks lack authority to carry out an operation of this magnitude on their own.”

“What’s going to happen to us?” pleaded Brandon.

“If they don’t shoot us as traitors, they’ll vaccinate us and force us to become like them.”

“Does the vaccine always work?” Brandon insisted, clinging to a shred of hope.

“In most instances. Its main active ingredient is scopolamine, popularly known as devil’s breath. Combined with some other ingredients, scopolamine inhibits the physiological action of acetylcholine, especially as a neurotransmitter. A full dose of the vaccine causes over the course of a few days the onset of severe side effects that render the recipient a gronk, a zombie with human face.”

Their conversation was cut short by the arrival of the paddy wagon to a police station. Gronks armed with rifles shoved the captives into one of the holding cells at the station. “You’ll be questioned and processed when Captain Modine comes in” announced an officer at the front desk. The quadroon who had led the prisoners’ seizure addressed the man at the desk curtly: “Tell the Captain that Lieutenant Akers arrested Dr. Stern at the BioScience Lab, as ordered, and brought him in.” She saluted and took off.

They were taken to a dark cell reeking of urine and excrement. There were two bunks and one chair and a bucket in a corner whose use was self-evident. A single low-wattage bulb cast more shadows than light on the scene.

“What do they want with us?” complained Brandon.

“They are injecting the vaccine in all adults to render them obedient zombies, whose actions are directed by the Combine. We are caught in the civil war, the Combine against the former government. They are going to force us to join their team.”

Night fell, and a deeper darkness enveloped the holding cell. Much later, the door was unlatched to admit a burly man wearing fatigues and a dirty beret. He addressed Stern in a gruff voice: “You Doctor Adrian Stern?”

“Yes.”

“Come with me,” he commanded. As they led him out of the holding cell, Stern could hear Brandon plead: “How about me?”

Someone answered curtly: “Shut up!”

Interrogation

“Dr. Stern, you are a renowned biochemist, is that correct?”

“I don’t know renowned, but yes, some of my works have been published in peer-reviewed journals,” Stern demurred.

“And you were nominated for a Nobel Prize for medicine five years ago for your work on the neurotransmitting properties of acetylcholine, isn’t that true?” The interrogator, a gray fish hook of a man, spoke with the authority of one in the know.

Stern tried to be evasive. “Some of my colleagues were kind enough to nominate me. But the prize that year went to the Hwang team from South Korea.”

“Never mind that” the man countered in a steely tone. “The fact is that you are an expert on how acetylcholine activates various parts of the human nervous system, right?”

“Yes, I have studied the effects of acetylcholine on brain functions” conceded the doctor.

“And you have also studied how certain chemicals, such as scopolamine, block the effects of acetylcholine on the central nervous system. Isn’t that so?”

“I’ve written papers on that subject, yes,” Stern was forced to admit.

“Well, Dr. Stern, you may be the man we are looking for.” The man’s tone of voice suddenly became less brusque. “As you know, we use a cocktail of drugs, mainly scopolamine, in the vaccine that at first was intended to protect people from the virus. We now modify the composition of the vaccine in accordance with the results we are trying to achieve. If the amount of scopolamine in the dose is diminished, the vaccine recipient retains more of his or her original

personality traits, including independent thinking and limited initiative, becoming a quadroon. Even less scopolamine gets us octoroons. However, the vaccination results for quadroons and octoroons are variable and sometimes impossible to predict.”

The man made a short pause in his presentation to let the issue sink in. He then continued: “We want you to refine the vaccination protocol to make sure that the freedom a quadroon enjoys is kept within pre-established bounds. We want to ensure that a quadroon (and even more an octoroon) is incapable of committing treason or sabotage, and can’t engage in other antisocial activities. You are to help us achieve this. If you agree, we promise to make you an octoroon, unchanged in most respects from the man you are today.”

“And if I refuse to cooperate?”

“We’ll be forced to give you a full-strength dose. Make you just another gronk. Or maybe you’ll get sent to the firing squad.”

Escape

Doug and Mandy spent the hours after their narrow escape hiding in the car, parked behind an abandoned church in the outskirts of the city. Most of the time they kept awake, dreading capture by a roving patrol of gronks. As they waited for dawn to break to continue their flight, their talk turned to plans for their uncertain future. Neither of them was willing to live in a Combine world; Doug was planning to flee into exile, whereas Mandy felt it was his duty to become part of the resistance by joining one of the anti-government contingents that operated in the mountains throughout the country.

Neither plan showed promise. The four thousand miles land border between the contiguous U.S. and Canada was heavily patrolled to prevent exodus across it; the border with Mexico was perilous, as it was frequented by gangs of bandits ready to victimize anyone

attempting to cross from the United States. Canada was by far the best option: the Canadians were required by an accord imposed on them by the Combine to capture and deport any Americans caught trying to enter their territory. On the other hand, once inside Canada, refugees fleeing the horror the United States had become were given assistance and allowed to settle there.

“Your best bet if you insist in fleeing into Canada is to go to New Hampshire or Maine. There must be some unguarded tracks of forest or mountain roads through which you can exit the country. But I fear you are neither fit nor experienced enough with living in the wild for such an adventure” lamented Mandy.

“You are not much better off yourself. Finding a resistance group should not be that hard; guerrilla groups are operating out of almost every mountain, from Appalachia to the Cascades. But these strongholds may be encircled by Combine forces and you may not be able to get through or be taken. Plus, you have no military training nor fighting skills” riposted Doug.

“Well, we have no choice. Let’s wish each other luck.”

At dawn, they drove northeast, staying on country roads and avoiding highways as much as they could. When they reached Kingston, New York, Mandy left the car and hitchhiked his way into the Catskills, hoping to connect with the rebel forces said to be headquartered on Slide Mountain. Doug planned to veer east, heading for New Hampshire.

Their leave-taking was emotional. “Please take care and try to keep in touch somehow,” said Mandy. Doug was overcome with emotion and drove away, blinded by tears.

Assimilation

When they came for Brandon, they had no interrogation in store for him. They took him directly to the procedures room of the station where a couple of policemen unceremoniously

deposited him on a stretcher and held him in place while an anesthetic was administered. While unconscious, a nurse injected into him a full dose of the vaccine.

He woke up an hour later, dazed and confused but feeling mellow. He had no recollection of what had happened since he was seized in the lab, but otherwise he felt fine. He allowed the nurse to assist him getting off the stretcher and putting his shirt back on. She then instructed him: “Boy, come with me. You need to start getting trained.” He complied.

The training lasted four months, getting progressively more intensive as the full effects of the vaccine took hold. It included aptitude tests, a survey of his areas of expertise and interest, loyalty and indoctrination courses, and military drills and weapons training. At the end, Brother Brandon (as he was now called) was assigned to a team of biochemists who were seeking to improve the various versions of the vaccine. Brandon was not tasked with any research responsibilities, but provided support to the team in record-keeping, chemical compound preparation, and sample collection and storage. The leader of the team was Dr. Adrian Stern, who Brandon did not recall meeting.

Brother Brandon discharged his duties in exemplary fashion and received several commendations from his superiors. At times, stray thoughts or feelings of having lost something important crept up into his mind. He vigorously brushed them aside.

Subversion

Stern had not forgotten Brandon or the former lab technicians. In fact, the vaccine shot intended to make him a compliant octoroon had done nothing to change his psyche, though he had been left in a state of constant terror at what his new masters could do to him if his independence was discovered. Fortunately, improving the cocktail of chemicals that had been developed to combat the virus proved difficult and no immediate successes were expected of him as proof of his loyalty.

His secret goal, from the first day of captivity, was to subvert the Combine's efforts to turn the country's entire population into zombie-like gronks. He realized this was an almost impossible, suicidal task, but could not content himself with living in relative ease in a country ruled by a handful of despots who lorded over a multitude of insensate slaves.

Stern was able to come up, over time, with potential methods for reducing the effects of scopolamine, some as simple as administering grapefruit juice with the dose. Yet, the risk of discovery kept him from attempting to carry out overt subversive activities until he was sure of success.

News

One afternoon, a couple of dour police officers came to the lab. "Dr. Stern," informed one of them without preamble, "the wreck of a Subaru Outback registered in your name has been towed out of a ravine near Boundary Pond in New Hampshire, less than a mile from the border with Canada. Neither the authorities in Coos County nor the provincial and local authorities in Quebec have any knowledge of how the car ended up in the ravine. Do you have any information you can share with us?"

“After I was released and returned to my office, I found my car to be missing and reported it promptly to the authorities as stolen” responded Stern. “Was the car in an accident? Has it been totaled?”

“It’s unclear whether the car was deliberately sent down the ravine or accidentally dropped into it. There is a dirt road leading to the pond, and the car may have been traveling on that road before plunging into the ravine. Anyway, the car is a total loss. Did you authorize anyone to drive your vehicle?” The tone of voice of the questioner left no doubt that he suspected Stern to be an accomplice to an illegal attempt to emigrate.

“I did not” replied Stern, trying to sound outraged. “Did you find any bodies in the car?”

“No. We suspect that, however the car ended up in the ravine, its occupants fled on foot and entered Canadian soil.”

“But you don’t know who the car thieves were.”

“No, sir. Let us know if you find out anything else about this incident. I remind you that assisting a person in his attempt to leave the country illegally is a felony, punishable with up to ten years in prison.”

“Thank you, officer. May I have a copy of your report for my insurance company?”

More News

Stern was reluctant to attempt following up on the news he had received about his car, since he was under almost continuous surveillance by the Combine’s agents. However, after a few days he could not stand the suspense and asked for Mandy’s mother to come to the lab on the pretext of discussing some matters left unresolved by the disappearance of her children.

According to her, Doug was in Montreal, working as a dishwasher in a restaurant and trying to learn French. He was unhappy with his situation and loathed having had to leave the

country, but at least was safe. Less was known about Mandy; he had managed to send a message several months earlier that he had joined rebel forces in upstate New York, but no more recent news about him had reached his family.

Conspiracy

Brandon had been working for a month with the team headed by Dr. Stern (whom he still did not remember) when he came to see his boss to seek help with a problem. He was having recurring nightmares and often woke up in the middle of the night in a cold sweat. He was never able to recall the nature of his nightmares upon waking up.

“You are an expert on mental issues. Can you help me figure out what’s going on and put an end to these bad dreams?” he asked.

Stern did a quick mental calculation. Brandon had been a good and reliable man before his vaccination. He could be an ideal subject for testing possible vaccine recovery strategies. This would have to be done with utmost care because Brandon was, at this moment, loyal to the Combine and would be likely to turn Stern in if he became aware of the doctor’s intentions.

“Brother Brandon, I’ll be glad to attempt to cure you of your nightmares, on two conditions. First, you should tell nobody about our project, because it might not be sanctioned by the Combine’s leadership in Idaho and we might both get in trouble. Second, you must follow my instructions faithfully and without questioning. Do you agree?”

Brandon had been drilled month after month on the need to obey orders, so he had no problem agreeing to put himself in the hands of his superior. He had only one question: “Will you let me know how we are coming along and if we are making progress?”

“Of course. But our work may take some time. Are you ready to proceed?”

“Yes, please.”

Coda

Six months after the gronk raid on the BioScience Lab, Stern found himself musing about how each of the four victims of the attack remained alive. Their destinies had diverged but they all were, in some form or another, working to overthrow tyranny and restore democratic rule. Stern did not know how long it would take for final victory to be achieved, but he felt their cause was just and their efforts, with patience and time, should lead to an inevitable success.

He would revisit these thoughts and hopes each year at the anniversary of their capture.

END