

*Argentina*

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## There's a Man in the Habit of Hitting Me on the Head with an Umbrella

**T**here's a man in the habit of hitting me on the head with an umbrella. It is five years to the day since he began hitting me on the head with his umbrella. At first I couldn't stand it; now I've grown accustomed to it.

I don't know his name. I know he's an ordinary man, with a plain suit, graying at the temples, and a nondescript face. I met him one sultry morning five years ago. I was sitting peacefully on a bench in Palermo Park, reading the newspaper in the shade of a tree. All of a sudden I felt something touch my head. It was this same man who now, as I write, automatically and impassively keeps striking me blows with his umbrella.

That first time I turned around full of indignation (I become terribly annoyed when I'm bothered while reading the paper); he went right on, calmly hitting me. I asked him if he were mad. He seemed not to hear me. I then threatened to call a policeman. Completely unruffled, he went on with what he was doing. After a few moments of hesitation—and seeing he was not about to back down—I stood up and gave him a terrific punch in the face. No doubt he is a weak man: I know that

despite the force generated by my rage I do not hit all that hard. Still, breathing a tiny moan—the man fell to the ground. At once, making what seemed to be a great effort, he got up and again began hitting me over the head with the umbrella. His nose was bleeding, and I don't know why but at that moment I felt sorry for him, and my conscience troubled me for having struck him that way. Because, after all, the man was not hitting me very hard; he was really striking me quite soft and completely painless blows. Of course, such blows are terribly annoying. Everyone knows that when a fly settles on a person's forehead a person feels no pain; he feels annoyed. Well, that umbrella was a huge fly which, at regular intervals, kept settling on my head. Or, to be more precise, a fly the size of a bat.

At any rate, I could not stand that bat. Convinced that I was in the presence of lunatic, I tried to get away. But the man followed me, in silence, without once letting up his blows. At this juncture, I began running (I may as well point out right here that there are few people as fast as I am). He set out after me, trying without luck to get in a whack or two. The man was gasping and gasping and panting so hard I thought if I kept him running like that my tormentor might sink dead on the spot.

For that reason I slowed to a walk. I looked at him. His face registered neither gratitude nor reproach. He just kept hitting me over the head with his umbrella. I thought of making my way to a police station and saying, "Officer, this man is hitting me over the head with an umbrella." It would have been unprecedented. The policeman would have stared at me suspiciously, asked for my papers, and begun questioning me with embarrassing questions. Probably he would have ended up arresting me.

I thought I'd best go home. I got onto the Number 67 bus. Not once letting up with his umbrella, the man got on behind me. I took the first seat. He stationed himself beside me, holding on to the strap with his left hand while with his right he

kept swinging at me with his umbrella, implacable. The passengers began to exchange shy smiles. The driver was watching us in his mirror. Little by little, a fit of laughter, a growing convulsion, seized all the other riders. I was on fire with shame. My persecutor, completely unaffected by the uproar, went on hitting me.

I got off—we got off—at the Puente Pacífico. We continued on down Santa Fe Avenue. Everyone foolishly turned around to stare at us. I felt like saying to them, "What are you staring at, you idiots? Haven't you ever seen anyone whacking a man on the head with an umbrella before?" But it also occurred to me that they probably hadn't. Five or six kids began to follow us, shouting like a pack of wild Indians.

But I had a plan. Arriving home, I tried slamming the door in his face. I didn't manage it. With a firm hand—anticipating me—he grabbed the handle, there was a momentary struggle, and he entered with me.

Since then, he has continued hitting me on the head with his umbrella. As far as I know, he has never slept or had a bite to eat. All he does is hit me. He accompanies me in all my acts—even the most intimate ones. I remember, in the beginning, that the blows kept me from sleeping; I now believe it would be impossible to sleep without them.

Nevertheless, our relations have not always been good. Countless times, in all possible tones, I have asked him for an explanation. It's never been any use; in his quiet way he has gone on whacking me over the head with the umbrella. On several occasions, I have dealt him punches, kicks, and—God help me!—even umbrella blows. He took these things meekly, as though they were all in a day's work. And this is exactly what is scariest about him: his quiet determination, his absence of hatred. In short, his inner conviction of carrying out a secret and superior mission.

Despite his apparent lack of physiological needs, I know when

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I hit him he feels the pain, I know he's weak, I know he's mortal. I also know a single shot would free me of him. What I don't know is whether when we're both dead he will go on hitting me on the head with his umbrella. Neither do I know whether the shot ought to be aimed at him or at me. In any case, this reasoning is pointless. I know full well I wouldn't dare kill either him or myself.

On the other hand, it recently occurred to me that I could not live without his blows. More and more frequently now I have a horrible premonition. I am distressed—deeply distressed—to think that perhaps when I most need him, this man will go away and I will no longer feel those soft blows of his umbrella that help me sleep so soundly.

*Translated by Norman Thomas di Giovanni  
and Patricia Davidson Cran*