

CHUKY

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This is a true story. It's not fiction, although it may seem like a black humour tale. It was late on Friday night when I arrived home and turned on the television to see what was happening. I had intended to watch the news for a few minutes and then finish an article for a deadline the next morning. The twenty-four hour news channel Cronica (the one with the marching band music and the red headlines filling the blank white screen flashing "4 DEAD" "4 DEAD" every time there is a robbery or an uprising) had a live image of hundreds of police in front of a local supermarket. I didn't pay much attention to it and began to change channels, but TeleNotica had the same footage, and so did all the others. I returned to Cronica to see a red headline flashing: "SUPERMARKET WITH HOSTAGES. STILL ALIVE." I decided to keep watching Cronica, and this is what they were reporting.

At seven o'clock in the evening three teenagers, a sixteen-year-old, a seventeen-year-old, and "Chuky," their fourteen-year-old "boss," entered a supermarket in a suburb of Buenos Aires called EKI, which in Spanish is pronounced "X," to rob it. The alarm sounded and the police arrived. Chuky and his "boys" wanted to flee, but the store didn't have an exit in the back. So they decided to stay and play the last card they had: to take hostages in order to negotiate an escape. At first there were only a few police in front of the supermarket. Inside, there were shoppers from the surrounding neighbourhood and the store employees, twenty-one in total. The gang decided to keep nineteen hostages and to let a seventy-eight-year-old woman and an eleven-year-old child go. Chuky, who had just turned fourteen, didn't want to risk the lives of children and grandmothers. He was the one who decided who stayed and who didn't, and this made him the boss. From that moment on, I was hooked by the TV.

As "crisis" experts—psychiatrists, psychologists, sociologists—began to arrive at the television stations to discuss the precociousness of the assailants, people from the neighbourhood gathered in the street in front of the supermarket to watch the hostages. The unfortunate clients of X

were lined up against the glass window of the supermarket with their hands in the air. It was a large window occupying the entire front of the store, and the hostages looked out onto the street—where the police, their neighbours, and their family members stared back—with expressions of horror on their faces. The journalists were conducting live interviews, talking with the parents, the wives and husbands, and children of the hostages, and asking them if they could recognize their family members on the other side of the window. Some said yes; others cried that they weren't sure. There had been a lot of hostage-taking recently, but this was the first time one could see everything that the victims and the victimizers were doing. It was like gazing into a huge crystal ball; it was like a dream reality show; and it was being transmitted live to Brazil, Uruguay, and Chile. We don't know about Bolivia, but it's entirely possible that the *coyitas* were occupied with problems of their own at the time.

The police, who now numbered several hundred, plus a special anti-terrorist unit, circled around the supermarket with a huge public display of force. Inside, Chuky became nervous. After all, he had only wanted to rob a supermarket and now he was being transformed into a grand spectacle for all of Mercosur. The gang decided to try to relax, and began to open the drinks for sale in the supermarket. They started with wine, continued with beer, and when that was gone they finished off with cider. I have to declare at this point that they had been holed up in the supermarket for hours, and that the negotiations were in full swing. Chuky had asked for a 4x4, with a full tank of gas, in order to make his get away. The spokesperson for the gang was Big Ears, the sixteen-year-old. We found out later that his real name was Gabriel Galvan and he had escaped from jail two days before. The negotiator for the police was a specialist in hostage-taking trained in the USA, known as Vampire. His second-in-command was called Baby. In total, the operative had five hundred men plus a SWAT team led by a commissioner named Claudio Smith—at last an English surname!

Smith ordered Vampire to try to distract the hostage takers. Inside the supermarket, Chuky was watching himself on TV. Big Ears may have been the spokesperson but Chuky was the chief, controlling everything via the television: everything that was being said by Big Ears, and everything that was being said about himself by the experts. We learned afterwards from the hostages who survived that Chuky had become really angry with the professional crisis specialists, declaring, "What do they know? They're just government stooges." For Chuky, it seemed, the system and the government were the same thing, but in any case it's not really important. After all, Chuky was only a thief, not an academic.

There was a lot of tension in the air. The police had refused to give Chuky his 4x4 and the negotiations had stalled. Chuky came towards the door of the supermarket with a woman hostage and a gun in hand, put the gun to her head, and screamed at the police, "If you don't give me what I want, there's going to be blood." The tension mounted. Cronica played the theme song from the film *Jaws* to make the moment seem more dramatic. Then Chuky went back inside again. He didn't shoot the woman. Millions of television witnesses in the southern cone breathed a sigh of relief. Vampire called to Big Ears through a megaphone, trying to convince him to hang on a little longer. Big Ears resumed the negotiation, which was taking place by shouting through the door of the supermarket. Vampire told Big Ears that Chuky had to wait for his demands. Big Ears replied that his boss was really crazy and wanted blood. One does have to think about the amount of drinking that had been going in Supermarket X over the last few hours.

At this moment, something bizarre was happening inside: the robbers were now serving drinks to the hostages. The psychiatrists commented that this meant that the robbers were overextended, and weakening. They gave a vote of confidence to Vampire. He was achieving his objective, which was to gain time and trust. Suddenly, a hostage came yelling towards the door. "For God's sake give them the 4x4 and let them go!" Had there been a change in roles? Was it no longer Big Ears who was negotiating, but a hostage? Was this an excess of trust, or of alcohol? The sociologists were confused. Nobody had explained this possibility to them, neither Foucault nor frou-frou, and now Chuky could no longer be seen through the window.

From this moment on, Chuky never appeared again. Big Ears seemed to have assumed the role of the chief negotiator. Speculations ensued. Some journalists claimed that Chuky had escaped through the subterranean passages of the sewer tunnels that lead to the Rio de la Plata. It's important to remember that the real Chuky is an evil doll, a master of terror, or at least according to Hollywood. And it's also true that this Argentinean version also had something doll-like about him: short and fat with clothes that were too big. Suddenly it seemed that the final assault was about to begin. The theme song from *Jaws* increased in volume. At the door of the supermarket appeared a hostage with a white handkerchief. He yelled, "I'm Alejandro the butcher. I want a cellphone. A telephone!" Vampire was disconcerted. He couldn't understand this continual changing of roles. His Yankee professors had never coached him about this scenario. In any case, he listened to the demand and told him he'd see what he could do. Then the butcher, Alejandro, just kept walking until he had crossed the police line and was free.

Vampire turned to consult with his chief, the one with the English surname. The butcher disappeared into the crowd. Big Ears came back outside again, screaming, "Give me a cell phone!" Vampire thought for a moment, and answered him through the megaphone. "OK, but give me someone to come and get it," trying to take advantage of the butcher's strategy who had managed to escape from the supermarket. In any case, Vampire was applying basic Yankee theory: grab everything you can. But Big Ears ruined his plan. "No, you idiot," he yelled back, "I want a policeman to bring me the cell phone here." That was a smart move on Big Ears's part. Vampire thought again. "I'll give you the cell phone, but why do you want it?" he asked. "I want to talk to my mother," answered the delinquent. The police were disconcerted. The psychologists and the psychiatrists commented that we were witnessing a regressive syndrome: a search for a secure place, for the mother's womb. And they proceeded to analyze the cellular umbilical cord.

Vampire conceded to Big Ears's demand. He no longer understood what was happening. But that didn't really matter as Big Ears had told him, "Give us the telephone—and we'll give ourselves up," and had added, "Chispita is going to talk with his girlfriend." Chispita was the third delinquent, who had been guarding the hostages, although by this point everything was a bit confused as one could see through the glass that the robbers and hostages were in conversation and were all drinking together. We learned afterwards that Chispita needed the cellular phone to call his girlfriend as he had promised to take her to a dance that night. He wanted to tell her that he didn't think he was going to make it; as he was tied up with a problem. During all this time nothing more had been seen of Chuky. Some thought that he had been transformed into a toy, like the one in the film, and that he was now in the children's section of the supermarket waiting for an opportunity to escape. Others recommended that if, by chance, one saw a little doll walking by, not to touch it, just in case it turned out to be the evil Chuky. Inside the supermarket, one could see Big Ears, then Chispita, talking on the cell phone. Of Chuky, nothing. Then the two of them started to walk towards the entrance of supermarket X.

There was tension in the air. The theme song from *Jaws* played louder. The robbers hugged the hostages; they kissed each other. "They're afraid of being killed," said the sociologists. The police prepared to attack. Big Ears, who was the tallest of the three, came out first, carrying something on his shoulder that looked like a sack. Vampire yelled, "ON YOUR KNEES! SLOWLY! WITH YOUR HANDS IN THE AIR!" Big Ears dropped the sack on the ground. The sack began to move. It wasn't a sack at all. It was Chuky. Completely drunk. The police ran forward to grab Chuky and

the others. Suddenly everyone was running; everyone was yelling. The standoff had ended.

In the testimonials that followed, Chuky's grandmother said that the child had never drunk anything stronger than Coca-Cola, and that his name was Miguelito. "He's only a baby," said the old woman from Villa Tranquilla (Tranquility Shantytown) where Chuky lived. The hostages recounted that Chuky was totally out of his mind and that he wanted to kill them all. Big Ears and Chispita had taken away his gun and put him in the safe of the supermarket with a bottle of whisky to keep him quiet. If you don't believe my story, or think it fiction, I have photographs, testimonies, and newspaper clippings to prove it happened.

Translated by Dot Tuer