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Writing Sample

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"The Mask of Fawkes"

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Carlos PATIÑO PEREDA

THE MASK OF FAWKES

*Artists use lies to tell the truth, while politicians use them to cover the truth up.
V for Vendetta (2006)*

CARACAS

It was on TV. I pack my suitcases. Four politicians blown to pieces after a government van vehicle exploded. The Vice Minister calls. "I am alive." The journalists immediately connect the attack to the water problem. On the screen you can see the metal wreckage wrapped in smoke, the asphalt destroyed behind the yellow tape, the rescue workers racing down Paseo los Próceres.

They speak of a suspect as well, a man in costume who left four flowers at the site. The same one who has been following me. A man wearing a Guy Fawkes mask. I check my passport and flight ticket printed off the internet. There's a rose on my bed. I am number five.

-Remember, remember, the fifth of November...

WASHINGTON, D.C.

I walk fast from DuPont Circle. I am a few blocks from the hotel. Despite the winter, I am dying of heat. There isn't a soul on the sidewalks of Connecticut Avenue. Or is there. The man dressed as Fawkes. In the dark you can see his smiling mask under the conical hat. He approaches me; I turn quickly and notice his dark suit, his open cape showing me sharp blades that hang from his thick belt. I start to run. I feel one of his gloves brush my shoulder. I try to scream but the words won't come out. I can't speak. I panic. It all becomes very confusing, even darker. I wake up in a sweat in my room at *the Churchill Hotel*. I get up and turn off the heat.

* * *

It's daytime and I'm in Freedom Square. The Occupy movement has taken the square and set up a camp similar to the land squatters in my country. Around us, the city remains unscathed. I walk up to one of the blue tents and stand in front of an occupier who's wearing the mask of Fawkes.

-Hi, I'm Corryn Freeman.

You're a woman, Corryn. I can tell by your voice, despite the thin beard and mustache on your mask. Let me tell you that Fawkes is following me all over the continent and you tell me that it's a symbol of your struggle and of many others. *That Occupy is a protest against the political and economic power groups. I listen and ask, what is the message?*

-Bye, bye, Corryn...

RENO, NEVADA

I stop the rental car at the lookout. The road is quiet. I look out, see Lake Tahoe, and think about the waters. I'm tempted to jump, free myself of everything. We knew how serious the damage was and we hid it. Politics, always politics. Searching for Fawkes I arrive at the hiding place of *Anonymous*. The *hacktivist* at *El Dorado* sent me here. He arrived at the casino at sunrise, wearing his white mask, taking the escalator up from the slot machines. He saw me, stood with his back to the handrail and discreetly dropped a piece of paper with this address.

-Knowledge is free!

But nobody is there, only the lake, immense like the sea, and the snow-covered mountains. I think about death and my escape from the country. When the pipes broke, the oil spill spread one hundred forty kilometers, reaching the river waters. We hid the accident and hired amateur workers in an attempt to contain the damage. It was futile. It only eclipsed the environmental disaster, but the rural and indigenous communities were silently poisoned. Until someone killed four of the five culprits by detonating a bomb. And that's how I got here.

-Hi, man.

Distracted, I get an awful scare, as if the masked man from *Anonymous* was about to push me into the river. I calm down when I see his index and middle fingers in the shape of a "V", making the peace sign.

-Hey... I'm looking for answers. Fawkes wants to kill me!

I didn't get any answers. He only said that they used Fawkes as their symbol (yes, again the same) and that they were fighting for free internet and freedom of expression. Why? Because attacking the system by hacking it turns us into heroes. You will get a message from us soon.

LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA

Natalie arrived first. The email from *Anonymous* confirmed her arrival at the Getty at noon. I would be able to find her in the most discreet spot in the tree circles on the central patio. The colors and scents in the garden aren't calming me. I am nervous. She's wearing the mask, of course.

You're beautiful, I tell her. I perceive an invisible smile. Who is Fawkes? That's your confusion, she answers. It's not Guy Fawkes. It's V who's following you. He's hiding behind the image of Fawkes. I turn towards the red circles and I feel dizzy. Talk to me about V. Is that what you want? Fine. I am V. And you are V. It's all of us!

She gets close, hiding from some tourists passing by on the garden labyrinth. Perhaps out of habit because her face is still hidden. The mask touches my lips and I feel my heart racing. I passionately kiss the bearded mask that covers Natalie Portman's face. And she lets me. Desire transcends the plastic barrier. Because it's Natalie. And it's her character Evey Hammond too.

MADISON, WISCONSIN

I leave the Irish pub. I was able to get an interview with the protesters. It's nighttime and the cold in Madison is like nobody's business. It's snowing and the city is deserted. I feel my legs wet underneath my pants. My coat and thermal sweater aren't of much use. I rub my gloves while I look at the steam coming out of my mouth. The hotel is near, right in front of the Capitol. The same one that a couple of years ago protesters took over for twenty-one days to oppose Governor Scott Walker's anti-labor measures. Unions, students, and civil society obtained a referendum in order to revoke it. And as they confessed over pints of *Guinness* and steaks, the first *Occupiers* were born out of this movement, and not with Stéphane Hessel and his outraged Spaniards. In Madison's Capitol they were the first to use the mask of Fawkes.

Capitol, Parliament, *gunpowder conspiracy*... The real Guy Fawkes was sentenced to death in 1606 for trying to blow up the British Parliament with explosives. And Madison's Parliament is in the Capitol...

V pulls me out of my thoughts. He appears behind me. Now it's not a dream. He's coming to take revenge. I am another bureaucrat with no scruples. The reason that these people fight for. I run, slip, and get up again. I am out of breath when I get to the *Marriott*. I turn and nobody is there. The end is near. One of the two will defeat the other.

NEW ORLEANS, LOUISIANA

I'm walking through the French Quarter. It's Mardi Gras. I leave the *Krewe du Vieux* floats behind and enter the nocturnal madness of *Bourbon Street*. I am in Babel and Sodom and Gomorrah. People from all over the world squeezed into five blocks. Men on balconies throwing purple, green, and gold necklaces, and women who show them their breasts when they catch them. Jazz bars and whorehouses. Cocktails named after grenades and hurricanes. Prey hunting the hunters.

I walk into the bar and the band sounds like a 50s movie. The five men in the masks of Fawkes are at the table. They fit in perfectly with Louisiana's carnival.

-Sit down, man. It's Fat Tuesday!

In front of me there's a mask and a beer on the table. I take the second. Despite having their faces covered, I know who is who. From right to left there's Hugo Weaving, Alan Moore, David Lloyd, and the Wachowsky brothers, Larry and... Andy in drag?

-"Who is V?," I ask.

They all laugh. Weaving Fawkes answers, like someone who's been studying a libretto for years, that V is only a man with a mask. The Wachowsky brothers Fawkes look at me and whisper to each other like they were at a casting. I hear Larry calling his brother Andy by the name Lana, stroking his pink hair with violet highlights.

Moore Fawkes explains that V contrasts two extreme political ideas: fascism and anarchism, but the latter, says Moore Fawkes pointing to Lloyd Fawkes, betrayed the story that we wrote together and is now trying to settle for the simplicity of neoconservatism versus liberalism. Lloyd Fawkes shrugs as a sign of deference.

V, says Weaving Fawkes with his chameleon voice, is *Occupy* and *Anonymous* and everyone who is at this table. Including you. Yes, my dear friend, you are V.

The words are an infinite train that runs me over. And then, I wake up from a nightmare, putting the puzzle together with fragments of memories. The polluted water and its victims. Impunity and guilt. The rotten within the system. The graphic novels in my room, the *Vendetta* films, the costumes. The bomb I built and the timer I put on it in order to avoid being a victim of my own attack. The explosion. My escape. The dreams about V.

The band starts a new song without words, instrumental. It's Tchaikovsky's *Overture 1812*, a jazz version. I stand up from my chair and take the mask that's on the table. I put it on.

-Thank you, gentlemen. I'm leaving. I have to get back to Caracas and blow up the Capitol. Ha, ha, ha. Hahahahahahahahaha...

Translated from the Spanish by Valentina Pereda

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