

THE BOY WHO HID IN A CLOSET

This story aims to be authentic. It begins with my mother giving birth and ends with the COVID-19 pandemic and the arrival of man on Mars, which, as is already widely known, took place when a billionaire, angry with the president of the country whose election campaign he had financed a good part of, boarded one of his spacecraft and left in a fit of rage, not without first making rude and disrespectful gestures to the leader.

There is no hint of magical realism in it, although I admit to having some doubts about that. Certainly, before writing it, I promised myself that I would be faithful to the events that occurred and to my interpretation of them. I am aware that absolute objectivity does not exist. Everything is nuanced by individual perception, and various factors influence it: age, education, profession, social context, past experiences, beliefs, motivations, interests, etc.

I won't deny that my life's path followed somewhat unusual directions at different times, but it was after being astonished and overwhelmed by the events unfolding not only across the globe but also within my immediate circle that I put my final decision into action. This last act isn't included in the series "The Boy Who Hid in a Wardrobe." It is, however, in the story, since I finished writing it moments before making my sudden desires a reality. The aforementioned series made me famous worldwide, unintentionally. It's based on exhaustive and detailed information provided by some people close to me and expanded upon with the screenwriters' considerable creativity. The producer was a former BBC war correspondent who will probably continue to rake in the cash at my expense. But that's life, what can you do? Initially, I appeared on the late-night schedule, but given the unexpected attention I generated, the network moved the broadcast to a more typical time slot, where viewership and audience ratings saw exponential growth. Apparently, something truly exceptional.

When I was just two years old, after several failed attempts to open the door of my detached house, I finally managed it one warm August evening and set off for a walk around the neighborhood. Because of the sweltering heat, I was wearing nothing but a diaper that barely covered my private parts. As soon as I stepped outside, I bumped into my neighbor sitting in his doorway, fidgeting and looking at his cell phone with a certain frenzy and a fair amount of unease. I stood beside him for a while. This man, who always greeted me with enthusiasm and talked to me when I was out in the stroller with my mother—but not with my father—didn't even bother to look up at me. "How strange," I thought. I touched his shoulder. Nothing. I wrinkled his nose. Still nothing. I would have gladly stayed with him for a bit. So I continued on my way, but, just at that moment, his wife came running out in her nightgown, grabbed me in her arms while filling my face with saliva, shouting some unintelligible words, and roughly placed me on the threshold of my house, immediately pressing the doorbell continuously until my parents appeared with questioning faces, yawning loudly and still half asleep.

My elderly mother shakes her head and bangs her cane on the table. I tell her I'll look into it later. She glances at me sideways and blurts out, "You should have protested. That's no way to treat a child. That

happy... After everything we did for them! He was a complete slacker. We had to lend them money so they could make ends meet. Without us, they would have starved.” Then she reverts to her usual catatonic state.

At the preschool, formerly the nursery, a little girl sat next to me. I was thrilled: two redheads together. How lovely! She smiled at me, glanced at me sideways, and touched my mouth. Everything was fine until she swatted down the tower she was building and went back to her seat. The teacher, seeing the pieces on the floor, came over and, in a syrupy voice, told me to pick up the toy and be more careful next time; otherwise, she'd be forced to send me to the thinking corner. The girl turned towards me and smiled again. How beautiful!, I dreamt.

My father, now elderly, shakes his right index finger in protest. He, who had always been left-handed, was now right-handed. Life takes unexpected turns! He stands up and repeatedly taps the ground with his walking stick. I tell him I have to persevere with my plan and that I'll reread it later, and if I need to change anything, I will. After clearing his throat, he says: “Not just one; several, several! She even took away the teddy bear you couldn't part with. Emma, the footballer's daughter, was very clever, and you, head over heels in love, didn't say a word.”

In fourth grade, we went on a field trip to the mountains. As soon as Jorge got off the bus, he stood next to me, and we stayed together all morning until lunchtime. When lunchtime arrived, my classmates took out their water bottles, drinks, and sandwiches. I looked for mine in my backpack, but I couldn't find it. “Mom must have forgotten,” I thought. The neighbor's son, who was the most popular kid in the group, had three. Jorge, who was in his circle, looked up and, pointing at me, smiled. The neighbor's son smiled too. I felt really good because, even though I wasn't part of their group, they liked me. My sister blew her nose in fury. “What's wrong with you now!” I exclaimed. “What's going to happen to me! You were being bullied, you innocent soul. You never dared to say no. You denied your problems so you wouldn't have to face them, but when you got home, you hid in the closet and didn't come out until Dad threatened to leave you without lunch or dinner. You were a voracious eater, and fasting was an unbearable punishment for you.”

In my second year of the Science Baccalaureate, Jorge and I used to hang out on weekends with Rocío, a chatty classmate, and her friend Iris, a year younger. Rocío especially liked talking to me, and between laughs and deep glances, she would often challenge me. I wanted to escape those intense conversations from time to time and try to connect more with Iris, but her attitude toward me was timid, too reserved. I thought Rocío was crazy about Jorge because she talked to him less, and that Iris was crazy about me for the same reason. Jorge thought the same. A few years later, Rocío told me I was completely wrong and that my classmate hadn't played fair. My sister read this passage and smiled. “Everyone at school knew what was going on, but you, as always, didn't dare to step forward and backed down. Remember that, during that semester, you resorted several times to hiding in the darkness of your bedroom closet.”

For the rest of those years, until the final outcome, I continued to offer a benevolent interpretation of human actions, an attitude that not only failed to improve my social relationships but also made me the perfect target for criticism from my coworkers. When I was alone, in the darkness, I would ask myself: Why? I came up with many different answers. I knew that simplistic analyses were useless; it was necessary to

delve into the complexity of the causes. My wife always told me not to rack my brain overthinking it, because it wouldn't do me any good. "Even though it might sound harsh, your problems stem from misinterpreting what's happening around you. This leads you to believe that people are inherently good; then you realize that's not the case. So, instead of facing reality, you disappear from the scene, hide in your closet, and mutter your contradictions to yourself. You have to learn to say no, to lay your cards on the table, to stand up for yourself, and to fight, rather than beg, for the respect and acceptance you deserve."

A few months ago, the COVID-19 virus inoculated me with a chemical substance that degenerated into mental hyperactivity, emotional indifference, and behavioral apathy. Nothing matters to me. I, who already struggled to cope with the circumstances affecting me, am now completely defenseless and disarmed. There is nothing I can do to change things. All that remains is to renounce my principles and accept what is given to me. This disease is very dangerous, not only because it is highly contagious, but because it leaves individuals without initiative, paralyzed, and therefore prone to being manipulated by a society where absolute individualism reigns supreme.

I go for a walk in the city. Walking at a brisk pace helps me manage my existential crisis. My mind races. Wars everywhere: in the Arab monarchies and emirates of the Persian Gulf, in Iran, in Lebanon, in Ukraine, in Gaza, in much of Africa, in Pakistan, in Afghanistan... Deaths, so many deaths on land, sea, and air. Rapes, massacres, genocides, famines... The presidents who have invaded other countries claim the Nobel Peace Prize for themselves. Oil and arms companies raking in millions and millions of dollars. Half the world starving, and the other half hurling insults at each other on social media in the name of freedom of expression, prisoners of oblivion, boredom, consumerism, and depersonalization.

My wife filed for divorce because I was too difficult to live with. My parents, at my age, telling me what to do. My children somewhere, trying to cope with job insecurity and soaring rent. I hardly ever see my friend Jorge, who's also retired. He goes to his garden; he's very happy there.

Suddenly, I find myself strolling through the countryside, near the spacecraft launch site, now recalling the words my wife said to me that night I was holed up in the master bedroom closet. I don't know how to lay my cards on the table; poker has never been my strong suit. I smile. I don't know how to stand up for myself either. It's hard to understand other people. I'd like to disappear and start my story over somewhere else.

Suddenly, an intense light blinds me. "Run, get inside the ship, we're taking off in five minutes," a deep voice shouts from the spacecraft cabin. No sooner said than done. I'm abducted by a gust of air and pulled inside. Before departing, the billionaire owner and pilot of the ship makes a video call to the president of the country, showing him two rude gestures: one with the middle finger of his right hand and another with the index and pinky fingers of his left. The call is cut short when the president has only had time to utter five words: "Deserter, son of a bitch!!"

Finally, I should mention quickly—there's a hell of a racket here—that the most fitting title for this story would be: "The Man Who Hid in a Closet and Didn't Know How to Say No." Heading to Mars.

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