

Open Topic

I

Joaquin didn't speak. He prepared his schoolwork observing, silently from the corner, what was happening around him.

The essay was due the next day. "Open topic," the teacher had said.

With great ceremony he wrote the title: "A Day in My Life." He stood back from the paper and nodded with a smile.

He looked at his mother who, with a cigarette butt, was pacing nervously from one side to the other of the room, waiting.

"Fucking man" — she said exhaling a puff of smoke and shaking her head without stopping for a moment. "I have to stay here like I have nothing better to do."

The smoke mingled with the latrine's smell from the building's communal bathroom; a smell that seemed to transform the green trail of moss that grew fertile on the surrounding walls giving the interior courtyard the appearance of an elegant patio.

"Stop making so much noise, all the time!" the mother shouted as she passed over Joaquin's three younger brothers, who were rolling around punching each other laughing and saying obscenities.

Joaquin and his brothers were so different from each other that the neighbors called them The United Nations.

In front of the boxing match of the three brothers, the turned-on television made the room in which the five lived change colors. Sometimes, the shades on the walls seemed to paint the room, masking the moisture stains and the holes in the wooden ceiling.

Sitting where he was, the spider web in the corner was arranged at the exact angle to reflect only the bright colors. Joaquin had barely noticed that the dark colors made it disappear.

Behind the wall where Joaquin was leaning, three sharp blows erupted followed by screams. *I hope Mrs. Lucrecia isn't fighting again with her husband*, Joaquin thought. Each fight was worse than the last. The last time, the bruises, like splashes of black paint, were spread all over her legs and arms. Nothing, not the sunglasses, nor the pants nor the long-sleeved shirts, stopped the stares and the merciless tongues of the neighbors. After the reconciliation, she had come to the Joaquin's house with a big smile, to tell his mother that she was convinced that this time he would change: he had sworn it in front of the image of Saint Gustav, patron saint of love's struggles.

He continued his task writing unwillingly: "The day has gone by as usual." He stopped not very convinced and without any more to write, when the screams from a crowd began to grow like a tidal wave in the street, paralyzing for a second the actions of everyone in the neighborhood. Faced with the cries of "catch him," one hundred and twenty-three brains understood that it was a thief, and they went out to see. Joaquin and his brothers leaped onto the wooden balcony full of hanging clothes, separated by two thin beams from the live electricity cables that, leaning on the same balcony, crossed in the air.

The thief was stopped by four men just in front of the balcony where Joaquin and his brothers were. They started to beat him up. "I had never seen him," Joaquin would excitedly recount the next day, in the classroom. "He was a short and skinny guy, with cropped pants and a tattered sweater. He was moving all over the place, but what for if he was caught by four of them and they beat him up so badly that it even hurt me."

The patrol car arrived amid the howling and red lightning of the siren. The people around the scene stepped aside, exposing the four men surrounding the thief who, thrown on the ground, was bleeding from the mouth. Two policemen got out. One looked like an exact replica of the thief, but with a uniform and kepi: a short and thin man, who scared everyone with his joyful expression when he saw the man's battered body. The second policeman, pushed back the curious people with two or three shouts. He went up to the four men surrounding the thief and, with a look of anger, snatched him from their hands. While handcuffing him and putting him in the patrol car, the short policeman jabbed the offender hard in the side with the black baton that looked freshly oiled, and when he could, he hit him on the head with the baton.

From among the crowd, the cries of distressed women were jumping out, begging the police to release him, poor thing, look, he could be your son, while other yells, mainly from men, asked that he be taken away prisoner and beaten even more, so that he would learn to continue stealing from poor people, damn it.

The patrol car, carrying the thief, zig-zagged away. It left a trail of red lights and echoes that pounded the eardrums, and a strange sense of emptiness in the middle of the neighborhood, while the brains, lethargically, registered again the dirty streets and condemned buildings of the surroundings.

Joaquín picked up the pencil and the sheets of paper that he had left lying around. He leaned back against the same corner he had come out of before, turned the pencil and with the eraser made red jumping jacks all over. With the page blank again and with greater impetus, he wrote a new title: "The Thief" and, in front of the magic act of the spider web, he escaped, with a smile, to another world.

II

He finished his writing with the words "for world peace," as, according to him, all good stories should end.

It was six thirty in the afternoon and a gentle breeze accompanied the darkness that was softly falling over the neighborhood. From the neighboring houses the smell of beans rose that mixed with the aroma of fried fish from the street vendors.

At that time, Joaquín was flooded with a feeling of guilt, an anxiety, that he detested. Trying not to be seen, he approached the kitchen slowly, with remorse, as if he should not feel the need to eat that was invading him and that he continually tried to ignore. *Will I find something?* he seemed to wonder as he methodically searched the cabinets where the same tasteless bags of spices, salt, and coffee that always slept among cockroaches.

The exposed light bulb, hanging from a wire, danced when his siblings entered with great excitement accompanying their mother, as in a procession, who had just returned from the street with two cans of tuna.

"And for that the miserable man made me wait. I'm selling myself cheap," Joaquín's mother said to herself, amid the joy of the boys. Joaquín felt the anxiety escape and a feeling of warmth spread through his stomach.

In the dirty and flickering light of the light bulb, Joaquín's mother divided the small cans of tuna among the five of them. She took three packets of soda crackers from her pockets, the kind they give with soup at the Chinese restaurant Chong. "Lucky sometimes people don't eat them," said the youngest of the four, with a smile on his lips and a fork in his hand.

III

The mother slept on a cot near the door, just in case someone decided to break in and steal the television they had bought from the gold-toothed man who, at night, sold electronics behind the appliance store.

The children slept on a mattress they had found at the edge of the municipal dump. "The mattress is big and all it needed was a wash with Florida water to make it look like new," Joaquín's mother had said. Three springs protruded like daggers from one side and two from the other. They had chosen to place it on the side where only two spring tips were visible. They tried to put rags and pieces of cardboard on them, but the springs seemed to penetrate everything. Lying across the mattress, the four children found a way to get comfortable and unconsciously managed to avoid, even in their dreams, the sharp spikes. After two years, they knew well where the sharp points were that had left deep wounds and were responsible for the five scars that Joaquín had on his legs.

Joaquín found it difficult to sleep. He stared attentively at the closed balcony door through which a beam of yellow light from the street's neon lamp filtered in. He knew that after two in the morning the light breeze came accompanied by scratching against the door frame and the grinding of teeth. The shadows seemed to play with the light and wake up Joaquín, who remained petrified listening as a litter of rats pointed their snouts through the cracks in the wood.

The furry paws fought to enter and tore at his sleep with their squeaks that, like laughter, filled the air. There were four or five gray rats with stiff hair, who entered with ownership and walked around the contours of the mattress that slept on the floor. He knew they had entered when he heard near his head, the hard blows of soft matter scattered on the floor, the laughter and the tingling that made his skin crawl. They roamed the room without any fear, playing, courting, mating.

Joaquín's little toes protruded slightly from the mattress, feeling the moisture of the snouts and the wired mustaches that caused him chills and disgust. More than once, he felt the rough rubbing of the rings of the thick tails against his legs, the heavy breathing of their warm and soft bodies that rested on his back. On one occasion he opened his eyes to find himself face to face with the bright flashes of eyes that stared at him and teeth that gnawed at his breath.

Perhaps out of shame or because they wanted it to be a bad dream, no one spoke of the beasts that looted the house at dawn, nor did anyone speak of the sharp spikes on the bed.

That night, Joaquín couldn't sleep, he was attentive to the beams of light from the door and to the silence that he knew would be shattered at any moment. When he heard the entry ritual and the scandalous march of the rodents through the room, he felt that one of his brothers, with a quick contraction, was resting one of his feet against his own. The foot trembled hurriedly. A soft cry, almost imperceptible, began to fill the room. Amidst the squealing and victory cries of the rats, Joaquín asked in a very low voice, as if not to be discovered: "What's wrong?"

"I'm very scared," replied the muffled and trembling voice. He barely lifted his head to comfort him when he saw a shadow that quickly slid between the sheets through the narrow space that separated him from his brother. Perhaps it was out of reflex or fear that Joaquín, with a quick movement, pushed the bulge against one of the bed's springs. The spring came out the other side of the animal preceded by a wet tide that spread across the blanket. The animal writhed in pain, giving off squeaks that made everyone tremble.

The lights came on over the convulsing monster wrapped in a sheet that was being dyed red and the boy, with his face transformed, was leaning his weight on the bulge. While Joaquín examined the scratches that the animal had left on his skin, they studied him. Four children

around a bloody bulge impaled on a punch. The sheet was soaked in a red stain that continued to spread forming, in the middle of the mattress, a dense puddle. When they discovered it, its tongue was slightly protruding from its snout and its body was contracting in rhythmic spasms. I thought it was bigger, said the younger brother amazed that this monstrous creature was only the size of a small cat. The mother, from her cot, watched in silence.

The next day, Joaquín and his brothers got up to the smell of fried meat that woke up from the black round-bottomed pot. The tough meat cut into thin pieces was easy to eat perfectly marinated in the dormant essences and accompanied by a little bit of coffee.

The unusual silence of the diners was interrupted by the clatter of cutlery on the plates and the swallowing of meat and the sipping of coffee.

No one asked about the origin of the food; no one said anything. They all now shared a secret and the look of triumph of someone who slowly devours their enemy.

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