Antón Lopo
from *Extraordinary*
translated from Galician by Jacob Rogers

17

When I turned seven, Mom wanted to buy me a suit for my First Communion but none would fit me. They were too big. She decided that I wasn't growing properly. Nothing about me ever pleased her, but the issue with the First Communion suit had her beside herself. She couldn't see the life emanating from my every pore, my gaze, my movements, my constant doubling over in laughter. That irrepressible laughter was torture for her. I would laugh and she would send me to another room because she saw it as the cause of her hysteria. It gave her headaches [her head hurt every day; she called them "migraines," but her physician, Dr. Mazaira, thought it was probably a nervous condition, which she never acknowledged].

I had a hard time learning to hold in my laughter [pretending that life's pleasures didn't tickle me]. But I continued to laugh in silence, internally, unable to deny myself the wonders of the world in all their many forms [the marvelous phenomena of colors, flowers, clothes, cars, the enormous people around me, the streets, the massive trees, the majestic movie screen displaying women as elegant as Mom]. I saw spaceships in the stones, and the outlines of wolves, sleeping beauties, buses, swans, hammers, and wedding dresses for wide brides in the clouds [as they drifted apart and came back together]. One of my favorite pastimes back then was to imagine the insides of houses

in the city and picture Mom within: the furniture she would install, the conversations she would have, the identity she would construct in each and every one.

18

My love for Mom was absolute, but the apple of her eye was Marcos, her eldest son. She'd had him when she was seventeen, ten months "to the day" [as she always emphasized as a certification of her pre-marital virginity] after her marriage. Marcos was fourteen years older than me [I was "an accident," as she told the ladies in our building]. For fourteen years, he was an only child and she was a mother only to him, her affection growing into an emotional zygote that died when I was born. The bed they shared when Dad was gone [Mom gave birth to me at home, with a midwife] was soaked through with sticky blood. Grandma Carolina [Dad's mother] said she feared the worst when she saw Marcos silently pacing beside the bed, stalking me like a wild animal. He didn't cry that day, or in the years to come, when I ripped Mom's bosom and sweat away from him, her intoxicating aroma of bacteria, heath, and sage. But as I got older, he began calling me his servant. "Obey me, servant," he would say when it was just the two of us. He ordered me to lick his feet. He hit me. "You're my servant, and if you ever refuse me, I'll take a needle and sew your lips shut."

19

2

When I was little, I came down with an illness that nearly killed me. It was a rare condition without a name [Grandma Carolina called it “tarantella,” after the folk dance]. I was given me a series of injections that made me so weak I could hardly open my eyes. They stayed that way [squinting] for months, meanwhile Mom got it into her head that my left eye was pointing in the wrong direction. She wouldn’t back down until the eye doctor gave me a patch, even though he didn’t detect any major issues. From the time I was three years old until my early adolescence, I wore glasses with a piece of dark brown plastic covering up that left eye.

Marcos made fun of my appearance: my legs, my mollusk-shaped nose, the brown eyepatch that [he mocked] made me look like a rabbit. The older I got, the more intolerable he found me. The way I talked, the way I moved, my insistence on climbing [like a sexless cat] up to Mom’s neck. He had an overwhelming urge to punish me [through humiliation and destruction]. He would take my toys and break them, or throw them down the well [we lived in a house with a backyard at the time]. If they were mechanical toys, he would take them apart as if he were trying to fix them. Then he would leave the pieces on top of the kitchen table. From the moment I saw them there,

arranged by size or color, I knew that they would never work again. But what gave him the greatest pleasure of all was to inflict pain on me. He used all manner of strategies and would constantly change his approach. Once he was an adult and had been working at the post office for a few months thanks to our parents' machinations, he started to make a show of the money he was earning. He would come home every Saturday and put all the tortures he had concocted for me that week to the test. His repertoire was extensive, and he must have taken immense pleasure in causing pain. Once, he tossed a coin onto the floor and said "if you pick it up, it's yours." I bent down to pick it up. He waited with closed fists. Once I was back upright, pleased to have the coin, his fists came raining down on my head. He wanted to see me shed tears, blood. And Mom never uttered a single reproach.

20

Marcos was working in Altsasu at the time of my First Communion. He'd chosen the Navarre region because the government gave hazard pay in areas where the Basque guerrilla operated. At twenty-two [according to the version I heard from Grandma Carolina], Marcos had asked Dad to get him a promotion. Dad wasn't much good for favors, so Mom took it upon herself. After speaking with the priest at our church, where she taught catechism every Sunday, she managed to get in contact with a senior official at the Ministry of Governance. Out of the kindness of his heart, he

allowed Marcos to take a promotion exam, which he was guaranteed to pass, for the price of fifteen thousand pesetas and eleven ham legs. The senior official justified his price by reminding her that he would need to divvy the legs amongst all those whose services he would require to ensure their success. Mom borrowed the money from Grandma and a woman who lent at low interest. She bought the ham legs from a salesman friend of Grandma's. A couple days after she sent them to her contact in the Ministry, three came back with a note: These legs won't do. They're not cured.

Marcos gradually rose through the ranks with the help of his Ministry contact, who continued to hold sway even he'd retired and the dictatorship had ended. He was an able swimmer in any political waters. Mom called him her "Angel of Divine Providence."

21

4

I wanted to dress up as a sailor for my First Communion [like the rest of the boys in my class], but Mom had read that the "prince style" was in fashion. She dragged me with her into her fantasy, tantalized by all the brocade threads, embroidery, and bias cuts she saw in Torixas' imported magazines. She seemed so stressed that Dad suggested hiring a tailor. She refused. According to her, the prince style [as she'd seen it in a cutout, which she always kept on hand in her purse, so that she could display it in every store we entered] was a three-piece ensemble, and she found it highly unlikely that a tailor in our "uncultured, backwoods" city would properly affix the jabot to the elegant shirt, for example. Not to mention [she emphasized] the "sheer improbability" of

finding patterned velvet, which was essential to the outfit because the jacket required interlocking gold chains rather than buttons.

We spent an entire month searching nearby cities to no avail. Most stores had never heard of the prince style for a First Communion. Where they had, the measurements were never right for me. The pants were either too long or the waist too wide. The coats almost always sagged on me. Once, at a several-story shop in Ourense with beautiful window displays on every

floor, a kind employee put pads on my shoulders to adapt my body to the suit. Instead of hiding my deficiencies, the pads made my body seem deformed, like my head was much too small for my body. I looked at myself in the mirror and noticed my mother [mortified, hiding her face] in the reflection. Her body [paralyzed by silence] said it all. It was as if there was a metal rod rooting her body to the spot. Beside her, Dad shifted back and forth on the balls of his feet with his hands in his back pockets. He wouldn't look in my direction because if his eyes fell on me, they would betray just how much my existence wounded his pride as post office civil servant. Mom apologized to the clerk ["the suit is fine but I'm not sure it's right"] and tore the costume from my body.

That day marked the beginning of a toxic, poisonous era in our household. The precise reasons for the change were beyond me, but I suspected that I had done something wrong. Mom's face went flat, like an omelet, or a pancake, or bread dough. A sound from the street, or from the other side of the walls we shared with our neighbors, would snap her face into contour. She would place her middle fingers on her temples as

if there were a needle digging into her head. “These migraines are going to drive me out of my mind,” she moaned. Dad wouldn’t even risk turning on the TV to watch the news after he’d come back from his card games at the club. They didn’t speak. At least, not until after I went to bed, when I would hear them begin to argue. I would flee into my room like a French soldier being pursued by desert bandits and taking shelter in an impregnable fortress [with Mauritanian towers]. Guilt grew within me and fermented by night, bringing on an insomnia that led me to devour the countless Enid Blyton books I checked out at the local library.

The torture continued until, one day, they took me to a doctor in Santiago under the pretense of having my lazy eye examined. Rather than examining my eye, the doctor [a man with grey hair and mustardy skin] measured my skull, thorax, and legs, took X-rays, listened to my heart...Once he’d finished his tests, he called us into his office and informed us, with a beaming smile, that he hadn’t detected any signs of dwarfism. I was stunned. A dwarf? Me? Her chest puffed out, Mom pursed her lips, furrowed her brow, and broke into a twisted sob: “thank you so much for this wonderful news, doctor.” Fat tears ran down her cheeks and fell onto the white shirt with multicolored flowers on its collar. Neither Dad’s stroking nor the ministrations of the nurse who had rushed in to help could calm her down. The doctor, blubbering out soothing words, was even less help. “I’m sorry, it’s just that this is such wonderful news,” she stuttered, her lips quivering.

The nurse brought her a glass of cold water. The doctor tried to cheer her up.

“Once he enters adolescence, he should experience a growth spurt and reach a normal size. Neither you nor your husband are short.” Mom hiccupped and the doctor took her hand. He softened his voice and drew a smile on his mustard-colored face. “The only unusual thing about your son, I should mention, is the extraordinary size of his genitals.” She turned around, as befuddled as if she’d just wandered in from the roadside, and broke into a sob even louder than the first: “right, like a dwarf!” She flapped her arms and legs around in a windmill motion that cleared the doctor’s table [papers, two silver-framed photographs, a folder that spilt its contents all over the floor, a container with pens and pencils, a lamp with a glass shade that broke in the fall, an embossed leather notebook, a stethoscope, a reflex hammer...] The doctor, the nurse, and Dad combined were unable to restrain her. “Ma’am, ma’am, please, you have to calm down,” the doctor repeated. Catching him off guard, she bit one of his fingers. “Margarita!” Dad snapped. With that she shrunk back against the wall.

The nurse put a pill under Mom’s tongue and it tranquilized her. The three of us walked out of the clinic like a funeral march, with Dad holding Mom by the arm as she wobbled her way along. Her face was smudged with blue from the eyeshadow she often wore on her eyelids and black from the mascara on her eyelashes, her mouth half-open like she was getting ready to say something sweet. Seeing her so utterly helpless sunk me into a deep melancholy uncharacteristic of an eight-year-old boy.

We took a green railbus with faux leather seats back to the city, stopping at every station as it chugged along, sluggish, empty. Mom slept. The tranquilizer was still at work. Her head hung from her neck and lolled back and forth with the bumps, leaving a trail of spit that made her look much older than she was. Sleep robbed her eyes [green or brown depending on the

light] of their glow and muddled the harmony of her features. Dad's mouth stayed closed. He didn't say a word, just stared at a vague point in the train corridor. Two pearls of white saliva kept pooling on the corners of his lips. Every so often, he would take out a perfectly folded handkerchief from his pant pocket, unfold it, and dry them off.

The rain pattered on the windows as we made our way out of Santiago. Thunder boomed in the distance. Lightning flashed in the mountains in the background. I curled up into the seat. Dad got off at the stop in Irixo, where the train had to wait for a crossing. He went out into the storm and entered the café. My heart began to race. I was terrified he would run away and that this image of him braving the downpour would be the last I ever had of him. I imagined a series of potential outcomes: Dad would change his identity and emigrate to Venezuela or Equatorial Guinea, like the father of the boy who sat behind me at school, Migueliño. Once in Guinea, he would either die of malaria, from the deadly bite of a coral snake, or from being torn to shreds by the claws of a hungry leopard. Mom would lose her mind and we would have no choice but to check her into a mental hospital.

But Dad came back. He depended on Mom more than I could ever have imagined adults depended on one another. In my limited understanding of the world, it seemed like children were the only beings [along with pigs and cows, of course] that couldn't fall off the map, because we didn't know how to fend for ourselves, because we were small, weak, clumsy, and feebleminded. And fearful. Fearful of the little we did know [so little!], and even more so of the great deal we didn't [enough to fill several continents]. When

Dad sat back down, I threw myself around his neck out of happiness. He pushed me off: “don’t come near me, I’m wet.”

22

8

Marcos shows up at the hospital a day before Mom’s surgery. He walks into the room arm in arm with his wife. They stop cold when they see me. They weren’t expecting this. Ana didn’t mention it to them. “What brings you to town?” he thinks to say as he mentally reassesses the situation. “Our sister called and asked me to help her out. You were having work done on your house.” His wife complains [“That’s right, by a crude, expensive construction company. They did a terrible job.”] and he plays the tough guy: “I won’t pay them if they don’t repaint the garage floor. They did the epoxy all wrong, there are air bubbles everywhere.” He pulls a sly grin. “Time passes for all of us, Óscar. We’re old. You too.” He kisses me timidly on the cheeks. She [Fefé, an absurd nickname for Alfonsina] scolds him: “you’re not supposed to say things like that.” She engages the artificial [perfect] smile of her false teeth. “You look just the same as ever. Maybe thinner. That’s fashionable right now.” They’ve both aged well. You can tell they take care of themselves. He hasn’t gotten fat and still has his hair—straight and combed to one side, with grey hairs sprouting from his temples. His nose is still straight. His eyes have gotten rounder [birdlike], and he has thick, uneven eyebrows. Fefé has dyed her hair blond [it was black]. Her skin is smooth, healthy, wrinkle-free, and she’s wearing brown foundation that contrasts with her bright, striking red lips. Her

movements are stiff, as if she's posing for a photoshoot.

Mom hasn't taken an eye off of Marcos, but he won't come near her. He shouts from the foot of the bed [as if she's deaf] that she looks much better, and surreptitiously motions for Ana and I to step outside with him. "Her situation is critical," he says in a grave voice out in the lobby. He spoke to the doctor in private; they're assuming the worst. "She probably won't make it out of the operating room. Her heart is exhausted, and she has an irregular heartbeat. She's old." Ana

and I exchange a glance. I cross my arms. "We talked to the doctor too, and he didn't give us such a dire prognosis. There are risks...but Mom is tough." "Let's not kid ourselves, Óscar. She's not going to make it through this. Just today, I was going have Ana call and let you know, because we don't have your number. It's the end. We need to accept that and start to get things in order."

Marcos speaks Spanish, like Ana, but his voice mellows on diphthongs, as if there were a sudden slackening in his vocal cords. His face tightens as he speaks to align it with the gravity of the subject. He addresses Ana as if she's the only other one who has a say: "you need to find her life insurance policy and get in touch with the funeral home. I can go pick out a casket today. The best—we'll pay." He turns to me. "As far as our inheritances go, I'm guessing we all agree that Ana will get the apartment, and we'll split up the land. As the eldest son, I should get the buildable plots. I won't put forth any preferences about the rest of it. You can decide. The other plots are out in the country, and aren't worth much. I would never question an equitable division." It's obvious that

he and his wife have spent days talking about the inheritance and how to arrange Mom's funeral. I'm sure they've done all the math on what they should get and how to present their verdict in a way that sounds solid and undeniable.

"Then there's the matter [he turns to Ana again] of the jewelry. Fefé loves the ruby earrings our uncle in Venezuela gave to Mom, and her emerald necklace. A bit of everything, that way you guys get a bit of everything, too. I'll leave it up to you whether you want to let Fefé have any more. She loves Mom like her own mother. She's taken better care of her than even some daughters do. But don't tell her that I talked to you about this. She's very sensitive. Mom's death has really affected her. You have to remember how rough things were with her parents' inheritance. And that was without spending nearly as much time caring for them. I'm telling you this because I don't want anyone to have to go through that unpleasantness again.

She was depressed for half a year, if not longer. Her brothers acted like swine." Ana cries. Marcos hugs her. "You have to be strong." She tries to push him off. He lets go. "Family is for the hard times. I'm your big brother and this is the moment for me to step into my role."

I uncross my arms. "You're getting ahead of yourself. It's too soon to talk about funeral homes, caskets, and inheritances." Marcos licks his lips. "I see where you're coming from, but you're in no position to weigh in. You abandoned Mom at a really hard time in her life, and we had to stay with her, constantly on call...where were you all that time, out partying?" "All I know is that I've been with Mom for three nights and this is the

first time I've seen you here. I came when I was needed, and here I am, ready to help." Marcos shrugs. "I could stay tonight. The workers are gone." "Do they work overnight?" "Fefé has a spinal injury and can't even move a vase. The house was in shambles. Besides, I don't like for her to have to sleep alone." "She's not Mom's daughter. It's your responsibility." He gets angry. "What are you trying to say? Do you think that after all these years we've spent putting up with Mom, meanwhile you were off doing God-knows-what, God-knows-where, that it wasn't hard for Fefé and I?" "Sorry, did you say putting up with?"

Ana butts in: "stop arguing, we're in the hospital!" Marcos is still infuriated. "Talk to him, he shows up out of the blue and starts to think he's a big man." "Oh please, you want to have everything your way. You're trying to arrange a funeral for a woman who's not even dead yet." People stare at us. A man stops in front of the coffee maker as if to study the various options, but his ears are perked. Marcos notices. "We'll discuss this later."

24

Mom goes into surgery at eight in the morning. I'm here with Ana, Marcos, Fefé, and their policeman son, Enrique, who greets me with a skeptical grunt. I've never met him. He looks more like his mother [straight hair, fiery cheeks, puffy lips, eyes with an insane, feverish gleam]. It's too hot for the end of September. The other people in the waiting area [a middle-aged couple] talk about the heat wave on its way. It's the fourth

in a row. It hit the nineties in Vigo this August. Without any breeze. The two of them, who live in a mountainside village fifteen miles from the city, seem scared. The springs have dried up, the wells are going stagnant, the creek has stopped flowing [no one has ever seen anything like it] and their nights are like “in the tropics,” says the large, out-of-breath woman with tight, elastic denim pants and fuchsia-dyed hair. Her husband nods [it’s her mother in the operating room; she’s getting knee replacements]. They’re siphoning the water from a cistern to keep their cows hydrated. They have to use a water pump to get it out. “It’s a hassle and a huge expense,” she complains as her fingers swiftly type WhatsApp messages about her mother’s condition to family and friends.

Marcos, who spent the night, put a hand on my shoulder when we saw Mom on the gurney in the hallway, and blew her a theatrical kiss. Mom waved, looking anxious. They were only going to give her an epidural, and she hated the thought of having to hear the banging of the hammers, the snipping and grinding of the scissors and saw, the surgeons’ voices, the nurses’ whispers, the heart monitor’s beeps...She would have preferred anesthesia. Meanwhile, the simple fact of her distress has me in agony.

I leave Fefé talking to some people about the weather and ask Ana to come get a coffee with me. She wrinkles her nose and shakes her head. I go by myself. It’s for the best, I’m not used to being around so many people. I’m disappointed with myself. I’d crossed the invisible line that

freed me from family commitments, military service [I was insubordinate], the neighbors' gossip, and Mom. But here I am, right back in the middle of the placenta, betraying myself.

25

For months afterwards, I puzzled over what the doctor in Santiago had meant about the extraordinary size of my genitals. Was he talking about the two little balls tucked into the bag under my pecker, or my pecker itself? Marisé, who lived in the apartment across from us, had a cat with similar balls, and so did the dogs at Grandma Carolina's house. Marcos bragged to Dad about having balls down there too, as big as a tiger's. The tiger illustrations I found in the Espasa Calpe encyclopedias in the library didn't enter into that level of detail. And I had nothing to compare my pecker to. The other boys and I all peed around a hole in the ground, and some liked to try to hit each other with their streams, but I hadn't paid much attention to their genitals and none of them had ever struck me as being especially large. It didn't seem like anyone had a thicker stream than the rest, disproving my very unscientific theory that stream thickness might have a relationship to pecker size. I'd been told that my genitals were extraordinarily large, and I'd never seen any that were bigger [or more beautiful] than mine, so I concluded that the doctor in Santiago must have been right. When I got into bed at night, I would rub my pecker to make it hard and inspect it with a tape measure. At times, I gazed at it in fascination, and at others, in panic. What if what the doctor had meant by extraordinary was that I had a monstrous pecker? What if I had a monster

between my legs and it sent Mom into a hysteria? The thought sent me into flailing into a state of panic for several days, during which

time I hid my body in a position that made it look like I had a stomach ache from eating a massive snail.

Until then, my erections had been sporadic. My pecker beat like a heart [like it had its own] and throbbed with each beat. In a way, it was separate from me. Convinced of its independent identity, I decided to call it Heliogabalus, after the Roman emperor who my religion teacher, don Roberto Saco, would bring up in his [vehement] rants as a symbol of "the lecherous ailment of the flesh." Heliogabalus was demanding when it was swollen. It was the only thing in the world, shouting for attention, siphoning the blood from my body, and using its hidden [private] heart to pump itself with overpowering strength. And when Heliogabalus was swollen, so swollen that I could think of nothing else, it would tell me to touch it like it deserved. "I [it said] am capable of great things."