



A DRAMA OF OUR TIME

It happened when youth and optimism were my boon companions.

The breezes of spring came wafting down Matienzo street in Las Cañitas around 11:00 o'clock on a Thursday, the only day of the week that my teaching schedule left me free. I taught Language and Literature in more than one high school, I was twenty-seven and full of enthusiasm for books and imagination.

I was sitting on the balcony drinking maté and rereading, after a lapse of fifteen years, the enchanting adventures of King Solomon's Mines. (I noted sadly that when I was a boy I had enjoyed them much more.)

Suddenly I felt someone watching me.

I looked up. On one of the balconies of the building facing mine, at the same height as my own apartment, I spied a young woman. I raised a hand and waved. She waved back and left the balcony.

Curious to know where this might lead, I tried to get a glimpse inside her apartment, with no result.

"This will go nowhere," I said to myself, and returned to my reading. I hadn't read ten lines before she was back on her balcony, this time with dark glasses, and she sat down on a deckchair.

I began feverishly making signs and gestures. The young woman

was reading – or pretending to read – a magazine. “It’s a ruse,” I thought; “it’s not possible that she doesn’t see me, and now she’s posing so I can enjoy the show.” I couldn’t quite make out her features, but I could tell she was tall and slender and her hair, dark and straight, came down to her shoulders. Overall, she seemed to be a beautiful girl, maybe twenty-four or twenty-five years old.

I left the balcony, went to my bedroom, and peered through the shutters. She was looking in my direction. So I ran out and caught her in flagrante delicto.

I sent her a big, pompous wave which demanded a response. Indeed, she waved back. After such greetings, the usual thing is to strike up a conversation. But of course we were not going to shout across to each other. So I raised my right-hand index finger to my ear and made the rotational movement that, as everyone knows, meant I wanted to call her on the telephone. Sinking her head into her shoulders and opening her hands, the young woman indicated, again and again, that she didn’t understand. Bitch! How could she not understand?

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I went back inside, unplugged the telephone, and took it out to the balcony with me. I brandished it like an athletic trophy, raising it overhead with both hands. “So, little airhead, do you or do you not get it?” Yes, she got it: a toothy smile lit her face like a flash of lightning, and she nodded affirmatively.

Fine. I now had permission to call her. Only I didn’t know her number. I would have to find out using body language.

I went back to making complicated signs and gestures. Formulating the question wasn’t easy, but she knew perfectly well what I needed to know. Naturally, as women will, she wanted to have a little fun with me.

She stretched the game out as long as possible. And, at last,

she pretended to understand what had doubtless been clear from the beginning.

Using her forefinger, she drew hieroglyphs in the air. I realized she was drawing the numbers as she would read them, and that I would have to “decode” what I saw as if seeing them in a mirror. Thus I obtained the seven numbers that would put me in touch with my good-looking neighbor from across the way.

I was pleased as punch. I plugged in the phone and dialed. At the first ring, someone answered:

“Helloooowww!!” a deep male voice thundered in my ear.

Surprised, I hesitated.

“Who’s there?” added the booming voice, with a touch of anger and impatience.

“Uh . . . ” I mumbled, intimidated. “Is this 771 . . . ?

“Stronger, señor!” he interrupted, unbearably. “I can’t hear nothing, señor! Who d’you want to talk to, señor?”

He said “stronger” instead of “louder,” he said “I can’t hear nothing” instead of “I can’t hear anything” ; he said señor in the tone you use to call someone an idiot. Terrified, I stammered:

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“Uh . . . With the girl”

“What girl, señor? What girl are you talking about, señor?” The thundrous voice now carried a note of menace.

How do you explain something to someone who doesn’t want to understand?

“Uh . . . With the girl on the balcony.” My voice was a tiny sliver of glass.

But this didn't move him. On the contrary, he became more enraged:

"Don't bother us, señor, please! We're working folks, señor!"

An irate click ended the conversation. For a minute there I was speechless. I looked at the telephone and began cursing it between clenched teeth.

Then I spoke harshly of that stupid girl who hadn't taken the trouble to answer the phone herself. Suddenly I decided it was my fault for calling too soon. The man with the booming voice had answered so quickly, the telephone must be within reach, maybe even on his desk. That's why he'd said, "We're working folks."

And what about me? Everybody worked, that wasn't so special. I tried to picture him, giving him awful features: he was fat, florid, perspiring, and potbellied.

This stentorian-voiced fellow had served me an unconditional defeat by telephone. I felt a bit depressed and wanting vengeance.

Afterward I returned to the balcony, resolved to ask the young woman what her name was. She wasn't there. "Of course," I deduced optimistically, "she's standing by the phone waiting anxiously for me to call.

With my spirits somewhat renewed, but also with trepidation, I dialed the seven numbers. I heard a ring; I heard:

"Helloooowww!!"

Terrified, I hung up.

I thought: "This troglodyte can tyrannize me just because I'm lacking one thing: the name of the person with whom I want to speak. I must obtain it."

Then I reasoned: “In the Green Guide there’s a section where it’s possible to use the telephone number to find out someone’s name. I don’t have a Green Guide. Large companies have the guide. Banks are large companies. Therefore banks have the guide. My friend Balbón works in a bank. Banks open at noon.”

I waited until 12:30 and called Balbón.

“Oh, dear Fernando,” he answered, “I’m overjoyed and comforted to hear your voice . . .”

“Thanks, Balbón. But listen . . .”

” . . . that voice of a young man with no cares or obligations, duties or responsibilities. Lucky you, dear Fernando, drifting along on the happy tide of life, not allowing external events to disturb your peace. Lucky you . . .”

I can’t prove it, but I beg to be believed: I swear Balbón exists and that, indeed, he talks like that and says that kind of thing.

After having endowed me with such imaginary charms, he proceeded to portray himself – without giving me a chance to talk – as a sort of victim:

“In contrast, I, the humble and negligible Balbón, carry on today, as I did yesterday and will tomorrow, and for centuries of centuries, dragging a heavy cartload of miseries and heartaches across this treacherous planet . . .”

I had heard this story a thousand times.

My mind wandered as I waited for the litany of complaints to reach an end. Then suddenly I heard:

“It’s been nice talking to you. Take care, now.”

And he hung up.

Indignant, I called him back.

“Che, Balbón!” I reproached him, “Why did you hang up?”

“Ah,” he said, “you wanted to tell me something?”

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“I want you to look in the Green Guide, see whose name corresponds to this telephone number . . .”

“Hang on. I’m looking for my fountain pen, I hate to write with pencils or ballpoints.”

I was eaten up with impatience.

Finally, after several minutes, he said, “That number belongs to one CASTELLUCCI, IRMA G. DE. Castellucci with double ell and double cee. But, why do you want to know?”

“Thanks a lot, Balbón. I’ll explain some other time. Bye now.”

Now at last: I had in my possession a powerful weapon. I dialed the girl’s number.

“Hellooooww!!” thundered the caveman.

With no hesitation, but with sonorous and well-modulated voice, and even a certain peremptory note, I enunciated:

“I’d like to speak to Señorita Castellucci, please.”

“Who’s calling, señor?”

This habit of asking who’s calling gets my goat. To unnerve him I said, “This is Tiber’ades Heliogábalo Asoarfasayafi.”

“But, señor!” he sputtered, “The Castelluccis haven’t lived here for at least four years, señor! I get so many calls for the damned Castelluccis, señor!”

“And if they don’t live there any more, how come you asked me who’s . . .?”

I was cut off by a furious click. He hadn’t even allowed this minimal protest against his despotic behavior. Well, I wasn’t going to let him get away with it!

Quick as a flash I dialed again.

“Hellooooww!!”

Enunciating slowly as if I were mentally deficient, I asked:

“May I pwease tawk to da Castewussi famiwee?”

“No you can’t, señor! The Castellucis haven’t lived here for at least five years, señor!”

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“Oh, gweat! Dat’s you, señor Castewussi . . . How you dooing, señor Castewussi?”

“No, no, señor! Listen to me, señor!” He was about to blow a fuse. “The Castellucis haven’t lived here for at least seven years, señor!”

“You dooing OK, señor Castewussi?” I cordially insisted. “And da wife? And your widdle ones? Don’t you wemember me, señor Castewussi?”

“But who are you, señor?” In addition to being terrible, the monster was curious.

“Dis is Bawwie, señor Castewussi.”

“Barrie?” he repeated, disgustedly. “Barrie who?”

“Bawwie, señor Castewussi, da qwerk in da wibwawy.”

“What?! The library?!” He hadn’t understood me very well: it was all I could do to keep from laughing.

“Bawwie, señor Castewussi, Bawwie Wudder.”

“Barrie Rudder? What Barrie Rudder?”

“Bawwie Wudder, da one dat got one eye cwossed and can’t see wit dee udder, señor Castewussi.”

He exploded like an atom bomb: “Do me a favor and get lost, you idiot! Why don’t you just shoot yourself, clown!?”

“I can’t, señor Castewussi. My aim is cwuddy, señor Castewussi. Da wast time I wanted to shoot myself in da head I accidentawwy killed a penguin dat was in da Antawktic, señor Castewussi.”

There was a moment of silence, as if, having gone raving mad, he was breathing in all the oxygen in the atmosphere so as not to die of apoplexy.

Patiently, I waited.

Then, at the peak of fury and strangling on his own rage, the fiend launched his heavy artillery at me, screaming, hurling the words so fast they were tripping over each other:

“Go to hell, you siphilitic, blennorrhagic piece of Siberian shit, you mental misfit, you crusty pie-faced wanker, you parasite, you useless imbecilic son of a whore-faced loon!!!!”

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“I am so gwateful for dose compwements, señor Castewussi, muchas gwacias, señor Castewussi.”

He slammed the phone down with a violent bang. A pity, for I was enjoying his insults. It was delicious to imagine my enemy: red in the face, perspiring, tearing his hair and biting his knuckles . . . maybe even the telephone had been damaged by being banged so hard.

I felt something close to happiness. It no longer mattered

that I couldn't talk to the girl on the balcony.



JEREMY AND THE MAGIC LOBSTER

Jeremy lived out on Coney Island with his mother, father, and sister Cleo. He'd inhaled the smell of the ocean since the day he was born, and there was nothing in the world he liked better than to go for a walk on the beach.

Rain or shine, Jeremy hit the beach every day. He watched ships in the distance, listened to the waves, buoy-bells and foghorns, felt the sand and water on his feet and dreamed about sailing. Beach walks always made him hungry, and what Jeremy liked to eat was fish. In fact, anything that came out of the sea was just fine.

One day, after a particularly excellent walk, during the course of which he'd seen a three-masted schooner go by and a horseshoe crab wandering around at the shoreline, Jeremy went home and was delighted to see that his mother had bought lobsters for dinner. They were on the kitchen counter, still alive, wriggling their legs and antennae. Jeremy inspected them. He was seriously hungry and wanted to reserve the biggest one for himself. One of the lobsters was quite a bit bigger than the others. Its shell was almost black. Jeremy picked it up and looked into its beady little lobster eyes.

"Hey boss!" the lobster whispered. "Get me out of this jam and

I will definitely make it worth your while.”

Jeremy, startled, nearly dropped the lobster.

“Keep your cool, kid. That fat lady over there might be watching us.”

“Hey, that’s my mother,” Jeremy said.

“Oops, sorry. Listen boss...you look smart. Think of something, fast. Get me outta here!”

Jeremy thought fast. He petted the lobster like it was a cat and carried it over to his mother at the stove.

“Mama, this is the most amazingly beautiful lobster I’ve ever seen. Would it be all right if I kept him as a pet and had a sardine sandwich for dinner instead?”

Jeremy’s mother shot him a strange look. “But Jeremy, you love lobster. I got them especially for you.”

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“Please, mama.”

“Well, if that’s what you really want, I guess it’s all right.”

“Thanks, mom.” Jeremy hustled the lobster out of the kitchen and up to his room.

“Whew,” the lobster said, “that was mighty close. The water in that dirty pot was almost boiling. Boss, you sure are one sharp character, and this is your lucky day, because...I am a magic lobster.”

“Really?”

“That’s right. And you’ve got some wishes coming.”

“I do?”

“Sure, but I’ll need a few things first. Like some water – salt water – in a clear tank, so I can see out. And please, please get these rubber bands off my claws.”

Jeremy rummaged around the house until he found a decent-sized clear plastic tub. He filled it with water and sea salt and put the lobster in.

“Brrr. Hey, this water’s cold, kid. Go get me some warm water, fast!”

“You sure are fussy,” Jeremy said. “I thought you lobsters didn’t like hot water.”

“Did I say hot? Warm, kid. Think vacation in Florida.”

Jeremy fetched warm water. Then he had to sit through dinner eating a sardine sandwich while everyone else devoured lobsters with home-made mayonnaise.

Before going to bed that night, Jeremy leaned over the plastic tank on his table. The lobster seemed to be taking a little snooze.

“Hey!” Jeremy said. “I’ve thought up a wish. How does this work?”

“Hunh? Oh, yeah...uhm, tell me...what’re you gonna wish for?”

“What I’ve really always wanted is a sailboat. Nothing too big, maybe a yawl. I’d paint her green and red and call her The Green Dolphin. I want to sail around the world, see the southern constellations, weather storms, ride out monster waves, catch fish, mend ropes, get some tattoos, smoke a pipe and play the accordion.”

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“Whoa, kid. Try to keep it simple. Here’s the deal...you want a sailboat? OK, go to sleep now and dream of that sailboat. Then, with the magical power granted me by Neptune,

I'll have it out there waiting for you just off the beach in the morning. Green and red, just like you said."

Jeremy dreamt of the Green Dolphin all night long.

Early the next morning, Jeremy raced out onto the beach, expecting to see his new sailboat fully rigged and ready to ply the bounding main. What he saw instead were some tar-stained plastic bottles bobbing in the low tide and some dead jellyfish on the sand.

When he got home from school, Jeremy sat down to have a talk with the lobster.

"Uh, to tell you the truth, kid, you forgot to feed me last night. I'd like to see *you* conjure up a whole sailboat on an empty stomach."

"OK, OK," Jeremy said. "Let's see, I read somewhere that lobsters eat little fish, barnacles and seaweed, is that right?"

"Well yeah, kid. Usually that kind of stuff is all right, but a nice hamburger, rare, with some smoked oysters and spinach and maybe an eye-dropperful of your daddy's best whiskey...that'd make me feel highly magical, if you know what I mean."

"Yeah," Jeremy said. "I guess so."

Jeremy got all the stuff for the lobster's dinner, then watched him eat it. Wasn't a pretty sight.

"Ah, delicious! Now, what was it you were wishing for again?"

"A sailboat. Something with two masts, painted green and red."

"Oh yeah...listen kid, why don't we start out with something a little smaller? See, I haven't done this for a while."

"All right. How about a sextant?"

“A sex...what?”

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“You know: a navigational instrument, made of brass, with lenses and a mirror, used to gauge the angle of the sun at noon, or the other stars at night. I got a book about how to use a sextant from the library, but they’re expensive and I don’t think my parents would buy me one.”

“How big is one of these six-shooter things?”

“Sextant. Not too big. Like a camera, I guess.”

“All right, you got it! Now let’s get some shut-eye, huh? Remember, dream about that saxophone you want and it’ll be here when you awake, all shiny and new.”

Jeremy woke up excited and anxious to go out on the beach to take a reading of the sun with his new sextant, but he couldn’t find the thing anywhere. He tapped on the lobster’s tank and woke him up. “Hey,” Jeremy said. “Where is it?”

“Where’s what, kid? You’re bothering me.”

“The sextant I wished for.”

“Oh...listen, kid, I tried real hard, honest. But I couldn’t work my magic because I was...’cause I was lonely.”

“I didn’t know lobsters got lonely.”

“Sure we do, same as anyone. Here’s what you do...there’s gotta be a fish store here in the neighborhood, right? Well, you go on in there and tell the nice man you want the prettiest little female-type lobsterette he’s got. Tell him to make her about two pounds, with long hind legs, a fan-shaped tail and dainty claws with rubber bands on ’em. You got that, kid?”

“Yeah, I got it.”

So Jeremy broke his piggy bank and spent his savings on a

blue-shelled female lobster, the prettiest one in the whole fish store, according to the fishmonger. The magic lobster seemed highly pleased with her. He winked his beady eyes, clicked his claws and smoothed back his antennae.

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“Ooh-la-la! Nice work, kid. She’s gorgeous. You drop her right on in here and then go get us something to eat.”

“Then will you get me a sextant?”

“Well, let’s talk about that, kid. See, a sexton’s kinda complicated. I couldn’t quite get it to look right. Maybe you ought to wish for something simpler.”

“All right. How about a ship’s whistle, on a rope lanyard? Then I could at least pretend I was about to board a sailboat for a round-the-world voyage. Can you manage that?”

“Sure kid, sure. Ship’s whistle. Nothing could be simpler. Now get lost for a while. Me and this nice-lookin’ lady got to get acquainted.”

Strange noises from the lobster tank kept Jeremy awake most of the night.

Next morning there was no trace of a ship’s whistle anywhere in the house.

Jeremy got angry. “Hey, where’s the whistle I wished for? You said it was easy. Are you sure you’re a magic lobster?”

“Huh? Sure I am, kid. Of course I am. I just forgot to tell you...I need some magic clothes. You know, a silk top hat and cape and a black cane with a white knob on the end that I can use as a magic wand. What do you expect me to do, unless I got the right outfit? Besides, I gotta look sharp for my new girlfriend here...”

Jeremy put on his jacket, pulled the magic lobster out of the

tank and headed for the beach.

“Hey kid, what’s going on? You sore? Just say so. I’ll try to work a little harder, I swear. You’re not going to sell me to some restaurant, are you?”

Jeremy didn’t answer. He walked down to the beach and out onto the long pier. The lobster began to shake in terror.

“Hey kid, what’re you gonna do?”

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“I’m throwing you back where you belong. You’re no magic lobster.”

“Aw, don’t do that, kid. It’s murder out there. Nothing but other fish trying to eat me and fishermen in boats trying to catch me in a trap. It’s cold and dark and it’s tough to find food. Besides, I am *too* magic. I can talk, can’t I?”

“Yeah, but you’re just a big liar.”

Jeremy threw the magic lobster as far as he could. It waved its claws in the air, made a splash and was gone. A few bubbles rose to the surface.

Jeremy kept the female lobster as a pet. Her bright blue shell reminded Jeremy of the sea on a clear day. She didn’t seem to miss the magic lobster much either.



THE TROUBLE TREE

The carpenter I hired to help me restore an old farmhouse had just finished a rough first day on the job. A flat tire made him lose an hour of work, his electric saw quit and now his ancient pickup truck refused to start. While I drove him home, he sat in stony silence. On arriving he invited me in to meet his family.

As we walked toward the front door, he paused briefly at a small tree, touching the tips of the branches with both hands. Upon opening the door he underwent an amazing transformation. His tan face was wreathed in smiles and he hugged his two small children and gave his wife a kiss. Afterward he walked me to the car.

We passed the tree and my curiosity got the better of me. I asked him about what I had seen him do earlier. "Oh, that's my trouble tree", he replied. " I know I can't help having troubles on the job, but one thing for sure, troubles don't belong in the house with my wife and children. So I just hang them up on the tree every night when I come home. Then in the morning I pick them up again." "Funny thing is," he smiled, "when I come out in the morning to pick them up, there aren't nearly as many as I remember hanging up the night before."