

Light is Like Water

For Christmas the children once again asked for a rowboat.

“Sure,” said the dad. “We’ll buy it when we get back to Cartagena.”

Totó, nine years old, and Joel, seven, were more determined than their parents thought.

“No,” they said in unison. “We need it right here right now.”

“First of all,” said the mother, “the only water you could sail in here is what comes out of the shower.”

She and her husband were right. At their house in Cartagena de Indias there was a patio with a pier that reached over the bay and enough space for two big yachts. On the other hand, here in Madrid they lived squeezed into the fifth floor of number 47 Castellana Ave. But in the end, neither he nor she could refuse their pleas, because they had promised the children a rowboat with a sextant and compass if they won the third grade laurel award in school, and they had. And so the dad bought it all without saying anything to his wife, who was more reluctant to pay the debts of gambles. It was a beautiful aluminum boat with a golden border at the waterline.

“The boat is in the garage,” the dad divulged at lunch. “The problem is that there’s no way to bring it up through the elevator, nor the stairs, and there’s no more open space in the garage.”

Nonetheless, the following Saturday afternoon the children invited their classmates to bring the boat up through the stairs, and they managed to get it to the bathroom.

“Congratulations,” the father said. “Now what?”

“Now nothing,” said the children. “All we wanted was to have the boat in the room, and now it’s there.”

Wednesday night, like all other Wednesdays, the parents went to the movie theatre. The children, now the men and owners of the house, closed the doors and windows and broke the shining light bulb from the lamp in the room. A stream of golden, fresh light, like water, began to flow from the broken light bulb. They let it run until it was four palms high. Then they cut the current, pushed off in the boat, and sailed between the islands of the house as they pleased.

This fantastic adventure was the result of my thoughtlessness during a seminar about the poetry of household objects. Totó asked me how it was that with the simple push of a button, lights turned on. I did not think twice about it.

“Light is like water,” I answered him. “You turn the knob and it comes out.”

So they continued to sail on Wednesday nights, learning how to use the sextant and compass, until their parents came back from the theatre and found them sleeping like angels. Months later, eager to go further, they asked for scuba diving equipment. All of it: masks, flippers, tanks, and air-powered spear guns.

“It’s bad enough that you have a useless rowboat in your bathroom,” said the father. “But it’s worse that you want scuba equipment as well.”

“And if we win the gold gardenia award first semester?” said Joel.

“No,” said the mother, worried. “Now nothing more.”

The father criticized her stubbornness.

“It’s just that these kids don’t deserve as much as a penny for doing their duties,” she said. “But on a whim they are able to win even the teacher’s chair.”

In the end the parents did not say yes or no. But Totó and Joel, who had been at the bottom of their classes the two previous years, won the two gold gardenia awards and public recognition from the principal in July. That same afternoon, without having asked again, they found two sets of scuba equipment in their original packages in their room. So the following Wednesday, while their parents watched *The Last Tango of Paris*, they filled the apartment up to their shoulders and they dove like domesticated sharks under the furniture and beds. From the bottom of the light they rescued things that, over the years, had gotten lost in the darkness.

In the final award ceremony the brothers were praised as an example for the school, and they received excellence awards. This time they did not have to ask for anything. Their parents asked them what they wanted. The children were very reasonable; they only wanted a party in their house to celebrate with their classmates.

The father, alone with his wife, was glowing.

“It’s a testament to their maturity,” he said.

“God willing,” said the mother.

The following Wednesday, while the parents saw *The Battle of Algiers*, the people who passed by Castellana Ave saw a cascade of light falling from an old building hidden between the trees. It flooded from the balconies and spilled in torrents from the front, channeled by the large avenue into a golden flood that illuminated the city up to Guadarrama.

Called to the scene, firefighters broke down the door of the fifth floor and found the home brimming with light up to the ceiling. The leopard skin sofas and armchairs floated in the room at different levels, between the bottles from the bar, the grand piano, and a shawl that fluttered mid-water like a gold manta ray. Household objects, at the peak of their poetry, flew with their own wings past the kitchen ceiling. The marching band instruments, that the kids

played to dance to, floated every which way between the colorful fish liberated from the mom's fish tank. They were the only ones that floated lively and happily in the vast illuminated swamp. In the bathroom the toothbrushes, dad's condoms, the small containers of creams, and mom's false teeth were floating. The master bedroom's television floated sideways, still playing the last installment of the midnight movie forbidden for children.

At the end of the corridor floating suspended below the surface, Totó was sitting at the stern of the boat clinging to the oars with his scuba mask on, looking for the lighthouse, when his tank ran out of air. Joel floated at the bow still searching for the height of the North Star with the sextant. Their thirty-seven classmates floated through the whole house, eternalized in the rebellious moment of peeing in the geranium flowerpot, of singing the school anthem with different lyrics as a joke on the principal, of secretly drinking a glass of dad's brandy. They had opened so many lights at the same time that the house had overflowed. The entire fourth year at the San Julián el Hospitalario school had drowned in the fifth floor of number 47 Castellana Ave in Madrid, Spain, a city far from stifling summers and icy winds, without sea nor river, whose indigenous of terra firma were never masters of the science of light sailing.

1978