

Marianela Luna

Speed is my school



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Bleeds out of nowhere

For my father, eating out was an obligatory double-shift family outing: Sunday noon and Wednesday night, to cut the week short. It didn't matter if he and mom had argued a few hours before, if Matías had gone out with the car without permission or if some starving worker had called him to ask for an advance. He went out the same way, showing his ass-face. My brother Matías was the only one who could not go out because he was a teenager and because, according to Dad, he did not know how to go out to eat. He would only have milanesa with mashed potatoes and my parents would roll their eyes until the waiter left. They always reproached him with the same thing: "Having so many dishes, what a shame". I think he did it on purpose, at the end he'd won because they let him stay at home. He only had to go when Dad arranged to have lunch with his partner and his family. They had to set up a triple table for us because Eduardo

had a lot of children who, on top of that, brought little friends so they wouldn't get bored with the old people. I didn't like the guy because when he asked the waiter to bring him bread, he would shake the bread basket as if he was calling a dog to eat. Mom said that it was worse to call him to the table and then tell him, but I still thought it was in bad taste. At the end of every meal they would have a shouting match to decide who would pay everyone's bill. The whole restaurant would look at us and then my dad —who never hugged me— driven by the euphoria of paying a very expensive bill, would lift me in his arms or give me a loving father's tickle.

It really mattered which restaurant we went to. We had to go to a restaurant on Pellegrini Street or to the ones where businessmen like Palazzo —who was also from Saladillo and went out to eat with his own family to expensive places but in the neighborhood— used to go, because they, wealthy and all, were still from the South.

Every once in a while, the businessmen in the neighborhood would do something for the neighbors and traders, so my dad had no choice but to do the same. It all started when one of Palazzo's suppliers built a

small awning for the drugstore on the corner. The guy was so grateful that Palazzo didn't want to be any less and gave him a vertical display. Everyone in Saladillo began to flatter him. One afternoon we ran into him in the square and Dad brought up the issue. Palazzo ended up confessing to him that it was a faulty refrigerator that he would not be able to sell to anyone, so giving it to Jorge didn't cost him anything. My dad listened to him like he was a teacher and eventually ended up doing what he said.

That's how he ended up giving away a metal shelf to the grocery store on the corner of our house. Mom got mad because the guy who attended the store was a nasty guy —she resented the fact that he sucked his finger to turn the pages of the sales booklet. But my dad said that Juan was a great guy because he always paid attention to him or gave us chocolate bars. My father also liked to think of himself as a friend of the poor, although once he almost broke the septum of a window cleaner who insisted when he had told him not to. That's when they explained to me the difference between 'poor' and 'negro de mierda'¹. Mom said it wasn't that bad, that the nose is the most weak or-

¹ Racist expression used as an insult in some parts of Argentinian territory.

gan in the body and it bleeds out of nowhere. I didn't understand if she was talking about the little black guy or about me, since I had to be taken out of school every two weeks because of nosebleeds. My mother was terribly embarrassed to pick me up because it was obvious that I was either bleeding from picking my nose very much or I had issues at home. Either way it was humiliating for her. And instead of keeping quiet and pretending to be concern —as any mother would do— she would argue with the teacher and reproach her that they were educating little dummies if they made such a fuss over a little blood. For her, they had to give me a cotton tourniquet and continue the class as if nothing had happened; after all, in a short time we were going to bleed from the other side. I want to see those nuns there, what explanation they would give to us, she said. The truth is that when they finally left me in class with the tourniquet —thanks to the scandal mom had caused last time— my classmates looked at me so much that the teacher dismissed me and I ended up having tea in the teachers' lounge.

There was a night when they argued so much that I played loud music and they didn't tell me off. Matias set off straight away without saying where and they didn't tell him anything either. Before he left, he came

into my room to ask for a Twiggy cassette he had lent me but I knew he wanted to check up on me because by that time he was no longer listening to Twiggy because his friends mocked him. My brother did look after me. I said I was OK so he would go quietly. Calm at home depended on all of us acting as if nothing was wrong. As soon as anyone noticed that something was wrong, a battle would break out that could last a month. Like the time Mati took the car without permission, with no driving license and crashed a traffic light. My dad rebuked him because the news reached the media and he had been named as *the son of a well-known businessman*. At the same time, mom got angry with dad because he was worried about that and not about Mati having a broken bone. I dreamed that my brother would someday run away without telling anyone and leave me a letter with an address and a phone number so I could find him when I grew up.

That night Mom came into my room with her face still wet and said, “Change your clothes, we’re going out to eat”. Of all the times we went out in a bad mood, that was the worst. What was the need to go out to eat when no one was hungry? I wore the dress I had gotten for my birthday to cheer them up and a headband with a flower my mom loved. In the car, the only

thing that could be heard was the annoying voice of an announcer pretending to be the cool one with the girls who were calling to ask for songs. I was praying that we wouldn't go through the traffic circle of the window-washers because my dad was in the mood of smashing someone's whole face. To avoid them, I asked him to pass in front of a party room where —I made it up— my friends were having a birthday party to which I hadn't been invited. I could even have given him a fake name because he didn't know any of my friends. Mom, outraged, asked if we had invited her to my last little party and I had to tell her we didn't so that she wouldn't take it out on her or her mother. "If you didn't invite her, it's okay that she didn't invite you either". When we arrived, we had to leave the car a block away because there was no place to park. By then, my mom had touched her lipstick up about three times. So much so that she looked like a clown. During dinner, I made sure there was no lack of topics of conversation to get them to stop being angry and start talking to each other again. As soon as we were silent, I had the feeling that everyone was looking at us and felt sorry: a little girl talking up to her elbows, a father coughing non-stop with his eyes fixed on his glass, and a silent lady with a clown's mouth and dark

crying circles under her eyes. We were the saddest table in the bar. To rest a little, I went to the bathroom at the other end of the room. I covered the toilet with a double layer of toilet paper and stayed there for a while, giving them time alone. I didn't realize that I was snorting my boogers until I felt the first drops of blood on my dress. Immediately, I got up and went to the sink, outlining the path in red. While I was trying to wash myself, a woman came in. She was shocked by the scene and asked me if I was okay, as if I could answer her with my head under the faucet. As soon as I could see her face in the mirror, I knew she was the eldest daughter of the Palazzo family.

—Let me help you. I'll take you to your parents.

I thought that if I showed up all bloody, holding Palazzo's daughter's hand, my dad would kill me.

—It's all right, I always bleed because my nose is but-tery weak.

—Are you sure? Tell me where your parents are so I can at least call them.

—No, it's ok, it'll stop by itself, thank you.

The woman came out of the bathroom and I stayed

there cleaning the stains on my dress, which, luckily, cleared up a lot. To give them time to dry, I sat on the floor with my head back and a paper tourniquet to stop the waterfall. Just then, an ambulance doctor came in to pick me up. Palazzo's daughter had alerted the restaurant and they, instead of telling my parents, called the emergency, with such bad luck that they arrived right away.

I came out of the bathroom holding the doctor's hand and we were the show of the night. I looked like a little girl whose parents had forgotten on the beach and a lifeguard had to carry over his shoulders. I thought people was going to start clapping at us. In fact, they looked at the doctor like he was a hero but they felt sorry for me. We walked through the whole restaurant and we were almost at the table when my parents saw me through the window: they were smoking and drinking wine on the sidewalk. They had already made peace.

