

## **“Light is Like Water” - Gabriel Garcia Marquez**

On Christmas the children asked for a rowboat again.

“Okay,” 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 believed.

“No,” they said as one. “We need it here and now.”

“To begin with” said the mom, “here there aren’t any more navigable waters than those that come from the shower.”

Both she and her husband were right. At the house in Cartagena there was a deck with a dock on the bay, and a boathouse for two large yachts. On the other hand, here in Madrid, they lived cramped together on the fifth floor of 47 Castellana Road. But in the end neither he nor she could deny them, because they had promised them a rowboat with sextant and compass if they got perfect grades for the school term, and they had been gotten. And so it was that the dad bought it all without saying anything to his wife, who was the most resistant to making debts for pleasure. It was a beautiful boat of aluminum, with a golden line painted around the draft line.

“The boat is in the garage,” the dad revealed during lunch. “The problem is that there’s no way to get it up the stairs, and there’s no more space available in the garage.”

However, the following Saturday afternoon the children invited their classmates to help them bring the boat up and they managed to get it as far as the service room.

“Congratulations,” the dad told them. “And now what?”

“Now nothing,” said the children. “We just wanted to have a rowboat in the room, and now there is.”

On Wednesday night, as on every Wednesday, the parents went to the movies. The children, masters and lords of the house, closed the doors and windows, and broke the light bulb burning in one of the lamps in the living room. A jet of golden light, as cool as water, began to flow from the broken bulb, and they let it run until it reached a depth of four hand spans. Then they turned off the current, got the boat out, and sailed at their pleasure around the islands of the house.

This fabulous adventure was the result of an offhand comment of mine when I was participating in a seminar on the poetry of domestic appliances. Totó asked me how come the light turned on by just pressing a button, and I wasn’t brave enough to think twice about it.

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

So they kept on sailing Wednesday nights, learning to master the sextant and the compass until the parents came home to find them asleep like angels on dry land. Months later, eager to go even further, they asked for submarine fishing equipment. With everything: masks, fins, tanks and compressed-air shotguns.

“It’s bad enough that they have a rowboat in the service room that they can’t use,” said the dad. “But it’s even worse that they want scuba diving equipment on top of it.”

“And if we get gold stars for the first semester?” asked Joel.

“No,” said their mom, frightened. “No more.”

The dad reproached her inflexibility.

“It’s just that these kids don’t get anything for doing what they’re supposed to,” she said, “but for a whim they could earn a teaching position.”

In the end the parents didn't say either yes or no. But Totó and Joel won the gold stars in July, and were publicly recognized by the principal. That same afternoon, without their having asked again, they found the scuba equipment in their room in the original packing. So the following Wednesday, while the parents were watching *The Last Tango in Paris*, they filled the apartment to the depth of two arm lengths, and they scuba'd around like tame sharks under the furniture and the beds, and they rescued from the depths of the light the things that had been lost in the darkness.

At the award ceremony at the end of the year, the brothers were acclaimed as examples for the school and they were given certificates of excellence. This time they didn't have to ask for anything because the parents asked them what they wanted. They were so reasonable that they only wanted a party at home to reward their friends from school.

The dad, alone with his wife, was radiant.

"It's proof of their maturity," he said.

"From your lips to God's ears," said the mom.

The following Wednesday, while the parents were watching *The Battle of Argel*, the people who were walking along Castellana Road saw a cascade of light falling from an old building hidden among the trees. It was coming out of the balconies; it fell in torrents from the facade, and it channeled down the great avenue in a golden rapid that illuminated the city, to the Guadarrama River.

Responding to the alarm call, the firemen forced open the door to the fifth-floor apartment, and found the whole place filled with light, up to the ceiling. The sofa and the leopard-skin armchairs were floating at different levels in the living room, between the bottles from the bar and the grand piano and its Manila shawl which fluttered along midwater like a golden manta ray. The domestic appliances, at the zenith of their poetry, were flying with their own wings around the skies of the kitchen. The instruments from the marching band, that the children used to dance, floated among the colored tropical fish liberated from the mom's fishbowl, and which were the only living and happy floating things in the vast illuminated swamp. In the bathroom the toothbrushes floated along with dad's condoms, mom's jars of cold cream and her retainer, and the television in the master bedroom floated sideways, still on, showing the last scene of the late-night adult movie.

At the end of the hall, floating between two waters, Totó was seated at the stern of the rowboat, glued to the oars, with his scuba mask on, searching for the lighthouse of the port until his tanks ran out of air, Joel floated in the prow, still trying to measure the height of the north star with his sextant, and floating throughout the house were his thirty-six classmates, eternally preserved in the instant of peeing in the pot of geraniums, of singing the school song with the verses changed to mock the principal, of sneaking a glass of the dad's brandy. They had opened so many lights at the same time that the house had overflowed, and the whole fourth grade of Saint Julian the Hospitaller had drowned in the fifth-floor apartment of 47 Castellana Road, Madrid, Spain, a remote city of burning summers and frozen winds, without sea or river, and whose original landlubber inhabitants had never mastered the science of sailing on light.

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