

From Picture of You

I've always felt like the one who stands behind the action. That afternoon, when we went on the school trip to El Parque San Antonio, I enjoyed the feeling. The maths teacher was running around the park, trying to round up every girl and convince her to return to the main focus of the trip: a tour through Fernando Botero's sculptures, but it was impossible.

Daniela was convincing her friends to escape to El Hueco to buy cheap nail polish and sweets. Sara was standing behind the 'Naked Torso', with her tongue almost touching the butt of the statue, while Carolina was trying to stop laughing and take a photo. It had to be sent through Snapchat.

And there was me.

In my hands, the old black camera waited for me to find the perfect shot. I wanted to capture the sea of chequered skirts and the two desperate teachers in the middle of the chaos of street sellers. The sun over the grey pavement tiles, and stands full of hats, handbags, fruit and pirated movies under colourful parasols. It was impossible to frame it all in one picture.

Through the lens, I noticed the sculptures of two birds at one corner of the park. I hadn't seen them before. Next to them, there was a group of girls, the ass-lickers as Carolina used to call them, listening to Ángela the new art teacher.

'The "Boterismo" refers to the exaggerated volume that the artist gives to his paintings and sculptures ...' Ángela was saying, when I approached the group.

One of the sculptures was perfect; a massive bird, with a proud look, standing on a black base. The other statue was broken. It had a hole in its

chest, and its feet seemed as if they would fall apart at any moment. There was something hurting about it.

‘Any of you know why this sculpture is called “The Wounded Bird”?’ she said, pointing at the destroyed one.

Nobody knew. I had no idea. The teacher did her best to hide her disappointment.

‘Two or three years before you were born, somebody put a bomb inside it. It killed 20 people,’ she said. Then, she pointed at the bottom of the sculpture. ‘The names of the victims were carved on this plaque.’

I got closer, so I could read what it said.

In this place the 10th of June of 1995, as a result of a terrorist attack, the following persons lost their lives: Teresa Martínez Córdoba, Arturo Suárez Rincón, Sofía Valle Echavarría, Alejandro Pérez Suárez ...

As I read the names on the plaque, I remembered Dad’s phrase. How there were too many bombs to remember them all.

Ángela told us that when Fernando Botero knew the bomb had been placed inside the bird as a direct attack against the sculpture, because they said it was an icon of the wealth of Colombia’s rich, he refused to take it away and replace it with a new one. He said it would have to stay there as a reminder of the imbecility of the violence in Colombia.

I liked the word imbecility; it made sense for me. If the sculpture was the main objective of the attack, then why not blow it up at three in the morning, when nobody was around? According to Ángela, most of the victims were street sellers.

It happened during a vallenato concert, twenty years ago. The orchestra Los Cariñosos del Vallenato was playing on the south side of the park, next to the ‘Naked Torso’. Around three hundred people were dancing to the rhythm of the accordions and tambura drums. The explosives had been hidden in Nescafé jars, inside the sculpture of the bird, fifty metres from the orchestra. When it exploded, it barely affected the dancing people. The fast food street sellers, who that night were offering hot dogs, aguadiente, mango and other snacks, were the ones who received all the impact of the explosion.

‘There were seven kids who died that day,’ Ángela said, as she stroked the damaged peak of the bird. ‘Including a little baby.’

Some years later, a new bird sculpture arrived in the park. It was called the 'Dove of Peace'. The instructions from the artist were clear, both statues had to stay in the park, separated by three metres. The old one had to say 'Violence' on its plaque, and the new one 'Peace'.

As the other girls approached the plaque, I was looking at something else. Through the hole in the chest of the wounded bird, I could see an old lady selling coffee under a rainbow parasol. She wasn't looking at the bird or at us. Her eyes went from the large pot of coffee to the cup, to the guy who was buying.

That was the picture that I wanted. I started to move my hand towards my bag when Carolina appeared by my side with a plastic bag full of salty mango. I'd been avoiding her all day long.

Instead of looking at her, I placed the camera in front of my face. My right eye on the viewfinder and the left one remaining closed.

'It's not that interesting,' she said. I took my camera off my eyes and looked at her, standing there with her arms crossed. She was grabbing one mango strip and putting it into her mouth. 'Just a piece of old crap.'

Somehow that comment hurt me. I tried to replay in my head all the reasons why we were friends.

'It's part of our history,' I replied, with a fake calm voice that didn't work.

She didn't say anything for a while.

'Since when did you become one of the ass-lickers?' she continued, cleaning her fingers full of salt on my shirt.

'Hey, could you behave for a while?'

'When we went to the Modern Museum you were laughing with me all the time,' she said, but I didn't reply. 'This sculpture is old and overused crap, accept it.'

'You confuse me,' I finally said. 'From what I saw last night, I thought you liked overused crap.'

Her facial expression changed immediately. First she looked at me, directly in the eyes. Then she turned her back on me, to face the teacher.

The teacher was asking the group to leave a coin inside the 'Wounded Bird'. 'Some people say that the souls that died in this place grant wishes,' she said. Some of the students tried to laugh, but the teacher was not smil-

ing. I fiddled with a one-hundred pesos coin inside my jacket pocket.

Carolina threw her coin with such strength that the sound of metal against metal echoed through the park. 'I want your damn ex-boyfriend,' she whispered in my ear. 'Because it's fucking amazing to date somebody who talks about another person all the time.'

Some girls turned their heads to look at us. I kept looking at the statue, and Carolina walked away. The teacher called the group to continue walking through the park, but I stayed there. Alone. With the coin between my fingers.

I didn't know what to wish for. The park was silent. The afternoon sun was reflected on the bronze chests of the birds, and the coffee lady was sleeping under her parasol.

I let my hands wander on the surface of the bird, over its broken feet and claws. I stepped on the base and my fingers entered the holes, and the wounds on its face and wings. From her plastic chair, the coffee lady opened her eyes and looked at me, trying to understand what I was doing.

I didn't know. There was something there that forced me to get close, to catch the memories that the bird had inside it, to understand.

I thought about Mum in the videos, about the camera and the film, about the bomb in El Tesoro and the guy that could be my dad breaking the battery cover. I thought about all these memories I had with Esteban and how I didn't know what to do with them. I thought about Carolina, walking away in anger and how I didn't even feel sorry for it. And about last night, and how I suddenly didn't fit in that party. I thought about the stranger I'd seen this morning, and how it was easier to take a picture of him because I was never going to see him again.

I just wanted to be able to open my eyes to reality.

'Isabella!' somebody shouted. I looked up and saw a girl running over to the bird. Her glasses were almost falling off and she was sweating.

'Everybody is looking for you,' she cried, looking angry. 'The bus arrived twenty minutes ago.'

It was impossible, how much time had I spent there?

'I want to understand,' I whispered, as I left the coin inside the chest.

We ran across the park towards the school bus that waited by the pavement. The maths teacher was at the door when we arrived, holding the door

open. She was furious.

‘We are responsible for you, young woman! What would we tell your parents if something happened to you?’ I looked down, hiding my anger inside my fists. ‘You can’t disappear in this way.’

I didn’t reply.

Carolina was at the back; she turned her face towards the window. I didn’t have the patience to deal with her.

‘Sit here,’ said Ángela, patting the empty seat next to her. She was smiling.

Ángela started teaching at the beginning of the year, replacing a teacher who had been at the school for almost forty years. Ángela wanted to do things differently, to escape from the rigid way in which the school graded art. But I suspect she gradually discovered that the students were as the school wanted them to be. Whenever she said, ‘The exam is going to be a free drawing about Van Gogh,’ half the classroom raised their hands: ‘How are you going to grade that?’, ‘Can you give us an example?’, ‘Can we fail this?’.

Maybe she didn’t know we’d lost the ability to be free. I don’t know.

‘You’re supposed to be mad at me,’ I said, as I sat down.

‘I can’t get angry at a student who looks at a Botero sculpture the way you were looking at “The Wounded Bird”.’

I was never the one who became friends with the teachers, or even talked to them. I wasn’t a bad student or as impertinent as Carolina was, I always stayed in the middle. Staying in the middle allowed you to be ignored by them, and that was always good. I guess. But Ángela had something that made it difficult to see her as a teacher.

‘I was thinking about the wish, not exactly about art ...’ I don’t know where all this honesty was coming from.

‘I may sound crazy, but I believe that’s art too.’

We both remained in silence, as the small bus took Oriental Avenue towards El Poblado. I could feel the two birds looking at me, even as we went further away.

‘I saw you taking a photo,’ she said. ‘I didn’t know you were into photography.’

‘I wanted to take it,’ I replied. ‘I didn’t find the right time ...’

She stayed silent. I knew what she was thinking, she would have stopped the bus and made it turn around, only to let a student explore her artistic moment. She was nice.

‘Why did you want to take that specific photo?’ she asked.

‘I liked the idea of seeing the coffee lady trapped inside the bird.’

‘That’s what I like about photography,’ she replied. ‘The other arts, like drawing or writing, let you escape somewhere else. But with photography, you have to be there, so inside into the present that nothing else exists anymore.’

I liked that idea. A lot.

‘I like to think photography is a magical proof of our existence,’ she added.