

Laughing to tell the tale

Gustavo Ariel Schwartz

If this guy would just stop looking at me like that, then maybe I could concentrate on what I was saying. Well, now... I'm going to try and carry on with the story... Damn it! This table is really cold! Sorry... I've been distracted again. The thing is I can't help it; all this is new for me. Where were we? I can't believe that this has been my first time (and the last), that I had never tried to do this before; the thing is, to be honest, it always frightened me a bit. When I was a child, just a glance from my father was enough to stop me even trying to do it: "*all you need is a smile,*" he used to say. Once I got a bit older, it started to make me feel a bit sick and I chose to forget about it; I thought that the spasmodic retching, those guttural noises and the way your face changed was so grotesque, so barbaric and so contrary to human nature that I had even blotted them out of my dreams; but I have to admit that if I'd known how things were I would have tried to do it a lot sooner; and apart from that, on the face of it, I would have taken things gradually. But you know how it is, experience isn't like knowledge; experience can't be passed on, it can't be taught. Damn! We've hardly progressed at all! Wouldn't it be much smarter to teach people how to laugh, to love or to kiss rather than how to build skyscrapers, satellites or cars? Good God! If I had heard myself saying this a week ago! But well, now I'm beating about the bush as usual, the thing is at a certain age... you will be able to excuse a few slight digressions from what I was going to say. Where was I? Ah yes, that business in the park. Yesterday afternoon after my granddaughter had won a ridiculous water gun after she had fished out a couple of plastic ducks floating in a little carousel by the scruffs of their necks, we sat down with my daughter and son-in-law in the café in the amusement park. Obviously the first thing that the little girl did when they brought the coffees and water was to load up the

bottle in that damn water gun. Now she's going to start to piss us off with that lousy little gun! I thought. It was perfectly clear from the way I looked that I was fed up and my daughter went on and on at me about it; the poor thing thought that she could still change something in me; she forced me to go for walks with my granddaughter in the absurd belief that this could change me; as if I had something that needed changing in the irreproachable life that I had led until then. What the hell could I want to change at this stage of my life? What could I learn from a six-year-old pipsqueak? And while the little girl ran around the table with the water gun in her hand, my daughter told me off once again for never showing the kid any affection, and while my daughter was telling me off I looked for signs of support in my son-in-law's eyes. With him you could actually have a conversation: he was like me, serious, responsible, polite and kind; we used to talk about business, cars, investments, well... things that my daughter would never understand; and while I was thinking about this, the inevitable happened: from all that running around and jumping about the little brat ended up in tears on the ground; my daughter went over to console her and I picked up the blasted gun to see if we could put a stop to this once and for all. And it was at that moment that something strange happened; I don't know if it was because of an age-old reflex from the years I spent in the army or whether I was betrayed by some twist of fate, but the thing is the gun somehow or another ended up clenched in my right hand. The little girl carried on crying while my index finger sensuously caressed the trigger of the gun; the texture of the plastic was unfamiliar but the handle didn't seem to mind being stroked at all so I pressed down gently on the trigger; I felt that it hardly offered any resistance and so I pressed down a little bit more and then I released it again. I repeated this routine two or three times by pressing down a bit further each time; finally I pushed it right down to the bottom and the gun shuddered and vented its anger all over my son-in-law's face.

Time stood still for a moment and we all looked at each other and weighed up how we should react; the little girl, who never ever considered the effect that her reactions were going to have, suddenly stopped crying and made a noise that sounded like she was laughing through her tears. We all continued to look at each other nervously without knowing how to react, and then I fired at my son-in-law's dripping wet face again as he looked at me like someone who'd just seen a man with three heads for the first time; the little girl burst out laughing again, but this time it sounded louder and clearer; I moved my hand slightly and fired again; this time I shot at my daughter's face and the little girl laughed her head off and I slowly started to imitate her; it only took another two shots for my daughter to join in my laughter which as it got worse put me off my aim and meant that one of the following shots ended up hitting him on the shoulder while the other hit the table behind him. I couldn't stop laughing or shooting, my body doubled up in ways I had never experienced before and this made me laugh even more. I carried on firing; I no longer cared where, one of these shots ended up hitting me in the face so that my daughter and granddaughter choked with laughter while my son-in-law, who still looked rather puzzled and serious, dried his face with a handkerchief. Every muscle in my face was aching, but it wasn't bitter like pain I'd known before; this pain was different; it was a sweet, delicious kind of pain, that I hardly had time to savour. I carried on laughing non-stop all night long... and now here I am, completely naked, on this freezing cold table. The forensic expert is taking a look at me again, and he's totally baffled, he can't make out how a corpse can have a smile like that written all over his face; in a career going back twenty-five years he has never seen anything like it. He gently shakes his head without really believing what he is seeing and picks up his scalpel. Maybe I should get out of here; autopsies tend to affect me a bit.

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