

Just As It Was Back Then

Eloy M. Cebrián

Finalist of the 2004 NH Literary Awards for Short Stories

Translated by Bianca Southwood

Eloy M. Cebrián (Albacete, Spain 1963) holds a degree in English Philology and works at a secondary school in his hometown. As a novelist he has been awarded with the Premio Francisco Umbral de Novela ("El fotógrafo que hacía belenes" / The Photographer Who Made Nativity Scenes, Zócalo Editorial, 2005), and the Premio Jaén ("Bajo la fría luz de octubre" / In The Cold October Light, Alfaguara, 2003). As a writer of short stories he has also obtained awards (Marco Fabio Quintiliano, Alfonso Sancho Sáez, and he has been twice a finalist of the NH Awards). Many of those short stories have been gathered in "Las luciérnagas y 20 cuentos más" / The Glowworms And Another 20 Stories (2005). Alfaguara has also published his novel "Vida de Alejandro, por Bucéfalo" / Life Of Alexander By Bucephalus, a chronicle that recreates the life of the Macedonian conqueror Alexander from his famous horse's perspective. Since the year 2000 he is co-director of the literary review "El Problema de Yorick".

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The story Just As It Was Back Then arose from a news item heard on the radio, and according to the author, "the characters and details of this story are fictitious. The drama which inspired me to write it, on the other hand, is real. Far too real."

I have always liked the smell of mothballs. It reminds me of when I was a girl, when my mother put the winter clothes away, and I used to wait for her to leave the room so I could shut myself inside the wardrobe, breathing in deeply so that the fragrance would fill me completely. I enjoyed hearing her calling me at the top of her voice while she looked for me all over the house, thinking that I had gone downstairs to play in the street or to a neighbour's house, although I always came out as soon as I heard her beginning to get angry. And when I came out I usually felt quite dizzy and I had to cover my face because the light that came in through the window hurt my eyes after spending so long in the dark...

Saturday, 6th September

A man reports his wife missing

According to police sources, L. M. S., a 43-year-old taxi driver and resident of this area, reported the disappearance of his wife, M. J. G., a 42-year-old housewife. The man found his wife missing on Wednesday night when he arrived home after finishing work. It was after two o'clock in the morning, because, according to the man, his job often involves him arriving home very late at night...

...Then my mother would come in. Where were you, child? And I would look at her as innocently as I could. Nowhere, I was here all along. It's just that I was invisible. And she would laugh and her anger would vanish in an instant. My poor mother. I wish she were still alive. When I became pregnant she was the only person who opposed the wedding, the only one who told me I was too young to get married. It happened when I was studying my A-levels, on an end-of-course trip. I was only eighteen years old and Luis was nineteen. I found out I was pregnant almost exactly the same day as I got my university entrance exam results. I had passed with good marks. I could have studied nursing, which is what I had always dreamed. But then my son came along and that changed everything. Luis's parents insisted that we had to get married immediately and my father went along with them. My mother thought that I should keep studying and said that we were still barely children and that if we got married, we would be throwing our lives out the window. They ignored her. Luis's parents had this flat and they furnished it for us with these dark and ugly monstrosities that we still have and which have always made me feel like a stranger in my own home. At the end of summer, when I was hardly showing, we got married. I would have started university by then. I wanted to go to Madrid, to a hall of residence, and then to share a flat with some of my course mates. But instead I found myself dressed in white before an altar at a wedding that didn't even seem mine because I had always thought that I would be happy on my wedding day and that morning all I could do was cry with sorrow. And then the banquet, so grand, so full of people I didn't know because Luis's father was a lawyer and had lots of obligations, and everyone

kissed me and congratulated me and told me how beautiful I looked. Next to me was a boy a scarcely knew who I was being forced to marry because of something that had happened on an end-of-year trip to Majorca, a night I could barely remember because I was so drunk. But on my wedding day I didn't drink because I was three-months pregnant, even though I wasn't showing yet. Luis drank; in fact he drank a lot. I don't know if he thought it would give him courage or because he was still only a boy and didn't really know what he was doing. He drank so much that by the time the dessert came he could hardly hold his head up. And then when the orchestra began to play the Blue Danube and they made us stand up to begin the dance, he was so drunk that he threw up on his morning coat and stained my white shoes and the bottom of my dress. I didn't know what to do or where to hide, and although I realized that everyone was staring at me, I had the strange feeling that it wasn't really happening to me at all. How embarrassing, how embarrassing, muttered my mother-in-law, wringing her hands. Luis had to be taken to hospital because he was very pale. However, later that night he felt better and wanted to make love. In for a penny, in for a pound, is how he put it. But I didn't let him. He got angry, really angry. Still I said no. The same as on many other occasions over the last years, twenty-three years in fact, when he has come home completely sloshed after spending the night bar-hopping and crawled into bed reeking of booze and cigarettes and other things I'd rather not know about, determined that I had to let him do whatever he wanted to me, because he was my husband and it was his right...

"I am very worried" the man told the police officer who took his report at the police station because it seems that his wife had never left the house without warning. "When I left her in the morning at around eight o'clock, she seemed normal to me..."

...And he would shout it over and over again, groping me with those hands that reminded me of claws, until I would finally get up and run into the bathroom, locking the door behind me. He would come stag-

gering after me shouting it's my right, it's my right, open up, whore, and even worse things, and then he'd start beating on the door until I finally opened it so that he would stop making a scene, not for the neighbours sake, but for my children, as it didn't seem right that they should hear their father shouting those atrocities at their mother. But now the children have left home, he can beat on the door as much as he likes because I'll never unlock it again. Otherwise I might even go and report him to the police, like lots of women are doing nowadays. Although I've always thought that they probably don't take much notice of them. Because this world was made for men. There's no doubt about it. Anyway, why would I report him? The truth of the matter is that he's never hit me. He's shaken me violently a couple of times and left bruises on my arms and I've lost count of all the insults. But hitting, I mean really hitting me, he's never done that. He's hit my son, though. Often. Like that night my boy went out to an end-of-course dinner and he didn't get home until the following morning. He was sixteen years old and I didn't want to make an issue of it. I begged Luis to try and think back to when we were that age and we did exactly the same kind of things. But he paid no attention. He spent all night saying that when my son got home he was going to kill him. It would have been better if my poor child hadn't bothered coming home at all that morning because when his father saw him come through the door he went for him like a madman and gave him such a beating that I think that if I hadn't pulled Luis off him, he really would have killed him. I'm not surprised that he left home as soon as he turned eighteen. He said he was going camping with some friends, five years ago now, and I haven't seen him since. I've had very little news, in fact. He hasn't even phoned, probably because he's afraid his father will answer. He has written to me three or four times telling me not to worry, that he's living in the Canary Islands and that he's earning good money working as a waiter. But I imagine it's not going so well for him because at the end of each letter, almost as if in passing, he always asks me to send him some money via postal order. I send him whatever I can, just a few pesetas that I've had to get from my father.

Because once I mentioned it to Luis and he went berserk. That lazy bastard won't get a penny from me, he's no son of mine...

...However, it seems that the woman has suffered several serious nervous breakdowns, so the police decided to send out a search party urgently...

...And that's the way things stand. I would have hoped for something completely different for him. But life almost always decides for us, I know that too well. My daughter has fared better, though. She's always been a good student and she's been lucky because her father has always respected her more than my son and me. My little girl here, my little girl there. It's been like that ever since she was born. I am ashamed even to think about it, but at times I have felt jealous. I think that if Luis had paid half as much attention to us as he did to her, things might have been different. But it wasn't like that. She was his baby and we barely existed. She's just turned twenty, but Luis is still completely besotted with her, as if she were still three years old. Even so, he doesn't get to enjoy her company nowadays because she's spent the last two years studying in another town. She's studying law and sharing a flat with some friends. I even envy her that. I must be a very bad mother. Then again, I don't think it's really been my fault. She's always taken her father's side. Always. When she was tiny and she heard Luis and I having an argument, she would come running to kick me in the shins. Bad Mummy, bad Mummy. And Luis would roar with laughter. Later on, when she grew up, it was even worse because she didn't even act like a daughter to me because no daughter can treat her mother with so much contempt, as if instead of being her mother I were her maid. I was always squabbling with her; we were always saying horrible things to each other, the worst things that came into our heads. Even so, I have missed her terribly since she went away. Because when she left, I realized how lonely I was, as if I were the only person in the world, and it seemed as though the four walls of the house were going to cave in on me. Since my children are no longer with me, I feel as if my life is no use to anyone, not even myself, and

everything that had once seemed important to me is now ‘completely worthless. I don’t even have the comfort of being able to go and cry on my mother’s shoulder because one day in June, three years ago, they discovered she had cancer and by the end of summer she was already dead, suddenly, like a candle going out. Perhaps I should go out more, go for a walk in the afternoon. I don’t know. Maybe I should go and talk to my neighbours, even join in the gossip on the stairs, like they do. Although if I did, I would spoil all their fun because they spend a lot of time talking about me. I have heard them in the courtyard. They say that I’m strange and a bit crazy. But I don’t care about that. I know that I’m not like them. If at least Luis had changed a little, if time had softened his character a bit. But I have lost all hope now because time has only made him worse. The same as everything. Everything gets worse over time, and I stopped asking myself a long time ago if my husband still loves me. Yet when we were first married things weren’t so bad. We worked ourselves to the bone. Luis got a job in that office as a clerk with a letter of recommendation his father wrote-and I was at home with the baby. I could never have guessed how much work having a baby is. We were always exhausted in the evening but we were young and we still felt like laughing and having fun. Of course I missed my friends from college because they went on to study and got on with the lives they had planned for themselves, whereas I, without even realizing it, had become a mother and housewife almost overnight. But I tried to keep my spirits up because I thought that when my son got a bit older and began to go to school, I would be able to get a job outside of the house, maybe even keep studying. My mistake was to get pregnant again when my son was barely three years old. That tied me to the house for the rest of my days and it also made Luis turn into what he is now. But then again, maybe it wasn’t like I’m telling it. Maybe it’s unfair for me to blame my daughter. But when she was born Luis started to say that we couldn’t go on the way we were, that he wasn’t earning enough with his job and that now there was another mouth to feed. Then he asked for the loan to buy the taxi, and I hardly ever saw him any more be-

cause he'd spend the day working in the street. And when he finished, he'd go to the bar with his friends and he got home later and later and drunker and drunker every night...

...After forty-eight hours, the police had still not found any trace of the woman so yesterday, Friday, two officers went to the couple's house to look for clues they thought might be useful for the search. After seeking the necessary documents, they carried out a meticulous search of the house...

...And I spent all day slogging away with the housework and the children, especially with my girl, who was naughty even as a little tot, and she seemed to know when I was at my tireddest and she'd cry and carry on even more. Once when I was really desperate I grabbed her from her cot and shook her really hard, screaming at her to shut up. God forgive me. Shut up, shut up, shut up, over and over again a hundred times, until I saw that my son was staring at me in fear and on the verge of tears. Then I had both of them crying all afternoon. I also cried with them and I don't think I've ever stopped since that day. Yes, getting pregnant again was the last straw. To make matters worse, I got really fat, which didn't happen with my first pregnancy. The second time I blew up like a balloon and I could hardly recognize myself in the mirror. And of course because I hardly ever went out, I couldn't lose all the extra weight I was carrying around and I stayed fat. I was twenty-two when my daughter was born. My school friends were still studying and I was a fat woman stuck at home all day with two small children. Fat pig. How many times has Luis said that to me? Fat pig, fat pig, fat pig. It started as a joke, but then it wasn't any more. I could tell that he was serious and sometimes he even screwed his face up in disgust. He no longer wanted to look at me, let alone touch me. Except when he came home drunk and any old thing would do. Then he'd lie on me and relieve himself in next to no time and then he'd turn over and start snoring. But not any more. I'm determined not to let him do that any more. Although sometimes I miss the time when it was only the two of us and my son, when the weekend came and we'd

lock ourselves in our bedroom and frolic until the wee small hours. But that didn't last long because we stopped being young. At least I stopped being young the day my husband told me I was a fat pig and started looking at me in disgust. Then he wasn't satisfied telling me I was a fat pig and he'd also say that I was stupid and that I was becoming an idiot from spending so much time at home. He even made me cancel my subscription to my book club because he told me it was a waste of money, that a housewife like me didn't need so many books and that I should make do with my magazines. The worst thing of all is that I thought maybe he was right, that I was completely useless. There were days were I felt so dejected that I couldn't even get out of bed. I was so bad that even my GP realized and forced me to go to see a specialist. The pills I was prescribed help a little but I don't really like taking them because they leave me feeling empty. And anyway, I know that what I've got can't be cured with pills. Years ago, when my children were still little and we were always broke, at least I had concerns and things to think about. But I don't even have that any more. Now I'm all on my own and nothing matters any more. Sometimes I wonder what would happen if I became invisible one day. Would anyone notice? Would anyone care if I didn't exist? That's why I still can't get out of bed some mornings because I know that the day will weigh me down like a tombstone and I don't have the strength and I don't want to see anyone or for them to see me. I don't care if Luis tells me I'm mad and the neighbours hear him. I don't care if he abuses or shouts at me. I don't care about anything. I just want to turn invisible for once and for all, even though I know nobody will even notice. To turn invisible or vanish without a trace, which is more or less the same thing I suppose. So here I am, all curled up, filling my lungs with the smell of mothballs, just as when I was a girl and I used to hide among my mother's coats and her winter clothes. Just as it was back then.

...The officers could hardly believe their eyes when they found the missing woman in one of the wardrobes, where, as far as they could tell, she had been hiding since last Wednesday without her husband

suspecting her presence in the house. The woman was suffering from dehydration and was in a state of nervous shock so she was taken urgently to hospital. After being summoned to the police station, the man declared that he ignored what could have driven his wife to act in such a way. Later he refused to answer the questions of the journalists who were waiting for him outside. Some of the neighbours maintain that the woman was “a bit weird” but most of them say that they were a completely normal couple, like any other couple living in the building. There haven’t been any domestic incidences worth mentioning. The couple has two children, neither of whom is currently living with their parents.