

## MY FATHER WAS MADE OF STORIES

*Scientists say that humans are made of atoms,  
but a birdie told me that we're also made of stories.*

*Eduardo Galeano*

*My father was an engaging and skilled story teller. He had a knack for turning injustice into hope, and ignominy into dignity. He grew up in abject poverty, even though both his parents worked at back-breaking jobs. His father was a saltpetre miner and his mother, a laundry woman. He was the oldest of thirteen children, so from a young age he took it upon himself to help support the family. They lived in the Atacama Desert where wild life is scarce, but he managed to bring food home by trapping iguanas and downing wild turkeys with his slingshot. He also worked at odd jobs. This is one of his stories, as I remember him telling it at family gatherings.*

The gentlemen who sat at the square to have their shoes shone were always reading the newspaper, which meant that I had to look at the spread of words in front of me whether I liked it or not. Mama had already taught me the alphabet -- an exercise I had found quite useless and boring at the time -- but, as I worked away, looking at the headlines and the articles, I recalled my letters, started to put them together, and in no time at all I could figure out what the paper said. When I didn't understand something, I'd ask my client, he'd tell me, and so it went. Sometimes it'd take me three or four gentlemen to finish a story, while other times I never finished it because it continued on one of the inside pages; but all in all, I

had a good time reading the paper while I worked. That's it. Nothing wacky about it.

That's why I didn't understand the fuss when the gentlemen started to talk about me as if I were from Mars and then got the priests from across the street to come and listen to me read. At first, I didn't want to do it because I was feeling like a freak, but then I thought about my job and not wanting to lose my clients, so I read a whole article to the priests. When I finished, everybody clapped, which made me feel even more stupid, and then the priests asked me to come to the church later on that day.

I had to think hard about that, because at home we didn't believe in god, religion or priests. Not only that, mama and papa had always taught me that religion was like a potion that turned people into morons and that nuns and priests loved to wash kids' brains so that they couldn't think for themselves.

But, after much deliberation with myself, I did go to the church to see the priests. First of all, I wanted to see what a church looked like inside; second of all, I wanted to know why the priests had asked me to come see them; and third of all, I decided that I wouldn't let the priests wash my brain.

It was nice and cool inside the church, but a little dark for my liking. After a while, right at the front, I made out the cross with famous Jesus Christ nailed to it, which scared the shit out of me. Also, there were statues of ladies and guys along the sides, which I found pretty weird, as they were all rolling their eyes. The only one I liked was a beautiful lady with fair skin and blue eyes, holding a baby in her arms. "That must be the much-talked-about Virgin Mary," I told myself.

Then I heard a deep voice behind me:

“Welcome to the house of the lord, Manuel!”

I turned around, and sure enough, one of the two priests who had come out to the square was standing there in his black dress, smiling as if he'd seen the Virgin Mary come alive. He sat down on a bench and motioned for me to sit next to him. He said that it was amazing that I'd learned to read by myself being only four years old and asked me who my parents were and where I lived. I knew better, so I didn't tell him their names, just that my papa was a miner and we lived in the workers' camp.

Then he asked me if I wanted another job.

“What job?!” I asked.

“Well, my son, we need a smart, responsible boy like you to ring the church bells for our morning masses,” he responded.

“And what did you say the pay was?” I asked, knowing full well that he hadn't said anything about pay.

“Books, my son,” he answered.

“What kind of books?” I wanted to know.

“Stories,” he said and paused before adding:

“Very interesting and entertaining stories.”

“Do I get to keep these books, or do I have to give them back to you?” I pressed on.

“You can keep them, my son! They will be all yours to read at home, share with your parents and your brothers and sisters, lend to your neighbours... They’ll be all yours,” he repeated, another one of those ‘I’m seeing the Virgin Mary in the flesh’ smiles on his face.

Papa and mama had a crate full of books about the workers' movement -- books with words like "capitalism," "anarchism," "exploitation," "communism," "struggle," "proletariat," and "unions" on the cover. I knew that someday I would get around to reading them, but for now, wouldn't it be nice to also have my own crate of books?

“Okay, when do I start?!” I asked.

“Tomorrow, my son. You can start tomorrow,” the priest responded.

We went up the steeple so that I could figure out the bells, but it turned out that I was too short to reach the rope attached to the clapper. While the priest went down to get another piece of rope, I looked out the windows and saw the whole town, the mine and miles and miles of *pampa*. I was impressed. It was even better than being on a *tamarugo* tree because the steeple was way, way taller.

Our collection of shacks looked like a field of mushrooms on the right side of the square, in sharp contrast to the tidy blocks of the employees' cement houses and the sprawling grounds of the bosses' residences on the other side. Why was it that those of us who did all the hard work lived in

such ramshackle places while the bosses luxuriated in two and three-storied wooden houses with turrets, verandahs and gardens? Not only that. From my vantage point I could also see their huge theatre, their social club with tennis courts at the back and a riveted-steel swimming pool! Rumour had it that the rich people had a swimming pool, but I had never believed it. Where would they get all that water from? We had one public bathroom and one water tap per block on our side of town, the explanation being that water was very scarce in the middle of the desert, which made sense to me. But now I had seen it with my own two eyes: the bosses had a huge swimming pool filled to the rim with fresh, clear water.

I was so pissed that without thinking twice about it, I yelled “assholes” with all my might. Then I realized that the gentlemen at the square had turned their heads in the direction of the steeple, so I jumped back as quick as a wink and hid on the other side of the bell. From there I could see our soccer field and the train station, and then the mine with its freaky machinery, its smelters – which come to think of it looked a bit like the bosses’ swimming pool, only that they were full of bright red, bubbly saltpetre brew – and tall chimneys spewing thick, black smoke. Beyond all that, the *caliche* fields covered the *pampa* with an uneven, motley crust and the Atacama Desert spread out like the rugged skin of an old man’s face. Further east, I could make out the shimmering lagoons that gave life to flamingoes, llamas and vicuñas and at the very back, the pointy snow-capped volcanoes and peaks of the Andes.

I still had my eyes hung on the jagged edge of the mountains against the vivid blue sky, when I heard the priest climbing the stairs. He had found a longer piece of rope, so we tied that one to the clapper. Now I could

reach it, but I didn't have enough strength in my arms to wag the rope so that the clapper could hit the rim of the bell more than once or twice at a time.

We stood there, the priest and I, trying to figure out what to do, when it came to me:

If we folded the rope and tied the end to the section closest to the clapper, we would end up with a loop. Then, I could put my legs through the loop, sit on the rope and swing!

That's what we did and, sure enough, it worked!

There was a clock on the inside wall of the steeple and that's how I knew when to ring the bells: two bongs at the quarter hour, four bongs at the half hour and at the hour, five, six, seven or eight, a pause, and then tons and tons of bongs.

I must admit that sometimes I got carried away and rang the bells for too long, but the priests never complained, so I would just swing on to my heart's content.

At the end of the week, I got my first pay: a book.

That day I walked home with my book hidden under my shirt because I didn't want mama and papa to know that I was working at the church and that the priests had given me that book. Papa was at work and mama had gone out, so I sat at the table and started to read. The words were pretty weird and I couldn't really understand the story, but I wasn't about to give

up, so I kept reading until zap! I a hand grabbed the book off the table and I heard mama's voice say:

“What's this? Who gave you this?”

What could I say? I told her the whole story.

“Why didn't you talk to us about it?” she asked.

I told her that part too.

“Didn't we explain to you that priests just want to brainwash kids?” she asked.

“Yes, but this priest didn't put even one finger on my head, never mind wash my brain, and if he had, I would've kicked him you-know-where and run away!” I responded.

First mama just looked at me, but then she started to laugh, and she laughed and laughed like I'd never seen her laugh before. She walked around the room holding on to her pregnant belly, sat down, got up again and kept on laughing. It was so funny that I started to laugh too and in no time my little sister Eva had also joined in.

When mama finally calmed herself, she explained to me what “brain washing” really meant and how that's exactly what the priest had wanted to do by offering me books that were nothing more than religious propaganda.

So, that was the end of my short, but fun career as a bell ringer.

*By all accounts, my father should've died as a child or at a young age -- nine of his siblings succumbed to malnutrition and diarrhea before reaching puberty; and the other three, to tuberculosis in their thirties and forties. But he beat the odds and made it to seventy-three. Perhaps his stories propelled him into the future. Stories are powerful and resilient, and my father was made of stories.*