

Pale eyes big white horse

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When he arrived, it was like a gift. The kind you only realize you wanted after you've had it for a while, because you have to get used to its being a gift, and being yours. That is exactly how he arrived, even though he had only arrived after he arrived, because I didn't really know right away I wanted that gift.

When he did arrive, it was an enormous pair of pale eyes peering at me through the fence during a long period of silence.

It happened every time I went out to the back of the house. If I washed clothes, if I took them off the line, if I swept the yard, if I closed the windows, there were the pale eyes stuck in the middle of the fence.

At first, I wanted to be polite, me, who never really cared about being polite, so I greeted him cheerfully, but. There was no answer. Just those eyes. I smiled to myself and thought what a goose!

Over the next days, I tried again and again, just out of annoyance. Just the eyes followed me wherever I went. So, I gave up.

To be honest, by the end of the first week I was fed up with that game of being watched, which I hadn't been invited to play and that wasn't even funny. I thought about knocking on the neighbor's door and saying that things couldn't go on like that, that I was being harassed, he was being inappropriate, but just like I was cranky, because, yes, I was becoming a cranky old woman, my neighbor was evasive – actually, the whole family was aloof – and we didn't speak to each other. I only knew, by chance, that they were expecting a nephew to arrive – we did share a wall in common, after all. No, speaking to her did not seem to be the best measure.

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So, therefore, I began to exercise self-control. Ignoring was the next strategy, so I ignored him. I could certainly feel his presence, always annoying and inconvenient, and feel him panting, but, I pretended he wasn't there.

Then, one damp and silent morning, when birds sing away the last drops of rain, on one of those mornings, while I hung out a line full of clothes under a wing of the laundry, I suddenly heard something that could have been

"G' morning!"

I turned calmly, I knew he had been standing there since early morning, and, though I couldn't swear to it, I thought I had heard g' morning!, I turned calmly and stared at those pale eyes. I won't reply, I thought, for all my frustrated attempts, but I couldn't resist: they were the strange eyes of a 12 or 13 year-old boy.

He placed his hand over his mouth, as if he had been caught doing something very naughty, and ran off into his house.

Maybe because I had never paid attention before, maybe because I was very annoyed at being constantly watched on my own property – me, having won my freedom at great cost, without having to ask for it, me, having transformed, at great cost, the last few years of loneliness into freedom; me, mature, at the brink of old age, emancipated, resolute and remorseless! – maybe because I was sincerely insulted with the rejection that came, for absolutely no reason, from the other side of the fence, though I hardly cared about rejection, maybe because. It was only after he ran, an awkward run where his hands were out of sync with his legs and his knees seemed like they couldn't keep up with his feet, it was only after he ran that I noticed. And because I noticed, I kept my eyes glued to the fence, not knowing what to say.

I was overcome with a feeling of disgust, when it's disgust at myself. My rudeness and coarseness fell on my head with no chance of pardon. And I was so uneasy that I barely slept that night. I prayed, like I hadn't in a long time, and I called out for Fatima and Francisco and asked them to watch over him and, if there was a chance, that I could manage to forgive myself.

For the next three days, I didn't go out to the yard and I didn't open the back door, out of pure shame for what I had done to the young boy and out of pure fear. I didn't want to run the risk of hurting him for anything in this world, as I certainly had hurt him. I, who had shut myself up, from sheer incapacity of hurting anyone at all, even that dose of pain you need for survival.

On the fourth day, there he was.

"Good morning!" I said without looking at him.

"G' morning!" he managed to reply. He put his hand over his mouth and ran inside.

It was quite a while before he managed to answer and stay. I smiled when he did.

"Today I'm going to make candy, you know?" I said, pretending aloofness. "Soft chocolate candy. Do you like it?"

He answered with a silly, drooling laugh, nodding his head; his black fringe, straight and shiny, flitting over his eyes, almost banging his forehead on the fence.

"So, I guess I'll keep some candy for you."

He laughed and said something, like a long conversation I couldn't understand. From then on, we would have long conversations like that.

Ever since my children had left home and headed off to their own lives, I had no longer made sweets and I couldn't remember the last time I had bought candy or small toys – toys that could fit through the gaps in the fence. And every day I thanked the pale-eyed boy, whose name I couldn't understand, for the joy he gave me again and again, renewing me throughout the day, just from seeing his face stuck between the gaps in the wooden fence. He woke in me my capacity to love. It was a simple love that made us talk, laugh and run back inside our houses. I may not have understood everything he tried to tell me, but he also didn't understand everything I tried to tell him. But. What we did understand – the joy of being together – was enough for us and would be for a long time.

Little by little, I got to know him better. There were restless days and calmer days.

On one of the calm days, he gave me a beautiful drawing of something I thought was a horse.

"Bihg", he said, while his disproportionate hands made enormoussness in the air.

"Whide", he said.

I was afraid I wouldn't understand something that was so beautiful, so I just smiled.

The next day, very early in the morning, I went downtown to find a big white horse. Actually, a white horse that could fit through the gap in the fence. I found quite a few. But. I didn't want just any horse among the many I saw, I wanted the one with shiny eyes and drooling lips and tongue dragging over his teeth, constantly forming a sweet smile. One that could somehow fit into the enormous circle the disproportionate hands had made in the air.

I arrived home at lunch time and went straight to the laundry, next to the fence. I opened the faucet, slapped the clothes around, coughed, sneezed, sang, but he didn't show up.

I went back later, in the afternoon, repeated all of the previous strategies, but he didn't show up.

I went back other times, impatiently, my heart skipping, my soul wanting to rejoice in the size of the gift, but he didn't show up.

He did show up, at six in the afternoon, when I was sad and upset. His face was sleepy, his black fringe messed up, his pale eyes squinting from so much light. He came towards the fence, with his big-stepping, clumsy gait, and told me things I couldn't understand. What I know, I know from the two big hands stuck to his

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childlike face, showing me he had been asleep, and his silly laugh, as if the whole situation – making me wait like that! – were very funny.

It was hard to get the package through the boards in the fence. We had to find a larger gap, and then it fitted, it finally fitted.

“My?” he said, and said it twenty times.

Even when I answered twenty times:

“It’s for you!” It was only when I asked him to open the package that he did so.

I can’t say what was going on behind those pale eyes. There was a deep silence and so happy so happy so happy that it hurt as if, in that strong body and huge hands of a 12 or 13 year-old boy, as if there were no space to be so happy!

The horse was right in front of him and he couldn’t touch it. A long time went by in silence, like this:

Then he asked:

“My?”

“Yours,” I answered, wanting to hold him with all a mother’s tenderness. “It’s all yours!”

“My?” he asked over twenty times, unable to touch the horse.

“Yours,” I replied twenty times, my face pressed against two boards in the fence.

When he touched the horse, he did it as gently as his huge hands would let him and, affectionately, he taught the animal that it was myyyyy. Then, he placed it against his strong chest and ran inside.

Me? I stood there a while with my face between the boards, moved by thoughts.

From then on, our encounters were a threesome: first, he arranged the horse’s face between two boards and, I believe, told it not to move – and the horse obeyed. After that, it was his turn to position himself, and he would watch me wash my clothes, hang them out, sweep the yard.

Sometimes he would ask me for a story and I would tell him one. His eyes would open even wider when I told him that Jack – the one with the beanstalk – met the giant. A giant was much more impressive than a big bad wolf and he would say over and over:

“Jaint?” to which I replied:

“Giant.” Until I could go on telling the story. Sometimes I just couldn’t because time simply ran ahead of us.

Sometimes he would ask for a song and I would sing. He would then clap his clumsy hands and sing along the last syllables of the last words. And we were happy.

One day he gave me a pretty drawing of something I thought was a heart.

“You,” he said happily.

“For me?”

“You,” he said. And no matter how many times I thanked him, he kept on saying you, until, no longer able to contain my emotion, I answered:

“I like you a lot too.”

He laughed and looked at the big white horse and looked back at me and I immediately answered:

“And I also like your horse a lot.”

He picked up the toy and went back inside the house, but not without first waving and saying goodbye many times.

But, then, one day it happened. One day he broke the board on the fence; he was a very strong boy, as 12 or 13 year-old boys usually are, and invaded my yard. And I was afraid.

I asked him, politely, to go back to his side and fetch the big white horse that was all sad on the other side, and we would talk like we used to, but. He wouldn’t listen to me and just kept on coming towards me, with his pale eyes and drooling laugh and huge hands, kept coming towards me and I was scared and he hugged me with too much strength, the strength of 12 or 13 year-old boys, and I was scared, and he started to kiss my face and hair and I was scared and started to scream and he was scared and screamed and I couldn’t get away and he wouldn’t let go and I screamed and he screamed.

His uncle came to take him away, not without a dry apology.

By the end of the afternoon, I heard a hammer adding some extra boards to the other side of the fence.

Over the next days, I no longer saw the pale eyes. I didn’t know what to do with a part of me that was all missing him and all guilt; he was just a child, I kept saying to myself, a child! And when I went over to my neighbor’s house to apologize, all I heard was that he was no longer there. I wanted to ask if he had taken along the big white horse, which might have made me feel better, but. I didn’t ask. I went back home with what, throughout my entire life as a mature, emancipated, resolute woman, would be my greatest loss – and for such a great loss, though the years may pass, there is no cure. It was lost in the threat I become when I am afraid of being loved like that, with a love so immense, like a shower of stars in my own darkness, a love like that. It was lost in the gap – between two boards in a fence, in the depths of two pale eyes and a silly, drooling smile – which I myself had caused.