

“Pride is a plague that dominates the world:  
it makes the great look small, and the small, ridiculous.”

(Vicente Calvo Acacio)

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”Ojos de gato! Ojos de gato!” jeered the girls, excited to have something to yell about on a Friday afternoon as school let out for the weekend. “Cat’s eyes! Cat’s eyes! Green-eyed cat’s eyes!”

Maria covered her ears to block their spiteful chant as she scurried out the convent grounds and headed towards her home and refuge. “It rolls right off my back,” she averred aloud, feigning nonchalance. Yet her face told another story.

Pausing on the other side of the broad street to pull up her socks, she swung around on slender legs and looked over at the fortress-like building. Some of her classmates were still running around, playing happily. El Colegio de Las Damas Negras\* was not a happy place for Maria, however. Scowling, she kicked a stone tempestuously and resumed walking. Why did they have to taunt her so?

Cutting across Chamberí Plaza, she turned right onto Santa Engracia Street. *I guess*, she allowed, *I do deserve it, in a way*. She could be annoying, sometimes. She tripped over a segment of the sidewalk where a tree root had raised the pavement. *Okay*, she admitted to herself: *a lot of the time*. Sighing, she ran her fingers through shoulder-length chestnut-brown hair and trudged along several blocks, oblivious to the annoyed pedestrians forced to step out of her way to avoid a collision. Stopping at the busy intersection of José Abascal, Maria again reached down to pull up her socks. When safe to cross she strode on, happily missing an unnoticed token left by a neighborhood dog opposite the water tower of Canal de Isabel II. Crossing María de Guzmán St. she turned abruptly into the first doorway. *Fine!* she conceded, shoving open the wrought-iron door and swinging it shut behind her with a bang. She wouldn’t deny it. She could drive her peers and teachers crazy. *But I don’t mean any harm! I can’t help it! I can’t sit still and be quiet like other kids. It’s not my fault if I’m a little restless. At least I’m not boring!*

She strode past Secundino the concierge without a glance and hurried up marble steps to the first-floor landing. *And even if I am a bit of a nuisance, that’s no reason for them to make fun of my eyes! So what if they’re green! And...almond-shaped! And...well, they do slant down a bit, but it’s no big deal!*

Sidestepping the elevator, she commenced the steep climb to the sixth floor. She always took the stairs when she was alone. *Not that I’m afraid to take the elevator by myself, or anything*, she told herself unconvincingly. *It’s just that...well...I need to get my energy out now* - she stopped on the third floor to catch her breath and then continued her ascent – *before I greet Mama!*

Even at home she was reminded of her faults. She sighed. *Why do I have to be so difficult? Why can’t I be a normal, eleven-nearly-twelve-year-old girl?* Heaven knew she’d tried. She’d confessed it enough times to Padre Colombo.

“You can be patient with yourself, no?” the kind priest would reply in his heavy Italian accent. “Give yourself time to grow up? To mature?”

The fact that Padre understood and didn’t judge her was comforting, but patience was not something she excelled in. How long would this maturing thing take?

Mama greeted Maria with a smile that changed to a frown when she saw her face. “Nervous Mary, what’s wrong?” she asked, kissing her daughter tenderly on each cheek while dispensing a generous crimson imprint as usual.

Maria exhaled and rubbed her cheeks with the palms of her hands to erase the vivid lip impressions she knew by habit were there. *If only Mama would stop calling me that! - Nervous Mary, for being ‘puro nervio’, a fidgety bundle of nervous energy!* Sometimes she said it in Spanish, “MariNervios,” and other times in English. Mama’s own mother had been an immigrant from England, so Mama could speak English and liked to sprinkle an English word here and there when she had the inclination. *I know Mama means well, but does she have to give me a nickname that constantly reminds me of the one thing I can’t stand about myself? Why can’t she just call me Marūchi like everyone else?*

“Nada Mamá,” she replied quickly, looking up at her proper mother with as convincing a smile as she could muster. She didn’t want to disclose that her schoolmates had been making fun of her again, much less reveal the reason for their ridicule! *Though she’ll no doubt hear about it anyway.*

She frowned. Some of her classmates were probably gossiping about it to their mothers that very minute. *Then one of them will probably run into Mama at the salon and spout it out to her! Or worse.* Maria gulped. *Headmistress Mère Supérieure, Mother Superior, might phone Mama to complain!*

Maria’s hand still smarted, her face becoming hot as she remembered the pain and, worse, the humiliation when Madame M., her teacher, in her long, black habit, plump cheeks like bright, red tomatoes protruding from her raven veil, smacked her repeatedly with a ruler in front of the whole gaping class, screaming the school motto all the while in her native French: “Simple dans ma vertu, forte dans mon devoir! Simple in virtue, steadfast in duty!” How Maria had grown to despise those words! She would never live it down.

Maria wanted to kick herself. *Why did I have to stick my foot out to trip up Teresita? That has to be the stupidest thing I’ve ever done! Well, maybe not. Okay, I was jealous! I admit it! I’m full of pride! And as the saying goes, ‘Pride is a plague that dominates the world. It makes the great look small, and the small, ridiculous.’ – So, I’m ridiculous! I know! Still, what’s so special about Teresita that she always gets called up to the board? Teacher’s pet! Always gets the answers right, too. She’s so darned perfect! And popular! It drives me crazy!*

Then Maria remembered the pained look on her classmate’s face. Not so much when Maria tripped her, causing her to crash to the floor, as when Madame M. pulled Maria aside and began striking her with the ruler. Teresita actually had tears in her eyes, as if it hurt her to see Maria being punished so harshly. That made Maria feel even worse about what she’d done.

*But I didn't mean for Teresita to hit her head and get hurt!* That's what she told Headmistress Mère Supérieure when she was sent to her office, and it was the truth. *I never lie! I just wasn't thinking!* That was her problem; she was always saying and doing things without thinking! *No wonder everyone hates me. Even Mama.*

But Maria knew even as she thought the words that they weren't true. Mama loved her. Her younger brother Luis, who everyone said was smarter than her, loved her. Even her domineering, sometimes scary military officer Papa cared for her. In fact, deep down she knew that her classmates didn't hate her either.

She handed her book bag to their young maid Belarmina, who winked and gently tweaked her ear. Typically, children got their ears tweaked by friends and family on their birthday, one gentle tug - or painful yank, in some cases! - for each year of life. But Bela gave Maria and Luis a tweak whenever she sensed they needed encouragement, a sign of affection that seldom failed to elicit a smile.

Maria sat down at the kitchen table while Bela, moving a porcelain vase of fresh yellow and ivory carnations to one side, placed her afternoon snack in front of her. Señora de Muñoz accompanied her daughter with a look of concern, sipping her just brewed cortado while fingering the embroidered flowers on the spotless, pressed and starched tablecloth. Maria's eyes drifted to her mother's hand, so clean and smooth, her well-manicured fingernails a shimmering soft pink. Then she looked down with a frown at her own chewed nails.

Remembering the events of the day Maria squirmed, wishing there was something she could do to erase the lingering feelings of guilt and frustration. She took the linen napkin from the table and draped it over her lap. As she spread the butter on her sugar cookies and dipped them in her warm, sweetened milk, an idea came to her. "Mama, could I go with you to Mass later? You're going to The Basilica of Jesus de Medinaceli, right? It's Friday."

Mama, with her stylish, undulating light brown hair parted a little to one side, turned to Maria with a look of pleasant surprise. "I only go to the Basilica on first Fridays. Today's a second Friday." She smiled. "But I *will* be attending Mass at *our* parish as usual if you'd like to accompany me. Provided you change out of your school clothes and finish your homework first." Raising an eyebrow, she reached over and gently rubbed away the remaining smudges on Maria's cheeks. "Be sure to wash your face and comb your hair with cologne." To Señora de Muñoz, who never missed the daily seven p.m. Mass, it was important to always look your best.

Maria nodded. *Gladly!* She was always eager to shed the dark, shapeless uniform and replace it with colorful, fashionable clothes. Though she'd have preferred to go to the Basilica with such an urgent prayer request. *Just in case it's true what people say...that when you pray before the statue of Jesus de Medinaceli, and kiss His feet, and present three petitions, He's sure to grant you one of them!*

Maria leaned back in her chair and heaved a sigh. *I'll just have to pray harder. I really need God to answer my prayer, and help me behave and grow up, extra quick! And while I'm at it, I'll ask the Virgin Mary*

*to pray for me, too. Jesus always listens to her requests! Why, He even turned water into wine when she asked Him to!*

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Maria smiled. It felt good to see Mama pleased with her, especially after her awful day. As she followed her into Our Lady of the Angels parish, dipping the fingers of her right hand into the holy water and making the sign of the cross, she felt her tensions subside. Approaching the pew where they always sat, she genuflected and joined her mother, kneeling to pray.

Silently reflecting on their brief, three-minute walk to church, just the two of them, Maria recalled how Mama had complimented her. She'd just finished memorizing a poem for homework that she'd been working on all week by Saint Teresa of Avila, and while reciting it proudly to Mama as they walked along, she'd tried to put her heart into it:

“Let nothing trouble you, let nothing frighten you;  
All things pass, God never changes;  
With patience all things are possible.  
Whoever has God lacks nothing.  
God alone is sufficient.”

Mama had paused when they'd reached the church, standing a few feet from the doorway to keep out of the way of other communicants arriving for Mass, and encouraged Maria with a nod to finish reciting the whole poem before they went in together.

Now Maria opened her eyes slightly, just enough to peek over and see her mother praying fervently at her side. Would she ever learn to be good, like Mama? Her eyes traveled to the statue of another mother, above the altar...the Blessed Mother, with Baby Jesus in her arms.

The air was heavy with sweet-smelling incense, and as usual, her eyes began to sting. Closing them once more, she began to rub them, all the while remembering Mama's rare words of praise that were like vitamins to her soul, boosting her confidence: “*Muy bien, Hija! You remembered all the words and recited them beautifully.*”

*Yes, things will get better.* Maria felt hopeful that if she tried very hard, with the Blessed Mother's prayers she would be a changed girl when she returned to school on Monday.

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Maria did not return to school on Monday, however. For that very weekend, a wave of violence erupted against the Catholic Church which history books would refer to as the Burning of the Convents. All over Madrid, as well as in many other parts of Spain, unbridled rioters set fire to churches, convents, and parochial schools. And the governmental authorities of the newly established Second Republic did little to stop them. Maria's school and parish were untouched; but on Monday afternoon at three o'clock, two schools from neighboring Cuatro Caminos were ablaze: Nuestra Señora de las Maravillas and San José.

Eventually under the new Constitution, Catholic religious orders were banned from teaching, and all parochial schools were taken over by the government or ordered closed.

“What a relief!” exclaimed Maria upon learning her school had been closed. No longer would she have to deal with Headmistress Mère Supérieure, Madame M., or her unsympathetic classmates! She shoved her uniform deeper into the closet and pulled out her favorite yellow blouse and soft fitted skirt.

Despite all the turmoil and political upheaval, Maria was content. For she’d not witnessed any of the violence firsthand and hadn’t a clue what it was all about. Nor did she have any way of knowing that the mayhem of the present moment...foreshadowed very difficult days yet to come.

\* El Colegio de las Damas Negras (The School of the Ladies in Black), a Catholic school for girls from well-to-do families, was run by French nuns dressed all in black, including their veils. (Hence their name.) It was located on Paseo del Cisne, Swan Avenue, now called Avenida de Eduardo Dato. The school is still there, but the name has been changed to Colegio Blanca de Castilla.