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Story of a Monster

de
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traducción de
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(fragmento en inglés)

To Asunta Yong-Fang
In memoriam

The question is the following: why, in which way, and how does the production of images take part in the destruction of human beings?

Georges Didi-Huberman

The image is not a simple piece of what is visible, [but] is a staging of the visible.

Jacques Rancière

CHARACTERS

A GIRL
HER MOTHER
HER FATHER
A JOURNALIST

How much can we know about them? What do we think
we know? What have we been told?

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This text is deeply rooted in what became widely known in Spain as *el caso Asunta*, or “the case of Asunta”. In the play, however, truth and fiction deliberately merge and collide, with some bits of information being revealed while others remain hidden. For that reason, under no circumstances should the dialogue or action be taken as snippets of reality, of what actually happened.

I would like to express my gratitude to Mark Guscini for generously sharing his research with me, and for being so willing to discuss it and answer all of my questions. His book, *The Murder of Asunta Yong Fang*, is published by Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

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Once Upon a Time

4711. Year of the Serpent. Fade in. After a moment or two, a small light illuminates the backdrop of the stage, silhouetting the Chinese shadow puppet of a MONSTER.

JOURNALIST

A long, long time ago, there was a monster called Nian. According to legend, this monster was half dragon and half unicorn. With a big head and very sharp fangs. Perhaps you are not familiar with Nian. It lives at the bottom of the sea, where no light reaches, and where no man can breathe. Once a year, Nian would come to the surface and devour everything in its path. Those who lived near the sea ran, terrified, to hide in the mountains. Then one day, a stranger came to the village. A man with a red tunic and a big white beard. The villagers warned him that Nian would soon appear. But the man very calmly said he would take care of the monster. No one believed him. When night fell, Nian appeared, furious and hungry. It went up to the first house, where the old man was waiting for it. The monster stopped when it saw the mysterious stranger's red tunic. Just then, hundreds of fireworks went off, filling the sky with color and making a deafening noise. Terrified, Nian ran back to the sea. When the villagers returned, they saw that their houses, animals and crops were all fine, and they found the old man safe and sound, so they asked him to share his secret with them. He told them that the color red, bright lights, and the noise of firecrackers were the three things that had scared off the monster. From that time on, it became a tradition in China to ring in the new year by decorating streets in red, performing dragon dances, lighting firecrackers and setting off fireworks, in hopes that the monster would not show up that year, making it a happy and prosperous one.

Silence. Little by little, the light begins to reveal a new figure that will replace the monster: the figure of a man.

JOURNALIST

This folk tale explains how the Chinese welcome in the new year. The protagonist of this story took part in that celebration only once. Maybe now, like you, she doesn't know anything about Nian either.

Fade out

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Once Upon a Time

Fade in to reveal a piano and a little girl seated at it. On the piano is a metronome in the shape of a pyramid. The man from the previous scene is now a JOURNALIST. The JOURNALIST walks over to adjust the weight of the pendulum to a speed of 60ppm: "larghetto." The GIRL settles herself on the bench, making her back very straight and placing her hands on the keys. Just then the JOURNALIST places a coin

on each hand. One of them falls to the floor. The GIRL doesn't seem to be aware of his presence as he picks it up and puts her hands in the proper position: her fingers should curve over the keys, as if she were holding a ball. She begins playing L'Arabesque Op.100, No. 2, by J. F. Bürgmüller.

JOURNALIST

I love a good story.

The music drowns out his words. Nonchalantly, the JOURNALIST returns to the piano and depresses the damper pedal. The GIRL doesn't seem to notice. The sound of the piano now becomes background music.

JOURNALIST

I love a good story. Not just children's stories either. We adults also have our own stories. And I'm not talking about books or movies. Well I am, but don't you find it odd? I mean the thing about stories, the fact that they've been around practically as long as man has. Think of Altamira or Lascaux. Gilgamesh, the Iliad... the Bible itself! We need to explain the world around us, and that's what we use stories for. That's why I studied journalism. The best stories are always out there, among us. When I was little, I used to love news talk shows. Seeing what was happening and why. Having access to the way people think. Understanding the way they behave. Deep down, that's what it's all about. I love good literature, but what can't be found in life itself? I used to dream about doing what I do now, bringing these stories to people, helping them to understand what's going on. Sometimes I think of journalism as a simple thing, telling just the facts about what happened. Nothing further from reality. Good journalism goes way beyond that. Good journalism isn't just a description. You've got to select the information, condense it and choose the best words to analyze, show and explain events. But above all, a good journalist is someone who isn't afraid of the truth. Obviously, the first thing you need is a good story. I like to think I'm not the one choosing the stories I tell; the stories choose me. When this thing happened... everyone in the area was shocked. No one understood what could have happened. I felt like it was my duty, like a new story had chosen me to tell it.

The GIRL seated at the piano drops the coin again. The JOURNALIST places it once more on the back of her hand. Then he sets the weight on the pendulum of the metronome in motion once more. This time it's set at 66ppm: "adagio." The GIRL plays the piece again.

GIRL

(in time) La, ti, do, ti, la.

La, ti, do, re, mi.

Re, mi, fa, so, la.

La, ti, do, re, mi.

JOURNALIST

People like seeing stories on television and reading about them in newspapers because it makes them feel safe, because there are things that only happen to other people.

The coin falls once more and the GIRL stops again. The JOURNALIST puts it back

on her hand and she resumes playing. She continues to ignore his presence. The JOURNALIST picks up a piece of chalk and draws a line on the floor. Next to it he writes the word "window." Or better yet, "observatory."

~~ventana~~ *mirador*
window observatory

JOURNALIST

This is our city. A city that feels more like a town. A town you can feel safe in. A town you can feel at home in. Maybe you also live in a place like this. Where nothing ever happens. Look, you can see it. You can feel how peaceful it is. People know their neighbors, they greet each other whenever they cross paths. Here, every day seems like the day before, and that's why, when something happens, it's very hard to keep it a secret.

GIRL

(in time) La, ti, do, ti, la.

La, ti, do, re, mi.

Re, mi, fa, so, la.

La, ti, do, re, mi.

JOURNALIST

Then the day arrives when our town becomes a stage. The day arrives when the stories on the page can now be seen through the window we have right in front of us.

GIRL

Mi, mi, fa, re, re.

So, re, mi, do, mi.

La, ti, do, ti, la.

La, ti, do, re, mi.

Re, mi, fa, so, la...

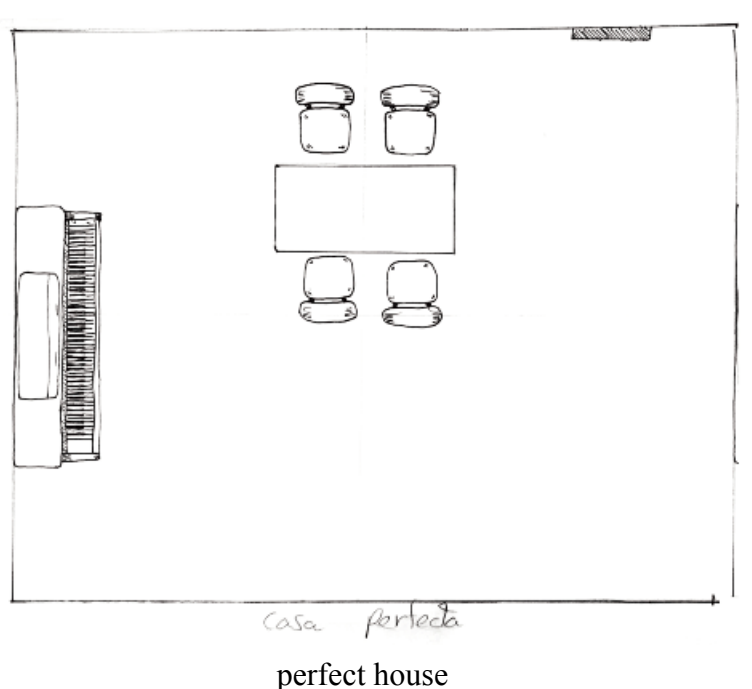
The coin falls. This time the GIRL gets up to retrieve it herself. She balances it as best she can and goes on playing.

JOURNALIST

This is the story of a family. A good family. A perfect family. You don't need me to tell you much more about them. Everyone knows what these families are like. Their house is perfect. We've all wanted to live in a house like theirs. We've all tried to make our house like theirs. You can picture this house, right?

The JOURNALIST takes out the chalk and draws a rectangle on the floor at the edge

of the stage. He erases the word “observatory.” The words he writes now are: “perfect house.”



On one of the walls inside this house, there is a framed silhouette of the three family members. First the father's, then the mother's and, finally, the girl's. On the black floor, the stage floor, sit four plain chairs and a table.



GIRL

La, ti, do, ti, la.

La, ti, do, re, mi.

Re, mi, fa, so, la...

JOURNALIST

A bright, well-behaved girl. A model child. An outstanding student, she plays the piano, violin, dances ballet, studies English, French and Chinese. She adores her parents. She likes pasta, eggs

and salami. She's calm, happy and extroverted. In the words of her mother:

MOTHER

My daughter is fun-loving. She works hard, but she plays hard, too. The queen of fun.

JOURNALIST

But also:

MOTHER

My daughter loves to make things up. She has a great imagination. The queen of fantasy.

JOURNALIST

Although her teachers don't think so.

Silence.

JOURNALIST

A strict mother who's very fussy about her daughter's care. A cultured woman from a good family who had an equally rigid and rigorous upbringing. She encourages her daughter to develop a love of culture and pursue several hobbies. She has a very active social life, since she and her family are well-known and well-liked. Her love of travel has taken her all over the world. She's good-natured, spontaneous and expressive.

MOTHER

I'm a passionate woman.

FATHER

And a bit hot-tempered.

Silence.

JOURNALIST

A father who overcame his more humble beginnings to achieved a level of professional success on a par with his wife's. He's calm, tidy and methodical. He loves a good book and enjoys life's little pleasures: time with his family, a glass of wine and good conversation with friends.

FATHER

I'm not someone who's obsessed with making something of myself, I just want to live my best life.

JOURNALIST

He asserts.

Silence.

JOURNALIST

Doesn't this seem like the perfect family?

The coin falls for the last time. The GIRL bangs once on the keys, striking a jarring, dissonant chord. She gets up, retrieves the coin, balances it on her hand as best she can and resumes playing. During the first few bars, it falls off yet again. In one swift movement she stands, picks up the coin and throws it angrily at the wall. The coin hits the framed silhouettes, breaking the glass and falling to the floor. Silence. A new light lets us see her parents for the first time. They seem to be arguing. We have the impression they've been arguing. They look at the audience. Now it's as if nothing's wrong.

MOTHER

(Picking up the coin and ignoring the broken glass) Fingers curved, never flat. They should curve over the keys. As if you were holding a ball.

Silence. The girl holds her fingers as she's been told and goes back to playing the piece.

MOTHER

That's enough now, it's time to eat.

The GIRL starts playing a different piece. This time she plays from memory, without sheet music. It could be the children's piece Clowns, op.30, 20 by Dmitri Kabalevsky, or Invention 13 in A minor BWV 784 by J.S Bach.

MOTHER

You already play this one well. You have to practice the other one, the one you're preparing for class.

GIRL

But I like this one better.

The GIRL continues playing.

MOTHER

Have you done your homework?

GIRL

It's summer. There's no school!

MOTHER

You know perfectly well that now's the time to review and get a jump on this year's subjects.

The GIRL keeps playing.

MOTHER

Did you get it done?

GIRL

Yes.

MOTHER

All of it?

GIRL

Yes.

MOTHER

Well, come on, then. Help me set the table. And tomorrow I want you to study the pieces you're supposed to be studying, all right?

GIRL

Okaaaay.

The GIRL helps her mother set the table. When everything is ready, her father comes in holding a frying pan and serves a portion onto each plate.

FATHER

Scrambled eggs and mushrooms.

After he puts the pan back they all sit at the table to eat. They eat for a while in silence. The parents exchange glances. The FATHER looks at the MOTHER who lowers her head. Then he looks at the GIRL.

GIRL

I don't like it.

Silence. The parents look at each other.

MOTHER

What do you mean you don't like it? You've eaten this hundreds of times. Dad makes it for you all the time, doesn't he?

GIRL

Yes. But it's not the same today.

FATHER

I don't know what it could be. I made it the same way I always do.

GIRL

It tastes weird.

MOTHER

What a thing to say... Stop being silly and eat up.

Silence.

FATHER

What about you, sweetheart?

MOTHER

I'm not very hungry.

FATHER

Are you feeling alright, my love?

MOTHER

Yes... it's just...

Silence.

MOTHER

Nothing. I'm fine. I'm just tired, that's all.

FATHER

Try to eat something. Just a bite or two. You can't take your medicine on an empty stomach.

MOTHER

Yes.

Silence. The MOTHER picks at her food.

MOTHER

Sit up straight. How does my little pianist sit?

The GIRL sits up straight in the chair and continues eating.

MOTHER

So, tell us, what did you do in class today?

GIRL

In French? We did irregular verbs.

MOTHER

For example?

GIRL

Être, paraître, disparaître...

MOTHER

Which mean...

GIRL

To be, to appear and to disappear.

MOTHER

Can you conjugate them for me?

GIRL

Which one?

MOTHER

Whichever you'd like.

GIRL

Je parais, tu parais, il paraît...

MOTHER

And the plural form?

GIRL

Nous paraissions.

MOTHER

Very good.

Silence.

FATHER

How'd it go yesterday? Have a lot of work?

MOTHER

Yes, actually, I did.

Silence.

FATHER

It might be too soon, don't you think?

MOTHER

I'm fine.

FATHER

I don't think this is good for you right now.

Silence.

FATHER

You stayed quite late.

MOTHER

No, it wasn't that late. But I had to drive all the way back.

FATHER

Where was it?

MOTHER

I told you.

FATHER

Oh, of course. That's true. You're right.

Silence.

MOTHER

I don't like her to stay up so late. She should be in bed by eleven. And today she had to get up early for her French lesson. That's why I asked you to take care of it.

FATHER

Yes, you know it's no trouble at all. You sleep really well here, don't you?

The GIRL nods. Silence. She gets out of her chair and continues to eat.

MOTHER

Where are you going? We haven't finished.

GIRL

To take off my jacket. I'm too hot.

The GIRL takes off her sweat jacket. Now she's wearing a white tank top. She sits back down. Silence. Her father is looking at her.

FATHER

Yes, it's too hot.

MOTHER

Especially for this time of year. It's fall already.

Silence.

GIRL

I need a...

MOTHER

Put your sweat jacket on.

GIRL
But I'm too hot.

MOTHER
Put it on.

The GIRL puts her sweat jacket back on.

MOTHER
What do you need?

GIRL
Nothing. It doesn't matter.

FATHER
As long as we're here, we could do something.

MOTHER
Do what?

FATHER
Do something together... I don't know. Go to the beach.

MOTHER
To the beach?

GIRL
Yay! The beach.

MOTHER
Well, I don't know...

GIRL
Pleeeeeease...

MOTHER
School's started already and...

FATHER
One last swim.

MOTHER
You have to make up the first day of class.

GIRL
But I can do that some other day.

MOTHER

No, not some other day. You need to call a classmate and ask her what they did the other day. You can't start school on the wrong foot.

FATHER

It's okay. She doesn't have much work yet.

MOTHER

There are all sorts of things to organize and...

FATHER

How long has it been since all three of us went to the beach together?

MOTHER

You don't have your swimsuit here.

FATHER

But you can go get it.

GIRL

Yes, let's go get it.

Silence.

GIRL

Pleeeeeease...

MOTHER

Don't tuck your hair behind your ears, you look terrible like that.

The GIRL takes her hair out from behind her ears.

GIRL

But can we go?

MOTHER

We'll see.

GIRL

Yes?

MOTHER

I'll think about it.

GIRL

Yay!

Silence.

GIRL

I don't want any more.

FATHER

All of it.

MOTHER

You heard your father.

FATHER

Or no beach.

GIRL

Okay...

The GIRL reluctantly finished her meal.

FATHER

And now, bedtime.

GIRL

Already?

FATHER

Yes.

GIRL

But I don't want to go to bed.

MOTHER

Come on, honey, it's very late.

GIRL

And what if it happens again, like last night?

MOTHER

Nothing's going to happen.

Silence.

GIRL

Can I play Nintendo for a while?

MOTHER

No. To bed.

GIRL

Jeez... Pleeeeeease...

FATHER

Tomorrow there'll be no getting you up. You know what it's like in the morning.

GIRL

Who's taking me?

MOTHER

Dad.

GIRL

Is Dad sleeping here tonight?

FATHER

No, but I'll come get you in the morning. Now get to bed.

The GIRL goes to bed.

FATHER

I'll tuck you in and say goodnight. Give Mom a kiss.

GIRL

'Night, Mom. *(They kiss)*.

MOTHER

Good night. I love you.

*Her FATHER accompanies her.
The GIRL lies down on the floor.*

JOURNALIST

Être, paraître, disparaître... Unbelievable, isn't it? Sometimes truth is stranger than fiction. Don't you think?

GIRL

(From the floor) It was Chinese class.

JOURNALIST

Well, that's the least of it...

Silence.

JOURNALIST

The story of the perfect family ends one fateful September day. And then a very different story begins. Do you want to hear more?

Silence.

JOURNALIST

Of course you want to. Of course you do. If not, what did you come here for?