

## THE SECRETS OF SILENCE

Pablo Castelo

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It is also true that I miss them - she said to herself as she noticed how her high heels reflected the splendor of the morning at each step. I know, it will not be a moment of pleasure, I will remember episodes that I had always avoided to revive and certainly I will want to forget them immediately. I am pleased, however, with the idea of seeing them again even if it's only by photographs. I miss them a lot and the horror they went through just makes me love them even more.

The building is ready only after months. The photographs were restored in advance. Everything was prepared with great care and respect. Apart from the photos, a collection of objects related to them was also included. There was a postcard of a mother in remorse that probably caused even more damage than relief, however, it was treasured as something invaluable. Some heartbreaking letters were found as well. They received the reviving treatments of a chemical laboratory that cleaned everything but the desolation they were soaked in. Some other items that might belong to all and to no one in particular were added to the collection: a small pillow, a single wool sock, a little spoon with an old-looking handle still with a touch of orange. Everything that could be recovered and have the possibility of belonging to the abused girls at the orphanage, was the subject of the care that their owners did not get. In particular, anything that might have had relation with Mary, the first one who had the courage to break the silence. Among the things, now treasured, there was a small red ball made of rubber that took a while to cease bouncing. Except for being now pale, it was in perfect condition perhaps because it was confiscated from a girl at the time of admission. There were also two semi bald dolls but it was very unlikely they had been used by the orphans.

There's the door - she thought to herself- It seems like yesterday. We were left outside for a few moments. The three of us hugged each other. So we stood, one against the other. We were terrified. We were very little. We could not know that it was the last embrace between us. Then, they took us to a room and gave us the orphanage clothes. They cut the hair of my sisters, June and Daphne, until it was very short. Then, they washed their heads with kerosene.

When she entered in the building, the rejuvenated appearance of the environment surprised her. She did not remember seeing the walls as white, without greenish or yellowish spots splattering the ivory paint. Also the stairs had been revived with new, dark and shiny wood. The orphanage, now bright, before was gloomy.

After taking a printed exhibition guide, she found out where the room devoted to photographs was located and she went directly there. The room was medium-sized, well-lit. The photographs hung like dry leaves; coppery, amber, waxy windows to the past.

She sighed. Her heart trembled and her eyes watered immediately.

There they are! - She thought, looking at the first photo - I think they're all here, although the last ones are blurred and I can not recognize them at all. This is Anna, Gloria, Olivia, Charlotte ... I think that's Mia and the next one seems to be Chloe. The row extends rearwardly and its second half is blurred. So we were before entering the dining room. Taking distance, they said. One after the other, with outstretched arms, hands on the shoulders of who was ahead. We had to be very straight. A nun passed along the row; the one who was not perfectly aligned received a blow of her rod. And since it was the same nun who imagined the line, we all got hit at the end. Ah! Either way, they beat us with sticks or belts for the most trivial reasons, such as talking in the bedroom or for not standing up straight.

This other ... - she thought facing the next picture - Ah! Sister Isabelle is tightening the uniform of someone I do not recognize. That was the uniform they used before. It was almost black and it had to be closed from behind. Over this uniform was a white apron that was tightened on the back, making a loop with the waist strips. The shoes are exactly the same we used. They were ugly. They were like boots. And they were hard. And they hurt.

The shoes! - She thought then - We worried so much about the shoes! Actually, everything was cause for punishment. The nuns belting us for not making the bed perfectly, because our shoes were not shined enough, because our work had not been executed flawlessly, because our lockers were neglected, because we were going too fast, because we were going too slow ... anyway . It seemed that the nuns wanted to whip us just because we were there. The first time I saw Mary was when she was held precisely in the shoe box for the first time. A nun had heard her complaining about her tasks. It was a wooden box about four feet long , four wide and four heigh. They sat another girl on the top for an hour so Mary can not escape. I remember I wanted to entertain her, somehow.

- This is the corridor leading to the central stands. - She said to herself after moving to her right to see another photograph - Yes, of course! The bedrooms were located at the sides of the stairs, and this corridor was on the left because the other one ended at the sewing rooms. Here in this photo, it looks better than it was. Probably because they used flash. It was much gloomier than here. And that was because there were only two bulbs at both ends of the corridors. The stairs had their own bulbs but they were turned off when all were already in bed and then, yes it was dark. Even by day, they were still bleak. The walls were quite high. On one side of the corridor, long windows began halfway up the walls. The glasses were covered by some kind of green paper. On the lower half of the wall, the brown pastel paint was peeling here and there, revealing a green olive predecessor. The wooden floor appears here painted gray, but on the sides, one could already see how the rash that follows the moisture begins to appear. The hallways were scary. Walking around there at night was unsettling. Never, did anything scary happen, though; nothing that could not have been attributed to the nuns. Nothing from beyond, I mean. Well, ... as in any old building, the boards creaked. There were nights when some girl thought she heard footsteps. On one or two occasions, it sounded like someone was playing. The only one who said there were ghosts there was Mary.

The bedroom! - she thought, watching another picture - I remember those metal beds without any ornament but four spheres crowning every leg. Two rows of beds facing each other on both sides of a long room. Between the rows there was less than the width of a bed and between bed and bed, just

enough room to lie down. There were no nightstands, of course. We did not wear sandals either. Some, slept without socks. It was a pretty cold place but it was our resting place. More than that, the space under the covers felt like all ours. The cold weather bothered us, especially our feet, but under the covers there was something gentle and warm; something that was our ally. Speaking was forbidden. It was oddly pleasant to share the silence with the girls from both sides. Before falling asleep, we took comfort in being one beside the other, in the dark, in secret, with eyes open, staring each other in complicity until finally the sleep reached us. In the dreams, yes we were free and we were happy. Although some like Mary, had frequent nightmares and were unhappy even then. Occasionally, we dared to speak softly. We liked it. Ah ... but if you got caught by a nun! ... They beat us with belts or rods. They had sticks at their fingertips. There were also favorite rods for one or another nun. We woke up early in the morning. From 6 am, Sister Isabelle, with her own rod, "put in order" to all the girls who had wet the bed. First, she whipped them and then wrapped them in their own sheets. Usually, Mary was within that group. She was forced to stand on a line with the wet sheets around her head. Then she had to wash the sheets in cold water. Mary was only seven years old and barely tall enough to reach the sink. She was terrified of wetting her pants because the Sister hit her with the belt for "playing with herself" and being a "dirty girl". Most of the time, Mary wet her pants from fear and that induced more belting. Once, Mary was forced to lie face down on her bed to be flogged until Sister Isabelle was exhausted. Her wounds were deep. From her back to her feet, everything was considerably swollen. It was so bad that they called the doctor to treat her wounds. Mary had to stay in bed for several days with a nightgown covering her injuries. I do not know what horrified me more: the cruelty of the nun; that Mary did not receive food during her stay in the bedroom; or that the doctor did not reveal what was happening inside the orphanage.

Here they are the main stairs - she thought as she saw another picture -. Here, a nun found Mary sleepwalking. Because of her fear of not being able to complete her tasks before the school started, Mary was trying to clean the stands in her dreams. Cleaning the stands was one of the tasks at her charge. All of us had tasks. There were so many corners in the building that it did not lack work. Her duties included cleaning the metal strips on the stands with a steel punch. She also had to wax and polish the floors of the chapel and the bedroom. She was always hungry, looking for some food among the scraps. There were also no toys to play with; there was only the darning of socks, writing sentences and the chores.

On one occasion - she recalled -, Mary gave a different version of what happened on the stairs. She said that, at night, when all were asleep, her friend came and woke her up very carefully as not to alarm anyone. Her friend - Mary said - made all the bad that was there disappear . The fear disappeared, the mattress, the cold, the stick with which she was beaten. The nuns who slept with an open eye ready to punish the slightest noise also disappeared. They vanished and everything vanished as well, even the other girls. Everything vanished. The darkness disappeared and everything was white, fragrant and bright. The light came through the large windows and its heat spread warming it all. And they could walk through the bedroom without being stopped by anyone. Her friend drove her through the deserted corridors. They were free and they were happy as they wandered through the building hand in hand. Often, Mary slept in the arms of her friend and her friend took care of her dreams, embracing her with

love until the next day. The night they found Mary on the stairs, she was with her friend precisely, but they were caught. Her friend promised to make sure that it would never happen again. She said her friend kept her company when she was locked and, if she concentrated enough, she could make her friend appear and stop the beatings.

She moved to the next picture.

There's Mary! It's time for dinner. It is somewhat obscure, probably because the room itself was dark. There's also Olivia, Anna and Chloe. Mary is among them. All except Mary, are eating. Mmmmm ... How strange! The length of the table crosses the photography from side to side and it's as if it was taken from an angle, from above. I do not recall nothing up there but the wall. Thats weird! Mary seems to be staring at me straight in the eye!

- Ah, ah! - said the girl sitting three seats to the right of Mary, in a mocking tone- That's the face when she is seeing ghosts. She says she sleeps almost always embracing a ghost but other nights they play until dawn with two semi bald dolls and a red rubber ball.

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