

## Light is Like Water

By Gabriel García Márquez

At Christmas the boys asked again for a rowboat.

"Okay," said their papa, "we'll buy it when we get back to Cartagena."

Toto, who was nine years old, and Joel, who was seven, were more determined than their parents believed

"No," they said in chorus. "We need it here and now."

"To begin with," said their mother, "the only navigable water here is what comes out of the shower."

She and her husband were both right. Their house in Cartagena de Indias had a yard with a dock on the bay, and a shed that could hold two large yachts. Here in Madrid, on the other hand, they were crowded into a fifth-floor apartment at 47 Paseo de la Castellana. But in the end neither of them could refuse, because they had promised the children a rowboat complete with sextant and compass if they won their class prizes in elementary school, and they had. And so their papa bought everything and said nothing to his wife, who was more reluctant than he to pay gambling debts. It was a beautiful aluminum boat with a gold stripe at the water line.

"The boat's in the garage," their papa announced at lunch. "The problem is, there's no way to bring it up in the elevator or by the stairs, and there's no more space available in the garage."

On the following Saturday afternoon, however, the boys invited their classmates to help bring the boat up the stairs and they managed to carry it as far as the maid's room.

"Congratulations," said their papa. "Now what?"

"Now nothing," said the boys. "All we wanted was to have the boat in the room, and now it's here."

On Wednesday night, as they did every Wednesday, the parents went to the movies. The boys, lords and masters of the house, closed the doors and windows and broke the glowing bulb in one of the living room lamps. A jet of golden light as cool as water began to pour out of the broken bulb, and they let it run to a depth of almost three feet. Then they turned off the electricity, took out the rowboat, and navigated at will among the islands in the house.

This fabulous adventure was the result of a frivolous remark I made while taking part in a seminar on the poetry of household objects. Toto asked me why the light went on with just a touch of a switch, and I did not have the courage to think about it twice.

"Light is like water," I answered. "You turn the tap and out it comes."

And so they continued sailing every Wednesday night, learning how to use the sextant and the compass, until their parents came home from the movies and found them sleeping like angels on dry land. Months later, longing to go farther, they asked for complete skin-diving outfits: masks, fins, tanks, and compressed air rifles.

"It's bad enough you've put a rowboat you can't use in the maid's room," said their father. "To make it even worse, now you want diving equipment too."

"What if we win the Gold Gardenia Prize for the first semester?" said Joel.

"No," said their mother in alarm. "That's enough."

Their father reproached her for being intransigent.

"These kids don't win so much as a nail when it comes to doing what they're supposed to," she said, "but to get what they want they're capable of taking it all, even the teacher's chair."

In the end the parents did not say yes or no. But in July, Toto and Joel each won a Gold Gardenia and the public recognition of the headmaster. That same afternoon, without having to ask again, they found the diving outfits in their original packing in their bedroom. And so the following Wednesday, while their parents were at the movies seeing *Last Tango in Paris*, they filled the apartment to a depth of two fathoms, dove like tame sharks under furniture, including the beds and salvaged from the bottom of the light things that had been lost in darkness for years.

At the end-of-the-year awards ceremony, the brothers were acclaimed as examples for the entire school and received certificates of excellence. This time they did not have to ask for anything, because their parents asked them what they wanted. They were so reasonable that all they wanted was a party at home as a treat for their classmates.

Their papa, when he was alone with his wife, was radiant.

"It's a proof of their maturity," he said.

"From your lips to God's ear," said their mother.

The following Wednesday, while their parents were watching *The Battle of Algiers*, people walking along the Paseo de la Castellana saw a cascade of light falling from an old building hidden among the trees. It spilled over the balconies, poured in torrents down the facade, and rushed along the great avenue in a golden flood that lit the city all the way to the Guadarrama.

In response to the emergency, firemen forced the door on the fifth floor and found the apartment brimming with light all the way to the ceiling. The sofa and easy chairs covered in leopard skin were floating at different levels in the living room, among the bottles from the bar and the grand piano with its Manila shawl that fluttered half submerged like a golden manta ray. Household objects, in the fullness of their poetry, flew with their own wings through the kitchen sky. The marching band instruments that the children used for dancing drifted among the bright-colored fish freed from their mother's aquarium, which were the only creatures alive and happy in the vast illuminated marsh. Everyone's toothbrush floated in the bathroom, along with Papa's condoms and Mama's jars of creams and her spare bridge, and the television set from the master bedroom floated on its side, still tuned to the final episode of the midnight movie for adults only.

At the end of the hall, moving with the current and clutching the oars, with his mask on and only enough air to reach port, Toto sat in the stern of the boat searching for the lighthouse, and Joel, floating in the prow, still looked for the north star with the sextant, and floating through the entire house were their thirty-seven classmates, eternalized in the moment of peeing into the pot of geraniums, singing the school's song with the words changed to make fun of the headmaster, sneaking a glass of brandy from Papa's bottle. For they had turned on so many lights at the same time that the apartment had flooded, and two entire classes at the elementary school of Saint Julian the Hospitaler drowned on the fifth floor of 47 Paseo de la Castellana. In Madrid, Spain, a remote city of burning summers and icy winds, with no ocean or river, whose land-bound indigenous population had never mastered the science of navigating on light.