

# SILVINA OCAMPO, THE IMPOSTOR AND OTHER STORIES

(Tr. Daniel Balderston)

## VOICE ON THE TELEPHONE

NO, DON'T invite me to your nephews' house. Children's parties depress me. That probably seems silly to you. Yesterday you got mad because I didn't want to light your cigarette. Everything is connected. So I'm crazy? Maybe. Since I can't ever see you, I'm going to have to explain things on the phone. What things? The story of the matches. I hate the phone. Yes. I know you love it, but I would have preferred to tell you everything in the car, or on the way out of the movie theater, or in a coffee shop. I have to return to my childhood.

"Fernando, if you play with matches, you'll burn the house down," my mother would tell me, or something like, "The whole house is going to be reduced to a little pile of ashes," or maybe, "We will all fly away like fireworks."

Does that seem normal to you? That's what I think too, but it made me want to touch matches even more, to caress them, to try lighting them, to live for them. The same thing happened with you and erasers? But they didn't forbid you to touch them. Erasers don't burn. You ate them? That's different. The memories of when I was four tremble as if lit by fire. As I told you already, the house where I spent my childhood was huge: it had five bedrooms, two entrance halls, two living rooms with ceilings painted with clouds and little angels. You think I lived like a king? No, you're wrong. There were always fights among the servants. They were divided into two groups: the supporters of my mother and the followers of Nicolás Simonetti. Who was he? Nicolás Simonetti was the cook: I was crazy about him. He threatened me, in jest, with a huge shiny knife, and gave me little slices of meat and lettuce to play with, and cara-

mels I spilled on the marble floor. He contributed as much as my mother did to awakening my passion for matches, lighting them so I could blow them out. Due to my mother's supporters, who were tireless, the food was never ready, or tasty, or cooked properly. There was always a hand that intercepted the plates and let them cool, that added talcum powder to the noodles, that dusted the eggs with ashes. All of this culminated in the appearance of a tremendously long hair in the rice pudding.

"That is Juanita's hair," my father said.

"No," said my aunt, "I don't want to 'get her hair in my milk'—to me it tastes like Luisa's."

My mother, who was very proud, stood up from the table in the middle of the meal and, grasping the hair between her fingertips, carried it to the kitchen. My mother was annoyed by the face of the cook, who was entranced, seeing it not as a hair but as a strand of black thread. I don't know what sarcastic or wounding phrase made Nicolás Simonetti take off his apron, wrap it up in the shape of a ball as if to throw it away, and announce that he was leaving the household. I followed him to the bathroom where he got dressed and undressed each day. This time, he who paid me so much attention dressed without even looking at me. He combed his hair with a bit of grease he had left on his hands. I never saw hands that so resembled combs. Then, with dignity, he gathered up the molds, enormous knives, and spatulas in the kitchen, put them in the briefcase he always carried, and went toward the door with his hat on. To make him look at me I gave him a kick in the shins; he put his hand, smelling of lard, on my head, saying, "Goodbye, kid. Now many people will be able to appreciate Nicolás's food. They'll lick their lips."

You think that's funny? I'll keep on with my list: there were two studies. Why so many? I ask myself the same thing—nobody wrote. Eight hallways, three bathrooms (one with two sinks). Why two? Perhaps they washed with four hands. Two stoves (one inexpensive, the other electric), two rooms for washing and ironing (my father said one was so the clothes could get wrinkled), a pantry, a vestibule by the dining room, five servants' bedrooms, a room for the trunks.

Did we travel a lot? No. Those trunks were used for many different things. Another room was for chests of drawers; another, for odds and ends, was where the dog slept and where my hobbyhorse sat on a tricycle. Does that house still exist? It exists in my memory. The objects are like milestones showing you how far you've gone: the house had so many of them that my memory is full of numbers. I could say what year I ate my first apple or bit the dog's ear, or when I peed in the candy dish. You think I'm a pig! I preferred the rugs, chandeliers, and glass cabinets in that house to my toys. For my birthday my mother organized a party. She invited twenty boys and twenty girls so they would bring me presents. My mother had foresight. You're right, she was a sweetheart! For the party, the servants took out the rugs, and my mother replaced the objects in the glass cabinets with little cardboard horses filled with surprises, and little plastic cars, rattles, cornets, and piccolos for the boys, and bracelets, rings, change purses, and little hearts for the girls. In the middle of the dining table they put a cake with four candles, sandwiches, and chocolate milk. Some children (not all of them with presents) arrived with their nursemaids, others with their mothers, others with an aunt or a grandmother. The mothers, aunts, or grandmothers sat down to chat. Standing in the corner, blowing on a cornet that made no sound, I listened to them.

"How pretty you are today, Boquita," my mother said to the mother of one of my girlfriends. "Did you come from the country?"

"It's the season of the year when you want to get a little tan and end up looking like a monster," Boquita answered.

I thought she was referring to fire rather than to the sun. Did I like her? Who? Boquita? No. She was horrible, with a tiny mouth, no lips, but my mother said that you should never compliment the pretty ones for their beauty, but instead the ugly ones because that was good manners; she said beauty was of the soul and not of the face; that Boquita was a fright, but "had a certain something." Besides, my mother didn't lie: she always managed to utter the words in an equivocal way, as if her tongue were stuck, and that's how she said, "How pretty you are, Boquita," which could also be taken as a



compliment due to her friend's strong personality. They spoke of politics, of hats and clothes, of economic problems, of people who hadn't come to the party: I assure you I'm repeating the exact words I heard them say. After the balloons were passed out, after the puppet show (in which Little Red Riding Hood terrified me as much as the wolf did the grandmother, in which the Beauty seemed as horrible as the Beast), after blowing out the candles on my birthday cake, I followed my mother into the most private room in the house, where she shut herself in with her friends, surrounded by embroidered pillows. I managed to hide behind an armchair, trampling on a lady's hat, squatting down, leaning against a wall so as not to lose balance. I'm clumsy, you know. The ladies were laughing so hard that I could hardly understand what they were saying. They spoke of bodices, and one of them unbuttoned her blouse to the waist to show the one she wore. It was as translucent as a Christmas stocking; I thought it must have some toy inside and yearned to stick my hand in. They spoke of sizes: it turned out to be a game. They took turns standing up. Elvira, who looked like a huge baby, mysteriously took a tape measure out of her purse.

"I always carry a nail file and a tape measure in my pocketbook, just in case," she said.

"What a madwoman," Boquita shouted boisterously, "you look like a dressmaker."

They measured their waists, busts, and hips.

"I bet you my waist is a twenty-two."

"I bet you mine is less."

Their voices echoed as in a theater.

"I would like to win for my hips," one said.

"I would be happy to win for my bust," another one said. "Men are more interested in breasts, haven't you seen them staring?"

"If they don't look me in the eye I don't feel anything," said another, who was wearing a sumptuous pearl necklace.

"It's not a matter of what you feel, it's what they feel," said the aggressive voice of one woman who wasn't anyone's mother.

"I couldn't care less," the other answered, shrugging her shoulders.

"Not me," said Rosca Pérez, who was beautiful, when it was her turn to be measured; she bumped against the armchair where I was hiding.

"I won," said Chinche, who was as pointed as a small-headed pin, shaking the nine silver bangles she wore on one arm.

"Twenty," Elvira exclaimed, examining the tape measure that was wrapped around Chinche's tiny waist.

Who had a twenty-inch waist, except maybe a wasp? She must have been a wasp. Could she make her stomach go down like a yogi? She was no yogi, but she was a snake charmer. She fascinated perverted women. Not my mother. My mother was a saint. She felt sorry for her. When people gossiped about Chinche she would comment, "Such nonsense."

Not on your life. I had never heard a scoundrel say "such nonsense." It would have been out of character. That was very typical of her. I'll go on with my story. At that moment the phone rang beside one of the armchairs. Chinche and Elvira answered it together. Then, covering the receiver with a pillow, they told my mother, "It's for you, dear."

The others jostled one another, and Rosca took the phone to listen to the voice.

"I bet it's the one with the beard," one of the ladies said.

"I bet it's the elf," said another, chewing on her necklace.

Then a phone conversation began in which they all took part, passing the phone along from one to the next. I forgot I was supposed to be hiding and stood up to watch the ladies' enthusiasm, marked by the ringing sounds of bracelets and necklaces. When my mother saw me, her voice and expression changed. As if she were in front of the mirror she smoothed her hair and pulled up her stockings; she then carefully put out her cigarette in the ashtray, twisting it two or three times. She took me by the hand and I, taking advantage of her confusion, stole the fancy long matches that were on the table next to the whiskey glasses. We left the room.

"You have to attend to your guests," my mother said severely. "I'll attend to mine."

She left me in the dismantled living room, without a carpet, without the usual objects in the glass cabinet, without the most valuable furniture, filled instead with hollow horses made of cardboard, with cornets and piccolos on the floor, with little cars whose owners seemed like impostors to me. Each of the children was hugging and pulling on a balloon in an alarming way. Atop the piano, covered with cloth, someone had put all of the presents my friends had brought me. Poor piano? Why don't you say poor Fernando instead! I noticed that some presents were missing: I had carefully counted and examined them as soon as I received them. I thought they must be somewhere else in the house and began wandering through the hallway that led to the garbage can, where I dug out some cardboard boxes and pieces of newspaper. These I triumphantly took back to the dismantled living room. I discovered that some of the children had taken advantage of my absence to take possession once more of the presents they had brought me. Smart? Shameless. After much hesitation and much trouble dealing with the children, we sat down on the floor to play with some matches. A nursemaid came in and told her companion, "There are very fine decorations in this house: there are flower vases that would crush your foot if they fell on it." Looking at us as if she were speaking of the same vases, she added, "Each one alone is a devil, but together they're like the baby Jesus."

We made buildings, plans, houses, bridges out of matches; for a long while we twisted their heads. It was not until later, when Cacho arrived with his glasses on and a wallet in his pocket, that we tried lighting the matches. First we tried to light them on the soles of our shoes, then later on the stones of the fireplace. The first spark burnt our fingers. Cacho was very wise and told us that he knew not only how to prepare but how to light a bonfire. He had the idea of surrounding the vestibule next to the dining room, where his nursemaid was, with fire. I protested. We should not waste matches on nursemaids.

Those fancy matches were destined for the private room where I had found them. They were the matches belonging to our mothers. On tiptoe we approached the door to the room where we could hear

voices and laughter. I was the one who locked the door with the key; I was the one who took the key out and put it in my pocket. We piled up the paper the presents had been wrapped in, and the cardboard boxes full of straw; also some newspaper that had been left on a table, the bits of trash I had collected, and some pieces of firewood from the fireplace, where we sat for a moment to watch the future bonfire. We heard Margarita's voice, saying, "They've locked us in." I haven't forgotten her laughter.

One of them answered, "That's better, that way they'll leave us alone."

At first the fire threw off only a few sparks, then it exploded, growing like a giant, with a giant's tongue. It licked the most expensive piece of furniture in the house, a Chinese chest with lots of little drawers, decorated with millions of figures that were crossing bridges, looking out of doorways, walking along the banks of a river. Millions and millions of pesos had been offered to my mother for that piece, and she had never wanted to sell it at any price. You think that's a shame? It would have been better to sell it. We drew back to the front door where the nursemaids had gathered. The voices calling for help echoed down the long service staircase. The doorman, who was chatting at the street corner, didn't arrive in time to use the fire extinguisher. They made us go down to the courtyard. Bunched together under a tree, we saw the house in flames, and the useless arrival of the firemen. Now do you understand why I refused to light your cigarette? Why matches make such an impression on me? Didn't you know I was sensitive? Naturally, the ladies gathered by the window, but we were so interested in the fire that we barely noticed them. The last vision I have of my mother is of her face pointed downward, leaning against the balcony railing. And the Chinese chest of drawers? The Chinese chest was saved from the fire, luckily. Some little figures were ruined: one was of a lady who was carrying a child in her arms, slightly resembling my mother and me.