

RAQUEL CASTRO
(translation by Alberto Chimal)

SWINGS

*T*he swings are screeching. Constantly, rhythmically: after a while they begin to sound like music. The apartment block we live in has a playground near our bedroom window, so we get to know about every laugh, every fight and every child that falls on their head. But we know only because of the sound: through the window one can't see more than some trees beside the slide, a few paces from the seesaw and the swing seats. Anyhow the sound is enough for us to know about everything, as I've said.

Around four o'clock in the afternoon, the swings become a symphony: all of them screech at once, out of sync but with a strange harmony all the same. And sometimes, around midnight or one or two in the morning, we can hear a lone swing, slow, sluggish, as if the one using it is sleepy or weighs very little.

I felt indignant: what kind of a parent lets their child to be at the playground that late? At that hour there lurk drunken neighbors, stray dogs, even the occasional drug dealer (everyone knows it, even though they pretend they don't). And the solitary swing then sounded like a cicada, tempting those and other agents of evil.

One afternoon, arriving from work, I chanced upon my neighbor from next door. We seldom meet, so, as neither of us was in a hurry, we chatted for a while. We were mainly criticizing the other neighbors, I must say. And we arrived to the part when one talks about the children's educations and all that.

I saw the opportunity to give her my speech about leaving children at the playground after midnight. And she, instead of enthusiastically supporting me, went pale. I insisted, described the noises, even tried some empathy ("you have them right outside your windows, they must sound even louder through there"), but she was only more and more nervous.

In the end she moved towards me and murmured into my ear:

“One night, about a year ago, I tried to see who it was. I was sure it was Claudia’s daughter, that girl from downstairs, because her mother is so awful, you know. I looked out, because the swings are right outside my window.”

She stopped for a moment, and then went on:

“The moon was in the sky and they had just replaced the lights on the lampposts. There was plenty of light. It looked as bright as the nights in movies.”

She said the last bit even lower than the rest:

“Only one swing, the one in the middle, was moving, back and forth. I stared at it, thinking maybe someone had just jumped from it and it would soon stop, but a minute or so passed and the swing didn’t lose any speed. It didn’t deviate because of the wind either. Then my husband said that I should stop snooping, I started and since then I don’t open the curtains even though the swing wakes me up in the early morning sometimes.”

We went to our apartments without saying goodbye. I didn’t know if I believed her or not, but I felt something in my stomach. That night, when the screeching woke me up at two o’clock, I remembered: my neighbor’s husband died almost ten years ago.

I didn’t look out the window.