



FROM THE
CORNER OF
HIS EYE

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Translated from Spanish by Toshiya Kamei



“What’s wrong with the boy? What else is broken?” My husband, Paolo, asked. I didn’t think it was funny, and I didn’t laugh. Instead, I cringed.

“Maybe he’s hard of hearing.” Paolo clicked his tongue bitterly. “Inserting another microchip under his skin will do the trick.”

I leaned into the crib. My Nino, aged one, no longer responded to auditory stimuli. Every now and then his brown irises slid into the corners of his eyes as he looked at us. Or so we wanted to believe. In reality, he looked past us. As if we were behind a veil visible only to him. Paolo always came up with a rationale for our son. It helped him feel better. He blamed the saturated air and the health insurance that got us the cheap microchips grafted into our bodies.

At two, Nino stopped speaking. Noise made him burst into tears and scream. Six months later, he no longer reacted to physical contact. He seemed to be burning: he wiggled out of our hands. Not being able to hug him broke my heart. My body heat repelled him. He couldn’t stand Paolo. Paolo couldn’t stand him either.

“He’s broken,” Paolo repeated, his lips twisted with contempt. “He’s a broken child, pieces of nothing.”

I stood in front of the crib with my arms outstretched. It was the first time I’d ever yelled at Paolo in my mother tongue. He looked at me with horror. He clenched his fists, wielding the invisible stick to castigate me for my ingratitude. In his eyes, I was an illiterate savage he’d rescued from the jungle. Also, it was the first time I’d ever spit blood. Paolo stepped away from me, from the child, and made a gesture as though he were warding off demons.

“It’s the microchips,” Paolo scorned. “Not only did it break the child, they infected you too. And I told you to forget that stupid language of yours. You mutter in it when you think I don’t notice it. Go see the doctor tomorrow. Get rid of those pieces of metal!”

At dawn, I wrapped Nino in his blankets and took him to the hospital. A fine mist hovered over

the street. It was one of those days when the oxygenating field failed to clean the air. The best places to live were near the transmitting antennas and receiving structures. But it was already reserved ground, a tapestry of wealth and disdain for those who tried to get some fresh air.

Nino struggled to pull off his face mask. In a way, we had that privilege, even if it was simple. Many didn't even have medical microchips and were slowly drowning under bridges where the tide of plastic replaced rivers.

The doctors said Nino's microchip was working fine. There remained things to be analyzed: his lack of eye contact, lazy movements, squeals, and abrupt silences. Through sessions, he was diagnosed with autism. He wouldn't learn at the same rate as other children. Perhaps he'd never speak. He'd never answer by his name. Perhaps he'd develop odd bodily movements and repetitive routines. However, Nino might learn to cope, to create a way of speaking about how he perceived the world. A way I could understand him and connect with his life, which was so different from mine.

My diagnosis, however, was unsettling: I had tuberculosis. And the microchip failed to detect it. It failed to send the alarm.

But it was a cheap microchip. Another medical plan, the doctors suggested with open hands, dropping all pretense of humanity. A special school for Nino. A patient teacher who would also have open hands to receive bank deposits, because they needed oxygen and purified water. Everyone needed to eat, to survive in a world full of chaos.

Paolo didn't give it much thought.

"You," he said, pointing his finger at me. "You're still fertile. Nino is broken. We'll send him to an orphanage. Let somebody else take care of his broken pieces, or finish him breaking. I don't care. He's no longer my son."

As I heard his words, I hugged Nino as he twisted in my arms and screamed incomprehensible protests. I was willing to sell my life, but not my son's. I'd pick up all the pieces of him, and I'd put them back together with my own hands.

I stole from Paolo. I took money from his wallet, from his virtual bank account. I ran away with Nino in the middle of the night. Nino wasn't looking anywhere, only at the veils hiding everything, always at the edge of his gaze. When I reached the bay, my shoes were torn and my feet were bleeding. We stank of urine, suburb, broken things. We were two more rag dolls trying to escape the cruelty of humanity.

The anchored humanitarian ships proclaimed salvation and survival. The crew members made lists and drew names for the few

remaining spaces as cries of despair filled the air. I filled out all the forms. Like other mothers, with the strength that only came from our hearts, I lifted Nino through the crowd.

More than one trafficker approached me and whispered sweet promises in my ear. They were the same as Paolo's words: I was fertile, my son, unnecessary. I'd heard the same words too many times to believe them. When I still clung to the few trees in the jungle and cried when the fire devoured the vegetation in humanity's search for petroleum underground.

I bribed a customs agent and slipped into the cargo area of one of the ships. Any ship would do. Its final destination didn't matter. They discovered us on the first day of sailing. I could keep hunger at bay, but Nino couldn't. He screamed and writhed, tired of spending so many hours close to me. I was afraid they'd abandon us in some lonely key, a nest of traffickers in the Caribbean.

But it was a humanitarian ship, not a ship built of pieces of rotten wood, deception, and laziness. It carried needy people, not merchandise. I occupied a cabin with Nino next to a skinny man with vacant eyes. He possessed the look of someone who has seen his land perish in the name of progress.

At sea, far from any oxygenating field, we wore masks. From time to time, islands of plastic objects came into view like scraps of other lives. We didn't see land right away. A mist hovered on the horizon, threatening a storm. When we finally neared the port after days

of waiting and worrying, an oxygenating field receptor enveloped the ship. When we passed by it, we were liberated.

We all went out on deck and gazed up at the sky. A layer of leaden clouds cleared, little by little, until the blue reappeared. As night fell, the pink veil of pollution didn't return. We soon left the masks behind and the medical microchips concentrated on their work. My blood spits decreased in frequency. Nino continued to watch the world from the corner of his eye. He fidgeted over the heat, my smells, and the hundreds of people traveling with us.

When we docked at the port of Mariel, Cuba, I got off with Nino. I had no desire to keep traveling. When I became aware of my surroundings, I thought, for a moment, I'd returned to my beloved jungle: unknown climbing plants clung to buildings, in bloom, even though it wasn't spring. Small drones orbited over the heads of passersby.

I feared ending up in the wrong place. Some TV networks spoke of humanitarian ships whose passengers were never seen again and used in illegal experiments. However, I knew we were fine when we were taken to a quarantine facility. I expected doctors to examine us and list our ailments. Then they would shove the invoices over to us. It was what always happened. They would shake their heads in feigned grief and outstretch their hands to receive payment.

When I was prescribed the first intensive antibiotic treatment, I took out Paolo's bank card. Our languages were close enough, so our



communication flowed easily. I told them the account might have been frozen, but I could work downtown to pay them. The doctors exchanged glances. They weren't mocking. They didn't pity me. They weren't perplexed.

"Healthcare is your right," a woman said. Her smile widened under the mask, and her eyes sparkled. "And your son has autism. We'll make sure he attends a special school. But you, now, are our priority. We'll do everything possible to make sure you survive, to see your child recover, and to provide you with an alternative communication system."

We were housed in the same quarantine facility. My condition required me to remain quarantined while I received antibiotics. In addition to the doctors, a man who said he was a programmer visited me. They made me a medical drone, identical to the one everyone else had. The robot continuously recorded the readings sent by the nanobots the doctors were going to inject into my body.

"They're pieces of metal." I was scared, because I remembered the useless microchip

Paolo feared so much. "I don't want metal in my body!"

The doctors explained to me that they could perform the treatment in a traditional way. However, the drone's assistance would prevent any mistakes from the nanobots. They would directly attack Koch's bacillus, wherever it lodged. They would choose the correct antibiotic. The drone was permanently connected to a doctor, who would come as soon as he received adverse notifications.

But being separated from Nino hurt me the most. During the treatment, he had to remain isolated for everyone's safety. I was allowed to see him through transparent barriers. They held him so he could stand upright. He hung his head to one side. He refused to look at anyone else. He didn't react to any movement around him. I called him, tapped on the glass, and smiled at him. He watched me from the corner of his eye. He refused to recognize me.

I feared the doctors were the cause of his apathy. That they finished breaking our connection. More than once hysterical attacks seized me. I wanted to break the glass that separated us. I wanted to touch his hands, kiss his feet, hear my voice directly and not through loudspeakers. The psychologists rushed into my cubicle. They explained to me my son didn't exhibit this behavior because someone instilled it in him, or because of any medicine, microchip or nanobots, but because of his autism. Nino didn't interpret the world like me, or anyone else. However, according to the doctors, when

I was still tied to Paolo, it was possible to establish a communication bridge. But I had to be patient.

And two days after mentioning Paolo, I heard from him. He requested permission to set up a video conference. I didn't want to speak to him, but the doctors insisted the best way to heal the wounds of the soul was to face what eats away at us. Only then did I learn that the bank issued an alert when I bribed the customs broker. In this way, Paolo found out the ship's destination and where it was going to anchor first.

"Come back," Paolo pleaded. "My business has started to take off. Now I can give you the life you want. You didn't need to run away, or rob me. I can forgive that. That kid clouded your judgement."

"You wanted to send him to an orphanage," I told him as fiercely as a jaguar protecting her cub. You wanted to throw him away, like a broken object. That's what you called him. That's how you treated him!"

"Did you go that far for Nino?"

"He's my son! And yours, too, even if you deny it. I stay here. I want to live here with him. They're teaching him what we couldn't. They want to help him. Unlike you."

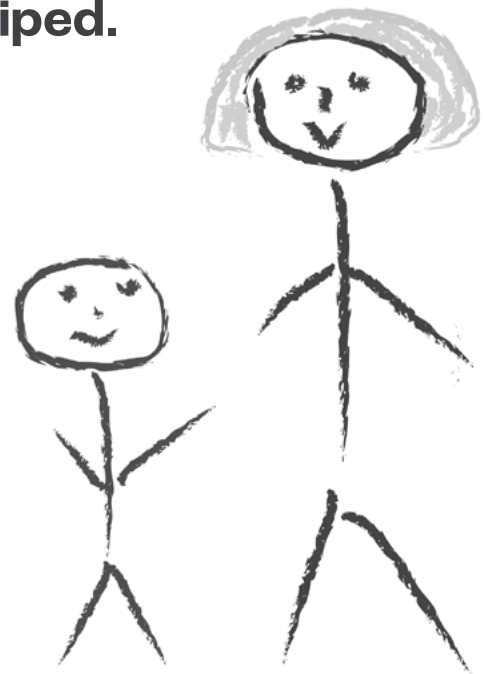
We cut our communication. When I recovered from tuberculosis, Paolo contacted me again. He wanted to make a monthly payment for life. It wasn't much, but any

help was welcome. Perhaps he feared I'd report him to the authorities and tarnish his business's reputation.

They placed us in a small apartment and handed Nino over to me. He only tiptoed and waved his arms, but it was progress. He attended the special teaching school. A psychologist visited me once a week, and they offered me assistance through my personal drone. Not to evaluate my son, but to teach me to live with him.

After three years, Nino approached me of his own free will. His gaze still avoided mine. He carried a piece of paper in his hand and placed it on the dining room table. I approached slowly. Any sudden movement or noise scared him. I picked it up and saw a drawing of human figures: a woman and a child holding hands. He placed a finger on them and tapped three times.

**"Me. You. Mama,"
he piped.**



From the Corner of His Eye by Malena Salazar Maciá