EL LADRÓN DE MINUTOS

(The Thief of Minutes)

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...AND I LOST MY BIRTHDAY

The sixth of October just gone, I was ten for the last time.

I'm not saying I've had my tenth birthday several times, I mean I won't have another birthday ever again.

Never. It was my last birthday.

And no, I'm not going to die. What's happened is, the Authorities have decided to eliminate a day from the calendar and the date they picked was, of course, the sixth of October.

My sixth of October

The day I was born.

Out of three hundred and sixty-five days, all of them exactly the same, each with twenty-four hours, *they had to pick that particular day*.

It's 'official', which means (I love learning new words) the Authorities can't have second thoughts.

It's done. There's no going back however much I cry or complain. I will never have another birthday. I will always be ten years old.

The sixth of October has been ripped from the calendars.

"As from next year, after the fifth of October, it will be the seventh," my class teacher informed us, solemnly.

So, I've had to learn what it feels like to be left, out of nowhere, without a birthday. It's like missing teatime, only a much bigger deal. And it's forever.

I feel a bit like an orphan, "You're a refugee in time," said the teacher pointing at me as if, overnight, I'd turned into some kind of rare beast. All my classmates turned to stare at me.

I still don't know what a 'refugee' is, but it can't be anything good.

I'm not even sure if I'm still ten years old; the day I was born doesn't exist anymore, so I don't even have a date to count up from. Perhaps I don't have an age.

It's crazy, one day you wake up and find out you don't have an age. Maybe I'm zero years old now. Will I turn into a baby?

My family had better not try putting me in nappies, like granny.

My granny must be at least three hundred years old. She walks with a stick and sometimes she leaves her teeth in a glass and when she does that, you can't understand a word she says. She's very special. Just now they've been saying she has a cataract in one eye. I have no idea how anyone can have a waterfall in their eye unless they have a river inside their head.

I guess crying is pretty easy if you have a cataract in your eye.

My granny is so old that when she was little, PlayStation didn't even exist. Dad says she's so ancient her memories are in black and white. I love black and white photos.

Thinking about it, I'm pretty sure granny wouldn't mind if they took away her birthday. She must be fed up with them. She was born on the twelfth of March. Why didn't they scrap the twelfth of March from the calendars instead of the sixth of October?

MY LIFE IS A 'DRAMA'

So, yes. The sixth of October doesn't exist anymore.

I got the news in school and later, at home, Dad and Mum called me into the living room to have a talk with me, all serious. I knew there must be a 'conversation' brewing because Mum called me by my full name: E-duardo-Ma-ría.

I hate my name.

Why couldn't they just have called me Edu?

And if they were going to take my birthday away, why couldn't they have rubbed out my second name while they were at it.

But no. Although I don't have a birthday anymore, I'm still stuck with the name Eduardo María. 'My life is a nightmare!' like my sister Nuria screams from her room when her boyfriend doesn't call her, or when she has to revise.

The facts of the case are, I came out of my room when Mum called me and went into the living room.

Then, when I'm in front of him, Dad went through the usual ritual he has for these occasions: first he sighs, he ruffles the hair on his head, then he shrugs his shoulders and, finally, he turns to Mum his face full of hope, expecting her to start the conversation. He calls all this 'delegating'. When Dad 'delegates', Mum becomes his spokes-mum. Someone is a 'spokesperson' when they speak for other people. It's not that the two of them speak together or that mum puts on a strange voice, clairvoyant style, what happens is, that what she says is what dad thinks too (or what Dad thinks he thinks).

"They've removed the date of your birthday, but we still love you just as much," Mum begins, "we'll still give you presents."

"When?" I ask, keen to pin down the most important detail.

The question throws them. They look at one another.

"When would you prefer?" Dad intervenes; this is definitely an exceptional situation. "The fifth of October or the seventh?"

Dad is asking me to choose between my old birthday-eve or the day after. Of course. But it's the same difference. The thrill just won't be there. Or at least not so much. I've decided they'll have to buy me some eye-wateringly expensive gifts to make up for it. Trying to cheer me up by spending loads of money on me is something the grown-ups call 'compensation' (a word I learned last week, although I think it's quite hard to say).

But it's not working, the whole thing is just making me sad.

I chuck another question at them:

"So, how old am I?"

They look at each other again.

"They're going to recognise all the sixths of October that happened before their decree," Mum clarifies. "So don't worry; you're still ten years old."

I don't know what 'decree' means, but it makes no difference. 'Decree' and 'refugee' are two words I don't like the sound of. I decide never to learn what they mean. I get up from the armchair to go and have a

good cry in my room, which is simply what I feel like doing.

They've condemned me to ten years of age. Great, so I won't ever be younger, but I also won't get any older. I will be a ten-year-old kid forever. All my classmates, my friends, will keep having birthdays and will keep growing up. They'll get to celebrate year after year with parties, presents, and sweeties. And their voices will change (mine is like a whistle). And they'll get spots (I don't feel this is essential to my life). And, most of all, they'll get to grow tall, clever, and strong.

Meanwhile, I'll be left behind. Without anything to celebrate, trapped being ten, which isn't a bad age, but it seriously loses something with repetition.

A shadow appears on the horizon. Something suddenly dawns on me: if I don't get any older, will they make me stay in the same class year after year?

Nightmare.

The truth is, I simply can't see any plus side to my new situation (well, except not getting spots).

Mum has just come into my room and she's sitting on the edge of my bed, next to me. I've buried my head in the pillow and she strokes my hair like she used to when I was little. She's not spokes-mum anymore.

"Come on Edu," she whispers, her mouth right next to my left ear. "It's not all bad… You'll soon get used to it. It must have happened to loads of people. Just think how many people must have been born on the sixth of October! They're all just like you and I'm sure they're not bothered that much."

This doesn't make me feel better. Lots of the people this has happened to will be much older than me. Lots of them are not ten and they're not called 'Eduardo María'.

"And it's not the first time it's happened," Mum adds. "Why do you think February only has twenty-eight days? Well, obviously, to begin with it had thirty-one, and all the people who had their birthdays on those last three days are all getting on with their lives perfectly happily."

“Well, they should’ve carried on stealing days from February.”

I’m not planning on letting this go too easily.

“Come on,” Mum continues, “I’m sure this year will be full of fantastic days… Think positive!”

Then I remember what granny always says before she bursts into tears when she’s watching TV or listening to something dreadful on the radio: “What a drama.”

“What a drama!” I do an impression of her.

“What did you say?”

“That my life is a drama,”

Mum doesn’t know what to say, so I know I’ve used the word properly.

A ‘drama’ is something that makes you cry. Not having a birthday is a drama. Peeling onions is a drama. Having a cataract in your eye is a drama.

TRAPPED BEING TEN

Last night I slept really badly. And on the first day of my *new no-birthday-life*, I woke up with bags under my eyes. The day to day is so hard when you don’t have a date to look forward to.

Maybe I’ll never look forward to anything again.

Actually, I don’t want to talk about it anymore, but the TV news keeps going on and on about how they’ve got rid of the sixth of October. This morning they explained they’ve taken it off the calendar because it’s a ‘superfluous’ day.

That’s what they think of the sixth of October: ‘superfluous’. That word impressed me, and I asked dad what it meant.

“Superfluous means something unnecessary,” he replied, just before leaving the house to go to work, suit on, briefcase in hand.

‘Unnecessary’. Well, if you ask me, having a birthday is very necessary.

Later on, we were in class, and I asked my desk-mate, Sandra, if I could borrow her eraser. She didn’t have one. So, because I like to test out the new words I learn, I told Sandra she was ‘superfluous’. I don’t

understand why, but she started to cry. Perhaps she thought I'd called her 'super-filthy'.

Unsurprisingly, our teacher noticed all the fuss and came over.

"What's going on?" the teacher snapped.

So, I remembered my granny and, pointing at Sandra, I replied:

"A drama,"

I still don't get why the teacher told me off—I'm serious. It must be the power of words. Mum is always telling me I have to watch what I say.

In class everyone keeps staring at me and people whisper behind my back as I walk along the school corridors. It's a shame I seem to have become a bit of a mystery for them, even though we still share the same age. They treat me differently.

I'm the only one in the class that was born on a day that doesn't exist anymore.

In third period we celebrated Raúl's birthday. He's so fat that once he lost his pen inside his rolls of tummy blubber (he found it later when he yawned). I couldn't help it, I had to run to the toilets to cry. How come everyone else gets to keep their birthdays? It's not fair!

The worst thing is the way my classmates looked at me when I came back. The silence. They pity me. Being pitied makes me cross. I have become a 'second class kid'.

A 'sub-kid'.

Now, finally, I'm back home. I look at myself in the mirror in my room. I still look the same as ever, despite everything: I'm called Eduardo María, I have blond hair and I've been ten years old for a week (and will be for a long time—as you know).

I like videogames, football, and reading. People say I'm clever and have the brainpower of a fourteen-year-old kid. What they don't mention is I have the body of an eight-year-old: skinny, pale, freckly, and short. And, obviously, the combination is totally uncool.

You can't imagine how complicated life is for a ten-year-old kid with a fourteen-year-old's mind and an eight-year-old's body. I have to pass a maths test to

understand myself. If I could choose, I think I'd prefer to be eight with a fourteen-year-old's body and a ten-year-old's mind, for example. That seems more reasonable to me. That way, maybe it wouldn't bother me so much not having a birthday anymore.

This evening my sister is somewhere else. I notice Mum and Dad while we're having dinner. Well, what I mean is, I notice they aren't taking so much notice of me, because, really, I shouldn't be noticing them at all.

What a mess.

What I'm saying is they seem to be taking less notice of me than yesterday. And that's bad since I'm still a 'victim' so, the whole family should be taking loads of notice of me. I need tonnes of exclusive attention. I mean, it's not every day a person experiences a terrible tragedy like the one I'm going through.

But the massive problem is that, at least in this house, it's not such a novelty anymore. I can tell. Dad and Mum still pay me more attention than normal, but now, their eyes show much less concern than before. I'm losing their attention, so I need to complain more, before it's too late:

"In school they give me funny looks now I don't have a birthday," I say. "I'm going to wind up being 'marginalised'."

Mum's fork, a slice of steak skewered on it, stops half-way to her mouth.

A piece of meat and a non-existent date have come between us. I don't know if this is what they mean by 'intergenerational conflict', but I can feel a new sense of distance between us. It's because they have birthdays, and I don't.

"Marginalised?" she repeats.

"Yes," I reply. "Someone who's 'marginalised' is alone because nobody…"

"Mum knows exactly what marginalised means, Eduardo María," Dad interrupts me. "Don't get started with your vocabulary lectures,"

I shut my mouth. If I'd really wanted to show off the new additions to my vocabulary, I could have

picked some much juicer words, like ‘ephemeral’ (something that doesn’t last long), ‘largesse’ (a generous gift). ‘Superfluous’ on the other hand will have to wait until I have a better handle on it; I don’t want to get into trouble again.

“It’s all still very fresh,” Mum states, after a long pause. “In a few days your classmates will forget about it all, you’ll see. Be patient.”

They’ll forget about it? Forget that I’ve become a half-kid? I doubt that very much. Now I’m like… exotic. A kid without a birthday is a rare species. Like a mutant with a wooden leg, a vampire without any teeth, or a zombie that’s lost its head. A rare and dismal creature.

“You need to be brave and just get through this,” Dad adds, wiping his mouth with a napkin. “What’s happened to you makes you special, do you see? It makes you unique.”

What nonsense, I think looking down at my plate. If not having a birthday makes me special, then I want to be ordinary. Very ordinary. Fantastically ordinary. And I want to celebrate my ordinary birthday ordinarily.

And get loads of ordinary presents.

Hmph. The only thing that’s going to become ordinary is my actual age. How am I going to feel after twenty years of being ten? Basically, I have a *definitive* age.

I have The Age.

Not cool.

Dad and Mum, unable to understand my trauma soon get lost in a conversation about their work and exclude me completely. They don’t even see me anymore.

Clearly, I can’t count on them to solve my problem. What I do know is that I won’t put up with losing my birthday, at least not without some resistance.

I’ll fight to get it back!

I just won’t give up my date. I’ve decided.

And I know who might be able to help me in my mission: the Seller of Forbidden Things.

When we face outrageous challenges, we need outrageous solutions too.

THE SHOP OF FORBIDDEN THINGS

The good thing about living in a small city is my parents let me go out on my own to go play with my friends and spend the day with them kicking a ball around on in the town square.

When you have a birthday, it's easy to lose track of time playing ball.

Today I'm not interested in the match. I have a secret mission: paying a visit to the Shop of Forbidden Things. The shop is two streets away (everything is 'two streets away' in this place).

I tell my mates my ankle hurts, and I don't want to play football. I stay to watch for a bit, and when they're distracted, I head away from the square towards my secret destination. It doesn't take me long to get there.

The Shop of Forbidden Things is unusual. It has an enormous shop front taking up a whole corner (it's lit up at night), where all sorts of strange objects are displayed. Inside, however, it's tiny; there's barely space for the counter and standing behind it, a very tall, elegant man in dark clothes. He's the Seller. I can always see his silhouette from the street, but never in all my ten years of life—those perpetual ten years—have I ever entered the shop or seen anyone else go in.

I don't even know anyone who's gone inside or anyone who intends to in the future. Nobody in my family, nobody in the city, nobody in the whole world. Or somebody's lying, or perhaps, nobody has ever gone in, and the Seller was born standing there behind the counter.

When I was little, I always used to meet the same neighbour in the lift and, for a long time, I thought the guy lived in there. Stranger things happen.

So, like I said, the Shop of Forbidden Things is a very mysterious place. Its massive glass shopfront, its shadowy interior, the figure of the Seller standing like a sentry... Yes, it's a disturbing place. Dad has even banned me from stopping in front of the door when we pass by. Although I'm an obedient child, I sometimes

dare to go up and take a peep at all the things on show in the window. There are always such strange objects. I'd love to find out what they cost and what they're for, but there are never any price-tags or labels.

Everything in there is an enigma.

That afternoon I kill some time walking in circles around the Shop. 'Prowling' is what my granny—the granny of 'drama' fame—would say. In the end I make up my mind to go in; my situation is so desperate it's worth disobeying my family.

I take advantage of a moment when there's nobody else on the street to sneak in quickly.

"Hello, are you the Seller?" I ask the man in the shadows. My voice comes out in a whisper.

Inside, the shop is so miniscule that as soon as I go through the door, I'm at the counter. It's a micro-shop. The face of the man behind the counter is long, pale, and moustachioed. His eyes sparkle as he looks me up and down.

"I am not the Seller. A Seller sells things," he says. "And I cannot sell my wares, the law forbids it."

"OK,"

I have no idea how to respond to this. It's the first time I've been in the Shop of Forbidden things.

"It was a trick question, right?" the man leans towards me narrowing his eyes.

I want to step back but I can't as there's no room. My back bumps against the shop door.

"No sir, it wasn't a trick. I'm sorry."

I have no idea why I just apologised. The man straightens himself up behind the counter.

"Are you a secret police agent?" he looks at me, still suspicious.

"A secret agent?" I can't understand why this man thinks a ten-year-old boy with an eight-year-old body and a fourteen-year-old mind would be working with the police: "I'm… just a kid, Sir."

"Are you sure you're not in disguise?"
He points at me. What's he on about? My short, skinny body? Does he think my body is a disguise?

"I… I'm just made like this," I'm overwhelmed by immense self-consciousness.

A new ‘drama’ is brewing, I feel the tears prickling my eyes: “I’m just a ten-year-old kid.” *And I’m going to have to get used to it,* I think. *I’ve got years of it to get through.*

“Right you are, Ten-Year-Old Kid.“

My last answer seems to have convinced him because the expression on his face seems to have softened.

“What’s your name?”

“Edu,”

“I’m Vinicius,”

“Pleased to meet you Mr Vinicius,”

You have to be polite; Mum always says so. Then, I pluck up courage to ask:

“If you aren’t the Seller, who are you?”

“I’m the Dealer,” he says with satisfaction.

“Ah,”

‘Seller’, ‘Dealer’, same difference, surley?

“Yes,” he repeats. ”The-Dea-ler. Because if you ask me if any of the objects in the shop are for sale, absolutely any of them, I will reply: ‘It’s a great deal’. I am the Dealer because it’s my job to say: ’ It’s a great deal’. I will always reply ’ It’s a great deal’ when you ask me about the merchandise.”

I understand less and less with every moment. Surely, if all your wares are forbidden, you can’t sell them anyway, great deal or not.

“That’s what you’d reply?” I ask, “And what makes everything such a great deal?”

The man strokes his little moustache.

“Well, a great deal depends on whether they change the law, so the object you’re asking about stops being forbidden.”

“So, you could sell it then, of course.”

“In theory, yes.”

“In theory?”

“The problem is, since this is the Shop of Forbidden Things, I couldn’t offer to sell you that object as it would have become a Permitted Thing.”

“Seriously?”

“Yes, this is a complicated business.”

“But… then… why? … Why do you have a shop full of things you can’t sell?”

He gazes at me as if he can’t believe what he’s hearing.

“Why do I have it?” he exclaims. “Just in case!”

I thought he was going to say something more, but the man has stopped speaking as if he’s said everything he had to say. Would you believe it? So, I have to keep asking questions. What a difficult man. His presence gives me the creeps, but my curiosity gets the better of me:

“You have a Shop of Forbidden Things, just in case… what?”

I’ve curled myself up one side of the counter. He is busy straightening out the ends of his little moustache with his fingertips. He licks his lips before fixing me with his two black, black eyes.

“In case they change the laws. Why else?” He spreads out his arms. “On my shelves I have absolutely every kind of forbidden object. Every kind. The smallest change in the law and I’m the only Seller who has the newly legal product. Isn’t that great!”

“But didn’t you just say you wouldn’t be able to sell it even then?”

“You’re too young to understand,” Mr Vinicius shakes his head. “It’s all about the satisfaction of being the only one who has something everyone else yearns for…”

I’m still not convinced, and I don’t know what ‘yearns for’ means either.

“But the law probably won’t change…” He whispers.

“My boy, in business you have to have hope. Hope is key. You have to dream. Everything changes in time. Everything.”

He’s got a point there, everything changes. Even the calendar. I can remember when the sixth of October still existed.