

EL SÍNDROME DE BERGERAC: UNA COMEDIA HEROICA
(Bergerac Syndrome: A Heroic Comedy)

By Pablo Gutiérrez

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I was just a normal girl like any other. I went to class, argued with my parents, loved my friends unconditionally, and sometimes fell in love with someone I shouldn't – the same as everyone else. There was nothing particularly novelistic about me, nothing really worth writing about, and that's why this story isn't about my parents, my classmates or the people I fell in love with. It's not about the day-to-day life of a student studying for their post-sixteen baccalaureate in a school in a medium-sized Spanish city, simply sitting there bored. This story has just one character. And that character is a nose.

And it's not even *my* nose – which happens to be small and ordinary – but a huge, gigantic nose which we can refer to as *The Nose*.

A famous nose of huge dimensions.

Like a hypotenuse, like a space shuttle, like the sail on a ship.

A nose you can use to test the temperature of the water just by slightly moving your head, but one that won't let you drink it from a glass without the fear of drowning.

The nose of a French hero born in Bergerac, who goes by the name of Cyrano.

I suppose I really ought to start from the beginning – *ab ovo*, as the literary manual says – and, at the beginning, at the very beginning, Cyrano didn't even exist. Or rather, of course he existed, carefully guarded between golden covers for centuries, like a vampire in his coffin. When I say *he didn't exist*, what I mean is *I wasn't aware of his existence*, and, in a way, if you don't know something exists, it's like it doesn't exist, not for you or anyone else. It's like that old Kung-fu proverb: "Does the tree that falls in the desert make a sound?" The Master asks his apprentice. The boy thinks and scratches his head... When it falls, the tree causes vibrations that the ear perceives and converts into sound. But if there's nobody in the forest to hear it, the waves float around like the waves on the sea, like the song of the last whale, like grains of pollen blown by the wind...

Cyrano was a tree that fell in the cosmic silence, pure antimatter.

Cyrano had existed for four hundred years, yet we knew nothing about him. And there he had stayed: a Musketeer, defending his pride against his enemies who... oh wait, hold on a sec: I've just realised this story isn't just about Cyrano and his nose; it's also about Guadalupe, the new teacher that fate planted in our path, as if by magic.

And it's about bikinis.

And Nancy dolls.

It's about making you think you're all grown up when really, you're still a child.

From your first kiss, and the first lie to your parents.

This story is certainly about all that as well, so perhaps we should just take it from the top again, for the third time. And just like the theatre, it's best if we begin as all plays begin:

ACT ONE

THE STRANGER

The great unknown. I always felt nervous on the first day of school. The night before, I rummaged through my wardrobe trying to find something that wouldn't make me look too ridiculous, or too skinny, or too insignificant. In the end, I chose a pair of jeans and a T-shirt. During the holidays I'd spent every day in a bikini. Now it was as though I was drowning in a pair of jeans that felt like a suit of armour. Like someone was trying to punish me.

The summer officially ended as we put away the bikinis in a shoe box. The beach was still a stone's throw away, bright and available, but the season was over. We forgot about the sea, the sand and the joy.

September meant queues at the school gates, presentations, reconnecting with people, speeches, lists, books, the repetition of the school rules and fire drill...

The boys: so tanned, so much older.

The girls: so tall, so beautiful, so different.

You wondered if other people looked at you the same way, did you look different in their eyes?

You'd also ask yourself if you'd made the right choice with the T-shirt, because suddenly everyone else looked so radiant and so attractive, like Instagram stars.

September dragged, and yet this year would be different. It was a crucial, definitive year we'd all remember, one that would forever stick in our minds as The Year of Cyrano, or The Year of the Great Nose, or The Year of Lupe. We'd also remember it as the end of our childhood and the bridge towards the great unknown, even if we did still hide away in our bedrooms at home (far from the prying eyes of our parents) playing with Lego bricks and Nancy dolls – those perfect little mini-women who made us cry with melancholy. Mine were all lined up on a shelf; I had refused to send them to be adopted by the daughters of some friends who surely wouldn't treat them the same way I did. Every so often, I'd pick one up and brush her hair. Just so it didn't get tangled, of course. Definitely not because I wanted to play with her.

It was the start of a new school year. The torture of compulsory education was over after four years of problems and apathy: kids who'd only shown up to class to mess around and teachers who'd gone along with it simply to survive. We'd finally reached the pinnacle of the baccalaureate, the place we'd be free, adult, better. Well, more or less free, more or less adult.

Anger. I really want to help you understand that this year was going to be unforgettable, but there's so much to tell. My notebook's full of scribbles, doodles, underlined sentences; ideas run riot in my head and my fingers can't keep up. I want you to meet Cyrano before you meet us. I want you to know he was a Musketeer in the service of the King of France, the captain of a company of Gascony soldiers. I want you to try and imagine a man wearing a hat with a goose feather plume, knee-high boots, heavy leather strapping, army-regulation trousers, and hanging at his waist, a fearsome sword – something a bit like D'Artagnan, but

much stronger, more fierce, and more badly tempered. A veteran of a thousand battles, boastful and petulant. Only one thing existed that was greater than his pride: his nose, of course. If you met him at a crossroads, you'd better have kept your eyes on the road so as not to stare at the appendage, at the protuberance, at the shark's fin. Because if you looked – oh, poor wretch! – if you raised your eyes and glanced at the grandiose feature of his face, death would be more welcome than his fury.

“What are you looking at, fool? Do you consider something a little large...? Does it disgust you, terrify you?”

Nobody could avoid being sent off with a thick ear and a footprint on their behind. In some ways, it was as if Cyrano was sixteen, too, as if he'd never actually left the unforgiving playground where jokes, malicious laughter and mocking looks fly around like blow-darts. Cyrano: the gigantic bear of the Musketeers, and the boy who couldn't bear to look at himself in the mirror. The man who slips out of every photograph, yet who is willing to risk his life to avenge an offence. Bergerac syndrome.

What would become of me? My classmates were the cutting edge of a new generation. Next to them, I was just an innocent baby, despite the fact I had top-mark grades. When I talked with them, I felt like a tons of bricks had fallen on me, an avalanche of energy, ideas and talent that took my breath away.

Claudia loved music, history, literature and cinema. She would go on to receive grants and awards. She would become a famous pianist, or an award-winning investigator. She'd be so successful and everyone would love her.

Connor wanted to be a lawyer and study in Wales where his father's family came from. He'd work for a prestigious law firm, make statements for CNN on the steps of a courthouse and pursue fierce criminals. Nobody would stand in Connor's way; he was so charismatic, so Connor.

Maria was a forest nymph who dreamt of being seventeen things all at the same time: singer, actress, cake maker, orchestra conductor, voiceover actress for Mrs Rabbit in those cartoons that still made us laugh. She possessed all the

energy she needed to achieve them all, one after the other, and to make half of all humanity fall in love with her along the way.

Me, on the other hand, that September of The Year of the Great Nose, I still didn't know who I was or what I'm wanted to be. A blank page. A closed envelope.

I knew I didn't like getting into trouble, and I was embarrassed by just about everything.

I knew I liked drawing and singing songs in English, and I wasn't too bad at it either. I knew I liked reading, or rather that I had enjoyed it greatly once, back when books weren't school projects but nights of secret reading (I read *Harry Potter and the Half-blood Prince* four times – 652 pages multiplied by four makes 2,608 pages. If it took me two minutes to read a page, that made 5,216 minutes, or more than 80 hours when my parents thought I was asleep while in reality, I was suffering all thanks to Harry, Ron, and above all, Hermione Granger, my favourite heroine of all time).

That's all I knew about me.

If someone asked me what I wanted to study, or what I wanted to be, I felt like bursting into tears. I'd bury myself away in my room to avoid seeing anyone and stroke the spines of Rowling's books as if they were kittens.

The siege. Carrying out the orders of Cardinal Richelieu, our hero fought at the siege of Arrás against the Spanish troops. That's where he won his promotion to Captain of the Regiment, and where he received a slash to his throat that left a scar to be proud of. A scar he would waste no time in displaying to the ladies (as all show-offs do), tearing back the collar of his shirt to reveal the damage.

Good old Cyrano didn't just possess brute force and courage in battle, his wits were sharp, too. He understood rhetoric, astrological physics and military strategy. I can just imagine him behind the French lines, scrutinising maps to enable them to strike their enemy at their weakest point, outwitting the field marshals and writing a sonnet for his lover before departing for battle.

In the same way a line of hendecasyllabic poetry would challenge Cyrano's deciphering skills, the registration form for the baccalaureate tested my brain cells.

The form was covered in arrows, schedules and incomprehensible choices that all sounded far too serious. Growing up was just that, making decisions with no clue about the consequences, and I'm afraid I wasn't particularly good at either of those two things: growing up or making decisions.

In the seventeenth century, a guy my age would have had to raise his weapon and sacrifice himself in the first available skirmish. That was all that was expected from him.

In the twenty-first century, a girl like me was forced to decide her future by filling out a form on a Thursday morning.

The lance sounds more attractive.

Better to pick up the sword and head out of that trench under Cyrano's orders.

What if today is Thursday?

"Velia, what's up with you?" they said when they saw me.

What do they mean, what's up?

If only it was as simple as knowing what's up.

If only there was a dropdown menu to select from.

"Think about your future, Velia... It won't be long until you have to get a job and start making your own way in the world, you ought to bear in mind..."

What future are you talking about, Dad?

What if my future doesn't exist?

What if my future is Friday and today is Thursday?

What if my future is waiting for Claudia to leave the Conservatory so we can meet at the park or go skating along the seafront before afternoon turns to night.

I can't imagine autumn, or Christmas. I can't imagine next summer now I've stowed away my bikinis in a shoe box. Maybe they won't even fit. Maybe they'll be out of fashion, and I'll look at the wooden hoops I thought were so cool this year and think they're ridiculous – those wooden hoops that left a mark on your hips but that looked so pure, so wild. It's so sad thinking that one day you'll think your favourite bikini's ugly.

“Why are you crying, Velia?”

How to admit I’m crying about next year’s bikinis?

How to tell them I’m crying for the nostalgia that doesn’t yet exist?

How to share all that with someone who asks whether you prefer Statistics, Industrial Technology or Mathematics II?

How to tell them you’d prefer to fight in Arrás with the Gascony troops, that you’d prefer to cross enemy lines and take a bullet in the stomach than mark a cross in the wrong box?

Golden BIC. Everyone gets carried away by their own dramas and I was mortified by my indecision. The deadline to hand in the registration form to the school office was the very next day and I was a mess. My hands trembled and I probably looked ridiculous, so completely over the top. But that’s how I was feeling, as if I was making a momentous decision that would change my whole destiny.

I asked Claudia what she was going to take. I trusted her opinions a hundred times more than my parents’. Claudia was the wisest girl in the school, my confidante from pre-school when we used to wear ribbons in our hair and sport paint-splashed aprons.

She said she’d had the same lecture – the line about how tough life is and how difficult it is to find a good job, etc. etc. – but she wasn’t on board with all that crap, so she’d gone for Latin and Universal Literature, but really only to annoy her parents, she laughed. They wanted her to study one of the sciences (a privileged mind like hers shouldn’t be wasted), but she loved old and perfectly useless things.

My friend Claudia was the spirit of contradiction, a storm of ideas and opinions. Sometimes her sharpness and strength of opinion was unbearable, but other times it was as though she was an oracle.

Come, Claudia Clairvoyant, illuminate me. Tell me what is to become of me. Tell me what to do with this wretched registration form. I don’t want to crucify myself with equations and trigonometry but I don’t want to die of starvation either.

Claudia resolved it emphatically: LAT and LIT, plain and simple.

She even marked the crosses on the form – “that way we’ll be together”, she said – and initialled it with her gold BIC biro, as if writing with the spear of the goddess Athena.

What better reason could there be? After all, Friday (otherwise known as the future) was still a long way off.

Universal Literature: Universal, Extra-terrestrial or Plutonic, it was all the same to me. The only thing that mattered was that we’d stay together for another year, harking back to the aprons and ribbons. Leaving the future for some time further away. Perfect.

Snout. That nose was like a design error, a system failure. Maybe all noses are. After all, what is a nose? What is a lump of skin and cartilage doing in the middle of a face? Doesn’t it look like a last minute add-on? Is the elongation really necessary given it doesn’t turn into a snout? If you’re trying to smell, or follow a trail, if your nose has a specific job and use, wouldn’t something smaller be better? Would it work the same if it were just two simple holes, like Voldemort’s hideous face? Or some gills in your neck, like a shark? “What is this extra part for?” cries the gentleman from Bergerac, his tears forced to take a longer journey. The ugly duckling. In the solitude of his room, or the darkness of the trenches, Cyrano laments his misfortune. Who has not been a youngster, plagued by complexities that one does not understand? Who wouldn’t sell their soul to the devil to make *that* disappear?

The school playground becomes the courtyard of the rough musketeers. Jokes, taunts and insults fly about in the same way; it’s lucky we don’t carry swords at our waist nor comply with a code of honour. Otherwise, there may well be a death toll of five or six on the football pitch before the bell rings.

Plink. There are people who have the skill to figure out strangers. They look you in the eye and they know who you are, what you need, what you like. They look at your hair, your shoes, your clothes, the way you speak and they process it all to come up with a very precise, robotic portrait, *et voila!* they’ve worked you out.

It's a valuable skill and I'm sure these people are set to become undefeatable detectives or insurance salespeople. I envy them. My abilities work in the opposite way; I meet someone for the first time and I get it all wrong. I think someone's wonderful and they turn out to be an ogre, and the person I think is an ogre turns out to be a lamb. It happens all the time. With boys, with girls, with my first love interests. And the same thing happened with Guadalupe, the Stranger.

The Stranger came into class so flustered and so unpredictable I thought she'd be another of those wacky teachers who forget the dates of their own exams and never quite manage to learn your name. The sort of teacher who really annoy me. Most people like them because they don't ask too much. But I wasn't like everyone else. I was a strait-laced, obedient pupil. The phrase on my coat of arms would read: *Everything has its place*. Everything and everyone. The police chase the thief and the thief escapes. The teachers set tasks and the students protest. The cheetah runs and the gazelle flees. That's the way it should be. Unless you're the gazelle.

Proof of my obsessions: I was incapable of sitting down to study without first clearing the desk in my room, plumping up the pillows, lining up my Nancy dolls and sorting out my books into perfect symmetry. Only once every element was in its rightful place was I able to take out my notebooks and pens. Giving in to my habits, my father had put up two strong shelves on the wall. On one shelf went books I had already read and on the other, books still to read. That transfer gave peace to my universe, it soothed me: *The Order of the Phoenix* flying to its new home, *The Call off the Wild*, *Where the Trees Sing* searching for their places. It might seem silly (and I'm sure it was) but each time one of these books moved, I felt a shiver of satisfaction – plink! – like the sound of the pieces in *Candy Crush*.

My friends thought I was a bit odd. They'd say I'd end up as some crazy old cat lady and maybe they were right, but really, it takes one to know one. If you really know someone, if you really get into their world and their mind, it's impossible for their habits, their ideas and their ways of doing things not to seem strange. Knowing someone is like travelling abroad, like learning another language. There are no two people the same, nor two families, nor two homes alike.

Whenever I'd visit my friends, I noticed everything, especially the smell; I could tell which house I was in with my eyes closed. I must come from a line of hominids with a very well-developed sense of smell. My forebears must have guided the clan through the woods looking for ripe fruit or herds of antelope, lifting their noses to the wind and sniffing.

I inherited it. My nose, I mean.

A dainty nose, a Nancy nose.

Nothing at all like Cyrano's fabulous monument, but functionally perfect.

It almost rhymed. Lupe Ossorio, the new teacher, was dark and bony. Her hair was black as a raven and she had sharp features: a prominent chin, slightly sunken cheeks and a furrowed brow that gave her a look of deep concentration. She must have been in her early thirties and the whole ensemble together formed a good-looking woman, or at least so I thought. My sense of beauty has always been different. Sometimes my girlfriends would gush about boys they thought were hot while I couldn't see it at all, and other times I'd be head over heels over some unconventional cutie.

Right from the start, we realised she was a bit odd – I guess that's why I liked her. I belonged to the weirdos, too. The ones that read books and were clueless about football. The ones who hate the kids' menu at restaurants. You know the sort. Over time, I've come to realise there are lots of us weirdos, and it's not even that we're weird. I don't know how to explain it, but back then, I was living sandwiched between two extremes. There was one part of me that wanted to be a normal girl – go out, laugh and make the same jokes as everyone else – and yet there was the other part of me that yearned to stay at home, seeking refuge in books, pictures, songs, good grades and florescent highlighters. I think this part was the stronger part and I might have ended up inflicting that on everyone else had it not been for my friend Claudia who pulled me back to the civilised edge of the world.

Claudia: the perfect girl, so beautiful, so intelligent, adored by everyone else. It was a godsend that we were best friends. There were no other two souls as well

matched as ours. We had so many sleepovers at each other's houses, staying up all night talking about not a lot and whisper-laughing so we didn't get caught. If we ended up on a deserted island because of some disaster, we'd be fine. We'd find some way of surviving and passing the time. Conversation never ran dry, the jokes, the closeness. Claudia and Velia: it almost rhymed.

But let's get back to Lupe; she's the key to this story. The problem was, she didn't look like a *real* secondary school teacher, and that tripped us up. Lupe was an intruder, someone who wasn't meant to be there. Like a diver in the desert, or a skier on the beach. I'm not suggesting teachers have a certain gene that distinguish them from the rest of the human race, but it sometimes seems like it. They act the same, they copy each other. It's easy to pick one out from a group, and you can even put them into categories and work out which subject they teach just by watching them.

The ones with short-sleeved shirts teach Maths, everyone knows that. It's so obvious. History teachers always wear knitted cardigans, almost always with a zip. Foreign language teachers make themselves up to come to work, the women wearing pencil skirts that barely let them walk. And Spanish teachers are a complete mess; they look like they've just dragged themselves out of bed.

So from the stereotypes, even at the first glance, it was obvious that the Stranger didn't fit into any of them, even though as I've already said, I'm not a great judge of character. Connor, however, is. He's really good, that's why he'll make such a great lawyer. I can imagine him fiercely interrogating a false witness, saying, "Not even you believed a word of your own testimony, did you?" and the whole courtroom bursting into laughter. Connor, what a guy, so slim, such clean skin, curly hair with cherub-like ringlets, and in contrast, those long fingers like Count Nosferatu, and that accent that wasn't quite ours, yet wasn't quite foreign; just so Connor.

He was the first to suspect her. Lupe, I mean. And he had his reasons.