

The Old Woman and the Zipper³⁶⁶

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One evening in September 2020, I went out with a friend of mine, Paquita, who works as a professor at BMCC, and also with her sister Paz. If it weren't for the pandemic, Paquita would have had to be in New York by then, but since she didn't have to be physically there, because she was having online classes that semester, she was in Asturias for a little longer than usual and she was teaching her classes via Zoom.

At the end of the evening, the three of us decided it was time to go home. Paquita had to take a train, as she was staying with her parents in the countryside, so Paz and I accompanied her to the train station and then Paz and I went walking to our respective apartments in Oviedo. We live nearby, so we walked together for a while. At one point our paths parted, and we started to say good-bye. We were standing at a corner between two streets that are typically busy, but by then it was late at night and there was hardly anyone out. The place was shabby, in a working-class neighborhood, with run-down apartment blocks around us where only old people live, and some immigrants too. Rent is cheap in that area, you know? So that explains everything.

When we were about to part, an old woman, who seemed to be in her eighties and was dressed in what looked like her Sunday best, approached us, looked me in the eye, and asked me to take down her dress zipper. She told me she lived alone and if I didn't help her, she would have to sleep in her dress, unable to put on a nightdress. I was shocked. First, because I could hardly understand what she was saying. You see, because of Covid-19, we were all wearing face masks those days and we were keeping social distance, so her voice sounded distorted. Also, I was slow to understand her because the situation was absolutely bizarre. This woman wants what?, I thought. So I asked her to tell me again what it was she wanted. The second time, I got it, but couldn't believe this was happening to me. I doubted

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if I should follow her order—yes, it was more like she was giving me an order, not like she was asking me a favor, and the tone of her voice was very authoritarian. In the end, however, I thought that maybe she really was alone, had no one to ask for help and, in spite of the pandemic, I could not refuse to help her. How could I? So I decided to help her.

She turned her back against me, so that I could put my hand under her jacket and reach for the zipper. Her back was warm and sweaty. As I was reaching for the zipper, I had a feeling that maybe I shouldn't do what I was doing. Come on, Carolina, I thought. We're in a pandemic, told to keep social distance, and you're unzipping this woman's dress and touching her sweaty back? Are you crazy or what? When I finally found the zipper, I lowered it a few centimetres, but it was difficult to do so, because it was broken. You know the part of a zipper that you grip? That part was missing. Anyway, when I stopped lowering the zipper half-way through the back, the woman turned to me and said: "Lower!" So I lowered the zipper a few more centimetres. Then she looked back at me once again and yelled: "Lower! I won't manage to undress unless you lower it some more!" This went on for a while. She would give me orders, I would then follow her orders, uncertain as to whether I was losing my mind or simply being a nice person, until I reached the woman's waist. Then she shouted "LOWER!!!" one more time, but at that point I said: "No. This is enough. You should manage with this. And besides, it looks like I'm undressing you in the middle of the street. This is it." So she said, "OK. Thank you." And then she walked a few steps away from me and I thought, it's over. Thank goodness! But half a second later she turned around and asked me: "Would you like some hand sanitizer?" Oh my! I was really taken aback by this and didn't know whether to laugh or to ask her to leave me alone right away. The hand sanitizer simply did me in!

After the old woman left, I looked at Paz, she looked at me, and we both cracked up, totally unable to believe what we'd just witnessed. Then we went home, each one of us our separate ways and I never got to ask her how she'd felt about this old woman. I did keep laughing all the way back home. And kept laughing some more when I arrived home and told my husband, my kids, and my whole family about the zipper anecdote.

But the next day I woke up and I simply wanted to cry for the old woman who had found herself so lonely she had asked a stranger to unzip her dress in the middle of the

night. A woman who was walking to the solitude of her home. A woman who had made me feel unease, maybe afraid of contagion, and maybe repelled, too—her warm, sweaty back was still vivid in my memory, as was her old, worn-out dress with a broken zipper.

Two days later, I woke up even sadder. In that poor woman I could see myself, maybe in thirty years' time: old, in need of help even for basic things like dressing and undressing, and so alone.

Notes on contributor

Carolina Fernández Rodríguez is an Associate Professor at the University of Oviedo, where she teaches American Literatures and Cultures. Her research focuses on contemporary women's writing. Early on in her career she focused on feminist revisions of fairy tales, a topic on which she has published extensively. More recently, she has been interested in the representation of latinidades in American literature and mass media, and in issues related to multiculturalism in children's and young adults' literature. In 2016 she started working on the genre of popular romance, publishing articles on Nora Roberts and on romances by Chamorro writers, as well as a book on historical romances: *American Quaker Romances: Building the Myth of the White Christian Nation* (University of Valencia, 2021). She has also written a few short stories, like "El juego del escondite," which received an award in 2010 in Miranda de Ebro (Burgos), and "Credo," published in *Raudem* (vol. 7, 2019: 217-220).

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