

TRANSLATING CATALINA LA MAGA BY LUIS CABRERA DELGADO: SENSE, SONORITY AND SUITABILITY IN THE TRANSLATION OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

TRADUZINDO CATALINA LA MAGA DE LUIS CABRERA DELGADO: SENTIDO, SONORIDADE E ADEQUAÇÃO NA TRADUÇÃO DA LITERATURA INFANTIL

Victoria Wallace¹ 
Lexa Olivera-Smith¹ 

¹University of Essex, Colchester, Reino Unido

Presentation

The translation of children's fiction is an inherently subversive act. At first glance, this may seem unlikely: children's books are often perceived to be short, simple and easily digestible, devoid of the intellectual rigour associated with the great classics, often designed to be read aloud during circle time instead of being critically analysed at the local book group (Lathey, c2006). Indeed, it is generally believed that the aim of children's literature is far less about rocking the boat than it is rocking the child to sleep. With these stereotypes persisting, it is unsurprising that the translation of children's literature remains under-researched, underrepresented and undervalued. As Lathey (c2006) explains:

This may be because books for young readers are written for a minority: the primary target audience is children and they and their literature, like women and women's literature, are treated in many cultural systems as, at worst, peripheral, and, at best, not really central to the concerns of 'high art' culture (Lathey, c2006, p. 18).

Many scholars (Van Coillie & Verschueren, 2014; Klingberg, 1986; Oittinen, 2000) agree with Lathey (c2006) regarding the low status historically attributed to children's literature and its translation. Consequently, choosing to translate children's literature becomes an act of reclamation, justifying its place in the literary canon and asserting its merit in the academic field (Van Coillie & Verschueren, 2014).

Consequently, taking time to render a children's book into another language not only lends prestige to the source text (ST) but also gives credibility to the CLT field as a whole. The more children's literature is translated, the more likely it is to be taken seriously as an academic art.

To the casual onlooker, it may seem that the children's literary translator spends their time working with a straightforward source text (ST), delivering to an uncritical target audience (TA). The reality proves rather different. As well as contending with the usual challenges of the literary genre (among them, maintaining style and preserving the aesthetic form), the children's literary translator must also tackle several unique constraints, considering matters such as child image, duality of audience and sonority.

The challenges involved in translating literature for children are explored through an analysis of our translation from Cuban Spanish into British English of a short story by Luis Cabrera Delgado, whose work exemplifies the beauty of whimsical children's fiction whilst placing a spotlight on Cuban culture in particular.

Luis Cabrera Delgado (1945-2025) was a prolific and highly acclaimed Cuban writer of children's and young adult literature, who also authored adult novels, plays, essays and radio scripts. With over 50 published books—many of which have been translated into several languages—Cabrera garnered international recognition across Latin America, Europe and the United States and received multiple literary awards. Cabrera's writing has resonated deeply with both young readers and adults alike, thanks to his distinctive way of portraying the world. Familiar, everyday situations are usually reimagined through a fantastical lens, marked by bold flights of the imagination, a generous dose of humour and an even greater sense of humanity.

One of the clearest examples of this imaginative and humanistic approach can be found in *Catalina La Maga* (hereafter *Catalina*). This short story, which is split into micro-chapters and aimed at readers aged six to ten, was published by Norma Publishing House (Bogotá, Colombia) in 1997. The story follows Catalina, a young girl with emerging magical abilities who seeks to better the world around her. Blending wonder with everyday reality, *Catalina* highlights the complexity of real-world problems: even with her fantastical powers, the protagonist struggles to overcome the ordinary challenges of daily life.

Indeed, *Catalina*'s magic helps drive home the story's key themes. It is used as a vehicle to explore complex issues, such as sexual and racial inequalities, alcoholism, parental pressure, loneliness and life in a blended family. By combining these themes with fantasy, the story creates an engaging space for children to learn about mature topics. More generally, the text addresses core themes of childhood (grappling with growing up, conflicts with adults,

autonomy and curiosity, among others), so inherent to children's literature. More than two decades later, the story's main themes are as resonant and universal today as ever, making the story well deserving of translation into English.

In addition to the difficulty of conveying these thematic complexities to a young audience, *Catalina* posed several other notable translation challenges, including Cabrera Delgado's frequent use of Cubanisms and references to Cuban culture (such as beliefs, food, and traditions), as well as his charming writing style, characterised by frequent wordplay, humour, and intertextual allusions.

In the sections below, we explore a selection of these translation challenges, focusing specifically on issues of sense, sonority, and suitability.

Sense: Culturally Embedded Elements

As a subgenre of literary translation, CLT shares many of its primary priorities and purposes. Where other translation types tend to place importance on the faithful and coherent transfer of factual content from ST to target text (TT), a literary translator's main concern is preserving the aesthetic form. The emphasis on accurately conveying the source text's tone and style sets literary translation apart, providing additional translation challenges. When the presentation of content is as important as the content itself, creative strategies are required to overcome stylistic constraints. Indeed, this "creativity is precisely what makes literary translation such a distinctive writing practice" (Washbourne & Van Wyke, 2019, p. 49).

Furthermore, the literary translator must afford special consideration to the ethical and practical implications of retaining or omitting certain ST details. A decades-long debate within the translation field, this discussion began in earnest with Lawrence Venuti's definition of 'domestication' versus 'foreignization' (Venuti, 2018). Put simply, 'domestication' involves making the ST's foreign concepts and language familiar to the target audience (TA), converting cultural references (food, place names...) to TT equivalents (Venuti, 2018). Meanwhile, 'foreignization' advocates keeping the text's cultural specificities untouched in translation, exhibiting such 'foreignness' as a core feature (Venuti, 2018).

Subscribing to Venuti's perspective, it is desirable to avoid, where possible, unnecessary domestication, since preserving cultural references can be integral to recreating the ST's rich and layered world. Perhaps more importantly, however, it can play a vital role in redressing the power imbalance between well-represented Western, Anglophone cultures, and those which do not enjoy the same level of global popularity or power.

Venuti (2018) explains, “The terms “domestication” and “foreignization” indicate fundamentally *ethical* attitudes towards a foreign text and culture” (p. 19). Therefore, preserving a text’s original references and linguistic features can serve to fight the hegemony of dominant cultures: domestication often leads to the eradication of ST culture and autonomous voice; foreignization demonstrates a desire to acknowledge ideas and opinions outside of the privileged Western perspective.

The choice to domesticate or foreignize a text becomes even more nuanced—and contentious—when considering that literature frequently serves as an outlet for ‘unacceptable’ parts of culture. Often dealing with the difficult (racism, sexism, xenophobia...) and the distasteful (taboo language, forbidden behaviour...), societies ultimately use literature to explore these themes carefully and respectfully. In other words, “[literature] provides a safe platform for exposure to... the daily lives of individuals and groups from around the globe” (Pyke, 2017).

However, if ST cultural elements are deemed unacceptable in the TT culture, the translator must be cautious when adopting a foreignizing approach. Presuming the choice has not been made for them by publishers or other stakeholders, the translator may find their loyalty split between the ST and TT, needing to decide whether it is more important to avoid risking offence by rendering the ST cultural element accurately via foreignization, or instead protect the TT reader’s sensibilities through domesticating the text.

This was indeed a major consideration in the translation of *Catalina*. Although efforts were made to pursue a foreignizing approach as far as possible (Cabrera Delgado’s work does, after all, pay homage to Cuban culture, making the transmission of Cuban elements a priority), there were occasions where a solely foreignizing approach was not suitable. References to “food-related CSIs [culturally-specific items]...”, for example, “are a well-known problem for translators of texts...” (Van Coillie, 2025, p. 124). An example of food-related CSIs is found in the excerpt below, where Catalina enchants the school snack tray to provide an assortment of classic Cuban treats.

In this case, the focus on food (both its variety and novelty) executes an important function, emphasising Catalina’s magical abilities via the lens of the familiar and the accessible: food.

Consequently, a balance needed to be struck between including the ‘otherness’ or ‘foreign’ aspects (in keeping with the foreignizing approach) and ensuring comprehension; unrecognisable foods would risk confusing the TA and the intended effect of listing them would be lost. Therefore, generic food items (‘galletitas de chocolate’, ‘pasteles’) were generalised—translated via their generic English equivalents (‘chocolate biscuits’, ‘pastries’)—but a dual approach was adopted for dealing with culturally-embedded elements.

Example 1

Source Text (ST)	Target Text (TT)
—¡Abra la cabra, pata cadabra! —dijo Catalina el día que la maestra la mandó a buscar la bandeja. En esa ocasión los niños de su aula comieron yemitas con canela, panetelas de nata, boniatillo, galletitas de chocolate, pasteles, crema de leche, africanas, merenguitos de fresas, queques, besitos de coco, calabacitas chinas, timbas de dulce de guayaba con queso, semillas de marañón, tostadas, turrón de ajonjolí y raspadura. ¡Ah!, y mucho bicarbonato.	'Abrakazam, Alacadabra!' said Catalina the day that the teacher sent her to fetch the snack tray. That day, her classmates ate Yemita cakes with cinnamon, cream cakes, sweet potato pudding, chocolate biscuits, pastries, soft fudge, chocolate-covered biscuits, strawberry meringues, gingerbread, coconut kisses, winter melon, guava paste and cheese sandwiches, toasted cashew nuts, sesame nougat and hard fudge. Oh! And a lot of baking soda for their stomach aches.

First, where possible, overtly Cuban items were maintained and explicited, to allow the TA insight into Cuban gastronomy whilst providing information necessary for comprehension.

The addition of the noun 'cakes' conveys a generalised meaning of the original Spanish, whilst preserving the original term for the TA to learn and enjoy. This avoids long-winded explication (thus preserving clarity) and shifts the focus onto the traditional desserts (thus emphasising the Cuban setting). As food with non-English names will likely pique the TA's curiosity, the original function of listing the foods—to show how Catalina's magic adds wonder to the mundane—is preserved.

Second, in contexts where explication would disrupt the rhythm or where retaining the ST term would deprive the TA of insight into the nature of the item, Spanish terms without generic equivalents were omitted in favour of descriptive equivalents.

Understanding the exact nature of the treats serves an important imaginative function within the story; if the child cannot imagine the delicious snacks, the wonder of Catalina's magic is lost on them. This justified the use of domestication in this case.

Example 2

ST	TT
Boniatillo	Sweet potato pudding
Crema de leche	Soft fudge
Timbas de dulce de guayaba con queso	Guava paste and cheese sandwiches

Sonority: Duality of Audience, Childlike Voice

The pedagogical function of children’s texts means a translator must have keen linguistic awareness. Children’s literature is unique in that it is written and translated by adults, but primarily aimed at children. As Lathey (c2006) states, “the adult-child duality inherent in all books for children originates in the paradox that—with very few exceptions such as Anne Frank’s diary—only adults write, publish and edit children’s books” (Lathey, c2006, p. 2). This presents issues of style for the author and translator alike—it can be difficult for an adult to replicate childish speech patterns and “finding the voice of a children’s text in order to replicate it in translation requires particularly careful reading...” (Lathey, c2006, p. 17).

This relates to a special quality of children’s literature, namely, the duality of its audience. Children are rarely entirely alone in the reading experience; there is usually adult intervention of some kind. Whether a teacher, parent, caregiver or publisher, adults are almost always involved in selecting the type of content a child consumes, matching the book’s linguistic level to the child’s linguistic ability, or the thematic content to their level of emotional development. Consequently, the TA comprises both children and adults.

Adults may even participate in the reading process itself, reading aloud to, or alongside, the child. For Oittinen (2000), the way children’s literature is consumed is essential to its definition: “I see children’s literature as literature read silently by children and aloud to children” (Oitinnen, 2000, p. 4). This expectation that texts will be read aloud means the reading experience itself differs between adult and children’s literature. Where adults tend to approach reading as a solo activity, children’s books are designed for both individual and group reading. Consequently, the translator must consider stylistic elements such as onomatopoeia, rhyme, rhythm and repetition. Failing to capture this in translation could severely affect readability, and thus the reading experience as a whole.

Catalina is characterised by its informal and playful tone, which is achieved through a variety of literary devices. To replicate this effect in the target text, occasional adjustments were made. The use of addition and equivalence strategies helped create an idiomatically informal tone in the translation.

Example 3

ST	TT
!;En dedo?!	Wait, back into a finger?!
¡Al fin!	Finally!
¡Ay! ¡Ay!	‘Ouch! Ouch!’

Despite the absence of quotation marks in the ST, the choice of punctuation and use of sentence fragments clearly signal an attempt to replicate natural speech. This implies that the narrator—or Catalina herself—is directly reacting to her finger returning to normal, drawing the target audience more intimately into the plot. To reproduce this effect in the TT, several elements were carefully considered. Although the so-called interrobang (!?) is non-standard in English, it was retained in the TT, since its lively informality helps establish a conversational tone. Additionally, the inclusion of the discourse marker ‘wait’, which echoes informal, spoken language, implies diegetic sound: that the sentence is being uttered by a character, thus faithfully mirroring the ST’s intent.

Onomatopoeia is a device often present in children’s content, since recreating real-life sounds produces more realistic dialogue, ultimately improving the child’s engagement with the narrative. Encapsulating an entire emotional response in a single sound, they also convey considerable meaning. As children’s stories are often read aloud, finding ST equivalents for the onomatopoeia ‘¡Ay! ¡Ay!’ was crucial: ‘¡Ay!’ does not trigger the same emotional response in an English-speaking child as its English equivalent, ‘Ouch! Ouch!’ Whilst a British child may not know exactly what ‘¡Ay! ¡Ay!’ means (is Catalina happy, in pain...?), the equivalent eliminates any doubt, smoothly recreating the ST onomatopoeia’s function.

Names and referential expressions are also used to great effect in *Catalina*. Rarely straightforward, they usually give insight into the person being described, either the character’s relationship to Catalina, or Catalina’s perceptions of the character.

This required special consideration in translation, as just like incidental music in an audiovisual piece, names convey meaning. As Van Coillie (2025) notes, ‘personal names can be divided into two major groups: conventional names (considered meaningless) and loaded names (bearing meaning, connotations)’ (p. 125). This is why proper names such as ‘Catalina’, which does have an English equivalent (‘Catherine’), were left untouched, while translations were found for names that convey meaning.

Example 4

ST	TT
!¿En dedo?!	Wait, back into a finger?!
¡Al fin!	Finally!
¡Ay! ¡Ay!	‘Ouch! Ouch!’

Example 5

ST	TT	Relation to Catalina
...para que su papa de verdad la siguiera queriendo...	...for her actual dad to go on loving her...	Biological father
Su otro papa, el que se casó con su mamá...	Her other dad, the one who'd married her mum...	Stepfather

A key example is that of the descriptive names or referential expressions that Catalina uses to differentiate between her biological father and stepfather. These names also highlight that Catalina comes from a blended family, which exposes the child reader to a model other than the nuclear family, thus helping fulfil the pedagogical function of children's texts. As stepparents are just a fact, rather than the focus, of Catalina's story, it is important that the moniker remains equally neutral and descriptive in English.

Consequently, although 'real dad' might be a more literal translation of 'papá de verdad', to avoid possibly conjuring negative connotations via use of the adjective 'real' (the antonym of 'real' is fake)—invalidating her relationship with her stepparents), the adjective 'actual' was selected instead. This implies the same relationship in a less critical way, whilst replicating the childishness of the name.

Similarly, the magical spells used throughout *Catalina* played an important role, requiring careful translation. After all, a children's literary translator's role necessarily involves "reworking wonder" (Lathey, p. 106) for the young TA.

Catalina's spells were variations on the traditional fantasy spells, "Abracadabra!" and "Alakazam!". Using these two words as a lexical base helps form a pattern that the TA can recognise and associate with Catalina's magic, whilst the coining of new spells showcases her magical creativity, whilst also implying her inexperience with magic. This formula maintains consistency and structure whilst contributing to the text's informal tone and magical flavour.

Accordingly, it was essential to replicate the spells in function and form. This required careful and consistent translation, following the logic of the spells in Spanish.

Example 6

ST	TT
¡Abra cadabra!	Abracadabra!
¡Abra cadabra!	Abracadabram Alakazam!
¡Abra cadabra!	Abrakazam, Alacadabra!
¡Abra cadabra!	Abracazabra Dabracazam!
¡Abra cadabra!	Abracadabra, cadabrakazam!

Example 6 – Cont.

ST	TT
¡Cada cabra, pata cabra!	Alacadabra, Abrakazam!
¡Cada pata, abra la cabra!	Alabracabra, Abradazam!
¡Cadabra, cadabra, abra la cabra!	Cadabra, cadabra, abradazam!
¡Pata de cabra, abra cadabra!	Alakazam, abracadabra!
¡A la una, a las dos y a las tres!	One, two, three!
Chasqueó los dedos y dijo: —¡Ya está!	She snapped her fingers and said: “Hey presto!”

Suitability: Pedagogical Function and Child Image

A vital feature of children’s literature is that it usually serves a pedagogical function: improving a child’s linguistic and cognitive abilities, emotional development and cultural awareness. Indeed, Lathey (2025) equates translators to “moral guardians...” (p. 109), stating that “translators of children’s books adopt the role of cultural mediators for the young” (p.109). As such, the author and translator share great ethical responsibility: they must accurately portray the world as it is, whilst modelling desirable behaviour.

Further complications arise, however, when considering the concepts of ‘childhood’ and ‘child image’. These are essential in CLT, as true understanding of what it means to be a child allows access to their world, and increased TA awareness can only ever be helpful to the translator. These are complex notions due to their innate subjectivity. The concept of ‘childhood’ and what constitutes child-friendly material varies extensively according to culture, time period, socioeconomic background and individual experience. The current Western conceptualisation of childhood favours treating children with special care, making them uniquely valued, nurtured and protected as a social group. As Lathey (2025) states, “To adult carers, translators and publishers, children represent a nexus of social and moral concerns... [and are] regarded as impressionable and vulnerable...” (p. 109). This can be seen in the content of children’s literature which tends to see children “isolated from the negative aspects of society and given the opportunity to remain ‘small’ and enjoy childhood” (Van Coillie & Verschueren, 2014, p. 23).

Therefore, a key consideration for translators of children’s literature is their own sense of child image. Each individual’s idea of what counts as ‘suitable’ for a child’s eyes is shaped by their own childhood experiences.

Consequently, it can be challenging for translators to establish what is culturally (un)acceptable in the TT, and what is motivated by personal experience. Different translators may hold different views on the suitability of themes such as violence and social inequalities, and this will significantly influence their decision to adapt or even omit ST elements.

However, it is widely recommended that translators avoid altering their tone or delivery to such an extent that they patronise the TA. As Lathey (c2006) puts it,

“The desire to shield children from aspects of life openly discussed in juvenile literature in one country but deemed to be profane or harmful by another is an issue to which translators and their editors have to be sensitive, but which should not lead to choices contrary to a realistic assessment of child behaviour and understanding” (Lathey, c2006, p. 27).

Whilst it is important for translators to consider whether certain elements of a story are appropriate for a young readership, there has historically been a tendency to ‘coddle’ children to such an extent that the resulting text becomes saccharine, unrealistic and bland. Striking the balance between adhering to one’s own child image whilst respecting the TA’s intelligence is therefore essential for any translator of children’s literature.

This said, in CLT, it is not uncommon for translators to make changes that accommodate the TC’s sensibilities and cultural norms. As Dybiec-Gajer (2025) notes “...translation is the result of what the target culture deems acceptable for the child.” In this context, the translator bears considerable ethical responsibility. Since “culture is passed on from one generation to another by learning” (Van Coillie, p. 118), the translator’s lexical choices have the potential to shape a child’s worldview.

This was especially poignant in *Catalina*, where the depiction of racial inequalities demanded careful and sensitive handling in translation.

Example 7

ST	TT
Es que Manuela, como Catalina, era negra como un tizón, tenía los labios grandes y una pasada apretadita y pegada al cráneo, pero linda como la que más, y todos los libros de cuentos dicen que las princesas son blancas, rubias y con ojos azules.	The thing is that Manuela, like Catalina, had black skin, large lips and very short curly hair. She was pretty as could be, but all the story books say that princesses have white skin, blonde hair and blue eyes.

The publishing industry is currently experiencing a shift in how race is described in literature. Whilst previously the norm was to use floral descriptions and similes to describe skin colour, there is growing concern that this only serves to exoticise people of colour, often in ways that are inaccurate and insensitive, likening people to commodities such as coal, chocolate and ebony (Thorne, 2018). This is why the ST simile was adapted to the simple descriptive phrase, ‘had black skin’.

Example 8

ST	Literal meaning of ST	TT
...era negra como un tizón...	... was black as coal...	...had black skin...

Omission was used in the following line to avoid misunderstandings:

Example 9

ST	Literal Translation	TT
Manuela... era negra como un tizón... pero linda como la que más...	Manuela... had black skin... but was pretty as could be...	Manuela... had black skin... She was pretty as could be...

The coordinating conjunction ‘but’ implies entailment here, i.e., *in spite of* her skin colour, Manuela was considered beautiful, raising the issue of racist beauty standards. Omitting this conjunction removed the tension between the two elements—Manuela is both black *and* beautiful—and this flows better into the denouement of this segment, which sees Catalina changing the books to reflect Manuela’s beauty, rather than changing Manuela to fit the exclusionary beauty standard.

In conclusion, far from being a matter of rendering a simple ST for a simple audience, CLT proves itself time and again to be a far more complex endeavour, requiring loyalty to the source text, author and culture, as well as sensitivity to the TC’s expectations and norms.

As the translation of *Catalina* has demonstrated, CLT demands creative strategies to navigate culturally-embedded elements to faithfully render the aesthetic form. Beyond this, the process also required thoughtful debate about the role of the translator, balancing their responsibility to accurately render all ST elements with their duty to create content that enriches and enlivens the TC’s literary canon. Translators are encouraged to remain faithful to an ST at all costs, sometimes to the detriment of the TT, which due to close adherence to the ST may lack an idiomatic style or fail to fully connect with the TA. Perhaps, then, there is something to be learned from CLT, a genre that permits more adaptation than the norm, so long as it is done to achieve a certain purpose and respects the integrity of both the ST and the TT.

It is clear, therefore, that CLT can and should serve as a powerful vehicle for global social change. It provides a space to thoughtfully and deliberately challenge our concept of child image, develop our individual and collective literary collections, and amplify the voices of those who are often excluded from the debate. In an increasingly divided world, CLT offers a hopeful solution: protecting and proliferating the timeless tradition of storytelling, while broadening the horizons of generations yet to come.

References

- DYBIEC-GAJER, J. Ideology and Censorship in Translated Children's Literature. In: BORODO, M.; DIAZ CINTAS, J. (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Translation and Young Audiences*. New York: Routledge, 2025. p. 132-145.
- KLINGBERG, G. *Children's Fiction in the Hands of the Translators*. Lund (Sweden): CWK Gleerup, Studia psychologica et paedagogica Series, v. 82, 1986.
- LATHEY, G. (ed.). *The Translation of Children's Literature: A Reader*. Clevedon (UK): Multilingual Matters, c2006.
- LATHEY, G. Translator Visibility and the Voice of the Translator in Children's Literature. In: BORODO, M.; DIAZ CINTAS, J. (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Translation and Young Audiences*. New York: Routledge, 2025. p. 105-117.
- OITTINEN, R. (ed.). *Translating for Children*. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc, 2000. 2 v.
- PYKE, T. *Using Novels to Explore Development Issues: Some Initial Ideas and Suggestions*. Development Education, 2017. Disponível em: <https://developmenteducation.ie/feature/using-novels-to-explore-development-issues-some-initial-ideas-and-suggestions/>. Acesso em: 1 junho 2025.
- THORNE, A. *Avoiding Racism for Writers—Coffee, Honey and Other Color Don'ts*. Kriftel/Frankfurt (Germany): Ylva Publishing, 2018. Disponível em: <https://www.ylva-publishing.com/2018/05/29/avoiding-racism-writing-coffee-honey-colors/>. Acesso em: 1 junho 2025.
- VAN COILLIE, J.; VERSCHUEREN, W. P. (eds.). *Children's Literature in Translation: Challenges and Strategies*. New York: Routledge, 2014.
- VAN COILLIE, J. Cultural Specificity in Translated Children's Literature. In: BORODO, M.; DIAZ CINTAS, J. (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Translation and Young Audiences* (pp.118-131). New York: Routledge, 2025.
- VENUTI, L. *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*. 2 ed. London/New York: Routledge/ Taylor & Francis, 2018.
- WASHBOURNE, K.; VAN WYKE, B. (eds.). *Routledge Handbook of Literary Translation*. New York: Routledge, 2019.

Translation

CATALINA THE MAGICIAN

Luis Cabrera Delgado

Grandma was the first one to notice.

At Catalina's fifth birthday party, when she blew out the candles and the cake turned into a top hat with a rabbit inside, Grandma said:

'Catalina is a magician!'

* * *

'Ouch! Ouch!'

Catalina was trying to take the lid off a tin of condensed milk—intending to scoop out the contents with a slice of bread—but that tin opener business is such a palaver, and in the end, all she had to show for her efforts was a cut finger.

It's not as though things were going well until that point, but they just sort of happened as one might expect: a tin opener, a stubborn tin and a cut finger. The real problem began when Catalina's mum bathed the wound in surgical spirit.

'Ouch! Ouch!'

Catalina already knew she was a magician, but she'd hardly performed any magic yet, and so it was just her luck that she decided at that very moment to blow on her stinging finger: she blew on it, and her finger turned into a daisy.

At first, Catalina felt extremely proud of the flower that sat where her index finger had just been, but when the novelty wore off and she wanted her finger back—even with the cut and the stinging from the surgical spirit—she didn't know how to get it back.

Her grandma advised,

'Blow on it again.'

The daisy promptly turned into a pencil.

Catalina blew on it again and again and the pencil transformed into a lollipop, and the lollipop into a ruler, and the ruler into a thermometer, and the thermometer into a fork, and the fork into a clothes peg, and the clothes

peg into a screwdriver, and the screwdriver into a pen, and the pen into the arm of a pair of glasses, and the arm of a pair of glasses into a carnival baton, and the carnival baton into a pen and the pen into a toothbrush, and the toothbrush into a small banana, and the small banana into a stick of chalk, and the stick of chalk into a spoon, and the spoon back into a finger again.

Wait, back into a finger?!

Finally!

‘Ouch! Ouch!’

* * *

Catalina wanted to be an astronaut.

Perhaps because everything in space is magical?

* * *

Her other dad, the one who’d married her mum, was as nice as pie, but he often said words that children shouldn’t hear.

One day, Catalina read a story about two sisters who set out to find water: one sister was kind and gave water to an elderly woman, the other was mean and said nasty things.

This time, Catalina didn’t have to say ‘abracadabra’ or ‘one, two, three’. She didn’t even have to blow on her finger: it was enough just to wish for what she wanted.

When her other dad, the one who’d married her mum, got home from work and was about to utter one of his usual bad words, a frog hopped out of his mouth. He was so scared that he tried to say another bad word and out popped a snake. Every time he was about to let loose a swearword, he spat out rats, scorpions and cockroaches.

And the more he kept trying to speak, the more bugs appeared.

First, the bugs filled up the room, then the apartment, then the entire building, then the gardens, the pavements, the children’s play park. They were on the brink of taking over the whole street when the firefighters arrived. But they simply couldn’t handle that many minibeasts: not with the hose jets, not with the long ladders, not with the axes or the foam extinguishers. It was only when Catalina’s other dad—grey-faced from shock—crossed his heart and vowed silently that he would never again use bad words that the bugs finally disappeared.

Then everyone turned to Catalina, who looking very innocent indeed exclaimed:

‘Don’t look at me! You know I’m scared of cockroaches!’

* * *

Catalina had always been taught that friends don’t fight.

But not even her magic has helped her understand why parents are allowed to fight.

* * *

Poor Adriano!

He lived in a city, but ingrained in his eyes was the gentle flowing of the water round the river bend. The vast silence of the savannah and the sweet trilling of the mockingbird among the high leaves in the treetops still rang in his ears, which was why every day, on their way to the corner shop, he would ask Catalina to enchant the motorbikes, the buses and the cars to keep them from making such a racket.

* * *

As Catalina was a stamp collector, one day it occurred to her that by offering magic ice lollies in exchange for stamps, she could collect many more stamps.

These homemade ice lollies would turn a person invisible for half an hour, and as this was more than enough time to have a blast, the neighbourhood children, as well as the children at her school, immediately got to work rifling through their houses’ drawers and cupboards, on the hunt for old envelopes.

On the first day, Catalina received fifteen stamps that had been missing from her collection; on the second, she got one hundred and thirty-two, and by the third day, she would have completed her album altogether, if not for the grown-ups.

The grown-ups, as they usually do, spoilt everything. Instead of playing at any of the thousands of things you can do when you’re invisible, the moment they found out about the magical ice lollies, they rushed to use them to do naughty things: sneaking onto the bus without paying, even smoking where they shouldn’t.

And so many more things!

The crowd outside Catalina's door made such a ruckus that the family had to call the police to keep it under control, and Catalina was so scared that the police had actually come to arrest her that she ate the remaining tray and a half of ice lollies and was invisible for three days.

* * *

To begin with, the villagers reacted with astonishment, but through force of habit, it all became normal to them over time.

The thing is that having your clothes scattered between three different houses can be a real hassle, and every time Catalina wanted to wear something, say, her pink dress or her flowery shorts, she had to think hard to remember which of the three houses she had left it in: at her own house, at her actual dad's house, or at Grandma's house. And as bad luck would have it, whatever she wanted was almost always in one of the houses where she wasn't, so she was often frustrated that she couldn't wear the clothes she wanted when she wanted.

'Alakazam, abracadabra!' she said.

From that moment on, it wasn't uncommon in Catalina's village to see a clothes rack catching the bus, complete with a skirt and some blouses, or a pair of shoes scurrying along the pavement, or even a handkerchief flying above the power lines.

* * *

When her mum was expecting a baby, Catalina's grandma put a knife on a chair and covered it with a dishcloth, and on another chair, she put a pair of scissors and covered them with another dishcloth. Grandma called Catalina's mum and told her to sit on one of the two chairs.

'You're going to have a baby boy,' said Grandma, because Catalina's mum had sat on the chair with the knife.

'Your goose is cooked, Catalina,' she added.

It was just one of those grown-up things that Catalina couldn't begin to understand, but if her other dad, the one who'd married her mum, was to go on loving her, then her mum would have to give birth to another girl.

But she gave birth to a boy.

And that was why, when Catalina went to the maternity hospital to meet her new brother, she sang him a strange lullaby which went something like this:

*Change your nature,
Bespelled, bewitched,
Sleep as you are
And wake up switched.*

Later, when they went to change the baby's nappy, they discovered that they had got it wrong—the baby they believed to be a boy was, in fact, a girl.

So, Catalina's other dad carried on loving her, and instead of having a little brother called Manuel, Catalina found herself with a little sister called Manuela.

* * *

'Magic mirror, on the wall, who's the fairest in this town?'
'You are, Catalina, you are.'

* * *

It was just one of those grown-up things that Catalina couldn't begin to understand, but if her actual dad was to go on loving her, then his new wife would have to give birth to a girl.

When her actual dad's new wife was expecting a baby, Catalina prepared the two chairs covered with the dishcloths and invited her to choose a chair to sit on.

'You're going to have a baby girl,' said Catalina, and hurriedly collected the dishcloths before anyone could work out that she had placed scissors on both chairs.

* * *

It was as though her grandma had two versions of herself within: one warm, perfumed and sweet, the other grumpy and nonsensical.

'Little girls don't pick their noses.'
'Little girls don't play with boys.'
'Little girls don't whistle'
'Little girls don't sit like that.'
'Little girls don't swear.'

‘Little girls don’t talk loudly.’

But neither her own magic nor the school computer could tell Catalina exactly why little girls couldn’t pick their noses, play with boys, whistle, sit like that, swear, or talk loudly.

* * *

The teacher who took their Year four Three class was as fierce as a panther.

She was always nagging and would spend the whole day shouting and dishing out clips behind the ears on people’s wrists.

And all for no reason!

All for silly little things: like if Adriano had forgotten to do his homework, or if Leticia wasn’t paying attention, or if Emma was chatting, or if Octavio stood up without permission, or if Elena was sharpening her pencil at her desk.

Whatever the case, she was always nagging.

The day that a note was being passed around the classroom, they took great pains to avoid the teacher from noticing. The note was for Catalina, and it said that at playtime the rest of the class wanted to speak with her behind the almond tree.

‘Turn her into a frog.’

‘No, turn her into a Hutia rat.’

‘Turn her into whatever.’

Catalina was very flattered that her classmates trusted her with this mission, and the very first moment that the teacher walked by her seat, Catalina said:

‘Abracadabra, Alakazam!’

In maths class, she said aloud,

‘One, two, three!’

But no matter how hard she tried, she just couldn’t turn the teacher into anything.

It wasn’t until Catalina was told to wipe the blackboard that it occurred to her.

When she started to sneeze from the chalk dust, she remembered that in all the fairy stories they always say that magicians use magic dust to perform their spells, so she gathered a little chalk dust in the palm of her hand and blew on it towards the teacher.

There was a blinding flash in the classroom, and a strong smell of sulphur filled their noses. When the smoke cleared, where before there had been a teacher who was fierce as a panther, there now stood a proper teacher.

* * *

Fifteen minutes after all but one of the competitors had reached the finish line, they had to send a boat out into the pool to retrieve Catalina who, splashing around with every stroke like a gargling whale, was still nowhere near the end. But she managed to find a way to perform her magic tricks without anyone noticing, and that is why they never did quite understand how the announcer ended up saying into the microphone: 'And now for the medal presentation: For the 100-metre freestyle, gold goes to... Catalina Merlín!'

* * *

Manuela had been crying for three days and no one could work out why.

They tried everything, from threatening punishment to promising the moon.

Everyone in the neighbourhood came to see if they could cheer her up, but to no avail.

None of it worked: not Grandma's star anise fritters (even though Manuela had a sweet tooth!), not their new neighbour's seashell necklace (even though Manuela was into her looks), not the ride in the Jeep promised to her by Octavio's dad (even though Manuela loved to go out!), not Adriano's promise to marry her when they were grown up (even though Manuela was a romantic!).

When they had turned out the lights on the third night, Catalina got out of bed, went up to her sister and said to her in a quiet voice,

'If you don't shut up and let me sleep, I'll give you a smack.'

'I just want to be a princess,' Manuela sobbed.

The thing is that Manuela, like Catalina, had black skin, large lips and very short curly hair. She was pretty as could be, but all the story books say that princesses have white skin, blonde hair and blue eyes.

'Watch this,' said Catalina, and made straight for the bookcase.

'Alacadabra, Abrakazam!'

And from that moment on, there were many books that said:

‘Once upon a time, there lived a very beautiful princess. She had black skin, large lips and very short curly hair...’

* * *

‘Every boat is just an enchanted whale that once fell in love with a sailor,’ Catalina thought the first time she went to the seaside.

* * *

One time early in the morning, Catalina fell so ill that she had to be taken to hospital.

‘She’ll have to stay in the hospital to have an operation,’ said the doctor.

When Catalina heard that, she burst into tears, but her grandma pointed out that magicians don’t need to cry when they’re faced with a problem.

‘Alacazabra, Dabracazam!’

And with that, the hospital bed she was being wheeled on turned into a golden carriage pulled by six white horses. The operating room turned into a wondrous place: a garden full of plants made of green tiles, the sky made of blue tiles, the flowers made of tiles of every colour. There was a fountain spurting water and releasing bubbles into the air, and also the biggest collection of stainless-steel toys imaginable glinting under the enormous sun, which was suspended from the ceiling.

‘We’re going to play appendix hide-and-seek.’

And everyone covered their eyes until Catalina said they could look.

‘Cold, cold,’ she said when the anaesthetists started searching through the medical records.

‘Getting warmer,’ she said when the nurses looked among all the medicine bottles.

‘Hot, hot,’ she said when the doctors peered beneath the sheets.

‘Boiling hot!’ Catalina said when a surgeon finally found the appendix hiding under her hospital gown.

The next day, she was allowed to leave the hospital and was given instructions to follow to get better at home.

‘Be sure to eat a scoop of chocolate ice cream for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Suck on a mint sweet once every three hours. And if you’re in a lot of pain, use Mummy’s lipstick and eyeshadow to make up your eyes and lips.’

Catalina always wished that her dad, her actual dad, could live with her and not just come to visit her every now and then. So, as she was a magician, she set about fixing this problem.

‘Abracadabra, Alakazam!’

And so, with a magic spell, her father was moved back into her house. But then, Merceditas, her other half-sister, started to cry because now her dad wasn’t living with her anymore. So, as she was a magician, Catalina did all she could to fix this problem.

She blew on her fingers.

And so, with a magic spell, she sent her other dad, the one who’d married her mum, to live at Merceditas’ house, but Merceditas carried on crying because the dad she had been sent was not her actual dad and he wasn’t married to her mum, and Manuela also started to cry because now she was missing her actual dad, who could only come to visit her every now and then. So, as she was a magician, Catalina did everything she could to fix this problem.

‘One, two, three!’

And magically, she moved both her sisters: Manuela went to live at Merceditas’ house with her actual dad and she brought Merceditas to her house to live with her actual dad.

But then it was the mummies who were sad. Catalina’s mum was sad because she missed Manuela, and Merceditas’ mum was sad because she missed Merceditas. So, as she was a magician, Catalina did everything she could to fix this problem.

She snapped her fingers and said,

‘Hey presto!’

She swapped over the mummies, but then her mum missed her and she missed her mum and her actual dad objected because now the house was very far from work and he had to catch three buses, and Catalina missed Manuela, and her other dad, the one who’d married her mum, said that his house was better than the one he had been sent to, and Manuela missed her, and her mum didn’t know where everything was kept, because she was in Merceditas’ mum’s house and Merceditas’ mum didn’t know where everything was kept, because she was in Catalina’s mum’s house. So, as she was a magician, Catalina did everything she could to fix this problem.

‘Abracadabra!’ she snapped her fingers and blew on them, ‘One, two, three!’ And hey presto!

Everything returned to how it had been to begin with.

‘Even with magic and everything, the problems that the grownups create aren’t easy to sort out.’

* * *

Everyone wanted to know if it was true.

Emma, who had four brothers, said it was, but Leticia thought she might have read in one of her mum’s medicine books that it wasn’t.

The solution to such a mystery was to be found in Catalina’s magic, but over and over again she refused to do it.

‘It’s too embarrassing!’

‘But you’d be invisible.’

‘No one will find out.’

And they pestered her and pestered her until she finally agreed out of sheer exhaustion.

‘Fine,’ she said, ‘but if they catch me, I’m telling them it was your idea.’

At playtime, Catalina turned invisible and went in. Her anxious classmates stayed outside. Now they would finally know the truth.

They did not have long to wait.

Catalina returned and, even before she was completely visible again, her voice could be heard from the middle of the group, saying:

‘They pee standing up!’

* * *

They didn’t know if it was because the dinner lady always ordered them, or because the delivery driver always brought them, or because the people in the factory didn’t know how to make other kinds, or because the manager only bought those types of moulds, or because the ship that brought them only carried things made from the same flour, or because who knows why, but since the time that dinosaurs roamed the earth, until perhaps pigs finally do learn to fly, the afternoon snack had always been exactly the same type of cake every day.

‘Abrakazam, Alacadabra!’ said Catalina the day that the teacher sent her to fetch the snack tray.

That day, her classmates ate Yemita cakes with cinnamon, cream cakes, sweet potato pudding, chocolate biscuits, pastries, soft fudge, chocolate-covered biscuits, strawberry meringues, gingerbread, coconut kisses, winter melon, guava paste and cheese sandwiches, toasted cashew nuts, sesame nougat and hard fudge.

Oh! And a lot of baking soda for their stomach aches.

* * *

‘Catalina, I need a spell.’

‘What for?’

‘Tomorrow is my dad’s birthday, and I don’t have the money to buy him a present.’

‘But you don’t need a magic spell for that,’ said Catalina to her friend Octavio. ‘Go to the countryside and pick him a bouquet of wildflowers.’

Octavio did as she said, but things don’t always go according to plan. The next day he arrived at the bus stop, looking very sad.

‘What happened to you?’ asked Catalina when she saw him.

‘I did what you told me, but my dad threw out the flowers because he says they’re girly.’

‘In that case, I am going to need to use magic after all,’ Catalina said.

That night, Catalina went to Octavio’s home and under the guise of wishing his dad a happy birthday, she went up to him and did a few magic tricks on him.

‘Cadabra, cadabra, abradazam!’

Since that day, Octavio’s dad likes all beautiful things, as he now thinks they are three times prettier than they are: flowers delight him, landscapes enthrall him, and butterflies entrance him.

But out of all these, the most beautiful thing to him is his son, as it is no wonder that all the girls at school and in the neighbourhood are very much in love with Octavio.

* * *

Catalina’s actual dad had dreams of her becoming a ballet dancer, and so poor Catalina was put on a diet, as she weighed 40 kilos and was expected to lose half of that.

Catalina's mum dreamed of her daughter becoming a big sporting star, and so, even when it was cold enough to freeze a brass monkey, Catalina took swimming lessons three times a week.

Her other dad, the one who'd married her mum, wanted Catalina to become a scientist and so poor, unfortunate Catalina had to set aside four hours every weekend to study chemistry, physics and computing under his guidance.

Her grandma was convinced that the best future for her was one that included traditional handicrafts, and so poor, unfortunate, unhappy Catalina had to learn how to embroider, knit and crochet.

Whenever the opportunity presented itself, her other mum, the one who'd married her dad, was always saying that little girls should learn to cook, wash the clothes and do the dishes. And so, poor, unfortunate, unhappy, unlucky Catalina cooked, washed the clothes and did the dishes.

But at nighttime, Catalina would enchant some mice and a pumpkin all by herself and would go about in a carriage playing princesses.

* * *

Catalina's grandma hid the sexual education book and told her that children came into the world via storks, all the way from Paris.

Catalina, tired of hearing the same tall tale so many times, went out into the garden and put a spell on the first black vulture she saw swooping about.

Now Catalina's grandma doesn't know what to do with the baby that this dark stork brought her.

* * *

As no one knew where Catalina's magic had come from, no one knew why it sometimes failed either.

This happened when she tried to perform a spell for Enrique, and listen, if there was anyone who deserved a super-duper spell, it was Enrique, and you won't believe it: no matter how hard she tried, it just wouldn't work.

Enrique was the guy who sold newspapers at the newsstand next to the ice cream parlour, and as Catalina passed by that newsstand every evening, he would always give her the fashion magazines and the cartoon strips from the papers he had saved for her.

'One day, I'll do a magic spell for you.'

‘Only if it’s a lovely one.’

And although this was their usual exchange, Enrique had never had cause to resort to Catalina’s magic before.

But everything happens eventually, and so the problem Catalina had to solve came about when Enrique got married to Galia, and the couple found they had nowhere to live.

Together they all went to the seashore, chose a spot and Catalina said:

‘Abracadabra, alakazam!’

But instead of producing, say, a fairytale palace, a house, or at the very least, a bedroom—or even a brick they could use to begin construction—what did appear was a colander.

‘Alakazam, abracadabra!’

There came another colander.

And so, after an evening of shouting abracadabra ten thousand times, Catalina ended up with a grand total of ten thousand colanders.

Now Enrique and Galia live in a house which is made from colanders instead of bricks... but it is so fresh and airy!

* * *

When the word spread that one of the little girls at the school was a magician, the school inspector hit the roof.

‘Argh!’ she cried.

And although no teacher nor the headteacher knew anything about it, the inspector decided to write it up in the official report. And what a to-do it caused!

‘This cannot be allowed!’

The head of year got in contact with the specialist from the local council.

The local council sent a report to the regional council, and the regional council sent another report to the national council.

‘Brace yourself, Catalina!’

The national council sent inspectors to the regional council, but since the regional council didn’t want to take any blame for what they might find, they sent their inspectors to the local council, and the local council wriggled out of this by sending a snooping committee to the school.

‘There’s going to be an inspection, we’ve got to get this place spick and span,’ said the headteacher.

The committee arrived, and what with all the advisers, psychologists, heads of year, specialists, teachers and inspectors, it took fifteen full buses to get them there.

When their headteacher gave the signal, the children chanted, ‘Welcome to our school, dear visitors!’

The visitors didn’t take much notice of this, and instead made straight for the headteacher’s office, demanding that she send for Catalina.

‘Is it true that you can perform magic, little girl?’ asked one of the advisers, the most sharply dressed lady of the lot.

‘Yes,’ Catalina replied.

And the gaggle of advisers, psychologists, heads of year, specialists, teachers and inspectors got out their pens to start jotting down the possible measures they could take to deal with a young magician attending school.

‘And what kind of magic can you do?’ asked the most sharply dressed adviser.

‘This kind.’ Catalina said. She ripped up some scraps of paper and from these pieces produced a whole piece of paper.

‘That’s just a parlour trick,’ said the most sharply dressed adviser, ‘Little girls aren’t magicians, little girl magicians don’t exist.’

‘Phew!’ the rest of advisers, psychologists, heads of year, specialists, teachers and inspectors sighed with relief. They put away their pens, snapped shut their briefcases and said, ‘She is funny!’

Catalina wanted to go and see them off at the door. With her right hand, she waved them goodbye, but with her left hand hidden behind her back, she cast some magic that turned them into a forest of twisty trees.

‘Now at least the birds can use them to build their nests,’ said Catalina.

* * *

The menu board at the ice cream parlour always said the same thing:
Vanilla

But Catalina always fixed it so she could eat ice creams of each flavour and every colour.

When Emma's mum got it into her head to move to the village, she was going to stop at nothing until she achieved her objective.

Emma now sits at the last desk of the row where Catalina is: Emma is very tall, tall and blonde, and as her hair is always wafting, if she sits in front of Catalina, Catalina can't see the blackboard.

Catalina loves being friends with Emma.

Emma has a bicycle which she rides to school, but as Emma is so tall, tall and blonde, when she rides her bike, it always looks like she's got some extra limbs – two or three more legs, and another arm.

Even though Catalina loves being friends with Emma, they almost never talk.

Emma is like when there's a power cut looming, but it's just a low voltage and the lightbulbs dim a little. She almost never speaks and despite how tall and blonde she is, she always walks so slowly.

But that's not why Catalina almost never talks to Emma.

Emma is always gazing out at the countryside, as if she had left something important there.

'I used to have a little white pony to get to school,' she told them one day.

And that is how her classmates learned why Emma was so tall and so blonde: so she could look the part when she was galloping on her pony; and they knew why she had so many arms and legs when she was riding her bike and why she was always looking so far into the horizon, almost never talking and always walking so slowly.

'Abracadabra, cadabrakazam!'

From then on, Catalina didn't care about looking short and chubby next to Emma: Emma is the only girl in the world who, bumping over the cobblestones of the village, trots to school on her bicycle.

In the middle of the forest, Catalina was lying down in a glass coffin. Wild orchid petals pattered persistently onto its lid like light rainfall.

Nearby butterflies, hearing of the girl's beauty, paused their flight to rest awhile and admire her, and everyone—the trees and the saplings, even the sun—grieved the curse that had been placed upon the girl.

A day passed, and there came the clatter of horses' hooves approaching the clearing, crunching through the golden leaves.

It was Octavio.

He came to a halt and leapt down from his steed. He ran to kneel next to the casket, swept away the flowers that had been placed on the glass lid, drew close to the girl's face and said, 'Snow White—I mean, Catalina—I will break the Evil Witch's curse with a kiss.'

But all of a sudden, just like in all the worst stories, off went the alarm clock.

* * *

Every day, when Catalina made her way back from school on the bus, a big woman with a moustache would stand next to Catalina's seat and say:

'Listen, girl, let me have your seat and you can sit on my lap.'

On her thighs the woman would first place her shopping bag. Some days, the bag would be full of potatoes; other days, it had cabbages or tins of soup. On top of all this, she would perch Catalina, who would end up so high up that she couldn't even look out of the window.

Catalina was so fed up of dealing with this every day that, on one occasion, she decided to snap her fingers in front of her nose.

She turned herself into a cactus, the sort that has lots of spines.

When the big woman with the moustache saw that, she jumped up screeching, and without even waiting for the driver to come to a halt at the stop, she ran off the bus.

From then on, the big woman with the moustache respected Catalina's right to have her own seat and look out of the window just like all the other children.

* * *

No doubt about it, Elenita was a sad child.

How could she not be?

She lived alone with her mum in a fourth-floor apartment, so many flights up that by the time she'd made it down all the stairs, she had hardly any time left to play.

Her mum was often on shift at work, and so Elenita barely saw her, but she always heard from her mum through the little notes she would leave for Elenita on the kitchen table.

Beans in the fridge. Heat them up for lunch.

Or maybe:

Don't forget to turn off the gas before you leave.

Sometimes they did get to see each other, but when this happened, they were so bogged down with housework that they just couldn't stop to chat.

The last time Elenita saw her dad was when he came to take away the television, but that had been several months ago, and he never wrote to her.

So, left with no one to talk to, and with no letters coming through from Dad, no wonder Elenita was sad. Yes, no doubt about it, Elenita was a sad child.

Catalina would go over to Elenita's house as often as possible, but no matter how hard she thought about it, Catalina just couldn't think of a way to use her magic to help her friend.

But inspiration often strikes precisely when you stop searching for it, and this was how Catalina got her idea.

One day, Elenita's mum got it in her head that she should fill her living room with plants because, according to the note that she had written, house plants were all the rage.

'Alabracabra, abradazam!' Catalina said to the plants.

From that day on, Elenita always had someone to talk to.

The enchanted plants tell Elenita all about Carnation's engagement to Yellow Garland Lily, fill her in on Geranium's bouts of grumpiness, or let her know when the bees pop by for a chat. Together, they all laugh at Fern's pranks and the tall tales that Chrysanthemum tells to make himself seem more important than Sunflower.

* * *

'What sort of magic,' thought Catalina, 'could I use to get rid of all the bad news that's on the TV, in the papers, and on the radio?'

It all started with requests from the neighbourhood kids and her classmates.

If, say, Octavio forgot his maths book at home, Catalina would have to charm his science book to show the calculus questions from that week's homework. Or perhaps Leticia would have Catalina come over to her house to turn Leticia's dad's alcohol bottles into perfume ones instead so that he wouldn't get drunk.

But it didn't take long before Catalina started to receive letters from anyone and everyone, all asking her for some magic spell or other. And the letters weren't just from her village, they were from all over the country and even came in from far-off corners of the world.

At first, there weren't too many, but before long there was so much mail that it took eighteen postal workers delivering letters round the clock to bring Catalina all the messages that she received from every continent, written in every language.

Poor Catalina—no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't keep up with her magic to solve all the children's problems, and so after thinking long and hard, she came up with an idea.

She went to the airport, but since they didn't want to play ball, she had no choice but to hypnotise the pilot and that's how she managed to get into a plane and go higher than the clouds, where she jumped out with a parachute.

As she glided to the ground, in amongst the biggest soap bubbles that you could possibly imagine, she saw the rising sun and the boundless sea, stretching over the Earth like a huge bedspread.

It was from this vantage point that she cried out to the world:

'Abracadabra, alakazam!'

And just like that, the world became a wondrous place, because from Alaska to Patagonia, from Mexico to Japan, all the children all over the world came to have a little bit of magic of their own.

Luis Cabrera Delgado

La abuela fue quien primero lo supo.

En la fiesta de sus cinco años cuando sopló las velitas y el cake se convirtió en un sombrero de copa con un conejo dentro, esta dijo:

—¡Catalina es maga!

* * *

—¡Ay! ¡Ay!

Catalina se puso a tratar de quitarle la tapa a una lata de leche condensada para limpiarle el fondo con una masita de pan, pero eso de manejar una lata y un abridor es harto complicado y lo que sucedió fue que se hizo una herida en un dedo.

Hasta ahí las cosas no es que marcharan bien, pero ocurrían como era de esperarse: un abridor, una lata que no se deja abrir y un dedo cortado. El problema grande comenzó cuando la mamá de Catalina le echó un chorro de alcohol en la herida.

—¡Ay! ¡Ay!

En mala hora a Catalina, quien ya se sabía que era maga, pero que todavía no había hecho casi ninguna magia, se le ocurrió soplarle el ardor del alcohol: el dedo se le convirtió en margarita.

Al principio, la niña estaba de los lo más orgullosa de la flor que se balanceaba donde debía estar su dedo índice, pero cuando se aburrió y quiso tener de nuevo su dedo, aunque estuviera cortado y le ardiera con el alcohol, no supo qué hacer.

Fue su abuela quien le aconsejó:

—Vuélvete a soplar.

Entonces se le convirtió en lápiz.

Y con los siguientes soplos el lápiz se transformó en chambelona, y la chambelona en regla, y la regla en termómetro, y el termómetro en tenedor, y el tenedor en horquilla, y la horquilla en destornillador, y el destornillador en lapicero, y el lapicero en pata de espejuelo, y la pata de espejuelo en bastoncito de carnaval, y el bastoncito de carnaval en bolígrafo, y el bolígrafo en cepillo de dientes, y el cepillo de diente en platanito, y el platanito en tiza, y la tiza en cuchara, y la cuchara en dedo.

¡¿En dedo?!

¡Al fin!

¡Ay! ¡Ay!

* * *

Catalina quería ser cosmonauta.

¿Será porque en el cosmos todo es mágico?

* * *

Su otro papá, el que se casó con su mamá, era bueno como un pan, pero se pasaba la vida diciendo palabras que los niños no debían oír.

Un día Catalina leyó un cuento de dos hermanitas que fueron a buscar agua a la fuente: una era buena y le dio de beber a una anciana, y la otra era mala y hablaba feo.

Esa vez no tuvo que decir «abra cadabra» ni «a la una, a las dos y a las tres», ni mucho menos tuvo que soplar: bastó que lo deseara.

Cuando su otro papá, el que se casó con su mamá, llegó del trabajo y fue a decir una de esas palabrotas, le saltó una rana de la boca. Se asustó tanto que fue a decir otra y le salió una culebra. A medida que iba a soltar palabrotas, escupía ratas, alacranes y cucarachas.

Y mientras más trataba de decir, más bichos aparecían.

Primero se llenó la sala que no cabían, después el apartamento y el edificio entero; los jardines, las aceras, el parquecito infantil, y ya amenazaban con llegar hasta la avenida cuando aparecieron los bomberos. Pero ni los chorros de las mangueras, ni las escaleras por el aire, ni las hachas y los extinguidores de espuma podían con tantos animaluchos, y solo cuando este otro papá de Catalina, cenizo del susto, juró por señas que no volvería a decir malas palabras, fue que desaparecieron.

Entonces todos miraron a Catalina, pero ella, haciéndose la inocente exclamó:

—¿Con el miedo que yo les tengo a las cucarachas?

* * *

A Catalina siempre le enseñaron que los amiguitos no se pelean.

Pero ella, ni aun siendo maga, ha logrado entender cómo es que los papás sí se pueden pelear.

* * *

¡Pobre Adriano!

Vivía en la ciudad, pero aún en sus ojos estaba la mansedumbre del agua en el recodo del río. La amplitud silenciosa de la sabana y el suave trino del sinsonte entre las hojas altas de la arboleda todavía abanicaba en sus oídos; por eso todos los días, camino a la bodega, le pedía a Catalina que embrujara las motocicletas, los ómnibus y los autos para que no hicieran bulla.

* * *

Como Catalina era filatélica, un día se le ocurrió que cambiando los sellos por durofríos mágicos, podría recoger muchos sellos.

El efecto de la invisibilidad de los durofríos duraba media hora y como durante ese tiempo se divertían que daba gusto, los muchachos del barrio y de la escuela enseguida se dedicaron a registrar gavetas y cajones en sus casas para buscar sobres de cartas.

El primer día, Catalina obtuvo quince sellos que no tenía; el segundo, ciento treinta y dos, y ya el tercero hubiera completado su álbum de no ser por las personas mayores.

Las personas mayores, como casi siempre ocurre, lo echaron todo a perder, pues en vez de jugar a las miles de cosas que se pueden jugar siendo invisibles, enseguida que se enteraron de los durofríos mágicos, corrieron a comerlos para hacer cosas mal hechas, desde montarse en los ómnibus sin pagar, hasta fumar en los lugares prohibidos.

¡Y muchísimas cosas más!

Fue tanto el alboroto que se armó en la puerta de la casa de Catalina que tuvieron que mandar a buscar a la policía para que controlara aquello, y Catalina, por miedo a que la fueran a llevar presa, se comió tártara y media de durofríos que le quedaban sin cambiar y estuvo invisible durante tres días.

* * *

Al principio, la gente del pueblo lo miraba asombrado, pero con la fuerza de la costumbre, se les fue haciendo habitual.

Es que eso de tener ropa en tres casas es un problema tremendo y cada vez que Catalina quería ponerse, digamos la bata rosada o el short de flores, tenía que saber en cuál de las tres casas lo habían dejado: en la suya, en la del papá de verdad, o en la de su abuela; y daba la casualidad que casi siempre estaban colgados en una de las casas donde en ese momento ella no se encontraba, así que con mucha frecuencia se quedó con los deseos de ponerse la ropa que quería.

—¡Pata de cabra, abra cadabra! —dijo.

Y desde ese momento, no fue raro que en el pueblo donde vivía Catalina, se viera un perchero con una saya y unas blusas cogiendo una guagua, un par de zapatos caminando apresuradamente por la acera o un pañuelo volando por encima de los cables de la luz.

* * *

Cuando su mamá estaba en estado, su abuela puso un cuchillo en una silla y lo tapó con un trapo, en otra silla puso una tijera y la tapó con otro trapo. Llamó a la mamá de Catalina y le dijo que se sentara en una de las sillas.

—Va a parir varón— dijo la abuela, porque su mamá se había sentado en la silla donde estaba el cuchillo.

—Y te fastidiaste, Catalina —agregó.

Es que por una de esas cosas de la gente grande que Catalina no acababa de entender, para que su otro papá, el que se casó con su mamá, la siguiera queriendo a ella, su mamá tenía que parir otra hembra.

Pero parió varón.

Por eso cuando Catalina fue al hospital de maternidad a conocerlo, le cantó una extraña canción de cuna que decía más o menos así:

Que no sea lo que es

Que se duerma al derecho

y se despierte al revés.

Más tarde, cuando le fueron a cambiar el pañal, descubrieron que se habían equivocado, pues el niño que creyeron varón era hembra.

Entonces su otro papá la siguió queriendo, y Catalina, en vez de tener un hermano al que le habían puesto Manuel, tiene una hermana que se llama Manuela.

* * *

Dime, espejito mágico, ¿quién es la niña más linda de este pueblo?

—Tú, Catalina, tú.

* * *

Por una de esas cosas de la gente grande que Catalina no acaba de entender, para que su papá de verdad la siguiera queriendo, su nueva esposa debía parir hembra.

Cuando la nueva esposa de su papá estuvo en estado, Catalina preparó las sillas tapadas con los trapos y la invitó a sentarse en la que ella quisiera.

—Va a parir hembra—dijo Catalina, y recogió los trapos antes de que se dieran cuenta de que en cada silla había puesto una tijera.

* * *

Era como si tuviera dos abuelas en una misma persona: una tibia, olorosa y suave, otra gruñona y tonta.

—Las niñas no se hurgan en la nariz.

—Las niñas no juegan con los varones.

—Las niñas no chiflan.

—Las niñas no se sientan en esa forma.

—Las niñas no dicen malas palabras.

—Las niñas no hablan alto.

* * *

Pero ni en la computadora de la escuela ni en la magia, Catalina encontró por qué las niñas no se pueden hurgar en la nariz, no pueden jugar con varones, no pueden chiflar, no se pueden sentar de esa forma, no pueden decir malas palabras ni pueden hablar alto.

* * *

La maestra que les tocó en tercer grado parecía una pantera.

Por todo peleaba, se pasaba el día gritando y repartiendo pescozones.

¡Y por nada!

Por boberías: que si a Adriano se le había olvidado hacer la tarea, que si Leticia no estaba atendiendo, que si Emma estaba conversando, que si Octavio estaba de pie sin permiso o que si Elena estaba sacando punta encima del pupitre.

Por todo, una peleadera.

El día que corrieron el papelito por el aula, sí tuvieron mucho cuidado de que no lo viera. Era para Catalina y decía que a la hora del receso querían hablar con ella detrás de la mata de almendra.

—Conviértela en rana.

—No. Mejor en jutía.

—En cualquier cosa.

Catalina estaba de lo más oronda por la misión que sus compañeros del aula le encomendaron y en la primera oportunidad que la maestra le pasó por el lado de su asiento, le dijo:

—¡Abra cadabra, pata de cabra!

En la clase de matemática le contó encima:

—A la una, a las dos y a las tres.

Pero a pesar de todo su esfuerzo, no lograba convertirla en nada.

No fue hasta que la mandó a borrar la pizarra.

Cuando comenzó a estornudar por el polvo de tiza, se acordó de que en los libros de cuentos siempre dicen que los magos usan polvitos mágicos, así que cogió un poco en la palma de la mano y se los sopló encima.

El fognazo iluminó el aula y un fuerte olor a azufre se les coló por la nariz. Cuando el humo se disipó, allí donde antes estuvo la maestra que parecía una pantera, apareció una maestra de verdad.

Quince minutos después de que la penúltima de las competidores llegó, tuvieron que tirar un bote a la piscina para sacar a Catalina que, salpicando agua en sus brazadas como cuando una ballena hace gárgaras, no terminaba de llegar a la meta. Mas ella se las ingenió para que nadie se percatara cuando hizo unos pases mágicos, y por eso nunca supieron por qué el locutor anunció por el micrófono: —Premiación de los cien metros estilo libre. Medalla de oro; ¡Catalina Merlín!

* * *

Manuela estuvo tres días llorando sin que se supiera él por qué.

Le ofrecieron desde un castigo hasta parajito volando.

Por su casa pasó todo el vecindario para contentarla, pero nada.

Ni los buñuelos en almíbar con anís estrellado de la abuela, ¡y con lo golosa que era Manuela!; ni el collar de caracoles de la vecina nueva, ¡y con lo presumida que era Manuela; ni el paseo en *jeep* prometido por el papá de Octavio, ¡y con lo paseantina que era Manuela; ni la promesa de matrimonio que le hizo Adriano para cuando fueran grandes, ¡y con lo enamorada que era Manuela!, sirvieron de nada.

A la tercera noche cuando apagaron las luces, Catalina se bajó de la cama, fue hasta donde su hermana y le dijo bajito:

—O te callas y me dejas dormir o te doy un trompón.

—Es que yo quiero ser princesa —sollozó Manuela.

Es que Manuela, como Catalina, era negra como un tizón, tenía los labios grandes y una pasada apretadita y pegada al cráneo, pero linda como la que más, y todos los libros de cuentos dicen que las princesas son blancas, rubias y con ojos azules.

—Ahora tú vas a ver —dijo Catalina y con la misma fue hasta el librero.

—¡Cada cabra, pata cabra!

Desde entonces hay libros de cuentos que dicen:

Había una vez una princesa muy bonita. Era negra como un tizón, tenía los labios grandes y una pasa apretadita y pegada al cráneo...

* * *

«Los barcos son ballenas hechizadas que alguna vez se enamoraron de un marinero», pensó Catalina la primera vez que fue al mar.

* * *

Una madrugada, Catalina se puso tan enferma que tuvieron que llevarla para el hospital.

—Hay que ingresarla para operarla —dijo el médico.

Cuando Catalina oyó aquello se puso a llorar, pero su abuela le señaló que las magas no tienen que ponerse a llorar cuando tienen un problema.

—¡Abra la pata, cada cadabra!

Y la camilla en que la llevaban se volvió una dorada carroza tirada por seis caballos blancos. El salón de operaciones se convirtió en un lugar maravilloso: era un jardín lleno de plantas de loza verde, el cielo era de loza azul, y las flores de loza de todos los colores. Había una fuente en la que cuando el agua caía, saltaban cientos de pompas de jabón, y los más diversos juguetes de acero inoxidable que puedas imaginar brillaban al sol que, inmenso, pendía del techo.

—Vamos a jugar al apéndice escondido.

Y todos se taparon los ojos hasta que Catalina avisó.

—Frío, frío —dijo cuando los técnicos de anestesia comenzaron a buscar por entre las historias clínicas.

—Tibio, tibio —dijo cuando las enfermeras buscaron por entre los pomos de medicina.

—Caliente, caliente —dijo cuando los médicos registraron por entre las sábanas.

—¡Se quema! —dijo Catalina cuando al fin, debajo de su roponcito, un cirujano se encontró el apéndice escondido.

Al otro día le dieron de alta con un tratamiento para hacerlo en la casa.

—Comerse una bola de helado de chocolate en desayuno, almuerzo y comida. Chuparse un caramelo de menta cada tres horas. Y si hay mucho dolor, pintarse los ojos y la boca con los creyones de la mamá.

* * *

Catalina siempre deseó que su papá, el de verdad, viviera con ella y no que viniera a verla de vez en cuando, así que siendo maga, bien pudo arreglar ese asunto.

—¡Abra cadabra, pata de cabra!

Y por arte de magia su papá estuvo de mudada de nuevo en su casa. Por entonces Merceditas, su otra media hermana, se puso a llorar, porque se quedó sin un papá que viviera con ella, así que siendo maga, Catalina bien que pudo arreglar ese asunto.

Sopló.

Y por arte de magia mandó a su otro papá, el que se casó con su mamá, a vivir a la Casa de Merceditas, pero Merceditas siguió llorando, porque el que le mandó no era su papá de verdad y ni siquiera estaba casado con su mamá, y Manuela también se puso a llorar, porque se quedó sin papá de

verdad así que viviera con ella y solo venía a verla de vez en cuando; así que siendo maga, bien que pudo arreglar ese asunto.

—A la una, a las dos y a las tres.

Y por arte de magia mudó a sus dos hermanas Manuela se fue a vivir a casa de Merceditas con el que era su papá de verdad y trajo a Merceditas para su casa a vivir con el que era su papá de verdad.

Pero entonces fueron las mamás quienes se pusieron tristes. Su mamá, porque extrañaba a Manuela, y la mamá de Merceditas, porque extrañaba a Merceditas; así que siendo maga, bien que pudo arreglar ese asunto.

Chasqueó los dedos y dijo:

—¡Ya está!

Cambió a las mamás de casa, pero entonces su mamá la extrañaba a ella y ella extrañaba a su mamá y su papá de verdad protestó, porque ahora la casa le quedaba muy lejos del trabajo y tenía que coger tres ómnibus, y ella extrañaba a Manuela; y su otro papá, el que se casó con su mamá, decía que su casa estaba mejor, que para la que lo mandaron, y Manuela la extrañaba a ella, y su mamá no sabía dónde estaban las cosas, porque estaba en la casa que era de la mamá de Merceditas, y la mamá de Merceditas no sabía dónde estaban las cosas, porque estaba en la casa que era de su mamá, así que siendo maga, Catalina bien que tuvo que arreglar ese asunto.

—¡Abra cadabra! —chasqueó los dedos y sopló—. A la una, a la dos y a las tres. Y ya está.

La situación volvió a quedar como al principio.

—Es que con magia y todo, los problemas que crean las personas mayores no son fáciles de resolver.

* * *

Todas querían saber si era verdad.

Emma, quien tenía cuatro hermanos varones decía que sí, pero por su parte Leticia creía haber leído en un libro de medicina de su mamá, que no.

La solución de aquel enigma estaba en la magia de Catalina, pero esta, una y otra vez, se negaba a hacerlo.

—A mí me da pena.

—Pero si serás invisible.

—Nadie se va a enterar.

Y tanto le dieron y le dieron que por cansancio lograron que aceptara.

—Está bien —dijo—, pero si me descubren, digo que fue idea de ustedes.

A la hora del receso, Catalina se hizo invisible y entró. Afuera quedaron sus ansiosas compañeras, pues al fin lo sabrían.

La espera no fue larga.

Catalina regresó y, aún antes de hacerse totalmente visible, su voz resonó en medio del grupo:

—¡Orinan parados!

* * *

No se sabe si era porque la conserje los pedía o porque el repartidor los traía o porque en la fábrica no sabían hacer otros o porque el administrador solo compró esos moldes o porque el barco trajo toda la carga de la misma harina o váyase a saber por qué; pero el asunto es que desde la época de Ñaña Seré, y parece que hasta que la rana criara pelos, para la merienda siempre hubo los mismos dulces.

—¡Abra la cabra, pata cadabra! —dijo Catalina el día que la maestra la mandó a buscar la bandeja.

En esa ocasión los niños de su aula comieron yemitas con canela, panetelas de nata, boniatillo, galletitas de chocolate, pasteles, crema de leche, africanas, merenguitos de fresas, queques, besitos de coco, calabacitas chinas, timbas de dulce de guayaba con queso, semillas de marañón, tostadas, turrón de ajonjolí y raspadura.

¡Ah!, y mucho bicarbonato.

* * *

—Catalina, necesito una magia.

—¿Para qué?

—Mañana es el cumpleaños de mi papá y no tengo dinero para comprarle un regalo.

—Para eso no es necesario la magia —le dijo Catalina a su amigo Octavio—. Ve al campo y recógele un ramo de flores silvestres.

Así hizo Octavio, pero las cosas no les salieron nada bien. Al otro día llegó muy triste a la parada de la guagua.

—¿Qué te pasó? —le preguntó Catalina cuando lo vio.

—Hice lo que me dijiste, pero mi papá botó las flores porque dice que esos son cosas de niñas.

—Entonces sí me va a hacer falta la magia —dijo Catalina.

Esa noche fue a casa de Octavio y con el disimulo de felicitar al papá por el cumpleaños, se le paró delante y le hizo unos pases mágicos.

—¡Cadabra, cadabra, abra la cabra!

Desde ese día al papá de Octavio le gustan las cosas bonitas, porque las ve tres veces más lindas de lo que son: las flores lo deleitan, los paisajes lo arrebatan y las mariposas lo complacen.

Pero de todo, lo más bonito que ve, es a Octavio, su hijo, pues por algo todas las muchachitas de la escuela y del barrio están enamoradas de él.

* * *

Su papá de verdad soñaba con que fuera bailarina de ballet y por ello la pobre Catalina tenía que hacer dieta, pues de las ochenta libras que pasaba, debía bajar cuarenta.

Su mamá aspiraba a que fuera una gran deportista, y Catalina, aunque hubiera un frío que chiflara el mono, tenía clases de natación tres veces por semana.

Su otro papá, el que se casó con su mamá, quería que fuera científica y la pobre e infortunada Catalina tenía que bajo su dirección dedicar cuatro horas los fines de semana para iniciarse en el estudio de la química, la física y la computación.

Su abuela estaba convencida de que el mejor futuro era la artesanía antigua, y la pobre, infortunada e infeliz Catalina tenía que aprender a bordar, tejer y hacer croché.

Su otra mamá, la que se casó con su papá, siempre que se le presentaba la oportunidad decía que las niñas tenían que aprender a cocinar, lavar y fregar, y la pobre, infortunada, infeliz y desdichada Catalina cocinaba, lavaba y fregaba.

Pero por las noches, ella misma embrujaba la calabaza y los ratones y se iba en su coche a jugar a las princesas.

* * *

Su abuela le escondió el libro de Educación Sexual y le dijo que a los niños los traía una cigüeña desde París.

Catalina, aburrida de oír la misma mentira tantas veces, salió al patio y hechizó a la primera aura tiñosa que pasó volando por allí.

Ahora la abuela del Catalina no sabe qué hacerse con el bebé que le trajo una cigüeña prieta.

* * *

Cómo la magia de Catalina no se sabe de dónde salió, tampoco nadie sabía por qué a veces fallaba.

Así ocurrió cuando le hizo la magia a Enrique, y mira que si a alguien Catalina le debía haber hecho una magia bien buena, era a Enrique, y para que tú veas: no hubo fuerza humana que le saliera al derecho.

Enrique era el muchacho que vendía los periódicos en el estanquillo, cerca de la heladería, y como Catalina, todas las tardes pasaba por allí, él siempre le guardaba la hoja de los muñequitos y las revistas de modas.

—Un día te voy a hacer una magia.

—Pero que sea bien linda.

Y aunque esta era la despedida que habitualmente se hacían, a Enrique nunca se le había presentado la necesidad de recurrir a la magia.

Pero como todo en la vida llega, el problema a resolver fue cuando Enrique se casó con Galia, pues no tenía donde vivir.

Juntos fueron hasta la orilla del mar, escogieron el sitio, y Catalina dijo:

—¡Abra cadabra, pata de cabra!

Pero en vez de aparecer, no digo yo, un palacio como el de los cuentos, una casa o por lo menos un cuarto, hasta digamos un ladrillo para empezar a construir, apareció un colador.

—¡Pata de cabra, abra cadabra!

Otro colador más.

Y así, por los diez mil abra cadabra, pata de cabra que dijo Catalina esa tarde, tuvieron un total de diez mil coladores.

Ahora Enrique y Galia viven en una casa que, en vez de ladrillos, está hecha de coladores... ¡Pero es de lo más fresca!

Cuando oyó decir que en esa escuela había una niña maga, la inspectora puso el grito en el cielo.

—¡Ay!

Y aunque ningún maestro ni la directora sabían algo de aquello, ella decidió comunicárselo a la metodología del grado. ¡Y ahí mismo se armó la burumba!

—¡Eso no se puede permitir!

Y la metodóloga del grado se lo comunicó a la especialista del municipio.

Del municipio mandaron un informe a la provincia y de la provincia, mandaron otro informe a la nación.

—¡Prepárate, Catalina!

La nación mandó una visita de inspección a la provincia, y como la provincia no quería cargar con las culpas, mandó una visita de supervisión al municipio, y el municipio, para quitarse el golpe de encima, mandó una comitiva de averiguación a la escuela.

—Viene una visita; hay que limpiarlo todo —dijo la directora.

En quince ómnibus llenos de asesoras, psicólogas, metodologías del grado, especialistas, pedagogas e inspectoras, llegaron.

—¡Bienvenidos, distinguidos visitantes! —saludaron a coro los niños cuando la directora les indicó.

Los visitantes, sin hacer mucho caso, se dirigieron a la dirección y mandaron a buscar a Catalina.

—¿Es verdad que tú eres maga, niñita? —le preguntó la más encopetada de las asesoras.

—Sí —contestó Catalina.

Y la caterva de asesoras, psicólogas, metodólogas del grado, especialistas, pedagogas e inspectoras prepararon los bolígrafos para comenzar a escribir las medidas a tomar ante el caso de una niña maga en una escuela.

—¿Y qué magia tú sabes hacer? —le volvió a preguntar la más encopetada de las asesoras.

—Esta —dijo Catalina. Picó papelitos y después sacó una hoja entera.

—Es un truco de teatro —dijo la más encopetada de las asesoras—. Las niñas magas no existen.

—¡Ah! —suspiraron con alivio el resto de las asesoras, psicólogas, metodologías del grado, especialistas y pedagogas. Guardaron los bolígrafos, cerraron sus portafolios y agregaron—: ¡Qué graciosa!

Catalina quiso ir a despedirlas en la puerta de la escuela. Con su mano derecha les decía adiós, pero con la izquierda, escondida detrás de la espalda, les hizo unos pases mágicos y los convirtió en un bosque de retorcidos árboles.

—Por lo menos que sirvan para que los pajaritos hagan sus nidos —dijo Catalina.

* * *

En la tabilla de la heladería siempre aparecía lo mismo:

Vainilla

Pero Catalina, también siempre se las arregló para comer helados de todos los sabores y colores.

* * *

Cuando la mamá de Emma cogió la seguidilla de mudarse para el pueblo, no paró con la cantaleta hasta que lo logró.

Ahora Emma se sienta en el último pupitre de la fila donde lo hace Catalina: es que Emma es muy alta: alta y rubia, y como su pelo siempre flota, si se sienta delante, no deja ver la pizarra.

A Catalina le gusta ser amiga de Emma.

Emma tiene una bicicleta para ir a la escuela, pero como Emma es tan alta: alta y rubia, cuando monta en su bicicleta parece que le sobran dos o tres piernas y algún que otro brazo.

A pesar de que a Catalina le gusta ser amiga de Emma, casi nunca conversan.

Emma es como cuando se va a ir la luz, pero que solo baja el voltaje y las bombillas se quedan medio encendidas; casi no habla y, a pesar de lo alta y rubia que es, siempre anda despacio.

Pero no es por eso que Catalina casi nunca conversa con Emma.

Emma siempre está mirando hacia el campo, como si allí se le hubiera quedado algo importante.

—Yo tenía una yegüita blanca para ir a la escuela —les contó un día.

Y fue entonces que los muchachos del aula supieron por qué Emma era tan alta y rubia: para verse bien linda cuando galopaba en su yegua; y supieron por qué, para montar en la bicicleta, le sobraban piernas y brazos y por qué siempre miraba lejos, casi no hablaba y andaba tan despacio.

—¡Abra cadabra, cadabra, la cabra!

Y a partir de entonces, a Catalina no le importó verse tan gorda y bajita al lado de Emma: Emma es la única niña del mundo que todas las mañanas, por sobre los adoquines del pueblo, va a la escuela trotando en su bicicleta.

En medio del bosque, yacía Catalina dentro de una urna de cristal sobre la que, constantemente, como una fina llovizna caían orquídeas silvestres.

Las mariposas, quienes habían oído acerca de la belleza de la niña, detenían allí, un instante, su vuelo para admirarla, y todos: árboles, arbolitos y hasta el mismo Sol, lloraban el embrujo.

Más un día, sobre la hojarasca dorada, retumbaron los cascos de un caballo que se acercó al lugar.

Era Octavio.

Allí se detuvo y no demoró en tirarse de la cabalgadura. Corrió hasta la urna y poniendo rodilla en tierra para verla, quitó las flores que había sobre cristal; acercó su rostro al de la muchacha y dijo:

—Blanca Catalina, mi beso romperá el hechizo de la malvada bruja.

Pero en ese instante, como en los malos cuentos, sonó el despertador.

* * *

Todos los días, cuando Catalina venía de la escuela, una señora gorda y de bigote, se le paraba al lado y le decía:

—A ver, niña, déjame sentarme ahí y yo te cargo.

Sobre los muslos ponía la jaba de los mandados, unas veces llenas de papas, otras de coles o de latas de sopa, y encima sentaba a Catalina, quien quedaba tan alta que ni mirar podía por la ventanilla.

Tan aburrida estaba de todos los días lo mismo, que en una ocasión decidió chasquearse los dedos frente a su nariz.

Se convirtió en un cactus, de esos que tienen muchas espinas.

Cuando la señora gorda y de bigote vio aquello, se levantó dando gritos y, sin esperar que el chofer terminara de frenar la guagua en la parada, se bajó corriendo.

Desde entonces la señora gorda y de bigote le respeta a Catalina el derecho que, como todos los niños, tiene de sentarse a mirar por una de las ventanillas de los ómnibus.

* * *

Sin duda alguna, Elenita era una niña triste.

¿Cómo no lo iba a ser?

Vivía sola con su mamá en un quinto piso y con tantas escaleras poco tiempo le quedaba para bajar a jugar.

Por los turnos de trabajo de su mamá, se veían poco, aunque sabía de ella por los avisos que siempre le dejaba en la mesa del comedor.

En el refrigerador hay frijoles. Calientalos para el almuerzo.

O si no:

Antes de irte, cierra la llave del gas.

A veces sí se veían, pero en esos pocos momentos estaban tan atareadas con los quehaceres de la casa que no se podían poner a conversar.

La última vez que vio a su papá fue cuando vino a llevarse el televisor, pero de eso hacía muchos meses y él nunca le escribía.

Así, sin tener con quien hablar y sin recibir cartas del papá, no digo yo si hay que estar triste. Por eso Elenita, sin duda alguna, era una niña triste.

Catalina, siempre que le era posible, iba hasta su casa y por mucho que se rompía la cabeza, no sabía cómo usar su magia para ayudarla.

Pero como las cosas aparecen cuando no se están buscando, así apareció la solución.

Un día, a la mamá de Elenita se le ocurrió la idea de llenar la sala de matas, pues según le dejó escrito en una nota, estaban de moda.

—¡Cada pata, abra la cabra! —les dijo Catalina a las plantas.

Desde ese día, Elenita, por lo menos tiene con quien hablar.

Las plantas encantadas le cuentan cómo anda el noviazgo del clavel con la mariposa amarilla, de los resabios del geranio o de si las abejas vinieron a buscarles conversación; juntas se ríen de las travesuras de los helechos o de las mentiras que inventa el crisantemo para hacerse más importante que el girasol.

«¿Qué magia», pensó Catalina «habrá que hacer para que en el televisor, los periódicos y la radio no salgan más noticias feas?»

Primero fueron los muchachos del barrio y de la escuela.

Que si a Octavio se le había quedado a la libreta de Matemática y entonces Catalina tenía que hechizarle la de Ciencias Naturales para que en ella aparecieran los ejercicios de cálculo de la tarea. O Leticia la llevaba a su casa para que convirtiera en pomos de perfumes, las botellas de bebidas con las que su papá se emborrachaba.

Pero después, comenzaron a llegarle cartas solicitándole magias de todos los tipos habidos y por haber. Y no solo de su pueblo, sino también del país y hasta de los más lejanos confines del mundo.

Primero fueron poquitas, pero no pasó mucho tiempo sin que en el correo tuvieran que contratar a dieciocho carteros para que se dedicaran solamente a llevarle a Catalina las cartas que recibía de todos los continentes y en todos los idiomas.

La pobre Catalina, por mucho que se esforzaba, no daba abasto con su magia para resolver todos los problemas que los niños le planteaban, por lo que pensando y pensando se le tuvo que ocurrir una idea.

Fue al aeropuerto, pero como no la querían complacer, no le quedó más remedio que hipnotizar al piloto y así fue que logró que la subieran en un avión hasta más arriba de las nubes y desde allí se tiró en paracaídas.

Cayendo, vio, por entre las más inmensas pompas de jabón algodón que puedas imaginar, al sol naciente y el inconmensurable mar, como una sobrecama cubriendo la Tierra.

Desde allí gritó a los cuatro vientos:

—¡Abra cadabra, pata de cabra!

Entonces el mundo fue de maravilla, porque desde Alaska hasta la Patagonia, desde México hasta Japón, todos los niños fueron magos.

Victoria Wallace. Mestre em Tradução, Interpretação e Legendagem pela Universidade de Essex, Reino Unido, instituição que lhe concedeu o Prêmio Roger Hawkins em 2024 por seu excelente desempenho acadêmico. Atualmente se desempenha como tradutora freelancer e professora. Sua principal área de atuação é a tradução de literatura infantil.

E-mail: victoriawallace912@gmail.com

Lexa Olivera-Smith. Professora de Tradução, Interpretação e Legendagem, do Departamento de Linguagem e Linguística da Universidade de Essex, Reino Unido. É Diretora do Programa de Mestrado em Tradução Audiovisual e Literária e do Mestrado em Tradução e Prática Profissional. É membro da *Higher Education Academy* no Reino Unido e membro da ESIST- *The European Association for Studies in Screen Translation*. Também é afiliada ao *Institute of Translation & Interpreting* (ITI) e ao *Chartered Institute of Linguists* (CIOL) do Reino Unido. Seus interesses de pesquisa estão na tradução literária, a tradução audiovisual e o ensino da tradução.

E-mail: molivera@essex.ac.uk

Declaração de Autoria

Victoria Wallace e Lexa Olivera-Smith, declaradas autoras, confirmam sua participação em todas as etapas de elaboração do trabalho: 1. Conceição do projeto, pesquisa bibliográfica, análise e interpretação dos dados; 2. Redação e revisão do manuscrito; 3. Aprovação da versão final do manuscrito para publicação; 4. Responsabilidade por todos os aspectos do trabalho e garantia pela exatidão e integridade de qualquer parte da obra.

Declaração de Disponibilidade de Dados

Todo o conjunto de dados que dá suporte aos resultados deste estudo foi publicado no próprio artigo.

Agradecimentos

Alea agradece aos herdeiros de Luis Cabrera Delgado, Judas Ra e Luis Sinuhe Cabrera, pela gentil e desinteressada colaboração com nossa revista, ao autorizar a tradução e publicação de Catalina la Maga.

Dedicamos este trabalho à memória de Luis Cabrera Delgado.

Parecer Final dos Editores

Ana Maria Lisboa de Mello, Elena Cristina Palmero González, Rafael Gutierrez Giraldo e Rodrigo Labriola, aprovamos a versão final deste texto para sua publicação.

Recebido em: 19/05/2025

Aceito em: 30/07/2025