

Solitude

by [Armando Simón](#) (February 2024)



A Man Reading on a Sofa, Louie Burrell

“I’m going to have to go to see mother,” Violet announced to her husband after she hung up the telephone. “She’s feeling ill. It could be the virus that’s going around.”

On hearing the news, Pascal, her husband, suppressed the smile that was about to form on his face and instead put on a look of concern.

“Oh ... I’m sorry to hear that. Is it serious?” He was hoping

for one of those lingering illnesses that never quite go away, not an unreasonable thought since the old bat was pushing 80. The couple themselves were in their 40s.

“Not sure what it is. I’m going to take her to the doctor. She’s got—” and she launched on a list of symptoms that went in one ear and out the other.

“Well, you should pack and go right away!” he interrupted her. “You never know. She’s 80 and at her age things could turn for the worse in a moment’s notice. She needs someone there, now that your father passed away last year. If you start now, you can get there by midnight. Go on!” he said. Her mother lived across the state, a good four hours’ drive. He, of course, had to stay because of his job.

This thought energized his wife, and she took out her suitcase and began to pack. Although Violet usually took a whole hour to put on makeup, choose a dress, and play with her hair prior to going out, this time she was ready and packed in what seemed by comparison a blink of an eye and Pascal was soon waving goodbye to her from the driveway as she drove off in her car to attend to her mother.

It was not until he was inside, with the door locked behind him, that he allowed himself to smile. A smile from ear to ear.

If lucky, she would be gone four days, maybe even a whole week!

He walked around the house, enjoying the emptiness, the absence of a constantly judgmental presence.

He went to his bedroom and disrobed, then walked around the house in his underwear in a (safe) act of defiance before plopping down on the sofa. He scanned the television channels and found a movie that he thought might be good, but which Violet would almost certainly have disapproved of. A little

way into the movie he got up to make popcorn, then resumed his movie, with a feeling of deep contentment.

In the morning, Pascal woke up and got dressed. He did not make the bed but, instead, left the sheet and cover tousled. Instead of the usual soggy oatmeal for breakfast, he cooked scrambled eggs and cheese having enough cholesterol in them to clog up an artery, and ate the breakfast with a feeling of bliss.

On the way to work, he drove over an empty soda can on the road, and later on splashed a puddle by the sidewalk, something that would have drawn shrieks of disapproval from his wife.

At work, everybody noted his good mood. When asked why he was in such good spirits, he answered honestly. "My wife's out of town. I don't have to put up with her crap for a few days."

Speaking of whom, she called him at work. "I took Mother to see the doctor. She's going to need surgery, so I'm going to have to stay with her for about a week."

"Oh, no, that's terrible," he smiled. "But, now, listen, you take as much time as you want. She needs you there."

"But I feel guilty leaving you alone."

"Bah! Nonsense! I don't want to hear of it! You be sure to take as long as is necessary. I'm serious!"

After he hung up, he felt even better than before, lighter in step.

Prior to arriving at home, he had dinner at his favorite restaurant, glad that he did not have to pay for two people. He arrived at home and reclined on the sofa, thinking hard and looking around him. What was it about the house that bothered him? What was it that worked in the back of his mind at always making him feel dissatisfied and irritated? Something,

something.

He got up. Every flat surface in the house, every table, every counter was cluttered with useless knickknacks and frames. It was as if whenever she saw a flat surface, she immediately had to put stuff on it. She was just like those infernal developers that sees a field of wildflowers and just has to pave it over with cement. So, he went through the house with cardboard boxes and put in them every picture, every useless ornament, every vase with plastic flowers or dried, decorative weeds, and put them in the guestroom. He stopped and realized that the same principle applied to the walls. Every wall had a plethora of framed photographs and cheap, mass produced, tasteless paintings found in stores that sold cheap goods. He put them all in the guest room, on the floor. When he finished, the house now looked spacious.

Pascal looked at the couch and frowned. Now, why the devil were those miniature pillows with cutesy embroidery there, anyway? What were they there for? He threw them on the bed in the guest room.

He went to the master bedroom where two people, Pascal and Violet, slept. There were six pillows for two persons on the bed. He took the excess pillows to the guest room.

Next, he went into the bathroom and his mood soured. In one corner of the bathroom counter, he had his electric shaver, his toothbrush, his deodorant and his cologne crammed together. The entire remainder countertop was filled with her amassment of things.

“I think I’m going to need a shovel,” he said to himself.

He left and came back with boxes. In them, he put in a miniature vase with a plastic flower, her hairbrush, her hair dryer, Sulfacleanser, Lubriderm, Sensodyne, Elvive protein recharge, Elvive frizz taming serum, Milbon thickening mist, seven assorted perfumes, a dozen assorted pencils, small

sponges and pads, an electrical contraption with sandpaper, Infallible matte lock, Ambi fade cream, Deep Cleansing Nose Strip, Lancome genifique, L'Oreal true match, Neutrogena shine control powder, eight little round containers of eye shadows, Acyclovir ointment, Biore charcoal, Neutrogena rapid tone repair, Lancome Mile-en-mousse, Estée Lauder advanced night repair, Desonide, Superstay 24 color, L'Oreal lipstick, Still a Lipstick, Melted Matte-talic, L'Oreal Infallible liquid lipstick, perfume roll-on jasmine, Neosporin, an electric tweezer, Cils booster XL, L'Oreal voluminous base, scissors, and Sumptuous extreme mascara.

He was beginning to understand why it took his wife almost an hour to get ready to go out of the house.

On a hunch, he opened the cabinet door beneath the bathroom sink and saw a small three-tiered stand also filled with even more cosmetics spilled over from above. Since they were out of sight, he decided to put them out of mind and simply closed the cabinet door. And once again he stored the boxes inside the guest room, with all of the other things awaiting her eventual return.

The bathroom looked more spacious.

"Much better," he said aloud and in doing so, he realized that now there was something else that he was enjoying.

The silence! That glorious silence!

Just as Violet seemed to be driven by an urge to fill in an empty space and walls with knickknacks, so was she driven to fill in an empty silence with chatter. It was one of the things he hated when going hiking with her. He went hiking partly for exercise, but also to enjoy the sight and sounds of nature; the rustle of the tree branches and the song of birds were overlaid with her constant verbal diarrhea.

In the following days, Pascal began to actually enjoy coming

home from work. It was more inviting. Pascal would either stop on the way home and have dinner, or he would cook at home. He would then lay down on the sofa and watch the type of movies that he liked (she only liked comedies and chick flicks). He now took a shower using hand soap instead of gel. After using the toilet, he left the toilet seat up. In the mornings, more often than not, he would stop at IHOP and eat the types of food that Violet disapproved of: pancakes, French toast, bacon, scrambled eggs, ham.

The first week stretched out into the second wonderful week, then the third glorious week.

He occasionally went out to attend live theater. Violet did not like stage plays.

And even though he ate what he wanted, when he wanted, as much as he wanted, he was surprised at having lost ten pounds by the end of the third week.

To be sure, the house looked lived in. It did not have that museum exhibit look.

Pascal washed his clothes, carefully hanging up his pants and shirts, but he just threw his underwear and socks in a drawer. For a long time, Violet had nagged him to fold his underwear and socks, which he did, only to be told that he was doing it wrong. He had been nagged to vacuum the house, only to be told that he was doing it wrong. He had been nagged to put the dishes in the dishwasher after dinner, only to be told that he was doing it wrong. In bed, she would tell him that he was doing it wrong.

He was sick of his wife treating him like he was a child—a retarded child.

And then there was the fact that for once, he knew where everything was, nothing was “mislaid.” With her constant “rearranging” and “straightening,” he would put something down

somewhere only for it to disappear out of sight within ten minutes later as she swooped down upon the offending article and flew off with it, stashing it somewhere where only she knew where to find it.

Adam should have asked Eve for his rib back, he thought to himself.

Throughout the days, Violet kept him up on her mother's recuperation, as if he cared, while Pascal insisted on her staying as long as possible. But he knew, of course, that all good things finally end and, naturally, one night she told him that she would be coming home early the next day. She also told him that she was going to bring her mother with her. That way, Violet could take care of her and be at home. The convalescence was estimated to take at least another month, at which time she could go back to her own house. He hung up the telephone.

Her mother ... was coming.

To live with them.

For at least a month.

Now ... there would be two of them.

During the night, a dismayed Pascal began the process of putting back the house to normal. Back to being suffocating. He went to the guestroom to put all the irritants back in the boxes to replace them in their proper places.

When the women arrived very early the next day, Pascal's car was still in the driveway. He would be leaving for work soon. They entered, Violet calling for Pascal to let him know they were there and could he bring in the luggage from the car. At first, he did not answer, so she went from room to room. Violet found him in the guest room, on the floor.

He had had a heart attack.

And he was dead.

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Armando Simón is a trilingual native of Cuba, a retired psychologist and author of *When Evolution [Stops](#)* and *A Cuban from [Kansas](#)*.

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