

The Repairman's Son

Puco had been a very regretful 5-year-old. Instead of rushing and roaring headfirst into adventures like the other children, Puco had always weighed up the potential pitfalls of the options open to him, and – no matter what course of action he had eventually taken – he'd wondered if he'd done it all wrong. Whereas his friends drifted gracefully on the ebb and flow of new experiences, Puco made a barren island for himself in his own skull. Here he would mull things over to himself and replay the mistakes that he might have made, wistful for what might have been.

There are few things that Puco, at 25-years-old, likes doing more than tickle his wife-to-be, Maria, until she is all but ill with hysteria. It is an idyllic summer's morning and he wants her to laze around in bed with him in their cramped one-bedroom home in the capital city. He makes sure to tickle all the choicest spots: the soles of her feet, her armpits, her neck, and especially the sides of her ribs. She giggles and squirms as he tickles even more tenderly and cautiously than usual (he is a *very* cautious tickler), for Maria is now fat with child. He cuts the tickling short and transitions seamlessly into stroking her bulging stomach.

"I think it feels like you," Puco says, a sly smile creeping over his face. "So if it's a girl, we must call it Maria."

"No, it feels just like you," Maria replies, "So if it's a boy, we call it Flatulence." And then she repays his tickling twofold.

"*Enough!*" Puco eventually says in delightful agony, freeing himself from her hold.

Changing the tone, he asks, "Have you found anywhere yet?"

"Don't worry about it, Puco, I will tell you once I've found somewhere fantastic enough for us and our little Flatulence."

"Are you sure you don't want me to help looking? I could take some days off work-"

"Just leave it to me. I enjoy it, and you wouldn't."

"Maria, I love you and trust that you will find us a good house."

Maria gets dressed and leaves. Puco transfers his affections to his dog, who wags his tail ferociously as he looks longingly out of the window, ball in mouth. He is just a tiny puppy, and has not become accustomed (nor ever will be) to the monotony of life's routines. He has brown fur so soft and delicate that it looks like ducklings' down. The dog reminds Puco of his childhood.

At 5-years-old, Puco had been very envious of his dog. His dog had been called Alpalpa – a big brown, earnest-looking dog almost the same size as him – and they were always going for what seemed like long walks in the garden, by the Grubola trees, or to friends' houses, him throwing sticks, and Alpalpa fetching sticks, all the way. Alpalpa had been an old, wise dog, Puco had thought, and he'd envied that dog's obliviousness in many ways. A dog has plenty to regret, but regret he does not.

The old family house, in Tappleton Village, had held a stoic charm, and young Puco had always assumed it to have remained in exactly the same state for centuries. It'd had very tall, thin, looming windows, which, to Puco's eyes, had somehow looked *concerned* (a feature he liked). It had been covered all over in neat white planks that were always kept in the finest condition by his father, who was a repairman – a fine repairman. There had been a big garden in the front, marked off by a tall dark green hedge, and in the back a few dozen Grubola trees that could survive anything. The only strange thing about the house had been a circular ornament made of stone in the front garden, on which were sculpted identical stone men daisy-chained hand-in-hand, their body parts all out of proportion in a way that young Puco had found quite amusing.

It was when Puco had been 5-years-old when he laid down his first memory – that is, his

first memory vivid and enduring enough to stay with him for the rest of his life.

He had been building castles out of bricks in his bedroom upstairs and he had not yet come down for breakfast. It had been very early on a cold autumn morning. Proud of one of his creations, he'd rushed downstairs to seek the admiration of his parents. Nearing the bottom of the staircase he'd jumped the last four steps, resulting in a loud *thud!* Puco had looked up to see his father sitting in his armchair in the sitting room at the end of the long corridor. His father had immediately gasped and put his head in his hands, deep in sorrow. Puco had frozen still. His grandfather had been at his father's left side, with his hand delicately placed on his shoulder, and he had whispered just a few words to Puco's father. Both of them must have been able to see Puco there at the bottom of the stairs, but they did not acknowledge him, and he stood motionless as if this would allow him to gradually fade into the background.

He remembers that as his father had wept in such a way he'd never seen before, the noise of the kettle in the kitchen had risen, taking an eternity to go from a whisper to a scream. He remembers the leaves from the Grubola tree floating down hypnotically in the window behind his father. He remembers not noticing how his father's weeping had turned, imperceptibly, into a smile. By the time the kettle had reached its shrillest scream, his father had seemed content and let out a sigh. At that point, Alpalpa had run in from the garden and bounded for little Puco, running circles around him and licking his neck.

Puco had pushed the dog away and looked about him for some sign that he'd made a bad decision, and was personally culpable for his father's waves of emotions. Was it the *thud* of his jump which had shaken his father so? Could he have spent a minute longer on his castle - would this have given his father peace? Or, on the other hand, if he had crept just a little closer to his armchair, could he have heard the words whispered by his grandfather?

But as he had looked for answers, all he had seen were the leaves falling innocently out of the window, and all he heard was the kettle softening to a murmur in the kitchen.

Then there were the times Puco regretted that left nothing specific to regret.

One day, just before his sixth birthday, Puco had gone for a walk with Alpalpa, by the Grubola trees, thrown his stick a couple of times, just like before, and Alpalpa had come back, hobbling just a little on his two front paws. Puco had known straightaway that he was ill.

The dog had been around for all of Puco's life, so oh how he'd suffered as he saw Alpalpa get worse and worse.

He'd find himself walking for hours and hours around his house, trying to think of what he'd done wrong. He had asked his father about this, but his father only worried about it too, so he had searched for his mother because she could always be relied on to cheer him up with a joke or two.

Eventually Alpalpa had passed away. "There is an order to all of this", Puco's father had said, with best intentions.

The death of Alpalpa hadn't been the cause of Puco's regretful disposition; and Puco had in no way been the cause of Alpalpa's death.

But boy had Puco regretted that walk.

And boy had Puco regretted throwing that stick.

When Puco was 7 his parents had gotten him a new dog – a small, scurrying white one. They called it 'Alpalpa' once more, which Puco had found quite disturbing. He objected to this name on two grounds: that it gave him bad memories, and that it betrayed a lack of respect for his first dog. Yet his parents had insisted, telling him that this was the name given to all dogs in their family as far back as memory would go. Puco had begrudgingly accepted the name. In truth, the memories he had of his old dog were not all bad - not at all - and in time he had come to love the new dog with a fondness that rivalled that for the old.

Puco takes his dog – who is, by tradition, called Alpalpa – to his workshop, in the middle of the city,

where he works with Raymon and Decatia. Puco is a repairman, like his father, and so he helps others in mitigating their regret – not therapeutically, but mechanically. He has a reputation in the city for being able to fix the unfixable. His workmates say he will always be more skilful than them because, unlike them, he cares little for the money or the career; he just likes to fix. He loves fixing all manner of bits and bobs, no matter how big or small, with Alpalpa beside him helping as best he can with his trusty ball and gnawed bones.

His father held this same job too, before mother died and he moved out to the coast.

Puco loves to focus on the things that can be fixed – the things you can restore to their full glory.

Over the past few months, Maria has taken Puco to see half a dozen small houses, some very far from the city. Often they've had to take a boat, a train, a bus, or perhaps all three. Because of Puco's skills and reputation, he is confident he can get a job almost anywhere, so Maria's sole objective is to find the best home where they can start a family. She is sanguine and persistent, which has been entirely essential, for Puco is not an easy man to please.

In each house so far, Puco has found the potential for some calamity: a little mildew with the whiff of possible rot at the house's foundations; or a whisper of a crack that could one day bring the house to a thundering collapse.

The porch of one house had a faint medicinal smell that was enough to rule the house out, for it gave Puco a bad memory.

The memory was of a day when he'd been 17. He'd been an apprentice to his father, in a garage a short walk from the old family house. His mother had been "just resting" in the house. His father had left the garage in the afternoon, saying he needed to go and pick up some tools from the shed back at home.

Two things had troubled Puco about this situation: it was not like his father to forget his tools, and it was not like his mother to spend days "just resting". It was his father who had been the exhausted one, the anxious one, the one who needed to take a day off every now and again. Suspicious, Puco had followed his father home.

As soon as he'd arrived at the front garden he'd regretted his actions. He'd tutted as he'd entertained the thought that his father had returned to his mother with amorous intentions. Ruling this out as utterly ludicrous, he'd weighed up the wisdom of creeping around the house to find out what his father was up to. Then he'd found himself rather upset thinking about the circular stone ornament, judging its misshapen little men rather *tacky*. He'd had no idea why his father hadn't replaced it a long time ago; and the reason why he'd felt so upset was because he remembered the days, not so long ago, when anything his father had turned his hands to had filled him with pride. Quite unhappy out in the front garden, Puco had snuck inside.

He had opened the front door ever so quietly and heard some muttering coming from his parents' bedroom. It was at that moment when he'd smelt something faintly medicinal. He'd tiptoed up the stairs and strained his ears in the direction of the muttering, finally reaching a point where he could make out some voices. He'd been able to make out his mother's voice, his father's voice, and one other voice, of someone very old and very serious.

"I tell you once more, sir, there is nothing I, you, we, or anybody else can do," said the very old and very serious voice.

And Puco had realised, almost instantly, that his mother was on her deathbed. She: the life and soul of the household and, for all Puco knew, one of the brightest lights on earth. Puco had heard some footsteps and had quickly hidden behind a chest of drawers - just in time too, for some loud and lugubrious footsteps soon made their way out of his house. Puco had known that his father was still in there with his mother. He had felt so terribly sad, knowing not only that his mother was going to die, but also that his father must have felt so hopeless. His father was, after

all, a fixer, and he had just been told that this was something he could not fix.

And then he'd heard the very faint voice of his mother, saying to his father:

"I'd have done it all over again."

And Puco had made quite an unbearable effort to keep his crying silent.

Two months later, they'd left. His father's official line had been that the house was too big for just the two of them and the dog, but they both knew it wasn't that. On the day of the move, Puco had seen his father watering the Grubola trees, when they both knew the Grubola trees didn't need watering.

They'd moved far away, and soon found themselves in separate homes. His father had moved to the coast, to take it easier, and Puco had moved to the capital to make something of himself. On the occasions they met up, they would often talk of the house and of her. For her sake – because she would have insisted – they both put on a bold show that about these two things they would show no regret.

"Puco, embrace me!" Maria gleefully yells as she bursts into their little apartment. "For I have found the perfect place for us to start our new life together."

Puco does hold her. As he does, he makes sure to maintain a thick smile on his face, concealing his apprehension that she is setting herself up for a fall. Puco can never really understand the premature joy which people allow themselves to indulge in prior to such inherently uncertain outcomes.

Maria is a jester. She always insists that Puco put a blindfold on for the entire journey to view a new house. This time is no exception.

First of all, Puco suspects that he is on a train, but not for all that long, and then he is walking. He can hear Maria almost skipping.

"It's perfect, even for a big grumble-puss like you," she says. Their pup, named Alpalpa, by tradition, shares her enthusiasm, audibly sniffing any old thing he can shove his nose into. "Stop trying to peek," Maria says to Puco, "I'll tell you when we're there." She squeezes his hand and tugs him along.

Soon enough, they come to a halt. "There!" Maria says, and Puco promises himself that he will try to like this place, so he dredges up some unnatural optimism. His blindfold comes off.

He almost collapses. "Isn't it *wonderful*?" 8 years it has been. "Puco, what's wrong? This is Tappleton Village, it must be somewhere near where you grew up." The old family house. "You don't like it?" He hasn't been back since his father sold the place and moved to the coast. "*Alpalpa* likes it. Say *something*, angel."

"Maria, this is..."

He drifts off and looks around the house. Its tall, thin windows still looked reassuringly *concerned*. The white paint is peeling off the planks in a way his father would never have tolerated. The little stone statues are still there, looking more tacky and ridiculous than ever. The front door opens to a thousand memories. "It's my childhood house," Puco says.

"*Really*? I didn't know! Oh I'm so sorry, Puco, is this where your mother--"

"Yes."

"I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have brought you here."

"You weren't to know."

"But it was stupid to pick a place in Tappleton Village, wasn't it?"

They just stand there for a while. Then Puco starts walking around to the back garden, Maria following him. A weak smile grows on his face as he sees the Grubola trees, still looking tough, standing just as they had done when he'd played, for many years, with his friends and with

his childhood Alpalpa. The whole place is drenched with memories, but they are not all bad - not at all.

“We should take it,” he tells Maria, with conviction.

“Well don’t you want to look inside?”

“Of course not. I lived here for 17 years. It’s the finest house I’ve ever known. Dad couldn’t look after it – or didn’t want to look after it – after Mum died, and I moved to the city. He’d be happy to see it in our hands again.”

“Puco, let’s just take a minute-”

“The decision’s been made. I’m not often certain about things, Maria, but I am certain of this.”

It is three years later. Puco sits in his armchair, mending a broken watch. His two-and-seven-eighths-year-old son is running after Alpalpa trying to catch his bottom, and Maria is running after his son, trying to catch *his* bottom. Puco is so perfectly happy to be alive with such joy around him. In the end he cannot resist but put down his watch, and his tools, and chase after Maria, to try to catch *her* bottom.

Maria looks fondly at their child and whispers in his ear, “He’s so adorable. He’s like you: he worries he’s done everything wrong, when there isn’t a single thing he could’ve done better.”

Another three years later. It is a cold autumn morning. Puco is in his armchair. It is early in the morning and he is about to share a cup of tea with his frail father, who is down from the coast to see how the family is getting along. Puco’s father is proud of him: he spent the whole of yesterday searching from the top to the bottom of the house for something to fix or improve, but to no avail. The white planks on the outside of the house are in immaculate condition, and Puco had never had the heart to do anything to the tacky stone statues in the front garden, which has been there as long as either of them can remember.

Puco’s father stands with his hand on his left shoulder, gazing out at the leaves floating hypnotically down from the Grubola trees out of the window.

“Where is little Puco?” his father asks him.

“Upstairs. I heard him building his castles, but I did not want to disturb him,” he replies.

The kettle starts to whisper in the kitchen. Puco hears the rapid *plod-plod* of his son rushing down the stairs. There is a short silence as he must be jumping through the air, and in this silence Puco senses the most momentarily uncanny feeling take over him.

Thud, goes his son, appearing at the end of the corridor, landing and freezing on the spot.

Puco gasps audibly and drops his head into hands. He realises how distraught he must look to his son. His father, so composed, whispers into his ear, slow and careful:

“This is when it dawned on me too.”

As his son simply stares at him, as his father clutches his shoulder that little bit firmer, and as the sound of the kettle rises to a scream, Puco weeps. As the kettle reaches its shrillest scream, Puco finds some sort of contentment, or acceptance, and smiles. At this point, Alpalpa runs in from the garden and bounds for his son, running circles around him and trying to lick his neck.

Puco is quite ashamed of himself for scaring his son so. His son, who is also called Puco, by tradition, will probably think that this was his fault in some way. His son, you see, is a very regretful 5-year-old.

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