

## In Working Condition

JULY, 1999. I am three years old, enjoying the solitude of introversion while basking in the bliss that is the lack of responsibility or obligation. I am accompanied by the familiar, comforting droning of a single air conditioning unit, hastily fastened to the bedroom window that seems to be permanently fixed into its semi-open position. I rest upon the ocean of deep blue bargain carpet, meticulously arranging my collection of Hot Wheels cars into neat little lines, first by color, then by other specifications that I select upon a whim. Red, blue, red, green... red, blue, blue... no, that won't work. Round body, square body, round body... No, the Firebird has a rounded, triangular body, almost arrowhead-like. I reach for it, and my hand brushes against the Aventador. I touched it, so now I have to touch the one in front of it, but not the one directly in front of it; the Aventador was the second car in line, which means that I have to touch the fourth car in line, followed by the first, then the third, then finally, the fifth (the fifth being the Firebird). One re-assessment later, and I still have yet to decide on a final arrangement.

Patterns represent predictability, something that I have learned to find comfort in. The comfort of consistency and predictability creates a perfect state of mental homeostasis that keeps me immersed in my own thoughts and fixations, never longing for change since deviating from my usual habits causes too much emotional turmoil. Alas, one cannot realistically hope to avoid such turmoil, as life is an inconsistent, unpredictable phenomenon in itself. As my mother enters the room with the Hoover, my repetition is compromised; the die cast cars that I had so meticulously arranged into perfect lines must now be moved in order to commence the cleaning of the carpet. The onset begins, for my environment is now different than it was before, and I do

not know how to cope. It is such a subtle alteration to an otherwise trivial entity, yet I find myself in panic. Before I can even verbally express my discomfort, the real horror sets in; the vacuum has now been turned on. The noise – oh, that God-awful noise! It is as if a thousand freight trains carrying a million shrieking elephants has begun to derail, the screeching of metal on metal only adding to the ungodly commotion of bitter noise. I am trapped, unable to escape the horrid whirlwind of sound; what is this overload of the senses?

As quickly as it begins, the nightmare ends, though I remain frozen. What the heck did I just experience? How long was I in that state? Slowly but surely, my senses return, and I react accordingly. My mother, with what experience she has gained so far throughout her time as a mother, tries her best to stop my sobbing, but I am inconsolable. Am I ill? Am I injured? It is concluded that it is nothing more than *chiflazón*, and the issue is not pursued any further.

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JULY 2014. I am seventeen years old, and I have just started my first part-time job at a local Dairy Queen. As I learn the basics of foodservice and interaction with customers, I become comfortable with the repetition and monotony that comes with the job. Assembling ice cream deserts has little to no deviation from a set pattern, which makes the work relatively enjoyable. The ice cream goes first, followed by toppings, and then whipped cream (which could then be optionally followed by pecans). Ice cream, toppings, whipped cream. Ice cream, toppings... no whipped cream? It's no big deal, the interruptions in the pattern are consistent, which in a way makes them acceptable within the pattern. For days, this aspect of the job remains consistent, as I have become familiar with where everything is located and I have grown used to the repetition.

Yet even as I wane from childhood and stand upon the brink of adulthood, life is not so generous as to retain any sort of consistency.

As I arrive one day, I notice that something is off. A second blender has been installed, and as a result, the ice cream dispenser has been moved to a different wall. On top of that, the dispenser for the sundae dishes has also been moved, my familiarity with the previous setting being rendered useless. I am frustrated, but it's no big deal, I suppose. I'll just have to become familiar with the new setting. This new approach has helped ease the burden of order being disrupted; instead of fearing disruption and viewing it as a sense of destruction of order, I view it simply as the original order being amended. It still takes some adjustment, and the initial anxiety of my setting being changed is still present, but it has become manageable.

However, as time progresses, it quickly becomes evident that certain quirks are still present, despite being repressed for so long. The ice cream machine is empty, and as a result, it has been pulling pressurized air into the freezing chamber. As I try to dispense ice cream into a single dish, an abrupt "pop" emerges instead, triggering numerous responses at once in a way that I cannot immediately react. Again with that horrendous noise; it makes me tense up, and I am temporarily suspended from reality. Everything around me seems to freeze as if time itself has ceased to move forward, and once more I am trapped. Suddenly, I feel a tap on my shoulder: a fellow employee. He has no way to fathom the reaction that I have just experienced, and he voices his frustration with my decrease in efficiency. He is not rude by any means, but my own acknowledgement of my long-suppressed quirk only makes me angrier with myself when another employee brings it to my attention. As if nothing had happened at all, I resume my duties, furious, and defeated. I am nearing adulthood, why are my senses so easily overwhelmed?

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SEPTEMBER 2003. I am roughly seven years old, sitting in my first grade classroom as my parents converse with my teacher (who also happens to be the principle of the small private school that I attend). I sit at the back of the empty classroom, as I am instructed by my parents to complete the homework assignment that I had been given while they speak with my teacher. Silently, I obeyed, though a sense of strange discomfort had resonated within me for the duration of the meeting. Why were my parents so stoic? Was I in trouble? I swear that I had been trying my best in school, I made straight As, and never anything less. I could read very well, in fact, I was encouraged to read books that were recommended for students who were at least two grade levels above me. Though I suppose that was not enough if I couldn't reasonably respond to other students re-arranging my crayons, or popping balloons near me when I wasn't expecting.

I am ashamed; I should be doing my homework, but my dad's denial-filled expression is like something I have never seen before. Why was he so angry with whatever my teacher had said to him? I could hear mentions of my name on several different occasions, as well as a few other words that seemed to stand out. What did they mean by "special accommodations?" As far as I knew, I wasn't physically handicapped in any way. Autism? Was that an infectious disease? It must have been, if my parents were discussing the possibility of getting me tested for it. As the conference concludes, I am prompted to leave with my parents, who are both silent as they reflect upon what they had just heard. Working up the courage to speak up, I apologize, though I am unsure what for. I am not given a response, and I hear my mother mutter something else about *chiflazón*.

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SEPTEMBER 2016. I am twenty years old, sitting at the dinner table with my family. The atmosphere is full of positive energy, and both of my parents are thrilled; I have just gotten a letter in the mail telling me that I had earned a perfect 4.0 grade point average for the semester, getting me a spot on the President's List. My father's face beams with pride, and my mother can hardly contain the overjoyed tears that stream down her face. I laugh as I offer her a napkin, though the process is a bit delayed since my hand brushes up against my glass, naturally indicating that I have to touch it before I can reach for the napkin again. While it fills me with a sense of achievement to see how proud my parents are of me, there is always a bittersweet undertone to it all. I was never tested for autism, something that my mother always regrets since she insists that I show so many traits that can be linked to it (and I would agree with her to an extent). It makes me sad to know that my mother refuses to attribute my accomplishments to her own as a mother, as she feels that her denial of the possible origin of my quirks constitutes as a form of neglect. But I don't feel neglected, because I am not, nor was I ever.

Throughout my childhood, I learned to adapt. Try as I might to overcome the quirks that I would often demonstrate, I could never overcome them. Instead, I learned to cope. A "sensory overload?" Maybe that's what they were; there was no way to prevent one, but I found out that they could be alleviated if I held my breath and tensed up my hands. My obsessive compulsive nature has not been as easy to deal with, but I do feel that my outbursts to certain disarray have gotten a lot better. Maybe the key to overcoming such difficulty is to challenge yourself, learning to adapt, and eventually, to thrive.

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OCTOBER 2018. I am twenty-two years old, and Mother of God, college is stressful. Never would I have thought that I would form such a strong emotional bond with my bed. Despite this, it has definitely been an interesting experience, one that has tested my ability to adapt to change. While the future holds many possibilities, I try not to dwell upon the anxiety that arises from the fear of the unknown. I still find comfort in the predictable, there is no changing that. But I have since learned to accept that life does not consist of predictability; it follows the pattern that you set for it only until fate decides to alter it with the inconsistencies of life's behavior. Does this mean that I am comfortable with these changes that come up? Absolutely not. But each time the pattern is disrupted, I am presented with a choice; to let myself become overpowered by fear, or to accept the change as the new pattern for which my life is to abide by.