

# THE PROOF

*César Aira*

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‘Wannafuck?’

Marcia was so startled she didn’t understand the question. She looked hastily around her to see where it came from . . . Yet it wasn’t so very out of place, and perhaps nothing else was to be expected, here in this labyrinth of voices and glances that were transparent, light, inconsequential and yet at the same time dense, rapid, slightly wild. But if you went around expecting something . . .

Three blocks before Plaza Flores, on this side of the avenue a youthful world came alive. Stationary but mobile, three-dimensional, it defined its own boundaries, the volume it created. There were big groups of boys and girls – more of the former – gathered in the doorways of the two record shops, in the empty area round the Cine Flores that stood between them, and clustered against the parked cars. At this time of day they were out of school and all met up here. She had

also left school two hours earlier (she was in year ten), but a long way away, fifteen blocks further down, in Caballito. She was out for her daily walk. Marcia was overweight and had a back problem that wasn't serious then at the age of sixteen, but might become so in the future. No one had told her she should walk; she did it out of a therapeutic instinct. For other reasons as well, above all habit; she had survived a serious depression she had suffered, which had reached its climax a few months earlier, by being constantly on the move, and now she still was, just because, out of inertia or superstition. By this stage of her exercise, already close to the point where she turned around, it was as though she were slowing down; after the kilometre of no man's land on Avenida Rivadavia which separated the two districts, invading this new, youthful space made her go increasingly slowly, even though she did not slacken her pace.

She came up against floating signs; every step, every swing of her arms met endless responses and allusions . . . with its sprawling youthful world, arriving in Flores was like raising a mirror to her own history, only slightly further from its original location – not far, easily reachable on an evening walk. It was only logical that time should become denser when she arrived. Outside her story she felt she was gliding along

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too rapidly, like a body in the ether where there was no resistance. Nor should there be too much, or she would be paralysed, as had happened to her during the rather tragic period that was already vanishing into the past.

Although it was only seven o'clock, it had already grown dark. It was winter, and night fell early. Not dark night; that would come later. In the direction she was walking, Marcia had the sunset in front of her; at the far end of the avenue there was an intense red, violet and orangey glow she could only see as she drew closer to Flores and Rivadavia made a gentle bend. It was still almost daytime when she set out, but the light faded quickly; in midwinter it would have been dark by half past six, but the season had moved on and these were no longer what you could call the shortest days of the year, although it was still cold, twilight descended quickly, and nightfall was already in the air when school was out at five. There must still have been light in the atmosphere, even at seven o'clock, but the street was so brightly lit that the sky looked dark by comparison. Especially when she reached the more commercial part of Flores, near the square, with the illuminated shop windows and canopies. This made the red glow of the sunset in the distance seem incongruous, although it was no

longer red, more like a weak blue shadow with grey streaks around it. Here the brightness of the mercury lights was dazzling, perhaps because of the crowd of young people who were looking at each other and talking, waiting or arguing loudly. In the previous blocks where there were fewer people (it was very cold, and those who weren't young, with their ridiculous need to meet their friends, preferred to stay indoors), the lights appeared less bright; although it was true it had been earlier in the evening when she passed them by. Time seemed to be going backwards, from an unknown midnight, towards evening, towards day.

She didn't feel it, or shouldn't have felt it, because she herself was part of the system, but all those young people were wasting their time. The system meant being happy. That was what it was all about, and Marcia understood that perfectly, even though she couldn't be part of it. Or thought she couldn't. However that might have been, she entered the enchanted realm, which was not in any particular spot, but was rather a fortuitous moment of the evening. Had she reached it? Or had it reached her? Had it been waiting for her? She didn't ask herself any more questions, because she was already there. She had forgotten she was walking, that she was going in a certain direction (she wasn't headed anywhere anyway) through the soft resistance

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of the light and darkness, silence and the glances exchanged between face and face.

They looked at each other, met one another: that was why they were out on the street. They talked, shouted, whispered secrets among themselves, but everything quickly dissolved into nothing. That was the joy of finding oneself in a particular place and moment. Marcia had to sidestep to skirt round groups inside which a secret was circulating. The secret was being young or not. Even so, she couldn't help looking, seeing, paying more attention. Boys and girls were constantly peeling off the little groups, scurrying this way and that, in the end always to return, talking, gesticulating. They filled all this stretch of the avenue; they seemed to be constantly coming and going, but the number remained the same. They gave an impression of shifting sociability. In fact, it was as if they weren't stationary but were just passing through, exactly as she was. It wasn't a place of resistance, except a poetic, imaginary one, but a gentle tumult of loud and soft laughter. They all seemed to be arguing. Arsehole! Arsehole! was the commonest insult, although nobody ever came to blows. They accused each other of all sorts of things, but that was just their way. They did not watch her go by; they weren't silent or immobile enough for that. Besides, it was only an instant, a few

metres. She walked on, crossing Calle Gavilán, where she hit the real crowds. This side of the intersection, where the huge Duncan café stood, was darker. There seemed to be a lot more people here. Now they were typical kids from Flores: long hair, leather jackets, motorbikes parked on the pavement. Latent urgency hung in the air. There was a closed newspaper stand, with a florist's next to it; there were small knots of teenagers for a further twenty or thirty metres, right up to the first entrance to the shopping mall; it was outside the record shop there that the number of youngsters displaying themselves reached its height, for the moment at least. Marcia knew that on the next corner, opposite a pharmacy, at this time of evening there was always a gaggle of kids. She was venturing into the most typical part of the neighbourhood. For now, though, she was still on the previous corner, by the Duncan café, packed with bikers . . . Marcia could already hear music from the record shop: The Cure, whom she loved.

The music changed her mood, took her to its silent conclusion. As this had not happened with the music from the two earlier record shops, it must have been down to how good it was, although possibly it was the climax of the accumulated impressions. The music was the remaining resistance needed to make

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the mall completely fluid. Every look, every voice she slipped past, mingled with the night. Because it was night. The day was over and night was in the world; at this hour in summer it was still broad daylight, but now it was night. Not the kind of night for sleeping, the real one, but a night superimposed on the day because it was winter.

She was walking along enveloped in her halo, in her sixteen years. Marcia was blonde, small, chubby, somewhere between child and adult. She was wearing a woollen skirt and a thick blue pullover, with lace-up shoes. Her face was flushed from her walk, but it was always ruddy anyway. She knew her movements made her seem out of place; she could have been just another member of one of the gangs or other, where girls like her were not infrequent, chatting and laughing, but she didn't know anyone in Flores. She looked like a girl who was going somewhere and had to pass through here. It was a miracle no one had handed her any fliers; she was given them every day, but for some strange reason not this time; all the people handing them out had been looking the other way when she passed. It was as if she were a ghost, invisible. But that only made her increasingly the empty centre of everyone's gaze and conversations . . . if they could be called conversations. If nothing was aimed at her,

it was because all directions had vanished. It was a swarm of unknown youngsters . . .

‘Hey, I’m talking to you . . .’

‘To me?’

‘Wannafuck?’

Two girls had split off from the large group or groups outside the Duncan, and they began to follow her. It was not too long before they caught up, because Marcia wasn’t far ahead. One of them was talking, the other was her sidekick, listening eagerly a few steps behind. When eventually she had made out who was speaking, Marcia came to a halt and looked at her:

‘Are you mad?’

‘No.’

They were two punks, dressed in black. Very young, although maybe slightly older than she was, with pale, childish features. The one doing the talking was very close to her.

‘You’re gorgeous and I want to fuck you.’

‘Are off your head?’

She glanced at the other one, who was the same and looked very serious. It didn’t seem like a joke. She didn’t know them, or at least couldn’t recognise them beneath their disguises. There was something serious but crazy about the pair of them, about the

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situation. Marcia couldn't get over her astonishment. She looked away and carried on walking, but the punk grabbed her by the arm.

'You're the one I've been waiting for, you fat cow. Don't make things difficult. To begin with, I want to lick your cunt!'

Marcia freed herself at once, and yet turned her head to answer her a second time.

'You're nuts.'

'Come to the dark bit,' she said, pointing to Calle Gavilán, which was in fact pitch black, lined with huge trees. 'I want to kiss you.'

'Leave me in peace.'

She set off again, and the two stood where they were, apparently giving up before they started, but the one talking was raising her voice, as people always do to somebody walking away, even when they are still close by. Vaguely alarmed, Marcia realised a posteriori that this stranger had been speaking loudly right from the start, and that some of the others had heard her and were laughing. Not just the youngsters, but the flower seller as well, an elderly man, a granddad, whom Marcia brushed past in her flight. He was looking on with great interest, but did not allow it to show on his face, as if he were not entitled to react. He would do so later, when he talked to his female

customers; there would be no stopping him with his ‘degenerates’, his ‘you won’t guess what happened’, et cetera. ‘They must have been on drugs,’ the old ladies would say. How thoughtless these girls were, Marcia was surprised to find herself thinking. How reckless! How they undermined youth! The boys who had heard didn’t seem to care in the slightest about that; they were laughing and shouting, thinking it was great.

The two punks were some way away. Without meaning to, Marcia had sped up a little. The music was louder, and some boys standing in the record store doorway a bit further on were looking at her curiously. They might not have heard, but could have guessed, if not the exact meaning of what was going on, at least how strange it was. Or perhaps she wasn’t the first person those two had approached, or others: maybe it was a joke in bad taste they made the whole time. She didn’t turn to look, but guessed that the two punks had rejoined one of the small groups and were laughing as they waited for their next victim.

A few more steps, and Marcia had reached the loudest spot. But now the music had changed meaning. It was as though it had become real, something that never happened with music. And that reality prevented her from hearing it. She too was thinking

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at her loudest, so that it was also as if her thinking had become real. Where she was now there were still clusters of youngsters, who as before no longer paid her any attention (the entire incident had lasted only a few seconds, it was almost as if she had not stopped), but now they were no longer emblems of beauty or happiness, but of *something else*.

Everything had changed. Marcia was shaking from delayed shock. Her heart was in her mouth. She was dumbstruck with astonishment, although, as she didn't usually talk to herself, this wasn't obvious. But the effect was already wearing off, had worn off. The shock had a delayed effect because there had been no time for it while the event was taking place; but afterwards it made no sense, it was a fictional shock. Marcia wasn't hysterical, or even nervous or impressionable, or paranoid; she was quite calm and rational.

No, that wasn't where the change was. The atmosphere, the weight of reality had changed. Not because it had become more or less real, but because it seemed that now, anything could happen. Wasn't it like that before? Before, it was as though nothing could happen. It was the system of beauty and happiness of the young people. It was the reason why they gathered there at that time of day, it was their way of making the neighbourhood, the city, the night, real. All of a

sudden all of them were different, as if a cloud of gas had suddenly been released. It was incredible how everything could change, thought Marcia, even the smallest details. There was no need for catastrophes or cataclysms . . . On the contrary, an earthquake or a flood would be the surest way of keeping things as they were, of preserving values.

That two girls, two women, should have wanted to pick her up, out loud, voicing obscenities, two punks who confirmed their violent self-expulsion from proper behaviour . . . It was so unexpected, so novel . . . Really, anything could happen, and those who could make it happen were the hundreds of young people who came out into the street to waste time at nightfall, after school. They could do anything. They could make night fall in broad daylight. They could set the world spinning, and infinitely slow down Marcia's walk in a straight line (apart from where there was a bend in Rivadavia) from Caballito to Flores.

Marcia was one of those girls of her age who could swear that they are victims. Even though they're not, they could swear it. Maybe that was why they had picked her out. There are not many of her kind, even though there are a lot of virgins. A virgin is surrounded by an atmosphere filled with possibilities, looks, time, messages . . . If she doesn't appear to be one, then the



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atmosphere is purer, more transparent, everything flows that much more quickly. If she does look like one, as was Marcia's case, one in a million, that atmosphere can burst into reality. All the faces round her, all the floating, self-absorbed, exhibitionist bodies had become weighted with stories and possibilities for stories, like she was wandering through myriad tales . . .



She had not taken five steps and she was already completely calm again. In her heart she felt something like the shadow of euphoria: that is the infallible effect of reality. She raised her eyes and all the lights of the avenue shone just for her against a dense black background. There was still a glow in the sky on the horizon. It didn't matter that they had said it as a joke, which was the only plausible explanation. Just having said it was enough, whatever had been their intention. To have said it was irreversible. Just like that, and everything else was left behind. That meant the two punks had been left behind once and for all, like a sign read and understood so well that the entire world was its meaning.



But in reality they had not been left behind. Marcia had not gone twenty metres, and was still within the radius of The Cure's music, when they caught up with her.

'Wait a bit, are you in such a hurry?'