

# DRAMA AND **LIKES** IN HIGH SCHOOL



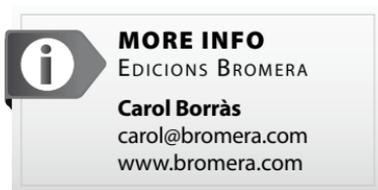
**SECRETS**

Gemma Pasqual i Escrivà

Translated from the Catalan by Andrew McDougall

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Original title: *Drames y likes a l'institut*

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Translation: Andrew McDougall, 2025

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Cover: Jorge Collado

Layout design: Laura Giménez and Eva Bueno

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*For Guillem,  
eternally Guillem*





## JUST ALOMA. ME.

Let's see, where should I begin? Perhaps with my name. Everyone, absolutely everyone, thinks I'm named Aloma after the novel by Mercè Rodoreda. Everyone except my parents, of course, who are responsible for this cultural misunderstanding. Whenever someone says to me, *Oh, Aloma, like the Rodoreda novel!* I don't know what's more tiring: explaining to them that that's not the case, or seeing their blank expressions when I tell them the truth.

The name comes from my grandfather, my mum's dad, a man who, they say, was quite a character. The story goes like this: when my mum was pregnant with me, everyone was sure I was going to be a boy, and that I would be called Roger, like him, but when they found out I was a girl, they didn't have a plan B. That's when my grandad decided that this wasn't going to be a problem. *You'll call her Aloma*, he decreed, as if he were a king choosing the name of an earldom. *It's a pretty name and a girl should have a pretty name.* Just like that. But there was also a second reason: my grandad was a fan of Ramon Llull, while he had never read Rodoreda. For him, Aloma came from the character in Llull's novel *Blanquerna*. And said and done, they called me Aloma.



So that's how my story began. A name with literary origins and a family that seemed straight out of a work of fiction. However, the truth is that life is not like a Netflix series. Either that or someone decided to improvise with my plot. Because, honestly, if my life were a series, I think it would be one of those comedies full of family farces, minor teen dramas and scenes where the protagonist – which is to say, me – makes a fool of themselves. The difference is that, in series, there's always a cool soundtrack in the background. In my life, there's just the shouts of my little brother, Roger (yes, he's named after my grandad), trying to get my attention. How can I describe him? It's as if someone had bottled an earthquake in a six-year-old human body. Inexhaustible energy, destructive capacity and the constant need to turn everything upside down. One time, he decided to check if my phone was water resistant. Spoiler: it wasn't. It ended up in the toilet and I was crying on the floor while he looked at me with his little angel face.

Roger has a strange hobby: asking absurd questions. The other day he left me open-mouthed when he asked me if birds do peepee. Obviously, I had to Google it because I had no idea. And no, I found out that birds don't do peepee like us because they excrete everything all together...but I didn't tell him that because I didn't want him to try doing experiments on the pigeons in the park.

Also, Roger had another great skill: dirtying everything he touched. It's as if he had a secret power where any clean thing he touched became filthy in a matter of seconds.



However, despite everything, for some reason I still I can't quite understand, I love him. It's as if fraternal love were some kind of irrational magic, because look at all the things he does to me, but I can't stay mad for long. Maybe it's because, underneath that tornado, there is a little Roger who just wants a bit of attention. Or maybe it's because fraternal love just doesn't make sense. And that's okay.

Then there's my parents. And, honestly, I don't know how they do it. My mum is a nursing assistant and my dad is a taxi driver. Between shifts, standbys and a thousand other things, it seems like they never stop. When my dad has a night shift, mum is on call. When mum gets home, dad is already starting his car to leave. It's as if they were the leads in a complex choreography that only they understood.

I admire them. They do all they can and more. However, of course, in this corner of organised chaos, it sometimes falls to me to maintain order, especially with Roger. This being a full-time babysitter, while trying to survive adolescence, is is no mean feat.

My mum is a practical woman. If anything in the house breaks, don't waste your time looking for a specialist, because she'll already have the screwdriver in her hand before you can call for help. She's like a lighthouse in the midst of a storm: resolute, determined and, let's be honest, bossy. But, of course, you can't say anything to her because Hiro Hamada from *Big Hero 6* is always right. Always.

My dad, on the other hand, is one of those people who are always in a rush but never stop smiling. Thanks to the taxi,



he knows the whole city and if you ask him where anywhere is, he'll give you better directions than even Google Maps. However, that said, when he gets home, the taxi driver stays outside and the star chef comes in. Truly, he's incredible. He makes dishes that look straight out of a fancy restaurant, with the presentation and everything. If there was a family edition of *Masterchef*, he would win hands down: spectacular food and impeccable service.

The two of them are a curious couple. But, as disorganised as everything might seem, they always end up making everything work.

As for me, I'm not exactly the most popular girl in school, nor the most brilliant student, nor the sportiest. I'm the one who tries to go unnoticed and, with a bit of luck, make it to the end of term without major disasters. Why? Because I have a golden rule: the less they know about you, the better.

Joan is my best friend, the person who makes me laugh even when it seems like the world is about to end. He's the kind of friend who carries your rucksack when you've decided to check out half the library while also giving you a hard time over it, as if he were making a heroic sacrifice. *Aloma, this weighs almost as much as me*, he always says, as if he wasn't all skin and bones. Oh, and he always carries his camera round his neck. He seems to have discovered that his camera is the best shield with which to maintain a safe distance with the world. Joan is a like one of those books that hook you from the first page: full of interesting chapters, moments that make you laugh out loud, others



that make you think, and some which make you cry out: *but how can he be so patient?* Yes, because if there's one thing Joan needs, it's patience. Especially, with people at school.

Joan is adopted and of Vietnamese origin. But he's never been to Vietnam. Although that doesn't stop our classmates assigning him the role of *official representative of the whole of Asia*. Distinguishing different countries isn't everyone's strong point, I know, but at our school it's as if someone made geography illegal.

The other day, our classmate Martí decided to enlighten us with his wisdom. He turned to Joan and said:

'Hey, Chinese boy, how do you say *hello* in your language?'

A moment of silence. At this point I was getting ready to intervene, but Joan, who has a PhD in putting up with idiots, just smiled and answered:

'Firstly, Vietnamese. Not Chinese. Secondly, my language is the same as yours, Martí.'

However, of course, Martí doesn't have an off switch. So he carried on.

'Is it annoying that people get you mixed up? I mean, in Asia you all look the same, right?'

This is when Joan switches from zen mode to "that's enough" mode. With a mixture of anger and weariness, he let loose.

'Martí, it doesn't annoy me when people get confused. What annoys me is that you still haven't discovered that



Asia has more than forty countries. Forty. Yes, that's more than there are *Fast and Furious* films. Surprising, right?'

I, meanwhile, was already getting my tongue warmed up and I couldn't stay on the sidelines. So I looked at Martí and took my shot.

'Martí, intelligence follows you, but you're faster.'

It's not just Martí, though. There's also Gina, who thinks that anything "different" is *supercool*. The other day, she said to Joan:

'Oh, Joan, you're so lucky to be Vietnamese. You must do all kinds of exotic rituals and eat insects.'

That's when Joan, in that uniquely calm tone of his, replied:

'Yes, Gina, I have a ritual every morning: I get up, I have tomato on toast for breakfast and I go to school. If that's exotic, you must be from another planet.'

So, for all those that are still unsure, Joan knows where he's from. And if anyone isn't sure where to find Vietnam or a bit of decency, no problem: he'll let them know. With sarcasm. As for me, as always, I'll be at his side, making sure no one dares to argue back.

Joan currently lives with his grandma, Maria. His parents have had to go abroad to work for a year. Not for good, just temporarily... That said, they do come to visit him often.

Personally, I think it's a really interesting idea. I mean, I think sometimes everyone needs a bit of space, don't they? I'd love to send my parents and Roger somewhere far away. Just for a year, of course, don't worry. A while



without Roger yelling or my parents arguing whether the car does or doesn't need an oil change? Where do I sign?

Joan is handling it well, his parents being far away. Every day he videocalls them, tells them how things are going, shows them he's not missing them too much...even though he is. That's Joan for you, he isn't one to complain. He's more the kind of person to find positives in everything, even when things aren't perfect.

Maria's house is one of my favourite places in the world. If there's a special person in my life – besides Joan – it's Maria. She has everything you can imagine: wisdom, patience and an unfailing radar that detects when someone needs advice. I never knew my grandparents. My dad was orphaned when he was little and my mum's parents died not long after I was born. So having someone who spoils you, who tells you stories and makes you feel like the world is a little bit safer, wasn't part of my early years. But then Maria appeared and it was as if someone had gifted me a grandma with superpowers. She has a special talent. You don't need to say anything: she just looks at you and knows what's wrong.

Talking to Maria about books is an experience that everyone should have at least once in their life. She runs the book club at the senior centre with more enthusiasm than an influencer talking about their favourite clothing brand. She talks to you about a book so passionately that you feel like you just have to read it. She's like a machine for generating love for literature. I was already a reader, but



now I'm a book addict. There's always a bit of everything in our conversations: she tells me about the books they're reading at the centre and I tell her about the ones they make us read at school. And when I let out a complaint about how hard some texts are, she smiles and says:

'They just haven't taught you yet that difficult books are like homemade croquetas: at first they're tricky, but in the end, they're worth it.'

Because if anyone knows about croquetas, it's her. Maria's are legendary. I'm not exaggerating when I say that there are people who go to the senior centre just to try to get the recipe from her. But Maria never shares it. She says it's not a question of ingredients, but of patience.

Hold on, don't get me wrong: at home, everything is great. Seriously. I mean, I have parents who love me and a brother, Roger, who is, well...unique. However, naturally, family life isn't a TV advert. Sometimes you need a bit of silence, somewhere where you don't need to compete for attention. A place where you're not *Aloma, Roger's brother* or *Aloma, who complains about everything*. Just Aloma. Me.

When the world seems too complicated, I know I can count on Maria. I go through the door and I see her with that placid smile and suddenly everything looks a little brighter. Never, ever, does she make you feel silly for having a bad day. If you tell her someone at school annoyed you or your maths teacher gives you too much homework, she doesn't look at you with a face that says *come on, child, that's nothing*. No. Maria listens to you, as if what you're saying were



the most important thing in the world. Maria is the grand-  
ma I never had but, somehow, I always needed.

These are my people, as the song by La Pegatina goes:

Eh, eh, eh, eh-eh.  
Eh, eh, eh, eh-eh.  
I've found my people,  
they smile at me,  
and nothing else matters.

And this is my world. It's not perfect, but it's mine. And,  
in a way, I think that's enough.



# 1

## HIGH SCHOOL SURVIVAL GUIDE

There are places in the world where people do important things. Things like cure diseases or build robots. My school, however, is not one of those places. Here, the great mission is surviving each day without making a fool of yourself. Or, what's worse, ending up on the @HiddenFaces Instagram account, an absolute nightmare.

@HiddenFaces is our very own Big Brother. But not just any Big Brother. This one is sarcastic, evil and always has a camera ready. Every post is a compromising photo of some poor soul, accompanied by a caption capable of humiliating you in front of the whole school. I've yet to have the honour of being included, but I know my luck has an expiry date. Because, honestly, my daily life enjoys playing tricks on me.

At our school, phones were more forbidden than Cheetos in the library. Someone had decided that these technological devices were responsible for all the misfortunes taking place within those four walls: falling grades, distractions in class and, for sure, the plague of flies in the canteen.

So, the rules were clear: phone in sight, phone confiscated. And it was no joking matter. If they caught you, you had to go to the headteacher's office, apologise as if you'd



been caught stealing in the supermarket and then hope your parents didn't condemn you to an eternity without your phone. However, the worst part wasn't the punishment, nor the condescending looks from the teachers. No. The worst part wasn't even being disconnected. The worst part was the void, the notifications that poured in effortlessly. The world kept spinning, the group chats didn't stop, the likes and comments piled up, memes exploded in stories... and you, without your phone, gone without a trace. It was as if you had disappeared, as if no one knew whether you'd been punished, abducted or if you'd simply been trapped in a different era, without connection, without anything.

However, as happens with any law, there's always a way to get around it. At school, the unwritten rule is: *Everything has a loophole, and that's where the WiFi gets in.* Everyone, absolutely everyone, has a perfect system for getting around the ban. Some hide their phones in their folders with the sleight of hand of a magician. Others use textbooks as improvised screens, as if everyone was suddenly a big fan of trigonometry. The most daring even chose to carry two phones: an old one to be confiscated and the real one, carefully hidden.

I was no exception, of course. I had a fine-tuned strategy: my phone was always hidden in a false school diary cover. The diary was full of apparently important notes, such as *study or remember to hand in maths homework*, but, in reality, it was a façade. Inside, my phone lived happily and connected to the outside world. Joan, however, took it



to another level. He didn't need to hide his phone because he had an ace up his sleeve: his camera.

The toilets were the nerve centre of clandestine connection. There was always someone feigning a menstrual emergency or some mysterious "stomach problem" when, in reality, they were using the time to check messages, send memes or watch short videos in silence, with the discretion of a spy in a bad movie. It was so blatant that I was surprised the teachers hadn't caught anyone yet.

'The irony!' I said to Joan while we observed from the stairs as a group of students disappeared towards the bathroom, smiling suspiciously. 'Here everyone plays the martyr over the ban, but no one can live without their notifications.'

'It's fascinating, to be honest,' he replied, adjusting the focus of the camera to take a shot of the playground. 'We're all hooked and, at the same time, we love dodging the rules. It's almost...artistic.'

Perhaps having our phones banned wasn't so bad. If nothing else, it made daily life more exciting. However, that said, we had to be very discreet. Because if they caught you, you could say goodbye to your digital life. And, honestly, that would be a genuine tragedy.

That morning, like almost every morning, I thought my best chance of survival would have been to stay in bed. But no, there I was, with the sun blazing too intensely on the well-worn paving stones of the playground, which didn't so much resemble a place of recreation as an observation



site for a *National Geographic* documentary. *Welcome to the fascinating world of the wildlife at an average high school.*

To my left, the popular crew had occupied their usual territory: the bench under the only tree which offered a bit of shade. There, as always, reigned Gina. The alpha queen. The supreme governor of notifications, likes and flattering comments. She held her phone in her hand as if it were a sceptre, pretending she wasn't bothered, but we all knew she was checking it obsessively. The masses couldn't remain uninformed, heaven forbid someone didn't know what she'd had for breakfast that morning or what "inspiring" phrase she'd nicked from a Pinterest account.

However, like all queens, Gina didn't govern alone. Eva, her faithful shadow, was always there. Eva was like an extension of Gina, only with a little less radiance and without the budget to maintain those perfectly glossed nails. Her job was clear: to laugh at all her jokes, applaud her every idea and make sure the world knew how fabulous Gina was.

When Gina recorded a video, it was Eva who held the phone, adjusted the angle so the light was favourable and fixed her hair so that everything looked "natural". Every time that Gina needed an inspiring quote for her socials, it was Eva who searched for it. Whenever she had to do her homework, who do you think ended up in front of the open book, pen in hand? Exactly, Eva.

You might think that Eva was exploited, but she seemed happy as Larry with her supporting role. She was always smiling, always nodding, always doing whatever Gina



needed. She was like a personal assistant, except that she didn't earn a penny. If Gina was the sun, Eva was like those small mirrors which serve only to reflect its light.

That day, while Gina was making as if she didn't care about her latest Instagram post, although in reality she was waiting impatiently for the first comments, Eva was by her side, adjusting her bracelet so it shone better in the photos. They made a perfect duo, like an advert for fake friendships with motivating music in the background.

'Eva, do you think this filter will suit me? Or is the other one better?' asked Gina, turning the phone towards her.

'Oh, Gina, you look amazing with any filter! But this one makes your skin look even more radiant,' Eva replied with a smile so wide it almost hurt to look at it.

'Of course, you're right. You're a genius, Eva. What would I do without you?' said Gina, even though her tone suggested that the answer was: *exactly the same*.

Eva smiled even wider, as if she'd just been awarded the prize for best friend of the century. Meanwhile, I was trying not to throw up my sandwich. The false adoration made me nauseous.

The rest of us mortals watched them from a distance, some jealously, others with disdain. Gina, so perfect, so unattainable. And Eva, so devoted to her role as number one fan.

'Poor Eva. Maybe one day she'll realise she's just a pawn in Gina's game. Or maybe not. Maybe she likes being a pawn,' I murmured to Joan, who was next to me.



‘I don’t think so. Eva seems delighted with her job as *shadow number one*. Someone has to do Gina’s homework, right?’ replied Joan, with a sarcastic smile.

I looked at him with a mixture of indignation and amusement, but deep down I knew he was right. Eva had chosen her spot under the shade of the tree...and Gina. I only wondered if one day she’d decide to move towards the light.

On the other side of the playground, the sporty crowd, permanently warming up, were marking their space. Or at least that’s what they said. The reality was they spent most of their time complaining to the PE teacher while they sent balls flying all over the place. *Here we have a curious specimen*, I imagined the documentary voiceover, *the alpha male of the football subspecies, known for its ability to do absolutely nothing but always look busy*.

Meanwhile, in the middle of the playground, a chaotic jumble of tribes were doing everything except socialise normally. And then there was the group of invisibles, who always hung out near the gym. *This strange group*, the off-camera voice would continue, *have developed a unique strategy for passing unnoticed, combining stifled laughter with an excessive consumption of crisps*.

And then there was us. Joan and I, on the steps to the gym, far from any unnecessary interaction. Our habitat was perfect: discreet, comfortable and off the radar of the social predators. Joan, with his camera always hanging round his neck, looked like the professional documentalist of this



chaos, capturing every moment for posterity. And I, well...I was just trying to survive another day without ending up on the @HiddenFaces Instagram account.

I gave a quick glance at my surroundings. The playground wildlife wasn't so different from that of the African savannah. Some showed off their feathers, others marked their territory and we, the peaceful observers, just tried not to attract the lion's attention.

'Have you seen the latest post from @HiddenFaces?' Joan asked me, camera hanging from his neck, his way of connecting with the world without having to participate in it too much.

'No, but if it's not about Gina, I'm not interested,' I replied with my best cynical smile.

He made a quick movement with his phone and showed it to me, and I almost wet myself laughing. The photo was glorious. No, it was epic. It was Martí, the school's wannabe Messi, bent over after a desperate sprint to reach the ball. But, oh, poor Martí, his tracksuit trousers had decided to take on a life of their own and fall to his knees, and what had remained on display was...well, let's say you could see more than he would have liked to share with the world.

'That's pure gold,' murmured Joan, with his cheeks red from trying to hold back the laughter.

The caption beneath the photo was one of those which go down in history: *When you try to be Messi, but you end up going behind.*

I looked at Joan with a playful smile.



'I think they'll hang this one up in the school corridor. Framed.'

He nodded, trying to act serious.

'It's a contribution to modern art. Emotion, tragedy and sports clothes. All in one photograph.'

That photo wasn't just a work of art, it was the new topic of conversation in the playground and Martí...well, Martí would take a while to regain his dignity.

'I don't know whether to laugh or feel pity,' I said.

'I think I'm the only one who finds all this fascinating,' said Joan, focusing his camera to take a photo of the playground.

'You're not the only one. You're the only one who admits it,' I replied.

While the playground continued with its daily show, I wondered who could be behind @HiddenFaces. Someone who had an unnerving talent for being in the right place at the right time. Someone with a good eye for capturing ridicule in its highest form of expression. Someone, probably, very bored.

'Do you think Martí knows he's now a digital star?' I asked, pointing towards our athlete who'd fallen from grace.

'Probably not. But I don't think he'll take it too philosophically,' said Joan, making me laugh.

This was our world. A school full of defined roles, scenes that appeared repetitive but that hid minor tragedies, and moments of dark humour that only someone like Joan could

capture. With him, perhaps surviving another day wouldn't be as hard as it seemed.

\* \* \*

When the bell rings, the playground turns into an out-of-control swarm. People surge in all directions, like a runaway flock, only with rucksacks and hidden phones.

Joan and I, on the other hand, hang back, walking with a calculated calmness. Running only serves to attract attention, and that has never been our style. We are discreet folk, or at least we try to appear so.

'Aloma, one day a teacher is going to catch you and make you run fast as a punishment. You're like a tortoise,' said Joan with that teasing smile he loves using to make me nervous.

'Don't worry, Joan. In this school, punctuality is like common sense: everyone knows what it is, but no one really uses it,' I responded with my best air of superiority.

And then I saw him. The new boy, who had joined the school a few days ago.

He was tall, with dark, lightly-tousled hair, which had that casual look but had surely required hours in front of the mirror. His face looked straight out of an advert for expensive perfume and his eyes twinkled with a kind of calm confidence. And that rucksack hanging off to one side...who wears their rucksack like that? How could he make it look cool?



‘What do you know about the new boy?’ I asked Joan, trying to sound uninterested, although I noticed my voice trembled slightly.

‘Pol? Not much.’ Joan took a pause while he focused his camera to take a photo of him. ‘They say he’s come from another school because he had problems there.’

‘Problems? What kind of problems?’ I asked with a curiosity I couldn’t hide.

‘I don’t know. Maybe he’s an evil genius.’

‘Not so genius if they caught him,’ I replied, trying to return to my usual sarcastic tone, but my gaze was fixed on Pol, who seemed completely immune to the curious glances of his new schoolmates.

The most eye-catching thing was his calmness. Gina was already next to him, talking to him with that toothpaste-ad smile, fully aware she was in control of the situation. But he didn’t seem impressed. He just nodded slowly, as if all that were a mere formality.

In class, Pol chose the most inconspicuous seat: the last one in the back row. When the teacher introduced him, he did so with that nervous enthusiasm he only used with new students.

‘This is Pol. He’s come from...well, that doesn’t matter. Anyway, make him feel welcome!’ The teacher made an exaggerated gesture with his hands, as if he were a game show host.

Pol nodded and gave a half smile, but he didn’t say anything. He opened his book and started writing something,

completely immune to the attention on him. It was fascinating. Or frustrating. Or maybe both.

My phone vibrated in my rucksack. I took it out discreetly and hid it under the table. It was a message from Joan.

**Joan**

When do you think he'll appear on @HiddenFaces? 🙄

This afternoon. Gina already took the first photo. 📷 😊

While I typed, I noticed that Pol had glanced at me out the corner of his eye. Just for a moment, but long enough for me to wonder if had been too obvious. I pretended I hadn't seen him, but I felt slightly nervous.

When the class ended, while I was gathering up my things, I observed that he remained in his place, as if in no rush. For a moment, I thought about approaching him, but then I imagined me babbling something stupid about mathematical formulae. So, I took the safe option: passing next to him and giving him a casual smile.

He looked at me, with that tranquil, mysterious air, and gave me the slightest of nods. It was a brief moment, almost insignificant, but it left me with a strange feeling. As if he already knew something that I was yet to discover.

Pol was an enigma. A boy who seemed to have a whole world within him and I, even if I didn't want to recognise



it, felt attracted to him. However, naturally, that wasn't the kind of thing I'd admit. Even to myself.

\* \* \*

Back in the playground, while we acted like we were busy looking for something in our bags, we were actually checking our phones on the sly. It was a skill we had perfected to Olympic levels, a kind of synchronised choreography between all of us. That was when it popped up: a notification from @HiddenFaces.

Joan was the first to react, with a manoeuvre worthy of a spy, he turned his phone towards me, with the screen shining like the Holy Grail.

'Look at that,' he said, with a smile so wide his teeth almost glistened.

I focused my gaze on the screen, and there it was: a photo of Pol sat at his desk. The post's caption read:

*The new boy has secrets. Who will be the first to discover them?*

'Here we go again... It's like they're amateur detectives with cruel intentions,' I said, frowning.

'Not detectives, Aloma. They're like vultures. Vultures with unlimited data,' Joan replied with his classic wit.

I smiled, but I couldn't get Pol out of my head. It was clear that something about him was intriguing everyone. Even if I didn't want to admit it, I also wanted to find out



more. But not so I could post it. Just...for curiosity. At least that's what I told myself.

'This is starting to get disturbing,' I said, at last, not taking my eyes off the screen.

'Disturbing? It's fascinating!' exclaimed Joan, capturing something that only he must have seen with his camera.

'Fascinating? Oh, sure, because you're immune to social consequences. I, on the other hand, live in constant anxiety over the thought of appearing on that account with some humiliating comment about my hair,' I replied.

Joan raised an eyebrow and smiled with that air of superiority which came so naturally to him.

'Aloma, this account is the biggest mystery of our time. It's like a game, an enigma...' he took a dramatic pause, waiting for me to follow his lead.

'Yeah, a game where the prize is losing your dignity in front of the whole school. Thrilling,' I said.

But the truth is that I couldn't stop looking at the post. That text seemed to be written by someone who knew something that the rest of us didn't. What if it was true? If the new boy did have secrets? I looked around, looking for him automatically amongst the groups of students. I didn't see him.

'So...what do you think they mean with that bit about secrets?' I asked, trying to sound indifferent.

Joan shrugged his shoulders.

'All I'll say is that this could be the start of a great story. And we could be the main characters.' He paused, making



his statement more dramatic, as if in a film. ‘Aloma and Joan: high school detectives.’

‘I love that you include yourself in this plan, as if you don’t have anything better to do than get wrapped up in other people’s dramas,’ I said sarcastically.

Meanwhile, the playground continued with its usual routine. The popular crowd under the tree, the athletes pretending to stretch, and us, sat on the steps to the gym, doing what we did best: being the ironic spectators of a show that seemed to have more episodes than a soap opera.

## 2

### SHELTER AT MARIA'S HOUSE

If there's a place where time stands still, it's Joan's grandma Maria's house. When you go in, the outside world ceases to exist. The smell of homemade stews, biscuits fresh out the oven and that indefinable scent that only houses with history have, makes you forget about any worries you have. Exams, @HiddenFaces or even my existential doubts about Pol, everything is left at the door.

Maria isn't just any grandma; she's a professional grandma. She has that gift for making you feel like you're a part of her family from the very beginning. She's a combination of incredible cook, teacher of practical wisdom, and an innate observer, capable of reading your soul with only a glance.

'Aloma, sit here!' Maria called out when we arrived, with that grandma smile that seemed to envelope you like a warm blanket.

Of course, I needed no second invitation. I sat down straight away, while Joan, true to his breezy manner of doing things, was already investigating what else was in the oven.

Maria's house is a place where there is no hurry. The old furniture makes you feel like everything has a story and the



kitchen table is always prepared for a long conversation and a good meal. Maria had put an incredible stew on the table. Well, incredible for me. For Joan, it was a challenge worthy of a cookery contest.

‘Joan, what are you doing now?’ I asked, looking at him incredulously. He was meticulously separating the peas from the potatoes as if performing a surgical operation.

‘I don’t like peas. And I don’t want the potatoes to be contaminated with their flavour,’ he replied, completely straight-faced.

‘Contaminate? Joan, they’re peas, not nuclear waste,’ I responded, but he was unmoved, focused as he was on his separating task.

Maria, meanwhile, was observing us from the other side of the table with that patient smile of a grandma who has seen it all.

‘Aloma, let him be. Joan has always been fussy with food,’ she said, shaking her head affectionately.

Maria rose to her feet, took a book from the shelf and passed it over to me. *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley.

‘You have to read this one. It’s much more than a horror story. It’s a book that talks about humanity, responsibility and what happens when we don’t face up to the consequences of our actions.’

I took the book with a mixture of curiosity and fear.

‘Frankenstein? Isn’t that the green monster with screws in its neck?’ I asked, but before I could add anything else, Joan, who had raised his head from his plate, chimed in.

‘Yes! Frankenstein! The monster from the films!’ he said enthusiastically.

Maria chuckled softly and settled into her chair, ready to give us a lesson.

‘Oh, Joan, Joan...Frankenstein isn’t the monster. Frankenstein is the doctor. The monster doesn’t even have a name. It’s part of the tragedy of the story. He creates him, but then abandons him, and that’s what turns him into a true monster. It’s a metaphor, my dears.’

Joan wrinkled his nose, more confused than ever.

‘But then, why does everyone say he’s Frankenstein.’

Maria smiled wisely.

‘Films have simplified the story, as they always do. It’s not just about a monster, but how we treat what we don’t understand. It’s much more profound than it seems. Aloma, read it. Frankenstein has many things to say about life and ourselves. But I won’t tell you the whole thing. Discover it for yourself.’

I nodded, intrigued, while Joan went back to his plate, as focused as a surgeon, but suddenly he looked up. His eyes lit up as if he’d remembered something vitally important, one of those thoughts that can’t wait another second longer to be shared with the world.

‘Grandma, there’s a new boy at school. He’s called Pol. He seems different.’

‘Different how? Nice?’

Automatically, I turned red.

‘No, it’s not that...he just doesn’t seem to really fit in.’



And, also, he's already been on @HiddenFaces,' I said, quickly changing the subject.

'What's that about @HiddenFaces?' asked Maria, visibly confused.

Joan took the opportunity to launch himself into an explanation.

'An Instagram account which posts compromising photos of people from school with sarcastic comments. It's like if someone wanted to be the cruellest detective on the playground.'

Maria shook her head.

'Modern nonsense. But if this account is causing you problems, don't worry about it. Know that if they publish anything about you, I'll beat them up myself.'

I burst out laughing. The thought of Maria taking on a community of digital haters was too funny. However, she looked at me seriously, placed her fork on her plate with a slow, calculated gesture, as if she were reflecting on the weight of what she had just heard. Then she locked her eyes first on Joan, then on me, with that expression which combined worry with determination.

'I don't like this @HiddenFaces business one bit. Aloma, Joan, it's serious. Publishing compromising things about people? That's not just kids having a laugh. It's dangerous. Have you thought about talking to the headteacher about it?'

Joan raised his hands, as if declaring himself neutral in a war.

'Grandma, there's no need to make a big deal out of it.'

It's just an Instagram account. No one likes it, but it's not like it's the end of the world. And the headteacher? What do you want her to do about it?'

I tried to back up my best friend because I knew that if Maria went into "protect my babies" mode, she'd end up storming down to the headteacher's office.

'Maria, trust me, we'll take care of it. It's just silliness more than anything else. It's simply people with nothing better to do than look for drama. If we give it any more importance, it'll be worse.'

She still didn't really seem convinced. She leaned back in her chair, but her eyes were full of doubt.

'I don't like it. This Pol...are you sure he's alright? He doesn't need help? That stuff about not fitting in...sometimes the most vulnerable are the first to suffer.'

I felt a pang of guilt. I hadn't considered that Pol might be having a hard time. I just knew he was different, and for some reason that difference fascinated me.

'Don't worry, Grandma. Pol's fine. Well, more or less. We still don't really know him. But I don't think he's the kind who lets others affect him. He seems very...' I searched for the right word, '...secure. As if he doesn't need anyone's approval.'

Maria looked at us for several seconds that felt like an eternity, then shook her head.

'Just make sure nothing's the matter with him. And if this social media account causes you any problems, you let me know.'



I smiled, but inside I knew that if one day Maria decided to take action, @HiddenFaces was doomed.

# 3

## WHEN THE WALLS HAVE EYES



Mornings in my house were like an action film: lots of adrenaline, fast-paced dialogues and a mayhem that only the bravest can survive. Roger roared all around the kitchen, attacking his yoghurt with a plastic dinosaur, while my dad timed every one of our movements as if he were directing a military operation.

While I tried to eat a piece of cold toast with one hand, the other raced all over my phone, replying to messages from Joan. The phone vibrated nonstop on the table, making a noise that competed with my dad stirring his coffee as if performing a symphony.

‘Aloma, leave that phone and eat like a normal person!’ said my dad, pointing at me with his spoon like a sheriff from a bad western film.

‘I’m trying, dad, but my fingers are faster than my jaw,’ I replied, looking at him with an innocent face as I wrote the following message to Joan:

Leaving soon, but we’re still in  
Operation Breakfast mode here.  
 Don’t catch a cold now!



He didn't keep me waiting:

**Joan**

Operation Breakfast? 😄 I'm in  
Operation Freezer mode 🧊.  
Come on, Aloma, there are  
penguins nesting in my pockets.

I laughed quietly, but my dad raised an eyebrow, suspecting that the phone was winning the battle. I finished my toast in a hurry and quickly typed:

Don't exaggerate, Joan. If you  
freeze, I'll bury you in an igloo  
and put a sign saying *Monument  
to the Waiting Martyr*. 🧊 ❄️

The reply came immediately:

**Joan**

Very funny. But if I freeze, no one  
else will put up with you, eh.  
Come on, hurry up! 🧑 🧊

Chill, Joan. I'll be there before  
you turn into a snowman. 🧑 ❄️ 😄

'What are you doing now?' my mum interrupted, with her "don't make me tell you off before my first cup of tea of the morning" look.

'I'm planning my day...I'm multitasking!' I replied, at the same time as I sent a gif of a snail wearing a rucksack to Joan.

Roger was busy trying to submerge his dinosaur in his glass of juice to attract mum's attention.

'Roger, drink your juice, don't play around with it!' she told him in a firm but sweet tone.

Dad, with the air of a sheriff determined to establish order in the room, decided that he'd had enough of seeing me glued to my phone.

'Give me the phone, Aloma. If you can't put it down, I'll take it away,' he said, stretching out his hand as if he expected me to obey without protest.

However, as I had no intention of giving up my phone without a good fight, I took a step back, clutching it tightly as if it were an extension of my soul.

'Dad, I need the phone for emergencies!' I replied, although I knew that wouldn't wash.

He looked at me with one eyebrow raised.

'What emergencies?' he answered, with an expression that said "let's see you dig yourself out of this one".

I improvised. It was my natural talent.

'I don't know...what if suddenly there's a dinosaur in the playground and I have to let Roger know so he can come and tame it?' I said, pointing at my brother, who at that moment was dancing and singing, using a banana as a microphone. Naturally, he didn't hear anything.

My dad rolled his eyes, but before he could reply, my phone vibrated again. It was Joan.





**Joan**

Aloma, if you don't come right now, I'm going, I'm fed up waiting. 🚒

I sighed. Joan was always being dramatic over nothing, as if his life depended on waiting five minutes.

Taking advantage of the fact that my mum was sweeping up the breadcrumbs Roger had left all over the table, I fired off a reply before my dad became even more dramatic.

On my way! 🏃 But if they confiscate my phone, it's your fault.

My dad looked at me, as if I was his most complex case.

'Aloma, one day you'll realise you can live without a phone. And that day, without doubt, the world will be a better place,' he said, with the patience that only parents can pretend to have.

'Maybe, dad, but it won't be today,' I replied, smiling as I pocketed my phone and grabbed my rucksack.

'This generation is lost, with so much technology. When I was young, we communicated face to face, without phones!' he said, throwing his arms in the air.

'Yes, dad, and did you also ride dinosaurs to school?' I replied, throwing my rucksack onto my back and a last bite of toast into my mouth.

Before going out the door, I went past Roger, who was trying to make a tower out of biscuits.

'Bye, little brother,' I said, stroking his hair.

He looked at me with his bright eyes and replied:

‘Aloma, bring me a dinosaur from the playground!’

‘If I find one, it’s yours,’ I told him, laughing as my mum waved goodbye to me and my dad carried on muttering something about “the youth of today”.

When I went outside, Joan was waiting for me, leaning on a lamppost, camera round his neck.

‘About time!’ he exclaimed.

‘If you knew what it took for me to survive my breakfast, you’d build me a statue,’ I replied as we began walking to school. Of course, with my phone well hidden, ready for the next battle.

\* \* \*

At our school, everything seemed to follow a secret code. Officially, the rules were clear: no phones, no cheap excuses and, for the love of God, don’t ever question Gina, who was a sort of queen without a crown, only with loads of notifications. There were also unofficial rules, the ones everyone knew but no one said out loud: pretend your life is perfect, don’t appear vulnerable and, above all, avoid doing anything which could attract the attention of @HiddenFaces.

When the playground filled up again after classes, Joan and I went to our usual place: the stairs behind the gym. It was our refuge, a strategic place with a good view but not too busy, perfect for talking without anyone bothering us. Or so we thought.





I heard footsteps. When I looked up, I saw him: Pol was coming towards us.

‘Can we talk?’ he asked, straight away and without giving us time to react.

Joan and I exchanged a quick glance. What made Pol want to talk to us? This was strange. Here no one talked to you without a reason, especially someone like him.

‘Of course,’ replied Joan, in a tone that tried to sound calm but came out a little nervous.

Pol sat down next to us, resting his elbows on his knees. For a few seconds, he didn’t say anything, he just looked at the ground, as if he were organising his thoughts.

‘What do you know about that account?’ he finally asked.

‘The same as you, I guess,’ I told him, looking at him somewhat mistrustfully. ‘It posts photos, humiliates people and gets everyone talking. It’s like a reality show: terrible but addictive.’

‘Yeah, but who’s behind it?’ he insisted, this time more intensely.

Joan shrugged his shoulders.

‘It could be anyone. Someone who knows how to go unnoticed but who has a cruel side to them,’ he said, not looking directly at Pol.

‘Exactly. That’s why I want to know who it is. And why.’ His voice was firm, but there was also a hint of frustration in it. Clearly, this was affecting him a lot more than he wanted to admit.

‘But why do you care so much?’ I asked him, trying to understand his obsession.

Pol paused, as if deciding whether to trust us or not. Eventually, he spoke.

‘Because this isn’t the first time it’s happened. At my other school, someone started a similar account. At first it was innocent photos, but then they started to post personal stuff. It was awful. I had to leave.’

I was left speechless. I’d never considered that an account like @HiddenFaces could have such a big impact. It was a joke that had gone too far.

‘That’s awful,’ I said at last.

‘It is. And I don’t want it to happen again,’ he said determinedly.

Joan nodded.

‘We can help you find out who’s behind it. We don’t know how, but we’ll try,’ he said, with that enthusiasm of his that always surprised me.

I like this side of Joan: his ability to care about others. But I also know it can get us into trouble. I had a strange feeling, as if someone had mistaken our little “nobodies” corner for a club of professional detectives. I couldn’t avoid wondering what had gone through his head to make him come straight to us. So, between mouthfuls of the cupcake Joan had brought, and trying to act calm, I casually asked a question.

‘Let’s see, Pol, be honest. Why did you come to us? We’re...you know...nobodies. We’re not in the “popular”





crowd, nor the “sporty” one, nor the “lab geniuses” one,’ I said, making air quotes with my fingers.

He thought for a few seconds before replying.

‘That’s exactly why. You’re not anyone. No one will suspect a thing. And also, you’re not, you know...’ he paused, searching for the right words, ‘...bad people.’

Joan looked at him fixedly, as if trying to decipher that reply, while I let out a short laugh.

‘Oh, how wonderful! We’re not bad. Thanks, Pol, really, you’ve brightened up my day with that revelation,’ I said with a sarcastic smile.

He shrugged, unmoved. I looked at Pol with my arms crossed, trying to keep up my playful tone, but with a hint of curiosity.

‘But, if they’ve done something similar to you before, why do you trust us, even if we’re nobodies? Aren’t you afraid that it could backfire again?’

He looked straight at me and for a moment I saw something in those eyes I hadn’t seen before. Perhaps a mixture of tiredness and hope.

‘I don’t have any other option. I don’t want to go through that again and you are the only people who seem...normal. And able to help without making a big scene.’

That bewildered me. Normal? Us? Joan was focusing his camera to take a photo of our broken seat. And I was the queen of random replies. But I suppose, deep down, he was right. Compared to the rest, maybe we were a bit more reliable. Just a bit.

'Okay, Pol. But if this goes badly, you can't say we didn't warn you,' I said, wagging my finger at him.

He smiled slightly and I thought that, despite everything, this boy had his head clearer than it seemed.

'Then we're in the same boat,' he said.

'Perfect. A boat full of nobodies who are taking on a psychotic Instagram account. Sounds like a great plan!' I replied, holding back the laughter, while Joan nodded.

And, at that moment, I knew that this was only the beginning.









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My life, my school, my friends, my family...everything seemed like a comedy of errors that I was surviving without attracting much attention. But all that ended the day that **@HiddenFaces** appeared, an account that exposes the secrets of everyone in school. Staying on the sidelines was no longer an option.

My name is **Aloma** and this is myworld. It's not perfect, but it's mine. Along with **Joan, Júlia** and **Pol**, I will try to find out who is behind that profile. However, the closer I get, the more I realise that the secrets aren't just other people's business and that social media can be a broken mirror which distorts reality.

*Drama and Likes in High School* is the story of how I discovered that friendship, forgiveness and honesty are more important than appearances. And that loving someone also means trusting them. However, sometimes trust can be a bit of a minefield.

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