

ORIGINAL STORY

TORPOR

Estañol Lilianda [✉]



ILIANA ESTAÑOL

She was born in 1987 in Mexico City. She studied Film Direction at the International Film School in Cuba and at the University of the Arts in Zürich, as well as Experimental Film & Media at the University of the Arts in Berlin. She has worked in films as a screenwriter and producer. *Lovecut* (2020) is her first feature film as a director and earned her the Max Opühls Award for Best Screenplay.

I

When he started living here, I felt invaded. This is my house, and although the Spanish saying goes “*Mi casa es su casa*,” that’s not the case in this house. What I did like from the beginning was watching him, it was as if he came from another world and had never seen almost anything. Well, maybe he had seen many things, but he had never really stopped looking at them. I remember the first time I showed him the buds blooming in the jasmine tree. He watched them with great interest for a long time. The following day, when the flower blossomed, he got deeply excited. It was like getting excited over drinking water, very weird... Two days later, when the jasmine flowers withered and he saw them, he got immensely sad. It was as if he couldn’t accept that everything fades. As if he didn’t know that everything will be born again, so it doesn’t matter that everything dies. I think it was when I saw him so upset over the jasmine flowers that I realized that even if I didn’t want to accept it and was very mean to him, I really liked him. He has awkward but pure heart, and even though he’s fat and can’t move well, there’s something funny about him, as if he were a child who grew up really fast and still isn’t aware of his size.

II

For many years, I wanted to come to Mexico. I would have never believed that I’d spend so much time here and that I wouldn’t get to know anyone or anything. I haven’t even tried the food in the markets or visited any pyramids. I’ve only spoken to two Mexicans in the last two months, the doormen of the building where I live. I should really appreciate the luck I had finding a place to spend the quarantine. There’s a campaign here in Mexico that says, “Stay home” and people finish it off by saying, “If you have one!” I think it’s cruel to say something like that, but sadly it’s true that there are many people here who don’t have a home.



When all the flights got canceled and I couldn't go back home, I was terrified thinking I'd have nowhere to stay. All hotels and Airbnbs closed. If you didn't have a house, it was impossible to get one. I was lucky enough to get to stay at the apartment of a friend of a friend's recently deceased mom.

Although I was happy to have a place to stay, I was upset at the idea of having to share a place with her. First, because I've lived on my own for many years, and second, because from the moment I saw her in all her arrogance, she made it very clear that I was invading her space and that she's the one to make the rules around here. How can I follow the rules of someone fifteen times smaller than me? At first, it was difficult for both of us, mainly because I've never liked cats, and I think this cat never liked humans (except for her deceased owner). And suddenly, the two of us were confined together, forced to be inseparable. I felt like I was in a road movie where two characters who hate each other have to travel together.

As I stared at the wall lost in these thoughts, I heard her walk and then watched as she jumped onto a very tall dresser. Considering her size, if I were able to jump as high as she could, I could jump a three-story building. How come such small animals can jump so high? These animals are like superheroes, and we don't even notice. But this wasn't an achievement for her, she cared about looking through the window above the dresser. Suddenly, her fur ruffled, and her eyes were moving from one side to the other as if she were watching an action movie. I approached to try and see something, but I could only see the sky from where I was. I realized that my legs were still shivering, I was so cold. I went to look for a sweater and then made myself some coffee to warm up.

When I returned to the room, I saw she was still watching her action movie, but it now seemed to have gotten better, like one of those movies that Netflix advertises as "unbearable suspense." I must admit I was dying of curiosity, but even though I'm much bigger than her, getting up on that dresser seems like a suicide attempt. But, as they say, curiosity killed the cat, so without giving it much thought, I pulled a drawer open, stuck a foot inside, and used the other to push myself up. Everything wobbled and for a moment I thought the dresser was about to collapse, but it was too late to stop, as I'd already ordered my body to propel itself

and it couldn't stop anymore. To my surprise, I managed to get onto the top of the dresser. She stared at me with killer eyes, as if we were in the movies, and she was telling me to shut up. I tried to get comfortable as quietly as possible. When I could finally look through the window, I saw the back of a big house that had been divided into small apartments. There were many windows for us to peep through. You could see one window through another one. In another room, an old couple was sitting down on a sofa listening to music all the way up, some sort of reggaeton. I thought the music came from somewhere else, but when the chorus hit and both of them sang along, it was obvious. Finally, I saw another window from which you could see an office chair and a cat on top of it, grooming itself as if it were the most important thing in the world. *At least she's not as obsessive-compulsive as that cat*, I thought. Or like me, who now washes his hands every five minutes. Suddenly, the cat stopped grooming itself and a fat lady with tight pink pants sat down in the chair where the cat was. When I looked to my side, she wasn't interested in any of these scenes. She was just staring intensely at nothing. I didn't understand what she was staring at.

I remembered a cat my grandma had when I was a kid, it always meowed at a wall and an esoteric aunt said it could see ghosts. I thought maybe cats can see things we can't (I didn't know just how right I was). Suddenly, she got excited again, her pupils dilated, and she sat back up. I discovered a hummingbird that was flying in front of us and perched on some kind of coconut split in half on top of a tree. Something seemed to be moving under the hummingbird. There were two hatchlings in a nest (it wasn't a coconut). They were really ugly, hairless, and very small. Had I seen them without their mother, I would've thought they were only some slightly fat worms. She was really excited and wasn't even blinking. Honestly, I got excited too.

III

During that confinement, we watched the baby hummingbirds grow up. We also watched the fat lady masturbate, the old couple love and fight each other, and the neighbor cat who wouldn't stop grooming itself. We got to know all the birds who lived in the trees in front of our window, and how they cuddled up together when it rained. We watched many sunsets and watched the rain fall for many hours.

We became friends with a bee and saw how plants grew. We saw butterflies I'd never seen before and saw many flowers and mosquitoes grow and die. We ate when we were hungry and slept when we got tired. That's how my life went by. Days, weeks, or months... it didn't matter. I felt like I was learning more while confined than traveling everywhere like crazy. Even though I still fantasized about eating food at a Mexican market, I didn't crave it as much as watching the first flight of the hummingbirds (who, by the way, weren't ugly anymore) or discovering a bird or something I'd never seen before (and I'd already seen tacos before). As I'm writing this, I think this all sounds silly and sentimental. I've never been sentimental. On the contrary, the few girlfriends I've had have broken up with me over that. But what can I do?

IV

I woke up shivering from the cold. I was on the ground, half-dressed, still half-asleep. At first, I didn't recognize where I was, but when I looked to my side and saw her extended on the floor, staring at me, I remembered everything. From the window I could see the sky, it had a reddish color. The clock on the wall read 7 o'clock. I didn't know if it was seven in the morning or the afternoon. At this time of the year, dusk and dawn can both look like this. A halo of light entered and seemed to paint the wall pink. I thought I'd like to take a picture, but a second later, I realized that any reproduction of this moment would immediately become a baroque and tasteless cliché. I don't understand why an imitation of reality usually trivializes its deeper beauty. Not wanting to take a picture anymore, standing there, with the red sky above me, her by my side, and without a clue, I suddenly felt happy.

I'd spent days without knowing what date it was or how hours passed... the days were strangely short. At first, this intrigued me, but I later realized that it's absurd trying to understand something as relative as time, and maybe it's even more absurd because (as I've suspected for the past few days) it may not even exist. This filled me with ease and with some weird kind of relief.

I started imagining I was turning into a cat. I couldn't understand the things that mattered to me before. I didn't know if that was good or bad. But this didn't matter either.

V

Cats sleep for 14 hours a day, so I have some lonely hours when she's asleep. With one jump I climb onto the dresser, I've become more agile since I've been confined. I look to find something that she would find and that I would've never seen before. Nothing. I look for the hummingbirds and suddenly find the mother hanging upside down from a branch. It seemed like she was dead, but her hatchlings looked calm beside her. I wondered if they maybe didn't understand death and wouldn't notice anything had changed until they got hungry and tried to move their mother. But looking more carefully, I realized that the chest of the hanging hummingbird inflated and deflated. Was she breathing? It looked like she was sleeping hanging down from a branch, like a bat. I thought that was really weird. I looked for my phone all over the apartment and when I finally found it, I googled "How do hummingbirds sleep?" I discovered that they sometimes sleep hanging down from their legs and enter a state called Torpor.* I obviously looked up the definition of torpor in the dictionary:

* **OPTION B** The definition of torpor in the dictionary of the Spanish language is "a physical state, generally transitory, characterized by a slowdown of reflexes, a decrease in sensibility, and the dullness of the mind." Another definition of torpor in the dictionary is "a state characterized by a great decrease in physiological activity in an animal, generally evidenced by a reduced body temperature and metabolic rate." Torpor allows animals to survive during periods of famine. Torpor time can refer to the time period that a hibernator spends at low body temperature, which can last days or weeks, or to a period of low body temperature that lasts less than 24 hours, as in "daily torpor". The animals that enter daily torpor include birds (even tiny hummingbirds, especially Cypselomorphae) and some mammals, including many marsupials and kinds of rodents, such as mice and bats."

“Physiological state characterized by a great decrease of metabolic and temperature levels that can happen every day, like in hummingbirds and bats, or seasonal, like the hibernation of bears or the estivation of worms. Torpor allows animals to survive during periods of famine...”

I realized that I had also entered torpor. I later thought that maybe literally everyone is or was in torpor because of the pandemic. Was this maybe just what we needed to stop running? I don't know. Since I'm in torpor, I can't think so straight. Or do we think straighter when we're in torpor?

As I kept reading, another definition of a word I hadn't previously paid attention to randomly appeared, but I read it anyway: a name or substantive is a kind of word whose meaning determines reality. Substantives name everything: people, objects, sensations, feelings, etc.

I thought it was very odd how this definition claims that, depending on the substantive we use, we determine our reality. In the end, this is maybe the confirmation that everything is subjective and relative, not just time or how we look at the world, but also our idea of who we are as human beings, and, well, of everything else.