

Mariasun Landa

Crocodile Under the Bed

The following is an extract from the short-story: *A Crocodile Under the Bed* Translated from Basque by Amaia Gabantxo. Original Basque title: *Krokodiloa ohe azpian*, (Alberdania, 2002).

Dr Toofast wore an unbuttoned white coat over his clothes, and stood behind his desk all tensed up, like a torero about to plunge two multicoloured banderillas into a bull. Privately JJ was grateful for the speed with which the doctor dealt with his patients, because it helped him be concise and to the point.

-There's a crocodile under my bed.

The doctor didn't move a muscle, or make any gesture that indicated a desire to take notes.

-How big is this crocodile?

-The size of a big suitcase.

-What colour?

-Greyish.

-Does it move?

-No. It only eats.

-What does it eat?

-Shoes.

Again there was silence for a while, and JJ breathed deeply, as if he'd just reached the finishing line after running a long and difficult race.

-OK, you're to take the following: Crocodiphine capsules, one in the morning and one in the evening; Crocodital suppositories, one every night; and soluble Crocodithalmine tablets, twice a week at lunchtime. Next!

JJ picked up the prescriptions from the nurse as quickly as he could and left the surgery feeling much calmer.

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-How can I help you, young man?

The pharmacist was staring at him over the rim of his glasses as if he knew him but couldn't remember his name. JJ, who was looking rather pitiful because of the things that had been happening to him lately, detected a note of genuine interest in the pharmacist's enquiry.

-I have these prescriptions for some medicine.

JJ remained respectfully silent to hide his embarrassment as the pharmacist tried to decipher Dr Toofast's handwriting.

-OK, I see. Crocodital, Crocodiphine and Crocodithalmine!



After pronouncing the names, the pharmacist lifted his eyes from the prescriptions looking very pleased with himself.

-This crocodilitis is such a pain! he sighed, going to the back of the pharmacy in search of the medicines.

JJ felt a little window open in his heart. For some reason, the pharmacist didn't think his illness was anything special. He'd said that word, 'crocodilitis', with no particular emphasis, as if it were a common cold; and he'd added that it was 'a pain', so he must have come across it often.

-Excuse me, -JJ asked the pharmacist when he returned. Have you come across many cases of crocodilitis?

-Many cases of crocodilitis? Indeed I have!

The pharmacist removed his glasses and gave JJ the sort of look a master lecturer gives his audience.

Crocodilitis is a condition of our time. Ever since people started leaving the countryside and abandoning the natural life, severing their connection with the cycles of life and death, ever since they started flocking to the cities.

JJ gave a little cough and looked at his watch. He thought the pharmacist should cut his lecture short and get to the point.

All right, young man, you're asking me if I know of other cases of crocodilitis. I'll tell you one thing: crocodilitis is not the worst thing that can happen to you, believe me! There's spideritis, for example, which is much more dangerous. Think about it: the spider, the net, the fly, feeling trapped, attacked...

JJ was getting paler by the minute: he was starting to look like a hospital sheet. In fact, young man, -continued the pharmacist, staring straight into JJ's eyes, -compared to the spider the crocodile is a supreme beast, calm -almost sacred. I remember how when I lived in Cuba I went to visit a crocodile colony. They call them 'caimans' over there do you happen to know the difference between a caiman and a crocodile?

JJ didn't know, and he had to admit that until his present sad situation he'd known very little about crocodiles and their relatives.

-Well, caimans are longer, crocodiles are smaller. As I was saying, the first time I saw a crocodile colony I was in Cuba. Some were under water, and only their eyes showed above the surface. Others were lying on top of each other in the mud, in an animal stupor. What a glorious sight they were! Crocodiles don't frighten me. Mosquitoes do. They were horrid! They devoured my arms and legs! But the crocodile is a beautiful creature, especially when it's under water and it suddenly opens its jaws & what's wrong with you, young man?

Nothing, other than he felt like he couldn't breathe. It was as if a slimy, flesh-eating plant had swallowed his stomach and was now heading for his heart and his guts.

-Well, as I was saying, crocodiles have practically no enemies. Consider that often not even bullets can harm them! -said the pharmacist, smiling warmly at JJ. All those silly American films have destroyed their image. You know what I'm talking about, all that stuff about the crocodile following Captain Hook and so on. How absurd! For example, did you know that in Lower Egypt crocodiles were worshipped as sacred beings?

'No' -JJ muttered, imagining his roommate snapping its huge sharp teeth into a boot.- People's ignorance about crocodiles these days is incredible! I'm sure that even you haven't the slightest idea whether your crocodile is an alligator or a caiman, or a swamp crocodile, a *crocodylus palustris*, or a crocodile of the Indo-Malaysian family, a *crocodylus porosus*. But what's the matter, my friend?

JJ had fainted and collapsed on the floor like a sack of potatoes. Good heavens! But you asked me all those questions! How sensitive you crocodilotics are!

The pharmacist fanned him with the prescriptions until JJ slowly started to come around.

-Right now I only have Crocodiphine. Start taking the capsules immediately and come back and see me again. I'll be glad to help you -we'll have everything you need in stock next time you come. Chin up, young man! Remember crocodilitis isn't the worst thing that could happen to you, and besides...

JJ didn't wait for the end of the sentence. He grabbed the box of capsules, left the money on the counter and staggered to the door.

Thanks for everything! The said, with what remained of his politeness.

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We humans get used to company, and when JJ got home, the first thing he did was kneel down and check what the visitor under the bed was up to. As he did every day.

That frightening reptile, the king of the American swamps, the revered animal who clamps its jaws down on its victims to drown them before eating them was lying there very still, completely oblivious to the latest developments and to the existence of its greatest fan: an apron-wearing pharmacist.

JJ threw a pair of cheap shoes under the bed and left his bedroom after closing the door, brooding on his miserable fate. Then he sat down at the kitchen table, unfolded the leaflet that came with the Crocodiphine capsules, and started to read, becoming more absorbed than he had ever been.

Crocodiphine Capsules

Active ingredients:

The main active ingredient in Crocodiphine is drazepamcroco. These capsules are available in 1.5 mg, 3 mg and 6 mg form.

Properties:

International clinical trials have shown that Crocodiphine is a powerful anticrocotrophic medicine. Taken in appropriate doses, it has a sustained effect on feelings of loneliness, anxiety and emotional dependency. Exceeding the recommended dose increases the production of utopias and fantasies, which can actually be very helpful in extreme cases of urban loneliness.

Recommendations:

Crocodiphine is intended for patients who experience any of the following: feelings of anxiety, fear of abandonment or other similar symptoms. Crocodiphine is recommended for the treatment of patients with an extreme need for love, brought about by intense loneliness and deep-seated autoerotic habits. Crocodiphine should preferably be taken in combination with treatment for affection and communication deficit, the lack of joie de vivre, rejection of existential truths and in cases of repressed aggression. Alternatively, it can be used as a supplement to life-affirming treatments.

Dosage:

Moderately ill and/or quasi-despondent patients: 1.5 mg capsules three times a day. Extreme cases and/or patients with low self-esteem: 3 or 12 mg capsules, taken liberally.

Contra-indications:

Due to its aggrandising effect, Crocodiphine is contra-indicated in cases of extreme smugness.

Side-effects:

No cases of intolerance to Crocodiphine have been recorded, even when taken in excess of the recommended therapeutic dose. Abundant clinical trials have shown no adverse effects on work productivity or civil responsibility, or on patients' attitude towards TV or shopping. We recommend careful dosing for elderly people and children, since such patients tend to be hypersensitive to lonetropic medicines.

Known incompatibilities:

NB: If Crocodiphine is taken in combination with a central crocodepressant drug, intense feelings of acute loneliness may occur as a side-effect.

Interactions:

Patients should avoid sitting around doing nothing and feeling bored, as well as rainy, nostalgic weekends, as they may experience completely unexpected reactions to such situations.

Caution:

Crocodiphine may alter patients' perceptions (affect their talent for self-delusion, encourage automobile fantasies and feelings of satisfaction regarding bank statements, etc.). NB: THIS MEDICINE IS ONLY TO BE PRESCRIBED DURING THE FIRST MONTH OF FALLING IN LOVE.

In case of intoxication:

In case of intoxication the following symptoms may occur: convulsive orgasms, surges of ecstasy and feelings of immeasurable peace and oneness with the world. The following treatment has been found to have a positive effect

JJ stopped reading. He was shocked. The little leaflet created such a commotion inside him that he spent a long time thinking about all the symptoms, realising that what he'd read was a perfect description of his condition.

It seemed to him that he knew himself better. He hadn't been able to name or describe what was going on inside him until now: his feelings of abandonment, loneliness, the autoerotic habits, the lack of joie de vivre, the hidden aggression. These were the exact things that were happening to him. What an accurate diagnosis! He had no doubt: these capsules were going to change his life. The minute that thought crossed his mind a flame was born in his heart, and JJ, influenced perhaps by the psychological explanations he'd just read, called this new feeling JOY OF LIFE. The capsules, he was sure, would enable him to invite Elena for a coffee; no, better still, he would invite her home, and then he would tell her...

And JJ went to bed, having swallowed a handful of capsules with a glass of warm milk. For the first time in weeks, he felt hungry. Really hungry.