

A Mother's Voice

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Translated from the Spanish by Charlotte Coombe

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For my mother

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*How could I have had lunch. How served myself
these things from such distant plates,
when my own home will have broken up,
when not even mother appears at my lips.
How could I have had a nothing lunch.*

César Vallejo

Governing a large country is like frying a small fish.

Tao Te King

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Siblings

It's a calm, sunny midday towards the end of January, and the city seems to stand still. I arrive at my sister's house for a family lunch. It could be just another gathering, siblings getting together on any ordinary day. But it isn't. It's the first time we're seeing each other since my mother's funeral. Our mother's funeral.

I ring the doorbell.

My sister comes to open the entrance gate. She's wearing denim shorts and white trainers, her hair pulled back in a ponytail. She smiles, I smile, and we exchange a brief kiss on the cheek. There's something too polite about us. Something wooden, forced and theatrical, like we're two little girls playing at tea parties for the first time.

We take the stone steps up to the front door. Lining the path are flowers of all different colours. Red, yellow, lilac, blue.

Busy lizzies.

That's what they're called.

Together, we go into the kitchen to put the ice cream in the freezer and my niece's dog León appears, greeting

me by jumping up and down and barking. He has a tuft of copper-coloured fur flopping over one eye and the most comical, clueless expression I've ever seen on a dog. I can't believe he's named after the king of the jungle, with a face like that, and I can't help laughing every time I see him.

For months now, I've been promising my niece that I'll write a story starring León as the main character. Guadalupe, thrilled at the idea of her pet becoming a literary character, sends me countless photos of León. She calls to update me on the funny things he does, which of course she thinks are all extraordinary. I tell her I'll write the story soon, but time goes by and León's story, like so many other things, remains buried in that daunting chest marked *someday*.

At the table on the veranda overlooking the garden, my brother is waiting for us with his new girlfriend. She's a charming blonde, cheerful and outgoing. She has a spontaneous nature that's so different to us.

We are not like that. We will never be like that.

It dawns on me that this is the first time all three siblings have met up anywhere other than our mother's house.

It was always our mother who invited us to her house, who made an effort to bring us together, to see us together. To see us. It would never have occurred to us to meet up

outside the borders of her realm. Or perhaps it might, but even if we had wanted to, we wouldn't have dared to suggest it, at the risk of our carefully constructed walls of ice coming down.

What a strange family I have, our mother used to grumble, placing herself firmly out of the equation.

Today we are together.

Three siblings. Three orphans. Three castaways.

Mother's absence occupies the head of the table. And it was my sister, the one with the busy Lizzies, "the most normal one" according to my mother, who thought of getting us together.

I watch her as she sets the table.

A well-laid table, with a proper tablecloth and linen napkins edged with pink and purple embroidered flowers. I don't think I even have cloth napkins in my apartment. Perhaps because my home isn't a real home. Not in the way this house is.

I notice how some of my sister's gestures are so like my mother; our mother. Certain outdated expressions she says, the way she cocks her head to the side, the way her shoulders lift when she laughs. Although we're very different, or perhaps for that exact reason, many of the qualities I admire in her are ones I don't have: her ability

to keep a marriage going for decades, her innate desire to be a mother, her determination to be happy.

I'd have liked a stable life like hers, with cloth napkins, and busy Lizzies in the garden. A life as tranquil as a mountain landscape. Although, who really knows how many shadows lie just beyond those pleasant hills?

I go into the kitchen with her and we return to the table with the salads in matching blue glass dishes.

'Siblings be united, for this is the first of laws,' declares my brother, quoting from *Martin Fierro* in an attempt to be funny. We laugh. Or pretend to.

My sister's husband brings over a steaming platter of meat from the barbecue. It smells divine.

'A round of applause for the chef!' says my niece.

And we all clap.

I'm silently grateful that my sister has invited us over. There is something restorative in this encounter, something necessary. Through my siblings' bodies I salvage what is left of my mother in the material world. She is present in their bones, in their organs, in their corneas.

My blood relatives.

This is the first time these words take on real meaning for me, as someone who knows so little about having a family.

My sister's husband comes over and congratulates me on an article I wrote that was published a few days ago in the newspaper.

Suddenly, I feel everyone's eyes on me, and I think, horrified, that they've all read the article. An intimate, stripped-down piece in which I recount episodes of my life that they didn't know about.

'The writer in the family,' says my brother-in-law, with a faint smile and a twitch of his eyebrows, which I can't quite read.

He says this while holding a huge fork—a sort of trident—which he is using to serve up the cuts of meat and offal. For a moment I imagine that life is a Netflix series: my brother-in-law lunging forward with his trident in hand, stabbing me in the heart to prevent me from revealing the family secrets.

Fortunately, nobody says anything about the article and I ask my niece a question about her piano lessons, managing to steer us off the topic.

Over coffee, my brother pulls up his chair and discreetly asks me if I'm going to write that book about our mother.

'I'm working on it,' I say.

'Mm-hmm.'

Something in his tone of voice puts me on edge.

'But it's not a book about mum,' I tell him. 'She features in part of it, of course, but the book isn't about her.'

He takes a sip of his coffee, and after a few interminable seconds, says, 'Alright, but you don't have to write about *everything*.'

I'm not sure what he's referring to. I tell him not to worry, that it's a fictional text, that it's my perspective on certain events that took place, or that I've imagined or invented. I also try to explain that each of us lived in a different house, in a different family, even though we had the same parents and lived under the same roof.

The words came gushing out, like a swimmer coming up for air. The fear is pulling me under. The fear of not being able to write that book. I can see in his eyes that he doesn't understand what I'm saying, while I, with the desperation of a person lost at sea, frantically cling to my precarious raft of freedom.

'You don't have to read it, anyway,' I tell him, to put an end to the discussion.

'We will read it,' says my sister.

She says this firmly. Her words reverberate in the air.

we will read it we will read it we will read it

Then she adds, 'Our house wasn't sad.'

She's alluding to a certain comment I made in the article, where I mention the sombre atmosphere in our family home.

'And mum wasn't sad either,' she adds.

I look at her blankly. 'What do you mean, she wasn't?'

'She wasn't before.'

'Before?'

'Yes, before.'

'Before when?'

'When we were little.'

'Huh?'

'Yeah, when we were little. At all my birthday parties there was music, and mum would make delicious food for all my friends. She told me she liked giving us baths when we were babies. She really loved being a mum.'

I'm baffled.

I remind her that a few days ago, she'd told me, among other things, that our mother had been ill with depression for a long time, perhaps forever, and that we hadn't realised the magnitude of the problem.

Now she doesn't seem to remember any of that conversation.

She's talking about bubble baths for babies, and pink birthday cakes, assuring me that I must have misunderstood.

My brother watches on impassively.

They give each other a look.

I suspect that prior to this lunch, they had spoken about the risk of having me in their ranks.

Back at my apartment, I water the plants, take off my clothes that smell of barbecued meat, take a shower and get into bed. From the bedside table drawer, I take out a box containing a few photos.

I'm staring at a photo of the three of us on the beach playing with buckets and spades in the sand with my mother, when I hear a message come through on my phone.

It's a voice note from my sister.

'Don't put anything in about dad making her cry.'



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My Mother's Voice

For my mother, cooking was neither a duty nor a hobby. She made dishes and desserts for her children, her grandchildren, her nieces and nephews, her friends, her friends' children, her neighbours, the people in her tai-chi class, her doctor, the building manager, the building manager's children, and anyone else who deserved her affection. It was rare for her not to love someone, so I can say that my mother cooked for the masses.

But cooking wasn't just her way of showing love.

It was her voice.

As was usual in her day, especially in families of Arab origin, she learned to cook by watching her own mother prepare food. She told me she also learned from her mother-in-law, who, in a kingdom of men, taught her secret recipes to her daughters-in-law, so that their children would eat well. That is, as well as they did in her home.

Everyone expected some delicacy to materialise from my mother's hands. From Rosita, as she liked to be called.

When my friend Diego called me from Spain, we would catch up, talking for hours about our projects and

our love lives, but before hanging up, without fail he would ask me for the recipe for 'Rosita's little cheese empanadas'.

'Hey, don't forget,' he would say, emphasising the words, knowing full well that I would forget.

I met Diego a long time ago, when were classmates in Abelardo Castillo's literary workshop and we shared books and dreams. We became friends immediately, and even now, despite the distance and the fact that we sometimes go years without seeing each other, he is still one of my dearest friends.

Diego left Buenos Aires during the 2001 crisis and has been living in Madrid ever since, with no intention of returning. He misses little to nothing about our country, except for a few friends, live tango shows, *radichetta* and Rosita's cheese empanadas. With the carelessness which makes us forget life isn't infinite, I let the time pass without ever asking my mother for that recipe.

Or any of her other recipes.

When she died, it saddened me to think that along with her secret recipes, some essence of her was lost forever. Until a few months ago, I was surprised to learn that my niece Guadalupe, with whom my mother had a very close relationship, used to spend many evenings with

Rosita – as she also called her – learning to cook. And she had written everything down.

I would like to include some of my mother's recipes among these pages that revolve around my memories of her. Pages I write slowly, simmering away between long valleys of silence, with the only desire being, perhaps, to remember that voice.

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A Name

My mother was a beautiful woman, gentle and melancholic. She liked sad songs, silk scarves in pastel colours, tiny handbags, doctors, babies and markets.

Even in her old age, her voice, the way she spoke, always retained something childlike, something youthful about it. Her femininity was not contrived, nor did it radiate naturally from her, but rather it was something tangible like a table or a hat. If a name is the map that indicates a destination, none was more so than hers.

Her name was Rosa, but we all called her Rosita.

Like Golden Arrows

I live in a small, bright apartment in Buenos Aires' Almagro neighbourhood. In Calle Gascón. I like calling my street that, with that short, manly name. I like imagining that I live inside the belly of a moustachioed gentleman.

In Gascón.

Every summer, from my high-rise apartment in Almagro, I can hear the voices and laughter of a group of children in the swimming pool in the communal garden. They're young: four, five, six years old, not much more.

There are also adults in the pool but I don't hear them. They – we – are silent or talk in low voices.

Next to my partner Fred's house in Colonia del Sacramento, there's a children's playpark. I travel to Colonia often, sometimes for prolonged periods. I could almost say that I live in two cities, so that, both in winter and in summer, I'm surrounded by those children's voices for hours on end.

Listening to them, I'm surprised at how they all make identical sounds, as if they share a common language. An

atavistic, unlearned language. One that only they are able to understand.

Theirs are burning, yellow voices.

Every summer I listen to them from my kitchen in Gascón, the place where I spend most of the day. In the kitchen I dream, read, cook, cry, think, write. Along with the sun, every summer the joy of these voices reaches my window. Every now and then, between the laughter and shouting, they produce these intriguing trills. High-pitched, piercing trills like golden arrows.

I love to hear them laugh.

Those voices.

Sometimes I stop whatever I'm doing and just focus on them for a long time. Voices of pure joy, I say to myself with a certain nostalgia. I choose that word, joy, because their laughter goes beyond happiness. Way beyond. Or above, who knows. It belongs to a place akin to heaven.

I wonder when we stop laughing like that. When is the moment that our childhood ends?

I wrote this text in Colonia del Sacramento, one New Year's Day, at 10 o'clock in the morning.

It was a warm, bright day, with a clear blue sky that I interpreted as a promise, as a good omen for the year that had just begun.

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As soon as I wrote the final words, my phone rang.
It was my sister, telling me that my mother had died.

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A Woman Made of Tears

The daughter doesn't quite know where she is walking but someone is taking her by the arm. Someone is holding her up.

Just a few minutes ago her sister called to tell her that their mother had died. She repeats her sister's words to herself. Mum died. She refuses to think things like: she left the body, she departed, she left this plane. She prefers to call things by their name. She died. She is dead. She needs it that way so she can believe, so she can accept. But you can't accept what you don't understand, and how can you understand the abyss of death, how can you even understand the word *absence*?

Her sister had said: mum died.

And she thinks about death, about her sister's voice, and how this is the first time she's ever heard her cry.

Mum died, her sister said.

And she fixates on those two words—she has always felt like a prisoner to words—and thinks about how 'she died' is not the same as 'she is dead'. The way her sister described their mother's act of dying seems to include a

will, an intention. As if she knew that their mother had decided to put an end to the matter, once and for all.

She drank a glass of orange juice.

She applied her lipstick.

She put on a green hat.

And she died.

On New Year's Eve, when she went to sleep (did she sleep?), while her offspring laughed and celebrated with their friends, the mother – in that very unassuming way of hers – left behind the miseries of old age, illness, the world.

'Now she's at rest,' they all say, by way of consolation.

They say. They say it. They say it to her.

But she doesn't say it. She can't say anything.

The pain is a blood clot. It is silence. It is a non-word.

She thinks about her dead mother, and how this is the first time she's ever heard her sister cry. Because in their family nobody cried. Apart from their mother. Their mother cried a lot. She cried out of emotion, out of fear, humiliation, rage.

A woman made of tears, as if she had been born of the sea.

On Mothers and Daughters

'When I grow up, I'm going to have seven children,' I said to my mother as we came out of the cinema, after seeing *The Sound of Music*.

'That many?'

'Yes,' I replied, thinking of the Von Trapp family, the picture of happiness that ignited my girlish fantasies.

I wonder what happened. When did that desire vanish? How did this disconnect happen between that little girl and the woman I am now? When did I first think: *I don't want children?*

I can't pinpoint when that fervent desire to be a mother to many children transitioned into not wanting to have them at all.

I try to find some reason in my past for that rupture. Or, should I say, that revelation?

The first thing that comes to mind is a painful incident that happened when I was a teenager, which a therapist later connected with my lack of desire to be a mother. I was almost eighteen, I had a boyfriend and my first sexual encounters. Everything was going normally, until one day

I noticed something that surprised me: a spot of dark blood on the bedsheet when I wasn't on my period.

The same thing happened again the next day.

As the spotting continued, I made an appointment with a gynaecologist at the public hospital.

I was seen by a doctor I didn't know. A stout woman with a gruff voice and square-framed glasses called Guitler – ever since, for some reason I always pronounced her name with an “H” – . After examining me, she told me that she didn't have premarital sex, for fear of having an ectopic pregnancy.

I looked at her for a moment, not understanding.

‘What is that?’ I asked.

‘It could be what you have.’

In those days there were no ultrasound scans yet and it was difficult to make a precise diagnosis. She explained that an ectopic pregnancy is a pregnancy that, for some reason, lodges outside the uterus, which is why it has no chance of going full-term.

‘So what should I do?’ I asked.

She told me I had to wait. If the diagnosis was confirmed, a procedure would be needed. From that moment, I was walking through the tunnel of fear. A tunnel that got darker and darker.

At that time I lived with my parents and shared a room with my younger sister, who was about thirteen then. Because of my family's moral prejudices, there was no way I could tell my mother what was going on. And definitely not my father; I was intimidated if he so much as looked at me.

I had to keep quiet.

Pretend everything was fine.

Only two people knew my secret: Dr. Guitler, and my boyfriend, who was as shocked as I was and could barely grasp what was happening.

As the days went on, the blood loss increased, and the suspected ectopic pregnancy was confirmed. The doctor explained that if they did not operate in time, I could have internal bleeding, with all the associated risks. The fear prevented me from sleeping, I found it hard to concentrate on my studies, and I was also struggling to keep up the pretence at home.

I remember carrying a piece of paper everywhere with me, which had the phone number of the emergency department, the hospital phone number and Dr. Guitler's phone number on it.

'It's vital you always have this piece of paper with you,' she said in a concerned voice. 'Internal bleeding is a very serious thing.'

I will never forget the eternity of those days. I remember trembling night and day.

The terror.

The endless wait.

The cage of silence.

After three weeks, being sure of her initial assumption, Dr. Guitler set a date for the procedure. Although I'd never been in an operating theatre before, it was almost a relief to know that the agony of waiting would come to an end.

I was out of my mind with fear.

I remember that on the morning of the operation, to ward off the anxiety, I put on a blue dress with ruffled sleeves – the prettiest dress I owned – and like a child, I took *The Little Prince* with me, to read in the waiting room before going into surgery. I found it comforting to have that book with me, a text I had adored since I was a little girl.

Knowing that my mother would be angry I'd had sex with my boyfriend, before the operation I asked Dr. Guitler to tell her that it was an ovarian cyst. She promised me that she would.

I later found out that she didn't keep her word. She told me that because I was a minor, and there was a risk to life, she was obliged to tell my mother the truth.

When I woke up in the ward, still groggy from the anaesthetic, my mother was sitting beside my hospital bed.

She looked at me for a few minutes with a serious expression.

She shook her head, biting her lips, and then said, 'You might not be able to have children.'

Then she closed her eyes and was silent, like some kind of fortune teller.

At that moment I wasn't thinking about the future ramifications of what had happened. I wasn't thinking about children, nor did I want to have them. I wanted only to live.

As the days went by, the pain of the wound lessened and my mother's anger subsided, until it finally disappeared. The severity of her words, which I now judge more harshly, only made me sad at the time. I wasn't angry with her then, or later. As for my dad, he never found out what happened.

Slowly, my life seemed to return to normal.

But fate had another card up its sleeve.



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