

You're Very Quiet Today (Estás muy callada hoy)

Ana Navajas

Excerpts translated from the Spanish by Charlotte Coombe

Mum, poor thing, all she asked for was to be cremated. She died in Buenos Aires after three years of a horrific cancer, on a Friday, 25th May, at lunchtime of a long weekend that was about to become even longer. When we called the funeral home they told us that because it was a national holiday, the cremation would be delayed by three days, and so would the funeral. How horrible, Mum there, dead, waiting; what were we supposed to do in the meantime? There we were, the five siblings and Dad, standing in a circle in the corridor. I said, using one of Mum's typically blunt expressions: no way. There's no way we're cremating her. We're driving out of here tomorrow. And the burial will be the day after. The world is for the living. My little sister said, are you all okay with not carrying out her final wishes? More than okay, I replied.

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Her last day was a Friday. In the early morning, she started struggling to breathe. The five of us had time to phone each other, to come to the house, to let my aunt and uncle know. Dad was there. We went in and out of her bedroom, we held her hand. She was no longer able to talk. I suppose all morning she must have felt completely alone, isolated, listening bewildered to her own breathing, like when you go diving. The sound of death. At one point I got the feeling she needed her privacy. It was clear that each breath was becoming more

and more difficult. There are certain things that are best done without an audience. Like taking a shit. Like dying.

I got up from the chair beside her bed and went into the living room, with the others, to eat the food that had been prepared by Francisca, our childhood nanny. It's been years since Francisca worked in the house, but during Mum's final few weeks she came back to cook for her, to help her to the bathroom, and change her nightgown. It was around midday. We were hungry. It was like this: while Mum was dying, I was eating salami and *matambre*. Afterwards, I thought I'd never want to eat those things ever again because it would bring back terrible memories. It didn't, of course. It wasn't long before I was eating them both.

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When Dad was little, his father, the owner of everything, made him hand out gifts to all the staff's children, in the garden of the big house. It was a garden filled with wide-trunked trees, and monkeys and toucans, which Dad liked to hunt with a slingshot. When he grew up, he regretted that. As his birthday was on 6th January, on that day he was a tiny Rey Mago, handing out the parcels himself to the children who lined up. A feudal scene. Or a Peronist one. Dad is the youngest (by a long way) of four brothers, and that tradition was brought in when he was born. I can imagine him as a spoilt little boy of five or six, dressed in white, wearing leather loafers without socks, like in some of the photos. Suddenly I'm not sure whether I made it up. Just in case, I ask him: is it true that you handed out gifts? Was it just once, or did you always do it? Of course it's true, he replies. He says it's also true that he always ran out of gifts and had to give away his own toys. We can tell the therapist all about it, he adds, because he knows he's never going back to the family counsellor I tried to drag

him to after Mum died. The last time we went, he berated my older sister as soon as we got outside: How could you even consider telling all those things to a stranger?

We lasted five sessions.

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In the garden everything grew out of control, green and unruly. Dad called in an army of gardeners to tackle the sudden growth. Now that the noise of the lawn mower engines has stopped, all I can hear are the cicadas, overlapping in an endless round of noise that drives me mad. Like the heat. I always say that I prefer the heat, but the heat here is like a slap in the face.

My childhood home reminds me of numerous things I don't like about myself; that's why ever since I moved to Buenos Aires, I always need to go away, to come here for a short time, and then go away again. The first time I invited a friend to stay, we were eighteen; it was 1992, and January was dragging. Paca arrived first thing in the morning on the bus from Retiro, gazed out of my bedroom window at the lakes and said: this is paradise. It surprised me as much as the time when I was eight years old and the catechism teacher told me that my mother was very pretty.

Pretty? Paradise? I had never realised: life wasn't only what I saw through my eyes.

A long time later, when I re-educated myself, when I left and came back, I started to understand. When I was little, I could run barefoot up and down the dirt tracks. Then I lost the knack. Or the skin on my feet grew too soft. Now I tread carefully, my feet searching out the pleasant coolness of the stone patio tiles.

Dad claims he wants to move to the Atacama Desert, that he can't stand the humidity anymore. He doesn't say much, and usually he complains. He tells us he needs to go into town and then pass by the cemetery. We go to the cemetery every day. People find this strange. To us it's normal.

He wants to get a passport photo so he can renew his driving licence. Several times he asks: who said they needed to go to the pharmacy? We could go together, that way I can get my photo done. Dad loves to need things, or when someone else needs them; it gives him a reason to leave the house: to go out shopping, to go and pick something up, or go and order it. Just to go out. We're similar in that way too. Not me, I say. Not me, says my younger sister. Not me, says Rosa. Alright, I'll go with you, I say. I would've preferred to go for a bike ride, is what I don't say. Dad has trouble walking on his own. Actually, while you're at it, I need some size 37 flip flops, some boric acid alcohol and some Betamethasone drops, says my sister. So why don't you go then, I really can't be arsed. I don't say that either.

As soon as we get in the car, Dad pulls off the track and onto the grass. He tells me he's got some secret rose plantations at the bottom of the garden, almost as far down as the creek. I ask him why they're hidden behind the orange trees; I'd never seen them, there are loads of them. He says that from now on, he'll never run out of roses. He gets out and chooses five. I watch him from the passenger seat.

When we get into town, the air is so heavy that it's hard to breathe. In Rolando Fotografia, as well as the passport photos, Dad photocopies a couple of pictures of Mum; here, do you like them? Both are photos taken with a phone, low-resolution, they're rubbish, but I say they're great. Photocopying pictures is one of his recent foibles. They are almost always of people who are dead, or about to die.

In the Rolando photo shop, like everywhere else in town, things move at a snail's pace. We are all submerged, in slow motion, struggling to move. Sorry, Dad says as he shuffles back over from the counter, dragging his feet across the terracotta tiles, they took ages. Don't worry, I say from the burgundy sofa I'm sitting on, the imitation leather sticking to my bare legs, phone in hand; I'm just reading my messages. Here, in town, all the girls wear next to nothing and our skin sticks to other people's when we kiss each other hello, when we sit down, when our sweaty bodies brush against each other, when the heat makes us lose all sense of decency. In the pharmacy there's another long wait, in front of a standing fan which is diffusing dust and apathy in equal measure. They only have one of the items we came in for. The red earth is starting to cake itself to us; we are turning the same colour as the town.

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In my family there is an innate disdain towards the quest for happiness. Something deep in our very core is flawed. We have dissatisfaction guaranteed. Whenever my maternal grandmother Totona saw any of her grandsons laughing, she'd say: he's happy, the poor little sod. As if any state of fulfilment corresponds to an inferior stage of development.

Perhaps Rosa is right and we are a shitty family, a pavement full of loose slabs after a day of rain. When we step on the wrong place, our words splatter upwards like droplets of dirty water, unexpected, nasty.

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Are you pulling thorns out of your eyes? Pedro asked when he saw me with the tweezers in front of the mirror. I think Pedro is a poet. When I ask him what he wants to be when he grows up, he says a wanderer. So maybe he is a poet.

Things are happening this November. Rosa turned eighteen; I don't really know what that means. It means you're not a young mum anymore, one of my friends said to me. I wrote Rosa a fairly uninspired card, I was tired and didn't manage to stay awake until midnight. I gave it to her early in the morning and saw her read it several times, the following day, and the next, and the next. My husband said to me, why didn't you sign it from both of us? Because I wrote it. I can't go around talking in the plural all day long. Whenever something pops into my head, he likes me to say: 'we're thinking', 'we're doing', 'we're going'.

Elena got her period. She texted me from school and asked me to come and pick her up. When I got mine, I didn't tell my mum, I told my older sister. When my younger sister got hers, she didn't tell Mum, she told me. According to her, all I said was: you're screwed. I didn't even explain how to use sanitary towels and for months she used them with the sticky side facing up. Today, when I told her that Elena had got hers, she said: try to be a bit gentler than you were with me when I got mine. Elena got her period and she didn't tell her older sister. She told me. I dropped everything and went to pick her up. We didn't talk much on the way home.

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My psychologist asked, how do you feel about us taking a break? Months ago she morphed into an old aunt. Fine by me, I said, let's make the most of the holidays, the end of the year, it's all coming to an end. I say this to her and I don't feel bad. I can't stand her anymore. But

later on when I tell my husband about it, I feel a twinge of self-pity. Then I remember her tiny heeled shoes, size 34 or 35, that don't quite touch the floor when she's sitting down, and the feeling quickly vanishes. I don't trust people with feet that small. She once said to me: I've got a twin, we're identical. I'm just warning you in case you bump into me in the street one day. If I don't say hello, it's because it's not me. Two pairs of feet with tiny heeled shoes. I hope I never bump into either of them.

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It's been five years since Mum died. Her wardrobe is still intact. So is her bedside table and the dressing table with creams, makeup, and perfumes. When I need a nail file, for example, I know exactly where to find it. Dad asks us to please empty everything, to share out her things, but my sisters and I say yes, yes, but in the end we never get round to it. I don't know what my sisters think. Personally, I like it that way, I prefer for Mum not to disappear.

Pedro asked in therapy if nightmares could last forever. The psychologist said no; that the good thing about nightmares is they're so horrible that they wake you up and you realise they aren't real. She looked at me and I said: Of course.

We both know that's a lie.

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I don't like mornings. I was born as the clock struck twelve, at midnight on a day in autumn, the most indecisive of seasons. When I got married, I left my bedside table in my mother's house intact. When I quit my job, I left all my notebooks and books, I never went back to

get them. I always leave a shoe somewhere, like Cinderella, in case I feel like going back. I don't know if it's a good strategy, thinking that this is possible.

Sometimes I have the feeling I am saying goodbye prematurely; the last time we are all here, the last time I walk through this door, the last time I look at this landscape. It almost never works. My premature, theatrical goodbyes are not the real thing. What I hate most about endings is that they happen without pain or glory, like life in general. I suspend them, as though that were possible. Like someone who leaves the room without turning off the light.

Once I broke up with a boyfriend; we had the talk, we cried, and when I went to the bathroom to tidy myself up in front of the mirror, I left two hair clips sitting on the edge of the basin. A few weeks later, we got back together. We were lying on the sofa in his living room and he said to me: don't think I didn't notice you left your clips here on purpose. You were letting me know that you'd be back. I laughed.

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Elena has liked sparkly things, makeup and accessories ever since she was little. At the age of two, she could walk astoundingly well in plastic heels. Mum disapproved. She used to say to me: darling, good taste is something you have to teach. I let her go to kindergarten dressed up in a Dalmatian faux fur coat. In her world of high standards, Mum found Elena's superficial leanings dangerous.

My mother was beautiful when she was young. She had long hair and used to wear printed headscarves. She looked like an actress from the movies, especially since, like actresses, I only knew that version of my mother from photos and Super 8 movies. She had dark eyes

and full, sensual lips that she never made the most of. She was thirty by the time I was born and had already cut her hair short. Since then she always wore it in the same style, until one of her final chemo treatments left her without any hair at all. Ever since I knew her, to me she was a lady with short hair. Neither pretty nor ugly. A lady. A mother. That's all. I was always scared that that's what growing up meant.

Mum was close to death; we had already hired the palliative care nurse. She barely spoke at all. She did, however, ask me to call the manicurist at the hair salon on the ground floor of her building; she wanted to get her nails done. An unexpected oasis of superficiality. I was shocked. Mum wasn't vain in any way. She never really knew what to wear, or what went with what; she hated that clothes and makeup had to speak for her. She also thought décor was superficial. In my neighbourhood today, I bumped into the mother of the first friend who ever invited me round to her house when I came to live in Buenos Aires. It was in a gated community. I had never been to a house in a gated community before. I'd never seen so many frills in my life. The kitchen curtains, the flowery bedspreads, even the bathroom bin was frilly. Everything was matching. When I came home, my house looked horrible.

The manicurist sat down on a stool and held my mother's hands, which although still young, had been defeated by the disease, either reluctantly or with her consent. They were weak, just like the rest of her body slumped in the wheelchair. She'd given up, but even so, she wanted to get her nails done. She chose a natural shade, a final and almost imperceptible gesture of frivolity that I noted with surprise, but without question. I watched the scene from a living room armchair, where I was trying to draft my latest communications texts for work. A few days after mum died, I quit my job. My mother died and I decided to become a mother. From that moment on, the only thing I was going to be was a mother; the best mother.

Elena draws me a card with two hands forming the shape of a heart, and writes “Mum, you are pretty, funny, a bit sarcastic and you act like a big kid. I love you.” I laugh dejectedly and thank her for her declaration of love.

I don't want to be a big kid. But I don't want to be like my mother either. I stick it on the wall of my bedroom, above the bedside table, where I keep drawings and cards from all three of them. I look at it every day.

The day the hearse came to collect the coffin, I thought that all the people from the salon on the ground floor would come out onto the pavement to give mum a silent send-off. Despite not having a vain bone in her body, she had still been the most loyal customer to that tacky salon ever since we came to live in Buenos Aires. Nobody came out.

Every time I see one of the salon employees outside smoking on the pavement or one of mum's friends walking through the neighbourhood, every time I see a grandmother walking with her grandson, or I paint my nails, I wonder why we are all still alive but she isn't.

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Whenever we go and visit my childhood home, at some point during the stay Pedro asks me how soon we'll be going back. In two days, I tell him. Three. Sometimes I answer: four, at most. It's always soon, when I go, I never want to stay too long. Once he asked me if I'd like to stay there for good. I said no, that since I left, I'd never thought about going back to live there. Not even for an instant. He replied: I like the city too. In the city you're never alone.

I like Buenos Aires. I like walking along and stopping to look in any window. Are you just interested in everything? my little sister asked me once. Yes, everything. I like the synchronicity of the crowds that cross the avenues when the traffic lights give the signal; I

feel like it's genuine choreography. I like being part of them and looking at them from a distance. I like going to view apartments even though I never buy any of them. I like to see how people live and what the city is like from other people's homes. I like standing on a balcony watching the lights of the cars as they drive in a high-speed swarm; the city is not kind, its beauty is ephemeral like those lights, like a shooting star in the sky, and that makes it more beautiful. I like the enormous container ships down at the port, which you can see from the highway. I like the cranes even more; there is something primitive about them. I like the deserted financial district at the weekends; what's horrible on any normal day suddenly becomes wonderful. I like listening to other people's conversations when I'm in a bar; I've never been able to read a book in a bar, I think eavesdropping is much better. I like spying on the neighbours across the way; I have some night-time friends, two who come out to smoke at the same time as me. I like going out to ride my bike in the summer when it gets dark, but every time someone beeps their horn, my small-town instinct makes me turn around. I think they're saying hello to me.

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After four years and eight months, Pedro finished therapy. With great fanfare, his psychologist Irene said, her eyes like two shiny marbles. Pedro laughed, and so did I. When we left, I hugged her wordlessly to keep from crying. I get so moved and overwhelmed by others' achievements that it makes me want to sob uncontrollably. It doesn't matter if it's an anonymous contestant on a talent show who, seemingly charmless at first, actually turns out to be brilliant. Or someone pushing themselves to finish a long-distance race. Like Nano, Elena's obese classmate, who with every step, looks like he's climbing a steep hill instead of

running on level ground. He finishes thirty minutes after everyone else, but he finishes, to the applause and cheers of his classmates, of the teachers and the parents who went to watch: Nano! Nano! Triumphant, like Pedro in his final session.

I took the lift down and walked for half a block before realising that, for the first time in almost five long years, I'd left my phone behind on Irene's desk. I went back and pressed the buzzer, embarrassed, and thought about how Pedro always grows much faster than I do. Irene came down, handed me the phone and laughed the same contented belly laugh that she gave to some of Pedro's responses or attitudes in therapy, mini chuckles like castanets, and said: I think you're the one that doesn't want to it to end.

To celebrate, Pedro decided to invite seven of his friends to the club for a four-a-side. When we arrived, I spotted my in-laws sitting at the usual table, having the usual lunch with the usual friends. The scene I invariably see every time we go to the club made my throat close up with primal fear, and after greeting everyone with a kiss, we found our own table. My in-laws' friends are all married couples. I met all of them in one go on the day of my wedding, and from then on I always saw them in a group, so they were impossible to tell apart. I said to my husband in a low voice that the mere thought that we might become like that had given me the immediate urge to leave. He said: you always want to leave. It's true. It's not my club. I don't have a club, although I've been a member of this one since 2002, when after the crisis, with the remains of our savings in dollars converted to pesos, my husband suggested that I join. We had so little money left, and I was so frustrated, that I agreed. So you can use the pool in the summer, he said: visitors can't. It's the club they've been going to all their lives. *De toda la vida*: the phrase my mother-in-law uses to assure you that something is the way it should be. I never went in the pool.

When I was little, there was this TV show I loved called *The Marriage Game*. The host was a man who looked happy but later in life he committed suicide. Various couples competed against each other and the winner was the one who knew their partner best. The host who seemed happy asked them questions like: when he gets out of the shower, what part of the body does your husband dry off first? Or he'd say a phrase out loud such as: I like eating bread after dessert, and the man who recognised the statement had to press a buzzer and shout, That's my wife! The part where the couples celebrated the right answers with a mechanical kiss on the lips struck me as sad. I felt that marriage as a string of correct answers and perfunctory affection was a bleak notion. That was what winning was. I always wonder how we would have done. I think if my husband had been asked: what does your wife think about every night before she goes to sleep?, then we would have definitely lost.

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Yesterday morning, Pedro found out everything. Now, when he talks about Santa Claus and the Tooth Mouse, he makes air quotes with his fingers, and asks questions, demands details. When do I get my cash? Who eats the cheese we leave out? Where are all my teeth now? Mum, do you like being Santa Claus? I laugh, slightly sad. I don't want to answer him. Three days ago, at school pickup, I heard him telling a friend that the Tooth Mouse has a castle built out of golden teeth because he's rich, and that this time instead of pesos, he asked for dollars and he got twenty. Only three days ago, he still believed.

For homework, the teacher asked Pedro to make a timeline of his life's milestones. First word. First steps. First day of school. First trip. Life is like that. One day, it happens. I have everything written down. For each of my children I filled a book with photos, stories, and

memories. They love looking at it. Now, in Pedro's book, I'm going to note down his first disappointment.

At the club, I bumped into the mum of Pedro's friend who died of cancer. It's been nearly a year. What were you talking about, Pedro asked. About Florian, I replied. "Florian" he repeated, using air quotes. Why did you use quotation marks? Because he doesn't exist anymore, he replied. The quotation marks turned into something sinister.

I went to a barbecue that wasn't a barbecue because we were all women, so it was actually quiches and salads. When I got home my husband asked me, what did you eat? Quiche? I should learn how to do a barbecue, I thought. My friends said, it's amazing to be eating on our own, on a Saturday lunchtime, isn't it? No kids, nobody to look after. I had my dog there with me. As I drove home, I looked at Chica, who had run around in the grass and played with the ball and chased birds, and thought, I'm glad I went. Since having kids I've grown used to enjoying myself through others. They asked me to bring dessert and it annoyed me. I love to bring things, but I don't like to be asked. A friend told me it annoys her when her husband tells her ahead of time that he wants to fuck. She feels obligated. It's so important to believe we do the things we do because we want to. Bringing a dessert. Fucking. Going to a barbecue. Eating quiche. I was the first one to leave.

After years of looking at adverts, calling estate agents and viewing apartments, we found one with a roof terrace, and I think if they drop the price a little, we'll buy it. It has an outdoor grill, a fountain and plenty of sunlight. My husband is enthusiastic, he's often enthusiastic: he's cheerful, confident, optimistic, all the characteristics I'm lacking and which I only possess by association. Or at least, I possess them as much as one can possess something by association. They're not in my nature. I asked my brother, an architect, to accompany me in my search for flaws. I like the apartment, but it scares me a little, it's too big. I told him:

look, Pedro could play two-a-side on this roof terrace. Before you know it, Pedro won't be here anymore, he replied. Well, I'd also like to be alone on this roof terrace.

When I was little, I didn't like to be alone. But after being alone so much, I finally got used to it. Now people tire me out. I don't have the stamina. After get-togethers I feel like my body's out of shape, like someone who never works out and then decides to run a marathon. The homeopath told me that moving house speeds up processes, good or bad. It's up to you. On the roof terrace of the apartment is a white climbing rose. As we were leaving, I pointed to it and said to my brother: I've always wanted one of those.