

# NOTES FROM CHILDHOOD

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Flickering and joyous, broken by only a single night, the first journey we made from Buenos Aires to Mendoza emerges from my memory like a landscape recovered through a misted pane of glass.

My five years clung out of fear to the evening we arrived in Monte Comán, where we spent the night before continuing, the next morning, to our destination.

There were only a few rooms in the hotel, and all of us – my parents, Eduardito, the five girls, the governess, and the nanny – had to sleep in three cramped rooms, but neither this nor any discomfort could have diminished our excitement at the special occasion of having dinner with the grown-ups in the dining room of a hotel.

All five of us, in our white sailor dresses, awaited the moment so eagerly that our mother seemed to us to be dawdling as she got ready, and the nanny to be taking longer than ever to lull Eduardito to sleep.

When we finally entered the dining room, we saw a couple seated at the only occupied table. Soon after sitting down, we heard the waiter say to my father in a hushed tone, “That’s the owner of the circus, and next to him is the strongest woman in the world. Every night she lifts three men with her teeth.”

Five pairs of eyes, widened with curiosity, fixed on the couple all at once. I had my back to them, and had to twist

around to stare at the woman. As I watched her, I thought I could see her body, her hideousness, expand little by little, and I was baffled that the circus owner could laugh, watch her eat, and sit so calmly by her side.

Across the table, my father told me to sit up straight, but before obeying I noticed the woman smiling at me, and since I wasn't brave enough to return the gesture, I turned around quickly and went on eating.

I had never been to the circus, and couldn't imagine that a woman might be able to dangle three men from her teeth. As I bent my head over my plate, the very idea caused an unstoppable wave of fear to rise up my legs. I thought the woman might be displeased that I hadn't returned her smile, and that, at the first opportunity, she would clamp me between her teeth. With my back to her, it was impossible for me to keep watch on whether she was getting up from her table and coming over to ours. Gradually, uncontrollably, my terror became so great that I almost burst into tears, and I begged my mother to let me sit beside her.

That night, to get to sleep, we had to wait until our fatigue had eclipsed the knowledge that the circus woman was staying in a room a short way from ours. The next morning, in two brakes – my parents, Eduardito, and the nanny in one; the governess and we five girls in the other – we set out for the neighboring town.

After a bumpy three-hour ride, we forded a stream. Before our brake plunged into the murky water, we looked – stricken – to the other one up ahead, seeking comfort from Mother, who, hunched over Eduardito, watched us closely as the horses splashed our white dresses and the water rose, almost covering the wheels' axles. We huddled together, trying to assuage our fear by stroking the dogs that cowered behind the seats. When we reached the other side, we felt the small joy that later would always be sparked by clods of mud flying from

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wheels and the light trot of horses after clearing a swampy and treacherous path.

Before darkness fell, we glimpsed the old house where we were to stay until the new one was built. A couple from San Luis welcomed us at the garden gate. The woman was wearing a dress with an immense floral train, which we assumed she must have dug out of a trunk to confer some grandeur on the occasion, but which, during the month and a half we stayed, she never removed.

At dinner time, we had to light a great many lamps and candles to watch the spiders and kissing bugs all over the walls. This didn't prevent us from jumping out of our skin at the slightest brush of a shoe against a chair, convinced that a mouse was climbing up one of our legs.

While we lived in the old house, we used to force ourselves to stay up until we were tired, so that when we went to bed we might drift off immediately and endure as briefly as possible our fear of the creepy-crawlies lurking there. During the day, after running around the land on the quinta, we climbed trees and clambered onto rooftops shrouded with creepers, in search of bats. If we managed to find one, we trapped it in a wire cage.

Motionless, hanging from the bars, they looked like dark, wrinkled rags. Sometimes, it seemed to us the bats were hiding their faces and weeping, so we would take them out of the cage and perch them on a branch so they could fly away.

At the time, I wasn't the least bit frightened or disgusted by them, but when we left that gloomy house – full of disjointed, mysterious spaces – and moved to the large house that was built for us, they clung so densely to the pale walls, and their flight was so silent, like a wet cotton drape flapping in an open window, that the very idea of them brushing against my cheek was enough for me to take a permanent dislike to them.

I see her framed with a gentleness no one could touch without taking something away, without adding more grace than that which was essential and true.

She used to ride her horse in one of those full, thick riding habits people wore in those days.

On one side of the horse, we saw the whole length of her, the black brim of her hat concealing her face. We saw only a single gloved hand on the other, yet her profile was as sharp as if she had suddenly drawn alongside a lamp.

From one flank of the horse, her whole body seemed to balance out the other, luminous side where her face could be fully seen. When she rode this way, our delight was doubled: we could see her from one side, the shadowy, mysterious side, while, from the other, where she was whole, we recovered her intact, identical to the picture of affection she showed every day.

To help her into the saddle, my father needed only to link his hands to lift her foot. Mother would mount, and once she was ready, immediately sit waiting attentively. Each of her movements, though new, soon formed part of a constant landscape.

My father would press his dapple-gray forward. When he tapped him lightly on the legs with his boot, the horse would stretch out his front and hind legs, crouching until the saddle was so low that my father no longer needed to use the stirrup.

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Standing in a semicircle, my sisters and I would remark on the horse's meek and obedient nature. Then, after putting on this display, they would trot off slowly into the distance.

Our mother's radiant side would disappear, leaving only the one that was less familiar, more austere. As she approached the first poplars that bordered the quinta, we felt newly bereft. We could make out only my father's reddish beard.

Now I know that my mother's other side, the luminous one, rode close beside him.



Three windows look onto my childhood. The first belongs to my father's study. The few times we ever went into that room, we felt timid at the sight of the imposing furniture upholstered in cold, slick leather, and the walls covered in charts and maps of different countries. We sensed that one went there only to talk of serious things, or to dismiss a farmhand or a servant. The only thing I remember of my father's desk is the enormous globe he would sometimes spin to make Norway and Ireland suddenly appear before our eyes. A cabinet held a jumble of bows and arrows, pipes, and beads the native people had given him on his various expeditions, and which he allowed us to peek at from time to time.

At bedtime, we would glimpse a faint, almost imperceptible glimmer of light underneath his door. This was my father's writing time, and only Mother, with her enduring sweetness, might go in to speak with him.

When his window lights up suddenly and stands frozen in memory, it seems to possess the sorrow of unfinished letters, abandoned for some unknown reason, that one finds years later at the back of a drawer.

Mother's window was more inviting. It belonged to the sewing room. In houses with many children, the sewing room is always the sweetest, the most sought out. Beside sewing baskets overflowing with ribbons and lace, we often gazed upon little garments that weren't our size. We never suspected that

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someone else might arrive suddenly, after us. Mother spent hours on end in the sewing room, knitting and embroidering tiny things. She seemed more accessible there, more willing to let us unburden ourselves, so that when the youngest among us turned thirteen or fourteen, we understood that, in that room, it would have been easier to confide in her the fear, shame, ugliness, and sorrow of that awkward age. The three elder girls managed it. Susana and I were denied that tenderness: a window so tucked away, the light so perfect for hiding our blushing cheeks, the tears welling in our eyes, and our bitterness, our sense of being cut off from everyone by a contagious illness. Her window always had just the right light for children. I have never seen any such window since. Children arrive in rooms where no one awaits them, rooms that were not built with them in mind; their little clothes are sewn in bare courtyards, in bedrooms accustomed to other presences, affections, and memories, or at teatime, while chatting with visitors, in idle moments that do not allow for any devotion. I have seen so many women who do not alter their tone of voice, whose expressions remain unchanged, allowing jokes about their appearance or trying to disguise it, regarding life with neither more nor less concern, as if what they carried inside them weren't enough for them to see that theirs is the great joy of having a child; as if an imminent birth were part of the daily routine and there were no need to set aside days and nights for waiting, to be able to recall them later with an expression different from that used to speak of anything else.

My mother was different. My mother did not knit booties or blankets in idle moments. Idle time was made up of other things. Waiting, for her, was a duty, and she waited both day and night. When she entered that room suffused with warmth, it was as if her air, her expression, changed. Whenever I saw her withdraw to that room to sew such tiny things, she was wide-eyed and wistful from so much looking within, wearing a

gaze like one I've seen since in those who've been watching the sea. When we played in the garden, her lamp, whose light in winter was languid, reassured us of her presence. Little did we suspect that from one day to the next there might be another name in the house, another mouth to kiss before going to bed.

The third window was Irene's. I was always a little afraid and a little in awe of her. She was six years older than me. Sometimes, she was allowed to sit at the table in the large dining room during visits from family friends. My older sisters used to whisper about her. They had discovered her secrets, and spoke of these in a delighted, mysterious tone, far from believing that it would soon be their turn, too. Susana and I, the youngest two, weren't shrewd enough to guess the reason for these long whispering sessions. One afternoon, I heard them speak of breasts. When I think back, I understand the fear she must have felt – the first sister, all alone – when she saw her body begin to curve, her rib cage lose its rigidity, her breasts start to ache and stir imperceptibly.

From her window, we always awaited momentous surprises. Irene told us tales of kidnappings, of elopements, of how she would leave one morning with a knapsack like *Oliver Twist*, because she was unloved at home, or someone was waiting for her outside. Perhaps that's why, for me, her window was always mysterious.

One night, when we were all tucked in, Irene came to my bed to say farewell. Wrapped in a blanket, she had a bundle of clothes slung over one arm. She announced in a doleful voice that she was running away because we were so unkind to her and she was terribly miserable.

I thought straightaway of her window. I thought the moment had come. I got up and followed her, in tears. Much later, Marta's regretful lips told me it was all an act.

Then, little by little, her window faded away, until it looked just like the others.

She was four years older than me. We always seemed to come upon her long before the others, and it was as if she were always waiting for something.

She used to bite her lips until they bled, and slowly pick at the skin on her hands with her fingernails. In my memory, I still hold her in that pose, which always used to send a shiver down our spines: one hand open, the other always above it, moving so furtively that no one noticed her fingers delicately rubbing her already ragged skin, until, finally, a tiny trickle of blood caused by too tense a jerk would make her wince, only for her to return to silently tugging a less raw flap of skin, with a cautious, perfunctory hand.

I will always remember her hands. With their peeling skin, they looked like the pages of a well-loved book whose edges curl backward. I don't know how she could bear to touch anything, to brush against her clothes or against her own flesh. Unheeding, listless, and earnest, the world of her childhood held the intensity of one who waits, indifferent to what is to come.

Knowing she couldn't yet tell the time, my father made her study the clock each day. Marta would cry without sobbing, almost without any tears, covering her face with an open hand. Through the gaps between her outspread fingers, we could just make out a moistened eye, a patch of nose, a corner of mouth.

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Once in a while, she shed her torpor and played alone. One night, she began to put on all the starched petticoats, adorned with the folds and ruffles people wore in those days. Little by little, her body began to swell, until her head was a tiny fair-haired dot atop an enormous crinoline. When Mother came into the room as she did every night to tuck her in, she found her asleep on her bed, exhausted, lost in a tangle of ribbons and lace.

The next morning at breakfast time, she wouldn't hear a single joke. She had recovered her serious, distant demeanor. One of her hands was stretched open beneath the table, the other slowly crawling between her fingers.