

## **Antes de volver a caer – Before I fall again**

*Written by Camila Valenzuela León, translated by Ruth Donnelly*

Voices

December 31st, 1999

I'm lying on my bed staring at the ceiling, which is a deathly white. I bought a book of essays today in the market at Muelle Vergara. I wanted to start where I always do, at the beginning, but for some reason the title of the second essay, by Virginia Woolf, caught my eye, so I broke with tradition and skipped straight to that:

"... And while I was writing this review, I discovered that if I were going to review books I should need to do battle with a certain phantom. And the phantom was a woman, and when I came to know her better I called her after the heroine of a famous poem, *The Angel in the House*."

When I got to that point, the shouting started, so I stopped reading. I closed the book and stared at the ceiling again.

My parents have some habits I don't understand. I don't know if it's to do with being an adult, or if it's a couples thing, or maybe both, since my parents are both adults and a couple, but whatever it is, their behaviour seems strange to me. One thing is that before any special occasion, they have a fight about something. That's why, even though my door is closed, I can hear my mamá shouting. She's saying that someone has "taken" her pearl necklace. That "someone" sounds pretty vague, but we all know what she really wants to say: that Ceci stole her necklace. It sounds like papá is trying to calm her down, because he's saying she probably left it in Santiago, she should just wear another one, and to hurry up because the guests are about to arrive.

I pick the book up where I left off before the shouting started:

"It was she who used to come between me and my paper when I was writing reviews. It was she who bothered me and wasted my time and so tormented me that at last I killed her."

My papá starts shouting again, that she should stop screwing around with the necklace, that he'll buy her another one tomorrow so she's got one in Viña and one in Santiago, but mamá says no, that she needs *that one* because it goes with her dress. This time the shouting is louder, angrier, so I put the book down again and close my eyes. I imagine I'm a moth flying around the room, free and happy in my drabness, that no one wants to catch me or trap me.

That's when Ceci comes in and closes the door behind her: she doesn't like hearing my parents fighting either. She has her hands behind her back and she stands there looking at me, with a tight-lipped smile and a pained look in her eyes. Ceci has a habit of looking at me like that. Sometimes I think it's because I make her sad; other times I think it's because she doesn't like to show her teeth. Maybe it's both.

'You aren't ready yet' she says, like she's expecting me to move, but I stay put. 'Come on, *po*, you know your parents will be mad if the guests arrive and you're not ready.'

Ceci comes closer and sits at the end of the bed. I slither down towards her like a snake and rest my head in her soft, warm lap. The book slips and falls to the floor, but I don't mind because I can feel her hand on my hair and my left ear. I can't see her face, but I know she'll be smiling that same smile, have that same look in her eyes.

'What's that you're reading?'

'It's an essay, it's called "Professions for Women"'

'What are you reading that for, *po*, when it's obvious?'

'What do you mean, it's obvious?'

'Well it's obvious, isn't it - they go out to work and we women work in the house.'

Now my parents aren't shouting about the necklace anymore, but because my papá just found out my tío Felipe's coming tonight. He's asking mamá why she invited that communist shit when she knows papá can't stand him, and my mamá's saying that no one in her family's a rojo, that he's making up excuses because everyone knows that's not why

he won't see Felipe. She can't even bring herself to say the word. There are a lot of words that can't be spoken in my family.

'Come on, shall we have a look at what you're going to wear?' Ceci asks, kissing the top of my head.

She gets up and goes over to the closet, and when she opens it I think how ridiculous it looks, such a big space for so few clothes. It's like my parents think that by giving me an enormous closet they'll make me want to fill it. Ceci searches through the hangers and I know what she's looking for - the dress my papá gave me to wear tonight. Every new year he likes my mamá to choose something for me to wear so I can "rise to the occasion". My mamá, on the other hand, likes to spend new year eating grapes and making little bags with uncooked rice inside. She says this will bring riches for the coming year, and I wonder why she wants more, when she's got plenty already.

You can tell she chose the dress. It's a silvery grey, strappy and short - although not so short it will upset papá. I don't want to wear it. The twins will be wearing something identical, or almost identical, but even shorter, and gold instead of grey. Like the one Francisco Merino wears in *Cerro Alegre*. And I'm nothing like the twins, or like Francisca Merino in *Cerro Alegre*. Ceci takes it out of the closet and gives it a resigned look, knowing I'm not going to like it.

'You're going to look beautiful' she says, holding out the dress, which is still in the transparent bag it came in.

I take the hanger, mute. While Ceci opens the drawers to choose some tights, I get undressed. Behind the door is a full-length mirror, with a chunky, polished frame. My mamá says my tía María Piedad (mamá to the twins) gave it to her, although Ceci told me it was really a present for me. Apparently she heard my aunt say that I looked a mess and that maybe a "cool, contemporary" mirror like this one might inspire me to find a new look. But that new look hasn't turned up yet. It's best not to let my eyes stop for too long on the mirror, because - as the twins would say - I am, *like, waaaaaaaaaay too* skinny and, *like, waaaaaaaaay too* tall.

I put the dress on and it makes me look stupid, because it's designed to cling to your curves and I'm like an ironing board. Suddenly I feel like a hamster, stuck inside the wheel.

'What did I tell you?' Ceci says, and she takes me by the shoulders to hold me in front of the mirror and force me to look at it. 'You look beautiful'.

My reflection is like the ceiling: deathly white.

"Do you want me to braid your hair?" she asks, and I try to nod my head, although it comes out looking more like a nervous tic.

I sit on the trunk at the foot of the bed, where I keep the stock of books that I plan to read throughout the summer. I brought most of them with me from Santiago, and the rest I bought at the Muelle Vergara market, or in the Viña Book Fair, which pops up on avenida Libertad every summer. I like them both - in one I can find rare, used books that smell like a 19th century caballero, while the other has all the latest releases.

Ceci begins to plait my hair. She has short, stubby fingers, so it takes a while for her to finish the braid, but I like that, because time stands still. The shouting has started again, but I can't hear what they're arguing about now, because Ceci is talking to me loudly:

'Were you able to speak to el niño today?'

"El niño" is Juan Cristóbal, who is 23 years old, and I, at fifteen, am "la niña". I guess Isabel beat us both, because she will always be "mi niñita", my little girl.

'They told me they'd call him after midnight.'

She doesn't respond straightaway, she's trying to find the words. Then, I know they called him when I went down to the muelle. My parents say they adore Juancrí. What they don't say is what they're really thinking: that it's better to keep him at a distance. They have a strange way of showing their love.

'Maybe they'll call him again tonight,' says Ceci and I know she wants to make me feel better, but she doesn't manage it.

Nobody does.

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Saturday, January 29th, 2000

Isabel,

Ever since I was a little girl, I have felt like an autumn leaf. About to fall. About to be trampled by people like Gachi, who jump up and down on dry leaves just to hear them crunch. You, on the other hand, used to step around them. Pick them up, collect them. With you by my side I was protected. You were my forcefield, the one who gave me strength, who told me I could, that I was someone.

You made me belong, but now you're gone I'm beginning to discover the parts of you that were hidden, your shadow. And I don't know how to make sense of your shadow when your body isn't there. I don't think mamá and papá can help; sometimes I think they knew even less about you than I did. That must be hard. Having kids and not knowing what they're like, what they do, how they think. Not knowing who they are.

Mamá and papá never knew who you were, Isa. I don't know if it was because you didn't let them in, or because they were too busy with their own lives. With me, it was different. There were things that you told me, and others that you showed me in ways you didn't even realise.

I learned something about you on October 16, 1998, when Pinochet was arrested in London. You had your elbows on your knees and your head in your hands and you said *por fin, por fin*. The others saw you, but they didn't hear you. But I, just beneath you, with my back leaning against your legs, I heard your voice. I knew you wanted to celebrate, that you wanted to shout, jump around, dance. I wanted to as well. I didn't really understand why, but I wanted to. You did that to me. You made me want to do things that I didn't understand,

even if I thought I did. A few days later, you did celebrate. You probably did shout, jump around, dance.

And then, you left.

Sometimes, I still wait for you to come back.

October 25th was a happy day for you. You and Juancri left early to go to Parque O'Higgins, even though mamá and papá didn't want you to go. I remember your face as you told papá that you were both of age, that you could do what you wanted. Papá looked at you and his face said this brat doesn't know what she's talking about. Mamá looked at you and her face said this kid will be the death of me. You didn't say you were going anyway because you'd been dreaming of this moment for a long time, but I knew you wanted to. You didn't tell them how little they knew, how blinded they were, open your eyes, remember, but I knew you wanted to. I knew, because you'd said it before, when they didn't want to hear you.

Mamá and papá left for Viña. You and Juancri left for the Fiesta por la Justicia. I stayed behind with Ceci. We watched the little that was shown on TV and I imagined you there. You were singing and dancing to music like Violeta played to me today. You were listening to the speeches that were censored on the TV, that I couldn't hear. You were hugging and kissing the more than 30,000 people who were there with you. But I comforted myself that you would come back, that the party would stop at five pm and then, you would come back with Juancri, to take over from Ceci and to tell me your stories. Stories I would never hear.

Five pm came, but you didn't. Six came, seven, eight. And you didn't. Ceci was muttering to herself, *pucha, these selfish kids aren't coming home*. She said that you didn't realise others wanted to celebrate too. And mamá called the house and said *por Dios Cecilia, how are those kids not home yet*. Nobody understood why you and Juancri weren't back, when you knew it was Ceci's night off, and that our parents didn't want me left alone in the house.

Nine o'clock came, ten. But still you didn't. Until finally it was eleven - always your unlucky number - and the call came. Then came Ceci's cry, her trembling hands. I didn't know, but I understood. And I didn't want to understand, Isa. I can't tell you how much I didn't want to understand, but I had to. I had to know about the overturned car and I pictured the shattered

glass all over the street and your body and Juancri's, blood-soaked on the outside, alcohol-soaked on the inside.

We arrived at the clinic gripping onto each other's hand. Ceci tried to focus her gaze, her whole body, but she couldn't. *Mi niñita, mi niñita*. I pictured papá behind the wheel, driving to Santiago. *Cabros de mierda, I told them not to go to that damned circus at Parque O'Higgins*. Mamá by his side, both silent. *You were such a beautiful baby, so beautiful*. And I just wanted to see you.

Ceci asked after you and they looked at her oddly. Family? They asked. No, she said. Then immediately, Yes. I'm her nana. I brought her up. This is her sister. How are they? The nurse said something about not being able to give out information. She didn't say why, but I guess it was because of us - Ceci just your nanny and me your kid sister. They wanted papá or mamá. And Ceci told them, as far as she could because she could barely speak, their parents have been in Viña, they're on their way. You'll have to wait for the doctor, the nurse said.

I wanted to be like you. I wanted to say listen, you know what, I'm their sister and I have every right to know how they are even if I am only fourteen, so tell me, tell me how they are.

But I just squeezed Ceci's hand as hard as I could, like when I was a kid and I used to grip onto yours before jumping into the pool and sometimes we'd both fall in and you'd laugh and shout to Juancri look, Enana's stronger than you. Oh yeah, stronger than me, is she, he'd repeat, disbelieving. And he'd divebomb into the pool and push your head under the water, saying who's stronger now, *po*.

But Ceci couldn't wait calmly, she could never stay calm knowing that you and Juancri were there in that room, in who-knew-what state. So the doctor came and although he spoke only to Ceci, I heard everything, my ears pricked. He said that Juancri had multiple injuries, that he would need rehabilitation, Ceci asked him what that meant and he said kinesiology, and she was none the wiser, but she didn't ask him to explain, she just asked how he was. I want to know how he is, doctor. And he said out of danger. We both heaved a sigh of relief and squeezed each other's hands even tighter. And mi niñita? How is mi niñita? The doctor didn't reply straightaway. And you know, Isa, if there's one thing I understand, it's silence. I knew

right then and I wished I didn't. The strength in my hand diminished bit by bit and Ceci, who understands strength, knew too.

Then, we listened: we're doing everything we can. Like what, she asked, what does that mean, explain it to us. He told us that they were going to admit you, that they had to operate right now. Operate for what, on what. And he said some complicated words like traumatic brain injury, traumatic intracerebral haemorrhage. They were words that started with trauma and ended in silence. It was like a prophesy of your ending, which would be the ending of all of us.

We sat down to wait. To wait for mamá and papá to arrive. To wait to be able to go in and see Juancrí. To wait, above all, for the doctor to come to us without gaps, just with words, and to tell me, like you used to, that everything would be OK. That nothing was too serious. I waited to hear your voice singing *Baby don't worry, 'bout a thing, 'cause every little thing's gonna be alright...*

We waited for hours. Papá asked how you were and again I heard words like trauma, operation, as far as possible. I remembered how you used to hate that phrase, you said it was a pathetic expression, that you couldn't do things by halves. Mamá sat down, pressed her lips tightly together. She didn't want to cry. She must have thought you were going to be OK, that there was no reason to cry. She said, Cecilia, why don't you take Elena to the cafeteria. I don't want to go anywhere, I said, and I knew that Ceci didn't want to leave your side either, but eventually she pulled me up with the hand I was still holding onto and we went down to the cafeteria. We drank water, we didn't want anything else. It was the driest water I've ever tasted. We stayed there for a while, in silence. Ceci's eyes were full of tears, but she didn't cry either.

After a while we took the lift back upstairs and just as it opened we heard a cry. It was mamá. And we knew, Isa, just from that cry. We paused before going into the waiting room, perhaps thinking, deludedly, that we would get our strength back. And then I saw mamá as I have never seen her before or since, not even when I took the pills. She fell to the floor sobbing, and papá was crying too and I think he would have liked to fall too, but he didn't. Ceci clapped her hand to her mouth, letting go of mine. And everything turned a cold, pale white,

my ears didn't hear, they felt like they were made of cardboard. And then, then it all went blank.

I left with you, Isa.

We all left with you.