

Desabafo

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Desabafo: Fly, Pigeon, Fly

Dora, oh Dora, to this day I still dream about Dora. In my dreams, Dora is my General I get up from bed and I walk through the living room. I am puzzled but I know I am sleeping. I go to my car and peek inside. What I see makes me think of Dora: a pigeon is trapped inside my car. Right there in my dream I try to pull up my memories, of all the Dora stories that I thought I had put away forever. After all they belonged to my past, the little girl I once was. Yes, but I wanted for Dora's stories to stay in the past where they belong. Like my oldest brother Ivi said, the past is not called past for nothing.

Was the pigeon my unconscious waking up in my dreams?

Dora used to take us on all kinds of outings. She wanted her girls to be worldly girls. Most of the outings were a relief compared with the treatment we had inside the closed walls of the convent. Outside the convent walls we never witnessed Dora's bad spells. For Dora didn't show her rage in public. She would say this,

"Wait till later, *Fulana* or *Sicrana*, Just wait for my brown belt."

So, it was on those outings that I tricked myself into believing that I loved Dora. I even held Dora's hands, while I skipped beside her. Those were the moments I felt somewhat happy..
.Dora was the hen and we girls were her chicks.

It was nice to get out of the secluded suffocating walls of the convent. But going out was a different kind of nightmare, as if my life had been designed to have terrors everywhere I went.

Dear Reader, bear with me, the way I tell my story it is hard indeed to revisit the inferno of my tender years. I had the memories of Cidie and the pigeons juxtaposing themselves. And I

hope now that is not so confusing for you to understand the hell that I am trying to relate here. It was also confusing to me, the time when I dwelt in this inhumane hell.

What was my misery when one day Dora called out only a handful of us: "Tatie," -That was me—"Lola, Paquita, Nina, go get yourselves ready. I am taking you on a special outing." *Special* did not sound good to me or to Lola, so I whined, "My tummy hurts."

"You will have to come, Tatie, Lola if you want, you can stay. I can get someone else to be in your place."

The ache in my tummy got worse. I got very anxious about the *special* treatment until it was time to leave.

The whole time, I recognized the path to Aunty Lou's house. Finally, we stopped in front of a house I knew; it was my Aunty Lou's house. When the door opened, my nostrils filled with the stench of burning smoke from a dozen candles. Then I saw that Aunty Lou was collapsed over a tiny coffin—I know it is cousin Cidie, but I ask, "Where is Cidie?" I get pain in my stomach as if someone had punched me there. I want to think that Cidie was just playing dead. If she really died, would not someone have had the sense to tell me? Aunty Lou is crying for real. And Cidie just lies there. Then Lou pulls me to her again, I yank my arm back, but she tugs and pinches my hand, forcing me to pray with her. I jerk out of her grasp, and run to the convent walls where I finally stop and throw up.

Dear reader, another day I will tell you more about Cidie, because my stomach is hurting again. I am not sure I will ever pull up Cidie's file again.

Oh Dora, still, to this day, when I think of the thin misty rain on the hills of Cantareira, the memories of you follow. Oh Dora you wanted us to be worldly so you taught us to chase pigeons—pigeons that could not fly free.

I remember one early Spring Sunday. It was right after our nap, it must have been three o'clock in the afternoon, and the sun as usual was burning. Oh, it was hard to get up. The afternoon bell was going *bleim-bloum* insistently. I got up and I went downstairs and I walked out into the mouth of a giant furnace. The heat melted the unending hurt in my heart. Today is Sunday, *pe de cachimbo, cachimbo e de ouro...ThQ* other girls were singing a sad Sunday song and my heart sank. Amidst the gurgling laughter and the song singings of the others, I could never stop thinking of my family and wondering what they were doing at that moment.

Sprig was in the air in Sao Paulo but I remember that September sun seemed to be tattooing its color onto my skin. Thus that hot Sunday afternoon, Dora packed crispy bread, creamy *Catupiri* cheese, cold meat *mortadela*, and lots of tangy *limonada* with chunks of lemons inside. We climbed inside a big bus. We were so excited that we were all singing. I worked at smiling especially. I always had a long face, even when I smiled.

Dora said, "Really, Tatie!" (Dora called me by the nickname my peers had given me. Dora broke the rule; she named me as my friends named me. She strode into my world of make believe. There was no running away from Dora.)

"Really, Tatie! Sometimes I think you are a wise lady in the body of a fragile child."
Dora had me trapped; there was no way to run.

We arrived in the pigeon aviary, the *pombal*. We descended from the bus, and stayed under the shade of a weeping willow that bestowed a tiny breeze upon us. We walked to the

great pavilion, where there were men shooting at the pigeons. In front of the aviary there was a man standing tall and Dora called to us,

"Girls, I want you to salute the president of this wonderful precinct. He is the designer of this place and the tower." In unison, we saluted the tall man, dressed in khaki pants and a checkered shirt and sunglasses.

"Good afternoon *Senhor* Matapombos!"

Dora then pointed at the top of the tower.

"See there, girls, the pigeons inside the tower?"

That was when I saw the pigeons trapped in the tower, flying in the small space of their cage, bumping into one another, then yet another. Lola and I held hands. Lola was happy; here outside we could be friends. If Lola was happy, I could be happy too.

"Lola, please tell me this is not happening."

"Those are caged pigeons for real."

"Why, then pinch me to prove it to me." Lola then twisted and pulled on my skin.

"Ouch!"

"Quiet now, Tatie, Dora is telling us how clever those caged pigeons are." Dora pointed at the tower, and said,

"Do you see the pigeons there on the tower? Just one pigeon at a time can get out of the tower, and this is a test of intelligence. Only some pigeons are able to find the trap door and then be able to fly free."

Dora loved when some girls, some birds, or some other animals acted intelligently. She smiled, to see a pigeon pushing open the lever with its beak and flapping its wings, rising out of the tower's trap door into freedom. The pigeon had barely tasted its relief when I heard the noise

of a bullet ricocheting into the air. Bullets were flying and the pigeons were falling. I had to ask,

"But what happened to the pigeon?" Dora was boasting and talking about the pigeons, and the other girls cooed after her.

"What a clever pigeon. He knew how to find the trap door and fly free." Then another pigeon, and yet another... *Ploft! Ploft!* The pigeons were escaping and falling by the dozens. Dora was smiling and talking so openly with all the girls, even with Lola. Dora said again,

"Look there Lola, look Tatie, did you see that one?"

"Dora if the pigeon is intelligent shouldn't it stay inside?" With tears trickling down my face I continued. "The pigeons are not flying away. They are falling, falling, one, two, three...."

Dora looked at me, reading the wisdom of my words. For a second only I saw that she had appreciated what I said. However, Mr. Matapombos was standing by Dora. I was not listening, inside my chest I felt something burning as if the bullet was inside my heart. With great effort, I forced the words out.

"Dora, the ones that find the trap door and peck their way out are not intelligent, they cannot be, because they are being killed." Pointing to the pigeons, I pleaded, "There, look, another one just fell."

Falling,

Ploft.

Thudding.

"Look." Dora pointed to an invisible pigeon and murmured, "That one is the cleverest of them all—it sure escaped."

Matapombos then mocked, "Not long, our sportsmen are agile and fast."

Dora shouted instructions at us to go and fetch the falling pigeons. Matapombos with his *pince nez* pointed to us where the dead pigeons had plunged. He threw at us burlap sacks and his instructions.

"Fill these up, girls, and bring them back in here." Matapombos saw our questioning eyes. "Oh, take as many as you want, fill as many bags as you wish. You will have a wonderful dinner for tomorrow night."

From my corner, I watched how the other girls were quick to obey, but I still did not understand how fast they could shift from disgust to laughing and chatting garrulously and did not fuss to perform such a horrendous task. Now they were stuffing the burlap sacks. Even Lola was caddying lifeless pigeons.

"Lola, these pigeons, *coitadinhos*, were just killed and you are putting them in the bag."

"This is not so bad of a chore."

"Lola, if we bring them home we will have to eat them."

"You crazy, Tatie. Pigeon's meat is better than chicken. I heard Mr. Matapombos telling that to Dora." Lola was reasoning if pigeon meat were better than chicken meat, then the nuns would be getting the pigeons for their table. I did not trust, not only my heart was hurting but my stomach as well. I swore I was not going to eat the pigeons, even if I had to starve. Then I thought again. It was better not to be true to my promises; otherwise, I was going to have an early death, just like Cidie.

The older girls had half-filled their burlap sack. I looked again, and to my disbelief, everybody seemed to have been having a great time pigeon caddying.

For once I did not fight Dora, I did not fight what was in front of me, I just obeyed.... The girls were having a hell of a time and I for a change was going to try to have fun, too.

Lola called me, "Come, Tatie, it isn't that bad. See, touch this one. Feel—it is hot. It is not cold like your cousin Cidie."

"Did you touch Cidie that day? You never told me."

"I bet Nina if she would give her new eraser I would touch Cidie. So I touched Cidie's dead body."

"I never saw your new eraser, Lola. You lie."

"You never saw because I ate it on the way back home to pretend it was chewing gum. The other girls thought your Aunty Lou had given me the gum. You know after you left that day, Lou came to me and held my hand, too. I was happy that a person touched me with love. You know, Tatie, Dora only touches to make it hurt."

I felt for Lola and said, "That is not true, Lola, I touch you all the time."

"You don't count. You are a child yet. Your Aunty Lou said that I was the spitting image of Our Lady Aparecida; you know she is black like me. I liked your Aunty Lou the best. Now every time she sees me she gives me candies. She told me not to tell you."

I thought, Lou was paying promises to the saints and to Our Lady of Aparecida. That is why she was trying to do good by Lola. My mother and Lou made deals with the saints in the church all the time. They made bargains with the saints, gods, and sometimes even with the good dead people in our family. I never saw Mother or Lou pay back their promises. I was not sure if that is what Lou was doing that day with Lola.

"Touch it, Tatie."

"Touch what?"

"The pigeon, touch it"

Trembling but curious, I touched, slightly, the still-warm bird. I saw that its chest was rising and receding.

"Its heart is still beating." Lola picked up the pigeon and looked for injuries. Not a drop of blood. "This pigeon is afraid; I think it is just resting." We looked around and put it in the hollow of a tree. "I will go and get some food and water for it." I went to tell Dora that I felt faint. I was planning to faint anyway. I knew that was a good way to get food.

"Why are you not with the rest, Tatie?" Dora asked me as I approached her.

"I think I am going to faint." Dora made no fuss, handed me some food and water, and tucked a piece of chocolate into my pocket and said,

"Hurry, scat with the others now, and make sure you stay in a shady spot. This heat will make a man like Mr. Matapombos faint."

After I got the goodies, I went back before she had time to stop me. I was starting to have fun. I was saving at least one of the pigeons. Lola put the food close to the pigeon and held water in her palm. The pigeon drank from her palm. Then I got the chocolate, broke it in two, and gave Lola some. Then we ran and joined the others and helped them fill the bags. There were three burlap bags full of dead pigeons when we were done for the day. Then we washed our hands, ate sandwiches with provolone and mortadela, and drank warm lemonade. The heat was unforgiving.

"Come back next week," said Mr. Matapombos when we were leaving. "And next week are going to serve real pizza." Dear reader, we took one sack full of dead pigeons with us. The other two bags were sent to the nursing home nearby. Inside the bus, we all smelled like wet pigeons; we were all one when came to smells. Dora was so happy. She said,

"When we get home we are going to pluck out the feathers of the pigeons and we are going to roast them outside on a big bonfire."

Everybody was good at plucking at the dead pigeons' feathers.

"How do you do it, Lola?"

"Well, pull on the feathers one by one, like so." Lola held firmly on a feather and yanked it out.

"Let me have a turn." I pulled, and pulled on a feather but it would not give way. I tried and tried. It took a long time for me to finish plucking my pigeon. I only threw up once.

What was happening to me? I never wanted to obey before, and now, I was ready to give up the fight. The pigeon gave their lives to us, and now I was giving them my fights. Deal! That was a good deal indeed.

Lola interrupted my thought and asked,

"Why, Tatie, did you leave your Aunt's house the day of Cidie's funeral?" "Lou said I was the spitting image of Cidie." "What was wrong with that? Cidie did look like you." "Stop it, Lola. I got a stomach ache when Lou said that to me." "You did not cry for Cidie, and Lou was upset about that." "Lou said she wished it was me that had died instead of Cidie. She told me, 'Tatie, you look like my Cidie, but you are alive and well. I wish she was with the nuns instead of you.'" "Did you see how she clutched my hand between hers, and started to pray aloud?" "That is how she held my hands with hers, too."

"You didn't feel seek in your stomach, Lola?"

"No, why? I liked that a person touched me."

"I was so grossed out, that she wanted me to be her saint. Lola, she doesn't deserve any saint.'

Some years later, Aunty Lou asked me.

"Why did you have to do a thing like that?" Just like that, as if Cidie was still laying in there in her little box.

"Oh well, Lou, I sure have no idea what you are talking about."

"You know, girl. You know pretty well, what I am talking about. You just could not comfort me that day. I used to think you were a saint, just being raised by the nuns. You were just the devil, you were, you and that twin of yours. You may fool Cali, your mother, all your brothers, and the nuns, but you will never fool me. Do you hear me, girl? Do not go and pretend now. The likes of you cannot fool me." I could not stomach Lou's talk. The uneasiness in my stomach came back as soon as I would see her. I said,

"Next time you have a dead person in your house, don't you dare call the nuns to pray for you.

"Malcriadal You are badly raised! I will tell on you to your mama."

Dear reader, I have to confess one more thing. I tasted the pigeon.

DESABAFO: Children of War

Did I say Dona Gioconda screamed like crazy every time it rained? No, Dona Gioconda screamed like crazy because the war had squished her house to nothing.

I, at least, saw Dona Gioconda running in the starless night in her soaked nightgown. The lightning was as blinding as the night, and the thunder tore through the blindness. *Cabrooonnm*, one bang after another endlessly. Breaking down, piercing through the pregnant clouds. *Cracklaatiiichhhh*. Pouring more rain. *Plattiffff*. The *raios* shards of light illuminated the night for a slice of a second. There, I spied Dona Gioconda running, *na noite*. For a second only, I could see her almost naked body. Do you know this happened every time we had tempestuous weather? Dona Gioconda was louder than the thunder. You could always know that her screams would follow the first crack.

"Run! Run everyone, run away from *la Guerra*. This is the end of the world. The war, *Gesu Bambino!* Mussolini *figlio de putana!* *Il Duce*, the traitor. Up in the sky the fighter planes, down on the ground, the bombs, and the shrapnel. There is no place to run. I cannot run." *Cabroomm spla-tkrtchum*. More rain-washed down in front of Dona Gioconda's house, flooding our street like a river. Dona Gioconda ran against the current.

My eyes stung trying to penetrate into the black night. Then another crack and more sparklers pierced through the darkness.

I saw Gioconda running through the muddy waters alone, screaming. Many a night I witnessed the theatre of life with the rain as its background. It was a torment to be awakened by the thunderous night, knowing Gioconda's screams would follow.

Cabroomm spla-tkrtchumchizizzzzz. "Mussolini, // *Duce*, fascist, son of a bitch!" Her cries tore through her mouth to attack the night. Some of the girls in my room would bury their heads under their thick pillows—me, I needed to see. It was less scary that way.

Not even Gioconda's broad-shouldered sons, Gianni, Bruno, Sandro and Piero, could contain *la mama*.

"Please mama! Come to the house now. What are the nuns going to think?"

"The nuns? *Me nefregol* They didn't care when my house came down, and the bombs exploded right there in front of me and killed my *nona*"

"But mama, that happened when you were a little girl in Italy, and now you live in Brazil."

"Everything is the same shit!" They could not take hold of *la mama*

Dona Gioconda would open her arms big as if she were the thunder itself and elbowed them out of her way. Dona Gioconda was, for sure, the strongest woman I had ever seen in my life. She was fast too.

The Dona tore through the streets like a tornado. She carried herself so elegantly, even running in the stormy rain, in the flood. I could see her statuesque silhouette. She looked like a prima Dona, but instead of singing, she screamed like hell.

The next morning, just a few hours after the night apparition, we girls walked in lines to the chapel. And the neighbors of the convent went to mass day in and day out. In church sitting in the first pew on the right hand side, was Dona Gioconda, kneeling in front of Baby Jesus. Could she not see that he was just an infant?

The front pews had been assigned to the novices, then behind them the regular nuns; however, when Dona Gioconda came, dressed in silk, she always took the first pew—then the novices had to be reassigned to the rows just behind her. One of the nuns sitting close to me said to another nun, "Don't bother with *La Gioca*, The Joker." But they sat behind.

When the procession of believers left the mass, I wove myself into the crowd to get outside of the heavy iron gates of the convent. We children asked every adult for their blessings, and in reply, they gave us change for candy. I took my money, and I ran to the bakery. I passed the butcher opening his shop; he was taking slabs, flank, ribs, and parts of rumps, hanging them on the big hooks overhead. Blood dripped down on the saw-dusted floor. Mr. Juancho, who escaped from Franco, now lived in my neighborhood. He was busy, but when he saw me, he motioned his head to greet me and I said, "*A bengao*\ Bless me, *Senhor* Juancho."

"*Deus te Abengoe*, Tatie! Do me a favor; tell Sister Francine to come and get the beef tenders that I have specially separated for her."

"*Senhor* Juancho, we girls never get to eat any of that."

Mr. Juancho's face grew red. He avoided my eye. I took advantage of that, and said, "*Senhor* Juancho, did you hear Dona Gioconda last night?"

"I have no idea what you are talking about, girl."

"Were you sleeping during last night's storm?" I asked.

"No, I never saw such a thing like that storm in my life, not even in the most remote part of Spain."

"But Dona Gioconda...?" He pretended not to know what I was talking about. "I will tell Sister Francine about the tenders." *Beef tenders that I never get to see.*

I continued on my way to the bakery. I saw Mr. Manuel pulling from the oven a tray of hot bread that smelled like home happiness. Mr. Manuel broke a piece of the hot bread and gave to me. Chewing on it I said, "*Senhor* Manuel, I want candy."

"Which candy, girl, that one?"

"No."

"That one over there?"

"Noo."

"*Que raios!*" Mr. Manuel swore out loud.

"I want *passoca*."

"*Que raios!* Why didn't you tell me that right away?"

Raios, lightening, I remembered what I had gone there for. Actually, I had never forgotten about it. But I did not know how to strike up a conversation with adults. I never knew when they were going to explode.

"Did you see the *raios* last night?"

"I see it and hear it, girl, I hear it every night."

"And last night did you see Dona Gioconda?"

"Forget it, girl, it wasn't her. Didn't you see her in church this morning? It couldn't be Dona Gioconda that went mad last night."

"It was her; I always see and hear Dona Gioconda."

"Do me a favor, girl, don't tell anyone about that."

"Why not, *Senhor* Manuel?"

He turned his back and washed his hands for the longest time. I stood there and watched him until I heard the thundering steps of Mr. Batiste, the dentist. I left Mr. Manuel, and ran to talk to the French man on his way to his apartment above the bakery.

I hid my candy. Mr. Batiste did not believe that children and candy went well together. I wondered why. I opened my mouth big and pointed to my fillings and said, "*Senhor Bachiste, shee* how good my *taath* look."

"Very good, it looks wonderful. It is shining! No *bon-bon!* Do you hear me?"

"*bon-bon, Senhor* Batiste?"

He explained, "*Doce, candy!*"

"Did you hear Dona Gioconda, last night cursing // *docel*"

"No, // *Duce. Aiil La guerre. Mon Dieu*\ Hear me girl! We all came to Brazil to forget about the horrors of the war."

"But Dona Gioconda can't forget it."

"She forgot. Didn't you see her this morning in her fineries, taller than ever? Or for that matter every morning, sitting like a real saint in the front pew?" Not even Mr. Batiste could talk about Dona Gioconda....

"*Abenqao, Senhor* Batiste!" He then touched my head and said, "Bless you!" and he gave me some coins.

I was opening the heavy gates to go back to the orphanage, when I saw Mr. Zelinsky coming my way stumbling and walking in an "S," and limping all at the same

time. Mr. Ze came from Romania, or was it Albania? He drank all the time and talked about the war; he was not able to forget the war.

"Senhor Zelinsky, did you hear Dona Gioconda last night?"

"Dona Gioconda?" Pointing in the direction of her house, he nodded yes, but I did not understand Mr. Zelinsky slurred while trying hard to speak Portuguese. The only thing I understood was when he said,

"The war." Mr. Zelinsky was the only person that did not deny Dona Gioconda's storm. He said again,

"The war!" An acrid mixture of old smells rose up from the scalding morning. Mr. Zelinsky did as he always did, as soon he saw me. Fumbling, he would pull on the leg of his pants with great struggle, point to his knee and with effort he say,

"See this?" I touched the protruding cold metal thingy on Mr. Ze's knee.

I saw Mr. Manuel coming toward us.

"Now, now, Ze, how many times I told you not to do that? Come to the bakery. Have some coffee with me. You can have some sweet bread to go with it, too."

I went back inside the orphanage. After I closed myself in behind the weighty gate, a heavy shadow overpowered me. That was Dona Gioconda leaving the church. Not knowing what to do, I stretched my hand to her and I quickly said,

"Bless me, Dona Gioconda/"

"To hell with you all!" was her reply.

The Bath

Fafie, after the last time we were together, in Rio, I am face to face with the portrait of you and Auntie Paloma. I have so often wondered what happened to it. The last time I saw it was at Paloma's house when you were still around, Fafie.

I remember that was several days after your birthday, your fourth year birthday. A sunny day of May, fall season was at its fullest, trees lazily throwing their leaves on the ground in Auntie Paloma's backyard and the lazy sun casting its long, cold shadow, a shadow that was larger than life—it followed me wherever I went.

Mama had moved in with Auntie Paloma and *provisorio* was a word she used all the time. She would say,

"We are only going to stay here at Paloma's *provisorio*." That was right after Dad died but Mama told you and me that he was on a voyage.

The same thing happened the day she took you away.

I do not remember much about what happened after that because the memory of my life without you is not worse to remember. I do remember the time we spent with Auntie Paloma.

One morning mother started her day happier than she had been for a long time. Again, she said, "Ximena, while we are staying here *provisorio* at Paloma's we are going to have a portrait of Auntie Paloma and Fafie together, and because Fafie is young I want you to entertain Fafie while the painter is sketching them."

"What about me? I want a portrait, too!" I remember crying until Paloma promised me one, too. I was not one to believe any adults, especially Mama, but Auntie Paloma, who looked so much like

Mama, I believed. Auntie Paloma had black hair and she looked like a good fairy. The picture of me was the one by the same artist and I usually sat for her after you and Paloma were done for the day. I was so tired then that I sat there in the blue armchair. I saw the picture of me sitting on the blue armchair, many years later in a gallery, in Rio. Strange to say, but I do not remember the other armchairs in Auntie Paloma's atelier. I only remember the blue chair that I sat on. There was *toto* sleeping on a blue chair too, though I remember *toto* sitting on my lap.

Because you could not sit still in Auntie's lap, my job every morning was to sit there shaking toys at you. Sometimes I held *neca*. Do you remember? That was your favorite doll! You would stretch your cute little arms at me and say, "*Da, da my neca.*" I wanted to hand you the doll but Mama would give me a *cascudo*, knock hard on my head with her knuckles, if I disobeyed her orders. But I played a game of hide and seek with your doll while you watched me attentively. When the portrait started, it was OK if you looked away; it was towards the end that you had to be looking down. Sometimes, when I hid *neca* from you, you faked tears and as soon you saw your *neca*, again you gave a good laugh. It was a laugh that only you could laugh, full of *gs* and *rs*, *ggggrrrrrrraannns*, or sometimes you cooed and gurgled as when you were still a little baby. Oh, Fafie, how much I loved you those days! And I played like that with you for a long time. Sometimes, I dozed off there in the floor, still holding *neca* near you. But I awoke when Aunty Paloma would call my name and say,

"Ximena, carry on with the hide and seek game, only a little bit more." Paloma was sweet with you; she pretended that she was bathing you. For the portrait, she wore a warm bathing robe while you were naked, your hair black, the same shade as Paloma's. After a while, you were cold and tired and started to whine and cry,

"Enough, no more, down now, down," your faint whine *crescendoing* into loud screeching,

"*Cheeeega, noooo mooooore, I colllld gimmmme bonbons*" Mama would then rush in from the adjacent room with her hands full of *bonbons*, and offer them to you, but by now, not even the candies worked to fool you anymore. You pushed her hands full of goodies away, and screamed some more. That was when I would collapse on my blue chair. Your portrait was very tiring for me too.

"OK, enough for today," Paloma would announce, "the child is tired and I am tired too. Now it is your turn, Ximena, the painter is going to work on your portrait."

I was so tired that I would dig my elbows in the sofa looking for a soft spot, and would fall into a slumber without dreams. That was the same thing for many weeks -until the day you were there no more.

I will remember, forever, the day Mama took you away. It was in the middle of June, the month for bonfires, firecrackers and real balloons, full of balloons floating, flickering, and flying away, real balloons with torches. Uncle Dilon helped us ignite one.

"What makes the balloon fly, Uncle?"

"The heat makes the balloon fly. It gets hot inside, and hot air is lighter than normal air and it helps the balloon to fly." We also played a lot with the Chinese firecrackers and Paloma's house was all decorated with Chinese lanterns. The luminaries and the starry nights had a particular smell; it was the smell of the red earth mixed with burned firecrackers—to this day embedded in my memory. The day was so full of you, Fafie. It was all a heaven to me but like the sparklers we played with -it all was extinguished. It was hard for me to have known paradise and then to spend the rest of my life wishing I would again find it....

That morning, I woke up and the *vitrola* was still on and playing an old *chorinho*, *Eu quero a alegria de crianqas brincando...* "I want to be surrounded with the laughter of children playing..." Dolores Duran's loud blues voice still reverberates in my ears, making everything still and fresh in my mind like yesterday. As was expected of me, I fetched the toys and I set the basin with water and the pitcher by the easel in the study room. Now, near the end, Mama had bought you a red chiffon dress and red shoes with silky socks that she set in the boudoir, a place you could see when sitting with Paloma.

"Fafie, this is your new dress Mama bought especially for you. You are not supposed to wear the dress, not yet, not until the picture is done."

"New *tido* Mama, new *tido* for Ximena too?"

"New red shoes for you, hon."

"Red all mine."

As always, you cried for something. Whenever you saw your new dress, you started whining, "*Da, da tido, sapato, gimme* my dress and shoes, red all mine." Although you spoke well for your age you liked to talk baby talk; you knew all the adults loved it. Me too, I loved it, for you were my *doce de coco*, Fafie, my *Ximena*, my coconut candy full of sugar!

That cold June morning I went into Mama's closet where she used to keep the toys that I used to entice you with. But I did not find a thing. Not even the portrait was not in the studio anymore, it too, was gone. Something was not right, but I went in all the closets of the house looking for your red shoes and red dress—nothing to be found. *The dress and the red sandals were gone with you inside them*, I thought. Then I rushed to Mama's bedroom. She was not there either and neither were you my *doce de coco*, my little *Fafie*. For me and you only, it meant little sister. The air was heavy, the same way as when daddy was not there anymore.

Where was everyone? I started to cry... I heard someone in the kitchen and rushed there. I wanted the smell of you, my coconut candy full of sugar, and like a kitten, I sniffed the air for your vanilla scent. But all I got was the strong smell of coffee.

Mama was there sitting on one side of the table, holding her head in both of her hands, as if it too was going to disappear or fall apart. Uncle Dilon, her oldest brother, was sitting on the other end, also looking terribly sad, Mama then handed me a cup of the strong coffee, and she scooped several spoons of sugar into it and while she stirred, she said,

"Drink this, you need it."

"Mama, I am only seven, I never drink coffee." She said again, 'You drink it today. You need it. Don't cry hon, don't cry.'"

"Where is Fafie?" I cried.

"Oh Fafie," she said trying to sound normal, "Fafie went out with Paloma." I tried the coffee. I needed something to hold me down. I felt light as a feather. I knew she was lying. I felt the same way when daddy was gone too.

"Liar!" I screamed, "You sent her away!"

"Tell her, Cali," I heard Uncle Dilon say in a whisper,

"She needs to know the truth."

"Don't, Dilon, hold your tongue!" As I twisted my fingers in a knot, I screamed,

"I know you took her away, all her clothes and toys are gone." I screamed so much and kicked mother's legs.

"Liar, liar, *liarrrrT*

Words kept going through my head. What was it that she might have told you? I wonder how she must have bribed you, especially after the long period of the portrait while everyone was running out of ideas to bribe you. Oh, I know this is what she did: first she bathed you as usual, probably asking you to shush so I would not wake up. Probably then saying,

"Today, honey, you are going to keep your new red dress and new carmine shoes on, as long as you please." Remember, red was your favorite color.

"I am going to wear my *tido*, my *sapato* the whole day long, all red."

"Yes, sweetie, and you can take your dolly too, for I am taking you on an outing."

"Outing with *necal* No *Ximena*, Mama?"

"Not this time, Mama is going to take you to the zoo to see monkeys."

Was this what she told you, my Fafie, when she took you away? I will never know because several months later when we met again, we no longer shared our world: it was gone forever.

Now, as I look at the portrait trying very hard to remember the smell of vanilla on your skin, to remember your voice and to remember your laughter, to me....

I remember the painter wanted you to be looking down,

"Ximena, put something in the basin so Fafie can look down, I want Fafie to gaze into the water. Maybe she will find her own reflection there." It was then that I put the beautiful blue-green marble into the water. A strange noise followed when I knocked the marble against the enameled basin *pppinpannnn*. To please you, I kept touching the basin with the glass marble and making the

pinnpaannn noise, until one time the marble rolled under your chubby foot. You tried to reach for the marble the painter said,

"Great pose! That is exactly what I want. I want Fafie gazing down."

"This is very good," said, Paloma. I think I heard her choking up as she said,

"Fafie really loves you, Ximena." She faltered short. Everyone in the house knew what was about to happen but you and me.

Maybe that is what Mama meant by *provisorio*; my life and yours together was but a little piece of paradise. Still trying to reach for the blue-green marble under your foot you gurgled for the last time for me saying,

"Get it, Ximena, my Mena *Ggggrrrrrrrrann.*"

The Green Dress

Was it a day of June or July? Oh, I know now, it must have been September, because spring was just starting then. I remember now the yellow *Ipe* tree was in flower, and wet with droplets of the quick spring showers that had just passed. Coming to think of it, the purple *Ipe* tree on the backyard was also filled with blossoms just ready to open.

Mama, what did the telegram say? My mama tried to hide from me that papa died, but mother could not conceal from me the truth. Because I remember how mama put her raw heart on the table.

Pulling on the hem of Mama's dress, "*Mamae*, where *ispapaaiiiT* (But mama screamed more than all of us until her throat got so raw and red.)

What did the telegram say? In the little paper that mother dropped on the floor, I recognized my daddy's name because of the 'J,' and *hoje*, today, and everything else was just long strings of letters jumbled together making it hard to understand the meaning underneath it all: "Joaquim *morreu* today at dawn." When you put these letters together *m-o-r-r-e-u* what does it read? *uufffhhhhufffhhhh....*

Now mama was outside, under the shady purple *Ipe*, she got a big caldron and put water to boil, and put inside the caldron a black powder. I saw the water, darkening, and looking like the sky on a stormy afternoon. I did see, too, the real clouds traveling so fast inside the caldron. And the dark dye seemed to be racing and trying to catch up with the clouds too.

What did the telegra...? I did not know the names of the clouds then, but I knew it looked just like heavy clouds, heavy with rain, heavy with *lagrimas* just like mother's eyes.

What did the tele...? Now mama was screaming, "Susana bring your first and second best, you are old enough to mourn for your father now that he is gone. And like that you can accompany me and wear black too."

What did the tele...?

What... ? Susana was only eleven in 1959, and she in a plea to mama, "Mama! Green, is the color of my dress, green suits me, I am happy with my beautiful dress just the way it is."

What did the telegram say? "Oh, girl, now you think you can do whatever you wish, don't you know you have no saying about what you want. Especially now, that your father is gone to be with our lord, the redeemer."

But mama what did the telegram say? "Susana, bring your dress, I said, don't you behave as if you have been badly brought up. Go Dilon, yank the dress from your sister, and throw into the dyed water."

MAMA... WHAT DID THE TELEGRAM SAY? Susana ran in circles around the back yard, with fast Dilon in her wake.

What did the telegram saYYYYY? Dilon, like Neptune himself, threw Susana's attire in the pot—a storm was now concocting. Will it thunder?

What did the telegram say *Mamdel* Susana cried that day and to this day, she does not understand why she hates everything black.

What does it mean *m-o-r-r-e-u, Mamaef?*

The Blank Space

On Reading *the Blank Page* by Isak Dinesen

"And at the very end the fabric
Is laid out on the grass to bleach...."

This memory is also mine
I'd forgotten— It had
been hidden under My
helplessness.

My front upper tooth is missing
With my tongue I tease the

empty space

A warm breeze is blowing,
My mother is outside with Lara,
Today is washing day,
They spread the pale laundry on the
Grown green grass.
My mother speaks with her midday voice,
"This is a shady meadow now,
Soon, the noon sun will move in
And light up my washings."

I hear an Old Portuguese tune,
"Portuguese washers Wash their
linen early morning... " Mother
repeats the old refrain The clothes
are

...*watered time after time.*

Until the sun removes Yesterday's
dirt.

She then, rinses, rings, and suspends her Linen—like
flags flapping, flying in the cloth line-Drying in the
sun.

What about making the boys pretty too?

Only the girls had to follow the rule In school We needed To tie a white Ribbon in our hair It had to sit On the top of our head So for a substantial Head of hair like mine There was only one solution One needed to grab a Handful of hair Tie it with A white bow Pull and stretch Like a tug of war Then ready for the butterfly loop On a good hair day My ribbon stayed up Until we sang The Brazilian hymn

Ouviramdo *pirangaasmargensplacidas*
Singing the song as if It was one big word I'd hold my breath But on a bad hair day my bow Limped to the side By the time we all stood to sing My head leaned sideways too So while Aurelio next to me Was already singing the *refrain Oh Patria amada Brasil Salve! Salve!* I was still Singing *Desta igualdade...*

Lampiao Was his Name

Sipping coffee with mother I said,
"But *mamae* the scary tales about *Lampiao*
Were stories *thatpapai* told us
On rainy days?"
Oh no! They were
Real stories for sure.
Why do people nickname him *Lampiaol*
Because he always came
In the quiet of the night
Holding a gas lamp.
Lampiao, my daughter,
Raped the land
And the women in it. And took
From the rich to give to the poor.
My grandparents left Bahia behind where
The trees *offrutapao* gave us solace
From the boiling sun.
And came here to Sao Paulo
In the middle of a coffee
Plantation, rows and rows of coffee
Trees standing like soldiers.
I had just lost my tooth
When *Lampiao* started to attack the
Roc. as of Bahia. The carnage
Happened too often.
One time Grandpa Zuza came back
In the middle of the night.
He was white as paper. He started
To put things into bundles and we
Did the same.
The silence was loud
And smelled like crushed bones.
Papal and mamae, all the ranch hands
Grabbed a pot packed a *louca*.
Vovo Calu made
Farofa with chicken, *acarajes* and *canjica*
A lot for a long trip.
Next morning the furniture
Was all covered and we had bundles
Of goods waiting
To be packed on the mules.
Grandpa Zuza then said,
"I am happy you
Kept yourself busy, but
We are traveling unnoticed."
The food and the clothes
On our back was all we could take.
But at the last minute, Calu
Grabbed a tea cup and saucer and
Stuffed them in her bosom.

Mother looked at the dainty
China in my hand. "You look
just like her."

Go There *Fulana* and Ask that Mother the Name of Her Child

"That one looks just like my little Tatie..."
After my mother gave me away
(She went around the tumultuous city
Looking for me)
In every little face that
She passed she'd see
A bit of me
"Look at that little *bemtevi*¹
It is as if I am seeing my Tatie..."
Even though we had real names
Mother had a funny way
To refer to her children
"Go *there fulano or fulana*, go *there sicrano*
Or *sicrana, betralno or beltrana* and ask this other
Mother for the name of her
Child And, oh, remember to tell
that mother that my
Tatie
Looks just like her little one." Lara
the oldest sister was normally
Fulana
Dilon was *sicrano*— But the
rest of us were *Beltranos* and
sicranas So and so this, so and
so that...

Today I saw a woman just like Mother
Infatuated by a little child
Repeating
"She looks just like..."
Nobody gave her importance,
But I stared at her,
While she gazed at the child

"Go *there fulana* ask that lady her name Tell her I
have a mother that acts just like her, Oh, do not
forget to ask her, Her name."

¹ Bemtevi (*Pitangus sulphuratus* L.) a small bird that when he sings it sounds like it is saying "bem te vi" that translates as 'I see you'

You are the little babushka inside of me

Sunday is empty because
You are not,
Not there.

You Think you can
run away

You In that
Japan so far—
Me Here
empty without
You

I Left mother,
too, but it is
Her That
looks back at
Me In the
mirror now.
I
Am inside of
Her

You Are
inside of
Me
Sophie
You are my little
Babushka.

The Blank Space

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"And at the very end the fabric
Is laid out on the grass to bleach...."

This memory is also mine
I'd forgotten-It had been
hidden under My
helplessness.

My front upper tooth is missing
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mother is outside with Lara, Today
is washing day, They spread the
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linen early morning... " Mother
repeats the old refrain The clothes
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...wateredtime after time.

Until the sun removes Yesterday's
dirt.

She then, rinses, rings, and suspends her Linen—like
flags flapping, flying in the cloth line— Drying in the
sun.

CARLALBERTA

A tall Italian nun
She had a mustache
And a way with children
We children had a way with her.

When Carlalberta first came to live
With us, she did not speak a Word
of Portuguese. It was my duty To
teach her.

Carlalberta was loud
And pointed to things as if she
Were the teacher—
"Tatie, what do you call this?"
Oh cloth?
I did not tell her *pano*
Instead, I said,
"*Cano.*"
Then, holding a pair of scissors
She asked again,
"And what is this?"
So, *tesoura* became *besoura*.

Another nun walks in.
Carlalberta a good learner said,
"I need a *besoura* to cut the *cano.*"
"Why on earth do you want to cut the water pipe?"

Like a tomcat, I showed teeth

'ttttt' te-
sou-ra

Carlalberta put her teeth together

'T'T'T'T'T'T'T'T'T'T'

As I looked at Carlalberta's mouth
I saw under her well-trimmed mustache
That her teeth were as tall as the rest of her,
Like a white picket fence,
Perfectly lined one after the other, but
Shinning like new silk cloth.

Good News From the US

It is not only the crow that Comes
to play in my backyard Here also
comes the hummingbird,

O helicopter full of love!

That delights
In the store-bought
Nectar
I wonder if in my ignorance
I am trapping you
With this false ambrosia.

One little tenderness
Resting in a tiny leaf
It pinches
Inside its iridescent plumes
Scratches
The back
With its long bill
(Handy to reach hard places in it's tiny back)
Ah, if only I could hear
Your songs....
But the CAW, CAW, of the
Black birds fills up the air
If I hear your voice
I die of love.

Once a salesman knocked at Cali's front door

When Cali opened the door For the
salesman, "Pardon me, sir, my small
abode, It has not always been like
this.

I used to live under the vast blue sky
Where the birds sang,
The frog croaked, and the sun was my ally.
Rainy days were my day of rest,
And the wind was my children's lullaby,
When it blew, they could hear
The voice of the luscious verdant trees
Swishing and bending..."

She took her visitor
Straight to the kitchen
Where she put water on
To boil, To make fresh coffee for the
salesman,
"You will take a cup of coffee, won't you sir?"
Already pouring the hot sweet fluid for her company,
She too, sipped her coffee.

How she used to be happy
But she did not know that,
Now she yarns
For her trees, for her birds.
She tells about the jackfruit trees
The ambrosia of her children
She tells how
Uirapuru
Was the best singer of them all
How his melody was so beautiful
That all the other birds stopped
To hear the *Uirapunfs* rich harmonies.

The salesman sat in Cali's kitchen, Sipping
his hot coffee While round and round,
whirling, turning, She spun the cloth of her
life.