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## But Who Could Have Known? (Grief, Gratitude)

Thomas Glave

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But how could anyone have known? Known or believed that even now, nearly three decades since your sister's death from aggressive breast cancer at her tender age of forty-one, that remembering it today would feel so eviscerating even now, in the present day? It wouldn't have been possible for anyone who knew you back then as someone who often smiled a great deal (even if sometimes clearly disingenuously), and who laughed and joked frequently (though the jokes rarely succeeded) that such fierce remembering, forced through the guts, would have the power and stamina even now to clench itself so painfully in the chest.

The chest and heart: exactly where your sister still really *is*, while on this earth she absolutely no longer is, and for a long time now hasn't been. Your only sibling. (Even now it's a little easier if you don't write her name.) On that rainy Sunday afternoon back in 1991, after receiving the news *over the telephone* of her sudden and unexpected death after so many years of her combating that pre-menopausal cancer, did you really believe that you'd someday still feel this angry? (And this furious at God or whomever, and this prepared to rip apart the world with your bare hands... yet in spite of so much shaking of your fist in God's sometimes cruel face, and even daring to *spit at* His face, risking the palpable threat of eternal damnation, you somehow managed to remain a faithful Catholic... even a sincerely penitent one, even when scorned by agnostic and atheist friends for what they viewed as possession of a ludicrous faith.) Your slack-jawed gaze upon learning of her death aside, could you have believed that such rage, that kind that burns in the bowels and really does taste worse than shit, could have endured for so long?

But how did it endure so long? How, in a world of so many more important things, a world filled with the most hideous tragedies? A world of wars that even when they eventually end (fortunately not always in a mushroom cloud) invariably begin again; the same world in which semi-automatic rifles are aimed at mosques, syna-

gogues, and Black churches alike. In this world, as wildfires rage and insects vanish from sterile fields, how can such stupid little personal grief persist?

Yet persist it has done, from the moment it began on that distant 1991 November afternoon when you received the news. You were still something of a pup in the world back then: an undergraduate college student enrolled for that academic year in a Latin American Studies study-abroad program based primarily in Bogotá, Colombia, that began in late August in the recently post-military-dictatorship Guatemala, the capital city of which was still thick that year with young green-uniformed usually unsmiling soldiers, men even younger than yourself and your fellow students. The features in their generally grave faces bore witness to the Mayan, Garifunan, and Xincan ancestors' blood still determinedly coursing through their veins. Unlike their most primeval forebears, the grave present-day men all sported rifles often nearly as long as themselves, and, along with all the city's inhabitants, were always overseen by sharpshooters positioned for the ready—ready for whatever—on numerous rooftops high above a deeply uneasy Guatemala City. The autumn semester that began in that city of tense-faced young men and others would move to Bogotá within a few weeks to pass two months there, and finally transfer to Quito in late November for the term's concluding two weeks.

And so in late November there you were—there you all were—in chilly, often cloudy, Andes-nestled Bogotá, on the Sunday afternoon the day before the group was scheduled to depart for Quito. It was an afternoon of a crashing thunderstorms powerful enough to terrify: storms that were blood relations of the Jamaican thunderstorms you'd always known: awesome (if one dared to glance out a window), but violent enough to make you and anyone with sense dive to cower within the perceived safety of a dark closet. (But in your experience such safe hiding places when storms arrived were invariably difficult to find.) You were studying that afternoon, or

trying to, at times distracted by the storm's bullying and, when the thunder especially blasted, by the occasional half-frightened, half-playful shrieks of Luisa and Marta, the two mid-twenty-somethingish *Bogotana* sisters in whose cozy ground-floor garden apartment on Bogotá's leafy, broad-boulevard somewhat fashionable Calle Cien ("La Cien," as *Bogotanos* liked to call it), near Avenida Suba, you were a guest for the time in Colombia as arranged by your program's professors; in that place feeling happy and even privileged, with your own generously provided small comfortable bedroom, full access to the kitchen, and the gift of the sisters' camaraderie and warmth, all underscored by the great fun and occasional challenge of speaking Spanish constantly when in their company, every day. Their thirty-ish brother, Diego, who was gay (but not 'out' in the global northern/Western sense to his sisters or other family), also lived there; it was ultimately and surprisingly Diego with whom, of the three siblings, a slight deeper friendship ultimately sort of formed, despite the occasional embarrassments of his sometimes amorously inclined nature that emerged especially when he was drunk and the two of you were alone in the apartment, and his slightly vexing inclination to more often than not regard you with the gentle condescension commonly displayed by an imperious older brother toward a younger. No one in that household could have foreseen that only a few months later, in early 1992, Diego would receive a shattering diagnosis of HIV-positive status: terrifying news in an era before the emergence of protease inhibitors and other HIV-suppressing drugs, that would subsequently impel him to turn with a desperation that at times bordered on quiet frenzy to an assortment of wooden and metal crucifixes, small and medium-sized statues of the Blessed Virgin in blue and white, votive prayer candles encased in glass holders both clear and colored, jars and vials of crystalline holy water, and a paperbound Bible the dog-eared covers of which betrayed the wear and tear gradually wrought by his sweat-moistened gripping hands. None of those things, nor hundreds of hours of fastidious prayer and meditation, nor months of begging and pleading with priests and even actual prostration before them, would save him from the choking suffering that would eventually envelop him and so many others infected with the virus: the suffering occasioned by that little stealthy determined microbe, that would gradually disfigure him all over, completely ravage his once-handsome face, and finally utterly consume him from the inside out.

But when the telephone rang in the apartment on that late November 1991 Sunday afternoon, you couldn't know about any of that. You didn't jump up to answer the ring, and so couldn't know at first that it was in fact your mother in New York on the line, struggling as a non-Spanish speaker and with a strong Jamaican accent—and deeply rattled by what you would soon learn was transpiring in New York—to make clear that she needed to speak with her son, it was urgent, *please* put him on the line. As it happened, the thunderstorm (*una tormenta*, the Spanish word for thunderstorm, you'd recently learned) was pitching a royal tantrum over Bogotá, disrupt-

ing electrical and phone service citywide and raising waters in some of the more flood-prone areas. It also wasn't helping with static over long-distance phone lines.

When you did take the phone receiver handed you by Marta, your mother sounded concerned, but not frantic; serious, but not quite grim. Your sister was *very, very sick*, she said, but in between the intense crackling and static-snapping, and your fear that you might both be electrocuted at any minute (if the natural world's destructive power could actually travel that way from Bogotá to New York), it was difficult to hear more than that. You would learn later that she was calling from your sister's home (no mobile phones in those days), and that other people had been nearby: your sister's husband, their two teen-aged children; your mother's sister, who had always been your very favorite aunt; and possibly a few family friends. It's possible that she may have felt constrained both by the others' proximity and by the increasing gnawings of her own horror as the situation's approaching brutality dawned on her. Subsequent years of numbness and recurrent shock, to say the very least, would rule out the possibility of a conversation between you both about her feelings and even possible presentiments during those pre-death moments. And then of course the reasonably well-bred brown middle-class Jamaican woman that she was, born and raised in Jamaica during the British colonial era and instilled from the age of six or so with what would become a lifelong determination, until her massive stroke decades later, to *always* put the best possible face on everything, from family alcoholism to the abiding soul-ache of spending more than forty years loving a man, your father, who had more often than not despised her in return (and that was hardly the half of it), ensured that she would *never* have blurted out over the telephone words such as *Your sister is dying, you hear? Come home immediately*. No, certainly not. For we were most certainly not coarse Americans, whom God knew at a hat's drop would spill private feelings out all over the place irrespective of present company. No. We were Anglican church Jamaicans, after all, as in the (colonially) transplanted Church of England, the most eminently self-respecting Jamaicans of them all. We were, to use the dreaded and weighted word, *civilized* people, even—especially—in the face of imminent death. Truly civilized people who never would "lose" it, nor, God forbid, behave in a "colored" fashion, nor "carry on" with what Jamaicans sardonically called "cow bawling," in the manner of those whom your mother had so often when you were growing up referred to with deep contempt as *that element* (which included the most dreaded and loathed African Americans), which we knew we were most emphatically *not*. And even if your eminently civilized brown middle-class Jamaican mother was about to lose forever to pre-menopausal breast cancer the only daughter she had ever had, at the daughter's tender age of only forty-one years, and even if said mother had only recently lost her husband of almost forty years and also her own mother, your grandmother (of whom your mother had never been particularly fond, a dislike between the two through the years consistently re-earned and returned),

not even the lightest-brownest, nor most colonized Jamaican, nor most Church of England tight-assed human being would want to even begin entertaining the possibility of her daughter dying, her firstborn child, and in fact dying in the most unexpectedly civilized quiet way right before the mother's and everyone's eyes, right there on the daughter's living room sofa where only a few hours before, in some pain, that daughter had gone to lay down for a nap... or so such information would be passed down days later through much grieving incoherence to all including those who, like yourself, had unfortunately been absent.

But then quickly, one of your aunts—your much-beloved (by you) well-educated aunt, with whom your mother, her younger sister, got along, as Jamaicans still like to say, like puss and dog—pulled the phone from your mother, and intoned rapidly, and uncharacteristically not calmly: *Your sister is extremely sick. She*—But in that suspenseful moment the line, either because of distance or the irate cascading heavens, or both, went dead. Silence on the other end. *La tormenta*.

Silence, yes, but what about the blurs? The blur, for example, that immediately followed that phone call's anxiety and confusion? And the blur that within a few seconds quickly, asphyxiatingly, descended over you as, bewildered as to what the hell was actually going on up there in New York, panic charged in, followed by the dreaded cold of legend, also known as the prescient cold-before-horror: the chill anyone might feel as we become more certain that something really awful is about to happen or has just happened, just there, behind us, just out of sight, which unwelcome prescience in turn makes us feel all the colder. Yes, because pretty scary, wasn't it, downright frightening, when you realized just then, deep in the blur, that you didn't know what the hell to do next, and in fact, just as writers describe in books and actors portray in films, could barely move (though who would ever have believed it?). *Well, Christ, try to call them back, stupid*, you thought, or rather your hands seemed to think, so rapidly ahead of your blur-fogged brain were they as (slightly shaking, no use denying it for self-heroizing purposes) they scrambled for the phone, in their agitation knocking over something breakable that immediately crashed loudly on the floor, the sound of that little tragedy causing Marta to rush into the room as another boisterous crack of thunder offered yet another unrequested jeremiad, and ask in a hushed tone, as if herself foreseeing:

*¿Qué pasó?*

*No lo sé*, you replied. *Creo que algo mal está pasando con mi hermana en Nueva York*.

Something bad happening in New York indeed. And it was then, that the blur and its accompanying chill re-descended not only upon you, but over the entire scene, the entire apartment and each of its occupants, over the entire *tormenta*-drenched city and the mountainous gorgeous country beyond, and even over the entire Andes-backed continent, and—in the scarier realm of both dreams and waking—over the entire world. And doesn't it seem strange even now, decades later, as that remembered cold again grips and twists

your actual balls, how when you simply could not get through on the phone to them because nothing seemed to be working, all the lines had fallen awry, you were cut off from your loved ones without a clue as to what was happening, that in that instant you simply completely forgot about all that you'd traveled to Colombia to study: forgot about *narcotráfico* cartels and dictatorships covertly funded and artillery-supplied by the United States and what was at that time still known as the School of the Americas. The foggy chilling blur even made you briefly forget what you had learnt of Spain's colonial viciousness throughout most of Latin America and escaped African slaves' establishment of maroon communities in Colombia's more remote regions (the village of San Basilio de Palenque being one that, with other Black students from the main group, you'd visited earlier that term).

In the next instant, as the phone suddenly and unexpectedly began to ring again, another kind of forgetting began: one that trounced all reason and calmness as the *tormenta* continued crashing above the Andean-nestled city and you leapt almost maniacally to snatch the receiver off its cradle—though in retrospect, why so crazed? Someone might have been ringing for one of the siblings, after all, merely to discuss the storm or something else quite unimportant: *Que tormenta, querida*, the kind familiar voice on the line might have said, a voice elderly and quavering or young and strong, *¿Ustedes están bien?*

But no. That call wasn't innocuous, as you knew in your heart of hearts it wouldn't be from the moment that, gripping the receiver and whispering into it with terse politeness *Hola, buenas tardes*, you realized that the mature male voice requesting in Spanish to speak specifically with you was of course neither your mother's nor your aunt's nor that of anyone in your family, but one you had been accustomed to hearing and attending during the program's daily lectures and classes convened in central Bogotá: that of the program's director, a native upper-middle-class *Bogotano*, the sort of person Colombians sometimes playfully-derisively referred to as *un cachaco*. It was your professor-director-*cachaco* speaking with you then on the phone, the same man whose thick black moustache and thick eyebrows reminded some people just a little of a younger, bespectacled García Márquez; your professor who next said in a voice not at all like Gabo's: Yes, I just spoke with your mother. Your sister died a few minutes ago.

Your mother and aunt had been able to reach him by phone through the *tormenta*. Thank God you had provided the relatives with all his contact information before departing the US at the summer's end.

Sometimes, when we feel the world is about to end because in such moments it obviously must, even though it somehow astonishingly doesn't and (typically, in spite of human stupidity) stubbornly won't, we become aware that everything around us, even the enraged bullying of an Andean *tormenta* or the strange sound of our own breathing, has become silent. In such remarkably deafening silence that prevails for what begins to feel as though it will be

for a long time, maybe for all future days that, youth aside, loom as unmistakably finite just then, it's of course not possible to hear when Diego enters the room a moment later, that shocked expression on his face that itself will be a skeleton only a few years later, as he asks you: *¿Se murió la hermana?* (Yes, Diego, she died, you simply *could not* say.) But how on earth could he have known so quickly? Had he guessed because of the expression, or lack thereof, on your face? Or from the fact that your face had literally dropped? And so when Marta reached out to hug you, you began to "lose it," as people say, mortified at your sudden loss of control... as she began sobbing with you. (Oddly, as you'd recall later, even locked so closely in that needful hug, neither of you was able to hear the other's losing it.) The louder silence was all part of the greater blur, that also blinds. And so hearing was no longer possible as, awkward as the proverbial china shop's bull, you managed to stumble into the bathroom where, collapsing over that cold tile floor, you proceeded to throw up with phenomenal violence, to the point of burning stomach acids stinging your throat in their gravity-defying uplift. And therein, between the indignity of retching and the violence of retching's force lay, and has always lain, the unfortunate answer: the answer to the unasked and unpleasant question that rises and descends when a telephone rings, for example, and a voice on the other end, perhaps with unsolicited pity or compassion, conveys news like the news just conveyed. Recalling this terrain, it's easy to remember a similar reaction when, four years earlier, your father died one unreal afternoon after his long ill health, at which point you knew with absolute certainty that all you needed to do from that moment onward was lie in a dark room, a room utterly devoid of light, for the rest of your days, within which darkness you knew without question that all would ultimately be just fine: *Just leave me in peace here*, that foolish younger man who was you mumbled through a particularly stubborn blur, *just leave me alone, I'll be fine here. Yes, of course, because there's peace and silence here. Yes yes.* And as everyone knows, pitch-dark rooms fit for lying within forever as if one is already dead, or as if one yearns to join the dead in their eternal silence, easily transform when necessary to tile-floored bathrooms in which kneeling on the cold tile with one's head resting on the white porcelain toilet rim is possible, in fact is the only posture imaginable, as the sour stink of one's recently hurled vomit assails the nostrils more forcefully, presaging future heaves of both bitterness and regret. *And yes, if I can just remain here for the rest of my life*, one might think-without-thinking in such moments, *remain here kneeling beside the toilet and feeling the cold tile beneath my legs, even with the sour stink of my vomit floating beneath me in the toilet bowl, remain here with my eyes completely closed as I think of nothing at all, absolutely no-thing, why... I'll be just fine, thank you very much. Perhaps even wonderful. Ay, gracias, muy bien.*

*Pero sí, estoy bien, no te preocupes*, you insisted to one of the sisters—Marta, Luisa?—as those warm surprisingly strong arms began to pull you up and out of the bathroom. You didn't want them to worry, you didn't want anyone to worry. Hadn't they all their own

profound worries? Yet whether all was really *muy bien* or not, and whether in those blur-moments you fully registered their looks of concern and genuine care or not—the actual elusive something-or-other often known more generally as love—you needed to comprehend quickly that someone whom you'd loved more than you could ever have imagined had just died, requiring your immediate return to the United States for her funeral even as your study abroad classmates, *tormenta* or no *tormenta*, were preparing for the following morning's air travel to Quito and the semester's final weeks. And so in that blur you all at once couldn't remember the small things, such as where you'd last put down your passports (the cherished Jamaican one or the more "useful" for visa-free travel US one). Did you have US currency in your possession for use upon arrival in New York, and enough of it? And would you remember the looks of compassion and kindness, or sometimes indifference, you'd soon note on the faces of airline employees when you told them, sometimes through (but how awful) unexpected tears, that you needed to travel immediately, as fast as possible, because of (yes, yes yes). You would definitely remember the sullen grey skies and chilly late autumn air that greeted your arrival at JFK Airport, and the leafless trees whose ostensible "death" offered small solace. Their temporal mortality, dressed in the bleakness of seasonal sleep, was but a guaranteed illusion until spring's resurrections.

And the family members, and your sister's red-eyed friends in New York: you would remember them. Who couldn't, even though remembering was and still is, decades later, the least desirable thing? Remembering that your mother's and aunt's faces, blurred to your vision through the unreality of those days that stretched into years, would remain blurred well into the next century, but that was only because for most of what would turn out to be that very short time in New York—only a few days before you rush-returned to South America—you really couldn't bear to look at them. Couldn't bear seeing your sister's face so clearly predetermined in your mother's, but also in that face the indescribable *tormenta* of a woman who had just experienced the most unimaginable theft possible. (The decades-earlier cruelty and extreme violence of your mother visited upon her daughter in your sister's vulnerable formative years, including many punches in the face, head-slamming against hard walls, and bashes on the head with heavy cast-iron frying pans, and much more, can't ever be forgotten, but the damage that violence levied on both women, and ultimately on the entire family, and the guilt over that viciousness that would take much toll on your mother's deeply scarred soul in years to come—and toll on your own—will be recollections for another day.) Yet look at each other everyone did, somehow managed to do, through blurs of varying magnitude, which was infinitely preferable to gazing with the dumbness of shock at your sister's dead body. In fact no one except her husband, earlier on, during funeral preparations, had been able to do this, given that the distinctly unelaborate, in fact severely plain light brown wooden coffin had remained closed right through the eager flames of cremation.

*(Of course in recounting those moments now you'll refuse to remember how at one point during the funeral, completely overcome in the midst of someone's ponderous eulogy, one of too many that morning, you ran out of that room sobbing. Your mother and aunt and others may well also have been sobbing, but the rapid onslaught of your own tears permitted no time to observe them, nor offer the comfort that surely would have been most welcome. Remarkable, isn't it, you would think later, how incredibly selfish and self-centered grief can make one.)*

Yet you must remember, and must never forget, that there remains and always will remain another part, not nearly so awful—in fact not awful at all. The part long before the funeral and rainy day interment and the weird-because-none-of-it-should-have-been-happening reception back at your sister's house where the familiar faces were greeted, the unfamiliar ones introduced, and the despised one avoided. It is the part of you and your sister not having been on good terms before your departure from the US for Latin America in late August of that year, and your deciding to visit her in her hospital room the day before you traveled, during the late morning visiting hours when few if any family members, thank God, were likely to be there. (None had been.) She was in the hospital "only" for the monitoring of some of the steroid drugs she had been prescribed, but nothing serious, your mother and aunt had said, ostensibly unworried, and reassured by the patient herself: only a few days in, the patient had maintained, waving away concerns, and then back out again. And so that morning, having no idea that that would be the last time you saw her alive, you walked into her hospital room smiling, holding out to her astonished face (all the more astonished because you'd not seen each other for so long, at least four months if not longer) a huge bouquet of truly beautiful flowers (definitely not lilies; perhaps roses?), as you kissed her, hugged her, heartfelt affection that she returned, and you both were, at least so it seemed in those moments, truly happy, and (this even more rarely felt) happy with each other: genuine love between you, younger brother and elder sister, as had always pretty much been the foundational emotion in spite of the rough now-and-then arguments and seething enmity and anger and shame and misunderstandings and bitterness and rejections. In spite of her anti-gay attitudes and beliefs and (from a very young age) your absolute loathing of her husband for all sorts of reasons. At its best and most useful, it was the sort of love that could provide joy without nurturing lunacy; the sort of love that could and did continue embracing and buoying you both long after your departure from her hospital room, at which time you'd hugged her again as she had again returned the hug, and you assured her that you would send her postcards from Latin America throughout the study away year... the stress on the "would" of course raising the tacit reminder, verbally unacknowledged by either of you, that there had been a few times in the past when neither you nor she would ever have considered doing any such thing. But as you didn't articulate to yourself then partly because you lacked prescience, such mean-spiritedness should never

be directed toward any human being, much less toward a woman who within less than three months would be unexpectedly dead from the stealthily metastasized cancer that first began chewing through her young breasts eleven years earlier, at which time, when announcing that grim news to the gathered family after a holiday dinner, she had added, quietly, with that look of pre-dread on her face, *I just hope it doesn't spread.*

But spread the cancer cells had most industriously done, in spite of the invasive radical mastectomy that had sliced out wads of tissue, and the months—years—of debilitating chemotherapy (*It makes you feel really bad*, she'd once said, looking sick to her stomach) and life-altering steroid regimes: *the cancer "migrated" into her lymphatic system*, we were told by someone, some faceless doctor or nurse, perhaps?—and from thenceforth would not be contained. (Chemo, you learnt at a relatively young age: not fun. Steroid anti-cancer regimens, definitely not fun.)

And therein lay some of the worst truth: that despite the earnest efforts of so many skilled and caring people, *it destroyed her*, transformed her to a cold flesh slab, as blithely as it has destroyed and made into cold flesh slabs so many others... in her case leaving in its indifferent wake her shell-shocked teen-aged son and daughter, her husband, and her other surviving shell-shocked family and friends. It was the power of that initial shock that would most stun—but above all haunt—her brother—you—well into the next century, as he learned with some sadness, but also with gratitude, that it was indeed possible, and still is, to miss someone so intensely, with such longing and *fury* at God or the world or whatever: to miss them, go on missing them, as if they had died only the previous week. Missing to the point that he would think, and think not only once, most often while driving alone on a dark winding road at night: *When we really love someone, their sudden and unexpected death can produce in us a fear that stalks us for years, breathing deep within us constant reminders of our mortality. Decades later we can still miss the loved one like hell, and still feel so fucking angry, or worse, actually sick unto our bones and even deeper that the beloved left here so soon, departed us all so soon, even though there were so many times when they were alive, and certainly after their death, when we might have hated them, as I often hated you. You left us all before your breasts—what remained of them post-mastectomy—began to flatten and sag with age as would have done the other parts of your body, and before your teeth yellowed and dislodged, your jaw flabbled into jowliness, and your hair greyed and thinned to sparse whiteness. You even left us before the unforeseen unprecedented presence of a Black family in the White House. You left before your brother could watch you grow old and decrepit, asking you questions as we both aged about what the world was like when you were young and I was younger, when you were younger and I was unborn, when you were younger still and growing up in Jamaica as a beautifully rendered child in the colonial era's twilight, through which you could have no idea yet of the differently colored friends you would someday make, the superb education you would attain, the seven languages you would learn to speak,*

*the ferocious beatings you would suffer from our mother mostly unprevented by the weakness of our alcohol-addled father, and the two children you would eventually produce, all in spite of the terribly short life you would have, all ultimately overshadowed by an eventual lump in the fibrous breast. The birth control pills that you used during years of cigarette smoking may have caused it, you once said. Although of course the genetics might have been there, given that our maternal grandmother had also had breast cancer, though post-menopausal, but none of that had ever been openly discussed in the family. Our grandmother in the mid-twentieth century had survived the most radical and brutal of mastectomies, a virtual chopping off of the breast. Imagine living with the lonesomeness, the weight she might have felt, of feeling she could never discuss such a thing with almost anyone. Imagine the decades-long toll of the secret, which for her was what it forever had to remain, and the shame. And then the alteration in relationships with brassieres, and the introduction to new—not necessarily welcome—discussions of possible prosthesis. The sense of alienation from, and betrayal by, one's own flesh, enabled by malefactors in the very blood. By some so-called carcinogen. Whatever the cause, the result of simple cruel luck. But who could have known?*

But when you step away for a moment from the awful longing and remembering, and from the more tempting unwillingness to remember, you note that in spite of all the loneliness and bitterness and the ongoing sadness—and the particular sadness over unexpectedly becoming an only child—something powerfully good remains. Remains even as our earth steadily warms to an ominously increasingly oceanic, less mammal-friendly orb. You recall that decades-ago December afternoon, only days after the funeral, when you returned to South America from the grey and greying north, to Andes-embraced Quito, to conclude the semester's remaining assignments. The professors and other students weren't deceived by your dissembling all-is-still-somehow-lovely smile, but were polite enough not to verbally or otherwise acknowledge that your face had clearly dropped closer to your chest (which couldn't quite support the weight) since the preceding week, and your feet, in weary détente with your knees, had definitely resigned themselves to shuffling. You weren't moping, they noticed, but just... grave.

Yet the heart in all its gravity and turmoil, and even the most drooping of chins, couldn't triumph over the outstretched hand of that deeply caring classmate who, two afternoons after your return, ventured to reach through your blur to pull you up from where you were sitting in a patio chair, shoulder-slumped, in the courtyard of the hotel that housed your group, and tug you out into the daylight and Quito's pre-Christmas vitality. It was her idea to pull you forth into the city's beating blood and electricity, and so back into the humanity that out there and all around kept insisting, no matter how downcast and drained you felt, on *life*, the wellspring more commonly known as *life*. Let's go for a walk, she'd insisted, or perhaps she'd actually said *Let's go shopping*, her warm hand pulling you up out of the blur and into the wellspring. The city had all at once

without warning become boldly enamored of the season and itself, preening itself with evergreen pine trees and lights, with unlikely Santas and hastily outfitted elves too human-faced for elfhood by half, while continuing its unyielding ardor for life in the vibrant tones of everyday existence: in the glossy black braided hair of the Otavala indigenous women, that stretched down their backs over their invariably colorful embroidered blouses, beneath which their dark ankle-length skirts gazed toward the pavement, as they moved through the city's busy avenues and the festive, crowded outdoor markets, selling their multicolored textiles that had become familiar sights throughout Europe and North America; their husbands, brothers, fathers and sons, more often than not sporting broadbrimmed ten-gallon hats or natty fedoras, beneath which their own thick single dark braid stretched down to the belt that held up the blue jeans that they, but never the women, almost invariably wore; the lively sounds and smells of the many open-air markets—where were they all, there seemed to be so many?; the passing traffic, sometimes impatient and sometimes simply self-absorbed, including the minibuses and often jam-packed route taxis, as well as the (hopefully) nine-lived many bicyclists; the gorgeous Street of the Seven Crosses, Calle García Moreno, with its seven churches; Calle Junín and its elegantly wrought-ironed balconied buildings; the many other streets lined with people's poverty and sometimes their wealth, but above all filled with their lives, the breaths of which no eagle-taloned US president, nor anyone else, could ever completely vanquish. That afternoon's walk back out into *life*, while clutching a dear caring classmate's warm hand—she who never has been forgotten, and who still is revered for what turned out to be the (but really what else to call it?) resuscitating reach—provided simply gifts of the world in living human faces, in yawning mountains, in hilly streets of high crosses beneath which children played and shouted, vendors raucously vended, and dogs as usual did their raised-leg best to one-up each other. And with all of that, simply walking with her and feeling the lively city all around you filled with all its people and their bursting lives, you suddenly, with an abrupt lift of the chin off your chest at least for a little while, sort of *snapped out of it*, as people like to say; it began to feel almost kind of possible to *come to*, as some still like to say, or to *wake up*, so to speak, though literal sleeping had had very little if anything to do with any of it... though of course whether you awoke or snapped out, the blur and its weight, and the longing for the dead simply to again be, would recur constantly, and would take decades to lessen even slightly... yet there, for some time, in the profoundly alive and breathing pre-Christmas city, recollections of recent death, and wrestlings with grief, could be put aside for just a bit. Placed aside just for a little merciful while in another city, warmer than chilly-rainy Bogotá and similarly nestled amidst burly Andean shoulders, where the world would—actually could—continue to spin and go determinedly, indefatigably, about its daily larger-than-large business. There, where at least for a little while it could be possible not to think about the many faces, and the voices of all those who, once gone, would, at

least according to the most enduring evidence (that would hold no ground in Jamaican culture), never be seen nor heard from again... but would always be recollected through the lacerations and caressings of memory. Memory sometimes greeted with grief and occasionally with bitterness-to-rage, but also often with gratitude. Gratitude for so many still-loved faces and voices of both the living and the dead. Gratitude for the ability to conjure and feel them, hear them. And gratitude for the moments when, reveling in an aged tree's arcane disclosures, or while scratching out a meek pattern in the earth, any one of us might again discover how possible it is to believe that some part of those gone on might actually abide somewhere not so far off: with luck just in that recurring place-of-places where leaves literally do turn pale, descend, and remain still, silent, as if apparently insensate, but without question mutely waiting just there, right there, down there, beneath our feet.

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