

Among Absences

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Dear mama:

I know you are going to tell me I took too long to write to you, as if I do not take you into account, but it is not so. It's only that the days passed too quickly, and since the girls told you my news, I just let it go. Earlier, it was not so important. Even though it was expensive I could phone you at any time, but now I am unsettled, with a continuous concern. I need to tell you things I did not mention before, above all, to overcome the grief. Having to come back immediately and begin working without time for a breath was very odd, like carrying a load. It was as if in real life nothing happened, and in a few months when I returned to Mexico, you would be there waiting for me. Being here it seems nothing has changed. I continue talking with you as always.

Even though I wrote you emails, it was always rushed, and it's not the same. It is funny,

I was supposed to have more time then, since I was not in charge of anyone, but the

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days passed without me having a minute to myself. The hardest part was to learn English, nothing like what I learned in the classes. When I speak I feel I control my words, and if I don't know something it always works to pronounce the Spanish words as if they were in English. But it is difficult to understand their replies. At the university I struggle to make sense of my students. You cannot imagine how hard it is. They pretend they comprehend me and I fake my understanding of them; that's how I deal with the situation.

Besides, to meet new people all the time is tiring, especially on social occasions. To be identified as Mexican forces me to always chat about Mexico. I have to be an expert on everything, from history to the latest political news. It's nice that they are interested, but I do not feel I am myself. Besides, if I miss a word I do not know what they are talking about, and I reach a point at which I disconnect myself. When everyone is talking I sometimes only hear noise, maddening noise. Then I stay quiet, smiling, pretending I get them. Luckily Bob is not very social and we would rather spend time together, each on our own affairs. Then it's as if the world is only what I have inside me. I greatly enjoy those moments. They remind me of my escapes to the roof, when I would sit in the darkness doing nothing, staring, letting the stars be my words. Yes, I know you did not understand it, but since you believed I was always sure about what I was doing and they were OK, you were never intrusive. Many times I felt upset at that foolish belief. Now I ask myself: did you also think it was right for me to migrate to Australia while my daughters stayed in Mexico? So many times I felt you never forgave me, but you could not tell me.

Now my life here is so different and I do not have moments alone. The days go by with work. Everything has changed. If someone had told me that my life was going to finish

with me teaching, in English, I would have thought it was a bad joke. How much I have hated it! It's as if my destiny played a cruel trick on me. And how much I resent being unsure that what I write is correct! My friends are used now to my Spanglish, but there are some situations when I lack confidence; I feel embarrassed. Even though Australians are cool it's like being a lesser person if one does not master the language, like becoming a little girl again, dependent on others. Bob is a saint; whatever I need he corrects it, but I yearn to write in Spanish, to be able to say, 'it's ready' and send it off. Also, it's double work. I do everything more slowly, even reading. I was never very fast, but now each page feels endless and I do not have a minute free.

I miss the days after I first arrived in Australia; my only duty was to write my thesis. It was complete happiness, as if my life was beginning again, with a new gaze, as my kids used to say: 'seeing with the eyes of the dead one.' It was as though to see again after the cornea transplant I needed new landscapes. By the way, maybe you can see now how beautiful Australia is; it is a different beauty, no? All vast. Even the sky looks immense. I think I have never seen such distance. When I miss you all, I look up and it's as if my soul opens and encompasses the entire world. But it hurts; the emptiness is also huge. If only my little ones were here!

The nostalgia quickly goes away and then I enjoy the silence. Silence, noise, silence, noise. Have you ever thought they are the same? Here I sense they get confused. When I am working at the university and no one is there the silence allows me to discover different noises, birds and insects I have not heard before, the wind moving the bushes, the rain on the windows, the far voices from the students at the pool. Ah, and of course the thoughts that become words, *taca-taca, taca-taca*. But when people are around and

chatting the words get crowded. The noise in English is different. The sounds lose their meaning and then all is silence, so much that I cannot hear my breath.

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It hurts to have you all so far away. I imagine how my children would see everything I see, Lorena with her noisy and explosive passion, Mariana with her unbroken silence, wishing to trap the world with her gaze. And you, what can I tell you, you would be so happy with the cult of dogs here. And now the little grandkids as well. Do you know that Marti says she wants to come to Australia for her fifteenth birthday? You surely understand what I feel, since it was so important for you to be a grandmother.

Unfortunately you spoiled them. Mariana always complains that I am Marianito's only granny, and so far I am. They miss you so much, they always talk about you, as if they cannot believe it happened. They tell me you are always around, doing tricks. Is it true that you phoned Mari on her graduation day? Patri said he saw an old lady, and Lore told him that it was his great grandmother. I do not know if I should believe them but I would like it to be true. If so, you might be able to visit my world, share my life, finally.

We never managed to bring you here.

Even if you could visit me now, you wouldn't see my first house. It was incredible, like living in the middle of the forest, in Ajusco, surrounded by trees and clouds, which entered the windows. There were parrots and some *tlacuachitos*, who run on the roof. Here they called them possums. I was fearful at night, when alone. It sounded like footsteps on the roof. Then I got used to it. Where I live now there is another one. I sent a photo to Marti and she named it Lolita. Little frogs came in through the bath, and because we used rainwater and didn't have a filter, fungi grew in the shower. Artus solved that problem when he and Lore came to visit me.

We decided to move because there was no public transport and I did not like it. Here it is not like Mexico City, where you can stop a bus at any corner. There are no little shops growing like mushrooms in each block. Imagine, to buy some milk I needed to walk for twenty minutes to the closest gas station. Yes, you could buy milk in the gas station, or the garage as they are called here! At the beginning I didn't dare drive on the other side of the road; I felt trapped, just wishing to catch a train to Sydney and fill myself with urban life. I was not missing the traffic or the smog. In fact, now that I can drive I rarely go there. No, what I missed were the people, my people. But in Chinatown I felt at home. You won't believe how much we look like Chinese people; the eye shape is less marked, but still alike. I enjoyed looking at Chinese people walking in the streets and finding resemblances to my friends.

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The other day when I spoke with my girls we talked of Jaime. I was terrified when they told me about his cancer. Lorena still cannot forgive him, she is still mad at him and, I guess, at life. How could he have left it unattended? Ay! My dear brother, always such an idiot! It was shocking to speak with him by phone and hear death in his voice. I didn't recognise him, as if his enthusiasm had disappeared. But I was calmed when he told me he would wait for me. It sounds silly but I believed him, and although it was months before I could travel, and my girls felt he was expiring like a spent candle, something told me I would arrive on time. Still, if you had told me that he was leaving us I swear I would have driven to the airport at that moment. Ay! I don't know ... if death is so hard, not to be with you all is even worse, a heavy load on my soul. That hurts most. Fortunately he waited for me. I love so much having his guitar here; it's broken but it still sings his dreams.

Ay, dear mum, I didn't tell you either how much I appreciate your support for my Lore. You never told me how you received the news, although I think the twins gave you new life. I have the photo of you carrying the twins. I remember Lore's face, holding her breath, as if helping you so that the weight did not break you, with me close just in case. I almost collapsed when she told me she was pregnant. And Mariana, I'd better not mention! How much anguish I felt. Even though they had my house to live in, it was hard for Artus to get a job, for her to do anything to help. Her thesis was far from finished! It was good, however, to hear her sound so happy, even if scared. And besides, given it was twins I thought: now she will have to grow up fast.

At the beginning I could not sleep with so much anguish. I wanted to cry. I am not sure if that was because I was here, or just because of how life was. My first reaction was to run away but as the days passed I grew calm again. I always trusted my daughters. I was sure that even if they needed me they could deal with the situation themselves. To make things worse, there was also my little Mariana with her Jaime and her complicated love. I am not sure if it was better to be there or accept, as Mexicans say, 'Eyes that cannot see, a heart which does not feel.' Happily, all finished well. It is hard to leave them to grow. I do not need to tell you that. In those moments I ask myself, can I overcome absence? Can it be true, as the song claims, that absence is not oblivion, or is that only my fantasy, letting me believe that I can be both here and there? I am relieved to know you are so close to them. It has always been like that. Even half crippled you were unconditionally there. It is understandable how much they grieve for your absence.

You were not there when Mariana married, however. You would have enjoyed seeing her dressed like a queen with her mask of crystal. Did she show it to you when she returned from Australia? Or were you absent then too? As time passes I get confused

and have no idea what happened before or after. It was difficult taking leave from university to be at her wedding: it was the middle of the semester, and they made it so hard. It was even worse trying to be at Mariano's birth. When Marti and Patri were born I stayed in Mexico for longer, because I was still employed there. It was wonderful, and they always remember me well. When they visited me in Sydney they were almost two years old, and Patri recognised me in the airport. He was the first one to see me, in the distance, waiting. I nearly resigned my job with the hassles over Mariano. To be between two countries, with my loved ones separated by an ocean, hurts my soul. Although I can see their pictures and speak on the phone you cannot know how much I want to see them, touch them, feel how they grow. Their life escapes like water between my fingers.

The joy of being a grandmother began growing in me like a weed. It is absolutely crazy, as if something or someone turned on the switch. Like you, I was never keen on kids, but grandchildren transform you. Since I was in Sydney my fantasy was to buy clothes for them, modern things I never saw in Mexico. Today when I go shopping I still look at baby things, though they would not fit even my littlest one now. You know, one case for the presents and the other for my clothes. To travel that way is tiring but it brings such pleasure to see their faces as they discover the surprises.

Whenever I return to Australia I count the days until I return. It is sad not to stay longer with them. With you it doesn't matter. Now I have you close, but them, I missed so much. Even though we talk by phone, it is not the same. I lament not to have witnessed their bellies grow full of life, to miss their graduations, to display my pride, to attend Mariana's exhibitions, watching how my artist grows. I have some of her paintings here.

I would like to bring back more but have no more walls for them. By the way, can you look after her? I sense her sadness.

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I am eager to reach my retirement. I hope health won't cheat me as it did you, that I can continue travelling. I plan to spend some time here, some there. The last time I was in Mexico we visited Malinalco, and we would like to buy a small house there, with a pool to lure the kids to visit us with their friends. I hope we can afford it. If I can't see you here, I hope you will visit us there. You might ask why I do not stay in my house in Mexico City. To be truthful, I can't. I am used to a quiet life and it's good for everyone to have their own life. Visiting is nice but everyone has their own affairs to attend to.

As the years pass everything feels more difficult, and my fear of being sick or dying in Australia grows. I panic, imagining I cannot explain myself to the doctors. Even if I describe what I feel in detail, it's frustrating, they do not understand me well. What one feels in the body is intimate; it cannot be taught. It's learned through life, and my life was in Spanish. When I had the surgery for my fractured toe, even Bob did not know how to treat me. I was devastated. Because of the idea they have here of not being intrusive, no one visits, you don't even receive phone calls. And then when Bob left it felt like an eternity. Imagine! He went to have lunch at home, and I waited and waited and he did not return. He thought it was good to leave me alone to sleep and recover. Do you remember how it was with you? All of us were there, making fun. It looked like a party, laughing and laughing over family jokes. Here, it was like the funeral of an orphan.

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Ah, I have forgotten to tell you how grateful I am for your generosity. It looks like a family custom to plan our deaths. Do you think it is cultural? I hope I can do the same. I would not like to die alone. Nor have my daughters be stuck with grief for not being with me at the end.

With you, I imagined it was a trick. I remember how angry you were with Chacho, just because he had planned his holidays for after I got back from Chiapas. I had only two weeks before returning to Australia. Your bad mood was incomprehensible. I thought it was manipulative, making him feel guilty. You knew I would stay with you. Wasn't your constant complaint that I was not with you enough when I visited Mexico? So, why? We had planned the Sunday meal with everyone. Mari and Jaime were bringing *chicharrón* and *carnitas*, and Lore, Artus and the twins the cake. I was buying the beers, the *chelas* as we call them in Mexico. Was that not what you wished? Partying with the girls? No, you insisted that Chacho and his kids not go. Surely you wanted to die with your children and grandchildren close to you, but we didn't know that.

You never told me that the doctor wanted to keep you in the hospital and you refused. Always so stubborn. Or is it that I did not want to know? That was nothing new; you always got sick when I was there, just so I would take care of you. The medicine was useless. Or didn't you take it? You didn't want to eat anymore. Not even sip water. If it wasn't for the fact that Lore is a little witch, we would not have got there on time.

Chacho and his children had gone and we drove to your house as fast as we could. I was not sure whether to call him, or wait to see if you responded. With the serum you might have recovered a little, but no, it was useless. You had decided to die. You fell asleep, waiting for everyone to be there and allow you to go.

I do not know if you listened to us. I do not know if something was missing that needed to be said. I only know that when one lives abroad one wants to get back and be there when a loved one dies.

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