

Excerpts from *Ita*
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SEBASTIAN / PAIN

The ten-point scale. To locate your pain on it from one to ten. To test your memory, to remember all body aches, their duration, the groans that would tell you if it was a three or a seven or a nine. And what if I think my pain is seven point seven or plus ten, or if it could be a twelve, for example. I keep busy with the scale trying to organize my pain, which comes and goes in disparate directions with no distinguishable blueprint, betrays me, extends further and suddenly contracts. It drives me crazy.

As I fill out the scale on a regular basis, I enter a space of self-examination. Because analyzing one's body only leads to exhaustion. Answers escape me. I don't give up. Obedient, I try. I survey my gestures, attempt to make connections to find a moment of shock, my head resting on the desk, an ill-timed getting out of bed to stretch my leg because it's being attacked by pins and needles. And so, I start a list that may be able to reveal a pattern. But among the letters on that list there remain doubt, the trap of exaggeration, the Christian tradition of endurance, the shame of feeling pain.

That word weighs down heavily on my every movement. That word that I learned just two years ago, but which traveled along my nerves and muscles for a long time before. A climbing, elegant word, with a nasty aftertaste of classical science: FIBROMYALGIA. Because of it my world acquired the accent of perception, since according to the brochure that the white robe-clad, lemon and sandalwood-perfumed doctor gave me, "in general terms, fibromyalgia consists of an anomaly related to pain perception, so that stimuli that would normally not be painful are perceived as such." In other words, I am separated from the rest, I feel what others don't. I lack a normal body, I follow the wrong routes to calibrate pressure, I dilute myself into a ramshackle Ita with deficient sight, hearing, touch, and sometimes smell. That's why I wake up every morning in darkness and silence. Protected by thick curtains and nothing more than stillness, I see myself

as already dead inside a sarcophagus. I slowly move my neck from side to side to lessen its stiffness and sit up on the bed. The vision of a ghost. This could be the initial shot of a movie about someone who opens her eyes after being hit.

But there are days when the scale, despite its imprecisions, yields low numbers. Those are better days, as I call them, and which Juan José has learned to recognize. On those days, Cymbalta, the brand name for duloxetine, successfully tames the unbalance caused by serotonin and noradrenaline. It whips neurotransmitters into shape. I wake up feeling lighter. I'm less anxious about the future and, instead of images of corpses or specters, I encounter a sunny morning, saturated with turquoise hues facing the sea. I remember a painting by Sorolla. Resplendent. The work of a swift brush rolling in the waves.

Why fibromyalgia? For reasons that have no reason, like all answers to cliff-hanging questions. Why does a lover you trust leave you? Why does someone die prematurely? Why do two people who love each other cannot be together? Why does failure follow us? Unknown causes, that's what I read in books and webpages I visit to satisfy this thirst to understand my difference. Some researchers suspect that the immune system in people affected by fibromyalgia does not respond well and that such deficiency might be linked to a psychological issue, perhaps childhood abuse or the inability to process trauma. But those are all conjectures, nothing is certain.

I recall my past and cannot identify the trigger to my severely weakened defenses. The only thing that vaguely takes shape is my mom's departure. But that doesn't seem very significant to me. Some people have dealt with worst things. Nonetheless, the temptation to dive backwards into my life slowly takes over me. That was the reason for calling Sebastián. He's about to arrive, despite his dismissive answer. I want to meet his eyes with mine. I want him to help me count from 1 to 10.

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During next few days we tour this city, which reached its height as an industrial center at the beginning of the 20th century. We go to the Botanical Garden, attend Mass at St. Joseph's Cathedral, and finally cross the border to go see Niagara Falls. Water that reverberates and crashes down from the river. Like a giant and distant vapor bath in the cliff. Rocío memorized her lesson and repeats it while I stare into the vastness: "Some 10,000 years ago, Ita, an enormous glacier, moved over the eastern half of Canada crushing rocks and soil, and one of the rivers became this. The waterfalls are 1,000 meters wide, 54 meters high."

We came back earlier than planned. Rocío is feeling weak. On the way home, the sound of the waterfalls is heard while the image of Guatemalan rivers is displayed. Manuela stares at one of them, upstream.

Rocío insists that she wants to be left alone in the living room. She sits on the sofa, while I sit on the Persian rug near the chimney. Rocío never asked me about mom. That's why her inquiry takes me by surprise. I suppose facing death makes you curious. Rather than talking about mom, I tell her my story. What has happened to me in the past few years. Rocío listens to me with a half-empty stare and, for the first time, chooses not to animate the conversation with funny comments. Let's say we haven't managed to escape this time around. We met because the die is cast.

Suddenly, Rocío tells me, imagine that I am the evil stepmom, Ita. Like the one in Snow White. I hand you the poisoned apple. And I tell you we were happy with Roberto, that Andrea was to blame for the mess between the two of you, that thank God Fabiola found the straight and narrow and that you, poor little girl, were cursed with pain. Imagine me wearing a black hood, descending from the palace. Because I'm not the evil stepmom, I tell you, Ita, the kingdom where we all lived back then was a pile of shit. Her words scare me, and I reprimand her for saying shit, since she has always been so proper with her language. She laughs. Yes, Ita, our lives were all about wiping our shit and moving on. No exceptions.

Alone in my room I think about my parents' love, mom's passion for art, Rolando's execution. I make the word fibromyalgia all mine.

Before returning to Guatemala, I call Sebastián. For several weeks now we have only exchanged emails. I see his image on the computer. He recriminates me, the great Ita, why didn't you come here, I've been waiting so long. He confesses he doesn't feel like returning. He's planning another project, something to do with the ways of God. Yes, Ita, I'm getting into religion, I have no idea what I'm doing, but that's what I want. Guatemala is almost like a bible. I joke, telling him that Fabiola must be his partner now.

I confirm I would have liked to speak with Delfina. Should-haves are worthless, Ita. That may be so, I answer, but she knew me more than anyone else back then. Not just me, but Fabiola too. Sebastián stares at me, incredulous. We switch topics, and he tells me just got a new tattoo. Another one? I ask, concerned. He knows that I think tattoos should be small and hidden from daily activities. Well, it's a D on my forearm. This way I can take her everywhere, he tells me, raising his strong, dark arm. I like them, I answer, the tattoo and the arm.

We say good-bye.

It's time. I move toward the exit door. Rocío's farewell was painful. Sergio cried as he was leaving the house. I did, too.

In the airplane, I watch through the window the luggage carts that come and go along the tarmac. It's a sunny day. Intense sunlight falls on my face. I lean back and close my eyes. I carry my medications, a talisman that life affords me. I leave wanting to return. Return to the Ita who carries all the pain like tracks blazing the road. An exploding desire moves me forward. Toward

the origin, toward women, toward some man. Certainty accompanies me. Mi history is my body.
I'm this body of mine.

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