Brenda NAVARRO
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[…]

DANIEL DISAPPEARED three months, two days and eight hours after his birthday. He was three. He was my son. The last time I saw him he was between the see-saw and the slide in the park where I took him each afternoon. I don't remember anything else. Or maybe I do: I was upset because Vladimir had texted to say he was leaving me because he didn't want to cheapen everything. Cheapen it, like when you sell something valuable for two pesos. That was me the afternoon I lost my son: the woman who, every few weeks, said goodbye to an elusive lover who would offer her sex like some kind of bargain giveaway to make up for his leaving.

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That was me, the conned shopper. The con of a mother. The one who didn't see.

I didn't see much. What did I see? I comb the warp of visual images for the thread that might help me grasp, even for a second, when exactly it happened. In which moment, which instant, amid which little yelp from a three-year-old body did he disappear? What happened? I didn't see much. And although I walked among the other park-goers calling his name, I could no longer hear. Did any cars go by? Were there any other people there? Who? I didn't see my three-year-old son again.

Nagore finished school at two, but I didn't collect her. I never asked her how she got home that afternoon. In fact, we never discussed whether any of us actually went home that day or if we all disappeared with the fourteen kilos of my son, never to return. To this day, there isn't a mental image that can give me the answer.

Then, the wait; me in the Attorney General's Office, slumped on a grubby chair where Fran later came and found me. We waited together, we're still waiting on that chair, even if, physically speaking, we're somewhere else.

More than once I wished they'd both died. I would look in the bathroom mirror and imagine I was seeing myself crying over them. But I wouldn't cry, I'd hold

back the tears and put my calm, collected face back on in case I hadn't got the act quite right the first time. And so, turning back to the mirror I'd ask: Dead? What do you mean they're dead? Who's dead? Both of them? Were they together? Are they actually dead or am I just imagining this to help me cry? And who are you, the one telling me they're dead? Which of the two? And the only reply I'd get was me, standing in front of the mirror repeating: Who's dead? Please, tell me someone has actually died, anything to fill this void! Then, faced with an echoing silence, I would answer myself: Both of them, Daniel and Vladimir. I lost them both at the same time, and both of them are still alive, somewhere in the world, without me.

It's the last thing anyone ever imagines: waking up one day shouldering the weight of a missing person. What is a missing person? It's a ghost that haunts you, like some kind of schizophrenic delusion.

I never wanted to be one of those women people look at in the street with pity, but I did regularly return to the park, almost every day to be exact. Nagore often followed me there. I'd sit on the same bench and retrace my movements: phone in my hand, hair in my face, mosquitoes buzzing around me. Daniel with his one, two, three steps

and dopey smile. Two, three, four steps. I looked down. Two, three, four, five steps. Right there. I look up in his direction. I spot him and go back to my phone. Two, three, five, seven … no steps. He falls. He gets up. Vladimir in my guts. Two, three, five, seven, eight, nine steps. And me behind each one of them, every single day: two, three, four … And only when Nagore would glare at me, mortified because I'd be standing between the see-saw and the slide, right in the way of all the children, only then would it click: I had become one of those women people look at in the street with pity, and with fear.

At other times I would look for him from the bench in silence, and Nagore, sitting beside me, would cross her little legs and not say a word, as if her voice were somehow guilty, as if she already knew that I hated her. Nagore revealed to me my own monstrousness.

Why didn't you go missing instead? I asked Nagore the time she called me from the shower to pass her towel from the bathroom shelf. She looked at me with those blue eyes of hers, completely stunned that I'd said it to her face. I quickly threw my arms around her and covered her in kisses. Her wet hair wetted my face and arms, and I wrapped her up in the towel and pressed her body into mine and we wept together. Why didn't she go missing instead? Why, after all the sacrifices, did we get nothing in return?

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It should have been me, she told me some time later when I was dropping her off at school. I watched her walk away towards her little classmates and I wanted never to set eyes on her again. Yes, it should have been her, but it wasn't. Every day of her childhood, she returned to my house without fail.

It's not always the same kind of sadness that you feel. I didn't always wake up sick to my soul. But the smallest thing would make me swallow hard and remind me to keep breathing. Breathing isn't mechanical; it's an act of stability. Becoming aware of your own breathing is really no joke; realising that breathing is the only way to remain steady. Living is innate, but breathing is learnt. And so I forced myself to take things one step at a time. Wash. Brush your hair. Eat. Wash, brush your hair, eat. Smile. No, no smiling. Don't smile. Breathe, breathe, breathe. Don't cry, don't scream. What are you doing? What are you doing? Breathe. Breathe, breathe. Maybe tomorrow you'll be able to get off the sofa. But tomorrow is always another day and the fact remained that I was stuck in the present.

Sometimes Fran would call from work to remind me that we had another child. No, I would tell him, Nagore wasn't my daughter. No, but we're her guardians, we offered her

a home, he would say. Nagore isn't my daughter. Nagore isn't my daughter. (Breathe. Cook a meal, they have to eat.) Daniel is my only child, and when I used to cook he would play on the floor with his toy soldiers and I would take him carrot sticks with lemon and salt. (He had one hundred and forty-five soldiers, all of them green, all of them plastic.) I would ask what he was playing and in his garbled phonemes he would reply that he was playing at soldiers, and together we would listen to the great marching strides leading them into battle. (The oil's too hot. The pasta's burning. There's no water in the blender.) Nagore isn't my daughter. Daniel no longer plays at soldiers. Long live the war! After he went missing, I would get calls from Nagore's school reminding me she was waiting for me to pick her up and that they had to close soon. I'm sorry, I would say, only just stopping myself from adding, the thing is Nagore isn't my daughter. Then I'd hang up, furious about all those maternal demands that I never asked for, stifling my sobs, which surfaced anyway in a gasping plea to be Daniel, to go missing with him. But instead I would just sit watching the hours pass until Fran called yet again to remind me that I mustn't forget Nagore because she, too, was my child.

Vladimir came back once, just once. Probably out of pity, out of obligation, out of morbid curiosity. He asked me

what I felt like doing. I kissed him. He took care of me for an afternoon, as if I mattered to him. He touched me gingerly, sort of afraid, with the delicacy of someone who's not sure if it's okay to touch a freshly cleaned pane of glass. I led him up to Daniel's room and we made love. I wanted to say hit me, hit me till I scream. But Vladimir only asked if I was okay and if I needed anything. If I was comfortable. If I wanted to stop. I need you to hit me, I need you to give me what I deserve for having lost Daniel, hit me, hit me, hit me. I didn't say any of that. Later, driven by guilt, he came out with the non-proposal that we should have got married, and that he … Forget it. That he wouldn't have got me pregnant? I suggested, in the face of his embarrassment, his fear of saying anything binding. That he wouldn't have taken me and our child to any park? No. Rather, that there wouldn't have been a child. What he'd been about to say before he stopped himself was that he would have given me a life without maternal suffering. Yes, maybe that's it, he replied, and then, in that breezy way of his, he walked out and left me on my own again.

That evening Fran came home and put Nagore to bed and I wanted him to come near me and realise my vagina smelled of sex. And for him to hit me. But Fran didn't notice a thing. It had been a long time since we'd touched each other, or even brushed shoulders.

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Fran would play the guitar for Nagore in the evening, before she went to bed. I despised him. How dare he have a life? I couldn't forgive him for it. He went to work, paid the bills, played the good guy. But how much goodness is there, really, in a man who doesn't spend every day grieving the loss of his child?

Nagore would come to kiss me goodnight every evening at precisely ten past ten, and in response I would bury my head in the pillows and pat her on the back. How much goodness is there, really, in a person who offers you love only so she can demand yours in return? None at all.

Nagore lost her Spanish accent as soon as she got to Mexico. She imitated me. She was an insect species that had arrived to us in a chrysalis before hatching to reveal new wings so we could watch her fly away. In Mexico she burst into colour, as if the cocoon her parents had woven for her had merely prepared her for real life. She grew out of her sadness. After Daniel went missing, I clipped her wings. I wasn't going to allow anything to shine brighter than him and his memory. We would be the framed family photo, knocked to the floor by the sad flutter of an insect, but still intact.

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Fran was Nagore's uncle. His sister gave birth to her in Barcelona. Fran and his sister were from Utrera, Spain. They'd both travelled a lot, leaving their mark on the world before deciding to immortalise themselves in a family.

His sister was beaten to death by her husband, which is why Fran imposed Nagore's care on us. I became the mother of a six-year-old girl even as Daniel grew in my belly. But the trouble is I turned out to be no kind of mother. The trouble is I survived.

There were moments when I wished I was one of those mothers who dragged their heavy feet and covered miles and miles. The kind to go around putting up posters with Daniel's face on them, all day, every day, telling everyone I met about his disappearance. There were also moments, admittedly fewer, when I really did want to be Nagore's mother: to brush her hair, make her breakfast, smile at her. But I'd remain suspended, lethargic, sometimes awake on bodily instinct alone. Far more often I wanted to switch places with Amara, Fran's sister, and to dump the responsibility of those two lives onto her. I wanted to be her, the bad girl, the murdered girl. I wanted not to give birth. Not to conceive or produce the cells that generate life. Not to be life or the source of life, not to let the maternal myth be perpetuated in me. I wanted to

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scupper Daniel's prospects while he was still in my belly. I wanted to shut away Nagore until she stopped breathing. Be the pillow that smothered her in her sleep. Decontract the contractions by which they were both born. Not give birth. (Breathe, breathe, breathe.) Not give birth, because once they're born, motherhood is for life.

The sound of violins would take me back to my own childhood – if indeed I ever was a child – and to those joyful moments in my life, which I was incapable of passing on to Nagore. Violins. Violins in my parents' house as the sun poured in through the window, brightening the living room where I would play with my toys. Violins, the music of play. One day I woke up absolutely determined that Nagore must learn the violin. I looked into private teachers. We went into town to browse brands and prices. We enquired about the differences between them and listened to the replies, pretending we understood. Nagore took my hand, grinning with excitement, radiating youth. That's right, violins, and Fran frowned but agreed and even arranged for music lessons at home. He gave me a piece of paper with the schedule and a phone number I had to call to confirm the first one. I stuck it on the fridge. There never were any violins in our house.

How about we go to Utrera, to Grandma and Granddad's white house? Nagore asked. Go to Utrera, with my son missing? I slapped her. Then denied it. I could never hit a little girl.

Daniel was born on 26 February. He's a Pisces, I thought. Fran didn't think anything of it. Pisces are tricky. They suffer a lot but catastrophise even more. He should have been an Aries. I always wanted an independent child. Daniel weighed two kilos nine hundred grams, had healthy lungs, an average Apgar score of 8. (Breathe, breathe, breathe …) Daniel was a Pisces and he had pale, almost transparent skin … (Breathe, breathe, breathe!) Daniel was a Pisces, he weighed two, almost three, kilos, pale, transparent skin, but a Pisces, it's not good to be a Pisces … (Breathe, breathe, breathe!, breathe.) Daniel was a Pisces, he was my son, Daniel was my, my son. He is my son … (Breathe, brea— no, I don't want to breathe.) Daniel is my son and I want to know where he is.

I don't deserve to breathe. I breathe. Breathing is my sentence.

Fran, how little remains of what we had, a few crumbs on the floor from a mouth that tried to gobble them all up in one go. Fran, how little I know about him and

he about me. Where did we find the nerve to become parents? And why? Fran, how brief our time together and how profound our misfortune. Fran, the stoic, strong, resilient one, the perfectly running clock. The rational, measured one. The fool. There are people, like me and Fran, who should die the second it becomes clear we're not fit to be parents.

A kind of natural selection.

I realised I loved Nagore only once she'd left us, not a minute before.

Fran never wanted children. Or rather he did, but not any time soon. What for? That's why he always ejaculated on my legs. I liked it. His white semen made my brown skin glow. Vladimir always used condoms. How flimsy that layer of elastic separating us, and how thorough his rejection of fertility! How quick he was to place a barrier between my skin and his. That's why when Fran touched me with the moist tip of his dick I felt loved. The kind of love – so deceptive, so feverish – that makes semen pass from the thighs to the womb, and from the womb to disaster. Some women are destined to make bad mothers, and God should have sterilised us before we were born.

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I did a pregnancy test. When I told Fran, he embraced me as though he knew that was the correct reaction. Do you want it? Do you want us to have this baby? I asked. Yes, he said, yes. (Breathe, breathe …) Do you want to look after it? Will you look after me? Yes, he said, yes. Whatever happens, we'll be okay, won't we? Yes, he said, yes. Yes, (breathe,) he said. (Breathe, breathe, breathe, breathe!) Yes, he said. Whatever happens, we'll be okay, won't we? Yes. Whatever happens, we'll be okay, won't we? Yes. No matter what, we'll be okay. Won't we? Yes. Whatever happens, we'll be okay, won't we? No. I mean, yes. We should have had an abortion that day.

Perhaps searching for some trace of him, Fran and Nagore would look at photos of Daniel when they thought I wasn't looking. You'll go blind, I told them one day. They didn't reply. You're trying to find him in a photograph. Why don't you actually go out and look for him? Nothing. They rarely took the bait. What do you even see when you look at him? You never really saw him, I'd say. When he was here you two never saw him. Yes we did, Nagore replied once. You didn't understand him, I said. Yes we did! Nagore shouted back. We did see him and you lost him, you! Fran cupped his hand over her mouth and she began to cry. They had failed to see him. So had I. That was what hurt most of all, the

fact that, deep down, all three of us knew it wasn't just my oversight. But it was easier to blame me. Or simply to put it down to misfortune, which at times we did. It made no difference what we thought.

Where had Daniel gone?

The first night at home without Daniel I wanted to sleep but couldn't. I held Fran's hand and we listened in silence to the sound of cars that reached our bedroom window. After a while, Nagore joined us. She curled up inside the hollow of my foetal position. I don't think any of us closed our eyes the whole night, but nor could we see each other; only the light from the passing cars on the bed. Only body parts, the bedspread, our interlaced hands. We were spectres. The missing person takes something with them forever: the sanity of those left behind.

Breathe. Brush yourself off. Grin and bear it. Get up. Breathe. But for what?

With Daniel gone, I gained a new-found respect for people who are able to talk about their feelings. Who can share, empathise. I felt as if I had something trapped between my lungs, windpipe and vocal cords. It physically hurt, the effort to talk, like a hand choking me. My body changed. It became meagre, flaccid, weak. Daniel

Translated from the Spanish by
Sophie Hughes

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