***Madre mía***
**Florencia del Campo**

**Synopsis**

On one side of the ocean, a mother with cancer. On the other, a daughter looking for her place, her identity, her impossible freedom. *Madre mía* is a work of auto fiction that explores pain, belonging, and family. In this novel, Florencia del Campo makes a stark, honest journey through the elements that define filial relationships: guilt, love, recognition, obligation, distance, and the foreignness of our own family. There is no shame in this story, no respite. On this daring journey, del Campo's sharp-edged voice mixes with another—needy, sarcastic—and in the various scenes from the narrator's foster cities, creates an implacable message: no matter how clean the wound, you can't run from the cause.

**From *Madre mía* (Caballo de Troya, 2017), chapters V y VI.**

## V.

October 7, 2012. Aunt E.:
"I didn't mention it yesterday because it was way too much, but I talked to your mother and she asked me to find a doctor who would help her leave this world. She can't stand it anymore. She begged me not to abandon her in this. I don't know anyone, of course, but I said I would look into it. Not true. No way. She told S. she thinks about killing herself with gas. [. . .] I'm listening to Chávez right now. He won. And he had cancer. I don't think your mother is going to die anytime soon."

Ten days later: October 17, 2012. My father's birthday. I called him from Paris. I was rocking in an orange armchair. The balcony and the rain behind me. It always rains in Paris, the balconies are a mess, the orange armchair rocked. To my left, the bathroom and kitchen. To my right, a Frenchman. He watched me as I talked, fascinated by the fact that he couldn't understand a single word (*though made of words [. . . ] one still*

*has to guess*). All we did was watch movies together, he was your competition. I had already begun to replace you. It was nighttime in Paris, day in Argentina. Winter everywhere. The orange armchair rocked. In that city, I was predisposed to movements that weren't considered forward motion. The subtle dip of my toes on the floor, an instant of air, the floor again. Rocking. The conversation I had with my father isn't worth writing about. Language rocked, too: word after word, silence, word again. Silence. The floor. Rock again. To my right, the Frenchman who watched me. To my left, the house that was never mine. Behind me, Paris rain outside the window.

Things I did while in Paris: visit the Musée d'Orsay, visit the Louvre, visit the Palais de Tokyo, visit the Pompidou, visit Shakespeare and Company, visit the National Library. I went to the first by myself, to the second with a guy whose name I can't remember or maybe never knew. I went to the Palais with my friend A. a few times, once for an indie press book fair. I picked up a couple of catalogs and talked with A. about several projects. We went for coffee at a nearby outdoor café and he said: "It's super expensive here because this neighborhood is like the Recoleta in Buenos Aires." I went to the Pompidou with one of the worst hangovers I've ever had and then went home with the Italian who had taken it upon himself to get me drunk the night before. At the bookstore, I stole a Paul Auster novel that I would later give to R. during the parenthesis we carved out in our lives and which would have us meet in Buenos Aires, despite the fact that neither one of us lived in our hometown. But the National Library was the place I went every day to work. I borrowed a library card from the Frenchman who had watched me as I rocked in that apartment, in the cinema that was Paris.

Later. The night you died in the hospital bed set up in your room, S. ordered takeout for dinner: *asado* with potatoes for her and my two sisters and empanadas for me, because I didn't want to eat meat.

*Come on! You're really going to describe the little party you had while I was dying?*

We drank beer.

*Oh, very nice . . . and I'll bet you smoked, too.*

You lay prostrate on the metal-backed hospital bed like a sack full of water. Your body, a dead jellyfish dragged to shore by the tide. Your left hand kept slipping down, every once and a while we placed it back on your chest.

*Like our El Greco print in the dining room?*

Your fingers were terribly swollen. It was horrible to see your silver wedding ring adorning your hand like a tourniquet.

When they came to take your body, the social service people asked for dish soap to remove your ring. I went to the kitchen and grabbed the plastic bottle. It was next to the sink. It belonged on the side of the world where the simple things lived ever since Madrid, ever since the veneer came down and divided everything in two.

I carried the dish soap down the hall leading from the kitchen to your room. The young guy who had asked for it waited for me in the doorway, the door half-closed to prevent my seeing you.

But I peeked.

They had laid you out on the floor. A blanket covered you. The kid took the dish soap and closed the door behind him. I stood staring at the wooden door. Not metal. Wood. It divided. The world of simple things and living people. From a place of death. The dish soap crossed through. From one dimension to another. And ever since that day. It's possible I began. Not to be. On the same side. Of the veneer. As you.

Which dimension is yours, now? A thread of invisible slime follows you; it contaminates and infects. Slug, you drag yourself along and leave your trail. It was something else, the attempt to avoid the path you drew. But now that the bedroom has fused with the kitchen, now that I live on the side of the world where people eat calamari, where eating calamari is living, nothing short of life itself, nothing else is on the menu,

now that I have lost your trail in my attempts to avoid it. But if I ever come across your image in a film, I will know for sure: there were no sides, only borders. Time flowed. The wind shook the windowpane that looked out on a large tree in front of our—of your—house, a tree that ripped up the paving stones with the inevitable force of its roots. Nature and life followed suit, that's how it's always been. And maybe in those moments we were briefly at peace; for a while, just a little while, because really, life is here (imagine my hand running over a tabletop), on this surface. You can never really jump the border, not even when the most boundless, the expansive, thing is happening to you. The essential, something you can't escape.

Do I have the right to write this story?

A story based on your already-written medical history, no less.

In part, medical (hi)stories are always a fabrication.

There is an element of fiction in how we tell the doctor our story. As if when we say *it hurts here but yesterday it hurt there and today I feel a little better but yesterday was hit or miss,* language cannot quite manage to narrate the body escaping its borders, the physical body spilling over. In cases of such extensive medical histories, such fatal disease, we are silenced in the telling, as if to tell meant to stutter until we lose our voice.

Or save it.

But what am I saying? That's so depressing! You never were one for discourse, you went to those appointments with real hope, and sometimes you left disappointed.

It must be because you were the sick person. It wasn't your job to think about the words.

## VI.

October 19, 2012. Marseille.

I went south, fleeing the cold and the rain—among other reasons. But when I got to Marseille, there was a wild storm and the wind destroyed three of my umbrellas. I met V. there. Meeting her brought on two feelings.

The first being that maybe I didn't want to keep moving around, maybe I was beginning to want a home where mostly I could consume movies and music, a place to put away my clothes. One evening, I saw V. in a red skirt, something like what Red Riding Hood would wear, and I thought I was probably starting to need them, the little symbols that ascribe an identity or place of belonging—to a table or to a body, it doesn't matter—and make it possible to go out and face the daily task of living, not the whole world. Regular life, where we don't question the reflection staring back at us. Order, a kind of learned discipline after the chaos had been tidied up.

Chaos, organized.

The idea of a base camp as something I both needed and longed for, while rejecting and refusing it, was the absolute symbol of my indecision. And the expression, of course, of my most neurotic phase.

Chaos, spilled and strewn.

The second feeling: a rejection of a particularly unstable way of speaking that entertains and distracts with clichés while postponing the idea or question.

Red.

Benefits of being nearsighted: I looked out the window. I thought the sun was setting, but it was a red building across the street.

To lack sight.

I spent the whole month of October 2012 in France. I met F. thanks to A. I was able to stay in F.'s house in Paris for a bit. That was a relief: Paris isn't just museums and culture, cinema and French. It is also rain, cold, and shame. Before F., I spent some of the afternoons sitting in laundromats. There were no employees present; the machines are coin-operated. There were washing machines at the back and chairs lining the walls, where you could sit and wait for your load of clothes to be done. I myself sat to have somewhere to be. This was a time when I managed to find a bed to sleep in for the night but nowhere to spend the afternoon. If a customer came in, I pretended I was waiting for my laundry, that one of the spinning mounds of clothes was mine. Outside, it rained every day and every day I couldn't afford to hole up somewhere that required me to buy something. I didn't have access to a card to work in the library yet. A friend in Buenos Aires told me that she imagined me writing novels in Parisian cafes. I'm usually in the laundromat eating Turkish takeout, I replied in my email.

I liked staying at F.'s. She spoke little and read a lot, and I think she admired me, too. She asked me about my life. I gave her a book on Portugal that I later missed and wished I could have consulted on more than one occasion. But it was always a consolation to remember that

F. had it, and not someone else.

F. got sick. We didn't know what she had. We thought it would pass. I bought her apples.

I asked her every day if she felt better and she said yes. But one day I saw that she couldn't get up to go to the bathroom.

It’s nothing, she’d say, let’s watch a movie. We watched several.

Let’s read. We read for hours in the same bed.

Outside, it rained. Always the same.

It’s nothing, F.? Are you sure?

Nothing.

But she couldn’t get up to go to the bathroom.

She went to see another doctor, one she could really trust, according to her sister.

Nothing. It was nothing. This pill every eight hours, such and such a diet, and this for the fever.

Nothing?

Nothing. The same opinion as the first doctor: nothing.

Days passed.

Are you sure you’re feeling better? Yes, yes, she replied every time.

That it was nothing.

Another movie, another book, the rain. Paris, nothing.

F. was on the verge of dying. I was traveling.

*You're always traveling when other people are dying.*

She had an emergency operation. They saved her life.

When I saw her again, F. said: "It's an interesting experience, not being able to count on your body at all."

I was left stuttering in fear.

Over nothing.

Had F. died, it would have seemed like the most unjust thing in the world. She wasn't even thirty. I wasn't either, but I wasn't dying, I was traveling.

*All the time, nonstop.*

The present. I get home to my apartment in Madrid. There's a woman, a kind of visiting hairdresser, dyeing my housemate's hair. It reminds me of when A. would go to your house to wash your hair. That was July 2012, you had just had surgery, the scar was a train track stamped along the right side of your ribcage, I was always wearing a patchwork wool sweater, you and A. examined it carefully, felt it, you wanted to see how it had been knit, everything had to do with craftsmanship or aesthetics, beauty parlor conversations, the simple things. Combined with the occasional morning visit from a nurse, A.'s dropping by in the afternoon provided a modicum of routine. I needed someone else to entertain you, for things to come through other people, too. Later, a Friday, I think, I went out in the appalling cold to get your medicine at the pharmacy on the other side of the Plaza Irlanda. As I headed home on the Avenida Gaona, down the sidewalk I'd been walking my whole life, I knew I could no longer be found there, it was as if I had evaporated. I came to terms with the fact that I had already committed the act of leaving and that it was hopeless for me to return.

No matter how many times you leave, it's the first time that really counts.

July 2013. One year after that raw winter, starved sunlight, train tracks on skin, steamed bodies. Interest in the moral question. I asked my friend R. for his opinion on whether I had to go see you before you died. I wanted him to give me his view, based fundamentally on morality. He was firm: he termed my absence "deliberate" and said it was very likely to cause a rift with my sisters; he referred to me as "nomadic" and argued (including himself in this category) that "people like us are selfish out of necessity"; he agreed that I should cultivate my independence but suspected that I would feel really awful later; he encouraged me to make the decision that would cause me the least pain, while pointing out that a certain amount of chafing was inevitable when dealing with family ("you can only try to minimize the damage," he added); he claimed that, in the end, the ethical thing always comes down to our private lives, and that this is natural; he wanted to make a clear distinction regarding the guilt of responsibility; he said: "You aren't guilty of anything [. . .] but you feel responsible for being far away." "I morally support you in everything you do," he added. "I've never loved you more than I do now."

What I wanted to know: Do we (daughters and sons) have the (moral) obligation to care for of our parents when they get sick, or do we have a choice (based on our feelings, our history, the circumstances . . .)?

I understood then that the question I posed couldn't be separated from the individual, from my specific situation. And moreover, regardless of what my friend replied, the truth was it would always have a little to do with costs and consequences.

I feared there was no answer (because perhaps there wasn't even a question) that could transcend the particularities of my case and allow me to talk about this.

One month after the moral question: August 17, 2013. I took a flight to Buenos Aires with layovers in Munich and Frankfurt. I arrived the morning of Sunday, August 18th. I went to see you in the afternoon, you had become a jellyfish. Your wedding ring, a tourniquet. You didn't look at me or speak, you no longer opened your eyes, you weren't conscious. I said hello and told you I was there, I'd arrived. Nothing. The

silence of neap tide, dead calm, madre mía, sea life, mamá muerta. I went to sleep at my sister M. 's. The next day was a bank holiday and I would take care of you day and night. On the way from your place to M.'s, I strolled through a fair they had set up in Plaza Irlanda, the park midway between your two houses. The fair was ethnically-themed. They had food from different countries and typical souvenirs and indigenous-type wares. I felt at peace, liberated, a decision had been made, something was happening almost by itself. The motion of a tide, turned to wake. On the morning of Monday the 19th I went to your house, I took care of you early, then S. came over and at dinnertime we ordered takeout: *asado*, French fries, and empanadas. It was unusually warm, we brought the table out to the patio so we could eat outside, the heat was unreal for August in Buenos Aires, impossible, the stuff of fiction. At twelve midnight on the dot, like an after-dinner toast, we had to give you your medicine orally, with a syringe. You had trouble swallowing. S. and my sister M. were already gone. L. said she would help me give you the three treatments. I administered the first. It wouldn't go down, we had to massage your trachea to move the liquid, you couldn't do anything by then. L. tried to lift your torso in hopes that a more upright position would help you swallow, off and on I massaged your trachea, you were so heavy that day, almost impossible for us to move, we couldn't get the pain medication into you, it must have been terrible, we were sweating, we rolled up our sleeves, pushed you from behind and pulled on your arms, stacked pillows behind your back to prop you up, turned the crank on the hospital bed many, many times, you started making a weird sound, liquid in the throat, we were afraid you hadn't swallowed any of the medication, you were bubbling inside, L. was really upset, she was afraid you were in pain, I started thinking that somehow the sound would eventually have to stop, almost fifteen minutes went by, you were still making that sound, it was getting worse, we were exhausted, we wrestled with your body, slug, jellyfish, I suddenly thought of F., in the impossibility of being able to count on your body, and I knew then exactly what was happening. The sound was deafening. I saw, as if in a vision, that only a hole in your trachea could stop the gurgling. I looked at my sister and said: Call an ambulance! Now!

She ran out of the room to get the phone. I shirred my eyelids shut and puckered my lips, three asterisks drawn on my face. When she came back, she told me they'd said

they would send one. She thought it might take longer than an hour. I looked at her, she looked at me, wanting me to say something, but she didn't dare ask. A windless cloud hovered. In the background, mother-thunder. I grabbed her arm and said: let's wait outside.