

I Was Born to See You Smile
(Extract)

The characters are the mother and the son. Her name is Miriam. The space is neutral. The son's back is to us. He's playing with dominoes, making rows, losing himself in the game. After they fall he doesn't do anything, he stays still. She circles him, engages, approaches, moves away. As if the son were a sun and she its orbiting planet. Every so often she sits, but an impulse launches her and she rises, circles.

MIRIAM:

I woke up early this morning.

Some days I wake up early.

Today for example.

Early, and full of anxiety.

My heart was beating hard... Like this... pounding in my chest. I pressed. I thought it would pound its way out... a heart outside... like when your father had open-heart surgery, like that but without a scalpel, a heart outside from sheer anxiety.

Yesterday before I went to bed I prepared everything. Actually I'd asked dear Laura to prepare them, but she forgot. Dear Laura has a boyfriend. Every time she gets a boyfriend she forgets everything. Loses herself. She can't see what's important. I told her, you must make everything clean. And when I say everything I mean everything. Several shirts ironed, trousers impeccable, shoes polished, at least one change of underwear per day for a week. Or else they'll say that one was raised in the gutter. And when I walked into your room this morning she'd gotten out the bag and opened it, but put nothing in, just left it there. That's what happens when she gets a boyfriend. She bolts out as soon as her day is done to, I'm sure, jump in bed with that driver, the one that's been after her for months. At first she didn't even like him but now you can't pry them apart. I asked her not to kiss him in the doorway, that's not the image one wants to present of this home. Let them go somewhere else to kiss. In the office, in the car, but here in my precious garden, nobody gets kissed. That little piece even told me there was a cot set up in the office of the car service. She'll sleep there, waiting for him to finish his night shift. And they just stay there, weltering like animals on that cot... disgusting... the poor creature doesn't even have the means to take her to a hotel...

In any case this morning I woke up full of anxiety. I packed your bag, which little Laura hadn't packed. I put in everything. I even slipped in some chocolates. In case you get hungry at night... or in case it gets cold or something... a chocolate's always nice... or if you're feeling sad... chocolate's good for that too... I don't know... I tucked in some chocolates... And then... when I closed the lock, I was paralyzed.

It wasn't a physical pain. It was something else. Like I'd turned to plaster.

And a thought struck me, like lightning.

I thought: I have a son who went insane... and this evening we're going to commit him. The sentence came to me and I murmured it out loud, like when you're not used to an idea and you have to repeat it to believe... "I have a son who went insane."

You know, in that moment I realized why I woke up so anxious. At night, while I slept, images of the past had come to me. In dreams, when I sleep I'm always the same age, always. I don't grow up. No more than twelve or thirteen... just a girl... I'm playing with a stick in the ground... I draw a line and think, this will be my life... I'll get married... I'll have a big house with lots of windows and light everywhere, and lots of children... and we'll all be together, holding hands, always smiling... and then I wake up... and I remember that time has passed... that I kept growing... the body grows but in dreams things stay right there, in the same place... ...where the future was a kind of game... and every so often, when I'm asleep I go back to that moment. And it's a little frightening... I mean to say, I am frightened... this morning I woke up frightened. Nothing uglier than to start the day full of fear.

I woke up and your father had gone to work. The sun was shining through the window. I woke up crying out, and looked all around. My throat was dry, I drank some water. I always leave a glass of water beside the bed. Mama taught me that. Sometimes in the night you can get thirsty, best to have water handy. She also said that water purified dreams. Prevented nightmares. That the water would sit there all night witnessing, and at dawn you had to not drink it. The water at the side of the bed would be full of bubbles. And those are the nightmares the water held off. A nightmare for every bubble.

I never believed that stuff. I was always more rational. Anyway I drank the water. It was full of bubbles. And then I got up and went to the bathroom. On the way I stopped by your room. I looked at you while you slept. Before (I mean a long time ago) watching you sleep was so moving to me. It must be because it was always difficult for you. As a baby it took you a long time. That's why it moved me, because when I saw you asleep it was as though you'd won a battle. It was the sleep of a warrior. Sleep was always easy for me. I could lie down and fall asleep just like that. But it was always hard for you to tame your thoughts. They fight you. At any rate, I watched you sleep from the doorway. I thought, asleep like this, he seems normal.

When people sleep they become the same. I don't know how to put it. There's something animal about sleep. Like we're all puppies when we sleep. Even old people. Sleeping shrinks us down.

You always liked it when I told you the story of Grandma. My mama's mama. On her one hundredth birthday, we had lunch at the country house, at a big table with Grandma at the head. Since I was the youngest grandchild I was at the far other end. I watched her from there, far away, she laughed a lot, with difficulty but a lot. She toasted, she ate and drank, she didn't talk much, it was a beautiful day. We sang Happy Birthday, she blew out a hundred candles. She gave every one of us a kiss. Then she said she'd like to take a little nap. I went with her to her bed. I helped her lie down. I covered her with a quilt. I closed the door and turned out the light.

And she never woke up.

My goodness! It's true. Just look at the kind of things you liked me to tell you.

I'm going to be long-lived.

Die in my sleep, like that. In the middle of a light summer nap.

I thought all that while I looked at you. He's at peace, I thought. The demons have left him for a moment. Left him alone. Exhausted.

But back to the moment I woke up. I'm sorry to harp on it. The thing is, if you can understand that moment. If you understand the color of the first moment of the day, you're likely to understand the rest.

The bed was in a mess.

The sheets were tangled. Torn.

This has been happening for a while. I don't know if it's your father or me but one of us tears the sheets while we sleep. I change them so dear Laura won't see them when she makes up the room, so she doesn't imagine things and go out telling tales.

We spend a lot on sheets. At least once a week I wake up with the sheets torn to ribbons.

I cut your father's nails so they stay short. I decided to cut mine too, I I don't paint them or grow them long. But the sheets keep getting torn. I wake up with destruction all around.

I wake up in the remains of a war. I get up after he does and the first thing I do is check to see if the sheets are torn.

This morning they were. Appalling.

When I got back from your room, I went to the bathroom. I showered. I found a nylon bag and threw the sheets inside. I looked at the mattress. I always thought mattresses without sheets were rather indecent. As if there were something obscene there... it could belong to a nun, no matter, if I see a mattress naked it embarrasses me. As if it held dark, black secrets. That must be why I stayed and stared. The mattress had two blots down its length, it took me a minute to recognize that they were the marks of our bodies. Your father's body, and mine. That fabric with its pattern of flowers...

Shadows stuck to the mattress, to the fabric, over all the flowers. Your father's shadow was bigger and mine was thinner, but stronger, darker. Like the mark had been made with more force. Like my fall into the mattress was deeper. There they were, two dark bruises...

People in Asia don't use mattresses, they sleep on mats. They're in harmony in the far east, night and day mix together, sleep and wakefulness aren't separate things. That's why sleep shouldn't be a division, but a passage to the next day... that's why they don't use mattresses, so they don't dawdle there... I couldn't, I couldn't sleep on a mat, no matter how transcendental it might be... I couldn't...

I threw out the sheets and went back to your room. These days I think a lot about whether you're asleep. Starting tomorrow, other people will care for your sleep. I'll have to get used to that.

When I looked I thought: well, keep sleeping, it shows you're calm. It gave me hope. A new way of hoping. That soon, one day, you'll be chatting away, just like that, like anybody...

Hope.

Last night, before I slept, I turned on the television. To think about something else. They were showing footage of the war. It was comforting to see more miserable lives than one's own. A woman wearing a headscarf said after the bombing, in the rubble you could see survivors searching for their dead.

She said that after the explosion there was silence, a complete silence, a kind of brilliance. And the survivors wandered, some aimlessly; the woman said that at that moment, hope was extinguished.

And a being can't survive very long without hope, a matter of seconds, minutes at most... She said that during that time of wandering, she saw many people beat their heads against walls, trying clumsy ways to kill themselves.

It was the end of hope.

It's strange, but it calmed me to see that.

I told myself, I have a son who will come back, he left, but he will come back. And I have a husband sleeping beside me. I still have time.

Sometimes you find solace in other peoples' horrors.

But I'm off topic. I want to get to the point. I don't know what the point is but I want to see if I can get to it. So we can understand something, d'you know?

Alright. This morning. After I packed your bag I took a shower.

I always liked bathing. Getting wet, being under the water. I could spend hours underwater. Mama would told me, get out of the bathroom, you're going to wash yourself out.

They'd shut off the heater on me. It used to be different. We had a tank, not natural gas like now. Showers had to be shorter. And I needed time.

Since I was a child I felt filthy.

I always scrubbed myself a lot. Sometimes I pushed the soap so hard over my body that I left myself all red, sore.

This morning, after I packed your bag, that happened. I wanted to get that all out of my body. What was left in me of the preparations for your journey. As if I wanted the water to flood away this tangle of thoughts. To clear me.

Water cleans bodies. Bodies contain rust. Something that stains. That's what stained the mattress. The friction of bodies. Exhaustion.

I've always felt a bit of disgust. Since forever. In the shower I thought about all the things that come out of a body. The waste, the heat it radiates. All the leftovers of a body. And water... sometimes I wish I didn't have a body, I swear I don't want one. That's the kind of thing you think about. That's why you're the way you are. You have to think about those things every so often, not all the time or you couldn't take it.

Sometimes I'm surprised I have a body. And that you came out of it. Just like it surprises me to see branches of trees emerging from the trunk. That exact feeling, sometimes I think we're all

like trees, bodies sprouting from other bodies, intertwined, budding out, more bodies... that's the kind of thought that came into my head there under the shower.

Then I shut off the tap. I felt cold right away. I dried myself with a clean towel.

If there's a pleasure I have in life it's to dry off with a clean towel. It's comforting. It brings me back to myself.

When I used to bathe you before you went to school. In the beginning, when you'd let me wash you. You liked being dried the most. When I'd rub your head with the towel. I'd rub you nice and hard and you'd laugh. You'd laugh and I'd laugh. We were always laughing together. Sometimes we laugh for no reason. It drives your father crazy. We look at each other and laugh. Laughing just to laugh. We have the same laugh. We think the same things are funny. Things you can't explain. Like drying your hair. I don't know why but it always made us laugh so much.

It's been a long time since we laughed. I didn't notice when we stopped laughing. The water was falling on me and I thought, it's been a long time since anything made me laugh.

You don't laugh now.

I don't laugh.

Look at me.

Please look up.

Look at me.

I'm right here.

I'm your mama.

Your father will be here in less than an hour.

We'll put on our coats. He'll start the car. We'll bundle you in. And we'll go to the hospital.

We'll drive in silence. Night. I'll watch you in the rearview mirror. You'll be looking outside, every so often the lights will light you up. You'll be far away. We'll get to the hospital. I won't have the strength to get out. So your father will. He'll balance your bag on one shoulder as he takes you to the reception. You'll let yourself be guided. Docile. Your violence has faded now. You'll be able to understand, a little. Like an animal that finds the hunt is already over and surrenders to the hunter. You'll let yourself be caught. No resistance.

Going insane is losing your perimeter. Your shape. That's why your father's taking you to a place where they'll impose order. Look at me. I need you to look at me. Are you ready?

Does anything in your eyes still see me, or are you gone?

Are you still you?

I'm still me. I'm still here, inside of myself.

This day is so long. I can't encompass it all. Soon your father will get back from work and we'll have to leave and I still won't have understood what all I've lived through. This day has become eternal. The days are so long and life has become so short. It's a problem of scale.

In horror movies there's a scene where a girl runs down a hallway fleeing peril, and the hallway gets longer and longer and she never reaches the end... that happens to me with days, they prolong, they become infinite... how are we going to make it to the night?... when your father and I get back from the hospital. When we'll eat in silence and lie down in bed.

Silence.

Look at me.

If you'd look at me for a second I'd know what to do with you. Please look at me.

After my shower I ate my breakfast.

When I wake up. All that time before breakfast. From the moment I wake up to the first drink of coffee. That first part of the morning, I'm uninhabited. I don't have my what-do-you-call-it. Breakfast reconstructs me.

Feed myself. Toast with cream cheese. Strong coffee with milk. In silence. Sometimes I glance at a newspaper. That's how I slowly return to being what you'd call a person. Breakfast situates me in this present. Nourish the body. Give it something material to live on.

I don't understand how hungry people survive a single day. How they stand up and make it to the night. I couldn't take being hungry. I can take anything, but not hunger. Sometimes I eat extra for fear that I'll get hungry later. I know there are people who are always hungry. I can't put myself in their place. I can't abide hunger.

I had breakfast alone because your father had gone to work. While I was having breakfast dear Laura got here.

Where were you?

Said I, pretending we were "besties."

I had a long night, ma'am. She answered.

I can imagine, I remarked, to keep her talking.

I don't like to talk while I breakfast. I like to listen to other people. Some days I turn on the radio and listen to those voices, I don't pay attention but they're there. Today I didn't feel like— didn't have the will to turn on the radio. So when dear Laura arrived, it was my opportunity to hear something human. Up to that moment, as I said, I was uninhabited. No words, all blank.

Did you go out with the driver?

Manuel, Señora, his name is Manuel.

You have told me that, but you know how bad I am with names.

Yes ma'am, but Manuel is an easy name.

Easy names are the hardest for me, I said, and then I scolded her for not having packed the bag.

She apologized, saying she'd had to go to the driver for an emergency. One of the sons of this Manuel had gotten into an accident in the street. They had to look all night for a hospital and I don't know what all else. The point is, you didn't pack the bag, I said. I was about to say some more. That it's not my fault those people have children like rabbits. I only had you. And I have to take care of you. That's what I said: Laura, I trust you to take care of my son, I'm not interested in what happened to Manuel's son. Señora, it was serious, she insisted. I'm not even interested in hearing your story, Laura. My toast stuck in my throat when I said that. I started coughing, she gave me a slap on the back, I motioned her away.

I don't know why. I'd wanted to just listen, but I interrupted her. Well, at that moment I realized I wanted even more to vent something, to rid myself of an anger that had overtaken me when I became conscious of the day, I wanted to explode more than I wanted to sit quietly listening.

Calm down, ma'am, she told me. I will not calm down Laura. You know what we're going through and you go to the driver with everything half-finished. I'm sure you went to wallow in that disgusting cot, while I'm here with this son who is not well. You don't care about anything Laura, you don't care. There's something called loyalty. A thing you don't have. Ma'am, but Manuel's son was almost killed. Don't you keep going Laura, do not keep going. Let me finish my breakfast in peace. Look what you've done to me. You've made me angry. Please leave, Laura. Let it pass. As you wish Ma'am, she said, impertinently.

She left and I was furious. I had a drink of coffee. I got to the end of the cup. Fury had made me alert. Yes indeed I was awake now. Now, I had to calm down. I breathed deeply. I moved my head, my neck creaked. I looked out the window. A cloudy day.

You like cloudy days. They're hard on me.

That even light over everything. It's hard on me. I knew this day was going to be hard on me.

Then I felt the cold. I could just say, I got cold. But actually I'd been cold since I woke up.

After breakfast. When Laura left the kitchen. I became aware of the cold. I realized that my body was contracted with the cold. That I had been cold all night. Breakfast had reanimated the cold.

And just like I can't take being hungry, I can't stand being cold. Especially not when it's an unmanageable cold, when you don't know where it comes from. And you begin to suspect it's an internal cold. A cold that comes from within, from the entrails. A cold that fixes itself in the body and leaves you with nothing. That's the sort of cold I felt.

A shiver ran through me.

I hate the shivers. Losing control of the stillness of my body. I called Laura. She walked in without looking at me. Are you cold? I asked. No ma'am, it's not cold. It's not cold at all here.

Then I thought of you. We'd have to pack more coats for you. You might be cold in the institution. We're alike that way. That way as well. We're both cold-blooded.

The chemicals will make the cold go away. I saw other sick people in the hospital courtyard, half-naked in the middle of winter.

Or maybe insanity produces heat. Suffocation. The fire that burns them from within.

Look at me.

Are you cold?

Do you want me to hug you?

Where are you right now? Far? Near?

Bipolar. The two poles. You should be cold like the arctic. But no, you're hot. So much heat in your body.

Or it's something else. Forgetting of the body. Of the body temperature.

The sick people in the yard of the institution didn't feel hot. What they felt was the refusal to feel. They couldn't feel so much as cold.

Being warm or cold is a certainty. It belongs to the body. But at the same time it's a state of consciousness.

In the morning. When I felt myself shiver, I stood up and turned on the hot water in the sink. Let it run. I put my hands under the stream. My blood began warming inward from the fingertips to my chest. It turned my soul around. I kept my hands under the water. That warmth arriving.

The same as the cold. There are days when the heat takes me off guard. I'm suddenly out of air. I open all the windows. I drink cold water but it doesn't go away.

I'm a broken appliance. I can't regulate my temperature. I need a moderate climate. Temperate. Neutral.

This body is changing. This. My life.

I need you to understand what I was thinking about, with my hands in that stream of water.

I thought. I have a life.

I thought about Laura, angry in the other room.

About the driver.

About your father.

And I thought about you. You don't know how often I think of you these days.

I thought, there are all these lives. All of your lives. When I walk down the street I look at people and all that life surprises me. All those lives that aren't mine.

I thought: dear Laura has a life, I don't know what kind of life it will be but in whatever case, it's a life. You have a life. Or you're going to have one, if you get out of this. Your father has a

life. All these lives together and the only one you can know is your own. The other lives— the lives of others— you can only know the surface.

My life, my hands under the jet of hot water. My life, this heat, this is reality.

And I am in reality.

A person can be in reality, or not.

I chose to stay. You left.

When I look at all those unknown people. I think each one of them has a reality. Something palpable. Us. You and me. We are material. I can approach and touch you. That is reality. This materiality. To accept that my hand is warm and losing its cold. Blood rushing and pounding. The pain of muscles. Saliva, sweat. That is reality. I am in reality. I am reality. Not you. You left. You left me here, alone. I am alone in reality.

In reality I am alone.

Oof, I scared myself.

I just got scared.

I took advantage of the flowing water to wash the cup. I justified the water's flow. I realized I'd only turned on the faucet to wash the cup. I went back and sat at the table. I doodled with my fingertip in the crumbs the toast had left behind. The day was just beginning. It will be a long day. I murmured. What was that, ma'am? Laura asked from the living room. Nothing, I didn't say anything.

We're going to have a long day.

In less than an hour your father will be here.

Two hours later you'll be in a room at the clinic.

I packed a sweater in case you get cold. I'm sure the place is heated. But sometimes, at dawn, if you wake up, if you feel like going out in the backyard. At any rate, I packed a sweater just in case.

Then I left the kitchen and went to your room. To wake you up. To give you your medicine. To try to give you a bath.

There was a lot of light. And you were curled up. You were smiling.

Translation from the Spanish by Samuel Buggeln and Ariel Gurevich