SEVEN DAYS in ST ANDREWS

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I arrived in St Andrews late on a Monday. An intense week of work preceded my flight, so it is fair to say I came depleted—so much so that I slept through the 11 hours that separated Mexico City from London. It took another flight to Edinburgh and an additional bus ride on narrow, winding roads to make it to St Andrews. It was dark by then. As we walked on the empty streets, dragging my half-empty suitcase, it struck me that I had yet to finish my article for my bi-weekly column at *La Jornada* and, alarmed, I realized that I was famished too. In addition, I did not wish to waste a minute of my stay in Scotland without sampling the local whiskies. Too many requests. Too little time. Even less energy. As I was to learn, St Andrews, the saint who never set foot in Scotland and famously brought Jesus the loaves and fish when he most needed them, managed to work wonders.

Liliana suggested to stop by The Criterion, a small place known for its traditional pies and selection of whiskies. We were led to the burnt-red velvety booth, placed our laptops on the dark wooden table, ordered a couple of steak-and-ale pies, and two local whiskies from the lowlands, one each. I caught myself peeking at my watch as I typed furiously. My essay had to be in Mexico within the next two hours, and I was addressing the Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum. Whisky, in small quantities, contributes to greater concentration, I found out.

My work at that point consisted in deleting and re-arranging a series of paragraphs I had concocted in Mexico City, hours before my departure. They were long and convoluted, but after a series of revisions, they not only read better but finally abided by the 4,500-character-without-spaces limit. Hitting the send button lifted a heavy weight off my shoulders. We ordered a second round of smoky whiskies, this time from the highlands, talked for a little while, and bid goodbye.

Rest well, she said.

The carpet had been stripped off the staircase of the building I was to live in the week ahead. Dead leaves, empty water bottles, and forgotten Amazon packages littered the lobby, whose door remained ajar, nudged by the wind. I was not only entering an alien edifice but a different era. The two-bedroom apartment featured orange-stained wooden furniture, intricately designed carpets, a collection of the Waverley novels in faded red-and-gold

hardcovers, and endearing family photographs. The large picture of the bikini-clad young woman sitting on a pebbled beach beside a boy with red life preservers in each arm greeted me in the spacious kitchen. Their laughter burst out of the frame, even at this hour, close to midnight. The sound of the soft tide. The splendor of that sunny day, kept intact over the years, reached another beach, in a differ coastline. I thought of my son. Motionless. I smiled with them, faint as I was, and climbed the stairs, carefully.

The ocean peeked at me through the bay window right after I woke up the first morning. The beauty took me by surprise. I did not know, I mumbled, holding my breath. I was not aware of this, I insisted in a low voice while I took a couple of pictures, realizing I had slept through the night. The jet lag, which affects me with greater intensity as I grow older, left me stranded on this side of the ocean.

I should have paid attention to this first sign.

In the future, I will remember this: the light blue, light grey texture of the sky and the clouds, unraveling, almost undone; the crisp hand of the wind on my face, a slap or a caress, no matter which; the disheveled hair. We stopped to take a couple of photographs—as protocol dictates these days—the towers of the town lingering in the background. Some ruins. I will remember the traces of the birds on the sand, how the indentation on the earth´s surface resembled an ancient form of writing. The grass, standing tall against the wind´s gusts. And the sauna, a square wooden cabin a few meters away from the beach, from where I did not emerge, sweaty and exhilarated, dashing barefoot toward the ocean before plunging into its freezing low tide.

The young boy climbed the wall-mounted cast iron ladder with ease. I still do not know what overcame me. Was it the horizon, against which we were just a series of minuscule silhouettes about to dissolve? Was it the contrived juncture of immemorial layers of stone and waves crashing incessantly against the sand under the bright light of the midday sun? Was it the young, long-legged women who walked beside me, chit-chatting among themselves, laughing at the slightest provocation, or without provocation, brimming with futures yet unknown? I remembered the rusty wall-mounted ladder standing against the wall of my house in Tijuana—the only means for the gas vendors to get to the roof—that I never dared climb. But here I was, a grey-haired 61-year-old woman motioning toward the ladder, placing hands and feet on the cast-iron steps slowly realizing there was no way back. Terror seized me. Images of hands and legs in midair. Images of bodies disarticulated over pools of blood. When I made it to the top of the wall, the view, which was resplendent and glorious—the ocean as vast as a geological era in plain sight—diminished against the enduring trepidation, finally conquered.

I dreamt of my father at St Andrews, twice. In the first dream, he stepped toward a narrow bed made of stone. He laboriously climbed and then rested on it, arms across his chest. A yellowish-orange light hovered over his body, flickering against the stained-glass windows and the low concave ceiling. I understood that he had died yet again. Motionless, I stood at a distance, thinking that he had been alive and among us for only fifteen minutes this time. Then, I nodded, realizing that he had not shared the passwords for his credit cards once again. I went back to a place full of noisy people—writers, artists, some friends, a few enemies—only to become conscious that I needed to take care of my father´s remains. Should he be buried? Should he be cremated? I woke up as I was preparing—dreadfully, a stone heavy on my chest, no air left in my mouth—for the long journey back to his resting place.

In the second dream, my father was alive but frail. We lived in a mansion, large rooms preceding by colorful terraces led to luxurious bathrooms with vistas to the ocean. A painting by Caravaggio. A painting by Pedro Friedeberg. My father kept on falling and urinating all over the place, leaving a stench on marble floors and thick carpets. Bored and anxious, he spent most of his time wrapped in sheets of dubious colors, lamenting his luck. The sorrowful look on his face. The stare of self-pity. My sister, who had been dead for years but was just a young girl of almost five or six years of age in this dream, came jauntily with the bad news. He did it again. Don´t step on that piss puddle. Be mindful of the acrid smell. Her voice not disapproving but almost cheerful in tone. I caught sight of him from afar, a mountain of soft fabric wrinkling into the light blue, light gray sky.

One night, I fell asleep at 9:30, woke up at midnight, only to fall asleep again at 3:00 am, waking up at 11:00 am. I have not slept this way in years.

Long trips provide endless opportunities for hypochondriacs. A sneeze, a burning sensation in the throat, a tender ankle, a stiff neck—all signs of the impending illness, paralyzing in nature, fatal in retrospect. An unfamiliar place becomes a trap, full of secret menaces. I move with extreme care on the stairs and around the bathtub, and turn on the stove only after serious consideration. Afraid of explosions and falls, of man-made and natural disasters, I remain vigilant. People mistake my caution for poise, but I know I must move judiciously through my surroundings. If I die here, who will oversee sending my body back to Mexico? How much will it cost? How will the news travel to Paris, where my son lives, and to Houston, where my husband is concluding the spring semester? Will my body rot during the flight back? Who will make the arrangements for my incineration? Do I wish to be incinerated? Anne Michaels, the Canadian poet and novelist, said that the question of belonging could only be answered by the ground that would embrace our remains. For the record: I wish to be buried in my sister´s grave at the foot of a volcano, the decay of my body furthering the cycles of life and death of the land. The light of the highlands, awash with memory.

Sent the only poem I´ve written in years to the Argentinean journal *El gran cuaderno*. Answered emails. Failed to write the long-overdue essay on architecture and death. Swollen ankle.

A bottle of Lagavulin. A Barbour jacket, brown. A woolen blanket. Check. Not check. Check. A Mini?

The erratic cry of seagulls as they disappear into the morning fog. The old couple in the tidepool, gently stroking the water. What did they talk about when afloat, heart-shaped ripples around their bodies? The young girls wearing high heels and long, sleeveless dresses at the church entrance, their arms covered in goosebumps. The humming of people close to each other, held together by conversation and wine on the stone terrace—the unbroken light of the spring dying on them bit by bit.

The scandal of laughter.

The clatter of footsteps moving into the night.

[redacted]

[redacted]

The fog. The rooftops, stained by pigeon droppings. The tiny lamp turned off for the last time. The comforter and the pillows finally at peace with one another. The way in which carefully folded clothes remain domestic and terrified in rectangular pieces of luggage. The stairs, seventeen steps of thick carpet, orange and brown. The cup of green tea, now empty and clean in the dish rack. Photograph of the bikini woman and the blond boy on the pebbled beach—thank you for that day of perfect laughter. Stay still.

The waist

when you turn slightly—the hand on the knob.

Many thanks, comrade Liliana Chávez Díaz. In awe.