

That life is a breath...

Cecilia Dondo Bühler

During the break with buffet, I saw that Elisa had sent me a very affectionate message inviting me to a exhibition at her Schule the following Tuesday, where the kids would be presenting reinterpreted works by various artists. I felt that the clear little voice speaking to me naturally in Swiss German, from the girl who is Juan's daughter and who knows about my passion for art, is a precise snapshot of my present reality: the perfect synthesis of my internal—and external—journey, a completed metaphor of the voyage I've undertaken over the last twenty years.

How to explain everything, how to convey so much? How, when even though Gardel's most famous tango assures that life is a breath and twenty years is nothing, these two decades have left an indelible mark on me and the snows of time have *clearly* silvered my temples? Here I go, this is my attempt.

Juan says that we decided to come to Switzerland in 2004 because there was a huge sign for an insurance company in front of our Buenos Aires apartment that said, "Next time, choose ZURICH" and that, after the 2001 crisis and the corralito, that was an unequivocal sign. I know we came because I was born with dual Swiss-Argentine nationality and studied German from an early age at a bilingual school, because both of us had previously spent seasons in Europe that we had enjoyed, and therefore Switzerland was the best place to settle and from there "see." Perhaps there, in its conception, began the differences that drew the line where the rift between us would open.

Then came his modest backpack and my gigantic suitcase, which prompted his well-founded accusations ("it seems my mission in life is to drag your suitcases"), the pregnancy a few days after our arrival, which delighted us despite taking us off the imagined path of freedom, the smoked joints, the difference in our interpretation of the Swiss treatment toward us (me: "they are kind"; him: "they are cowards")... and the loneliness. His loneliness, my loneliness. That loneliness that tinged with tremendous fear the happiness of being father and mother. Searching for a house, alone. Searching for work, alone. Understanding the Krankenkasse system, the garbage, the obligations and the Termine, alone. Trying again and again to make friends and failing even at that, alone.

Thus came the arguments, the misunderstandings, the shouts, the insults, the reproaches. Each time stronger, each time more frequent, each time more hopeless.

A loneliness that, however, at the moment of making the decision—already defeated—freed me from others' judgments, from family looks, from more or less well-intentioned advice. The isolation allowed my next steps to be chosen from my deepest and most sincere self.

Would we have separated in Argentina? Probably. The cultural differences were not only external: they were also internal, within the couple. We didn't come from the same neighborhood in the vast Buenos Aires. Would the path to the abyss have been different?

Less bitter, less dramatic? Certainly. We wouldn't have fallen so low, we wouldn't have hit such a bottom, if we had had family nearby, lifelong friends, our daily network. We wouldn't have felt so bogged down if we had pursued our profession as journalists, instead of those repeated ridiculous, frustrating attempts to work in jobs like carpenter, waitress, babysitter, translator, taster, and an endless list that, fortunately, I no longer remember. If, instead of living in a tiny environment, desperately searching for an apartment in Zürich, we had had our house with a garden, our outings to the cinema, concerts, the theater. Here, with a baby, without a social and emotional support network, nor a good bank balance, our universe was discarded. Disappeared. We were different, we were outsiders.

And yet, I chose it. I chose not to return "with a withered brow." I choose it. I like my life in a small city, with bicycle distances, where the lake turns into a beach every summer, and the bus looks like Noah's Ark, with people speaking every language on earth.

In those terrible years, there was no time for deep reflections: it was about surviving, raising my little son, creating a life as beautiful as possible, as close as possible to what I am. Many times, I guiltily asked myself, "What am I doing here, playing the proletarian, portraying to the world the role of the struggling single mother?" The memory of those years is one of hustle, of constant strenuous movement. The truth is, it was hard, but I liked my life.

I grew along with my son, and I stood on my two feet more and more firmly, and Juan and I stopped hating each other for the catastrophic failure our shared dreams had ended in, and I started giving all sorts of courses, working with refugees and immigrants. I heard countless stories and saw myself increasingly as a bridge, as an interpreter between cultures. And I managed to move to a more comfortable house. And men came and went, who excited and disappointed me, and friends came and stayed, who accompanied me on the journey.

My son Agustín is now a sensitive and inspiring person, who studies and moves fluently between languages and cultures. Juan is with Nadja; they have Elisa and Hugo. We spend Christmases, birthdays, Sunday outings, and even vacations abroad together. Elisa and Hugo fill places in me that are orphaned, because I only see my nieces and nephews who live in Argentina occasionally.

Nadja is a true friend. Together, we sustain this family first out of necessity and later out of sincere choice. She is my co-mother, my companion-sister. For years we have been looking for a word that defines the relationship that binds us. In German? In Spanish? In Latin? That term doesn't exist yet, as what binds us is a modern bond, unimaginable for past generations, a new connection.

The unexpected course my life took sometimes surprises even me. I believe that having spent these years absent from familiar codes that determined me, without roots, allowed me to develop more freely until today, to be who I am: an original cultural hybrid. A unique mix, a product of movement, of embracing the different. A hybrid characteristic of a world in transformation.