La Colère et l’envie

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PART I

mother

My darling, my little one, I made you to the rhythm of the secrets of my womb, and finally, I’ve seen you grow. In spite of everything. All those incomprehensible things you were up against.

father

I wasn’t cut out to be the father of a child like this. Today, soon, before long, she won’t be a child anymore. Not really. She’s grown up. But still I’m not cut out to be her father.

mother

I knead the cake dough and think of you. Images of your face appear, one year after the next, obstinate and innocent, absorbing me. I’m happy. I know you’re there now, a few metres behind me, on the green sofa in the living room, looking at the light through half-closed eyelids. The cover photo for all the memories I’m flicking through today.

father

She’s always been afflicted by some form of debility that no one ever really dared to name. Does she even understand that we’re celebrating today, for her birthday? We carried her through, and now we’ve run out of sacrifices to make.

mother

I’m your mother, and so I know: when your eyes pierce right through things or your gaze slips through our fingers, it’s because there are things you understand that we never will.

father

Can you understand the simple joy of this day? Tell me, are you capable of sharing it with us? Almost every night, I dream that Maude is pregnant again. And I wake up in sweats. Because the moment I go to put my hand on her belly, it’s your eyes I see, Isor, again and again, as though I’m seeing them through the wall of skin. Your eyes are the colour of mine, Isor, but the look in our eyes is not the same. No. I’m sure of it. That look is not mine. Where did I get to in you? Where?

mother

On evenings in springtime when I look in your braids, I find all kinds of unexpected things. When you’ve been outside for hours on end, and you come back, and you sit on the little stool in our bedroom, waiting for me to brush your hair, and my fingers undo the braids they plaited together in the morning, there are always little treasures hidden amongst the locks. Grains of pollen, dandelion petals, bits of bark, blades of grass, and even the occasional earwig.

Tell me, little one, how do you manage to collect all these things? Why do they attach themselves to you while you’re out roaming? I find them right in the thick of your curls, caught between the black strands of hair. At first, it worried me. Now I laugh and show you my discoveries to see if you’ll answer my laughter. And you, without fail, smile back at me, as if it were all perfectly natural, and sometimes you even blush, as though this were your way of giving me a glimpse of your inner self, otherwise so hard to reach.

father

More than anything, I’m afraid of her tears. They’re so foreign to me. How should I recognise myself in those tears? How should anyone? At times you’d think they were tears of acid, or resin crackling in a fire. They roll down her face, bringing with them such suffering. They appear for reasons so inexplicable and absurd, that consoling her feels futile. You couldn’t call it a tantrum. You could almost describe it as grief. You can sense from those tears the pain she must feel. A pain that’s indescribable, beyond all else. Not in terms of intensity, no. In the sense that it takes place outside of the realm where ordinary pain lies. Somewhere further, deeper, on another level, ineradicable. Beyond all plausibility. Fastened tight to her being by iron screws.

mother

The moment she realises she’s revealed her wounds, she recoils like a timid animal. Then, by some miracle of her constitution, she becomes joyful – filled with a sincere, radiant joy. It begins as a sort of apology for having let herself be seen, and ends up as genuine, childlike hilarity.

father

Or, on the contrary, she cries floods of tears and it’s impossible to calm her down. In truth, during those moments, she seems almost relieved. She seems to take full advantage of this metamorphosis of pain into sadness and, in sorrow as in joy, she surrenders herself completely to her emotions, until she’s rid of every last drop.

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mother

She doesn’t know it, but sometimes I watch her dance. She dances alone, without music. She gets up and pushes away the jumble of things on the large carpet in her bedroom. She crams all her treasures into the corners of the room, in what looks like a careless fashion, but isn’t at all. And then her little feet start pounding the ground with an unexplained grace. That’s when I come closer to watch her.

father

Isor has always refused to learn. For as long as we can remember. She refused to talk. She refused to learn our names. Not once did she smile at us from her cradle, like other children do, and joyfully cry out “papa” or “mama.” Never a word, the slightest utterance, that was meant for us or had any meaning at all. She refused to learn to eat (except with her hands), she refused to learn to draw, play music, ride horses, or anything else, for that matter. We’d never have dreamed of sending her to school and the doctors were forced to concede we were right. When she was four years old, we took it upon ourselves to give her a few lessons at home. But the moment we placed an exercise book on the coffee table and a pen in her hand, making gestures beside her to show her how to write her name, she would burst out laughing – a haughty laugh that seemed to say “this is all perfectly ridiculous,” or else she’d erupt into a storm of icy rage that would take hours to pass, or she’d simply get up and leave as if nothing had happened or she hadn’t understood what was expected of her.

And now, at the age of thirteen, what does she know? Nothing worth knowing. She doesn’t know that the Earth is round, she doesn’t know what an adjective is, she doesn’t know how to tell the time, she doesn’t know what a father is, and she doesn’t know that genetics are supposed to bring us together.

I think about it often. I wonder how she can live like that, without anything. In a world that must seem so arbitrary and absurd to her. I was convinced it was that making her angry: the fact she can’t understand anything. But she doesn’t even try to understand.

mother

Camillio thinks Isor is stupid. The doctors, when we still saw them, thought she had a disability. But I think she understands what’s essential, and only what’s essential. Under no circumstances does she want to burden herself with anything beyond that. I know she’s having to contend with something very powerful, something we can’t see. And this invisible, irrational thing, she’s looking it dead in the eye, with those blue irises of hers, the colour of joy. I’m convinced that’s what’s exhausting her, sapping all her energy until she doesn’t an ounce left to waste on anything else.

In any case, we only have our theories – Isor has reduced us to hypothesising – so this is mine. And all I can say to Camillio, when he asks me incessantly how she can possibly be his, is this: “She has your courage. She has your obstinacy.”

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On the morning of my fortieth birthday, Isor came to our bed to see me. Camillio was sleeping, but I have a sharp ear, and I heard the muffled sounds of her little feet on the parquet floor. Isor was standing stock-still in the bedroom, poised like a sentry, worried. She knelt down on the floor in front of me with a look I interpreted as imploring. I looked at the clock. Seven thirty. I made a little gesture for her to come closer. She came and pressed her forehead to my lips, something she usually does after waking up from a nightmare. Perhaps she wants me to suck up all the fear. She looked distraught. About what? I gave her a kiss and told her to go back to bed. Trouble continued to brew in her eyes relentlessly. Then, without further ado, she turned and left. I went back to sleep.

It was Monday, my day off. When I got up at nine o’clock, she was gone. Camillio spent the morning with me, saddened that that Isor hadn’t understood (even though we’d reminded her) that we wanted to spend the day together. I wasn’t angry. Nor was I particularly worried. I’d completely forgotten that morning’s episode, having fallen back to sleep afterwards.

It wasn’t until six o’clock in the evening that she reappeared. She was holding a little bird’s nest in her hands. There was nothing imploring about her gestures now, but the fear remained. Was she afraid I’d be angry? She held out the nest at arm’s length for me to take, like an offering. An empty nest.

What did it mean? Was it my birthday present? That she’d been out looking for all day? Is that why that morning (that’s when I remembered) she looked at me so insistently, to ask me what I wanted as a gift? Because she felt there was nothing she could give me? Was she distraught because she couldn’t find a way to tell me she loved me? Those were not my only theories.

I thanked Isor and hugged her. She quickly slunk off to her bedroom, leaving me alone with my questions. Why the hell did she give me that nest? I tried to push the other theories from my mind. Was the nest how Isor saw me? Did it symbolise birth, a departure, a lack of freedom? Was she returning the nest she no longer wanted? Did it mean she wanted to leave us?

I put her strange present straight in the attic. Seeing as we don’t have a basement in which to symbolically trample such things underfoot, our attic is piled up with things Camillio and I want to forget: medical files and all the other fragments of the past we wish had never existed.

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father

The first time Isor went to the hospital, it was to test for attention deficit disorder. I went alone; Maude hadn’t been able to move her shift. I’ll never forget it, the young junior doctor with his bushy, arrogant eyebrows. Doctor Jard, proud as a peacock. To him it was clear as day. Isor did indeed have concentration issues, and that was all there was to it. Thirty minutes he’d spent with her, but he knew her better than the rest of us. He had it all figured out and wanted to demonstrate his infinite superiority and expertise by regurgitating all the big words he’d learnt only yesterday. No matter how much I told him about the fits of rage, the language delay, the disconcerting looks (that gaze of hers that makes her look like a wistful adult, or worse, the statues of great men pondering the Future, Progress and Mankind) he didn’t listen to me. His stern face was fixed in an expression of disdain.

As he went to escort us to the door, with an excessive politeness too solicitous to be sincere,
he took one last glance at Isor. She’d been sitting in a corner since the beginning of the appointment. On the floor in front of her were over a hundred coloured pencils, lined up by size and shade, in order, from yellow to blue. She had her back to us, but from her stillness it was clear that she was perfectly calm. It could have only been her, because when we’d entered the room, the pencils all lay in a shapeless heap. The junior doctor sat back down at his desk and collected his thoughts for a moment. Then, he simply remarked: “It might be a little more complicated than that. ”

mother

That’s what set the wheels in motion, a whirlwind of tests, one after the other. Everyone in the medical profession was sure of their prognosis: thyroid issues, precocity, autism, iron deficiency, emotional deprivation... After the first month of tests, others would follow, each identical to the last.

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PART II

The family at number 14 had always been very polite and discreet, as if they had something to make amends for. That’s why I was quite surprised – and I could tell they were rather embarrassed – the day when they asked me to take care of their little girl for a few hours. Their boiler had just blown and with it, a whole chunk of the plumbing system had collapsed. They’d called for someone to come and repair it urgently, but there would be noise, dust, lots of bulky and dangerous tools lying around – in short, no environment for a child to be in. But how old is she, exactly? Ah, I see, thirteen. Not strictly a child anymore. The father stiffened, the mother seemed disconcerted, and she practically led Isor into my garden by the hand. Both of them were stammering. Had it not been an emergency, they would never have been so presumptuous as to ask such a favour (a word they insisted on using), given that we barely knew one another. And with that, the plumber’s van came around the corner and we had to part ways. In any case, if there was the slightest issue, I could call them and they would be there right away.

And so, they left you, quickly adding as they went: “You’ll see, she’s a little shy!”

The day after the leak, you came back to see me. And the day after. And the day after that. And all the days that have followed since.

A child in the house. Had there ever been another, before you? Only Phil, I believe, my sister’s son, who stayed for three days over the Easter holidays of 1972. A phlegmatic, frightened child who never asked for anything.

Now I think about it, they didn’t even tell me your name before leaving you that afternoon. I muddled through. The only names I had for you were “little one” or “my little one.”

“Would you like something to eat, my little one? I have chocolate biscuits if you want some. I’m sure I have an old box of dominoes lying around somewhere. Let me find them for you, little one, I think you’ll like them.”

Oh, Isor, I don’t think I told you my name that day, either. To you, I must have just been “mister.”

Yet I adore your name. That’s what I’m going to tell you when you come tomorrow. How marvellous, your name, the way it makes me travel. Isor, somewhere between Isidore and Igor. It’s Isidore of Seville, the bishop of sixth-century Visigothic Spain and author of *The Etymologies*. It’s Cartagena, it’s the Andalusia of the first centuries of Christianity, and the Guadalquivir River, winding its way through Cordoba, as the Moors once did, so they say. At the opposite end of the spectrum of your name, there's the Russian winter, with its icy winds that can stab you like a knife. All those names I read in *Michael Strogoff: The Courier of the Czar* as a child, the journey from Moscow to Irkutsk, capital of Eastern Siberia, to warn the Tsar that the barbarian hordes were on the march. All the strength, tragedy and rage of Russia in the face of its invaders, I can see it there in your wide-open eyes.

My Isor, there’s no doubt your name was made for you, a name adorned with ancient valour, imbued with long-lost wisdom.

My Isor, you can’t imagine how afraid I was. It had been nothing short of an eternity since anyone had entered my life – I’d made sure of it myself. But you knew from the very beginning you wanted us to meet.

My old age, my reclusion, my sorrow, at first I thought you had no respect for them, that they didn’t mean a thing to you, that you didn’t care about them and were simply treating me as you would anyone else. I was mistaken. From the very beginning, you accepted me for what I was without questioning or resentment: grief, old bones, slowness, and all the rest of it. But your way of tackling fear is to rush in, to jump in with both feet so that what has to happen will happen, as quickly as possible. I, on the other hand, am one of those people who take things slowly in an attempt to water them down.

Nothing can happen, I told myself, to a man as old as me. It’s too late to reorganise the furniture. I simply do not have the strength. That is my privilege: having nothing left to do.

How wrong I was. For at the age of seventy-six, I was yet to meet Isor.

One week after the plumbing incident, Isor’s mother came knocking at the door at four o’clock in the afternoon, a box of chocolates in hand and the same contrite look on her face. She thanked me and told me she hoped I hadn’t felt obliged to take care of Is... she stopped mid-sentence. There, on the carpet, she saw her daughter, moving the little horse across the board by the number of spaces indicated on the dice, a look of intense concentration on her face.

Silence.

She gulped, then rephrased the sentence: but you mustn’t (she insisted on using the word mustn’t) feel obliged to look after her.

She left the chocolates on the table and left. One week later, I received an email from her explaining in great detail how difficult – impossible even – it was to live with her child. My reply was as brief as it was deferential.

Yet you, my dearest, you didn’t ask yourself too many questions. Did I still have space left for you? Is it possible to simply turn up in people’s lives like that? To simply declare one day: “I’m moving in” and unpack your things in a stranger’s heart? To turn up just like that and start inhabiting someone else, set up camp in every nook and cranny of their existence?

All the same, little one, I almost said no. But clearly you knew what you had to do. And you did it. And as for me, I didn’t want to put up a fight.

When you’re young, it’s utterly impossible to imagine what it’s like to be old. Even for a lively, imaginative mind, the idea is impossible to grasp. At best we might imagine what happens to the body: the arthritis, the weakness that prevents our legs from walking, arms from lifting, hands from opening lids of any kind. But the way in which the mind grows tired and forgets, no, no... those things are inconceivable. The courage and patience required to deal with unexpected events. The slightest disturbance feels like an upheaval and can take a fortnight to recover from. That feeling that our stocks of friendliness, enthusiasm and willpower have been depleted. How stingy we become with tenderness once we convince ourselves that our reserves have run dry.

You and I: it was like the taming of the lion. But who was the lion and who was the tamer?