

Sylvia Molloy

BACK HOME

I.

Going from the relative darkness of the airport to the white light outside has always struck me as a particularly savage way of entering the country. The time it takes for the eyes to adjust, not only to the blinding light but also to a reality that always, from the first moment, seems dizzyingly strange, is the time for panic, for falling into the trap. I'm back and this time I won't be able to leave; this place, which was never really mine, will be my grave. I'll die and my friend's hand won't be there to hold my head, to shut my eyes.

I can't explain the uneasiness I feel when I return to Buenos Aires, the feeling of opening doors that always lead to empty spaces, of reading pages that are always blank, of groping for memories that lose shape as soon as I try to make sense out of them. No, my mother's world is not mine, this country is not mine. Why then the anxiety, the feeling of loss that invariably grips me as I step out onto the scorching pavement, as I wait for a cab? Two suitcases, that's it, and the address of the seedy hotel, whose peeling facade hardly matches its old prestigious name, the hotel to which I always return. Maybe, when my mother was young, all this was different. It's because of her, in fact, that I return, not just to this country but to this hotel. Amongst the many papers she left behind, bits and pieces of a broken life, there was a brand new peso note, whose potential circulation had been cut short by someone who had turned it into a personal memento. Two hands had collaborated in this venture. In a handwriting I did not recognize one had written a date, 15-V-1938 A.D., while another hand (my mother; I recognized her writing) had scribbled Lloyd George, and the name of this place, City Hotel. My mother left many scraps of paper behind. Some make me sad, others make me guilty. And then there are the others which, once read, I don't dare re-read. But this one I keep coming back to, as one comes back to an unsolved, possibly unsolvable enigma. The cryptic date; the name, Lloyd George, who by 1938 was no longer Britain's Prime Minister; and then the place, City Hotel. The latter is the only recognizable element of this triad: that is why I come back here to stay.

My mother would say (and would live to experience it in the flesh) that memory is an elusive, often hellish gift. When I try to remember her, I can't hold onto a stable figure but instead am swept up in a whirlwind of mixed images: my mother as a young woman; my mother dead; my mother as I dreamt of her one night, after the visit that turned out to be my last; a baby, only a few months old, crying inconsolably in my arms. It is easier to recall objects that belonged to her—that I know are her in some sense but that nevertheless are not her—easier, I mean, than to remember my mother. That is why I keep some of those objects: to evoke her, to celebrate some of her lost gestures, to feel less alone.

When she died, I thought my world had come to an end: I mean one of my worlds, my world in Spanish. A neighbor called me, a neighbor who also lived by herself and with whom my mother maintained a friendly yet superficial relation. They spoke daily, of the weather, of their plants, the woman baking a peach pie for my mother weekly, when peaches were in season. My mother, who was a good gardener, gave her plant cuttings, bulbs, and on occasion a sketch she didn't mind parting with. More than once, while on the phone with me, she would casually say, "The lights have gone on in Marion's house, it must be six." I understood that she was attentive to her neighbor's comings and goings, that her life was in some way attuned to them. When she died I realized that Marion did the same with my mother: "I didn't see any lights when I came home at six and it was still dark two hours later. I thought something had happened." They found her dead of a stroke. Death wasn't kind to her, despite my mother's often repeated announcements that she would not be caught unprepared. She spent years putting on make-up before going to bed in case she died during the night. Instead, she died at dusk, dishevelled, without her dentures which, by then, bothered her quite a bit. Since she would be cremated immediately and had requested that there be no viewing, the people from the funeral home didn't bother to put them back in. When I arrived to claim the body and make arrangements, my mother's face was horribly caved in, barely recognizable. I couldn't bring myself to kiss her.

Years ago I remember reading letters between George Bernard Shaw and Mrs. Patrick Campbell. In one of them, Shaw described his awe on seeing the contents of the urn with his mother's ashes, the loose pile of dust interspersed with little white bones. I felt the same awe when I was handed my small wooden box, only my mother weighed quite a bit, even dead. In a last romantic gesture that was not atypical of her, she had requested that her ashes

be scattered in the Rio de la Plata. One month after her death I traveled to Argentina for that purpose, hard to accomplish in normal times and harder to carry out during that frightening period. When I tried to arrange something through a funeral parlor there, thinking they'd be used to such requests, I found them unsympathetic. "Why don't you go to the promenade by the river, sir, and throw them in?" they told me, without a trace of irony. Thinking that in the aftermath of a regime that had recourse to similar acts of obliteration it wasn't exactly safe to follow that advice, I brought my mother back to New York in her little box weighing heavy in my carry-on bag. I did not dare check her through.

My mother, always so aloof, so austere, so controlled. My love for her is clouded by my vain attempts to break down her defenses, to make her go beyond the limits she imposed on her stories, identical, unvarying, well-honed through repetition. Now all I have left are memories, objects, the few paintings of hers that survived systematic destruction, fragments of a diary she asked me to burn. And yes, a one-peso note, that, together with the small box containing her bones, brings me back, yet once more, to Argentina.

II.

I would lie if I said I felt American, I would lie if I said I felt Argentine. And yet I travel with two passports and once made inquiries into getting a third one. I had been told that Ireland recognized the right of blood up to the third generation and knowing that my grandfather, my father's father, had emigrated to Argentina at the turn of the century I tried to gain yet another nationality. I knew, because the information was in the marriage certificate that I had found among my father's things when he died, when and where he had been born. What I did not know was that in order for me to have a right to Irish nationality my grandfather would have had to claim it for his son, something he didn't do perhaps out of laziness, perhaps because he had begun to feel somewhat Argentine. Between my grandfather and myself the Celtic lineage was broken, there was a gap: my father. What had begun almost frivolously—let's see if I can get another nationality—suddenly turned into an obsessive search: I made vain efforts to convince the people at the consulate, feeling that I was being denied something to which I was entitled, something that was perhaps my true identity, and the one to blame was, once again, my father.

I have few memories of him and at this point am no longer sure that they are mine. When my mother and I learned of his death I felt liberated. He had been found dead on January 2nd. "The year didn't start very well for him," I told my mother, regretting the joke as soon as I saw the expression on her face. He lived alone with his dogs in Barrancas de Belgrano, in a crumbling house (which was in fact demolished a few months after his death), a house only one person was allowed to enter, a cleaning lady who came once a week and was the one who found him. He had died of an internal hemorrhage; they say that death in those cases is sudden and painless. They called his lawyer who was, I think, the only friend he had left, and it was Pedro Vélez who notified us. The letter was awkward, as letters tend to be on those occasions, especially since Pedro and my mother, who had once been friends, were, for reasons that escaped me, no longer on speaking terms. In his letter Pedro tried to draw on their old acquaintance, at the same time informing us, as lawyer and executor, of the event. Besides what we already knew or imagined—that he had left nothing, that he had died with thousands of unpaid debts, that piles of checks uncashed and now expired were found around the house—were the details that brought back my father's humanity against my will, a troubling father with whom I did not want to have anything to do. Pedro wrote, with the circumspect affectation of the last century, that "his vice had defeated him," referring to my father's alcoholism, and then proceeded to describe empty bottles next to the rickety bed, bits of food all over the house, desperately hungry dogs, details worthy of an evening tabloid. Mysteriously, he added: "Don't worry, the hemorrhage was internal," as if the fact that there was no blood to be seen should make us feel better, making his death more decorous.

Pedro took care of the funeral, attended only by himself, the cleaning lady, and an old foreman from the country who had been fond of my father as a boy and who had made the trip from Venado Tuerto in order, as Pedro put it, to bid one last farewell. The dogs, out of control, had to be sent to the Humane Society where nothing good, I suspect, befell them. Pedro Vélez also took it upon himself to collect what little looked worth keeping amidst the chaos of my father's study and sent it to me separately, observing with diplomatic reserve that he thought those things would interest the son more than the wife. I was eighteen then and took no interest in any of them. I held onto the box almost in the state in which it had arrived, bringing myself to look at it little by little over the years. There were documents, like his par-

ents' marriage certificate, which contributed to my feeling Irish for a time. Also letters, many letters, some of them bland, some disturbing, and also the objects that Vélez had decided to send us, objects that made allusion to my father, like mute witnesses to a story that had been denied me. A megaphone, for instance, from the period when my father rowed, next to a clipping from an English newspaper of a photograph of him taken during a race at Henley, with the caption "The cute cox of the Argentine Rowing Club leads his crew to victory." It was hard for me to believe that the adjective could have ever been used with regard to my father, although I should say that in the picture, taken back in the thirties, my father did look, why yes, cute. Pedro added, in a conspiratorial tone, that I shouldn't forget to look him up if I ever came to Buenos Aires, he would tell me many things about my father, "I think you may not have, as they say in English, the whole picture." More than once, on trips to Buenos Aires, I thought about going to see him and then didn't. Only after my mother's death was I finally able to call Pedro Vélez and tell him that after so many years, fourteen to be precise, I wanted him to tell me about my father. Unfortunately I got there too late. The voice of the woman who answered the phone told me that Pedro had died the year before. He had taken the whole picture with him. Or at least one of the whole pictures.

III.

When my mother and I arrived in the United States we went to live in an old decaying city in upstate New York. It was the only place where my mother, thanks to a friend of hers, the owner of a reasonably prestigious New York gallery that later went bankrupt, could find a temporary job at the local university. In that golden era, the university had money, a rather good collection of Latin American art, and pretensions. It was easy to sell them my mother as artist-in-residence: not only did they offer her a contract but they bought several of her works in advance. I remember that when we arrived, my mother determined that, despite all the differences, she didn't feel that she was in a foreign place. There was something about the architecture, she said, about the mixture of styles and the unevenness of the height of the buildings, that reminded her of Argentina, as if architectural chaos were a mark of the New World. Look, she would say to me excitedly, this could never be Europe and yet it could be a street in Belgrano. Look quickly, just the first impression, don't analyze. I did not see what she saw; at twelve, I already analyzed too much.

My mother's romantic identification did not last long, however, and the new reality imposed itself on us. Our English, which was the English of my father and of the British schools in Argentina, that British English with an intonation that was slightly off and made someone ask my mother in a shop one day whether we were from India, set us aside without incorporating us entirely. We were and were not Hispanic. We were and were not Latin American. We did not consider ourselves—that is, for the moment; the revelation would come later—exiled or displaced or even, and especially, immigrants. We were cosmopolitan, which was a way of saying that we were well-off and passing through. My mother had been offered a job for two years. In that city we were, above all, exotic.

My mother worked her way quickly into the local intelligentsia, a diverse group composed of other talents-in-residence, of local writers and critics, of iconoclastic professors and brilliant graduate students, of young men from old families who collected art, played polo and therefore knew something about Argentina, and flirted with my mother. It was the end of the sixties and my mother publicly assumed a rebelliousness that Argentina had first made her fear and then forget. Rosa Luxembourg, Michael called her, when he saw her joining every demonstration that took place at the university against the war in Vietnam. You can't understand what it is to be able to go out in the street and shout whatever you want against the government without being arrested, my mother would invariably say. You don't know what it is to shout whatever you want against the government and realize that this is part of what the government allows you to do, Michael would answer, Michael, whose turn to be heroic would come a year later at Stonewall. The important thing, he added, is precisely for them to arrest you. They would spend hours together, caught up in endless conversations about political strategy and course of action, my mother and her new friend, the only one of the many who came through the house who didn't make me uncomfortable, I later understood why. I listened to them, looking at them with envy, perhaps with anger. My mother had found a friend, I had not.

I didn't like my mother's other friends, or their children, or—after a nasty incident—their dogs. One of those friends, a professor at the university, had the reputation for being subversive, a reputation mainly based on the fact that he loudly and publicly advocated the legalization of marijuana. One night we were at his house at one of his parties, the usual combination of a poetry reading with a moderate consumption of drugs and the ingestion of enormous

amounts of food and drink tirelessly provided by his wife, when the phone rang and an anonymous voice warned the host that the police were on their way. "They know there are drugs," the voice said, "get rid of your guests." In the ensuing confusion, the household dog gave me a ferocious bite in the leg, leaving a scar I have to this day. "War scars," Tom would invariably say after that, every time he ran into me, with the falsely complicitous tone that adults like so much and that so bothers adolescents. And he always added, with a theatrical gesture, "The only war worth fighting." The day after the failed raid that would have hauled in the most select group of the town's intellectuals in various states of drunkenness, euphoria, and (if the sounds I had heard coming from one of the upstairs bedrooms could be trusted) undress, the newspaper carried the news on the front page. "The End of the Party," the headline said. From this remove, I think that the phrase was prophetic: despite my mother and her friends, the sixties were coming, inevitably, to a close.

Translated by Daniel Balderston with the author