

DEMENTIA: Living and Forgetting

By Mariela Toro

I survive in a mental limbo. Time slips away as I watch and listen to the doctor weep—his brilliant mind beginning to leak away with those first lapses of memory. Last night, he went to bed wondering if that morning he had taken the pink pill (for sleep) or the blue one (for his thyroid). With my characteristic calm, I told him that if he was unsure, he should just take another pink one—it wouldn't hurt—but he, as always, refused. We went to bed. At two in the morning, I got up to use the bathroom and heard him let out a little whimper.

"What happened?" I asked, and amidst his whimpering, he murmured:

"I just haven't been able to fall asleep, and I'm really anxious because I did take the blue pill..."

He whimpered again. With the patience of a mother dealing with her most difficult child, I replied:

"Calm down, my love; it doesn't matter that you took the blue pill. Tomorrow, just take a 50mg dose and that's it—it won't throw off your schedule. Just take the pink one now."

And of course, as always, he refused... because he remained stuck in that loop of doubt and lamentation. Exasperated, I exclaimed, "I've had enough—stop crying! From tomorrow on, I'll be the one to give you all your pills so we can avoid this kind of midnight distress." He calmed down, saying, "You've really put my mind at ease," and immediately fell asleep—or pretended to.

It is just another day like the others, fraught with insecurity caused by his anxiety. That is how I have to manage things wherever we go. After walking around the market for ages, we got home and he lays down to rest; it was 5:30 in the evening. I went to organize the fridge and start dinner when he appeared with wide, wild eyes, asking what time it was. I answered:

"It's almost seven o'clock."

He grimaced in annoyance as I looked at him.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"It is just that I fell asleep; I don't know if it's nighttime, because I was sleeping."

"What... and you are going to cry over that?"

“It is just that I got scared”—he insisted, on the verge of tears—“and I didn’t know if it was very early or very late... if it was day or night, and with you so irritable, nervously complaining.”

On another one of those many grim days, I took him to a check-up appointment and left him with Carmen, who helps me out. That day, a certain woman came to visit the doctor, and he invited her to lunch. She asked for an aperitif—one of those little cocktails he used to make, the ones that were so delicious and that she loved—a Manhattan. He prepared it with great care, right down to the little cherry. He told the whole thing to me quite coherently.

Another day, around that same time, I asked the doctor who we should invite to celebrate his 90th birthday. He answered promptly:

— “The one who lives in... what’s her name again? The one who visited the other day.”

— “That woman?”

— “Yes, her.”

I mentioned that, since his birthday falls on a Sunday, she would likely bring her boyfriend along—did that matter?

— “Yes, that’s fine. She called recently to ask if she could come with her boyfriend to get the rest of the liquor. You see, the day she was here—when she asked for a drink—we went to the liquor cabinet, and I told her that since I did not drink anymore, she could take whatever she wanted. So she grabbed a bottle of... I do not remember what... and when she called the other day, she asked if she could come back with her boyfriend for the rest of the spirits... but I told her no and made an excuse.”

— “Oh my! So, just because you do not drink, she gets to take whatever she wants? That is unbelievable!”

Well, I had to inform the doctor that all of that liquor was actually mine.

— “How could you think of giving away such fine spirits—cordials, gin, vodka, rum from the Dominican Republic and Cuba, that Rémy Martin (the finest cognac in the world), tequila, pisco, whiskey, and wines?”

He stared at me in horror, as if I were an alien who had never had a drink in my life.

—“Carmen, the day that woman came by and the doctor gave her a bottle of liquor—did you notice which one he gave her?”

—“Yes, ma'am; she took a bottle of whiskey and one of vodka.”

So, very stealthily, I took all the liquor out of that closet and locked it away. If *that woman* shows up thinking she’s going to take whatever she wants—just like the doctor told

her she could—well, she'll find the closet full of lingerie instead. And if anyone asks what happened to the liquor, I will answer quite smugly: "I drank it all myself." A few days later, the woman called; I could hear the doctor talking and arguing. A little while later, she showed up. She told me who she was and said he had mentioned the liquor to her—and that I had claimed it was mine... Apparently, she flew into a rage and said she would bring it back, but he told her to stop being rude. He added that he did not think that she would call again—or come back at all—and that it was probably for the best... and that he certainly hoped so.

On his 90th birthday, his young grandson asked his grandfather to show him his famous guns. At first, the grandfather didn't quite grasp what the boy was talking about, but once he understood, he was more than happy to show off his shotguns, pistols, and revolver—along with thousands of rounds of ammunition—and share stories. The grandson was delighted to listen to his hunting tales while sizing up the arsenal. Noticing the boy's interest, the grandfather made an offer:

"If you want, you can take them; they are yours."

"Really, Grandpa?" the grandson shouted, jumping for joy. "Thank you, Grandpa, thank you!" He was beside himself with happiness—even happier than that woman had been when she got the liquor.

When they left the room, I found out about the gift. But since the grandfather has suffered from severe indecisiveness his whole life, and the grandson was trying to finalize taking them right then and there, a back-and-forth ensued: "No, wait and see..." "Maybe another day..."

"So, when can I come by, and at what time?"

"Well, I don't know."

As he looked at me, waiting for a suitable answer, I shared that we were presentable and available every day after 9 AM. The grandson was attentive and restless, wondering why we slept and ate breakfast so late—eager to get his hands on his gift once and for all—while the doctor was full of doubts. The next day, at 8:30 in the morning, he called to ask if he could come over and use the parking space; he said he'd be arriving with a friend—a gun enthusiast whose grandmother had been a shooting champion at some club or other, and who had a country estate, a private shooting range, and connections for permits. The grandfather was interested, and at 9 o'clock sharp, the grandson was knocking on the door. When I saw him alone, I asked about his friend, and he replied that he was waiting downstairs in the parking area.

"Call him up; your grandfather wants to meet him."

They sat there listening to the same old stories about his world travels and tales like the one about the crazy old man, until the grandfather ran out of things to say. The handover of the guns was a warm affair, conducted with the meticulous attention the doctor brought to any matter; Beethoven's **Emperor Concerto**, No. 5 played in the background to lend solemnity to the moment, and his famous weapons ended up in the right hands.

Another day—with time seeming to stand still—the doctor woke up sluggish, heavy, and stubborn. We went out to get some medication. He began complaining of back pain, as if he had lumbago. He seemed unsure of himself, asking me where we were going. We finally arrived. The young woman who helped me raised a thousand objections regarding a prescription—insisting I go God-knows-where... how... when... why... to fill out God-knows-how-many forms. That was when I started to lose patience, and I said to her:

"Look, miss, I'm with a ninety-year-old man who has senile dementia and can barely take a step; I'm tired, and I am not going to do any of the things you are telling me to do." I would rather just make an appointment—wait however long it takes—and have any doctor sort out this silly little matter in no time; surely I won't have to trek across the city just to get the same prescription refilled that he has been taking for two years."

"Yes, ma'am, go over to that window; they will help you there, just as you said."

I got an appointment for 2:40 PM.; it was 11:30 AM then. I went back to the doctor—who was sitting there with his eyes closed—and explained the situation. He didn't understand.

"Let us go have lunch and come back."

That, he understood, though he pessimistically remarked that we would not have enough time. The doctor was reverting to what he loved best: dwelling on difficulties and obstacles—on things that could not be resolved. "Come on," I said firmly, "let us go right now; we **do** have time."

We went into the consultation room. The physician treated him very well. The doctor used the appointment as an opportunity to tell her about his travels around the world and all his other tall tales. She listened with an expression of astonishment—full of attention and admiration—even as he recounted the story of the "crazy old man." She examined him, checked out his lumbago, and we ended the visit sharing plenty of laughter. He walked out standing very straight, and in the elevator, he told me the pain was gone. I stopped to pick up his medication so he could take a pill, but—as always—he refused. When we got home,

he lay down for about half an hour and got up feeling wonderful. He kept remarking on how he did not need the pill after all—he was perfectly fine without it. I just sighed, feeling both bewildered and exhausted.

It is distressing to see him sitting there with his eyes closed all day. He does not read; he does not watch television. He drifts from one state of disillusionment or disconnection to another. I scheduled an urgent appointment and therapy sessions with a neurologist. There are patches, another pill, and a program that includes coloring beautiful mandalas; he eats breakfast, lunch, and dinner accompanied by music—whatever he likes best: the French songs he still sings along with, classical music he "conducts" with his hand, and plenty of opera—all the tenors and baritones. Whenever a singer performs, he asks where they are from. I tell him they are Spanish, but the next day he asks the same question again, and I might say they are Colombian, German, or Italian. Whenever he hears a song again, he claims he has not heard it in ages. My little lies do not interfere with his therapy. His massive ego remains intact despite his cognitive decline, so I occasionally stop by to admire his work on those beautiful, carefully colored mandalas.

Taking advantage of the doctor's memory loss, I made many improvements to the beach house. I converted the garage-workshop into a studio apartment. He knows—or at least I tell him—all my plans, but he does not quite grasp what they entail. Fortunately, he says that whatever I do is fine. I am sure that if we go there, he will not even notice the changes. I hired a contractor and his partner—who had done work for me before—and gave them free rein. I avoid the whole messy business of demolition, cement, and painting; I am allergic to all of that. While the doctor is happily coloring mandalas, I am running back and forth dealing with the beach house. A cousin is helping me; she has already cleared out the useless junk from the doctor's workshop—rusty nails and over 23 years of trash he hoarded like treasure, thinking it "might come in handy someday." Since his memory is fading more and more, I decided it was finally safe to toss it all out. I scheduled a trip to inspect the completed work on the house and took the doctor along.

To my utter surprise, the doctor is regaining his memory. I was astonished when he started looking around the house and asking, "What happened here?"—asking a thousand questions. I kept telling him we had discussed it beforehand and agreed on the plan, but he insisted, "I don't remember." While there, we played board games with my sister and a friend, and we were amazed by his ability to beat us. At his appointment with the neurologist, I mentioned the shock he felt upon arriving at the renovated house and recognizing the changes, as well as his skill at the games.

On another one of those days, he assured me that I was the only thing he had in his life. Visibly overcome with emotion—covering his face and even letting out a groan—he insisted that while he had plenty of friends, the only person he truly loved, adored—and I do not know how many other verbs he used—was me.

"If you really have so many friends... where are they? What happened to them?"

"I do not know," he replied.

I found his address book and told him we were going to go through the list of all his friends, all while looking for Beethoven's Violin Concerto for him. He claimed he did not recognize that little notebook—that it was the first time he had ever seen it. He started reading out the names listed in it: "So-and-so... do you know who that is?" He would ask if I knew them, and based on the nicknames they had earned, I would answer: "That one is 'Rabbit'; that name there—that is 'Toad'; that one is 'The Countess'..." but for almost all of them, he would say, "I do not remember." He came to a certain woman's name and said:

"So-and-so, So-and-so [repeating her name]? That rings a bell... wasn't she the one who was widowed recently?"

I reminded him that she was the one he had planned to give the liquor to, the one nicknamed "Sophocles," who loved the Manhattans he used to make for her—complete with a cherry—but then came another "I do not remember." He moved on to another woman's name: "That sounds familiar—do you know her?" "Yes, she is a crazy woman who must be in an asylum by now, because she has not called or visited since."

"But who is she?"

"She was So-and-so's girlfriend. She used to call you a lot to tell you about her romances and ask for your advice."

Even then, he did not remember. But there was one person on the list he recalled with emotion.

"Yes, yes, that is the Ecuadorian guy, right?"

"And Quique?"

"Yes, he lived in Caracas; I think he is dead now." He did not remember one of his best colleagues, someone with whom he had shared his entire career and four years of work. As for two other dearly loved colleagues, he failed to recognize them even when shown photographs. Exhausted by the effort to recall so few familiar faces or names, we ended the session by revisiting the days of his wild, unbridled antics.

On just another day—much like the others, yet somehow different—the psychologist who had stayed at the beach house came by to invite us to a play being performed near the apartment. After explaining to him—both she and I—that the play was by a specific playwright and was being performed by students, he agreed to go, and off we went. After all those explanations, the doctor was convinced that the invitation was for *him*—that they wanted to see and hear *him*. He put on a very nice jacket and his university cap, and we set off with high expectations, joining a large crowd waiting in a spacious hallway. Suddenly, a young man in an elaborate costume stepped out and shouted:

"Ladies and gentlemen, you may come in. First, we will look at the exhibition we have put together—showing how the masks were made—and then we will enter the hall where the play will be performed."

At that point, the doctor asked:

"What is this?"

I explained it to him again, but he said:

"I don't see anyone I know, nor anyone who knows me."

He kept looking around for a familiar face. Finally, we reached the hall, that was dimly lit. Actors were scattered throughout the room, making funny faces and gestures as if trying to draw the audience into the play—which was titled *Vanity Fair*. We sat in the very last row, right by the entrance we had come through, apprehensive about what was to follow. The doctor did not understand a thing; he kept asking what we were doing there, and I had to explain the play, the masks, and the actors to him for the hundredth time. When the lights came up, the sound of drums filled the air... all the actors gathered center stage... and the doctor bowed his head, closed his eyes, and completely shut himself off. I, on the other hand, remained calm and began to enjoy the play, following the storyline. Ten minutes later, he touched my arm; I looked at him, and he said, "Let us go." So we left. Once outside, he remarked:

"I thought it was something for me." And "Why was I invited... and what was all that shouting about?... It was awful!"

And I stayed quiet until we arrived... those two blocks, and the constant nagging—on top of the shock of the program—wore him out. I was left dealing with his pitiful agitation.

Another year, another birthday—his 91st—and another Father's Day; the two occasions fell very close together. His children managed to celebrate both on the same day. They took him to the doctor and brought him back at 7:30 in the evening. I welcomed him

back with all his colorful packages, mandalas, and pajamas. I asked him who had been there, and he told me it was the woman who brought him, two little kids, and two teenagers; then he asked me what his son's wife's name was.

The doctor forgot to do the paperwork. Today, he had to sign a document confirming he was still alive. I had him sign two sheets of paper until he finally managed to scrawl his tangled signature on the page. He asked me if we had eaten breakfast, if we had eaten lunch. He suffers from a sleep disorder; he dozes all day while sitting there. At night, he gets up, goes to the office, turns on the lights, comes back, lies down, gets up, sits down... leaves the lights on. It is the same routine every single night.

One of those days turned out to be the worst: trying to be funny and clowning around—dancing for a friend of my sister's who had stopped by for a specific errand—he lost his balance, fell to the floor, and fractured his right arm. They put in an IV line, but he pulled it out that same night; he vomited, his condition destabilized, and I had to take him back to have the arm immobilized again. His sleep patterns remain disrupted. He is restless all night because lying down makes him uncomfortable. He rambles; nothing he says makes sense. Carmen has stayed on to help; she has to feed, bathe, and dress him. He keeps sleeping during the day and having hallucinations; he is incoherent. The doctor's daughter visited on Sunday, but he did not even realize it. She left terrified after seeing him like that—deeply confused, unable to grasp that he has a fracture and is immobilized because of it. He wants to stick to his usual routine; he is not aware of his actual situation. During the night, he took the cast off—again. He hallucinates and rambles; we have to guess what he means and put words in his mouth. He obsessively asks for a little pill he is supposed to take before breakfast, starting at midnight and then again at 2, 3, 4, and 5 AM. I give it to him at 6 AM. He cannot tell the difference between dinner or lunch and breakfast. They swapped his cast for a lighter one. Transporting him back and forth was a huge struggle; he was very heavy. We try to keep him awake during the day so he will be tired by nightfall. He is terrified of the dark, the silence, lying in bed, and death. His daughter came to see him on Sunday; she found him in such bad shape that she spoke to her brother—who showed up for the first time since seeing him on Father's Day, three months prior. He arrived with one of the granddaughters, and they stayed from two to three in the afternoon. The doctor passed away the following day at 5:40 PM.

It was sudden—happening while we were enjoying the music of **Peer Gynt**, Suite 1, Op. 46, by composer Edvard Grieg. I awaited his passing with strength. As we are atheists, I had personally stated that no ceremony should be held, but his children insisted on organizing one, and I felt compelled to attend. It was a dignified affair; the music was divine, and the ritual unfolded without displays of emotion or tears.

I felt a profound sense of liberation. I imagine him enjoying the music of the spheres as he journeys toward another dimension—his final, unforgettable voyage of peace.

The doctor enjoyed eternal youth until he turned ninety, and his sense of humor lives on in all of us who knew him, as do his flair for the dramatic and his avant-garde spirit. We both rest in peace now. Mission accomplished. In Jericó—a land of illustrious men—I laid his ashes to rest beneath an oak tree. I offered his collection of personal memorabilia to his family. His grandson took all the military-related items, such as the *kukri* (a Nepalese knife), swords, daggers, pocketknives, weapon cases, banknotes, coins, and binoculars. I gave his son the antique wall clock that had belonged to the family; I told him I pictured him reliving childhood moments spent with his father, and that the familiar ticking sound of the clock in his own home would bring him comfort.

MY SILENCE

Now I dwell in my silence by the sea; every day is a Sunday of leisure, even though there is so much to do in the outside world. Four moons have passed—and an eclipse that eclipsed me. I watch the neighborhood, the neighbors, and the street from afar, and so, little by little, I am settling back into the magic of this place.

My affairs—always simple, of no great consequence, with nothing particular to tell—represent a reunion with things best left undisturbed in the corner of lost memories, alongside all the madmen who pestered me: good madmen, yet madly in love with me.

My story does not fit here; I wandered everywhere, and the future was a blank slate—here and there, here, there... and beyond. Blissfully, that is all gone now!

Let nothing spill over; let the things that trouble me trouble me less. Everything I learned helped me cross to the other side of fear. I live with myself, finding my silence. Hearing, seeing, and feeling the ocean waves is the finest of monasteries—snugly settled in the belly of my pink hammock, that offers its own gentle rocking to cradle me, alongside the soothing lullaby of the sea.