

ON TIME FOR BREAKFAST

By Solange Rodríguez Pappe

It's important to be on time for breakfast in the hotel, but I find it hard to keep track of the hours as they pass me by in this new existence. I spend my time thinking about the past or writing about it in my notebooks, so I'm usually late and have to flee the scene, abandoning my best ideas mid-thought. I've never crossed paths with anyone in the corridor or on the stairs, probably because I'm always either so early or late to take my seat at the table. Today I sense I must be late, so I stagger along the first floor in a daze and make my way to a hall of dark wood, hazy lighting and dirty curtains. I take an empty seat in front of a plate of food. I'm never hungry but still I eat, watching the sad expressions on the other guests' faces.

When I was ten years old, my father killed someone. This is my fundamental memory. The things I write keep repeating the tale. I've been over it so many times it's become sterile now, void of emotion. Everything that happens to me is connected to that memory: speed, night-time, The Ramones on the tape player, collision with something we can't see, body breaking. Patchy recollections, inconsistent: as if everything were wrapped in plastic film. My father is driving with his foot on the gas. As I suffocate, I notice his left leg shaking. My hand reaches out towards the windscreen, tensed, pointing at the shred of live blood strung together with flesh. "Don't worry, you're going to be alright," my father tells me. He covers my eyes with his hands, and it turns to night.

Darkness falls.

I raise the palm of my hand. I've been engrossed in my thoughts, revisiting the scene. Sitting across from me is the woman with no legs, the one who always asks me to help her move. Her name is Judy. Her jaw shifts rhythmically, though she never swallows. Her bowl of porridge is almost full. The woman stares without looking at me, passing through me with those drowsy eyes. Her breakfast will take a while. No doubt she'll be the last to leave the table. I've never stayed until the end, and now it's time to leave. After all, there are more pressing matters to attend to than eating. I make my way up the deserted staircase, taking my time on the steps, riddled with that familiar anxiety and the fear of meeting someone else on route. When I realise I don't know where I'm going, I make my way back down to my room to write in one of the clean notebooks I found on the old shelf of used books: "When I was ten years old, my father killed someone." The memory has its own variations, I'm not sure how to explain it. The versions are like the layers of an onion, sliced into infinite possibilities. I try to guess what happened that night. In one of my false versions of the event, my father forces me out of the car and says: "I've done this for you, André." The body I'm staring at is a mess, a bony mass of guts he has detonated with the tyres of his car.

The terror silences my screams, leaves me wordless, defenceless. I want to wrestle free from the grip of his tough hands as they hold me still. I know, inside this memory, that I will never be able to erase this image. I know I'll have to live with this negative lodged behind my eyelids, and that everything I do from now on will be built on the foundations of that damp, red earth. Then the ominous rattle sets in and I feel myself suffocating. It's as if I were closing my eyes, even though I know they're really open. Sometimes Judy brings me to my senses and tells me to be quiet, says I'm going to scare the other guests bawling like that.

Sometimes I think I recognise some of the faces in the dining hall. Almost all of them chew and swallow, lost in thought; only some of them allow their eyes to wander over to their neighbours; wide eyes of loners, not used to having so many people to watch, dazed eyes, dopey from sleep or fatigue. Though the table is narrow, we try to avoid contact, not brushing against each other, grazing arms or, worse, touching legs under the table. To do so would provoke the undisguisable disapproval of our neighbours – even though, as we share the first meal of the day, we know that we have to be polite,

tolerate the quirks of our neighbours who chew with their mouths open. Like the podgy, bald-headed guy who looks like he's made of gummy candy and eats with his hands and belches, splattering his neighbours' shirts.

The diners who look at me with a flicker of recognition but don't say anything are the most intolerable of the lot. One time, this woman with dry, dirty hair held up dinner just to tell me that she wanted to talk and would be waiting for me upstairs. But when I retraced my footsteps back to my room and looked behind me, there was no one there.

In another memory, it's my father who is suffocating and I'm the one driving non-stop, trying to save his life. I am my father, I can feel his hands covered in callouses from lifting weights, his stiff tendons, his bloated stomach wedged against the steering wheel, his horse heart tumbling off a cliff, and then I understand why my father has been crashing into everything and anything that crosses our path as we drive down the road that separates life from death.

My father butts all the wire fences in the world: he sends all the goats, cats, snakes and cows flying into the air and then breaks their bones with his tyres; he is a priest, offering torn hearts to the blood moon so that mine can keep beating. My father will stop any man who gets in his way, flinging him to the pavement and trampling him because he loves me. My soul bursting with gratitude, I wake up. I've lulled myself to sleep with my imaginings, and now I'm late for breakfast.

I stagger out into the empty corridor and a woman, perhaps the woman with the dry, dirty hair or any other woman in the hotel, looks at me before disappearing up into the staircase. "You look familiar," she says but doesn't stop to talk. She scurries up the stairs, probably trying to be on time for breakfast. Wisps of her memory remain: hair aglow with red sparks, slight squint to her eyes, ashen skin. As I approach the bottom of the staircase, I realise, confused, that it was a reflection from a mirror I've never noticed before. The person talking to me was me. I would stop to study myself, but I'm afraid there's no time for socialising. I've already forgotten about the incident by the time I make it to the dining hall, which is always full of people I gradually start to recognise. I look for an empty seat, sit down and silently start eating the eggs old Mórtimer has prepared.

Occasionally someone will talk to me, usually one of the new arrivals who don't realise how things work around here; the ones who want to leave and ask where the doors are. But like everyone else, I say nothing, and gradually they stop talking too. Soon enough they blend right in. They eat breakfast like the rest of us, their mouths full of food and empty of questions. Then there are those who want to go straight back to their rooms without eating breakfast: the same ones who cry inconsolably and ramble on about their memories out loud. But they are few and far between, and that kind of thing only happens on special days.

Most of the time we're good guests: we use our cutlery and clear our plates of scrambled eggs and fruit with some degree of skill; we leave our plates clean and meditate in silence, trying to think of a new spin to put on the memory we've been amassing and crushing with our teeth, the recollection that nourishes us, the hobby that helps us while away the hours. I always ask the others for the time, even though I know I'm a pest. Many of us try to rush down our breakfast so that we can get back to our rooms and continue to ruminate on the peripheries of these images, to wring out even the driest of their traces.

Either too early or too late, I cross the empty corridor and recognise my reflection from afar, like the headlight of a silent car approaching. I am too lost in thought to see the car coming down the road. On holiday you expect the peace and quiet of the countryside, to slow down the pace of everyday life beneath the winking moon, but then from out of nowhere, up shoots the fist of life and hits you, knocking your teeth right out of your mouth. First comes the impact and the fall, a pain that spreads through the body without a particular wound because the wound is all there is. Then hitting the ground, stunned, you lose your breath, still conscious as your hipbone grinds under the weight of that hideous

fate. Then your ribs crunch and you feel your left arm snap as the blood oozes up and slowly fills your broken mouth.

With aqueous eyes, I see the father and son looking at me, no longer as a human being but as a juicy piece of meat on a plate. I try to ask them for help, but my voice is replaced by a frothy gurgle. I lose myself in the eyes of that terrified boy, who falls to the ground with me.

My fundamental memory is dying.

I've been daydreaming in front of my food again. Though I know I'm running late to write the memory I'm revisiting, I deliberately take my time as I chew on the bland scrambled eggs Mórtimer has prepared. I swish the spit-soaked mixture from side to side without swallowing, like Judy who, across the hall, is still busy with her infinite mouthful.

Eventually the only ones left are an extremely tall man with bulging eyes and that same absent expression we all have around here, the legless woman who chews but never swallows, and me. I study the woman and she lets her gaze wander over to mine, perhaps seeking company for the remainder of breakfast.

Judy is one of the new arrivals, one of the people who still thinks there might be a way out of this maze of reminiscence. When she asks if I recognise her from somewhere, I offer a different response to the one we've been churning out in this hotel for as long as I can remember. Yes, I say, she does look familiar. Then she smiles and bares her dry, toothless gums, covered in food.