

NOT REAL

“Vanessa, you have to fly home now. It’s time. I am dying.” Dad tells me he wants a sane person around. He needs me — we have a special bond. Yet my mind is a blank. I’m a blank; have been for the last three weeks. Dizzy. I know I need to be there for him. I should have gone three weeks ago... when we first found out. But I can’t believe this is real. Cannot be. Real.

“I’ll be there tomorrow, dad. No matter what. I promise!”

I hang up and open the window. The crisp evening air hits my face. The cold chases the dizziness out of my body, my mind. It all happened so fast; Dad began getting headaches that wouldn’t go away, then nausea. When the headaches turned to migraines Mum forced him to see a doctor. It was too late. “Your imaging results indicate a significant mass in the pancreas. Advanced-stage pancreatic cancer is characterised by metastasis. Palliative care will be essential for symptom management, however, treatment options are limited at best.”

The doctors tried to reassure Dad by stating how well he was — given his terminal condition and old age — and that we should be grateful. Like it meant Dad wasn’t dying. Which he was. One week they said or one month. One year would be a miracle — but who knows. This was three weeks ago.

I start packing mechanically, throwing random items into a suitcase just to fill it, overlooking the purpose of

whatever goes in. I stop by the photo on my nightstand. I look at the faces in it: Mum, Dad, me, and my siblings Petra and Eduardo over a plentiful dinner table. I don't want to go. I don't want to see it, see them. I don't want it to be real. And if I go it will all be.

If I go, Dad will die.

If Dad dies, I cease to exist.

I stop packing and check for flights. I find last-minute return tickets from Dublin to Rio de Janeiro leaving in a few hours, for only 2200 euros. While I book it, dozens of texts flash on my phone — all from our family group chat.

Mum

I should never have made him go to the hospital.

He gave up the minute he heard cancer.

God knows how long he would have lived if he didn't know.

Petra

@Mum Stop!

That's not how diseases work.

Will I bring dinner?

Mum

He gave up, I am telling you.

I'm glad I managed to sign him out of there.

He needs to be at home.

Eduardo

My flight arrives tomorrow at 13h00.

@Vanessa When does your flight arrive?

Maybe we can share a taxi?

Petra

@Mum Have you eaten?

There in an hour or so.

Stuck in traffic.

Mum

He is deteriorating by the hour.

I keep telling him.

But he isn't fighting back.

Me

@Eduardo My flight arrives at 16h45.

Mum

He doesn't listen to me anymore.

He just sits there and watches TV.

I put the phone down and walk to the fridge where I search for a bottle of wine. I find one in the fruit-and-veg drawer. It's been open for a few days so I sniff it first. Not too bad. I pour. The content of my glass is sharper than expected but not vinegary enough not to be wine anymore. I go back to my suitcase and take out its contents. I sit down with my glass and list the items I will need for the two weeks I booked to be back home in Laranjeiras. The weather will be hotter than I have experienced it in two years.

It feels wrong to pack summer dresses to go see my father die. Sunscreen. Sunglasses. Flipflops. Hat. By the time I close the suitcase I am ready for a summer vacation

I know will not happen. I don't want to check my phone again but I need to set an alarm for an hour before I need to leave.

Mum

I'm so glad you are both flying home.

I'm grateful to have Petra here but we really ought to be together, all of us.

Petra

@Eduardo Let me know if you need me to collect you from the airport.

I'm at the supermarket now and they have the black bread you used to like.

Mum

Your father looks awful, he's so thin.

I told him, he has to stay positive.

Please don't get a fright when you see him, we all have to stay strong.

Eduardo

Vanessa and I would never leave you alone, Mum.

You know we are always here.

Petra

@Mum Nearly there!

Mum

I know but New York and Dublin are very far away.

I'm just glad we'll be together tomorrow.

Petra

@Vanessa Send me your flight details.

Me

Just rest Mum.

We'll be there soon.

Outside, the city is silent. I feel like the only person in the world. I walk to the bathroom and turn the lights off, but leave the door slightly open to let a sliver of light in. I undress in the dark. The violent pressure of the hot water on my head gives me pleasure. The sound of the water gushing down fills the room, bringing me back to the waterfalls of my childhood. The disorienting sensation of showering in the dark washes me away. In this sacred wet cave, it doesn't matter who I am, where I am, or what is happening. Here, I feel real. There is just water. And sound and force and darkness.

I want to let go, to give myself to this unknown, this blackness around me.

My alarm rings and I am out of the trance. I already miss the safety of my home — far away from family, doctors, treatments, medications... everything I don't want to deal with, can't deal with. Except now I have to leave my haven in Clontarf, the place where I thought nothing could find me. I have to leave the place where Dad is not dying and fly to the place where he is. My sweet, kind, quiet Dad.

At the airport, I find myself lingering, looking at all the shops, wondering if I should bring Mum and Petra a gift. It would be expected if it was a normal visit. But this is no normal visit, I know. Still, I wonder whether to buy them

perfume or face cream. I wonder what to get Dad. If I buy him a really long book, will he somehow live long enough to finish it? And if I buy him gold cuffs, will he live forever? I stroll through the shops, not knowing what to do until I hear my name on the speakers. I am late to board. I run to my gate and make it just in time.

On the plane, I simply cannot focus. I try a film, a documentary, a show. Nothing distracts me. I look outside the tiny window and stare at nothing. My legs restless. I have so much energy, I need to get up. I need to run laps. I need to do something, anything. It bothers me that I don't recognise this feeling, this disquiet.

"There is no question regarding whether Dad will make it. He will not. Why aren't you here, Vanessa?" Petra's words spring to consciousness and I suddenly want the plane to crash. I want to die. I want everyone to die. Then I won't have to see Dad. I start shaking. I try to stop, but it only makes the shaking more intense, and I don't know what to do or what is happening to my body. I begin to laugh like I haven't in years. I laugh uncontrollably.

"How is it possible that three weeks ago Dad had migraines and now he's dying?"

An air hostess approaches me and asks if I am okay. She smiles, her words are polite but her voice breaks slightly. Her amber eyes are alert and her brow furrowed. She is afraid. She asks me to calm down. Giggling, I tell her Dad is dying, and tears roll down my cheeks. I laugh and cry at the same time, however, the truth is that I am neither sad nor happy. I am lost, hopeless. I can't go see Dad die and then go buy his coffin with my siblings.

I sense dozens of eyes on me and the feeling only makes me laugh louder. I'm trembling and chuckling. I know I must look insane. Yet, the awareness of having an audience awakens something in me. Like a revelation. A sign.

This is not real

Dad will not die

I will not cease to exist

When the airplane lands, I don't get up to get my bag. I don't elbow my way out of there as fast as I can. I take my time undoing my seatbelt, getting up. Two air hostesses approach me and ask if I need help, if I need them to call anyone. I am uneasy about turning my phone on so I let them arrange a taxi for me.

On the way to my childhood home, I watch my old city from the back seat of the taxi. The scenery changes every minute. Poverty, riches, poverty, riches. Life, death, life, death. When the car stops in front of our building I wonder if I will burst. I don't. I feel sober. Strangely sober. Like I know everything. I'm calm and accepting. The doorman, Mr. Nelson, who has worked here for at least fifteen years, recognises me and opens the door.

"I am so sorry, Miss Vanessa... for your loss", he says gently and awkwardly, staring down. I want to correct him, I want to tell him Dad is still alive. But as I begin to speak, it occurs to me that he might know something I don't. I might be too late. Tears silently fall on my cheeks and I do not remember breathing in the elevator. I do not remember breathing while I stood outside our door waiting for it to open.

I am here but I am not here at all.

I don't ring the doorbell. I stand there and take comfort in the seconds I have before Regina, our maid, opens the door. She hugs me gently and tells me she is terribly sorry. She takes the small suitcase from my hand and gestures towards the living room, where I can hear Eduardo crying and Mum consoling him by demanding he be stronger. They see me. We hug, we cry. We console each other. I speak words I instantly forget.

Mum grabs my face hard and stares at me, one eye at a time, like she always does when she's in one of her moods. "Bring him back," she says, releasing my head from the grip of her sticky hands. She sits down again and sips her cognac. Eduardo looks at me awkwardly, he doesn't say anything, he just looks at me. Our intimacy has always been our shared silence.

I am too late. I cry. I let my body fall and with my face buried on the couch cushion. I scream. "Dad? I want my daddy!"

"Don't be like this, girl," Mum orders.

A hand pulls me up. Petra. She takes me in her arms and begins singing the lullaby she sang to me all my childhood, her voice grave but smooth. It always tuned me like an instrument. Whenever I was overwhelmed and could do nothing but scream and cry, she sang the old rhyme in my ears until I was soothed and tuned inside.

Until everything was quiet again.

"Come. Come see him," Petra says.

I follow her down the corridor decorated with photos,

framed diplomas, medals — our ancient memories. We were always together. Never quite close but together. Dad sober, Mum less so. My parents' bedroom is much colder than the rest of the apartment. Mum set the aircon system this way. I look at the furniture around the room, then at the sky outside the window. It's impressive that I can hear the birds with the windows shut. I focus on their music as I avoid at all costs looking at the bed.

Petra asks the nurse to leave. I stay by the window. Dad looks small under the blanket. Petra sits beside Dad, fixes his pillow, and whispers. "Guess who is here? Your favourite child, Vanessa," she turns to me but there is no envy on her face this time, no blame. Then Dad coughs. I wasn't too late! I was so tired, I didn't have the energy to second-guess my fears. I approach him feeling lighter than I've ever been.

This is all I wanted, all I needed. Bubbles of joy burst through my entire body. I feel effervescent. I bend in gratitude and kiss his forehead.

"Dad! God... I missed you!"

"I missed you more"

The ebony eyes that gaze at me are calm. The wrinkles on his mocha skin have sunken deeper. My tears fall on the cracks of him and I wonder what it would take for them to cure him. Is it a matter of how many tears I cry? Or of what I'm thinking when the tears fall? Perhaps there is an incantation I can recite?

How does one manifest a miracle?

"My child, I just wanted you to sit with me. Like the old times."

“Of course, Dad.”

We watch television. I hold onto his swollen, cold hand. He changes channels from football game to football game. You’d think a person wouldn’t care about championships in a time like this. But it seems to be all Dad wants to focus on. “Goal! Goal!” He goes, celebrating. I am unsure of what to say. There is nothing I can do so I just watch football with him. And nap. A nurse comes in three times a day.

Eduardo busies himself going over paperwork: health insurance, life insurance, the will. Petra busies herself overlooking Regina’s duties — to Regina’s terror. Mum busies herself sipping Hennessy and studying the healing powers of the brain. She relentlessly encourages us to detox our bodies and minds. “Stress kills. Love Heals.”

Three days go by. And with every day a new pain in his body. Dad asks me to search old football matches online. The classics, he calls it. We watch them all. “GOAL!” He chants. The men in old-fashioned t-shirts and bad haircuts look middle-aged compared to the players of today. The men — who have fat on their bellies — run across fields and perform skilful tricks that lead to points, to victories. I begin to understand why he needs football at a time like this.

This is not real.

“Goal!” I cheer with him.

Dad and I have a special relationship. We could always be honest with one another and always have been. Now he looks at me like we have a new understanding. I am beyond grateful to be able to be here with him. Whenever

things got too hectic at parties or Christmas, Dad would always sneak into his bedroom to watch something on TV. It didn't matter what was on. It was how he cleared his mind. Whenever I saw him sneaking in, I would follow and sit with him. We didn't say much, we mostly watched telly together.

"I need to tell you something," Dad says, his voice grave and precise. He turns the volume on the television down. "I meant to say it before, to your mother... to you. I should have said it. I didn't know how. I am not good at things like this," he avoids my gaze and stares at the window instead.

"There is a boy. Well, a man... His name is Pedro."

Petra walks in holding a tray: grilled chicken, salad, and coconut water. She kisses Dad gently on the cheek. "Love you," she tells him. The tension in my silence palpable, she adds, "Sorry to interrupt, Vanessa", as she walks out.

"He is your brother."

"What?"

"It was a mistake."

"What the fuck, Dad?"

"I couldn't die without telling you. I can't tell the others though. You have to understand. It was a mistake. But you deserve to know and I hope you will forgive me one day. You deserve to meet him... if you want to. I know he does... He doesn't know I'm dying, Vanessa. I didn't know how to tell him. I was hoping... maybe you would. I thought, perhaps, he could come over as your friend... an old friend... So he can say goodbye. I am only asking you to lie for me this one last time. After I go... you can tell everything. Can I give

him your phone number?"

I stare at him, mouth agape. Dad has another child. With another woman who isn't Mum. Dad, who barely has friends, barely goes out or does anything. Dad, who never is anywhere Mum doesn't know about. Dad? It can't be true. I chuckle. Dad looks at me, puzzled. He goes through his phone and shows me a photo of him with a man who looks eerily like Eduardo.

"He is forty-nine, like Eduardo. So... I really couldn't have said it at the time. Then never."

I burst out laughing. "Is everything a lie?"

"You're scaring me, Vanessa."

"Dad... Is this real?" I laugh louder.

"Are you taking your meds properly? Are you seeing your doctor?" The panicked voice asks.

Not Dad's voice.

Of course. This is not real. I knew it!

I put the pillow on Dad's face and press down, his arms too weak to stop me. On the screen, the players keep running. "Goal!" The narrator shouts enthusiastically as I watch Dad stop fighting. I feel strangely relieved. This is not real. Not real. I will wake up and be me again. Everything will be back to where it was.

When it was real.