Biescas

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Won.
Doo.
Ree.

This is the sound of my daughter Maite counting.
Faw. Always happy.
Fy. Always smiling.
Sis. Sehbin.
Hands clapping.
Ayi. Dancing little circles.
Niy. All the way.
Teeh.

Maite has pearly cheeks and eyes of the full moon. The old ladies on the bus cannot resist. They smile. They tickle. They draw her onto their laps when there are no seats. Why shouldn't they? If she is in a good mood, she will laugh and cover her face with her hands. Kick her feet into the aisle as if pumping a swing.

When she's had enough and wants release, she will raise her index finger and wobble it from side to side. Like me, when I am angry. Only she cannot balance the rhythm with the motion, her finger like a metronome at death's door.

The old ladies find this funny and continue to poke. Then I have no choice but a quick escape to the street, where I hold Maite's arms tightly against her sides until the twitching has stopped. When that finger ascends, I know what's coming. I warn them. But they choose not to hear me.

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I believe these ladies come from a time when children were not allowed to have bad moods. Days when fathers did nothing. Came home from work, read the paper, waited to be served lunch, drank themselves stupid. Even from the street I can hear them cackling like blackbirds and I know exactly what they are thinking: What an odd father. What business does he have carting a young girl around like that?

They are the Greek chorus of this city and we would all be better off without them.

Maite means love in Basque, as in *maite zaitut*, I love you, or *maitea*, sweetie. Before Maite came to us, my wife declared our daughter would carry that name. What better way for her to know how deeply she was loved? How silly, I thought, holding her for the first time under the blazing lights in the nursery, her tiny fists punching the air like a baby bird beginning flight. How could she ever believe anything else?

But the name is pretty. It rolls off my tongue no matter how I say it, whether I am calling her for dinner, scolding her for pushing a child off the slide, or telling her I love her. At night, when I say this in Basque, as her mother used to do, I get to say her name twice. Maite, I say, *maite zaitut*, and together we have a good laugh over that.

When the rains come, Maite coils her body against mine. If there is thunder and lightning, she grinds her fist into the deep scar that crosses from her eyebrow straight up her forehead. What I would give to rip open my chest and cradle her in the warmth of my own fluids, as she once lay suspended inside her mother. The noise of the rain diminished to a whisper, the steady cadence of my heart carrying her to sleep.

For me, there are no laps to climb onto. Only the drumbeat of the rain against the roof. When Maite has fallen to sleep, her breaths in a perfect time she will never unearth during waking hours, my own heart lets loose, sputtering with recall. I don't pray, but if I did, one small favor I'd request: To slide back to that day when I could open my balcony doors after a storm and find the air rich with the scent of lilacs and magnolias, not the stench of human carnage.

So many numbers. One hundred and sixty liters per square meter. That's how much rain fell in 45 minutes. Six hundred cubic meters per second. That's how much water was in the wall. Those figures mean nothing unless you were there, first taking refuge in the tent when the skies flung open like a trap door from heaven. The ground then saturating, water bubbling through the canvas floor and turning your car into the refuge of last resort. The water rising so fast it surged through the doors, flooding the floor and then the seats. Only if you were there might you have grabbed a rope and tied your child to the top of a tree, thinking, it will never get this high.

An explosion then. Like a car bomb, the shuddering of a mountainside blown to bits. Although you know there are no car bombs in the Pyrenees. That is why you have come here, to escape all that. One final second then to grab onto the top of your car as it is swept away in the wave of water and mountain and mud. One final comfort as you hurtle to your own death:

The knowledge that your child is safe.

Until you see her fly past, still attached to the tree.

Much later, there is time to think. Far too much time and far too many numbers. Including the one that those of us who were there know intimately, like the date of our birth:

Eighty-seven.

That's how many people died.

A bridge of debris is what the experts called it. A dam of trees and rocks and animal carcasses that blocked the flow of the river until, like a bottle of champagne, it exploded, releasing its fury down the path of least resistance. Right through the campground.

Some families sued and are still in court years later. I chose not to. We observed the one-year mass in Biescas four years ago, and then I thought, I must put this behind me now or I never will.

When I dream of it at night, it comes like an airplane crash. Deafening. Instantaneous. Mangled limbs, crushed metal, pines splintered like matchsticks across the hill. Mud-faced survivors stumbling in search of family. Kristof and Hilde, a German family camped next to us, and their two children, Mark and Greta, who

showed Maite how to draw animal figures in the sand. All dead. Twin brothers, Josep and Jordi, from Barcelona, on a month's holiday with their wives and five children. All dead. A mother from Pamplona, pleading with the Red Cross to perform CPR on her child, even though he had been submerged over an hour. Me, bruised and bleeding, a complete absence of consciousness as I lay on the river bank for hours. My wife, emerging one week later, two kilometers downstream.

The channel that led the water to the campground was so old the geologists insist there was no way to have known about it. The lawyers retort: What was a campground doing in a flood plain? The town people testify for the defense that they have lived in Biescas for centuries, tending their goats and tourists, and the river has never harmed them. This was my wife's childhood retreat, her own family escape from the explosions rocking the nearby headquarters of the Guardia Civil. The place she dreamed of returning to from the day of Maite's birth. To give her the simple gift of a clear mountain sky, the chase of the salamanders and newts along the stream bank, the butterflies whispering her name.

I might be called to testify. But I won't go. When that time comes I will be far away with Maite. We will take a trip, maybe to another country. Or perhaps to my home in the south, the dry canyons and gullies of Almeria, where there is no rain in the summer, the only loud noise the screaming of the wind as it's compressed through the narrow valleys.

It will be hot this time of year, the travel agent warns me. I know. I know it will be hot, and I know it can be loud, but it will be a constant noise, not a pitter-patter that could explode into a wall of water that will eventually suffocate us both.

At the airport, the lady behind the counter will look at Maite's passport and then her. She will not utter the question, but her face reveals everything. If she is completely unkind, she will ask Maite something, just to prove the point that Maite is not what she seems. If the lady is nice, she will smile and offer her a candy.

Maite will be holding my hand, smiling, or dancing in little circles while she waits for me to get our seats. She knows this routine. Every summer we travel and she is an expert flier. If she is talking,

she will be counting: Won. Doo. To ten. Like I told her to do when I tied her to the tree. Count to ten, I urged, and it will all be over.

Ree. When the tree was thrown from its home, forcing Maite underwater for three minutes.

Faw. That's how long the doctors believe she was without oxygen.

Fy. When the tree smashed into a rock, exposing her flesh to the rancid debris.

Sis. When a caravan caught the tree as it jammed up against the bank, lifting her mouth, by the slightest grace, mere millimeters above the water.

Sehbin. Did she think she might be dying? Could she have understood that at three?

Ayi. When the man from the village who did not know how to swim risked his life to cut her loose, later telling me he only saw her because of the rope.

Niy. And she lay in his arms, waiting for her mother. For me.

The lady at the airport will shake her head, the pity apparent in the downward turn of her lips and the softening of her eyes, glancing again at the birth date on the passport and then at Maite. Counting. Lying in the arms of the man from the village. Until a Red Cross worker found me and brought me to the shelter.

And I saw her. Alive. Maite. Maite zaitut.

And I picked her up and held her close.

Teeh.

And she was quiet again.

THE END