

Mayte Aparisi Cabrera  
**the sound of night**

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## PART I

### THE FINAL STRAW

*Buenos Aires, January 1983*

The family finally arrived in Buenos Aires that night. Home. Exhausted and still badly shaken, they got out of the car. They had been silent for a long half-hour. They collected their luggage and, thoroughly downcast, walked towards the house. It was past midnight and cooler than usual for the time of year. The rain that had fallen a few hours earlier, typical of summer in the Pampas, had freshened the air. It smelt of damp earth.

As he observed his family, Jorge made sure the vehicle was locked while checking at the same time that nothing had been left inside. The last raindrops, which still ran down the windows and the windscreen, caused him to hurry as he closed the boot. A few dark clouds remained in the sky.

"It looks as though it's going to rain again," he thought, as he looked vigilantly into the distance and round about him, in the disturbing silence of the street. At that moment his eyes alighted on the Southern Cross, the small constellation, symbol of the firmament. Everything happened in a split second... And there, in front of Jorge, lay that Buenos Aires described by Cortázar in the poem "Blue Funk":

"You see the Southern Cross / you breath the summer with its smell of peaches / and you walk at night, my little silent ghost / through that Buenos Aires / always through that same Buenos Aires."

When they entered the house silence prevailed, the same silence as that of the streets. Aunt Edel was sleeping placidly. Susana pressed the light switch and immediately a sharp sound rang out like a shot, an explosion resonated, and darkness returned. The light bulb had blown, and it broke into a thousand fragments, scaring them all to death. For the second time that night.

"It must be another power surge," thought Susana as she calmed her daughters with the little strength that remained to her. She recalled that they had experienced problems with the electrical installation lately. "Power surges!" she thought as a bitter smile escaped her, unnoticed by all; "How could it be otherwise when power surges are all there are in this country."

In the privacy of the bedroom, with only her husband for company, Susana, like the light bulb, exploded. In her own way, very discretely:

"Jorge, I can't bear it anymore! I really can't!" she said with half a voice, while using a towel to dry her hair and the old necklace that she had worn almost constantly ever since her grandmother, Marian, had given it to her.

"Calm down," he replied, as he, too, removed his wet clothes.

"Jorge, I really can't stand it anymore! So much humiliation and for no reason, I can't bear it! Do you understand? I can't bear it! They frisked us in the rain, they pointed torches at the girls' faces, they searched the boot... but, who do they think they are? Sometimes I think that, if they want to, they will kill us and that's that," she said as she prepared a hot shower. She needed to calm down, and to cry, too. Jorge left her for a moment and went to see how his daughters were and to wish them goodnight:

"Girls, everything okay?"

"The police frightened us more this time," said Marta, "Why did they make you get out of the car in the rain? And why did they turn the lights off? Everything was dark and all we could hear was the policeman shouting and pointing his gun at you."

"What were they looking for in your windcheater, Dad?" asked María, the older daughter.

"I don't really think they were looking for anything, dear," explained Jorge with the intention of calming the girls so that they could sleep peacefully. "It was probably just routine. But it's over now! Don't worry."

The journey home that Sunday had been no more eventful than previous weeks, but they were more on edge. The four of them had spent the weekend in the country house of their friends, Gabriel and Alicia, and although Gabriel had warned them that searches were more and more frequent on the Pan-American



Highway, they always thought it would not happen to them. But, once again, they were wrong. They had already experienced several scares on that road, and their patience was wearing thin.

That night, two police officers, armed to the teeth, had stopped the car at random, despite the fact that it was raining heavily. Marta and María's parents knew that a simple search could be highly dangerous since any movement considered suspicious by the police, in 1983, was enough to make them start shooting.

"Do you know what I think?" commented Susana, in bed now after a comforting shower, "That it's all problems here. With the economy that doesn't recover, with your company that doesn't recover, with the military, with what happened to our friends, to their children... Argentina is suffocating me, Jorge."

Jorge, as well as the shower, needed music to calm him, and with a sweet melody by Henri Salvador, he lay down beside Susana, breathed deeply and prepared to go on listening to his wife. Susana continued:

"Can you imagine living in Europe?" The Melody of 'Dans mon île', the aroma of lavender converted into tiny drops of vapour that spread around the room and Susana's words transformed that moment into something unique.

She was wearing a long, translucent cotton nightdress, immaculately white and reaching her ankles, one of the many gifts that he had brought her back from his business trips. She talked as she brushed her long platinum blond hair. And while Jorge listened to the words that escaped from his wife's mouth, Susana suddenly pronounced a phrase in a different and much firmer tone:

"Why don't we listen to Garo and go and live in Spain?" Those words reverberated strongly in Jorge's head. With the help of Henri Salvador he managed to let them go, but he continued to remember them until he was overcome by sleep. Paradoxically, the couple finally slept much better than they had expected. That night, after a pleasant weekend and a gruelling return trip, they had begun to take a momentous decision for the family.

## ONE YEAR LATER

*Summer 1984*

One Saturday lunchtime a year after that eventful night, Marta, the couple's younger daughter, emulating the conversations of the residents of Buenos Aires those days, asked at the table in the context of the conversation:

"Mum, how much is the dollar worth today?"

"Today, for example," continued her mother, vexed, "I had to ask my nurse's husband to lend me his van to go to the supermarket and do the shopping before the afternoon. We can't go on living like this, thinking food's going to cost more in the afternoon than in the morning."

Jorge nodded, as he knew what Susana was trying to tell him. Added to the difficulties of everyday life owing to the high price of any product, were the fear and the insecurity that had been instilled in them years ago, during the Videla dictatorship. And which were still there. So many misfortunes, so many people disappeared – like the son of Jorge's partner, whom they now presumed dead – and then everything that was happening to their friends and to so many acquaintances...

With the arrival in the country of the long-awaited democracy led by president Alfonsín, the Argentine people were really beginning to learn about the true horrors with which they had lived. A cruel reality that had been added to the great economic instability they were suffering from and the severe recession.

The reduction of salaries in families was the norm, that was in the best of cases, and furthermore there was the inflation and unemployment; and now that Jorge had no occupation or perspectives, Susana thought that perhaps a change of air would help her husband to prosper.

Since they had mentioned the idea of going to live in Spain a year earlier, they had both spoken at length on the subject, and

they had taken a firm decision. Now all they needed was to find the right moment to communicate it to the rest of the family. And that moment, which had seemed as though it would never come, arrived suddenly and with no prior warning. Like almost all the important things in life.

Jorge and Susana looked at each other penetratingly. At that moment, an uncomfortable silence made its presence felt around the table, which even the children noticed, but not Aunt Edelmira, who was lost in her own thoughts, gazing at her plate and concentrating on trying to roll her spaghetti with tucó sauce around her fork before carrying it to her mouth, a task that in her early seventies was becoming increasingly difficult.

Susana had decided, and Jorge, with a glance, assented. That was how everything started, how their life changed. Susana said to her daughters:

“Girls, how do you feel about going to live in Spain, in Valencia? Dad has already sold his company. In this country everything is in disorder and what’s more, you already know what Garo told us, that they need dentists in Spain...”

At last, she had managed to pronounce those sentences. Her eyes, reddened and sparkling, gave away her level of excitement. Susana was a dentist, and Garo had been her dental lab technician since she had started working in Buenos Aires. Some years earlier, Garo had decided to go and work in Spain, but he had kept in regular contact with the family by telephone.

Upon hearing that, the two sisters looked at each other in terror and asked, almost at the same time:

“Spain? Why?”

“Because it’s a land of opportunities. Because we’ll only be there for about five years and then we’ll come back, and because the situation in Argentina is very changeable and unsafe,” replied Jorge, quickly.

Aunt Edelmira, learning the news at the same time as the girls, was horrified and only had the strength to utter three sentences:

“I’m not going! Why would I go? I’m not leaving my country...!” she said, as using her knife to help her, she began to cut the long strips of pasta into minuscule pieces, drowning her sorrow and rage in every gesture.

Again, an uncomfortable silence. They looked at each other and, although nobody wanted to express what they felt, they were all waiting to see who would cry first. Aunt Edel continued to cut her pasta into tiny pieces without trying so much as a mouthful, head lowered, eyes firmly on her food.

Marta, who was twelve, observed attentively. She noticed that all their eyes were shining, but she was most concerned by her aunt Edel, her dear aunt Edel, with whom she had a very special relationship. She was seated to her left and, from where she sat, she observed her from the corner of her eye. She furtively analysed her angular profile and sharp nose. And although she too tried to digest what she had just heard, at that moment all she could think of was the advanced age of her aunt and in how she would assimilate that difficult piece of news. Marta suffered for her.

Aunt Edel's face looked paler than ever. Her short black hair looked shorter and blacker than ever. It was as though her aunt's thinness had made her turn transparent, as though she were being consumed incessantly.

"Aunt Edel looks absent," thought Marta.

Perhaps that was her aunt's intention, not to be present in that painful conversation, at that bitter meal which, for her, represented the end of the world, the end of her world.

"I don't know whether she will be able to stand Buenos Aires without us," thought Marta, because she had been, and continued to be, an important pillar for the family. In fact, the family could not be understood without her since, over the years, although Aunt Edelmira always seemed to play a secondary role, some family drama always supervened to place her front of stage.

Marta was suddenly impressed by the thinness of her aunt and how aged she was and, although she did not really know why, Edelmira reminded her of a character in the book she had just read. And at that moment she saw in her Úrsula Iguarán, the incombustible old lady of One hundred years of solitude. Two women joined to the fate of their families, witnesses to everything, always suffering for others and finally ending up so alone...

Aunt Edel's life had really been that of everybody else, since she had never had a life of her own. She was a teenager when her

mother, an Italian named Ana Beilys who had arrived in Buenos Aires from Piedmont, had died suddenly. Edel was the oldest of six siblings; her younger sister, Sara, was Susana's mother.

At that time, Sara was just eight years old, so Edelmira, as well as caring for her father, had to act as mother to her brothers and sisters and, above all else, she cared for little Sara. That was her first leading role.

Edelmira had never had relations with a man, or with a woman. Despite this, at seventy she liked to be attractive. She took great care of her clothes, her dresses, and she always wore pearl necklaces and earrings, with bracelets from which a thousand charms hung, and her fingers were full of rings adorned with small rubies, aquamarines and other precious stones.

Marta was still observing her aunt when, suddenly, a compact tear, just one, falling from high on a crumpled face, confirmed her niece's worst fears. Aunt Edel was suffering. Although the old lady tried to keep her composure and to show herself as she was, sober, cool and distant, that tear reflected the true state of her soul and what her apparent coldness kept hidden. Aunt Edelmira, although she was a person full of love and feelings, liked to keep them deep inside where they did not show.

Some uncomfortable minutes had passed since Aunt Edel had said that she would not leave Argentina, minutes that seemed eternal to them all, and then the girls' curiosity asserted itself in the atmosphere, to the relief of Jorge and Susana. Aunt Edel, however, remained absent.

"What's Valencia like?" asked the sisters suddenly and at the same time, as though they had reached an agreement.

"It's beside the sea; there are a lot of oranges, what's more there's snow nearby and we can go and ski. It will be like living in Mar del Plata," replied Susana quickly.

Mar del Plata had been their first summer holiday destination, then came Pinamar and Punta del Este, in Uruguay. And their memories of Mar del Plata were always pleasant: summer, warmth, dips in the sea, ice-creams, friends, walks, croissants in the Sao bakery, hunting for glow-worms, fishing for cockles and clams which they would then eat in the house beside the beach... Susana had carefully considered the effect that her reply would cause.

The girls liked Mar del Plata very much, but not so much as to live there all year. The girls were very sure about the type of city they loved: Buenos Aires, their city, a large and vibrant capital.

“And why don’t we go and live in Barcelona?”

“Because they speak Catalan, and we don’t,” replied Susana.

“And why don’t we go to Madrid?”

“Because in Madrid there are already a lot of dentists. We’re going to Valencia, it’s the third-largest city in Spain. There’s a university there and we have friends there, too. What’s more, don’t you remember the lovely gifts we brought you back from Valencia when we travelled around Europe? You were very little.”

Susana tried to sweeten the conversation and to steer it towards positive and appealing topics for her twelve and thirteen-year-old daughters full of fears and questions.

“Yes! of course we remember that trip! You left us alone for a month,” said one of them, angrily.

“It was nearly a month and a half, and you weren’t alone, you stayed with Grandma and Grandpa and Aunt Edel,” spelled out Susana quickly.

That first trip to Europe meant a lot to the couple, since they had taken it after a run of bad health for Jorge, a difficult period of illness. That break was a prize authorised by the cardiologist, and organised by the Banco de la Provincia de Buenos Aires, where Horacio, Susana’s brother, worked.

The journey began in Madrid, and after a comprehensive route through numerous European cities, the couple returned to Spain. In that country they visited Barcelona, Peñíscola, Valencia, Alicante, Seville, Granada, Córdoba, Málaga and Cádiz. In Valencia they coincided with the Toy Fair, which seemed important, and there they bought dolls and other toys for the girls.

“You brought me back a doll dressed as a bride and a toy that walked,” said Marta.

“And do you remember the baby that you fed and then it did a poo and got everything dirty? What! You don’t remember it?” added Susana, gesticulating.

The all laughed over those almost-forgotten childhood anecdotes. They sighed deeply and took heart to eat the cold pasta.

Aunt Edelmira still ate nothing as, head lowered, she fiddled with the charms of her little bracelet, the small amulets and jewels that hung from it. One by one she rubbed them and shined them, but there were a few medallions that she caressed with greater intensity, those that she wore to commemorate the birth of Susana, María and Marta. Then came her favourite, the image of Our Lady of Luján, patron saint of Argentina. Susana observed her aunt while she prepared herself mentally to speak to her alone later.

As soon as they had finished eating, the girls asked permission to leave the table and the first thing they did was to run to the telephone to tell their friends that they were going to live in Spain and, of course, nobody believed them. A few hours after the initial shock, the sisters alighted in the sitting room and, flopping into their favourite armchairs in the most original posture, each one launched at the other the first thing to come into their minds:

“What will Valencia be like, Marta?”

“And what will happen with our friends?”

“And Grandma and Grandpa? And Grandpa Mitre? Won’t we see them anymore?”

“Will we come back soon?”

“And what will we wear? What will we talk like?”

“María, is it winter there now or summer?”

The few references they had of Spain had names:

José Sacristán, Imanol Arias, Julio Iglesias, and King Juan Carlos I and Felipe González. So they went to get an atlas to locate the city of Valencia on the map.

“What school will we go to?” wondered one of them.

“And do you think we will like anyone there?” added the other.

Suddenly they both remembered how happy they were in Argentina, with their friends, with their grandparents, with their family, with their life! Marta was assailed by memories of her childhood, of the fun they had in their grandparents’ house, in the country houses of their parents’ friends. She remembered the little wooden houses that Grandpa Mitre used to make for their dolls, with their tables and their chairs...





## PART II

### THE LEBANESE WHO SOUGHT THE SOUTHERN CROSS

*Beirut-Buenos Aires, 1880*

In around 1880, a Lebanese couple arrived in Buenos Aires. Just one couple among almost a million Europeans who, between 1850 and that year, disembarked in Argentina. This country had a lot of land and a very small population to farm it. At that time, there were not even two million Argentines in the whole territory, owing to which immigration was a matter of State importance. The Constitution of 1853 was written with the slogan "To govern is to populate".

From the end of the nineteenth century, Europeans were given all kinds of inducements to cross the ocean and settle in Argentina. There were years during which the Argentine government even funded the voyage. Europeans were not alone in arriving in Argentina; Arab immigration was also considerable, fundamentally originating in Syria, Lebanon and Palestine.

Gabriel and Marian, the great-grandparents of María and Marta, were among the many Lebanese people who travelled to Argentina in search of a future, because in their country Lebanese Catholics like them were suffering persecution by the Turkish empire. In those days the Druze, encouraged by the Turks, pursued and assassinated Lebanese Catholics.

After a great deal of thought that young pair of newly-weds, encouraged by other Lebanese people who had already left, decided to set out for America. That determination had extremely far-reaching consequences, since the laws of the Ottoman Empire, which governed Lebanon, prohibited emigration and, therefore, anybody who absented the country for a long period of time could never return.

Even so, the young couple embarked in Beirut and, after calling at Marseilles, headed towards the New World. They chose Argentina owing to the good news that arrived from

across the sea, and from the outset it was clear to them both that they would settle in Buenos Aires. It was a coastal city, a port like Beirut, that was starting to become known throughout the world for its good climate, rapid economic growth and wealth. Quite the opposite of Lebanon in those days.

Gabriel and Marian's country, the ancient Phoenicia, mother of the alphabet, of trade and navigation, and also one of the oldest and most versatile peoples of the planet, was experiencing hard times. So the couple took their savings and their traditions and, as return passengers, something that was authorised by the Ottoman Empire, they prepared to cross the ocean.

As the ship neared land, somebody on deck pointed to four stars high above them that described a beautiful, small and shining cross in the firmament. It was the Southern Cross. And that cross gave the couple the peace they needed since, to defend their cross, they had had to leave their homeland. Now, another cross welcomed them. Marian and Gabriel thought this was a very good omen, and they stayed on deck a little longer, enjoying the constellation. There they remained, immobile, scanning the horizon and breathing in the smell of the sea while the strong wind struck their faces and ruffled their hair.

It was not yet daybreak. Marian, taking advantage of the fact that Gabriel was absorbed in his thoughts, drew back a few paces and left him alone. She sought a space on deck that was sheltered from the wind. Those were the only minutes during the crossing that she had dared to leave her husband's side without his consent. Marian felt that the moment she had been waiting for, for so long, had finally arrived. And she held an old necklace in her hands.

When she was little her elderly grandmother, who lived in the town of Byblos, had given her a very old pendant, the size of a large coin of the era. She had explained to her that it had belonged to her family since time immemorial, since it had been given to one of her forebears as a wedding gift by the groom's parents.

It consisted of two pieces of glass, concave and translucent, that acted as a case. The surface of each piece was ornamented with zigzags in various colours. One of the pieces was slightly larger, so that the smaller piece fitted perfectly into the other.

Each one was finished with a kind of ring made of cedar with silver inlays. The upper piece, which enabled a cord to be threaded through from which the pendant could be hung, also served to hold the two spheres of glass together, like a claw. Thus, the contents could not be lost.

When Marian received the gift, she noticed that there was something inside, but when she tried to see it, her grandmother, a Maronite Catholic, stopped her hand and said, in Arabic:

“Marian, you will know when it is time to open it... Only you will know, and then you will understand...!”

Marian, obedient and respectful, thanked her for the gift, put it around her neck and said no more. She never took it off. And that night, on the boat off the coast of Argentina, she felt that the special moment her grandmother had spoken of had arrived. She was afraid and wanted to feel her grandmother beside her. So, very carefully, she took off the necklace and opened it...

She saw a tiny piece rolled up like a parchment scroll and, holding her breath, she dared to take it out. It looked like parchment, but its touch reminded her of leather. She unfolded it with the utmost care, and, as she did so, some brief inscriptions in purple ink began to appear. Marian no longer felt afraid, now she was excited and deeply moved. It was as though her beloved grandmother were there with her, to accompany her during that hard journey that would separate her, perhaps for ever, from her loved ones, from her roots, her origins, her history. Marian cried.

She dried her tears and concentrated again on the inscription. She read it, and then took from her bag a tiny Bible that she carried, one of her treasures. She looked something up in the Old Testament, and then she smiled; peace and calm spread through her entire being. Her face lit up. She put on the necklace again and joined her husband.

Once in Buenos Aires, they settled in the Palermo neighbourhood. For the first few months they lived in rented accommodation, until they managed to buy a house very close to the Jewish quarter. During this time, Palermo and another five towns – Belgrano, Chacarita, Caballito, Flores, La Boca and Barracas – came to form part of the city of Buenos Aires, they became neighbourhoods, and Buenos Aires was declared a Federal District. A great

city was coming to life, and it was doing so with Gabriel and Marian as witnesses.

The metropolis they found was vibrant, and the thousands of Europeans arriving from across the sea contributed to this. The main streets were extremely busy, and in the Plaza Victoria it was usual to see boys with newspapers under their arm, which they sold as they dodged the trams pulled by animals, the carts and carriages.

For a Lebanese man like Gabriel, despite not speaking the Spanish language well, it was easy to keep up with the course of current events, since at that time another Lebanese founded in Buenos Aires the country's first magazine in Arabic, *Sadà al-Yunub*, and almost at the same time the first Arabic newspaper, *Al-Subh*, was launched.

The emerging city also understood entertainment and saw the introduction of celebrations such as the Spring Festival and the Flower Parade. During the festivals, the residents of Buenos Aires, which soon included Gabriel C. and his wife, dressed up in their Sunday best: the men, with suits and bowler hats, the women with long dresses, majestic and demure. Marian and Gabriel soon adopted the style of dress of their new country.

Buenos Aires grew so quickly that at the beginning of the twentieth century it was already one of the largest cities in the world. It grew socially, culturally and commercially, and the streets of the city centre, with exquisite premises called *café-restaurants* and luxurious *cafeterias*, displayed the power of the capital.

And the prestigious London Department store, Harrod's, wanted a share of that power, inaugurating in 1914 its first and only store in South America. An imposing building in Calle Florida where all the glamour of Europe arrived in the form of chocolates, jewellery, haberdashery, decoration for the home and the latest fashions.

In the house they acquired, their six children were born: Mitre was the oldest of them all, then came Nicolás, José, Elena, Óscar and Miguel. In the same family home, they set up their business. Gabriel C. was an expert shipwright, and that was what he had come to do in Argentina, to build boats. It was the only thing he knew how to do. Or so he thought.

(end of fragment of chapter 3)



