2022

The Calm Amidst the Storm

Fabrizio Vassallo

Denison University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/exile

Part of the Creative Writing Commons

Recommended Citation
Vassallo, Fabrizio (2022) "The Calm Amidst the Storm," Exile: Vol. 68: No. 1, Article 29. Available at: https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/exile/vol68/iss1/29

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at Denison Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Exile by an authorized editor of Denison Digital Commons.
The Calm Amidst the Storm
Fabrizio Vassallo

"The bravest are the most tender; the loving are the daring."

—Bayard Taylor.

It's September 21, 1971: Student’s Day. In the backyard of some house in Resistencia, Argentina, about thirty kids are enjoying the sunny day, gathered around a few tables, eating asado and chatting away. As the latest hit of the spring starts playing in the background, the host of the party stands up from his place at the end of the table and turns up the volume to the max, so the group of 18 year-olds naturally leave their seats to dance to Nino Bravo’s “Te Quiero, Te Quiero.” As the song plays and almost everyone is up laughing and dancing, Silvia stands up to follow her peers when she notices one skinny guy still sitting by himself, elbows on his knees, chin resting on his palms. Knowing he’s new to the group, she almost feels an obligation to invite him for a quick couple of songs.

“Hugo, do you want to dance?” the young blue-eyed girl says, sweetly, as she looks down straight into his eyes for a sign of confirmation.

One song turned into a few, and a few turned into many; they dance all afternoon until the party is over. And when the host says goodbye to everyone at the door, they stay outside, sitting by the road, talking about their families, hobbies, and aspirations in life. When it was clear that the time had come to leave, they indecisively part ways, at least somewhat relieved that they’d get to see each other again.

When seven-year-old Silvia arrives after riding her bike for the seven miles of dirt road that separates her school from home, Cecilia, her mom, is preparing dinner. Graciela, Silvia’s younger sister, is helping her cook in that not very helpful manner characteristic of a three-year-old.
Moments after, the sun is disappearing behind the lonely Carob trees typical of that desolate area of Chaco, recently incorporated as an official province of northern Argentina. Glancing at the twilight from the kitchen window, Cecilia realizes what time it must be and rushes outside with the bronze basin tub and her two daughters. Now, outside on the porch, she bathes them promptly under the improvised vine pergola, which her husband Francisco had constructed when they finally moved into a house of their own a few years back.

Cecilia thinks that Pancho—as anyone “lucky” to be named Francisco is called in Argentina—is minutes away from closing his workshop and coming home to dinner. That is where he fixes bicycles and recharges car batteries, an occupation he took on to bring food to the dinner table when they relocated. By the time he is back, the kids have to be bathed and changed, ready to eat with the family.

When the two girls are done and it’s time to go back in, Cecilia stands up from her squatting position and glimpses at the sky. The clouds that were threatening with rain last week have returned to mess up her plans to do laundry tomorrow. This time, though, they seem ticker, angrier, and their previous white appearance has become a definite void-like dark grey.
Seven weeks have passed. Silvia glances under the weak kitchen table by the window. Right where one of its chipped legs meets the dirt floor of the kitchen, a circular shadow of wet mud has been growing for the past few days, and other smaller ones have erupted in different parts of the house. After contemplating it for a bit, she turns around and enters the room shared with her sister and parents.

“Mom, why are you putting all of our clothes in a bag?”

School had been closed after it rained for a week straight. And it never stopped. Silvia adored going to school; it’s hard to play with friends when the next kid lives kilometers away. Now, she is trapped home by the non-stop downpour over the straw roof and the growing pools of water that were starting to find their way inside the four brick walls. Pancho instructed Cecilia to prepare everything to leave. They couldn’t handle a week more of his business being completely shut because of the weather.

A day later, it is time to leave. Aboard an improvised raft that Silvia’s father built with wood and two empty gas tanks, they load as many bags as they can. Then, with water to her knees, Silvia is prompted by her dad to jump on the raft. Looking back, she gazes at their small house for a final time. Under the hellish dark sky and the unbroken downpour stands the two-roomed humble brick building she called home. Behind it, the leafless branches of the aromo tree dance by the rhythm of the mighty wind. It is in this scene of complete anarchy that the Zampas left their home in April of 1961.

After hopping from the house of one family member to the next for a couple of weeks, the four finally landed in Resistencia, the province capital, where Pancho got a job working at a small bank. Once again, they had to call a foreign place home. The rain had won, forcing a young Silvia and her family to look for certainty in a life that had been filled with everything but in the past few months.

She immediately restarted second grade at a school right by her home. Because of the time of the year, they didn’t have a single free spot for her, so she was admitted under the condition that she would bring a small table and chair from home every single day to class.

Despite the many challenges her short life had presented her, she finished primary school there with high honors and having found a couple of new friends. That didn’t change in secondary school, where she gained admission as the top sixth best student in over two hundred.

Precisely a decade after Silvia fled the countryside and a few months before graduation, she met Hugo, her future husband, at that party on Student’s Day and started dating almost immediately. He says that her calm demeanor and sweetness is what hooked him.

Only three months into the relationship, Hugo’s mom died after fighting breast cancer for years in secret.

“I was disheartened, and she accompanied me through that moment of grief,” Hugo said, recalling that sad moment in his life. His mom meant a lot to him, and Silvia knew that.
Having graduated, she accepted that her family couldn’t pay for her to study medicine, her real aspiration, and started working right off the bat as a secretary at a factory. The couple got married and soon after had their first baby, Silvana. Two years later, they moved into their own home and had another kid, Hugo (little Hugo). As her work demanded increasingly more hours, her ambition and determination helped her push through at a time when women were starting to rise. That earned her a few promotions, which allowed them some economic stability. She went on her first-ever holiday trip around that time with Hugo and the kids. He says that their marriage was peaceful; they never had a fight, not even a discussion, and he concedes that this was mostly her virtue. She made him calm down, he confesses, and taught him to communicate better with the kids.

At 46, her first (and until now only) grandkid was born, me. Seven months later, Silvana got divorced and Silvia and Hugo welcomed us into their home, where we lived for over twelve years.

Silvia is one of the most important people in my life. When I was a kid, she was the one who took care of me when my mom, a med student back then, had to spend long hours away from home. My grandmother acted as the principal of my school in the afternoon when I played to be a teacher in the living room; she’s the one who would help me with my homework after making us some hot chocolate. And we are equally as close many years after. Now, she’s the only one who will genuinely pay attention when I talk about physics, or who will come every day simply to say hi for a few minutes and tell me that she loves me.

And you won’t be surprised to know that she has the same importance in the life of everyone that surrounds her. For her husband, she seems to be the only one capable of taming him. It could be said that she cracked the code when it comes to him. For her daughter, she’s the only person who understands what she needs without even asking, a real lifesaver. For her son Hugo, she’s the only one who truly backed his decision of dropping out of college to pursue his entrepreneurial ambitions. For her elderly mother, she’s an authority figure, as her age forces her to look for directions somewhere else. For all of us, she’s the person we all admire most without knowing.
Silvia and Hugo in the spring of 1971.

After the two teenagers finally parted ways on that sunny day of 1971, Silvia turned the corner and, realizing she was now alone, looked at the concrete tiles and smiled as she walked away, or more like skipped from happiness in direction to her house. Her mom was watering the plants when she got there, and she couldn’t wait to tell her everything about her new acquaintance.

“Mom! I met this really sweet boy and we danced and talked all afternoon!”

That night her head revolved around him. She thought he was modest and tender. He thought she was charming and peaceful. And they still do almost fifty years after.
References


Lentati, Hugo, Sr. Personal Interview. 28 October 2020.

Lentati, Silvana. Personal Interview. 9 November 2020.


As a way to end, Silvia on her first birthday.