

She, Herself

"No! It hurts!"

"If we don't do it you are going to die."

She feels how the shock of the defibrillator makes her body jump several inches in the air over the gurney, and the pain, as if stricken by lightning, paralyzed her from head to toe.

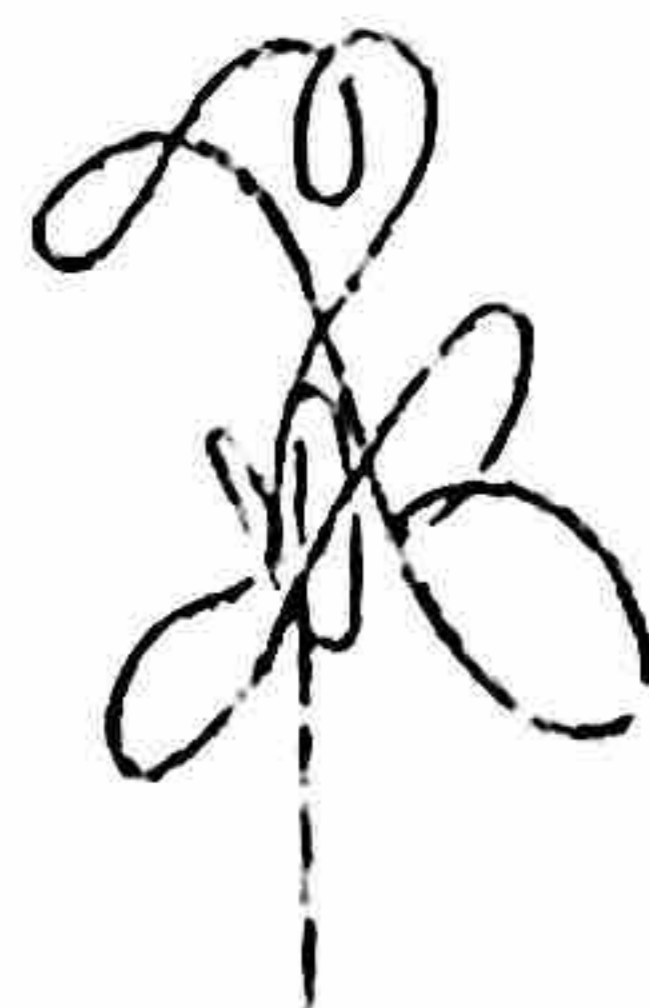
(We should notice, of course, that such dialogue is impossible. If she was able to talk, there would be no need for a defibrillator. Nonetheless, those words sound clearly in her mind.)

And then, nothing. Almost peace. And suddenly, her girls. Her thoughts come back and the pain of thinking of their pain, the girls', without a mother, too soon, no ... an abrupt clarity and the need to come around.

(To come around where? Had she left? Had she left herself? Whose, then, is this voice in her head? Whose that aching body?)

To come around, wake up, open her eyes, to talk to the doctors and nurses making all that noise around her, to explain to them what had happened. But she can't: her eyes, her voice, her hands do not respond to her will. She tries again and again she fails.

She recognizes the voice of the electrophysiologist who treated her months ago, the same one who thought that the danger of a fatal arrhythmia had passed. (He was obviously wrong.) She also hears the young Romanian who was finishing his internship in cardiology ... She sees them. She believes that she is seeing them. Somebody lifts her eyelid, shines a flashlight, but apparently there is no reaction. She tries again. She forces herself to shake her body with all her might. (She believes she shakes her body with all her might.) In her mind, arms and legs flail violently, as if trying to knock off annoying bugs that have landed on her. She, a black belt capable of breaking one-inch boards with her fists, puts all her strength into shaking her legs with no success. She wants to say that she is alive; she wants to beg them not to shock her again, tell them



that it hurts too much. Concentrating like she has never concentrated in her whole life, she tries to move one more time. A woman's voice says, "She's moving."

The Romanian comes closer. She hears him say, "María, blink."

Another voice says, "She is just flinching."

But the intern says "María, blink. Blink! María, blink!"

(It was so weird that the medical personnel, to encourage trust, would call her by that first name that none of her friends would use.)

She concentrates in responding to his request, all of her strength trying to blink and finally her eyelids respond. "She blinked!" they say, and then she feels that they know she is alive, she can let go now ...

She opens her eyes. Everything hurts and, surprised, she thinks, "I did not die."

"I did not die." What a strange thing to think. Her husband is by her side and smiles with tears in his eyes. He tells her what happened: the many surgeries, the transport to a different hospital with an advanced heart failure centre, her organs shutting down, her kidneys, the dialysis. She looks at her hands and finds a couple of balloons, inflated rubber gloves, a collection of sausages. She had not realized how much her hands were part of who she is, the backs of her hands, that part of our bodies most exposed to our own eyes, even more than our faces—for which we need a mirror—our hands are what reveals to us who we are. But that is not what she can see now. This is different, alien, almost obscene. Several machines are keeping her alive. She cannot keep track of the days that have passed since she collapsed at the dojo. She remembers the arrival of the ambulance, the emergency room, and now this present when time has become immeasurable, a series of intervals marked by doctors' visits and the changing of bandages.

Her husband has decorated the walls of her intensive care room with photos of her loved ones and her most impressive karate demonstrations. They give character to this otherwise sterile environment, filled with machines, rhythmical beeps, and strepitous alarms. Doctors come in wearing friendly smiles and kind words. One of them points at one of the photos and says, "We'll get you back to that." She smiles or, at least, she tries. The nurses who change her bandages praise her strength when she holds the rails of the bed for them to clean her back. She knows they are trying to be encouraging, but her eyes fill with tears. She was strong once, but not now. Now she is vulnerable in the extreme.

Her best friend visits every day. She squeezes his hand the whole time he is there. He feels offended that nurses call her "sweetie" and "honey." To him that is infantilizing, disrespectful. For her, those names remind her of her humanity, as much as holding his hand so tightly. He might not understand that, immersed in that soundtrack of beeping machines in that sterile room any tenderness is a lifeline, a vest keeping her from sinking, a ground wire, a cable connecting her to the mothership in the desolate, infinite space.

What she cannot stand is hearing others use her name in the third person, incapable of raising her own voice, lost in a throat ravaged by tubes. What she cannot stand is not being able to support her own weight and the look of pity in others' eyes. In her dreams she recovers her voice and rides her bike through sunny, tree-lined streets. In her dreams she dances and laughs with her daughters and discusses topics dear to her heart with her closest friends. When she wakes up, she wonders, she asks herself again, if she died then, and now lives in a limbo, or if she is still alive, even if the others do not know she is still herself.