



As
the
Andes
Disappeared

A NOVEL

Caroline
Dawson

translated by Anita Anand

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PROLOGUE

SAMPLE

*Residencia en la tierra*¹

THE FIRST TIME I DECIDED NOT TO KILL MYSELF, I WAS SEVEN years old.

It was summer in the Southern Hemisphere, December 1986. In Valparaíso, the land of sandy dust that infiltrates poorly insulated old stone houses and sticks to all the furniture. Our house stood—I'm not sure how—on one of the hundreds of slopes of one of the dozens of hills in one of Chile's big cities. It seemed unstable and rickety, yet it resisted each earthquake that regularly shook it and all the other crappy houses in our poor neighbourhood. It moved in sync with the Earth itself, and I with it.

I whirled around on the top floor, the only one that let in a little light. Our house was old, dim, and shabby, like all the others on the steep hill we called our street. The ocean wind knocked at the windows, snuck inside even when everything was shut. My parents called me from their bedroom, had me join them on the gigantic ocean liner they used as a bed. It was probably just a queen, but to

my young eyes, it was an enormous island. The soft light of dawn on the white sheets, the warmth of their still, sleepy bodies, the lovely languor of early morning: it was bliss, lying there between them. I rolled from one side to the other, seeking attention. Until they grew subdued and said those sharp, stark words that divided time into a before and an after, a past and a future. They announced their decision, and I froze; time stood still, the future was suspended. A pivotal moment, words like blades, like an axe splitting a log.

I don't know what those words were. They've been obliterated, as have almost all my memories of the country where I was born. And yet, I did spend a good part of my childhood in Chile. It's where I first went to school, learned to read and write with words like *mi mamá*,* loved my family and my friends. Like all Chileans, I played with my *balero*,† my *trompo*,‡ with kites made from old newspaper. My life was carefree and happy despite the disappearances, detentions, tortures, and concentration camps of which I'd heard nothing more than murmurs, half-spoken whispers. I spent seven years under a dictatorship in a divided, unstable country, and I barely remember anything apart from this turning point in our lives. That moment and then everything that followed it.

They told me that in a few days we would leave the country to seek refuge in Canada—forever. Fear seized me then, in the same place it sometimes still does: in my stomach. Stunned by the immutability of this decision, I didn't say a word, didn't ask a single question. I was clearly aware of the seriousness of this moment and of my complete powerlessness to change anything. I looked at my pudgy hands and wondered if Canadian children also had dirt under their fingernails or if everything over there was immaculate.

My parents left the room, left me alone to come to terms with their decision, and with the magnitude of my own emotions. On this bed-island in this stone house that I'd believed to be as eternal

* My mother.

† A game with a cup on top of a stick attached to a ball on a string.

‡ Chilean spinning top.

as a rock, the floor seemed to quake until it disappeared under my feet, and I wallowed in my despair. They'd been categorical: "We're leaving the country and never coming back."

"Never ever?"

"Never ever."

"Not even for birthdays? Not even for school vacations? Or Christmas?"

"No. Not even for births. Not even for burials."

"And what about all the people we love?"

"We'll keep loving them. From far away."

The foundations of what I'd thought was my life were giving way. Could we really love from far away? My world had crumbled. In a single fleeting moment, something swung out of balance, and the universe, as I had known it, turned to vapour and slipped through my grubby fingers.

I took stock of everything I'd be leaving behind, feeling as if I were the one being dispossessed. My pencils, my drawings. My notebooks, my classmates. My book of stickers, my school. My skipping rope, my friends. My tree, my cousin. My pebble collection, *mi abuelita*.^{*} My hopscotch, my mother tongue. My hula hoops, my certainties. My grandfather and my dog, who both died before I could see them again. Final farewells dragged out of me, forced, torn from the bottom of my throat. *A Dios*.

I was suffocating. I opened the window. The sun blinded me. Below, the orange ground, the grime, the mangy stray dogs. Farther off, the avocado trees, the Pacific Ocean, the Andes. I'd never see this horizon again; I'd never have this view as a reference point. The heavy finality and the pain of inevitability crushed my lungs. The air deserted me.

I hoisted myself onto the window ledge. I looked at the ground from the top of my cliff. It didn't shrink back; it invited me. *Jump, little one. The life you used to have no longer exists. Say goodbye. No, don't say goodbye, just jump and it'll be over. Leave without saying*

* My grandmother.

anything to anyone. Jump before your parents come back. They told you, Chile, it's over. The world as you know it doesn't exist anymore. Seize the moment and jump. So that life as you've loved it remains within you when you return to the earth.

I would die there, between the cordillera and the sea, dust in my mouth, anguish in my guts.

I didn't jump.

Not out of apathy or laziness. Faced with the call of the void, I made my first important decision, the most important one. The life that stretched out in front of me took up all the space. I'd just turned seven years old and made my first leap of faith in favour of the world that would henceforth reveal itself as a foreign perspective, an unfamiliar point of view. I didn't know that I would unconsciously renew this choice every day, even in dark moments, in times of upheaval, in bleak fog.

I didn't kill myself in that room, but something that had existed died. I tore myself from my past at the same time as I was being uprooted. From then on, I kept only two or three muddled memories. Almost nothing remained from Chile, neither in our suitcases nor in my head. From my buried past, I would retain almost nothing: foggy fragments I happened to remember, stories in ruins, memories in ashes. The only thing that endured was a posture, a relationship to the real world and a way of being in the world: embrace existence, even if that necessitated completely transfiguring it. My death wish crashed to the ground as I went into survival mode.

PART I

Sometimes in America, race is class.
—Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

In a big, sea-blue Boeing²

THE DAYS PRECEDING OUR DEPARTURE WERE ENTIRELY taken up with preparations. My mother wrote lists on anything she could find; crumpled slips of paper littered our house, the same house that was so quickly clearing us out. Our vacated furniture gave way to sudden emptiness, and yet there was no space for my childish fears as I tried to both understand our present and glimpse our future. Although I'd never been on a plane, I have no memory of being excited to board the flying monster that would take us to Canada. I couldn't fathom how those huge engines would manage to stay suspended in the air with so many people and suitcases strapped to their bellies. Faced with my parents' resolute march toward our new life, I was floored by the very idea of this flight; it presented itself as a metaphor for all that eluded me.

I saw how my parents' worries overshadowed the last days of December. I didn't talk about it; I kept it to myself. It was only once inside the plane, after the flight attendants completed their safety demonstration, that I—immobile, the seat belt tight around my

waist—finally fell sick. My body spewed out all its worries in an endless stream of diarrhea. My poor parents had to spend most of this trip that was bringing them to a new, unknowable life taking turns going back and forth between the airplane's tiny bathrooms and their uncomfortable seats, so that their daughter could empty herself of her anxiety.

After the third time, my mother said, "You know, you can ask me if you have any questions."

"Okay. Is Canada far away?"

"Yes."

"How far?"

"About nine thousand kilometres."

"What are kilometres?"

"It's what we use to measure long distances."

"Oh. So nine thousand kilometres is far?"

"Yes."

"But are we going to get there before tomorrow?"

"No. When we get there, it'll already be tomorrow."

"What?"

"When we get there, it'll already be tomorrow."

"But then we'll miss Christmas!"

"No, no. We'll celebrate Christmas on the plane. You can sleep now, and tomorrow we'll be there."

My parents had actually chosen December 24 to begin our family's exile. Could that be right? We wouldn't have Christmas that year? Imprisoned mid-flight in that huge plane, I went on with my list of questions. Does the sky have a middle? How does the plane stay up in the air? Could it fall? Where exactly are we when we're in the air? And especially, how was Santa Claus going to find us?

That's when I realized I was nowhere. Out the window, way down below me, the only things visible were clouds. Nothing in front of us, nothing behind us, the world had disappeared from my sight, carrying with it, it seemed, people living there, playing soccer, hugging, kissing, mourning their dead or departed loved ones.

From up there I saw only clouds, thick clouds that took up all the space and obscured my vision.

“What are clouds, Mama?”

“Water vapour. Go to sleep now, my baby.”

“But how does water vapour stay up in the sky?”

“I don’t know. Ask Papa.”

My father, with his wrinkled forehead and haggard features, was too far away, both physically and in his own thoughts, for me to ask him anything. To me, clouds would always remain air, emptiness, nothing. A kind of nothingness that began to weigh heavily on my shoulders, knotting itself into a clump, an icy mass, like the one in my little stomach. How the heck was Santa Claus going to find us through these clouds? My questions accumulated in my throat. I was having trouble breathing through all this fog. Once again, it had to come out; I threw up. Over and over again, until there was nothing left.

In addition to the stale air and breath of five hundred passengers crammed together, the plane now also smelled of vomit.

“Can we open a window, Mama?”

“No, we can’t.”

“Why not?”

“They’re sealed shut.”

“Sealed shut? Why?”

“Because of the air pressure. If we opened a window, the people would get sucked outside.”

“Outside? So they’d die?”

“Yes, they’d die.”

“So we can’t open anything?”

“Not while we’re flying, no. Now say your bedtime prayer and try to sleep.”

The altitude overwhelmed me. The pressure snuck into my empty stomach and made it heave. A gap in a door, a crack in the windows, could send us falling to our deaths. We’d accepted that risk; my parents had bet on the unknown—the void ahead of us—to save us from our *before*.

At the age of seven, I became profoundly aware that it was possible to leave everything and never return.

At the age of seven, I learned to say “adieu” and not “bye-bye,” not “see you tomorrow,” not “see you soon,” not “goodbye,” not even “see you again one of these days.” Adieu, which means farewell forever, “to God,” til never again.

At the age of seven, I stopped believing in God and in a pre-determined fate.

At the age of seven, on a plane for the first time, I pretended to pray; I'd figured out that we were the ones who decided. We could just ditch everything and start a whole new life. But I continued to wonder how, if nobody could open anything, Santa Claus would manage to come in.

Finally, I succumbed to exhaustion and my questions faded away. I was asleep at last, but my mother's worries were far from over. She'd had to plan every detail of this giant leap into the unknown. Among the thousands of things she'd had to think about—the passports, visas, clothes for winters she was completely unfamiliar with, our safety, saying goodbye to her own mother, to her sister, to her brothers, to her friends, to her life, the police, the dictatorship—there had also been the unrelenting needs of children, which never disappear, not even when you're fleeing a country that is ripping apart—snacks, presents from Santa Claus. It moves me to imagine how, as she was cramming our lives into a few suitcases bought on credit, she took the trouble to hide some toys in the hand luggage. In the middle of this voyage into political exile, hanging on to a bit of normalcy for her terrified children meant that, among a great many slips of paper, she included a reminder to bring along the list for Santa.

When I woke up to the stale air of the plane, a brand-new Barbie was lying next to me. She was fresh, pink, clean, radiant, and perfect. She smiled at me. As my appetite slowly returned amid the rattling of the breakfast trays, I began to believe we'd land somewhere after all. Despite the knot in my throat, I took a bite of the bread that had been placed before me. It went down; I didn't throw up. I put some butter on it. It was good. I'd just turned seven, my

mouth was full, and I had a new Barbie, a real one finally, not some cheap imitation.

I straddled two worlds now: I didn't believe in God anymore, but I'd keep believing in Santa Claus for a long time. Too long—*years*—until I was finally told that he didn't exist. Just before it would have gotten really embarrassing.

SAMPLE