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THE WOMAN WHO DREAMED

Translated from Portuguese by Amanda Sarasien and Elton Uliana

SHE WOKE UP so happy. One of the nuns opened the bedroom door and crossed the narrow aisle between the beds. As the day's first gentle sounds touched the silence—the door opening, the thin rubber soles on the wood parquet—some of the women woke up. Leaning slightly toward the window, the nun raised the blinds. In this room, there were two rows of four iron beds each. At night, the women lay with their feet pointing toward the middle of the room. The nun raised the blinds. The light streaming into the room was made of a youthfulness of light. Slowly, the light climbed over the shapes in the room and over the shapes of the women's bodies lying under the blankets. The women's bodies were warm. The blankets were wool and very soft because they were worn; they were brown, they smelled washed, and they smelled of the washing powder that was the scent of all the objects in the nursing home. The nun took a moment in front of the window to stop and watch the women waking up. More from the soft light than from the voices of the women talking to one another, more from the soft light than from the nun's gaze which was also soft, she woke up. So happy. Her bed was the third from the window, in the row to the left of the nun's gaze. When she opened her eyes, the morning light. She felt her pajamas and the warm sheets against her body. She lifted one arm out onto the blanket. As she got out of bed, put on her robe, and stepped into her slippers, she still remembered the dream she'd had that night. She remembered the dream as though she were still dreaming. She smiled. She had dreamed that she was young and not in the nursing home. She was young and still at home. Her mother was calling her from the kitchen. She was young. She had dreamed. She had woken up so happy. She was young. Her mother was calling her from the kitchen. In the dream, she was holding a sliver of mirror in her hand. Her hair was long and lustrous. Her skin smooth. Her eyes were young, and they shone. She had dreamed. With the towel folded over her shoulder, with

the soap in her hand, she waited in line for the bathroom. She was not used to this, but the nuns always said that all the women had to take a shower when they woke up. She followed the rules. The steam enveloped her gaze. The voices of the women around her were something happening somewhere she was not. She had dreamed she was young. As though she were still dreaming, she smiled.

She woke up troubled. The dog started barking in the yard. Early in the morning, the dog started barking as though it were barking at anything without a solution: death or the cold. The beginning of winter seeped in through the window with the troubling sharpness of the cold. The beginning of winter alighted on the small enamel basin and on the iron scrolls of the washstand, alighted on the poor chest of drawers. Between the sheets and beneath her flannel nightgown, drafts of cold air swept across her skin. Her eyes still closed, the cold and the barking dog rekindled the world that lies behind closed eyes. Beneath heavy wrinkles, her eyes opened slowly. She marveled at the light that, like the cold, vaguely illuminated everything. The barking of the dog broke through the small glass windowpane and filled the room. She threw off the blanket and got up suddenly. She opened the nightstand drawer and took out a piece of mirror. It was a piece from the broken mirror that she had found shining in the street. The troubled feeling she had when she woke up stayed with her. That troubling dream. In a dream that continued after she woke up, she saw herself old. Her hair was white and brittle, old and dead. Her hair was dead and gray and dirty. Her skin was old and it sagged. Her face was old. She held the sliver of mirror between her fingers and, reflected in that surface which held only one of her eyes, she saw her smooth skin, her lips, her long brown hair. She ran her fingers through her hair. For a moment she felt at ease. For a moment she felt relieved. Her mother was calling her from the kitchen. On that day, she looked at her mother with wonder. She observed her mother's hands, her hair, her face, her eyes. She imagined being her mother's age, imagined being like her. In the dream that remained inside her, like a memory she couldn't forget, she was even older than her mother. For a moment, she felt the tiredness in her body. Without looking at her hair, she felt it was gray. Without looking at her skin, she felt its wrinkles like a weight. She felt her eyes beginning to cry out of tiredness. Then, she remembered the cold and remembered the tears welling in her eyes because of the cold. Then she ran the palms of her hands over the skin of her arm, tugged the ends of

her hair with her fingers, and became calm. Her mother asked her to go and find wood in the yard. The cold seeped under the door. She opened the door. The cold hit her in the face. In the yard, her sister was playing with a dog tied to the lemon tree. Her sister was tossing a small lemon, letting it roll along the ground; as the dog ran to fetch it, just when he opened his mouth, the rope looped round the trunk of the lemon tree would pull taut and catch the dog by the neck. She went up to the pile of firewood, crouched down, and with one of her hands began filling the other arm with logs, pressing them to her chest. Her little sister left the dog and smoothed out her skirt. Struck up a conversation. She didn't answer. She felt old. Like in the dream. She was old. Like in the dream. For a moment, she didn't know if the dream had been before or after she woke up.

After mass, she remained kneeling in the chapel, pretending to pray. As the nuns were leaving, they gazed at her—content, even moved. The other women looked at her with suspicion. She remained alone. The cold chapel didn't exist. Inside, behind her closed eyes, she saw that dream where she was still a little girl. Behind her closed eyes, she was young, she had gone to the yard in search of firewood. She was smiling. Her sister was walking by her side. Behind her closed eyes, she came into the kitchen and threw the wood in the basket. She smiled. Kneeling in front of the fireplace, she lit a pinecone, crossed two logs against the half-burnt wood left over from the day before, and placed the pinecone where its flames could reach the logs. Next to her, her sister watched the flames catch the logs, watched the fire. Her mother had put a pot of coffee on the table. She sat down on a stool to drink it. The coffee warmed a path inside her. She opened her eyes, trying to see, trying to feel everything around her, but her eyes misted over and saw nothing but what she had dreamed. Sitting there drinking coffee, she saw herself old, saw herself kneeling in a chapel she had never seen. Slowly, without bending her back, slowly, without moving her legs, slowly, with her hands holding on to the seat in front of her, slowly, she stood up, old, very old. She didn't look at the altar of that chapel she had never seen. She looked at the open door, at the light streaming through the doorway. Thinking about what she had dreamed the night before troubled her. The coffee didn't make her feel any better. And however hard she tried, she couldn't help but see herself as she was in the dream. She was in a chapel she had never seen, looking at the light streaming through the doorway. She walked toward the door. Her steps

made a faint noise, a noise that reverberated on the marble. When she finished drinking her coffee, her mother asked her to go and get some sausages for dinner. She was about to leave when her mother asked her to take her sister. She held out her hand. In the street, holding her sister's hand, her dream continued to consume her thoughts. She was old, she was walking along an unpaved road, between beds of flowers soaking up the sun with a youthfulness that seemed to laugh at her old skin and her lackluster hair and her unsteady walk. But she was so happy about the dream from the night before, a dream that was still inside her. So happy. The dream was like those Saturdays when she would wake up thinking it was already Sunday. In the nursing home, the days were all the same. But sometimes it was Saturday and she would think it was already Sunday. Not even when she realized it wasn't Sunday, not even when she realized she hadn't gone to Sunday mass, not even when the visiting hour came and she saw there had been no visits, did she stop thinking it was Sunday on those Saturdays when she would wake up thinking it was already Sunday. This is what the dream inside her was like. She saw herself young. She was walking through the nursing home garden, between the walls of boxwood and the beds of pansies, and she saw herself young. She saw herself in the street, holding hands with her sister, walking to the shops to buy a few sausages for dinner.

She was seated at the table. The whole day, no matter how hard she tried to focus on the moments of her youth, she couldn't shake that strange feeling. She was old inside. She was seated at the table. She was tired. It was the same troubled feeling she'd had the moment she woke up. Dinner was on the table. Her mother sat on one side, her sister on another, she sat between them. They didn't speak. The oil lamp darkened the blemishes on her sister's face whenever she tried to say anything. Her mother filled the plates with soup. She took a sausage from the pan, broke it in two, and put one piece on each of her daughters' plates. She didn't have much of an appetite. The fire was burning, and she thought that soon it would be time to go to sleep. She was afraid to sleep. She was afraid to dream. Sometimes, when she brought the spoon to her mouth, she closed her eyes and saw herself surrounded by old women eating soup in a well-lit hall. Then she would open her eyes suddenly and see her mother and her sister. Her heart was beating fast. Neither her mother nor her sister knew the fear that seized her. After eating, after washing the dishes, she led her sister to bed. She took off the girl's dress and put her in a flannel shirt. She had never looked at

her little sister's face with such tenderness as on that night. Gently, she tucked the blanket over her sister's chest. Her sister lowered her eyelids. Her skin white and serene. She stood there looking at her sister's face. Her sister fell asleep instantly. Such quiet breathing. She tiptoed out of her sister's bedroom. She went to her bedroom afraid to sleep. She undressed and put on her nightshirt. She lay down under the cold sheets. She lay there uneasy for a long time. She was nervous. She was troubled. She tossed and turned in bed. She was afraid to fall asleep and dream again. Every second of the night seemed interminably long. But after a while, after spending a long time within that night, after time could no longer be distinguished from that long, vast, interminable night, her body lost the strength and she finally fell asleep.

She was seated at the table. She was so happy that day. In the dining room, the nuns went around placing soup tureens on the tables. The white light from the fluorescent bulbs made the dining room clear for anyone with clear eyes. Her eyes smiled still seeing her younger eyes. She saw her eyes with her own eyes. She was not sitting next to those women eating soup, those women hurriedly lifting the spoon as though, from the plate to their mouths, the soup would spill. Those women trembling with their spoons full of soup, quickly closing their mouths around the spoons. She was sitting next to her little sister and her mother. She smiled. She saw them together and smiled because, at that time, her sister had not yet caught the pneumonia that would take her life. The pneumonia that would make her skin gray, skinnier each day, her ribs protruding even through the flannel shirt, her voice fragile as she asked to play, her hands small and weak, her smile small and weak on her gray skin, her eyes almost closing and then, dead. Her little sister was dead. A little angel's white coffin. Her mother crying. The grief consuming her. All of this was still unimaginable when, inside that dream, she saw her sister eating soup. Her happy and innocent sister. That dream was a piece of her life from before the sadness. That day had been so happy. Surrounded by women eating soup, she was next to her mother and sister. Her sister hadn't yet died, and her mother hadn't yet grown so old. Her mother wasn't yet wearing the black clothing that she would wear for the rest of her life, for the rest of her days. She was not yet old like she was in that moment, seated at the table, in that nursing home. Not even death. Not the cemetery with her little sister's grave, one cross crowning a little mound of earth in the Garden of Angels. Not the cemetery with her mother's marble tombstone, bearing her name

and the only photo of her. Not the lonely cemetery night after night, always black, always cold, nights passing over the earth, over the faces of her sister and her mother. All this was unimaginable when, inside that dream, she saw her sister eating soup. Her happy and innocent sister. That dream was a piece of her life from before the sadness. That day she had been so happy. As soon as she finished eating, she wanted to go to bed. She wanted to sleep. She wanted to dream. She wanted to be young for one more day.

She woke up so happy. As soon as she realized she was awake, an infinite joy awakened inside her because she realized she had dreamed again. She was lying there, surrounded by the voices of women also waking up, beneath the nun's gaze, she was lying there, surrounded by a cold light and the sound of a barking dog tied to the lemon tree in the yard. She woke up troubled. She had dreamed again. She got out of bed. In line for the shower, she felt on her arms the soft scratches from the bark of the firewood that she had carried into the fire. As she struck a match, she opened the tap. The small flame caught the pinecone. She felt the water with the back of her hand, it was already warm. She felt the water on her old, young body. She felt the heat of the fire on her old, young body. Her sister was next to her as she rubbed the soap over her arms. Crouching in front of the fire, she heard the voices of the other women. Her mother was striding back and forth across the kitchen. Her mother was striding back and forth across the kitchen. Her sister was alive. Her mother was alive. Old, young, she wanted one more day. She wanted to live.