

Matrimonial Beds

Lima, Peru; May 2008

I am lying on a double bed beside a young man. He says: “*Hola*.” And I reply back, “*Hola*.” How strange this is. I have been married for over four years—happily, might I add—and here I am “in bed” with another man. Yesterday I was in bed with an old woman. And the day before, I was lying next to a beautiful girl whose tragic story hammers my brain.

The boy is a bit shy; his eyes drop when I ask him in Spanish what brought him to “therapy.” He begins to tell me that a metal barrel fell on him while he was at work, and it tore his knee apart. He had one surgery and will be having another the following week. While we engage in our conversation, I am doing leg lifts. I am lying on my side facing him, while he is sitting with his back against the wall stretching his tendons with an elastic band. In just a minute, I will have to roll over and give him my butt. I am putting off that moment as long as I can.

The sign above me “*Rehabilitacion de Clinica Anglo-Americana*” hangs beside the sign that says “*Zona de Seguridad*” (the area that is supposed to be the safest when earthquakes occur). When entering the rehab room, which is probably about eighty square meters, the first thing you see are two stationary bicycles, and in the back of the room there’s a little “gym” that contains an elliptical trainer, a treadmill, another stationary bike and some floor mats where clients (a.k.a. victims of some terrible or silly accident) do their rehabilitation exercises. In the forefront of the room are the two “matrimonial” beds—the Spanish word for a double bed. I can’t help but think if this were the U.S., a person would have already sued the clinic and got rich for “sexual harassment.” I can just hear it: “And they made me lie by this stranger, and I could see him looking at me with those eyes, and when he stretched out his arm, yes, the one with the cast, I know he touched my breast on purpose.” Then again, this lawsuit would probably never occur in the first place since two people of different sexes would never be placed on a “matrimonial” bed together. We, Americans, are just a bit too uptight.

I remember the first time my husband walked into the therapy room to pick me up: I was lying beside the stranger. Hubby looked over—at my new friend, said “*Hola*,” to him first; then claimed me with a deep kiss. We normally never kiss this way in public (though, I must say, I quite enjoyed it). Hubby never brought up the awkward situation, his prickle of jealousy never overtly stated, but his face screamed out: “I don’t like this.”

But whose choice was this? Neither one of us could have ever imagined that dancing in Buenos Aires would lead to two torn tendons and physical therapy for eight months.

So today I am lying down and chatting with my new “friend.” He’s more my age, tall—about 1.90 meters, has a little goatee and a funny expression as if he just heard a joke. I used to think people of the opposite sex couldn’t be friends; I still kind of feel that way. In the real world I would never spend so much time with a single man, but in this world, anything goes. For an hour, four times a week, we are “in bed” together, doing exercises while horsing around. In the outside world, I would make him a female, and I would choose him to be my friend. I find his gregarious personality attractive. He talks a lot and laughs a lot. I like talking, and I love laughing more. He has had three surgeries on his leg because he went to a place in North Peru where his grandmother owns a beautiful all-wooden mansion. He told me that even the door knob and locks are made of wood. It’s a local historical site, and his grandmother loves to show off the house to visitors at no charge. She lives in a little brick house in the back.

So New Friend (whose name I still don’t know after five months—names are not essential—injury stories are) tells me he wanted to capture this particular photo of his grandmother’s house, so he climbed the stairs that were in the back even though he was warned that no one has been on them for over fifty years. As he made it up the rickety wooden third floor, the stairs began to collapse. One by one. As if in slow motion. Within seconds, he was at the bottom of the stairs with a bunch of wood on top of him—all he remembers is laughing because he survived, seemingly without a scratch. With his last laugh, one more piece of lumber, a heavy beam, came crashing down, smashing his knee, tearing it apart. Completely opening it up, so his knee bone was protruding. Then he passed out. Now he laughs. I laugh with him. We spend a lot of time laughing. We laugh at the silly things we did to get us into this position.

Today we are not laughing. Beside us lies Lilia*. She’s in the second matrimonial bed—alone. She’s new. Of course we need to find out her injury story, but there’s always that fine line of asking. One girl, about the same age as Lilia, jumped badly at a high school athletic competition, landed on a twisted foot and then landed herself in therapy. But the other woman New Friend and I talked to last week had some sort of degenerative disease. So even if we are curious cats, we must tread carefully. And then sometimes we wish we never asked.

New Girl is easy though. She smiles at me and is the first to speak, asking me about my injury. I give her the short version. Then she gives me her long version. Hers is such a sad story. Such a tragic story. She tells me her tale in a cavernous voice. When I hear her “story,” I can’t help thinking: How do some people do it? How do they go on? Where do they get the strength?

As New Friend and I lie on our sides doing leg lifts, my butt facing him, Lilia begins. It was December 25th, 2007; she went to an after-party at a friend’s house, following her family Christmas dinner. After the party, a drunk driver ran into Lilia’s car and three people died. As she talks, both New Friend and I are silenced. Even our legs lifts stop. She says they were driving about 50 km an hour, a speed that probably would have brought them home safely, but they got hit head-on by another drunk driver at 110 km an hour. Everyone involved was under twenty-five years of age. The driver of her car was a twenty-year-old university student and beside him was his eighteen-year-old sister. They both died. In the back seat, Carmen*, Lilia’s best friend since “the crib” (Peruvian for “since birth”) sat in the middle. She died, too. Lilia was sitting behind the driver; she broke both her femurs and was bed-ridden for three months. The girl on the other side of Carmen was in a coma for the same amount of time Lilia was bedridden. Both girls are returning to their university this month. Lilia has crutches and hobbles along. She says the other girl is “loopy.” But these are just the facts. What about the emotions? What happens in Lilia’s room at night when all the lights are off? Does she cry silently? Does she howl uncontrollably? Does she even sleep? Do nightmares haunt her dreams? Does she speak to Carmen? Is everything she sees, feels, tastes, hears become Carmen?

I lost a friend when I was twenty-two. A month before we were going to graduate from college, she got brain cancer and died four months later. She didn’t die from drinking and driving, but it was a tragic death nonetheless. When Claire* died, I was the exact age that Lilia is today. I dreamed about Claire for years. Though we were just more than acquaintances, I cried for her like she was my best friend. Sixteen years later, I still can’t forget her death. It just seems so darn unfair. It made me question God. Then it made me fear him. Then it made me love him more. Then I purposefully forgot about God. How could an Almighty, Loving God allow these sorts of things to happen?

Why should a mother get a call telling her that her twenty-year-old son has just killed her eighteen-year-old daughter? What if Lilia had sat in the middle? Why did the other driver, a twenty-year-old rich kid, live? Who decides these things? Fate? Chance? Destiny? Free Will? God?

So today New Friend and I are not laughing.

And Lilia has more than a story. She has a name.

Another day in therapy. Another day on the matrimonial bed.

*all names have been changed