

PROLOGUE

In how many ways do we lose those we love?

How many are the reasons our loved ones walk away from us?

How many ways do we learn to say good-bye throughout our lives?

These are questions I ask myself as I look back and decide to tell this story. They actually compel me to. And now, as I start, I feel like I always had to. The story has been waiting to be told.

Angélica. Ricardo. Leonardo. Jéssica. Taís. Miguel. Gladis. Pedro. Débora. Nine people. Nine lives affected by loss. Including mine.

Death is the most obvious way to lose somebody, we all know that. But what we sometimes forget is that isn't the only one. How many people die to us but are alive to the world? Angélica asked herself that ten years ago.

Death and loss walk together, hand in hand, like partners in crime. But loss is a promiscuous partner and walks hand in hand with many others. Betrayal, lies, jealousy, new love, distance, routine, prejudice, fear. The list can be long. And any of them can be the reason to take away those we love. When that happens, loss takes over as a vulture spreading its wings of grief over us.

I saw it all happening and at first I thought I did it as if I was on the periphery, just watching the story unfold. It is somehow curious that I wasn't involved directly until a certain point. But I now know that it was always as if I had been at the center of a wheel, from where I could see everything and everybody, waiting for the moment when I would step in and my life would spin along with the others.

The story travels between two different countries: Brazil, where I am originally from, and Ireland, where I am living now. More precisely, from Porto Alegre, the capital of the southernmost state of Brazil, to Dublin, the capital of Ireland. That is one of the reasons I'm taking the risk of telling it in English instead of my native language, Portuguese. And I say 'taking the risk' because although I've been here long enough, I feel I will never have the same grasp of the language as I have of my mother tongue. So I apologize in advance if my English sounds broken and rudimentary at any stage. Language is never perfect. I'm not perfect. People in this story are not perfect. The story itself is not. Life is not. Besides, telling

it in English gives me the impression that I'm stepping out of my real self and creating a character. Somehow this thought made it easier for me to concatenate my ideas, put them together to tell you what I saw, what I lived. It's the character who is telling this story, not me.

Have you ever suffered from a romantic loss? Even the most rational person is able to do the silliest things. I learned it's easy to be judgmental when it's not happening to us. It's easy to point our finger at the ridiculousness of the situation and even laugh at the agony of the others. Until it happens to us. I don't even know if you will be able to develop a rapport with any of the people in this book, but if you ever suffered for someone, I'm pretty sure you will relate to at least one of them. In their reactions you will find rage, self-pity, sympathy, confusion, and array of feelings you might have experienced yourself.

A mix of journals, emails, letters, conversations and overheard conversations, testimonies and my imagination will help me to write this book. Sometimes all becomes a blur. And I ask myself out of all that happened, what was real and what was fruit of my creativity?

As I take stock and try to see the big picture, what comes to my mind is a game I liked playing when I was a child: dominoes. I liked playing dominoes but I also liked playing with the dominoes pieces, putting them up in lines and curves until all the pieces were arranged in front of me; I would then push the last one and watch them to fall, one by one. Little pieces slowing falling and pushing over the next one. It always took me so long to build them and it all went down in a matter of seconds. Just like relationships can be sometimes. Just like it happened to these nine people, to us.

Different reasons for hurt feelings in a story where the heartbroken becomes the heartbreaker, in a chain reaction which forces us – it forced me – to reflect on attitudes and responsibilities when we begin a new relationship with someone and how what was once brightness and enchantment can easily turn into shadows and suffering.

Domino Effect shows us the pain caused by separation... It is a portrait of the irreparable effects of loss in people's lives, and how, because of those losses, their destinies can be changed... forever.

I was visiting Brazil a few months ago when I saw them again. At first I looked at them with a vague familiarity, faces I thought I knew but couldn't remember where from.

After all, it had been ten years, I found out when the coin dropped. In a matter of seconds, nebulosity turned into surprise which turned into curiosity.

Going out for dinner had not been a bad idea, in the end. I was spending a few days in the mountains, Serra Gaúcha, about two hours away from my hometown Porto Alegre, to promote my previous book – which had just been released in Portuguese – in one of the cities' book fair. The cold almost prevented me from leaving the hotel but on the other hand the hotel restaurant did not offer a very attractive menu. I didn't have any friends in the city so I set off for dinner on my own.

Such an irony to be in Brazil in winter time when one of the things I miss most living in Ireland is the tropical summers. And here let me tell you: we do get winters in Brazil, contrary to what many people think; not everywhere, but in the south we do and especially in the mountains, where tourists – Brazilian tourists – flock to every year in the hope of seeing snow or experiencing winter, even, something exotic to most of the country. Serra Gaúcha is a famous tourist spot, strongly influenced by German and Italian culture, which reflects mostly in the architecture and culinary.

I drove up a hill where I was told there was a good Italian restaurant. There weren't many cars parked in front when I got there. As I stepped inside and took the place in, I discovered it to be a small and cosy tavern, with rustic furniture and two large windows overlooking woodlands and, beyond and below, the city. My eyes were immediately drawn to a fireplace, located between the windows. I smiled thinking of my own fireplace back home in Dublin and it was then that I saw them, just taking their place at the table close to the fire which was being set. My eyes lingered on them as the emotions struck me and the waiter understood it as if I also wanted a table close to the fireplace. I did not object. As the saying goes in Brazil, it would provide me with a special sauce for the night.

Were they back together? How long had it been? How did they meet again? Was this a new honeymoon? Were they friends now? I felt like dragging a chair over and sitting at their table to interview them. Hey, folks, would you mind answering a couple of questions to satiate my curiosity? The table given to me, in diagonal to theirs, from where I could not only scrutinize them but also eavesdrop their conversation, turned out to be a far better option, though.

The candlelight inevitably evoked romance and, at first glance, anyone would have thought they were another ordinary, happy couple, sharing a dinner on any given night. The

silence which feel between them as soon as they settled at the table and started reading the menu almost tricked me. I almost dismissed them.

Were they a couple together long enough to be comfortable with silence? Were they facing an awkward silence? How many things can be implied in moments of silence?

I knew what I wanted to order as soon as I ran my eyes down the menu but I pretended to be indecisive so I'd have more time to watch them. His eyes peeked at her from the menu which, like me, he was probably not even reading; her hand played with the napkin on the table, folding and unfolding its corner; his leg twitched slightly under the table; her gaze was fixed on the menu.

Had the restaurant and its ambience been chosen in an attempt to recreate an atmosphere of intimacy that no longer existed between them?

Both started to talk at the same time and then they laughed, nervously. Their eyes ran quickly back to the menus.

There must have been so much to be said. There must have been so much to be cleared up. There must have been so much... My imagination started running wildly trying to catch up with my curiosity.

They were ready to order and soon the first bottle of wine was brought to the table. I had a sense there was a thick ice between them. But there was something even stronger. Not necessarily beautiful, not necessarily good, but strong, in a way only a shared history can bring.

As the night wore on, the crackling of the fire in the fireplace was like the feeling inside them: slow and withdrawn at the beginning, then it grew, intense and uncontrollable, flames going higher and higher. Were the flames going to melt the ice?

The wine – the second and the third bottles – was responsible for dissolving the tension both had been feeling since the beginning of that wintry night. From time to time they gazed out through the window upon the surrounding environment, and down to the lights of the city.

Outside, a storm was brewing. Lightning streaked the sky and lit up the landscape, while the wind swung the tops of the trees. It sidetracked me to realize how much I liked and missed storms, something I wouldn't witness as often in Ireland. The rain finally started to fall, heavily, the drops hitting the windows in vertical streams. The veins in his neck were bulging; her hand hit the table in a soft punch.

Wounds, questions, anger, regret... love. I savoured my dinner as I savoured my private theatre play, or vice versa.

They – we - stayed there long enough to witness the storm start and finish. We had been among the first customers to arrive and were among the last ones to leave the restaurant. They had had time to talk, to fight, to cry, to be moved, to laugh, and to become enchanted by each other again. I had had time to understand what was happening.

Was this a new beginning after everything they had lost? Maybe.

The rain had subsided when I left the restaurant. They were getting into a car. I was surprised to see he was driving after all the wine they had had.

A phone rang, but it was not answered.

In the split second before the car doors closed I could see their faces lit up by the dashboard light. They stared at each other and smiled.

Yes, it was a new beginning.

As they pulled out I thought to myself that it could not be categorized as stalking. I just happened to be going in the same direction.

The roads in Serra Gaúcha are as beautiful as they are sinuous. In many stretches they are carved between rocky walls and deep precipices. Danger lurks in each bend.

I kept a safe distance but I could still make out the shapes in the car.

They leaned towards each other to kiss.

The headlights illuminated a dark figure at the bend ahead. The driver of the car in front of me slammed on the breaks. The car slid on the wet and slippery road.

The driver managed to veer away from the figure, turning the car to the opposite side of the road.

We all heard the horn.

A truck.

Tires screeching.

A violent jolt.

The car spun on the road.

Glass burst.

Finally, as the car and the truck crashed, I could have sworn I heard a scream.

But this is not how the story begins.