

**THE WHISPER OF DUST**

by

Florencia Davidzon

(Sample 15 pages)

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## 1. FIRE

Rabbi Abraham discovered me suddenly with my ear pressed against his door. He wanted to know if I was okay. My face betrayed me; I was still in shock. I didn't want to tell him about the fire, although I knew I smelled like smoke—he must have noticed. I didn't mention anything about Dianita's building in flames, the girl who now called herself just Ita; nor the dust, nor that mother and daughter who were trapped on the second floor. They couldn't escape the fire, but they kept fighting. They screamed at each other from their windows while both struggled for gulps of pure air above the surface of the white smoke that invaded us. I didn't tell him about the firefighters, or the dogs, or the skill of the rats that ran with better speed than any human, without thinking so much, moved only by instinct—that thing more than a few of us would do well to learn. Especially me, and particularly now.

I didn't confess my immobility, my paralysis in front of those black embers. Nor how I crossed the ledge of a dirty sidewalk and dodged the fire. Nor how I became hypnotized by the curtains in flames that devoured hungrily, without discrimination, leaving everything raw and exposed, ruin and emptiness. I didn't tell him about the strident police sirens or those of the firefighters. I didn't mention the children's cries, or the fate of a teddy bear that was left headless and orphaned on the asphalt after the flight of its little owner... I didn't tell him I was afraid, that I didn't want to go down to the basement of what should have been my friend's apartment. To the rabbi, my neighbor, I only showed him her guitar. A stringless instrument I had recovered and carried hanging like a relic on my back. A Spanish guitar with a woven ribbon of colors in a Mixtec design. I was sure it had belonged to her, because of the beauty of that ribbon and the stickers with activist symbols, very much like Dianita, like Ita, I told myself. I also didn't tell him how I recovered it, when I snatched it from the firefighter and shouted at him with authority in my language, in a Mexico City-accented Spanish, "Young man, that's mine." Nor how he handed it over without hesitation.

The rabbi asked me, “Valentina, do you know how to play?” I admitted that barely, that not at all. Still, I tried to act like I knew. I put my fingers on the neck, which bore a new black stain because it had been grazed by the fire. I placed my fingers trying to form an arpeggio, but I couldn’t. I remembered I didn’t know any, while my fingers became impregnated with black dust.

Was the presence of her guitar a sentence, evidence that Diana was d...not alive? No, I told myself. I hadn’t inherited anything. She was missing. And everything indicated, moreover, that she hadn’t spent her last five nights in that building. She wouldn’t have survived the fire. She could be alive; she must be breathing somewhere.

I wonder if I should have let her guitar go with the firefighter. I don’t know. My pain isn’t eased by knowing she had been so close to me, breathing all this time just a few blocks away in Brooklyn. Besides, it angers me. She knew and didn’t try to connect with me. I feel hurt. But her mother is calling for her from Oaxaca. She could be in danger. What does it matter what I feel—we have to find her. But I no longer know where else to look.

Come, Dianita. Ita, come back, come for your guitar.

## 2. VISION ONE

All the shapes in this room fade, lose their edges, their limits.

What I could perceive just seconds ago now seems foggy to me. My neighbors drift away, but they don't disappear. They remain suspended at the sides of my vision.

Before me, the amorphous and some floating particles. I cling to them, I follow them. I enter the immensity of absence. And suddenly the emptiness begins to awaken from its lethargy.

I'm not afraid. New shapes, blurred, begin to appear and occupy the space. Their presence becomes increasingly defined. I don't move. I remain upright. Still.

Seated on the cushion of the chair I borrowed. I know the religious ones are still here, beside me. I feel them, although they no longer flinch. They breathe slowly. And I let myself be embraced by the calm. "It must be this way," I tell myself.

The walls, the floor, and all the objects in the rabbi's apartment have lost their materiality, but the frame of the window remains there by the sea. I rest my gaze on the only recognizable thing, the water that remains restless. Then, lifting my vision from the sea, I rest it on the window frame. Now there are curtains of a thick fabric divided into two panels of a creamy white tone. They are tied in a bell shape at the sides with thick pink ropes.

There is movement. A woman's hand is holding a piece of curtain. She hides her face in the folds. Her chestnut hair is gathered in a very compact, round updo. She keeps it tied between two combs. It's funny, I think, it's not a bun—it's something else. This woman has invented a turban with her hair and seems to be holding a perfect cake on top of her head. She wears an almost transparent cotton nightgown, frayed, that reaches below her knees. It's white, faded to pink, with small embroidered designs that look Mexican to me, in the same color palette. I can't see

her face, but her bare, slender, pale hands show smooth skin without jewelry, and they make me believe they belong to a fairly young woman, perhaps my own age.

Finally, the whirlwind of wind calms down and I can hear clearly that woman sobbing. I feel uncomfortable. I have entered her bedroom without meaning to, I think. I make a sound with my throat, I clear it, as if wanting to let her know that I'm sitting here in her space without invitation, without knocking on her door. But she doesn't hear me, she's unaware of anything. She cries.

Suddenly she tries to regain her composure and wipes the tears from what must be her face with a rough swipe of her fist and nightgown sleeve. At that moment, beneath the blankets of a bed beside me—an old little bed with a steel bar headboard—a lump of someone asleep, a human I think, moves and sprawls toward the empty side. The lump stops abruptly and seems to become aware that something is wrong when it doesn't find anyone's body beside it. First a bare foot peeks out, then the other covered by a sock. I think it's a man. Still asleep, prisoner of a deep, hoarse voice that reveals a hangover, he calls to the woman at the curtain:

“Elena.”

I confirm that my world is still there, blurred at the edges, but it has completely opened space for this new reality before a cold morning. Everything has settled and completed itself in this bedroom that now has all its objects well-defined in my field of vision: a small corner-shaped washbasin, a ceramic pitcher with water on a tray, a beveled mirror, crocheted doilies on the nightstand, a polished wooden dresser with buttoned drawers...

From the bed, the young man throws a pillow toward the woman who remains wrapped inside the curtain looking toward the boardwalk and has stopped sobbing, storing all her grief somewhere inside. The beach in front of me seems quite wild, more rustic than I remember Brighton Beach. The boardwalk is just a half-built wooden path. There are some rest benches with black lampposts on the sides and some glamorous carved metal railings. A group of men—

workers, I assume, because they advance uniformed in jackets and black pants—are arranging the boardwalk’s wooden planks that cross before my eyes. They look tired, with shadows under their eyes, as if they had just arrived from Europe and weren’t sleeping well. But at the same time, they carry this pride of doing something new, far from the violence of the first war that began in their lands.

I turn my gaze back to the bedroom. The man has managed to get out of bed. He’s stretched out behind Elena, who has bent over to pick up the turban that has fallen on the floor. He embraces her in the curve of her buttocks with his erect penis. She lets him. I’m ashamed, but I keep watching them. Looking at him better, he’s a handsome man, tall, with black hair, something of an indigenous profile. His skin is darkened—from the sun perhaps, but with something else, some pigment in his skin that makes me think he has Aztec blood or from some other ethnic group. His face is marked, as if by smallpox, but despite being ugly—or because of that—it gives him a certain charm. Elena lets him embrace her from behind and she stands up with him glued to her skin. She places herself against the light of the window. Her body remains illuminated. I can make out her small brown nipples under her nightgown. She also must have indigenous blood, although her light skin speaks of some other ancestry. She lets him sink his face in her neck. He starts kissing her skin with appetite. Elena lets out a sound that I identify as one of pleasure. Then I see her clearly, the fright on her face, and how she tries to hide it when she changes position to turn and see him. Elena doesn’t seem to enjoy Pepe’s kisses. She seems more afflicted than pleased, as if worried about something else that had nothing to do with being between these four walls. She separates from him.

“No,” she says. She says it but it doesn’t convince me. He doesn’t stop.

“Pepe,” she whispers when she manages to separate her mouth from him, “we need to talk.”

“Later,” he says. Pepe starts opening her nightgown buttons while Elena lets him do it. He shows her breasts to the morning light. Two small mounds with nipples the color of cinnamon are born

from her torso. Pepe spreads the nipples with his tongue and Elena lets him. Then Pepe pulls at her underwear and Elena lets him, resigned, more than surrendered to pleasure.

“You’re still a girl, but such a pretty female of mine,” he says. While he opens her legs again, he runs his tongue over the lips of her vagina. Elena closes her legs and decisively pushes Pepe away from her genitals. She looks tired; she has lost interest. She turns over in bed and gives him her back. She rests her chin on her two hands and looks out the window toward the sea; her frustration is an emanation that changes the color of the air.

Pepe takes the newspaper from under the door and throws it on the bed.

“A female you can’t impregnate,” she says quietly, and then she says it again a second time, but louder, watching Pepe reading with concentration while she gets up and begins to arrange her clothes. Pepe doesn’t take offense or acknowledge her words.

“Don’t be dramatic,” he says when the distance increases.

He takes her by the arm above the elbow.

“Elena! Sweetie, look at yourself,” he says with a tone of affection that strikes me as fake while he squeezes her body violently, dragging her until he leaves her in front of the bedroom mirror.

“You have the beauty of a Trojan woman, look at yourself. How many women would wish to have those hips, that waist, your dimples, your nose? Why do you want children? Celebrate your incomplete life, your broken womb; stop feeling sorry for yourself.”

Elena tries to repress her anger, but the paleness has left her face. She looks away from the mirror. She speaks slowly and the sound of her words comes out monotone while she stays focused on Pepe’s hand that squeezes and hurts her arm while she tries to free herself.

“Don’t call me sweetie, will you? The Trojan was that Helen we saw in Paris; she was Helen with an H. I’m not even with an aspirated H, nor with a Y like the Russian woman at the reception, Yelena. Nothing epic, nothing Trojan. Elena Mexican-style.” Since she can’t calm the pain from the pressure of Pepe’s hand, she raises her voice a little.

“Plain Elena,” she says. “The female you’re not going to impregnate.” Then she raises her voice and shouts, “Let go of me,” demanding to be released.

He complies and stops squeezing her arm. She breaks free. Pepe knows he’s made a mess of things. He tries again to sound affectionate and understanding.

“Don’t use that word, my love. Don’t suffer so much—we don’t believe in marriage but in the beauty of free relationships. Come on, come, put on your corset,” he says. “Bundle up, it’s cold out there—look how the city’s steam brays from the sewers.”

Pepe returns to his newspaper in the face of Elena’s indifference, she who is held by the pain in her arm that still presses her even though it’s now free. On the edge of the bed, Pepe remains seated, perhaps trying to get past the bad moment.

“Oh,” he exclaims, looking at the date without lifting his gaze from the paper, “remind me that we need to send a telegram to my family in Mexico today,” he says. Then he puts down the newspaper and, seeking sympathy, adds, “Come, put on your corset.”

Elena challenges him:

“No, I’ll go down like this.”

“Elena!”

“José!”

“Elena!”

“Okay.”

“I deserve everything; I want my complete life. Tell me—did you get her pregnant? Did you get her pregnant again? Didn’t you?”

Pepe doesn’t respond. He looks at the floor. He picks up the newspaper again and comments:

“It seems that today, January 25, 1915, will be an excellent day for the record—Mr. Alexander Graham Bell will make his first transcontinental communication. Do you hear me? From here he’ll call Mr. Watson in San Francisco. Do you want to go? Do you want us to go?”

“Pepe, I’m asking you something. What will we do—is she pregnant again?” Elena demands, trying to maintain her composure.

“We’ll go to San Antonio,” he says, sure of his plan. “I’ll move my family there, and I’ll set you up in a house a few blocks away. How does that sound? We can’t go back to Mexico, but we can’t stay here either. That’s it,” he says with a smile and mysteriously, “we’re going to San Antonio.”

Elena starts laughing loudly.

“This same man, who just moments ago wanted to open a guesthouse with me, wanted to make tamales, then, just like that, proposes to set you up in a house a few blocks from his family’s in San Antonio.”

Elena, who has deflated with the laughter, approaches to look out the window. Pepe becomes interested in his penis again.

“You’re like them, Pepe—they promise public beaches and then put up that sign. Do you see it? ‘No Swimming, Not Bathing.’ They put it in English and Spanish just in case an immigrant

doesn't understand. Here's my Clause 5: The constitution is valid only with an equal proportion of female signatures."

Pepe with his erect sex approaches her and strokes her hair. She doesn't know what to do. Pepe takes her chin and lifts her head.

"Elena, listen carefully," he whispers. "When everything calms down in Mexico, I'll be the new president. You'll see. I promise I'll declare that all our beaches will be public, and as for the female signatures, we'll see. Now come, let yourself be loved a little; let's stop fighting. Feel me."

Then boldly he takes her hand and brings it to his member. His penis throbs like a toad with hiccups under Elena's limp, aching hand.

"Let's go down," she says stoically without looking at him and removing her hand from his body. "I'd rather play the piano, strip it of its dust, and draw some beautiful sound from it."

Pepe doesn't hear her, or pretends not to. He takes her by the waist, turns her toward him, and pushes her against the window. She resists verbally. She says no. But he brings his penis close, which has lost patience. She says no again, that she doesn't want to continue.

"Yes, you like it," he says, and he pushes himself into Elena's body by force of pushing and pushing. He acts determined to overcome the closure and tension of her thighs that don't cooperate. He doesn't hear her; he's devoted to knocking down everything in his path, determined to open the floodgates. Finally, he penetrates her in a dry, rough thrust. She lets out a shriek. He continues at his rapid pace. He hurts her. Her vulva swells, reddens, and then relaxes, burning. Elena's face remains tense without offering more resistance; she lets herself be used while looking out the window, waiting for Pepe to finish soon. She seems to feel nothing, or nothing pleasurable. She just bites her lips and tightens the muscles of her neck more. Pepe, after a while, and with a sound of foolish, brief heroism, empties his semen inside her.

Elena seems to thank God that the man has finished and stays looking up at the sky. Then she moves away from the window and forces his sex to detach from her body. His transparent, viscous liquid drips between her legs. There's no blood, I think, and I feel relieved.

"You could have finished outside," Elena complains.

"Why? You're not going to get pregnant anyway," he reminds her.

"So I don't have to wash myself again," she says.

Elena approaches the chair beside the dresser again and lifts her left leg onto the seat. She pours water from a basin and feels the relief of the cool water running down her skin. I hear Pepe tell her that he loves her. She responds that she does too, without turning around, without looking at him, while she continues adjusting her dress and smoothing her turban with a net she hooks over her hair. The combs that have loosened, she tightens. Elena sighs and heads decisively toward the door. Pepe stops her now more gently.

"Elena!" he warns her with concern. "The corset!"

Elena notices it's still hanging on the back of the chair. She takes a few steps back. She breathes deeply, trying to make herself thinner and give space for that armor to imprison her. She places the corset against her torso and starts fastening it slowly, reluctantly. She doesn't finish buttoning it. She changes her mind. She throws it on the bed in a decisive act.

"I don't need it," she says. "It's torture, and the Porfiriato is over. If you want to be president, you should remember that."

Pepe laughs and repeats:

"The Porfiriato is over."

Elena walks forward with discomfort and pain between her legs, passes through the door without waiting for him.