

A Love Story in Eleven Scenes

2001

We meet at a poolside table at a hotel in the dusty town of Mossoró in northeast Brazil. It isn't quite love at first sight. After all, he is smoking, holding a drink, and sitting back in his chair with just enough overconfidence to be unattractive.

We are there for a workshop on agriculture in Latin America. I have been studying melons in Brazil for my dissertation at MIT. He has been studying raspberries in Chile for the United Nations. From melons and raspberries, our conversations meander to an increasingly appealing topic: each other. I'm intrigued by his journey from one of Quito's dangerous neighborhoods to the city's elite boys' school, which happened to be Jesuit, and I have a weakness for Jesuits (Dad studied with them for twenty years). He's self-reflective and articulate, a conversationalist unlike most men I know. He also has the most alluring olive skin.

2002

Our first family picture is in the neonatal intensive care unit at Georgetown University Hospital. We wear matching light blue hospital gowns over our clothes. I sit on a cushioned glider chair, holding Gabi, who's swaddled in one of those white hospital receiving blankets with the baby blue and pink stripes. Carlos sits beside us, one hand caressing my hair and the other cupping Gabi's little head. We both gaze at her.

Gabi was born near full term, but doctors keep her in the hospital because of her unusual features—widely spaced eyes, low muscle tone, long fingers, and, most concerning, a dilation of her aorta where it joins her heart. They can't figure out what she has. One specialist suggests Gabi could be cognitively impaired and paraplegic. Another is more reassuring: "We don't really know what your daughter has, but I've seen many children come into the world in much worse shape who go on to thrive." That's what Carlos and I hold on to as we sit there holding Gabi, in awe.

2005

Gabi and I craft a sign to greet Carlos, who's returning after two

weeks in Colombia on business. I place a yellow poster board on our dining room table, Gabi kneels on her chair, crayons in hand. “Bem-vindo, Pai,” I write in thick letters. All around, Gabi draws flowers, a sun, and three stick people.

Carlos travels almost monthly for work, a week or two at a time. I generally don’t miss him—our differences now turning to indifference—but that particular trip I do. I remember feeling giddy, probably putting on something nicer than my usual jersey T-shirt dress, probably preparing stew, rice, and fried plantains, knowing we’d make love after Gabi went to bed.

2007

Christmas Eve, Gabi and I decorate our gingerbread house on the dining room table with bowls of colorful jellybeans and miniature candy beads, deciding whether to put tiny candles in the windows or a Christmas tree that could be seen from the outside. Later we prepare the *pavé*, a tiramisu-like Brazilian dessert, our annual contribution to Christmas Eve dinner at my parents’. Gabi delights in dipping the champagne cookies in the Port wine and arranging them in the Pyrex. Christmas carols play in the background.

Carlos has just left the house for a yoga class.

“Yoga today, really?” I whispered, standing by the front door next to Carlos, with a yoga mat slung over his shoulders.

“I’ll be back in a couple of hours,” he said. “What difference will it make? You’re just preparing for this evening.”

Once again I thought, *He still doesn’t get it.*

2008

I don’t remember what we’re arguing about, but there we are, walking out of our bedroom, when Carlos stops, looks back at me, raises his arms, and, with uncharacteristic drama, sighs. “I just feel you’re cutting my wings.”

2009

It’s a Saturday morning in March, the three of us sitting on our sofa, Carlos and I next to each other, Gabi on my lap. I caress her hair, a natural instinct any time she’s on my lap. He holds her hands. We both try to seem calm.

We had planned to tell Gabi about our divorce that morning, giving her the weekend to process it before heading back to school, though knowing she'd probably be processing the divorce the rest of her life. Weeks earlier, he had shared with me possible rentals, discussing tradeoffs between layouts and location. With guidance from a family psychologist, we had also crafted a script of how we'd explain the divorce, refining it in the days leading up to that morning:

Hola, Carlos.

Attached is the revised script. Let me know if you'd like to change anything. Don't know if/when we'll have alone time before Saturday, so send me any comments.

Beso, Bel

Bel,

It looks fine, just made a few changes, but we can stick with the original version. I just tried simplifying a few things, keeping it more conversational, responsive to what she says. Just tell me how you'd prefer for us to do this, if you first or me first, or one of us starts and the other follows. And, honestly, the original script is fine, so if you'd prefer to keep it as such I'd understand.

Beso, Carlos

Hola.

Your edits are fine. I can start. And from there either of us can speak as it comes to us. The script is just meant to guide us, but who says what will depend on how we each react. The important thing is for us to be consistent about tone and message, tomorrow and whenever the topic comes up.

Beso, Bel

After telling Gabi, the three of us, in tears, drive to visit his new place, just a mile away. Then we go out to buy him a new kitchen table.

2011

At his nudging, we have a weekday lunch at a Thai restaurant downtown. We sit across from each other, having our usual—curry tofu for me and combination fried rice for him.

For the first year after our divorce, I'm uneasy when he invites me to lunch, dreading he'll request more time with Gabi or maybe announce he's remarrying. Not that I'd be jealous, only fearful

he'd provide Gabi a family life I couldn't offer on my own.

2013

Easter brunch at my place. My boyfriend Liam sits on my sofa, a little quieter than usual, as his two teenage daughters help Gabi arrange yellow Peeps on a tray with edible grass on our dining room table. Carlos is also there, along with his mom, who's visiting from Ecuador. Easter is officially the last day of Gabi's spring break with him, but she prefers celebrating at our place so we agree I'll host. Though we'd all fit around the table, I serve the meal buffet style. I keep the music and beers flowing.

2016

Gabi, Carlos, and I are in the pediatric intensive care unit at Hopkins. We've already been there for two weeks, Gabi on bed rest after an MRI reveals her descending aorta is beginning to tear, a rare event in the very rare syndrome she was born with. It's the night before the surgery in which they'll replace her entire descending aorta with a synthetic graft. Gabi suggests we have a movie night. Carlos sets up his home projector on one of the hospital bedside carts, positioning it so the image covers the entire wall facing Gabi's bed. *Madagascar* was her choice.

Gabi survives the surgery but not the ensuing hemorrhage.

2017

We sit at his kitchen table, eating Thai he ordered through Uber Eats, sharing a bottle of Rioja. We don't say much, but when we do, it seems to be the same conversation, a chant we embrace for solace.

"I don't know what to do," I say. "I get up every day, I'm actually productive at work, but then at night it's always the same: why am I still here?"

"I ask myself the same thing," he says. "There's no sense in any of it. What I do know is, while I'm here, well, I owe it to Gabi to make the most of life somehow."

He pauses. "At least that's what I tell myself on better days."

We notice our alternating waves of grief—one of us slightly stronger, enough to reach out to the other, who is about to drown. We swap books. He's the one I turn to when Liam and I split up. He tells

me about new women in his life. Since losing Gabi, he's climbed the Chimborazo Volcano in Ecuador and trekked the Annapurna Circuit in Nepal. With his encouragement, I walked the Camino de Santiago, the 580-mile route across northern Spain.

2018

It's the day after Thanksgiving, the highs below freezing. Carlos and I stand at the summit of Old Rag Mountain in Virginia, his left arm around me, his right holding his phone out for a selfie. Our cheeks are red from the cold, and we're both smiling. Behind us, blue-gray mountains fade into the horizon.

Getting through the mile-long rock scramble requires more upper-body strength than I can muster. Repeatedly he's a step ahead, anchoring his feet on a crevice and pulling me up in one strong swoop as I push myself up from a foothold.

"How are you feeling about your transition to Mexico?" I ask. He's moving to Mexico City in February for work. He has passed up offers to be based in Brazil, Colombia, and Peru over the years. Now he has nothing to hold him back.

"I'm dreading leaving my place," he says. "But I'm ready for the change."

"Selfishly, I'm not ready for you to go," I say.

"Oh, but I'll be coming back to DC a lot, at least three times a year," he says.

I freeze. I thought he'd be coming back at least once a month. My muscles start to feel fatigued, the cold settling in.

"C'mon," he says. "We can still make it down before the sun sets."

I take a deep breath and pick up my pace.