

# Drowning Lessons

*Lina Ferreira Cabeza-Vanegas*

---

The rules were simple. Each life raft could safely hold every person in the group without sinking, regardless of weight or size. All, that is, but one. Because metaphorical rafts are not bound by physics, but by the arbitrary rules of story tellers with a point to drive into the middle of our foreheads like horns into a bullfighter's ribcage.

The game was this: each person on the raft would then have to make a case for themselves in order to be allowed to remain onboard, to stay and survive together or else to be expelled and drown alone. "The final decision," the counselor explained, "will be made by the group. Who stays, who goes." Catholic school necrodemocracy. "We will assume there is a storm and whoever leaves, no matter how good a swimmer, will drown."

This was all explained in the shadow of an adobe convent on the second day of a school-mandated spiritual retreat. Because confinement and isolation breed contempt, and these are the loadbearing pillars of all-girl catholic schools. So most of the time we were fine in our plaid skirts, itchy knee high socks and assigned classroom. But most of the time we were lying about being fine and would tell extraordinary lies about ourselves, about each other, and about what and who we were and would be. Hoping secretly talking was like coughing into a petri dish, and soon our lies would bloom into this one's weight gain, that one's pubic lice, and our own incapacitatingly, validatingly, unequivocal triumph over the rest. So we drifted into smaller and smaller clusters, tried to break bones with words and when all else failed we threw metal sharpeners at sleeping classmates and stole each other's overweight boyfriends. That was when the school had to resort to calling on stained-jeaned, rolled-sleeved, bearded counselors to convince us we didn't really hate each other.

Meaning, roughly, once a year.

So we were herded onto a bus and sent away to bucolic scenes and quiet convents for two days of marathon bonding and self-reflection, metaphoric rafts

and gore-filled tales of Christian allegories.

"Hurry on, come on. Sit now." These things are calculated. "We don't have all day, hurry in, come on."

A room full of 15 year old girls at the end of a long bus ride smelling faintly of sardines and knockoff Chanel, and a counselor in torn jeans and a ponytail telling everyone to sit down on the floor, because that is how the indigenous people did it. And then it began. "Listen," he said, and no one listened. The whispered rumble of pebbles rolling down and unpaved road. Again, "Listen." And again, fifty or so girls zipping and unzipping their backpacks while some of the other counselors tried to manage the volume like desperate traffic cops trying to manage a 3 car pile-up. "There is a dead dog."

Silence. The counselor nodded. "Dead." And the girl who always cried when we watched an educational film let out a gasp.

"The dog is lying on the ground, just like that, on a wet street." He pointed at an empty spot in the room and yelled, "Look! There!" Nothing to see. Cracked tiles, dust. But he yelled again, "Look! Just look!" Some strange the-emperor-is-fully-clothed trick of repetition. "Right there." He gesticulated madly, covered his mouth with his hands as if he might vomit and pointed again at the empty spot, this time his finger following a trail toward his feet as if the floor were slanted and the blood raced toward him. "Oh God, there's so much blood!" I watched him shake his head and look up at the opposite corner of the room as if he had caught someone's eye, he quickly began to wave his arms dramatically as if flagging someone down for a rescue. Then he slipped out of place and character and ran to that corner to pick up the play from there. "What?" He said in a higher pitch voice. "What is that you found? Dead? Show me!" And he would take a step to the right or a step to the left and change his voice, and change his posture, and say "What?!" Again, and nod again. A man playing checkers beside a wall, another drinking and humming, a child

with a ball, or a hysterical woman who had to be dragged like an acrophobic to a ledge, to a cliff, to the spot where the invisible dog lay scattered like a deck of cards.

Some characters would sprint, some resist, but in the end they all plunged into the sight—a heart like a red hood and ribs like lonely trees. “Oh God, you are right. You’re right, look at the legs, and is that bone?” Then he’d repeat the process, slipping in an out of personae until he had built a mob of rubbernecking ghosts around the invisible body.

Walking to the equally invisible raft the next morning, I made a list in my head of all the reasons I should live and others die. “Up ahead,” a blonde counselor instructed us as we approached a second group of girls sitting in a circle on the grass, “Keep going, just up ahead.” Seven or nine girls maybe our age, maybe a bit younger, some definitely younger and some maybe slightly older. “Don’t stop there, we’re up ahead, keep going.” And as we walked on I heard them speak of Jesus and Mary Magdalene, and about how this or that reminded them of how life was before the convent. “Right, over there by the logs.” And it was how they rounded their vowels and emphasized their consonants that gave it away. The visible invisible class lines, the ghost maps of education and ancestry.

Something like the unseen outline of a dead dog in a one man play. The night before, despite the lack of scenery, prop and plot, the play had only gotten bigger and bigger with each repetition, and the play was all repetition. The counselor said, “Oh my God!” And “Oh my God!” over and over, and over again. He said, “Come look!” And “Are you looking now?” And, “Do you see it there?” and, “Careful now!” When one of us uncrossed our pins-needles riddled legs, “Don’t step on the tail? Watch your shoes!” A loud, spindly man with a greasy ponytail, leaping on the tiles and gesturing like he was playing a demented game of hopscotch-charades. The girl always cried, cried steadily now in the gasping interruptions of breathless sobs. “Look at it, do it. Look at it now.” He told us the crowd kept growing around the dead animal, larger and larger. Because no one cares about a stray dog but everyone likes a spectacle. “Just look at those eyes, look!” He pleased and I did look, like there was something there to see. Dirt-brown eyes, neither in nor out, barely eyes anymore, squashed grapes

and broken saucers. “Look at the tongue too. God, oh, God!” He drew a trail with his index finger, as if it were following the path of a flailing-fish tongue flapping away from a broken snout. The counselor motioned like he might vomit and a girl sitting at his feet ducked, because he seemed sort of lost in his play and we weren’t sure how much of it was planned.

A pause, almost-silence.

The girl who cried muttered that she was not crying for the dog but because it had reminded her of something else entirely while outside the rhythmic creak of the insects and amphibians of the Andean moors ushered in the night. “And then!” The counselor interrupted himself, “Right-right then, this man out of nowhere.” Later, inside the convent, we’ll be lead through long and quiet hallways of empty rooms offered to us for the night. Most of my class will choose to stay in a few adjacent room to spend the night in huddled and sleepless unison. I know, because I will hear about it for weeks after, flashlights and bottles and cell phones and joints and sleepy boys back in Bogotá mumbling confused hellos through the static of bad reception. I will choose a room at the end of the hallway by the staircase and realize I can count all the nuns in the convent with just my finger and wonder, as I count, if they sleep in adjacent rooms, or scattered throughout the building.

“So this man, he shows up late and out of nowhere, and then he leans in—I mean really leans in and really looks at the dead animal.”

The counselor walked to the corner to illustrate. He stuck his head close, almost into the make-believe body opened like a popup book. “Really, really look.” Then he straightened up, furrowed his brow, looked around the room as if noticing us for the first time and he asked, “And do you know what that man said?”

From my assigned raft I stared across the field at the circle of girls sitting on the grass around a nun. They spoke while pulling fistful of grass from the lawn. They wore oversized secondhand sweatpants and sweaters with cartoon mice in polka dot skirts, and I imagined one of the many empty rooms inside the cold convent filled to the brim with stuffed garbage bags of donated hand-me-downs and plump moths. “Lina, stop,” someone had tugged on my sleeve as we had walked past them. But then one of the girls in the circle had turned to the

nun and said something about understanding the story perfectly, because, for example, she felt she was just like the woman in it and she was about to say something else so I didn't turn away, not right away, and the girl who had been walking beside me had to tug again on my sleeve and whisper in my ear, "*Prostitutas*."

The counselor did one last nauseated pirouette and declared, "The man who really looked said, 'Man,' and 'Oh man, but did you see . . . those . . . teeth . . . man? Did you, man? Look at them, look how white they are, and look at those fangs, just look at them!'" He motioned to the other invisible characters in his pretend throngs, to come look too. He ran back and forth, like he was filling a pool with a bucket, character after character, nodding and whispering and nodding again. "I see. I do. Look, look! How white, how true! Shit, man, are you looking?" There was unanimity, how magnificent and white the mangled animal's teeth, and the legion nodded.

When I looked around my own randomly selected circle of peers, I felt almost confident. I played soccer, I carried a lighter, I wasn't a picky eater. I watched a lot of apocalyptic television shows and had been the only one chosen to hold the cow eyeballs on dissection day in biology. I felt certain I had a chance and it is likely my confidence showed because the counselor asked me to go first and give the reasons I should be allowed to stay and live. So, I took a deep breath and leaned forward to try to explain my list of aptitudes as clearly as I could. Background, experience, skills and the potential long term benefits for the group, given my survival, but before I'd even really started the girl beside me began to cry in the same panting sobs of the night before.

"Silvia, what is it? Why are you crying?"

"Because," she said drawing breath, "I," interrupting herself with shallow gasps, "Don't," like she'd been hit suddenly with a torrent of freezing water, "Haaaave." All her muscle contracting at once and shrinking the alcoves of her lungs into tiny crawl spaces, "A reason." I stared confused for a moment still holding in my mind the next point in my list while another girl changed seats so she could console the crying girl. She rubbed the girl's back with one hand and wiped away her own tears with the other. "It should be me," she said, "I'm the one without a reason. It should be me who goes."

It didn't take more than a minute before the

entire circle was crying as well. Before, I realized the error of my strategy and I was voted off unanimously for being the only one not to volunteer for drowning. A matter made only easier for the group when I pointed out that I was the only one with a pocketknife to which they responded that I was also the only one who had failed to console the crying girl.

It is a persistent character flaw. I take things too literally. I'm told the dog is dead and his teeth are white. I think the dog must have had an owner, because I've never seen a stray without rows of yellow fangs. I think someone should check for tags, the owner should be notified. I'm told I'm going to drown. I wonder if there was a plane crash, how we got there, where it is that we were going, and what our packed carry-ons hold. I wonder if I'm drowning in the ocean or a lake or the panicked snake thrashings of an angry river. Or if we can vote the counselors off the raft, or if I can refuse to leave, because I think I can take most of the girls. Especially the crying one. Or, maybe, if we could just tie the rafts together like circled wagons so my body won't float away and they will have something to give to my parents if they get rescued. It's not the point. The dog's teeth are white. "Do you know who that man was? Do you? The man who saw the teeth, the man who really looked?"

This is the point. "Every dead dog has his white-teeth lining." Or the noble man always sticks his face close enough to stain red the tip of his nose. There is redemption in the staring, he says. The raft is a metaphor, he says. So I'm asked to go stand a few feet away so the rest of the teary-eyed group can finish the game while I drown out of ear-shot. "That man. That was Jesus."

I didn't really resist. I stood between little imaginary rafts drowning in an ocean of grass and class and chance. I looked across the field at others who had also been chosen to drown and beyond them to the other girls' raft. "*Prostitutas*." The nuns explained it all later, while they made me an agua aromatic and my classmates slept in a pile in the stillness of a white paramo dawn. A very old nun ran her hand down the back of a very large white cat and said that these were girls looking to leave their old lives behind. The cat lifted its head to meet her hand while she explained that they held classes and seminars every other Saturday on the green by the convent, to explain the life of contemplation and

sacrifice, and give them a second chance.

I briefly thought the life raft exercise had something to do with the man who noticed the dead dog's teeth, but I couldn't quite piece it together, and drowning took so long and the day got so hot, I eventually just stopped trying to make sense of it. I paced for a minute and waved at the others who had also been chosen to die. Though only one waved back reluctantly, while the others did not seem to see me through their tears. Across the field the other girls talked about poorly lit motel rooms and street corners and long quiet hallways and convents. Johns, Jesus, sweaters and habits, and the counselor with the ponytail looked to be delivering some intense and important speech to his raft.

I tried walking back to mine but was told to stay dead for a bit longer while they finished the exercise. The girl who had sat beside me and cried, now trembled only a little while the others appeared to be taking turns telling her all the reasons she should live. I tried sitting down but the grass was wet. Then I tried yelling, *I'm dead! I've died, can I go home now?* Back at my raft, but no one seemed amused except one of the other girls in a dirty wool sweater on the other side of the field.

I looked across to them again. The nun nodded as her girls told their stories, the counselors nodded as their girls cried, and most of the drowning ones were allowed back into the rafts eventually while I stood in the middle of a bright green field imagining limp bodies being hauled out of the water, groups pulling together in coordinated efforts that would have made any counselors proud—"Ready, on three! One, two . . ." Fistfuls of wet shirts and hair and soaked rag-doll bodies at the bottom of sinking rafts. On the other side I saw the others, there weren't that many girls in the nun's raft and they all looked like strong swimmers.