

HEAL IN PAIRS

by Paula Bombara

Translated from Spanish by Analía Pérez Carvajal



IT WILL NOT BE JUST ONE THE MEDICINE THAT UNDOES THE HEX, THE PRESENT, WITHOUT PROMISE.

- ALICIA GENOVESE

1

Illuminated by the moon, the route crossed the deep valley of Jujuy as if it were a river. And on that asphalt river, the bicycle, like a solitary fish, sped forward. With the attention on the horizon, Gera repeated the words of Inti's video message: the disease had "activated." The concern was so overwhelming as the silence of the landscape.

With very clear signs Inti had said that she felt fine, however, the agreement with the research team was that the protocol should be started as soon as the signal was given. So Gera mounted the bike as soon as the video message light faded, confident that the rest of the group was also in action.

The group were Azzu, Jota, Inti and Gera. Inseparable since childhood, although now

they lived hundreds of kilometers away. They had met at an encounter of girls and boys survivors of femicides. The murders of their mothers and how painful and complicated it is to grow up with that imprint on the body were the main link at the beginning of their friendship. Later, like logs added to the fire, other commonalities appeared that kept the group together throughout adolescence. They shared the important and also the urgent. They supported each other, they encouraged each other, they celebrated.

The idea of the common tattoo had been Inti's. *An indelible mark. Something that we can show, that in the future represents us as a family.* She had proposed combining their initials into a private, secret word: *JIGA, a combination of love, friendship, family ... What do you think?*

They had laughed, they had joked about her sentimental overflow, but they did not hesitate to tattoo the same design, built in group, that weekend, each in their place. Since then, that's what they have been called, just as it was written on their bodies. They used *jiga* as an individual and collective nickname. They were not brothers, sisters, female friends, male friends. They were more, they were all that together, amplified.

Thanks jigas for being there. And for being part of this experiment with me, she had said less than an hour before, as a farewell. And she hadn't even given them the option of looking at the signing again: it was one of those video messages that disappeared into thin air.

When Inti saw the first spot on her arm and showed it to the group, Jota suggested sending a photo of it to the Puerto Piray Institute of Experimental Medicine. It was a very new medical research center, little was known about what they were doing there, but information had been leaked that it was one of the institutes designed to treat diseases in that revolutionary way they called *pair fortigelification*.

A researcher at the Institute, Doctor Amelia Pastore, had responded immediately. The questions were many and so were the physical and psychological analyzes that the group underwent when they agreed to be part of the experimental protocol. What most concerned the research team was that those rounded spots, between bluish and green, that slowly spread down Inti's arm, had

also been detected in more than a hundred people in the area and they could not discover what caused them, but they did know that when the spots exceeded, approximately, five centimeters in diameter, the cascade of coagulation factors was altered and this led to multiple organic failures that left the victim with life hanging by a thread in a few days.

"The most worrying thing is that we could not stop the process either with medications or with blood transfusions," Doctor Pastore had explained to them. "That is why we want to see if we can achieve an effective treatment with the new technology in pairs."

"And do you know how Inti got infected?" Jota had asked in that meeting.

"IT'S PROBABLY SOMETHING THAT SPREADS THROUGH THE WATER." MAYBE SOMETHING THAT ORIGINATES FROM LANDFILLS OR FIELDS THAT STILL USE BANNED PESTICIDES.

I live near a garbage dump, Inti's hands added and Gera translated. *I water my garden with water from a stream that surrounds it.*

Azzu started the truck at the same time Gera got on the bike. The first meeting point was Inti's house, in San Salvador de Jujuy. They would arrive around the same time: Gera from the west, Azzu from the south. The destination was the city of Resistencia, where Jota would join to drive to Puerto Piray. They trusted that there would be no setbacks: they had all the driving licenses and enough margin in the group's carbon footprint to be able to make the trip.

While driving, Azzu also thought about Inti. She was the one who, with those hands that filled the air with signs, contributed bright ideas, who organized the best activities so that anti-femicide policies continued to position northern Argentina among the safest places in America. She was so tiny when they met! Knowing about that terrible and definitive injury that prevented her from speaking had caused great sadness to Azzu. They learned sign language very quickly so as not to miss a word of what Inti was saying. Her mind was irreplaceable, as was her determination.

Just before they got into the Institute's diagnostic machine, they had decided to partner with the movement of custodians of the Guaraní aquifer to do some joint actions and prevent whatever was contaminating the waters from reaching that reservoir. What would become of Azzu if Inti was missing? Tears welled up, unstoppable. Anxiety and uncertainty were hard to bear.

The combined analysis of the genomic data, the accidents suffered throughout life, the emotional situation and the geoenvironmental factors of all the places where they had lived, added to the projections made by the Institute's sophisticated algorithms, had determined that Gera would be the partner of Inti in the treatment. Azzu had complained privately, not telling the group: how could it be, if Inti and Gera shared a history of poor nutrition during childhood? M.D. Pastore had been adamant.

"It is a high precision algorithm. Your role is that the pair arrives in optimal conditions. And you should not take it lightly: we need them to be 100%," the doctor had said when saying goodbye.

Azzu wiped the tears with the back of the hand, checked the time, and decided to put the truck on flight mode. The vehicle responded with a buzz that signaled the change of position of the wheels while a voice announced that they would be arriving in a couple of hours.

When Azzu got out of the truck, Inti was already on her way to hug her jiga. Then, they smiled and all seemed better.

"How do you feel?"

Inti answered *a little weak, but okay*.

"You ate something?"

I saved myself for the surprise you promised,
Inti replied.

Gera appeared on the road and honked.

**“HEY, JIGAS, WHAT
A THRILL TO SEE
YOU, GUYS,” SAID,
LEAVING THE BICYCLE
TO APPROACH WITH
LONG AND QUICK
STEPS.**

“Gera, you’re so tall! You were serious about growing up to be twenty-four!” Azzu exclaimed in surprise.

Gera, did you think you were a poplar? Inti’s hands joked after they greeted each other.

“A poplar or a giraffe, what matters is that we’re here already. Did you talk to Jota?”

Yes. Jota is waiting for us. I said we would arrive at night, responded Inti.

“In a good car it would be like that, but in this piece of art that I bought, maybe we arrive earlier,” said Azzu while inviting them to continue the journey.

When they put the truck in motion, the sun was rising among the houses of San Salvador

de Jujuy. With the seats rotated so that they could see each other, Inti and Gera took their places.

While driving, Azzu announced:

“Well, I’m going to introduce you to the menu. Gera, open that drawer, please.”

“Tell me you brought real food and not just nutritional shots...” Gera pleaded, half seriously, half jokingly, while following Azzu’s order.

“Nutritional shots are the top sensation in food technology, *jiga!* Don’t start complaining!”

“It’s okay, it’s okay. Don’t get angry. It’s just that before the shots, I’d like to eat some of your specialties.”

Inti laughed. She wanted to savor Azzu’s recipes too.

“Under your seat, Inti, there’s a small freezer with desserts. But eat it after the shots!” Azzu said with a smile.

Gera opened the metal box that was in the drawer. On the left, Gera saw the capsules to prepare the shot. Of varied colors and numerical codes, they looked like a palette of paint samples. Gera sighed: “I hated tech food...”.

“The evaluator is in the pocket,” Azzu said, staring at the road.

Gera looked at the evaluator with distaste and passed it to Inti.

"For some unknown reason it works better on the left ring finger," Azzu added.

Inti adjusted the gadget on the indicated finger and felt the prick. For a few minutes there was silence and then they heard the melodious voice of the evaluator, at the same time that the named codes were written on the panel of the truck.

"Evaluation carried out. Recommended dosage: shot of two black capsules, three navy blue capsules, two electric blue capsules, one sky blue capsule, one purple capsule, three red capsules, two yellow capsules, three gold capsules. Have another identical shot in seven hours. A double protein collation between the two intakes is recommended. Enjoy it!"

"So many things!? Inti, are you all right?" Gera exclaimed, concerned.

So so. I need to rest, she replied before returning the apparatus.

"I recommend that you start," Azzu said, mimicking the evaluator's voice. "The machine is inside the drawer."

"How much does each capsule cost?" asked Gera.

"Don't worry about it. We have plenty."



"I still want to know: how much did they cost you?"

"Jiga, it doesn't matter."

Gera put the capsules into the machine in the order listed, then, set the little paper cup and pressed the button. A viscous, aromatic liquid began to flow out. Being careful that nothing tipped over, Gera passed the cup to Inti.

While putting the evaluator on the finger, Gera made calculations. How many capsules could Gera buy per month with the pension provided by the State for being an indirect victim of

femicide? That could be the solution to feed the entire neighborhood.

The evaluator's voice interrupted Gera's thoughts. Gera prepared the shot and swallowed it in one go. It was lukewarm, it wasn't as horrible as Gera remembered.

"There's a box of protein bars next to the freezer, Inti," Azzu said.

"*Jiga*, don't get upset but I'd like to know how you got all this," Gera insisted. "Where do you get the money from?"

Azzu looked at Gera for a moment, then back at the road and sighed.

"I buy and sell cryptocurrencies. I learned from my father, before... well, you know. When my grandmother and grandfather passed away and I received the inheritance, I decided to invest it. How do I know when and where to invest, I don't know, it must be intuition, or good luck... I earn much more than I lose."

"You never told us anything ..." Gera commented. "I guess certain thing can't be said on the network."

"You have a point there," Azzu replied in a tone that ended the conversation.

Inti chewed the bars silently. When she finished, she opened the freezer: two chocolate volcanoes sparkled before her eyes. She showed them to Gera.



"Ahhh, now we're talking!" Gera exclaimed.

Azzu smiled. That pastry making course had been a great decision.

When only the chocolate's smell remained, Inti and Gera put on the headphones to sleep. They activated the induction and programmed the awakening in time for Inti's second shot. Within minutes, they were breathing evenly.

The most important part of Azzu's mission was accomplished. With the autopilot and the flight mode activated, the third *jiga* let the truck take them to Resistencia.

3

To reduce the anxiety, Jota took another shower and read the health's report again: Jota's nutritional status and levels of energy were impeccable.

"I drove many times to Puerto Piray last month... ¿Why am I so nervous?" Jota said out loud. "Maybe it's the responsibility for arriving on time..."

Jota's thought was interrupted by a message: they had arrived. Jota hurried down in the elevator.

"Heeeey, *jigas*, what a pleasure!" The short height made Jota's face rest under Gera's chest

as they hugged. "Did you sleep well? How do you feel, Inti?"

Better, I'm still sleepy though..., she replied in sign language.

"Can we use the bathroom?" Azzu asked hurriedly.

"Sure! Go ahead!"

Half an hour later they were on the road again. Jota was driving and the rest of the *jigas* were sound asleep. The panel predicted a smooth ride. They would be arriving at their destination before dawn.

4

It was still dark when Inti opened her eyes in alarm. She felt being bitten inside her, something inside her body was compressing. An intestinal cramp? She sat up in the seat. In the rearview mirror, Jota saw the pain in her expression.

"Inti! What's wrong? What's the matter? Azzu! Gera!" Jota exclaimed uneasily.

Azzu and Gera woke up. Inti trembled. She said she didn't feel good at all. Gera took her arm. Her spots had grown significantly during sleep.

"It was one of the risks of taking the shots," Azzu replied nervously. I'll call the Institute.

Doctor Pastore recommended that Inti take a pain reliever and stay warm.

Azzu pulled out two electric blankets and covered Inti with them. Gera gave her the pain reliever. Jota sped up.

Less than half an hour later Gera said:

"She's very pale... Inti! Inti!"

"What happens? Tell me! At this speed I can't look back," Jota asked desperately.

"She's not responding!" Gera was scared. "Is her heart beating?!"

"Take it easy! The doctor said that this could happen," Azzu placed a sensor on Inti's chest. Her heart was beating very slowly. We have to keep her warm."

Jota turned the heat to maximum and began to sing, just as Doctor Pastore had ordered them to do when Inti's heart was weak.

Inti, paralyzed and fragile, felt all her *jigas's* efforts and she overflowed with gratitude. Amid the mist of illness, she grew strong in the desire to continue hearing Jota's song. Her mother's face became clear, just like Azzu's caresses, like Gera's joy and her own, when they learned that they were "pairs", that they would also experience this together.

When Jota stopped at the door of the Institute, the nurses approached with a stretcher, took Inti out of the truck and brought her inside without delay. Gera ran after them.

Jota and Azzu kept their hands clasped long after their *jigas* disappeared from sight. The hours of that first day were endless. They spent them watching the waters of the Piray Guazú stream join those of the Paraná River. They were flooded by that sound, by that movement. They spoke little but shared a lot. When sunset filled the sky with shades of pink and orange, they looked for a hotel.

The next morning they returned to the Institute. Doctor Pastore told them that everything was going well: the pair was already an ensemble. They knew that the

fortigelification process took a lapse of time that could not be sped up. They were the defenses of the two connected bodies. "The union is the answer": that was the phrase chosen by the scientific community to describe the treatment.

How long would it take them to fight the disease? It was not known, it depended on the pair.

"Why don't they go away for a few days? This will take at least two weeks," said the doctor.

"Where to?"

"If you want to help us, we need someone to take materials to the Iguazú National Park. It's not far, but no one on the team wants to get away from the pair while they are battling the disease."

Azzu looked at Jota. "Inti would help, that's for sure."

Jota nodded. They decided to get out right away.

The researchers in the National Park received Jota and Azzu with enthusiasm. They really needed the pH meters and the extraction equipment that they brought them. After lunch, they were given a guided tour. The exuberant landscape of greens, flowers and fruits, the birds, the roar of the water from the Falls, they had no equal. But it was difficult to be moved by such beauty when the other half of the *jiga* group was fighting for Inti's life.

The park ranger told them that they were organizing various activities to preserve both the Iguazú Falls and the Guaraní aquifer and invited them to join the work. They did it with pleasure.

Three weeks had passed when the wait ended.

"Ehh, *jigas*, where are you?" Gera said through a video call, with a big smile on the thin, haggard face.

Azzu covered the mouth in excitement. Jota managed to answer Gera through tears of joy:

"Gera! You are well! Where is Inti?"

"With me, *jigas*. Still very weak, but with me," Gera answered while showed them Inti's sleeping face in the next bed.

The treatment, it seemed, had worked.

The spots were still not subsiding, but the color had turned yellowish. Doctor Pastore appeared on camera and gave them a more complete report. They still couldn't expose the pair to the harshness of polluted air, but she had high hopes that sooner rather than later, the day would come. "Hopefully we can sing Inti's happy birthday," Jota wished, wiping away the tears. It's in ten days.

"Hopefully!" Azzu replied with a hug. "And we're going to sing so loud, *jigas*, so loud, that not even the sound of the waterfalls will cover our voices."

