Literature and Translation

The Bankruptcy

A Novel by
Júlia Lopes de Almeida

Translated by
Cintia Kozonoi Vezzani
and **Jason Rhys Parry**
Edited by
Ana Cláudia Suriani da Silva

UCL PRESS

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Series Editors: Timothy Mathews, Geraldine Brodie and Ana Cláudia Suriani da Silva

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First published in 2023 by
UCL Press
University College London
Gower Street
London WC1E 6BT

Available to download free: www.uclpress.co.uk

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from The British Library.

This book has been selected to receive financial assistance from English PEN's PEN Translates programme, supported by Arts Council England. English PEN exists to promote literature and our understanding of it, to uphold writers' freedoms around the world, to campaign against the persecution and imprisonment of writers for stating their views, and to promote the friendly co-operation of writers and the free exchange of ideas. www.englishpen.org.

ISBN: 978-1-80008-568-8 (Hbk)
ISBN: 978-1-80008-567-1 (Pbk)
ISBN: 978-1-80008-566-4 (PDF)
ISBN: 978-1-80008-569-5 (epub)
DOI: https://doi.org/10.14324/111.9781800085664

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Translators' preface

Cintia Kozonoi Vezzani and Jason Rhys Parry

Translators bear a heavy responsibility. When Jerome translated the Greek *logos* into the Latin *verbum* in the Vulgate Bible, he set Western theology and philosophy on an errant path for well over a millennium. But we should not be too harsh on old Jerome; even the brilliant Erasmus flailed in the face of the polysemic Greek word when he attempted a Latin translation of his own.

The task of the translator is distinct from that of the writer. To venture a musical analogy: the writer is to the translator as the arranger is to the composer. One creates a work out of nothing, the other finds the best way to adapt that work to an entirely new context. We can imagine languages as unique instrumental ensembles, each equipped with vocabularies capable of conveying particular tones and timbres. To understand the translator's dilemma, just consider the difficulties of arranging a Mendelssohn violin concerto to be performed by a heavy metal band. Should the flutes or oboes be channelled through a Stratocaster and a full stack of Marshall amplifiers? What about the clarinets?

A translator encounters similar difficulties to our imagined arranger. In particular, two competing motivations reappear with every written passage: 1) to remain as faithful as possible to the beauty and nuance of the original work; and 2) to find out just what an old text can be made to do in the space of possibilities afforded by a new language. Like certain characters in Almeida's novel, translators must also reconcile the expectation of fidelity with the desire to explore what is unknown.

Part of the significance of translation is its capacity to make a work written in one language available to an entirely new audience. But another part of translation's power is its ability to bend a language into new shapes – to stretch a grammar and syntax into strange and

novel forms. In translating *The Bankruptcy*, we have attempted to walk a tightrope between these two extremes, making the text accessible and enjoyable for a new readership while at the same time leaving hints as to the vast gulf separating today's readers from the time and place in which Almeida's novel first appeared.

One aspect of Almeida's writing that is liable to be unfamiliar to Anglophone readers concerns the multiple forms of address employed by her characters. Originally aristocratic titles, *senhor* and *senhora* are polite and respectful forms of address still in use today, particularly when addressing elderly people or those who occupy high ranks in a social hierarchy. *Seu* is an abbreviated form of *senhor* and is less formal, but still more polite than simply referring to someone by their given name. *Dona* is often used interchangeably with *senhora*. It precedes a woman's first name and is intended to convey respect.

There are also a few forms of address used in the novel that are associated with slavery, which was only abolished in Brazil in 1888, when Almeida was twenty-five years old. *Nhá* is an abbreviated form of *sinhá*, which itself may have emerged as a shortened form of *senhora*. *Nhá* was commonly used by enslaved people to refer to their female enslavers. *Iaiá* is another word derived from *sinhá*. Both it and its masculine form, *Ioiô*, make an appearance in the text. Not only does the novel's language reflect the living legacy of slavery in Brazil, it is also evident in the terms used to indicate skin colour, such as *mulatta*, that also signal a character's past or ancestral relationship with the sexual violence of slavery.

Another word that deserves mention is *carioca*, used to refer to anything or anyone from Rio de Janeiro. The word's origins are obscure and contested. Some have traced the word to the Tupi phrase *kari'oka*, meaning 'house of the white man'.[1]

Almeida's novel showcases the many sides of its urban setting. The names of streets, churches and neighbourhoods in Rio de Janeiro have been left untranslated. Many of these places still exist, and we invite readers to visit the digital atlas at imagineRio.org to witness how the locations Almeida describes in the novel have changed over the subsequent decades.

Though the novel features extended descriptions of city life, nature encroaches at every turn. Plants are omnipresent in *The Bankruptcy*. Often, they are bystanders to the progression of the plot, simply adding decoration to the unfolding drama. But occasionally they intrude on the action itself, at times possessing a kind of subtle agency, communicating silent messages through scent that turn the characters' thoughts towards

love or sex or both. We have elected to give the common English name for specific plants when one was readily available. In the absence of such a common name, we have left the names of the plants untranslated.

Paul de Man once noted that a translator 'is lost from the very beginning', and we confess to having at times got lost in Almeida's vast and variegated world.[2] Readers may notice the distinctly cinematic quality of Almeida's writing, which often features sentences that seem to flow on forever, offering a seamless sweep of uninterrupted detail punctuated here and there by poignant images: soap bubbles bursting on hot cobblestones, an old woman delighting in the smell of a mango, clouds shaped like angels' wings the colour of flaming coral. So vivid is her imagery that *The Bankruptcy* richly deserves an illustrated edition, perhaps with alternating watercolours and thick impasto oil paintings. One style for the airy domestic settings, another for the sweltering street scenes.

Almeida's novel gives readers a glimpse into a nascent modernity, an early globalisation powered by sweat, animal strength, and new contraptions belching smoke and steam. It is a globalisation blinded by its own possibilities and blind also to the coming chasms and crises. The world of *The Bankruptcy* is one in which men run and pant and scheme and women work in drudgery or cheat or dream. It is a world that, through countless convolutions and contingencies, gave birth to our own; and, if we squint our eyes and look closely, perhaps we can see within it other possibilities for living well in the short breaths between catastrophes.

Translating this book required spending significant time sifting through nineteenth-century Lusophone dictionaries, newspapers and archival materials. Funding from the Social Science Research Council facilitated a visit to the Academia Brasileira de Letras to review Almeida's papers. We would like to thank Juliana Amorim for her support during our visit. Almeida's grandson, Cláudio Lopes de Almeida, provided invaluable information about his grandmother's incredible life, which shaped the way we approached the text. The Research Institute for Humanity and Nature in Kyoto and Tokyo College provided welcoming and collegial environments in which this work was completed.

We also relied on the tremendous support of friends, family and colleagues. We would like to thank Linda and Renato Vezzani for giving us their thoughts and feedback at all hours, Mervyn and Ellen Parry for reading early drafts of the manuscript, and Patty, Reiko, Emily, Trevor, Jenny and Jake for being so understanding and for cheering us on. We would also like to express our gratitude to Samuel Weber and

César Braga-Pinto, the former for his profound lessons on the hazards of translation, and the latter for introducing us to Almeida's universe. Our colleagues in Brazil deserve special mention, and we are deeply grateful for the constant encouragement from Giuliana Ragusa, João Roberto Gomes de Faria, Manoel Luiz Gonçalves Corrêa, Vitor Soster and Robert Wong. To Djelal Kadir, man in time: λαβὼν τόδε δῶρον.

Sandra Guardini Teixeira Vasconcelos was a tireless collaborator, a model scholar and colleague who improved this text in fundamental ways and guided us through many of the tangled thickets of Almeida's prose. Her treasure trove of knowledge, and her dedication to literature and language, set a rare example that we aspire to emulate one day. We would like to give special thanks to Ana Cláudia Suriani da Silva for introducing us to UCL Press and for her careful reading and insightful comments. Her excitement and expertise both proved invaluable from the translation's early phases to its completion. We are also thankful for the contributions of committed peer reviewers, whose astute suggestions improved the text in multiple ways. The whole team at UCL Press, and Chris Penfold in particular, deserve praise for supporting this project at every stage. We are also thankful to English PEN for selecting *The Bankruptcy* for the PEN Translates award, and for helping to bring Almeida the international recognition she so amply deserves.

When we began this translation, we were engaged. We finished it as a married couple. In several senses, this book was a labour of love. We hope you enjoy it.

Kyoto, Japan, 2022

Introduction
A vanished capital, a forgotten writer, and a pioneering novel of infidelity and finance

Ana Cláudia Suriani da Silva, Cintia Kozonoi Vezzani and Jason Rhys Parry

Júlia Lopes de *Almeida, née* Júlia Valentina da Silveira Lopes, known to her fans as Dona Júlia, was born in Rio de Janeiro in 1862. In 1902, a journalist for *Gazeta de Notícias*, one of Brazil's leading newspapers, rated her the second greatest writer in the country, just behind Black canonical writer and founder of the Brazilian Academy of Letters Machado de Assis.[3] She was considered for the inaugural list of members of the Brazilian Academy of Letters in 1896, but her name was excluded because of her gender and replaced by that of her husband, the Portuguese poet and journalist Francisco Filinto de Almeida, as a sort of compensation, since she had already been informed about her nomination.[4] Almeida was incredibly prolific, authoring ten novels alongside newspaper chronicles, plays, poems, stories for children and manuals for young women (today we would call them self-help books). Her writing testifies to the dramatic upheavals of her age: the abolition of slavery and its consequences, the end of the Brazilian Empire, and the flurry of technological and social transformations that rendered the Rio de Janeiro she was born in unrecognisable from the city she passed away in later, in 1934, at the age of seventy-one. Although she found critical as well as commercial success and carved a niche for herself as a woman in an intellectual world overwhelmingly dominated by men, she remained largely forgotten until her work received renewed attention in the late 1990s, with the emergence in Brazil of feminist literary criticism.

It is our pleasure to present here the first novel-length translation of Almeida's writing into English.[5] *The Bankruptcy* (*A Falência*), published

in 1901, is an ideal introduction to her sprawling body of work. It offers a panoramic glimpse into Rio de Janeiro at the turn of the century: a kaleidoscopic city, highly stratified and supremely self-confident, bursting with energy and newfound wealth. The novel's plot unfolds linearly from 1891 to 1893, during the turbulent early years of the first Republic of Brazil, established in 1889. Rio de Janeiro, the capital of this young state, is deftly rendered by Almeida's prose in all its colours and contradictions, her gaze equally attuned to its paradisiacal setting and its tense political atmosphere.

A stunning artefact of the era dubbed the 'tropical belle époque' by Jeffrey Needell[6] and other scholars, *The Bankruptcy* introduces Anglophone readers to a cross-section of turn-of-the-century urban Brazilian society and to an author who lent her formidable intellectual and literary talents to the promotion of women's rights in Brazil. It is our hope that this translation will solidify Almeida's reputation, and showcase the manner in which she combined a distinctly modern literary style with an acute sensitivity to social injustice and the growing perils of financial capitalism.

Her life …

Júlia's parents immigrated to Brazil from Portugal. Her mother, Adelina Pereira Lopes, was a teacher and graduate of the Lisbon Conservatory. Her father, Valentim José da Silveira Lopes, later named Viscount of São Valentim by the King of Portugal for his contributions in Brazil, was a medical doctor and educator. The couple moved to Rio de Janeiro in 1857 and opened a school called Colégio de Humanidades at Rua do Lavradio, 53, where their sixth child, Júlia, was born on 24 September 1862. The Lopes family moved frequently and, by the age of 24, the young Júlia had lived in several regions of Brazil as well as in Montevideo, Uruguay.[7]

Forced by her poor health to spend much of her youth at home with her family, Júlia nevertheless benefited from a singularly extensive education. She was taught how to read by her older sisters (Adelina, herself an accomplished poet, and Maria José), and also received instruction in foreign languages, music and literature. It was Júlia's father who first encouraged her to write, and her debut publication was a note on the Italian actress Gemma Cuniberti, which appeared in *Gazeta de Campinas* in 1881 when she was only 19. She thereafter became a regular contributor to local newspapers.

At the age of 23, Júlia began exchanging letters with her future husband.[8] At the time, Filinto was co-editor of *A Semana* with Valentim Magalhães, an important outlet for young writers published in Rio de Janeiro. A romantic relationship blossomed out of this correspondence, and the two were married in 1887. According to the couple's grandson, Cláudio Lopes de Almeida, Júlia's father did not approve of her marriage to Filinto, who was 'connected to the theatre and a known bohemian'.[9] Eventually, Júlia's father relented, and the two were married in Lisbon shortly before the publication of her first collection of short stories, titled *Traços e iluminuras* (*Sketches and Illuminations*, 1887). A short story contained within that collection, 'The Bankruptcy', was a seed that would one day grow into the book you now hold in your hands.

Júlia and Filinto returned to Brazil in 1888 and documented in their writing the epochal transformations that were unfolding across Brazilian society at the end of the nineteenth century. Along with trams, railways, electric lighting and the creation of large boulevards and public gardens, Brazil also boasted – despite its low literacy rate – a lively domestic free press, which fostered a nascent class of intellectuals, authors and journalists determined to steer Brazil onto the course set by the other 'civilised' nations.

This budding literary scene was a predominantly male environment, filled with competition and rivalry, greased by networks of relationships between publishers, writers and booksellers that raised formidable obstacles to the participation of women. The growing number of female readers could not be ignored, however, and magazines such as *O Espelho Diamantino* were created to target an expanding female readership. Beginning in the 1880s, Almeida wrote short stories and columns aimed at women for the major newspaper *O País*.[10] Such columns became a conduit for Almeida, and a small but influential number of female writers in similar positions, to articulate their views in the public sphere. Succeeding in the rapid-fire world of turn-of-the-century journalism required diverse talents: the array of topics addressed was dizzying, from gun control and policing to maternity clothes and gardening tips. Despite such formidable requirements, submitting to the imperatives inherent in the medium could open doors for women – including Almeida, whose novels, short stories, chronicles, and poems were first published in the pages of the periodical press before appearing in printed books.

In addition to being a popular writer, Almeida was also a mother of six children, four of whom survived to adulthood. She gave birth to her first child in 1888 while she was writing her first novel, *Memórias*

de Marta (*Memories of Marta*), which appeared that same year in *Tribuna Liberal*.[11] In 1891, Júlia and her sister Adelina Lopes Vieira published a successful book for children titled *Contos infantis em verso e prosa destinados às escolas primárias do Brasil* (*Children's Stories in Verse and Prose for Primary Schools in Brazil*). The book went on to be reprinted 17 times, and was added to the mandatory reading list for public schools in several states in Brazil. Not only did Júlia publish the book under her maiden name, but also she and her sister explicitly stated in the book's prologue that their aim was to make up for what they saw as the poor quality of children's books written by male authors.[12]

Contos infantis em verso e prosa was only the first of Almeida's many successes. It was followed by the serialised novels *A família Medeiros* (*The Medeiros Family*, 1892) and *A viúva Simões* (*The Widow Simões*, 1897), both of which appeared in the prestigious newspaper *Gazeta de Notícias*, and *A casa verde* (*The Green House*), co-authored with her husband and published under the shared pseudonym 'A. Julinto' in 1898. *The Bankruptcy* (1901) was her first novel to be published as a printed book rather than as a serial, a sign of both her growing stature as a writer and of the novel's outstanding significance.

Apart from her work as a writer, Almeida was also instrumental in shaping the intellectual life of Rio de Janeiro in her role as host of the 'Salão Verde', or 'Green Salon', a regular gathering of intellectuals that took its name from the ambience of her plant-filled home, which sat atop a hill in the charming district of Santa Teresa, overlooking Rio's city centre. She and Filinto built the house in 1904 – in part with the profits she received from sales of *The Bankruptcy* – and for 21 years the couple welcomed a stream of prominent writers, politicians and artists.[13] Almeida's oldest daughter, Margarida Lopes, describes her mother's closest friends as 'bourgeois women with no literary pretensions'.[14] However, the pages of *O País* reveal that she was working alongside other female writers as early as the 1890s, an activity that would intensify following her accession to the Federação Brasileira pelo Progresso Feminino (Brazilian Federation for Women's Progress) in 1922.[15]

In fact, Almeida was well-acquainted with Emilia Moncorvo Bandeira de Melo – a woman who was, incredibly, the best-paid columnist in *O País*.[16] In one of her chronicles, Melo comments on a literary conference organised by Almeida on 18 November 1905:

> It is today, Saturday, that Mrs. Júlia Lopes de Almeida gives her lecture on the empire of fashion, which I intend to listen to and applaud conscientiously for two strong reasons: first, because the lecture will

> be truly beautiful and worthy of the talent of the person delivering it; second, because this distinguished lady breaks the routine and presents herself valiantly in a tribune until now occupied only by men. It is a triumph over prejudice that deserves warm applause.[17]

Presenting at such literary conferences represented an opportunity to achieve indisputable prestige in Rio's intellectual circles, and, as Melo writes, Júlia was one of the first women to conquer such spaces. Such acclaim and social acceptance as a writer emerged partly because of what Michele Fanini has called her 'conciliatory spirit',[18] that is, her ability to juggle motherhood and a successful literary career. Her capacity to navigate the competing demands of motherhood and artistic achievement rendered her acceptable to a local intelligentsia which, however self-consciously progressive, often harboured reservations about the prospect of women's liberation.

Three years before her death, Júlia reflected on the advances of the feminist movement in Brazil, driven in part by the work of the Brazilian Federation for Women's Progress. When she was invited to deliver the opening speech of the II Congresso Internacional Feminista (Second International Feminist Conference), held in Rio de Janeiro in June 1931, Almeida confessed:

> Ladies! On behalf of the organisers of this Congress and on behalf of our Earth, I have been ordered to express to you, in my voice, warm greetings, which I convey to you with joy. I obey this order because my voice comes from another century, it carries the contrast of the times in its disharmonious vibration, but it also evokes something of the paths that I have crossed … I come from another century and have an ancient soul to which some prejudices, I cannot deny it, still cling, like wisps of clouds on bare rocks; but I understand the present and applaud with both hands all initiatives that tend to support and improve future societies. Anyone who has known how to age knows how the expressions of things and beings change as the days go by. We cannot be today what we were yesterday, just as we will not be tomorrow what we are now.[19]

Numbering herself among those who have 'known how to age', Almeida acknowledges the feminist movement's successes while situating herself as a woman whose views on gender remain partially anchored in an earlier century. Despite her own admission that she did not see herself as occupying the bleeding edge of gender politics in 1931, the fact that she

was invited to give this address indicates her continued standing among feminists in the 1930s and makes her subsequent descent into obscurity all the more startling.

From 1925 to 1931 she lived in Paris with her husband and her children, before moving back to Brazil. In 1934, she went to Luanda (in what is today the Republic of Angola) to visit her youngest daughter, Lúcia, who had fallen ill and was homesick for Brazil. According to Cláudio Lopes, Lúcia had graduated from music school and was a 'pianist, singer, and musician of unusual talent'.[20] While in Africa, Almeida contracted malaria, and her health deteriorated.[21] As soon as she was strong enough to travel, she returned to Rio de Janeiro with her daughter, where she passed away on 30 May 1934, eight days after her arrival.[22]

In (re)viewing the careers of Júlia and other female writers of her generation, Rita Schmidt encourages us to reflect on the social and economic circumstances that enabled their participation in the public sphere:

> One question that begs to be considered is related to the material conditions that made it possible for these women writers to participate, though marginally, in the sphere of public culture. With very few exceptions, these writers were members of white elite families and/or married educated bourgeois men who patronized their writing endeavours, sometimes acting as intermediaries in their wives' access to publishing.[23]

It is true that the privileged position that Almeida's husband enjoyed as editor of the newspaper *A Semana*, and the couple's close friendship with the director of *Jornal do Comércio*, granted her access to the publishing industry. Yet, it was her considerable literary talents, manifested in works published in a variety of genres over the course of five decades, that earned her a significant place in the Brazilian Republic of Letters.

Her times ...

The Bankruptcy depicts a period in the history of Brazil that is not well known to Anglophone readers. It is set during the early years of Brazil's Old Republic (1889–1930), in the period immediately following the abolition of slavery in 1888. The transition to democracy began with a coup headed by Marshal Manuel Deodoro da Fonseca, which precipitated

the exile of Emperor Dom Pedro II and his family. Dom Pedro was forced to flee to France but dreamed of returning to Brazil until his death in 1891, the year in which *The Bankruptcy* begins.

As Almeida's novel makes clear, these sweeping political changes were not universally applauded. Many wealthy landowners lamented the coming of the Republic, and plenty of peasants remained sceptical of the new regime's intentions. These antagonisms were made glaringly clear with the eruption of the Canudos War in 1896. The history of this violent peasant revolt was recorded in the famous work *Os Sertões* (*Backlands: The Canudos Campaign,* 1902), written by the journalist Euclides da Cunha – a book that remains to this day a stirring examination of the regional tensions and political radicalism that characterised Almeida's era.

To stimulate investment and industrialisation, the architects of the young Brazilian Republic adopted a monetary policy known as the Encilhamento (literally, 'saddling up'). The consequences of this policy underpin the plot of *The Bankruptcy*, which depicts how the rise of coffee production in Brazil coincided with the ascendence of the stock market as a major influence in the national economy. As part of the Encilhamento, Marshal Deodoro da Fonseca elected a new minister of finance, the eloquent liberal, orator and jurist Rui Barbosa, to usher in ambitious new market reforms. Barbosa sought to transform Brazil into a global hub for commerce along the lines of the United States. By means of protective tariffs and liberal credit policies, he envisioned Brazil rapidly ascending to the upper ranks of the world's industrial economies. In reality, his policies encouraged financial manipulation and inflation, and the Brazilian industry failed to grow at the rate necessary to meet domestic demand.

The results of Barbosa's efforts were most visible in a massive stock market boom, which increased nearly tenfold the combined value of the corporations listed on the stock exchanges of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo between May 1888 and December 1891.[24] In 1892, this vast economic bubble burst, provoking widespread bankruptcies and the collapse of Brazil's financial markets. Far from catching up with the United States, Brazil faced severe economic stagnation until the end of the First World War, when the shortage of imports spurred the development of domestic industries.[25]

The economic changes of the turn of the century were accompanied by intensifying urbanisation, and *The Bankruptcy* can be situated within a tradition of Brazilian urban novels that showcased life in the capital of the new Republic. These include Maria Benedita Bormann's *Lésbia*

(*Lésbia*, 1890), Aluízio Azevedo's *O cortiço* (*The Slum*, 1890), Visconde de Taunay's *O encilhamento* (*Encilhamento*, 1894) and Machado de Assis's *Dom Casmurro* (1899).

The action of Almeida's novel alternates between the domestic environment, the maritime milieu of the docks and coffee warehouses, and the streets and hills of Rio de Janeiro's old city centre. The successive residences of Francisco Teodoro, the businessman at the heart of the novel's winding plot, show his ascent up the rungs of Rio society. From a house on Rua da Candelária, located in the city centre, he moves his family to a sprawling mansion on Rua Voluntários da Pátria, in Botafogo – an area popular with the nouveau riche. The coffee trade, in contrast, is centred on Rua de São Bento, and Almeida's descriptions of the dust, sweat and noise of that region stand in marked contrast to her depictions of Teodoro and Camila's tranquil gardens. The other streets and central regions of Rio appear as the female and male characters move around the city by tram or on foot, creating a panorama that accurately reflects the social and economic inequalities of the city.

From her home on the hill of Santa Teresa, Almeida had a privileged view of Rio de Janeiro's city centre. In the chronicles she wrote for *O País*, she never tired of sharing her fascination with Rio's landscape with her readers: 'Through my open window I see the grass and the grove of the garden still wet from the dew of the night, and the grey clouds that cover the beautiful hills of our city.'[26] Elsewhere in her writing, however, she denounced the government's disregard for adequate lighting and sanitation measures, and its neglect of the older streets that crossed the hills around which the city had grown for three centuries. Many of these streets were demolished as part of the extensive urban renewal projects carried out by Mayor Pereira Passos between 1902 and 1906.[27] As such, *The Bankruptcy* is a loving memorialisation of a vanished Rio de Janeiro, characterised by stark divisions between a wealthy class with aristocratic pretensions, an impoverished middle class, and workers still living under the long shadow of slavery.

In a note found by her oldest daughter, Margarida, Almeida reveals that she had begun work on *The Bankruptcy* at a very young age, only to abandon the project. She destroyed most of this early manuscript, 'feeling that it was lacking what the subject demanded and the knowledge of life'. It was only later, 'after many years of married life, and becoming five times a mother', that she completed the novel.[28] As noted earlier, fragments of this early attempt survive as entries in her collection *Traços e iluminuras*.

Her themes …

The traumatic and transformative experience of the stock market collapse became a recognisable theme in world literature at the end of the nineteenth century. Halina Suwala, in an analysis of Émile Zola's *L'argent* (*Money*, 1891), established the category of the 'novel of the stock exchange',[29] a coinage that precedes Ericka Beckman's analysis of the 'stock market novel' in Latin America developed in her book *Capital Fictions* (2013). One of *The Bankruptcy*'s chief contributions to Brazilian and world literature is its early critique of financial capitalism from a woman's point of view. In *Central at the Margin: Five Brazilian Women Writers*, Renata Wasserman comments that Almeida was 'one of the few Brazilian writers of either sex to issue a novel that sits squarely in the world of business'.[30] The volatility of emerging financial markets introduced insecurities into everyday life that affected women in profound ways, and Almeida's novel clearly shows women attempting to piece together their lives amidst an economic catastrophe provoked by the senseless risks taken by powerful men.

The Bankruptcy is not only an astute critique of the effects of financial capitalism on domestic life, but also a unique example of an adultery novel written by a woman. The killing of adulterous wives (but not husbands) was a tragically common practice in Brazil that was legally sanctioned until the proclamation of the Penal Code of 1830. Although such killings were subsequently criminalised, the practice nevertheless continued, and the updated Penal Code of 1890 even contained a provision allowing men to escape punishment if they could prove such murders were mere 'crimes of passion'.[31]

Male novelists were not immune to such widespread anxieties about female promiscuity and the risks it posed to the social order, and such preoccupations were manifested in a literary genre that Bill Overton has dubbed the 'novel of wifely adultery'.[32] Popularised by the scandal attending the publication of Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856), other famous examples of this genre include Eça de Queirós's *O Primo Basílio* (*Cousin Bazilio*, 1878), Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (1878) and Machado de Assis's *Dom Casmurro* (1899). *The Bankruptcy* is notable for adopting some of the conventions of this genre while critiquing others; indeed, the novel itself may be read as a rebuke to male writers who are all too eager to blame the modern world's ills on women's bad behaviour. After all, in *The Bankruptcy*, no woman is caught in the act of ruining the nation's economy, and in the context of such colossal errors committed by men, the crime of wifely adultery seems comparatively trivial. In this

way, Almeida's novel entwines her criticism of stock market speculation with a commentary on the role of literature in shaping gender politics and a social space of female companionship outside the conventional patriarchal family.[33]

Furthermore, parallel to the story of Francisco Teodoro's fortune and ruin and Camila's affair, we find a considerable number of characters with precise roles in the plot, and subplots that expand the social realism and topography of the novel. The Portuguese businessmen and the captain of the steamboat *Neptune*, João Rino, represent the diversity of political positions of the time, from nostalgia for the monarchy to the nationalism of the Brazilians. João Rino's love for his homeland and the Brazilian people echoes Almeida's own view, which is expressed in her chronicles published in *O País,* through her criticism and suggestions for improvements to the city of Rio de Janeiro and Brazil. Through the female characters such as Nina, Noca, Sancha, and Itelvina, Almeida focused on religious hypocrisy, racism, the relationship between masters and servants after the abolition of slavery, the unfair treatment of mixed-race and black servants and dependants, the lack of job opportunities for single women and widows, the pitfalls of the marriage of convenience and the consequences of adultery, which mainly affect the female sex. Through her secondary characters, men and women, Almeida reproduced the divergent ideas about the emancipation of women.

Despite being a major success upon its publication, *The Bankruptcy*, along with many of Almeida's other works, fell out of print in the following decades. This is all the more extraordinary when one considers that Almeida was so popular among her contemporaries that a short note in the newspaper *A Noticia* from 1916 describes how crowds of her fans descended on her home in Rio de Janeiro to wish her a happy birthday.[34] Thankfully, recent years have witnessed an explosion of renewed interest in Almeida among Brazilian scholars and critics, and seven new editions of her works have been published in Brazil since 2018.[35] Nevertheless, she remains largely unknown beyond Lusophone academic circles. Although authors such as Machado de Assis and Clarice Lispector have recently achieved international recognition and received new English translations, Brazilian literature, particularly that written by women, remains largely undiscovered. This publication of *The Bankruptcy* thus makes an important female voice from the Global South available to Anglophone readers, and brings this unjustly neglected writer to a larger audience.

Notes

1 Stevenson 2010, 264.
2 De Man 2002, 80.
3 A. G. 1902, 1.
4 Fanini 2009, 325.
5 Translations of Almeida's works into English include the chronicles 'Did You Notice?' and 'I Can't Have a Single Private Thought', from her book *Eles e Elas* (1910), translated by Darlene J. Sadlier (1992).
6 Needell 1987.
7 Costruba 2017, 75.
8 Amed 2010, 97.
9 Almeida, C. n/d, 7. All translations from Portuguese are our own unless otherwise noted.
10 Silva and Luca, forthcoming.
11 Alós 2008, 691–3.
12 Eleutério 2005, 74.
13 Amed 2010, 87.
14 Fanini 2009, 321.
15 Silva and Luca, forthcoming.
16 Amado, apud Vasconcellos 1998, 12.
17 Melo, under the pseudonym Carmen Dolores, *O País*, 19 November 1905.
18 Fanini 2009, 323.
19 Almeida 1931.
20 Almeida, C. n/d, 9.
21 Igoki n/d, 9–10.
22 Almeida, M. n/d, 12.
23 Schmidt 2015, 120.
24 Haber 2000, 84.
25 Pelaez 1977, 683–9.
26 Almeida, under the pseudonym Ecila Worms, 'A moda', *O País,* 14 June 1892.
27 Silva 2019.
28 Almeida, M. n/d, 5.
29 Suwala qtd. in Wasserman 2001, 193.
30 Wasserman 2007, 38.
31 Thomas 1991, 20.
32 Overton 2002, 3.
33 For a comparative analysis of *Madame Bovary* and *The Bankruptcy* refer to Vezzani 2020.
34 'x x x' 1916, 2.
35 The publishers of these editions are: Martin Claret, Via Leitura, Principis, Penguin Companhia, Unicamp, Lafonte and Editora Campos.

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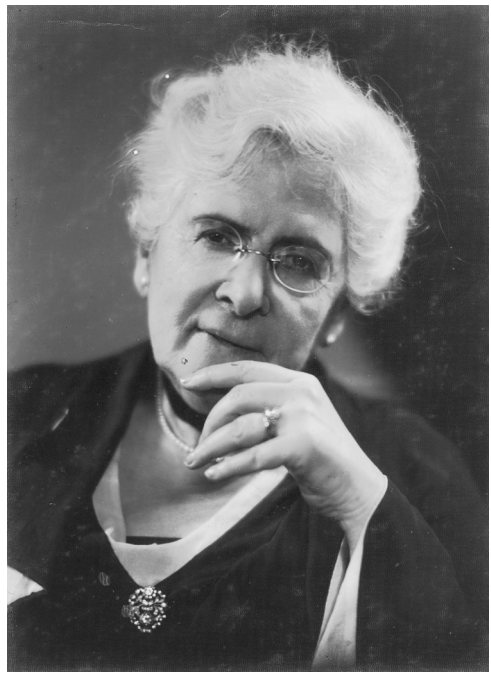


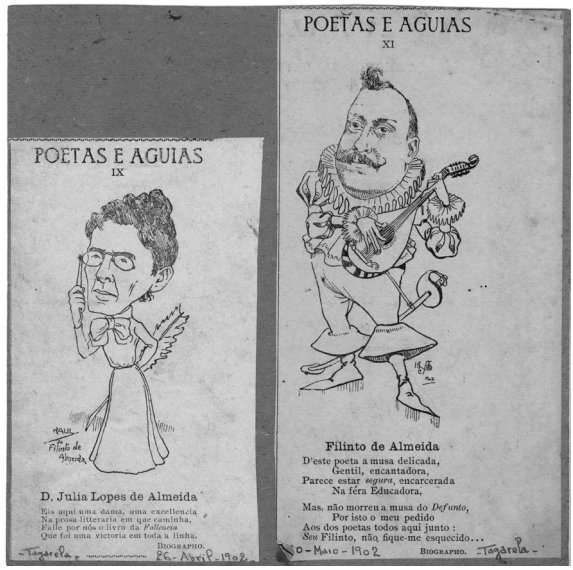
1 Photo of Júlia Lopes de Almeida, no date. Source: Filinto de Almeida Archive, Academia Brasileira de Letras, Brazil.

2 Photo of Filinto de Almeida, Júlia Lopes de Almeida, Margarida Lopes de Almeida and a group of people at Casa Verde, no date. Source: Filinto de Almeida Archive, Academia Brasileira de Letras, Brazil.

3 Photo of the interior of Lopes de Almeida's family house in Santa Teresa, Rio de Janeiro, no date. Source: Filinto de Almeida Archive, Academia Brasileira de Letras, Brazil.

4 Reproduction of a photo of Júlia Lopes de Almeida giving the lecture 'Women and the Arts' at Escola de Belas Artes, Rio de Janeiro, on 16 September 1916, published in *Revista da Semana*, no date. Source: Filinto de Almeida Archive, Academia Brasileira de Letras, Brazil.

5 Photo of Filinto de Almeida, Lúcia Lopes de Almeida, Júlia Lopes de Almeida, Izaura Drummond and Margarida Lopes de Almeida, no date. Source: Filinto de Almeida Archive, Academia Brasileira de Letras, Brazil.



6 Caricature of Júlia Lopes de Almeida in which the novel *The Bankruptcy* is mentioned, and Filinto de Almeida, published in *Tagarela*, 26 April 1910 and 10 May 1910 respectively. Source: Filinto de Almeida Archive, Academia Brasileira de Letras, Brazil.

The Bankruptcy

by Júlia Lopes de Almeida
Translated by Cintia Kozonoi Vezzani and Jason Rhys Parry

Chapter I

Rio de Janeiro burned under the December sun, and an oven-hot air spread through the atmosphere, scalding the cobblestones. The entirety of Rua São Bento was congested with heavy, clattering wagons smelling of raw coffee. It was the working hour.

Amid the clamour of horseshoes, the alarming rush of wheels, and the skittish movements of animals yanked still by coarse hands, the people on the street darkened with sweat, crushed and breathless.

That day, on the doorstep of Francisco Teodoro's warehouse, there was a great commotion. A driver organising sacks on his wagon shouted angrily, turning to the dark interior of the warehouse:

'Move along, now! I must be at the harbour by eleven!'

And the porters came, following one another at a fantastic pace, tossing the sacks atop the wagon, raising at each throw a cloud of dust that enveloped them. Some were white men, with hairy chests barely covered by filthy wrinkled cotton shirts. Others were black, naked from the waist up, chests shining with sweat and eyes bulging.

The smell of coffee mixed with the damp scent of those moving bodies, whose blood pulsed visibly in the swollen veins of their necks and arms.

In the desperate hurry, the irate driver cursed furiously at the others who passed too close, scraping the sides of his wagon weighed down with burlap sacks, raising a cloud of dust that they all inhaled together. The others responded in the same improper manner. Meanwhile, the tilbury drivers in their gridlocked lane listened and laughed, chewing on their cigarettes.

The porters zigzagged in the middle of it all like ants on the march, their heads curved by the weight of their bags, elbowing their straining bodies past the donkeys' glossy rumps.

Every now and then, pedestrians quickly retreated inside one open door or another, for fear of being smashed by the wheels that invaded the pavements and noisily skidded over the cobblestone street.

Here and there, old black women, their white kerchiefs tied into caps over their curly hair, swept gaily and swiftly at the spilled coffee beans with brooms made of palm leaves. With the same speed, they sifted them in small bowls made of thin sheets of metal held together with nails. That was their business, which in those days of abundance produced so much prosperity. They enriched themselves with the leftovers.

Throughout the entire street all one could see were gesticulating arms and moving legs. The mixing voices shared gossip, laughing with the same triumph, moaning with the same effort, in a noisy and inharmonious orchestra.

Excepting the African women collecting coffee and some Italian women who dared to leave the burlap factory carrying dozens of sacks upon their heads, no other women stepped on those cobblestones, more accustomed to the weight of ill-mannered brutes.

There virile force dominated, physical strength, moved by iron muscles and flexed chests intent on wringing a tough living out of life. These athletic bodies, these echoing voices that resounded like the strident trumpets of war, gave to the old street the same pulse that fresh young blood gives to an artery, flowing with impulsive vigour.

The heat wave was already arriving from the other streets in panting heaves. It came from Rua dos Beneditinos and from the warehouses along Rua Municipal, bursting with coffee. The warehouses emptied out their riches towards the hangars and the docks only to greedily fill themselves again as if they were famished.

In a few doorways, workers sat down to rest a moment, their elbows stuck to raised knees, chewing the leaves of their cigarettes, tasting the smoke, looking with indifference at the rushing multitude that, by means fair or foul, made their way through life in a whirlwind of dust and shouts.

Sometimes, a group of young boys, mostly Italians, emerged from the street corners to roam the blocks, laughing out loud, filling up their pockets with the old African women's spare beans, whose cries of complaint were drowned out in the dense din of the street.

Inside the buildings there was the same mad dash.

Breaks were unknown at Francisco Teodoro's warehouse.

The first clerk, Joaquim, a swarthy man with a pockmarked face, deep-set eyes, and protruding cheekbones, waved along the tired porters in his shirt sleeves.

At the door, the foreman, a mulatto, punched holes in each sack that left the warehouse so that thin trails of coffee beans escaped through the openings. The porters only slowed down slightly during this step in the operation, and the coffee fell singing to the floor.

In the back, a thin and yellow young boy, Ribas, recorded the number of bags taken out in a notebook. From a ladder nearby the porters climbed and threw down the sacks in a tall pile, running across the blackened asphalt and beaten soil.

Everything was done with an urgency that demanded grand movements.

An ardent sigh of life, a fiery breath, came from the hundred men moving in concert, all gripped by the fever of ambition. It penetrated the whole of the dark windowless basement full of stacked bags and adorned with endless spiderwebs that crisscrossed the dirty ceiling beams, twisting like long viscous valances of faded crepe.

At times, a cascading sound echoed throughout the warehouse. It was the coffee being poured into bags, followed by the pounding of shovels that unleashed clouds of dust carrying a pungent odour.

Outside, whips and loud curses cracked the air. In this confusion of sounds, human voices and wagon wheels merged with the clatter of the animals' hooves.

Some exhausted porters would stop for a while, wiping their sweat, only to start off again, compelled by the gaze of Joaquim, who restlessly paced hither and thither, holding up his trousers as they threatened to slide down his thin hips.

'Make haste, lads! Make haste! We have much to do today!'

This was his constant refrain.

And there was indeed always much to do at that warehouse, one of the most prominent commercial coffee depots in the trade. One might say that money had learned on its own how to arrive at the company's vault and ran towards it without interruption.

To the left of the warehouse, and communicating with it through a small narrow door, was a hallway and stairs leading up to an office.

In an ample square room, with old wood panelling and cheap wallpaper, Senra, the bookkeeper, wrote standing up next to a desk in the middle of the office. At another table two other men were at work. The older man, Mota, had an amiable smile and a submissive expression; the other was a liverish boy with a thin black beard that sprouted sparsely from his square chin.

In this room, the work was done in silence. The quills moved without stopping, hardly giving time for the hands to flip through the

books and other papers that lay scattered. The men uttered phrases without raising their eyes and the responses came in monosyllables.

On one side of the room, atop a small solid table between a window and the wall was a printing press. On the other side, on a high bench of painted wood, was a water jug darkened with use. Along the walls, spiral-bound folders were arranged in neat lines, filled to bursting, and labelled: bills, receipts, and letters awaiting answers. In the back, between the water jug and the entrance hall, a window opened onto the darkness of the warehouse, illuminated only by a dim and narrow skylight.

There was an annex next to this office with a window onto the street and equally miserly furnishings, in which the master of the house wrote his correspondence, comfortably rocking in an oversized armchair.

There he was, just finishing a letter.

His entire being radiated abundance and the self-satisfaction of those who emerge victorious from a hard fight. He was fat and bald, with a thin greyish beard cropped close to his pale face. He had calm teal eyes, small white teeth, and the pleasant air of a contented bourgeois.

Although he was not tall, the house trembled under his firm heavy steps.

One employee or another would come ask him a question, to which he always responded with patience, clearly emphasising each point, down to the smallest detail, so as to prevent any confusion.

Francisco Teodoro, at his broad desk made of peroba wood, faced the safe, which, at that moment, had its latch and lock open.

He had the habit, which had by then become something of a mania, to fiddle with his stubby fat hand the money and keys that he kept in the right pocket of his trousers. At the beginning of his professional life – harsh and precarious as it was – he would do this with intention. But now it represented a mechanical act, done without any trace of greed or pride in his possessions.

After many hours of feverish work done without interruption, a brief respite arrived with coffee, which a mulatto youth, Isidoro, would bring first to the office, and only afterwards serve to the other workers at the warehouse.

The overused stairs creaked under the weight of the neighbouring commissioner, João Ramos, and the commander, Lemos, who both came up from Rua dos Beneditinos. There was also Negreiros, from Rua das Violas, and Inocêncio Braga, a newcomer to the group. At two o'clock every afternoon these men would gather in Teodoro's office for their coffee break, resting their bodies and lightening their spirits with discussions about their varied interests and preferences.

On this day, the bells had already struck two when the businessmen finally arrived.

Francisco Teodoro got up and kicked at the floor to straighten out his crumpled trousers.

'Gentlemen! You took so long…'

'Blame Lemos, it's his fault…'

And then:

'Your warehouse is teeming!'

'I have been exporting heaps of coffee!'

'What a lucky one you are! Enjoy the season. It could not be better!'

The year was 1891, and the price of coffee had soared. The industry was in full swing and small producers were leapfrogging ahead in great jumps.

'What I envy about you,' said Ramos, the only one who dared to address Teodoro so informally, 'is not your fortune, but the mulatta who starches your shirts!'

The others looked on, laughing at the master of the house, who wore a lustrous white plastron and savoured his coffee with an air of satisfaction. He was standing, holding his saucer away from his body, grasping it firmly with the tips of his fingers.

'Not a bad joke,' grumbled Lemos, the commander of the Beneficência, scrunching his small childlike nose so that it was nearly submerged between his two cheeks.[1]

Following a weak and discordant laugh, they heard the flutey voice of Inocêncio.

'Your neighbour Gama Torres seems to have built a mansion overnight, did you hear?' The question was directed at Teodoro.

'Gentlemen, is this really true?!'

'Indeed!… I have proof… After all, it was I who inspired him in this small bit of business…'

All gazes were now fixed on Inocêncio Braga. He was a slender little man with small feverish black eyes and a thin brown moustache that one had to strain to see.

'It is hard for me to credit such miracles,' Teodoro pondered aloud, setting down his cup on the tray that Isidoro offered him.

'I aver it was a matter of daring. He foresaw the high price, filled up his warehouse, and waited for the right occasion. Of course, his father-in-law helped him.'

1 The Beneficência was a hospital founded in 1840 to serve immigrants from Portugal living in Rio de Janeiro.

'He did not dwell on what would happen if the price dropped.'

'Who said anything about a price drop?! I tell you now that the market of Rio de Janeiro would be the best in the world if it had more men like that one. Gentlemen, fortune blesses the audacious. Be sure that the good businessman is not the one who works like a black and follows the worn paths of his illiterate ancestors. The modern businessman acts more with his spirit than with his arms and expands his horizons through noble conquests of thought and calculus. Torres is one of these. He has character. I understand men.'

They all looked at Inocêncio with a certain respect, recognising his intellectual superiority.

'Gama Torres has the knack – a special touch, indeed,' declared Lemos.

Immediately, Inocêncio added:

'Well, the man is destined to become our Rothschild!'

Teodoro contracted his eyebrows. It had always been his dream to become the city's foremost merchant – the most skilled, the most powerful.

Returning his attention to the scene before him, Teodoro inquired about that fabulous business of Gama Torres, asking after the smallest details. The occasion was favourable to such speculations, and Teodoro meditated on the subject, stroking the greyish beard that was trimmed close to his soft, fleshy face.

Negreiros, after wandering the room and poking his bulbous nose through the office door, turned back to the others and said in a low voice:

'Oh, hell! I still can't get used to seeing that old man you keep around to help the bookkeeper!'

'What do you want?' whispered Teodoro. 'Matos recommended him. And in the end, he was a good find. He needs the work more than those young ones do. And he does what needs doing. I wouldn't even think of replacing him, either. He's diligent.'

'That other eccentric you keep here is downstairs. You know, Joaquim? No one would think it was the same man if they saw him in the street.'

'Ah, a walking carnival, that one. Overly fond of the ladies. I wish him well, though. Because here he works like no one else. He's the heart of the party, but he puts me at ease.'

'I've heard that he will marry Delfina from Recreio…'

'All stories! The lad is serious.'

'Well, stupid he isn't,' grumbled Negreiros while searching for his hat.

Inocêncio excused himself as well. He was on his way to Torres. He had so many tasks to do that he barely had time to swallow his coffee.

After he left, the others exchanged inquisitive glances. Finally, commander Lemos pronounced sentence:

'This Inocêncio is a wily one! Here he is, acting like he's the director of the bank. I don't doubt for one minute that Torres was pulled in by him… Such a silver tongue!

'And Inocêncio knows how to find the right trees to lean on. Barros has been treating him to some handsome commissions, and it's no accident he's now searching for Torres… He knows how to insert himself in the best circles. He didn't come from Portugal like us, without luggage and smelling of pine needles. He brought gloves and silk socks, the scoundrel!'

'Ah, but they are the ones who sink…'

'When they give up the chase, and don't have the ruses that Inocêncio has, perhaps. But he sings like a bird to lure us!'

'Plus, his superior intellect!' sighed Ramos while he reached with both hands to stretch his vest over his vast rounded belly. Afterwards, resettling himself on the small Austrian sofa, he launched into his litany of grievances about the things of this earth: the weak government, the undisciplined people, the infected city.

Earlier that morning, he had seen a platoon of soldiers marching without cadence or rhythm, and he remembered the ways in which the soldiers of his homeland had walked the streets. The uniforms were prettier, the metal more polished, the steps synchronised: one, two, one, two. It left a good taste. But these things, as with everything else here, all exhibited the same laxity.

The cursed Republic would wreck everything. They would see.

Only at the end did they ask after each other's families.

'By the way,' Ramos asked Teodoro, 'the girl who is playing the violin tomorrow at the concert for the poor – she is your daughter?'

'What concert?'

'The one tomorrow, at the Casino. It was my madam who read it in the newspaper…'

'It may be... these things come from her mother… the little one has a great talent. Even her teacher is amazed.'

'And she is a beauty! I saw her the other day,' observed Lemos.

'No, don't say this! For now, at least, we still cannot compare her with her mother,' protested Francisco Teodoro sincerely, and with a certain pride.

The others smiled.

'Oh, you certainly bagged the elephant there. You are blessed with everything, you devil!'

There was a pause.

'But really,' insisted Francisco Teodoro, 'Gama Torres got bravery on loan from somewhere. Honestly, I did not rate him for anything: a spindly little Brazilian…'

'And he only started the other day!'

'What's more, he seemed such a wallflower… so timid…'

'Hold on, now! That's not so! I knew him as a clerk at Leite Bastos. He was always a player; and there's the proof: he has gotten a mansion for himself from one day to the next. I second Inocêncio. Gama Torres is cut out to be our very own Rothschild.'

'Wait a bit!' Lemos growled, his jowls shaking and a greedy shine appearing in his tiny umber eyes. 'I wanted to do the same business, but my partner is a shuffler – a real coward! He said: 'wait, wait, wait'… And here we are!'

'He was right, he was prudent! Let Inocêncio talk. Gentlemen, the business of Rio de Janeiro is honest, and this system has not been bad,' observed Teodoro.

'Yes, Inocêncio appreciates this from the outside, and that is why he says the opposite. He calls the business world of Rio de Janeiro ignorant and run by pigs.'

'Pigs?!' the others shouted, indignant.

'Pigs,' confirmed Ramos with solemnity.

'Everything else I accept, but "pigs" I can't swallow,' observed the paunchy Lemos from his corner.

Ramos felt his answer jump from his tongue: 'Because the animals of the same species do not devour one another.' He himself confessed to being seduced by Inocêncio's exposition. What a talent the man had!

'But, after all, what does Inocêncio want?!' asked Teodoro, already standing and crossing his arms on his white cotton vest.

'He wanted… I think, to find a more developed market, with more transactions, more voluminous warehouses. He says that we haven't been able to take advantage of the prevailing winds. That we only work with our bodies. Didn't you hear him?'

'How the devil does he want us to work?'

'With our intelligence. That is clear. He explained it very well. Our market is made up of people who didn't go to school, who came up from the countryside… As for myself, I confess that I barely spent a few months at school! I was beaten a lot and learned nothing.'

There was a short silence, and before their eyes appeared nostalgic visions of their rudimentary schools, tucked away in the placid hidden corners of their villages.

After a sigh, Teodoro concluded:

'Let these doctors come with their theories and their modernisms. We will see how far they fall!'

They all exchanged glances. The truth is that they shared a sovereign disdain for the intellectual class. There afterwards arose subtle smiles of anticipation.

A few more remarks on exchange rates, stock market transactions, and subjects read in that day's *Jornal do Commercio* filled up a brisk quarter of an hour. Finally, they left, speaking in raised voices, saying how the house smelled of money.

Francisco Teodoro went for his tour of the warehouse. Seeing him downstairs, Joaquim came quickly, cleaning his coffee-soaked moustache with his tongue before giving his report.

'We are waiting for the coffee from Simas. His cart was close by but stuck between two grand wagons owned by Gama Torres. There's something excessive in the amount of coffee that warehouse was swallowing.'

'I already know this... well, did you send the bills upstairs?'

The other tried to disguise a flash of vexation and answered in a low voice: 'Yes, sir.' Then he shouted towards the back:

'Seu Ribas!'

Ribas crossed over towards Francisco Teodoro, who followed him to observe the area where the coffee was being bagged.

The people on the warehouse floor harboured a dislike for the penpushers, who increased their own value by depressing that of everyone else. Joaquim considered himself the warehouse's best employee and he took care to make his exacting standards known. The clerks were afraid of him, but his superiors treated him with a certain smugness, and that he could not forgive.

Old Mota, the bookkeeper's helper, was the only one who greeted him amiably and granted him every courtesy. But Joaquim read something in that adulation. Certainly, the old man was thinking about marrying off his daughter, who, at a spinsterish thirty years of age, was living in a small house on Rua Funda.

Francisco Teodoro took his time observing the packaging process. He recalled the days of slavery, when this work was done exclusively by the blacks of the nation with their sad African songs. It was more beautiful then.

The shovels would sing, rotating back and forth in a rhythmic compass, always followed by the voice: *eh, eh! eh, eh!* And now you could barely find a black worker in the warehouse! And to think there are those who still say that change only happens slowly!

Coffee beans rolled on the floor like cement beads and in the charged atmosphere it was almost impossible to breathe. Francisco Teodoro turned. The cart was at the door and the porters ran their frantic race. He was on his way upstairs when he was addressed by Neves, the owner of the storage sheds, who, seeing him from the street, stepped inside. Neves was seeking to expand his clientele, and, to encourage Teodoro, he added:

'Just now, you see, I came from your neighbour, Gama Torres. He's been sending me a stupefying number of sacks full of coffee!'

The movements of the warehouse interrupted them at every instant. Francisco Teodoro barely answered, his ideas drifting towards other paths.

He was thinking about Gama Torres, whose success everyone proclaimed with such warm words and admiration. Gama Torres was destined to become the foremost man in the market, Inocêncio had said; and Inocêncio was a man endowed with a good nose, a man of unfailing success in all his predictions. But this role – of being the mightiest financier and businessman among the mighty – had always been Teodoro's ideal. It had guided him for the entirety of his long life of work, submission, and bitterness. Was it fair that this interloper, in a single jump, had built an edifice taller and more glorious than his own, which was cemented together with tears, with sacrifices, and with so many years of effort and labour?

Francisco Teodoro left Neves without fully noticing him, meeting the man's handshake with a flaccid grip, and went upstairs to his office. On the staircase he met the mulatto Isidoro, who was holding a broom.

'Careful, now! Don't remove the spiderwebs from the warehouse.'

'No, sir! I know very well that they bring you joy.'

Francisco Teodoro detained himself a moment in his office before entering his annex.

Outside, the sun reddened the edges of the ugly and uneven facades. With their old repainted walls and absent plaster, the houses guarded their secrets and their fortunes. An ardent summer breath wafted over the feverish street.

The warehouses, through the cavernous mouths of their open doors, were still disgorging sacks and sacks of coffee that the locomotives

and the wagons lifted away with a grating crescendo of wheels and a gravelly crash of ironwork. Dense layers of dust billowed from the crushed earth, flittering through the air in scintillations of gold, as the coffee headed towards Prainha and Saúde.

Chapter II

On his way home, Francisco Teodoro reclined inside a tram. He persisted in his desire to read the evening paper as he felt his ideas running away on a dangerous path.

The success of Torres irritated him. It seemed as if he was standing in Teodoro's path, preventing him from reaching his goal. In a leap, Torres was ahead – a sudden and implacable obstacle.

That conquest of fortune, achieved in an instant, disturbed Teodoro. It muted the brilliance of his own riches, accumulated gradually with the daily weariness of his work. Life has its ironies. Had he been a fool?

Perhaps. He reviewed his life in Rio de Janeiro, from his days as a simple clerk, nearly illiterate, with his shaved head, faded jacket, and his noisy oversized shoes.

The day of his arrival was still fresh in his memory – it was so hot! – and he was toppled forward by kicks, poorly dressed, poorly fed, nostalgic for black bread, his mother's beatings, and the hunt for crickets in the moors of his village.

Little by little other crickets began to sing in his ambitious ears. The sound of money is music. He had come to make money, and threw himself at his destiny, tolerating all oppression, exerting himself to meet every brutal demand with the resignation of a dog.

In this way years passed by, sleeping on infected doormats, wetting his bare pillow with tears until his savings started to grow, slowly and greedily.

That childhood of banishment was now his triumph. His passion for money stretched far back in time. He was guided by it, and he knew no other passion in his youth. All his time, all his life, were consecrated to business. Business was his dream during the night, his hope during

the day, the target towards which his adolescent and youthful soul was directed.

He could not explain how, only by rubbing against more cultivated people, he slowly started to lose the thick layer of ignorance that had theretofore adorned him. His writing developed, became firmer, and his inclination for accounting became prodigious, sharpened by his acute sense for the verification of profits. Double-checking accounts, writing letters, formulating projects, and attentively observing his work and that of others, he had become a knowledgeable businessman who knew exactly what he had in his possession. He was a clean man, well-received by society.

He had not been allowed to be a boy. He had not known how to be young. He had given himself completely to the goddess of fortune, without realising that he was sacrificing the best part of life. For him, Brazil was the shop counter, the packed warehouse, where the effort of each individual has its own prize.

Outside of commerce, there was nothing that could divert his attention.

Times of bitterness and hope, they were!

Remembering the past, Francisco Teodoro searched within himself for the elements that he could use to repel these outside influences and oppose himself to the rush of speculation; he would find them spread throughout the rough days of uncertainty and the softness of prosperity.

This retrospection pleased him; it summoned a scattering of episodes.

The time when he had lived in a small apartment in an alley of Bragança, shaded by the outstretched roof covered with grass and by the balcony with dirty green blinds.

Below and in front of the apartment, carpenters hammered pine boards that gave the filthy alley the fresh scent of a forest. What did he care about the hammering? He was only at home for a few hours! During the day, he worked; in the evening, he went to the theatre or to Sidônia's house. What could have become of Sidônia? She must be around still, in some corner… grown old.

Sundays were at Matos's country house, playing cards, the Portuguese-style dinners, and the patient hospitality of kind Dona Vica… Everything turned around in his memory, smoothly, smoothly.

It was in the comfort of that country house, seeing himself surrounded by esteem, next to his relaxed and happy friend, that he felt his own importance and remembered that there should be other pleasures on earth. But his heart, tired of the tremendous struggle, denied him new

inclinations. His forgotten homeland no longer possessed the slightest charm to attract him. His mother had passed away and his only sister retreated to a convent. A door had closed on his childhood.

He felt lonely. He started to get tired and to feel disgusted by the easy women with whom he enjoyed momentary relationships. Even Sidônia angered him with her neediness and constant quarrels.

He committed himself to protecting the institutions of his country, keeping distinguished company, and making contributions to the Beneficência. Deep inside, it was neither distractions that he was seeking out, nor charity that animated him. Another reason had filtered into his soul to inspire that vocation for doing good.

And then the accolade arrived.

It was only after becoming a commander that Teodoro felt embarrassed at his housing and moved into the second floor on Rua da Candelária, which he furnished with laurel wood and an exuberance of coloured prints on the walls. Yet, he still felt that his happy house lacked something.

Indigestion came on, along with insomnia.

A doctor was consulted. He suggested a journey by land – or maybe marriage – to help regulate his habits. Teodoro thought it was too soon to travel. First, he had to consolidate his fortune. The idea of marriage seemed to him more promising.

What would be the point of keeping everything he had accumulated if not to share it with a dedicated wife and half a dozen children who would inherit his virtues and possessions?

In his daydreams, he started to sketch the idea of an heir. He would have a boy – one who would use his name, follow his traditions and would represent, above all, the continuation of the house on Rua de São Bento. The house would grow with his prestige and his youth, well established through the support and experience of his father. The son would be his living statue, and through him Teodoro would live again, but this time a life better and more perfect. At least the boy would have a real childhood and proper instruction.

And the idea so doggedly pursued him that on a sunny Sunday Teodoro opened himself up to Matos, who welcomed the confidences of his friend with a solemn and discreet air.

Teodoro remembered quite well the face with which the other answered him:

'I know what you want. We had here in the neighbourhood a family that fits your description. Poor people, but educated. The oldest daughter is the one who suits you. Beautiful and serious. Very dignified.'

Francisco Teodoro muttered:

'A woman like this would serve me well.'

'The devil of it is that they are moving to Sergipe.'

'Ah, so it's over.'

'It's not over yet. For now, they are staying with some aunts who have a house in Castelo. There is still time to arrange a visit. I'll take care of the rest.'

It was on a dark night that Teodoro, more out of condescension than curiosity, arrived with Matos at the house of the Rodrigues women on the Castelo hill.

It was cold. Somewhere on the street a dog unleashed a long dolorous howl.

It was Dona Itelvina who opened the door. She was the eldest of the house's owners – a tall, dry woman with a large nose, who wore a dun-coloured dress made of wool. While the others were still making their introductions she was already sitting down, lifting her sharp knee up under her sewing. She had no time to waste.

The other lady was out. Teodoro would get to know her later. That one was full of confidence and deeply religious. She had gone to the novena at the Carmo with two younger nieces and her brother, the old Rodrigues.

In a vast room, nearly naked and dimly illuminated by a kerosene lamp, Teodoro saw, for the first time, Dona Emilia, a beautiful lady with a majestic air and sly eyes, and her two eldest daughters, Camila and Sofia.

Camila was doing crochet next to the lamp. Sofia retreated to one side of the canapé, complaining of a headache. And the mother started speaking with an air of sincerity, very expansively. Each time the name Camila came out of her mouth it was accompanied by praise. Camila was the eldest daughter and the most educated. She had enjoyed the time of abundance during which her father still had a profitable position.

Camila's fingers rushed at the crochet. Certainly, she must have missed some stitches as she felt Teodoro's gaze burning her skin, which was beautiful, with the spotless purity of a blue camellia.

Dona Emilia asserted that her *Mila*, as she was called in the house, had forgotten her gifts, owing to the necessities of domestic work.

Francisco Teodoro was moved by the idea that this woman, sculpted to be a queen, should spend her days pricking her fingers with needles or have calluses on her hands from her use of the broom or the iron.

Work! Working is good for men, with their rigid skin and souls made of courage. He looked at the young lady with veneration.

She was beautiful, tall, with large velvety eyes, wavy black hair, and perfect teeth – which were very white, but seldom visible. He could see them only when she smiled. Her sister, Sofia, remained in the shadow, making it difficult to discern her features.

After one of these phrases, where an abundance of maternal love illuminated some facet of her perfection, Camila left her seat by the lamp and went to the window to observe the darkness beyond.

How swiftly that night passed by!

Francisco Teodoro left the house feeling dizzy. His friend laughed: 'What did I tell you?' He boasted of his prowess as a matchmaker, adding that very soon all his plans would bear fruit.

Days later, Matos asked for Camila's hand on his friend's behalf.

Then began the series of gifts and visits. Throughout, Mila always evinced the same embarrassment and the same soft smile.

What she heard from her family, Francisco Teodoro could not guess. He felt that she was at some moments reserved, and confident at others.

Their departure to Sergipe was postponed; there were some illnesses in the house. The engagement was prolonged. Teodoro made his pilgrimage to the Castelo hill, bearing sprigs of violet for Mila and all the sweetness of a suitor.

They were married on a beautiful day.

He gave plentiful alms to the poor of the church. Mila looked like an angel among white clouds.

Afterwards, the family departed for Sergipe. Mila's father was dull, but was carrying a stuffed wallet. Her mother, who possessed the air of a dethroned queen, was now dressed in finery, as were her sisters. They were all left to ponder Mila's future with tranquillity along with the future of Joca, the eldest son, an idle and directionless young man, whom Teodoro had promised to keep watch over.

His greatest shock had arrived when they first entered the house in Rua da Candelária. He had assumed that she would caress with eagerness the entirety of her new nest, and feel the joy of being its owner – the lady for whom so many things had been purchased. These things which constituted all the wrappings of his love. But no: rather than explore the interior of the house, Camila had gone instead to the balcony. He accompanied her.

Before and below them, grimy red roofs spread out unevenly, cutting angular lines. The lopsided houses accumulated, sagging walls threatening one another as small attic windows peeked out over the ridged roof tiles, encrusted with dirt and moss, from which short black chimneys rose, sighing forth smoke.

Camila murmured like someone speaking alone:

'If only one could see the sea…'

She said this and bent over the street. Then the nearby bell chimed and echoed sublimely, extending itself in a sound that was like the moan of an entire city. Mila stood up straight with a sudden tremor and turned her fixed gaze to the church's outline.

He had smiled at his own shock when she spoke:

'How tall it is!'

After that, calmer days followed. The woman embroidered cushions for the sofa and framed the prints with moss and dried flowers.

They had grown accustomed to one another, and were living in peace, when Sidônia re-entered the life of Teodoro, compelling him towards deviations and infidelities. Not even poor Camila had ever had any suspicion. Besides, she had lacked for nothing, and it must have been a gift for her to drape her snowy body in good clothes, to have a full table, and to walk around the city attracting gazes that delighted in her grace.

All the while, multiple large packages were sent to Sergipe.

That family was a drain, airing constant complaints in every letter, their thirst for money unquenchable.

Yet, around that time Teodoro's greatest distaste was reserved for his brother-in-law, Joca, an idle rogue who would on occasion install himself in the house. He had been the source of uncountable quarrels – aggressive in his indolence, and possessed of a foul humour exacerbated by his gambling debts. An ungrateful, ill-bred young man! Moreover, he had abandoned his daughter at the house. Poor Nina, so ill-tempered from an early age, slender as a reed, with an incessant cough that resonated down the halls. At least with time, Nina had been there to help Camila raise her daughters, since Mário was already strong as a hero!

Mário…

On the way from Largo da Carioca to the beach of Botafogo, Teodoro went about reconstructing his life, making it solid, setting it on its feet. It was with these memories of his family and work that he would entrench himself against the assaults of new ambitions.

The sea was very blue, splashed here with strokes of gold, and shaded elsewhere by the great black shadows of the outlines of the hills. A strong breeze shook the trees, and leaves flew in swirls through the dizzy air. Small children pushed a Newfoundland dog into the water, and the windows of the mansions opened ever so slightly onto the splendours of the outside world.

Close to the school, two nuns boarded the tram with bouquets of roses. Teodoro knew them. They were his daughter's teachers, and they

always singled him out, knowing that he was a religious man. They were taking the flowers to the small church in Copacabana – flowers they had promised for the salvation of a student who had been at death's door.

A simple conversation of only two minutes was like a balm for the businessman's tired spirit.

Moreover, he thought it was all beautiful, touching: a child at death's door, two religious women, one bouquet of flowers, and the vision of a small church by the sea…

When Francisco Teodoro arrived at home, his twin daughters, Rachel and Lia, were playing in the garden. As soon as they saw him opening the gate, the children jumped on him. But he barely touched their hair with his fingers, and they, too, only paused their game momentarily; and Teodoro crossed the garden.

His mansion was among the most beautiful in Botafogo. Located in the centre of a park, its balconies rose up between starry-leaved palms and the crowns of tastefully chosen trees. This was not his work. He had bought the residence from a noted connoisseur, whose bankruptcy had forced him to mortgage the house halfway through its construction and sell it as soon as the work was done.

To his left, a stone staircase flanked by a flower-laced lattice conducted him to the shelter of the second-floor terrace, where on multiple occasions the family chatted as they waited to go down for dinner. On this afternoon only the oldest son, Mário, was there, folded lazily into a rocking chair. The father kept walking, and the son sketched out the rudiments of an afternoon greeting.

Mário was a man already, though still very young, and everything about him revealed a preoccupation with luxury and concern for his own person.

In the living room there were joyful voices.

'We have guests,' thought Teodoro, seeing the male hats adorning the parlour's hangers.

When he entered the room, his wife was telling their daughter:

'Go practise, Ruth!'

Sitting next to her on the same divan, Dr Gervásio Gomes was drawing something in his notebook that made her smile. He often boasted of his skills for making caricatures. A thin man the colour of darkened wheat, he was skittish, forty-three years old and took special care with his toilette. He was slightly bald, and possessed a gaze whose sharpness was undiminished by his myopic glasses. His slight ironic smile showcased his clear teeth. They were small, like the teeth of a rodent.

Camila maintained the prodigious energy of youth. All of Rio considered her a beautiful woman. She had inherited from her mother the majesty that deeply impressed Teodoro on the day of his visit to Castelo, sweetened by a sweeping expression of serenity and kindness.

Francisco Teodoro went directly ahead to greet them, without daring to brush his lips on his wife's face, showing all the scrupulous prudency of domestic acts. He was already seated when she said to him with a tone of mild reproach:

'You will not greet Captain Rino or the maestro?'

The others were in the corner of the room, next to the piano towards which Ruth was moving, holding the violin in one hand. After offering his apologies, Teodoro turned to Captain Rino:

'I am very glad to see you here, Captain. When did you arrive back from your voyage?'

'Yesterday.'

'You will not believe it,' Camila interrupted, 'the captain has brought me a most beautiful gift!'

'What was it?' asked Dr Gervásio in a low voice.

Francisco Teodoro wiped his pinkish and gleaming bald head with a handkerchief. Mila, turning to the doctor, explained:

'A collection of orchids from the Amazon; and he promised to bring a Victoria regia for the lake.'

The doctor whispered through his teeth at a volume that only Camila could hear:

'One cannot admire a promise left unfulfilled.'

The lady gave him a quick look, as if seeking mercy for the man who was now conversing with the owner of the house.

'Why can't one admire that?!'

Captain Rino stood out among the others in the room with his blond hair and robust body. He was tall, with broad shoulders. He had big hands, light blue eyes the shade of faience, a silky moustache that looked as if it were only recently grown, and skin burned by the sea winds. One could only glimpse the whiteness of his skin on his wrists and at the base of his neck when he moved his head and arms with his expansive and clumsy gestures. There was something childish in that big man, perhaps a shy questioning in his gaze, and a certain kind of abandonment, as of someone who was not used to society. He dressed badly, preferring ties with gaudy colours and disturbing plaid textures on his poorly made cashmeres.

Ruth got ready and her mother cried out:

'Imagine that you are playing for a whole auditorium!'

She did not seem to hear. Standing up next to the piano, tall and straight-backed, the head joined to the slender shoulders of a girl, the dark hair falling in waves on the brown neck, the clear green eyes, aquamarine, open to the void, she had the air of a sleepwalker lost in divine dreams. The hands, long and slim, moved with confidence; the white dress garnished with small yellow flowers, showed a sliver of her thin legs and black shoes.

Lélio Braga, recently returned from Germany, the fat conductor who only talked about music or gambling, attacked the keyboard, vigorously. Silence fell, but not for too long. The soft chatter recommenced. Ruth did not hear anyone; a warm sunbeam shone from her green eyes, which were turned towards the light.

Only Captain Rino seemed to be listening to the music, looking sideways at Camila. He loathed to see how much confidence she entrusted to that other one there, the skinny Dr Gervásio, always clinging to her skirts and saying things that made her smile. Everything in that man irritated him: his luxury, his slender build, his ironic demeanour – which was on some occasions perverse, and, on others, exceedingly dull.

Francisco Teodoro, who had no interest in anything related to art, not even music, interrupted the reflections of Captain Rino, interrogating him on aspects of the North – namely, those of an exclusively commercial nature.

The last note of the violin still reverberated in the air when Nina, the niece of the owners of the house, entered the room, with her simple manners that endeared her to everyone. She was not beautiful: she had a thick nose and some light spots on her pale skin.

'Did you see the parasites?' Camila asked her.

'Yes,' and turning to the Captain:

'Should we keep them outdoors or in the greenhouse?'

The Captain made a gesture of ignorance.

Only at dinner did Mário join the family. The table, full of crystal and silverware, had a festive atmosphere.

Money gained at the expense of work delighted imposing itself on the admiration of others. The owner of the house, refreshed in a denim jacket, did not tire of praising his wines and alluded multiple times to the excellence of the cook.

If someone attempted to dodge a glass of Bordeaux or a tumbler of old Madeira, he replied excitedly:

'Drink, because this one is authentic; you cannot find its like with ease.'

There was often an excess of fine delicacies. Complex dishes returned to the kitchen untouched. Abundance became waste.

The serving room grew dense with large platters on which the leaves of lettuce and the patterns made with lime wedges, eggs, olives, and jelly did not disguise the opulence of the meats.

At the head of the table, Francisco Teodoro liked to spread his gaze over the long surface of the white towel and see it well-covered with expensive and ostentatious things. In this manner he ate with relish and a great appetite. It was his triumph in life, which all this luxury represented, and the only opportunity in which he had some time left over to enjoy and admire it.

The guests were urged to eat more, continually! With Dr Gervásio there was less insistence: they knew his delicate habits. But Captain Rino was much younger and brought a stomach strengthened by a life at sea.

The children ate at the table, conducted by Nina, and made a racket interspersed with curt demands.

Mário reproached them, thinking it was inconceivable that their father accepted such behaviour!

'The name of your steamer is…?' Dr Gervásio asked the Captain, adjusting his pince-nez.

'*Neptune*.'

'Loved by Amphitrite and the nereids. Such a patron has its risks…'

'Why?'

'Because young and handsome as you are, and all that implies, you need all your strength to resist the seduction of the mermaids…'

'Which no one has ever seen in Brazilian waters,' answered the captain, rather naively.

'But you must agree that we can't affirm their nonexistence in Brazilian lands,' intoned the doctor with a little smile, moving his gaze down to the pear he was peeling.

They laughed at the captain's embarrassment, who muttered, looking away from Camila:

'The mermaids' melodies would not seduce me…'

'That is a shame. Without imagination life at sea has no enchantments. If instead of being a doctor, obliged to preoccupy myself with nature's most prosaic elements, I were… the captain of a ship… forgive me, of the steamboat *Neptune*, then I would immerse myself in mythology. I would turn worship of the gods into my fresh and radiant religion; and I posit that the nights on the deck would be a delight to me, observing starlit Venus emerging from the foam, floating on the surface of the dark waves atop the white backs of the fifty daughters of Nereus. I am sure that I would not feel the kind of melancholy of the waters of which you gentlemen complain. After all, a man of spirit is never alone.'

The captain smiled and Francisco Teodoro said in his sententious way:

'Each enjoys it in their own way.'

'We do not enjoy it, no; life at sea is harsh.'

Dr Gervásio could not sincerely mean what he said…

'I affirm I was sincere, captain; it is a consequence of the principle on which I base every act of life – that is, the conviction that the remedy for all the evils that afflict a man can be readily found inside him.'

'If you say such a thing at the feet of your sick patients, they will never call you again,' replied Camila.

'They will call me; unfortunately, they always do. No one has absolute self-confidence. Though man may be told that he comes well-equipped to carry out his functions, he persists in ignorance of that fact. For us, nature represents only the secondary role of landscape; it is the accessory, the *mise-en-scène* of Life, where we torment one another in a hellish commotion. It is effort ill-spent to create such beautiful things that are so poorly appreciated. On my honour! If it were only possible to conceive a laugh, or even a smile across the tremendous face of the Omnipotent, I would say that He sometimes mocks us. To your health, Captain!'

'Thank you…'

'One day I will jump onto your *Neptune* and throw myself towards the North. Simply for curiosity; I have greater desire to see the crocodiles of the Amazon than… I don't know, the ballerinas at the Grand Opéra.'

'Men, they say that crocodile meat is very good,' said Francisco Teodoro.

'There are those who would say that that of ballerinas is even better!' observed the doctor.

Camila laughed despite herself. And then:

'And I, who have never seen the inside of a steamboat!'

'Do you want to come with me to Manaus?'

'No; but I do want Captain Rino to invite us aboard his *Neptune*.'

The young maritime man babbled, blushing:

'Oh! Madam…'

He interrupted his sentence, as he was about to say, 'there is nothing I desire as much!' – but he thought it more appropriate to simply add: 'whenever you want…'

'It should be on a Sunday, so that my husband can come along. And the children, can they come?'

'Why not?'

Lia and Rachel clapped their hands.

Over coffee, on the terrace, Camila announced that she would prepare a great ball for São João, when Ruth would celebrate her fifteenth year.

Dr Gervásio protested: the ball could take place, but under a different pretext.

'Why?'

'Because the night of São João intimidates the coats and scares the cleavage. This is a saint who only wants the light of bonfires, with tall flares and wood crackling, and such a ball has to be in the countryside, among uncultivated people who dance around the flames. It is a celebration that reminds me of a ritual ceremony, of primitive people, leave your ball to another day.'

'But afterwards I won't have an excuse…'

'My God! You need not deign to give explanations to friends, especially when you are bestowing such enjoyments…'

Francisco Teodoro was listening respectfully to Dr Gervásio, recognising his intellectual superiority.

He owed him the lives of his children, he confessed, and of this debt he never tired of calling himself the debtor.

He approved of the idea of the ball. They could do whatever they wanted; his purse strings were open. And at this, leaving the others to babble on the terrace, he closed his eyes and thought about the happiness of Gama Torres… Who knows?... Maybe he could do the same. The moment was favourable. Coffee was profitable as never before and there were hopes of still more to come… If this occasion escaped… he would miss the opportunity of tripling overnight his already great fortune… He had always been a man of action, of resources. How could he now let himself become the rear guard, stupidly, letting that other, a novice, attain the title of the Brazilian Rothschild? He was up to his eyes in jealousy of such a title. He tightened and loosened his grip on these calculating thoughts.

To have the greatest fortune, having come from nothing, was his ultimate ambition. He repeated to everyone the fact of his humble origins, scrutinising faces for the effect of this confession. To be the most powerful, the richest, the strongest, having come from nothing, wouldn't it be the most supreme glory on earth?

And right there, leaning back on his rocking chair, belly stuffed with excellent delicacies, his hands resting on the chair's arms, he insensately passed from dream to sleep.

In the half shadow of the eventide, the eyes of Captain Rino glowed. Fuming, he tracked the faces of the doctor and Camila as they

contemplated each other. Mário crossed the terrace in the direction of the street, with a cigar in his mouth.

'Where are you going?' asked his mother.

'To the theatre,' he answered without stopping, descending the stairs.

'That young man…' grumbled Dr Gervásio, his reproach passing between his teeth.

Camila forgave him; her son had a strong character and was very independent. She did not want to upset him; why? Life is short, and soon enough real concerns would come. His judgement would improve with age.

Below, in the garden, among the pleasant smells of heliotropes and Cape jasmine, the children and Ruth made a circle around Noca, a mulatta who had long been part of the household, who used to tell them stories of fairies and charming princes. Seeing Mário walking towards the gate, the mulatta called him with the familiarity of an old friend:

'Master Mário, listen to me!'

'What, Noca?'

'Where are you going?'

'If I don't die on my way, I shall arrive at the theatre.'

'You won't die. This last night I dreamt that you were in a shroud and that Dona Nina was crying blood… To dream of death is a sign of health. Bring me some candies.'

'You'll be kept waiting.'

Captain Rino took his leave and also descended to the street, listening to Noca's voice recommencing the melody:

'My magic wand, by the power given thee by God, doth…'

Nina, leaning against the railing, observed Mário moving away; upstairs, on the terrace, next to her sleeping husband, Camila bent over Dr Gervásio and kissed him on the mouth.

Chapter III

Too lazy to visit the old aunts on the Castelo hill herself, Camila would sometimes send her small daughters to hug them in her place, accompanied by Noca. The Rodrigues ladies still lived in the same old house atop the hill with guillotine windows and grimy walls. Dona Itelvina rarely went out. She was known as the neighbourhood miser. The other aunt, Dona Joana, barely stopped at the house at all, so dedicated was she to doing God's work. She was the widow of a rich mattress maker who had died of dropsy, and from whom she had suffered the mistreatments that, rendered unconscious by drink, he was liable to minister.

Since childhood, the two had lived together in the same house, inherited from their parents. They had preserved the habits of a penurious life, but applied them to opposing ideals: one compacting, the other expanding herself. For one, the entirety of life's pleasure consisted of locking away and hiding any goods that her hands could grab; the other aimed solely for the goods of heaven and the things of which the soul's dreams are made.

Nothing smiled in that old and barren dwelling. In the backyard, there was not even a flowerbed; a scrubby vegetable garden was set off to one side, some orange trees and a clothesline hung over heavily trodden and lifeless grass next to a large cement water tank covered with zinc tiles. Inside the house, it was the same austerity. The rooms were sparsely furnished but for some old relics; the alcoves were empty; and the worn bricks of the kitchen showed where the axe had hit through the firewood.

Dona Itelvina was aware that the house required considerable repairs. But she hoped to obtain these with her sister's purse, rather than her own. It seemed fairer to her.

Her sister did not even look at the holes gnawed by the rats, and cared even less, as long as the Senhora do Carmo and Santo Cristo of her shrine were illuminated, her soul in grace, and she could make her weekly confessions to the Capuchin friars. She was, moreover, a listless, overweight woman – an anaemic white colour, with sweet brown eyes and short grey hair that she covered with a black bonnet decorated with crimped frills. Her hooped skirt was frayed, and it showed her wide feet and twill shoes. In her thin milk-coloured hands, she either carried her book of prayers, full of dog-eared pages, or an amber rosary blessed by the bishop.

Dona Itelvina did not resemble a woman of faith. No one had ever seen her kneeling in her sister's shrine. A stranger would find no common trace indicating the sisters' kinship. This sister was tall, with brown hair, a strong nose, and thin lips.

Dona Joana's voice had the mild inflections of a calm soul. Dona Itelvina's voice had a whistly hiss, or else a shrill hoarseness as if it were emerging from a bronze organ. Not even they knew if they loved each other.

The good mornings and good nights were exchanged without the kiss that brings souls together. They perhaps only tolerated each other and supported each other out of habit.

When Noca knocked at the door, she heard screams inside. She soon reckoned that they must be from Sancha, the little black orphan, exploited by Dona Itelvina, who was charged with caring for the house.

A window opened with an impatient noise, and Dona Itelvina's face appeared, inquiring who was knocking.

'Ah!... It is you, Noca! Wait a minute, I will be with you shortly.'

Inside, the mulatta explained:

'Nhá Mila sent us to visit and ask how you ladies have been… You see, she couldn't come because…'

'I know. It is quite a climb… if these were the stairs of the Teatro Lírico, very well!... but to a poor house like ours…'

'No, ma'am! It's not because of that, and you ladies are not poor. People even say the opposite…'

'They say that? Lies! All lies… How is Teodoro?'

'Very well.'

'Excellent man; like winning the lottery, right Noca?'

'Yes, very true, ma'am. He is well. He has his temper… But we know that's just his disposition.'

'What now! Mila should adore her husband on her knees! These days it is not easy for a poor girl without a guardian to find a match like this one!'

'True, true... She is also very well.'

'Do you remember when they lived in Lapa and now and then even you would take food from the victualling house to give to the girls?'

The mulatta smiled an embarrassed smile and adopted a modest air, remembering that it was not only from Lapa that she would carry the leftovers of dinners from her friend's tavern. She had climbed the Castelo hill multiple times, carrying a bundle of meat in her hands to satiate the hunger of Mila and her sisters, when they were guests at Dona Itelvina's house.

'Whose bellies did you fill, Noca?' asked one of the children.

'A widow that has passed away,' replied Noca quickly, guiding the children towards the backyard. 'Go see the view, now. Go see the smoke from the steamers,' she said.

Dona Itelvina looked at the two girls and could not hold herself from exclaiming:

'So many hungry people and so much money wasted on children's clothes! Mila has always had a propensity to wastefulness… The dresses are beautiful, though. Where were they bought?'

'They came from Paris…'

'They must not have been cheap, eh? Is that silk I see?'

'Yes, ma'am. It is… Is Dona Joana out?'

'Of course! Touring her churches… If it weren't for me, I don't know how things would be!'

Noca noticed, looking at the alcove of the shrine that opened onto the living room, that the small oil lamp was extinguished.

Dona Itelvina continued:

'Joaninha only comes home to eat and sleep. She has someone who does everything for her… Has she not been by to visit?'

'No, ma'am.'

'And why did Ruth not come?'

'She stayed behind giving lessons. She played at the concert, and everyone applauded.'

'A lot of profit there is in that… I bet that she doesn't know how to sew a patch or make a dress.'

'Thank God she doesn't need that!'

'The future will tell…'

'Good heavens!'

'Oh yes. More and more I bless my mother for the education she gave us. There were days that we prepared candies from dawn to dusk…'

'I see! And wasn't Dona Joana fit for other things?'

'She has always been religious, but after becoming a widow she practically ascended! But she still complains of being sick, that she struggles for air and that her legs are swollen!'

'Poor thing!'

'My dear! She goes on foot to São Francisco, to Carmo, to Penitência, to São Bento, to any church in this city! At five she is already with the Capuchins; and in the afternoon in the hospital church nearby she sings with the Sisters and the soldiers. And God help those who must listen to her litanies…'

Someone knocked at the door, and Dona Itelvina, having peeked from the window, turned quickly and relit the small lamp in the shrine.

Sancha appeared, her lips swollen due to her endless crying, and removed the key to the front door, which was suspended from a ring nailed to the wall of the room. As she did so, she gave Noca a look of mute complaint.

The small black girl did not receive a response; the other pretended to contemplate the room's naked and washed-out walls. Through the open window one could see the crumbled remains of a tall wall, and, in the distance, an open stretch of vivid blue sea.

Dona Joana entered and, gasping with exhaustion, quickly sat down in the chair closest to the door. Sancha removed her bonnet, put her book and rosaries away, and disappeared, neither opening her lips nor drying her red and watery eyes.

'Today the church was overflowing,' Dona Joana said, 'Monsignor Nuno was the speaker… It was a great sermon, very uplifting, and delivered with such faith!' After a pause: 'Oh, Noca! Mila never attends to the solemnities of religion?'

'She goes to Mass every Sunday.'

'Good! So her soul is not lost! Even so, I pray for everyone. My penance is in the act of kneeling… Each day my legs are more swollen.'

'This again,' grumbled Dona Itelvina, who retreated to another room.

Noca immediately recommended a miraculous medicine, blessed with five crosses. She knew these things. Everyone in the house consulted with her. The pharmacy was the estate, with its plants; some of which she grew herself, others she collected. She knew all their secrets; extracted their most subtle secretions; and applied them with special prayers to the holy martyrs. It was always Noca who notified family members of the most propitious day to have a haircut, to go for a trip or to take any homemade remedy. She knew the phases of the moon and deciphered any dreams people told her with an unshakable conviction. She had

raised all of Mila's children – from Mário to Biju, the youngest, already dead.

When she was descending the hill, the children complained of hunger and confessed that they did not want to return to visit their aunts, who gave them nothing. Not even a tiny bite of bread!

In the square at the base of Castelo hill, Noca, feeling sorry for the children, entered a greengrocer's shop, recently established. The washed bowls, clay pots, and jugs on display all glistened; and she bought fruits for the two girls.

Portuguese women, wearing short skirts and large round golden earrings, would come and go, some stopping at the door, some holding small babies to their chests, others speaking with loud voices inside the shop. The owner of the business responded to all of them. But she masked her desire for gossip as she addressed the mulatta, a woman she was meeting for the first time.

'Are you moving here?'

'No. Just came for a visit.'

'With whom? If you don't mind me asking.'

'The Rodrigues sisters. Do you know them?'

'Those two old crones up on Travessa de São Sebastião?'

'That's right.'

'I don't know much about them!' A pause followed, during which she tried to restrain herself. But she abruptly pounced on the subject and began to talk uninterruptedly. The Rodrigues sisters were very well-known in the neighbourhood. Dona Itelvina was said to spend hours digging in her backyard, seeking the famed treasure of the Jesuits. The neighbours saw a lantern light moving in the shadow of the courtyard close to the ground and she was looked at with suspicion.

The other was a zealous woman of the church, and it was widely known that she would leave all her possessions to Father Angelo, of the Capuchins. The grocer affirmed that the two sisters must suffer from bellyaches. Weeks passed by wherein they would not even buy a sad bunch of spinach or a handful of carrots!

As Noca crossed the square and went up the hill by the Seminary, holding one child in each hand, she felt someone run up behind her and grab her skirt. She turned and saw Sancha, gripped by the fear of someone on the run.

'Ay ay! What do you want?'

'I want to ask you a favour,' the small black girl said, half gasping, and removing from between her breasts a filthy and rumpled five-hundred-*réis* note.

'What favour, by God?'

'When you return here, bring as much arsenic as that will buy,' she said, pointing to the money that she was offering the mulatta.

'Arsenic... for what?! Are you mad?!'

'It's nothing! Just a small favour.'

And as Noca did not open her hand, the little black girl quickly crammed the money through the opening at the collar of Noca's dress and returned to the house in a flash.

The goats walked freely, grazing in the tall grass; the sun blazed, whitening the clothes that were hanging over the street; from a repainted tower, the bell of the Capuchins rang – an invitation to prayer.

Noca sped up, dragging the two girls to the bottom of the hill. As soon as they arrived at Praça Mãe do Bispo, they saw Mário touring in his phaeton, which he drove himself with an upright posture. His footman, without uncrossing his arms, smiled at the girls; but the young man drove by without noticing his sisters, who maintained an air of resentment while clinging to the skirts of their nanny.

Mário's car turned onto Guarda Velha, and Noca thought:

'There he goes, straight to the home of that Luiza. A devil of a woman she is, too. She'll eat the eyes from his face and suck the blood from his veins. H'm! What I wouldn't give to see that!'

Dionísio would say that the French woman was beautiful and very *chic*, and Noca felt deep in herself a mad curiosity to get to know the lover of that young man whom she had rocked in her arms and whose round and naked body she had lifted in the air so many times to make him smile. He had been a joyful child. No longer. At least in the house he presented himself as very aloof and very serious. Noca sighed; and, after shrugging her shoulders, continued her thoughts:

'After all, he does very well: youth goes by and money was invented to be spent. He likes her, that's that! Only God knows what carousing his father may have done at that age. Now he lectures and tries to lay down the law in the heart of his son… He's dreaming, that one! Indeed! To each his own.'

At the same time, she felt pity for Nina. At home, Noca was the only one who knew her secret. She knew it, but she kept her mouth shut; why should she make noise? Nina was so good, the poor thing, so easily contented. It was enough to see the dresses and hats that she wore: all hand-me-downs from Mila and Ruth that she mended in her own way. She never asked for anything, never exhibited herself; no one even remembered when her birthday was! Maybe in the house there was a sense of ingratitude towards the girl; but whose fault was it? Mário was a

wealthy young man with good taste, he would choose the most beautiful woman – the one who would turn every head in a room.

Noca adored Mário; she considered him handsome, with his short golden moustache and his dark eyes and long eyelashes. The flower of the family. He took after his mother.

A tram was passing. The children shook the mulatta.

'Let's go, Noca!'

'Just so, let's, for above all else today is Tuesday…'

Following Dr Gervásio's advice, Camila had reserved Tuesdays for her receptions. In the beginning there was reluctance in the household. Francisco Teodoro liked to keep the door open every day of the week; his wife, raised according to old habits, suffered from this new arrangement. But it was the doctor's wish, and for him the gates of the estate were always wide open.

He was never absent; he would see her every morning, having lunch with her in Francisco Teodoro's place, who lunched alone two hours earlier, at one corner of the big empty table. At these meetings the doctor taught those people how to conduct themselves in society, polishing their spirit, modifying their tastes. He made them prefer the cheese that he preferred, the wine that he liked most, and the fowls and game with delicate sauces that he deemed most suitable for fine palates.

The docility of his listeners encouraged his overindulgence in certain phrases – created primarily for himself – with the excuse of sharing them with others, and which they all nevertheless accepted, with pleasure and a smile.

On this Tuesday morning they were still having lunch when fleshy hands clapped in the garden.

'It's Lélio!' Ruth exclaimed, removing the napkin from her neck and running outside.

It was Lélio; they saw his corpulent neck through the glass of the door as he came along the corridor.

With the pretext of showing the doctor a new ring, Camila extended her hand, covered with luminous stones.

He held it, and, raising it a little, observed:

'Like five rays of sunshine… Yes, madam! This diamond is perfect… But this other one is even more translucent.'

Mila smiled, and Nina went out of her way to attend to the children with the purpose of diverting their attention.

'But throw this ring away... it is unworthy of your hand.'

'It's so shiny!'

'It is from the Cape, much too yellow.'

'But I treasure it. It was the first gift my husband gave me.'

'Fine; your stones are not poorly chosen. You still need a black diamond for this little finger that remains so naked. I feel sorry that you do not like pearls, but only those stones that dazzle.'

'Only.'

'Shall we go to the parlour? I have brought you a book.'

'Poetry?'

'No. A novel.'

'Oh, good; I only enjoy poems when you read them. Poetry is so monotonous…'

In the parlour, she opened the shutters and inhaled deeply the smell of the resedas planted next to the wall. She loved strong aromas. What a marvellous day! Then, turning to him:

'The book?'

'Here it is.'

'Have you read it?'

'Yes. It is about a love similar to ours.'

'Then I won't read it. I know that it is full of injustices and perverse lies. Male novelists do not forgive women; they make us responsible for everything – as if we do not pay a high price for the happiness we enjoy! In these books I am always afraid of the end; I rebel against the punishments they impose on us, and I despair of not being able to shout at them: hypocrites! Hypocrites! Take your book with you, and do not bring me this kind of novel again. Our romance is enough to make me afraid of the end.'

'Do not have regrets; our romance will never end!'

'Regrets... Regret what? Do you think, Gervásio, that since the first year of marriage that my husband has not cheated on me as well? Is there a woman so stupid or indifferent who does not guess, who does not feel, the adultery of her husband on the same day that it has taken place? There is always a trace of the *other*, which expresses itself in a gesture, in a perfume, in a word, in a caress… They betray themselves with the compensations that they bring us…'

'This is all vague and abstract.'

'It doesn't matter. And the accusations? The anonymous letters? The gossip spread by friends? I have learned about many things and pretended to ignore them all! Isn't that what society wants from us? The lies that my husband told left their scars, and I repaid them with your love, and only through love! And still, betraying him hurts me, hurts me, because the more I love you, the more I esteem him. It is a torture that life seems to have invented only for me!'

Gervásio did not answer. His tense face bore an expression of jealousy. After a moment of silence, he muttered:

'It is extraordinary! I have never thought possible this duality of love. Well, I will take the book. Goodbye.'

'Don't go... It is so early,' she begged, with a pale face, illuminated with passion. 'Stay, it is so good! I will speak about something else. Teach me how to speak, Gervásio.'

'So, say the words: I love you!'

As she was about to repeat the words, the twins entered the room with an uproar.

Lia wanted to know if the small black ships spread across the newspaper belonged to Captain Rino.

'They do,' said the mother, cutting short her explanation. 'Go play.'

'Ee! Is he very rich then?'

'Yes. Go play.'

The girls left and the subject switched to Captain Rino. The doctor mocked him, wished him ill, considered him cowardly, tasteless, too pale and too blond, disorderly in his dress. He lacked elegance; he lacked spirit; he lacked everything.

Camila denied some of these faults. He should not be afraid: she would love only him for all her life.

The conversation in the parlour lasted a very long time, with the door wide open to the hallway. Lia and Rachel would pass every now and then at a gallop, riding their father's canes.

It was while saying farewell that the doctor and Camila would schedule, on occasion, a rendezvous in a house in the Lagoa, far away, showing respect for the home where her children roamed freely, always searching for her, bursting from behind the curtains or the furniture when least expected.

Ruth finished her lesson. They could feel the steps of the conductor echoing on the stairs. Gervásio stood up.

'Well, I will go down with Lélio. It is that hour of the day when the beautiful ladies appear on Rua do Ouvidor.'

'How I wish I were one of them… Old age terrifies me because of you! It is approaching me.'

'Silly! Am I not the older one?'

'Yes, but you men! The day I have white hair, you…'

'Won't have any hair at all; I will be bald like an egg. And we will both live with the sweet memories of these beautiful days. Our romance will never end. Give me your orders, madam, now Lélio approaches.'

Camila accompanied them to the terrace.

'What can you tell me about your disciple?' she asked the maestro.

'Very well. She is doing very well! Soon she will be the one teaching me...'

'She studies very hard…'

While the two talked, the doctor surveyed the garden. He then turned with indignation to Camila and said:

'That scoundrel gardener of yours is making a vegetable patch in your flowerbeds! Those lawn arrangements are in terrible taste. He doesn't have the instinct, the wretch! I will find you another, a French gardener – one accustomed to tending the flowers of Nice. You will see the difference.'

'This one made a mistake in his choice of profession: he was born to shear sheep or become a barber. He has no sense for the harmony of colours; look at this flowerbed: the purple at the foot of the red, the yellow next to the pink! And the rest: foliage, foliage, and foliage! It would seem these gardeners have declared war on the poor flowers! Tomorrow you will have a new one. Shall we go, maestro?'

They descended the stairs and Camila remained, leaning against a pillar until she saw the doctor disappear. He had already left, but she still looked on, pensive.

It had been years before... Gervásio was already living in the same house in Jardim Botânico; he was well-established there but very introverted.

One night someone had knocked at his door in despair: it was Francisco Teodoro, who was calling on him, the closest doctor, to examine his daughter who was burning of fever. They had gone temporarily to his neighbourhood, transporting Mário, who had had malaria. The doctor was not practicing, but he gave in to his plea and saved Ruth from typhus. The disease had been protracted; the girl only accepted medication and food from the hands of her new friend, Gervásio, who also endeavoured to strengthen Mário.

Camila would then say in ecstasy to her husband:

'We owe our children's lives to Dr Gervásio!'

His arrival had been a victory; it justified the doctor's ascent into the family. It had not been at the beginning that he had fallen in love with Camila. At that time, she had not known how to adorn herself – how to make others feel her beauty. She had all the mannerisms of a good quiet mother. She was quite banal with her long speeches and whimpering about the recent passing of her little daughter. It made her tiresome. The twins, a few months old, were always hanging from their mother's white jacket. Gervásio hated those coats and those unattractive

lamentations. But that time of despondency passed, and she rose little by little, leisurely, to beauty and grace. The evolution was not fast, but restrained and smooth, as if impelled by delicate puffs of air. When the doctor realised that Camila was changing, and that this slow and visible transformation was happening due to their growing familiarity, and the influx of his taste and spirit, he began to observe her with extra attention, cultivating the pleasure of turning her into somebody else – an artwork of his own creation.

Camila then adopted light colours that suited her well, and, as Gervásio had reminded her, were more flattering to her complexion. She acquired new expressions and vocal inflections that produced harmonious music of colourful tones. She made different gestures, more serious and appropriate; she walked with more rhythm and beauty; and she forewent her mixed perfumes, applied indiscriminately, for a mild fragrance. Everything she did was in effortless obedience to his suggestions. The doctor saw in her a perfect reflection of his soul. He felt her turning to him, rising up to him; and, absorbed in this delicate study, he fell in love with her.

Carried away by fascination, Camila belatedly realised the danger that was luring her. At that point she wanted to run away. She shut herself up in the house and avoided meeting the doctor; but, across the silent distance, he felt her love calling out for him, embracing him fully with a mad obsession.

Long months passed by like this: with silent agonies and longings without remedy; until one day, tired of a useless resistance, they let themselves be won.

For him, the liaison was a victory; for her, it was as if ordained by fate. It could have happened no other way; and this belief safeguarded her from guilt.

It had been a long time since Dr Gervásio entered the intimacy of the family. He knew all their secrets. He read all the letters that came from Sergipe, with their constant pleas for money. He knew the story of Nina's birth, that she was the natural daughter of Joca, who had run away after being compromised at some commercial establishment. Gervásio was informed about Mila's parents: the illnesses of Dona Emilia and the calligraphic skills of old Rodrigues; and he was also apprised of the oversized dowries that Francisco Teodoro had already sent to his sisters-in-law.

All of this he had found out naturally, without inquiring; it came amidst the deluge of confessions, in the disburdening of friendship.

With love, he had also learned how to gain and conquer their esteem. Everyone in the house listened to him intently.

These fancies fluttered around Camila's spirit as she followed Gervásio's shadow with a prolonged gaze.

Days later, as she was concluding her toilette, adding the final touches in front of the mirror, her husband walked in.

Camila saw him in the crystal mirror and, without turning around, asked him:

'Why back so early?'

'For two reasons…'

He broke off without finishing his sentence, startling her. She got up and approached him, inquiring with concern: 'Are you ill? Tell me!'

'It's nothing like that, dear, relax.'

Camila smiled and turned back to face the mirror, reassured.

'So what are the reasons?'

'First, to ask Gervásio to go see Mota. He broke his leg today.'

'The old man?'

'Yes.'

'Poor thing! How did it happen?'

'He was on his way home. He was getting off the tram. He is already medicated, but I wish Gervásio could examine him. The second reason is more serious.'

Without moving the *pompon* from her face, carefully adding rice powder to her features, Camila asked him with a certain indifference:

'Well, what is it?'

'It is about that gentleman – your son.'

'Only mine?! That's funny…'

'Funny? Look, I don't see the humour at all! He is a rogue dressed in gentleman's clothes – a rascal!'

'Ah, my old man, is it true that you come now full of accusations?'

'Certainly! After all, the guilt for these antics falls on one person alone: you.'

Camila turned, indignant, her eyes burning with rage:

'Pardon?!'

'I cannot take one step in the street without having the creditors of my gentleman son coming to meet me.'

'Ah, well, I see, it's all because of money!' Camila muttered with disdain, looking up at her husband.

He went on:

'It's essential that you warn him today that this can't go on! He is keeping a woman: he gives her dresses, a carriage, a house, and has the impudence to sign his bills under my name! Have you ever seen something like this?!'

'It is the youth…'

'Now this! Shameless. Let him go work!'

'Work! Mário is only nineteen years old!'

'You treat him with velvet gloves; it's what you've always done!'

'But why can't you talk to him?'

'Why? Come now! Because I will strike him in the face if he responds with his insolence! I will wait a few days… You talk to him first. Don't plant any schemes in his head. Simply tell him to work hard – to follow my example – and to quit incurring debts. I know very well that I should confront him, if only you did not sap me of all my moral strength.'

'Me?!'

'Yes. You always comfort him after I reprimand him, and here is the result… As if that treatment would make him an honourable man! What a disgrace.'

'Well! You also exaggerate. Mário has a good nature. He is incapable of an evil deed. But rest assured, I will talk to him. Would you have me advise him to leave that woman?'

'Of course! An old tart – a leech who won't let off until his last loose coin is hers. I cannot keep underwriting the caprices of such a madam. You can tell Mário this: either he straightens himself out, or I will send him to the Navy.'

'The time has passed for that. And I won't be separated from my son!'

'We have the girls. You may do as you like. Today, you talk to him. And if he doesn't alter his course, he will have to face me. The devil take him; I have other children to think of!'

'Poor Mário! You have never loved him very much.'

'H'm! What's this?! You say that I have never loved him?! Oh! This is too much! Fine, fine, let us speak of other things… Calm yourself… and get dressed if you like. The Gomes women are already here; I saw them in the garden with Ruth.'

'What do I care about the Gomes women?'

Francisco Teodoro walked to the window, moved the curtain, and, looking through the glass, said with an amiable voice:

'And Captain Rino is here as well… He could be a good husband for our Nina, eh? I like him. He seems like an excellent young man… despite his origins.'

'What origins?'

'Oh! His mother died at the hands of her husband. Adultery was her crime… Anyway, that was so many years ago. No one remembers the case now.'

'You remember.'

'Well, I was told of it just yesterday… A good marriage for Nina… a good marriage!'

Camila smiled with disdain and focused on fastening her pearl brooch to the delicate pink fabric of her bodice. Poor Nina… Oh yes!

'Very well! Here come Lélio and Gervásio.... I am great friends with Gervásio; but, let us be frank, he is an eccentric creature. He says nothing to us about his life, about his background… Considering the intimacy we share with him, it should be natural for us to know more about the man; but, in the end, we only know what everybody else does. Between you and me, not everybody shares our liking for him; people say that he spends all his time criticising books and writers although he himself has never written a single line… Really, he does not forgive anyone. Well, I will go speak with him. See you soon.'

Before leaving, Teodoro contemplated the woman and adjusted the curls falling on the back of her neck. Drawing her close, he bent to kiss her. She, however, evaded him with a quick movement. Francisco Teodoro laughed and left, thinking to himself:

'All mothers are the same! Only because I said something about her son…'

Below, Ruth was picking flowers for the visitors, who were gathering under the abundant branches of the mango tree. The Gomes women – a mother and two young daughters – were unfailing: every Tuesday they came, whether in good or inclement weather. The old woman was full of prejudices and scruples; and her head was replete with recipes – both medicinal and culinary – that she offered to everyone within earshot. The daughters were smart; they sang while playing the piano and the guitar; and they dressed gracefully – making even cheap fabrics look presentable.

Captain Rino examined the palm trees with the attention of a botanist, while the maestro and Dr Gervásio greeted the ladies.

Francisco Teodoro appeared with a smile, both hands extended towards the dear woman, Dona Inácia Gomes. She stood up, shaking the rustling silk of her dress, which was the colour of pine nuts. What an excellent silk that is! Over time, the material had been stitched into three different shapes, but it still looked as good as new!

'Dear madam, and my friend Gomes?'

'He is on his way. Goodness! He always has so much work to do; you simply cannot imagine.'

'I know, I know... life has been made for women. And still, they complain! They only speak about emancipation and other nonsense…

Woman was born to be the mother of the family. Home is her altar; if displaced, she is worthless.'

Everybody agreed and Francisco Teodoro moved on, pulling Dr Gervásio to a more isolated corner of the garden:

'I want to ask a favour of you. One of my employees, an assistant who helps with the bookkeeping – Mota is his name – broke his leg today when getting off the tram. The man was treated at Souto's pharmacy, but… you know that these splints done in a hurry do not inspire trust; I want to ask that you go tomorrow to see him.'

'Certainly. Where does he live?'

'On Rua Funda, I have the number here.'

Francisco Teodoro took out a note written in pencil.

'Rua Funda? Where is that?'

'It is on another planet, way out in the direction of Saúde.'

While Francisco Teodoro was talking to the doctor, Camila descended the external staircase of the mansion casting quick glances at everyone.

The Gomes women considered her very beautiful; and, inwardly, were astonished to see how she did not present a single sign of aging or decline. Her skin remained soft and white; and her black hair was untainted by a single strand of grey. Her perfect and glistening teeth lacked any touch of gold that would prove the passage of the years or the handiwork of a dentist. All this made her look just like the Camila who had lived in Lapa, where Dona Inácia had first met her.

Watching her beautiful form descend, Captain Rino blushed to the roots of his hairs. He was the last of the group to approach her and touch her bejewelled fingers that glittered like stars.

Nina, who was peering from above, thought that it was an opportune time to send the servant down with a silver tray carrying vermouth.

'Why did you not come upstairs?'

'We are fine.'

'Your Ruth has been doing the honours of the house. And how grown she is! Short dresses don't suit her any longer…'

'Don't say this close to her; although I am certain that she wouldn't tolerate the trains on long dresses. She is still very childish and has a boy's manners. The fantasies of this girl! Dona Inácia, you have no idea. I don't know how she manages, but the truth is that she climbs the trees with her violin. It is pleasant enough to listen to her playing from above. She calls it having a concert with the birds. Now tell me, can I make her wear long dresses? The horror!'

'Ah! But she really must change her habits; she is already thirteen years old…'

'Fourteen… almost fifteen! Though she doesn't look her age.'

'Climbing trees is for boys; an educated girl has responsibilities…'

Ruth interrupted the old woman's speech by bringing her a fragrant mango.

'Don't say bad things about me, Dona Inácia; here you are, have this fruit. I picked it from the very top of the tree. If I hadn't climbed up there to get it, I couldn't give it to you now…'

'Ah…'

Dona Inácia smelled the fruit, inhaling deeply and closing her swollen eyes. And then, turning:

'Camila, have you ever eaten mango jam?'

'I don't remember…'

'Well, it's very tasty and easy to make. Just listen…'

As Dona Inácia unravelled the recipe for the jam, Camila looked at her. But she listened to the murmurs of the other voices, trying to distinguish the words of the doctor and the captain. She smiled stupidly, grasping something only every now and then – a compliment to the *Neptune*, in one ear, or an instruction to squeeze the mango through a sieve in the other.

On this day Mário did not appear for dinner; and Francisco Teodoro complained about him to Dr Gervásio in an outburst of emotion as the two stood by the windows.

Gervásio listened quietly, biting his cigar, agreeing with Teodoro, without, however, pronouncing a single word. Teodoro assured him:

'His mother has the heart of a dove, incapable of doing or thinking any bad thing. This excess of goodness leads to foolishness… He is her oldest son, and she found in him all her tenderness… Not that I blame her. She is his mother. Notice how she is much stricter with the girls!'

The doctor had already noticed the same thing. On that very night he advised Camila to follow her husband's wishes and reprimand her son. He knew Mário's lover: she was a greedy French woman, stinking rich, with dyed hair and mushy flesh. She was worthless and she had ruined many good people.

Camila promised him that she would make good use of her maternal authority and then re-joined the general conversation, fleeing from that irritating subject.

Other visitors followed later that evening: two single businessmen and two ladies – the Bragas – from the neighbourhood.

Francisco Teodoro was animated, cheering on the games and the music, and catching first one daughter, Rachel, and then the other, Lia, as they threw themselves on his fleshy knees, wrinkling the embroidery of their white dresses and interrupting the grown-ups' conversations with their dashing and laughter. And it was amidst all this noise that one of the businessmen, Negreiros, from Rua das Violas, remembered the commercial endeavours of Gama Torres, and spoke about them with praise and astonishment.

One of the Gomes women, Carlotinha, sang sentimental songs on the piano with a piquant grace that her mother scarcely tolerated and that inspired laughter in the others.

The captain sought refuge near one of the windows. Ruth went to speak with him. The young man did not pay her any attention at first. Through the curtains, he followed the exchange of glances between Camila and Gervásio.

Could they all be so blind, that only he should be able to unveil a love so evident?

Ruth, throwing her head backwards, looked up at the peaceful sky. There was a long silence between them. Finally, Ruth said, without lowering her eyes:

'What does the earth look like, seen from that far?'

'A drop of light…'

'Thank goodness; it makes me glad to know that I live on a star. And how beautiful they look tonight! If God were to give me my choice of one, I would be confused. Now look, pay attention to that one, how big and delicate it is!'

'It is Hesperus…'

'Lovely, lovely, lovely!'

'Lift your eyes a little more; over there, notice the Crux – how clear it is! Marvellous night!'

'Yes… I can see… five shining stars in a black lake. Why is it so dark on that side of the sky next to the Crux?'

'Because there are no celestial bodies.'

'It must have been there that Lucifer fell.'

'Why?'

'Because he ripped apart the golden sky. That is why God placed a cross there, so the devil would never pass through that hole again.'

The captain smiled.

'If I were a bird,' she continued, 'I would prefer to fly at night…'

'Like the owls.'

'No. Owls are ugly, they make people afraid, and I only like what is beautiful. I wish I could be a white bird with wings so strong that they could take me above the clouds. Ever since I was little, I have loved to look at the sky; and I feel desperate for not being able to fly… Sometimes I dream that I am flying… and it feels so good!'

Captain Rino reminded her that she should visit the observatory on Castelo – it would be easy for her, as she had family in the vicinity. From there she could see the moon very well and the colour of the stars.

Intrigued by her ardent imagination, Captain Rino recited the names of the stars to the girl, feeling her hair brushing over his shoulder, and seeing in the luminous transparency of her eyes the fire of an unsatisfied curiosity.

He spoke in an accessible language; but occasionally his sentences were interrupted, and he would abruptly turn towards the adjacent room, attracted by Camila's voice.

Ruth neither perceived the cause of his interruptions nor noticed his constant movements but continued to question him with an inflamed look towards the illumined sky.

Palms broke into applause inside. Carlotinha had finished a sentimental song, and was coquettishly walking around the room, challenging the Bragas to a waltz.

'Who is playing?'

Judith went to the piano, and forcefully attacked the keys and pedal.

Despite the noise, Francisco Teodoro argued with Negreiros about the daring of Gama Torres. The former attributed the success of that other's famous enterprise to chance – an assessment that the latter denied, ascribing such triumph instead to uncommonly good judgement.

It was hot; the paper fans flitted like butterflies in the hands of the young ladies. Carlotinha, failing to dance with either Rino or Negreiros, threw herself into the arms of Terezinha, the youngest of the Bragas. Together, they spun around the room.

Two hours later, the businessman accompanied the visitors to the gate. From there, Dona Inácia walked arm in arm with her husband, Mr Gomes, a fat old man with big tortoiseshell glasses. The Bragas, very talkative, promised to lend the templates for the modern jackets they were wearing to Carlotinha and Judith. Camila followed behind them, slowing down her steps between Dr Gervásio and Captain Rino. The latter said nothing at all, reserving his full attention for the exhalations of that night without parallel! A tram passed by, and the Gomes family departed. Nina

had stayed upstairs, organising the house, seeing that the windows of the living room were closed.

While waiting for another tram to take him to Jardim, the doctor stood by the fence next to Francisco Teodoro. Camila sat down under the mango tree and the captain imitated her, observing her sweet profile and rehearsing a confession that dared not leave his trembling lips. Camila abandoned herself, seeming to provoke words of such consequence – as if her vanity as a woman was not already satisfied by the love of a husband and a lover.

All this transpired in Captain Rino's imagination, which was fully penetrated by her aroma and her charm. When Camila's hand alighted on the bench, he, in a similarly subtle and tentative gesture, squeezed it lightly. Abruptly, she got up, shaken by regret, blaming herself for such flippancy, and quickly moved towards the clear moonlight, leaving the captain under the shadow of the tree. Gervásio's inquiring gaze observed everything, while her husband spoke of irrelevant things. At this moment, up on the terrace, facing the white moon, Ruth played a long and harmonious sonata on her violin.

Down below all conversation paused; everyone's spirits hung suspended in the music and the night.

Remaining seated on the same bench, Captain Rino looked with despair at the clear outline of Camila, who ran from him, and approached her love happily, completely absorbed in the poetry of those sounds. He closed his eyes not to see…

The sweetness of the music filled everything with a lingering unknown feeling... A shooting star streaked across space in a fleeting luminous thread. Camila pointed it out with her finger.

The sonata opened up in a wide and intense harmony, when suddenly Teodoro shouted upwards:

'This is not the hour for music. To bed!'

And then, in a satisfied murmur:

'The little devil has plenty of feeling, doesn't she?'

'She has more than that,' affirmed Gervásio, 'she has talent, she has inspiration!'

'And for all her dedication, her brother has… Well! Here comes your tram, doctor!'

The doctor said goodbye in a hurry and ran; Captain Rino, with great effort, overcame his inner turmoil and left as well, taking to the street on foot despite Teodoro's request that he wait for the next tram to the city.

Camila entered the house before her husband and immediately searched for Noca, who was watching over Rachel and Lia as they slept.

'Has Mário arrived, Noca?'

'No, ma'am. Dionísio came a long time ago and said that Master Mário would stay there…'

'There?... at the home of that… Luiza?!'

'Yes.'

'If my husband finds out! Listen... if he asks, tell him that Mário had a migraine when he arrived. That was why he did not come to the living room. Ok? Say that he is sleeping.'

'What if he asks Dionísio in the morning?'

'You warn the boy first.'

'I don't know why Master Mário does this, only to get us into trouble…'

'Be patient, Noca… he is only a child… Tomorrow, I will give him my advice…'

'H'm... Lia spilt the oil of the lamp. I'm already waiting for some disturbance. It is well-known: spilled oil on the floor means trouble at home!'

'Quiet now; Teodoro is coming. Goodnight, Noca!'

Francisco Teodoro went around the house, checked whether it was shut, and posed all the questions his wife had foreseen to the mulatta. Then, on his way to the bedroom, he returned and said to her:

'Look, Noca, if Mário's migraine gets worse, it always helps to give him an antipyrine tablet…'

'Yes, sir, I will see…'

Francisco Teodoro left, and the servant sighed with embarrassment, lowering her head.

Chapter IV

It was noon when Dr Gervásio jumped from the tram and thrust his high-quality shoes forward through Rua dos Beneditinos.

Already, labour poured torrentially down the wide street. Thunderous wagons shocked the cobblestones, threatening to smash everything in their paths. Donkeys lurched ahead, driven by whips amidst the tumult. Sun-kissed drivers, with tousled hair and cracked feet, breathlessly held tight to the reins, jumping in time with the wheels, a brute wildness in their toilful work.

The clamour of confounded voices mixed with the smell of raw coffee and the stench of sweat emanating from so many moving bodies. These odours seemed to saturate the atmosphere with a greasy and fetid substance that was harsh on any skin unaccustomed to entering that environment.

Through the crystal of his myopia glasses, Dr Gervásio looked at everything with an air of curiosity, his head erect, and his nostrils enlarged, as if his sense of smell was helping him to know a little of the why and wherefore of everything around him.

With his walking stick suspended in the air, the fingers of his gloves bursting from the small pocket of his vest, his glossy top hat, and light cravat pricked by the glow of a fiery ruby, he was like a foreigner traversing those streets, which were only habituated to the clothes of daily work: bowler hats, bourgeois wool and denim, and the filthy rags of the coarse porters.

As he had lost old Mota's address, Dr Gervásio had to climb up to Francisco Teodoro's office. In the warehouse below, the shouts of commerce approached madness: they all seemed impelled in their quick movements by wound-up springs. They were machines, not men; those creatures never bent to the weight of fatigue…

Dr Gervásio, who presumed himself to be a strong man with his cold showers and the gymnastics he performed inside his bedroom, was amazed upon seeing the jaunty way these men moved the sacks from the top of the piles and placed them on their shoulders. His thin but valiant arms felt humiliated before those athletic biceps.

Francisco Teodoro smiled at Gervásio's astonishment. To ensure the address would not be lost again, Teodoro called in a young man from the warehouse, Ribas, and ordered him to accompany the doctor to the sick man's house.

'It will be better this way,' he said, 'there won't be any chance of you getting lost. You may be a *carioca*, but – look! In this part of the city, you are more of a foreigner than me!'

Ribas shook the dust from his hat and buried his head in it up to his enormous ears. Swinging his long arms without fists, inside a jacket shrugged on in a hurry, he walked ahead all bent over like an old man…

And all along Rua de São Bento, he maintained that posture, neither slowing his steps nor turning his head. Upon entering Rua da Prainha, he shed the bearing of a clerk on duty, and let himself fall back, until he was walking abreast of the doctor, dying to ask him for a little cigarette.

Dr Gervásio noticed his desire.

He gave him his cigarettes.

They crossed the square at Prainha, carpeted with golden sunlight. It was hot. Ribas remarked:

'If you would like to drink something, that tavern is very good.'

'I am not thirsty.'

'From here on there won't be any decent place…'

"The young man wants beer," the doctor thought to himself, "so let's grant his wish."

They entered the bar. It was a narrow room, with prints on the walls and coloured paper around the gas lantern. There were three small empty tables and one occupied by two angular gypsies, who gestured wildly, shaking themselves in their long greasy frock coats. It was a half-deserted haunt more fit for flies than men. The somnolent owner came over to ask for their orders; Dr Gervásio asked for the drinks while looking at a guitar resting on the counter from which hung a wide strap made of red cotton.

That abandoned instrument suggested to him the idea of sleepless nights and sentimental songs crossing the narrow streets of the neighbourhood. In the darkness, or under the pale moonlight, might those buildings have ears with which to listen to such vagabond music?

He imagined not. The fatigue of their rough days would render their sleep leaden, their tired souls impassive. No matter how much the troubadour cried, his voice reaching inside would only resemble the light buzzing of bees.

The owner of the bar thought he detected disapproval in the doctor's gaze, perhaps owing to the slovenly state of the room. He removed the guitar and placed it somewhere inside.

"And there goes the only picturesque note," Gervásio thought, throwing his nickels on the table.

They went on walking in silence. And it was a completely new route for the doctor, who considered it interesting in its ugliness, and extravagant in its conjunction of decrepitude and excess.

The novel environment afforded him the pleasure of travelling. Filthy alleys steered up the hill; houses with dirty walls mounted one another; neither the grace of a curtain nor the bust of a woman appeared at the windows. Instead, worried faces, the brutal noise of heavy vehicles, and the thick heaving trunks of men with great muscles turned this corner of his city into an alien one – an infernal city, bestially preoccupied with bread.

They were climbing Rua da Saúde. When they arrived at the corner of Beco do Cleto, Dr Gervásio looked out: in the distance, on the intense blue sea, the horizon was interrupted by the steamship *Lloyd*.

The fine points of masts made dark scratches on the clear expanse. On land the sailors came in groups, rocking back and forth. Portuguese men carried loads in wheelbarrows to a pier.

Just then a group of urchins burst furiously around Ribas, demanding the ten pennies from the previous day's game. There were four of them: a mestizo with vivid black eyes, a dark black boy, a blond boy that the others nicknamed Bota since he carried an old boot suspended around his shoulders, and a freckled little Italian without eyelashes.

'Give us the ten pennies! Give us the ten pennies that you owe us from the game yesterday,' they complained.

Ribas defended himself, hypocritically:

'What game? Me?!'

'Yes, sir, quit messing around!'

The blond boy demanded the money to put in his boot: he was the cashier; the others broke into whistles and obscenities.

Dr Gervásio sped up his steps, leaving Ribas at the centre of a spinning wheel of provocations.

It was his problem.

His curiosity urged him to keep walking, and he remained in good spirits with every step. He cast an inquisitive glance towards each ruined facade, and he stopped and smiled as he observed a broken window opening onto a vase of white carnations.

The flowers brought to his mind the thought of women.

He noticed that he had thus far only encountered men in that place: clerks in a hurry, sailors with their tanned skin, mulattos making noise with their sandals on the pavements, showing their sockless heels amidst a noisy stamping of feet.

Now, beyond the coffee from São Bento, he could also smell the bagged sugar, the pungent strips of dried meat, the soap from the factories, and the bacon-filled bamboo baskets at the piers and the big warehouses. All blended in a nauseating and asphyxiating mixture.

He had the impression of crossing the swollen belly of the city, a region packed with coarse food consumed with an insane and piggish greed. And he looked at his clothes, fearful of finding himself covered in stains and filth.

And in this way, he walked to the docks, already having forgotten Ribas and old Mota. At the edge of the docks, he stopped.

On the floor by the entrance, piled sacks of corn exhaled a smell of fermentation. A woodworm passed between the ropes of hemp, meandering under the sun.

On a small wooden stool, a Bahian woman bent with exhaustion over her knees, with rounded shoulders and healthy teeth, sold sesame seeds, peanuts, sweet potatoes, and tangerines to the sailors arriving that morning from the North. Through the large archway of the gate, one could see inside the docks where trucks followed the tracks to the pier. Meanwhile, lightly pushed sacks descended vertiginously down ramps from the upper galleries.

Dr Gervásio looked inside with interest when he sensed a few long, dragging steps nearby. He turned: Ribas was beside him, calm but dishevelled, tying his dirty cravat with hands that trembled lightly.

'Sir, you have already passed Rua Funda!'

'In that case, let us return.'

And so they returned, but the doctor's attention to his surroundings was undiminished. He looked with curiosity at some colonial roofs with extended eaves, at some balconies with latticework screens, at the short windows with small aged wooden frames that called forth memories and induced one to stray… At certain moments he would stop, raise his close-shaved chin, and look around. Ribas understood none of this, and kept waiting, stupidly, his arms hanging low.

They passed by a haberdasher when Ribas could no longer contain himself. Proudly, he said:

'This store belongs to my sister… She is there… Would you excuse me, sir?'

'You may go.'

Dr Gervásio looked. At a roughly hewn and narrow counter, a haggard man and a young woman were having lunch. She was pregnant, wearing black chintz, and sitting on a bench as naked children grabbed at her skirt. The lunch seemed frugal. There was neither tablecloth nor wine. Viewing their meal at a glance, the doctor was surprised to see only two glasses of water and a dish with something pale in it. To refrain from going the wrong direction, he decided to wait for his guide, looking meanwhile at the half a dozen objects visible through the modest pane of glass on the front door: thread for crochet, hooks and needles, cigarettes, fishing supplies, and alphabet cards.

Ribas did not make him wait; it seemed to the doctor that he had not been well received.

They went on in silence until Ribas announced:

'There is Rua Funda.'

Dr Gervásio looked and smiled at a sight that reminded him of a painting.

Rua Funda ascended the narrow side of the Conceição Hill, flanked by houses of uneven height pricked by clotheslines. From these hung white garments, recently washed, that formed dark silhouettes against the deep blue sky. The scene reminded him of an alley in old Naples, no more picturesque, featured in a watercolour he had in his house.

'Interesting,' he murmured softly, as Ribas strode ahead and knocked at Mr Mota's door. He lived in a small two-storey house, painted yellow, with guillotine windows and flower-filled lard cans on the windowsills.

Old Mota was resting on the couch of the small living room, his leg extended under a patchwork chintz quilt. His daughter hurriedly responded to the rapping at the door, expecting Deolinda from the shop, who had promised to watch over the old man for a while. Seeing Dr Gervásio, she froze completely, her eyes widening and her nervous hands fiddling with the collar of her chintz jacket.

'Who are you after?'

Dr Gervásio explained himself.

'Please come in.'

Mota's daughter walked in front, embarrassed, collecting the evidence of the house's untidiness: here a single sock falling from a

sewing basket, there a frayed linen cloth hanging from the arm of a chair.

The old man, awakening with a start, scarcely knew what to say.

Yes, he knew the doctor, and was grateful for his boss's care.

The daughter made the visitor sit down and ran to close the door to a cluttered room. She was old at thirty, with smallpox scars and hands shaped by the broom and kitchen drudgery. The doctor followed her with his eyes, and then hastened to examine the patient's apparatus. He was relieved to find everything in order. Good. He had become unaccustomed to his professional work. Practicing medicine irritated him, as if he had only tepid interest in the condition of men.

Feeling the fingers of the doctor running over his leg, Mota described his fall in a longwinded ramble, emphasising his lack of means. He assumed that he was being missed; his fall had happened at a moment of intense activity at the warehouse.

The daughter brought coffee in cups made of powdered stone. Dr Gervásio took a few sips out of kindness and the old man smiled in approval of his amiability.

Mota apologised for the state of the house. He did not live there by choice. Oh, if only Dr Gervásio had met him in Pernambuco, while his old wife was alive! After her death everything had gone astray…

The doctor cut his whining short, projected a quick recovery, and said goodbye, without noticing that the young woman had reappeared in the small room in a different jacket embroidered with crochet.

Below, he sighed with relief and began walking down the street, moving amidst the guttural utterings of the parrots hanging from the windows.

Always the same songs, always the same songs! He found it necessary to run away from those abominable animals. He sped up, but just as soon as he had turned the corner, he thought he should walk around more and fix the neighbourhood more firmly in his memory. However, walking back along the same path, he saw a street carved into the rock. He wished to know what world existed up there. He climbed.

Naked children, still unsteady on their small arched legs, descended by themselves along the precipice.

Above, Dr Gervásio moved to a different street made of large stones darkened with smears where uncombed women spoke loudly, and thin cats sneaked by keeping close to the walls.

It seemed to the doctor that the atmosphere there was colder, with a penetrating humidity, and a smell of old age and crushed greenery. The possibility of sleeping and loving someone in this sinister corner

of the city – more agreeable to worms than to human nature – was one he struggled to conceive. He noticed a young woman with a kerosene tin collecting water from a spout. She was pale and beautiful; and she looked back at him with a velvet gaze that was steady, sombre, and swept with sadness.

These fortuitous encounters inspired the doctor to make singular comparisons. That woman was an invocation; her gaze revealed a strong conscience, and her skin, the colour of moonlight, infinite longing. She was Hagar from the Bible: a flower in a swamp.

Continuing his walk, he saw suspect houses on both sides, with gloomy hallways and slippery stairs that caused him to think of mystery and crime. The idea of walking there at night in some disguise took him by surprise. It is when the sun hides that man truly reveals himself. He would drink with the sailors in the neighbourhood bars and would insinuate himself into some of those inns.

Instinctively, he refused this plunge into the mud and rejected these fancies, pausing to see if the rose in his lapel was still fresh.

Not especially... He was quickly obliged to jump backwards. From a very high window they were throwing soapy water onto the street. The foam ran in thick threads between the uneven cobblestones.

'Charming…'

From that point on, he accelerated his steps, sensing stupefied gazes on every side fixated on his top hat. He had the impression of crossing ruins; it seemed to him that in that entire street not one window frame with glass intact would be found, nor a single unrusted key or perfect hinge.

These were the remnants of a city, reclaimed by displaced people resigned to everything – to stale bread and the shade of any cheap tiles. It was a grasping and greedy poverty that suffused the whole brute slope with its enormous rats and filthy water.

Dr Gervásio interrupted the march of his ideas when he saw, with astonishment, Dona Joana exiting a house.

She was tired, walking with a red flush upon her wide face.

She carried in her stubby hands a silver salver, full of alms in coppers and nickels.

She seemed no less astonished to find him there, in such a place, and they walked together up to the top of Conceição Hill, where the open air swept the esplanade in front of the episcopal palace and the light of a pure indigo sky fell with all its brilliance.

Answering a question from the doctor, who was forcefully sucking in the sea air, as if he wanted to cleanse his lungs of the infected

environment that he had just traversed, Dona Joana explained that she had been collecting for a sung mass. She walked all over Rio de Janeiro (it seemed incredible!), and it was always in those streets with impoverished people, miserable indeed, that she collected the greatest number of alms. 'The poor are closer to God,' she would say in her sweet tone of devotion.

Then, right there under the sun, without restraint, she started to complain about her niece. Camila had always been a deviant, and had never had any inclination towards the church. A blind man could better see the things of Earth than the eyes of that soul could see the things of heaven!

He should notice the Jewish names that she had given to her daughters: Ruth, Lia, and Rachel, when there were so many saints' names on the calendar!

The children would follow the same dangerous path; and that was what caused her pain.

She needed to save the children.

Francisco Teodoro, yes, he was certainly a good Catholic; she liked to see him at Candelária, wearing the sleeveless cape of the brotherhood. A saintly man!

'But Dona Mila goes to mass every Sunday…'

'Well, the mass today is more of a social obligation than a religious precept. Camila only goes to church to show off. It is enough to see how she adorns herself… I would like her to be simpler… Ruth spent some time at the school of the Sisters, but she barely knows the catechism and she has not yet taken her first communion! I pray God for them, but…'

'That is good.'

'You are one of those who do not want to believe.'

'This does not prevent me from giving alms for your mass.'

'I accept them. I will pray in the mass for your conversion. You are in urgent need of it: you are pushing Camila to hell…'

'Me?!'

'Who else?'

'Oh, madam! What an injustice… It is quite the opposite…'

'Yes, say what you will. But don't look at me with those mocking eyes. Do you think I am ignorant of everything? The only blind one is her poor husband, who does not deserve this. I am here in my corner, but even I know what is going on. Everybody knows, unfortunately. It is not for lack of calling on Our Lady of the Rosary, my patron saint… But sins can be seen. They even leap up before our eyes. I have asked Father Mendes for council, of course, without naming names, and asked him

to pray for this to end well… He is a priest, his prayers must surely be answered… while I am but a poor sinner…'

'But are you mad, Dona Joana?!' the doctor babbled, poorly concealing his anger. 'I don't understand you!'

Fearing an avalanche of reproaches, Dona Joana said goodbye. She still had to wend her way around Pedra do Sal.

Dr Gervásio barely uttered a farewell. He felt glued by shock to the dusty ground. News of his love affairs, which he had thought were well hidden, had forded the sacristies and spread from elegant Botafogo to the shacks of Castelo and Conceição! He wished to contradict the old woman; but her clear light brown eyes had arrested his speech, severing his protestations at the root. She had not only spoken with her mouth, which was sincere, but also with her eyes, in whose transparency the entire truth had appeared.

The doctor watched her with hatred as she dragged herself through her pious peregrination, the pleats of her skirt exaggerating the stoutness of her wide pendulous hips and swollen legs.

He rushed to turn his back to her, fearing that she would suddenly return to tell him something else about his sin.

What repulsed him, above all else, was the requested intervention of the priest. From that moment on he stopped noticing the things around him and began to think about himself. And his feelings were of a confusing and sad kind.

In other times, in the greener years of youth, the revelation of these affairs would not vex him, perhaps… To be known as the lover of a beautiful and coveted woman is not something bad for a man… For her sake, yes, he had to be careful and mysterious. But might not this duty of maintaining an absolute discretion be smothered by the voice of selfishness – always the most imperious of men's drives – and by that of vanity, had not other circumstances demanded that he persist in his secrecy? The strong souls of men have these small flaws; and his soul, as he well knew, resembled those of others in this way, insofar as it possessed a purposeless desire to cause envy among the less fortunate.

Tired, nervous, and stung by the sun, Dr Gervásio walked on aimlessly. He went down the hill and walked through the streets, scarcely responding to the greetings of his acquaintances, who grew in number as he approached his customary territory. Nothing of what he had seen and had impressed him on his stroll that day left the faintest trace in his memory. All the riches, the movement, the houses, the low rumble of busy people, poor and mixed in origin, the high streets that crashed into long filthy stairs and precipices – all of it was dissipating

and melting into a single impression of sea and rubbish, out of which the honeyed and viscous voice of Aunt Joana emerged, offering promises, conferring with strangers about his loves and prized secrets.

A deaf anger groaned in his chest when he arrived at Rua do Ouvidor.

Then the scent of fresh flowers came to him in a wave from the street corner where they were being sold; and the grace of a woman, who passed by him in a bold hat and a well-made dress, distracted him a little…

Chapter V

Noca went to Mário's bedroom to let him know that his mother wished to speak with him.

'What about? Do you know?' the young man asked her.

'I have my suspicions. It must be because of that French woman… It seems you were born just the other day, and now here you are with such extravagances!'

'Take your blather somewhere else.'

'True, true, your father is right…'

'Ah, a lecture, of course it must come from papa,' Mário said with irony, adding the final touch to his toilette. Then the door opened. He turned to look; it was his mother.

Noca went quickly around the room. She pulled the bedcovers up to the pillows, beat the upholstery of the armchair with a towel, opened the windows wide, and went out, leaving behind an island of order in the room's disarray.

'I was going up; Noca has just come to call me now.'

'I thought it would be better to talk here. We won't be interrupted.'

'As you wish. Have a seat, mother.'

Camila sat down and fixed a hurt gaze on her son. He, holding her hands, asked with a feigned smile:

'So?'

'You are causing us serious pain, Mário.'

'Me?'

'Yes; you know well what this is about.'

'I can guess; but frankly, I don't see the reason for such an uproar…'

'Your absences are too frequent. You don't mend your ways!'

'My absences are the tribute paid to youth, easily forgiven.'

'You fool yourself.'

Mário let go of her hands and became very serious.

'I don't understand.'

'You do understand. I am talking about… about that woman you consort with… they all say that she will ruin your health and our fortune…'

'Oh! Mother…'

'She is not the kind of creature someone of your age falls in love with. When I come across her on the street, I don't know where I ought to stand.'

Mário blushed and murmured something that his mother could not hear.

'I always fear seeing you next to her, because I know you have been daring to present yourself with her in public. Do you see the horror you expose your family to? I don't refer to your father, who is a saint, but still a man. But to your sister and to me. It is shameful to subject us to such a disappointment…'

Mário was biting his lips, white with rage.

'Mother…'

'Do not interrupt me; now I will say everything. This woman's exploitation must end. Leave her as soon as possible, preferably today. Do you hear me? Your father demands this of you. He knows that because of her you have already committed indignities. It is a disgrace, every day there are more and more debts!'

Mário controlled his anger at great cost, tightening his trembling grip on the back of the chair.

'Look up to your father. Follow his example.'

Mário smiled with disdain.

'My father is old; he no longer remembers what he did when he was young.'

'You know very well that he never had time to be young; he has always worked like an animal.'

'The Portuguese were born for that; I have other tastes and aspirations. My father doesn't understand me.'

'But the money that you are squandering… whose is it?'

'Ah, money! Now I see. Of course, it all comes down to money!' he said with redoubled scorn.

'That and other things,' Camila shouted, tormented by her son's irony.

'But what other things, mother!?' he retorted, angrily planting himself in front of her.

'I've already told you! I've already told you! Don't pretend to be deaf! Because of your health, which is fragile, and your reputation.'

'Reputation! Come now, mother. And you are one to talk about this!'

Camila froze, speechless, grasping the significance of her son's words. The surprise paralysed her tongue; the blood chilled in her veins. But, suddenly, in a mad reaction spurred by her wounded heart, she found and cast at Mário the harshest reprimands. She realised that her tongue was saying more than she wished; but she could not control it. Her pain was compelling her forward, against that son who had until that moment been spared from every reproach.

Receiving the full force of this maternal anger, Mário thought he detected the influence of someone else in her insinuations. The traces of Dr Gervásio and his meddlesome interventions. As soon as Camila had finished speaking, he began, emphasising his words as they poured forth heavily:

'You may condemn me in the name of my father, as he lacked the courage to do so himself; but not in your own name, no!'

'Mário!'

'In your name, no! Who launched me on this path and gave me the tastes that I have?'

'I have been well punished for my excessive love for you! But this is not what anguishes your father now…'

'My father is blind to other people's faults; why isn't he blind to those of his son as well? The person who makes him so indignant is less harmful to the family than…'

'Enough!'

'No, not enough! You wanted it this way; you know my temper; you could have avoided these comments. Perhaps it is better this way; after all, I needed to say something to you as well. And here it is: I hate Dr Gervásio; and you must choose between him and me.'

Camila fixed astonished eyes on her son.

There was a long silence. Then he repeated, the words falling like hammer blows:

'Either him or me.'

His mother, pale as a corpse, could not shake her stupefaction. Her entire body was quivering, and her tears fell thickly and heavily, one after another, spilling over the lids of her unmoving eyes. She tried to defend herself and denounce his claim as calumny; but the words died in her throat, and she shrank into the armchair, encircling her bust with her arms as if trying to crush her offended heart.

Mário walked nervously around the room. Then, turning to his mother to say more, he saw her miserable appearance, and a sudden feeling of pity seized him.

She was crying, and looked very shrunken, as if making herself small out of a desire to disappear.

'Forgive me, mother; but what did you want me to say?!'

Camila raised her humiliated eyes to her son, and whispered almost imperceptibly:

'Nothing…'

Mário resumed his pacing, his hands in his pockets and his head down. Camila, still in the armchair, her back to the window, sat with her elbows perched on her knees and her chin resting on her hands. She searched for some word that would convince her son of her innocence. Everything seemed preferable to her than that humiliation. She would give the light of her eyes – oh, if only she were blind! – so that Mário would judge her pure, worthy of the respect of her daughters, exceedingly honest, belonging exclusively to her husband and her children… She understood very well that feelings and imagination in women only serve to cause pain. The unfeeling ones pick roses, living eternally in sweet peace; for the others there are only stones, hard as the words of her adored son. If only she were deaf! Then she would not have heard them!

How many times her husband had kissed other women, loved other bodies… and still, of him only good things were said! He had loved others out of sensuality, out of sin, out of a taste for the forbidden. She had strayed for only one man, after struggling for redemption; and because she had been dragged into this fascination, and because she did not know how to hide her happiness, here was the mouth of her son filled with bitterness.

Lia and Rachel were running in the garden, occasionally knocking against the room's Venetian blinds.

Mário advised:

'You had better show yourself; the girls are noticing your absence…'

'I wish I had died on the day I was born!' Camila thought, rising from her chair.

The door was pushed slightly ajar. It was Dionísio, asking if the master needed the car. He had heard the day before about a lunch in Gávea.

Mário, without opening the door further, responded impatiently:

'I don't need anything!'

Then, he turned and went straight to his mother. He pulled her towards him and kissed her forehead. With affection, he said:

'Tell my father that today I will say goodbye to her…'

When Camila left the room, she felt herself be grabbed by the twins, who pulled her towards the garden, exclaiming with enthusiasm:

'Come see, mama!'

'What a pretty thing, mama!'

'The man said that it was daddy who sent it!'

'Guess what it is!'

'Tell us, do you know what it is, mama?'

The mother did not respond; she let herself be carried away, incurious, still trembling, seeing again in the depths of her soul the face of her son as he said those terrible words to her. The children laughed, and their laughter was like a clamour of bells echoing around her. The sounds grew louder, reverberating in her aching brain. He knew! Mário knew! Who could have told him? What filthy mouth could have profaned that secret, buried for so many years? Was it Noca? And the others in the house, could they know too?

'Look, mama, how beautiful!' shouted Lia, pointing to the large lawn in the garden where someone had assembled a pair of painted dolls, a boy and a girl, sheltered by the same blue parasol.

Rachel clapped her hands and decided that the boy would be called Joãozinho and the girl, Maria.

'Not Maria! She should be named Cecília,' protested Lia.

'It must be Maria, it must be Maria, it must be Maria!'

'Is it true, mama, that the girl must be called Maria?'

Camila did not answer. She sat on a bench, and, instead of looking at the dolls, she observed her daughters, who were very beautiful, with their white pinafores and loose hair.

'Do you like me very much?' she asked suddenly, pulling them closer to her.

'I like you very much!'

'I like you even more!'

'Liar! I am the one who likes her more!'

'I think mummy is very beautiful!'

'I think so too.'

'And if I were ugly… very ugly… what if… for instance… I had smallpox and had many scars, if I had no eyes and stretched skin… would you still like me?'

'A lot, a lot!'

'If God gave me one of those repugnant diseases… like the one Raimundo has, you know? Leprosy. So that everybody would run away from me in disgust and fear… What would you do?'

'I would always stay by mama's side! I would put food in mama's mouth, change mama's clothes and tell mama stories…'

'I would sleep in the same bed as mama…'

'Why are you saying these things?! Don't cry, mama!'

Camila kissed her children, greatly moved. A feeling of serenity fell across her pale face. She could count on something; her daughters would defend her from the mistreatments of the world.

The first strike of the lunch bell rang out. Ruth closed her violin case and Nina went down to the garden with Noca to admire the pair of dolls by the pond, sent from the city by Francisco Teodoro.

Nina came down in front, in the calm fashion of a *ménagère*, neatly combed, in a dark dress brightened by the white note of a small apron surrounded by lace. Behind her, Noca waddled with her full body, wearing no corset, in her light chintz dress, laughing loudly at one of the footman's anecdotes.

Camila felt herself flinch.

Nina! Could she know everything as well? Camila felt an urge to go and ask her; but, lowering her eyes to the black hair of Rachel and Lia, who were resting on her skirts, she stroked their heads, slowly, in a mute caress, grateful for their love and their innocence.

'How pretty! Aunt Mila, don't you think they'll make a beautiful scene when they're placed in the middle of the pond?'

'I think so…'

'Very tasteful!'

Noca felt sorry. Poor children! Would they have to go like this, so naked, to endure the dew of the nights? So *chic*, though!

Some admired the girl's beauty, others the boy's, but in the end, they agreed that, combined, the set was invaluable. Ruth was the last one to arrive, complaining of hunger. The bell rang a second time. They asked her opinion. Weren't they beautiful?

'I have never liked dolls, as you all know very well…'

'They are just like people!' Noca exclaimed, indignant, 'those are not just puppets! You're so fussy! It's true! Mário hasn't seen them yet… Oh, Dionísio! Go call Master Mário!'

Nina turned, reddening, to her cousin's window; he did not appear, meanwhile Ruth insisted on lunch:

'What a miracle! Dr Gervásio did not appear today!' she exclaimed casually as she grabbed a yellow *Marechal Niel* to pin to her chest.

Camila shuddered and looked at her daughter with curiosity and barely disguised fright. Why would she have said that?

Noca lowered herself to the border of the flowerbed, searching with fast hands for a four-leaf clover to give to poor Nina. Oh! If only she could find the clover, her ungrateful cousin would reciprocate the girl's feelings, and then that devil of a Frenchwoman would knock at someone else's door… God, make it so she could find a four-leaf clover!

Half an hour later, they were all at table, and the mulatta was still searching anxiously for the fateful little leaf.

Mário crossed the garden; she felt his steps and turned around, calling him:

'Heigho! Why did you not have lunch?'

'I have to go right away to the city. Tell this to mother…'

'You didn't go say goodbye to her?'

'No… We've already spoken… say that to her exactly.'

'H'm!... What a face on you today!... Inside, it's only family… You can go in. It's your mother…'

'Sure. Goodbye.'

'No. Look, Mário, remember what this mulatta tells you: your happiness is here… Foreign women only like money…'

'Farewell!'

'Goodbye, my son…'

The mulatta went up to the fence to observe the young man whom she had helped raise since the day he was born.

'He is so handsome!' She thought to herself, 'women were right to prefer him to all others!... Dona Nina doesn't deserve him; but, anyway, better her than that leech… That is the way the world is: people like those they shouldn't… He dies for that other while this one dies for him!... Truly, truly, he is the flower of the family… in matters of beauty, I'm sure there is no one equal to Mário… I was right to say he would put his sisters to shame! Why did Dr Gervásio not come today… the sorcerer devil worked his witchcraft on Nhá Mila… If Senhor Teodoro finds out!... What a fuss! But who is going to say anything? Mouth, keep closed! Mouth, keep closed! Let it not be my fault… Well! Mário is on the tram… there he goes to have lunch with that other woman… Well! If this is what he wants, let him enjoy it!'

With a decided gesture, she concluded her self-involved thoughts and walked to the kitchen to search for lunch.

Chapter VI

On a clear morning the colour of sapphire, Camila and Ruth boarded the boat *Aurora* with Teodoro and Dr Gervásio. They were heading for the *Neptune*.

Webs of sunlight shimmered on the water's surface like a golden net. It was hot.

The ladies adjusted the frills of their linen skirts on the back bench and opened their light parasols.

'I have always wanted someone to prove to me the benefit of these parasols. They don't protect anything at all. They are useless objects. If I were a woman, I would never subject myself to fashion,' said Teodoro.

'That would be a mistake. Concerning the parasols, I think they are beautiful, very decorative. Look at the pink colour of Ruth's parasol and the cream colour of Dona Mila's – they harmonise themselves with the blue background. Say what you wish; for me, the artistic impulse resides in a woman,' replied Gervásio.

'That may be. I only like what is positive and practical. Anyway, I still forgive women for their small trifles.'

Teodoro knew that the spirit and the status of a man were reflected in his clothes; that is why his were always solemn and serious.

For every occasion that was not related to work, he would don his overcoat, tightly buttoned over his round belly.

His glossy top hat, which was well looked after, informed the multitudes that he was a man worthy of courtesy and respect; it was as if his title of Commander glittered along with his satin hat. He would not leave the house without carrying his umbrella. It was made of excellent Portuguese silk, had a gold-capped handle, and cast an ample protective circle around him in case of unexpected rainfall. He predicted

everything. Skilfully, he harmonised his clothes with his speeches, which were always interspersed with: *such as, in this way, however, this and that*…

The boat was already cutting a path through the calm waves when he told Dr Gervásio that some of his colleagues, friends of his, wanted to bestow on him an honorary title from Portugal; he had made it clear that he could not accept such a distinction, but, if they went ahead, what could he do?

The doctor responded with a vague gesture along with which passed the shadow of a smile.

'Others will exploit such titles who are less deserving,' continued the businessman, 'I'm not saying that I would say no; in any case…'

Mila reminded them that the substantial amounts that he had pledged to the group's subscriptions were justification enough for such an honour.

He laughed.

'I can see that you want to become a viscountess, h'm?'

She shrugged her shoulders. In truth, she had never considered it. She liked to live well, grandly, with plenty of money. This, she had, and that was enough.

They were proceeding along in silence when Ruth sighed:

'What a shame I haven't brought my violin!'

'That would be silly! How comical!'

'Mama, I like to play whenever I feel moved. I understand myself very well through music!'

Her parents laughed at such foolishness as Dr Gervásio fixed his gaze on the pale face of the young lady. He did not laugh.

The *Aurora* cut through the swells coquettishly, its metal surfaces gleaming, its high-pitched hiss scaring the ladies.

'This tour is whetting my appetite for a voyage… If things keep going the way they have up to now, it's certain I will take my people to Europe this year,' said Francisco Teodoro.

Camila and the doctor exchanged a shocked gaze.

Seeing Mila's beautiful face, always so fresh and so youthful, her black hair, her full bust, her velvet gaze, provocative and passionate, and the entirety of her figure – that of a woman in love, warm and dignified – which he could never tire of clasping in his arms, the idea of a separation appeared to him impossible and monstrous.

It seemed to him that he loved her more on this day than on any heretofore. Her conviviality had softened him so much that even now he gazed upon her with sweet and bitter longing.

She assured him with a smile that she would not be leaving. There would be no forces capable of dragging her from her love.

Francisco Teodoro was now indicating to his daughter the white hull of a warship on which the freshly laundered blue clothes of the sailors festooned the forecastle. Atop the mast, a man was unfastening the rigging. From that great height he had the proportions of a puppet.

Flocks of seagulls wheeled drunkenly in circles, weaving fleeting garlands of wings against the immaculate blue. Far away, the towers of the city's houses exhaled a roseate haze that faded into a diaphanous violet.

'How beautiful!' exclaimed Ruth exultantly, drinking in the air that poured in full force from the harbour. 'It seems to me that, if I were a boy, I would be a sailor.'

'Another piece of silliness!'

'Mama, blue is such a beautiful colour!'

'If you were a boy… if you were a boy… really, it would be better if you were the boy and Mário were the girl,' grumbled Teodoro.

'Poor Mário… here it comes,' said Mila.

'I am not speaking ill of him; it is the truth.'

'Is it not speaking ill of him to say that he has no aptitudes or that he is insignificant?'

'I said no such thing.'

'But that is what you implied. He hears so many insinuations against him, and still he is so good. If he were someone else, God knows what would have happened! It is because he has such a good heart. The mistakes he commits are natural for his age.'

'Do not defend him. You know very well why I say such things. I do not speak in haste.'

No, she did not know. What she saw was a great injustice continually weighing on her son's head. What else did they want the poor boy to do? He had not been born for hard labour, for business; he was too delicate. Certainly, he was not the age for playing card games with the family. At nineteen years he had other priorities. They should all perceive that this was only natural…

'Only natural! What nonsense! Indecent, more like it. Yes. A rogue: that's Mário.'

The previous day had brought knowledge of new feats. He had left the French woman. Oh yes! He seemed to have accepted his mother's advice. But for what? To walk in public, arm in arm, with other women. Perhaps of even worse repute! And to enter gambling dens of the sort often raided by the police!

Camila indicated Ruth's presence to her husband with a pained gaze, hoping he might moderate the fury of his words.

Pleased to cut the dialogue short, the doctor pointed towards a steamer that could be seen nearby.

'The *Neptune*… pretty, no? See there.'

'No, it's not ugly at all,' grumbled Teodoro, who was already distracted from his thoughts. 'But wait! On the deck, there seems to be a woman. What's this? Say, is Captain Rino married?'

'As if such a thing could be true! If he were married, then we would know full well. You really say such silly things.'

'Silly things! H'm! What would be the harm if the man were married, eh?'

'For me, nothing, certainly. What would I care?' Mila laughed, trying to quash by sheer force the rage she still felt against her husband after their argument.

The doctor became sombre. What would be the harm if the other was married? None! Certainly. And if the same thing was said to Mila about him, how would she respond? The same way? With the same shrug of her shoulders, the same disdain? He had the impulse to ask her. But how? There, at that moment, it was impossible. It would have to wait for later.

The boat docked with the *Neptune*, and from a portal descended Captain Rino, dressed in white flannel with a beautiful red rose in his lapel.

They were bemused by his appearance, which they considered more elegant than usual. He seemed like someone else. He had come down to help the ladies. Ruth got out of the boat with a leap, showing her skinny legs, pleased with the novelty: the surrounding sea of blue mountains, the white sails and the tarred hulls that had floated across her path. Captain Rino barely looked at her. He suspended her in the air and placed her with his strong forearms on the first rung of the ladder. Quickly turning to Camila, he extended his arms with an anxious gaze. She fell fully into his broad chest and laughed, apologising. She was so heavy! He blushed, stunned and trembling, unable to find a word to say in response.

Francisco Teodoro, careful with his top hat and the tails of his overcoat, accepted the captain's helping hand; Dr Gervásio came last, removing his soft hat in greeting.

Above, on the quarterdeck, sailors passed by slowly, indifferent to the visitors. Next to the portal, there was a lady, the same one, evidently, that they had sighted from the boat.

She was a thin white woman with blonde hair. She had a pair of faience blue eyes similar to those of Captain Rino and the indistinct features of an ornamental angel. She adopted a scarlet toilette at odds with her type. The result gave life to the lily-white colour of her pale skin that almost seemed an offence to her virginal body. The captain introduced her quickly with only two words:

'My sister.'

It was later, during their visit on the *Neptune* – which they toured from the quarterdeck to the ship's hold – that they learned, little by little, that this sister, who had until then been unknown, was named Catarina, and that she lived in the company of her stepmother, a widow, in a commodious country house in Cosme Velho.

Catarina helped her brother present the *Neptune* to their guests; and sometimes her explanations had more clarity than his. If he stopped, she would continue his interrupted thought, complete it, and move on with agile ease.

After going through the ship, Captain Rino invited them all for a cold vermouth in his chamber.

The room was not large. Camila, Ruth, and Catarina squeezed themselves onto a goat leather divan the colour of olives and framed with cedar. Francisco Teodoro leaned back on an armchair next to the table, while the doctor arranged himself next to a slender shelf filled with books. The captain, standing up, regaled the businessman with various stories of his trips to the North.

He concluded: 'What a country! What a wonderful country we have!'

'It's just a shame that there are no people,' pronounced Teodoro.

'It is not a shame. All these lands, still virgin today, will in better days be the glory of the world. The world will turn a loving gaze towards them once it has exhausted others. They guard their abundance for another race, one of great ideals, which is yet to come. Such great promises are not wasted on the wind…'

'Another race… another race… Coming from where? Born of whom?'

'Of ourselves, maybe; and of the others. The generations that wither in the old countries improve themselves and invigorate the new ones. The future of the world is ours, and it will be the coronation of our kindness and virtues, since the Brazilian people are so good.'

Francisco Teodoro disagreed completely. He could not forgive the Republic. That revolution had been a revelation. He felt choked up just thinking of the exile of the emperor. Consequently, he attempted to bend the conversation towards a new topic.

Dr Gervásio was fully aware of Francisco Teodoro's political ideas. He heard the same comments from him constantly. As for the other's ideas, it did not seem likely that he would profit from listening to them. He turned his back to them and started to read the spines of the books on the shelves:

'Virgil… Homer… Dante… Camões… Gonçalves Dias... Shakespeare... Bravo!'

What kind of man was this Captain Rino? Was he actually reading these poets? The doctor randomly opened the first book that his hand grasped, and he quickly noticed that it was annotated in pencil, with firm letters, clearly the product of a focused will perfectly conscious of its clear judgement. It was *El Cid*. On the first page that caught Dr Gervásio's eye, one line was marked heavily:

L'amour n'est qu'un plaisir, l'honneur est un devoir.[2]

Don Diego was the one speaking. The doctor re-read the line with a sarcastic smile.

L'amour n'est qu'un plaisir…

Oh yes! Don Rodrigo's old father must have been quite forgetful to think that, or perhaps he had never managed in his youth to love with real love!

After that, Dr Gervásio leafed through the other literary books, out of curiosity, leaving aside the technical ones, and in all of them he found traces of intelligent reading. That was enough. He was starting to understand Rino. He had deceived himself until now, judging him to be a mediocre and simple man. Simple he might be – but mediocre, no. He had never feared him as a rival, even though he could see that he was in love with Mila. He had judged him weak, inferior, without resources, lacking elegance – which has always been the element that seduces women, physically and intellectually. In his view, Rino had been nothing more than a coarse, naïve sailor, with neither the grace of the well-timed word, nor any mark of personal distinction.

What would Captain Rino's brain conserve from all his unsettling and extraordinary reading? What nerves were those, so perfect, that after all those tortures and delights, seemed unmoved by artistic commotion?

2 'Love is only a pleasure; honor is a duty.' The play is by Pierre Corneille.

Hence – who knows? – that whole heap of books that he had marked with his name, as a sign of his possession, may have come from some auction, from some inheritance, representing in this chamber nothing more than a mere adornment. It was most likely. It was the only plausible hypothesis. He could not admit that Captain Rino was on friendly terms with intellectuality. That brute! He stared at him with attention.

No! No one could detect in those limpid eyes, or in those steps that made the stiff floor shake, the habit of serious investigations into old art, which disturbed one like a fever or rare wine. No one would believe that such a big man, made of tough meat, with the pinkish face of a good-mannered and hearty boy, could be capable of understanding Shakespeare!

To read such books, annotate them, love them, delight in their conviviality, was the labour of a different species of creature. That was a mockery; it could not be anything else. He could allow Rino the reading of one Portuguese classic or another that lent themselves to calm study and a regular pulse. He reminded himself now of having been surprised by certain archaic words uttered by the captain, which – to his sensitive ears – had possessed a particularly grating strangeness. Recalling that sensation induced him to study the man. He looked back at Rino and summarised his judgement in one sentence:

'A handsome animal.'

The captain's sister served vermouth, showing with a lovely smile her small, pointy, and uneven teeth. Directing herself to the doctor, she obliged him to divert his attention from his observations; and he, careless, still reflecting on the phrase that had crossed his mind, thanked her in English.

'You think I have the air of a *miss*, don't you? Perhaps you are right; you are not the first person to have thought so...'

'If it displeases you…'

'Of course not; why should it? There was in our family some foreign ancestor; a great grandmother from Denmark, I believe. However, I assure you, we are quite Brazilian, even slightly nativist. I have already heard it said that the most exalted patriots are the descendants of foreigners. But you do not want ice?'

'Thank you…'

She moved on, and the doctor took his first sip of vermouth.

'A Danish grandmother, I believe…' Extraordinary to see this detachment from her origins! Such a thought confirmed his suspicions. Those people were not inclined to inquiry and would not waste their time with objects that had no immediate utility.

Their good practice was as follows: look ahead because that is where one may stumble. A path already trodden is a path best forgotten. So long!

From his armchair, Francisco Teodoro was lobbing his final bomb against the Republic, lamenting this great country, so deserving of better fortune...

Rino stood up; he had other opinions and a sincere faith in the destiny of his homeland. The new soul of America could only be draped with feelings of freedom. The monarchy was the dust of tradition accumulated across the centuries, coating the old lands of Europe. There, perhaps, it had a reason to exist; but not here! He concluded.

A rustling sound came from the ladies' skirts. They were standing up, already tired of the discussion, abhorring politics…

Outside, on the quarterdeck, the sun spread its clear golden light. They retreated under the awning.

How wonderful!

Ruth threw herself on the rail, waving her handkerchief. A barge from Niterói passed by, fast and white and filled with passengers, leaving a foam tail behind. The entire surface of the sea was a palette of lights, and it trembled like the skin of a young woman touched by a voluptuous caress. In the distance, the Serra dos Órgãos drew slate blue contours against the sky. Towards the estuary were dull silver hills; but where the sun caught the stones, they flashed in scintillating bands of polished silver, and the violet cliffs mirrored themselves on the water between vivid green mountains.

There were moments of amazement and concentration, and it was in this silence that the doctor noticed Camila's glance at the captain of the *Neptune*.

That simple movement was enough to ignite in the doctor's chest the bonfire of jealousy. It was done; the other would win; he had learned how to wait and reveal himself in time. It was the first time that he had felt concerns for his lover, always so readily his, so submissive to the arbitrariness of his uneven temperament and nervous spirit. Who can trust the loyalty of a woman? No one, and it would be justice if she deceived and betrayed him, as she betrayed and deceived her husband...

He realised that Captain Rino was more handsome, and younger, and these two qualities in themselves were enough, in his view, to make the captain a preferable man in the eyes of a forty-year-old woman.

'Are you having one of your days of *spleen*, doctor?' Ruth asked suddenly, in her free and reckless way.

He offered her his arm and explained that no; he wanted to be quiet so as to see better. He then asked her, directly, if she did not think that Captain Rino appeared very different from how he had normally looked in Botafogo.

'I told him this precisely myself; and I discovered the reason. It is because he always goes around in dark shades, and today he is in white!'

'And with a flower on his chest!'

'Indeed.'

'There is still another reason; it is because he is happy. Ruth, the influence of colours on creatures is great, but the influence of feelings is even greater. Happiness forces one to become beautiful. Today, the captain's soul is wearing white; it is perfumed like the red rose in his lapel… A beautiful flower! Do not believe that having a tailor is enough to give his stern face the expression that he bears today. The great influence of a tailor stops at the neck. The head belongs to…'

'The barber?'

'To passion. I do not believe that even the most frivolous women can content themselves with the smell of pomade or a well-cut tailcoat.'

'But who is talking about women!?'

'You are right, no one! See how that fishing boat goes by so beautifully… You like these things. That is good. The love of nature and the love of art are the only saviours and merits of pure souls. The others, pff!'

The scarlet blur of Catarina's dress appeared before them. The captain's sister invited them for lunch. They noticed that the others had already gone inside and soon the doctor was predicting that Mila must have gone in on Rino's arm…

And she had; there they both were, standing together at an angle from the table in front of Francisco Teodoro, who gesticulated, still in the heat of political discussion.

At the table, they randomly sat down, with the exception of Camila and her husband, whose places had been appointed by the captain. The doctor chose to sit between Catarina and Ruth.

Everyone had an appetite. The first dishes were well-received. Catarina, feeling herself more or less at home, helped her brother; it was she who seasoned the shrimp salad and who sprinkled sugar and ice on the strawberries. Her hands, very white, showed themselves skilful in the act of serving.

The servant was coming and going from the buffet to the table with the lofty seriousness of a necessary entity.

They occupied one of the lengthy tables in the long and narrow room. It was the one on the left, the same used by the captain during his voyages. The other, empty and without a tablecloth, had a dark and oily varnish that gave a gloomy aspect to the space. It was mentioned that during the ship's voyages there was not a single empty space to be seen in that room, and that the murmur of voices mixed freely with the tinkle of dishes and silverware… Only on stormy days, when the steamboat was shaken by the fury of the waves, did the turnout decrease so that only those passengers with strong stomachs presented themselves, and even they were strewn about and sad.

Francisco Teodoro remembered the trivial episodes of his sole voyage, from Portugal to here, and, nearly all of them looked at the captain with a certain renewed interest, as if he were a hero. At home, in the comfortable rooms of Botafogo, so rich and so bourgeois, Rino's profession had hardly seemed engrossing; now they understood the dangers and observed him with respect. The sea is so perfidious! Mila asked the captain what point in a voyage he enjoyed the most.

The mouth of the Amazon, answered Rino; and he described, with emotion, the formidable appearance of the river, the thick currents of its deep waters, its booming crash, its rhythms, unprecedented, that no language expresses and no music imitates, the dazzling shades of its sunsets, scattering infinite multicoloured branches on the waters in twinkling tones never before seen, that appeared only to disappear, and disappeared only to reappear elsewhere, equally luminous and fugitive.

'What splendorous sunsets!'

Then the verdant islands, true gardens, stretches of forest emerging from the deep water and reflecting themselves on it. I sense there, he repeated again, a new world, concealing virginities and mysteries for a race of giants not yet born… Ah, the burning lands of the North are an astonishment!

There was another point in his voyage that caused him even more emotion: it was when, already returning, he entered the bay of Rio de Janeiro. The ample poetry of this spectacle sweetened his mood, spoiled by the monotony of the high seas.

Dr Gervásio finally solved the riddle of the captain's soul. It was indeed this: the books on the shelf belonged to him; he was a man after all. The mercenary shipper removed the attire of a pilot and revealed himself a gentleman and a poet. How had he been deceived for so long? The explanation came shortly afterwards, when Rino affirmed that, despite his complaints, he only truly felt well aboard the *Neptune*; to such a degree had he distanced himself from society that he felt awkward

among people; and he believed that he always left a small piece of his soul behind on the ship whenever he went on land.

'Only on land,' he said 'do I understand the love that I have for my boat, my books, my pipe, and my hammock, all of which solitude and habit have given the status of friends. However, at sea, I miss the land, my family, other distractions, in short everything that joined together makes life delicious…'

Francisco Teodoro, referring to the North, talked about the prosperity of Pará, about the rubber business, and discussed their income and their habits. There, yes, there they had sensible minds; they were a good example. Indeed, there they were the true people. They had patriotism, principles, good intentions. That's something to talk about.

They all agreed. There was a pause; filled glasses were lifted to lips.

Then came the turkey cooked in the Brazilian style which provoked praise for the *Neptune*'s chef. Magnificent!

Francisco Teodoro soon ventured that the dish, as savoury as it was, had to be made by a woman. Brazilian women have a special knack for seasoning the saucepans, he said; and truth be told, as much as they should not be called upon to serve in roles occupied by men, men should not usurp women's roles either. The uglier sex should be locked out of the kitchen.

He spoke in a jesting way, in good humour.

Catarina, breaking the crust of the bread between her thin fingers, asked, smiling and with an air of cruel curiosity:

'You are against the emancipation of women, that is clear.'

'I am of the opinion, madam, that a woman is born to be the mother of the family. If she raises her children, is faithful to her husband, takes care of the house, she will have accomplished her mission. This has always been my judgement, and it has not ill-served me. I did not want to marry some know-it-all. It is among the mediocre that you find good wives.'

Dr Gervásio and Captain Rino exchanged a quick glance.

'And what about the other women? Women that no man of honour should consent to have around his daughters.'

Camila signalled her agreement. She was of the same opinion.

'They are not serious,' she added.

'There it is,' replied Catarina, 'and how many women spoken about by society can hardly read?'

'A few.'

'Many. Senhor Teodoro, would you please pass me the wine?'

'Listen, you ladies do not know the world!' exclaimed Teodoro, passing the bottle to the doctor, who filled Catarina's glass and said, laughing:

'They do not get to know the world, and we, my friend, do not know them! The sweetest and most honest woman is said to dissimulate and deceive with an art capable of driving Mephistopheles himself mad.'

'Man, what an idea you have of the honesty of women!'

'I have a sense that their honesty must be much harder to maintain than ours.'

'Well, when I spoke of the honesty of women, I was not thinking that there might be two kinds of honesty.'

'If you had thought such a thing, you would have been right. There are two kinds.'

'We have found another kind of honesty! If you are so disposed, please explain to us the difference.'

'I am not disposed, but I will explain. It is a simple thing. Let us materialise the comparisons, to make them very clear. Let us imagine, for example, that our honesty is a black coat, and that of women is a white dress. They are both clothing, they have the same destiny, but their appearance and responsibilities are different!

Our coat is worn one day on one side, one day on the other, hiding any small stains. The fabric is thick. With a brush the filthy dust flies away and we become decent once more. The honesty of women is a dress made of unlined white satin. A small amount of sweat, if it is hot, stains it; simply rubbing it against a wall, in search of fresh shade, injures it; and a small prick, intended only to pin a fragrant violet, assumes exaggerated proportions against that vast whiteness. Really, it must be very hard to know how to defend a white satin dress that one never removes from the body. I do not know how they manage it; and, frankly, I do not think life is worth such a luxury.'

'You are a man of digressions; it was a simple matter. I was just saying that ordinary women seem more serious than the others. At least they seem to be…'

'That is because we do not go searching for the stains in their satin. They go unnoticed…'

'Goodbye!'

'Now, this is serious; I will repeat what I said a short while ago to your daughter, whom, by the way, you have educated in the arts. It was more or less as follows:

It is not possible to fit too many passions in the human soul; and the best ones are those that lead us away from our fellow men, who are

always trying to deceive us. Only the ideals of art do not pervert us, on the contrary, they purify us and instruct us in the Good. Women should cultivate them with special care. I follow, then, the opinions of Dona Catarina, and I drink to your health, my lady!'

While he drank, Camila observed him with wonder. She knew he did not hold those ideas. She had always heard him saying that women ought to keep themselves in their submissive position.

'So you lament not having the right to vote?' Francisco Teodoro asked Rino's sister, with a mocking smile.

'Me? God forbid! I hope they let me stay in peace in my little corner, with my roses and my animals. I never speak for myself, Senhor Teodoro. I was born to be a woman.'

'Then, you speak for the others?'

'For the others who have the vigour and courage.'

'And the house, madam? And the children? To this argument no one responds!'

'It is old.'

'But it is sound, it proves that woman is born for the purpose of raising children and loving with obedience and fidelity one single man, her husband. What does our doctor have to say about this?'

'That she might have been born with such intentions, as you say, but turned away from them after a certain age. It would not be without cause that Francis the First said: *Souvent femme varie.*'[3]

Francisco Teodoro did not understand but smiled.

The doctor's words were for Camila, who, perceiving his perfidy, avoided his sharp gaze.

'This is what it means to speak without saying anything,' someone observed.

Catarina served the coffee. When she was passing the last small mug, she said:

'Women are poorly understood. See that engraving. There is a man challenging danger, advancing through darkness with a sword in hand; and the woman, frightened, barely illuminates his path with a candle, hiding behind his back.'

'Which proves that women are faint-hearted!' Teodoro exclaimed with triumph.

'But it is not true, at least not in Brazil. We do not hide behind the man that tries to defend us. If he advances towards the enemy, we feel

3 The French king is said to have inscribed these words on a window in the Château de Chambord. The complete couplet reads: 'Women are often fickle; mad is the man who trusts them.'

sorry for not having wings. And it is always with impetus that we throw ourselves in pursuit, eager to help him win or avoid defeat. This is our character: prove me wrong, if you can!'

Dr Gervásio observed Catarina with attention.

She was standing up, her nostrils flaring, her face reddened.

Yes, now it was her mixed blood that was jumping in her veins: she was Brazilian. Her Danish grandmother had been replaced by her other grandmother, a native, descendent of some savage tribe.

Two hours later, the visitors left the *Neptune*; Captain Rino and his sister conducted them to the pier, where they separated. It was a great relief for Dr Gervásio, who was terribly irritated by the other's presence.

Francisco Teodoro did not tire of praising the order and neatness of everything he had found aboard. He started to venerate Captain Rino: he considered him eloquent, superior… He remembered insignificant details and was very grateful for the young man's courtesy. Catarina on the other hand had displeased him with her independent manners. He had thought her ugly. One wants a woman with meat – with good volume, he would say – looking sideways at the round figure of his wife.

At Rua Primeiro de Março, he said goodbye to the group. He took advantage of the occasion to visit a sick colleague and charged the doctor with accompanying his family.

The three continued on: Ruth went ahead, in her distracted way, with her chin up and her firm steps; and Camila went along next to the doctor. They walked through the semi-deserted Sunday streets. At first, nothing was said. Without discerning the cause, Camila sensed a storm ahead. She had found Gervásio's sentences at the table strange; and she still felt the pain of the malicious insinuations that he had slyly cast at her. She lacked the courage to ask him a question, more out of submission than indolence. She always waited so that he would be the first to speak and act, in that torturous and slavish passivity to which her love had condemned her.

He spoke. He said he had opened his eyes to the sweetness of a nascent love, and that he was not astonished by Rino's victory. He thought he should say goodbye as he saw she would be well tended.

Camila understood everything in an instant. Unable to respond to the brutality of the accusation, tears rose in her eyes. Her face turned red as a wave of shame suffocated her. Faced with her silence, he continued to insist, softly, stubbornly, irritatingly, spacing out his words, spilling out all the jealousy that had accumulated during the hours on board.

She then muttered, vexedly, between her teeth:

'I do not like Rino… I do not…'

And why would he speak like that, in the street? It is reckless…

'I did not have the time to choose a place. That is fine for the calm headed ones. Seeing myself threatened with abandonment, I have hurried to say goodbye. It had to be done right away.'

'How proud men are, and unfair!'

'They may be. What about women? Fickle!'

'It is almost always that a woman still loves a man who already considers her a nuisance. This is our fickleness…'

They ceased to speak; people walked by. After a long pause, it was she who spoke first:

'What does Rino matter to me! I am ready to ignore him, if that is…'

The doctor interrupted her in a low but lively tone.

'Now I am the one who reminds you that we are out on the street.'

Ruth, always ahead on the road and always distracted, did not notice anything. The two followed her automatically. It was she who, suddenly, seeing a confectioner's shop still open, remembered to take sweets to Nina and the children; she stopped at the door and waited for the doctor and her mother. At the very moment when they arrived, a woman, still young, left the confectioner's shop in mourning dress.

Upon seeing her, the doctor retreated sharply, and she, on seeing him, blushed to the roots of her hair, and faltered as well. The shock was abrupt and fast. He stayed firm on the pavement, very pale, his face twitching, and she passed gravely, with an embarrassed and tortured rigidity.

Camila felt her light dress rub against the woollen dress of the other; she inhaled deeply her violent aroma of an unknown essence; she glimpsed the whiteness of her velvety skin between her crepe collar and that part of her face left uncovered by the small veil of her hat; she grasped, in that gesture of shared surprise, some mystery, a betrayal, an infidelity, an ignominious falsehood that stood in contrast to the honesty of her passion.

'Who is she? Who is she?' Camila asked with frantic eagerness, pulling recklessly at the doctor's sleeve.

Dr Gervásio, still rooted to the same place, looked at the woman in mourning who was moving with the speed of someone making an escape. Upon hearing Camila's voice, he returned, disoriented. He smiled with evident effort and then, in a low tone, very low, but in a trembling and nervous manner, said:

'Don't mind her. A woman I loved and who died.'

A black cloud obscured Camila's vision and her heart accelerated its march in a wild beat.

Ruth, patiently dawdling, selected sweets that a shopkeeper separated onto a cardboard plate.

Dr Gervásio asked Camila to calm her spirit. He would tell her everything later. She should rest, as this was something past, perfectly extinct.

She pretended to accept the promise; in her heart, she doubted it. But how could she accuse him if her weak tongue did not know how to translate her strong feelings? She would stay in her role as a woman. She would wait in silence.

Chapter VII

The coffee business was swimming in gold. Small houses leaped suddenly to lofty positions. Throughout the entire coffee-filled quarter there was a continuous buzz of money. And the tide of gold was rising with the great abundance of a flood that threatens inundation.

The price of coffee reached a peak without precedent. There was a delirium of labour in all the warehouses along São Bento.

At Francisco Teodoro's warehouse, there was a whirlwind of movement.

Seu Joaquim did not stop for a minute, incessantly coming and going, undertaking miracles of activity, observing, gathering, directing, ordering. He was quick to do errands, extremely confident in his predictions and commands. He knew about everything, he guessed everything, without anyone seeing him extracting secrets or denunciations from his friends or subordinates. It was in Joaquim that the soul of that great warehouse on Rua São Bento seemed to be incarnated, because it was his name that spread from mouth to mouth, through the air, from the truck at the door to the innermost depths, the courtyard of the baggers, where the coffee shovels, falling rhythmically, lent a musical accompaniment to the work.

Seu Joaquim was a small man with an air of daring. He could, in a moment, terminate the movement of that entire vertiginous gyre, proclaim a strike, paralyse life, and close the door to all the money that wanted to get in.

From the perspective of the coarse workers, who, like ants, blackened the floor of the warehouse with their incessant movements, all the prestige went to Joaquim.

Francisco Teodoro rested on him, allowed him freedom to act; 'I know Joaquim's zeal,' he would say; hadn't he been the same at the beginning of his career? Now, well established in life, Francisco Teodoro assumed a more aristocratic posture, affecting the airs of a great personage.

There was a time when the manager would go upstairs to his boss's office for some clarifications; and, in these few minutes, stolen away from the activity below, Seu Joaquim succeeded in unpacking the general situation of the day. He handed over the requested notes and even discussed the movement of the large houses nearby, quickly outlining a table that allowed comparisons at a glance, highlighting the position of Francisco Teodoro's warehouse.

And, in these simple sayings, there was between the two men something like a small flame, shining drunkenly, a spark of ambition fanned by their own successes and those of others.

They both loved the house, they both wanted to see it reach the highest possible position.

Seu Joaquim, speaking to himself, credited the prosperity of the business to the skill of his management, which was smart and positive. In his view, the people in the office were inept and did not contribute anything to the success of the business.

He judged himself a predominant figure, indispensable, and for that reason he afforded himself impertinences that Teodoro tolerated as a tax on his services.

When the manager descended the stairs from the office and returned to the warehouse, Francisco Teodoro reclined in his chair and remained thoughtful. In the room nearby, the rasping of the quills against the books and the whisper of the turning pages were sometimes the only sounds that could be heard.

In that great peace underwritten by his conquered fortune, Francisco Teodoro dreamed of lengthy voyages and long periods of abstraction.

Weariness reached him.

Nevertheless, if he reflected on such things, he balked, feeling certain that those days without the confusion of work, away from the charged atmosphere and uncountable concerns of the business, would be intolerable. This wavering desire, justly demanded by his exhausted body and soul, commingled now with a nascent fever that incited him to new undertakings – a fever that he combatted with his determination and better judgement.

Oh! If only Mário were a man, if only he had the skill and courage for that life… With what satisfaction would Teodoro sit Mário in his own place and show him the path. It was already made and easy to follow!

He had been severely punished for his desire to have a son. Perhaps not for wanting a son, but for his pride – his desire for the continuation of that house that would carry his name forward through to the following generations. The son had arrived and had turned his back on his fortune.

The house would pass into the hands of strangers, or it would have to die with him…

This was what cost him the most: the knowledge that he would leave the culminating work of his life, into which he had poured such tremendous sacrifices, towards which he had, in times of upset, staggered dreamily, achieving small morsels of success, forced onwards by a tireless volition, and, at the end, leave it to someone who would simply purchase it – like some arbitrary thing – and then change its name.

How good it sounded: Casa Teodoro, a golden rhythm!

In that street of wealthy houses, his would still be the richest if it weren't for Gama Torres putting himself ahead, helped by the hand of the devil, certainly, as God only assists those who labour long hours and provide good examples.

How had Torres amassed his fortune? By gambling. It was known now, throughout the city, that he had gambled on the stock market like a madman. The result was magnificent. But could it not have been terrible?

Certainly, he concluded to himself. That is not what one calls a good businessman. It is the work of chance. No more, no less…

The time for coffee had arrived. The first to enter that day was Lemos, whose ponderous flesh weighed him down. He sat immediately.

'So how is it going, Senhor Teodoro, h'm?'

'Good. A lot of work.'

'That is what one wants. I don't stop either. But do you want to know who is going from strength to strength? Inocêncio. The thief has a steady hand; he never misses! I watched him make immense transactions today with the greatest serenity. Money doesn't itch in his hands. He's coming now; I left him downstairs talking with someone. He is a crafty one.'

'Yes… yes, he is clever.'

Minutes later, Inocêncio Braga walked in, restless and cheerful, in the company of Negreiros, who had come up on account of some business. While Negreiros was amusing Teodoro, Inocêncio said, turning himself to Lemos:

'Today is for me one of the happiest days of my life! Guess what? I have just received a letter from my attorney informing me that a country house from my village – one that I have desired since I was a little boy – is now mine!'

'Is it land for wheat?'

'Not for that. The property will only incur expenses. I have bought it out of revenge. The owner was an old aristocrat, a rare specimen. Over a stupid matter he once mistreated my father. I was young, but I did not forget the offence. The days passed by. The aristocrat ruined himself and my father's son earned enough to make him sign, without reading the details, the contract transferring ownership of his country house. My father has already moved into his palace. The devil of it is, he can't get used to idleness, it's just his manner, so he goes to the fields to weed the flax with the workers… But no matter; he is the owner.'

'Really, that was an act of filial love, very honourable,' murmured Lemos, blowing his nose loudly.

Isidoro came in with the coffee and the conversation opened up.

'So, Senhor Teodoro, is it true that Joaquim is interested in a partnership?'

'Yes.'

'Just as well. You did not seem Portuguese; you seemed English!'

'Why?'

'For not wanting partners. A house of this size could enrich many people. You know, it is a mistake to want everything for yourself.'

Yes, thought Francisco Teodoro, life is short, a spring dug with such force and effort. It is fair to give abundant water to satisfy so many thirsts…

Isidoro was already collecting the cups when João Ramos entered, panting due to the heat. He asked after everyone's health, but before he could listen to the answers, he spilled out everything he knew about the latest dealings. He was coming from Lessa's house, who was earning extraordinary profits from coffee speculation. Ramos had also been involved in great enterprises. He pulled out a thick bunch of papers that filled his pockets – papers that represented vast sums of money.

Inocêncio Braga cited the names of impoverished individuals who had become millionaires on the booming market when João Ramos interrupted him. He wanted to consult his friends on whether he should accept the presidency of a bank. He was hesitating.

Inocêncio advised him to do so. It was a prestigious position. Moreover, the effervescent moment for gambling was gone. Transactions were now being done more securely. He himself already had a great new project in the making.

Teodoro was feeling suffocated; he didn't hear about anything else. His neighbour to the left and his neighbour to the right were both sending fabulous quantities of currency to Europe, gained in the luck of a moment. What about him?

His reflections took a disconsolate turn. He had worked so hard, so that he could finally achieve what others acquired in an instant!

Little by little his more circumspect friends were throwing themselves into the vortex of the stock market. The lucky ones, as if invisible hands were guiding them, almost always won. Only he had resisted, firm in his moral and economic principles. But the contagious fever manifested itself in the first shivers of temptation.

Francisco Teodoro grew pensive.

When his friends left, he walked mechanically to the window.

He looked down. Below, an old black woman hurriedly swept the pavement, gathering up the spare coffee in the street. Porters were leaving through the door, bent by the weight of their bags. Crammed wagons passed by with a clamour and a racket of iron, and a compact rumble of voices rose through the dense air, thickened by dust.

It was labour that passed by, burning and breathless.

From all that effort would one day emerge the redemption of the people. It is with sweat and tears that the best fields are fertilised.

From the hoe that exhausts the arm and tears the clay flows the good of humanity, the water that quenches the thirst, and the tree that casts its shade while bursting into blossoms.

Blessed are those who do not waver, those who may, at the end of their existence, hold their heads high, free from any stain of vice. Those who will have not succumbed to the swift currents of deceit, those will say to their children:

'Look upon my life and do as I have done.'

That was what Francisco Teodoro thought as he tried to cling tight to his old faith – a faith he feared might now collapse, shaken by the fierce gusts of those mad days.

Chapter VIII

In the small starching room, Noca stood with the iron in hand, aware of what was transpiring throughout the entire house. That day she had brought a large armful of clothes and placed them on the chair next to the ironing board. Lia and Rachel interrupted her work immediately.

'Noca, could you cut a dress for my doll?' asked Lia.

'And another one for mine, Noca?'

'You girls go away now. Today I have no time for distractions.'

'Just one, Noca, please?'

'I can't do anything! Tomorrow your father will be here screaming that he has no clothes!'

But the girls didn't leave her alone. They dragged in a straw mat, sat on it and Noca had no choice but to cut the dresses for the dolls and give the girls needles, thread, and patches. After distributing the tasks, Noca stood up. Nina passed by on her way to the pantry and smiled at Noca. But the mulatta barely responded to her greeting, sickened by the kindness of that creature.

It was the fault of her blood, of her race, that she esteemed her superiors less the more they cherished her. That is why she loved Mário, a bold young man with an authoritarian temper and harsh words.

She had just begun to iron her boss's first shirt when Dionísio approached her ironing board.

'You're arriving only now, Dionísio?!'

'Yes. I went to deliver a message from Master Mário… Do you know that he left the French woman? The one he is with now is prettier; she is from Rio. A real eye-catcher.'

'Just look at how foolish Dionísio is…' she pointed to the children, who were likely to go gossiping inside. And then:

'Is she blonde or brunette?'

'She is brunette, somewhat tall, and very *chic*.'

'Well. Go tidy Mário's room, move.'

Dionísio had hardly left when the housekeeper, Orminda, who had sly eyes and copper skin, came in.

'Look, Dona Noca, see what I have just found under Dona Nina's pillow.'

'What is it?' asked the mulatta, without raising her eyes from her work.

A portrait.

Noca looked; it was Mário's portrait. She put it away without saying a word. Orminda continued:

'My mistress is writing a letter up in her room.'

'It is for Sergipe.'

The housekeeper smiled.

'The music teacher is here.'

'I know... Go ask the gardener for some mint so that I can make an infusion. Go on now.'

Noca had risen above the servants, who referred to her as *Dona*. Even among the whites, her words of experience were listened to with respect. She was the resourceful woman who arranged everything; at the great parties she made the sweets; she was the only one capable of satisfying her boss's idiosyncrasies when it came to starching his clothes; no one knew better how to prepare remedies, to make a steam bath or a scalding foot bath, how to choose fish, prepare a pudding or dress a child.

Happy, strong, talkative and arrogant, with a prickly temperament and a tongue always ready to respond to anything, she did not accept admonitions and had no concept of thrift. Her clothes were very clean and always smelled good. She wore light colours and joyful ribbons. Walking with the full weight of her voluminous body, she always looked people straight in the face with an air of sincerity.

She excelled in the translation and interpretation of dreams, with an imagination glittering with small and extravagant ideas and original concepts. For the most insignificant fact she had a mysterious explanation, wrapped in mist and supremely curious superstitions, uttered as oracular mottos endowed with an indisputable truth.

And her influence had extended throughout the entire family. Camila consulted her; Nina shared her dreams and asked for explanations; Ruth listened to her with enormous interest, her soul open to anything that had an air of fantasy. The servants asked her for advice,

prayers, remedies, predictions on games of chance, and for consolation after heartbreak and grief.

Noca assisted everyone, honestly proud of herself for being useful, and readily served as many people as possible.

She was now suspicious of Mila's poorly concealed sadness. Something new must have happened since that outing on the *Neptune*… Now, Dr Gervásio was extra cautious; and poor Captain Rino was received with a certain indifference that the stupid man seemed incapable of understanding!

Nina, the poor thing, was becoming skinny as a herring; and only Ruth passed by without seeing anything, as if music carried her along other paths. The master of the house was also ruminating on something…

The one who provoked indiscreet confidences from the mulatta was Nina, who, on the pretext of needing a necktie ironed or a ribbon smoothed, went to the small starching room as soon as she saw Dionísio leave.

The mulatta noticed everything and had no qualms about repeating the truth. Well, maybe this would cure the girl, she thought to herself. If loves never faded, what would become of us? The heart wants everything. Suffering because of a man? Can't she see it's senseless!

Nina listened to everything quietly with moist eyes, the fingers of her stubby hands splayed flatly on the warm ironing board. As the last word fell from Noca's thick lips, the mulatta turned to blow on the embers. Nina returned indoors. She sat down to sew, feeling herself insignificant, ugly, and very miserable. All the efforts she made to please Mário were useless. He did not seem to notice her, and he was hardly ever at home… The other woman was beautiful, tall, and brunette. It was little what she knew, but it was enough to make her suffer.

Amidst the bustle of the house, while everyone else moved about frantically with their work and activities, Camila confined herself to her room, mute, shrunken in her armchair, her hands idle and her gaze feverish.

The vision of that woman in mourning, the one they had seen on the day of the *Neptune*, never left her. She felt, like a punishment, that woman's beauty, perfume, and discreet air of honesty. What made her physically ill, and tormented her even more, was Gervásio's obstinacy in denying her any explanation. What must there be between them?

In her jealousy and resentment, Camila now avoided the doctor; it was in vain that he invited her to their sweet and cruel rendezvous. But all her strength to resist was weakening, and she felt that, in spite of everything, the day would surely come when her feet would carry her back to him.

She was still in that corner of her room when Francisco Teodoro found her upon his return from the city.

'Are you unwell? Look here, I've got us a box for *Aida*. Negreiros told me that this company is performing very well.'

'What does Negreiros know about music?!'

'He has an excellent ear. I think it would be good for you to come down. Gervásio is downstairs.'

Mila went down. Before stepping onto the terrace, she stopped between the doors to hear what Dr Gervásio was saying. He was sitting down with his back to her. In front of him, standing up, Ruth was listening to him attentively, a skipping rope rolled around her arm; her face still flushed from her interrupted exercise.

'You mentioned that this sister of the Baroness of Lage is a well-educated young woman, but you mean to say that she is well-instructed. There is a difference: education and instruction should not be confused. See, why is it that you consider this girl to be well-educated? Because she speaks French and English, because she plays music and draws, isn't that so? But these skills, even if acquired with effort, can ultimately be purchased from teachers; other skills are born of a convivial environment. A well-instructed person will lack a gracious exterior if they are not well-educated. Instruction is not always visible, and it does not always contribute to happiness. Education inclines us to tolerance and is revealed in everything: in the way we make our greetings, walk in the street, kneel in church, and eat at the table; it is in what we say and in how we listen, in the way we alter the tone of our opinions during discussions when we are faced with contrary ones. These thousand effects, individually imperceptible, nevertheless enhance the individual; they polish a person, and make them worthy of good society. Instruction is the strength that equips our spirit for life; it is a spear for attacking and a shield for defence. Education is the perfume that intelligent parents spray on the souls of their children in such a way that it permeates them, and never evaporates, no matter what kind of environment they live in afterwards.

'It is important not to confuse these two words, Ruth, because although such confusions may be meaningless to the blind eye of the indifferent, they do alter the truth and do not escape more delicate ears.'

'I will not mix up the meaning of these two words again…'

'Lélio told me yesterday that he had brought you a waltz by Chopin. Well, you may play it, but you cannot excel at interpreting such a composer.'

'Why?'

'Because you are not old enough to understand him. Chopin is a dangerous musician, my dear. He is a torturer, an exciter of souls. Content yourself with works of the Classical period, they are healthier and fresher. Music, like literature, must be administered with prudence. I will speak with Lélio. Has your mother come down?'

'She is right there, behind you.'

'Ah…'

Mila made use of her daughter's presence to avoid being alone with the doctor, who could see how evasive she was. The pallor and sadness had sweetened her face, granting her a new charm. Gervásio observed her in silence, irresolute, fearing to suddenly resolve the situation with a single word…

Every year Francisco Teodoro celebrated his birthday, as well as those of his wife and his children, with banquets that filled three or four tables, with unlimited wine and dances that lasted until dawn.

On those days the doctor paid his respects, offered violets and a customary toast, and retired early to his quiet house near Jardim Botânico, where he would return to his reading, reclining comfortably in his rocking chair, warm in the robe-de-chambre that wrapped his thin body.

Camila knew his antipathy for these parties and for that reason she did not lament his absences.

On such occasions, the immense house was small for the number of friends gathered. The gardens were illuminated with balloons and small candlesticks. People were everywhere: in the rooms, the hallways, on the terraces, at the buffet, in the bedrooms. Everywhere was the murmur of voices and the humid smell of trodden plants, flowers warmed by lights, and diverse essences united in the odour of the sauces and meats served at the banquet. The beds disappeared under the weight of the capes, shawls, hats, and overcoats. The guests walked freely through all the rooms as if they were at home. Nina, the servants, and Noca threw into one room – the only one that remained locked – everything that might obstruct the guests' path: centre tables, vases, rugs removed hurriedly for the dances, sofa cushions that took up too much space, etc. The children ran all over the house, dropping raisins and bits of sweets; and a paid pianist tapped away at the polkas and waltzes of his repertoire on the Pleyel in the parlour.

At these parties, there was always the presence of Francisco Teodoro's colleagues and acquaintances, as well as people connected to his business, neighbours, some doctors, and a senator of the Empire, on whom the most attention was lavished. There were also Camila's friends

from her time at school, presentable women of some status; the wealthy ones she only met later, in the upheavals of life.

In the pauses between dances, there was always someone playing challenging pieces on the piano or singing an Italian song.

Francisco Teodoro, jubilant and kind, urged the guests to eat and drink. He did not forget anyone; he placed handfuls of candy in the children's laps; he ordered the opening of champagne bottles; he conducted old ladies to the buffet; and he insisted that Noca distribute wine and sweets among the servants.

These parties, where laughter communicated more by its volume than by its intention, were truly fit for Pantagruel.

Camila danced, brushing her marvellous bare arms against the sleeves of the commanders or her husband's employees.

At the table, the toasts followed one another haphazardly. Towards the end, there was always a loud unhurried voice raised to the victory of honourable and pure work, and this voice reminded Francisco Teodoro of the bad days, of his poverty, his energy, and his triumph.

The master of the house responded with trembling words and misty eyes. The glasses tinkled and the music vibrated forcefully throughout the room. They returned to the dances. As Ruth did not dance, her father called her studious, boasting about her to his guests, who looked at her with a certain amazement. Ruth dodged their curiosity and escaped outside. They would find her later, alone on the swing, flying towards the bright clarity of the stars.

Only on the day following the feast would Dr Gervásio go to Teodoro's mansion to taste the turkey already set aside for lunch and enjoy angel hair for dessert amidst the stillness of the exhausted family.

Vestiges of the mess were everywhere. Nina counted the silverware, which was scattered among the crockery and the crystal, casting waves of pale light on the dinner table; Noca swept the rooms; servants washed the marble of the stairs and the hall; and the gardener put away the candlesticks and lanterns that were disseminated across the garden.

It was one of those parties that Francisco Teodoro now desired to host for his friends. He went downstairs to consult his wife and the doctor, and found them still on the terrace, next to Ruth, whose hands her mother grasped nervously.

Mila greeted the idea coldly; her husband insisted:

'You are listless; you seem different. Do something, take some medication. What the devil! I have an obligation to indulge the men. They come on behalf of the community. I don't want to cut a sad figure.'

'Any reason for such an exhibition?' asked Gervásio.

'Yes. Just some foolery. Braga, Lemos and others have some ideas. Negreiros informed me about them today. They went to the minister and who knows where else! Anyway, as I've already said, I do not want to cut a sad figure. The irony is that my wife has been talking about giving a great ball; and now that the opportunity presents itself, she makes a face!'

Dr Gervásio agreed. The idea struck him as wonderful, and he offered to help in its execution. He thought to himself that this party might be a way to restore Mila to her habitual liveliness. It would pull her out of that pensive obstinacy and physical apathy that tormented him.

For the first time they saw the doctor interested in a party. Francisco Teodoro asked him to oversee it. From that day onwards the doctor had the run of the mansion; his authority was absolute. He would determine how things would be done. Supper would be on the terrace, in the back, under a silk canopy strewn with small ferns and white camellias; he designed ornaments, ordered flowers, replaced upholstery, and harmonised colours; he gave style and grace to what until then had been ungainly luxury; he made an ideal of the material and extracted a delicate soul from those mute and heavy rooms.

Mila watched everything in silence, worn down by her suspicions; but, little by little, Gervásio convinced her that her jealousy was madness. Had he not also been jealous of Captain Rino? And here he was: he did not even think about it!

As Mila's heart was not accustomed to such rigours, and was inclined to happiness, she began to forget.

Chapter IX

One afternoon, Mário was entering the dining room when he saw Dr Gervásio at the table; he retreated outside without saying a single word.

Mila felt her heart stop in her chest. Teodoro did not attach importance to the event; as far as he was concerned, his son had gone back to fetch some forgotten item. He was speaking so enthusiastically about his business that only during dessert did he say, with amazement:

'Oh yes, and Mário? He has not returned?

Nina attempted to excuse his absence, murmuring:

'I think he is indisposed…'

'I will go see.'

Teodoro stood up.

Everyone fell silent, as if the same thread of distrust bound them together. Camila trembled. What would her son say? How would his father react? Of all the sufferings that had ever beset her love, none had produced greater torment than this one.

The time had arrived when her husband would learn everything. And from Mário!

Dr Gervásio understood her and tried to comfort her from afar with a gaze that was firm and confident. He was convinced that there was no point in anticipating sadness, that all things arrive when they must, either on foot or on wings. But still everything made him hope that what she feared would not come.

To dispel these worries, he began to speak of trifles: some parties were being announced, an excellent exhibition of paintings was opening; and many were praising the brio of a new tenor at the Lírico…

He sensed that his voice sounded false. No one was listening to him, not even himself. Despite his apparent calmness, he was uttering those

words while thinking he heard others, coming from outside like bolts of lightning, blasting everything away.

Mila leaned against the back of her chair, very pale, her haunted eyes locked in a searching gaze. Dr Gervásio rambled on and on...

Meanwhile, Teodoro burst into his son's room.

'So, Master Mário, this is how it is done? You enter the dining room and turn your back with no explanation; in front of guests, no less?!'

'Guests? What guests? Dr Gervásio? He's quite at home here.'

'He is not; but even if he were, if you do not think much of me or your mother you should at least respect a guest.'

'But if it is the guest that I hate? I cannot look at that man, papa; I cannot look at him!'

'Are you mad? Why?'

Mário grew suddenly silent, full of remorse and staring blankly. His father insisted, furious:

'Such things are not said idly. Answer me. Why do you feel this rage?'

'I don't know… I have disliked him since I was a child… As if by instinct… I get irritated by that pale face, that skinny body, by his uneven voice and mocking smile. I have an aversion to his womanish hands, his pedantries, his overbearing attention; I abhor his shoes, the colour of his clothes, the glass in his spectacles, his perfumes, the way he is and everything about him. Do not ask me more; I cannot say anything else. Maybe it seems little to you; but it is a lot. For what happened today, I am sorry. I am unwell.'

'If you are ill, cure yourself. Only a delirium explains what you have just said. Get well. Because we must settle accounts! And this episode will not repeat, do you hear? Will not repeat! Otherwise, you will see my bad side!'

Francisco Teodoro stormed out of the room, but then went to tell the doctor that Mário was indeed unwell.

That night, as on the others, the young man went out onto the streets without so much as a 'farewell'!

He had to search for happiness where he would find it; his home annoyed him.

The family were walking around the garden, taking their sweet habitual stroll, soaking in the familiar sights with pleasure: watching the watering of the plants and the birth of the stars. There was a wild heat. Ruth was flying, holding tight to the ropes of the swing, singing loudly and throwing *cajazeira* flowers at her mother whenever she passed nearby.

Camila, touched by the gesture, caught the flowers with both hands and imbibed their lightly acidic aroma in a delicious sensation.

'Careful, darling.'

'Here comes a kiss, mama.'

The kiss flew with the flowers that got tangled in Mila's hair. And the stroll continued, unhurried and happy.

'One day that girl is going to tumble … But I know what I'll do. Tomorrow morning, I will have the ropes of the swing cut. Prevention is the best cure!'

'No, Teodoro, don't! It is her joy. It is so harmless!'

'Here we go…'

Ruth could not hear them. She was flying through the air like a feather, closing her eyes tightly against the clear light that scattered the glorious colours of the burning dusk. Occasionally when she kicked out with force her head brushed the flowering *cajazeira* branch, and the whisper of the leaves seemed to her ears like the divine and rhythmic sounds of flawless music. All her strength was concentrated in her hands, abraded by the rough ropes; it was the only sensitive part of her body, which moved back and forth in the changing evening light like an impalpable and wandering shadow.

In the vertigo of her flight, she did not see anything above and around her other than dizzying flashes of clear light, in which blue angels opened threadbare wings of fleeting clouds among bars of gold ensnared in bonfires of coral. Below, on the amber earth, the green velvet of the grasses and hedges extended itself in a voluptuous and tender stretch, as if getting ready for sleep.

The moment of nature's purest transubstantiation was arriving. It was the hour of the stars. Before long, the ripening orange sunset thickened into a dark purple split with black islands that dotted a silver sea. Then suddenly, nightfall.

The heat intensified; in the distance there was a rumble of thunder.

'It seems the good Lord wants me to leave,' said the doctor.

'Yes, that would be prudent, rain is coming,' answered Teodoro, consulting the sky. 'It will be a torrent!'

Camila bid Ruth to get off the swing, go inside, and retrieve the doctor's hat. They said goodbye.

When Teodoro entered the house, he asked Noca:

'And Master Mário?'

'Master Mário is out.'

'H'm… Just what I expected. But he will pay!'

Camila and Nina exchanged uneasy glances and moved silently to the parlour, where they usually spent their evenings. They had barely sat down when Mila began fidgeting. Winged ants were orbiting the light in a cloud, and harassing Mila, hitting her face and entering her dress through the collar.

'Trouble never comes alone,' she said angrily.

Nina waved at the ants with a handkerchief.

Around ten o'clock, Francisco Teodoro called out to the mulatta once more.

'Master Mário?'

'He hasn't returned…'

'Fine. You go downstairs and lock the door. When he arrives, even if he knocks, do not open it. Do you understand?'

'I do; yes, sir.'

'Now go call Dionísio.'

And the same order was given to Dionísio, as to all the other servants.

Mila had raised her eyes from the book she was reading. Nina was pricking her fingers with the needle, struggling with a stitch.

Teodoro turned towards them:

'In the old days there were no latchkeys. Children went to bed at the same time as their parents…'

'They went out through their windows,' murmured Camila.

'Oh yes!'

'What if it rains? The night looks so ugly…'

'Then he should go back where he came from. He's not coming home on foot.'

'But since the tilbury stops at the gate, he will have to walk, and under the rain…'

'If it rains, then he gets wet,' exclaimed Teodoro, beside himself, 'and if there's lightning, then he gets struck. Madam, isn't that how life is?'

'It's his youth…'

'This again! I spent my youth bent double under the weight of my work, thank you very much! And my son only knows how to spend what I've earned with the sweat of my brow!'

'He doesn't have the same health. Mário is weak.'

'All the more reason…'

'What reason?!'

'Enough; I have made up my mind. No more. From now on either the young man returns at a respectable hour, or…'

'Or?'

'Or he can sleep with the devil!'

Camila looked at her husband with disdain, disgusted by his fury. She was eager to reply, but a great fear came over her suddenly that Francisco Teodoro might once again make her the messenger for his threats, and she ran away from the room without answering him, slamming the door in despair.

'It is for those and other reasons that Mário is now the way he is…' grumbled the businessman, pacing the room with his hands in his pockets, tinkling his keys.

Outside, the night was pitch black and stifling. From out of the soil and vegetation rose an intense feverish smell that thickened the atmosphere and gave it body, rendering it unbreathable.

It was not yet eleven o'clock, but everyone had already retreated to their rooms, enervated and reeling.

Shortly thereafter the first gust broke over them, rumbling in grimly from afar.

They closed the windows; the storm had arrived. While she prayed, Noca shuddered: an owl scraped against the edge of the roof, singing.

The mulatta crossed herself twice and remained silent, straining her ears for any sound.

In the moments that followed, there was only the wind.

She laid down with a sigh.

The one who did not lie down was Nina. Alone in her narrow room, she opened the window and leaned out into the garden, seeking out the street through the grove.

The gas lamps scantly illuminated the lonely pavements, which were enveloped by clouds of dust swept in by the gale, swallowing everything. Every now and then a well-oiled tram passed by, its chiming bells echoing timidly amid the dreadful roars of the night.

Nina returned inside, unbuttoned her small bodice, and threw it on a chair. She felt oppressed. There was a pause in the gale. She returned to the window, anxious, bringing her naked chest near to the wide windowsill. She did not see anything. The slurred falsetto voice of a drunk carried shrilly from a nearby street corner, accompanied by another voice uttering the same tune. A strong new gust arrived, terrible, shaking everything.

The shutters closed on the only lit window in the neighbourhood.

The drunk man was dragged away, and they lost his moaning to the distance. Only the wind remained, growing stronger with each blast. Howling, howling.

Now it did not stop. It filled everything with its formidable gusts.

One could feel the crackling of the leaves burnt by the sun and smell the aroma of the green foliage that the wind lifted though the air in mad flocks. Struggling uselessly to resist, the trees bent over and snapped. Bushes were flattened, ripped out along with their roots; and unripe fruits crashed on the roofs with loud bangs.

Nina exposed her naked head to the scourge of the storm, irritated by her fixation. She knew that Mário did not deserve that. He would never love her.

It had been roughly fifteen years since she had moved into that house. She had been taken there by her father, Joca. Despite being only ten years old, she was already resentful, and she entered that house just as she might have entered any orphanage: for the sake of a bed and some bread. She did not forget these acts of charity; indeed, she remembered everything, and was even obliged to meditate on her past more often than she wished. She had never known her mother; and, facing the mute darkness, she thought about her, as if she could see her. Nina could not understand why they all scorned her loving heart. Neither a mother during her childhood nor a boyfriend in her youth. What a triumph!

She knew from others that her mother had been a fallen woman of a low class. She knew nothing else; but that alone was not so little.

From her first year she had been raised by her paternal grandmother, Dona Emília. She enjoyed few comforts as money was scarce and patience scarcer. Due to these circumstances, Nina had learned quickly how to perform all the domestic chores. She was the family's kitchen maid, and by the age of nine she could serviceably place a saucepan of rice or beans on the fire. She would have stayed in Sergipe forever if Joca had not married a widow already overflowing with children, who, moreover, could not stand the sight of her stepdaughter in front of her… Always this antipathy! Wasn't that sufficient to make a creature evil? She remembered how unenthusiastically she had been received at Teodoro's house.

In the beginning, frightened, Nina had sought out the company of the servants rather than the family. She was more habituated to rough work and crude words, with her countenance of a beaten dog. This tendency was considered by all a clear indication of her low instincts. It was the trace of the filth transferred to her by her mother, which she would carry with her all her life.

Noca skilfully took advantage of Nina's presence to entertain Ruth, who was then only taking her first steps. And in this role, Nina revealed the sweetness of her character and the ingenuity of her spirit. In a few

days Ruth grew to prefer Nina over all others, throwing her small round arms around Nina's thin and pale neck. That conquest was her moment of glory. She sensed Ruth's love for her as a blind man glimpses a ray of light. In the pink kisses offered by the round and pampered child, she sensed the aroma of life, which, until then, she had only dimly perceived from afar.

At the time, Mário was a young boy, only five years old but tall and strong for his age. He was very handsome, bold, and mean-spirited with Nina. Abusing his strength and his position as the favourite, he kept her enthralled and ready to give in to any of his absurd desires.

One of the most outraged by Nina's adoption at Teodoro's house was Dona Joana, for whom the girl smelled of sin and was a living blasphemy against the principles of religious morality. For this class of people, she insisted, there were the orphanages; weeds are not meant to live in flowerbeds of violets. Charity produced hospices, orphanages, and foundling wheels, where children of impurity and shame could be found and refined. But to embrace an unknown animal to one's honest heart was to expose oneself to a venom with unforeseeable effects.

Mila did not repudiate such an idea and was filled with indignation regarding the origins of her niece; however, the poor creature succeeded in, little by little, gradually entering the good graces of all, assisted by her docility and usefulness.

Although small and pale, no one ever saw her ill; she had muscles as flexible as her spirit. At the age of twelve, she persevered in her stupid and humble manner. She didn't know a single letter; but she could teach the new servants how to sweep the house and how to set a perfect dinner table. When one day Mário beat her with the harness of his wooden horse, Francisco Teodoro decided to enrol her in a boarding school. He recommended practical instruction, nothing ornamental. She was well guided.

School was the best time of her life. She had no news from her father except on certain occasions, as when he notified her of the birth of a new child and offered some half-hearted farewells at the end of his letter.

At first, the idea of that brother, whom she would perhaps never meet, moved her; then she stopped thinking about him. Why bother?

It was only after she became a woman that Nina began to love her mother; a love that was ignored by everyone and that she nurtured as a treasured secret. Delve deep inside the purest heart and you will find there a mystery, something that exists and is disavowed, either because it makes one blush, or because it makes one suffer.

Nina felt ashamed to ask about her mother and burned with the desire to know about her. Where could this repudiated woman be?

No one would tell her. Consequently, she sometimes imagined her mother in the grave, and this was a most consoling idea; other times she imagined her restored to grace, but lonely, or else living in one of the darker corners of the city, already aged and still mired in vice, beaten, mocked, and miserable.

She questioned the darkness anxiously and seemed to feel the obscure soul of her mother searching for her in the agonising sigh of the wind. She then extended her arms, sobbing, desiring Death and the definitive encounter of their two souls in the fusion of an eternal kiss, one that would redeem the mother and grant the daughter her first joy.

The first thunderbolts boomed in a massive roar; a golden zigzag cut the black expanse, and under the white light of the lightning the mute house performed a macabre dance with the dark grove.

The convulsion passed only to return more rapidly; in the travelling glare of the phosphorescent light everything attained extraordinary proportions; but immediately, at every interval, the darkness of the night returned, denser than before.

The wind died down; and then, in one single deluge, the rain commenced. It was heavy, brutal, and deafening.

The water sprayed the window. Nina searched for a shawl, covered herself, and returned. It was time: amidst the torrents of rain, she glimpsed through the glossless veil of water the indistinct flickering of the tilbury's lantern lights.

Leaning over, stretching her neck, the young woman yelled:

'Mário! Mário!'

But her weak voice was lost in the downpour.

Her cousin was opening the gate; she tried to tell him to go back, that his father had locked the door. But the lantern lights of the car were already drifting away through the shadows.

Nina returned inside. She lit a candle and slipped out into the hallway.

With her heart thumping, she descended along the carpet of the passage with the caution of someone preparing to commit a crime.

When she arrived downstairs, Mário was already impatiently shaking the lock, cursing with anger.

She groped the bolts and advised:

'Wait a moment, Mário!'

'What stupidity!'

'Don't make such noise... hold on!' she whispered, so quietly he could not hear her on the other side of the door.

Finally, the door opened. Mário was waiting, glued to the threshold.

'Whose marvellous idea was it to lock…'

He interrupted his sentence and forgot his anger upon seeing his cousin. Why would she open the door for him, and not some servant?

'It was on Uncle Francisco's orders. Goodnight.'

Nina wanted to go upstairs immediately, but a gust of wind obliged her to protect the flame of the candle with her hand, and with this gesture one end of the shawl that enveloped her came loose. In the semi-darkness of the hall, Mário noticed the sweetness of her naked shoulder, small and round. It was a little piece of virginal flesh that had remained secret until then, never before exposed, not even at a ball. And now he could see nothing else beyond the purity of that shoulder, which resembled satin, peeking out from the wool of her garment in a salacious and voluptuous assault on his senses.

Then the perverse idea struck him that there was a malicious intent behind that story. Hadn't Noca asserted time and again that his cousin loved him?

Now, here was the daughter of the fallen woman as she should be: free from hypocrisies. Mário extended his arms to her.

Nina understood.

A rush of blood surged up to her face; she held the shawl tightly and ran upstairs.

The candle went out; the steps of the staircase seemed to multiply under her feet. In her agitation, she stepped carelessly, sometimes on the bare floor, sometimes on the walkway, feeling her face burning in shame, happy in her desperation, assuming that his arms were still pursuing her. Mário, however, remained still, dumbfounded.

Thunder erupted, as if a bomb had burst inside the house. Nina felt her knees buckle, but she persisted in her wild gallop up to the top of the stairs. Once in the upper hallway, she feared entering the wrong door.

With her outstretched hands she groped her way through the darkness, listening only to the dense and constant rumble of the rain. She feared that her cousin was on her heels, chasing her, and she did not dare to turn her head and look behind her in case she might bump into him.

Her feet, accustomed to the path, took her directly to its end. A gust whistling through the cracks of a doorway made her recognise her own bedroom, where she had left the windows open. She forced open the door, which resisted, and entered the room in raptures. She locked the door quickly with her key and put her ear to the lock. There

was no one. She sighed with relief; she was alone. A flash of lightning guided her to the window where she closed the glass, soaking herself. She undressed quickly in the dark, letting her wet clothes fall to the floor.

And it was in the white light of another flash of lightning that she saw herself standing, naked and pale, in the wardrobe's large mirror. Suddenly she hid her face, as if she had seen a ghost, and jumped into bed, pulling on her nightshirt in a crazed movement, in fear of the night, and in fear of her own image, which seemed imprinted forever on the glass.

Ashamed, foreseeing great evils, in an anguish that merged with pleasure, guessing at her cousin's thoughts, cursing him and adoring him, feeling that she belonged to him for life and in death, she almost regretted not having abandoned herself, sobbing for those arms she had fled from.

The confusion and quivering of her nerves were such that she did not notice someone walking through the hallway with a lighted candle and even steps.

Mário was sleeping happily, enjoying the best peace of his life; Francisco Teodoro returned to his interrupted sleep having internally forgiven whoever opened the door to his son. After all, it was such an ugly and stormy night. All the while, Nina, in the narrowness of her bed, her wide eyes staring at the black ceiling, suffered, suffered, suffered…

On the following day, at eight o'clock in the morning, when Francisco Teodoro arrived in the dining room to have lunch, which he always ate early and separately from the family, he already found his niece there, retouching the footman's arrangement of his table.

'Good morning, Nina. Did you have a good night?' he asked her, staring into her weary eyes.

'I always sleep well...' she answered, blushing.

He felt pity for her; and in a lower tone so that the servants could not hear him, Teodoro said:

'It was not right of you to open the door to my son. He does not deserve such sacrifices… and… the impression is bad. Your intention was good; the night was indeed dreadful… However, I hope this is the last time that I am disobeyed.'

Nina was paralysed, leaning on the backrest of one of the chairs placed around the table. A wind of despair stirred her spirit, and she could find no words to utter in response. Sensing her embarrassment, Francisco Teodoro bid her to break off a slice of cold roast beef and then fetch his newspaper, which he had left upstairs in his dressing room.

That polished and reserved manner was not the one typically adopted by the businessman in his reprimands. On the contrary, he would use terms of utmost violence and rattle the house with his loudest voice. It was one of these crises that Nina expected, and she saw that the change in the tone of his reproach was merciful; and, for that reason, was even more touching.

She did not answer and hurried to serve her uncle.

Chapter X

Only rarely did the aunts from Castelo come to visit Botafogo. Dona Itelvina did not budge from her house, where she spurred Sancha to her labours and griped about her sister's wastefulness and moralism. It was her sister who, every now and then, came to sit at Mila's table, offering a curt word in the short breaks between her devotions.

Nina, still disoriented by her uncle's reproach, was placing a cockatoo cage on the terrace, when she saw Dona Joana crossing the garden with the slow steps of a fat and tired woman.

'What a miracle! You here!'

The old lady smiled at her, and, only after sitting down on a bench on the terrace, did she speak with her usual pleasantness, untying the knot of her black shawl with her small swollen hands.

'You can scarcely imagine where I have been! Listen: at five o'clock I was already at São Bento, attending the mass at Nossa Senhora da Conceição; then I made several rounds of the city, collecting alms.'

'So early?'

'In the neighbourhoods of the needy, life begins at dawn. By the way, speaking of alms, yesterday I was at the home of the Bragas, on Rua dos Ourives. Do you know them?'

'No, ma'am.'

'What a shame… Those souls really have the fear of God. They were preparing sweets to offer Vicar Alves, who is celebrating his birthday today. They were so engaged! You cannot imagine what they are like…'

'Excuse me, Aunt Joana,' Nina interrupted; turning inside, she said:

'Dionísio, take the coffee to Master Mário, do you hear me?'

'Are they still sleeping?!'

'Uncle Francisco has already left.'

'A sad sin is laziness… Here I am praying for everyone. Anyway, the Bragas gave me ten tickets for a great concert that is happening at the Cassino, to raise funds for the church of Monte Serrate… For such a purpose, no one can say no; Camila should take Ruth to these musical events… I will pay for my own seat, but I won't go, and the other nine I plan to leave here. You go to so many indecent spectacles that you won't come to any harm going to this one, as it is for such a good cause. The one singing is… a Marcondes or… someone else…'

'You should talk to Aunt Mila… Seu João!', Nina interrupted the conversation once more to call out to the passing gardener: 'Listen! We need to make a new bouquet for the dining room; since there are no roses, make one with leaves… Have you noticed the small palm trees by the entrance?'

'The rain destroyed them. It ruined the flowers and opened pits in the flowerbeds. God help us!'

'See if you can fix that by today…'

The gardener moved on and Dona Joana said:

'It is a shame that there are no roses; I wish I could take some to Vicar Alves. Yesterday the wife and daughters of Dr Mendes spent the day there, hanging his curtains, sewing his carpets, helping Dona Maria decorate her son's room… Those are also very good people…'

'Would you like some coffee, Aunt Joana?'

'Yes, I would... You are one of those that never attend mass… You will regret it…'

'I don't have time… Do you want more sugar?'

'I do... What do you mean you do not have time?! Look now, you have sins behind your back that you must repent if you want to be worthy of being called a good daughter.'

Nina frowned, knitting her brows. Turning her eyes away from her aunt's white face, she looked at the green garden, still soggy with water and strewn with leaves blown about by the gale.

Dona Joana savoured the coffee, not noticing the young woman who remained standing, her face contracted in an expression of anger and melancholy.

This was how Ruth found them. She came completely fresh from her bath, with her dark wavy hair draped freely over her narrow shoulders, wearing a white dress with a large belt that widened her waist, making her look like an angel in a cathedral.

'How grown up you look!' exclaimed Dona Joana upon seeing her.

Ruth showed her white teeth in a cheerful smile.

'Good morning! Do you know, Aunt Joana? Just yesterday I thought about you!'

'Why?'

'Because I have been wanting to go to the observatory at Castelo to see the moon and the stars.'

'What an idea! I thought it was to ask me to take you to some festivity at the church…'

'No, they make me tired, especially as I have seen so many! That one at the Sé, the other day, the musicians were so out of tune. It was horrible! If at least they could sing well… It was Captain Rino who reminded me to go to the observatory. To get a good look at the light and colour of the stars, that is what concerns me now. Would you take me, auntie, please?'

'You should think instead of getting to know the heavens from the inside.'

'You are asking for too much. Have you read the *Flower of Snow* today, Nina?'

Nina said no by shaking her head.

'What is this about a flower of snow?' inquired Dona Joana.

'It is a novel in the *Jornal do Commercio*, very beautiful. I am dying to know if Madalena died… but if she did die, I will not touch the *Jornal* ever again!'

Dona Joana was going to disapprove of such reading when Camila appeared on the terrace, beautiful, with a pink peignoir and a pervasive fragrance, holding hands with her two small daughters.

Nina accepted her aunt's blessing, and, to escape from the old woman's presence, which had become odious to her, went straight into the dining room.

'It is very humid here. Why haven't you gone inside, Aunt Joana?'

'The bench is dry. And Nina was here…'

Camila, after greeting her aunt, removed the cockatoo from its cage and kissed its feathery crest.

Then, to the old woman:

'What brings you so early?'

Dona Joana resumed her story of the Bragas, of the mass at São Bento, and presented her niece the ten tickets for the concert to raise funds for the chapel of Monte Serrate.

'As it is for a religious reason, I will take them; otherwise, I would not, as I already have an invitation to a party on Sunday.'

'Today is Vicar Alves's birthday; are you sending him a card?'

'I can send one.'

'I think it would be good. He prays often for your sake. He is a saintly priest and a perfect man.'

'He is handsome, and he takes good care of himself. Have you had some coffee, auntie?'

'Yes... Why do you allow Ruth to read newspapers? She was talking now about a feuilleton. These are impure works; you must watch over your daughter's soul.'

'Her father does not care, what should I do?'

'Has she taken her first communion?'

'It is still early.'

'It is not. Doesn't she want to?'

'Oh, she does! Even if it is only to put on a tiara and a veil… All girls dream of their first communion. It is a rehearsal for a wedding.'

'Heresies... And Mário... how is Mário?'

'He is a handsome young man.'

'And… growing any wiser?'

Camila blushed lightly and concealed her cheeks, brushing them against the white wings of the cockatoo. She answered with a smile:

'Like all young men of twenty years of age…'

Lia and Rachel were tussling in a corner over a green peach, knocked down by the rain, which they both claimed. Mila called Noca to intervene and take the rivals inside. Dona Joana stood up with a groan and went to sit down at a corner of the dining room.

She was exhausted, her legs heavy. The soft armchair swiftly enveloped her in a languid caress. She dozed off deliciously, scarcely hearing the children's laughter, their quick steps, the clinking of the dishes being set on the table or the movements of the servants. In her sleep these things were as subtle and pleasant as music in the distance. When she awoke, lunch was about to be served. Dr Gervásio, wearing light clothes and with flowers in his lapel, was in front of the nearby window speaking to Camila in a low tone.

Dona Joana coughed to alert them to her presence. She did not want to take advantage of the moment for indiscretions. Fortunately, Nina entered the room, carrying a small basket of white grapes from the pantry.

Upstairs, Ruth attacked the bass and treble of the violin with frenzy.

'Praised be our Lord Jesus Christ! It seems like the bray of a donkey!' the old woman thought to herself, stretching discreetly.

At lunchtime, Dionísio brought a tray to serve Mário in his room, since he only sat at the family table when Dr Gervásio was absent.

Camila could barely hide her despair, covering over that offence with feeble excuses, only so the doctor might not notice. And he did

not notice; he accepted the pretexts without a trace of suspicion. Mário deserved little of his attention.

Meanwhile, Nina selected the best steak for her cousin, the softest slice of bread, and the most perfect eggs. Dona Joana noticed this but said nothing, fearing to inadvertently touch a nest of wasps. Instead, she simply drowned her small sighs with sips of Bordeaux.

Dr Gervásio observed to Ruth that the exercises he had heard were not played at the right tempo. She should rehearse once more, before her lesson. He then advised Camila to seek out an English or German tutor for the twins, who were wasting their time, corrupting themselves with the language of ignorant servants. He favoured a German. They are disciplinarians, good-natured, and more approachable than the others. After directing two pleasantries to Nina, the doctor fixed his attention on the pale and humble face of Dona Joana, who was sitting very quietly next to Ruth. In a blink, he remembered their encounter on the slope of João Homem, on the greasy cobblestones of the pavement, amidst the crowd of curious urchins and the dirty walls of old buildings.

Her reproaches had lingered in his ears, and he felt an urge to grab Mila and kiss her, right there, under the chaste and prude eyes of the old woman.

It was only after coffee, when lighting his cigar, that he heard Dona Joana complain in her sugary tone to her niece:

'Why do you not at least teach your daughters to cross themselves when they sit and when they leave the table? There is no shame in thanking God for the goods that one receives… Your conscience, Mila, is quite disturbed by the lamentable advice and examples of atheists lacking charity… I did not wish to speak but am too much your friend to remain unmoved. Isn't it time to teach these girls to respect our religion?'

Dr Gervásio smiled; he understood the insinuation. Mila protested: everyone in the house was religious, no one failed to attend Sunday mass, with the exception of Nina, who never had time for anything, or one or another overburdened servant; at night as well no one slept without having prayed at least one Our Father. She did not forget her duties.

This was said in a dry tone that agitated her aunt's meek spirit. To revenge herself on the doctor – from whom emanated, she supposed, all the changes that were occurring in this family that she held so dear – Dona Joana exclaimed with irony, turning to him:

'I have no doubts the doctor also prays every night?'

'To my gods,' he answered with complete calm, 'why not?'

'How do you call these gods of yours?'

'Camões, Dante, Shakespeare... I never fall asleep without having read some poet, and sometimes I recite mentally the divine verses. And it is to this that I attribute having such beautiful dreams. My dear madam, you see what an ugly man I am, yet I have dreams that would perfume the existence of the most beautiful women. Yesterday I read Dante. I was in hell, Dona Joana, and what a beautiful hell it was!'

'Carry on with such ideas…'

'Rest assured; this religion cannot be taught; it is for the initiated. Have you ever heard of Byron?'

'Another enemy of our Church, like you?'

'But I wish no harm to your Church! I only think it very sad that all its attention should be turned towards death… I do not desire the church any ill at all, in fact, because for its glorification it has created cathedrals that are the true apotheosis of art.'

'Only for this?'

'It is one of the reasons, and the only easy one to explain to you.'

'You think I am very ignorant.'

'On the contrary, I am speaking to you as I would to a fellow man of letters! Now, if you like, we can discuss religion and philosophy. Do you know Comte?'

'Someone wicked.'

'That's the word.'

'I know… He is adored at the little chapel on Rua Benjamin Constant. How sinful!'

'Oh! You already have news of him… We are well advanced.'

'Are you one of those who do not miss these sessions?'

'I never go there. I have already said, I detest philosophy. Medicine alone is enough to bore me, and to distract me I have my roses. Do you know any remedy to kill aphids in a rose bush? I have a Yellow Persian that is nearly lost!'

'Is your medicine not even sufficient for plants?'

'Not even for the wretched plants!'

'Aunt Mila!' said Nina hastily from between the doors of the hallway.

'What is it?'

'The Baroness of Lage and her sister are here.'

'My God! And here I am in my peignoir!'

Dr Gervásio turned and said:

'That's all very well. Whoever seeks out a lady at this time can only expect to be received in such a fashion. I will say this too: for me, there is no dress more beautiful than this one.'

'Then I shall go like this…'

Dona Joana smiled ruefully; even in this she followed the opinion of that devilish man!

'Well, Mila, let's say farewell,' she said, 'I am leaving. And the money for the tickets?'

'Oh, yes! Nina! Give a hundred thousand *réis* to Aunt Joana for the ten seats. Till next time, Aunt Joana.'

'Goodbye.'

The young woman left.

'Jesus!' exclaimed the old woman, 'it's past one o'clock and Mila forgot to give me the card for Vicar Alves!'

The doctor turned quickly, transparent curiosity on his face. What could Mila wish to write to Father Alves? The old woman noticed the strangeness of his gesture and turned her back before he could ask her for an explanation, smothering her sagging face in Ruth's ample black hair, busying herself with hugs, blessings, and offering greetings to Mário.

When Camila entered the parlour, the Baroness of Lage was standing, dressed in black satin, contemplating an insignificant painting with an expensive frame.

Her sister was sitting by the sofa, with the fatigued expression of an anaemic blonde. She distracted herself by stroking with gloved fingers a pendant that hung from a golden chain.

The lady of the house apologised for presenting herself in such a way…

'But you are at home, it is fine. Look, Paquita, this peignoir is almost the same as the one I bought yesterday at Raunier, isn't it?

Paquita nodded her head languidly.

'Now guess the reason for my visit!' said the baroness through her beautiful smile.

'Simple. You came to tell me of your wedding!'

'Marry? Me? My heavens!'

'And why not? You are the most coveted widow in Rio de Janeiro.'

'Unfortunately… Imagine: I now have at home a certain woman, a kind of lady-in-waiting, you know? She is only charged with receiving and dismissing my suitors… Do not laugh, it is the truth. Isn't it true, Paquita?'

Paquita nodded her head.

'You see! Anyway, where did you hear that I was engaged?'

'On a tram.'

'As always! The tram is the eternal gossip of this land. Also, whenever you do not want to compromise your informants, you attribute all these indiscretions to the poor tram… That is why I abhor it. I only go

out by carriage… No! I do not come to inform you of anything! I come to ask your Ruth to brighten a concert that we, the protectors of Sagrado Coração, intend to give on the fifteenth. If it weren't a religious matter, I wouldn't get involved. I have already been asked to organise events to benefit the schools and hospitals for the poor, as if in our America there was poverty… Believe me, my friend, in Brazil there are no poor; there are only atheists. We need to regenerate the people with examples of Christian faith.'

Camila agreed; Paquita dared to say a sentence.

There was a pause.

'Paquita gave me news of your son the other day; she said that he is a very handsome young man.'

Paquita threw a reproachful gaze at her sister; but the words had already been pronounced, and no power could now return them to their starting point.

'He is… but a little idle; he doesn't like to work…'

'Oh, he doesn't even need to! He is very refined. In his place, I would do the same.'

'Yes, but his father cannot accept this.'

Paquita's smile went unnoticed. The baroness continued:

'Have you already received the invitation to our ball?'

'Yes…'

'We hope that Mário will be the one to conduct the cotillion. Father likes Mário very much.'

Paquita and the baroness's father was an old Portuguese prospector made into a capitalist by the favours of fortune. The entire city knew his jokes and his simple ways. Moreover, he was proud of his coarse and weighty principles.

'We are also organising a ball, only the date has not been settled yet,' Camila said.

'It's already being talked about.'

The baroness spoke volubly, barely touching the subjects. She spoke a great deal and could have spoken even more if Paquita did not interrupt her suddenly with a dry phrase:

'Let's go.'

'Yes, let's go.'

When they said goodbye, with the promise that Ruth would play at the concert, Camila had her hands full with tickets for the matinee.

Amidst the gloss of her black satin dress, the baroness walked as if she was following music; her steps had a cadence, her bust was raised, and a sweet warmth filled her beautiful chestnut eyes.

Paquita followed in her vague manner, in which everything seemed to escape her attention. Camila noticed, when squeezing her hand, the thinness of her wrist, like the small pale wrist of a sick child, glimpsed between her sleeve and glove.

Downstairs, in the hall, the young ladies bumped into Dr Gervásio, who was also leaving, tired of waiting for Camila.

There was then a significant exchange of glances between the baroness and the silent Paquita, who gave the doctor an almost imperceptible nod. The expansive sister held him back, speaking to him cheerfully, finding a way to fill his pockets with tickets for her religious concert.

That afternoon the captain appeared in Botafogo. They had started to notice his absence. Upon seeing him, Lia and Rachel jumped on his knees.

Ruth came in a flurry, calling him ungrateful, asking for news from the *Neptune*. Nina received him, as always, with affection. To her, he possessed the air of a good friend, as if he might, in a moment of danger or distress, be someone who would listen to the confidences pouring from a woman's heart and offer her consolation. Francisco Teodoro opened his arms to him: why had he not visited in such a long time? Only Camila smiled with effort and reserve, extending the edges of her cold fingers.

And that was the reason he had fled from that house, where his thoughts lived trapped like a stubborn animal. His love for Camila grew as he abstained from seeking her, and how poorly he saw himself being treated by her. He could not find an explanation for that change; had he not received her on his ship as a princess?

The children hugged him with enthusiasm.

'Girls! What is this? Come now!' exclaimed Francisco Teodoro, laughing, worn down by the twins' sweetness.

Camila looked at him and felt sorry. Captain Rino was thinner; his dark and awkward clothes seemed to dance on his body; there was a resigned sadness in his turquoise eyes. She stood up on the pretext of a headache and went upstairs to her room.

Rino thought: "She runs away from me… Maybe it is better this way."

He listened in desperation to the sound of footsteps on the staircase and no one noticed that his attention was elsewhere, and his lips were curved by a bitter smile.

Lia and Rachel shook his arms, laughing, comparing his big hands with theirs, so delicate…

‘Captain Rino, why do you never bring your sister here to us?’ asked Ruth.

In complete calm, as if unshaken by grief, he answered:

‘Catarina is odd; she goes out every day, but only to walk around the hill picking plants… Only rarely does she go into the city or out for visits. We are very unsociable, both of us. My father was a seaman, and my stepmother has always been very ill, and that is, I believe, the origin of our misfortune… or of our blessings. Who knows?’

Making a comic face and pointing towards the sky, Ruth answered with a solemn air:

‘Only God!’

Chapter XI

It was time for coffee at Francisco Teodoro's warehouse. The office was full; Inocêncio, small and restless, twisted his sparse blond moustache with a nervous hand, his eyes shining on his pale face, his nostrils dilated, smelling the money that seemed to be dispersed throughout the atmosphere of that enormous house on São Bento.

He noticed things at a glance and snatched from the air whatever suited him.

By his side was old João Ferreira, broad-shouldered and swarthy, with a wide face and wide gestures, who was praising the acts of the government, and sometimes shouting down the opinions of others, who attacked him on all sides with lively reprisals.

Lemos smiled in silence, too ignorant to ponder questions of such magnitude. They could talk to him about the price of dried meat, which he imported in bulk, or about the cost of bamboo baskets filled with bacon, and his opinion would emerge swiftly, bearing all the weight of his authority. Negreiros, who stood, occasionally touching his enormous arched nose with a distracted hand, was the only republican in that nest of old Portuguese men who were as anchored to the traditional institutions of their homeland as they were to those of the country they had adopted out of love and in their search for a better life.

João Ferreira forgave men for their weaknesses; a chatterer, like all those from Minho, he spoke as if tasting his words, smothering competing voices with his booming delivery, whether it was Inocêncio's ironic comments, or one of Lemos's panicked statements, or the protests of Francisco Teodoro, who could not understand why such a faithful monarchist should make excuses for the madness of this 'Republic of the Ungrateful.'

Negreiros smiled with the serenity of a confident man. He had always been a republican and an extremist, and for that reason he was viewed by some of his compatriots with a mixture of shock and fear. Just as João Ferreira reached the ardent apotheosis of his speech, he chanced upon the pleased expression on Negreiros's face, and at once understood the man's contentment at having him on his side; João Ferreira, adopting an evasive tone, soon found arguments with which to censure bitterly the same government that he had only just recently praised. No, he was mature enough to admit a mistake!

The others triumphed. That was what they wanted to see; and then it was time for Negreiros to enter the discussion.

It was at that moment, amidst the tumult of voices, that Captain Rino appeared at the doorway with his hat in hand and an inquiring expression on his face.

The sudden arrival of that stranger, for whom Francisco Teodoro quickly made a place at the edge of his table, reduced the heat of the conversation.

The groups were divided; there was low laughter, quick pats on the shoulder, and friendly reconciliation. Only the small eyes of Inocêncio Braga burned with the same fever while his thin fingers twisted ever more agitatedly the edges of his thin moustache.

'What a novelty this is! What brings you here?'

'I will not rob you of your time; I only need a few moments.'

'Come now, I am thrilled with your visit… Please let me introduce you to my friends.'

Once the introductions were made, Isidoro came in bearing the coffee on a large tray and a few seconds of silence descended. At that point, speaking quietly, Francisco Teodoro asked the captain if he wanted to have a word in private.

'No, I only came to say goodbye and kindly ask that you give my regards to your family. I am leaving for Pará.'

'Why don't you come have dinner with us? You have no idea how much you have endeared yourself to the household. My people would not forgive you for this! You know very well that we don't stand on ceremony.'

'Thank you, but this time my trip is very long, and I'm obliged to make such preparations that there is no time for anything else. When I return, I will come pay my respects to everyone.'

The captain blushed as he spoke these words. His blood danced frantically under his golden skin.

'Well, well! Not for anything can such responsibilities be left unattended. I understand your reasoning; I am a businessman. I will give

your greetings to my people. Camila will be sad… but we will have to accept it! Whenever you are ready, we will be at your disposal, as good friends.' Francisco Teodoro extended his large hand to Captain Rino, who shook it with nervous confusion.

Seu Joaquim appeared in the office and placed a stack of papers on the desk, asking Teodoro to give them his immediate attention.

That served as a goodbye; there was a pressing need to resume the toil. Everyone stood up.

Inocêncio Braga let himself be the last to stand and, upon saying his farewell, asked for a meeting to discuss urgent business of the utmost importance.

Teodoro's gaze was one of searching amazement. In Inocêncio's eyes there were flashes of gold. Seu Joaquim observed them in silence.

Having gone downstairs ahead of the others, Captain Rino entered a corridor flanked by the warehouse's protective bars and collided with Ribas, the clerk, who, with his floppy ears and sullen shoulders, was ruminating in silence on his deep hatred for Joaquim, who demeaned him in front of everyone. The captain's eyes were too full of other images to even notice him. The hot breath of the street, saturated with sun and people, woke him from his dream. On the pavement just outside the warehouse door, old Terência hastily swept the cobblestones with a tiny broom of piassava palm, her small head bound with a white kerchief that hung down as she worked. The porters came and went, crossing one another, slithering between the vehicles loaded with coffee, in a mad cacophony. Here, labour trumpeted its formidable strength to the four winds.

Captain Rino went on, opening a path through the compact and shifting groups.

That multitude stunned him.

The sea, clean and vast, continually obliged him to live alone with his own emotions, his own melancholy, and afforded him the chance to love what was both greatest and simplest in nature.

The wave of coarse people whom he bumped against was far more complex than the waves he could cut through with the firm bow of his *Neptune*.

Perhaps he had chosen his profession poorly. This here was the life of man: perennial agitation, violent effort, love without idealisations, the renewed spectacle of everything that the land produces, kills, and regenerates in the flares of time, instantaneous and eternal.

The sea, formidable in its fury, voluptuous in its infinity, which thrust its great complaints upon the white edges of the Earth, wasn't

it the same sea which he had chosen, and to which he had abandoned himself in his adolescent fantasy?

Is it by chance that the pale soil of the sands, the blood-coloured soil of the woods, the dark soil of gold, the purple soil of the coffee plantations, mother of abundance, and the clear soil of the orange groves, the birthplace of perfume, are those parts of the world most hallowed by man, where his sweat, as it falls, is transformed into fertile dew?

Captain Rino looked at those people: sailors, soldiers, vagrants, and manual labourers, black or Portuguese, a population of men who rushed onwards without noticing their messy gestures or the worry in their fiery eyes. Passing by in quick succession, they were men fixated on their destination. He heard their breathing, the panting of their tired chests, and the cadence of their steps, which pounded the hard cobblestones with a domineering rhythm.

That noise always struck him as a melody made of entirely new notes.

He turned onto Rua da Prainha, and then took Rua da Saúde. The unevenness of the houses went unnoticed, as did the smell of the docks, which reeked of the tallow and cane syrup that littered the ground. Flies buzzed from the doors to the back of the warehouses, which opened onto the glimmering sea like a picture frame.

The docks followed one after another, packed with barrels, sacks, packages, and planks that filled the atmosphere with a complex smell that was absorbed by the sea breeze into its mixture along with the rough sounds of the cranes that hung suspended in the air. Boats passed nearby with alternating wheezes and hisses, and that mad confusion of voices, which was familiar to him, struck him now as the struggle of a land gripped by a feverish delirium.

He was going to Conceição Hill to say goodbye to an old companion, now a priest. To do so, he took a narrow and sloping path carved into the white rock. The street twisted in serpentine curves, rising here to crash there, jutting out in angles on one side to fall away at another in rough-hewn steps.

From old houses that opened themselves to the tremendous light, women came out to hang the sailors' shirts under the sun, while inside the fresh voices of young women sang sentimental arias.

At the edge of the cliffs, amidst mounds of garbage, half-naked children kicked empty cans that rolled clanging among the slopes, and grimy old women, squatting in one threshold or another, stitched rags between sleepy cats and loose chickens.

The day was blue, and the air of the sea came in great gusts to caress the hot and vigorous face of the earth.

Captain Rino crossed a street of sailors.

Upon seeing the tranquil faces and thick arms of the women working in the open air, it seemed to him there was resignation in the hearts of these people who knew how to wait.

A great virtue was with them; only the simple can be strong.

After several turns, over irregular and dirty roads, he found himself on the slope of Conceição, among low houses that were mostly closed. A few of these buildings faced each other with an air of suspicion.

There were other people moving on those streets. Old tarnished uniform buttons rolled along the dusty cobblestones. Soldiers' wives spoke to ill-tempered neighbours with sharp tongues; and the rank smell of animal fats filled the street up to the vicinity of the old fort.

It was there, for the first time in his whole journey, that Captain Rino heard a whimpering voice asking him for alms.

That was a sound he never heard atop the mercurial waves.

Shortly thereafter he knocked at his friend's door. He was not home and would not return until evening. Rino continued his climb up to the courtyard of the fort and sat there a while on the stone wall, looking down.

What did he see? Was it the row of uneven, ugly houses that sprawled, some with gleaming roofs, recently rebuilt, others with black or greenish roofs and dirty walls? Did he notice the continuous movement on the street below, which cut between the melancholic buildings like a thick white line? No. With his gaze fixed on the rough water of the bay, replete with black steamships and white boats, by vessels of all sizes, he only thought about Camila, who was as strict with him as she was docile and lovely with the other…

He was running away. It was all over. It was his farewell to his youth, to that dream of love, that he pronounced before those roofs, which certainly sheltered countless strong and happy hearts. There would be no one else as unfortunate as him.

How good it would be to live in that filthy neighbourhood of workers, with a calm heart, with faith in love!

For him, it was decided: he would not see Camila again. The humiliation of his last visit burned him like hot coals. If only she despised him but did not love the other!

And in that preference was the root of his wretchedness. Why should it be the other, and not him?

The bell of Conceição rang with vigour. Rino turned around. Two young priests, wearing cassocks, crossed the square, resembling two black exclamation points in a vast sun-filled picture. At that moment,

the young seaman had the vision that he was encountering two identical souls, sad and sterile. But those souls still had their ideal, which kept intact the divine oil that soothes all sores and beautifies all miseries.

And he? Faithless, lacking any purpose that might give meaning to his days, possessed of a renegade love, a knight without his lady and without a dream, what was he worth in this world where a man's value is in what he thinks, what he creates, what he defends and what he cultivates?

The priests passed by; he wanted to follow them, but his body, tired and tender, remained still. And the insistent thought returned: why did Mila prefer the other? It seemed to him that if she were always an austere woman, enclosed in the circle of her duties, his love would forever be sweet and platonic.

This idea summoned the memory of his mother, stabbed to death by his father as an adulteress. Her image filled his heart; he rose abruptly and began his descent towards the street, propelled by the notion of fleeing somewhere far away, of saving himself from the danger that besought him.

He must never see Mila; never again! His pride as a man would count for something.

His will would tame his rebellious heart. He would not see her again.

The memory of his mother reminded him of his sister; he still had time to have dinner with her in that quiet house in Laranjeiras. Only on the following day would he board and prepare the *Neptune*.

He should think about other things; he tried hard to do so. Desiring Mila, what for? He would not see her again…

He hurried down the hill to Rua dos Ourives, and followed it, jerking his shoulders in the swinging movement of his body, adopting the gait of those who wish to see nothing, resolute, calmed by an effort that consumed all his will.

To run away from Camila, forever, to create, perhaps far away, in the lands of the North, an honest family, that was what he should do, what he would do, quickly and inevitably, as a remedy to forget...

The captain crossed streets and passed by friends as if he could not see them, and only upon entering Rua do Ouvidor did he stop suddenly, feeling a thump in his heart. Before him, majestic in her black dress, which was pierced in the chest by a scarlet rose, Camila smiled at him, extending her gloved hand. It was a reconciliation and a plea; he could not think of what to say. Next to her mother, Ruth stared at him with the pair of shining emeralds that God had given her for eyes.

After exchanging greetings, they did not dawdle, and the young man continued on his way, weakened, utterly soaked by her scent, completely dazzled by the appearance of that unattainable goddess.

From there to Largo da Carioca, his steps adhered to the cobblestones; his feet were eager to stop and follow after her as she returned to the warmth of her house; but Captain Rino obliged them to be prudent and walked to the tram at Águas Férreas, which was charging in at precisely that moment.

Only after he sat down did he notice that he was next to Dona Inácia Gomes and her two daughters, Carlotinha and Judith, who were both cheery and giggling in their light attire.

Dona Inácia sighed, tired from the effort of reaching her seat, her hands loaded with packages and her coiffure hanging over her left ear. She would not be seen in the city so soon.

Recognising Captain Rino, they immediately asked him for news of Teodoro's family, how was dear Camila?

He said what he knew, fumbling a little and blushing.

Carlotinha, always restless, bent over her mother's lap and spoke with her malicious voice phrases that showed more daring than decorum. They had moved to Laranjeiras and invited him to their house. Dona Inácia was shocked at the prices of the goods she had bought; if it weren't for the young ladies, she would not come to the city; she preferred her corner, the pleasant peace of her home.

'And Mr Gomes, how is he?' asked the captain, less out of interest than to have something to say.

'The poor man, old and always working. You cannot imagine! My husband sacrifices himself for others and we all know the result. This world is full of ungrateful people…'

'Yes, people are ungrateful,' the captain agreed.

Until they arrived at Laranjeiras, Dona Inácia had sufficient time to pour out all the lamentations of her troubled soul; she spoke of everything, even of the cooks and the poor service she had received at the butcher's. Her endless discourse, a long litany of grievances that was at times petulant, at times resigned, made the great distance of the journey unbearable for the captain.

Carlotinha asked about Dr Gervásio. What was he up to, that no one saw him unless it was at Teodoro's mansion?

Rino shrugged his shoulders; he did not know. It was Judith's turn to lean forward and contemplate him with curiosity.

They arrived at the terminus of their journey and descended, offering their kind regards and indicating the gate to their residence.

Captain Rino responded to their expansiveness with discreet amiability, admiring the exuberance of those people. What did Carlotinha's coquettishness matter to him, with her jolly eyes and dark skin; or that of Judith, who was pale and small, if all his thoughts returned to someone else, to Mila of such opulent beauty, and the sweetness of her gloved hand which he could still feel in his palm?

The fatefulness of that passion revealed itself in everything; he avoided seeing her, suffering longing and distress, but remaining firm in his resolution; and then, suddenly and unexpectedly, she appeared before him in a bend in the road! The tram pulled up at his stop and the young man got off and began walking towards his stepmother's country house. The gate was open; he entered.

Long plots filled with tangled stands of canna indica raised plumes of red and yellow flowers; he turned left onto a street flanked by sunflowers and magnolias the colour of old gold. At the end of this street the house appeared; it had antique features, solid and simple, with white walls and wide sash windows.

Sensing people nearby, an enormous dog came out from inside, jumping and barking, and soon afterwards Catarina appeared at the top of the semi-circular stone staircase.

She came down to meet her brother, overjoyed.

'Are you doing well?' he asked her, holding her strong squarish chin, and gazing closely into her clear eyes.

'I am. It is Dona Mariquinhas who is ill; it is her lymphangitis again, as usual.'

'Did you call a doctor?'

'I did, and I left her with Hermengarda at the foot of the bed.'

'Who is Hermengarda?'

'That mulatta nurse, from number fifteen, the mother of…'

'I remember now.'

'Dona Mariquinhas likes her very much. Do you want to go see her?'

'Later. Let's stay here. Your sunflowers are very beautiful.'

'Doesn't it resemble a Japanese garden? Just look. We have chrysanthemums like the ones from those traditional folding screens, canna like the ones you see on a Japanese fan, lilies and sunflowers… Dona Mariquinhas detests these flowers and says she'll order them all uprooted… Our stepmother has her singularities. She does not understand adornment and cannot appreciate a graceful line. She only likes flowers for their smell.'

'What have you been doing?'

‘Reading, sewing, gardening; what else can I do? Who would accompany me if I would like to go out?

‘Indeed, you are very lonely.’

‘I need to get married.’

‘Then get married.’

‘I am afraid.’

‘Do men frighten you?’

‘A little. They are deceptive, and I am so sincere. Imagine the conflict! And then, the memory of our mother makes me hate marriage.’

‘You should be honest.’

‘Who can know today what tomorrow will bring?’

‘You are right. Stay single; you will be happier. You have an indomitable soul. Stay here. This house is very suitable for a life of calm reflection.’

‘As you know very well, my stepmother lives in a state of open war with me. She calls me *doctor* quite maliciously. All my tastes are subjected to her mockery, and all her inclinations annoy me. And that is what you call the calmness of this house. Fresh tranquillity!’

‘Be patient; or perhaps I should take back what I have just said. Get married!’

‘To whom?’

‘It can’t be me.’

‘You wouldn’t want that.’

‘Why?’

‘Because you love Camila Teodoro.’

They had moved away from the house towards the orchard. The gardener passed by with his wheelbarrow filled with dried leaves, and greeted the young man, who did not respond to this courtesy, stunned by his sister, who was also frozen after pronouncing her last words.

‘Deny it, if you can,’ she said.

‘I do not deny it.’

They remained mute, staring into each other’s faces.

The memory of their mother, murdered by her husband, painfully crossed both their minds. They understood each other through the silence. Catarina murmured:

‘The older I get, the more attached I feel to my nostalgia for her, and the less I can dampen the hatred I feel for him. I do not forgive him.’

‘Neither do I; but society absolved him.’

‘Men… She was so good.’

‘She deceived him.’

'What monstrous punishment! And the result, do you remember? You distanced yourself from the house and my hatred. In vain he behaved well to please me; his humility was such that it moved everyone, but not me. I never kissed his hand again.'

'Not even at his deathbed?!'

'Not even at his deathbed. I wanted to. I curved my neck. But right before touching my lips to his hand, I stood up in horror. He noticed everything. What a death!'

'You were cruel.'

'I was human. Did you love him?'

'Before? Very much!'

'And afterwards?'

'No. But he was our father…'

'And she was our mother!'

'You are right. For children the mother is always the best and purest of all women.'

A thrush sang, and they listened with watery eyes.

'It was on the *Neptune* that you noticed everything, wasn't it?' asked Rino, changing his tone.

'Where else?'

'And was just that one time enough?'

'It was.'

'Make that thrush shut up, Catarina!'

'Leave the bird alone; he is crying.'

'I am leaving the day after tomorrow. This time the voyage will be long… I will deliver the command of the *Neptune* to someone else. I have a substitute in Belém; it has all been agreed to and settled. Completely settled. I need to escape from her. There was no need for you to evoke the memory of the past to discourage me…'

'I had no intention of dissuading you; it seems to me that love is not a clay figure that you can mould with your fingers. Yet, the way she loves Dr Gervásio…'

'Who did you hear that from?'

'From our stepmother, who without leaving this place always knows about everything, God bless her!'

'But who would tell her such a thing?!'

'Maybe the doctor… Maybe the cook… Maybe the wind. The wind brings things to her ears that others do not hear. And she is a sword drawn at every fault, that woman!'

'What's more, it's a calumny! Camila is discreet; even if what you say is true, who could guess?'

‘João, such passions are like lights passing through lace: they are always visible.’

‘No, no; someone must convince her this is false. Mila does not love anyone; she loves no one!’

Catarina closed her eyes for a moment, and then they resumed walking in silence, one beside the other, stepping on the enormous scarlet carpet of *jambo-rosa* blossoms spread over the ground. The afternoon descended clear and calm, completely blue, with light opaline touches.

‘Catarina?’

‘João?’

‘I would always need to have you by my side.’

‘Then get married and invite me to be your companion. I will raise your children. Try to love another woman. There are so many in this world, so many.’

‘There is only ever one: the one we love. I only want that one.’

‘Do you suffer much?’

‘Terribly, terribly! This confession is doing me good. It costs me a lot to keep a secret of this size! And I have been keeping it for such a long time!’

‘It seems like it. Now you can see that I have kept it too.’

There was sadness in their smiles.

As they had circled the orchard, they passed by the place where Catarina tended her nursery of roses, but they did not stop there. They crossed paths once more with the gardener and took the wide alley with the sunflowers back to the house.

Before sitting at the table, the two siblings went up to their stepmother’s room. She was a very fat woman, sprawled on the bed, her head wrapped with a scarf and her face dusted with starch. Hermengarda had closed the windows and watched over her patient in the half-light. On the table there were numerous bottles of medicine and a strong smell of camphor saturated everything.

The bed creaked with the movement of her enormous body which turned around with difficulty, and the sick woman, with a weak voice, complained of the cold and her many pains.

Her stepchildren said half a dozen encouraging words to her, urged her to be patient, and, upon feeling that they were disturbing her, left the room on their tiptoes.

Before they sat down at the table, Catarina confessed to her brother that she felt relieved at their stepmother’s absence. They could have a more intimate dinner.

He asked:

'In the end, do you feel annoyed only because she is your stepmother?'

'Yes. If our mother's death had been natural, I would have accepted having a stepmother afterwards – if not with affection, at least with respect. The way it was, I dislike her, because by choosing my father, she offended my mother. But the harm is done, and it is irremediable. Let us not talk about that. Pretend that she and I are simply eccentrics and think no more of it.'

During dinner, they spoke in low voices so as not to disturb the sick woman, whose room was nearby.

When in the evening Captain Rino said farewell to his sister in the garden, he felt, upon hugging her, that she was crying. It was the first time, after so many separations, that this had happened. He kissed her, comforted, confident that in the whole world there was one heart that loved him with constancy and sincerity – hers.

Chapter XII

In Teodoro's mansion there was a room that was seldom opened: it was a room originally intended to be a library, and which the businessman had made into his office.

It was downstairs, on the ground floor behind the vestibule. It faced the silence of the garden, where scentless plants clustered by the windows and spread across the wide lawns that absorbed the sounds of scurrying feet.

As the businessman did not use books, his office had no bookshelves. The furniture, made of cinnamon wood and leather, remained unperturbed, its austere character conforming to the vast and sober room.

Those chairs, and that sofa with its outstretched arms, had the air of things as yet unendowed with a soul by the intimacy of human beings.

The best wall for hanging pictures was occupied by two commercial prints with rich, glittering frames and a Venetian sideboard. Atop this item of furniture, a statuette of a knight with cloak and sword stood with an air of defiance, its plume bending in the wind.

From the shaded bronze lamp, a focused light was falling, spreading over the desk in a large tranquil circle.

It was towards this table that Francisco Teodoro brought his friend, Inocêncio Braga, offering him a chair next to his own.

The restless figure of that small man, who, at the age of forty looked no older than twenty-five, the brightness of his small and shifty eyes, which were keen and probing, his dull pallor, his rapid and incisive movements, the feverishness of his gestures, and the clarity of his exposition highlighted the placidity of the master of the house, the calmness of his manner, that of a contented bourgeois who has already

achieved everything in life, and who delights in gazing at the world from his position of prominence.

Teodoro rested his hands on the table alongside an ostentatious solid silver inkwell and a copy of Orlando's *Commercial Code*. He opened his ears to the other's words, anticipating an audacious desire for grand endeavours. Teodoro knew that Inocêncio was as intelligent as he was cunning, and full of feverish and fruitful activity. He expected the motivation for that meeting was a request for his good name and some capital.

He had already equipped himself with excuses and prepared a certain condescension which the man's value obligated him to show. His swollen capital could profitably assume various forms, fertilising areas and increasing its strength. Everything depended on the credit of the person asking for it and on the advantages they offered.

And it was only in matters of business that Francisco Teodoro paid such close attention to money. On the same day that he signed, in a firm and clear stroke, a bill of twenty or thirty *contos* for a hospital or a church, he refused to lend to some poor devil five or ten *contos* to start a new life.

His money, acquired with effort, liked to exhibit itself in sonorous outpourings and sparkle in everyone's eyes.

He wanted everything; no half-measures were acceptable. His was a house where clothes, food, and drinks filled the closets and pantries until they threatened to burst. The cooks were said to enrich themselves at his mansion and not even Nina's painstaking vigilance could attenuate Teodoro's impetuous wastefulness. Mário's debts made the businessman bluster, but not because of his consumption of money; it was due to that son's dishonour, whom he failed to bend to his own will.

To spend on himself, on his people, had always been a reason for vanity and enjoyment; but to spend poorly in business, and take risks in dubious commerce, seemed to him an ignominy.

Now, with this Inocêncio Braga, things were different. The superiority of that man obliged him to compromise a little…

That is why he let Inocêncio into his office, where the echo of his little girls' running footsteps was barely audible.

Without preamble, straight away, the other broached the subject with the haughtiness of those who do not ask for, but offer favours.

In the nasal timbre of his voice, which sounded as if it came entirely from his head, Inocêncio began:

'I would like to suggest organising here in Rio de Janeiro a great coffee syndicate. Gama Torres, who, between us, owes his prosperity to my advice, is prepared to enter with a large part of the capital. It was he who told me to consult you as well.'

Francisco Teodoro felt a shiver but did not blink. Braga's eyes shined in the shadows.

With moderate but effective praise for the businessman's shrewdness and good judgement, Inocêncio presented his plan, examining it and turning it over on all sides, showing the calculations that had cost him many nights' sleep, stimulating the other with his elaborations and his eloquence, and fortifying his proposal with persuasive arguments.

Everything appeared as the irrefutable truth. His simple words contained no artifice; the terms he used were as clear as water from a spring.

Francisco Teodoro, excited, pressed for repetitions. Inocêncio accommodated him.

All the obscure points were clarified, repeated, as the difficult passages of a composition are practised until they are played flawlessly. The business acumen of Inocêncio Braga was confirmed.

However, Francisco Teodoro hesitated. His school had been another, rougher one. The unexpected request frightened him.

Sensing Teodoro's fear, and feeling him slipping through his nervous fingers, Inocêncio smiled, and skilfully, not wanting to force a decision, took up once more the golden thread of his proposal and extended it seductively.

There was no coffee region, in Africa, America or Asia, which Inocêncio did not speak about with the authority of a true connoisseur.

One might say that he was able to count the beans on each tree. In some colonies, the sun shrivelled the fruit; in others, rainstorms had swept away the harvest; in certain areas where coffee was grown, it was now lacking. It was only in Brazil, the land of promise, that the coffee trees sagged with the weight of the ruby cherries. All of this was documented with passages from foreign newspapers, pasted into a notebook and annotated in the margins with miniscule letters.

In the whole exposition there was neither baseless calculations nor ideas without arguments. Everything was a matter of knowing how to seize the propitious occasion, this incomparable moment for doing business, to cast the net…

Francisco Teodoro still resisted, or at least, he wanted to resist, by instinct; but the truth was that he was opening his ears to the other's and found no terms with which to defend his reluctance.

The prestige of knowing how to translate an article from the newspaper is worth something. Inocêncio read an article that he translated from English, on advertising and the future of coffee; it was a solid work that Francisco Teodoro approved.

He recognised the English for their considerable ability.

'Precisely, considerable ability,' interrupted the other; 'and do you know why?'

'Racial superiority... Yes, that is what they say.'

'Don't believe in such nonsense… Racial superiority!? No! Educational superiority! It is only their education. Individually, the Englishman is not stronger than us, with their gymnastics and the doses of liver oil they ingest as children.

Their advantage comes from elsewhere: they can see better, and they know how to time their investments. They may be afraid of ghosts, but they are not afraid of business. To speculate with intelligence, to win large sums, to fill their sizeable hands with as many pounds sterling as possible. This is what the English are born for and how they develop themselves.

That is why their commerce is so strong.

How the English would laugh at us, my friend, if they decided to waste their time studying the timid speculations of our businessmen, who are so illiterate in the ways of commerce!

Let us not waste our time either; we shall study the subject at hand.'

They bent themselves once more over the desk covered with articles, charts, statistics…

Francisco Teodoro did not dare utter a single response. Without taking his eyes off the papers, Inocêncio said:

'Here I see only one man capable of joining this enterprise without fear: Gama Torres.'

'He is young.'

'And very clever.'

'Business must be done deliberately, without haste…'

'The old style.'

'The timeless style.'

'No. During a fever, one must know how to take advantage of it when the thermometer rises.

Opportunities escape and they do not repeat; you will think it over; we will wait a few days – only a few – you understand we cannot put it off for another time. Now is the best time. The only time.

I am leaving my papers here with you: consult it. Here are things better and more persuasive than words: numbers.'

Francisco Teodoro placed his pince-nez on his nose to assist his presbyopic eyes and followed with his gaze the compact characters which the other pointed to and traced rapidly with his finger.

Like the rumble of an approaching flood that threatens inundation, so that heap of dividends was growing and threatening to collapse into bars of gold.

When he saw a small opening, Francisco Teodoro jumped at the opportunity to insert an objection, which Inocêncio effortlessly repelled, evidence that he was prepared for everything.

At midnight he stood up, saying:

'Tomorrow is Sunday; keep these papers, and read them once more at your leisure. On Monday I will come pick them up at the warehouse, between two and three o'clock. Study them and decide. Goodnight.'

Francisco Teodoro accompanied the visitor to the garden gate. Upstairs, the house was completely closed; the family was sleeping. At the threshold, the gardener waited for the guest to leave before he unleashed the dogs.

'What a beautiful night, Senhor Teodoro, and how good the garden smells!'

'Yes, Camila is very fond of flowers. It must be the violets.'

'It is the Cape jasmines,' asserted the gardener.

'Or the Cape jasmines; well, a good night to you!'

That night, Francisco Teodoro could hardly sleep. His thoughts turned and turned. How times had changed! He understood Inocêncio's reasoning: the trade in Rio no longer tolerated the weariness of sluggish labour. Subtlety and astuteness were more valued than the rough and slow methods of the old system. Ah! If only he had been educated…

When, on the following day, he opened the *Jornal*, in the freshness of the veranda, he noticed that he could not bear to read. His eyes stubbornly insisted, and remained fixed on the paper; but his insubmissive thoughts rushed headlong on other paths. At last, the will of his thoughts could no longer be resisted. Francisco Teodoro went down to his office and immersed himself in Inocêncio Braga's papers.

And he was reading still, slightly dazed, when Ruth came in with a sullen air.

'Do you know something, dear papa?'

'No… I know nothing. What is it?'

'A disaster.'

Francisco Teodoro raised his eyes, startled.

'What are you saying?'

'I am saying that it is Nina's birthday today and no one has a gift to give her. Moreover, it is Sunday: everything is closed…'

'Is this is the disaster?'

'Yes, sir. She never forgets anyone, it is not fair that the others, who can do more, forget her…'

'Come now, she lacks for nothing.'

'To me, it seems she lacks everything. Whenever it is our birthday, you host a party and mama organises surprises… She is like another daughter. When Rachel was sick, it was Nina who stayed, as a sister, watching over her when I would go back to sleep on my bed… However…'

Francisco Teodoro gazed intently at his daughter.

'Go on.'

'When Rachel got better, everybody congratulated you, papa; they congratulated mama, me, even Noca, and no one remembered Nina's sacrifices. You say: she lacks for nothing. It may seem as such. Suffice it to say that if we want to give a copper penny for alms, we have to ask you or mama.

It is a shame that I did not remember yesterday! She doesn't have a hat…'

'Who reminded you of this today?'

'I remembered it myself, when I turned the page on my calendar.'

'Well; promise her a hat.'

'Is that all?'

'Does it seem to you that we have been ungrateful towards her?'

'It seems to me that besides the hat she needs something else…'

'What else?'

'The other day, when we went into town, there was a necktie on display that she really liked. I asked her: 'Why don't you buy this necktie?' And she just smiled. Then we walked by a confectioner's shop, and she expressed a desire for ice cream. I had a cough, so I couldn't have one, but I asked her: 'Why don't you have an ice cream?' And she just kept walking. When we were coming back on the tram, the conductor saw that she was older than me and asked her for the tickets. Nina turned as red as a *pitanga* fruit and pointed at me… That is when I realised that as soon as a person wears long dresses, they need a small wallet for their pocket…'

'So, you want to give her a wallet?'

'No. I will give her the hat. The wallet should come from you, papa, or from mama.'

'It is done. Let's see now if they will give us lunch.'

The entire family was already waiting for them in the dining room. As Dr Gervásio was absent, Mário had deigned to appear.

It was right at the beginning of lunch that Francisco Teodoro, turning to his niece, declared:

'Nina, since I do not understand fashion, the gift I have chosen for you today is a house. With the rent, you will be able to choose a dress every month according to your taste.'

The young woman, who, at that moment, was preparing dishes for Rachel and Lia, froze in place while her eyes bulged. They laughed at her astonishment and toasted her health. She began to cry.

'Really now! It was not to see you crying that I said what I said! So that…'

But, as he spoke, Francisco Teodoro's eyes were also shining. Camila applauded the idea, and they all touched glasses, moved by the scene.

Then, the businessman said that he would take his niece to the notary the following day to effect the transfer of the property, and added:

'The house is not big, but it is new and pretty.'

'It is true, Mário,' interrupted Camila, 'the baroness wrote again, insisting that you not miss her father's ball. It seems that Paquita is in love!'

Mário gave a smile of disdain; Nina dropped the cutlery with which she had resumed dividing her cousins' steak.

'So only Mário was invited?!' inquired the businessman, amazed.

'No, all of us: we are all going. I have already placed an order for the dresses to be made; but it is Mário they clamour for… a strange insistence! I can only attribute this to Meireles wanting him for a son-in-law.'

'A fussy son-in-law, a lad with no profession. Enough of this nonsense! Meireles is not a fool.'

Mário stared at his father impertinently, and said:

'Well, you should know that mama got it right. Paquita likes me, and she has already told the old man that she will not marry anyone else. I'm the one who does not want to marry her.'

Nina trembled.

Francisco Teodoro laughed out loud.

'Well, I have no doubt about the young lady… but now the father! He'll marry her the same way he married the other one, to a man of great consequence.'

'Oh yes!…'

'You will see. A great prize she is, that's right… How many daughters are there?'

'Five, I think there are five.'

'Still. Meireles is filthy rich. Filthy rich! Also, I have never met a man so miserly; he even had a nickname: *Cry-for-pennies*… Back then,

nicknames were very common. That was business: nicknames and slaps. Today that's all changed.'

'Still, there is a lot of brutality!' said Camila with an air of disgust.

'What do you want? Not everyone is born to be a doctor.'

There was no insinuation. Francisco Teodoro had the blindest faith in his wife; nevertheless, she blushed and did not dare turn her face in her son's direction.

When lunch was over, Noca encircled Nina in the pantry and asked her:

'What did I tell you today?'

The young woman, stunned, could not remember; the mulatta explained:

'Girl, didn't I tell you that seeing a blue butterfly is a sign of good news?'

'Blue butterfly?'

'Mercy! Have you forgotten already that earlier this morning you saw a blue butterfly? Look: she came to tell you that you were going to receive this beautiful dowry… And there are still those who do not believe it!'

'Yes, it is true, you told me…'

And the young woman smiled; but in her smile there was a blend of irony and sweetness.

On Monday, at two o'clock in the afternoon, Inocêncio Braga presented himself before Francisco Teodoro at his office in Rua de São Bento to collect his papers; but the businessman had left them at home, showing himself undecided, and discreetly renewed his questioning, revealing as he did so a lively curiosity.

The other, noticing everything, flawlessly explained every point in detail, without insisting upon Teodoro's agreement. What had to be said was said, and Inocêncio wished him a good day. It was then Teodoro's turn to promise that he would personally deliver the papers to Inocêncio's house on Rua do Riachuelo, and that there they could discuss the matter once more.

That afternoon, Ribas, swinging his lank arms, handed his boss a letter stained by his sweaty fingers. It was from old Mota; his leg did not yet allow him to return to work; he apologised humbly, exuding destitution. It was the day his salary was due.

Francisco Teodoro let the letter fall in a basket of torn papers, and, stroking his beard, considered how best to respond to Inocêncio…

Chapter XIII

Teodoro's mansion was getting ready for the ball.

From morning until the afternoon there was an invasion of workers in the rooms and corridors, a continuous hammering on the walls, an abominable racket of dragged ladders, tools thrown on the floor, blades scraping the parquet and furniture being moved.

All the curtains and drapes were ripped away and heaped disdainfully into a pile in the basement. The sun and wind poured boldly in through the yawning windows.

Swept by air and light, crowded with strangers, the interior of the house lost that aspect of intimacy and comfort which makes a home lovable and discreet.

Ruth had the impression of being in a public square. The ball did not interest her, and she was irritated by those preparations. She found her salvation: to escape to the back of the house with her violin or a novel. The music intoxicated her; the book opened schisms within her, and it was not uncommon for her to fall asleep, stretched out on the bench of the bower, in one of those long, serene days of laziness, between the violin and the abandoned book.

The other members of the family were preoccupied with the party.

When Camila imagined the splendour of the ball, she thought mostly of herself. From the dressmaker, she ordered a radiant tulle dress embroidered with pressed flowers and butterfly wings, that granted her body the brilliance of a star.

The restless bustle produced a fever in her, a yearning to see the end of it, to see her rooms filled with ball gowns and tailcoats fluttering in the twirls of the dances.

Other concerns began to dissipate, slipping into oblivion, ousted by new ones. What was that woman in mourning worth now? Hadn't Gervásio proven he was hers alone with his attentiveness? Perhaps she had been mistaken, who knows? People deceive themselves so often!

And she repelled the memory of the doctor's words, his half-confession, which had confirmed the fact and made it painful. Her memory of that day was fading; Gervásio would not let it return.

He now remained at the mansion for days at a time. It was he who had determined the transformation of two useless alcoves into a music room, and decided that this new function would be indicated by fresco paintings. It was he who hired artists, who chose the new furniture and who harmonised every piece in the ensemble. Everything that came from his hands seemed perfect to Camila.

Neither Noca nor Nina had time to rest. They watched over everything. The twins, incited by the commotion, thrilled with the novelty, threw themselves on the tools of the waxers and upholsterers, laughing at the chaos they provoked.

Even Francisco Teodoro seemed more satisfied.

After careful examination, he had made up his mind: he would accept Inocêncio's proposal… that restless Inocêncio, so shrewd.

Freed from a concern that irritated him, he became lighter and more cheerful. He had already resolved upon the following things: a month after the ball, the family would depart for Petrópolis, for the new mansion that he was building – a project which, as he often said, was swallowing money like an ostrich.

One fine day, Ruth was crossing the music room towards the stairs, anxious for some fresh air, when, glancing at the walls, she paused with surprise.

Against a misty background of opaque ivory, small angels appeared, naked and pinkish, blowing on long piccolos of gold.

Ruth shuddered seeing how that tender and sweet skin emerged from the paint, brought to the surface by the light touch of the brush. The picture showed a group of children approaching from afar – those in front hardly visible in the haze of the dense atmosphere, those in the rear smothered in the sun's limpid radiance. Like a mystery clarified by her understanding, the art revealed itself before her eyes.

She had never thought about it before. Most of the paintings in the house came from factories. Machines do not produce souls, and only a soul impresses and wakes the instincts.

Barely holding onto her violin as she stood, Ruth now conceived how a painting could be made. It amazed her that out of a rough

and compact wall the artist had crafted the ether, where clouds hung suspended and small gossamer wings fluttered.

That surprise gave her the impression that she was setting foot in a new country, a country of dreams.

Now she could not even consider moving away from that spot. Growing ever more curious, she fixed her anxious gaze on the painter's hands, so large and so light, and on the paints on the palette, which dissolved into softer tints or arrows of sunlight.

So enraptured was she that, half an hour later, when Dr Gervásio came in and tapped her shoulder, she answered him without taking her eyes off the wall:

'It is a joy to see…'

"Who the devil does this girl take after?" he thought to himself as he examined the painter's handiwork with a curious eye. The work did not please him greatly; he twisted his lips in discontent.

Later, when Ruth asked him what that gesture meant, he answered:

'Perhaps I had no reason; my standards make me unfair and leave me dissatisfied. I already knew that the artist was no genius; therefore, I could not expect a perfect work from him. What does it matter if one of the angel's legs is longer than the other, and that they all have the same nose? Let us not mention these facts to the others, and they will not notice. The colour is beautiful, the effect is graceful, that is enough. It is a joy to have something already…

'Since I do not understand it, I think it is beautiful. I even want to ask mama for painting lessons…'

'Do not distract yourself from your violin; even if serving only one art, it is rare to see someone serve it worthily. Study only music, music alone, and think of nothing else.'

After a few days, when the painting of the room was finished, Ruth once more found it impossible to remain indoors amidst the bustle of the workers. She returned to spending her days on the swing or under the yellow roses of the bower, turning the park into her own reading and music room. She taught the twins how to climb trees or crowned them with flowers and placed palm leaves against their backs like wings.

One day, however, the confusion reached the park itself. They were opening a new pond and changing the design of the lawns to achieve certain lighting effects. Men in shirtsleeves came and went between the flowerbeds, talking loudly, gesticulating impatiently and grumpily.

Having nowhere else to run, Ruth asked her mother to send her with Noca to Castelo. She would spend two days with her old aunts.

Aunt Joana promised her stories of saints and to take her to churches and to the observatory to see the moon and the stars.

That was her opportunity.

When Ruth entered the house of her aunts, the Rodrigues sisters, Dona Itelvina was in the chapel, counting the nickels collected by her sister as alms for a mass.

Dona Joana had gone to the novena to Our Lady of the Rosary, at the Capuchins, and was singing, at that moment, the *ora pro nobis* in a chorus with the people and the friars.

Ruth felt cold in that big house in Castelo, with its large greasy rooms without curtains. It was sparsely furnished and had dirty papers on its bare walls; but the idea of going to the observatory tempted her and seemed worth every sacrifice. She would stay.

It was Sancha who opened the door, with her habitually swollen eyes and tattered clothes. As soon as she laid eyes on Noca she smiled and asked for her package.

'Mercy! What package?'

'You've already forgotten,' the black girl said in a half-voice, 'the arsenic which I asked for…'

'H'm! You are crazy! I didn't even remember that! Here's your money; wasn't it five hundred *réis* that you gave me?'

'It was, but I don't want the money, I want the other thing…'

'What for? Now, see here, shall I tell Dona Itelvina, h'm?'

The little black girl held up her hands in a gesture of supplication.

'Don't say anything…'

'You are a fool!'

Sancha sighed quietly and muttered some words that were rendered inaudible by the appearance of Dona Itelvina: she came with her suspicious gaze and her dilated nostrils, which sniffed the surroundings for mysteries.

Shortly thereafter, on the living room sofa, Ruth responded to her aunt's extended interrogation. Dona Itelvina fondled the wool of her dress, labelling the silk lining a waste, and censuring the luxuriousness of the pearls in her ring and the texture of the satin ribbons on her straw hat. She moved from present matters to other things with more petty and sordid questions:

'Dr Gervásio still go there every day?'

'Yes, he does, ma'am.'

'Hum… Tell me something: is Mário falling deeper into debt?'

'I don't know…'

'Does Camila go out alone?'

'Sometimes she does.'

'Why don't you always go out with her, h'm?'

'I have to study.'

'It is not proper for a lady to go out alone…'

Ruth stared at her aunt, dumbfounded.

'People gossip. Is the mansion in Petrópolis ready?'

'It is almost ready. We are going there this year.'

'And how much money is it costing now?'

'I don't know, ma'am.'

'Is Dr Gervásio going as well?'

'I don't think so.'

'H'm… When is Nina getting married? Doesn't she have any suitors?'

'Nina? No, ma'am.'

'Your father must not be tightening expenses with this ball coming up now, hum? People say he is renovating everything! Is it true?'

Innocently, Ruth told her what was happening in the house: the doctor's intervention in the selection of the ornaments, the colours of the satin awnings on the terrace, the frescoes in the music room, the embellishments of the large vases for the hall…

Dona Itelvina listened to Ruth's narration without interruption, encouraging her to continue with a gesture of avid interest. Once Ruth had finished, she concluded with a twisted smile:

'They have money, they might as well spend it.'

At this point there was a knock on the door. Sancha moved inside and came down the corridor. Sensing her presence, Dona Itelvina ran to the adjoining alcove to light the candle for Senhor Santo Cristo, which she blew out every time her sister turned her back. Ruth followed her movements and watched in amazement as she dipped her skinny fingers into the alms dish and made a half dozen coins disappear into her apron pocket, as if by magic. The old woman believed that her niece had noticed nothing, so quick and sharp were her gestures, and turned to say that the wind had extinguished the lamp, and that she had been so absorbed in Ruth's prose that she had forgotten to light it again…

Ruth lowered her face, very flushed, regretting that she had stayed. After dropping her off, Noca had spun around on her heels; she had left, and where could she be now!

Dona Joana entered, groaning with exhaustion.

'Look, sister, come see who is here!'

'What a miracle!' exclaimed Dona Joana, opening her arms to Ruth, who threw herself into them, desperate to be free from her aunt's harsh aridity.

'Who has brought you here?'

'Noca… She is coming to pick me after the day after tomorrow, early in the morning… Mama did not want to give me permission to come; she feared I would disturb you; but I begged her so very much…'

'This house is very sad. Joy passed by here more than thirty years ago, leaving behind no trace. Sancha! Come remove my boots. This house is very sad… my girl… We are so old.'

Sancha knelt down. Dona Joana extended her two swollen feet, shod in twill shoes; and when the small black girl pulled and removed her boots, she moaned: first out of pain, then out of relief.

'Go get my slippers… You did very well in coming here… Tomorrow morning you can join me for mass, in the afternoon for the novena and…'

'And in the evening we can go to the observatory. That's why I came. Dr Gervásio wrote ahead to the director, introducing us… I am so curious!'

'But…'

'No ifs and buts, auntie; make your niece's wish come true, will you?'

Soon afterwards, as it was getting dark, Sancha brought out a kerosene lamp with a horrible stench. Dona Itelvina left the alcove, crossed the living room, and disappeared down the dark gullet of the hallway.

Ruth felt uncomfortable on that tall canapé with its sunken seat. She went to the window, and when she returned, her aunt was praying; when Ruth saw Dona Joana crossing herself at last, she asked to hear stories of saints and sat down next to her. Aunt Joana did not need to be begged.

The same words that had enchanted her imagination in the joyous ease of her cheerful home now chilled Ruth as she sat in the half-shadow, in a setting so distinct from that which she was accustomed to.

The hair shirts, the smoking cauldrons and bonfires of hell, the martyred virgins' nakedness, the crusades to the Holy Land, spears piercing the scorching air, armies eaten by the plague or crushing the Jews, the great solemn vows, the cruel rites, the unjust persecutions, the cries for mercy, all the agonies and all the ecstasies that the old woman described, heralding the victory of the Christian faith, haunted Ruth, who got closer to her aunt, gazing suspiciously into the shadowy vastness of that silent room.

On the back wall, the flickering of the weak light seemed to sketch in shadows the vague forms of fantastic animals; they were perhaps the

drooling pigs of the satanic legends, fire-breathing dragons, or skinny dogs with raised snouts, howling.

'Aunt Joana, Aunt Joana!'

'What is it, my dear?'

'I am afraid… Tell me some other story, something lighter…'

'Do not be afraid, girl! It is the great pains, blood, and death that teach the Faith. Who doesn't suffer, does not understand heaven, Ruth! Just yesterday Monsignor Cordeiro said those true words.'

'But this makes heaven ugly, Aunt Joana…'

'Close your mouth! Wait... Let us see if I remember an old legend that has been told around the world; it is very true and very simple.'

'With no pits of fire or blood, please?'

'No blood; no fires. One day there was…'

Chapter XIV

'One day there was a pale nun, very young, very beautiful, God-fearing, and devoted to the Virgin. She lived in Normandy, in an old convent. It was isolated on top of a rock and observed very strict penances.'

From the bars of her cell, the nun could only see the sharp black rocks below, and beyond, endless white moorland.

Such sadness.

Near the gatehouse, in the cloister where her cell was situated, there was a marble image representing Our Lady. It was so sweet, and so human, that it closely resembled a living being. Whenever Sister Pálida turned towards the cloister with her smooth glide, she would bow reverently to the Virgin and murmur:

'*Ave*!'

And the Virgin smiled at her from within her blue niche.

One night, Sister Pálida, after praying to the Blessed One, unbuttoned her white habit and was preparing herself for an innocent sleep, when she thought she heard her name coming from the small window. "It must be the wind…" she thought, removing her cross and veil.

'It was not the wind; the same voice, more distinct now, repeated her name. Sister Pálida wanted to resist; she was afraid; but her own name had never seemed so sweet to her, had never been uttered with such yearning; thus, compelled by her curiosity, or by some other force, she moved closer and closer…'

So quickly she arrived, Jesus! And what could she see?

Suspended from the iron bars of her window, the convent chaplain gazed at her, with eyes like two stars.

'Chaplain! Why are you there?' she asked in distress, holding up her trembling hands.

'It is because I love you!' he answered her.

And then in a thousand ways he began to tempt her.

Such things he said, such things he did, that the poor woman listened in rapture. He called her beautiful, charming, angelic, and finally (see the perfidy!) he asked her to kiss him, to kiss him on the mouth, or else he would fall and crash down into the abyss.

The nun struggled with herself: she thought, no! But so as not to see him die, ripped apart on the rocks, she condescended to kiss him. Madness! What had you done? It was your damnation! He disappeared and she remained on her knees, shaken, and deeply unsettled.

In vain she wrapped her flesh in a hair shirt, in vain she crawled, asking God to erase the memory of that sweet and horrendous sin; in vain! That kiss was always on her lips, she felt it warm, fragrant and intoxicating.

Sister Pálida was no longer the same; the sense of her prayers was lost, and she suffered from delirium and distraction.

The young chaplain returned, another night, and then another, urging her to escape. They could live far away, in a small white house, amidst fragrant orchards and crystalline waters.

She recoiled, fearing the enormity of such a crime; but he offered his lips and convinced her that love was worth more than heaven, more than perpetual beatitude, more than anything!

And he implored her once more to run away: he would wait for her next to the gatehouse, with his horses ready, faster than the wind.

You know how these things go: the real mistake is to listen in the first place. The nun could think of nothing beyond escaping those moors, galloping on a fiery horse, feeling the pulsing heart of her enamoured knight. But, always, when she glided towards the gate late at night, quiet and trembling, aiming to escape, she would bump into the Virgin, and, making her deep bow, whisper in a contrite tone: '*Ave*!' She then would move on; but, oh! What a shock! The grand gate of the convent had disappeared, and in the gatehouse, as well as in the entire cloister, there were only vast impenetrable walls.

Sister Pálida returned, astonished, and the Virgin smiled at her from her blue niche.

As flowers have always been the gift of lovers, the young chaplain brought roses to his favourite every night. And on the following day, the entire community chanted:

'Miracle! Miracle! The Virgin's sister receives roses from heaven. The angels bring her flowers from Paradise, just like Saint Dorothea!'

That is what they believed, as only thistles and hawthorn grew around those cliffs.

And they sang hymns.

Tired of waiting, on a dark and sad night, the young chaplain advised the nun to cross the Virgin with her eyes closed, and her face turned to the other side.

So did the fool do, but with her heart squeezed tight in agony. This time she found the door of the convent was not fully shut: the bolts and locks (and imagine their quality!) could be said to open by themselves. That is why the nun fled into the dark night in her white habit.

And then…

Only after one year, when he had grown tired of loving her, that the wretched woman realised that her knight was not the chaplain – but the devil himself! Shivering, overwhelmed by fear, she ran away over mountains and valleys, her cross raised, babbling prayers, seeking out the convent to redeem herself with arduous discipline. She walked in this manner for nights and days, for miles and miles, through dense forests, barely holding herself up on her weak legs and bloody feet, until at last in the faint light of dawn, she glimpsed the abrupt cliffs of the convent, and fell on her knees, crossing herself.

When she had finished her prayer, she stood. A weathered old man passed by with a staff and satchel, and she asked him if he had heard of a nun who had escaped from the convent the previous year?

'No nun has ever escaped that convent,' he answered, 'they are all little saints, praise the Lord!'

'Amen! However… I have heard that one of the sisters, who was receiving roses…'

'The one who works miracles? Ah! That one! She is the purest! You should see her, go see her if you suffer. She even gives sight to the blind and makes the paralysed walk.'

With vivid amazement, the nun climbed the rocky slope, trembling all over. Her heart thumping, she knocked on the convent door.

'Who is it?' asked an exceptionally sweet voice from inside.

'A repentant sinner, here for penance,' Sister Pálida whispered, her face awash in tears. And right there she confessed to her errors…

The door opened without making a sound: one might say that the thick rusty hinges were made of velvet. The sister offered a smile for the distressed nun.

Oh! That smile! The nun knew it very well, and bending her knees with deep and ancient reverence, whispered with immense compassion and infinite sweetness:

'*Ave*!'

The sister at the door was Virgin Mary, who, since the night of her escape, had assumed the nun's form and fulfilled all the duties that fell to her: ringing the bells, sweeping the cloisters, lighting the candles of the altars and tidying the large drawers of the sacristy.

'Take your habit,' Our Lady said, 'and go to your cell… Rest assured, no one knows of your disgrace, no one!'

Sister Pálida prostrated herself and placed her forehead humbly on the cold slab; then, raising her face flooded by tears, she asked, sobbing:

'And you, Blessed Mother?!'

'Me? I forgive you,' the Virgin answered her with a smile, already back inside her blue niche.'

It was nine o'clock; Sancha came in to call them for supper and moved the smoking lamp to the table. Dona Itelvina served mate tea as it was more economical. They sat down. Ruth hardly touched her cup. She was thinking of Sister Pálida.

That night she had to subject herself to sleeping with Aunt Joana. Remembering the old woman's swollen legs, she felt a shiver, and longed for her white bed with its delicate gossamer covers. Her aunt moved about, blessing the entire room. She prayed in a half-voice, shook out her clothes, which were redolent of incense, and she disturbed the girl's sleep with the insomnia of the elderly. It was in the house's silence that, suddenly, piercing screams erupted from some room deep within.

Ruth sat up in the bed, wide-eyed.

'What is that, Aunt Joana?'

'It is nothing… It must be my sister beating Sancha…'

'My God!'

'It is nothing, sleep, my child!'

'Oh! Aunt Joana, go in there, ask auntie to not hit the poor thing!'

'Me?! No… the black girl deserves it… Sister doesn't like other people to interfere… Sancha makes a fuss for no reason.'

'I will go.'

In a violent movement, Ruth jumped out of bed in her nightshirt and bare legs and went out towards the dining room. There was no light, only a weak glow from the end of the hallway to guide her. Ruth ran to the kitchen, where Dona Itelvina was spanking Sancha with a quince rod.

The small black girl was struggling to get free, hiding her face with her arms, and keeping her head low. Ruth jumped into the middle of the group and grabbed hold of the rod that was falling on the other girl's curly hair.

'This isn't done, Aunt Itelvina! This isn't done!' Ruth yelled impulsively at her aunt in a growing crescendo that caused the other to freeze in open-mouthed astonishment.

'It has nothing to do with you. This devil deliberately put grease in my bath water… I know why I do this. She deserves it. Go to sleep, Ruth.'

'I will not; tell Sancha to lie down first. You have no heart?!'

'Go to sleep, now! Sancha, come here!'

The small black girl had sought refuge in a corner, close to the stove. She was exaggerating her pain, twisting all over, sheltered by Ruth's compassion.

Dona Itelvina advanced her thin fingers, and, grabbing Sancha's arm, pulled her close; her niece then embraced the small black girl, joining her bared white flesh to the black and abject body of Sancha.

'Strike now, Aunt Itelvina, strike now!' she screamed, in a nervous challenge, shaking her abundant hair over her narrow shoulders.

Dona Itelvina threw the stick away and said to the black girl:

'Go to bed then, devil! That's all you're good for… But we will settle accounts later…'

Sancha scampered hurriedly towards a dark room where rats were chittering, and Ruth, shivering and upset, returned in silence to Aunt Joana's room.

The old woman was tying a handkerchief around her head. Her niece began to question her:

'Is it always like this?'

'No… once in a while.'

'But how can you live in this hell?!'

'Now this! You know nothing! Sancha provokes her. Sister is suspicious that she throws ground glass in the water and in the pot… She is an evil thing. And she is a thief, too! You know my temper, I do not know how to keep things locked away… And there's rarely a day when Sancha doesn't keep a few pennies from the masses… Sister corrects her for her own good. It is a sacrifice… I wouldn't have the patience to put up with her.'

'Sancha is coming home with me tomorrow.'

'Young lady, that's crazy! And who will take care of the house for us?

'Hire a woman.'

'Ruth… You are still a child… Don't think about Sancha. She does all she can to annoy sister… If I say that, it is because I know. Just yesterday Sancha purposely burned sister's new slippers, with the excuse that she was trying to dry them in the fire. She washes my clothes; she leaves my sister's to rot at the edge of the basin. It is an awful thing! Think no more of her. Sleep…'

But Ruth couldn't sleep; and when Aunt Joana got up at dawn to attend the Mass of Souls, she jumped out of bed to go as well.

Before leaving, they went to the kitchen in search of coffee, only to find Sancha blowing heavily to light the fire. It was then that Ruth came close to her and placed a hand on her shoulder. Showing no fear that Aunt Joana would overhear her, Ruth spoke loudly:

'Sancha, why don't you run away?'

The small black girl raised her bust and stared at the young lady in astonishment.

'Miss?!'

'Run away!'

Aunt Joana, busily cutting the bread from the day before, had not noticed anything. A vague hope flickered on Sancha's slow-witted face.

'And what then?' she asked, frightened.

'You come to my house; I will talk to mama.'

'What's the use? They will send me back here again…'

'No. Auntie can hire another maid… Papa will talk to her…'

Aunt Joana had finished cutting the bread and called her niece to share the previous day's reheated coffee.

When they left, it was already daylight; but the morning mists still rested on the roofs, and nothing could be seen of the city below.

Goats jumped along the way to the convent, followed by shaggy kids with fresh coats, and stray dogs raced one another on the wet grass. The matins rang and Aunt Joana crossed herself. Ruth, unused to the sight of dawn, felt a divine pleasure in breaking the mist with her skin, which was refreshed by the atmosphere's humidity, and her eyes filled with that soft white light that rose and diffused throughout the entire sky.

In the church, her aunt bowed at every altar, at each a small prayer poised readily at the tip of her tongue. Ruth followed her up to the main altar and knelt down, feeling as never before a supplication in her soul, an appeal to God's mercy. Somewhere between the altar, where a forgotten bouquet of flowers was fading, and her dreaming eyes, the rough, angular figure of Sancha appeared little by little before her. With her hands folded together, Ruth asked the Virgin to bless and pity the black girl, to offer her a refuge and consolation. Up to this point, what had she known of the miseries of the world? Nothing. That night on the Castelo hill, so simple and monotonous, had been a revelation! She was certain now that tears existed, that sobs erupted from oppressed chests, that for some people, days had no colours and nights had no stars! Raised among kisses, in the aroma of her gardens, with her wishes gratified, with

her soft bed and the delicacies of her table, Ruth now felt in her heart a desire with no name, an absurd desire or longing, *the longing for heaven*, as Dr Gervásio would say, and that was nothing more than the frivolous longing of an incipient artist germinating there in her weak chest.

That same sorrow struck her now as sweet and soothing, in contrast to that of the other, Sancha, who was her same age, but ugly, black, dirty, beaten by kicks, forced to sleep on a coarse straw mat without sheets, made to eat hurriedly, while standing, the two old women's cold and meagre leftovers, dressed in cotton rags, and bent over work without pay or respite!

Why? What right would some have to all the ripe fruits and gifts of life, if there were others who could not glimpse happiness through even the narrowest of gaps?

She was familiar with Sancha's story: a young black girl who had come to her aunts' house from the countryside at the age of seven in pursuit of bread and learning. Sancha represented one of the last blooms of this race which was disappearing, like a pack of hunted animals.

Everything about her repulsed Ruth: her stupidity, her humility, her colour, her figure, her smell; but she could perceive a soul and suffering there as well. At that moment, with tears in her eyes, she asked God, that great Merciful Father: why had he made her so white and so beautiful, and with that same breath created Sancha's dark flesh and ugly body? He ought to remedy that tremendous injustice and fill that black girl's heart with perfect happiness.

'Yes, her heart must be the same colour as mine,' wondered Ruth, confused, her eyes fixed on the altar.

When mass was over, Aunt Joana wished to do her penance, and recited the holy rosary in a half-voice with her eyes closed.

As they left the convent, two friars kept the old lady by the holy water font, asking after her health and covering her in blessings and good wishes. Outside, the sun had emerged victorious, pulverising the last ribbons of mist.

The old woman reminded Ruth that they still had time to go down the hill to the Church of Carmo.

Ruth did not answer; she let herself be guided. It was better to walk from church to church than to return to the big sad house of Aunt Itelvina.

'Have you been to the Church of Carmo?'

'No, ma'am. I always hear the mass at the school chapel. I don't like big churches.'

'Why?!'

'I don't know…'

'Oh, for shame!'

'Aunt Joana, there are many things that I feel that I can't explain. Doesn't the same thing ever happen to you?'

'To me? No; neither to me nor to anyone else. When we say that we like or dislike something, we always know why we say it.'

'Do you always pray the same way in a big cold gloomy church as you do in a small, bright church filled with flowers?'

'Certainly. God is in the big churches as well as in the small ones. He is everywhere.'

'But if God is everywhere, why does he abandon certain people?'

Dona Joana froze.

'Don't utter heresies, young lady! God forsakes no one.'

'What about Sancha?'

'Eh?'

'Sancha.'

'Here you come again with that little black girl!'

'Black or white, she is a child of God.'

'I don't deny it. But what is Sancha lacking?'

'Oh, Aunt Joana! Why don't you ask instead what Sancha has in abundance?'

'You are very impressionable. Believe me, the girl is not unhappy. What would become of her if she weren't at our house? She would be a wretch, like those on the streets. She might be a drunk or even be holding a baby in her arms by now.'

'To have a child in her arms! But that would be a blessing, Aunt Joana! I wish I could.'

'Young lady, what are you saying?!'

'I adore children! See, Aunt Joana, my dream is to have twenty children. Twenty!'

The old woman blushed.

'I forgive you these words, because you are innocent; but do not repeat them, do you hear me?'

Ruth brooded on why having twenty babies might constitute a sin when Dona Joana exclaimed, pointing at two children, one carrying a harp and the other a fiddle:

'Look, Ruth! Those, yes, those are the unhappy ones: they walk under the sun and the rain, and if they don't bring money home, they are beaten.'

'Don't compare them to the other, Aunt Joana. I would always prefer to walk in the fresh air, catching the sunlight and the raindrops,

playing my violin, sleeping in any stone doorway, to living in the cinders as Sancha does. At least those ones have music.'

Dona Joana laughed.

'It is true; when you play, you forget everything.'

They arrived at the church; the mass had already begun. Ruth, ignoring the tugs of the old woman who wanted her to kneel, allowed herself to remain sitting on the pew. What was the use, if her soul had exhausted its ardour in the first mass in the convent? Now, she felt tired, and her heart tightened with longing for her mother and her own joyful home. How interminable that mass seemed to her, as the old woman continued on her knees in ecstasy!

When her sacrifice was over, Dona Joana wanted to place alms in all of the boxes in the church.

Ruth hurried her along, dying to reach the street, but her aunt seemed not to hear her. In the churchyard she remembered:

'Since we are down here, let's go to Santa Rita to get news of Father Euclides, who is sick.'

Ruth objected:

'But auntie, I am hungry…'

'You are right, my girl; but it will only be a quick visit. The sacristan will give us some information and soon we will go home.'

In Santa Rita, they were praying a seventh-day mass. People in black covered the nave like a flock of vultures. The sacristan that they searched for was helping the mass, and there was no one else who knew about Father Euclides. Dona Joana decided to wait and pushed her niece into the body of the church, saying:

'Let's pray for the soul of this dead man, my child.'

'But we don't even know him, auntie!'

'It doesn't matter; he was a sinner; we need to save him.'

Aunt Joana knelt down and raised her fat and pale face towards the altar. Such was the faith and sweet piety emanating from her expression, that Ruth let herself fall on her knees. She asked God to forgive that stranger's soul, for whom so many women were weeping…

She asked that God shelter him and grant him eternal joy.

Finally, the sacristan affirmed to the woman of the Castelo hill, as many people referred to her, that Father Euclides was recovering and that he would say the mass on Sunday.

'Well, auntie, it is my turn to ask you for something,' said Ruth.

'Go on, child.'

'Since we are so close, let me go receive a blessing from father. At this hour, he is tired of being at the warehouse.'

Dona Joana hesitated:

'Mind you, it is not that close…'

'It seems like I have been away from home for so long.'

'Let's go then… Such sentimentality!'

They had walked half a dozen metres when they bumped into Francisco Teodoro, whose flushed face radiated health and happiness; prim in his well-starched linens and denim, whose whiteness was accentuated by a black jacket.

Sparks flickered in her small brown eyes; and he held out his hands to his daughter, with an exclamation of joy:

'Little Miss Runaway, what are you doing here?!'

'I've already swallowed three masses, papa; but I am still hungry! We were just going to search for you at the warehouse; I wanted to receive your blessing and then go for lunch…'

'Can papa take us to a hotel?'

'I can't. I have too much to do. Right now I am looking for Inocêncio Braga, who should already be waiting for me… Goodbye.'

And, cutting their meeting short, he placed a twenty thousand *réis* note in his daughter's hand, and advised the two of them to go eat something at a restaurant. He said goodbye quickly, barely listening to the innumerable messages Ruth was sending to her mother.

Dona Joana remembered that they were near the home of Dr Maia and it would be much better to eat lunch there rather than enter a restaurant by themselves. Ruth smiled at the old woman's scruples, which had already been infected by her sister's petty thrift.

'I don't mind, Aunt Joana; take me where there are steaks and I will be happy,' the girl answered her.

Her feet were burning; an enormous fatigue softened her body; and she surrendered lifelessly to the old woman's will. Luckily, Dr Maia's house was close to the square. It was an old two-storey house on Rua dos Ourives. The old well-dusted furniture in its spacious and airy rooms attested to the punctiliousness of the house's residents.

Dr Maia was the first to receive them in the hallway; he was very old, with a velvet cap covering his bald spot, and his feet dragging on the floor in slippers embroidered by his granddaughter. A hospitable smile lit up his bright face, which was small and withered, and his blue eyes were shrouded in the fog of old age.

Dona Joana was an intimate of the house; and as Ruth had a girlish air, they were received without ceremony, and he pulled both of them into the dining room.

The only other member of the household present was the old woman, Dona Elisa; their gang of children had scattered after lunch: some had gone to work, others to the dentist or shopping. But at the bottom of the saucepans there were still leftovers of rice and stew; Dona Elisa ordered eggs to be fried; and, in a few minutes, Dona Joana and Ruth were having lunch, eating to the sound of a speech by Dr Maia, who was describing with surprising enthusiasm his invention of an airship.

He thought of nothing else; he lived in perpetual flight among the upper layers of the atmosphere. For some years he had been fixated on these studies and all his cares converged upon them.

His wife smiled with the resignation demanded of her spouse's thousand wild caprices, which she had grown accustomed to. He had been that way since his youth, involved in enterprises at odds with his capacities. He had studied to become a doctor, and abandoned his practice to advocate for helpless defendants, to write for newspapers, and to waste his strength and time in the development of great undertakings that were never carried through to fulfilment. Now, it was the airship.

That old man of nearly eighty years of age, stricken with asthma, lost hours of sleep bent over his desk, drawing, writing, giving form to his idea, in a haunting pulsation of life.

In the house there was a certain pity for the man's manias and respect for the innocence of his ideals. Dona Elisa sometimes said that if the soul, on its final flight, assumed a visible form, those watching her husband's passing would see it emerge fluttering out of his chest like a butterfly. 'And all blue!' she would add, with her kind smile.

Dona Joana, chewing a slightly tough piece of meat that had been tenderised in a hurry, barely understood Dr Maia's descriptions. Ruth opened her ears and saw the fog that age had wrapped around the doctor's eyes dissipate while a white glow of spring appeared in his blue pupils. She perceived something in what he said, and could even see the airship rising, splitting the clouds, graceful and light, dressed in luminous colours. How good it would be to fly so, so high!

'My airship will be made of aluminium, an extremely light metal,' he explained, 'and be completely round; it will spin in great circles, as if dancing a waltz; do you see?'

Dona Joana assented with her head and speared a potato. Ruth muttered:

'White and round, it will be like the moon. How beautiful!'

Fortunately, a new visitor came to interrupt the old man's exposition, and he said farewell to the two ladies, clearing his throat on his way down the corridor.

Dona Elisa then poured out her domestic complaints to her friend. Her husband exhausted their meagre earnings on books and magazines. It was their oldest son, José, who helped the most… Their granddaughter was at the Escola Normal, and had enough for her modest expenses; their two single daughters, already in their thirties, poor creatures, were seamstresses…[4] Such is life. And that is how it is, everywhere. 'Everybody works,' she added with a sigh.

When Dona Joana and her niece returned to the Castelo hill, it was Sancha who opened the door to the house. Ruth recoiled in astonishment. What! So the stupid girl had not heeded her advice?

At dinner, a sad atmosphere. Dona Itelvina alluded to the grandiosities of Teodoro's mansion with thinly disguised scorn, lamenting that she could only afford cheap food and necessities. Dona Joana blessed the bread, prayed with her hands folded, and sat at the table with a happy conscience and a sweet expression of comfort. For her everything was good, everything was always very well.

That evening, Ruth and her aunt climbed the stairs to the observatory to see the stars; and when she saw them, her internal commotion was such and so many were her exclamations that her aunt observed:

'You exaggerate too much, Ruth!'

Ruth did not even hear her; she looked on, enraptured. In the sky's dense blue, those golden specks assumed exceptional forms and dimensions. This star was green; that one was blue, another was violet. One was like a many-hued bouquet, another was pale, and another aflame, another diamantine; and all of them were immense and radiant. Oh! The stars, and such a beautiful sky! Particularly the Southern Cross, so beautiful and limpid like the flash of faith. Moreover, those showers of gold and silver, the multicoloured teeming of the Milky Way, whose rays of fire danced, crossing one another, kindling sparks in fantastic pyrotechnics… And then the moon…

'My Lord, what immensity! How beautiful it is! Oh, Aunt Joana, how beautiful!'

'Good, good; have fun…'

Ruth didn't answer; her eye was glued to the lens, overwhelmed by the poetry of that splendour; she remained transfixed, as if the stars were raining down on her some intoxicating aroma.

'My child, let's go…'

'Just a little longer… Oh! Aunt Joana!'

4 The Escola Normal was a secondary education institution that specialised in training future teachers.

That night, lying next to her aunt in the dimly lit room that reeked of lamp oil, Ruth saw the stars in her dazzled imagination. Enormous crystal spheres filled with light and flowers hovered before her, glowing and scattering aromas. She was already falling asleep when her aunt heard her speak in a broken whisper:

'How beautiful!'

When she woke up the following day, it was already late. Aunt Joana had gone out alone to her devotions; Ruth had not even noticed. Aunt Itelvina was shouting around the house.

Ruth jumped out of bed, startled, and half-opened the door:

'What is it?'

Her aunt answered with a rude outburst:

'Sancha ran away!'

A feverish tremor ran across Ruth's body.

She threw herself on the bed and pulled the sheets up over her eyes. Where would that poor, lonely girl have gone, not knowing anyone? Whose fault would it be if some misfortune fell upon her? Whose fault, if not her own? Oh! Still, she would be much happier out there…

When, on that day, Noca appeared at the Castelo hill, Ruth threw her arms around her neck. It was her deliverance.

Dona Itelvina hustled through the rooms and hallways, blaming her sister, who got up at such uncommon hours for her pieties and left the house wide open, provoking the girl with the frenzy of the street.

It was amidst this roar of invectives that Ruth said goodbye to the old lady, leaving her alone in her big house, where the conjoined stench of the rats and the mould drifted freely.

Chapter XV

'Children, come have your snack!' shouted Nina at the twins in the garden, when she saw Terezinha Braga arrive.

'You have arrived at the right time, Terezinha, we are just about to have coffee. Come in.'

'I am in a hurry; I was wondering if you could lend me the patterns from the latest fashion magazine.'

'But we don't have those. Aunt Mila has everything made to measure.'

'Send Noca to ask at Dr Nuno's house then.'

Nina hesitated, wanting to help a friend; but the mulatta, who had heard everything from the pantry window, intervened with a peremptory air:

'Senhor Teodoro doesn't want us to ask anything from anyone in the neighbourhood.'

'He doesn't need to know…' insisted Terezinha, who was still in the garden.

'Some people! Why can't you ask for the magazines on your own behalf?'

'Because we are not on good terms with Dr Nuno right now… As you well know!'

'I don't. I only know that we've been ordered not to disturb the neighbours. Senhor Teodoro is not to be trifled with; complain once and see what happens! Children! Look where they are!'

'Go get them, Noca. The coffee is getting cold. Come in, Terezinha, maybe we can find something…'

'She's hopeless, this Dona Nina!' muttered the mulatta between her teeth.

While serving the coffee, Nina explained to Terezinha:

'The Baroness of Lage is inside; I'll ask her to send me her patterns soon.'

'It is for my ball gown.'

'Are you going to make it yourself?'

'What can I do!? Do you know what colour the Gomes will be wearing?'

'No…'

'Yellow! Carlotinha asked her dressmaker to make a low cut in the back to show off the dark spot on her shoulder… She's naughty, that Carlotinha! Sometimes, no one would guess she is from a good family; she seems like something else…'

'She is very beautiful now, after gaining weight.'

'But more and more mischievous…'

Nina did not answer; she was ordering the footman to serve coffee in the living room. Behaving like rascals, Lia and Rachel entered biting the hands of Noca, who was dragging them inside.

'Have you seen how these two girls are behaving now? Well, Dona Nina! Give all the pastries to Ruth.'

Smiling, Nina carried the plate filled with pastries over to Ruth, who was rocking silently on a chair, at which point the children advanced towards the table, waiting for their snack.

'Well, thank you!'

After swallowing her coffee, Terezinha declared:

'I have a lot to do; goodbye, I am leaving!'

The twins ran away as well, escaping to the garden with their hands filled with pastries. Nina and Ruth were left alone, and remained very quiet, listening to the flies hovering around the sugary remains on their plates.

Suddenly, Nina said:

'What are you thinking about, Ruth?'

'About Sancha.'

'What an idea!'

'Nobody knows… I was the one who told Sancha to run away. I felt so sorry for her. Aunt Itelvina is mean: she was beating the girl with a rod. I saw it. Sancha didn't even look like a human being; she was dirty, suspicious… How stupid! I don't know how she could endure such a life. I was the one who told her to run away; and now that she has, I am afraid that she might die somewhere out there, that she won't find work, that she will take to drinking or fall under a tram… I even dream of Sancha. What a terrible thing!'

Nina comforted her. Noca had already told her that the girl wanted poison; she was less stupid than she seemed.

'You are too nervous; let Sancha be and think about something else. Aunt Mila is on the terrace with the Baroness of Lage… Shall we join them?'

'For what?'

'To talk about dresses… I am growing suspicious of that woman's constant visits… Have you noticed how she whispers to Mário?'

'No…'

'Well, pay attention… That sluggish Paquita has a good advocate!'

'Mário doesn't like her.'

'Who said that?'

'He did, very loudly, at the table the other day. Didn't you hear?'

'I did…'

'So?'

'So? Who knows what may happen!'

That afternoon Camila let her husband in on the secret that the Baroness of Lage had come to declare her sister's love for Mário and remind her that the ball would be a beautiful occasion to announce the engagement.

The businessman stared at his wife with open-mouthed astonishment.

She said:

'They wish to hurry this match along because the old man wants to go to Europe.'

'But this is unbelievable!'

'Why?'

'Why?! Because Meireles is a practical man; he would not give his daughter to a lad without a profession! This can't be right. Lage's gone mad.'

'You are unjust. Mário doesn't have a profession, but he might still find one.'

'Oh, yes! That song and dance! Between us: the lad is worthless. What guarantee can the man who doesn't work give to his family?'

'He is rich and Paquita is even richer…'

'From this perspective, I approve. She has a good dowry, and the family is excellent. If Mário could be what I have always envisioned, I wouldn't care if he married a poor woman. They are the best; they bring the experience of life. Life experience is a great dowry.'

'Will you talk to Mário?'

'Me?! Not me. I will not add my counsel to such foolishness. You arrange this on your own. What the devil! He is not even twenty yet. You talk to him… if you want.'

Francisco Teodoro paced the room, hands in his pockets, tinkling his keys.

'Lage also told me that you've embarked on a risky venture with Inocêncio…'

'How does she know?!'

'I don't know… She said it means that your house will be one of the greatest out there…'

'I'm scared…'

'Huh?'

'It's nothing; it's done. Well, it is amazing, do they really want this wedding?'

'Well… As soon as Mário agrees, it will be settled in fifteen days. Meireles wants to take the bride and groom with him. That is clever; Paquita has good taste.'

'That's fresh! Look: I wash my hands of this.'

'I can see that… Mário must be back by now; I'll go talk to him. For the moment it is better not to say anything to anyone.'

'You don't need to tell me…'

Teodoro remained alone in the room, slowly changing his coat and shoes, his mind fixed on the business that was causing his concerns.

How the devil would Lage have known about his dealings with Braga?

He opened the window and leaned over.

The smell of grease wafted up from the kitchen and dining room downstairs alongside the music of crystal and silverware as the footman set the table.

In the fresh water of the park's large lake, fat ducks scorned the breadcrumbs that Rachel and Lia, lying down on the grass in their starched and embroidered dresses, tossed from their full hands. Under the enormous jackfruit tree, filled with big fruits the size of swollen udders, the chained watchdog devoured a massive piece of meat in a bowl. The well-tended plants were bursting into luxuriant buds or expanding into flowers, and the gardener, laden with fruits and fresh lettuce, came down the palm-lined alley leading to the vegetable garden.

The earth sweated profusely. It lacked for neither fertiliser to give it strength nor ornament to give it grace. At that moment, it seemed clear to Teodoro that life was a very good thing for whoever wins and makes fall upon the land around him a fertile shower of gold.

In his pride as a man who had come from nothing, the joy emanating from such material wealth filled his soul with a kind of heroism.

It was as if he had made everything, from the deep foundation stones of his mansion up to the rarest fruits of his orchard and the most divine flowers of his rose bushes. Seeds germinating at his expense were his own work, and that flattered him, as if the supreme perfection of those plants had emerged from between his own powerful fingers.

In all this feeling of conquest there was a kind-hearted naivety that he had succeeded in creating perfect happiness for those closest to him.

Never would his children know what his own childhood had been like: unsheltered and wandering. Never would his wife know what it meant to harbour a desire with no hope of its fulfilment; all of them, always, would be enveloped in luxury, abundance, and joy.

The crowns of the palm trees drew a line across the limpid atmosphere.

Footsteps crunching on the sand below drew his attention to the area under the window. Camila and Mário were entering the garden from the house. She appeared tall and walked slowly in a light dress that highlighted her figure, while he, hands in his pockets and a bouquet of forget-me-nots garnishing his chest, seemed to listen to his mother with an attention that was unusual for him.

They both passed to the front garden and walked around the house; when he lost sight of them, Teodoro descended to the dining room. The table was set; Nina, with her embroidered apron over her dark dress, was adding finishing touches to the fruit bowl.

'Did Dr Gervásio have lunch here?' her uncle asked her.

'As always.'

'Is he coming for dinner?'

'I don't think so…'

'Oh, hell! I needed to talk to him!'

'Is your worker feeling worse?'

'It seems so… Poor man…'

Nina sighed, and turning from the fruit bowl to the vase of flowers, thought about old Mota, whom she barely knew. After a pause:

'Shall I ring the bell?'

'It's better to wait a while; your aunt is talking to Mário. So Gervásio won't be coming back here today?'

Nina didn't answer; her heart pounded. The thought of Lage's presence filled her with foreboding. Could it be, God in heaven, that Mário was going to marry that other woman? Talking to him… what for?

Francisco Teodoro had leaned back in a chair on the terrace, reading an afternoon newspaper to which he paid little attention. What was his wife saying to her son? He deemed it his duty not to intervene in that childishness. If he did involve himself, it would be to dissuade the young girl from such a marriage. He knew his son's frivolity; what shocked him was the consent of an uncompromising man like Meireles. Senility: that was the only way to explain this; a case of feeble-mindedness.

'The man's gone mad! Well, well! Give his daughter to Mário!' Teodoro grumbled occasionally, with amazement, as if commenting on the article he had just finished reading.

Nina bustled from one side to the other, going from cupboard to cupboard and from window to window; at last, she came out onto the terrace and leaned over the balustrade, stricken. A white light shone from her brown eyes and cold sparks flashed.

She had glimpsed her aunt and cousin under the tamarind trees, and had fled from the window to the terrace, fearing that she might detect in their gestures the precise meaning of the words they were saying. She guessed the truth, but she feared hearing it, because such truth would not only hurt her, but would also insult her. It was an affront to her autumnal youth, to her poverty, and to her faith in love. She felt predestined to be a spectator in life to the happiness of others, and a rebellion of feeling provoked evil wishes inside her.

Didn't her aunt, against all sense of duty, love another? And wasn't she loved in return? Did she not sacrifice everything for a perfumed word of love, and for the madness of a divine kiss? That book of passion, so recklessly opened in front of her eyes, hadn't it made her shudder innumerable times with jealousy and dream of the delights of love?

Until that moment she had respected that passion, believed it sincere, and turned away her eyes, feeling pity for those happy souls. Now, she felt impelled to have her revenge, to grab the newspaper from her uncle's hands and scream at him with all her strength the story of those lovers that humiliated her. Because between herself and her aunt, one a mother and lover, the other an orphan and virgin, it was she who had the right to that joy of loving and being loved…

Two white butterflies fluttered close to her, chasing each other.

Nina closed her eyes, but that vision of another's happiness was already inside her. What could be her aunt's interest in marrying Mário off?

Lia and Rachel interrupted her. They rushed headlong on their bicycles, shouting for dinner. Their father smiled, thinking them beautiful with their flushed faces and wind-blown hair.

Having coordinated in advance, they threw themselves on him in a frenzy, asking him at the same time for the same things. They wanted a real carriage, pulled by ponies with a coachman dressed in blue.

Nina took the opportunity to have dinner served, desperate to interrupt her aunt's meeting.

When Camila and Mário entered the room, no one could ascertain even a shadow of the truth on their faces. They were both speaking about the ball as if they had talked of nothing else.

It was only in the evening that Mila told her husband in the bedroom:

'Mário accepts the marriage. Just like that, he really has no taste for business…'

Chapter XVI

In his small room on Rua Funda, Mr Mota lay stretched out on his old dusty sofa, emaciated, his hollow cheeks covered with a full beard. He stared at the buzzing flies blackening the grimy limewashed wall.

The silence inside was occasionally broken by the slow footsteps of his daughter, in which her fatigue could be felt.

With reason: she did everything herself. Despite the inconveniences of her father's disease and his typical demands for cleanliness, he surrendered with hardly a complaint to the filth in which he soaked himself. Undoubtedly, the idea of a woman managing every household chore without coarsening herself is something out of novels. Emília spent her days with her sleeves and apron soiled with coal dust, her nails impregnated with the smell of garlic and onions; her hands, reddened by the soap she used to scrub clothes, had lost the capacity for those sweet and soft caresses so dear to children and invalids. The poor woman walked down the stairs and up the stairs, from the attic to the kitchen and from the kitchen to the attic, her shoulders bent by the weight of the washbasin filled with soapy or wrung-out clothes that she spread out to dry on the roof under the scorching heat.

Her patience had been exhausted, and she sighed as she walked, her face assuming the pallor of cider.

When she looked at herself in the small mirror in her room, she found herself ugly. Her face was becoming elongated and acquiring an animal-like expression.

The father called her:

'Emília, look, can you sew some stitches on these socks? They are bothering me. And my jacket has no buttons.'

She didn't answer; she simply disappeared and then returned.

'Here are some other socks.'

'Be patient, my daughter, I cannot bend my leg…'

Emília squatted down and changed her father's socks. He continued:

'My denim trousers are very dirty; it would be good if you could bleach them while I'm at home. They'll be very important. Has my cashmere suit been brushed?'

She answered him with a barely perceptible nod. Wishing he could spare her, and regretting having given her such an existence, her father nevertheless burdened her with his demands: his handkerchiefs were tattered; there were no laces on his underdrawers; and the chairs had a layer of dust on them. What's more, the plants growing in the little tins by the windows were dying, starved for water and burned by the sun.

Exasperated, Emília undertook these tasks in a vexed silence as the old man turned his face to the wall, closing his eyes to hold back his tears.

The good days in Pernambuco came to his mind, and the joy of his late wife, so active, festive, and fun.

Who would have thought that from such a mother…

At dinner time, his daughter helped him to the table which was nestled in a corner of the kitchen by a window that overlooked rooftops.

There were moments when, in a fit of pique, he could not contain himself and sighed:

'A dinner for dogs…'

Emília did not respond; she put the beans and dried meat on a dish, which he swallowed with effort.

The afternoon that day was hot.

The neighbour's parrot mimicked the voices and laughter of the residents downstairs, gathered in the backyard.

Mota felt like chatting a bit as well, but his companion turned her back on him to go wash the pots and pans, and the smell of cold lard became unbearable.

He returned resignedly to the sofa in the small room, hammering his cane on the floor gnawed by rats and woodworms.

His dream was to go out, return to the office, touch the pages of the account books, and think about business; he wished to escape his daughter's long face and the pestilence of that filthy house.

From time to time, Bertolina, a Bahian woman, would shatter the gloominess with her cheer, bearing leftovers from the greengrocer's, slices of *mané-taiado*, or *cocadas* mixed with pumpkin that were prone to going sour. And then it was only: 'Ioiô! Iaiá!' and, adding amidst fresh laughter: 'Have patience; after bad days come good days, isn't that so my Ioiô? Have faith in God… Goodbye my Iaiá, and goodbye my Ioiô!'

Mr Mota smiled, nibbling the *cocadas*, happy to see someone laughing.

That afternoon they were expecting Bertolina, but it was Ribas who appeared.

Mr Mota counted the flies on the wall, not wanting to give the young man too much confidence, but he opened his ears.

Ribas was dying to say what he knew, and, after half a dozen words:

'Yesterday there was a ball at Senhor Teodoro's house. The street is said to have been filled with carriages. Dona Camila's dress alone cost ten *contos*…'

'Who believes in such things…'

'Mário is getting married to a woman who has more than a thousand *contos*. She went to the ball covered in jewellery. Mr Guimarães, Mr Castro, all the powerful coffee men were there.'

'How do you know so much?'

'It was Isidoro who told me.'

Ribas, with his slumped shoulders and a smile on his flaccid lips, spoke about such sumptuousness with a voice soaked in saliva.

The old man coughed, pretended to want to sleep, and refused to put his trust in the young man who was quickly becoming an annoyance. Seeing that the other didn't understand him, Mota exclaimed:

'Don't you have anything to do?'

'I haven't found work yet…'

'Look now, I don't want your brother-in-law to think that I am keeping you here in my house.'

'My brother-in-law doesn't control me.'

Mr Mota sent Ribas away but missed his company as soon as the young man descended the stairs. At the very least he was someone who brought in an echo of life and the buzz of the outside world.

Ribas went down the steps annoyed at the stingy old man, who had not even offered him a penny to buy a cup of coffee, as if he had brought him the news out of love! Stupid! He would teach all those scoundrels to fear him and to pour money into his small pocket; it was just a matter of talking to Pirouette from Pedra do Sal, who would teach him capoeira.

On Rua da Saúde he stopped at the doorstep of his sister's small store. Inside, Deolinda was closely examining the thick tousled hair of her three-year-old son, who was lying on her enormous belly.

Ribas signalled to her from the door, asking if he could come in and checking at the same time to see if his brother-in-law was there. She told him not to enter, and, shaking herself off and lifting herself up with great effort, went to the door to speak with him in secret.

'Have you no shame? Go away! Ubaldino is here…'

'I want to borrow five hundred *réis*…'

'Oh, yes, and where am I going to get this money?'

'In the drawer under the counter.'

'In the drawer! It was because you went through the drawer under the counter that all of this happened; go away!'

'Don't be mean, Deolinda.'

'And what about your salary? Look: we have no customers… My child is going to be born soon and I don't even have a small shirt ready. We barely manage to eat, and God knows how.'

'Don't be stingy; I'll pay you later.'

'Ubaldino is coming... go away.'

'Heaven's sake…'

And with that, Ribas walked along the pavement towards the docks; at the entrance, he filled himself up with the boiled red potatoes sold by Bertolina, who was chatting with the sailors from the *Lloyd*. After finishing the potatoes, Ribas still had a few pennies left for tangerines. Once he felt full, he beat the ragged soles of his shoes on the path to Rua de São Bento.

When he arrived, he wished to test Seu Joaquim's patience, and stood at the door of the warehouse like a fool, observing the shifts of the workers, who rushed endlessly in and out.

Upstairs, in his office, Francisco Teodoro, softened by the previous night's party, loyally pointed out to Meireles, Paquita's father, his son's lack of aptitude for work.

Meireles smiled and told Teodoro to rest easy; he would settle everything. And he added:

'Paquita may look stupid, but she has a masculine energy; no trifles for her. She has a remarkable judgement. I am taking them both to Europe with me, and I will make Mário watch the action at the centres of commerce, and upon his return, you will see, Teodoro, just how your son will work! It will be time for you to cede the field to him…'

'I am dying to see that…'

'So? Let's move quickly. I don't want to miss my trip aboard the *Equateur*.'

Francisco Teodoro was beginning to understand that Paquita, if what he heard was true, would be the only woman capable of moulding his son's character. Mário would be an instrument in her energetic hands. He had not imagined her like that, and did not yet believe it. All he could see was her whiteness and fragility, her inexpressive face framed by her blonde hair.

It was alright; Mário needed a firm will to dominate and guide him. Not even with a blazing lantern would he find something so good.

Paquita would be the salvation of his son, the guarantee that his business would no longer end with him.

Thinking in this way, a tenderness bloomed in his soul for that lost son, who had sown so much disappointment in his life. He was beginning to feel that he hadn't lost his love for him.

He would continue that house, born of so much work, which would maintain with him the same name, the same tradition… It would always be Casa Teodoro, erected by his ambition and immortalised by his offspring.

Chapter XVII

After returning from Mário's wedding, Nina undressed slowly in her room, her eyes fixed on the white light of the mirror.

It was the end, and even though everything was over, she did not feel resigned. Happily for her, the bride and groom were going that same day to Petrópolis, and from there they would only return to board an ocean liner. How sweet it would be for Paquita to cross the sea in her love's arms…

Nina removed from her bodice the orange blossoms that the bride had given her – a token of good luck for finding a husband – and contemplated them ironically. She was about to throw them on the floor when someone knocked at the door. She opened it.

It was Noca, who entered completely overwrought.

'Lord Almighty! The mirror in the great hall has broken!'

'Who has broken it?' asked Nina, simply to say something.

'Nobody knows. But mark my words, a great misfortune awaits! A broken mirror means either death or ruin.'

'Death! If only it were mine…'

'Shut your mouth, girl! Don't say such nonsense. Who loves only once in life?'

'Many people… Me.'

'Don't believe them, you just let those people talk. You are young, you will see. But come see the mirror; it's no good keeping such an affliction to yourself. It looks like the devil's doing. The horror! Today of all days!'

'You can go, I will join you soon.'

Nina swiftly changed her dress and went down.

She found two servants standing open-mouthed before the mirror, predicting the woes to come, swayed by Noca's influence.

'What a pity! Such an expensive mirror,' muttered Nina mechanically, thinking about Paquita.

'It's not the money that matters. I don't feel pity; I feel afraid.'

'What can we do now? Just have patience and wait,' said Nina with a faint smile.

'Wait! You put it very well. It was a stronger will than ours that did this. We can expect great things. Noca doesn't say idle words. You'll see. It's better not to say anything to Nhá Mila.'

'Indeed…'

On the following day, when Dr Gervásio entered Camila's garden, he found her on the terrace, fragrant and fresh in an ivory peignoir that was flecked with gold.

'How beautiful you are!' he murmured, holding her hand, which she let him kiss under the bright sunlight, as if Mário's absence blinded everyone in the house.

Mário's wedding had been a relief for both of them. They were freed of that inconvenient witness, whom they had been obliged to respect. Mila blessed that marriage, which had released her from constant humiliation, taking her son to the lands of luxury and pleasure. Being apart from her, he would be happy. What more could a mother's heart desire?

It was on that same day, in the afternoon, that Francisco Teodoro arrived with downcast eyes, and, instead of going upstairs as he always did, locked himself in his office below. Later on, Camila came in from the street, and rearranged herself in a hurry as she climbed the stairs.

During dinner she was the only one to speak; she was giddy, radiating the perfume that Gervásio had sprayed on her a short while before in the little cottage in Lagoa where they concealed their love. That perfume was like a piece of his soul that she could carry with her.

'What a beautiful evening! Look at the garden,' she exclaimed, pointing outside, with her glittering hand covered with rings.

It was a marvellous sunset.

'Everything is pink! It seems to me that the garden has never had so many flowers. How beautiful! And there are those who speak ill of life. And there are idiots who kill themselves!'

Francisco Teodoro crossed his cutlery without having eaten.

'Are you unwell?' Nina asked.

'I don't feel like eating. Have my coffee sent to the garden.'

Camila gazed at him with sadness, and explained to the others:

'He is affected by Mário's wedding. Girls, try to entertain and distract your father. Have a glass of milk kept for him, Nina; your uncle can't stay like this. God forbid he should fall ill…'

And a veil of sadness passed over Mila's eyes, which had only shortly before been full of laughter.

But nothing that afternoon could amuse Francisco Teodoro; he repelled all company and strolled alone in the backyard of the house. In vain, Ruth played her best songs; her father didn't even seem to hear them…

In the small starching room, Noca described her employer's sadness as something foretold by the disaster of the mirror…. 'It's beginning to happen… Haven't I told you?'

That evening, as Francisco Teodoro flipped through Inocêncio Braga's papers, Mila undressed in front of her full-size tilting mirror, flirting with her own image, a miracle of youth, and feeling a shudder of delight at being so well-deserving of a great love.

Like Shulamite, she was utterly beautiful. Her breasts were full, her neck was white and round, her hands were small and her wrists were delicate; and around her dark eyes were thick long eyelashes from which shone a sweet and velvety light that enveloped her in grace.

As she fastened her hair, she recalled a comparison made by Gervásio; he had once told her, as he watched her comb her hair, that her hands were like two luminous birds fluttering in the darkness. Mila smiled.

It was only after her prayers, as she stretched out on her wide bed, that she remembered she would have to wake up early the following day to say goodbye to her son.

Everything was like a dream. Mário already married! She still seemed to see him small and round, crawling through that two-storey house on Rua da Candelária, where her life had been so different. And it was with that vision of her son as a child – of that rosy flesh and of that innocent mouth that dribbled kisses – that she fell asleep, feeling the beloved weight of his body in the longing of her arms.

When midnight sounded, only Francisco Teodoro remained awake in the whole house, still in his office browsing through Inocêncio Braga's papers.

The first alarm had gone off that morning. It was a telegram from Le Havre to the *Jornal*, reporting a drop in the price of coffee in the major markets.

Distressed and sensing an imminent and enormous disaster, he hurriedly left the warehouse for Braga's office, who received him between two nasal giggles, as Braga reclined comfortably in his leather chair.

'What is this! You are easily scared… Don't you see this is all a game?'

'I don't understand…' stammered Francisco Teodoro with bewilderment, as he felt his bitter disappointment mix with the sweetness of a vague hope.

'You don't understand because you are nervous; you don't have the serenity of the great entrepreneurial spirits. I wish I could convince you of the certainty of your profits; but given the state of your mood right now, I see that this will be a hard task. Tomorrow, you will see there will be no more news of this sort. Because that is done here, my good man; I assure you that it is done here!'

'That's impossible!'

'Trust me.'

'This cannot be. The *Jornal*, so serious…'

'It cannot be! Come now! So much naivety! If I tell you this, it is because I know. If it were otherwise, would I be so calm? Tell me, is it possible that I would be calm?'

'I think differently: I have invested a large part of my capital there.'

'No one says otherwise… I know… It's only natural to have concerns; I am simply telling you that they are groundless. Tomorrow, there will either be silence or denial. This is all part of the drama. Look, Gama Torres is extremely satisfied; he left here a little while ago. He is content; and that one is a man of our times; he will go far…'

'Well, I confess having regrets.'

'Come now, don't say such things! What nonsense! Our triumph is certain. But since you are so apprehensive, let's do something; let's send a telegraph to Lacerda. If it were only for me, I wouldn't telegraph him. I know the inner workings of these schemes. They're like clockwork. I'll tell you something else: I am happy. Look, tomorrow I will prove to you, with irrefutable documents, the truth of what I have said. Return here at two o'clock.'

When he left, Francisco Teodoro was less tormented; but as the hours advanced, his disquiet returned, up to the point where he could no longer work. He ran away to his house, but there he found the same restlessness.

He threw himself on his papers: he read them and re-read them, took notes, and each time felt his good judgement capsize amidst a growing confusion and thick tangle of problems.

He was restless with forebodings. And there were many. After all, an isolated telegram, at odds with everything else that was being said, might not be genuine. He was distressed by the whispers in the city. Rumours are like crows, they appear in the air attracted by hidden rot.

Nevertheless, he forced himself to trust in Braga's positive projections. The man was honest and held the thread of the plot in

his capable hands. Therefore, it was better to wait for his irrefutable evidence…

It was six o'clock in the morning when Camila called on him to go to the *Equateur*.

There was a commotion in the house.

Noca was the most curious; she wanted to say goodbye to Mário and see one of those floating houses from the inside; she knew she would never travel on one, not even by the grace of God!

She hurriedly dressed the twins, who were being silly, demanding to wear the new dresses and the pink hats.

'No,' she reasoned, 'leave the pink hats for strolling around the city… take the white ones.'

'I want to take the pink hat,' shouted Lia, and Rachel added:

'I want to take the pink hat, too.'

'What nonsense! A hat like that for going to the sea!'

The girls screamed and Mila intervened:

'Let them take the pink hats. How you like to annoy the girls…'

At ten o'clock they boarded a boat. Ruth remembered their visit to the *Neptune*, and said, turning to her mother:

'I have just realised! We have never heard from Captain Rino.'

Camila shrugged her shoulders.

'When he returns, I shall ask him to organise another tour of the bay for us.'

'On a moonlit night…' Camila said.

To annoy Noca, who was clinging to the edges of the boat, Ruth added:

'Or even on a stormy night, with plenty of lightning and thunder. It could be even more beautiful.'

'Ah, how crazy!' Noca exclaimed, 'Our Lady of Penha! I am afraid with all this sun, let alone…'

'It's a shame that Nina couldn't come…'

'What for? To see the other woman?'

Francisco Teodoro heard nothing; he glanced anxiously at every telegram printed in the papers. There was no news; no news at all; and he did not know whether this was cause for relief or for greater concern.

When they climbed to the deck, they found Meireles alongside Mário and Paquita. She wore, as always, a nauseated expression and counted her words, treating her husband's family with distant manners. Meanwhile, Mário came and went, smiling and diligent, following the orders she uttered in curt phrases: Go to the cabin and lock the jewellery box… Go fetch her cloak… Go check which bags are going to the hold and send the red one to the suite.

As soon as he returned, she would delegate him some other task that took him away again: Count the volumes... Deliver the fruit basket to the *maître d'hôtel* and tell him to put it in the refrigerator... Put their visiting cards on the back of their chairs, to avoid confusion... Mário spun around on the rubber soles of his pale shoes and went off cheerfully to follow her orders. Camila was astonished. Who would have thought that this was the same dry, indomitable Mário, who had been so incompetent in carrying out the wishes of his mother and his sisters? Seeing his behaviour, she felt a jealous sadness rise from her heart to her eyes; it was the sorrow of a wounded soul, which no amount of reason could heal.

Paquita noticed everything and intensified her coldness, barely responding to her mother-in-law's questions.

Meanwhile, Teodoro and Meireles strolled in long strides from bow to stern.

Old Meireles was of the opinion that the telegram included in the previous day's *Jornal* was a serious matter, a cause for alarm. Francisco Teodoro gulped: he did not have the courage to tell the other that most of his capital had been thrown into the vortex of speculation. He did, however, report Braga's words and assertions.

'Don't talk to me about that man,' the other interrupted violently, 'he is a speculator without scruples… Shall I make myself clearer? He is a thief!

He came from Portugal, around six years ago, penniless, and do you know how much silver he has sent to England? More than a thousand *contos*!

I saw the proof. The scoundrel!

That one is from my parish… I knew his father, who was just as sly! Don't be seduced by his song and dance. Old people like us have real leaden feet; we don't hurry; we choose our ground. This bravado and risk-taking, it's only good for those who have nothing to lose… See now, the bells are ringing. It's time to leave. Tell your wife, she can start going down. There's no hurry.'

As he embraced Mário, Francisco Teodoro advised him in a choked voice:

'Be wise, my son.'

Camila, white as marble, hugged her son tightly to her heart; then, sensing his coldness in her embrace, she kissed him on the neck and face and gazed at him, a mute complaint evident in her large hurt eyes. It was only on the boat, hidden from Paquita's sight, that she burst into sobs that no one attempted to stop.

Everyone was filled with similar resentment. Noca mentally called Paquita a minx and realised that she was stealing Mário from his family. Ruth realised that separations are when love reveals itself. Had she ever thought that a goodbye hug could cost so much? Lia and Rachel cast curious looks at all the worried faces around them; and only Francisco Teodoro waved to his son with a handkerchief, putting all of his affection into that goodbye.

Who would have imagined? Now, facing the possibility of disaster, the only person in the family that he could see being saved was Mário!

Once back on land, Camila and her daughters went by carriage to the house, and Francisco Teodoro, after a quick lunch at a restaurant, left impatiently for the warehouse.

At his door, a small black woman named Terência was whining at an Italian boy who had encroached on her business without her permission, throwing himself on the coffee that littered the pavement.

'Is there any news?' Teodoro asked the warehouse manager.

'No, sir. Ah, in fact, it seems Mota is dying.'

'Poor man…'

'His daughter came today searching for you. She was crying.'

'We must send something to his people…'

'Move that sack, João!'

'Poor Mota…'

The manager was no longer listening; he was delegating tasks.

Arriving at his office, Francisco Teodoro arranged to send some money to Mota and inquire about his condition. The courier returned quickly. The old man had fainted but was recovering.

'Poor Mota…' muttered Teodoro, checking his watch, dying for it to be two o'clock. And when the hour finally arrived, he ran to Inocêncio's office.

Upstairs, a servant informed him that Senhor Inocêncio had left that morning for Petrópolis on urgent business. He had left his word that upon his return he would seek out Teodoro.

Francisco Teodoro did not contain his anger, and, disoriented, left the office without greeting anyone.

The noise, bustle, and joyful movement of the street magnified his moral fatigue. He was walking with his head bowed when he met Negreiros; freezing his steps, he asked abruptly:

'Tell me: what is your opinion of Inocêncio Braga?'

Negreiros smiled, scratched his enormous nose, and hissed:

'That one is cunning; he is not to be trusted, not to be trusted at all.'

'And what do you think about the telegram in the *Jornal* yesterday, about the fall in the price of coffee?'

'What can I say? It is the announcement of a catastrophe for many good people. Do you know what comforts me? It is that the United States will suffer a loss greater than ours. Doesn't it seem that way to you?'

What did the bankruptcy of Americans matter to Francisco Teodoro! He only trembled at the prospect of his own; everything that was good in the universe was condensed in his fortune.

Upon shaking Teodoro's hand, Negreiros felt its coldness, and suddenly lifted his eyes and met the other's gaze:

'Don't tell me that you…'

The businessman did not respond; he pretended to be in a hurry and moved on.

That afternoon he found his house full. Dona Inácia was reciting recipes for sweets to anyone with two ears patient enough to hear them. Befitting the vivacious brunette that she was, Carlotinha was teasing the giggling Bragas, alluding to Judith's boyfriends while winking at a student of medicine named Oscar Pereira, whom they were introducing that day to the Teodoro family as an excellent reciter of monologues.

But in that house there was little appreciation for verses, and no one asked him to recite them.

Dr Gervásio played with Gomes and Lélio as Camila whirled around the house, forgetting amidst the noise the feeling of abandonment that she had experienced that morning on the *Equateur*.

Inside, Nina was ordering another board to be added to the table, and she descended to the cellar to determine with the footman which wines were to be served.

Thus, that weekday seemed like a party.

Francisco Teodoro sat down by the piano and looked at everyone as if he was seeing ghosts. What could all this joy mean? Could it be that all these people had nothing else to do, nothing else to think about?

His peace and quiet did not last long. Lia and Rachel jumped on his knees and in his exhausted state he allowed them to climb onto his lap and for a few minutes he moved his knees as if he were a horse.

Chapter XVIII

Every day it was the same: early in the morning Francisco Teodoro jumped out of bed to check the telegrams in the *Jornal*. This time, like every other, he suffered the same disappointment. There came the news that the price of coffee was dropping, little by little, invariably.

He dressed hurriedly and descended to the garden, taciturn, as if a nightmare from the previous evening were still lingering in his mind. The sun was beautiful. And the cicadas sang through the tamarind trees.

It was six o'clock and Lia and Rachel were already jumping around, still wearing their pyjamas. Noca was chasing after them, calling them to their bath, towels on her arm and a soap dish in her hand.

'Oh, children, what devils you are!'

The little ones, with their chins raised, smiled at their father, matching his stride.

'Good morning, papa!'

'Good morning, papa!'

Their father did not even smile; pushing them away gently, he said:

'Go take your bath.'

'I want to go for a stroll with you.'

'I want to go too…'

'Don't make Noca wait. Go take your bath. Quick now…'

The children began to test the mulatta's patience, running everywhere and disobeying her orders. Meanwhile, Francisco Teodoro went alone to the backyard of the house. And there he walked in silence, ignoring his servants' greetings when they passed by him.

He felt oppressed, as if he were carrying a heavy burden on his shoulders. It was the first time that he had paid attention to the short

duration of his youth: the absence of the energy that he had enjoyed in former days hurt his soul.

And the cicadas sang; happy are they whose lives are so simple…

Nina went over to him.

'You have been an early riser recently… Would you like to have lunch? Everything is ready.'

He pulled out his pocket watch.

'Yes, I can go, it's almost nine o'clock…'

They went in. The girls positioned themselves next to their father, who fed them small pieces of egg and bread.

'You give everything to the girls and eat nothing!' observed Nina.

'I am not hungry.'

'You will fall ill like this… Why don't you talk to the doctor?'

'Me? Why?'

'Here is your coffee.'

Swallowing his coffee all at once, Francisco Teodoro left in haste.

Noca peeked at him from the window and went to tell Nina that Senhor Teodoro seemed like another man; he had even changed his gait. The two women looked at each other, and it was the mulatta who murmured:

'Maybe someone told him about Nhá Mila, h'm?'

At eleven o'clock, when the rest of the family sat down to have lunch, the vision of Teodoro had largely faded away. It must have been a passing discomfort.

The table was plentiful; and the sunlight, filtered through the blinds, stained the room with red stripes. On the tablecloth were the same excellent wines and the same *manacá* flowers that filled the room, as they always did, with the same excellent aroma. In the vases, the lacy fronds of the maidenhair ferns lent, as they did every day, a uniform freshness to the living room; and the children radiated good health… What else was required to make the hours fly by as if one were dreaming?

Meanwhile, Dr Gervásio asked Mila:

'Is your husband feeling better?'

'I don't know... He has been sulking. He was very affected by Mário's wedding. But he won't have it said that he is ill; and he isn't really. I don't know what it is.'

Gervásio remained quiet and thoughtful. The twins began to laugh at each other.

'Have you seen the beautiful croton in the vase at the entrance, doctor?' Ruth asked him.

'I have. The croton is beautiful, but the vase is dreadful. Remove that alabaster vase from there or I will not be returning.'

'You find it ugly?'

'Horrible.'

That day, Francisco Teodoro did not find a single moment of peace at work.

He went to Inocêncio's office and pestered him with questions; he realised that everyone there found him tedious and discreetly avoided him.

For nearly three months, the telegrams had announced regularly, as if taking pleasure in the fact, the collapse of the price of coffee at Le Havre.

Yet, Inocêncio still persevered in his mocking laughter, its meaning trite, difficult to grasp.

Francisco Teodoro, more enraged on this day than on any other, felt the urge to strike Inocêncio, so great was his anger at seeing his smiling face. Nevertheless, he controlled himself, aware that nothing would be gained by such fury, and he descended the stairs, claiming it would be his last time.

When he entered his office, the bookkeeper handed him a telegram: Casa Mendes and Wilson, from Santos, had declared bankruptcy, dragging down in its wake large amounts of Teodoro's capital.

The businessman read the message in silence and remained that way for some time: pale as whitewash, thick droplets of sweat falling from his brow, eyes still, and the paper held open in his trembling hands.

The workers at the office looked on, mute and embarrassed. Mota was already there, very yellow, his eyes sunken, his hair poorly brushed, and his tie twisted in a crumpled collar, betraying all the sad signs of unkempt poverty. He had also perceived some sort of disaster hovering in the air. Shaking his head piously, he fixed his gaze on his boss's troubled face.

Flies could be heard buzzing loudly in the air.

Fifteen days later the end of everything was announced. The great Casa Teodoro was forced to declare bankruptcy.

The family knew nothing; lately, the businessman had regained a relative serenity. On Monday, he was due to appear before the commissioners, and on the day before, a Sunday, his table was crowded with people.

The Gomes family arrived early.

Dona Inácia had once again changed the style of her silk dress that was the colour of pine nuts. What silk it was! With its black lace trim, it looked brand new.

'So, how has life been around here?' she asked, joyfully, leaning back comfortably on the best chair in the dining room.

'So-so... Uncle Francisco is not doing well at all; he is very down,' Nina answered.

'That's too bad. And your aunt?'

'She's upstairs, she'll be coming soon.'

'How did you like the biscuits I sent?'

'Very much, they were delicious.'

'I have brought the recipe to Mila. Tomorrow, God willing, I will try others. See how Ruth is growing up! Those biscuits are made with tapioca flour. Have you noticed?'

'We have.'

'With lots of eggs. At the confectioner's shops they don't make them like this…'

'No…'

Carlotinha removed her hat in front of the mirror, singing:

'In Brazil, the sweets are made of eggs, Chiquita! A kiss given to you. A kiss...' And she sent a kiss through the air to greet Ruth, who was smiling at her.

Judith moved across the room with the bouncy walk of a short woman, jerking her arms in a jingle of bracelets; she snatched Nina from her mother and pulled her out onto the terrace:

'Do you know something? I have been proposed to. How lovely it is! I am so happy!'

'Is it Samuel?'

'Who else would it be?'

'But your father didn't approve…'

'What could he do? It wasn't easy, huh? He will stop by later… Would you come with me to the garden?'

Soon afterwards the Bragas arrived with the student of monologues. Even Dr Gervásio, who usually did not show up on Sundays, came to play cards with Lélio and Gomes.

Francisco Teodoro ordered the beer to be opened. The children of the neighbourhood chattered through the hallways. The sun was bright!

'Did you like the biscuits I sent you, Senhor Teodoro?'

'They were very good... You are famous for them, Dona Inácia. We all know that.'

'They are made with tapioca flour…. I have brought…'

Camila appeared in the room. She was beautiful, all in blue. Dona Inácia shifted in her silk dress and stood up; interrupting her last sentence, she began another:

'Here she comes! Heavenly!'

Every now and then Noca appeared at the hallway door. She would look around the entire room and return inside, laughing, to perform for the other servants, offering flamboyant imitations of Terezinha Braga's cloying overtures to the student of the monologues by the window.

'Ugh! A young man like that…'

At ten o'clock the stampede began. The first to leave were the Bragas, who departed with lots of laughs and goodbyes. Dr Gervásio carried Lélio away, offering him accommodation on the condition that he listen to Chopin. The Gomes women were the last to take their leave. The young ladies left laden with flowers and plant seedlings; and Dona Inácia departed carrying a basket filled with peaches that bent her arm with its weight. The peaches would be perfect for her homemade sweets.

With the excuse of searching out ingredients for her sweets, Dona Inácia was constantly examining Camila's orchards. Her husband would give her his arm, and hold his head up, so that his heavy tortoiseshell pince-nez did not fall off his nose.

'It was a day well spent!' said Mila, later, to her family.

The others agreed.

They retreated inside. After seeing that the house was locked and silent, Francisco Teodoro entered the children's room.

From a gas lamp streamed a sweet light that was dimmed by a porcelain globe.

On two identical beds spaced one metre apart, made from white iron and with golden posts, the two girls were sleeping deeply. Their bedsheets were turned, their legs bare, and their hair spread over the pillows. By chance, they were both sleeping on their backs with their lips partly open.

It was the first time that he had found them similar. Lia, bathed in light, seemed fairer; she had one knee raised up, supported by the border of the bed. The other was veiled by a half-shadow, her hands held flat across her small round chest.

What beautiful sleep. He could almost read their dreams through their delicate eyelids.

Francisco Teodoro spent a long time looking at his daughters, sometimes at one, sometimes at the other. He noticed how good those beds were, how spacious that room. He noted how elegant their small shoes were, laying empty on the carpet, and how good their small embroidered skirts and white dresses smelled, tossed casually across the back of the chair. And his daughters could not continue being raised in this way, enjoying such comfort and luxury! In a few days they would leave the mansion and they would go… where? What awaited all of them?

Francisco Teodoro was bending down to kiss Rachel when he heard footsteps; he turned, startled. It was Noca entering with a glass of milk. The mulatta, who was on her way to lie down, retreated in astonishment. The businessman explained:

'I thought I heard groans: I came to see what it was.'

'They are dreaming... sometimes it's enough to change their position and then they quieten…'

'Yes, they must be dreaming… God willing, they are having good dreams…'

'They are fine! So relaxed… touch them, you'll see…'

'I'm sure, but let them sleep… And look after them… Look after them!'

Francisco Teodoro left the room with a lump in his throat. How would his children be educated? The poor girls didn't know anything yet, not even a letter… not a single one! Instead of going to his bedroom, where Camila was sleeping, he lit a candle, turned off the gas in the parlour, and went downstairs to his office on the ground floor.

At one o'clock in the morning Teodoro was still holding a quill. From the bronze lamp descended a calm and stable light that was conducive to writing. The room's furniture of cinnamon wood and embossed leather, well-arranged and bare, almost looked surprised in that silent clarity.

Atop the Venetian sideboard, the statuette of the knight with cloak and sword drew a shadow of his arrogant and vivacious pose on the hazel-coloured wall.

On the desk next to Orlando's *Commercial Code*, the silver inkwell emitted white reflections; and luminous flashes leaped from the four glittering golden frames that enlivened the room.

Francisco Teodoro was writing letters: when he finished one, he began another. It could be said that all the words were the same. His quill made the same twists and turns and creaked under his strength, as if it were being crushed by iron fingers. When he finished the last one, he placed them all in a bundle on top of his briefcase and leaned back on his large chair, panting, his eyes gazing into the void. He remained motionless for a long time. Then, without contracting a single muscle, he opened the drawer of his desk and removed a revolver, examining it attentively. It was a new weapon, still sparkling from the last time it had been rubbed down with suede; the businessman turned it over between his fingers, pulled its trigger, loaded it, placed it back in the drawer, and locked it away with his key.

There, inside the drawer, were rest and eternal peace.

He had oblivion at his fingertips.

On the following day, after a terrible sleepless night, Teodoro went down at his usual time to the dining room which gleamed with crystal and silverware, and he sat at the table facing the terrace that was visible from all the open doors. In the centre, ample steps led down to the park and its immaculate lawns; near the edge of the balustrade, amidst the clusters of maidenhair ferns, two splendid *manacá* trees erupted in full bloom. Francisco Teodoro looked at them without seeing them, absorbed in his grief, when his goddaughter interrupted him:

'Good morning, uncle!'

'Hello, Nina.'

'Were you enjoying the *manacás*?'

'Yes… Very pretty…'

'Beautiful! Do you know? Aunt Mila will have her heart broken today!'

'H'm?!' said Francisco Teodoro, startled.

'This morning the cockatoo was found dead, and no one knows why… Noca is already saying this is a sign of coming disaster in a house…'

'Ah! Did she say that?'

'She did. We are not bothered by it; but you know how Aunt Mila is so impressionable!'

'Don't tell her anything. Who gave her the cockatoo?'

'Captain Rino… Would you like me to serve you some ham?'

'No… Bring me a cup of tea…'

'But the steak and eggs are on their way.'

'I don't want anything. Only tea.'

'Then eat these biscuits. They are very nice.'

Nina went to the cupboard, from which she removed the crystal biscuit jar. As her uncle ate, she sat down next to him and asked for a pencil to write a note on the back of a visiting card. At the same time, she was saying:

'God forbid I forget anything that Aunt Mila has asked for…'

Then she read aloud:

'Please tell Mme. Guimarães to bring the two silk dresses today as well as the samples of the turquoise velvet. Tell Bastos to make, based on the measurements he has, a new pair of black satin shoes. There is more: one kilo of bonbons and…'

'Say no more; I cannot do anything like that today.'

'Then Aunt Mila will go to town… It's better.'

'No! Don't let her go!' he interjected, nervously. 'Tell her that I will be back soon. And I will do everything… I'll send for the silk dresses, the satin shoes, the sweets… Ah! Noca was right! Do you know that, Nina?'

'Me?' murmured the young woman, astonished. 'Me?' she repeated, with amazement. 'I don't know anything!'

'You're right… Keep quiet and wait. Explain to my wife the meaning of the cockatoo's death, it's fine. Goodbye, I am in a hurry.'

Nina was left wondering:

'Is Uncle Francisco mad?'

A beautiful day, warm and bright. The cicadas sang raucously from the flowery crowns of the flamboyant trees. The trams were full, and flocks of children passed on the pavements on their way to school.

Francisco Teodoro walked unsteadily: he sensed a heavy weight bending his shoulders, and his legs felt weak. He boarded the tram once he had arrived at the beach. On the seat across from him was a young Portuguese man, newly arrived, wearing a jacket, a felt hat with a greasy brim, and muddy boots. The young man looked at everything with astonishment, his dry cracked lips half-open in an expression of admiration. Francisco Teodoro could not stop gazing at that rustic youth. He was reminded of his own arrival, his poverty, the crust of dirt from his homeland that still clung to the raw soles of his shoes, and the bewilderment that he had also felt during his first days, looking up at this sky, these trees, and these mountains with an expression of hope and fear; and he remembered the longing he had felt for the corn bread of his village, for the bright water of the river where he would bathe on summer afternoons, for the heaths where he would hunt crickets, for the wheat fields gilded by the sun, for the cherry trees that he used to climb, for his mother's reprimands, and for his strolls on the white roads behind the miller's donkeys.

And he felt the impulse to whisper in the young man's ear: 'Return to your village, content yourself with hard bread, with grilled sardines, and with the good Lord's water!'

'Where there is a tree, there is a shadow where a man can rest. Don't seek out wealth, it deceives and lies. Better to be poor for all your life! Go back; accustom your wife to work and your children to rolling, naked, on the earth that will one day embrace them… If you dress them in finery, you will see: they will count their weight in gold and their worth in dust…'

It was ten o'clock when the businessman entered the warehouse. Seu Joaquim was sour and sullen, adopting a prickly and dry manner even towards his boss. Moreover, the work had come to a standstill; there were no wagons at the door and the clerks just stared at the towers of sacks and the spiders on the ceiling.

Francisco Teodoro approached the desk to the left of the entrance, collected his correspondence, and, turning on his heels, entered the adjoining hallway and went up to his office.

Upstairs there was only the bookkeeper, who wrote standing up, and old Mota, completely immersed in his work. They exchanged greetings.

'Has the order from Leite Mendes come?'

'No, sir…'

'Is everything in place?'

'Yes, everything.'

'I wrote the letters myself… See if they are in order.'

The bookkeeper made a gesture of refusal.

'See here,' insisted Teodoro, 'I am not used to these things… Read them. Then it would be good to put them out for delivery.'

'I think it would be better to wait for Sidney's answer from Santos.'

'What for?'

'We could at least postpone the… the catastrophe.'

'Come now! Sidney! He'll say the same as everyone else! Look, I've just received a letter from him that I haven't opened yet. I will read it now.'

Francisco Teodoro sat down very pale, and tore open the envelope with trembling hands. The bookkeeper turned his eyes away. After he had finished reading, there was a long pause when the silence weighed heavily. A few minutes later the businessman stood up and began to walk nervously from one side of the office to the other. Every now and then he asked a puerile or absentminded question:

'What date is it again?'

'The twenty-nine…'

'Ah!... yes… the twenty-ninth… that's it… twenty-ninth… twenty-ninth…' he repeated softly.

The others remained silent.

The sun shone brightly through the open balcony; Francisco Teodoro left the window shutters ajar and slowly crossed the office diagonally to the corner where the water jug stood. He began to scrape its clay surface with his fingernails.

From the street came a boisterous and deafening sound that rolled together wagons and cursing voices; whips snapped in the air, and, in thick clouds of dust, the smell of raw coffee rose in the hot atmosphere.

Suddenly, Francisco Teodoro turned to the bookkeeper and said in a self-assured voice:

'Send the letters.' And he disappeared into the annex.

The clerk reread the letters and, upon reaching the rear window that overlooked the warehouse's interior, shouted down:

'Senhor Augusto!'

No one answered him, and after he shouted again with more determination the manager turned a threatening look upstairs and a different clerk yelled back:

'Senhor Augusto hasn't come back in from the street yet!'

With the annex closed, Francisco Teodoro wrote at length to Meireles and to Mário, telling them of the disaster without a trace of despair.

After sealing the letter, he remembered that he could perhaps have gone to Lage for help, but he shrugged his shoulders. She was a woman, after all, what could she possibly understand of business? Moreover, things would go downhill quickly, and a new loan would be an irremissible commitment… It would have been better if he hadn't thought of her. And the aunts from Castelo hill? He would ask them for support for his family, but not for himself. He felt he had only a few days left to live: the blow had been too strong to leave him standing. But what about his wife?... and the children? And, finally, did he really believe that the old women had a fortune? Where did they hide it that no one could know about it? Riches, riches… Useless to seek such things in miserly coffers!

In the dispatched letters he had arranged for a meeting with his creditors to evaluate the state of the house. It was to take place at the warehouse the following day at noon. Francisco Teodoro had a few hours before him to notify his family, but he lacked the courage.

He left his office later, escaping his usual encounter with one friend or another. But at the first block he had a shock: at the doorway of Torres' house stood one of his creditors, Serra. Francisco Teodoro barely recognised his corpulent body, which was swathed in white denim, his black tailcoat disappearing behind him and a thick gold chain from Porto arching across his round abdomen. The businessman blushed, wishing the ground would swallow him. He touched his hat brim with trembling fingers, gave a little smile, and kept walking.

He could barely move: a terrible weight in his legs made him slow down his steps exactly when he wanted to speed them up; he held tight to his umbrella and twitched his lips as if he were talking to himself. It was the dryness; he had a tightness in his throat. It seemed as if he had swallowed all the dust from the streets.

He couldn't see anyone and cared little if someone greeted him. As he walked, he considered boarding the tram at the corner, but since he didn't see one coming down the long street, he continued along the

pavement close to the tracks. He had walked some metres when he bumped into Negreiros.

'So? Is everybody alright?' Negreiros asked him with the embarrassed air of someone who has been informed of a disaster but wishes not to allude to it.

'All alright… I'm waiting for the tram.'

'Sometimes they take a while… I don't have the patience.'

'Yes… It's irritating.'

They both stopped and moved closer to the wall to avoid a private carriage that brushed the sidewalk. Inside was Inocêncio, who saw them and greeted them with a wave of his hand.

Francisco Teodoro did not deign to touch his hat, muttering with anger:

'Dog!'

'He is going to Europe… Straight to London tomorrow on an ocean liner from New Zealand.'

'With my money…'

Negreiros swallowed a word, stroked his nose, and then, blushing slightly, moved closer to Teodoro, and murmured:

'If you need me… Friends are for moments like these…'

Francisco Teodoro shuddered and squeezed the other's hand tightly; in their eyes, there was something like the fleeting and eloquent glimmer of a tear. The tram approached, and the businessman shook hands with Negreiros once more in silence and left.

At Largo da Carioca, as he waited for the next tram that would take him home, Francisco Teodoro came across the Baroness of Lage, in her rustling satins and glass beads. He tried to avoid her but failed. The young woman extended her gloved hand and smiled through a small veil.

'Do you know? Father has written to me. Paquita seems like someone else, she has put on a lot of weight. Mário is dazzled; he has bought beautiful thoroughbreds in London; father says that, if it weren't for his wife, Mário would have spent all the money in a few days…'

'Ah…'

'I plan on leaving soon as well; I will meet them in Paris… Any day now I'll make sure to go and hug our Camila. Has Mário written to you?'

'No…'

'He is a newlywed… He has an excuse… Here, your tram is coming.'

'What about you?'

'I have my carriage. Greetings to everyone.'

She walked away quickly, a swish-swish sound emanating from her satin skirts. The businessman found a seat on the tram and mentally

repeated the phrase Lage had said about Mário: 'if it weren't for his wife, he would have spent all the money in a few days…'

Never had the trip from the city centre to Rua dos Voluntários seemed so short.

Francisco Teodoro feared his arrival at home. He feared the twins' kisses as they waited for him in the garden, both wearing white, smiling and bouncy; he feared the sight of Ruth standing at the top of the stairs, her emerald eyes reminding him of her mother's in a vague nostalgic reminiscence; and, above all, he feared Camila, sitting in front of her mirror, giving the last touches to her afternoon toilette, her arms arched and her fingers, covered in rings, joined in the black waves of her hair…

What would he say to them? What would he say?

Then he remembered Dr Gervásio: this friend would be charged with telling Mila everything the following day, while he would be with his creditors at the warehouse… Only at the end, absolutely at the end!

This idea cheered him up.

That evening he would go find the doctor at his residence and confess everything to him. Upon opening the gate to his mansion, he saw the twins flying on their bicycles on the lanes of the garden and he heard the sounds of a refreshing sonatina coming from Ruth's violin.

Nina was making a bouquet and Camila, already dressed, beautiful in a gown the colour of ripe corn, was reading on the terrace, her elbow resting on the large vase of gardenias.

Chapter XIX

With an apron tied over the lace of her peignoir, Camila, assisted by Noca, was following a recipe for sweets given to her by Dona Inácia.

It was a pudding, a famous walnut pudding, appreciated by all, and an unfailing success at the Gomes' birthday dinners.

The mulatta crushed the nuts in the mortar. Mila had just inspected the sauce and was consulting the paper, where Judith's sloppy handwriting rendered the *a*'s indistinguishable from the *o*'s, when Nina came in, announcing:

'Dr Gervásio is here. He's gone into the parlour. He wants to talk to you, aunt Mila.'

'At this hour!... Didn't he say why he didn't come for lunch?' she asked agitatedly, and soon continued: 'Well! Untie my apron. Listen, Noca, when the sauce looks ready, pour in the walnuts… After they are well cooked, remove the pan from the fire and add twelve yolks… Then put it back on the fire again… Hurry, Nina! Untie this apron at once!'

'There is a knot, Aunt Mila! Be patient…'

'Then?' inquired Noca, while Mila, not to waste a single moment, was washing her sauce-coated fingers directly in the kitchen sink.

'Then? Wait, let me check the recipe… Ah, after the mixture is well cooked, pour it in a buttered baking dish and put it in the oven. Fresh butter, do you hear? Remember that Dr Gervásio doesn't like salted butter… Is the apron ready? Finally! Take my place, Nina.'

Nina stayed by the sink while Camila, drying her hands on her apron before throwing it on the floor, headed to the parlour, arranging the lace of her collar with her agile hands even without the help of a mirror.

Sensing her footsteps, Gervásio went to meet her, but with such an unusually grave air that she quickly became suspicious…

'Are you ill?'

'Me? No… why?'

'You are different. What a look!'

'It's because I have something very serious to tell you.'

'To me?!'

'Yes.'

'What is it?'

He didn't answer immediately. He contemplated her in silence, holding her hands as if analysing her, testing to see if she could truly withstand the coming blow. Mila grew impatient.

'What is it, my God!' she said, and soon the idea came to her that some disaster had befallen her son, a shipwreck, perhaps. Frightened by that thought, she simply stammered: 'Mário?'

'It's not about Mário. It is this: you are poor… Teodoro has gone bankrupt.'

Camila became livid. There was a long silence broken only by the buzz of a wasp around a *reseda* near the window. She couldn't hear the wasp; she couldn't hear anything.

Her face, which had not long before reflected the glow of the embers in the kitchen, was now colourless, so much so that the concerned doctor, fearing that she might faint, held her up and said:

'I know it comes as a shock, but now that the truth is known, you must be brave… Camila!'

As she remained motionless, he shook her gently, repeating her name:

'Camila… Camila! I thought you were stronger than this, much stronger! Look at me. Consider the meaning of my words: bankruptcy isn't death. Your husband didn't die. He has gone bankrupt.'

'It's impossible!' she murmured at last, in the voice of a sleepwalker.

'Why is it impossible? How many others have suffered the same fate? You, women, do not understand such things. Your knowledge of life is superficial. That's why you are surprised by the most obvious facts. Today it is Teodoro's bankruptcy, tomorrow it will be someone else's… The list will be long.'

'What do the others matter to me?'

'It matters by way of explanation: it is a consequence of the times. But sit down, you are very cold… Do you want a coat?'

'I don't want anything.' And, as he endeavoured to hold her, she wrenched herself from his arms.

'Rest…'

'I can't.'

Gervásio remained silent, waiting. She began to walk with irregular steps, as if she were searching for something: a word, an idea. Suddenly, the life that had drained from her flooded back in a surge. Her reaction scalded her body. She started to speak, tearing her sentences into pieces:

'It's horrible! How we are going to appear before all these people… What madness, at his age! To let himself go bankrupt! I can't understand. What an embarrassment! What an embarrassment! And the children?! It cannot be! It cannot be.'

She abruptly froze in a flash of hope.

'What if it were a lie?!'

'I would be a wretch.'

'Someone could have deceived you. Who told you?'

'He told me himself.'

'Idiot!'

Camila pulled aggressively at her collar, as if her dress were suffocating her, and she soon resumed her aimless walk.

The doctor tried to calm her down:

'Listen, Mila, today I am… How do I put it? Ashamed to allude to our happiness; however, it is in its name that I ask you not to level mindless curses at your husband. Remember that, out of all of us, he is the most unfortunate.'

Camila felt her legs quake; and she murmured:

'It's his own fault…'

'It's everybody's fault.'

'This could not have happened all of a sudden and he didn't tell me! Men think that we are not interested in their lives. They keep us only for their pleasure! For that only and nothing else!'

'Teodoro is very despondent…'

'When did he tell you?'

'Last night, at my house. He cried.'

'Did he cry? That was the first time; I have never seen him crying!'

'The pain is severe.'

'Not even when he lost a daughter…'

'It was a new-born… Now he is losing what he cherishes above all else: his honour as a businessman.'

'His honour! But Teodoro has not stolen anything!'

'No, but he has invested his capital in risky ventures. The law has its severities. You must be prepared for everything.'

'Does that mean he could go to jail?'

'No one knows, it's unlikely, but…'

Camila's eyes, which had remained dry, now filled with tears; and with trembling lips, she said:

'No! He will not leave my side! Go find him.'

'You love him, Camila!'

She nodded and went to sit next to the doctor, staring him in the face.

For some time, the only noise in the room came from the buzz of the wasp around the *reseda*. Gervásio averted his eyes.

Camila bent over her knees and cried, hiding her face behind her hands.

Her fit of anguish lasted a long time. Behind the closed door he could sense small indiscreet steps along the corridor.

Gervásio consulted his watch. It was four o'clock. What could have happened at São Bento? He wished to bring the matter to a close; he felt oppressed, and went to the window to observe the tiny white clouds that filled the soft blue sky.

A beautiful day gone to waste!

Camila was sobbing. He returned to her side, unsure how to end her agony. Never had the heart of that woman seemed so impenetrable, never had her psychology seemed so obscure. He expected to see her angry, frightened by the prospect of ruin, reacting with fury at that tremendous deception. It was clear that if she had married out of self-interest, it would not be extraordinary for her to feel that she'd been robbed… However, only in the first few moments had Camila thought of herself and shown that selfishness that life had accustomed her to. After that, the pain of compassion had come quickly and was manifesting itself abundantly.

Slightly irritated and unable to suppress a spasm of jealousy, Dr Gervásio asked Camila in a low voice, staring at her sodden face:

'But have you always loved him this way?'

'No... I began to love him after I betrayed him… It's friendship, a great friendship.'

The doctor did not respond; he looked at her thoughtfully, and after a long silence, said:

'Dry your eyes. It's time to call the rest of the family.'

Ruth and the children entered accompanied by Nina and Noca, whom Dr Gervásio also included in the family. After they had all entered, the door was shut tight as a precaution, so the servants would not realise what the gathering was all about.

Dr Gervásio laid bare the fact in a few words, broaching the subject directly. Lia and Rachel didn't understand him and stared at their mother with open mouths. For them, the words had sounds, but no meaning.

Ruth listened to everything without blinking, then kissed her mother, and said:

'Don't cry, this will only increase papa's suffering.'

The doctor looked at the girl in amazement; then turning to Nina:

'And you, what do you have to say?'

'Nothing; I will wait.'

'And I know you will wait with steadfastness. Well done.'

It was five o'clock in the afternoon and Francisco Teodoro was still explaining, with a trembling voice, the business of the house to the creditors gathered in his office.

They all listened to him in silence, hardly daring to ask, even from afar, one question or another that grew bashful in the delicate compassion of the moment. Even Serra, renowned for his gluttony and brutishness, lightened his steps to keep the floor from moaning as he walked, and artfully transformed his thundering voice into a soft whisper.

Below, the warehouse seemed like a different place. Seu Joaquim sat by the table while the clerks stared idly at the rumpled sacks and at the black spiders that hung thin dark webs from beam to beam as if announcing a period of mourning. Not even a single coffee bean littered the floor. Everything was swept clean as if it were a holy day. From the street came the rumble of the last wagons leaving other warehouses as they closed early, seeming to belch with satiation.

From his vantage point, Seu Joaquim never lost sight of the house of Gama Torres, now the most prosperous one on the street.

As soon as he received the last handshake from his creditors, Francisco Teodoro took refuge in his annex, so no one would see him cry; but the tears that filled him did not reach his eyes; his heart absorbed them all. Aged, exhausted, he leaned on his old desk, his partner for so many years of work, and there he stayed, as a widower remains by the foot of the bed where his loved one sinks into her final sleep.

The creditors were already far away when he slowly picked up his hat and entered the office once more.

Mota was crying, his elbows resting on the desk. The bookkeeper stood up and said:

'I was waiting to say goodbye. I intend to leave soon for the North. I will try a different life…'

'That's a shame, you shouldn't cut short your career… be happy!' They hugged.

Mota approached.

'What about you?' Teodoro asked him.

The old man shrugged his shoulders and sighed.

'I will be around.'

'I will recommend you to Negreiros.'

'It would be a great favour.'

The other employees were not present: Francisco Teodoro thanked Mota and the bookkeeper for their cooperation, and descended the same eroded stairs he had walked up and down over a vast period of thirty years, filled with an infinite longing.

In the warehouse, he shook hands with all the clerks, independently of their rank. He stopped to talk to Joaquim.

'And you, what do you intend to do now?'

'Senhor Teodoro, a few days ago I was invited to join Casa Gama Torres… I shall begin there tomorrow…'

'Very well… very well!' stammered the businessman in a weak voice. And glancing sadly around the warehouse, in a final goodbye filled with longing, he went out into the street.

At the adjacent door, old Terência, whose curly dense hair was hidden under a white kerchief, was holding out her thin arms and shaking the leftover coffee beans, sifting them into a bowl made of sheets of metal held together with nails. Shadows stretched across the pavements, and only the roofs of the neighbouring buildings were gilded by the last glimmers of the sun.

Chapter XX

When Francisco Teodoro arrived at home, there were already stars in the sky. Dr Gervásio and the girls were waiting for him at the gate. As soon as he entered the garden, he felt the embrace of Nina and his daughters, who clung to him with lingering tenderness. Detaching himself from all of them, he looked around, searching for someone.

'Dona Camila fell asleep a little while ago,' the doctor explained, 'Noca is by her side.'

Francisco Teodoro did not respond; exhausted, he sat down on a bench, his head drooping towards his chest; and then, after a long pause:

'Is she so furious with me?'

'No,' replied the doctor, 'she is resigned. They are all strong, believe me.'

'Poor things…'

'Don't say such a thing, papa!' Ruth exclaimed, 'don't be distressed! In this world, then, is there really only room for the rich?'

'Well, essentially…'

'What?! We shall be very happy, rest assured.'

'How did Camila take the news?' the businessman continued, turning to the doctor.

'Naturally, she was shaken… She wasn't expecting such a thing; but she controlled herself with admirable courage. In any case, I gave her a tranquiliser to make her sleep and rest her nerves.'

'You did well; thank you.'

'Uncle Francisco, you must feel worn out; come have some soup, at least.'

'I'm tired.'

'That's why you should have some broth and go lie down.'

They entered the house. In the spacious dining room, there was a certain air of neglect. Nina had forgotten to adorn the table with the usual flowers, and the cockatoo's empty cage added a note of sadness and death to one corner of the room. Francisco Teodoro accepted the soup and ate it in silence; soon afterwards, he excused himself from the table and went upstairs. The doctor, concerned, followed him with his eyes. What would happen upstairs? How would Camila receive her husband?

He had the impression of hearing footsteps; they must be hers. Perhaps she was already awake and was nervously pacing throughout the house.

Lia and Rachel, typically so boisterous, clasped each other tightly and watched everything in amazement.

Imperturbable, Nina served everyone.

'How old are the girls again?' asked the doctor suddenly, pointing at the twins.

'Six years old,' Ruth answered.

'It's early for them to go to school,' he babbled, finishing some thought of his out loud.

They had just finished dinner when Francisco Teodoro came downstairs.

'Dona Camila?'

'When I went up, she was still sleeping; but she sobbed occasionally. Then she woke up and put on a brave face to calm me down. Maybe she hasn't understood the full extent of our disgrace…'

'She has, but she has resigned herself.'

'Thank you for all your care, doctor; I still have one favour to ask of you: can you come here tomorrow, early, at seven o'clock? Would that be possible?'

'I will come.'

'Thank you.'

The doctor left, recommending to Noca a thousand remedies that she could give to Mila. Two hours later, the house was silent; the children were sleeping and Nina, not seeing Ruth in any of the rooms, guessed that she had also gone to bed. Nina slowly descended the stairs to her uncle's office, where she found him writing at his large desk.

'May I come in, Uncle Francisco?'

The businessman quickly covered with his arm the paper he was writing on and then replied:

'Yes, you may.'

And Nina entered, embarrassed, having noticed her uncle's movement.

'What do you want?'

'I want to ask you a favour.'

'Can I still grant such things?'

'Oh! Uncle Francisco!'

'Tell me.'

'I am ashamed… I…'

'Say it, say it.'

Nina sensed impatience in her uncle's voice, and made up her mind:

'I would like to hand over the house you gave me to your daughters. It is small, but we can all fit in it… if…

Nina blushed; her uncle contemplated her in silence; then, feeling that tears were running down his face, he said:

'You did well, very well, to tell me this; I needed to cry. I can see that there are not only ungrateful people in this world; you are an angel. I accept your consideration. Look after my daughters.

The twins are still very small, they have no education… this is what worries me the most! Ruth, well, that one has talent and resources. Have plenty of patience with your aunt; she is the one who will suffer the most…'

'You must set an example of endurance for them.'

'Yes. What do you understand of such things? Go to bed.'

'But…'

'Go to sleep.'

Nina whispered, with embarrassment:

'Goodnight.'

'Goodbye, my child. May God make you happy.'

She left without fully understanding either her uncle's awkward gestures or the meaning of his words.

He wanted to be alone. His pain made him wary; he feared that his family's love would not survive the catastrophe.

Until then, of what had his family's happiness consisted? And how had he proven his worthiness in their eyes? It all came down to money, only money. He was good because he knew how to amass a fortune, fill his house with jewellery, abundance, and comfort. He was good because, having started from nothing at all, he had managed to attain everything; and, in a world ruled by money, vast sums of money had been his.

He was still unable to understand how he had worked so hard, saved up with such tremendous effort, and endured such a long period

of sacrifice, only to let it all dissolve over a few days. Undoing it proved so easy!

Outraged at himself, Francisco Teodoro dug his nails into his bald head, and called himself irresponsible and pathetic. How everyone would laugh at his lack of good sense. He was to blame. To be carried away by catchphrases at his age, and with his experience! He could feel his hate boil over for all those friends that had intoxicated him with dangerous and deceitful words. Back then everybody had called Inocêncio Braga honourable, perceptive, and shrewd. Now, once the deed was done and the money was gone, they said he was a speculator without a conscience. But it was too late; all was lost.

Begin his life again? How? Not even the example of his own old courage was worth anything.

His energy had been spent. Neither his body nor his spirit could withstand the tremendous struggle required to start again.

For the first time Francisco Teodoro realised that there is one thing in life better than money: youth. With his broken body and enfeebled spirit, he was an extinct man, a ghost of his former self, floating in the past, unknown to all, loved only as a memory.

"Old… I am old!" he thought, "I am useless. And now? Where will my family go, whom I have accustomed to such grandeur? Back to the two-storey house on Rua da Candelária? Not even that. In those days Camila was content… Now she's used to something else. Camila! Camila without her silk? No, I cannot imagine Camila without her silk. What was I thinking? Wretch! I am a thief; I have stolen from my own children. I am a thief!"

As if to escape his own thoughts, he began to walk round his office with a wild look. Everything tormented him, and he felt in that sensation some revenge for his crimes.

Speculation, fraud, greed, betrayal, and lies would gnaw and corrupt men's fortunes and characters. Deceivers and deceived alike would be swallowed up by another bankruptcy, of which his own was only the precursor.

In the end, justice would appear and punish the ambitions and vanities of these times and these mad men; and, when all was said and done, there would be nothing left to refashion but everything to create.

The pulse of his agitated blood left him with a fantastical vision of Brazil being dragged down dramatically by the wickedness of some, the ignorance of others, and the ambition of all, in a vortex conjured by cursed politics.

He no longer condemned his countryman Inocêncio Braga as the sole cause of his ruin. The responsibility for his loss rested fully upon the Republic, which he, in the midst of a despair-induced hallucination, castigated as criminal.

His entire life of routine material labour, making up in mercilessness what it had lacked in ideals, now appeared to him as a torrential river, which he had swum across only to later realise its depths and dangers.

Perhaps it might have been possible to make the crossing in a different, better way…If he were not such an ignoramus, he would not have let himself be bewitched by words!

It was also clear that intelligence and education were worth something…

Summing up his meditation on his defeat, Francisco Teodoro said out loud, with a sigh:

'I have worked, I have worked, I have worked, and here I am, like Job!'

But the sound of his own voice frightened him. He peeked to see if he was being watched. He went to the door; there was no one. Then he remembered his travel plans: trips to Europe, delightful relaxation.

It was justice, that's what they all said, and justice had been done with his own hands; man was born to work, and to work he should return.

And the strength? Where was it, that he couldn't feel it? Ah! Wretched body! Wretched body.

Burning, as if there were hot coals in his head, Teodoro sought fresh air, and went to lean over the window ledge.

It had been on a similar night, illuminated by a clear moon, that his grandfather had hung himself from an almond tree, escaping in a delirium of persecution from an enemy who was pursuing him. His grandfather had been a simple farmer; many months had passed before the act, during which he had become taciturn and agitated; but afterwards, what tranquillity!

Francisco Teodoro looked out into the night: the moonlight was beautiful, bathing everything in a sweet and silky white glow, and flooding the warm air with the scent of *manacás* and thorny acacias.

The fragrant plants revived in him the triumphal sensations of other times. That divine fragrance was brought forth by the fertility of his lands, and by the work of the men he paid.

The servants! Like them, but less happy than they, he was also now in need of a salary from a boss, with which he could kill his wife's and children's hunger…

'Just like Job!' he repeated, furiously, pulling out his beard and scratching at his cheeks. Regret and moral pain were not sufficient: he sought physical torment and the mortification of his flesh as fitting punishment for his ineptitude.

Not knowing how to keep one's happiness, after having learned to acquire it, is a sign of madness. Was he mad? Yes, he was mad. Just like his grandfather! He laughed loudly; he was mad!

It was then that, from the back of the garden, came the sounds of a violin playing softly.

Francisco Teodoro shuddered, and his legs bent; he looked up, astonished by the vast calm sky where the stars glittered. He understood; Ruth did not want to disturb the family's sadness and had escaped outside with her music! She was so strong; she loved her ideals more than anything, more than life itself! What would God have in store for that ecstatic soul so full of dreams?

The moans of the music roamed through the clear night like the complaints of invisible angels. Those notes, so soft and full of sweetness, did not seem to spring from human hands. Trembling, and overcome by emotion, Francisco Teodoro dropped to his knees and wept copiously. This last kindness was ministered to him by his daughter, like a sacrament. Even he did not know how long he was suffocated by that flood of tears. When Ruth finished playing, he heard her swift light steps on the sand, and he felt the urge to call her and cover her with kisses.

But stronger than his love and tenderness was the fear that his resolve would weaken. He fled inside; he had made his decision.

Every man is created for a purpose. His had been to earn money. Having earned it, he had fulfilled his destiny. Unable to start over, and incapable of further action, he should come to an end. All the energy of his life would be concentrated in a single decisive movement.

Ruth was climbing the stairs. He put his ear to the door to listen to her steps and thought of kissing the places where her feet touched the floor… He remained in that position for a long time, then went and sat in the corner, waiting…

Little by little the house fell asleep, until it was filled with the heavy silence of slumber.

At one o'clock Francisco Teodoro stood up looking very pale, crossed himself, and prayed, right there between the glimmering frames and the daring air of the bronze knight. When his prayer was over, he walked resolutely to his desk. The noise of his firm steps muffled the faint whisper of the skirt that glided down the staircase.

Francisco Teodoro took his revolver from the drawer. He looked at it for a moment and was holding it to his ear when his wife appeared in the doorway, mute with terror, holding out her hands. He quickly shut his eyes to the temptation of life and hurried the shot.

And the entire house was awakened by Camila's screams, who, with her arms raised in the air, was crying out for help.

Chapter XXI

Francisco Teodoro's death caused a stir.

Friends and acquaintances rushed to help the family at their home.

Negreiros arrived with his wallet full, thinking of organising the funeral. The Baroness of Lage offered to educate the twins. Called at dawn by the gardener, Dr Gervásio decided everything: the burial would be done in accordance with the wishes of the deceased, at the expense of his fraternity.

The entire family sobbed around the corpse. There was a sign of madness in Camila's eyes. The scene of her husband's death replayed before her, as if reflected in an endless series of mirrors stretching out into infinity.

She blamed herself for having arrived late. She had been waiting for her husband for over two hours, worried, fearful that he might do something reckless, dying to bring his dazed head to her chest, the chest of a woman filled with compassion, who loved him more in his pain than she had loved him in his happiness. But why had she obeyed her desire to go and search for him only when his death was already inevitable? If only she had guessed! And wasn't it her obligation to have guessed? Why hadn't she obeyed her first impulse of suspicion?

Dismissing one's forebodings is an act that conscience does not forgive. She could feel it; she turned the decision over in a deep remorse. Oh, if only she had come down one hour earlier! One minute earlier!

And now, how would she move on in life without her partner of so many years? What would they all do without him?

Her eyes were two springs of agony, weeping ceaselessly.

In the midst of so many people, only Dr Gervásio understood her. The others hardly believed in her sincerity.

The condolences were primarily directed to the children; the widow was greeted out of a sense of duty, etiquette, and the need to keep up appearances.

As they were neighbours, the Bragas had been the first to invade the house and take over, affecting great intimacy, arranging things, giving orders, and showing their involvement to strangers.

Teary-eyed, Dona Inácia Gomes had gone along as well, walking arm in arm with her old husband. She repeated to everyone that Judith had remained at home due to a fit of hysterics; Carlotinha was having a fainting spell as well. They were very close! There could be no doubt!

Crowds and crowds came and went; curious neighbours took the opportunity to explore the gardens of that luxurious house for the first time. Dark waves of people crossed one another at the threshold and flowed through the corridors in a whisper of footsteps and muffled voices.

Dona Joana had managed, through her merits, to have a priest deliver a sermon for the suicide. With the rosary in her trembling hands, and her eyes inundated, she did not leave the side of the deceased, defending him from hell with the ardent and pure faith of her prayers.

Who would have thought! A man, so fearful of God… so worthy of Paradise!

And she burst into tears for that lost soul.

For her part, sitting in a corner with her large hands resting on the faded satin of her black dress, Dona Itelvina reflected on human fragility. Why had that man died? Because he had not learned how to save.

Selfishness is the instinct of life. She had judged him stronger and more cautious; he was a fool after all. If he had kept his money locked away, would such a thing have happened to him? No. He would have died of old age, leaving behind a will.

She had always thought that he would leave behind a will. It would have been a complete and beautiful ceremony; naturally, money gives prestige to everything.

Impoverishing himself… committing suicide… who would have imagined? A Portuguese man, conservative and accustomed to work! His worst crime wasn't committing suicide; it was impoverishing himself and leaving his family in penury.

In society there is only one grotesque thing: poverty. See if the newspapers record the names of those wretched ones who are buried in a ditch.

Yes, sure! Money is said to be worth nothing, but the only beggars to make the papers are those who leave gold coins under the rotten straw of their mattresses.

Dona Itelvina glanced around the room and reflected on its luxury with revulsion. Beside her fell the ample folds of a velvet curtain. She touched it and felt a shiver as the satin surface of the lining clung to the rough skin of her fingers.

'This is what killed him, among other things!' she murmured to herself.

What will all these people do now? Maybe they are counting on me…

Ah, but I cannot… I cannot. Let them work! It's for that reason that God gave them five fingers on each hand.'

Amidst these considerations, the image of her new servant would occasionally come to her mind, and she wondered what she might be doing at the house. As long as she didn't open the door to anyone!

Ruth sobbed loudly; Dona Itelvina did not move, but said to herself:

'Poor girl…'

And she remained by herself in the corner of the room, taking in the wave of sobs that at times flagged with fatigue and at times redoubled with a violent commotion. The smell of wax and the flickering flames of the torches gave her a headache. She used this as an excuse not to help anyone. To her, it seemed as if the hour for the burial was long in coming; but it had to come, and it did at last.

Carriages stopped at the door and the room filled with people. Lemos and Negreiros were weeping. The whisper of voices and steps grew louder; it was time to close the coffin. Ruth fainted; the twins cried for their father. Nina assisted everyone with her bloodshot eyes; and Camila, removing the veil from the dead man's face, kissed him three times.

On his way back from the cemetery, Dr Gervásio entered Teodoro's mansion. The gas lamp of the living room was lit. He barely distinguished some figures in a corner and got closer. It was Camila sitting on the divan, between the sleeping twins. Her face was pale, a whiteness like polished marble accentuated by the dark sobriety of her clothes. She questioned him with her eyes.

Quietly, the doctor handed over the key to the coffin. Their hands avoided touching one another: she cringed, and he retreated. Finally, he sat down by the table.

It was the first time that they were repelling one an other. Mila felt the chill of that tiny, heavy key in the palm of her hand and did not know where to put it: she feared tucking it next to her breast and thought it irreverent to keep it in her pocket.

Gervásio considered the painful delicacy of that situation, which had obligated him to bring from the cemetery that key to the perpetual

prison of the other. The idea that he had been selected for that task out of a sense of irony annoyed him; and, upon looking at Mila's face, it seemed to him that he would never again be able to kiss the lips of that mouth, which had kissed a corpse so many times, without shivering.

The only voice in the room was that of the clock; he could scarcely hear the breathing of the comfortable children.

Gervásio wanted to speak, to give some advice to Camila; he knew that she was extremely inexperienced. But he held back, not knowing how to approach her. His tongue refused to address her in the more informal fashion to which their love had long accustomed him. She sighed quietly; her chin dropped down to her chest.

A few footsteps and the rustling of skirts down the stairs made them turn their heads. It was Noca. She was coming to collect the girls. She took Lia in her arms.

'How is Ruth?' Mila asked.

'She has a fever… Dona Nina is staying close to her…'

Camila turned to the doctor:

'Go see her, will you?'

He made a gesture of assent and accompanied the mulatta.

Chapter XXII

Only after a month did Teodoro's family arrange to move out.

Nina dismissed the servants and prepared the new house with cheap furniture, iron beds, and white dishes without gilding. She thought about everything, drew up plans, shook off the torpor and apathy of those around her, inquired about prices, and negotiated the cost of the objects she acquired.

'You make your own pain a form of happiness,' the doctor told her one day; 'you are more committed to your feminine duties than any woman I have ever known.'

'What good does it do?'

'To make others happy. Your influence and your activity have worked wonders! Even I see it, who had stopped believing in wonders!'

'You now see how you were wrong…'

'I see it well.' Nina smiled; and then continued:

'If I may speak seriously, I am afraid of the responsibility that I am taking on, without knowing how. Aunt Mila is beyond the age of accepting new habits without great sacrifice; Ruth only cares about her violin; when it comes to everything else, she has always been…'

'Lazy.'

'Yes… And the others are still so small!'

'I will be at your side.'

Nina blushed and didn't answer.

Days later, Noca went to her mistress's room to inform her that they were going to have lunch at the other house.

Mila pressed her eyelids.

'You are falling asleep again! I'll open the window… May I?'

Camila didn't answer; she felt the weight of her body on the bed and spread her hands over the large mattress. It was so good!

Leisure had suffused her blood with a voluptuousness that made her flesh, the colour of a ripe peach picked in the autumn sun, even more beautiful. Her round and rosy body had the expansive perfume of an open flower, and the softness of a fleshy and delicate fruit that can withstand neither great falls nor great gales.

Noca insisted:

'Shall I open the window?'

Camila remained quiet, trying to enjoy another minute of comfort in her fragrant room. She had set down deep roots in her luxury and could not free herself on her own. Someone would need to uproot her.

It had not been her fault… Was it to be her last time, then, stretching herself under the canopy adorned with lace and satin? Only now did she understand the significance of the smallest things in the harmony of the whole.

There, everything was good. The idea of need, of worn heels, homemade hats, and cotton-lined dresses, irritated her to the point of sickness. Poverty has a stench; it is dirty.

She tried to remember her bedroom from before she was married, seeking in the humiliation of her past the resignation to accept her future. She had slept in the same bed as her sister Sofia; barely could she reconstruct the cheap furniture of that room, where her clothes had hung from the walls.

Noca was walking around the room; Camila looked:

It was in front of those big mirrors that her husband would find her when he returned from work, satisfied with his business, pacing, and speaking loudly, his hands filled with parcels of delicacies and the afternoon newspapers.

And it was not for him that she had pinned a flower or a discreet jewel to her light dresses. It was for Gervásio that she had sweetened her beauty and held on so tightly to her youth. Oh, her youth!

Noticing her distracted face, and her damp eyes filled with sadness, Noca impatiently warned her:

'Look, Nhá Mila, we'd better not be late; the carriage will be here soon.'

'Help me get dressed…'

'And the girls, downstairs? Lia and Rachel need to have their bath now…'

'You're right… I am not used to this… Go, I will get ready by myself. As for this outfit… Oh, how I miss my clothes, Noca!'

'What can be done about it?! Now is the time to be brave!'

Two hours later Nina conducted the final thorough inspection of the house. She opened the drawers to see if all the furniture was clean and empty. She checked everywhere: from the living room to the kitchen and from the kitchen to the end of the garden. Noca helped as well, rummaging through shelves and closing the windows and doors.

In the office, no matter how much they had washed it, the stain of Francisco Teodoro's blood cast an indelible shadow on the wooden floor. Nina was about to step on it, when Noca screamed. The young woman retreated, staring terrified at the floor:

'Did I step on it?!'

'Almost…'

'My God!'

They looked at each other between their tears.

'It was a great tragedy, Noca!'

'It was! It still seems unreal to me…'

'To me as well. Sometimes I even think that he is just in town and that I will soon see him opening the gate … Poor Uncle Francisco!'

For the first time, it seemed to them as if the imperturbable furniture were holding out its arms in supplication.

On the desk, next to Orlando's *Commercial Code*, cold sparks emanated from the empty silver inkwell, which gripped the featherless pen with the weight of an abandoned corpse.

On the walls, the picture frames gleamed, and the silhouette of the bronze knight, with his bold profile and feathered hat in hand, made an arrogant gesture of farewell.

They said their last goodbyes and closed the door behind them.

While cleaning the house, Nina had found a small box in the basement; and amidst the innumerable ancient and broken objects, she had found the small whip with which Mário had flogged her in his days of rage. Back then, when she was small and thin, her hoarse cough had resounded through the corridors. He had stifled them by yelling at her:

'Shut your mouth! Shut your mouth!'

Shutting her mouth had been her life's work. With a sad and faded smile, Nina separated that small whip, so revelatory and prophetic, from the other objects destined for the bonfire. She would keep it as a relic.

Why had she been born, if not to be beaten?

When the whole house had been closed, Nina and Noca went out into the garden. Camila and the twins were waiting for them on the bench under the mango tree. Behind them, looking very skinny and pale,

and hardly hanging on to her violin case, Ruth looked with amazement and pained longing at the trees that she loved so much.

One minute later, they arranged themselves in the carriage. Noca closed the gate to the garden and handed the keys to Dr Gervásio's servant, who was waiting in the street to deliver them to his boss. She was the last to climb into the old coach. At the first jolt of the horses, a sigh fluttered from every breast, and their eyes turned back to see the house.

Ruth cried; it seemed to her that she was leaving her father behind there, her beloved father… Only Lia and Rachel managed a tiny laugh. Finally, they were moving to a new house!

During the journey no one said a word.

What for? They would have all said the same thing. They were muffling their moans and disguising their tears; and in this way they went, all dressed in black, to begin their new lives.

It was ten o'clock when the carriage stopped in front of Nina's house.

In the neighbourhood, someone was practising on an untuned piano. The sun burned brightly on the white gravel floor.

The house was small, on a quiet part of Rua de Dona Luiza, hidden behind a little and poorly cultivated garden. Inside, they all felt oppressed; accustomed to the spaciousness of the mansion, it seemed to them as if those ceilings and walls might suddenly close in and crush them all.

The best room had been arranged for Mila and the twins. Ruth and Nina were to share the same alcove and Noca was given a room at the rear of the house.

The dining room, newly wallpapered with fans and Japanese prints, opened onto a patch of backyard through a small tiled landing that made the stifling interior bearable. They had cheered the room up with light cretonne curtains and a few vases of flowers in the window.

Nina explained to her aunt how she had arranged everything, and encouraged her to move the objects around if their current positions did not please her.

She had thought it best to do away with the drawing room, which was ample and full of light, and transform it into a room for work. Instead of the sofa, the useless side table, and one or two lounge chairs, she set out a sewing machine, strong chairs, a music stand, a cabinet, a table, and an ironing board.

'That ironing board does not look good here…' grumbled Mila in a tone of light reproach, as she sat down, visibly dejected.

Her niece explained:

'The small room inside is too small; it's empty now so that the children can have somewhere to play when it rains. If you prefer, I can move the ironing board there instead.'

'Later…'

When they finished going through everything, Lia and Rachel asked to see the rest.

Where was the piano room? And the office? Where would they store their bicycles? Was the kitchen really that little cubbyhole?

Their mother stroked their heads, unresponsive, her eyes motionless.

They had found an old black woman to cook for a monthly salary of thirty thousand *réis*. Mila thought her repulsive and told Nina to make her at least wear an apron. During lunch, she didn't eat; she stared at the twins who were devouring the beef and rice that the new cook had prepared.

Nina offered her aunt a glass of Colares, of which she drank little, not even inquiring about the wine's provenance. Moreover, served in a simple glass, it could not help but taste poorly to her, as she remembered with sorrow her decanters of cut crystal that threw shimmering, iridescent bouquets onto the tablecloth – violets and golden blossoms forged from the light that had spread out on the damask linen.

The wine had come from Dr Gervásio's cellar; no one else drank it. Lia asked for more beef; Rachel demanded more potatoes; and Nina, decreasing her ration, filled her cousins' plates.

Sunlight streamed in through the window and covered the room like a large golden towel, glittering off the furniture's new varnish and off the red clothes drawn on the crooked Japanese prints.

The old black woman carried in the coffee on a small poorly arranged tray that she set down roughly on a corner of the table.

Camila closed her eyes so she wouldn't see; when she opened them, her niece was offering her a small delicate mug, the last one remaining from their set at the mansion.

Stirring her coffee slowly, her aunt asked her:

'Only this little mug made it here?'

'And a teacup; we drink just as well from the other mugs. A crystal glass came too. I forgot to put it on the table… Would you like more sugar?'

'I don't want to be treated differently.' Then: 'But, really, it's not easy to drink from thick glass!'

'I don't mind…'

'Ah, you!'

Nina smiled and went to open the door for Dr Gervásio's servant, who was bringing the mail. There were newspapers and a letter addressed to Francisco Teodoro that the postman had delivered to Rua dos Voluntários da Pátria.

'Were you at the house again?!' asked Mila, stunned.

'Yes, ma'am. I went there with the doctor, a fat man, Seu Serra and the auctioneer.'

'Already! They have moved quickly! Look now, it's better to notify the postman.'

'The doctor has already.'

'Good; you may leave…'

The letter was from Sergipe. Camila's father complained of illnesses and setbacks; he was very old and asked his son-in-law for support. Dona Emília was worried about congestion; Joca had gone to the countryside due to the lack of jobs; and Sofia had asked him for shelter after having quarrelled with her husband; the other two daughters were moving on.

A plaintive sigh of poverty and inertia swelled from the first word to the last.

When Camila finished reading the letter, she let it fall open on her knees; very pale, she remained silent. Ruth was sobbing with her head on the table. She had heard the pleas, but what disturbed her was not her grandfather's concerns. It was the fate of the envelope that rested before her eyes, bearing the name of her father. In one of life's deceptions, the letter had come from far away, impelled by many unknown hands, only to arrive at its destination and find no one!

They reread the letter; it had been delayed. By now, they must be tired of knowing the truth. How would they have received the news? Camila closed her eyes. She saw her mother, just as she had been the first time Teodoro visited them time at the Castelo hill: she was talkative and lively, with her large restless eyes always shining with hope… those same eyes would be significantly dimmed by now, exhausted from crying… And, as never before, Mila felt the longing for her maternal love and affection. It was all over! How fortunate she would be if she could return to her childhood, when she had been small and innocent, able to fall asleep on her mother's lap! It would be so sweet… so sweet…

The rigours of mourning would have made them recluses if the household straits and Nina's good sense had not helped them counter such formalities. Being economical was not enough; it was necessary to work, to make a living.

For the first time in the family's history, they discovered the bitterness of calculation and the burden of restrictions.

Mário wrote to them, lamenting that he had to stay longer in Paris; he was being held there by Paquita's illness, and he repeated her name in every sentence. The truth is that no one in the family counted on him and they all concealed their resentments so as not to aggravate their sorrow.

Noca, always resourceful, quickly found people whose clothes she could iron.

This upset Camila, who disliked seeing the bundles of clothes littering the house. The iron, the smell, and the sight of the shirt fronts whitening under the sun all increased her sulkiness and unease. Life weighed heavily on her.

One afternoon the mulatta arrived with news: she had found a violin student for Ruth. She was the daughter of a civil servant from the neighbourhood.

Camila objected. To see her poor daughter walking the street raising money from others? Never. Surely, they hadn't yet fallen so low…

'But, Aunt Mila, unless Mário gives you an allowance, what else can we count on?' Nina asked, astonished by her aunt's position, 'what we brought with us, even with all the saving, won't last more than two months…'

Camila's eyes widened, as if only realising, at that moment, the full extent of her misfortune…

Taking advantage of her mother's bewilderment, Ruth convinced her that the lessons would be a way of distracting herself; she could no longer endure those endless days.

Only Nina had no spare hours for interesting work; she had to divide herself between all the indispensable domestic tasks. It proved difficult to maintain a cook at the house: some drank heavily, others considered the salary mean… It was an exhausting flurry of motion, to which she committed her whole body, granting the charm of her patience to the harshest and heaviest chores. She accomplished her womanly mission, sweetening sufferings, calming tempests, and restricting herself to the half-shadow of a secondary role.

The months passed by. Their friends were becoming scarce, which had more to do with the family's retreat than with their change of fortune. Those who are unhappy judge men worse than they are, and cannot see in themselves the cause of certain feelings of abandonment. Sometimes, Camila complained about her old acquaintances, but did not consider that she was the one running away from them, embarrassed by her new situation.

Driven more by habit than anything else, Dr Gervásio continued with his regular visits; however, he kept them brief, and they were made in passing. With scrupulous discretion he avoided joining lunches in that poor and simple home. Besides, in that narrow house he could never talk with Mila in private; she was always surrounded by family, sealed up in her severe widow's dress, and very aloof. Her shunning did not disturb him; he felt that he was beginning to love her more out of friendship than out of love itself. She was like a sister in need of his support and his advice, whom he could not cease to see every day. The warmth of her hand and the sound of her voice did not arouse his numb senses; and he noticed that the passion had been quelled in her heart as well. For Camila, he was becoming solely a friend.

And so, a few months passed by, until one day, Camila exchanged a glance with him that radiated desire. The fire of passion, long smothered by the ashes of sadness, leapt suddenly like the flame from a forge. He was astonished; she restrained herself, embarrassed; and they moved apart, both restless and tormented.

Chapter XXIII

'Goodbye, mama! We are taking the leftovers from dinner to Jacinta's children, is that alright? Nina said that it would be no good to save them for tomorrow; there's too little and the food might turn sour.'

'But who are these children?' Camila asked the twins, who were speaking to her from the back garden with the bundle of food wrapped in a napkin.

'They are Jacinta's granddaughters…'

Ruth appeared behind her sisters.

'Mama doesn't know her… Jacinta is an old disabled woman who lives near my student. Every time we pass by, she asks for alms… She is so old that we pity her. We agreed with Nina that any time there are leftovers from dinner we would take them over to her. When I think about all the waste we had at the old house! In a certain way, it's better to be poor… It's not that they're evil, but wealthy people don't understand the needs of others, and they don't comfort anyone…'

'Keep your voice down! Well, my darlings, go then before it gets dark.'

'Come quickly, Noca.'

'Mama, since we aren't going alone, can we take a little stroll afterwards?'

'Yes…'

The children left with the mulatta. Camila smiled. Providence hadn't abandoned her. There were still leftovers in her house to give away.

Afternoon descended slowly; the widow, melting into her rocking chair in the dining room, looked through the open window at the large almond tree in the backyard, whose rust-coloured leaves fell in syncopated rhythms with a shy rustle.

A great sadness entered her: a vague desire to escape, to disappear through some transformation into a different essence. Her loving soul thrust the urge into her chest for a warm embrace and the taste of a kiss. She could endure no more. Her black clothes suffocated her, reminding her every instant of that unforgettable minute, repeated sixty times an hour, that haunted her existence, and from which she would never free herself!

Never? Who knows? She felt shivers of miraculous youth in her firm flesh, which was awakening from its long torpor. Oh, if only the passion that she saw cooling in Gervásio's eyes could be rekindled! If only he could love her with his old love, so extreme and absolute… If only that love would return!

Against the pallor of the dying afternoon, the large almond tree was baring itself calmly. Camila looked at it, envying the tree for its serenity, when she heard footsteps.

She turned around.

Gervásio was smiling at her from the doorway.

'Come!' she whispered, triumphantly, extending her arms. He threw himself towards her.

'At last, you are mine again! Mine again!'

'Wait… Calm down… Nina is in the house…'

'Who cares about Nina?'

'Be quiet! Oh, I can't endure this any longer!'

Standing very close to each other, with their mouths almost joined, they repeated the familiar words of earlier days. To Mila's ears they sounded utterly new.

The sky was changing colour; the leaves of the almond tree were falling quickly and frequently. It resembled an autumn afternoon, and it was only the beginning of summer.

Camila, as if re-entering a wonderful dream, appeared to glow. The doctor pulled her closer, and was about to kiss her, when Nina appeared in the room, pretending not to have noticed anything.

'Would you like some light? The girls are taking so long to return!'

Gervásio did not answer; he considered her inconvenient. Camila said sweetly:

'It's still early, my child…'

Afterwards, she remained silent for a long time, sheltered by her joy. It was as if she had been placed in a brilliant and fragrant glass dome, in which there was another atmosphere that transformed her nature, isolating her from everything else. Her mourning clothes no longer weighed her down, they felt like light lace; and for the first time

she found that the vision of her husband's final moments had been erased from her memory… It was already evening when she accompanied Gervásio to the tiny garden at the entrance. He felt her trembling with the inner tumult of a virgin, as if their old sinful love were now newly born.

Her voice, deep and slow, had timid inflections; and the whiteness of her flesh, kissed so many times by two different men, seemed to him, in the shadows, to possess a kind of pure immateriality.

'Now, you are only mine, only mine!' Gervásio said, squeezing her hands tightly, when a man approached the gate and pushed him away. They both looked at the man in amazement, and soon Camila let out a scream: she had recognised her son and ran to him.

Mário looked at the doctor with undisguised annoyance and stepped back, making space for him to leave in a gesture of dismissal.

They exchanged a quick greeting and crossed paths.

It was only when the gate was closed behind the doctor's back that Mário turned to his mother with an expression that meant 'still?!'

Camila burst into sobs; her son embraced her kindly and took her inside. Nina turned on the gas, her teeth chattering nervously. They all stared at each other in silence. Mila was still sobbing when she finally asked:

'Paquita?'

'She's too heavy, that's why she couldn't come.'

Camila felt the blood rush from her body. What! A grandchild! Her Mário was going to be a father!

'That's why I had to stay longer in Europe: the doctors thought it was unwise at the time for Paquita to make such a long voyage…'

'You have done well. Here we have suffered so much. When did you arrive?'

'Early this morning. We disembarked at nine o'clock…'

Another disappointment hit Camila: they had spent the entire day in Rio de Janeiro and only at night did her son come to search for her!

He explained: there had been a lot of work to do, multiple visits to the customs house, a complete mess! And his sisters? Where were they?

'They are on their way, strolling around the neighbourhood. Go let them know, Nina.'

The young woman left. Mário continued:

'Why didn't you put them in my sister-in-law's care? She wrote to us about her offer…'

'I felt sad… I don't want to be separated from them.'

'Yes, I agree that it's painful; but it's for the best; and this situation cannot continue. Paquita is a sensible woman, and even while we were

still on the ship she determined the best possible arrangement: Lia and Rachel will move into my sister-in-law's house; Ruth will live with us, which might improve her marriage prospects, as a poor young woman these will not be good; and Nina can move to her father's house…'

'And… me?!'

'Considering you are now a free woman… why don't you get married?'

Camila turned red and she hid her face in her hands.

Mário didn't know how to stop himself, and went on:

'I think marriage is better than continuing with this life. I'm sorry to say this, but your daughters deserve a different example…'

Mila's hands, very cold, pressed more firmly against her burning face.

Mário said more.

He had planned this speech alongside the foresighted Paquita, but his tongue refused to repeat it all in its strictness.

His words moved like a sword, cutting through every knot. He took advantage of his male authority.

His mother was disgusted, and in one single scream she unleashed all of her complaints. Her red cheeks became livid, and her hands and lips trembled. She went on:

'Go tell Paquita, your practical and sensible Paquita, that I don't need her money, do you hear? And don't stay here too long, she may very well beat you!'

'Mother!'

'Wicked! My son came from so far away to speak to me like this! My son! And I who missed you so much!'

'Mother, you are unfair…'

'She is the one who is unfair, who is trying to separate me from my children, who is teaching you to disrespect me. Don't you think I have suffered enough?'

'Once you've calmed down you will realise that we are right. Paquita is an angel.'

'She is a devil from hell!'

'You are offending me.'

'Has no one offended me? Answer! Has no one offended me?!'

'Keep calm, everything will be fine; you know very well that I have nothing; the fortune belongs to my wife, but we will give you an allowance, considering that…'

'I refuse; I want nothing from your hands. My son died the day he got married. If I bring you shame, you'd better simply pretend not to know me. Now go away.'

'Mother…'

'Go away! I don't need anything. Your sisters are out giving alms. We have leftovers in this house. What a punishment, my God!'

'I had no intention of offending you. If I hadn't met that damned man here, things would have gone differently. It's now my duty to look after your honour. You are a widow; Dr Gervásio is single; you both love each other: get married. It's logical.'

'For the love of God! Mário!'

'You are not a child; you must realise that this behaviour compromises the girls' future. Time will tell if I am right…'

'What insistence! Again, and for the last time: enough, enough, enough!'

'Well… In that case, mother, I rest my case.'

'Finally!'

The end of the argument was timely. The girls charged into the garden, screaming:

'Mário, Mário!'

He went to the door, agitated, and held out his arms to Ruth, who looked very thin, wearing a long dress like a grown woman. The embrace evoked in both of their minds the memory of their father. Mário scattered kisses and tears over his sister's hair, in his first outpouring of tenderness.

It was only after this that Noca, contemplating the young man's face, muttered:

'People, look how big Mário's moustache has grown, and how handsome he looks!'

Chapter XXIV

It was a summer Sunday; the cicadas chirped stridently from the flamboyant tree on the street. A great peacefulness reigned everywhere.

Shut up in her room, Camila tried to read, but her eyes roamed from her book to gaze at the twins' small empty beds; they had been taken the previous night to the home of the Baroness of Lage. Mário's orders were being carried out.

The family was being scattered by the brute kick of poverty: some left here, others there… How life is made of such unforeseen solutions!

With cruel persistence, her son's advice had inserted itself in her brain. Wounded and sapped of her will, she did not resist: fate would do what it wanted with her… It was her longing for the twins that tormented her the most. They had taken all their joy with them; and in her absence another woman was enjoying all those caresses meant only for her! Those poor innocent girls: there would come a day when the prejudice of honour would stand in their path, a jagged rock clawing at their flesh and blood.

She already saw the other woman as an enemy. It was she who had taken away her son and given him to her sister; and it was she who now pulled away her daughters. The pretext humiliated her, and she considered herself unworthy for not having had the strength to defend her children, torn from the house under the pressure of necessity. She looked at her hands: they were beautiful; but they didn't know how to do anything. Camila hid them hurriedly in the folds of her coat and felt herself shiver.

All this time her son's advice remained with her, acquiring a hallucinatory tenacity. It was true, only Gervásio could save her, if he cared to first utter the word that she lacked the courage to pronounce.

Camila closed her eyes and covered her ears, but still her son's words rang out relentlessly, defying both her pride as a woman and her motherly love:

'Get married, get married, get married!'

And he was right; only in this way would she once more have a home where she could nestle her daughters; Nina's and Ruth's sacrifices would come to an end, and Noca would work for herself. And Mário…

The resentment she had harboured against her son, who had come from so far away to embitter her, spilled over into tears. She had humiliated herself; she would go on humiliating herself until the end. She would speak to Gervásio.

It would have to be done quickly, in time to rescue her family and reunite her children before their detachment was complete.

Francisco Teodoro must have wanted as much; he had shirked his responsibility to the family, escaping life at the very moment when it had ceased to bestow gifts upon him and had instead asked him for favours. It was abandonment. Very well. She would rebuild the home that he had dissolved; her old love, purified by so many shocks and countless agonies, would resurface like a bright day after a spell of darkness, to the happiness of all!

The heart makes women pay dearly for their glory; she knew that very well. She had given everything: certain that it was not her husband's honour that she sacrificed, but her own. He was neither the perpetrator nor the accomplice; he couldn't be accused by their hypocritical society.

Fortunately, she had committed herself to a good man: Gervásio would save her. Mário had said to her once: 'Either Dr Gervásio or me.' And here she was, radiant, now able to choose both. One, out of love; the other because he was her son.

The hours passed slowly. A cheerful polka broke out on a nearby piano, and a burst of laughter resounded in the street.

What a beautiful day it was! Life was filled with such happy people! Camila went to the window, still hesitating. There was not a single cloud in the sky. Turning back towards the room, she bumped into the twins' small empty beds. With a gesture of resolve, she quickly undressed and selected her outfit; her fingers could hardly fasten up the back of her dress. In her anxiety to leave, to run towards the future, she didn't even look in the mirror.

It was four o'clock when she boarded the tram that would take her to Dr Gervásio's house. She gathered up the train of her dress and unfurled her widow's veil across her face, eager that no one should read

her thoughts in her changing expression. In the end, she was bending to her daughter-in-law's will, that relentless creature, who never sought her out, keeping herself at a distance as if fearing contact. Finally realising the reasons for her behaviour, Camila smiled at such great scruples…

In order to avoid her mother-in-law, Paquita had moved to Petrópolis; and Mário, always afraid to lose his privileges, visited his family only rarely, laden with packages meant for his wife and son, that big baby boy born so far away from his grandmother.

Camila forgot all this, opening her eyes to the images outside. It was as if she had left a prison: everything seemed different and more beautiful. The country houses of Botafogo began to appear, with their expansive lawns, tall palm trees, fresh water, and soft shades.

In how many of those houses had her jewels glittered, her silks trailed, and the perfume wafted from her lace handkerchiefs and dresses! Good times… ah! But they would return, when fortune and Gervásio's loyalty restored to her what her husband's ambition had stolen.

She was relieved. The road to happiness was so brief and beautiful!

The tram turned onto Rua dos Voluntários, and a sudden anguish fell upon Camila's heart. She was about to cross Teodoro's mansion as a stranger. For a long stretch of the street, she waited for this moment with a mixture of curiosity and dread; and when the moment finally arrived, she wanted to take in everything with her gaze, and even guess at what was happening behind those thick walls. But in that fleeting instant all she could perceive was that the window of her room was open and that they had replaced the old white sand in the garden with black sand. She felt the urge to order the tram to stop, to enter the house, go to the living room, and continue her embroidery or interrupted reading. She would kiss her two small daughters, their big blue-eyed dolls tucked under their arms, flushed and breathless from their last race, their bicycles stored safely by Noca's side in the ironing room.

The tram moved on, and Mila craned her neck to look once more at *her* house, at *her* garden, and at the tall branching canopy of *her* mango tree…

She felt as if her personality were unravelling. The woman passing by the house, alone, dressed in poorly fastened black wool with a hastily arranged crepe veil covering her face, was not the same Camila of the light dresses and luminous hands. That Camila would still be inside her mansion, within her eternal dream of beauty, youth, and love…

As soon as she entered Gervásio's house, she felt an impulse to turn back. All her scruples rose in a flurry. The idea that she was already a grandmother, and that such a title should mock her ambitions and

handcuff her to silence, pained her. Would the son of her son also become her enemy? So small and recently born, would he already have the strength to interpose himself between her and her happiness?

A servant opened the screen door; she entered indecisively into the hall. She had never been there alone: Gervásio did not want to expose her to the servants' comments; he had preferred to have an obscure corner dedicated entirely to her, which no other woman could sully with her presence or curious inquiries.

The same servant led her down a carpeted corridor on the ground floor adorned with plants. He left her in a room that opened onto a small inner garden where dracaenas bloomed.

The servant asked her to wait there. The doctor was conferring with someone in his office, but he would be notified.

She responded that there was no need; she was not in a hurry. She would stay until the other visitor had left…

When she found herself alone, Mila raised her veil with a sigh of relief. She cast a loving gaze at everything: there were some paintings on the walls and a certain sobriety characterised the ornaments and the furniture. On one chair, she recognised a cushion that she had embroidered; and, in a corner, she saw a large Chinese vase that Francisco Teodoro had given to the doctor as a gift after Mário's serious illness.

Her husband! Mário! How they fled to the horizon of her life… That vase evoked a time of happiness. Even then her son was a bold young boy, but so sweet, and so handsome! Her husband was strong, talkative, passionate, threatening to bring down the house with the fury of his outbursts. And she? She had been quite different: homely, poorly dressed, selfish, and very severe towards the faults of others… She had been very restrained; even her own husband obtained little from her beyond a cold and condescending caress; not out of spite, and not on purpose. She did not know why…

It was Gervásio who had taught her to be compassionate, to suppress her anger, to forgive others for their weaknesses, to beautify the house, herself, and her life, to like everyone with intelligence and a good conscience. It would have been better if she had never met him; maybe she had not been good to anyone, but at least she would have been honest and would not have known such suffering.

Resting her eyes on the vase's polychrome figures, Camila recalled all the martyrdom of her love, born little by little from their intimacy…

The other visitor was lingering in Dr Gervásio's office. She stood up and went to the window to observe the garden. The plants were elegant;

as in the house's interior, a distinct tranquillity reigned there. It was possible to see how the owner's tastes and instincts had subordinated everything in the house to his own strong will.

Camila was looking distractedly at the flowers when she heard footsteps in the corridor. She turned around; Gervásio appeared in the doorway.

'What is this, Mila?!'

'Nothing… I…'

'Why have you come?!'

Camila stepped forward timidly. He continued:

'Why didn't you have them call for me as soon as you arrived? You are pale! And so cold… It was imprudent of you to come here at this hour! But why?!

'There I wouldn't be able to speak…'

'You are right, that house is so small! One is so close to everyone! Sit down, my love.'

'Do I displease you?'

'Never! We are together! Speak.'

'I…'

As soon as she uttered her first word, Camila began to regret her decision. She was almost old; she was already a grandmother! The thought made her blush; she became quiet once more and her eyes grew misty.

'I don't understand you… You are frightening me! Are you hiding something? Come now, I will get angry! Tell me: what happened?'

'Do you still love me?'

'I do, always!'

'Like… in the beginning?'

'Even more.'

Then softly, in a whisper, with her face very close to his, Camila said everything. Carried away by her dream, she didn't notice how much his hands were trembling between her own, and she failed to notice the shadows that passed over his upset face.

When she had finished, he did not respond; for a long time, he remained motionless, as if he were still waiting for her to say the last word.

The afternoon breeze filled the room with the scent of the dracaenas; Camila breathed in with delight, as if the air was a caress from heaven. At last, she had spoken. The clouds had dissipated, and she was already smiling, urging him to answer:

'Do you want this too?'

The doctor stood up suddenly, and in a harsh metallic voice said quickly:

'It cannot be.'

Camila moved her lips in deathly agony. What she feared had come to pass. He was right; it was what she deserved. Get married, for what? It was her daughter-in-law who had pushed her towards such tremendous humiliation! Behind his grave mask, Gervásio must be laughing at her aspiration: as if she could move so easily from the body of a wretched grandmother to that of a bride in love! She had the painful impression of being covered in wrinkles and white hair; she looked at her hands with fear. She no longer understood her reasons for remaining there, so with effort she stood up to leave. Her destiny had been written, and her entire future was barred by the small body of her grandson.

Gervásio, putting his hands on her shoulders, gently forced her to sit down again.

'Why should I stay?' she asked him, nearly in tears.

'So that I can tell you everything: I am married.'

Camila suppressed a scream, covering her mouth with her hand.

He had uttered this confession in an outburst, as if finally ready for the inevitable blow, with a voice as sharp as an axe severing a green trunk. Having spilled out his secret, he immediately took pity on her and spoke with humility, remaining very close to her. He had also thought about what she proposed, and he would also have wished to make her his own in the eyes of society; but he was bound to another woman until death…

'Until death!' sighed Camila.

And he went on, visibly moved:

'You have seen her once, do you remember? It was that woman in mourning that we met on our return from the *Neptune*. You thought she was beautiful… You noticed the impression the encounter made, and you were jealous… I didn't want you to know… But now the explanation must be complete; I will tell you the whole truth. My poor love, forgive me…'

Gervásio held Camila's hands; she withdrew them slowly and fastened her questioning eyes upon him. He continued in a lower tone, chewing his words:

'Yes, I loved her deeply! I married for love; but on the day I realised she was betraying me, I left her… We were living in Rio Grande; she remained there with her mother, and I returned here. I wanted a divorce… She opposed it then, and still opposes it now; she wants me chained like a dog: she has succeeded. That is all.'

That was all. Camila realised the sensitivity of the secret, kept to avoid giving offence. His explanation illuminated everything. In his eyes, she could be neither better nor more dignified than that other woman whom he despised; the same guilt made them equal; and if he had not found a way to forgive his wife, how could he find a way to respect her?

Persisting in her silence, she pulled her widow's veil down over her face and stood up.

The aroma of the dracaenas suffused everything in a suffocating exhalation.

Gervásio kissed her hands, begging her for forgiveness; he had acted that way out of love… Why couldn't they continue living as they had been until then?

Camila did not respond. When he insisted, she said:

'Let me go!'

'You are right; you need to rest. But you cannot go like this; let me at least arrange a carriage for you.'

Camila, already very impatient, tore herself away from him; she wanted to go alone, to walk in the open air. He consented, sensing that he was losing her forever. Maybe it was better this way…

She gathered up the train of her skirt and went out into the bright summer afternoon shivering with cold. She had found the door to her future closed; she retreated, stunned, as if a mad bell were ringing furiously inside her head. He was married! He had lied to her! So many years of lies, so many years of lies!

It was already evening when Camila entered the small garden on Rua de Dona Luiza. The house was still dark, but inside Ruth was playing an adagio by Mendelssohn. Exhausted, Camila sat down on the stone steps like a beggar waiting for alms. The diffuse lights of the streetlamps scattered points of gold across the hill's dark silhouette; the last cicada was falling asleep on the open flowers of the flamboyant tree; and the souls of invisible beings rose up in the night, filling it with a sacred and impenetrable mystery…

Camila, gazing at the soft velvet shadows, realised that everything was irremediably lost. The following day, she would write a letter to Gervásio conveying her final words. Her definitive goodbye. Tears streamed down her burning face; she was sure that this day marked her second widowhood.

In her first widowhood, she had lost her comfort, the honours of high society, her wealth, and a calm friend, who would never repudiate her… In her second, she was deprived of the illusions of love and her

divine faith in everlasting happiness – the most precious thing in the world!

She had arrived at the end of everything: the hour of great penance. But had she been, by chance, a criminal?

She cursed herself. She had been so confident and given herself completely to daydreams and desperation; and the person for whom she had sacrificed everything had left her outside of his life, like a stranger.

He had lied to her! He had lied to her!

He was married, and he despised his wife for the same crime! How must she look like in his eyes?

Oh! To be honest, to live honestly, to die honestly, what a joy! If only she could go back and undo all those days of dreaming and intoxication, and begin again her life as an obedient wife, and all her old labours of humdrum domesticity, without imagination, without volition, happy in her subjection, satisfied with serving just one man. How swiftly she would go back to avoid this humiliation, which was worse than every death because it came from him whom she loved so much! And still loved. Still!

She looked with contempt at her body. It was beautiful, that of an ardent woman. But, now spoiled, what was it worth? She thought of her daughters with terror, those children she had birthed were predestined for suffering. They would walk gleefully towards love, and in return love would offer them only deception and destitution.

Anguished, Camila interrogated the mute darkness with an anxious gaze: 'Lord, what could there be in the world for the salvation of suffering souls?'

Something spoke to her through the air in a sudden burst of poetry that reached up to the stars: Ruth's music. The sound distilled the essence of her tears with its infinite power of pacification.

At that moment, the widow envied her daughter and her pure ideals, which would never bring her the bitterness of disappointment. Art would console her when the day came that she must love and serve a man…

Cursed nature, that had made her solely fit for love!

At eleven o'clock on the following morning, Camila sat in a corner of the workroom. The sun came in through the window, spreading a golden fabric over the floor. Bending over the table, Ruth scribbled on lined paper, preparing lessons for her two new students. All of her past indolence had now been transformed into activity. Nina was sewing at the machine; and in the middle of the house, Noca sprinkled the clothes to be ironed. Camila looked at them. Ruth was plain and skinny; but her

courage brightened her forehead, which was wide and pensive, like a man's. The others looked radiant in their diligence. They were at home in that atmosphere.

Speaking slowly, with a clear voice, Camila asked them to give her something to do. They looked at her in amazement.

'Mama, do you really want to do something?!'

'Yes, my dear… Everything is over; I must start a new life!'

'Then send for the girls; have them return and teach them to read!' Ruth exclaimed.

A shout rose from all their chests. Noca jumped up:

'I'll get dressed! Heavens! I never understood this idea of giving the children away. Let Mário say what he wants; after all, no one here will die of hunger… Should I go pick up the girls? Should I go? Or not?'

'Go,' replied Mila excitedly, 'but please, don't offend the baroness. It is enough to say that… I have nothing in this world but my daughters!'

'I did hear you crying every single night… I was about to…'

'Enough talking, Noca!' interrupted Nina, before adding: 'Rest easy, I'll finish sprinkling the clothes.' And then, to her aunt: 'This is for the best, Aunt Mila. Work helps keep your mind off things.'

Chapter XXV

After two years of travelling through the United States, Captain Rino disembarked in Rio de Janeiro. He returned a different man. He was rejuvenated, lithe, and stripped of his simple naivete. In his smile, there was now a small hint of that irony which the world's perversity teaches men.

Catarina immediately noticed the difference as she led him cheerfully between the sunflowers of her garden. She understood her brother's serenity. He was saved.

The following morning, he was reading aloud from the newspaper when he came across an announcement for a concert featuring Ruth.

He stopped; he had learned everything through Catarina's letters. Turning towards her, he looked at her with his light eyes. There was an exchange of secrets between the two mute faces; then, bending slightly towards her brother, the young woman asked in a low voice:

'Are you going to visit her now?'

Rino hesitated. Afterwards, in the most natural tone in the world, he answered with another question:

'What for?'

Literature and Translation

Set in the early years of the Old Republic after the abolition of slavery, Júlia Lopes de Almeida's *The Bankruptcy* depicts the rise and fall of a wealthy coffee exporter against a kaleidoscopic background of glamour, poverty, seduction, and financial speculation. The novel introduces readers to a turbulent period in Brazilian history seething with new ideas about democracy, women's emancipation, and the role of religion in society. Originally published in 1901, its prescient critiques of financial capitalism and the patriarchal family remain relevant today.

In her lifetime, Júlia Lopes de Almeida was compared to Machado de Assis, the most important Brazilian writer of the nineteenth century. She was also considered for the inaugural list of members of the Brazilian Academy of Letters but was excluded because of her gender. In the decades after her death, her work was largely forgotten. This publication, a winner of the English PEN award, marks the first novel-length translation of Almeida's writing into English, including an Introduction to the novel and a Translators' preface, and accompanies a general rediscovery of her extraordinary body of work in Brazil.

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Cover design:
www.hayesdesign.co.uk

ISBN 978-1-80008-568-8
90000
9 781800 085688