

Dead Houses' Shepherd

Daniel de Sá

Dedicated to

All men and women who still stoke the fire in the last villages of Portugal.

First Stones

...if a man makes up his mind and loves a stone
don't let it be just a stone
but a stone loved by a man
(Emanuel Félix)

".. managed to coexist with the universal factors of the human existence, with the pain and the nobility, and the ingratitude and the ardor, the representative schemes of what was and will be any passion, but not with the pain of such a duchess or the boredom of such banker, or lust of a typist, from the cities where all passion is tamed, serial passions, astounding but empty..."

(Gregorio Marañón, preface to the Spanish version of *Mountain Doctor*, by Fernando Namora)

in sadness ruins, one sees the old house,
at ungodly hours the wind specter prays there,
and the moonlight dews in secrecy shadows
lonely souls, fearful shadows,
Lives that an old sun, another sun gilded,
Smoke evolves from the evanesced home.

Teixeira de Pascoaes, *Ethereal Life* (1906)

I Manuel Cordovão

"I have never slipped or tripped over a stone, in so many years at the mountains tending goats and sheep..." He had a sweet and subtle accent, rather typical of the Beiras region, perhaps one the gentlest of Portugal. All his words treated carefully, softened the edges of phonetics as if he could never hurt anyone with those words.

He was admitted the first time at Dr Livaldo's house as if excusing himself that is how. Pausing, one could get the gist of it... and, there on the plain lowlands at Santa Marinha, he went down when alighting from the bus.

"At least I did not smash the souvenir I brought for Graça." Dr. Livaldo did not bother asking whom she was since it seemed an obvious answer.

An ointment, a bandage and a dosage of, God knows how many days, is the best orthopedic prescription for minor cases. Sitting with his leg stretched as far as possible, the accidental hobbler retorted ironically: "Spot on, doctor, since I have this book from Assis Brasil, a Brazilian writer I don't know, and its title is "*The Motionless Riverbank*."

Doctor Livaldo could not hide his surprise, inferring he was a shepherd but, perhaps, he was his peer, an animal doctor, since animals are God's creatures such as men....

Indeed, previously, the honorable doctor made no mistakes, but this time, he was mistaken. He was a true shepherd even now when he had few animals left to protect. He did not have to strive much to feed the flock since he had as much money as needed. It was more a matter of habit than work.

* * *

Soon, he became a regular, and started telling his story so that people knew who he was. Got hooked on reading with the cartoon-line magazine stories from "Cavaleiro Andante (The Walking Knight)," borrowed from a friend. That friend's uncle from Lisbon offered not only this but also Emilio Salgari, Enid Blyton, Mark Twain and the *Buffalo* series. Manuel Cordovão read them all. He watched the sheep while holding a book on his hands, instead of playing the flute so common in many shepherds' romances. He went further and further on, with his reading once the itinerant Gulbenkian library started going past at nearby Aldeia Nova do Vale. A certain day, he admitted to writing many of the scenes on his life on one of those Missionary Diaries that his mother always bought, year after year. Later on, he wrote them using A4 drawing pads. My daughter Sara, half adopted by Yara and Livaldo, and their children Raquel, Roberta and Rodrigo, managed to convince him to lend them to me. It was a negotiation won by persuasion. She assured me that I would love to write about his life. That is what I have attempted. I had to respect one imposition, though, changing the names of people and places, so that nobody would bother him for becoming a character in a novel.

The first diary came in Maria Alice's luggage, after one visit to the Santa Marinha centuries-old mansion, next door to the church, an erstwhile bishops' residence, where their Brazilian friends live during part of the year. Carolina and my son Rodrigo helped in the mass that his sister had just started officiating in the previous meeting. Manuel Cordovão let himself become convinced. The agreed terms included that I returned any diary I read together with the text written from such diary. On the return mail, he would

send me another diary. He would write a letter with his views on how well or unfairly I had treated the subject of his memoirs.

Sometimes, he would show his appreciation on what he read, saying, "How do you know about such things since they were not there?" Alternatively, he would ask me how was I capable of guessing what people thought or did, even if not mentioned on the short, few lines, where he summed up the most remarkable things that took place. Some other times he would disagree politely, always concluding that it was not badly written, plus or minus some details. The events were just as written or as they should have happened in case real life followed logic. He would also tell me some particular I had asked him for, so that I could get, as close as possible, to reality. The biggest difference surfaced on the speech he made when they launched the electric light and what he thought afterwards about what happened to him on that night. He could only remember the key facts and he stated to me that my account was much better. However, I would rather have known his true and full story.

On one of the reply letters, I wrote:

"My Dear Friend

We have always had the same age, read the same books whilst watching over sheep and she-goats, with the difference that my flock was smaller. It has no bearing on this that although I lived on an extremely small island, any five-minute walk would lead me to the airport where almost all airlines of the world landed. Nobody matches anybody, but we are not as alike that the stories of our youth do not replicate themselves. At that age, everything happens without distinguishing settings, as those forced upon us by adult age. Simply put, you live life. Little else matters."

We kept the epistolary exchanges going on, but my envelopes were thicker than his, since they included also my version of his life. The letters had numerous accounts of how I was able to fill in the gaps or why I have added, here and there, some full stops further away from what he imagined being the truth.

When the story reached present day, Manuel Cordovão still recorded it, but by now, he did it with more careful details. I worried that he stopped being spontaneous as usual, and instead chose to tell his story, as he wanted it to be told.

The character might want to start writing its own version. They usually do it, but we cannot let them know that.

II The House Custodian

When the new village of Aldeia Nova da Serra became old, Manuel Cordovão became the guardian of its memories.

Using some imagination one could surmise it had two main streets. The first, consecrated to Our Lady of the Snows spread at the bottom of the hill, dotted with five houses on one side and four on the other side. The next street climbed up towards the mountain peaks, with a rustic little chapel at its top end. On the right side of its way up, it had only three houses. Starting from Aldeia Nova do Vale, one could zigzag to the top of the mountain on a trail opened by sheep hooves and shepherd's feet, more than half a league¹ long. On the almost Main Road, located in the third house on the right, half of its ground floor operated as a general store: a saloon, which also sold sugar, rice, a grocery that also sold wine and firewater. The shoemaker and blacksmith lived and worked at the second house on the left, and the last house occupied by the barber who was also in charge of sheep shearing.

¹ Translator's Note: an obsolete unit of length of an hour's walk: usually equal to three [miles](#)

The village had nothing going for it, except once when a childhood friend of Manuel Cordovão went for a job interview at a Lisbon college. The school principal had asked him where he came from, and when confronted with the answer said: "Aldeia Nova da Serra? Never heard of it. It must have decent people living there." Once that said, he didn't want to see any other applicant's details apart from knowing whether he had completed Year 4 and how many years had he attended school. All he cared about was the village, whether there were brawls between them (no way, they were like a huge family!), or, if they had radio and television (there were only three radio sets, one at the shop, another at Manuel Cordovão's and the last one at the shoemaker blacksmith. Since they had no electricity, there was no television.) He also wanted to know what the inhabitants did, how many were they (according to the 1960 census there were one hundred and fifty eight people). There were a few other questions that seemed of no interest for someone who just wanted a decent job at Lisbon capital of all villages, towns and cities of Portugal, the opposite of his village. Even so, he got the job.

The village got some life when Torre Velha died, since he had declined to go into a hospital. When he told Manuel Cordovão that he was sick ("It is a flaw in the blood, I am not going to last long"), he explained: "is it worth to move this body away from here? To endure suffering for another three or four days? ..." Furthermore, his wife was there to give him the pills. Cordovão could give him the shots although he only practiced the needle and syringe on Teresa and other shepherds' sheep. He had never treated his own with real medicine, and a few sheep died without a quick and emotional knife blow on their throats when they started getting older. After that, Torre Velha had asked, "Shall you take care of my place as you do with the others?" Sheepishly, as Manuel Cordovão never saw before, not even moments ago when announcing his own death. Then, the old man uttered, "will you please take care of her. Don't let anything amiss."

"Her" was Maria da Graça, his wife. As stubborn as the mountain's granite, capable of withstanding any winds and storms, she insisted, "When I reckon I'm becoming too old to live on my own, I will pack a bundle with my clothes on it and go to an old age home." A few times, she had been visiting the children who lived in an entanglement of concrete and tarmac at Lisbon and Seixal. The paining thought she had retained was of those old ladies confined to their exile, looking indefinably at the non-stopping day and night traffic, leaning on parapets and aluminum balconies where a vase of fresh basil fooled the longings for fields and marshes. She could make out every house with such exiles whenever she saw a basil vase. Ever since that time she associated that smell with the smell of all exiles, a foretelling of death, away from the places where they should have lived and died peacefully, by their true birthright. It became unbearable. "Kill me if you can." If they ever took her it would be like killing her, the children knew. In that place, herbs and flowers do not mingle their smells with fumes of the car and factories. There the silence certainly does not intertwine with never-ending hisses or engine roars.

Torre Velha's two sons slept at Manuel Cordovão's while the three girls tucked into their childhood beds, where their mother kept putting washed linen every month.

From the occasional guests, Manuel Cordovão heard plenty of frivolous talk. These were people more accustomed to expressways and air-conditioning. They couldn't endure spaces that being diminutive inside and infinite outside, had streets only imagined and houses which were slightly more than almost-houses. It held their childhood and most of their teenage years, but now it seemed that neither the legs nor the glimpses would fit in there.

He had never admitted to them that Torre Velha did not want them to know about his impending death. "They won't come, and if they do, they will be reluctant. I'll die as we started: only me and you." I had recounted this to Maria da Graça, and she didn't take issue. Eventually someone told the kids about the event, and they showed

up for the formalities of evincing how sorry they were for the fact that their father's life was coming to an end.

Torre Velha passed away calmly as if he had just entered into a deep sleep. The drowsiness had gone on for three days, and his children could not predict the moment they came to witness. Thus, only his wife, a daughter and Manuel Cordovão witnessed his death.

Some men from Aldeia Nova do Vale came to help with the funeral. The cemetery **was located** there, and the distance between both villages was nothing more than a rivulet, sometimes dusty, other times muddy. One of Torre Velha's sons complained: "Only dumb people could imagine coming to stay at such a place *Out of Nowhere.*" Manuel Cordovão came in to the rescue of the memory of his grandfather and a few more shepherds who decided, nearly a century before, to climb the mountain almost three hundred meters in altitude. "You only die once in a lifetime and sheep graze every day." By climbing, they became closer to the summer pastures, and not afar from the winter ones.

III Maria da Graça

When the old man was as weak that he could no longer get up from the bed, Manuel Cordovão willingly offered to care for him as if he were his own son. They helped each other since they became the last three inhabitants of the village. Once a week, at least, he came down to the valley to buy groceries and help Torre Velha get some wood for the fireplace and oven. Maria da Graça baked bread and ironed his clothes.

Electricity didn't arrive early enough to prevent the village from losing its soul. Anyhow, it could never avoid it and didn't stop Cordovão and his habit of reading as much as a literary critic. When the itinerant Gulbenkian library stopped going to Aldeia Nova do Vale, he started buying the majority of books he read. He wrote the sentences he enjoyed most on loose leaf paper. He also took down any words he didn't understand or were not in the dictionary, so that he could ask about them to anyone who knew. That task, at times, took some months.

Being the youngest in the family, he was able to study up to Year 4. Maria da Graça only reached Year 2 thanks to him...

On that year, the Year 3 exam became mandatory for boys only. Although he was only ten, he attended Year 4 since he had started school at the age of six. The school subdivision of Aldeia Nova do Vale did not always start with thirty-two school age pupils at the beginning of every school year. Thus, the Regent Teacher², always asked a few children to forestall their school registration. The girls who had reached the school age limit but got no pass on the final exam (the so-called second-degree level) could stay on registered in those cases. As all parents needed their children to work, they always agreed to enroll early for their primary school registration, but rarely would allow them to stay at school past the age of nine or ten. As for as girls, it was difficult to get the ones from Aldeia Nova da Serra to register at six, due to the distance, and the ruinous unsheltered way they had to travel. By chance and at the insistence from the Regent Teacher, Maria da Graça's parents consented. That year the school had only twenty-eight students registered and run the risk of closing down. The nearest school was almost two kilometers further away at Fonte Gralha, making it unacceptable for all the mountain

² Translator's Note: Regent Teacher was unofficially a teacher who had not attended the Teaching school for teachers but who had, through some qualifying testing, considered apt to teach as a replacement teacher, but having no tenure and a lower salary.

residents. Her father congregated half a dozen neighbors to build a shelter along the way: it was similar to shepherds' huts and the children could shelter from the rain.

It was during May. For some weeks now, ever since he read "The Adventures of Tom Sawyer," Manuel felt he loved Maria da Graça terribly much, but didn't have the guts to tell her. Not even to write her a note as his colleagues did, to reveal their childhood passions. He envied the freedom and the daring of Mark Twain's hero. He even attempted some walks in front of her home as a love confession. He feared her father's wrath, capable of giving him some badly measured blow. The viperine tongue of her mother was always ready to defend the girls' honour. Some even said the girls would never marry. Measure is a merry mean. If other mothers kept their offspring gynoecia away from male lust contagion, that mother wouldn't even allow strange eyes focus on them, as if eyeing them was already a form of dishonor and "*ad vitam et mortem*" condemnation. Finally, the greatest difficulty was to meet face to face, word to word, the girl who was the cause and motive of his shyness. If he didn't make up his mind pretty quick, one of his bolder companions would get into his way, either by direct affirmation or through that little note, which didn't reveal red faces or heart tremors, unless the handwriting betrayed the intensity of the feelings. In such cases, Graça vanished from his designs, albeit not out of his mind.

Love has the impulses of ingeniousness and artistic creation that can benefit everyone, at any age. Then, one afternoon when he was near the desk with other students of Year 4 answering a questionnaire on the meaning of words, his eyes met hers. She had just taken her eyes away from the copybook to dip the nib in the inkpot. Suddenly, he dared and sent her a furtive wink. In those days, a reciprocated wink could be a commitment for an entire life. The first and only instance of passion could happen at eight or ten years of age. She could not blink with one eye only, so she used her hand to close her left eye and winked twice with her right eye.

"Manuel: foundation?"

The teacher's voice brought his mind back closer to his body. His answer came from the tip of his tongue:

"Act or effect of founding, origin, principle, institution."

On their return home, they split into two groups as usual, with the boys slightly ahead of the girls. Every now and then, he glanced back, trying to understand whether she reciprocated his message by spite or true consent. He noticed her smile coloring the group with a gleam he had never seen around those worlds. Graça was different that afternoon. No, his eyes were not mistaken; after all, he used them to announce what his words couldn't.

It started to rain when they were halfway, half distance between two of those shelter huts. Most of them started running straight ahead for the upper shelter, but Maria da Graça turned around, downwards to the other shelter. Manuel followed her along. It was an impulse, a sudden inspiration when one does not think before acting. He had no time to figure that the words or gestures he was unable to utter or make, face to face, would give him the jitters for not saying or doing them. When he came back to his senses, each second would become a long journey of hesitation for the faltering thoughts in his spirit. However, what mattered most was that he was able to turn around and run the risk of misfortune in the most desired of all adventures that he sought experiencing.

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A girl went to Maria da Graça's sister and told her that they were alone in a shelter, and he kissed her. The sister told her mother. The mother told the father. The father beat her, and both of them, father and mother, forbade her to go back to school.

IV The Big Rock

It was at the end of the previous year of 1953 that Manuel Cordovão's mother had bought and offered him a Missionary Diary. Instead of writing down the appointments he didn't have; he used it to record all the events that seemed relevant to him. He had kept this lifelong habit, yet many a time he left blank the area dedicated to each day.

The first time he mentioned Maria da Graça was on a Saturday, May 9, in the following manner: "Father Brites was at school today accompanied by another priest from the Seminary. They wanted me to go to Seminary, but I love Graça too much and I think she also likes me so I said NO straight away."

He would write about Father Brites, parish priest at Coutada do Avenal, a short distance from Fonte Gralha, on January 1986, dated Wednesday 29th: "Father Brites died. They say he passed away in the odor of sanctity. It must be only the smell from real sanctity." However, immediately after, as if fearing having been unjust he would retouch his judgment: "No one is perfect, not even the saints, although I do not have a favorable impression about him."

While Father Brites was a man capable of taking off his shirt to give it to the poor and return home wearing only his cassock over the skin, Manuel could never forgive him for what happened on that visit to the school. An elderly widow intended to pay for the Seminary to a poor boy. Manuel seemed to have all the ideal characteristics, being one of the most talented and with the best temper between all Year 4 students. Father Brites accompanied the other priest who was questioning each likely candidate. One of the questions had to do with the assiduousness of his parents attending mass. When asked about his father, half-abashed, he answered: "He usually goes to the midnight mass at Christmas." Father Brites scoffed at the reply, in mockery, and so did his colleagues. He felt humiliated. He intended to assert his father's eternal salvation with that yearly mass, but the priest offended him by jeering in such a manner....

On Tuesday, May 19, he wrote, "Maria da Graça's parents do not want her to go back to school, and now I am going to miss her immensely."

This and subsequent diaries contain numerous details and comments. Some added later on, when he grew up. However, they have no dates. Below this entry on a remarkably different calligraphy, written on a black ballpoint, in contrast with the delicate pencil traces, "I cried." During the following ten days, he only wrote, "Today I did not see her." On Saturday, 30th he mentions a scuffle with rocks between the valley boys and the ones from the mountain. Those rock fights started with a spontaneous agreement and meant neither hatred nor even rivalry. The worse seldom occurred. That was when someone had a fight summed up in a swelling hematoma or a trickle of blood. He didn't want to take part in the action excusing him "I didn't feel like it." However, the black ballpoint ink says it all, "I had no one to talk to about it."

His elder brother had already married, and the other, who would be conscripted into the Army, next September, had a girlfriend at Fonte Gralha, not far away from Aldeia Nova do Vale. That explains why Manuel kept the cattle on Sundays so that his brother could relax and spend the afternoon with his girlfriend. The pastures in May were close by, and one could listen to the shepherds' shouts down there. Up there, one could also listen to any screams from the village, and one could make up the peoples' figures although it was not easy to recognize each person. Nevertheless, he wrote on the 31st. "I was near the great rock always staring at her house and never saw her. I reckon her mother doesn't let her set foot on the street because of me. Now she can't play, go to school or Sunday school. She won't be learning anything, and I'm the one to blame." The last sentence occupies the area for Monday although written on Sunday, such as

referred by the note "written the previous day. I felt genuine remorse because of Graça who became my disgrace in my youth ardor."

Remorse keeps growing throughout the week, and by Sunday, June 7th, he avowed, "I should go and talk to her mother. Should tell her a terrible lie, I don't care anything about her and never kissed her. Her mother is a fool for not letting her go out." The following day he is somewhat confused. "I do not know whether is worse for her, to pretend not loving her so she comes out to play and resent it, or, for her to stay at home thinking that I love her." Next, the explanation comes in black ink, "I remember it as if it happened today. I spent the whole Sunday thinking about it. If it were me, what would have I preferred? Staying locked at home thinking about how much she loved me, or being able to go out and play with the other boys imagining she didn't love me. I would rather be in jail."

At last, on June 14th, "I saw her when I was going out with the sheep. She was on her way to the mass with her mother and sisters. She also saw me, and although we could not exchange any word, not even by motion, I became so glad."

During the next weeks and always with satisfaction, there is a reference to random stares, once in a while and at a distance. Using the blank spaces, the adult Manuel Cordovão revisits his childhood as if he were sorry for anyone but himself. The mature man, not dumbfounded by the mountain isolation and talking to the sheep, became entranced as if taking a juvenile reverie seriously.

On Wednesday, the 1st of July, he reports on his written test for the Year 4 exam, "My teacher told me, I had done everything right, and if the distinction mark still existed I would get one, for sure." Then, on Monday, he alluded to the oral examination, "I have completed the exams with a Pass. My female teacher said that the teacher was sad because the distinction mark is no longer used; otherwise I would get one. He has never encountered a student that knew everything like I did." After that, the dazzling, "As soon as she saw me, she run and hugging me strongly, congratulated me. It was as if an angel had touched me or if Our Lady came to me in an apparition. It was much better than passing the exam." Soon after, between brackets on black ink, an enormous and amazed exclamation point and some disillusioned ellipsis, the truth comes to light, "Lie!..."

Farther on, the grown-up doubts become entangled with attempted judiciousness: "Could I have been happy with Graça? Who knows if we would be already tired of each other, me always grumbling and complaining about whatever occurred. Maybe she would keep her patience of a saint, perhaps even apologetic for something I was at fault. It may have occurred with Maria da Graça what happened with the Hebrews' Chorus."

Manuel Cordovão had purchased his first radio set, battery-operated once he had turned the age of twenty. It had cost him, and he didn't regret it at all, one thousand and eight hundred escudos. The radio became his privileged companion on the mountains together with the book that he always carried. When he first listened to the Hebrews' Chorus from Verdi's opera "Nabucco," he felt quite fascinated. Whenever he had the opportunity to listen to it, he almost became ecstatic with the first chords of the orchestra. Years later, he bought at an enormous cost – three thousand escudos - a record player, also battery-operated since electricity had not yet reached the village. Once he had his favorite choir at his disposal he never again felt any serious emotion when the flutes sounded in preparation for the voices. Not even when the Jews were claiming for freedom next to the rivers of Babylon.

On another passage, he blames himself:

"At this age, I shouldn't be worrying about an 8 year old child; seriously taking a passion of another boy aged ten? Nonetheless, no matter how strange it looks, I have never forgotten Graça, and brood over that she has never forgotten me either. When I

think about not forgetting, all I can do is to think about love and fall in love... silly me... If Fernando Pessoa states that all love letters are ridiculous then, all love is also ridiculous. I do not mind making a fool of myself. I couldn't care less. This world is full of silly things that we deem as deeply important."

He wrote as memory of that date on a 1968 diary, entry for August 2, Friday, which also occupies the Saturday:

"I have read most stories by Alphonse Daudet «Letters from my Windmill» but, while reading "The Stars" I could not stop thinking that Stéphanette might be Graça, or to put it better, that Graça could have come to meet me as the landlady went to meet her shepherd. I imagined her sitting by my side, the sudden rain outpour filling up the creek, as in the day I actually got frightened. Today I wouldn't be afraid, since I am a man, but I would be perfectly happy having her in my cabin. I would be her hero, guarding her against evil dreams. When I reached the scene when Stéphanette leaves I felt sorry for the shepherd, although the truth is that I felt sorry for myself."

Later, trying to get back to his senses, "I should be ashamed of still thinking about Graça in this way. So many years have gone by; she has grown up, married and had children... God forgive me, since I'm not to blame as a matter of fact I still love her as much as when I was ten years of age."

V Storm

On Thursday, May 12, 1955, he wrote about a storm that he would later admit having frightened him mightily:

"Yesterday the creek filled up so much that the bridge came down, and my father had to come and get me with other men to cross the creek, but they left the sheep on the other side. Today, at early dawn, he went for them. I would not have minded staying alone in the mountain as far as I could see Graça afterwards." Years later, he added, "Not even for such a prize could I pay that price."

When he started readying to gather the sheep and return home, towering dark clouds began forming over the mountaintop. The day darkened, and everything resembled it was under the colors of a solar eclipse. Heavy raindrops, aplenty, announced by lightning and thunder flooded everything in a matter of minutes. Manuel run for cover with the sheep on a shed built for similar circumstances or for shepherds who wanted to spend the night in the mountain. He trusted that the storm would be brief and watched the water flowing over the hillside creating pools of water where the ground was waterproof. At first he was elated to observe nature's show, but afterwards, the delay and the extent of the storm started frightening him, especially when he realized that he probably was alone on the mountain since the other shepherds who had not crossed to the right bank, should have had enough time to leave before the storm settled.

The father who worked at his "courelas"³ had a gut feeling and came home to ask whether Manuel had arrived already. He found his wife worried imagining the worse as any mother who fears whatever may happen to a son, no matter how small the danger they face. He did not ask anyone whether they had seen his son, because that would be a waste of time and would serve little or no purpose. He told a friend to gather some more people in case of need, bring ropes and a shepherd's crook in case the bridge was demolished and they had to cross the creek. He also asked for lamps since dusk was coming. On his way up, he carried all the guilt hitting hard at his soul – for whatever

³ Translator's Note: A courela is a parcel of cultivated land, long and narrow

may have happened to his son – and why did he tell him to go to that area. First, he heard the dog barking once it sensed his presence near, and then he saw Manuel bewildered by a big fear, on the other side of the creek, next to the bridge that as he feared, the water had destroyed. Manuel cooled off seeing his father. It was too late to find a place to cross the creek. They waited for the rescue coming from the village in no time.

“Were you afraid of being there alone?” although it was a lie, he answered negatively. His father knew that the determination of faking how strong and dauntless he was, could be a way to ignore the fears already felt and to scare the fears he still felt. Whilst waiting, they kept chatting and shouted the words in an apparent cheerful mood.

When help arrived, the rain had stopped, and a delightful calm had settled. They held back until it was almost dark waiting for the stream to lose its impetus. Then, they tied a man to a rope, from behind the neck and below the arms, on a less leaning position where the water force was smaller. He was carrying food for the dog that would be taking care of the sheep while sitting at the foot of the cabin’s door. The other men were holding the ropes, which fastened him, his back opposite upstream. He kept upright, firmly poking a shepherd’s crook ahead of each short step. Once he reached the other side he tied Manuel below his arms and by the belly. Told him to lie down on his back, and let it go. Afterwards, did the same for himself. In a couple of minutes, they were both in safety, and obeying submissively the dog went back to the sheep.

At one of the valley villages, a woman who had lost a baby boy the previous week and who believed that when a child passed away another star would light on the sky was able to go back to her window hoping to see a sign of that new light. The husband was already in distress, since apart from the grief he feared his wife was losing her marbles. That night, the waiting would be the last and didn’t take long. An intense light scintillated on the mountainside, and it seemed to rush towards the village. The woman smiled for the first time, after so many days of sorrow and long vigils, she smiled well until after the cocks crowed.

At the same instant, one of the men who went to help rescue Manuel cursed. He had taken a firework intended for St John’s night, to light it when the boy was safe. He warned the boy’s mother that he would do it, but forgot about it in the middle of all the uproar. The rain had left the gunpowder wet so it didn’t explode, and only the primer sparkled for a moment, as a shooting star.

VI

The Mountain

Manuel Cordovão’s Reading Book for Year 2, contained a poem by Afonso Lopes Vieira, and called “The Shepherd,” that started this way:

*Far from the land,
here on the mountain
alone,
neighbor of the blue skies,
I tend my flock,
play the flute and listen to the birds:
dim, dim...*

*I live far from the village,
have to care for my flock,
we are close to the skies
my dogs, the mountain, me*

and my flock...

The author narrates a visit to alpine villages, on *Mythical Portugal*, a series of chronicles printed at the time and kept by Master Gil, the barber. None of the shepherds he spoke to was Manuel. However, any of them would resemble him. Let us take an excerpt from the text:

It is an idyllic peace, deep as the heights of these mountains, spreading as far as the eyes can see, when one seeks to observe everything at a glance and insists on stopping at every detail. Dotted valleys and hillsides, villages of biblical houses, patriarchal, solid and immutable as the boulders that form them, they are an assertion of eternity in the vortex of time. From hillock to knoll, an unruffled harmony seems ready to either harbinge the perfection of the world or rule over chaos.

On the way up, I start by following two small shepherd dogs and their offspring at close distance. For sure, the animals must be aware of their destination, since little livestock stop to gnaw at the sprouts that come within their range. My legs falter, the hearts rattle begging for respite. I try not losing sight of the swift mountaineers who don't slow down and keep up with the herd rhythm; they still have the stamina to jump over mounds or hillocks chasing some adventurous she-goat, since there are always four or five following such peregrination.

The fewer mountains there are above us the more landscape there is. Therefore, when the underframe begs for a halt, the spirit fills with delight. I'm baffled by this pristine beauty full of contrasts between the roughness of the furze and the living softness of variegated flowers, the rough but peaceful arrogance of the hilltops and the soft dainty of the new grass barely dried from the benevolent dew. I am unable to understand whether the mountain is one acropolis of boulders, amongst whom the plants fight for space and energy, or if it is, forest and meadow hurt by the majestic rocks.

I reach shepherds and cattle at the table set with greenly summits. I am reluctant to talk, since I cannot and do not know yet how to tell them about the purpose of this journey. Most certainly, they think I came for nothing, and I foresee a difficult task explaining them that yes and no, in a way they can understand without judging me foolish.

After all, they accept me as if I were a stone planted there thousands of years ago. I address myself to the youngest, a little boy that should be at school were it not for the cattle. The other boy, apparently slightly older, comes closer so he also can hear what the visitor has to say. The stranger barely greeted although they saluted him well. He does not make a noise in front of these happy and pure pagans, due to the weariness that remains at this height, although blithely inhaling this air made up of pure oxygen – one could say – and never before breathed by animals or plants.

I ask if they own the flock. Yes, it is theirs, but these are two flocks from another two owners. Can you recognize the sheep that belong to you? "Indeed!" Replies the eldest and immediately I realize that my question was silly. "Of course, how could we not know our own sheep?" Both laugh but not in scorn. Perhaps due to the pleasure of having encountered such an ignorant city person. Do they have names, those sheep? Why shouldn't they? Moreover, before asking them, didn't I recall that a true shepherd knows any sheep by its name...? Even the dogs know who is who among those balls of cotton that require no directions or guidance they will go directly to their sheep-pen, although I keep thinking nothing distinguishes them from one another

And do they like the life they have? I almost offend them just by raising the issue.

I take their picture with half of the world as a background. They stay happy with a smile that, so soon won't be erased.

I return with my soul purified. It felt better than a pilgrim's journey to Cova da Iria⁴ or Sameiro. At any sanctuary, one gets the impression that God has to share Himself with crowds, and now we have Him all for ourselves in the monumental temple he worked on as an architect and builder.

From Manuel's Diary, Tuesday September 7, 1954:

My brother was conscripted into the army yesterday, and now all I will see is sheep. It will be another ten years until I can travel afar when I, too, go to the army.

VII Royal Queen

A poet may find routes inside the words and travel through them. He is even capable of envying the freedom of a shepherd or the luck of whoever ends up marrying the daughter of his laundrywoman. Manuel had no choice; he could not walk through paths that not were the heights. Were he granted the whole world below the mountain, and he might never want to come down. The daily sacrifice of taking each step equaled his duty for not refusing them.

The only thing Manuel did not want to change was Maria da Graça's love. He would not trade her for a Royal Queen. Even when he imagined himself as a prince on a fairy tale, she was the one awakening him with a kiss (when reading fairy tales, he cogitated about what real princes would like to be...)

It was only at spring that he could glance closely at her. She had gone to the local shop with a sister, and surely, the vigilant periscope of their mother's pair of eyes was following them. He was on his way out with the sheep and noticed that Maria da Graça slowed her pace, a little. The sister being slightly ahead due to that hesitation on the rhythm of the walking turned back, more a turn of the face than of the body and poked her in the belly. This gesture came together with an antipathetic mutter, in the harsh manner allowed by her being the eldest, in charge of safekeeping her although they were on a mutual custody mission.

On Saturday, April 23, he wrote, "She was so close to me, as soon as I came out of the haystack, but I could not exchange a single word because her sister escorted her. I saw some tears on her face, certainly not caused by the sister's belching, but because she could not talk to me." Decades later, and in between brackets, he added a quote from a book he was reading "a tear like an E flat on a Chopin's Nocturne."

A month later, he recorded on the diary "I trust Graça has seen the lovely letter G from her name that I have written."

He picked up as many flowers as he could before drawing a "G" just opposite the large rock. Maria da Graça had seen it and understood the message. She was learning how to make a stem stitch or *pé-de-flor*, and kept practicing on two handkerchiefs with a drawing of the initials on her name, but would only show one to her mother so that she could check her progresses and she kept the other one in hiding. On one of these, she did not cross the "G," which ended up as a "C," asking to one of Manuel girl cousins to deliver it to him secretly.

Manuel wrote on Friday, June 17 concerning that unexpected gift, "Olivia gave me today the handkerchief that she sent me with a real nicely embroidered M and C. I knew she loved me, but I am even surer now. It will be all settled by the time we are

⁴ Translator's Note: Cova da Iria, near Fátima in Portugal, place where Our Lady of Fátima allegedly appeared to three little shepherds in 1917. Sameiro is a holy shrine devoted to Mary in Braga.

grown-ups, because I know that my father and mother would also not allow my sister to have a boyfriend at that age."

On St John's Eve, everybody at the village came to dance around the bonfire. Manuel had an enormous joy but made a tremendous effort in order to avoid showing enthusiasm fearing they would forbid the girl from walking freely on the streets. He thought the confinement only occurred during the first times due to her mother's anger fed by the initial ire explosion.

In May, on the following years he kept writing his flowery "G" near the large rock and received another embroidery in response, always furtively made and sent via his girl-cousin. The first had a flower design; the second had a tree, and the third one by now had a lamb, a little masterpiece in cross-stitch.

When, by the fifth time, Manuel was starting to prepare the flowers for his usual salutation, he guessed that it would be the last time, at least as a love message that he was not clearly allowed to convey. He was already fifteen and Graça thirteen on a woman's body. By Christmas, he would talk to her parents and, surely, the courting would become official, since there were no reasons for it to be denied. He was a lovely lad, loved by all, hardworking and in his family there was nothing to shame the memory of the deceased.

At that stage, a slightly older shepherd who knew the meaning of the drawing came to him and said, "Don't do it, Manuel." More astonished by the friend's critical expression than by the prohibition, which could be no more than a joke, he asked why. "Graça is going to marry Torre Velha." He scoffed. "You must be crazy! Make up another one, he is old enough to be her grandfather." He wasn't, but he was close to forty. Working as a woodcutter, keen on saving money in order to escape life's turmoil, he had reached that age as a bachelor. "Manuel, it is true, I swear." His voice was still solemn. Manuel vacillated on his certainty, desperate with the vague chance that the news is true, trying to argue against his friend as if he were a judge that could decide the cause. "But she is still a child..."

That is why the marriage would not take place that year. They would wait until the following year until Graça reached the minimum age for marriage. "Do you swear?" He crumpled the flowers with a sign that impressed on his friend. "I know it is hard on you, but it is a fact. That is the way women are. What can we do?"

Manuel believed that Graça was not like that. Being true, surely, it was the work of her covetous mother and father, capable of selling their souls to the Devil to make one more escudo⁵. He asked again with a begging: "Don't taunt me. Do you swear?" He promised...

The other shepherd went back to his flock while Manuel climbed up the big rock and stayed there staring at Graça's place. He was so sad that he refused to think about anything but the cause of his sadness. He was confident that plenty of voices would be heard criticizing such marriage. What if someone knowing about that passion coming from the school days and having grown up with the time, would regret its sudden end even warranted that Graça would be better off marrying him or, at least, someone of her age. It would be a long time coming before he would see her again. Her mother would certainly put the girl in hiding waiting for the wedding day. He tried to imagine her body but to his despair, he could only envisage her back. She was returning home slowly in order for him to delight in a longer contemplation. That was how he saw her the last time around. No matter how much effort he put into it, she never turned around, to let him see the twinkle in her eyes with a mischievous childish manner pretending to be a grown up. That is what she would have to overcome forcefully from this year to the next. Not long after, her body would change shape, an enormous belly. That would be

⁵ Translator's Note: Portuguese currency until 31 December 2001 when it was replaced by the Euro.

the time when he did not want to see her. He wanted to keep in his memory the child she still was. Ironically, on his mind there were visions of her, face to face, with a suffering look, thick lips, and the abated freshness by the weight of another life born inside her.

He understood how it was possible for someone to jump from a rock like that or choose another way to die for love, but it never came to his mind that he could, one day, fall into such an extreme state of despair. If he were one of those, or if he happened to be a poet thinking of some nice verses at the time of killing himself, would he commit suicide first or would he write the poems? If he wrote the verses, would he still be brave enough to kill himself? ...

Those thoughts run in his head. They came in and went out, neither invited nor expelled, but unable to divert his attention from Maria da Graça or his eyes from her house.

He always had a prodigious appetite for lunch. Did not matter if it were only a handful of olives, with rye bread and a few glasses of instantly milked milk, from Moorish, his favorite she-goat. On that day, he had a special treat of rye wheat bread and a leg of roasted lamb. He couldn't swallow it: all he could manage was a lukewarm glass of milk. As the day went by, he started recovering his hopes. If he pointed to Graça's parents how much he still loved her, if he could only make them understand how much happier she would be with him than with Joaquim Torre Velha. They might commute her sentence, since that would be no less a condemnation for her entire life, only because they were tricked to believe that wealth brings happiness.

At the end of the day, and incapable to throw food away, he made an effort and almost finished the food her mother had prepared. She wouldn't be worried if she saw his knapsack. Even so, the bone he threw the dog was still full of meat.

VIII The Wolf

That night he filled the space allocated in his diary with the same derogatory term, repeated a lot, which years later he erased, replacing it by "Children stuff."

He didn't have the guts he thought he had at a distance while in the mountain. Thus, he never dared speak to Graça's mother or father. He spent the days, then weeks and months, always hoping to hear the news that, in the end, she had given up on the Torre Velha wedding. He never heard it.

They married on a Saturday. Manuel went further away than usual in the mountain. He got up to a place from where he could see the watchtower. They said Torre Velha got its surname from it.⁶

Two versions spread about the origin of that name, one of them a legend, but perhaps none of them true. Joaquim Torre Velha had his version. According to it, and he guaranteed his grandfather told him, his illustrious grandfather was a sentry at that tower, used as an ammunition depot during the Civil War. Another more popular version connected it to a group of highwaymen who went there to hide the spoils of their robberies. The group leader went deported to Angola because he killed a priest. This story coincides with that of João da Silva Brandão, militia commander and guerrilla in the province of Beira at the time of dissidence between *cabralists* and *septembrists*⁷. Nothing specific led to a relationship between the exiled bandit and the Torre Velha family.

⁶ Torre Velha means Old Tower.

⁷ Translator's Note: two opposing groups after the Portuguese Civil War in 1836

Once sighted, Manuel felt hatred as if the tower were his own enemy. He, who, on this very day, destroyed forever his greatest dreams of happiness. Looking at it from afar, he measured in terms of will and wrath the kilometers as if they were meters. Desperate, he started throwing rocks on its direction, swearing all the time. The curse went further than the stones, both thundering the immutable quietness of the rocks.

Not knowing who it was, the dog started barking at the same enemy. The dazzled sheep got together in a circle to protect against an unknown fear.

A shepherd came running to enquire about that succession of angry screams. From a distance, it sounded like a vague sound of a battle. He found Manuel sitting on a rock, head between the hands, as if crying or meditating.

"Did you see a wolf, Manuel?"

Manuel stared at the other, shortly silent, not knowing what to say. His eyes betrayed a troubled expression and close by, one could see it was more a want of crying than actual sobbing.

"I did. It was an extraordinarily large wolf."

The other shepherd grew slightly worried.

"Was it a lone wolf?"

Manuel answered affirmatively.

"Are you sure you have seen a wolf, and that he didn't have any more behind it?"

"It was a lone wolf", he was sure. "And quite a large one."

"Where was it?"

Manuel gestured, vaguely, towards the direction of the old tower.

"It came through there but run away when I started screaming."

That night they set a wolf hunt for the following day. Manuel contemplated telling the truth, but he couldn't come to terms with it by sheer shame. When he heard about the expedition, Joaquim Torre Velha wanted to take part too. Used to walk around the woods, he knew that part of the mountain better than the shepherds did. He knew where to look for and had dug many a lair.

They patrolled miles and miles of mountain terrain. They set on the dogs in all suspicious directions. As a matter of precaution, Joaquim Torre Velha set various traps. When they came back at the end of the day, they brought a dead fox. It was torn into pieces by the dogs, which used it to discharge their wrath, since they scented, ran and looked in vain for a beast worth a real fight.

Manuel stayed back with the younger ones, caring for the flocks' of all shepherds who took part in the wolf hunt. When he witnessed how the poor animal ended, he felt sorry for being the cause of its death. Indeed, the true wolf he wanted to hunt was so close by, at the distance of a word of contempt or hatred, but he could no longer get the prey away from his lair. When Joaquim Torre Velha walked next to him, their eyes didn't meet, but Manuel understood he had turned his head away, as if he didn't want to face him. Perhaps that after knowing what happened the day before, at the time he should be on his way to the little chapel, he realized what could have triggered his reaction and didn't want to show it.

He took notes on his diary about that Saturday June 11, "No more, it is all over; she will become unhappy and so will I." He didn't write anymore and didn't even describe the wolf hunt and its cause on the following day. Many years later he would continue, "I have a peculiar form of happiness! I am happy just thinking that I could have been happy."

IX Stones

Perhaps no one has ever christened stones, but Manuel named many. After living with them for so long, he ended up talking to them. He started greeting them good morning and wished them good night. Gravely, with true feelings. He needed them to sit on, to climb higher and see further or lie on their shadow. People love what they need, and christen what they love.

All names were female, and that made them up nicer. Some had nicknames as if they could grow up. He never called any of them Leonor, Isabel, Mariana, Margarida or Madalena, since he reserved such names for his daughters.

A stone he would never need was on a recess where no one ever went. In case someone went there, it would neither be seen nor would they see anything. That is why it was nameless. If he spoke there alone, no one would call him nuts. If he cried there, no one would call him a sissy. On Monday, he went there. Then, the stone started having a name.

X Olivia

The following year at full steam started the Angolan War to throw the wand while it is green. However, this was a deep-rooted evil, which took five centuries to grow up. On its first go, the conscription draftee lot draw its fate on number 097038/60. Its mission was patriotic and included burning down huts. Before he went to bed, soldier private 097038/60 cried. Afterwards, he had nightmares. A group of blacks was climbing up the hill and set fire to the stones of his own hovel at Aldeia Nova da Serra. The stones burnt as dry foliage, his mother and father, brothers and even the sheep, were sneaking out of the burning shack. They ran away burning, shouting and bleating.

The destruction of the little African hamlets would have everlasting effects. It helped depopulate others, away from where the arsonists came. When number 097038/60 stopped being a numeral and became human again, he had become already used to strange people and spaces. None returned from a batch of another three draftee lot numbers of mountain kids who followed suit on the draw to the Russian roulette of the ambushes and land mines. They came back so altered that their future no longer fitted the mountain.

Until then, the balance was kept between those who went down to the valley, or looked for the cities to live for the rest of their lives, and those who were born, coupled with all the marriages with outsiders. After that, the village learnt, even better, about France and other Taprobanas⁸ where the poor were richer than the wealthiest in the mountain.

Graça has confided her vows of homage to Olivia, a girl cousin of Manuel who met one of those country bumpkins who got the "lucky draw" as a warrior for the lonely motherland pride. They met at the pilgrimage of São Lourenço das Fragas, and she danced with him until they both fell exhausted. At the end of the party, the boy told her that he was conscripted and would love to have her as war godmother. Olivia had no idea about what she was being invited for, but, nevertheless, accepted.

Two months later, she got a letter from Guinea. It was a rare event, a letter going all the way up the mountain, and ever rarer to be addressed to Olivia, because neither

⁸ Translator's Note: The first verse of The Lusíads, epic work by Camões (1524-1580), refers to Taprobana as Sri Lanka was known at that time.

she nor any of her relatives knew how to read. She had started going to school but only until she got her first cold, drying up her wet clothes while wearing them.

She had to get hold of Manuel, the family erudite. The greeting "Dear Godmother" was the first cause for amazement. However, the cousin explained to her what it meant. It was some kind of performance so that the soldiers would forget the fear of war and the loneliness of the absence. After that, there was a report on the boy's condition, without any allusion to motives to live in fear, talking about hunting and bathing in some river, evenings spent singing and drinking. It seemed like a holiday, which was funnier than the usual in those fields and villages, not shown on the map, contrary to those names that Manuel had learned in Year 4: Luanda, Cuanza, Congo... "I would love to know these places," he said. "Doesn't the war frighten you?" He had fear, but his desire to learn about new places and people was stronger.

When Olivia asked him to reply to this letter, Manuel asked her what she wanted him to write. "Don't know... Whatever you feel like. Look, pretend you are writing to Graça."

Came to feel sad. Never had he written a love letter, and it was obvious he would never write one. He didn't even imagine that her cousin could love that stranger in a manner that would deserve his words to Graça, in case these were allowed. Olivia understood his fluster and caressed his cheeks. Then, she kissed him and apologized. He hugged her. They stayed like that for a long time. She understood she was not hugging a cousin but didn't care.

Manuel got used to her constant presence, and he was always anticipating the day he would have to write this post-paid aerogramme. The State proffered aerogrammes to its soldiers and those who corresponded with them. He would take longer than the effort demanded. She would cling on to his body pretending to watch the words that were filling up the paper. She only separated from him when hearing someone coming upstairs.

Manuel ended up following the advice that previously seemed hasty. He would draft a letter as if writing to Graça. Afterwards, he copied it to the aerogramme with the needed changes. He always softened the amount of affection that, although useless, he could never get rid. He had to switch from, "My dear beloved Graça," to "My dear Francisco." Time to change from "my love" to "my godson" and whatever else the cousin should not tell the private, a stranger to him and almost a stranger to her, as well.

After a few months, Manuel started writing another name on the draft: Olivia. At least, she had learned how to read and write that word and soon could recognize herself as the destination of the words, which would follow. She showed her amazement with an obvious "But that is me!" Yes, it was. Slowly, he had started feeling he loved her, more and more. Graça became a dim memory, an illusion of childhood, and the regular physical presence of the cousin triumphantly won the affectionate place that Graça had occupied for ten years.

She hugged him with all her might before exclaiming: "No one needs to know that we are engaged. If your mother or mine have any suspicion they would never leave us alone again."

No one knew. Manuel started living happy days. He, no longer wanted to go to the war or to learn about other places and people, since from one day to another the mountain became his world and Olivia became all the people.

Meanwhile, his father got sick. It was more a question of age than any physical illness. If his son went to the army, nobody there could earn a living for him and his wife. The youngest brother had been an orderly to a Major, and he asked him to try to release Manuel from the army, in order to provide sustenance for his elders. The physician who examined him had trouble finding arguments to release him. He was a shepherd full of vitality and health, but he managed to find a charitable lie, and warned

him that if someone asked him how he got rid of the conscription draft he should reply that he got the lucky number.

Soon, Olivia started making plans for their future, but they all started with a precondition of travelling away from there and forever. "Where am I going to find a secure job?" doubted Manuel. He was bright and knew many things... "I only got Year 4; I am just like the others." If you went for a job interview, you'd beat them all... "What about my father and my mother? I can't leave them alone, without anyone to care for them." To wait until they died could make it irreversibly late for everything else in his life.... "God save me if I have to wait for my parents to die, in order I become what I want. God keep them for a long time."

Olivia once said, in a serious and sad manner, with disillusioned understanding, "I know you want to stay here. I am not sure whether it is for the mountain or Graça."

He imagined himself as a wild teasel obliged to behave as a greenhouse, as a wild mountain buck inside a cattle-rail on the plains. He could now realize that the only freedom he could ever aspire, was what once seemed like a condemnation. However, he said, "Neither of them. Furthermore, I have you. I swear it is because of my parents." Olivia replied that she didn't believe him, even if the parents died or if they moved away now he would never leave the place. She predicted, "You are going to be the last one to abandon the mountain. Only when you are dead, maybe. But if that is what you want, I will stick with you." They embraced strongly whilst his silence meant approval for her words.

Weeks later, Manuel opened the aerogramme and, instead of starting reading it aloud straight away, he read it silently with compunction. "Something happened to him?" Olivia enquired worried. About him, the other, but maybe it was happening to him. The letter started with a greeting never used before: "My dearest Olivia." That is why he wanted to know the change before telling her about it. It was followed by a clumsy declaration of love. An offer to share a living in France, where one of Francisco's brothers had guaranteed him a job contract.

Olivia listened quietly, without any apparent reaction. When the reading was over, Manuel asked without looking her in the eyes "What do you want me to tell him?" Spontaneously, she replied, almost annoyed, "Tell him No, of course, not. What absurdity: I hardly know him. You know well how I love you. Not a problem for you to ask me."

Four days later, she went to see Manuel, with an immense sadness and another aerogramme for her to hear. She hugged the cousin and boyfriend and cried, cried as if she had tragedy in her soul. She had not sent the previous reply to the post office, what was not yet known to Francisco. "Manuel, I am not sure if I am capable, but forgive me... I will never love anyone as I love you, although I always knew you never loved me as you love Graça..." He tried to rebut those predictable ghosts, "I don't love her anymore, and it is as if she never existed. You are aware of that."

Olivia let go of her as she had done never before. Manuel felt somewhat relieved with his hopes renewed at every moment of intimacy. When he acquired enough courage, he read the aerogramme. There was the passionate confirmation of the previous request. She cried again and hugged him again, with strength borne out of an enormous despair. With sunken eyes, she pleaded "Forgive me, Manuel; forgive me on behalf of all your happiness."

As usual, he picked up his rough paper and started writing: "My dear Graça, you cannot fathom the immense joy that your love causes me. So help me God, and I will make you as happy as you deserve. I will love you as if there is nobody else left in the whole world."

XI Laundrywomen

Suddenly he realized that it had gone the time when everything is supposed to happen. What had not yet happened could yet eventuate. Nonetheless, Graça was already married, and her sons were taller than her. Olivia had left for faraway places. The lack of news from her was almost as large as her absence.

Gone were the time to happen, and the time to wait it to happen. His father dead, buried and rotten. His mother had rusted in all the hinges of the body; all her keys to lucidness were stiffened. The water he drunk on the scoop of his hand was pure since it was never the same. The body, though, had accumulated ages and the soul disillusioned.

He had served seven years plus another seven. He was about to complete the servitude of another seven.

Had Labon cursed his love for Rachel? He had had Lear on his arms, but even that was forbidden. Moreover, the seven years he now served were for no one. Labon would be himself, never decided to make up his mind, the days going by on the vague hope that something decisive would eventuate to change his life although he did nothing to change it.

"Goddamn, so many silly ideas," he thought after trying to give up thinking about these things. He shook off the water from his hand. It fell in drops returned to the stream, which went down with a definite course, turning round hillocks and jumping over boulders, until the moment when one could not make out the origin of any water. However, further down it withheld briefly on the small width of a well where women washed the clothing.

Amongst the aged, some had always rolled up their skirts up to their knees not caring whether they got them wet with the water that leapt from the trip of the hands between the well and the clothes. Others didn't care for the useless chastity of their physical ruin. Amongst the younger ones, some imitated such modesty while others exposed the generosity of a palm of thighs to the eagerness of those passing by. Only Graça, decent or indecently, never took part in those stages of desire. Torre Velha had built a small leat from the creek to the backyard of his house. Thus, she didn't have to go with the rags to the well nor did she have to carry the vessel pot to the fountain.

The laundrywomen legs had aged. There was not much point in going there, per chance or on purpose, to look explicitly or in disguise. None of them complained about the passing presence; none would arrange the spinning skirt, in an ascending motion of feigning laxity in public provocation.

That spring, Joana was still out taking care of her clothes and her husband's. The clothes of the son, yet to be born, would rarely be rechristened on that water, since she would depart to France at the end of summer.

When the boy was born, Manuel understood that it was probably the last one coming to life in that mountain. He would be named João, and so he decided to emulate Gil Vicente and his "Visitation Play or Monologue of the Cowherd," offering a lamb and a poem to mother and son.

He wrote the verses that ended like this:

"You climbed to the mountain going down/ from climbed heights. / May the God of those heights/ and of all our lives / make you as venturesome / as a true king. / I here bring this lamb, / year old and very beautiful, / to my *good Lord João, the last.*"

Three months later, mother, father and the closest relatives ate the lamb when they said goodbye to the village. Just like a Passover celebration.

XII Light

*"...and the doors shall be shut in the streets, the mouth, with the upper and lower lips, no longer being able to perform its function of speaking well, when the sound of the grinding is low, the voice, breathing out from the wall of the teeth, lacking the power and force of youth, and he shall rise up at the voice of the bird, his voice being reduced to the low, whispering sound of old men, and all the daughters of music shall be brought low, the ears, growing deaf, no longer enjoy the singing as in former days...."*⁹ This allegoric passage from Ecclesiastes about the end of human life could also be used to describe the ageing of Aldeia Nova da Serra.

Joana's son was only born there by chance. When she realized the delivery date had come there was not enough time to take her to the maternity ward. Nowadays, they sent women away to give birth. The children came back with their birth registered in the city or a small town. The name of Aldeia Nova da Serra would never again be written on a birth certificate or Identity Card. Neither for Aldeia Nova do Vale nor any other. As if the villages had no right to exist. May be there was no other woman on the mountain capable of being mother again. They said that even Graça, who was three years short of her thirtieth, had dried her womb after the fifth child.

The flow of departures without return didn't seem to have a dam to contain it or a sluice to slow it. The younger ones left, and some who were not that young anymore also left for Lisbon, France or Germany. The same that happened in Aldeia Nova da Serra, also occurred in smaller villages, where all one could see was old people or those nearing such stage. Women were always on the wait for letters, and the children were growing up to be large enough to have feet for walking afar. Manuel Cordovão was the only male between the age of twenty-five and thirty.

All those people who grew up there and those were ageing, under the sun, or the candlelight finally saw the arrival of electricity on one of the last summer nights in 1973. That gift also lighted up in other places on the parish of Quintais, which belonged to Aldeia Nova da Serra. The president of the local community wanted one of them to speak up to thank the supreme offer to the Estado Novo¹⁰ (Portuguese for "New State"). He asked Manuel Cordovão to do it on behalf of his neighbors.

He accepted without hesitation although he reacted as offended when the one inviting told him, that if needed, maybe it was better; he added – the Mayor could write his speech. "If I am the one speaking out, I am the one writing it," replied without any margin for negotiation. "Well, be careful with what you say since a minister and many other government prominent people are coming." Manuel ironically said, "And lots of *hoi polloi* are coming too, surely they will understand me much better than they will understand the minister and all these other notable people."

The minister must have understood. For sure, everyone must have understood; the masses without titles applauded, so, spoke Manuel:

"I have been asked to speak on behalf of Aldeia Nova da Serra. To do it, I had to listen to my neighbors and to what they think. What they said is what I am about to tell Your Excellences, but bear in mind that being a shepherd I am not talkative. In my work, a few shouts to the sheep or the dog are enough. It is easy to command sheep,

⁹ Translator's Note: in http://www.kretzmannproject.org/SOL/ECC/ECC_12.htm **ECCLESIASTES CHAPTER 12. An appeal to the young**

¹⁰ Translator's Note: The governments and parties most often considered to have been fascist include Portugal's Estado Novo. **Estado Novo** (Portuguese for "New State"; pron. IPA: [(i)'tadu 'novu]) is the name of the Portuguese authoritarian regime installed in 1933, following the army-led *coup d'état* of 28th May 1926 against the democratic First Republic. The Estado Novo was developed by António de Oliveira Salazar, ruler of Portugal from 1932 to 1968

since they all follow the one leading the way. If one of them runs away, my dog goes and gets it; there is no need for me to get out of my spot, since I have taught my dog to command the sheep. Truth is that I don't know whether they obey me because they respect me or because they fear my dog's teeth.

Simply, what is Aldeia Nova da Serra? Some among Your Excellences may have read some of the same books I read and probably many more. Thus, before you knew about the existence of Aldeia Nova da Serra, you must also have learned the names of other places that I do not even know how to pronounce, but you shall understand what I have to say, and if I make a mistake please do not laugh. You probably have known for a long time where is Iasnaia Poliana¹¹ or Luberon¹². Sometimes they are invented places but the difference between you and us, mountain people like me, is that you know the difference between truth and lie.

Please excuse me for what I am saying, since they invited me to thank you for the electric light supply. That is why I have asked my neighbors, as I mentioned, what I should say. An old man who became blind a year ago, told me «What do I need the light for now, if I couldn't have it while I could see? » Another replied «My wife, your mother, all the women from here, when they had their babies delivered, they did it in the dark of the night. Nowadays, no one is born here, and no one will ever be born here. »

I am not going to disturb Your Excellences with what they all told me. I heard more complaints for so many years of darkness, than I heard congratulations, because you remembered us now. Aldeia Nova da Serra exists and still has people. The worst is that these are its last people and they will live less time with light than they have lived without it. A few years from now, the hands of an elderly man or woman will turn off the lights just like you turned them on today. No one will notice. If Spain conquered a miserable village in our border, everyone would think it was a crime, but no one ever cared about the ageing of Aldeia Nova. If Your Excellences waited a few more years, you didn't have to bother with us since we wouldn't be there.

God bless you."

The president of the community, as soon as the ceremony was over, told him furiously, in *sotto voce*, "You wretch! Do you know what you said?" Manuel answered nonchalantly, "I won't forget it so easily." The other one threatened, "Now prepare yourself for whatever happens to you." Then, he went away, ashamed and fearful, to rejoin the higher authorities.

Soon after, appeared a stranger with an overly cared personal appearance too good to be authentic, and in a mellifluous tone too faked to be true, just asked for the paper he read. He gave it, folded, to the stranger. The stranger thanked him with an exaggerated bow of theatrical politeness keeping it inside a pocket of his jacket. Manuel, in a hurry, bade farewell to a couple of friends who eulogized him and went back home.

The paper where he supposedly wrote the speech only had these names, written repeatedly: Iasnaia Poliana, Luberon, and Maria da Graça.

XIII Vultures

Manuel spent the following day wondering about that stranger who asked him for the paper he pretended to read. Maybe he would go up to the mountain, certainly accompanied by an older gentleman, probably his chief, to demand explanations about

¹¹ Translator's Note: place of birth and burial of Leon Tolstoy.

¹² Translator's Note: in Provence, France

his speech. He tried to compose himself to welcome them, calmly, guessing what they would tell him and what he should reply. Probably, they would be waiting for him when he returned with his flock.

Would they treat him respectfully or put him down? Would they talk about the paper filled with three names only? Would they pretend not to have read them to avoid holding a grudge for having been fooled by a simpleton shepherd? Less amiably than on the previous day, the one he had already met would ask, more or less, something like this: "Who taught you the speech?" He would be so offended as when the president of the community suggested that the mayor should write his speech, and he would reply: "To this date, only two people taught me what to say: my mother and my father. My father died, and my mother doesn't teach me anything anymore for quite some time." The older man would understand the offence and the challenge, but would try to conceal the annoyance felt. "Do not take it seriously, but it seems improper for a shepherd and a true patriot not to be grateful to those who brought such enormous benefits to his land. It cost more than three hundred *contos*¹³ to bring electricity up to here." Manuel would restrain the reins of rebellion and would force the words to come out sweetly as if only evoking his dead. "We built these houses with our hands. We made these footways with our feet. We made the pipes and the cup for our fountain. The people from this village must have paid more than five thousand *contos* to the State and never has the State thought about us. Do you still consider those three hundred *contos* a bit too much?"

The older man might try to intimidate him "Do you know that, for much less than that, people have landed in jail?" He would neither tremble nor hesitate. "Do you know that every time you send a man to jail, you are punishing lots of people who have no guilt of their own? Do you know, how many women, how many sons starve because they have no one earning their bread? Do you know how many friends despair with their loss? Do you know how much my mother and my sheep would miss me, do you how many would rebel if you took me? Until when can you jail people inside and many more outside?"

The other would intervene, forcibly conciliatory, "We only wanted to know who wrote the speech that you memorized so well." At that point, Manuel would realize he was at an argumentative advantage and would carefully choose the words to impress on them even more. "If you do not believe that I am the author, you can challenge me. Aren't there people who say that Bernardim Ribeiro wrote *Menina e Moça*¹⁴ to prove how capable of writing well he was? Well, give me a subject and, here, I will make a new speech for you." They would be surprised by that literate reference made by a man who they had thought was little more than illiterate. The eldest would taunt him immediately. "Well, well, improvise a speech about the war." He would take less than a second to ask, "For or against?" Either of them, was the answer, "As you wish."

He would stare at them, as if focusing, and would say, "Thou shalt not kill. This was stated by someone who knew what He was talking about and to whom. And, what happens in this country of ours, Christian and God-abiding in words but with Works far from the respect due to the Scriptures? They send the youngsters to kill other youngsters, at an age where they should be enjoying the life that God granted them. Our leaders do respect neither life nor the life of those who live far from Portugal nor those who are turning twenty years of age. As soon as they get enough muscles to hold

¹³ Translator's Note: in the old currency of Portugal, the escudo, one thousand escudos was called a conto.

¹⁴ Translator's Note: *Menina e Moça*, a novel written by Bernardim Ribeiro, was printed in three separate editions in the sixteenth century: 1554 (Ferrara, with the title *História de Menina e Moça*), 1557-58 (Évora, with the title *Saudades*) and 1559 (Cologne, based on the first edition), with the second edition incorporating a further extension of the story, which is normally accepted as being by the author, up to Chapter 24.

a rifle, they send them to war, that monster that devours everything, as Priest António Vieira¹⁵ said. We are poor, and we have nothing to offer anyone, you have already asked for what is most valuable in the mountain, some of our boys. Luckily, none of them died, but maybe they might have killed. They will spend all their lives with remorse for doing it, as if it were their fault. No one ever came from Lisbon to this village for good. However, now two distinguished and scrupulous zealots on behalf of Order in Motherland dirtied their fancy shoes on the dust of our byways to make sure that a shepherd, who never hurt anyone, will not again bother the sensitive ears of a minister and a mayor. You can go back, assured that, in this village, no one will ever hear, even if you shout extremely loud, at the full power of your lungs,"

He shut up briefly, before asking, "Is this enough? Have I passed the exam?"

The two men in fashionable shoes dirtied by the dust of the mountain byways would be astounded and seemed to fear whatever they would have to say. In a last attempt, they would ask, "Haven't you got the written speech?" He would riposte, "as much as this I have just delivered as you asked just now."

Maybe they would pretend themselves defeated and advise him to take care. Manuel, in a tone of forced patience, would then say, "You have watched how we live and where we live. Put yourselves in my shoes, in the shoes of these poor people that have close to nothing and, furthermore, cannot even complain. Keep living in cities with everything at your disposal but, at least, let us scream up here, since we won't bother anyone."

After assuring him, they did not want anything but his speech, and, finally convinced that he didn't have it, they would bid farewell, counseling him to take appropriate advice. He would tell them, "Here in the mountain, when you are ten or twelve years of age you already know everything you need to know. The girls know how to make cheese and the boys how to protect their sheep. That's all.

They would leave without any further word.

Manuel studied his answers almost with as much care as he has memorized his speech. Nobody came that day, not on the following day, not ever.

Indeed, you could scream in the mountain that no one listened.

XIV Fountain

The mine water came out under the rock as if the soil squeezed by its immense weight had converted into serum. A piece of lead pipe, cut in a wedge shape, to work as drain at the conflux of three water streams, bringing it together in a single gush to the mouths of the water pitchers or people.

Apart from this, it was a well like all the others. Where the prey had to go, and the hunter never tired to wait. Many a girl blushed there, in spite of the freshness of the place, following the silence of a consensual Yes or a dumb maybe, while the water pitcher rested on top of a typical rock and slowly filled up.

Graça soon stopped going to the fountain. In the dark of the night, before the animals dirtied the creek, she went to fill up the tin can with water for the mug and the pan at the leat that Torre Velha built into his backyard.

Although she didn't go to the reservoir and neither did Manuel, since he lacked the time to do it while the day was up, she often came to him in dreams. That persistent presence, albeit unreal, helped him to carry on loving her, or, was she a frequent visitor

¹⁵ Translator's Note: Many consider the 17th-century Jesuit priest António Vieira (brought to Brazil as a child) the true master of Portuguese prose in the classic style

because she never stopped caring for him a lot, against all certainty that she would never be his, since she now had a master. Had she a master? ... Graça became pilfered land.

The dreams usually started without her. Another one came first in those dreams. Someone he didn't usually know who she was: No matter how strong was the sight of her face, she was never the same. Sometimes she even wore glasses, a rare thing for the girls he knew. The clothes of those dream companions were predictable, in light grey shades, barely disguising the distinction between skirt and blouse that they all wore. The more the scenes repeated themselves, the strange face and unidentified body revealed the smile and contours of Graça at the age of fourteen.

Occasionally, the primary female presence was that of Francisca from Aldeia Nova do Vale, a girl from his school days that loved spin dancing while the boys kept the beat with a pastoral song. She whirled on toe shoes, from left to right, and the faster the spin, the more the spinning skirt went up, until it reached her waist. Manuel could never know whether she liked to demonstrate her dancing skills or something else. He used to sing with his mates, increasing the tempo from a verse to another, "*Spin, spin, my top toy/ do not sleep on the floor, / I want to grab you within reach./ I'll give you string you daredevil,/ spin, spin, my top toy,/ don't stop, oh don't you stop,/ that I want to grab you within reach,/ I'll never leave you on the floor,/ my daredevil top toy,/ oh top toy, top toy.*" The boys repeated the melody until they were almost breathless and she kept on spinning until she fell down with vertigo.

Sometimes, several days went by without thinking about Graça, or, at least, painlessly thinking of her. Then, a certain night she would come back to see him, and he would wake up in a despair that never aged.

He envisaged such fire fading away when he became an adult. He imagined that the years would make him remarkably different, as it happens when everybody climbs the maturity ladder. After all, he could detect few changes. The child in him insisted to be kept alive. May be that was the central drama about the death of an adult... A man doesn't die alone by himself, alone in his adult years. No, it wasn't that, yes, he dies alone. But he dies as a whole, as a whole from the time he was a child, a sucking and playing one, he dies as an adolescent and adult, and that is the ultimate tragedy of his death: all ages contained within him. He is still the same little boy that listens to that sound of "my darling" but the voice is a different one now, now it hurts; it hurts a lot. That is the tragedy; that is the fate, all ages and all dreams dying at once and in one person only.

XV Carved in the stone

After his father becoming sick, Manuel used the *courelas*¹⁶ as grazing of forage since, alone, he couldn't care for the land and the flock. This allowed him to have some spare time, since he could leave the sheep at the haystack with enough food for a day or more. Although rarely, he even went to visit his brother who worked in Lisbon. He always came away convinced that he couldn't live there, to walk on the footpath he had to detour from people instead of abysses, rocks or trees. The mountain shortcuts ended up being larger than the capital's avenues.

On his return from one of such visits, he stopped at the fountain, as usual, to drink a sip of water that relieved him from the tiredness of the climbing. Thinking about the contrasts of Lisbon, of which he admired the cleanliness of streets, buildings and gardens whilst lamenting what they said about people's lives, he carved some verses in

¹⁶ Translator's Note: A courela is a parcel of cultivated land, long and narrow

the stone, just next to the fountain tip. Maybe those who climbed up there afterwards would heed those words as the expression of a people that became extinct because of its divisions and forced to wander the earth. After work, little by little, every afternoon for a week, he carved this quatrain with a chisel and hammer:

*"Ever since I was born,
I have lived in a filthy world
But since it does not live here
I never begrimed it."*

XVI Elderly

Only on rare occasions did his brothers visit him since their mother died. The house had become soulless. There was no reason to gather around the table for Christmas Eve or Resurrection. The village didn't even have midnight mass at Christmas or the blessing of the new fire by Easter. People never heard of any miracles by Our Lady of the Snows in her withered body of uncouth clay.

During those nights of birth or rebirth, the elderly became sadder and older since they were unable to resist the shaking of the donkeys down the hill.

The wrinkles on their faces were a biographic synopsis written by the time that the clouded sight could not see in detail. Nevertheless, their legs accrued the weariness left over by so many steps of life. They didn't lie.

Their arms tired of waving goodbyes, countless times, to some hands on the back of a car.

And they cried in hiding. Their hearts would not let them do more.

Any day, any night, a light blow, a last blow. Other feet would walk on their behalf the last trip to the valley. Some drops of water and salt...

With a pinch of luck, there would be some aspergillum tears and a poorly made sign of the cross between the forefront and the neck, by half a dozen sorrowers.

They loved that mountain until the end. Until the end, of the mountain. The end of life. "Ha! If I was young and knew what I know now..." they said, and they dreamed about other worlds.

However, they would have done the same and said the same things.

Barely taller than the sheep, they would know them by their names and would recognize the runaways by the chime of their cattle bells. They would not be afraid of wolves to bring them back to the good ways.

They would talk about the copiousness of milk and the wool quality. They would bet their lives, or – at least – their honour on the courage of their dogs.

They would be happy, and after becoming old they would think they were not.

XVII The little chapel

Maria da Graça started caring for the old little chapel when the village became reduced to half a dozen inhabited houses. Actually, she opened it early every morning and locked it in the evening; decorating the altar with the flowers she grew, and washing the floor every now and then.

Manuel used to walk into the little chapel when returning from the cattle pasturing. He would only stay for a few minutes in a deep silence disrupted only by one

or two mentally prayed Hail Mary and one or two Our Father. Frequently, Maria da Graça arrived to lock it up while he was still there. They spoke briefly about some special moment of the day, other times they only saluted. Afterwards, Manuel went straight to the haystack. If it were the right time at the evening, he went to milk the sheep, and she returned home for supper. After all – all being so much time and so many things – he still felt a slight trepidation on those occasional encounters. He could not discern how much devotion to Our Lady of the Snows was or to Maria da Graça in that tradition, which became daily ever since she became guardian of the little chapel.

As an obsession, he always imagined the same scene. Graça, in front of the altar, dressed in white, with a bouquet of flowers as white as the Snows from the invocation of the Virgin, he would be side-by-side, dark on the outside and rainbow colors within. If thought could also be a sin, he had plenty to account for God for an entire life of sins.... Nonetheless, although he could not deny the joy he felt in that imagined obsession, similarly, he knew that even if he wanted to, he could not hide in any section of himself where Maria da Graça would not appear as a constant but welcome intruder. However, his was a clear conscience; he never had a conscious gesture, or even a word, to make her feel the perturbation of so many years of disenchanting life. However, he had trouble resisting the temptation to ask her if she kept loving him, or even if she ever loved him whilst they were children. That would be enough to allow him a piece of happiness. It was because of her that he said no to the Seminary. Ironically, such purpose soon stopped, although he admitted he was unable to choose a life for which he felt no vocation whatsoever.

The little chapel of Our Lady of the Snows was in a small plaza, barely bigger than the distance between the houses on both sides of the road. The people from the village built it without any outside help. If it weren't for the cross, you could barely recognize it from a human house. They had not enough money to request an iconic image from an artisan. Instead, they went for a saint maker, a potter from Molelos, to make the body and put a face on Our Lady of the Snows.

When the archpriest went to check the conditions of the small chapel to be consecrated, he found the chapel undeserving as a place of cult. He even joked with the locals about the image "Have you had it made at Malhada Sorda?" One of the elders, Joaquim Viveiros, understood the joke and didn't like it. It was customary to say, "You can get one done at Malhada Sorda" to any girl who always found defects in any pretender to be her boyfriend. Therefore, he hit back "We could even put a rock in there, since it is the intention that counts, isn't it Mr Abbot? Or, do you think we are going to pray to a piece of clay? This Our Lady, at least, is better than that Saint Sebastian you have got in your church falling into pieces."

That is how the elders narrated the conversation that took place between the archpriest and that villager of penetrating wisdom. That Saint Sebastian was an ancient image, but for ordinary people, such as these, it was no more than a shoddy worthless thing. The archpriest didn't safeguard the integrity of the martyr but replied that, in his opinion, the little chapel had no dignity to be consecrated, since it was an extremely poor property not distinguishable from the poor houses of the village. It was Joaquim Viveiros again, who according to the memories of the elders, tried to destroy the arguments of the special magistrate, "Our Lord and Our Lady were also poor, and those who live in the houses of our village are people, and nobody will remove them because their houses are not suitable. Our Lady won't suffer any cold since the saints do not suffer, isn't it? If our houses are suitable for people to live in them, that little chapel is also gracious enough to have an image of Our Lady. If Your Eminency does not want to convince the Bishop we will go and talk to him."

Sometime later, they consecrated the little chapel.

XVIII Duke

It felt ludicrous at his age to walk up to the altar and tell the priest he would take the children that God should like to give him. He had already christened stones with names such as Leonor, Isabel, Mariana, Margarida and Madalena. He sold the majority of his sheep, as he became lonelier at home and in the village. The few sheep he had left were not there to make money but to be useful to the mountain and him. He had saved money in the bank, for the daughters and sons he neither did raise nor educated. That would be enough to make him happy, if he needed nothing else to be happy.

Afterwards, there was no one left to care for the cheese, but used to them, he always repeated the gestures and rhythms. The cheese had no significant differences both in taste and appearance. When he lacked the time or patience, he gave the milk to the cats and dogs abandoned when their owners left the village uncaring for their future.

With so much spare time, he started caring for those houses in the village, which were on the verge of ruin. Beautiful Laura's house, the young widow with eyes as black as the night, had lost part of its roof and was disemboweled. It was the second house on the way up, and the first to get derelict. Since there was no cure for it, he carved on a rock the time of the abandonment: "This house died in 1966."

He fixed the roofs, covered holes in the frames and silts and cleaned the spider webs. He did not ask for money for his work and the little expenses he incurred. Some abandoned houses had their doors unlocked, for others he obtained permission and keys from their owners to care for them.

Whilst the empty houses seemed to have no complaints, the cats seemed impervious to abnormal absences; the dogs were benumb, walking as orphans on the mountain, searching for their masters and food. At its worst, there were more than a dozen stray cats and three dozens of dogs. He cared for as many as he could do.

Manuel Cordovão enjoyed his lunch of bread and prosciutto when he saw the Farias' dog climbing up the hill. Three days earlier, the two went away with their son. He went to a men's old age asylum, and she went to a women's one. They might not have kissed for quite some time, but surely they did it, at the moment of separation. There was no one else left in the village apart from Torre Velha, Graça and him.

The creature walked slowly. It stopped ten steps away from him, its eyes following the movements of his hands between the stone table and his mouth. Manuel shouted, "Come here, Duke." It came unhurriedly, probably because he couldn't rush, and waited, its head almost glued to his right leg. Manuel cut the bread and prosciutto in half to give it bit by bit. He slowly chewed every part of prosciutto on one side of its mouth, then, on the other side, tasting the hunger. Swallowed it clattering the jaws, with a dry clicking of teeth. His wet pouting lips were slightly separate, as if tasting saliva.

Duke had no pedigree, a cattle dog of no particular breed apart from its name, a sheer irony. It had a reputation, though, and it would be impossible for Duke to abandon its masters as someone who abandons a dog. He waited for them all day long, at the place where the car departed. When he heard an engine thrust its ears towards its eyes and the sound, wagging its tail in a sign of joy. Then, twisted the head to follow the passage and disappearance of the car and lied down again. That is how he was seen on the day they departed, and another day, and yet another.

Maybe he went, at night, to make sure that the masters were home. It only stopped its vigil when the hunger instinct was stronger than its instinct of faithful affects. Duke went back to the road from sunrise to sunset, every day, looking out.

XIX The window

Manuel Cordovão started with Rita's house. He tried to keep the village as if it were alive, or, at least capable of receiving life, if life ever needed to shelter in the village.

At the window where Rita waited with her boyfriend, many a time, for the sunset there was this split windowpane. On those instances, Manuel saw her waiting, wishing that window to be another window at another house. He wished that other house being Graça's and the waiting for him. Gone was the time when that could have been possible, and when time goes by, the millisecond closest to the past is infinitely further away than thousand years in the future. He could have done with some patches to his heart, but that was it. With Rita for example.

Everything started happening so fast in the village... When the time came, he suddenly realized that Rita was the only spinster left, unattached to any boyfriend. Maybe he screwed it all. He had a rotten tendency to be impulsive as a thinker, and extremely cautious as a doer. They exchanged some smiles every now and then. Her neighbor, the old Simeão, knowledgeable of returned feelings assured him how confident he was that she loved him. They would make a lovely pair, what else did they wait for? Nothing, damn. Absolutely nothing, since that was exactly what happened when he saw Carlos, for the exact first time, a young man from Aldeia Nova do Vale, talking to her as if they were dating. What went wrong was the time he spent thinking about whether he loved her *per se* or just because there was no one else around.

(Half dozen years later, Graça's eldest daughter had the same age as Graça when she married. Seventeen years, although a serious period, was smaller than the difference of ages between Graça and Joaquim Torre Velha. However, he could not imagine anything more similar to incest than marrying one of her daughters.)

When Rita showed up, leaning firstly against the doorpost and sending a bit more of shade inside, he was finishing drawing milk from the udder in the shed. He looked at her and saw the Sun, starting to redden before it disappeared with an aura behind the waist lace. She said, "I came here to ask you to my wedding." Then, she stepped inside and sideways, leaning her back against the wall. Manuel got up and said, I mean, he said nothing, since what he said amounted to nothing: "So, you are marrying..." He walked slowly towards the girl, and, felt a sudden desire to kiss her. He had a harbinger, almost a certainty that she understood and desired it, as well. He came close, a few inches from her. She neither moved her body nor avoided his stare.

Gazing at her, as if fascinated, he stopped just like that. Rita was likewise. Then he remembered she would be getting married one of these days. Whenever Graça became angry at her husband or, regretted her marriage, she could imagine how better off she would be with him. The fruit you never tasted is always the tastier, but when you do, it is rotten. He put his hand on her shoulder. He was defending against himself and avoiding touching her with his body. "Sorry for dirtying you. I didn't mean to." It doesn't matter, be assured. "I wish you all the happiness." She would give her best, and she left with the first traces of twilight. She was already halfway between the shed and her house when Manuel said, "I'm not going, Rita. I cannot go." She stopped, turned at him and replied "You can't or won't?" He asserted, "I can't," and the girl started walking away with no more protestation than a fake "that's alright."

She may have tried her best to be happy, but may be Carlos didn't. She took her mother with her to a Cova da Piedade, since the husband got a job at the naval shipyard at Lisnave. A few years later, it became known they divorced. The old women who exhaled the last villages' last breath felt outraged. It was something unheard of from people of that village. She was a son of a bitch. The old men did not show their opinion but understood better. Maybe some of them had a heavy conscience, since they knew

that if they traded places with her, they might not resist the temptation of divorce for as long as she did. All that Manuel had left was the only consolation of not blaming himself for that kiss that never became anything but a desire.

XX The chair

Manuel could not avoid the tears when walked into old Vasco's house, even if he didn't want to shed them. There was the chair, at the usual place, where old Vasco spent most of his days, covered with what seemed to be centuries-old dust. It was in that chair where he used to tell fabulous stories, some older than him and other invented by him. If some child happened to mention "Let us go and listen to old Vasco tell a story," ten or twelve of them, from those who could barely walk to those who already attended Year 4, would immediately stamped through his door asking for a story.

They sat in front of him, crossed legs, all of them wanting to be as close as possible to the movement of his hands and to the revelations on his voice. "Once upon a time there was a princess..." a shepherd..., or a king who had three daughters... or a woman who had three sons... So many times for "once upon a time," and they always had the same anxiety, the same expectation and enthusiasm, no matter how many times they heard the story. They always feared for the goodies not being able to avoid serious situations, and that fear equaled their desire for punishment to the baddies or evil ones.

Old Vasco's strong hands with bulging veins and nerves draw castles in the air, and mountains, rivers and forests. They molded bodies for princesses and crowns for kings. They unshielded swords and threw arrows on the bull's eye. They tightened the ropes on the treacherous characters condemned to hanging while they unhinged the knots from the necks of the innocent.

Without those hands, old Vasco would not know how to tell stories, how to speak or how to cry.

When the movie about Our Lady of Fatima came to Aldeia Nova do Vale, on the school wall whitewashed on purpose, the children had already seen it through the hands and mouth of old Vasco. It was brilliant as his gestures became images and his voice transformed into various voices of earth and heavens.

The novel of the *Amazon Princess* was a children's favorite stories, required in almost every session of their fascination. Vasco imagined it was her own name. No one will ever know how much he added to the traditional story, of his own creation.

Before sitting down, Manuel cleared most of the dust, with as much attention as respect. He knew this story by heart, so many were the times he had listened to it. He imagined he was in the middle of the children there, eyes wide open as if they needed them to listen to the story.

He told that little crowd of no one in front of him:

*Once the poor shepherd
Guarding his flock
Atop his horse
Saw such a lovely girl go by*

*She was so attractive, so attractive
So comely as to enchant
The more he opened his eyes
He could not believe it*

The day went the night came

*The shepherd went to bed
He didn't want to sleep
To think of her only*

*His eyes went to sleep
Tired of so much staring
But even asleep
He kept on dreaming*

*Days went by and so did nights
So hard to get through
No matter how hard he tried
Forget her he could not*

*The girl he had thus seen
He could not have guessed
She was a princess of the kingdom
Where she would reign*

*One day the little princess
Didn't return back from her walk
Forthwith, the king ordered
Thousand men to look for her*

*"They stole my daughter
The one who finds her
Rest assured on the king's word
Marry her he will."*

*Looking and looking
To no avail
Came back after a month
All thousand all-crying*

*In the flock saw the shepherd
A strange sheep grazing
Knowing no owner
To look for*

*He called all shepherds
To show them the little sheep
None owned it
All wanted to buy*

*Not selling said the shepherd
No one will get it
Only its master.
If so could he prove.*

*When the day came
Sheep shearing time
Sheared them all*

But he did not want to

*Since it was so hot
Not wanted to disquiet it
Called it close to him
Started clipping it*

*Oh! What a wonder
No one could have guessed
That sweet sheep
Started talking to him.*

*"Shepherd what you do to me
You want to denude
I am the princess of the kingdom
You have to respect me*

*Soon as she spoke
Went on to transform
In that lovely little girl
He watched horse riding*

*"Look at my skirt
My travelling skirt
You cut its fringe
And more cuts to come"*

*The shepherd bowled over
It was something to marvel at
He took her to the parents
Crying for two months,*

*So momentous was the joy
So successful was the party
For three full months
Nothing but merrymaking*

*Now, dear listeners
It is time to wrap it up
The princess went to sleep
The shepherd got to bed*

At that stage, children always asked "Didn't they get married?" They didn't, old Vasco explained, because no one wanted to be their godparents. If one of them wanted to be a godparent he had to marry. Half, or even more, of the children arms went up, because some of them raised both arms. Old Vasco would pick up a couple of them, having the trouble of sharing the distinction between them so everyone had a shot at being a godparent to the princess and the shepherd. Manuel pretended to have ten or twelve arms raised and said, "I do; I do." Then, with a solemn voice pointed his right hand forefinger: "The shepherd's godfather is going to be Manuel and Graça is the godmother." He clapped on behalf of the audience and concluded:

*In the same bed they slept
They could well be together
Wed them the holy priest
In his most golden altar*

XXI The bed

Laura's house had been the first to shut down entirely, even before its owner immigrated. The kitchen partly in ruins for some years had some more bits coming down during that winter. The winds swept through that inner sanctum which had been so intimate to him, the lock broke down, and the half-detached wood planks from the door danced against the door sash. Manuel decided to fix them up so that the disemboweled house would not disclose its exposed entrails to the passers-by. He went for a hammer and nails, but before setting down to it, he walked through the house, which was a reflection of what all the village houses would become, come or take a year.

Only the bedroom was intact inside, with a bed still standing, but the blankets and sheets chewed by time and rats, showed bits of the mattress under a cover of dust that created a loathsome crust.

That was Laura's bed, the most damned and desired in the whole mountain. God should not give eyes like hers to a woman destined to become such a young widow. Either she should not have them or men ought to be blind so that she didn't have to live always in danger of damnation. Everything in her body made to measure such as those two black pearls that made desires glitter.

"Black as the devil," the old prude women would say, fiddling with their skirts down to their feet, or the younger girls envious of not having the same eyes. If the devil has eyes, these must have another color, or in case they are black, they would be as different from those as burning coals are different from the rarest of diamonds.

Once her husband passed away the only treasure she had left were those eyes and the enticing body she carried as dowry.

If those were her risks of damnation, those too were the motives for her salvation. No person deemed worthy of receiving favors from such high nobility, which refrained to dare desire her, so convinced were they that no one was worth Laura's sin. Nevertheless, her fame was as evil as her pulchritude, since there was no evidence of any attempts against the resistance of the fortress walls of her pudenda. If any reasonable opinion voiced her defense, there was another one guaranteeing that Laura was honest, not by her own volition but because the mountain men had their senses.

Those more distrustful women or those with more reasons to be against appearances stated as fact that only minor problems of conscience forced Laura to hide the scandal. For them, beauty was the cause and effect. Mud and dissolute life were positive synonyms. She sheltered in a private burrow so that no one could ever see the result of her depravation. Indeed! Hadn't she lived with her husband without generating a living creature during four years? She was infertile, wasted as the mountain cliffs; she could afford dirty tastes without ever having to wash diapers.

One day, a letter from afar reached Laura. A cousin from Fonte Gralha, kept away by birth and geography, felt lost in the best of Americas, California. He understood not a word of the language and never got used to their mores. There was no Portuguese, Latin or whatever similar girl of marrying age, in many a horizon around him. Where she to undertake to provide bearings to that canoe without a master, he would be grateful until they reached the human version of infinite. He would even give her the immense privilege of swapping from Purgatory to Heaven. He farewelled her with as much love

as "saudade¹⁷", not missing the miser valley and the meek mountain but her, an eighth generation girl cousin remembered from three or four "hi there" exchanged in their lifetimes.

Firstly, she replied yes. It was well thought, measured and feared. For the first few days, her instinct advised her to respond no; during the following days, her intuition and pauperism advanced the yes as mere hypothesis; at last, penury alone gave its final sentence with a yes capable of crossing the seas. Afterwards, from the end of the world – seen in a perspective from here – she wrote a pungent reassertion of love with the utmost result of choosing word by word, a few hundred of them to fill up that letter. That and the following letters. The sender could not muster much more with the little practice of the language in which he first said the words mother and father, since most of the time he expressed himself by gestures.

Bit by bit, the details of the union were advanced and agreed. After a while, in that painful task of writing there was an allusion to marriage by power of attorney. Going from here to there and once one sets foot in the blessed America, it has barely reached half of the way when the destination is California. Laura thought it exaggerated or else they had lied to her about the immense sea. The bridegroom could not come to Portugal. He would be represented at the wedding by a first cousin from Fonte Gralha. All this was due to such long distance that so much took away from the purse and time at work. This cousin knew how to read and write well, having developed a keen sense to unknit bureaucratic whorls at Viseu, where he worked. He handled everything so fast that even the most endowed busybodies had not a hint at what was going on, before Laura announced it. "Calculating" they said about her in what could almost become a compliment.

The day after the wedding, those who defended the thesis of an immoral ex-widow rejoiced with the news that came by. The cousin who represented the husband took his role so seriously, and so did she, that they decided to live as true spouses after that day. Ever since such day, no one had any practical word, to defend the girl.

They lived for some time under the anathema of concubinage until a priest from the cathedral told them that the marriage could be made nullified since she had not cohabited with the lawful husband. They were elated by the news. They did not even know it to be possible for those who didn't share their bodies but only their minds.

At the Aldeia Nova da Serra village, there was disbelief; everyone was as ignorant of the canonical laws as the debauched couple was. It was then when rumors started that Laura was going to marry a third time, more in accordance with her style now than on the previous occasions. There was disillusion in the spirits who corrupted like moth; they soon had to reformulate old mistrusts when learning that she gave birth to a baby girl. It was the first of two kids she would take to Luxembourg, where her husband settled, a country they had never heard of and whose name they would hardly learn.

XXII

The mirror

The mirror in front of Teresa did not irradiate light. Time had it blinded.

In front of it, she made hair braids. At that time, her long hair reached the waist, in a display worth watching, often conceived of by Manuel Cordovão.

17 Translator's Note in Wikipedia Saudades (pron. [sɐu'dad(ɨ)] in European Portuguese, is a Portuguese/Galician word for a feeling of longing for something that one is fond of, which is gone, but might return in a distant future. It often carries a fatalist tone and a repressed knowledge that the object of longing might never return. Saudade has no direct English translation; its translation is dependent on context. It originates from the Latin word *solitatem* (loneliness, solitude), but developed a different meaning. Loneliness in Portuguese is *solidão* (a semi-learned word), from Latin *solitudo*. Few languages in the world have a word with such meaning, making it a distinct mark of Portuguese culture. It has been said that this, more than anything else, represents what it is to be Portuguese

Everyone living in the mountain was a pauper, but Teresa and her mother belonged to the lowest caste. All they had left was an expression of reconciled dignity; her mother pretending to be a widower from a husband who sailed to Brazil never sending any message back home, Teresa had no reasons to long for a dad she never met. Both were slender, more due to hunger than the desire to be skinny. Fortunately, maybe, Teresa was not a smart girl and that led her to give up school right at Year 1. Wasn't the dictator right when saying, "An educated population is an unhappy one"?

Her mother died when she was eighteen. They found her a job working as a "maidservant" with a wealthy family who spent their holidays at Santarém. She met, and he met her, a boy from there, and they got married with all the happiness in the world at the Church of Milagre (Miracle). Along the way rested the humiliation imposed by the lady of the house who locked up all cupboards and offered her the bread counted and sliced. Afterwards, she went to France. For nearly thirty years, she never set her feet back at the mountain or even in Portugal. That explains why Manuel Cordovão did not immediately recognize her on a late July afternoon. She had aged, fattened and lost her plait. When he realized who she was, after a solid and long hug and when he heard her name as an echo, unheard of for so long, he stared at her and thought, "Jesus, I am getting old!"

Because she could not read, she could never obtain any news from the village, something she never missed or needed. Her husband drank half a bottle of cognac a day until the deadly cirrhosis caught up with him, but fortunately, she had her three children married. Suddenly, without any apparent reason, she felt the urge to come back where she too had been unhappy. She hired a taxi to take her up to Aldeia do Vale, and asked the driver to take her luggage a dozen steps up the track, since nobody would rob her there and she would get someone to come and get her luggage. "Times are different now, madam", warned the taxi driver, but she didn't believe him.

Climbing up the hill, bedazzled by seeing only some smidgens of smoke near the creek, even more surprised was she when no dog barked when she reached the village. She missed all the hands she expected to hold with decades of astonishment. She understood. There was no more left but memory ghosts. There was no evidence of life but at Graça and Torre Velha's place. That explains her sudden excitement when hugging Manuel, as if grabbing a tree to avoid falling into the abyss.

"Where are the others?"

"There are no others. Only her and Torre Velha."

"Where have they all gone?"

"Some did the same as you, the remainder died, as your mother."

"And your wife and children?"

"I don't have and never did."

"So sorry!"

"Who are you sorry for?"

"Me."

I will tell you later; she could have added. Because when her heart quietened, and her soul got a new breath, she stated,

"You know Manuel... I loved you terribly. I had no hope of you ever loving me. I was a silly girl, the silliest in the mountain, and you were the smartest in the whole world..."

She was already at his house when she mentioned this. She had not wanted to return to her house, transformed as all the others, in a mausoleum of memories. Manuel had gone with the donkey fetch her luggage.

"Did you suffer a lot?"

"Not that much..."

"What are you going to do now?"

"I will stay at your house if you let me."

Manuel got troubled with the idea. What would he do having her inside these walls?

"People can talk..."

"Who can speak, if there is no one left to know that we are living together?"

"There is Graça and Joaquim Torre Velha."

Graça... She understood that Graça was still remarkably much inside his head and maybe inside his heart. A woman does not need to be the smartest in the whole world to know these things. For a man, not even so much intelligence is enough...

Manuel stopped going to the little church where he used to go, late afternoon, to wait for Graça to come and lock it. She cleaned, decorated and opened its doors only for him, so that Our Lady of the Snows could accept his visit to the two ladies. They met on the road a few days later.

"Is Teresa staying with you?"

"Yes." He made an effort to respond naturally, as she also had probably made an effort to ask it in a sedate manner.

"But that is a sin, Manuel."

Against who, he felt tempted to ask. However, he improvised an excuse:

"We are going to get married."

"Good on you."

Really?"

"Indeed, you need someone so much, to take care of you."

Teresa lived happily. At least she looked like it. Manuel enjoyed coming home and having someone waiting for him, with a tight hug and the table set.

Teresa went out alone one afternoon to do some walking to the fountain, and Manuel could not resist the curiosity to check out what medication she took every day. Then, he understood why she returned: she came back to die in the mountain. She had cancer.

Manuel disguised his anguish, as much as possible, but not enough for Teresa to see his unrest.

"What's the matter with you?"

"Nothing... I do not know how to tell you this..."

"Speak up!"

"I wanted to marry you..."

Teresa hugged and kissed him a lot. Manuel's mercy turned into affection, and this fondness became love. They married at the small church. Graça and Torre Velha were their wedding godparents.

The day came when Teresa could not go on any longer. The table yet to be set and her arms were not waiting to hug him. He called for her, but the answer did not arrive. He found her, silently crying, lying in bed.

"What's wrong with you?"

She thought she was about to make a revelation. The same disease took her mother. She had no intention of going to any hospital and just wanted him to let her die there, by charity.

Manuel cried for all those days when he had to pretend to share the same joy as she did.

Teresa had enough money for a funeral with many wreaths and enough to celebrate two or three masses for her soul. After paying these, the medical expenses, and the chemist, he should still have some money left. She also gave him her sons' addresses so that he could write to tell them she had died. Her children did not even dreamed of her being sick; they only imagined she was missing home, but she had come here to let the evil kill her. She never imagined dying in his arms. God bless.

Manuel cared for her as best as possible, and Graça came up to lend a hand during the last days when Teresa could hardly get up from bed... He also brought the doctor to give her prescriptions against the pain since there was not much else to be done. Manuel never went far away from home, so that he could come and help her with a morphine shot when her pain was more acute. On her instants of relief, she admitted, in spite of everything, to be happier than ever. That everything killed her after three and half months of shared suffering. She was smiling when she said for a last time "Thank you."

XXIII The cradle

The cradle from Joana's son, *good Lord João, the last...* He did not grow up with the passing of time as his master, who by now should have become a full mature man. A ruse of hazard mockery by the end of the village. It seemed that all the village's spiders went into ambush waiting for their turn. Once there, when they completed the dossel of webs they left the battlefield, since there were not enough decent enemies.

He was always impressed when thinking about all the villages, which succumbed under any given dam. How can one survive the drowning of his own house? How can you remember it, transformed in an ornament inside a giant aquarium? He had heard about this old guy, perhaps from the Vilar Dam or Santa Luzia's, may be from another one or none. He had stayed home until the river flooded his room, where he slept on the floor. He heard neither requests nor pleads, did not follow any orders. He had every inch of land measured in length and height with a spike delimiting the end of the pastureland. Every time the skies threatened rain, he summed up tons of clouds, and once abated the torrents, he would get another spike to calculate how much had the water gone up. He had a raft made for the moment when he could no longer stay there, and left without ever looking back. He went to live at a place where all the waters flew off, and where no flooding ever occurred, not even Noah's flood.

Seen from afar, the landscape at Aldeia Nova da Serra was still remarkably the same. No streets submerged, and no houses drowned, the quiet little chapel preaching to almost no one. The only living souls were Manuel, Graça and Joaquim Torre Velha.

One of these days, I will be all the people around here. What have I done so far? Was it worth having lived and being alive? For three months of her life, he made Teresa feel happy when she could no longer be. But not Graça or himself. A scoundrel... He examined his conscience at any given moment of his remembrances. He was brilliant, they said. Always healthy, as he knew well, had genuine feelings, he acknowledge that. What good was it? What good was it for him and the others? "God made me in good clay but I was a terrible ceramist." He confessed it in order to listen to himself as in most confessions he had made, since he was his best listener and rarely had others to listen to him.

He felt like smashing that cradle, that fake proclamation of life. What would have happened if he had children? How many would he have farewellled by now? Certainly, almost all of them. He would be even lonelier. Solitude is bigger when there are more absences.

The mountain people had spread throughout the four corners of the world. God only knew if they missed that village which behaved like the stepmother in Cinderella. Probably they didn't miss it... Only Teresa came back to stay, but so short was the delay that it was not enough for her to regret it. Only she came back, and perhaps because she was not so smart. How is it that intelligence does not always know how to love?

He got this urge again to destroy the cradle. He had a tendency never to follow his impulses, to control himself, bridoon of himself. What if he stopped being like this? Isn't regret part of the revenge?

Senseless questions. Silly ideas. What if any given day he wanted to look again at the cradle from the *good Lord João, the last*, to excogitate about the life that once was there? Lilies once cut from their stems cannot return to them. He had to stay there in his space with no laughing with his sneering webs.

XXIV The boots

Mariana lived in such a time warp that after the children arrived for their father funeral she offered them his boots in case they might still need them one day. The boots were still at the corner where he left them before falling ill. Manuel Cordovão saw them when he came to help the body walk over to the valley for the first time, not on his feet. Seldom had he used the boots on that journey. When he ordered them to the shoemaker, Francisco Poços told him that he wanted them to last for the rest of his days. "Only if you die young or if you carry them on your shoulders," the shoemaker replied. That he did for many a time. He came down from the mountain with the sandals on, keeping them inside a hole in a fence wall. He put them back on his way up, just like most women did when coming down and going up with old wood clogs or old shoes. This, they did, in order to preserve the only pair of decent shoes to go before God or before the most respected people but not the mountain neighbors.

He was moved by that serene presence of worn and wrinkled leather, another way of telling the story of the last years on the life of Francisco Poços.

He had arrived alone and without a warning at the village, during the last month of the first year of the Spanish Civil War¹⁸.

He came without calluses or a history. Soon they imagined him with a job and a color: smuggler and red. They started preparing a biography, both brave and uncouth. It grew up, step by step to heartless cold blood crime. He fought against the border and the smuggling vigilantes. More than that, he had even killed a Fiscal Guard. No, they were on border patrol. And he had killed two nationalists ... three... five... seven!

However, his life in the village was the denial of any violence one could have imagined in his past. He never got angry by words although sometimes, some people thought, he had a terrible character. Seldom did he drink in public, due to his temper and poverty. On the day that Salazar¹⁹ fell ill, he walked into the grocery shop, by the time it was already operating as a tavern. Inexcusably, offered a drink to every one of half a dozen men present there. When the dictator died, he repeated the unexpected generosity without uttering a word, apart from those needed to encourage them to take it.

He added the nothing he had brought to the nothing that Mariana had, freeing her from being a spinster for the rest of her life, since she had reached the age of 28 without a suitor. She had inherited two sons and two daughters, from her mother, and she had to care for them until they became adults. Having no occupation, neither spud nor shepherd's stick, neither hammer nor pick, he accepted any work that became available. When he had no one paying for his bread, he followed the shepherds to the mountain to learn with them how to protect the herds. He became highly skilled at guarding sheep and goats, whenever someone got sick or when they needed him to do their job.

¹⁸ Translator's Note From 17 July 1936 - 1 April 1939

¹⁹ Translator's Note Portuguese dictator between 1926 and 1969

He did several days of work for the president of the Quintais community, who was extremely harsh and demanding but stingy when paying. He never liked him, because he was terribly subservient to those above him and an emperor when dealing with those below in the social scale. Some days after the young rich boy died, they had Sunday mass at Aldeia Nova do Vale on behalf of his soul. So it was the following Sunday and the third and fourth. He asked the priest if that would last for long. Yes, it would, since the pious defunct after learning he soon would become one, had left enough money to celebrate Sunday masses for a whole year in every church of the Quintais parish. Francisco Poços complained: "We suffered under him while he was still alive and we also have to pray God for His mercy? That is not right." The priest tried to harmonize *in memoriam* of the deceased, "A Christian must forgive." Indeed, he must, yes sir, but "He is dead; he is forgiven. That point of paying for his sins is for those who have the job of prayer of other people's sins, as you father. You will not see me in the church until the year of penance ends."

However, he never missed mass. For eleven months of posthumous expiation those boots took him to the Valsanto church. They said prayers there for defunct people who were less prominent in life positions and in wealth left behind. He became a heretic on the eyes of some and a just to others.

He never told his children the story behind the edge of the border, apart from a mere whisper of saving some "reds." He had seen a lot of three people hiding behind some rocks, a few yards away from the place where the country name changes from Spain. One of them got hurt, and the other two held him up. Soon afterwards, a group of four nationalists came by, so he went to them and extremely apprehensive warned them that behind each of the rocks around them, within a hundred yards radius, there was a republican man ready to kill them. The pursuers trusted the apparent conviction of the informant before running away more swiftly than when they were chasing the "reds".

He had never denied nor lied about it perhaps because he knew legends come up against the will of the ones who incarnate them, recounting more what their authors say than what their actors lived. Not even when according to the popular imagination his hands were still clean or when they dirtied them nine times with alien blood.

When she became too old to be alone they took Mariana to one of her daughter's house at Damaia. It lasted little more than a month for her to realize how bothersome her presence was to the others. She passed away two years later in an asylum disguised under the name of old age retirement home.

XXV The clock

The house of Manuel da Mota, who had gone to Switzerland with all his family had an extraordinary wall clock, not respected by the dust, the spiders and the time. He heard it so many times. Even he was just passing by on the street. It sounded on the hour just like a church bell, as the one at the church of Fonte Gralha, when sounding the Trinity. Its sound went up the hills in a straight line as if it were a bird who does not submit to the curves of old wicked horses.

That would be the clock of that sad, sad story of his Year 3 book, "The Saudade Clock²⁰" It was the first sad story he genuinely enjoyed although he felt like crying when

20 Translator's Note in Wikipedia Saudades (pron. IPA [sɐu'dad(ɨ)] in European Portuguese, is a Portuguese and Galician word for a feeling of longing for something that one is fond of, which is gone, but might return in a distant future. It often carries a fatalist tone and a repressed knowledge that the object of longing might really never return. Saudade has no direct English translation; its translation is dependent on context. It originates from the Latin word *solitatem* (loneliness, solitude), but developed a different meaning. Loneliness in Portuguese is *solidão* (a

reading it. Since he read it a lot, he knew it almost by heart. It started thus, "there is no people in the world friendlier to their mother country than the Portuguese. It is not known, however, where they inherited their huge wish to undertake for remote lands."

Well... where from came that wish? Had they gone up to the mountain and seen all those abandoned houses. It seemed that everyone was running away from a harbingered cataclysm. They left behind beds, cradles, everything, even that clock, that friendly and inconvenient clock, sweet on a sunny summer afternoon, rocking a coveted siesta, impertinent on the winter dawns, warning that time had come to leave the cozy bed and go milk the sheep before taking them to graze. Abandoned because it was troublesome in any trip and useless in the country of the clocks. It was as an old dog left at the mercy of the wolves' revenge; because its wolf was the time he has kept, year after year, since it migrated from Brazil in a non-return trip. From Brazil, so close to Argentina where the action took place in that story of the "Saudade clock." The story of a poor emigrant from Minho province who went to Buenos Aires with delusions of fortune but never found more than enough to soften the hunger without ever getting compensation for the "saudade." He heard a clock sounding the time on the most affluent jewelry shop of the city. "It had the same sound as the bell on my village's church," he would say, confessing at his deathbed when explaining that piece of luxury right in the middle of his shackle's misery. He had struggled a lot to be able to afford it. He died smiling and listening to his village's church bell sounding twelve noon...

The clock at the house of Manuel da Mota... It had been a long time since the clock knew what time it was. Two minutes past six, it announced in a silence of many years. Would it have stopped during a sunny afternoon or on a winter dawn? Could it have sounded the six hours as obliged just two minutes before? Would it have stopped with a final tic or a final tic-tac?

The sound in Manuel's memory was not any tic-tac... tic-tac... but a somewhat subdued tone, a small, monotonous, rocking vibration. If he closed his eyes, he saw the clock pendulum moving again as a swinging seesaw.

Just like a child on a seesaw... She was there once more... what a reverie... how much time lost, yours, time from before, looking at her beguiled; yours, now, thinking about the impossible, so hard because it wasn't...

She was at the swing. Stopped, readying herself to let go. Then, she started swinging her legs, slowly, with the rhythm of the rigmarole. And she went up and down, more and more, at the rhythm of the rigmarole, in a binary compass of well-defined *tempi* (allegro...adagio... allegro...adagio).

*Weather-vane weather-vane,
 Never stopping for a moment.
 Weather-vane, vane, vane
 My love's gone
 To Azemmour, Azemmour.
 Left on a galleon
 Broke my heart.
 Weather-vane, vane, vane
 Catch the good southerly,
 To bring, to bring
 My love from Azemmour,
 No wounds from dagger,
 No hurt from girl Moor
 To rob me, to rob me*

semi-learned word), from Latin *solitudo*. Few other languages in the world have a word with such meaning, making *saudade* a distinct mark of Portuguese culture. It has been said that this, more than anything else, represents what it is to be Portuguese.

*And take my life away,
The heart I had
Also sailed
In her lovely galleon.
If my captain dies
No blood's left in me
My heart dies
In the captain's chest*

He dusted off the clock. Manuel tried to wind it up, but the rusty mechanism refused to let the spring roll. If only he could listen again to that toc-tac (that's it, it was a toc-tac...) and the triumphal announcement of the hours. It was like going back in time, as if going to school and hearing eight clangs of the bell, or if coming home and the clock sounded four chimes. Perhaps he could listen to Graça's laughter on the group of students preceding him...

"What a fool I am..."

Silly, Manuel? Why all those tears that escaped the hope you had to hide them from yourself?

XXVI The weaver's loom

At the abandoned weaver's loom, only the spiders weaved again. Even they had abandoned their mantles of webs, left as fishing nets on a fishless seaside beach.

Mantles weaved by Madalena reached a faraway fame. In the parish, they knew her as the Mountain Weaver, further away they called her the weaver from Quintais. Although she didn't like it, she did not complain since it served no good. Her fame brought in large profits because she made her blankets to order, sometimes even from places whose names she never heard before. Once she outlived that glorious fame, another nasty one came to haunt her. Its reasons are not comparable to those of the Saint in the Gospel, because she barely had any time for connubial duties and their regular consequences. She even worked from moonrise to moonrise, because when the sun was up she had the house to care for, the cheese to make, children and a husband to feed. Fate had played a trick on her. As if on purpose, when most couples had to wait – sometimes in vain – for male children to help out on the hard work at the "courelas" and on the mountain, she had three boys before God brought her a girl.

Manuel Cordovão had a faint remembrance. He was probably aged five or six, when a minister came through Quintais paying his compliments from Lisbon. He had to stop at Aldeia Nova do Vale, to greet the people from this village and the mountain shepherds. The president of the local community wanted to give His Excellency, the Minister, what best the village could provide. Some came with excellent cheese, but the cheese one eats one forgets. The ideal memento, from the hard working and creative people, would be a blanket to warm His Excellency in winter and decorate his bed in summer. He would know that Portugal could count on this village, and its people although its people could not matter much on Portugal. They only remembered the village, to call men to service the king or the Republic at the time of military conscription. Once the boys learn how to shoot a gun, they put them back on their rustic stone homes.

The head of the local community asked Madalena to give a blanket to the minister. "Think how grateful he will be when knowing someone thought of him! Maybe he will have them make a better public road, for us to go from one village to another. Perhaps a public fountain, or, who knows, may be electricity..." Madalena heard the

request with amazement, so they said. Then she asked, "How much money does the minister make?" The local community leader didn't know for sure, but ventured a number: "may be three "contos"²¹ a month." She glanced at the blanket on the loom and replied with scorn, instead of the expected appreciation for that exorbitant amount, "I don't get that money in a year!"

She became damned. Patriotically damned. Niggard, avaricious. She even refused to accept the order, for the blanket she was going to start, proving she wasn't greedy. She passed on that order to Maria dos Anjos, since she was poor and was getting married the following month.

They started selling most of her mantles with an undefined origin. She did not live long enough to know that carnations can also be weaved.

XXVII

The prayer beads

Maria Angelina's bed still had on its bar the prayer beads she used to pray until a few days before she joined the peace of the angels. The beads were worn out by years of prayers. Prayers for all those who faced danger in the seas and temptations on land; for the penitence of all sinners and the virtue of all damsels; for the souls in Purgatory, especially those who had no one to remember them; for the sick and the healthy; for peace and soldiers at war... She also prayed for Salazar, to whom she reckoned she owed almost everything that did not come directly from God.

Manuel Cordovão was not a man for many prayers. However, he felt the urge to take with him the prayer beads, to place them on the bar of his bed, as if they could take care of him. Those beads would never erase the many Pater Noster and Hail Mary that Maria Angelina prayed. It was as if she were continuing her penance on behalf of mountain shepherds, now reduced to only one, him.

He enjoyed going to the small chapel but rarely used words on his prayers. He looked for solitude. For him, the mountain had the same meaning as the crowds for those who live in human beehives. He felt lonely, truly lonely in that small area of half a dozen meters of isolation and absence. Waiting for Maria da Graça to come and close the door gave him a stronger argument than her own presence, since he knew that to wait for something is a sure way of being alive.

He had learned his Sunday school with old Angelina. Wrong notions filled with delicious intentions derived from raw ignorance. She almost cried when she talked about the poor little boys not baptized that could not go to heaven. Or, when she talked about the suffering of Our Lord in His passion and death. Any of her sins (certainly she had no sins or were not large enough to be noticed at the Final Judgment), as well as those from the children in our village (and she didn't want them to get lost), had gotten into the body and soul of Golgotha's martyr with the same violence as the crucifixion nails and the thorns, the scorn and disdain of those who condemned Him.

Were hers the biggest errors in the whole world and humanity would be saved from itself... There is always someone willing to use other people's ignorance to give reason to his force, and to use other people's kindness as a force of evil. If Salazar got Portugal out of the Great War it was the terrorists who wanted to take Angola, which was always ours²²; at least there was peace in the motherland since the sea makes everything further away and unbeknown, except those who were seen crying when departing these shores. This crying thing when departing is an adage you cannot run

²¹ Translator's Note: in the old Portuguese currency one thousand escudos was called one "conto" One thousand Escudos is currently, the equivalent to 5 euros.

²² Translator's Note: Angola is ours, is ours was a patriotic slogan used during the Salazar dictatorship

away from, be it for some to eat more bread or for others to protect Empires and other human vanities. Above them all, there was God and His interpreter on the land who could do no more for his people, but kept well and safe, the congregation from much worse wolves than the mountain ones. It was, thus, worth praying for his health, saying with the saints' and the ignorant, "May Your Will Be Done," providing God with the blame for hunger and other miseries, since He seemed capable of erring; only the man in Santa Comba²³ couldn't.

Manuel respected the cradle of the *good Lord João, the last* and its role at the house, as he respected old Vasco's chair and the quietness of Francisco Poços' boots. Maria Angelina's beads were as much sacred as those things. If only he knew, what she wanted him to do, he would follow her wishes. However, he had to decide on his own.

Having doubts, he made sure he would not have her memory profaned in order to better protect the mountain. The mountain was so devoid of souls caring for it that it didn't matter if the beads stayed at the Maria Angelina's bed bar, where she had prayed and suffered, or elsewhere in the world.

XXVIII **The letter from America**

Master João Bernardo was a shoemaker and blacksmith. Putting shoes on human or irrational creatures was not enough for him and his family's subsistence, and that is the reason why he learned those two trades. Since he did not want to offend people, he defined himself as a shoemaker who also put shoes on animals. If he described himself as a blacksmith who also put shoes on people this would undermine the dignity of those sensible thinking bipeds. Furthermore, he also did any work needed in brass or steel; he also brought all mail to the village when he came back from any job at Aldeia Nova do Vale or any other village where he had gone to deliver his goods. He brought all correspondence and left it at the grocers' tavern or the tavern's grocer, according to the time of his arrival.

He came to the village once the business of putting shoes on people and animals was defeated by brand shoes and car tires. When the village became a natural reserve for half a dozen persistent mountaineers who didn't want to have anywhere else to go, he left for America, since he had received the pledge of an unexpected and awkward working contract. A son, who migrated there, had sent him a sponsorship letter. He should go, and fake being a blacksmith from about one hundred or more years before, in one of those places like a living museum where they recreate the times and lives in a village of pioneers. He didn't understand the whole idea but gladly accepted the move to the land of plenty where the past was able to pay for the present of many people.

He left behind his double workshop and took nothing with him, the furnace ready to be lit and all materials ready to be used. Anyone who knew how to do it could revive his shop in no time.

²³ Translator's Note: Santa Comba was the birthplace and place of abode of the dictator Salazar.

It was at his place where they have played the last *sueca* (a game of cards²⁴) in the mountain. The table, chairs and even the bottle with some leftover *aguardente*,²⁵ were still there.

Next day, with Master João Bernardo departure, the village had only three men left: uncle Amadeu, Joaquim Torre Velha and Manuel Cordovão. That is why that last session of *sueca* was like a farewell in a quiet death vigil that not even the *aguardente*-filled cups were able to stimulate.

The players were drawn up and given a playing card to each of them. Manuel and Joaquim Torre Velha had the lowest cards, and they formed a team.

Manuel would rather have him as an opponent, since, in case he won, that would constitute a small revenge, albeit insignificant by whatever the other owed him for an entire life that was the opposite of what he desired. Any last day is always memorable, even more than the first one, even if it is only a mere game of *sueca*.

To avoid an endless succession of games in which those at a disadvantage could claim their right to requital, it was agreed that victory could be claimed when one of the teams reached six wins.

Manuel nurtured the idea of not making a tremendous effort to win, giving Torre Velha the small vexation of a loss in the game. Perhaps this was the game he least wanted to avoid in his entire life. Manuel was honest, and it has long been said that gambling shows a person's character. No matter how much he disguised the intent – if he let it transform into an accepted temptation – he would not be able to bear his dishonesty, since everything he did was always defined by his conscience and not because of what others would perceive or judge him for. So, he played concentrating on each trick (called *vaza*), counting his own points and the others', calculating the risks and trying to understand what each letter revealed about the other players' cards.

Game after game, the string of wins and losses gave no pair an advantage of more than a game, until they reached four all. After that, Manuel and Torre Velha easily won the last two.

When playing the last card and knowing victory was assured, Manuel felt sadness as big as if that was the greatest loss of a lifetime. Every time someone left the village, his melancholy increased proportionally to the reduced number of people left in the village. It seemed that all who bade farewell felt the same. They felt it in the same proportion as those who farewelled by staying behind.

The other two players started remembering that last night as one of the most valuable of their lives. Old Amadeu maintained that it had been sheer luck for Manuel and Torre Velha, and if he had another chance with Master João Bernardo and a deck of cards between them, he would make sure they would know what a loss meant.

On a given afternoon, they were chatting at Torre Velha's front door. Manuel took a deck of cards from his pocket, shuffled well, told him to cut and asked uncle Amadeu to deal, as if master João Bernardo were there. "Are you crazy?" said the old guy, nevertheless obeying. Manuel picked up an envelope, put into it the remaining ten cards and explained: "I am going to send these ten cards to master João Bernardo. Please Mr Joaquim, play and I'll tell him, so he can decide what to play next."

²⁴ Translator's Note: Sueca is a game for four players in 2 teams, with partners sitting opposite from each other. It is played with 40 cards (remove the 8s, 9s, 10s from a standard 52-card deck). The rank of the cards in each suit, from highest rank to lowest one, is: **Ace, 7, King, Jack, Queen, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2.**

As well as the high position of the seven (known as "manilha" or "bisca" to Portuguese speaking players), notice that the jack beats the queen. This is very common in Portuguese card games, a resonance of the Old Portuguese decks where the jack was thought of as a knight and the queen corresponded to a maid.

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sueca_\(game\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sueca_(game))

²⁵ Translator's Note: the local firewater or brandy.

Facing their amazement, he explained. Each of them would keep the cards while awaiting the reply from their distant mate. When the reply came, they would all get together and would finish the trick. Afterwards, they would start another round and Manuel Cordovão would write again explaining how they played. "That will never end!" said the old man, showing more satisfaction than blame.

Each reply from America took, at least, two weeks to arrive. Then, the three men met at the house of Joaquim Torre Velha, with uncle Amadeu's wife keeping company to Maria da Graça, and they waited with anxiety the revelation of the card returned. Sometimes, the evening *sueca* was no more than that. Manuel opened the envelope, put the playing card sent by master João Bernardo on the table, on top of the other three cards and, if this came to win the trick they would put their cards away and wait for another two weeks. When his turn to deal came, he forewarned if they wanted trumps, up or down, but old Amadeu noticed. They were as happy as if no one was absent.

Old Amadeu got sick when they had a draw at two games, but he almost won the fifth game at three to one. He lasted until the penultimate trick, which he won, and he would have won the game if master João sent trumps to cut a king played by Torre Velha. No trumps came. However, Manuel swapped one of his cards and showed it to the almost moribund as if it were his partner's. "You won uncle Amadeu." The old man smiled happily for a last time. Manuel could have stolen gold to make him smile during another game of cards.

XXIX **The barber**

The room at master Gil, where the barbershop operated, was still full of memories of his art. Pure art, praised by the self and those subjected to the scissors and shaving razor. Similarly to the shoemaker cum blacksmith who put shoes on men and animals alike, this one also cut the hair and sheared animals. The sheep after his shearing did not have the emaciated look of the others. It was like a strange reincarnation, with the sheepskin as a golden fleece, filled with tiny waves of wool, their paws simulating canes, their elongated necks, their bellies like half-filled balloons and their bodies covered in red spots due to the pinch of the scissors. He left them all with about a millimeter of hair, but none showed any marks from a prick.

The seat was still there with holes on the armrests' leather; the headrest crushed and the chair broken. There was an old rusty cut-throat razor, a shaving brush with twisted bristles, the mug to make shaving foam, and leather-strops to blunt the blades.

Hundreds of issues of newspapers "Jornal do Fundão," "A Bola" and others piled at a corner, together with clippings of articles that master Gil most enjoyed. He waited for his clients immersed in his reading and those who could read also expected their turn likewise. Manuel often read aloud for his clients. He searched in the disintegrating pile, chewed by mice and worn out by the time, for some subject he could remember and that pleased him. He found, almost intact, a copy of the series *Mythical Portugal (Portugal Mítico)* and various articles referring to the hinterland and the difficult conditions for those living there. In the newspaper "A Bola," the only news items related to the national soccer team and roller-skating hockey. On the walls, reproductions of those national teams and another one of Vicente, one of most esteemed Portuguese players of all times. Not long before, Manuel had read an article where they wrote that when the sports' newspapers became daily, quality newspapers in Portugal vanished. It was, certainly, an exaggeration, but indeed, he no longer felt emotional with tearful eyes and a steady lump on his throat. This had happened when he read the story of the first win by Manuel Faria at the S. Silvestre marathon in São Paulo. It was just as if he had accompanied the athlete racing behind everyone else and slowly regaining field positions

until he came shoulder to shoulder with the Olympian and preferred Vladimir Kuts. Two compact rows of spectators shouted "Faria! Faria! Portugal! Portugal!" The Russian became so worn out trying to resist the advance of the Portuguese runner that ended the event on the eighth position. Ever since that day, Manuel started believing that there are no inferior people. Sometimes they forget they have a heart, or that others also have one. The mountain heart barely pumped. The most difficult is to race alone against time. All that desolation meant he was losing the battle. His mountain was the Avenue Paulista. He would keep the village standing for as long as possible. Even without the Finish line in sight, without anyone whispering to him "Manuel! Manuel! Portugal! Portugal!"

Master Gil left the village when there were less than few hairs left on the heads of the few remaining men.

XXX

Torre Velha's testament and last will

For Torre Velha, Manuel became a kind of elder son. His daughters did not have the kind patience of their mother and the sons had not inherited the strong personality of their father. Seldom did they come back to the mountain. And when they did, they could not avoid complaining about past and present, cursing all years prior to their departure from the village as if it that departure were a deportee's goodbye from the place of exile.

Torre Velha got mad at them. It seemed they accused him of a crime, which consisted of having them born in those summits of the world. He would rather not remember their farewells. "Manuel, what I miss is the time when they were small children. Nowadays, if I didn't see their faces I could even think they were not my sons and daughters. What a man had to endure to make the kids become grown-ups, and now it is as if I had them growing up in hell."

Manuel understood that Torre Velha needed more and more his company as the village became depopulated. They chatted every day and Manuel was often invited for dinner. Torre Velha did it with admirable intentions not understanding how much it hurt him, sitting at the table with Graça. She didn't cook for Manuel but allocated a portion of what she prepared for the couple. During those moments, Manuel even felt sorry for himself, as he would have felt for anyone down and out. The sheltered solitude – he thought – is a kind of abandonment similar to those without a home where to stay. As he had always thought, a house without a wife is a place without a soul. At Graça and Torre Velha's place, he felt like a beggar. Recalling the name of a book that most impressed on him, he saw himself as a beggar for a miracle that never occurred.

Manuel envied Torre Velha's courage when he told him, almost with indifference, that he suffered from a deadly disease. He would never complain. He would never thank the favors received and Manuel Cordovão understood that as a delicate manner on its own terms. One late afternoon, before the shadows cooled the air, forcing him to shelter at home, Torre Velha seemed to dictate his testament, albeit absent-minded as if his didn't belong to him. Sitting on a rock, head down without ever staring at Manuel, he kept on drawing lines on the soil with a dry brushwood. "I have never bought burnt wood. I never dirtied the creek's water before the animals drank it. I have never killed anyone. However, there are many ways of killing without having to take someone's life. It is also killing to change what a life should normally be.

"One of my uncles came back rich from Brazil. My father had a vision to get me to do some studies; he wanted me to become a doctor. He wanted to borrow money from my uncle, they said he came back immensely rich, very rich – I already said it. We were supposed to pay him back when we could repay, at the latest, when I started working, paying him a higher interest rate than the rates from the bank, in case my

uncle wanted the money back. He didn't lend the money; he said he couldn't because he was not as rich as people thought.

"As you are well aware, I didn't do any studies and stayed uncouth, as you know. But, look, Manuel I am rude, but I have a heart."

He shut for a while, as if talking tired him.

"Manuel, I am going to tell you the truth. I never had any rich uncle. My father never thought of sending me to study. I only said so in order for you to understand what I am about to tell.

"I know you saw no wolf whatsoever, on the day after the wedding. I knew it right away, Manuel. I know what you were thinking of. Do you understand why I said there are other ways to kill without taking someone's life? What could I have done? I changed the existence of two people a lot. Forgive my honesty, I feel sorry for that, but I do not regret it. I do not regret either to have felled so many trees. Sometimes, it even feels as if I was sorry for felling down so many hundreds of years of life. But what else could I do, Manuel, what else?

"I always had plenty of esteem for Graça. She always respected me, and you know it better than anyone else does. That woman is a saint, Manuel. I don't need to swear it since you know her extremely well.

"I don't know whether I should say this or if this sounds right... in a few days' time, both of you will be left alone in the mountain. People who will learn about it will start thinking... you know what I mean... you are both still more or less young, alone in this end of the world...

"Nobody comes back from the other world. It is unheard of. Even if someone came back, I wouldn't. Do you get it?

"I had to tell you this. May Our Lady of the Snows bless you both. And forgive me for having lasted so long... "

All this talk was imagined by Manuel. His life had more imagined things than real ones. However, some of those would become true one day... Nevertheless, Manuel didn't want death to speed up its work on Torre Velha's ailing body.

XXXI

Water from Pure Mountain

Happiness came almost half a century late, but it came. The village never seemed as inhabited as now, with only Maria da Graça, down there, waiting for him.

It was not yet noon. He came down slowly, because he enjoyed that anxiety. He felt happy since his was not a return to solitude, as it happened for so many years. He left his sheep under the shade of the house and got inside to change his clothes. There was a note on top of the table, but that was old news. What was new was its starting sentence "My dear Manuel," instead of just "Manuel." Perhaps because in the past Graça didn't dare say "dear," and "Manuel" sounded as not enough. He read it slowly, very slowly, at the rhythm she must have written it, "Maciel is here. He didn't bring my stepdaughter or my grandchildren; he came alone, and I would love you to have lunch with us."

He dressed up slowly and slowly went to her house. Apart from the haste, he didn't have; he needed time to think about what he would say. It must be like this that a twenty-year boy feels like, before asking another person for his daughter's hand. He felt silly, having enough age to be the father of Graça's youngest son and having to tell the news, as if asking for permission. "I am going to marry your mother."

Whilst they were having lunch, Graça must have been as tense and ashamed, as he must, since she barely spoke. Only Maciel, who obviously didn't even think of what was going on in their spirits, was the one trying to cheer up the conversation. When

lunch was over, Maciel went to another part of the house to do something. Silently, Graça turned down her eyes. Manuel held her hands. Those hands had grown little since they weaved those handkerchiefs. He asked, "Is it you or me, who is going to tell him?" She cried silently. Manuel let her hands go, so that she could wipe out her tears. "We are no longer any young for this sort of thing..." he replied.

Age didn't matter. If they had married when they were young, now they would have the same age, and they would not be splitting just because they were growing old.

There was no point on insisting. She would go and take care of the grandchildren who need her most.

Did she or didn't she love him? Did she ever love him?

(Graça squeezed her hands over her belly as when she was eight.) All her life...

That is what he always wanted to know, to soften, slightly, the pain on his soul because shared grief is less painful. His past suddenly became more bearable with that shared pain. The mere fact it existed made it worth for him to have lived.

She hugged him with all her strength. Manuel felt the hot humidity on her face.

She did not know how to say sweet words as he could. She had read the diaries.

After a little while, she would be wearier of him than of the Hebrew's Chorus.

No way!

What was it that he once said? That he was happy just by thinking how happy he could have been, wasn't it? That was the joy he had got left...

She must have been talking seriously. Definitely, although she preferred to carry on with her life on another path. Those tears were the evidence. She also grew used to sacrifice feelings. And children are always children... He was never able to be anything but an illusion, a mirage, perhaps one of the colors color on the drops of a rainbow... He shut his eyes imagining her, aged fourteen, the last time where he could still think she would be his one day...

It was the impression he got from her, if only he could, he would never open his eyes again in order not to lose her.

Maciel came back. They had two suitcases prepared to carry on their shoulders down to the road. Manuel said he was going to harness the ass so they wouldn't tire going down the track. "Are you going to have all that trouble for us?" There was no need. If they pointed the way back and drove it, the donkey would come back alone.

He only accompanied them until the fountain. A few months earlier, a water technician had taken some water samples to analyze. Soon, they would start selling and bottling it against the bacteria of civilization. Manuel had a sip, disguising in this manner and with a sprinkle of water that refreshed his face, the reason why he went to the fountain. This way, those two departing would not understand those drops of water that started wetting his face. He tried to be funny: "Soon you will be able to remember us drinking our bottled water." However, Graça answered back in a serious manner: "The water should be drunk straight from the source."

They said goodbye, shaking hands.

There was still fire in the fireplace. Graça had given him the keys so that he could care for another dead house. Now, Manuel was the master of the whole village. The young ones went far away; those who have died in the mountain had moved to the valley. Although the village could not be buried, it would never resurrect. Even if they bought it and prepared it for tourists, it would stay dead, irrevocably dead. A village is not only made of houses but mostly of people. These would not or could not come back.

He added some fire. Then, he went to his and to the other houses and lighted all their fireplaces. He almost made up his mind and burned his diaries too. It would not be retaliation against Graça, but against life. He wanted to erase her name from all written memories, but he could never burn the soul. Maybe he would regret it later.

He climbed up the mountain and sat by the big rock. The wind blew towards the valley, but his eyes stung as if the smoke burned them.