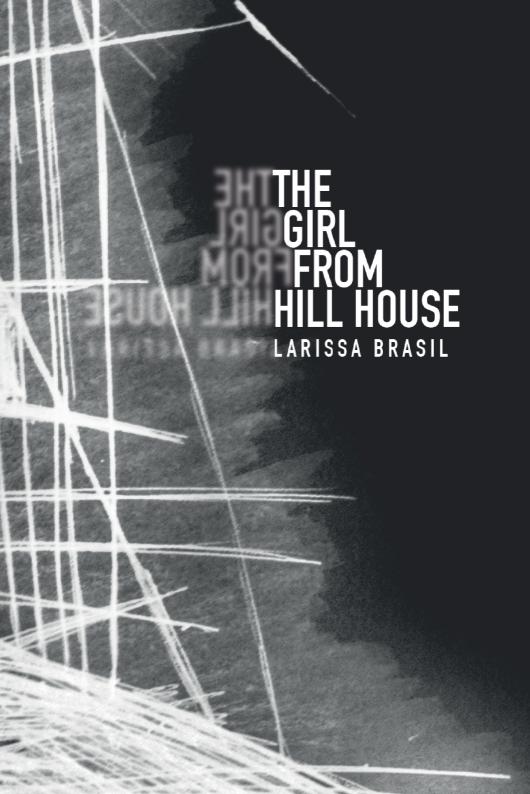
THE GIRL FROM HILL HOUSE LARISSA BRASIL







The Girl from Hill House

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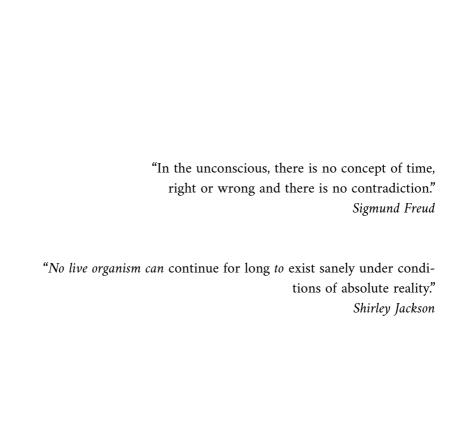
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To the women of my life: Ordália, Audízia, Lorena, Laura, Ana Clara, Manuela and Clarice.





A SCREAM PIERCES THE NIGHT.

Horror washes over me when I look at the two-story house, my home. Sometimes, I have a vivid impression that it looks back at me, sinister and questioning. Fear clings to me, sweat escapes my hands and my heart gallops.

Thud-thud, thud-thud, thud-thud.

I face the house, challenging it. I own its full attention. It breathes in rhythm, slowly like a person inhaling a cigarette and holding the air in their lungs, savoring the tobacco for as long as they can. It focuses on me, eyes lit up and calling me to the fight. In the background, I hear the first notes of the music that always accompanies our clash. I fight not to let myself be carried away, dragged, defeated by its cunning. Despite the efforts, I'm hypnotized.

Thud-thud, thud-thud.

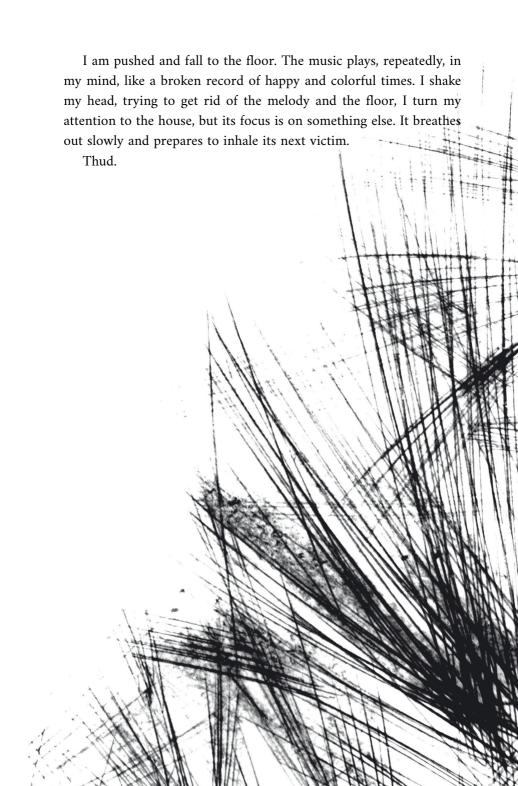
I free myself when he runs towards the scream and hold him by the arm. He turns to me in anger, hollow eyes and glistening teeth, and yells:

"Let me go!"

"You don't understand. Don't go in there, it is still awake. The girl knows what to do," I whisper.

"Are you insane? She's only a child."

Thud-thud.



SOME YOU WIN, SOME YOU LOSE 2017

"GET UP, YARA!" someone shouts. I search for the man's voice coming from the corner of the ring, but I can't find it, "GET UP!"

Ten, nine. I blink several times and realize that I'm still on the floor. Eight, seven, six. I take a deep breath and concentrate. Five, four, three. By working my legs, I manage to get up, woozy. I spit red saliva on the floor. The countdown stops and the audience goes wild. I straighten up and face my opponent. She reminds me of a bulldozer: wide, angular, ready to destroy everything in her path. But I have a lot of kick-ass left in me. I move forward, protecting my face. I'm contaminated by adrenaline. With each step, trust recharges in me.

I give a quick and strong direct punch, she defends herself and tries an uppercut, aiming to hit my jaw, but I manage to dodge it. I step forward again and strike repeatedly at her abs. She backs away, trying to escape me. This is my chance. I get in her face, striking at each step with the opposite hand. One straight, one jab and one cross punch. My opponent is shaken and stares at me, red-faced. She tries to hit me, but it takes more than a second. I take my shot. I plant my feet on the floor and give a short, quick blow in a circular motion. The punch hits her in the jaw. My body moves, like a pendulum, as I watch her fall apart in a puddle of sweat and blood on the floor. The loud noise echoes through the ring.

The ref counts to ten, this time without interruption. She remains inert, unlike the crowd that's shouting my name. I run around the ring, my fingers trailing along the red ropes that separate us. This is one of the best sounds in the world. I forget the tiredness, the pain in my right eye and rib when the judge raises my arm. *Champion!* I try to approach the bulldozer, which has already risen, but she turns her back on me and leaves the ring. *Fuck it!* I climb up the pole in the left corner of the ring and shout back to the crowd. Adrenaline surges through my veins. This is the best drug there is.

It takes me a while to get to the locker room. Facing the mirror, I analyze the damage. After the fights, it's not unusual for me to discover body parts I didn't learn about in anatomy classes. I run my tongue over my teeth and realize they're intact, unlike the right side of my face. She really got me with that left cross. Eggplant tones begin to break out under my right eye, which I can no longer easily open. As I slide my hand over my belly, I lose my breath, feeling a sharp pain, though I know I haven't broken a rib. I lie on the wooden bench and let my adrenaline drain.

Come home, dear!

The voice is so real it makes me sit up and search for its owner, but there is no one here but me. A bit fearful, I leave the locker room in a hurry and go up to the ticket office.

"Good night, Gordo," I say to the man behind the glass.

"Oh! What a fight, girl! What a fight! I thought she had you on that first punch, but... you're fucking awesome! Congratulations!"

"Thanks. When can I get my money?"

"Tomorrow, late afternoon. That all right?"

I nod.

Slowly, I drag my bones through the well-known and not very busy streets of the capital towards my home. The moon is high and the night accompanies me. I look for the cell phone in my backpack. Fifteen missed calls, all from her. A shiver licks me from head to toe and twists my spine. The voice comes back to me: *Come home, dear*. My heart beats unhurriedly, like a clock striking midnight. Thud-thud-thud. I hear the only voice message she left. Fear makes me cringe: "Yara, it's me. Ya, he..." the voice is low and sad. She pauses, probably trying to stop her crying. I know what happened even before she says it: "Your grandfather died."

I freeze when I hear the end of the message, "Come home, dear." I can see her, white skin almost transparent inside a black dress, at the foot of a pompous coffin, tears streaming from her bloodshot eyes. I hear the message again, and again and again, sometimes to make sure it's real, others just to hear it once more.

He is dead! The pompous Dr. Adolfo Leão de Oliveira Dante has kicked the bucket. Let him rest in hell. My smile lights up. Déjà vu. For me, he was already dead and buried for so long that the news seems old. However, satisfaction disappears quickly, the mere mention of the old man's name contaminates me like a deadly virus. The night turns bleak; old hatred pulsates in my veins and activates unwelcome memories. I'm devoured by my grandfather's words.

You're all kinds of wrong, girl.

The small church's bell strikes steadily, but my pulse is irregular. People enter the church, but he stays and stares at me, resembling a character from classic films: top hat, morning dress and cane, even his face, aristocratic, matches the scene. The smell of a cigar per-

meates the air. He smiles, disdainfully, and curls his trimmed black mustache. The ceiba leaves fall around, making everything more surreal. He limps away, his wrinkled hand firmly gripping the cane with the head of a golden lion. My white dress dances with the feather-like leaves from the tree. The bitter taste of bile brings me back to reality.

"You're dead!" I shout.

"Shut up, bitch!" someone yells from one of the neighboring houses.

I run as fast as my tired legs allow. Vomit rises to my throat and I stop in a square. The cold of the cement bench is soothing. If I close my eyes, the leaves still dance in the wind around me. He may have died, but the grudge is alive in here. I grip at stability. Finally, I remember I need to call her. *My grandmother*. The only person who keeps me alive, despite the distance. I feel as if I've been living hooked to machines, in an induced coma. Four years, to be exact. I'm a blur of a painting that was once beautiful, illuminated and full of life. My grandmother remains as the only colorful relic of that colorless, forgotten place.

Something lights up in me. *Maybe, now that he's dead, I can...* The light burns out without ever glowing to its fullest. Dr. Leão was not the only impediment. That city is peopled with grudges, revolt, fear... Not all the palettes in the world could give tone to what I have become, what I ran away from, whom I have hurt or still hurt. There is no turning back.

The voice repeats the mantra: I must at least call her. I reach for my phone in my backpack, but soon give up. There is a blender of emotions working inside me, a lot of noise and little logic. I want to hear her voice, but I'm not going to pour all this confusion on the person I love most in the world.

She doesn't deserve it.

A void replaces the euphoria I felt over the old man's death. My thoughts go sour like the taste in my mouth. *I gotta eat something*. I get up from the bench, put the device in my backpack, and go home. I

drag myself up the stairs, open the door, throw my backpack on the table and go to the kitchen. I realize the refrigerator is as empty as my soul. I take the last two eggs from the carton and make an omelet. I devour the food and go to bed.

"Just a few more hours, grandma. I promise."





SPILT MILK AND WATER UNDER THE BRIDGE

THE CELL PHONE RINGS BUT THERE'S NO ANSWER.

It's ten in the morning and I still haven't been able to speak to her. The mechanical tone of the voicemail talks to me. It's not exactly what I want to hear, but it's what I need: to listen to her calm and drawn out speech. I hear the long beep, but don't leave a message. Worry produces films in my head. One last try. Nothing. Impotence irritates me.

I walk through the narrow streets towards Ring do Jorjão, the boxing gym. A music box, greenish with golden details, catches my eye in a window of an antique shop. It reminds me of the music box my grandmother gave me, which was stolen. I realize it's not the same one, so I return to my course.

I'm on the gym's street. I slide my fingers over the posters of yesterday's fight glued to the walls. In the poster, Paulina and I face each other with arms in a defiant posture and unfriendly countenances. When I remember the fight, my blood vibrates and my right eye pulsates with pain. I enter and cross the training area. Several people greet me and I wave to them from afar.

I go straight to the register.

"Hey, what's up? Do you have my money?"

"Hey, Yara! Jorge wants to see you in his office."

"Thanks, Gordo."

My boots resonate down the long hall. I knock on the door, but don't wait for anyone to open it. Jorge was my first and only coach, we're comfortable with each other. He talks on the phone, I sit across from him and wait for him to hang up.

"You look like shit!"

The tall, strong man rises and stands before me. He takes his hand to my face, but I move as far away from his contact as I can.

"Thank you," I say.

He freezes his hand midair and interrupts me:

"Have you taken any painkillers?"

"I'm fine, Jorge. It's not the first time I get hurt, is it?"

He snorts, looks resigned. He shoves his hands in his pockets and goes to a corner table. Fills a glass with vodka until it almost overflows and goes back behind the table. Opens the drawer and takes out a manila envelope.

"Ten grand."

"Fuck! All that?"

"No other female match has had this many bets in the past five years," he pauses, sips his vodka and pushes the envelope, which slides over the table for me, "You deserve every penny. Count it, please."

"I trust you," I take the package and push it into my backpack.

"Are you really leaving?"

I get up and walk over to the corner table, fill the glass with vodka and drink it in one gulp. It burns my throat and makes my face red. Flames seem to come out of my nose.

"Yara?" Jorge appears beside me, his hand on my shoulder.

"I'm fine," I press, avoiding his eyes.

I go to the chair and grab my backpack.

"You didn't answer me."

"Yes. I am, today if possible."

"Then I'm losing my best fighter," he extends his arm to me. I reach for his hand, "have a safe trip. Call me if you need anything."

"You bet. Thanks for everything."

I walk to the door and leave without looking back. I leave the ring behind and relief gradually becomes melancholy. I stop at a currency exchange office and exchange part of the prize money from Dollar to Real. Then I try, once again, to call my grandmother. The cell phone is off. I'm reluctant to call the house, but worry makes me give in. The phone rings, and rings and triggers the answering machine: "You called the Leão de Oliveira Dante residence, you know what to do!" I hear our voices talking in unison, with her laughter in the background.

We recorded that message while drinking hot chocolate wrapped in a comforter. My grandmother's dragging, firm voice is one of the few things I remember from my childhood, the sound that has guided and still guides me today. I don't remember my parents' faces. My mom died when I was little and my dad disappeared a while later. My grandmother raised me. She is my person, the one I call home when I close my eyes, or who I want close to me when I get hurt in a fight. Perhaps the only person who would make me go back to that small town at the end of the world. I tell myself it won't be necessary. That she will soon answer the phone and say that everything is fine.

I return to my apartment. In the mirror, I notice that my face is more swollen. I apply a little concealer to hide the biggest bruises. I shove the few belongings I have in my backpack. In its front pocket, I store the rent and travel money. I separate the prize money into three wads, two thick and one thin. I place the two largest ones on the false bottom of the backpack and the other on the side pocket.

I think about the future. My impression is that I've spent my entire life running away. How many more times? It doesn't matter, now it's time to go. Something flashes in my mind before I close the door. Maybe I miss the place I called home for the last two years? I scan the corners of the apartment. I won't miss you. After tomorrow, I won't even remember you.

The door creaks for the last time and another cycle closes in my life. *I really hope I don't miss you*.

By my calculations, tomorrow I will be by the sea. Shrimps and piña colada populate my mind. The mouth waters when thinking about pineapples mixed with rum. A whistle improvises on my lips. A church bell rings with its twelve chimes.

I still have the whole night.

As I approach the terminal, the city becomes more deserted and quiet. It is not a good place to walk at dawn, but I'm not afraid. The few people who cross my path do so like ghosts. They don't want to be disturbed. I don't either. I ponder whether to take the longest or shortest route. My intuition commands me to take the longest one, but I ignore it and go down the narrow street. I realize it's a bad choice when I'm halfway through it.

Someone is following me without making much noise. I cross to the other side of the street, abruptly, and the person imitates me. I pick up the pace and slow down to a near stop. The follower does the same. The wind changes direction when I turn and face my pursuer. The person wears a hooded jacket, and I don't know whether it's a man or a woman. I drop the backpack on the sidewalk. Electricity runs through my veins. My muscles complain, still recovering from the recent fight. The person takes off her hood and reveals herself. I'm surprised to see Paulina. Her face is as bruised as mine. A little worse, I would say.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" my voice echoes through the worn asphalt of the street.

She doesn't answer me, just takes off her coat and throws it on the ground. Well, it seems like she does. I take a step and she hesitates, stares at her sneakers. A film must be playing in her head, and I find myself hoping it's one in which she gives up at the end. My muscles ache with tension and my head starts to throb. She takes a long time to face me. Damn it! I clench my fists, my skin breaks out in a sweat. A new round is about to begin.

She attacks me, furiously, I step away. An involuntary smile opens on my lips when I remember a phrase my grandmother likes to say. A pressa mete a lebre à carreira, which basically means that when you act impulsively, you get screwed. I stand there, waiting for the bull-dozer to charge. She approaches, hand up, almost too close, certain she'll hit me. Only I don't take the punch, deflect it and grab her by the arm. I use her strength to my advantage and throw her on the hard asphalt. Paulina doesn't make a good landing.

"Oops!" I say, seriously, "forgive me, I didn't mean to..."

"You'll regret that, bitch."

The girl's red eyes shoot at me. I don't change my countenance. She gets up and, this time, *don't you run*, we spin in infinite circles, waiting. She lacks patience and strikes again. I hit as much as my body allows. Paulina doesn't connect any punches, but I feel breathless just the same. I'm tired. *If she notices, I'm lost.* I control my breathing.

"What do you want, Paulina? A rematch?"

"Rematch?" she spits on the floor, "you were never a match for me, girl. I want my dollars."

After cleaning the red drop from the corner of her lip, she attacks. I defend myself, but she's faster and hits me in the spot, to the right of my abs. The pain radiates and I double over. She wastes no time and sweeps me off the floor. I fall on my back on the asphalt and it's as if a sumo wrestler is sitting on my chest. I gasp for air. Paulina kneels next to me and squeezes my abdomen in the

injured place. My vision is blurred. I come to my senses when she kicks me.

"Where's the rest, Jorge's little bitch?" she asks with a smile on her lips.

I notice the wad of cash in her hand. The green from the bills reflects in her eyes. *Damn it.*

"Fuck you, Paulina."

"Trash. That's what you are."

She spits on me and walks away. Her laughter sweeps the street with the wind. I'm in no condition to go after her, let alone fight back. I sit on the sidewalk and catch my breath. A while later I get up, grab the backpack and drag myself to the bus station. The uncomfortable seat on the platform squeaks when I try to find a position to soothe my body's suffering. I check the two wads of money I left under the false bottom. *They're still here*. I try to relax, but everything burns when I breathe.

The cell phone rings and I almost jump. My heart races even faster when I think it could be my grandmother. I look for the damned thing in the backpack — it seems to be hiding on purpose. An unknown number on the screen. Who would call me at two in the morning? I wouldn't normally answer...

"Hello!"

"Yara? Yara Leão de Oliveira Dante e Lima?" the woman's voice is calm. *It's strange to hear my full name*. I assume it can only be someone instructed by my grandmother.

"Yes."

"My name is Rosie, I'm calling on behalf of Mrs. Theodora Leão de Oliveira Dante. Your name is registered as a contact, I've tried to reach you several times... Your grandmother is hospitalized in the ICU in serious conditions. She suffered...

The woman continues to speak, but everything becomes muffled, distant as if I were underwater. I hang up the phone, but soon it rings again.

I don't answer.

I remember the last time I saw my grandmother, at my bedroom door before my wedding. She smiled and said that everything was going to be okay. A cry gets caught in my throat, but no tears fall. It's no use running away. Sooner or later, you have to collect...

I have to go back.

The driver calls the passengers on the bus heading for the coast.

I get up and adjust my backpack. The bus sign flashes familiar words. Campo das Flores. *I don't believe in coincidences*. I stop between the two buses. One leads to paradise, the other, hell. One leads to the unknown, the other, not so much. One leads to escape, the other, reckoning. The minutes drag on. The bus station is underwater with me. *I can no longer hold my breath, I gotta get back to the surface*.

I breathe at last. I get on the bus and don't look back. She made the choice for me.



"HÁ MAR E MAR, HÁ IR E VOLTAR"

Portuguese Proverb meaning we must be careful when playing in the sea" of the sea".

THE ROAD PASSES BY. I'd like to be in the opposite direction, but I have no choice. She will always be my choice. Fear does not subside. I adjust myself in the chair and try to find a comfortable position. I close my eyes and let the swaying of the bus lull me. The lights from the cars that pass through my window now and then, however, keep me awake. I try to think of something that calms me down, which makes me control the irrational fear of that city, of those people, of the situations I ran away from, but nothing comes to mind.

¹ TN: this sentence was created by Alexandre O'Neill as a slogan for the Portuguese Government, to warn people of common drownings on the Portuguese beaches. It was so easy to remember, due to its simplicity and rhyme, that it was passed on, from generation to generation, and is known today as a proverb. The literal translation would be "there are seas and seas, there is going and returning."

The bus stops in some hamlet, people jostle to get off the vehicle. The silence snuggles in me. When I think I'm about to have ten minutes of peace, a woody scent invades my nostrils. My whole body responds to the smell and the thoughts of a single name populate my mind. *Guilherme*. My heart resembles the wheels of a car on a dirt road. Puh-puh-puh. I open my eyes with a start, searching for the owner of the fragrance. *It's not him!* It's just a teenager, who smiles at me as he crosses the bus towards the back. Puh-puh-puh. I control the trembling of hands, legs, thoughts. If that simple smell can shake me up, I wonder what will become of me when I see him in the flesh. I keep the scent and its owner where they shouldn't have left before they force me to get off at the next stop.

The bus starts on its way and restlessness sits next to me again. I get lost in the dark landscapes of the road.

"I can't sleep on buses, either", someone says. I turn towards the voice and find a chubby lady staring at me from the seat across the aisle. I ignore her, but she insists: "Would you like one?" and extends a packet of starch biscuits.

"No, thanks," I turn my attention to the road.

"Are you coming home, dear?"

I get goosebumps. *Come home, dear!* I look at the woman. Red cheeks seem to pop out of her face when she smiles. The overhead light beaming on them makes her look like a cartoon character.

"No," I lie.

"You look worried. Is anyone sick?"

"No."

I look away from the lady with the pink face and nervous mouth before she asks another question. The sky is clear and clouds are scarce. At the foot of the mountain, the night is cold and the sky is starry. The words my grandma used to say play in my mind.

"Trust that everything will be fine, dear," she insists.

A strange calm settles in. I drift off to the crunchy sound of the lady eating cookies. I only wake up when the inviting city lights ap-

pear. From a distance, it doesn't look toxic; it's just a small country town like any other. When the bus pulls up, I try to remain calm. I wait for everyone to leave. The lady gets up and waves goodbye to me, I wave back. The bus empties in a few moments. The calm still survives inside as if I'm in a bubble, safe and confident.

From the window, I watch the shadows of the mountains in the night landscape. They give me claustrophobia, a tightness in my throat. They are like sleeping giants waiting to be awakened. I take a deep breath, get up and go towards the dim light from the exit sign. The closer I get to the door, the more despair grows inside me. I stop before the steps, hands perspiring, hesitant. I'm not a coward. The driver looks at me tired, impatient. Or am I? My legs are trembling and disconnected thoughts start popping up in my head. The bubble bursts and the calm evaporates.

I walk on the asphalt and a big wave runs over me and leaves me enveloped in feelings, voices, confusion. A sea of faces, words and events covers me. Known and unknown people swirl around my body. And, worse, a strange sensation pricks me.

I have to leave this place!

The throat closes and adrenaline floods my veins. The shiver becomes a second skin. My heart rushes to my throat with the bus horn and reminds me why I'm back. *Leaving is no longer an option*. The bus station is still a few miles from the city. I put my backpack on.

I'm coming, grandma!



OPEN WOUNDS

"WELCOME TO CAMPO DAS FLORES."

The sign is like an invisible line, a boundary separating two people: the one I used to be and the one I am now. My heart races when I cross the imaginary border. Is this a starting point or ending point? I do not know. Gradually I get closer to the old Yara and distance myself from the other. I don't know which version I like least, maybe none. At the bus station, it seemed like a good idea to go up on foot, now tiredness accompanies me. My body hurts at each step.

I walk by the ruins of what used to be the inn. A green sign at the entrance says *Estalagem Campo das Flores*. It is the exact place where the city was born. The

inn was famous, in reach of a few towns and, little by little, a small village began to grow around it. Some say it is haunted. In the old days, we used to bet on who had the guts to enter the ruins at midnight on a Friday the thirteenth. I won three times. I never believed in ghosts, although the city has a notorious one.

The houses start to appear, sparse. The old cobblestones greet me and the mountains draw curves in the sky. I cross Ponte do Rio Pintado, a bridge that cuts the city in half and disappears between the hills, forming hidden beaches and caves. The sunrays appear, lazy as the residents, few of whom venture out into the streets, looking at me sleepily. I put on sunglasses to hide the puffy eye. At first, I get nervous, then I relax. No one will recognize me. The radio host speaks to me through the speakers installed on the lampposts.

It is still too early to go to the hospital, so I look for a place to eat. I stop on the sidewalk and understand where I am. There was a bakery, on the street above the square, where we always drank coffee after parties in the neighboring city, Caperal. The best grilled cheese in the region. Saliva springs up. I adjust the sunglasses that hide most of the bruises on my face and pull the cap closer to my head. My hunger guides me along the known path.

The bakery is still the same. I look for an isolated and dark spot. I find the left corner of the counter, where I sit down. A boy gives me the menu. I know exactly what I want:

"Two grilled cheeses and a double espresso, please."

He writes it down without even looking up.

"The *mané pelado* is fresh out of the oven..." he speaks quickly, focused on his pad.

I smile. I had forgotten that peculiar name for the cassava cake, which means *naked guy*.

"No, thanks."

The boy looks up, leans towards me and says:

"It's the most famous in the region."

"Then I'll take one to go."

He shouts out the request. The bakery is full, a sign that the food is still good. A group sitting next to me is talking cheerfully.

"...but Dr. Leão helped a lot of people..."

The conversation revolves around the death of the most famous man in town, in this case, my grandfather. It couldn't be any different. A fragile-looking woman defends the deceased for the rest of the group. Most do not agree with her. The boy sets the grilled cheese and coffee on the counter and disappears. I bite the sandwich and keep paying attention to the group.

"Who?" a guy interrupts her "tell me *one* person he really helped. Someone we know..." He approaches the group as if he were going to tell a secret "my cousin's husband, who works at the hospital, always says that, for the rich people in town, he was God incarnate, but for the rest of mortals, the devil himself," he gets closer "they say he had a pact with the latter." Everyone in the group laughs, even I smile.

I finish my coffee, leave the money on the counter, and get up. The smell of his perfume arrives first and permeates the air, again. *It's not him!* I pray, and fear takes over me. The woody scent, with a light touch of flowers and musk, hangs over the rest of the people. It is the smell of our Sunday mornings in the summer. We would swim in the river and go downstream to a hidden beach or cave. In the afternoon we would return to the city by hitchhiking or on foot, with the sun beating on our heads, as his mother used to say. My face turns as red as the sun at dusk on those old days. My heart beats like a blender again. Luiz Guilherme Dias. I would recognize him even in the dark. *Gui*.

The smile sprouts, spontaneous, on my face.

I go back to my stool wanting to disappear. *Talk about bad luck! So soon*? He walks in and doesn't look around. The environment changes, conversations wane, everything is quieter. *Or is it my impression*? I hope that at any moment he will look to the side and see me. This doesn't happen. I'm a little disappointed as if I wanted to get caught.

My legs are begging to run, but I do the opposite, curling up close to the wall, wanting to be absorbed by it. I try not to pay attention to his conversation with the bakery staff. He leaves as fast as he arrived. I leave shortly after him, half defeated and visibly irritated. Something strange inside me wanted to be seen. Contradictions. I count my steps not to think too much. I walk down absentmindedly when someone takes my arm.

Gui.

My legs give out a little, but I can contain myself. A thousand things go through my head before I face him. *Gui*. I turn around with a strange smile on my face...

"Lady, you forgot the mané pelado."

The boy from the bakery smiles from ear to ear as I wilt. He leans towards me, wetting his lips. I frown, but the boy doesn't move away. He hands me the cake and a piece of paper. Then, winks at me and runs back to work.

On the card, his name and number are written in blue pen. *Not sure I deserved that...* I tear it into a thousand pieces while I walk silently down the street, wondering what the hell just happened.

I enter the hospital at eight sharp. The large, white, lit reception stretches before me. I've dreamt of this place thousands of times. So familiar, even after so long. The skylight illuminates the entrance. I go in a little farther and see the flames of the candles dance in the chapel of Nossa Senhora de Lourdes, the orange tone bouncing off the walls.

In the lobby, a sea of people and odors runs over me. The sound of the crowd, the cry of children and the groans of the elderly. Hope and despair in the same place, mixed like ingredients in a cake. *An indigestible cake, it sometimes seems.*

Part of my identity comes back little by little. I can see myself in a white coat, walking around. I can't say when I found out I wanted to be a doctor. It must have been from walking around the corridors of that hospital. "What do you want to be when you grow up, young lady?"

"I'm going to be a doctor."

"Ah, like granddad."

"No, like my mother!"

My grandmother spoke of how dedicated my mother was. Always worried for others, unlike my grandfather, whose only concern was with profits and spotlights. She was a neurologist and, due to irony or an error in fate, died of a cerebrovascular accident, still called a stroke at the time. I was four years old. I remember her very little, but I'm sure she is what inspired me to want to be a doctor.

I take another step and stand before the imposing painting of the hospital's founder, Dr. Leão, my grandfather. The smug look in his eyes weakens me for a moment. From there, from the huge picture on the wall, he assesses me. *He judges me even in death*.

"Excuse me, ma'am," someone wants through.

I head quickly to the counter, without looking back at the damn painting. Someone could do me the favor of tearing it down. I ask for nurse Rosie and the attendant answers amid forms and ringing phones that I must sign up on the counter next to the elevator and go up to the fifth floor. *Of course, ICU.* I identify myself at the information desk and enter without any major problems. The tightness in my throat makes it difficult to breathe. First, second, third, fourth... fifth floor. The doors open and my legs push me out of the elevator. The familiar odor invades my nostrils: alcohol, air-conditioning and loneliness. Everything cold and impersonal.

"Good Morning. I'd like to speak to Nurse Rosie."

The nurse across the counter looks at me without interest and checks the computer.

"You can wait over there while I locate her."

She points to the chairs, but I don't sit. Instead, I walk down the hall. My fingertips read the uneven texture of the walls, just like Braille. *Just as I remember*. I reach the end of the hallway at a familiar door. *Doctors' room*. I go in and the past takes me away. I walk around the room and stop in

front of a mural with photos. I recognize several people, including myself, in the last year of medical school. I look at that woman in the white uniform, smiling with a red clown nose. It was Children's Day, we walked the corridors of the children's ward in costumes, handing out balloons to the little ones. She looked happy.

"Lady!" the nurse calls out to me, her voice echoing down the hall. Before leaving, I remove the photo from the mural and put it in my pocket. I leave the room in a hurry. Rosie arrives and I can almost recognize the smile coming from somewhere inside my mind. I stare at her. She looks back at me as if she knows me, too. We stay there, for a moment, in that limbo between recognition and trying to remember.

"How can I help you?" She extends her hand to me, the feeling that I know her gets stronger when I hold her warm hand.

"Hi, Rosie, my name is Yara. You called me about my grandmother." Her face goes from relaxed and friendly to serious and dry. She pulls her hand away.

"Ah, yes, Yara..." she says, seeming to remember where she knows me from, though I'm not as lucky, "my condolences for your grandfather. Mrs. Theodora has been hospitalized in an induced coma since yesterday afternoon." She goes behind the counter.

I don't bother to thank her for the condolences, I just shake my head in agreement. I don't want to be rude, but the concern for my grandmother's condition is breathing down my neck. Rosie brings out a folder. The blue label highlights a name: Theodora Leão de Oliveira Dante. The nurse says she had a cardiac arrest shortly after my grandfather died.

I think of her despair when trying to get air, her white hand gripping at her chest...

"Will she have any impairments?"

"We can only assess that when the patient wakes up. The signs are stable and Dr. Rodrigo is confident," Rosie keeps explaining to me, although I should know all that "the speed of medical assistance was crucial. The chances of recovery without sequelae are encouraging."

"Can I see her?" my breathing quickens and my hands get even colder. "Sure, I'll call you in a bit, okay?"

I nod my head in agreement. Before I turn away, I study the woman's face, but I can't recognize it in the sea of faces lost in my subconscious. She walks away and I take out the photograph again. I can't explain why, but that Yara from four years ago makes me a little less anxious.

Rosie calls me, I take a deep breath, wipe my hands, wet with cold sweat, on my pants and put the photo away. The smell of alcohol becomes more intense. From the reception to the room, it seems to be no more than ten meters, however, it is the longest path I've ever taken. Her voice does not come out of my head.

Come home, dear!

Rosie indicates the room. Through the glass window, I see it, an island caught in a sea of wires and equipment. The white nightgown makes her look ghostly, paler than she really is. I notice the sweat mark my hand leaves on the glass. I don't know what to do. What if I go in and find out that's what was left of her? *I will never forgive my-self*. I think of the Yara in the photo, who was not afraid, who would stop at nothing. I need to be that Yara, at least for today. I enter, my courage stuck to me like lint on my clothes. In the bedroom, only the sound of the pulse beeping and the oxygen pump keep me company.

"I'm here, grandma!" I break the silence of the room while holding her cold hand.

At that very moment, her heart rate starts to drop. The beeping becomes scarce until a flat line appears. I despair. I press the emergency button on the side of the bed once, twice, I don't know how many times. Then, I spread my hands on her chest.

Stay with me, please.

Three nurses quickly arrive at the room, Rosie among them. Someone takes me off my grandmother and pushes me outside. I watch everything glued to the cold window, my soul even colder. I have no reaction, except to say the only prayer I know, the prayer she taught me when I was little:

Holy Angel of the lord...

The shortest distance between two points is a straight line and the one that appears on the monitor has no end.

My zealous keeper...

Rosie rips up the white nightgown, my grandmother's chest is a calm sea, with no movement.

If you have entrusted me with divine piety...

The defibrillator is used once, twice, three times against the thin and fragile body. My grandmother dances violently with each discharge of energy.

Always rule me, guard me, lead me, enlighten me...

And there is silence in the room. Everyone holds their breaths, hoping to hear some air entering her nostrils.

Amen.

Beep, beep, beep. The answer echoes through the room and, little by little, the tightness in my chest dissolves. Rosie watches me, as if she has noticed my presence at that moment. My anxiety is shown in the trembling of my hands. She leaves the room.

"Your grandmother is stable now. Dr. Rodrigo is on his way."

"Thanks. I can go in?"

"Yara, I can only allow that if the doctor authorizes it. And it is best to let your grandmother rest," I wilt a little "look on the bright side, she responded to your visit."

We watch my grandmother through the glass. The nurse turns to me.

"Why don't you go have a coffee or something and come back in two hours?"

"Yes, yes, a walk might calm me down a little. I'll do that. Thank you, Rosie."

"You're welcome."

I go down, drink coffee, fiddle with my cell phone. The minutes don't pass and don't calm me down. Two hours later, I return to the ICU anxiously. Rosie authorizes me to enter the room. I don't know what to do with my hands as I walk over to the bed. Deep down, I hope she opens her eyes and says something. A thousand versions of the scene. In one of them, she wakes up, we hug and then we leave this town to never return. However, she remains still, it doesn't seem like she'll wake up anytime soon, a reality that is difficult to digest. The words upset my stomach. I need to say so many things...

I'm sorry.

It is the first of them, but I am silent. If it were her, she would know exactly what to say. I take the thin sheet and cover her up to the shoulders. I pull up a chair, sit down and warm her hands with the little heat I have in mine. In the bedroom, my heavy breathing joins the sound of a heartbeat in a tuned and sinister orchestra.

"Don't worry, I'm not leaving!" the words finally come out of my throat "remember the auction to raise funds for the pediatric ward?" I smile as I adjust her thin black hair "it's been exactly four years. It was a difficult night for me. You told me something I never forgot and that now maybe makes perfect sense."

All the sense.

My grandmother had smiled and held my hands. Hers hot and mine cold, as always. She wiped my face and made a ponytail on my hair.

"Don't cry, dear. Certain wars, even when won, leave a bitter taste in our mouths, and nothing and no one can change that. Running away doesn't solve it, fighting doesn't either. The only thing that eases it is time. My mother used to say that time cures everything, even cheese," she smiled widely "if you are not healed, dear, it is because not enough time has passed."

I return to the present. I kiss her face lightly. It's time to go.

"You told me that even cheese is cured by time. I'm here as long as you need, but come home soon, Grandma," I say, somewhat hopelessly.

I leave the room with a ticking sound in my head. This will be the first of many days here. I wish time really healed everything. If it were true, I wouldn't have stayed away, exiled from the company of the most important person to me. It would have moved on, like a boat after the storm. The problem is that the storm did not pass, the calm never came, and I remain adrift, drenched in resentment, fear and anger. Tic-toc. Perhaps the last big wave is to stay and bear the consequences. *Is it?* Confront the past. A past tense in which I stole, cheated, lied. I hurt the people who loved me the most. *I had no choice*. I repeat the old mantra I have been singing for four years. A tsunami awaits me here, in that same water where I vowed to no longer wet my feet. The fear of it swallowing me, keeping me from the surface dominates me, however, I will only know when I sink. Tic-toc. The desire to leave embraces me tightly, like a life vest. It's too big a storm for such a little boat. It's too early to make a decision. Tic-toc.