MODERN CLASSICS

'Witty, mystical, surreal and profound'
Guardian

Clarice Lispector

Too Much of Life



PENGUIN MODERN CLASSICS

Too Much of Life

'This complete collection of the Brazilian writer's newspaper columns, translated into English for the first time, shows her insightful engagement with humanity, politics and literature . . . this book opens a door into her uniquely challenging and rewarding body of work . . . a treasure to return to again and again' Madoc Cairns, *Guardian*

'Her *crônicas* muddied demarcations between nonfiction and fiction, resurrecting the oldest question of form: Where does nonfiction truly end and fiction begin, and what do we do with texts where we do not know the answer?' *The Paris Review*

'Clarice Lispector had a diamond-hard intelligence, a visionary instinct, and a sense of humour that veered from naïf wonder to wicked comedy . . . She attempts to capture what it is to think our existence as we are in it – in the "marvellous scandal", as Lispector puts it, of life. An astounding body of work that has no real corollary inside literature or outside it' Rachel Kushner, *Bookforum*

'No two columns are alike: strands of dialogue, observed scenes, diaristic entries, life advice, even the author admiring herself in the mirror . . . *Too Much of Life* is a huge addition to an already impressive collection of evidence that Lispector could transcribe a guestbook and make it interesting' J. Howard Rosier, *Vulture*

'In 1967, Brazil's leading newspaper asked the avant-garde writer Lispector to write a weekly column on any topic she wished. For almost seven years, Lispector showed Brazilian readers just how vast and passionate her interests were . . . Indeed, these columns should establish her as being among the era's most brilliant essayists. She is masterful, even reminiscent of Montaigne, in her ability to spin the mundane events of life into moments of clarity that reveal greater truths. Superb, wonderfully obsessed with exuberance and what it unlocks and reveals' *Publishers Weekly*

'This is Clarice Lispector as one-woman chorus and psychic weather forecaster, and the charm, wit and engagement that she brings to her columns transcends barriers' John Biscello, *Riot Material*

Copyrighted Material

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Clarice Lispector was a Brazilian novelist and short-story writer. Her innovation in fiction brought her international renown. She was born in Ukraine in 1920, but in the aftermath of World War I and the Russian Civil War, the family fled to Romania and, eventually, Brazil. She published her first novel, *Near to the Wildheart*, in 1943, when she was just twenty-three, and the next year was awarded the Graça Aranha Prize for the best first novel. She died in 1977, shortly after the publication of her final novel, *The Hour of the Star.*

Margaret Jull Costa has translated the works of many Spanish and Portuguese writers, among them novelists: Javier Marías, José Saramago and Eça de Queiroz, and poets: Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen, Mário de Sá-Carneiro and Ana Luísa Amaral. Her work has brought her numerous prizes, most recently, the 2018 Premio Valle-Inclán for *On the Edge* by Rafael Chirbes. In 2014, she was awarded an OBE for services to literature.

Robin Patterson has translated and co-translated a variety of works by Portuguese, Brazilian and Angolan authors, including Luandino Vieira's *Our Musseque*, José Luís Peixoto's *In Galveias*, Lúcio Cardoso's *Chronicle of the Murdered House* (which won the 2017 Best Translated Book Award), and *The Collected Stories of Machado de Assis*.

Copyrighted Material

CLARICE LISPECTOR

Too Much of Life

Complete Chronicles



Copyrighted Material

PENGUIN BOOKS

PENGUIN CLASSICS

UK | USA | Canada | Ireland | Australia
India | New Zealand | South Africa

Penguin Books is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com



Penguin
Random House
UK

First published as a New Directions Paperbook Original in 2022
First published in Penguin Classics 2022
This edition published in Penguin Classics 2023
001

Text copyright © Todas as Crônicas, 2018; Paulo Gurgel Valente, 2022
Translation copyright © Margaret Jull Costa and Robin Patterson, 2022
Afterword copyright © Paulo Gurgel Valente, 2022

Published by arrangement with the Heirs of Clarice Lispector
and Agencia Literaria Carmen Balcells, Barcelona

Passages from Thomas Merton's *No Man Is an Island* copyright © 1955 by
Thomas Merton, renewed. Reprinted by permission of Curtis Brown, Ltd.

The moral rights of the author and translators have been asserted

Typeset by Jouve (UK) Milton Keynes
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

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

ISBN: 978–0–241–59758–3

www.greenpenguin.co.uk



Penguin Random House is committed to a
sustainable future for our business, our readers
and our planet. This book is made from Forest
Stewardship Council® certified paper.

Copyrighted Material

TOO MUCH OF LIFE

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

Jornal do Brasil

*

1967

August 19, 1967

BRATS

No, I can't. I simply can't bring myself to think about the scene I imagined—it's all too real. The child is lying awake in bed with hunger pangs, and he says to his mother: I'm hungry, Mama. She very gently says: Go to sleep. He says: But I'm hungry. She says again: Go to sleep. He says: I can't, I'm hungry. Exasperated, she repeats: Go to sleep. He says again that he is hungry. Out of her own pain, she yells: Shut up, you little brat, and go to sleep! They both lie in the darkness, silent, not moving. Is he asleep?—she wonders, as she lies there, wide awake. And he is too terrified to make so much as a sound. Both are awake in the black night. Until, out of pain and weariness, they eventually drift off into the cozy nest of resignation. And I simply cannot bear resignation. Ah, with what ravenous pleasure I devour rebellion.

SURPRISE

Looking in the mirror and thinking in amazement: How mysterious I am. How delicate and strong. And how the curve of my lips has retained its innocence.

Copyrighted Material

Who among us has not, by chance, looked in the mirror and felt surprised? For a fraction of a second we see ourselves as an object to be looked at. Some might call this narcissism, but I would call it: the joy of being. The joy of finding in our external face echoes of our internal face: ah, so it's true, I didn't just imagine myself, I actually exist.

PLAYING AT THINKING

The art of risk-free thinking. If thought did not always lead us down certain emotional paths, thinking would long ago have been categorized as a way of having fun. One doesn't invite friends to join in the game because of the whole ceremony that thinking entails. The best way is to invite them just to visit, and then nonchalantly think together in the guise of words.

That's fine as long as you're not playing seriously. However, in order to think deeply—which is the main aim of this new hobby—you need to be alone, because surrendering yourself to thinking involves great emotion, and you would only dare to think in the presence of *someone else* if you trusted that person so much that you would feel no embarrassment in applying that term, *someone else*, to them. Besides, it would be asking an awful lot of someone else to be there, watching us think: it requires a big heart, love, affection, as well as personal experience of surrendering to thought. It demands as much of someone listening to the words and silences as it would for them to feel them. No, that's not true. Feeling is far more demanding.

Anyway, when it comes to thinking as an amusement, the absence of risks puts it within the grasp of everyone. There are, of course, some hazards. Even playing at thinking can oc-

Copyrighted Material

casionally leave you with a heavy heart. Generally speaking, though, there are no dangers as long as you take the necessary intuitive precautions.

As a hobby, it has the advantage of being eminently transportable, although, in my view, it's best done in the bosom of the air. At certain hours of the afternoon, for example, when the light filling the apartment seems to empty it out completely, while the whole city is atremble with work, and only we, unbeknownst to anyone, are working at home—at those moments when dignity would be restored to us if we had, say, a garage or a sewing workshop—those are the moments when you can think. That way you start from wherever you happen to be, even if it's not in the afternoon; although I would advise against thinking at night.

Once, for example—in the days when we used to send our clothes out to be laundered—I was drawing up the laundry list. Perhaps because I'm in the habit of naming things or out of a sudden desire to have an unblotted exercise book as I did at school, I wrote: list of. And it was then that the desire to be frivolous arrived. That is the first sign of the *animus brincandi* if you take up thinking as a hobby. And so I blithely wrote: list of feelings. Precisely what I meant by this I had to wait and see—another sign that you're on the right track is not worrying if you don't understand; your attitude should be: you lose nothing by waiting, you lose nothing by not understanding.

Then I began to draw up a brief list of feelings for which I have no name. If I receive a present given affectionately by someone I don't like—what name do I give to how I feel about that? The nostalgia you feel for someone you no longer like, that bitterness and rancor—what is it called? Being busy—

Copyrighted Material

and stopping because you're seized by a sudden blissful vacancy of mind, a lifting of the clouds, as if a miraculous light had just entered the room: what would you call that?

A word of warning. Sometimes, we start to play with thinking and, quite unexpectedly, the plaything begins to play with us. This is not good. But it is fruitful.

A COSMONAUT ON EARTH

I have, very belatedly, been reflecting on cosmonauts. Or, rather, on the very first cosmonaut. Even just a day after Gagarin, our feelings were already lagging way behind compared with the speed with which that event had been overtaking us. Now, even more belatedly, here I am reconsidering the whole subject. Such a very difficult subject to grasp.

One day, when warned that the ball he was playing with might drop to the floor and annoy the downstairs neighbors, the boy responded: the world is automatic now, and when one hand throws the ball in the air, the other automatically catches it, so it won't fall.

The problem is that our hand has not yet become automatic enough. It was alarming when Gagarin went up into space, because if the automatic world had failed to work, the "ball" would have done far more than upset the downstairs neighbors. And my not-very-automatic hand trembled with fear at the possibility that it would not be quick enough and would let that "cosmonautical event" escape me. Having to feel was a big responsibility—not dropping the ball being thrown at us.

The need to make everything a little more logical—which, in a way, runs parallel to that idea of automaticness—prompts

Copyrighted Material

me to attempt a detailed description of the huge shock I experienced:

—From now on, when referring to the Earth, I will no longer indiscriminately talk about "the world." I will consider the "mappa mundi" to be an inappropriate expression; when I say "my world," I will remember with a thrill of joy that my map also needs to be redrawn, and that no one can guarantee that, viewed from above, my world is not blue. Other thoughts: before the first cosmonaut, it would have been quite right for someone referring to his or her own birth, to say: "I came into the world." But we were only born to the world very recently. And then almost sheepishly.

—When we want to see blue, we look up at the sky. The Earth is blue to anyone looking down at it from the sky. Is blue in itself a color or merely a question of distance? Or a question of profound nostalgia? The unreachable is always blue.

—If I were the first astronaut, my joy would only be rekindled once another man had traveled there and back: because he would have seen it too. Because a description is no substitute for "having seen something": "having seen" can only be compared with "having seen." Until another human being had seen it too, there would be a great silence inside me, even if I spoke out. A thought: imagine if someone in the world had already seen God, but never said a word. Well, if no one else had seen him, what would be the point?

—The great favor that chance does us is that of still being alive when the great world began. As for the future: we should smoke less, take better care of ourselves, so that we have more time to live and to see a little more; and also urge the scientists to get a move on—because our personal time is running out.

Copyrighted Material

August 26, 1967

OUR VICTORY

What we ourselves have done in a day and considered to be our daily victory.

Above all else, we have not loved. We have dismissed what cannot be understood because we do not wish to appear foolish. We have accumulated things and certainties because we have neither the one nor the other. We have failed to experience any previously unrecorded joy. We have built cathedrals, but remained outside, fearing that any cathedrals we ourselves build might turn out to be traps. We have not given ourselves to ourselves because that would be the beginning of a long life possibly devoid of consolations. We have avoided falling on our knees before the first person who, out of love, utters the words "your fear." We have organized clubs of smiling terror, where they serve soda with every drink. We have tried to save ourselves, but without explicitly using the word "salvation" so as not to feel embarrassed by our own naiveté. We have avoided using the word "love" so as to avoid having to acknowledge how closely love and hate are interwoven. We have kept our death a secret. We have created art because we do not know what the alternative is. We have disguised our indifference with love, disguised our indifference with anxiety, disguised our greatest fear with a lesser fear. We have not worshipped because, just in time, we were sensibly mean-spirited enough to remember the existence of false gods. We have deliberately not behaved ingenuously in order not to have to laugh at ourselves and so that, at the end of the day, we can say "well, at least I didn't make a fool of myself," and so spare ourselves shedding any tears before we turn out the light. We

Copyrighted Material

have enjoyed the certainty that we and, yes, you too, have done precisely the same, which is why we all, unknowingly, love each other. We have smiled in public at things we would not smile at when alone. We have called our candor weakness. We have, above all, felt afraid of each other. And we have considered all this to be our daily victory.

SO MUCH EFFORT

A visitor. A former classmate come from São Paulo to visit her. She welcomed her with tea and sandwiches, making the visit, the afternoon and the meeting as perfect as possible. Her friend arrived looking very pretty and feminine. As the hours passed, however, she gradually began to fall apart, and a less youthful, less happy face appeared, more intense and more intensely bitter. That lesser, easier beauty soon fell away. And soon the lady of the house had before her a woman who, while less pretty, was nonetheless more beautiful, and was—as she always did in the old days—giving vent to her ardent thoughts, getting confused, resorting to reason's clichés, and trying to prove to her hostess the need to go forward, that "we each have a mission to fulfill." At that point, the word "mission" must have struck her as somewhat hackneyed, or perhaps not so much her as the lady of the house who had been one of their group's intelligentsia. She corrected herself: "a mission—or whatever you want to call it." The lady of the house fidgeted uncomfortably in her chair.

When the visitor left, she tottered slightly, apparently overcome by the kind of weariness brought on by making a decision prematurely: everything she had decided to do would take years to achieve. If she ever did achieve it. The lady of the house took the elevator down to the street with her visitor.

Copyrighted Material

It was odd seeing her visitor from behind: the other side of the coin consisted in childishly mussed-up hair, short skirt, chubby legs, shoulders made too broad by ill-fitting clothes. Yes. A remarkable, solitary woman. Struggling, more than anything, against her own prejudices, which were advising her to be less than she was, to bend the knee. So much effort and yet still that childishly mussed-up hair. Out in the street, she was passed by other creatures who doubtless had fewer problems and were heading for more immediate destinations. The lady of the house felt a kind of awkward understanding like a weight on her heart: how could she help her? Knowing that she could never transform that understanding into action.

THE PROCESS

"What am I to do? I can't bear living. Life is so short, and yet I can't stand living."

"I don't know. I feel the same. But there are things, lots of things. There's a point where despair is a light, a love."

"And after that?"

"After that comes Nature."

"Are you calling death nature?"

"No, I'm calling nature Nature."

"Have all lives always been like this?"

"Yes, I believe so."

September 9, 1967

UNDYING LOVE

I still feel slightly unsure about my new role as a writer of what couldn't really be called *crônicas*. As well as being a novice in

Copyrighted Material

that, I'm also a novice when it comes to writing as a way of earning money. True, I've worked as a journalist before, but I never signed my work. Signing what I write automatically makes it more personal. And it feels rather as if I were selling my soul. I talked about this to a friend who said: but writing *is* rather like selling your soul. It's true. Even if you don't get paid, it's very exposing. However, a doctor friend disagreed: she argued that in her profession you have to give your entire soul, and you earn money simply because you need to live. It is, therefore, with great pleasure that I sell you a small part of my soul—this Saturday conversation.

Except that, as a novice, I still get in a tangle over what to write about. I was in precisely this frame of mind when I was visiting a friend. The telephone rang, and it was a mutual friend of ours. I spoke to him too and, of course, told him that my new job meant having to write something every Saturday. And I asked him point-blank: "What are people, women, for example, what are they most interested in?" Before he could even reply, we heard, coming from the far end of that enormous living room, my friend's loud, candid voice giving her one-word answer: "Men." We all laughed, but it was a perfectly serious response. It is with slight embarrassment, then, that I am obliged to acknowledge that men are what most interests women.

We should not feel humiliated by this, as if we should have far more universal interests. Also, let us not feel humiliated, because if we were to ask the world's leading electronic engineer what most interests men, his immediate, frank, personal reply would be: women. And it is sometimes good to remind ourselves of this obvious truth, however embarrassing. Some will say: "But when it comes to people, surely our children are what interest us most." That's different. Children are, as they say, our

Copyrighted Material

flesh and blood, and it's not a matter of being interested or not. It's something else. So much so that it's as if every child in the world was our flesh and blood. No, I'm not being fanciful here. One day, someone told me about a young girl who was partially paralyzed and who sought to vent her rage by breaking a vase. And my very blood ached. She was an angry daughter.

Men. Men are so likable. Just as well. Are men the source of our inspiration? Yes. Are men our biggest challenge? Yes. Are men our enemy? Yes. Are men our most stimulating rival? Yes. Are men both our equals and entirely different? Yes. Are men attractive? Yes. Are men funny? Yes. Are men children? Yes. Are men also fathers? Yes. Do we argue with men? We do. Can we manage without the men we argue with? No. Are we interesting because men like interesting women? We are. Are men the ones with whom we have the most important conversations? Yes. Are men annoying? Yes. Do we like being annoyed by men? We do.

I could continue adding to this endless list until ordered to stop by my editor. But I don't think anyone else would order me to stop, because I believe I have touched a nerve: which is how men hurt women. And how women hurt men.

Given my penchant for taking cabs, I always make a point of interrogating the driver. One night, I was picked up by a young Spaniard with a small, neat mustache and sad eyes. We chatted about this and that, and then he asked me if I had children. I, in turn, asked him if he had children too, and he replied that he wasn't married and never would marry. And he told me his story. Fourteen years before, back in Spain, he had been in love with a young Spanish woman. He lived in a small town with few doctors and few resources. The young woman fell ill with a seemingly unidentifiable illness and, three days later, she died. She died knowing that she was dying, predicting: "I will die

Copyrighted Material

in your arms." And she did die in his arms, praying to God to help her. For three years after that, the driver could barely eat. In that small town, everyone knew about his love and tried to help him. They would take him to parties, where the girls would ask him to dance instead of waiting for him to ask them.

Nothing helped though. Everything about the place reminded him of Clarita—the name of the dead girl, which startled me because it was so like my own name, making me feel at once both dead and loved. Then he decided to leave Spain, without even telling his parents. He found out that, at the time, the only two countries willing to receive immigrants without a letter of invitation were Brazil and Venezuela. He opted for Brazil. He grew rich. He owned a shoe factory, which he later sold; he bought a restaurant, which he later sold. Because nothing really mattered to him. He decided to turn his car into a taxi and become a driver. He lives in a house in Jacarepaguá, because "it has some really lovely freshwater waterfalls (!)." But during those fourteen years, he had failed to find love with another woman and, according to him, he doesn't really love or care about anything at all. He explained very discreetly that, although he missed Clarita every single day, he didn't let this hold him back and he had managed to have affairs with various different women. But he would never love anyone else.

My story ends in a rather unexpected, alarming way.

We had almost reached my destination, when he spoke again about his house in Jacarepaguá, and about those freshwater waterfalls, as if there *were* such a thing as a saltwater waterfall. I said, rather vaguely, that I would love to spend a few restful days in a place like that.

Well, this was completely the wrong thing to say. Because, at the risk of driving his car straight into a house, he suddenly turned round and asked in a very insinuating voice: "Would

Copyrighted Material

you really? Why don't you come, then?" Greatly alarmed by this sudden change in tone, I heard myself blurt out that I couldn't possibly because I was about to have an operation and would "be very ill afterward" (!). From now on, I will only interrogate older taxi drivers. But this at least proves that the Spaniard was indeed an honest man: his longing for Clarita really didn't hold him back.

This ending may prove disappointing to those of a sentimental disposition. Many people would want his fourteen years of grief to hold him back. That would make a better story. But I can't lie just to please you. Besides, I think it's quite right that he shouldn't be held back by his grief. It's bad enough that he should feel incapable of loving anyone else.

I forgot to mention that he also told me various tales of business deals and embezzlements—it was a long journey and the traffic was terrible. However, I listened to these only distractedly. I was only interested in what we term "undying love." That tale of embezzlement is beginning to come back to me now though. Perhaps if I concentrate, I'll remember it more clearly and tell you about it next Saturday. But I don't think you'd be interested.

September 16, 1967

PRAYER FOR A PRIEST

One night, I stammered out a prayer for a priest who is afraid of dying and ashamed to feel afraid. I spoke briefly and somewhat awkwardly to God: bring solace to Father X's soul … make him feel that Your hand is in his, make him feel that death does not exist because we are already in eternity, make

Copyrighted Material

him feel that to love is not to die, that surrendering yourself to someone does not signify death, make him experience a modest, everyday joy, don't let him ask too many questions, because the reply would be as mysterious as the question, remind him that there is also no explanation as to why a child should want a kiss from his mother, and yet every child does want that kiss and the kiss is always perfect, make him welcome the world without fear, because we were created for this incomprehensible world and are ourselves incomprehensible, so there is a connection between the world's mystery and our own, but that connection will remain unclear to us as long as we struggle to understand it, give him Your blessing so that he can experience with joy the bread that he eats, the sleep that he sleeps, and have him be kind to himself, because otherwise he'll be unable to feel God's love, and tell him not to feel embarrassed for wanting to have another human hand hold his at the hour of his death, Amen. (Father X asked me to pray for him.)

NOT FEELING

Habit has softened his many falls. However, although he experiences less pain, he no longer has the advantage of pain as a warning and symptom. Today he lives incomparably more serenely, albeit in great danger of losing his life: he could be a step away from dying, a step away from having already died, without the benefit of a receiving a warning from himself.

GOING SOMEWHERE

Last night, a cat was yowling for so long and with such feeling that I felt as much compassion for it as I have felt for any

Copyrighted Material

other living being. It sounded like pain, and in our human and animal terms it was. But was it pain or was it simply "going," "going where"? Because all living beings are going somewhere.

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS FROM NOW

I was once asked if I could imagine what Brazil would be like twenty-five years from now. No, not even twenty-five minutes from now, let alone twenty-five years. But my impression-hope is that in a not-too-distant future, we might come to realize that today's chaotic events were just our first few hesitant steps in tuning up and orchestrating ourselves for an economic situation worthier of a man, a woman, a child. This is because the people have already shown signs of greater political maturity than many politicians, and will one day end up leading the leaders. Twenty-five years from now, the people will have spoken out and had far more of a say.

However, while I may not be able to look into the future, I can at least hope. I can hope fervently that the most urgent of all problems has been resolved, namely, hunger. Far sooner, though, than twenty-five years from now, because there is no time to lose: millions of men, women and children are literally dying on their feet and should, technically, be in a hospital for the undernourished. Levels of poverty are so high that the government would be justified in declaring a state of emergency, as if for a public disaster. Except that it's far worse than that: hunger is endemic here, an organic part of body and soul. And, in the majority of cases, when you describe the physical, moral and mental characteristics of a Brazilian, you hardly notice that what you're actually describing are the physical, moral and mental symptoms of hunger. Leaders who make it their goal

Copyrighted Material

to find an economic solution to the problem of food shortages will be as blessed by us as the world will bless those who discover a cure for cancer.

September 23, 1967

SPRING AT TYPING SPEED

The first warm days of the new season, as old as a first intake of breath. And yet I can't help but smile. Without actually looking at myself in the mirror, I can tell that my smile is as idiotic as the angels.

Long before the new season arrived, there were already signs: an unexpected warmth in the wind, a new sweetness in the air. It's impossible, impossible that such sweetness will not bring more sweetnesses, says my breaking heart.

Impossible, echoes back the still fresh, yet mordant warmth of spring. Impossible that such an air will not bring with it the love of the world, repeats my heart, cracking open its parched self with a smile. Not even realizing that it's *already* brought love, that this *is* love. That first still-fresh warmth brings—everything. Only and indivisibly that: everything.

And everything is a lot for a suddenly debilitated heart, which can only bear the very least of anything, can only want a little and then only little by little. Today I feel a kind of, yes, mordant future memory of today. And to think that I never gave what I am feeling now to anyone or anything. Did I give it to myself? Only insofar as such fragile nerves, such gentle deaths, can cope with the pungency of goodness. Ah, how I want to die. I have never yet experienced dying—what an open road lies ahead. Dying will have the same indivisible pungency

Copyrighted Material

as goodness. To whom will I give my death, a death that will be like the first fresh warm days of a new season. Ah, pain is so much more bearable, more graspable than spring's promise of frigid, liquid joy. I hope to die with the same degree of modesty: the pungency of goodness. Not that I want to die before I actually do die—because it's so delicious to prolong that promise. I want to prolong it with great subtlety. I take a bath, I take nourishment from the very best and finest of life, because nothing is too good as I prepare myself for the arrival of this new season. I want the best oils and perfumes, I want only the best kind of life, I want the most delicate of waitings, I want the finest as well as the richest meats to eat, I want my flesh to dissolve into spirit and my spirit to dissolve into flesh, I want those fine mixtures—everything that will secretly prepare me for those first moments yet to come. In this initiated state, I can sense the change of season. And I wish I could enjoy the lush life of an enormous fruit. Inside that fruit taking shape within me, inside that succulent fruit, there is room for the lightest of insomnias, namely, my keen animal wisdom: a veil of alertness, just enough to be able to sense what is to come. Ah, being able to sense something is far pleasanter than the unbearable acuity of goodness. And let me not forget, in this fine battle of mine, that the most difficult thing to understand is happiness. Let me not forget that the steepest of wind-battered climbs is being able to smile with genuine happiness. Because, for one reason and another, that is what I have found hardest to grasp: the infinite delicacy of happiness. For when I linger too long in it and try to grasp its feather-light vastness, my eyes fill with tears of exhaustion: I grow weak before the beauty of what exists and what will exist. And during that whole ongoing apprenticeship, I still cannot grasp the initial joy of life.

Copyrighted Material

Will I manage to capture the infinitely sweet joy of dying? Ah, how it troubles me, not being able to live well and therefore not being able to die well either. How it troubles me that there might be those who do not understand that I will die while rushing headlong into the dizzy happiness of spring. But not for one instant will I hasten the coming of that happiness—because living and waiting for it is my vestal vigil. Day and night I will keep the candle burning—make it last through this very best of waitings. The first warm days of spring … ah, that *is* love! Happiness plants a daughterly smile on my face. I am perfectly groomed and coiffed. Except that I can barely stand the waiting now. It's so good that I run the risk of overtaking myself, of missing my first primaveral death, and, in sweaty anticipation of so much tepid waiting, dying before I get there. Dying out of sheer curiosity, because I want to know now what the new season will be like.

But I will wait. I will wait, savoring delicately, modestly, parsimoniously, each tiny crumb of everything. I want it all because nothing is too good for my death which is my life, a life so eternal that it already exists, it already is.

September 30, 1967

FOR THE RICH WHO ARE ALSO GOOD PEOPLE

I was honored to receive a message from Dr. Abraão Akerman, one of the world's greatest neurologists: he wanted to make use of my column.

I had received a message from him before: he would like to give me an interview on the subject of men and women, by which he must mean love. When I received the second mes-

Copyrighted Material

sage, I thought the moment for that interview had arrived. I asked him, but he wrote back, saying no: he would only give me an interview if I wanted one. Of course I did, even if it was about men and women from the neurological point of view.

So I went to visit him one Sunday afternoon. Dr. Akerman is a very cultured individual: as well as being an expert in the field of neurology, he is up to date on the very best literature, even sending to Europe for books. And he has a very select record collection.

After chatting for a while—and what we chatted about would itself make a fascinating interview—after chatting for a while, we moved on to the subject of today's column, which involves the moneyed classes, science, taxes, people who have a good heart and who, above all, take action. Am I being enigmatic? All will become clear when I tell you what Dr. Akerman himself said to me:

"In order to pursue our research and reveal new horizons, I and various other people who work in isolation, researching and teaching, need help and not just now and then. Believing as I do in the infinite possibilities of Brazil and our younger generation, I would like that initiative to come from Brazilians, without having to resort to help from foreigners.

"New laws passed during the last two years make such an initiative easier for the very rich, since, as in many foreign countries, especially the United States, such generosity is tax deductible. That same generosity could benefit other activities important to the Brazilian people, funding orchestras, museums and so on."

As the conversation continued, I learned that a wonderful new electroencephalograph worth fifty thousand new cruzeiros was recently donated to the Neurological Center of which Dr. Akerman is the director. Obviously, that donation

Copyrighted Material

was not made without due consideration being given to how useful such a machine could be.

Private donations are currently rare because few organizations can use those donations to maximum advantage. The big industrialists and teachers who visit from abroad are always surprised at the amount of modern equipment that exists in public institutions, but which remains unused. The staff simply don't know how to use them. These are hugely expensive purchases, bought with taxpayers' money, of machines for which there are no technicians.

And yet we all know of private organizations that make good use of scientific instruments.

Unfortunately, the nation can often prove to be a very absentminded boss and, when the machine arrives, it's abandoned with no regard for the public interest.

Dr. Akerman added:

"Let's hope that there are many more such private donations—they in no way contradict official regulations and they honor those who want our country to reach the scientific level it deserves to reach."

Dr. Akerman mentioned Mellon, the big banker who donated enormous sums of money to American museums, and said:

"The rich must get into the habit of giving. Now is the time to give."

October 7, 1967

BAD LANGUAGE IN THE THEATER

I myself never use bad language because when I was a child no one in our household did and I got used to expressing myself

Copyrighted Material

in a different sort of parlance. But I'm never shocked by swear words—the kind that express what another word could not. There are certain plays, such as *A volta ao lar* (Fernanda Montenegro* is excellent) or *Dois perdidos numa noite suja* (Fauzi Arap and Nelson Xavier,** both excellent), which could simply not exist without swearing because of the world they evoke and the characters who inhabit it. Those two plays, for example, are of a very high quality and should certainly not be bowdlerized.

Besides, the average theatergoer already has a fair idea of the kind of play he or she is going to see, even if only from hearsay. If you're going to feel uncomfortable or scandalized by swear words, then why buy a ticket?

Furthermore, plays are age-rated, and normally no one under sixteen can go, and that, in itself, is a guarantee. Then again, most modern young people of that age and below already know and use plenty of swear words.

So what then is the problem with using swear words in a play if the text calls for it? Besides, like it or not, swear words are part of the Portuguese language.

* Fernanda Montenegro (b. 1929) is widely considered one of the greatest Brazilian actresses of all time. In 1967, she played Ruth in *A volta ao lar*, Millôr Fernandes's translation of Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming*. She has performed on stage, television and in movies, and has won countless awards. She is the only Brazilian to have been nominated for an Academy Award for Best Actress in a leading role, and the only person nominated so far for a performance in the Portuguese language.

** Fauzi Arap (1938–2013) directed and played Tonho in Plínio Marcos's *Dois perdidos numa noite suja* (Two poor wretches on a murky night). Nelson Xavier (1941–2017) played the other character, Paco.

Copyrighted Material

CHACRINHA?!

I'd heard so many people talking about Chacrinha that I finally turned on the TV to watch his program, which seemed to me to last a lot longer than an hour.

I was utterly astonished. I am told that his program is currently the most popular in Brazil. But why? The man appears to be demented, and I'm using the word in its proper sense. And the audience was packed. It's a kind of talent show for amateurs, or so I gathered from what I saw. It occupies what is called prime time. The man wears absurd outfits, the contestant performs his or her party piece, and if he or she fails to please, then Chacrinha sounds his hooter and sends them packing. There's something sadistic about Chacrinha, you sense that he gets a certain pleasure out of blowing his hooter. And he repeats the same jokes over and over—does the man simply lack imagination or is he obsessed?

And the contestants? Oh, that's so depressing. They are of all ages. And in every one of them you see the same longing to appear on television, to show off, to become famous, even at the cost of being humiliated and making complete and utter fools of themselves. Even seventy-year-olds take part. With a few exceptions, the contestants are all from humble backgrounds and all look undernourished. And yet the audience applauds. There are money prizes for those who guess the number of honks Chacrinha will give, at least that's what happened on the one program I watched. Is it the chance of winning some money, like with the lottery, that makes the program so popular? Or are we just a mean-spirited people? Is there a sadistic streak in the viewers which allows them to take pleasure in Chacrinha's sadism?

Copyrighted Material

I simply don't understand it. Our television, with a few exceptions, is usually pretty poor and overloaded with commercials, but Chacrinha was just too much. I simply don't understand the phenomenon. And I felt sad, disappointed: I had hoped the Brazilian public would want something better.

October 14, 1967

DIES IRAE

I woke up in a rage. No, I don't like the world at all. The majority of people are dead and don't know it, or else are alive but live like charlatans. And love, instead of giving, makes demands. And anyone who does love us wants us to fulfill some need of theirs. Lying brings remorse. And not lying is a gift the world does not deserve. And I can't even do what that partially paralyzed girl did to voice her rage, namely, smash a vase. I am not partially paralyzed. Although something inside tells me that we are all partially paralyzed. And we die without so much as an explanation. Even worse—without so much as an explanation we live. And having maids—let's be honest here and call them servants—is an offense against humanity. And being obliged to be what people call "presentable" infuriates me. Why can't I walk around in rags, like the men I sometimes see in the street with a beard down to their chest and a Bible in their hand, those gods who have made madness a way of understanding the world? And why, just because I've written a few things, is it assumed that I must continue to write? I warned my sons that I had woken up in a rage, and they ignored me. But I don't want to ignore it. I would like to do something to finally break the tense tendon sustaining my heart.

Copyrighted Material

What about those who simply give up? I know one woman who did just that and she lives reasonably well: her way of living involves keeping herself occupied. But no occupation pleases her. And nothing I have done in life pleases me. Plus, anything I did do in a loving way has shattered into pieces. I didn't even know how to love, I really didn't. And now they've created an Illiteracy Day. I only read the headline, and refused to read the article. I refuse to read the world's articles, the headlines are enough to enrage me. And there's far too much commemorating going on. There are wars all the time. A whole world of partially paralyzed people. And we wait in vain for a miracle. And anyone who isn't waiting for a miracle is even worse off, with still more vases to be smashed. And the churches are full of those who fear God's wrath. And of those asking for his grace, which would be the opposite of his wrath.

No, I don't feel sorry for those who die of hunger. I feel only rage. And I think it's right to steal in order to eat.—I've just been interrupted by a phone call from a girl called Teresa, who was really pleased when I remembered her. I do remember: she was a complete stranger who appeared in the hospital one day, during the almost three months I spent there, recovering from the burns I suffered in a fire.* She sat down, said nothing at first, then spoke a little. Then she left. And she phoned me just now to have a frank conversation, saying that I shouldn't write *crônicas* for the newspaper or anything of the sort. That she and many others wanted me to be myself, even if I am getting paid. That many people buy my books and want me to be the same me in the newspaper too. I said Yes, partly because

* Lispector suffered severe burns after falling asleep in bed while smoking a cigarette. She spent three months in hospital and it took many more months to recover.

Copyrighted Material

that's how I would like things to be as well, and partly to show Teresa, who didn't appear to be partially paralyzed, that one can still say Yes.

Yes, dear God, one can still say Yes. But then, just now, at this very moment, something strange happened. I am writing in the morning, and the weather has suddenly grown so dark that I had to turn on the lights. And then I received another phone call: from a friend asking me in some alarm if it had grown dark where I am too. Yes, it's black night here at ten o'clock in the morning. It's the wrath of God. And if that darkness becomes rain, then bring on the flood, but with no ark this time, since we have failed to make a world in which we can live, not that we, in our paralyzed state, know how to live. Because if the flood doesn't return, then Sodom and Gomorrah will, and that would be one solution. Why allow one pair of every species into the ark? At least human couples have only produced children, but not that other nonexistent life, the one that made me wake up in a rage.

Teresa, when you visited me in hospital, you found me all bandaged up and immobile. Today, you would find me even more immobile. Today I am paralyzed and dumb. And if I try to speak, all that emerges is a sad little roar. Ah, so it's not just rage? No, it's sadness too.

October 21, 1967

STRENGTH AND FRAGILITY

And I felt a sudden unbearable pain in my left eye, which began watering, turning the world all blurry. And distorted too, because when you close one eye, the other eye automatically half closes too. On four occasions in less than a year, a foreign

Copyrighted Material

object has entered my left eye: twice it was a speck of dust, once it was a grain of sand, and the fourth time an eyelash. On those four occasions I had to consult whichever ophthalmologist happened to be on duty. The last time, I asked Dr. Murilo Carvalho, an eye surgeon working for a chain of opticians, who is also an artist in the making, fulfilling his vocation by taking care of what you might call our vision of the world:

"Why is it always my left eye? Mere coincidence?"

He said No, however normal your eyesight might be, one of your eyes sees more than the other, and so is more sensitive. He called it the "dominant eye." And, he said, because it is more sensitive, it traps the foreign object rather than expelling it.

Which means that the best eye is the one that suffers most. It is, at once, stronger and more fragile, it attracts problems—far from being imaginary, what could be more real than the unbearable pain of a dust mote wounding and scratching one of the most delicate parts of the body.

Food for thought.

Does this only happen with the eyes? Could it be that the person who sees most, and who is, therefore, stronger, is also the one who feels and suffers most? The one most racked by pain as real as having a speck of dust in your eye.

Food for thought.

YES

I said to a friend:

"Life has always demanded too much of me."

She said:

"Don't forget that you have always demanded too much of life."

Yes.

Copyrighted Material

AN UNUSUAL INCIDENT AND A REQUEST

I received a neatly typed letter, with not a single grammatical error and no fancy phrases, although it was perhaps a tad overly respectful: he addresses me throughout using the very formal *Vossa Senhoria*.

The letter is from Fernando Bernardes, who apologizes for "taking up my valuable time." He writes: "I am a modest man, working as a night watchman on construction sites, and reading has become my companion, helping to keep me awake through the night." He goes on to say that a friend lent him one of my "excellent" books, although he doesn't say which one. And then he asks if I could send him a few used books because "I earn very little, and certainly not enough for me to buy new ones."

The letter surprised and touched me. What is such a man doing working as a night watchman?

I phoned the writer Umberto Peregrino, director of the National Book Institute, and told him about the letter, and he immediately ordered a selection of books to be sent to the man.

May I ask my readers a favor? Could you also surprise Fernando Bernardes by sending him some used books? His address is: Rua Imarui, 124, Bangu. Thank you.

MY NEIGHBOR'S BOOK

I was sent a book accompanied by a letter. It's a book of short stories, entitled *A Journey in Circles*, and the author is José Luís Janot. I learned from his letter that he lives almost opposite me: from my small terrace, I could look into his apartment,

Copyrighted Material

where, according to his description, I would see: "white walls, a brief flight of stairs, a door and blue-framed windows." He says that, on the night of the fire in my apartment, he saw "a great cloud of smoke, and, guessing that it was your apartment, I raced downstairs." He adds: "on that dreadful night, when I least expected it, I found myself instinctively praying to some god that nothing irreparable would happen to you." Thank you, dear neighbor, for your prayers and for the book.

I read the stories. They're good. On the inside flap I learned that this is his first book. It doesn't feel like it. There's no sense of this being the work of a beginner lacking in confidence. The note also says that, although this book marks his debut, the author is no neophyte. "He underwent a long process of maturation before he felt ready to face the public." If I were to write a review, I would probably go into more detail. But I am not a reviewer. I will say only that *A Journey in Circles* is a good book and I enjoyed reading it.

October 28, 1967

SPRING SUITE SWISS-STYLE

Winter in Berne, the tomb opening—there are the fields, and there is the grass and all the other greenery. New leaves, leaves, how to separate you from the wind? One sneeze followed by another, springtime sneezes, outside the window, an attentive spring with a slight cold. Cobwebs around her fingers, the well in the garden revealed—but such a smell of new steel emanating from the tiny yellow, yellowing flowers. Leaves, leaves, how to separate you from the breeze? Where can I hide from this eyes-wide-open brightness? I have lost all the cozy corners

Copyrighted Material

where I used to meditate. But if I put on a white dress and go out, I will be lost in the light—and lost again—and lost again in that slow leap up to a higher plane—and how will I find the spring in my absence? Rosa, please iron my blackest dress. On those higher planes growing gradually calmer—and even calmer on the next one—and the next—I will be the only possible me, barely mobile in this century and the next and the next of this silent lucidity, O inhospitable Spring. Or perhaps I will race through this new era—traversing this new pathless world—with a thousand scintillating sneezes and with plants in their thousands too. I will pause, panting, only there where my heart beats faster, the one marker in your emptiness, O Spring: me in black and you in gold, me with a flower in my hair, you with a thousand flowers in yours, which is how we will recognize each other. Just in case, I will carry a book in one hand and, in the other, a great deal of hesitation, I am tall and have a slight cold: you will recognize me by my handkerchief and my sneezing. And in the midst of this odious empty sky, which I breathe in and breathe in—I will recognize you by your blind wind and by my own fine flowering of sneezes.

In this sleepy spring, the goats are dreaming in the fields. The fish is in the aquarium on the hotel terrace. And there up in the hills is the solitary faun. Days and days and days and beyond—in the countryside the wind, the impudent dreams of the goats, the hollow fish in the aquarium—that sudden spring kleptomania, and the faun, cheeks already flushed, as he bounds along alone. Yes, but only until the summer comes and a hundred thousand apples ripen in the autumn.

I bite into the fruit and throw half away, I've never pitied the spring. I drink water direct from the fountain in the street, I don't wipe my mouth with my handkerchief, I lost my hand-

Copyrighted Material

kerchief and I lost the winter, but I don't care, I've never pitied the spring. Somehow I peer through the keyhole, visiting you in the sacred hour of your sleep, I've never pitied the spring. As for the swimming pool, I spend hours and hours there, trembling as the last winter chills set the first cold leaves trembling. Just look at the pool! I look, unmoved. I've never pitied the spring.

Insomnia makes the dimly lit city levitate, no door is closed, no window unlit. What are they waiting for? They are waiting. The already warm cinemas are empty. Around the streetlights something is germinating. The last snow melted ages ago. The banks of the river, the invasion of couples sitting together at tables, a few with small children asleep on their laps, while others fall asleep on the hard pavement. Conversations drag. The worst thing is this wide-awake brightness, the streetlights of Berne buzzing with mosquitoes. And how we walk and walk. Dust on my sandals, no destination. No, things are not looking good. Ah, at last, the Cathedral, shelter, darkness.

But the Cathedral is warm and wide open.

Full of mosquitoes.

November 4, 1967

THE GREAT PUNISHMENTS

I met Leopoldo on my very first day at the kindergarten in Rua Formosa in Recife.* And by the second day we had al-

* Leopoldo Nachbin: see *Jornal do Brasil* dated February 13, 1971. Lispector lived in Recife, capital of the northeastern state of Pernambuco, from the age of five until she was twelve. See *Jornal do Brasil* dated November 14, 1970 ("A Final Explanation") for Lispector's own account of her early life.

Copyrighted Material

ready become the class impossibles. We spent the year hearing the teacher bawling out our names—but I don't really know why, because even though we were hard to handle, she clearly liked us. She tried sitting us at different desks, but that didn't work because Leopoldo and I simply talked to each other more loudly, which had a bad effect on class discipline. Then we went on to our first year at elementary school. And for our new teacher we were again the class impossibles. We always got very good grades, although never for behavior.

Until the day when the very commanding headmistress came into the class and spoke softly to the teacher. First, I will describe what it was really about, then how I actually felt. It was simply a matter of using tests to raise the intellectual level of children in the state. Any children who were, in the teacher's opinion, *brighter* than the others, would take the test intended for the year above, because their own year's test would be too easy. That's all it was.

However, when the headmistress left, the teacher announced to the class: Leopoldo and Clarice will be taking a sort of exam with the fourth year students, and that was when I experienced one of the great traumas of my life. The teacher gave no further explanation, but the fact that our two names had once again been mentioned together revealed to me that the hour of divine punishment had come. I was a cheerful child, but also easily brought to tears, and I began to sob quietly. Leopoldo immediately came over to console me, explaining that it really wasn't important. In vain: I was born to be the guilty party, the one born with original sin.

And suddenly there we were with the fourth grade kids, with a teacher we had never met and in a classroom we had never seen before. My fears grew and tears poured down my

Copyrighted Material

cheeks, dripping onto my chest. They sat Leopoldo and me side by side. Printed sheets were handed out, and the stern teacher then said these incomprehensible words:

"Do not look at the paper until I say *now*. Only start to read when I tell you to. And the moment I say *stop*, you must stop writing at once."

We received our printed sheets. Leopoldo was completely unfazed, while I grew ever more panic-stricken. For one thing, I didn't know what an exam was, since I had never taken one. And when the teacher said *Now*, my muffled sobs grew louder. Apart from my father, Leopoldo was my first male protector, and he played this part so well that I have accepted and wanted male protection ever since—Leopoldo told me to calm down, to read the questions and answer them as best I could. In vain: by then, my sheet of paper was soggy with tears and when I tried to read the questions, I couldn't see for crying. I didn't write a single word, I wept and suffered as I would only suffer later on in life and for different reasons. Leopoldo was not only writing, he was also looking after me.

When the teacher yelled *Stop!*, I had still not finished weeping. She called me over, and I said nothing, but she kindly explained that we were the brightest pupils in our year group, etc. etc., words I only understood some days later, once I had recovered. I never found out the result of the exam, and I don't think we were supposed to.

In my third year, I changed schools. And at the entrance exam for the Ginásio Pernambucano, there was Leopoldo again, and it was just as if we had never been parted. He continued to be my protector. I remember once using some slang expression, of whose rude origins I was completely ignorant. And Leopoldo said: "Don't say that word again." "Why?"

Copyrighted Material

"You'll understand when you're older."

In the third year of high school, my family moved to Rio. I only saw Leopoldo again once, by chance, in the street, when we were both adults. We had become two shy people traveling in the same bus almost without speaking. We were still those same impossibles, only in a different way.

Leopoldo is Leopoldo Nachbin. I found out that in the first year of his engineering degree, he solved a theorem that had been considered insoluble since antiquity. And that he had been summoned to the Sorbonne to explain how he had arrived at the solution. He is now one of the greatest mathematicians in the world today.

As for me? I'm less of a crybaby.

November 11, 1967

IN FAVOR OF FEAR

I am convinced that during the Stone Age, I must have been wounded by the love of some man, because a certain secret fear of mine dates from that time.

Be that as it may, one warm night, I was sitting chatting politely to a civilized gentleman who was wearing a dark suit and had very correct fingernails. I was, as Sérgio Porto* would say, feeling perfectly at ease, and eating some guava. Then the man says: "Shall we go for a little stroll?"

* Sérgio Porto (1923–1968), pen name Stanislaw Ponte Preta, was a Brazilian writer, journalist, commentator and humorist. Lispector may be referring to his collection of *crônicas*, *Garoto Linha Dura*, published in 1964.

Copyrighted Material

No. I am going to tell the naked truth. What he said was: "Shall we go for a *paseíto*?"*

I didn't have time to find out the nature of that *paseíto*, because I immediately heard, coming from thousands of centuries ago, the rumble of the first stone in an avalanche: my heart. Who was it? Who, in the Stone Age, took me out for a *paseíto* from which I never returned, because I'm still there?

I don't know what hidden terror lies hidden in the monstrous delicacy of that word *paseíto*.

Once my first heart had rumbled through the centuries, and I had golloped down another little guava—I felt absurdly alarmed by what was a most improbable danger.

I say "improbable" now, reassured as I am by nice manners, by a particularly ruthless police force, and by my own self, which is as slippery as the most mimetic of eels. But I would really love to know what I would have said back then in the Stone Age, when they shook me down from my leafy tree—when I was still almost at the monkey stage. Ah, those were the days, I really must spend more time in the country.

Anyway, once I had golloped down my little guava, I turned pale, my natural color draining from my cheeks in an appropriately civilized fashion; my fear was far too vertical in time to leave any trace on the surface. Besides, it wasn't fear. It was sheer terror. The collapse of my entire future. The man, my equal, who had murdered me for love, and yet that is what people call love, and it is love.

A *paseíto*? That's what they must have said to Little Red

* "*paseíto*" is Spanish for a stroll or a ride, the diminutive of *paseo*. In Portuguese Lispector actually writes *passeíto*.

Copyrighted Material

Riding Hood, who only later on took care to take care of herself. "I'm going to play it safe and, just in case, hide under these leaves"—where did that little jingle come from? I don't know, but they do say that Pernambucans* never lie.

I hope the Man who may perhaps recognize himself in this tale of a fear will forgive me. Let him be in no doubt that, as they say, "it's entirely my problem." Let him be in no doubt that I should have taken his invitation for what it really was, tantamount to him sending me a bunch of roses: a courtesy, it was a warm night, his car was parked outside. And let him be in no doubt either that—in the simplistic division between good and evil imposed on me by the centuries—I know he's the Good Man in the Cave Next Door Only Five Wives Never Beats Any of Them All Very Happy. And I hope he understands—I appeal to his good nature—that I am perfectly well aware that a man like him from the Brazilian-Argentinian border uses the word *paseíto* quite innocently, while for me it carried within it the terrible threat of a caress. I thank him for using that precise word, which, being new to me, gave me a real shock.

I explained to the Man that, being a very refined young woman, I could not go for a *paseíto*. Having undergone centuries of training, I am now the most refined of the refined, and, however unnecessarily, I will hide under these leaves just in case.

The Man in question did not insist, although I can't say he was pleased. We looked at each other for less than a fraction of a second—over the centuries, the Man and I have come to understand each other very well, and all it takes now is a frac-

* Pernambuco is a state in northeast Brazil, where Lispector grew up.

Copyrighted Material

tion of a second—and my spluttered-out *No* echoed scandalously around the walls of the cave that had always favored the Man's desires.

After the Man's hasty retreat, here I am safe, but still frightened. Had I escaped by the skin of my teeth a *paseíto* where I could have lost my life? Nowadays, people always lose their lives so randomly.

Once the Man had gone, I realized that I felt joyful and revivified. Oh, not because of that invitation to go for a *paseíto*, we women have spent millennia being invited out for *paseítos*, we're used to it and are quite contented; we rarely get whipped for it. I was happy and radically changed—by fear.

Because I am all in favor of fear.

For certain fears—not the mean little ones, but those with ineradicable roots—have provided me with my most incomprehensible reality. I am delighted by the illogicality of my fears, which lend me an almost embarrassing aura. Beneath my veneer of cheerful modesty, I can barely conceal my great talent for succumbing to fears.

But in the case of this particular fear, I again wonder what could possibly have happened to me in the Stone Age. It can't have been anything natural, or I would not to this day preserve that nervous sidelong look, and would not have made myself so discreetly invisible, sneakily taking on the colors of the shadows and of greenery, always keeping close to the wall on sidewalks, while affecting a brisk, businesslike pace. It can't have been anything natural, since I am, whether I like it or not, a natural being, so nothing natural would have frightened me. Or did I even then—in the age of caves which is still my secret home—did I even then become neurotically fixated on the naturalness or otherwise of a *paseíto*?

Copyrighted Material

Yes, but having a slightly skewed heart has its advantages: it means I have a good nose for things, a sense of which way the wind is blowing, wisdom, keen instincts, experience of deaths, an ability to read the future in a pool of water, as well as being happily maladapted, for maladaptation, I find, has proved to be my wellspring. For I know when heavy rain is coming because the mosquitoes tell me so, and that cutting my hair when it's a new moon will make it grow stronger, that saying a name I dare not say will bring delay and great misfortune, and that tethering the devil to the table leg with some red thread has at least tied up some of my own demons. And I know—with my heart which, having for centuries always avoided the spotlight, lurks in the shadows to the left—I know that the Man is a stranger to himself, but his very innocence means that he is also natural.

No, my oblique heart is absolutely right, even if the facts openly contradict me. A *paseíto* means certain death, and the victim's horrified face gazes up, glassy-eyed, at the full, full-of-itself moon.

November 18, 1967

A PERFECT ENCOUNTER

When Maria Bonomi* was in Rio, we had lunch together in a restaurant and drank a full-bodied red wine that, afterward, sent me into a long, deep sleep, untroubled by nightmares. While I was sleeping, she was catching the plane to São Paulo,

* Maria Bonomi (b. 1934) is a Brazilian artist who works as an engraver, sculptor, painter and muralist. See also *Jornal do Brasil* dated October 2, 1971.

Copyrighted Material

where she lives with José Alves Antunes Filho, her husband, one of the best theater directors we have, and Cassio, my godson. Cassio had been complaining about me for a while: everyone else has a godmother close at hand, whereas he is obliged to relate to me through photos in the São Paulo press. I found out that he'd already had two girlfriends, and had broken up with the second one because she hit him. That's quite wrong: *men* hit *women*. I decided, on the advice of a friend, to buy him a machine gun, the sort that spits fire and makes a lot of noise, so that he could find his natural male aggression, so cruelly slighted by his girlfriend. And one of these days, I will make a special visit to São Paulo to devote myself entirely to my godson. I don't want to talk to anyone else, just him. Also because I'm afraid that his father (like Martim Gonçalves in Rio) is keen to persuade me to write something for the theater, which he would then direct. I would find it even more impossible to write a screenplay, as movie directors Walter Hugo Khouri and Maurício Ritner wanted. One of their arguments was that my writing is very visual. If it is, though, that's purely unconscious. If I ever had to make something *consciously* visual, I would get completely blocked.

But let us return to my friend and mother of my godson, Maria Bonomi Antunes. When did I first meet her? In Washington or in New York? Well, anyway, she hadn't changed one bit: she's more than just pretty, there's something very free about her, and she has twinkling eyes that immediately grow serious when she talks about her art. Maria is a mixture of lucidity and instinct, which makes her a complete being. Our encounter was such an encounterish encounter that, when we said goodbye, Maria said "See you tomorrow." I felt renewed by her, and I hope she felt slightly renewed by me, not that she needs renewing.

Copyrighted Material

We started by bringing each other up to date on our daily lives. Then I asked about her work. She can barely cope, what with working *and* selling her work, and success is getting in her way. She's even had to employ a secretary. I can understand that. My small *success* abroad sometimes gets in the way of my close relationship with my typewriter. I don't have a secretary because any business I have is minimal, phoning publishers when necessary, and endlessly putting off replying to letters from foreign publishers. We discussed *success*. Maria thinks that, when you reach that particular impasse, the only solution is to become a professional. I have always been an amateur, a compulsive amateur, but an amateur nonetheless. And I have a dread of professionalization. Maria doesn't and is currently looking into the matter.

As for *my* work, she thinks my most recent book is premature in the sense of being ahead of its time, ahead of me even; she thinks I wrote it too early, perhaps in a desire to complete the circle.

Then we talked about our respective astigmatisms, which means that while we have to wear glasses to read, our far vision gets better and better. Which is also rather symbolic.

I am now considering becoming a professional. Not a bad idea. The time has come to cross my *T*s and dot my *I*s: that would be a way of taking charge of myself, which will not be easy.

I'm afraid she'll have missed her plane, because we had so much to talk about: she was supposed to be at the airport by three o'clock, and it was already three when she dropped me outside my house. Antunes would be furious, waiting impatiently and anxiously for her return. More than that: the journalist and novelist Antônio Callado was staying with them

Copyrighted Material

and Antunes wanted Maria to come home in order to welcome him and fulfill her role as mistress of the house. We then talked about the problem of being mistress of the house at the very moment when one is immersed in thinking about one's art. How to reconcile the two? But women do end up reconciling them, it's a gift we have.

We talked about the importance of eating and sleeping. Perhaps that's why I slept for so long afterward. This was what got in the way of my phone call to Otto Lara Resende:* it was Saturday, I phoned him, and he was asleep, and then when he phoned me back, *I* was asleep. I ended up asking Helena, Otto's wife, the question I needed to ask him. I only managed to speak to him at half past ten at night, just as he was heading out the door to visit Hélio Pellegrino.** We complained, with pleasure, about our respective naps. But, by then, at half past ten, I was wide awake: I had just been to see Khouri's movie, *O corpo ardente*. I would have gone to see it anyway because he was the director. This time, though, there was another reason: Marly de Oliveira,*** my goddaughter by marriage, and Maria Bonomi had both said that the lead actress, Barbara Laage, looked extraordinarily like me. Maria added: she's *like* you, but her face is rather impassive, less expressive. But she really does look like you, in terms of prettiness, of course. Another friend said that her mouth and chin were different, that mine are much softer. It felt rather uncomfortable seeing myself on screen. But I coveted the actress's clothes as if, given our close resemblance, I had every right to wear them. What I really liked, though, was the black horse that appears in the movie.

* Otto Lara Resende (1922–1992) was a journalist and writer.

** See *Jornal do Brasil* dated September 4, 1971.

*** See *Jornal do Brasil* dated March 6, 1971.

Copyrighted Material

The liberating way it has of shaking its head and long neck is just beautiful. I actually identified more with the horse than I did with Barbara Laage. I even used to have a habit of tossing my hair back like that: an attempt at liberation. Fortunately, I no longer need to make that gesture. Well, sometimes I do.

But I was talking about my fine encounter with Maria. We even ate well too, although we didn't pay much attention to the food: we were completely absorbed by our encounter. Did you miss that half past three flight, Maria? And did you give Antônio Callado my message? If he doesn't realize I was joking, he'll be angry with me. Anyway, Maria, see you soon. I'll come to São Paulo to visit Cassio. And, if I can, I'll send the machine gun before that, so that—fair's fair—he can exact his revenge.

November 25, 1967

WHEN TO CRY

There is a good way of crying and a bad way. The bad way is when the tears flow unstoppably and yet give no relief. This simply exhausts you and leaves you feeling completely empty. A friend asked me if that kind of crying was like the crying of a starving child. It is. When you feel that kind of crying coming on, do your best to resist it: it will get you nowhere. Far better to try and be strong and hold back the tears. That's hard to do, but easier than turning as pale as if all the blood has drained out of you.

However, it isn't always necessary to be strong. We should respect our own weakness. Those tears are gentle, the tears of a legitimate sadness that we have every right to feel. They flow slowly, and when they reach your lips, they leave a pure, salty taste, the product of our deepest sorrow.

Copyrighted Material

Seeing a man cry is very moving. He, the fighter, has realized that fighting is sometimes futile. I have a lot of respect for a man who cries. And I have seen men cry.

THE SILENT GIRL FROM MINAS GERAIS*

Aninha is a very silent girl who works here in my apartment. And when she speaks, she does so in a very muffled voice, on the rare occasions when she does speak. Now, even though I've never had a maid called Aparecida, whenever I go to call Aninha, Aparecida is the name that immediately springs to my lips. That's because she's like a silent apparition. One morning, she was tidying a corner of the living room, and I was in another corner, doing some embroidery. Suddenly—no, not suddenly, nothing is sudden in her, everything seems to be a prolongation of her silence. No, like a prolongation of that silence—I heard her voice say: "Do you write books, Senhora?" Somewhat surprised, I said that I did. Without interrupting her tidying or raising her voice, she asked if I could lend her one. I felt embarrassed. I was frank though: I told her that she wouldn't like my books because they were rather complicated. It was then, as she continued her tidying, and in an even more muffled voice, that she said: "I like complicated things. I don't like sugared water."

THE CLAIRVOYANT

My cook is called Jandira. But *she*'s a strong woman. In fact, she's a clairvoyant. When one of my sisters was visiting me, Jandira came into the living room, looked at her very seriously

Copyrighted Material

* Minas Gerais is a large, rural state in southeast Brazil.

and suddenly said: "The journey you're planning *will* take place, and you are going through a particularly happy time in your life." Then she left the room. My sister eyed me in alarm. Slightly embarrassed, I made a gesture indicating that it had nothing to do with me, at the same time saying: "She's a clairvoyant you see." My sister responded calmly: "I see. Well, we all get the cook we deserve."

GRATITUDE?

One day, when I gave her her wages, including a promised raise, that same Jandira—may God preserve her, because she's an excellent cook—stood there counting the money while I waited to see if the amount was correct. When she finished counting, she didn't say a word, but bent down and kissed my left shoulder. What?!

"THE THING"

But another maid I had was no joke. I would say: "Ivone." And she would carry on sweeping, with her back to me. I would say again: "Ivone." No response. Then I would say: "Ivone, would you please answer me?" Then she would whirl around and scream: "Stop it!"

Then one fine morning, some time later, the same *thing* happened again as I was giving her money for the shopping, and this time I did react. And I don't know how I managed to respond so calmly. I said: "Today I'm the one to say 'stop it.' I want you to find another job and I wish you all the best in your new post." To which she responded in an unexpectedly reedy voice, in the sweetest, humblest, most groveling voice you can

Copyrighted Material

imagine: "Yes, Senhora." And she phoned me several times after she left and even occasionally dropped in to see me.

December 2, 1967

WHAT LIES BEHIND DEVOTION

I don't know if you remember me telling you about my maid Aninha: I said she was from Minas Gerais and barely spoke, and when she did it was in the muffled voice of someone from beyond the grave. I also mentioned that, while tidying the living room, she unexpectedly asked me, in a still more muffled voice, if she could read one of my books, and I said they were too complicated, to which she retorted in exactly the same muffled tone that that's precisely what she liked, that she didn't like sugared water.

Well, she has been transformed. How she has grown and evolved! She even initiates conversations now, and her voice is much clearer. I didn't want to give her one of my books to read, because I didn't want to create an overliterary atmosphere at home, and so I pretended I had forgotten her request. Instead, I gave her a detective novel I had translated. After a few days, she said: "I've finished reading that book, and I liked it, but I did find it a bit childish. I'd like to read one of *your* books." She's persistent, the girl from Minas Gerais. And she actually used the word "childish."

In that same column, I also mentioned my strange tendency to want to call her Aparecida. As it happens I have never had a maid called Aparecida or a friend or an acquaintance. One day, I forgot and I did actually call out to her: "Aparecida!" Not in the least surprised, she asked: "Who's Aparecida?" The

Copyrighted Material

moment had come to offer her an explanation, which I didn't have. In the end, I said: "I've no idea why I call you Aparecida." In her new, less muffled voice, she said: "It must be because I just appeared." Yes, but that wasn't enough of an explanation. It was my clairvoyant cook, Jandira, who set about trying to solve the mystery. She said that Our Lady of Aparecida* obviously wanted to help me and this was her way of alerting me, by making me call out her name. Jandira wasn't so much explaining as advising: I should light a candle to Our Lady of Aparecida and, at the same time, make a request. I liked this idea. After all, there was no harm trying. I asked if she could light the candle for me. She said she could, but it would have to be bought with my money. When I gave her the money, she told me this was the moment to make my request. Since I had done so long ago, it was only a matter of fervently recalling it. Our Lady of Aparecida, hear me, what I am asking is both fair and urgent, I have been waiting for far too long.

Speaking of maids, about whom I have always felt guilty and exploitative, I felt even worse after seeing the play *The Maids*, directed by the excellent Martim Gonçalves. It really upset me. I saw how maids feel inside, I saw how the devotion we often receive from them is filled with a mortal hatred. In Jean Genet's *The Maids,* the two maids *know* that their mistress must die, but their long enslavement to masters and mistresses is too ancient to be overcome. Instead of poisoning their ghastly mistress, one of them takes the poison they had intended for her, and the other one devotes the rest of her life to suffering.

* Nossa Senhora da Conceição Aparecida (Our Lady of the Conception of Aparecida) is the patron saint of Brazil. Aparecida is a municipality in the state of São Paulo, home to the national shrine of Our Lady.

Copyrighted Material

Sometimes that hatred remains unexpressed, and takes the form of a very particular kind of devotion and humility. I once had an Argentinian maid like that. She *pseudo*-adored me. Precisely at those moments when a woman is looking her worst—for example, getting out of the bath with a towel around her head—she would say: "Oh, you look lovely, Senhora." She overflattered me. And if ever I asked her a favor, she would reply: "Of course! We Argentinians are always ready to help." I took her on without any references, and later found out why she had none: she used to work in dodgy hotels and her work consisted in making beds and changing sheets. She had also worked in the theater. I felt sorry for her: I was convinced she must have played a maid on stage too, the kind who walks on and says: "Supper is served, Madame." She brought Tônia Carrero a cup of coffee once, and when I told Tônia that my maid had been a "colleague" of hers, Tônia had an idea: my maid must have been one of the girls Walter Pinto used in his revues. Her brief conversation with Tônia was quite strange: Tônia: "So you're from Argentina." Maid: "Yes, I'm sorry to say." Tônia: "No need to be sorry, I've always been made most welcome by the Argentinians and I really like them." Carmen—her real name was María del Carmen—later said: "What a lovely lady and so pretty too!" Not flattery this time, but genuine admiration. Carmen was extremely vain. She wore false eyelashes, but because she never bothered to trim the ends, her eyes looked like those of a china doll. In the end, she left without an hour's notice.

Another maid, who went with me to the United States, stayed on when I left in order to marry an English engineer. In 1963, when I was in Texas to give a twenty-minute lecture on contemporary Brazilian literature, I phoned her in Wash-

Copyrighted Material

ington, where she was living. I couldn't believe it: she was already speaking Portuguese with an American accent: "You really must come and see me!" I told her that I couldn't afford such a long flight. She insisted: "I'll pay for your ticket!" Needless to say, I did not accept, and besides, I didn't have the time.

And then there was the maid whose name I can't reveal because of professional confidentiality. She was having psychoanalysis—I mean it. Twice a week, she went to see a certain Dr. Neide, whom she would phone whenever she was feeling anxious. At first, she never said she was going to see an analyst, and gave other reasons for her absences. Then, one day, she told me that Dr. Neide had said she thought I would understand and that she should tell me the truth. I did understand, but ultimately, I found the situation untenable. Whenever she was feeling unwell, which happened frequently, she became very rude and uppity, although she would always apologize afterward. She had to have the radio on full blast when she was working, and sang along to it in a loud, shrill voice. If, already driven to distraction, I asked her to make less noise, she would turn up the volume and sing even louder. I put up with it until I could put up with it no longer. I dismissed her very gently. A week later, she phoned me to let off steam: she couldn't find a job because whenever she told her future employers she was in analysis, they took fright. Since she was alone in Rio and had nowhere to stay, she had spent two nights on a bench in a square, in the cold. I did feel guilty, but what could I do? I am not an analyst and could do little to help in such a serious case. I consoled myself thinking that she was at least being treated by Dr. Neide, a very pleasant doctor, to whom I had talked on the phone once, asking her advice on how best to deal with my maid. It wasn't the mood swings that got to me: it was her voice. I'm very sensitive to voices, and if I'd had to go on lis-

Copyrighted Material

tening to her hysterical chirpings, I would have been the one running to Dr. Neide for help.

December 9, 1967

A THING

I saw a thing. A real thing. It was ten o'clock at night in Praça Tiradentes and the taxi was moving pretty fast. Then I saw a street I will never forget. I'm not going to describe it: it's *mine*. All I can say is: it was empty and it was ten o'clock at night. Nothing more. But the seed had been planted.

PIANO LESSON

My father wanted his three daughters to study music. The instrument of choice was the piano, whose purchase involved great sacrifice. And my teacher was enormously fat. She was genuinely obese and had tiny hands. Her name could not have been more appropriate: Dona Pupu. For me, those piano lessons were torture. There were only two things I liked about my lessons. One was a dusty acacia tree that appeared around a bend in the tram line, and for which I waited expectantly. And when it appeared—ah, it really appeared. The other thing was inventing tunes. I preferred inventing to studying. I was nine years old and my mother had died. With my clumsy fingers I can still pick out the little tune I invented then. And why did I write that in the year my mother died? The tune has two parts: the first is gentle, the second half-military, half-violent, a kind of revolt, I suppose. When Dona Pupu played Chopin, I felt nauseous, and I like Chopin. The same thing did not happen when she gave me candy to eat, because she ate them herself.

Copyrighted Material

When it came to studying, I was so extremely lazy that I would ask one of my sisters to play the high notes, while I played the lowest or the middle ones. And I was lucky: imagine if my father had wanted me to study the violin. I could also play by ear. But one of my sisters was really talented. She left Dona Pupu to study with Ernani Braga at the Music Conservatory in Recife. And he asked if she would like to become a professional pianist. I don't know why she didn't want to. In the evenings, my father would ask us to play for him. I remember him taking a nap one afternoon and waking up to the sound of the radio and demanding excitedly to know what that music was. It was Beethoven. One of my sisters still has a present given to her by Dona Pupu: a pincushion in the form of a china doll covered in silk. Of the three of us, that sister has always been the one most likely to keep things. Sometimes I still ask her to keep certain things for me. What I have kept from Dona Pupu is, above all, that yellow acacia tree. Who lived in that house, I wonder? I was more interested in that than in my piano lessons. How my mind would wander. I would think about all kinds of other things. About Dona Pupu herself. How could such a hugely fat person have such small, delicate hands, which flew over the piano keys? She's probably dead by now. She would have needed a very large coffin. She was married. How was that possible? In my genuine ignorance, her being married was doubtless one of the problems that preoccupied me during my lessons. There were some steps up to Dona Pupu's house, where I would sit and play. That's all I have to say, I think. I, too, moved on to Ernani Braga, and he said I had fragile fingers. I'll say no more: he, too, died. And my fingers are not fragile. I know that I am strong. And my strength lies in the softness of my fragile, delicate fingers.

Copyrighted Material

UPPERS

I've never taken so-called uppers. I want to be alert, but on my own account. I was invited to a party once where people would definitely be taking uppers and smoking weed. My alertness is precious to me. I didn't go to the party: they said I wouldn't know anyone there, but that everyone wanted to meet me. So much the worse. I am not public property. And I don't want to be looked at. Maria Bethânia rang, asking to meet me. Should I or shouldn't I? People say she's very nice. I'll have to decide. People say she talks about herself a lot. Is that what I'm doing too? I don't want that. I want to be anonymous and private. I want to talk without talking—if such a thing is possible. Maria Bethânia knows me from my books. Thanks to the *Jornal do Brasil* I'm becoming popular. I get sent roses. One day I will stop. In order to stop becoming and to have become. Why do I write like that? Not that I'm dangerous. And I have friends, male and female. And then there are my sisters, of course, to whom I grow closer and closer. Generally speaking, I can get very close. Which is good and not good. I feel the lack of silence. I used to be silent. Now I communicate, even without speaking. But something is missing. I want to have that something. It's a kind of freedom, without my having to ask anyone's permission.

December 16, 1967

GOD'S SWEETNESSES

You will probably already have forgotten my maid, Aninha, the silent girl from Minas Gerais, the one who wanted to read

Copyrighted Material

one of my books even if it was *complicated*, because she didn't like "sugared water." And you've probably also forgotten that, for some reason, I used to call her Aparecida, which she explained by saying: "It's because I just appeared." What I did not perhaps mention was that, in order for her to exist as a person, she needed you to like her.

You may have forgotten her, but I will never forget her. Not her muffled voice or her missing front teeth, which, at our urging, she replaced—a pointless exercise really, since because she always talked and smiled inwardly, you never saw her teeth anyway. I forgot to mention that Aninha was very ugly.

One morning, she took longer than usual to do the shopping. When she finally returned, her smile was as soft as if she had no teeth only gums. Crumpled up in her right hand was the money she had taken with her for the shopping, and in her left hand the shopping bag.

There was something new about her. What it was, I couldn't tell. Perhaps a greater sweetness. And she was somehow a little more *aparecida*, as if she had taken a step forward. That new something made us ask suspiciously: what about the shopping? She replied: I didn't have any money. Surprised, we showed her the money in her hand. She looked and said only: ah. Something else prompted us to look in the shopping bag. It was full of milk bottle tops and empty bottles, as well as grubby bits of paper.

Then she said: I'm going to lie down because I have a terrible pain here—and like a child, she indicated the top of her head. She wasn't complaining, just telling us. She stayed in bed for hours. She didn't speak. She was the one who had said she didn't like that "childish" book, and now her very expression was so childish and clear. Whenever we went to her room and

Copyrighted Material

spoke to her, she said she couldn't get up.

Before I knew it, Jandira, the clairvoyant cook, had called the Rocha Maia hospital for an ambulance, "because the girl's crazy." I went to see Aninha. She was silent and, yes, crazy, but I've never seen such sweetness.

I explained to Jandira that she should have phoned for an ambulance from the Emergency Psychiatric Unit at the Instituto Pinel. Feeling slightly dizzy, almost on automatic pilot, I phoned. I, too, felt a kind of sweetness inside, which I can't explain. Yes, I can. It was love for Aninha.

Meanwhile, the ambulance from the Rocha Maia hospital arrived. The doctor made Aninha sit up in bed so that he could examine her. There was, he said, nothing clinically wrong with her. Then he started asking her questions: why had she collected those bottle tops and bits of paper? She replied very gently: to decorate my room. He asked more questions. Ugly, crazy, gentle Aninha patiently gave all the right answers, as if she had learned them by heart. I explained to the doctor that I had already called another ambulance, this time from the right hospital. He said: yes, this is definitely a case for one of my psychiatric colleagues.

We waited for the other ambulance. While we waited, we felt stunned, dumbstruck, pensive. The ambulance came and the new doctor had no difficulty in making a diagnosis, but said she would have to be treated as an outpatient. But then she would have nowhere to go. I phoned a doctor friend of mine who spoke to one of his colleagues at the Instituto Pinel, and it was agreed that the hospital would keep her in until my friend had had a chance to examine her. Suddenly, the new doctor, whom I later learned was Professor Artur, asked: "Are you a writer?" I stammered out "Well, I . . ." He: "It's just that

Copyrighted Material

your face is very familiar and I heard your friend call you by your first name." And in that situation, in which I could barely remember my own name, he added politely, effusively, far more interested in me than in Aninha: "It's such a pleasure to meet you." And foolishly, mechanically, I responded: "Oh, me too."

And off Aninha went, that mild, gentle girl from Minas Gerais, with her gleaming new front teeth, and only partially awake. Because one part of her was sleeping, the part that, in her waking hours, caused her pain. To be brief, my doctor friend examined her, found her to be in a very serious condition, and had her admitted to the hospital.

I sat in the living room all night until dawn, smoking. The apartment was filled with the kind of crazy sweetness that only the now vanished Aninha could leave behind.

Aninha, my love, I miss you and your awkward way of walking. I'm going to write to your mother in Minas so that she can come and fetch you. I don't know what will become of you. I know that you will continue to be sweetly crazy for the rest of your life, with brief intervals of lucidity. You *could* decorate a room with milk bottle tops, why not? And with crumpled bits of paper too, why not? She didn't like "sugared water," and she certainly wasn't that. Neither is the world, as I realized again that night when I sat up into the small hours, smoking fiercely. Oh, how fiercely I smoked! Sometimes I was filled with anger, then horror, then resignation. God's sweetnesses can be very sad. Could it be a good thing to be as sweet as that? Aninha had a printed skirt that was much too long for her, a gift from someone. On her days off, she would wear that skirt with a brown blouse. This was another of her sweetnesses, her lack of taste.

"You should find yourself a boyfriend, Aninha."

Copyrighted Material

"I had one once."

What?! Dear God, who could possibly love her? The answer: dear God.

MORE OF GOD'S SWEETNESSES

I wrote about Aninha immediately after she fell ill. Time passed, and there she was knocking at my door. I felt slightly alarmed at first, but I soon saw that she was much better. She had remembered our names and addresses, and had asked if she could visit us to collect the wages she was owed. She had not yet been fully discharged, but had been allowed out as a test. She looked almost pretty, because she was plumper after all those serums she'd been given, and had undergone three bouts of electroshock treatment. She commented on how much my sons had grown, and I was touched when she asked: "Are you still writing, Senhora?" I gave her the money I owed her, and the clairvoyant cook said: "Count it out so that we can see you know how to count." She counted it out correctly, and more than that, she noticed that I had paid her for the whole month, for which she thanked me. Now she says she wants to find a boyfriend and even go on some dating program on TV. The hospital has discovered Aninha's potential, and once she's discharged, she's going to work there for a while. The whole household felt happy.

December 23, 1967

THE CASE OF THE GOLDEN FOUNTAIN PEN

I'm calling this *the case of the golden fountain pen*. Actually, there's no mystery about it at all, but my ideal would be to write something reminiscent of Agatha Christie, even if only a title.

Copyrighted Material

Someone was kind enough to give me a gold fountain pen. I've always written in ballpoint or, of course, on the typewriter. But if a gold fountain pen comes my way, why not use it? It's very beautiful and an excellent brand. I immediately met with a problem that I equally immediately brushed aside. The little problem was this: with a gold pen was one obliged to write golden words? Would I have to write special sentences with such a precious writing implement? And would it make me write in a different way? And if it did, would that inevitably influence me, so that I, too, would have to change? But how? For the better? Another question: with a gold pen, would I face the same problem as King Midas, and would everything the pen wrote turn to glittering, implacable, rigid gold?

As I say, I paid no heed to these minor problems: I never consider thinking to be a dangerous activity. I think, but remain undaunted.

What happened then was a major problem. The fact is that I have one gold pen and two sons. But I'm getting ahead of myself, and I should start at the beginning.

The moment my younger son saw the gold pen, he underwent a truly remarkable physical transformation. After examining it, he didn't say a word, but his face was a veritable mask of greed. Greed to possess that lovely object. His eyes glittered silently. I understood. He wanted the gold pen. It was as simple as that.

I helped him out: "I know what you're thinking, you're thinking that this pen will one day end up in your hands." Silence. A struggle between desire and guilt. Guilt won out, and he suggested rather unenthusiastically: "You could have your name engraved on it." I said: "But if I did that, you would have to use a pen with someone else's name on it." Silence, deep

Copyrighted Material

thought. Then glumly: "Yes, but if I used it now, it would either get stolen or I'd lose it." This was true. We both thought deeply then. My thinking proved productive: I had an idea. "Look, the pen will be yours when you finish high school, because you'll be bigger then, and no one will steal it from you and you'll take care not to lose it." "All right." But he still felt guilty, as if, since that pen was mine, he would be taking it away from me, little knowing how much I like my sons to take my things.

A day later, however, all trace of guilt was gone.

Unable to find a pencil to jot down a message, I picked up the gold pen. My son came into the room at that point and caught me in flagrante. "You can't use that one!" he cried indignantly. "Why not?" I asked. "May I not occasionally use your future pen?" "But you'll damage it, look, it's already slightly scratched!" He was right: the pen was going to be his, and I should be more careful. I showed him where I would keep it, and promised not to use it again.

But—I have two sons. Why had my other son not asked for the pen? I felt sad. It seemed to me that an open dispute between them over the gold pen would be better than one of them not even asking about it.

I waited for a moment when my other son and I could be alone. I told him the whole story and concluded: "If you had been the first to ask me for it, I would have given it to you." "I didn't even know you had a gold pen." "Well, you should have known. You've obviously not been paying attention to the conversations going on here." Silence. I asked hopefully: "But if you'd known that I'd been given a gold pen, you would have asked me to give it to you, wouldn't you?" "No." "Why?" "Because it's very expensive." "Don't you deserve such an expensive object?" "You've had other expensive gifts, and I've never asked

Copyrighted Material

you for them either.""Why?""Because then you'd be left with nothing.""I wouldn't have minded."

We fell silent, having reached a total impasse.

Finally, in an attempt to resolve the matter once and for all, he said: "It really doesn't matter to me. As long as a pen writes, any pen will do."

This was a valid response, even for me. But I didn't like it. There was something not quite right about this conversation. I would have preferred … oh, I don't know. I really don't. But I didn't like it, and that's all there is to it, I just didn't like it.

Suddenly, I saw what it was. It wasn't the gold pen that mattered. What mattered was that one son had asked me for it and the other hadn't. I resumed the conversation. "Why don't you ever ask me for anything?"

The response was immediate and blunt: "I've often asked you for things, and you've always said no."

This accusation was so harsh that I was shocked. Besides, it wasn't true. But the fact that it wasn't true made it all the more serious. He had been nursing such a deep grievance that he had turned it into that untruth.

"What was it that I didn't give you when you asked?""When I was little, I asked you for a float, I mean, one of those rubber rings.""And I wouldn't buy you one?""No.""Do you want me to buy you one now?""No, I don't need one now.""What a shame I didn't buy you one then."

He took pity on me: "You've forgotten. You wouldn't buy me one because you said it was dangerous, that I would get carried out to sea on the waves, and I *was* very small then, and it was before I'd learned how to swim.""So then you know that I didn't want to risk losing you at sea.""Yes." But the sense of grievance had not gone away.

Copyrighted Material

That gold pen had carried us very far. I thought it best to

stop. And we did. Analyzing things too closely isn't always a good idea.

December 30, 1967

THE HAPPY INTERVIEW

A little while ago, a young woman phoned me up saying she was from the publishing house Editora Civilização Brasileira and that Paulo Francis* wanted to know if I would give an interview to be published in the series *A Woman's Bedside Book*. I don't like giving interviews: I find the questions embarrassing and hard to answer, and, even worse, I know that the interviewer will distort my words horribly. But—this was Paulo Francis asking me, and I couldn't refuse. I agreed on a date for the interview. Then I felt absolutely furious, yes, even with Paulo Francis. Here are the facts. *A Woman's Bedside Book* will sell like hot cakes and the publishers will rake in the profits. The interviewer will rake it in too. And I'm the only one who'll be inconvenienced. I tried to phone Paulo Francis to cancel the appointment. But how? Since I am, like everyone else, a victim of the telephone. There was either no dial tone or else I couldn't get through to the other person. In the end, I gave up. But, I thought, I will have my revenge—somehow or other, I will have my revenge.

Except that I didn't, nor did I want to. At the appointed time, a lovely, adorable creature called Cristina entered my apartment. She has one of those faces that's very hard to capture in a painting or a photo, because, although her actual features

* Paulo Francis (1930–1997) was an eminent journalist, political pundit, novelist and critic.

Copyrighted Material

are very pretty, what matters are the internal features, her expression. We immediately hit it off. This prompted her to tell me something: she also worked for a newspaper, and when her colleagues found out that she was going to interview me, they all commiserated with her. They said I was "difficult" and barely spoke, and Cristina added: "But you are speaking."

"Yes," I said. How could I resist? Power outages were a regular thing then, and so as to get closer to the two candles I had lit, Cristina sat down on the carpet, and immediately became part of the household.

Her questions were intelligent and complex, almost all of them about literature. I said: but I thought middle-class women would be more interested in finding out if I ate beans and rice. She responded coolly: "We'll get there. We've only just started."

I was utterly charmed by Cristina. She's engaged to be married. What a shame, I thought. I would like her to stay sitting right there for several years more until my sons have grown up so one of them can marry her. But she can't wait that long, my sons are taking a long time to grow up. I can console myself by recommending her as an interviewer.

The interview began very good-humoredly. We often laughed. Once, because she asked for my reaction to what the critic Fausto Cunha had written. Apparently, he had said—and I knew nothing about this—that Guimarães Rosa and I were just a couple of frauds.* I gave an almost joyful yelp of laugh-

* João Guimarães Rosa (1908–1967) is considered one of Brazil's most important writers, his most notable work being his novel *Grande Sertão: Veredas*, which uses a combination of literary and colloquial language and words invented by the author himself. He is often compared with James Joyce. Lispector wrote this article about a month and a half after his death.

Copyrighted Material

ter, and said: "I didn't know that, but one thing is sure: frauds we are not. You could call us anything, but not frauds." Really, Fausto Cunha. I met you at Marly de Oliveira's wedding, and you seemed very nice, but really … Perhaps you should think again. I bet Guimarães Rosa would have laughed too.

Cristina asked if I was on the left politically. I told her I would like to see a socialist government in Brazil. Not just a replica of the English model, but adapted to our way of life.

She asked if I considered myself to be a Brazilian writer or simply a writer, and she used the feminine form of *escritor*—*escritora*. I replied that, first of all, however feminine a woman might be, she is not an *escritora*, but an *escritor*. Writers do not have a gender, or, rather, they have two, in differing doses, of course. And that I considered myself to be a writer, not just a Brazilian writer. She argued: what about Guimarães Rosa, who is so very Brazilian? I said, no, not even Guimarães Rosa, who is very much a writer for any country.

Cristina had a cough, and so did I: another thing that bound us together. The interview was interspersed with coughing fits, which further helped to dissipate any awkwardness. Also, neither of us was taking any cough medicine, and for the same reason: sheer idleness.

My vengeance took the form of me interviewing Cristina. I asked her several questions, to which she responded simply and intelligently. On the pretext of showing her various portraits of myself, I gave her a tour of most of the apartment: Cristina was one of us and had the right to know me through my home. Someone's home is always very revealing. She went into a bedroom, where one of my sons was lying down, reading by candlelight. He didn't appear in the least embarrassed; that's how normal Cristina's presence was. My other son was heading off to the movies with a friend. And he, who

Copyrighted Material

has reached the age when he needs to show his independence from his mother, was quite happy to give me a goodbye kiss in front of Cristina. And the other son was perfectly happy to interrupt our conversation to ask me for money to buy *Manchete*:* this was a Wednesday evening, and it was getting dark. I felt so at ease that I put my legs up on a coffee table and slid down on the sofa until I was almost supine.

Cristina, you represent the very best of Brazilian young people. It makes me proud. I hope my sons will be like you one day.

Then she asked me another question: what was more important to me, motherhood or literature. My immediate way of finding the answer was to ask myself: if I had to choose one, which would I choose? The answer was simple: I would give up literature. I am much more important as a mother than I am as a writer.

Cristina said: "Crime doesn't pay. Does literature pay?" Not at all. Writing is just one of the many ways of failing. Cristina was surprised, and asked me why I wrote then. I had no answer.

The funny thing is that she was so well-prepared for the interview that she knew more about me than I did. She asked me why my female characters are more clearly delineated than the male ones. I protested mildly. I have one male character who takes up an entire book, and he couldn't be more male.

Perhaps I will interview *you* one day, Cristina. University students will identify with you and almost all of them will want to marry you. Tell your fiancé to be very careful. I also have a friend who, if he met you, would fall in love with you in a more poetic, more real way. You are very necessary to Bra-

* *Manchete* was a weekly news magazine published from 1952–2000. Considered to be one of the main magazines of the day, it was inspired by such publications as *Paris Match* and *Life*.

Copyrighted Material

zil. If we had more boys and girls like you, Brazil really would progress.*

I see that, in the end, I am having my revenge: she is writing about me, but I will write and am writing about her. And Cristina, would you like to have supper with me one night? Just give me a call. You're going to marry a diplomat, but this will be a very undiplomatic supper, probably in the kitchen because I keep forgetting to buy a bell to summon the maid, and so we almost certainly won't be able to eat in the dining room. A great friend of mine, a confirmed but very absentminded gift-giver, told me she had a spare bell and would bring it over. So what happens? I forget to buy a bell, and she forgets to give me her spare bell.

Cristina asked me what I thought of politically engaged literature. I said I found it perfectly valid. She wanted to know if I would ever write such a book. I feel that I already do. Everything I write is connected, at least inside myself, to the reality in which we live. This side of me might grow stronger one day. Or not. I really don't know. I don't even know if I will write more. Possibly not.

She asked what I thought of popular culture. I said that it didn't as yet properly exist. She asked if I considered it important. I said that I did, but there was something even more important: making sure that those who were hungry had enough food. Unless, that is, popular culture makes people aware that hunger gives them the right to demand food. *Vide* the new encyclical that speaks of rebellion as the last resort against tyranny.

See you soon, Cristina, when we have supper together. I

* Brazil's national motto is *Order and Progress*.

Copyrighted Material

think you liked me too. Which is good. But on reading the interview, I thought I came over as very banal. I don't know why. I don't think I am banal. And my eyes are not blue.

Copyrighted Material

1968

January 6, 1968

SAN TIAGO

No, clear thinking isn't always a sign of coldness. San Tiago Dantas, who was sometimes accused of being cold, is one example. Even Schmidt contradicted himself on this point.

I met San Tiago in Paris. We immediately became part of a group of friends. And for some reason, that same night, we decided to do the rounds of the Paris nightclubs. Which we did until dawn. Whenever the violins became too shrill and too close for comfort, we would leave. But, of course, on a long night like that, people do drink. And I'm not good at drinking. If I drink, I feel either sleepy or weepy. If I continue to drink, though, I become quite brilliant, positively witty. And I don't know which is worse really. That night, both things happened. If San Tiago was inclined to tears, he showed no signs: his clarity of mind signaled great self-control, not coldness.

Ah, how many deaths-to-come there were in that group. Bluma, Schmidt, Wainer, San Tiago. No one knew that. Or did we? So much so that we couldn't bear those shrill, shrill violins?

One nightclub owner, a woman, also managed the till. She

Copyrighted Material

had bare shoulders, strong, plump shoulders. We talked a lot about shoulders. Mine had grown fragile. What did I drink? Whatever I was given, a real mixture.

Until day began to break, almost very slowly to break. No one was tired, although it was high time that we were. We walked. And on the street corners of Paris, San Tiago discovered the first flower sellers. Impossible to say how many roses he bought me. I know that they were too many for me to hold, and roses spilled onto the ground as I went. If I've ever been pretty, it was on that early Paris morning with roses overflowing from my full-to-the-brim arms. And a man who heaps a woman with flowers like that is not coldly lucid.

The hotel room was filled with that fresh, fresh scent. I died rather than slept.

I woke at midday and was so hungover I could barely open my eyes. I woke my then husband and asked him to ring the bell for the *garçon* to bring us the strongest coffee they had.

The *garçon* soon came. Bringing not only coffee, but more armfuls of flowers: sent by San Tiago. And while I was drinking my coffee, the phone rang: it was San Tiago asking how I was. I was in a dreadful state. He asked if we could all have lunch together. I can't remember anything beyond that point: I *think* we had to catch a train to Berne then and so couldn't meet for lunch.

When did I see San Tiago again? In Rio. We went to supper at his and Edmeia's house. He found me odd. I hadn't been drinking, I wasn't crying, and far from being brilliant, I was rather silent. He asked if I was feeling sad. I told him that this was simply the way I was.

Halfway through supper, the conversation turned to a painting in an Italian museum. San Tiago asked me if I had liked it.

Copyrighted Material

I told him I couldn't remember. His response was very simple and honest: ah, of course, you're one of those people who only remembers what happened before they were ten years old.

Time passed. He came to Washington,* and I was thrilled when he phoned me as soon as he arrived. He had supper with us, and we sat up talking until three in the morning. And I learned things. I've forgotten what I learned, but I'm sure in some way it has stayed with me.

Once, we had supper at a hotel in Washington. And he talked to me a lot about politics. I was rather taken aback: men don't talk politics with women. Was I becoming less of a woman? I asked him this straight out. He replied that, no, on the contrary, I had better beware. I enjoyed my supper much more afterward.

Then, years later, there was his illness. One day, I received a formal invitation to a banquet at which San Tiago would be giving a political speech. Who but he would think of inviting me to something like that? I went. After the meal, San Tiago stood up, white as a sheet of paper. His voice faltered. Then he took a sip of water. And he began again like a self-conquering hero, because every hero is his own hero. Anyone who conquers must first conquer himself.

Afterward, I went over and gave him a hug, biting back my tears. I was embracing death. Lucid death. And I'm sure that he accepted death.

I forgot to say that San Tiago had several nieces, all of whom he loved. One was his particular favorite. And when she was in Washington, she came to me with a letter of introduction

* Lispector lived in Washington, DC, from 1953 to 1959, and her second son Paulo was born there in 1953.

Copyrighted Material

from San Tiago, in which he asked me to have a chat with her. We had several. Indeed, she often joined our family for supper.

And then he came here to Rio for her wedding. Bride and bridegroom were shy and beautiful. I sat in one of the pews. I saw San Tiago in another pew. He was dying sitting down. The wedding service ran its course.

When everyone got up to congratulate the happy couple, I found myself next to San Tiago. He could barely speak. He asked if I was writing anything. I told him I'd just finished a book entitled *The Passion According to G. H.* And he said that he really liked the title.

He would have liked the book too, I'm sure of it. But he died before it was published. I did not go to the funeral. Because not everyone dies.

January 13, 1968

HUMAN WARMTH

No, the day wasn't red. It was almost dark and yet still light. If only what she saw really was as red as it intrinsically was. The heat was made up of colorless, stagnant light. No, the woman couldn't even sweat. She was dry and clean. And outside only birds with stuffed-bird feathers were flying about. But it was a visible heat, and if she closed her eyes so as not to see the heat, it assailed her anyway in the form of a slow-motion hallucination: she could see huge elephants approaching, gentle, ponderous elephants with dry, crusty skin, although underneath they were steeped in a warm, unbearable tenderness; still, finding it hard to carry their own weight, they were slow and heavy.

It was still too early to turn on the lamps, which would at

Copyrighted Material

least hasten the onset of night. The night that would not come, would not come, would not come, the impossible night. And her love which was now equally impossible—which was as dry as the fever of someone who doesn't perspire, a love without opium or morphine. And "I love you" was a splinter that could not be removed with tweezers. A splinter embedded in the thickest part of the sole of her foot.

Ah, the lack of thirst. Heat with thirst would be bearable. But, oh, the lack of thirst. There were only losses and absences. And not even any will. Only splinters with no ends that could be easily tweezered out. Only her teeth were moist. Inside her greedy, parched mouth her moist, hard teeth—and her mouth greedy for nothing. And in that eternal late afternoon, the nothingness was hot.

Her eyes open, diamantine. On the rooftops the dry sparrows. "I love you, people," was an impossible sentence to utter. Humanity to her was an eternal death, yet one that did not enjoy the relief of finally dying. Nothing, nothing was dying in that sere afternoon, nothing was rotting. And at six in the evening, it was still midday. It was midday with, in the background, the attentive throb of a water pump that had been working away without any water for so long that it had become rust-encrusted rust. There had been no water in the city for two days. Nothing had ever been so in tune with her sweatless body and her diamantine eyes, her stopped pulse. And God? No. Not even a feeling of angst. Her empty unpulsating chest. Not a sound uttered.

And yet this was summer. A summer as broad as an empty playground on the school vacation. Pain? None. No sign of tears or sweat. No salt. Just a heavy sweetness: like that of the slow skin of those parched leather elephants. Hot, limpid

Copyrighted Material

squalor. Was she thinking about her man? No, just the splinter in the sole of her foot. Her children? Fifteen children hanging motionless in the windless air. Ah, if only her hands would begin to grow damp. Even if there was water, she would, out of loathing, refuse to take a bath. And, out of loathing, there was no water. Nothing flowed. Difficulty is a motionless thing. It is a jewel-cum-diamond. The cicada with the dry throat kept up a continual snoring. And would God finally liquefy himself into rain? No. Nor do I want him to. Out of dry, calm loathing, this is what I want—this hot silence made perceptible by the rasping cicada. Perceptible? No, there is nothing to perceive. Only this cruel lack of soothing opium. I want this intolerable thing to continue because I want eternity. I want this waiting, as unending as the rust-red song of the cicada, because all this is death suspended, it is eternity, it is estrus without desire, dogs without barking. This is the hour when good and evil do not exist. It is a sudden pardon, for those of us who find succor in punishment. Now it is the indifference of a pardon. No more trials. It is not the pardon that follows the trial. It is the absence of judge and convict. And death, which used to be a once-and-for-all thing, now ceaselessly is. And it doesn't rain, no, it doesn't rain. There is no menstruation. My ovaries are two dry pearls. I'll tell you the truth: out of parched loathing, this is what I want, for it not to rain.

That is precisely the moment when she hears something. It is something equally parched that leaves her attention still more parched and more depleted. It's a dry roll of thunder, saliva-free, but rolling where? In the completely blue sky, not so much as a cloud of love. The thunder must be a long way off. At the same time, though, there comes the sweet smell of large elephants, and of jasmine from the house next door. Of India

Copyrighted Material