

## PREFACE

THE MANY SAYINGS OF A SILENCE: *THE SILENCE OF THE BOOKS*

Beatriz Virgínia Camarinha Castilho Pinto  
Master in Linguistics

The *silence of the books* is a great metaphor about the role of books in people's lives. It's a declaration of love to Literature and to the Portuguese Language, whose story recreates mythically. It is, still, a romantic plot about maturation.

The novel takes place in a nearby future, in which the books have been banned and the relationship between people and the world – and with themselves – is mediated by technology. In this environment, circulate a man that only interacts with women virtually, a mother whose only occupation is to watch television, an adolescent who relates to the world only through social medias, and a girl who loves stories – however, these are prohibited. The conflict

gets worse when a foreigner comes to town committed to the liberation of the books, carrying a mysterious little notebook.

The story begins in Vila Nova de Gaia, Portugal, told through the perspective of the girl: *It was one of those times in history so tragically adult that the absurd is only visible through childhood eyes*. The second part of the novel takes place in Brazil, narrated from the viewing angle of a mysterious character, while the third part takes place again in the region of the Douro River, once more under the perspective of the girl.

To make the reader see a world through the eyes of a child is one of the great finds of the novelist, which, with such a resource, takes to the extreme the effect of estrangement and the feeling of absurdness. The reader feels with the girl, feels whatever she feels.

*The silence of the books* is a novel to be savored not only for its plot filled with tensions and suspense, but also for the details of its construction, like the work with the language, the impacting descriptions and the choice of the character's names. The girl's name is Alice, but the family only refers to her as "girl". What does it mean to be someone not called by your name? And why did the author choose Alice? Who is the Alice from the universe of books, since these are the theme of the novel? And her sister, why is she called Beatriz? Which literary character does this name refer to? The Beatriz from the novel is a mirror or an inverted mirror of the muse of Dante Alighieri? Discovering the literary memory of the names is a way of demanding the active participation of the reader and, this way, adds new values to the novel.

Managing a precise and poetic language, the author creates surprising metaphors, either with adverbs: *periods tragically adult*; with adjectival expressions: (the girl) *flooded with absences*, or yet with verbs: *the noise of dishes dancing in the sink*. Also explores stylistic features like the oxymoron: *the warmth of an agitated serenity*; the sonority: *the smell was of feathers and skin on fire*; and the polysyndeton: *repeated everything with the second grave, and the third, and with the other one, and another...* He knows how to invite the reader to unfold feelings just

suggested, interpreting a silence made of not-saids, however full of possible meanings.

The novel is part of the best western tradition, with subtle mentions of books, poems and wines, of classical myths and folklore, of artworks and scientific theories, without any sign of pedantry. On the other hand, embarks on great contemporary debates, like the genetic programming, privacy invaded by cameras and recording devices, the question about the identity in the virtual world, the right to oblivion, the role of literature, free will.

This book can be understood as a coming-of-age story, to the extent of the maturing and pain experimented in the process. While growing up, the girl is full of scars: *being clever hurts so much*. To grow up, she should make haste slowly. So much for the epigraph of the novel: *festina lente (make haste slowly)*, oxymoron that shows the delicate balance between the readiness and the accuracy. Throughout the narration, the phrase will be represented by the drawing of an anchor intertwined by a dolphin, which appears on the logo of the renaissance editor Aldo Manuzio, and on a pendant. On the limit, the phrase – such as the image – symbolizes the paradoxes of human life, squeezed on the thin frontier between good and bad, sanity and madness, balancing over the maelstrom that separates the I from the other.

Besides the literal reading, the novel, for its symbolic character, can also be interpreted in many other forms, being a true open work.

For all of these qualities, *The silence of the books* shows a mature writer, with a complete domain of the literary art, qualified to conduct a walk through the lands, through the people and through the languages of Brazil and Portugal, inviting the reader to dive in the abyss of the great human troubles.

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## PREFACE (II)

*THE SILENCE OF THE BOOKS: POETIC PROSE OF IMMEASURABLE BEAUTY.*

*Maria José Gargantini Moreira da Silva*  
*Specialist in Portuguese Language and in Textual Production*

*Learn by heart this poem of mine*  
*Books only rest a little time*  
György Faludy (1983)

HAVING BOOKS IS A CRIME. REPORT IT.

FESTINA LENTE: MAKE HASTE SLOWLY. As in *Felicidade Clandestina* (“Clandestine Happiness”) by Clarice Lispector, in which the girl procrastinates the reading of such a desired book, so that she would be able to prolong her delight with reading it, the same happens by having in hand *The silence of the books*, as thought that could ever happen.

Therefore, just like the Alice (a coincidence?) from *Wonderland*, who unveils parallel and fantastic worlds, the reader of *The silence of the books* sees himself on labyrinthine paths that lead you to each door/path/line and take you on a new discovery, a new access to the masters of the universal Literature.

This book, filled with “insinuations”, brings us on a stroll between the foreign lines, through concealed meta-languages and very well posted during the course of the reading.

With the persistent sign “HAVING BOOKS IS A CRIME. REPORT IT”, it creates the background of this timeless novel/denunciation and very relevant in modern times, in which the survival of publishers and bookstores is threatened. The memory of *Fahrenheit 451*, the dystopian novel by Ray Bradbury, is subtly made present.

The burning of a residence, like transforming into ashes a hole past, also echoes *The Book Thief*, by Marcus Zusak, in which the character Liesel “stole” books that were going to the incinerated to be able to survive the real world – after all the girl was at the age where “*the following day is good enough to overcome traumas.*”

The reference to gene-C creates a dialogue with the novel by Aldous Huxley, in which *Brave New World* talks about a futuristic London anticipating the genetic manipulation.

Just like Yahweh’s narrators, two characters try keeping track of their memories so that they don’t submerge confronted by a society that vanishes in its culture, history and tradition.

The dialogues that the reader faces while entering the “*woods – gate to the future*” – while unlocking the mysteries in the book – are built in such a way and with such ability that the reader eager for discoveries isn’t able to silence.

Silence them? How? With the books “*we can transcend the platitude of our everyday lives*”.

They are the ones that, “*besides what they already reveal on the surface*”, take us to “secluded” places in our lives, “*through the characters we are able to see the world with a different filter, savoring lives that aren’t ours and, this way, better understanding what surrounds us*”.

THE SILENCE OF THE BOOKS

And, therefore, imagined *“a woman bringing him books [...] an ocean of books, books made of sea, the waves pouring books over him and leaving, taking a piece of him and leaving a piece of her, she, wave, she, sea”...*

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# PART I



*Through the eyes of Alice:  
The perplexity of the world and the  
Foreigner who told stories*



## HAVING BOOKS IS A CRIME. REPORT IT.

t was the last winter afternoon and the winds hit the cracks on the wall as she crossed the street under the gray sky, her eyes down avoiding the gloomy sign. It was one of those times in History so tragically adult that the absurd is only visible through childhood eyes: in a world of inverted signals, the base of the mountain is the highest part, and its peak, the apex of the abyss; for no other reason, what happened there could really only be told through Alice's eyes.

There were identical signs everywhere, of course, but that one, up against the wall right at the entrance of the woods, made everything worse. Something like a final warning – HAVING BOOKS IS A CRIME. REPORT IT. – to remind the girl of the dangers of keeping her book at home. They were only a few old pages, she thought, with grandmother's inscription and all, but they had been banned. And it was the only remaining one from uncle's old collection, a gift harvested from the shelves packed with books that were an invitation to a genuine friendship and that enchanted the girl even before she knew how to read: once in a while, still very small, the girl saw

a spine jump from the shelf as if challenging her “come, devour-me, decipher-me” – and she then daydreamed, inebriated with the colors, textures and scents of the paper. But soon after uncle ended up being arrested for collecting books and all the volumes were destroyed, remaining just that one, a storybook, which the grandmother was able to hide in the old sewing machine.

It hadn't always been that way: the girl had heard about a time, distant and magical, in which it was permitted to read stories in books – which, being a good thing, now had the face of a myth.

The girl liked stories, but had no one to tell them to her. The storytellers were gone, and she searched for someone who would tell her about the sea, deserts, hills. Back then, she knew nothing about the crime, the great architectural projects or the Library of Babel, and little did she understand about the pain and scars of grown-ups. Back then, she wanted to be clever.

Under the attack of whirlwinds of dust, she crossed the bronze gate and entered the woods. Mist. Lifted up the collar of her coat to protect her ears from the cold, went down circling the willows, took the stone bridge and embarked on her favorite trail, from where she could see parts of the friendly river. The waters of the Febros River strolled through Vila Nova de Gaia, here and there more rapidly over mounts of pebbles, and then again serene. The waters were sincere.

Walking away from the river, the girl entered the high part of the woods, passing by the square of the small Neo-Classical mansion, closed for a while, and finally arriving at the red concrete house with the blue and yellow panels: it was her house, her haven of tranquility and security. Nevertheless, as she opened the door she was snatched and dragged up the stairs, towards the office, under mute and clear actions that imposed silence. The girl was thrown in a corner as if throwing crumpled paper in a wire basket and, with her little mouth still and eyes dilated, waiting for the next action, tormented by what, she already knew, would follow.

There was only the sound of paper being ripped.

The girl heard the sound, then the same one, and another, the pages from her precious book were being torn, the letters broken, the book dismantled. The paper shredder was turned on, and the girl saw the colorful cover fade into it. Soon after it was the turn of the page with grandmother's inscription. Then many. The girl watched her worlds convert into a dull spaghetti, the machine spit out strips of paper and letters, chewing the soul of the book, chewing the girl. And another page, and another, and one more, the strips of paper looked like dirty snow. The girl cried without a sound, and wanted to believe that what was being done to her was for protection; but it hurt knowing that there could be no complaints – it was the mother's rule – and nothing was to be told to the father – another rule. Wearing the big beige nightgown (it was usually like this), the mother left without explaining *how* she had found the book – it was hidden in the basement between the cans of kerosene, fuel to the father's old model airplane. With dull vision, the girl went up to the shredding machine, opened the transparent compartment, dried her eyes, took her grounded treasure. She remembered when she had gotten it from her grandmother in a big secret, she remembered the crumpled pages, the format of the letters, the colorful cover, the scares, the laughs, the letters holding hands to form words and the world. She tried to recover that small world in the shredded paper, but now they were just strips of letters. Here and there she could identify an "a" beheaded, an "e" lacerated, an "s" assassinated; but it was just that, the separated letters didn't form words, or sentences, or stories, or anything; they were an insurmountable Nothing. She thought of the letters as people, now all separated, cut in half; she thought that, when people are separated, they become broken people – and nothing can be formed; the little fluffy pile of paper didn't form any small world at all.

However, as per a spell, the fluffy pile reminded her of grandmother's snowy hair, and the memory trespassed her eyes and watered them. Therefore, she held on to the old lady's little paper hair.

Still dizzy, through the window the girl watched as the sun turned away from the clouds in a horizontal gap. Like a god that dies, the sun torched the end of the day painting everything orange and yellow, and slipped down to rest in the empty space shaped like the letter “v” between two hills, as if it were going down an abyss.

The girl smiled: she liked the twilight – even more when it pushed away the gray from the rest of the day. However, it was now a crooked, trembling, clumsy smile.

In the afternoon of fire, there were no longer books to be read.



The next afternoon came and the girl repeated the path; the sign HAVING BOOKS IS A CRIME. REPORT IT seemed more and more repulsive to her. (Actually, back then, “repulsive”, like any other weird word, wasn’t part of the girl’s vocabulary; but it replaced well, years later, the lovely term “ugly” that she found written down in one of her little notebooks.)

The girl had spent the night crying because of the book, twisted on the bed. She was very sad. However, she was also at an age where the next day is good enough to overcome traumas forever (forever equivalent to twenty years) and could rejoice again with life’s trivialities: she turned over a beetle and smiled seeing the thing fly. It wasn’t any different when a bird hit the windows of the house: she would pick it up from the floor in a hurry, let the cold tap water run over its beak and then she would wait for the flight. It had been like that with a spotted starling weeks before, right on the girl’s birthday. But it was an ordinary day, bland; there were no balloons, no cake, nothing. Back then birthdays were no longer celebrated, not even for the little children – something that to her seemed as stupid as destroying books.

Penetrating in the woods, flooded with absences, the girl thought about the shredded book and her mother; and also, her father and sister. She loved them. She thought of her parents and sister as pretty

shoebboxes, like those stacked in stores, all together, but without looking inside one another, not seeing the girl. They felt some love for her, maybe – a scrawny love, if any –, and occasionally there even was tenderness; but there were such few moments that time slaughtered the memory: when you have so little of something, you hold on to that little bit eagerly; but when that little bit is less than less, it wears off and loses itself in dust.

The parents said that the girl always bothered the adult too much, she didn't need to know everything, she had to stop with that story about stories – some nonsense of that type. They called her crazy. So, she would go to the forest waiting for a fantastic event to happen: it could be a fruit, a rabbit, a peep, a mirror. It wasn't really a forest, but the girl liked to think that the woods were very clever and they could transform into one.

Remembering the woods makes her want to cry really badly.

After the stone bridge, the girl moved on to the path companion of the small river and went ahead enchanted by the aroma of the forest, the rustling of the leaves and the robustness of the trees. As usual, she got herself into recapping the names of familiar things in the woods and also inventing others for the unfamiliar. Distracted by the flight of a heron, the stumble came and, with it, her knees scrapped the ground. Fixing her stockings, now ripped around the hurt knee, she got up. Beams of light fell from the leafy treetops, unveiling blue patches of the sky and decorating the ground with lit circles. Stroked by the breeze that made the forest her song, the girl started walking again without hurry, until she noticed the open windows of the mansion – something new in months. She came closer quickly, the dried leaves whispered under her slippers, and the neighbor's house got bigger in her eyes: the columns looked like white threat bobbins, and the windows and arches lent eyes to the straw-colored walls; now she was able to see lit, inside, an alabaster scene. Stopped, curious.

A man went out through the back of the mansion with one hand tightly closed and the other embracing a hammer. The black

hair brushed back made him look serious, and his facial expressions revealed wisdom and rightness of character, with a face that showed the tranquility of whom, if not deprived of sins, at least had with them a good battle. (In fact, these things the girl didn't know yet, but she liked to think that people had their souls published on their foreheads.)

The man made his way to the white fence, built of stakes with soft tips. He bent down and his hand was opened. Put the hammer in a corner and with the hand that was free he took two nails from the other hand, taking them to his mouth. He took from there one, held it down and made it go in the little hole on the loose hinge, putting it in the place outlined by antiquity. Got the hammer back and gave it the first hit, but the little nail bent and he had to yank it out doing a lever. He pulled to himself a flat rock, leaned the nail on it that now looked like a scimitar and, with little hits from someone that knows what he's doing, gave the nail back its original form, weighing well his force so it wasn't too much or too little. As if making a sword. Resumed. This time the blows were precise and the nail mixed in with the wood, maintaining the order in the woods, the man ennobling himself while hitting the right nail the right way on the right wood.

He got the second nail, shiny and sublime. However, it was another stubborn nail that refused to bend and, with the blow, splattered. The man stood up and crossed the entrance of the small gate; leaned his back, broad like the Atlantic, kneeled down, rolled up his sleeves and with his right hand touched the low vegetation.

The girl slid until the edge of the fence without being noticed, with the green and red of her school uniform blending in with the foliage and flowers, and her long hair mimicking the brown of the tree trunks. She carried in one of her hands just the tablet from school and, in the other one, her little notebook for taking notes, the little notebook she didn't let go of – causing her to be knowing by her classmates undesirably as weird, the hurtful lack of friends and the nickname “The Little Notebooks Girl” (they would say

to her “Little Notebooks, come here” , “Little Notebooks, write this swearing in your little notebooks” and, with some ear tugs that made her ears burn, “Little Notebooks, go talk to old people that like paper”).

She took a few more steps forward and stopped in her slippers – always a size bigger so she could move her toes, just as she enjoyed. She moved her toes.

– Sir have you seen a kitten around? – asked the girl.

Still kneeling down, the man seemed surprised. His hair looked revived with hair dye, light wrinkles revealed that he smiled with his entire face, the ears were very small; but it were his eyes that intrigued the girl, looking like two polished spheres to her, the same tone as seen in the horizon when the sun rises. The man stared at her just like a boy her age would – as if on that adult face naive childlike eyes had been planted.

– I saw a cat earlier – he responded. – Maybe a male cat.

– What color?

– I think it was black, brown and beige – he said while getting up, vigorous and rocky, now looking like a *moai*.

– Then it wasn’t a male cat. With three colors, only females. At least that’s what my grandmother used to say. She was the owner of the cat.

– Your grandmother...

– My mother says she became a little star. But I know she died. I pretend not to know so mommy doesn’t get sad. My grandmother used to say that, when she died, she would live in her cat; to protect me and so I wouldn’t miss her. She would also say if one day the cat went away it was because I didn’t need her protection any more. Are you going to live here sr.?

– Yes, that’s correct. I’m doing some repairs.

– You didn’t want to call anyone to fix this? – asked the girl, pointing to the little wooden gate.

– I like fixing things.

– Are you Portuguese, sir?

- No. I come from Brazil.
- Do you have a daughter to play with me?
- Unfortunately, I don't have a family. I will live here alone. And you, where do you live?
- Over there. I'm your neighbor. I always come back from school through the woods. Artemisa usually waits for me on the way, but since yesterday she hasn't showed up.
- Artemisa...
- My cat.
- I understand... But, through the woods? And alone? Isn't it dangerous?
- Only if you are scared of weasels, sir. There are many of them. They're my friends. Can you come to my house sir?
- Well... I have many things to do here and...
- My father always says that. He always has things to do. I liked my grandmother and my uncle. They had time for the children, told stories. Now nobody else does.
- I'm sorry. I also like stories.
- My grandmother and my uncle told good ones.
- And at school? Don't they read good stories there?
- Boring ones. They give a story and everyone changes everything. When the prince goes to meet the princess, someone annoying comes and makes the prince die in the story. Then another one comes and makes him live again. Then comes another and makes the princess not like the prince any longer. Another one comes and changes everything, saying that no longer exists princes nor princesses. It never ends. A drag. I really liked my uncle's and grandmother's stories. They had a beginning and end.
- Middle also?
- Yes. Middle, beginning and end.
- What's your name, young lady?
- Alice Maria Crástino. But at home they just call me "girl". You can call me Alice, sir. If you want.

– It’s a pleasure to meet you, Alice. My name is Santiago – he said leaning his body into a curtsy.

– Just Santiago?

– Actually, Santiago Pena.

– That’s it?

– Fine, you got me. Santiago Pena de Jesus.

– That’s more like it, Mr. Pena. Or should I call you in a different way?

– You can call me just Santiago. If you want.

– Very well, Mr. Santiago. Now I have to go.

The girl left the place with an enormous joy: she knew that from there a great friendship would emerge, something that would change her life.

Actually, she knew nothing of this, but that was how she liked telling the story.



The next morning presented surprises to the girl: the mother, normally refractory to news, interrupted the milk with toasts to insist on meeting the man that had just moved to the small palace. The father tried talking her out of it, talked about commitments, complained about the lack of time, said there was no reason to be mixed up with neighbors. As usual, he was beat and, while he finished the *pastel de nata*, head down, agreed. Stuffed in the pleaded pants worn higher than they should, the father put on a tie – the bottom, as usual, above the right place –, having the collar tighten his chubby neck, everything gave him a funny and harmless look as if of a pelican. When he wasn’t with his electronics or collections, the father was caring and even taught things to the girl, talked about the importance of doing everything with security, being moderate, being punctual. The girl adored her father. Adored her mother and sister also, although with them had less chats.

Driven by the girl's mother, before going to work the father walked over to the neighbor's residence – the last one on Woods Street and the only one that divided the land with the Crástinos. Squatting behind the bush, the girl saw her father introduce himself and make the invitation for dinner; embarrassed, Mr. Santiago, which insisted on being called by his first name, accepted. Only after her father had gone, the girl left the hiding place, taken by a slight guilt – the mother would always call her nosey, wanted to know too many things, she should stop with that, she didn't need to talk to everyone and all. The girl was indeed all of this and she acted the way every child should: being nosey. She liked adventures, to know about things, the sound of the words – mainly that ones that evoked old stories. Liked listening to conversations and repeating to herself the sayings of others, imitating the voices to memorize. Like a collector of words, she wrote down everything in her little notebooks. She didn't understand very well what the adults used to say, but embraced the words anyway – for when she grew up and became clever.

Later on, coming back from school, the girl encountered a man in a dark gray suit standing on the side of Mr. Santiago's house. Pulling a retractable bezel from his pant pocket, the man spied through the window glass the interior of the house and, with an ascending movement of his arms, his jacket lifted, revealing, hanging from his waist, the shiny object: a gun.

He repeated the procedure in two more windows. Then, waiving to the man standing next to the police car, shook his head in a negative signal. They left there in a hurry.

It must be nothing, thought the girl, which, with the expectation for the dinner, saw that spring day unfold into a long wait, an uncontainable anxiousness that would only end at the beginning of the evening.



– The foreigner arrived! – the girl’s mother shouted from the back of the house.

At 20:27 on the digital display on the TV, three minutes early, Santiago placed himself in front of the Crástino’s house, bringing in his hands a bottle of wine. The girl was on the sofa with her eight dolls, and through the opening on the side of the door she was able to see the guest standing there, the black suit over the same colored vest, his torso erect with the hauteur of an oak.

Short in his baggy pants, the father opened the door and, with his hands wet with sweat, welcomed the neighbor. While cleaning his rectangular glasses, the father said it wasn’t necessary for Santiago to have brought wine, but that one was fancy and something like that could not be refused. Behind the father came the mother in high heels which she hadn’t worn in a while, stuffed in a white satin dress, with her shoulders bare and breasts almost showing, that held a necklace that matched the blue stone earrings – everything in an insidious harmony.

– Good evening, Mr. Cícero Crástino – said Santiago, ceremonious, to the girl’s father.

– Good evening, Mr. Santiago. This is my wife, Louise.

– It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Louise. Thank you for the invitation.

– Please is all mine. And thank you for accepting – answered the mother, twisting her mouth with an unusual smile, although maintaining her voice rough and her deviant eyes as always (the mother stared at children, but strayed her eyes when an adult talked to her).

– If you permit my curiosity, are you Brazilian Mrs.?

– Portuguese, certainly – responded the mother.

– I’m sorry – said Santiago, embarrassed. – Even though I have lived in Portugal for months, I’m still not used to the fact that in bigger cities they speak just like in Brazil.

– We speak the same language, no? – inferred the father.

– Yes, but I was referring to the old Portuguese accent – responded Santiago.

– Oh... Well, as you may already know, we don't speak that way anymore – said the father.

– Did you come with family to Portugal? – it was the mother's turn.

– No. I live alone here.

The girl got closer, but only looked, silent.

– Hello, Alice.

– Hi, Mr. Santiago – she said, shaking, thrilled to be called by her name. – You came to my house! Can you tell me a story now?

– What is that, girl?! Don't upset Mr. Santiago – the father got annoyed, squeezing his daughter's shoulder.

– Go over there to play with your dolls – amended the mother.

– Okay, Alice. Maybe I can tell you a story another time – said the guest.

– Daddy always says that. Another time...

– Calm down, girl! – said the father more severely – I will go up to the office with our guest.

– Are you going to bother the neighbor with your collections, dear? The bats and the old rock vinyl records. After that he won't come back here again...

Santiago interfered, politely:

– It's fine, Mrs. Louise.

The men marched up the stairs, very formal as if part of a funeral service. The mother went to the kitchen, and noise from silverware came from there. The girl aligned the dolls into two rows of four, while listening to her father explain to Santiago the origin of each bat, their effects on the ball and the birth of his passion for baseball in his youth, when he studied in the United States. With a shout, the mother announced dinner, and they went down.

The mother sat down on the chair with the red upholstery, took a look at herself in the diamond shaped mirror on the opposite wall and fixed her hair back, revealing her triangular face with light freckles; as usual, kept tapping the tip of her nails, recently painted brown, on the legs of the table.

– Darling, where is Beatriz? – the father had on a serious expression.

– She said she would only come later. Forgive me, Mr. Santiago. Our other daughter should also be here to greet you. Teenager. You know how it is.

– Don't worry about that, please – said Santiago playing with the enormous watch covering his wrist and part of the back of the hand.

Framed by the beige wallpaper that flaunted abstract drawings, the mother, now looking like a cubist painting, said she made two of her specialties: green soup and lamprey. She took off lids of the soup tureen and the transparent casserole, releasing aromas throughout the living room, and, wielding the plates with decorated edges with red spirals, served the guest with soup, then herself, then the girl; gave the husband the utensil, without looking at him, and turned to Santiago:

– Are you going to live there, sir?

– I will stay for a good period. I have some activities to develop in the Port.

– If I'm not mistaken you mentioned that you have been in Portugal for months already. Business? – asked the mother, slowly unfolding the linen napkin.

– Not exactly. I work for a cultural foundation. We develop partnerships for the promotion of the Arts.

The father excused himself to answer his cell phone and left the table under the disapproving look of his wife, which continued talking to the guest.

– You must travel a lot sir, no? To Brazil too?

– I travel a lot, but I haven't gone back to my country ever since I moved here.

– You said you aren't with family. I spent some time in the countryside, at Cima-Corgo, with some interruptions for trips abroad; but they were quick trips, from airports to meeting rooms and vice versa. I have contacts in various countries, but I can't say I have made friends.

– But you will have friends in this house sir!

– Thank you for the warm welcome, Mrs. Louise – said Santiago, leaning in to his typical bow.

– Did you know that former owner of your house? – asked the mother.

– A man named António, as I record. As far as I know, an educated man and very busy.

– I believe so. He was never there. The house was always closed.

With the extended silence of the guest, the girl took advantage to speak:

– Now can you tell me a story, Mr. Santiago?

The mom interfered, it was for the girl to be quiet, not bother. Santiago promised that after dinner he would try, and at that moment the father came back apologizing for the interruption and sat down at the table again. That's when they heard a knock at the front door. Beatriz appeared in a little black dress and immense high heels had made an irritating knock-knock sound, her eyes so mediocre and small lined with a number 2 pencil, her hair ripped with a single bleached lock. The neckline exposed some youth and she carried on her wrist hoop bracelets of all colors, which she never let the girl touch. With no hurry, Beatriz took out her earphones, which certainly played acid jazz – something she hid from her friends, but the girl knew.

– You're late – said the father. – Say hello to our guest.

– Hello – murmured Beatriz, sitting down harshly.

It was her way, unchangeable. Even around those days, when a friend had died by ingesting a few little rocks – something the girl couldn't understand –, Beatriz didn't seem really worried, not even upset; just distant.

– Mr. Santiago, forgive me for our daughter's bad manners – said the mother. – Beatriz you have to get to know people better and ...

– I don't want to know anyone! – screamed Beatriz, which when she got angry would speak in an uncommon way, making the vowels disappear.

The mother resumed:

– Beatriz, greet our guest. *Properly*.

She ignored her mother and put a large spoon full of green soup on her deep plate. Took off her shoes, rested her small feet on the chair beside her, with her torso all twisted looking like a corkscrew, and started eating while playing with her cell phone. The mother huffed, took her hand to her hand, exchanged looks with her husband, made noise with her spoon while touching the plate. But, since there wasn't much to be done about the daughter that still needed to be tamed, the adults returned to the conversation, now seasoned by the answers the neighbor had to give to the great amount of questions from the girl's parents. The Crástinos launched on the table brief bibliographic notes, and that night Santiago knew about the father's job in the insurance market; knew also that the mother had a degree in Communication, but quit her job with the birth of the youngest daughter; also, learned that the couple decided that the mother would no longer work – in order to have more time for the kids, she said.

– I am not a kid anymore – snarled Beatriz. – And mommy only watches TV. All day long.

– Beatriz! – this time the mother shouted.

The oldest daughter wisely didn't prolong the dispute, knowing she couldn't go against her mom, from who she got her temper from – persistent, but cautious. Beatriz didn't take after her mother, yet, with her almost curly light brown hair – the teenager's were black and straight like the father's –, not even the freckles, or the green eyes. Still the mixture was pretty: with curves well defined, Beatriz looked like a Chinese porcelain vase with Native American hair.

– Daddy, have you seen Emília's new dress? The girl asked suddenly.

The father didn't respond.

– Dad. Daddy. Daddy. Daddy?

– Say what you want – said the father harshly, who sweat more than other men the girl had ever seen and always cleaned his glasses before talking.

During a moment, however, while paying too much attention to the guest, the mother put an enormous piece of lamprey into her mouth, bigger than she could chew, and choked. Agile, she got rid of the chewed up food by rolling it in a napkin and, seconds later, got up to substitute it for another, coming back from the kitchen fast; but she had to run back there again, furious, to get a cloth – the father had dropped the water jar on the table.

The curiosity of the hosts sharpened and the questions were no longer generic, with the conversation becoming more informal according to the wineglasses consumed. They opened another bottle, and another one. The parents asked for details about the cultural foundation projects, and Santiago told them about being invited to participate in a group that claimed the return of the books.

Husband and wife looked at each other stunned.

– But... For what? – questioned the father. – No one is going to read a whole book anymore. The few that take the chance on the screen soon use the modification tools and create their own version of the original. The unrestricted interactivity, one of the biggest advantages of our time, is democratic; yet the books weren't very democratic: they froze the author's vision.

– If I may, I would like to disagree – said Santiago. – There are many layers of reading, and a book is able to summon us to reflect, confront us, delight us. To rekindle the pleasure of reading is exactly what the group intends. In fact, there will be an event on the subject at the Portuguese Center of Photography next week. If you are able to come, it will be on Tuesday night.

– Why at a photography center? – questioned the father.

– They are partners with the foundation, and we are helping them not to close their doors. I don't know if you've heard, but, just as the banning of the books, there is a similar movement starting to end the printed photographs and also the digital pictures protected against alterations. The argument is the same: they would "freeze" a vision of the world, and because of that there should only be allowed photos available on the net which any one could be able to change.

– Got it. – said the mother. – I kind of like the old printed photographs. As for the books... Nobody has time to read anymore...

– Well, darling, if you only watched less TV...

– That's not it at all! – the mother got angry. – It's just that in the books there were no immediate answers. And I like to have everything I want fast.

There was a void of voices, the hosts waiting for Santiago to say something. But he didn't. the mother glanced at the girl and she understood the message: "no word about the shredded book". No word about it was said since the shredding machine, and neither would there be: the mother wouldn't allow the father to know – that would give him ammunition for more jokes about the girl's grandmother.

By the works of the mother, the conversation took another turn and the adults talked about the recent scourge in an African country – something sad, but necessary to the survival of the most able, said the mother (something else the girl wasn't able to understand). Santiago brushed off and asked if it wasn't dangerous for the girl to walk alone in the woods. The parents said they had already ordered her to use the other access to the neighborhood, but the girl insisted on taking a short cut through the woods. The neighbor asked about the school, if it was good, and the father stated yes, there were two equally qualified around, one farther, one closer.

– You opted for the one that's closer, I believe.

– Actually, no. – said the father to Santiago. – Both had a bilingual education, which was one of our requirements. At the end, they decided for us – completed, looking at his wife.

– You mean *she* decided sir? – asked Santiago, smiling, with his head leanings towards the girl's mother.

– It's not like that really – responded the father. – The closeness surely would be an advantage; but I used twice the application to consult randomly and it indicated the farthest school. That's why it *had* to be that one.

With his forehead populated with folds of afflicted expressions, Santiago looked at the girl's mother.

– We must change the subject. I *hate* these electronic things that my husband and Beatriz use – said the mother, caustic, looking at the father. – They decide everything based on luck.

The girl also hated things decided on luck. She agreed with her mother on this, with whom, actually, she had learned the verb *to hate*, copying from her the funny way of bending her eyebrows when saying “I hate”.

– As you can see, Mr. Santiago, my wife is standoffish with technological innovations – resumed the father. – What she doesn’t see is that the random method is the safest and most fair ever adopted in all of Humanities’ history. And for a very simple reason: because it’s in perfect harmony with what the universe is, with what we are – a random combination of infinite factors. It’s been a while since we overcame that nonsense about choices and responsibility, values, free will. Nothing lighter for the human heart than depositing everything on the great hand of luck.

Santiago’s face seemed to have melted, and it looked as if he were to say something serious; but the mother stood up and asked the husband, in a not very cordial manner, to help her take the plates from there, preventing then the continuation of the subject. Baffled, Santiago offered to help, which was politely refused. From the door that led to the kitchen, the mother asked the guest if he accepted desert. He thanked her; he was already satisfied. The mother insisted, but, to the girl’s misfortune, not consulted, Santiago said he didn’t really like sweets, and nothing else came to the dining table.



In the living room, the mother served coffee in the yellow cups – the girl preferred the old Portuguese porcelain, unfortunately abandoned in the basement. Beatriz wanted to go to her bedroom, but the father prohibited: the daughter would have to stay with them until the guest left. She cursed, speaking in jolts, with punches, like all teenagers of that time, but she ended up surrendering and

threw herself on the living room sofa. After filling the wineglasses with *Porto Wine*, the mother grabbed the jacket that Santiago had laid down on the arm of the sofa and hung it on a chair; but she didn't get the balance desired – the clothes insisted on pending to one of the sides.

– There is something heavy in your jacket, Mr. Santiago – said the mother, uncomfortable.

– Don't be bothered with that, Mrs. Louise – he responded tainting himself on the black leather armchair. – It's just that I carry a notebook in my side pocket.

– A notebook? Look, darling, your old mother did this – joked the father. – And the girl also does this with little notebooks, Mr. Santiago. Writes down everything. Never lets us see. It's her little secret – he completed, serving himself once more with *Porto*. – By the way, Mr. Santiago, what is there to do with a notebook these days?

– One of those promises that we make and don't fully keep. I got it from a special person to me...

– That's so outdated. – interrupted Beatriz, without taking her eyes off her cell phone screen.

– It's true. I'm old-fashioned. And from my promise I have only kept up the part of carrying my notebook. To write I lack time.

Santiago seemed to distance himself from there, as if he weren't thinking of the dilated time of children, but of the flattened time of the adult commitments.

The girl had left the table and was at the dining room door, still and an acrobat; when she tried to walk, however, two rag dolls fell to the floor. The dolls didn't get hurt, that's true, but she got scared and her eyes searched for mom's, her little eyes asking for forgiveness and help.

– What the hell, girl! Always these dolls back and forth! – the mother went off.

– I wanted to have eight arms – said the girl, her eyes set on the guest.

– May I know why? – asked Santiago, smiling.

– One for each doll. They always fall. Mr. Santiago, is now another time? Can you tell me a story now sir?

– Stop bothering our guest, girl! Mr. Santiago, I'm sorry. This girl has her grandmother's damn gene. We shall protect you from her – affirmed the father.

Santiago proved to be dizzy as if he had taken a blow to the neck. After realizing, the father amended:

– You can rest assured, Mr. Santiago. The girl doesn't have the criminal gene. Nobody in this family does. You are safe with us. No one here is capable of any crime. Speaking about a damn gene, I referred to the habit of bugging other people with this thing about legends, fairy tales, stories. My mother-in-law was the worst.

– And the story, Mr. Santiago?

The parents were going to scold the girl once more, but this time Santiago stepped forward:

– I'm not a very good storyteller, Alice, but I know some. I can try.

– Don't be bothered by the girl, Mr. Santiago. She is always asking her father and I this – interfered the mother.

– And you never tell! Mommy always has a TV show, daddy has to work, Beatriz pretends not to see me. Please, Mr. Santiago, just a short story...

– Fine, Alice.

The girl got comfortable on the white ottoman, in front of Santiago, and placed the dolls in two lines of four. She only had eyes for the neighbor that now told a short story, but intense in dangers, with island, labyrinth and Minotaur – the first of many stories that would reveal the attention devoted by Santiago to the girl.

There were so many details in the story that in the first moments the girl thought that the protagonist of the story was the storyteller, the foreign neighbor lurking while talking as if of someone else; then, something astonishing – there was no difference between the world of the story and the living room in which they were; then, a

brief return to the house when she heard the noise of a wineglass being put on the table, and then, the astonishment grew, because it seemed to be her, the girl, who searched for a thread in the labyrinth.

While listening to the intonation that indicated the end of the report, the girl jumped.

– It was like in my grandmother’s and uncle’s stories! – she leaped, hugging the guest by the neck.

The parents said nothing.

– Where did you learn this story sir?

– In an old book, Alice.

– Did you own a lot?

– I had few books, but years ago there were places called libraries, and in them you could read books and even borrow them. Unfortunately, they were all burnt.

– How sad... – said the girl, still attached to the storyteller.

The mother served more *Porto Wine* and the father ran his fingers through his cell phone.

– But I *really* loved the story – the girl pointed out while letting go of Santiago.

– What a stupid thing... – mocked Beatriz.

– No, it’s not! – the girl was angered.

– Yes, it is – said Beatriz.

– Stop right now! – shouted the mother.

The girl was lost in thoughts about her grandmother and the shredded book. Maybe the book had gone away because it was time for Santiago to arrive. But, since she was prohibited of talking about the subject, she thought she was also prohibited of thinking of the subject, and then stopped the thought. Grabbing the dolls that had the scent of childhood, lifted them one by one, presenting them to the neighbor: Emília, Blue, Little Ball, Miloca, Faquiolina, Joninha, Moon and Zazá.

– I had an idea – said Santiago.

The storyteller excused himself on his way to the small palace and came back minutes later with a roll of thin nylon rope

and scissors; silent while opening the door, he almost surprised the girl's father, which mocked the formal verbiage of the new neighbor. Santiago sat down on the same armchair from before, cut a piece of about three meters of rope and started tying knots like the ones men of many sea adventures know of, forming a line with interwoven soft knots. He picked up the dolls, passed the wrist of the first doll through the first knot and tightened it. Passed the wrist of the second doll through the second knot and tightened it. Passed the wrist of the third doll through the third knot and tightened it. That's how it went, always bypassing the back of the dolls with the own thread, coming upon the eighth doll. Cut the leftover, got up, opened his arms, having each end of the rope in each hand, and showed the doll, now united like the letters of a book.

The girl followed quiet, standing on the rug, staring at Santiago who, with his back straight and chest out, looked like a noble character of forgotten stories.

– There. Now your dolls won't fall anymore – he said. – And you won't even need eight arms.

– Thank you, Mr. Santiago.

He kneeled, handing the dolls to the girl, and she touched his shoulder, like a queen ordering her knight.

– You are such a good person sir... – said the girl.

Santiago was silent as if visited by a surprise, as if that simple comment that thrown him into memories of something far away.

– Thank you, Alice. You really are lovely. I have noticed... – and interrupted himself, as if talking to himself and his voice lessened.

Standing up with watery eyes, Santiago said it was time to go home and apologized for the inconvenience of the story – he didn't want to create conflict between the sisters. The parents asked him to overlook the oldest daughter's harshness and the impertinence of the girl, who took up his time with nonsense. Not in any way, responded Santiago: everything had been very pleasant.

– The pleasure was *all mine* – said the mother, stating the “all mine” and showing off her teeth blueish from wine, her mouth half-opened with impudent smiles. – Stay a little longer.

– I would love to, Mrs. Louise. But I haven’t exaggerated on the wine in a while and I am a little bit sleepy – pondered Santiago while getting, from the floor, the jacket that had slipped from the chair without anyone noticing.

The girl saw something on the chair and ran over. Grabbed the object, a notebook. The cover was white with parallel lines in which someone had written a name with a blue ball pen. The girl read the writing: “Hilário Pena”.

– Mr. Santiago, this must have fallen from your jacket – she said.

He returned, and looked terrified. Then crouched down to stay on the same height as the girl and, receiving from her the notebook, thanked her and made that slide into the side pocket of his jacket, straightening out his forehead in relief.

At farewell, the mother confirmed with the neighbor the date and time of the event on books and asked her husband if he intended on going. The father said it depended on work, he would try returning on time, he would let Santiago know at his house. Better by phone, said Santiago, informing that he would go to Lisbon in the morning and would only return on Tuesday of the next week, the day of the event.

So soon Santiago left, the mother placed herself at the window, with lascivious eyes fastened on the neighbor’s house. The girl appeared under her and, copying the mother’s posture placed one of her hands on the cold glass. Beatriz left saying she was going to a party in Matosinhos and would return around two in the morning. Came back at three, when the mother napped in front of the TV in the living room, while the father visited a website of tattooed girls, almost Beatriz’s age, which had forgotten to wear clothes.

The girl didn’t understand why the parents never went to bed at the same time. It seemed like they never slept. Now the girl liked to sleep a lot. Atypically sleepless that night, however, she turned on

the lights in the bedroom and started to fix the dolls on the shelf, making sure that none of them covered the lavender drawings of the wallpaper – with the exception the drawing of the little lilac plant, the rest of the room had the feeling of a clinic, no decoration, no small painting (they didn't let the girl hang anything up), just the ice colored walls, the small bed, the closet and the dresser-desk. After the girl walked through the house and then back to sticking herself to the window that overlooked the small palace.

During the night, the neighbor's house danced in the woods without touching the ground.



The girl spent part of the night writing in her little notebook the story told by the new resident of the palace. Thought about Santiago and that, if he were a father, maybe he would tell bedside stories to a daughter. He certainly would tell. She was delighted with the idea. Now she could have two fathers: one that she had known since she was a baby, and this one, Mr. Santiago, the “father of letters”. She liked this – there was no problem with having two fathers. Mr. Santiago could be her father of letters storyteller. Better, he would be the grandfather she never met. Yes, Mr. Santiago would be the grandfather that she didn't have, and he would have to be a calm grandfather like the Febros River that crawled through the girl's woods, storyteller like the grandmother that lived in the lost cat, fond of pipes like the uncle that was arrested for keeping books. A grandfather that would send away the feeling of missing the unknown, which would fill the whole of the absence. A Grandfather of Letters.

She also thought about a lot of other things: she wanted to know why the world was as it was, why they had banned the books, why you had to report who had them, and another handful of whys. That night in particular, however, she wondered about the “Hilário Pena notebook”. Maybe there Mr. Santiago wrote down stories.

“Hilário Pena”... the family name was the same as Mr. Santiago’s: “Pena”. The girl wanted to know what was in the notebook. And wanted to know who was that Hilário Pena. Later we would see to that with the woods.

The girl knew that, when you wish for something in the woods, the woods answers, and that, having asked for someone who told stories, the woods had already given her that. She was very thankful. She also knew that, if that was really a story notebook, some day, when she was bigger and cleverer, the woods would bring it to her. But maybe until then she would have a lot of growing up to do. Perhaps she would come to know the story of Hilário Pena through his own writing. Or would learn about Hilário Pena through Santiago’s voice, the Foreigner who told stories.



## PART II



*Through other eyes:  
Hilário Pena and the Library of Babel*



## REQUIEM

(BRAZIL, MANY YEARS BEFORE...)

ilário Pena was twenty-two years old on the day of the crime.

The cold air of May in São Paulo didn't prevent the concentration of ladies and gentlemen, and the racket rekindled the afternoon in the bohemian neighborhood, before redoubt of elderly citizens; rays of sun escaped through loopholes in the clouds, lighting the roofs, and were going to strengthen the bright-yellow of the sidewalks; from there, it was almost inaudible the *chorinho* presentation that happened in the back of the bar. Under the shadow of the weeping willow, Hilário waited for the arrival of his colleagues from work – engineers from the projects sector, his superiors at the construction company. Rocking on the chair, he rested his elbows on the tabletop and, taking advantage of the side mirror of a car parked nearby, fixed his straight black hair. Took off his coat, revealing the robust arms, and rubbed his hands, touching the calluses that

evoked the time of activities in carpentry. While drinking his beer, he read on the bulletin board, mounted on an oak barrel, the call for a samba group on Sunday and the poster of the campaign for the restoration of the Municipal Library.

At that time Hilário didn't care at all about books, but the discussion at the table beside him captured his attention: three girls and a skinny blonde guy received with hugs the short man with Indigenous features that had just arrived by bicycle; while sitting down, the shorty deposited on the table a dusty book he took out from his shirt, starting the feud.

– This old thing has to end! – shouted the blonde guy, and between laughs amended that the books were hateful and anti-democratic, that it was the case of being modern and ban them like Switzerland, set everything on fire.

The shorty clenched up, spoke clearly, gained support from the women; but soon the discussion was substituted by the commotion of the pub. Squeezing part of the clientele on the sidewalk, the “Galeriano's Music Bar” had this curious effect of messing with stranger's lives for minutes, mixing voices and impressions, binding looks replicating matters like little pieces of glass in a kaleidoscope.

The sound of cars honking made Hilário look at the street. An elderly man with burnt skin from the sun pulled his little cart collecting recyclables – he was in the way of the traffic and, though the slowness didn't really bother who was walking by, with *that* the drivers had no patience. Hilário measured himself with the old man, who seemed to him someone that was sentenced to forced labor, but it didn't take long for him to forget about the old man – at the time Hilário still carried the typical optimism of youth, with the certainty of success ahead: the childhood marked by poverty to the mockery in college for using simple shoes, all his setbacks now seemed overcome; the wheel of fortune was going to turn and he would get to the apex, he would gain respect; and he already noticed that even Cristina, the red haired engineer with skyscraper legs, was more and more receptive to him.

When the four men finally arrived, they congratulated Hilário briefly on the promotion from intern to trainee, they sat down and started chatting about the trip made the year before, in which he didn't participate. Oblivious of the conversation, Hilário switched from sips of tequila to gulps of beer and put himself to observe youthfulness of the short skirts that defied the wind. Already a bit drunk, he got up, squeezed in between the chairs, tables and people on the side of the street, and then when to check out the inside of the bar – the long rectangle of walls lined with wood, on which were hung musical instruments; but nothing of Cristina there too. When he returned to his table, Hilário noticed that neighbors had gone back to the conversation about banning books; he was going to mention such matter to the engineers when someone yelled “silence!”, and everyone's attention turned to the news shown on the television set fixated over the marquee of the bar.

The TV had been repeating the same news since the morning: the judicial decision was now definite, there were no appeals permitted, and the legislation about the new method of crime reduction, would be applied. The technique consisted of an exam that would investigate the presence of a conditioning violence gene, and with that it would be possible to map out the possible potential criminals and enforce the capital sentencing to the authors of serious crimes. The news echoed the one from four years before, when the bill was published, but immediately suspended, and the matter now returned because the justices of the Supreme Court had heard experts, revised concepts, changed the understanding. The anti-crime measures had obtained surprising results in England, United States and Germany, said the excited anchor, later were taken in by all of Europe; and troublemakers screaming against the death sentence, showing photographs, tying themselves to poles, making a riot with their signs. Hilário payed no attention.

Now Túlio, the engineer that for some incomprehensible reason was thought of highly by Cristina, celebrated: finally, the Government – or someone higher than the Government – fulfilled

their role, resolved conflicts, all the criminals would be arrested, and the common citizens would be able to drink their beer in peace. Soon cell phones rang, someone remembered an old joke, another commented on Wednesday's soccer game, and the subject was over when the portions of pork rinds and *pastel* arrived. *Feijoada* and *caipirinha* came to the table, two hours passed on the gray afternoon of yellow spasms, and everyone forgot about the story and the genes. In the far the blurry sun plummeted from the clouds and brushed itself behind the buildings; by that time Cristina had already arrived radiating her cupric beauty, but limited herself of waiving at the door, going to meet up with friends inside. As usual when drunk, Hilário daydreamed about some heroic performance that could bear him – he needed something that aroused other's attention, because he had the constant sensation of being excluded from everything, as if in any part of the world he would always be considered an outsider.

It rained lightly when Túlio got up and placed himself between the two men at the table next to theirs; he spoke loudly, his hands opening and closing nervously; it seemed as if he hadn't been very respectful to the woman in lilac. Everything started with a simple discussion, but in seconds arms were intertwined with necks, legs reached unimaginable heights, heads were hit. A symphony was created with breaking glasses, bottles and chairs; the oak barrel fell to the ground, breaking with the bang, and a "no", shouting like a chorus, was followed by the strange sound of skin being torn.

With his feet on the sidewalk and back on the wet asphalt, the shorty from the book was shedding blood through the neck staining the sidewalk, the asphalt, staining everything. A squalid dog crossed the street and with his paws tainted went along stamping the sidewalk, stamping the asphalt, stamping.

Pale from horror, Hilário Pena had in his hand a bottleneck in the form of a dagger.



It wasn't the best way to awaken. His arm hit the wall stuffed with humidity and bran from paint fell on Hilário's face, keeping him from opening his eyes. What place that was he didn't know; there was a narcotic basement smell. He lifted his torso from the rough floor, rubbed his eyelids and so he saw, unfocused, the pattern of rods aligned in front of him like clean soldiers. He tried to remember what happened, but everything seemed surrounded by water, mist, and vomit.

There were blood spots on his shirt, but apparently, he wasn't hurt. He found a bandage glued on the merge of his arm and forearm. Putting himself up, Hilário noticed he was in a cell and felt dizzy, holding on to the metallic bars not to fall. Vomited. Seconds after, more clean-cut, he found himself in a wing of four cubic cells: his and the adjacent, on one side of the corridor, and two identical, on the other side. Walls of gray brickwork delimited the back and one of the sides of his cell, while bars closed off the front and made the division with the adjacent cell; there wasn't a lightbulb on the dirty ceiling and the floor was of thick cement, looking like a plate of zinc crumpled and filthy. Hilário pushed away the beige curtains on the left and discovered the tiny bathroom, there was a broken mirror, hanging over the small sink, a sanitary hole and a shower whose wiring snuck up on the wall. A luminous gap originating from the small opening on the back wall invaded the cell, projecting on the floor, in light and shadow, the drawing of the railings. Climbing on the concrete bed, narrow like a camping cot, Hilário stood on the tip of his toes, but, even though he was almost one meter and ninety centimeters tall, he didn't reach the window bars. While getting down from the bed, he noticed his watch fallen on the floor in a corner and bent down to grab it.

– Welcome to Babel.

The voice came from the corridor and caught Hilário still bent down; he looked back and saw a man in a gray uniform with a hyena face.

– What am I doing here? – asked Hilário, standing up.

– You don't know? Great. Tell that to the judge. Maybe he'll take into account your amnesia. Maybe he'll forget to ask to press the button to fry your brains.

– Judge? – and Hilário vomited some more.

His stomach hurt as if a poisonous creature ran through his bowels. The memories came in parts: the bottle injuring the ground, shards, him defending his friends. The prison officer left whistling.

Veins and artery trampled in Hilário's head, forcing him to lay down, even though he had his vomit right there, with the smell mixing with the tequila and the fried food from the pub. Shocked by what he had heard, he stayed motionless and ended up sleeping. When he woke up, the digital screen on his watch marked 20:01, synchronized with the pointers. He found, leaning on the rail, an aluminum lunch pail and opened it, but the smell of sautéed vegetables made him gag, and with the bile dancing in his throat there was no way he could eat. He remembered the events at the bar, and couldn't understand why *he* was arrested; that was unfathomable – and a stunning absurd. He sought shelter in a less cold corner, far away from the bed that looked like a crypt and the stain of vomit that polluted the floor. While using his coat as a blanket, he remembered Mrs. Marta, the little old lady that had given him that article of clothing made of suede. From the old lady his thought jumped to Professor Andrada, her husband, and to the scholarships – from a carpenter apprentice Hilário was now an Architecture and Engineer student and was about to graduate in both courses. He recalled when he helped the professor, at the time a stranger, to change his tires on a rainy night; recollected the friendship born between the educated man and the teenager with dirty nails, the afternoons playing chess at the old couple's home, of Mrs. Marta – always touched by the story of the orphan working in exchange of having somewhere to sleep – teaching him Music; what touched the old couple the most, however, wasn't the orphanhood, but the story of the lists: deprived from anything that he could call his own, the boy Hilário had captured all of them in fantasy: they were lists

of trips dreamed of, of toys from store windows, toys from fairs, animals, friends, junk food, family members – anyway, of absences. The unusual memory had also reunited ethereal treasures: lists of street sayings, of rare words, of unheard-of equations. Hilário didn't refuse when, a few years later, the professor offered him the scholarships and, kind of lightheaded, he found out that the ability of changing tires could be worth a college degree. Two.

The night found Hilário between sleep and vigil, trying to recollect what seemed to be the night before, the Saturday at the bar with the colleagues from the construction company. In the beginning, he had thought they were snobs, letting himself down a little by the rich: they were boring, always told the same dull stories and dressed as if they all belonged to the same rugby team. No one there had been spanked as a kid, or felt embarrassed while filling in the darn "parents" space on a stupid form. But they lived in sumptuous houses and had fast cars, and it hadn't been difficult to like that world: in a few months, Hilário dressed like them, imitating them in everything. Cristina was the propulsive of the change, it's true, despite not saying anything – a woman like her didn't need to say anything to show what she wanted. Convinced that he was only doing his job defending his friends, Hilário fell asleep, comforted.



Hilário awoke with screams from the hyena: Someone important wanted to see him. Certainly, one of the engineers; maybe Cristina; or even Professor Andrada.

Conducted through slender hallways intercalated with oxidized doors and flanked by empty cells, Hilário arrived at a dark room, without windows and pestilential air. Soon his eyes adapted to the dim lights and he was able to see something: there was a rectangular table, from which hung a dirty lamp that made the place look like a gambling house, besides four chairs and a metal archive. Placed with his back to the door on one of the chairs, he noticed on the side

there was a masonry staircase. Three men wearing ties went around the table and sat down, and the oldest one, with a lively black face, presented himself:

– Mr. Hilário Pena, I am Carlos Castelo, a lawyer – said the man, while he unbuttoned the blue suit clearly expensive. – I was nominated to represent your interests. My work will be *pro bono*. Free. These two gentlemen are from the Commission for Investigation, Analysis and Execution of the Ministry of Criminal Politics.

Hilário aimed at the oval face that talked about such commission with a strange

and long name. The lawyer's eyes blinked behind the round shaped glasses, his fingers adjusted the gold cufflinks, and his white hair and beard, shaved very short with a machine, outlined perfectly the handsome skull. The first impression to have of Mr. Castelo was of a good man, unpretentious, one of those that are called only to extreme situations – like old farmers when asking for a saint's intervention.

Deflecting to the two men spectators from the Commission, Hilário felt thrown in a tub with ice: they were identical black suits and, if it wasn't for the long beard and long hair of one in contrast to the military style haircut of the other, they would be interchangeable the two men, both with pallid faces and the same opaque executioner eyes.

Leaning again on the chair, Hilário provoked a mute sound when hitting his handcuffs the *jatobá* wood tabletop.

– Nice to meet you, sir. Did Professor Andrada call you for my defense? Or was it the people from work?

– I was nominated by the State – responded the lawyer, opening his briefcase.

– There must be a mistake. I am sure my friends will be here soon. Ask them to contact the Professor. With all respect to you sir, I prefer someone of his trust.

– Professor Andrada was here while you slept – said the lawyer firmly. – When told about the whole case, he said not to be

bothered anymore. He made it clear that you were just a boy he had helped some years ago. Didn't seem comfortable with the situation.

– I understand. He is of certain age; he must not comprehend these things. However, what about the men that were with me at the bar?

Mr. Castelo hesitated, but Hilário projected his body forward, as an indication that the lawyer should answer.

– Your friends will not come.

– What do you mean?

– They testified at the Police District and were emphatic: they wouldn't answer any of your calls.

– That can't be, sir! – shouted Hilário. – I am here for them! I only got the bottle so nobody else would get hurt.

– Calm down. You see, I'm your lawyer, but I will only be able to do a good job if you tell me the truth. The *whole* truth. Let's recap: You killed a man and nobody confirmed that it was self-defense or...

– That's ridiculous! I didn't kill anyone! Those guys were the ones hitting my friends.

The short one even had a gun; he could have killed Túlio!

The lawyer passed the nail on his index finger on a folder made of ostrich leather.

– Actually, Hilário, your friends were the ones outnumbered the others, and according to them, when it had all calmed down, you jumped over one of the men, lost balance, fell and, while you were getting up, you got a hold of a beer bottle, broke it in half on the curb and plunged it in the young man's neck.

– Who said that?!

– I'm going to ask again that you calm down. Or else we won't get anywhere. You see, by the testimonials collected, your situation is very delicate.

– Sir, I did nothing wrong! The man had a gun!

– For now, no witness has said anything about a fire weapon. Anyhow, we have a possible triumph in case you are convicted, and that is why these two men from the Commission are here.

– Hilário got up yelling: he wanted to speak to Professor Andrada, he had the right to a phone call, someone had to contact the people from the construction company, someone had to come straighten out that mess. The lawyer clarified that yes, he had the right to a phone call, but no, he couldn't call the friends that had already vetted his calls. The hyena came to the door of the room with his bludgeon raised; Hilário sat down, buried his head in his arms and looked at his own knees. The lawyer waited for him to come back to his original position and continued:

– Do you have anyone else you want to call?

Hilário didn't have. He was alone. Again. He was nothing but human fillings.

The men from the Commission continued still, looking like gargoyles from a gothic cathedral. Hilário wanted to know about the “triumph”, but he glanced at the men from the Commission of the Ministry of Criminal Politics and asked if he wouldn't have a reserved interview with the lawyer. Mr. Castelo responded that there would be time for that later, but that first contact in the presence of the agents was of great importance for the case. Only then the men presented themselves.

– I'm Agent Martins. Nice to meet you – said the man without a beard. – This is mister Supervisor, Agent Meireles.

Hilário greeted them by only moving his head and returned to the lawyer, that

started to explain.

– The day that everything happened the new legislation of the genetic criminal tracking was already in effect. Now the good news, more so to you than to the Government – said the lawyer ironically. – Before you were brought here you were taken to the Central Hospital of the Capitol. You were unconscious. As determined by the Deputy, a small amount of blood was extracted from you to examine blood alcohol level and narcotics and...

– I don't use drugs!

– We know, the tests confirmed. But may I finish, please. Your blood was also submitted to the tests of genetic profiling. You were one of the first. And the only one with a negative result. You can escape the death sentence and...

– Death sentence?! First the warden and now you too sir, sir?! You must be kidding.

– Unfortunately, all of this is very serious – and the lawyer rubbed his thumb on his lips.

– About four years ago, was promulgated a law that permits the use of genetic exams to indicate the tendency of criminals relapsing...

– I am not a criminal

– Let me continue – said the lawyer, impatient. – This law was a blatant copy of the American one and included the possibility of the execution of the convicted, something that was unthinkable in this country. Maybe you heard something about it at the time. I was a member of the group that contested this absurd in the Supreme Court. Unfortunately, we lost: nine of the eleven ministers welcomed the theses that, with the presidential act of “declaration of war to the violent crimes”, the death sentence, expected in the new bill, could be adopted for homicide cases, rape, torture, terrorism and armed robbery. The Court also decided that the Law must follow the scientific innovations and, that’s why, the analysis of the genes doesn’t imply violation to fundamental rights or...

– Forgive me, sir – interrupted Hilário – but all this chatter doesn’t tell me anything! In fact, I always hated the Law and its stuffy terms. You sir had mentioned “good news”, but now there is a death sentence and before there wasn’t, no?

– Actually, I can only regret this point. But that wasn’t what I was referring to. You see, the new legislation permits the execution of assassins, but only the recidivists or those that, being first offenders, like you, have had identified in their exams the criminal gene. You *don’t have it*. By the way, that’s the reason why these two men are here: your case could represent a hole in the criminal gene theory.