

## Shadows

Agostinho Fernandes

Though October, it was cold at first light. That early in the morning, four o'clock, the station was still practically deserted. Towards the far end, on a rough bench, a guard slept fitfully.

The man looked up again at the vast clock hanging on the wall: five past four. The train was late. He trudged along the platform and, as his footsteps echoed in the empty darkness, he again found himself brooding on his father's health. The attacks of angina were growing more and more frequent and painful. He feared that the next crisis might result in myocardial infarction. Perhaps they should consider a bypass operation, just as their doctor had been advising so insistently.

An unpleasant clatter, unyielding in its crescendo, interrupted his thoughts. It was the train, which drew puffing into the station twenty minutes late.

\*\*\*

He climbed aboard. It was warmer inside the carriage. On the back seat an old man slumped snoring, like one who neither owed any debt to the world nor expected to accrue any interest from it. On the other side, half leaning against the bulkhead, her legs stretched out on the seat and covered with a blanket, a nun read in her prayer book with pious concentration, indifferent to the goings-on around her yet certain of a fitting place in heaven.

He sat next to the window, before a man killing time with a crossword, so absorbed in it that he didn't even look up to acknowledge the newcomer.

'Why, it's my colleague Afonso Mendes! What a surprise!'

'Carlos Alberto? A surprise and a coincidence . . . Pleased to see you. I suppose you're off to the Congress too.'

'Haven't seen you for months. What have you been up to? Put on a few kilos, eh . . . Life's treating you well . . .'

'I'm getting by. Listen, it's pure chance that I'm on this train. I was supposed to catch a lift yesterday with our colleague Alcino Menezes. Remember him? But my father had one of his attacks of angina, and I had to take him to A&E . . . As luck would have it . . .'

'Luck?'

‘Yes, Menezes ended up going on his own. Speed freak that he is, he took a bend too fast . . . They tell me he was taken to hospital in a pretty bad state. If I had gone along . . . I’m due to pay him a visit after the Congress.’

‘I’m sorry to hear that. I hope it’s not too serious . . . If you don’t mind, I’ll come with you. He’s a good lad . . . A bit pretentious, but that’s just his way. . . But what a coincidence! Your father’s attack of angina might well have saved you from an accident . . .

‘It’s no coincidence. I’d say it was fate.’

‘What do you mean fate? You Orientals chalk everything up to fate.’

‘I see you’re still a doubter.’

‘Of course. I think believing destiny is responsible for everything is a form of cowardice, a flight from responsibility, a refusal to struggle . . . It’s an airy excuse for the weak to explain away their failings . . .’

‘But fate doesn’t merely explain failures. It accounts for successes too, for everything good that happens in life . . . Those who believe in destiny, as I and millions and millions of others do, base their ideas on the principle that in this Universe not a leaf flutters in the breeze without it being predestined.’

‘What about free will, free choice?’

‘It exists, of course. Free will is a right we all enjoy, but it operates on an entirely human level, far below that of predestination.’

‘Free will is the right to choose. Man is free to make decisions. He is free to establish his own fate.’

‘But there you only consider humankind. Shouldn’t the rest of nature have the same right? Fate isn’t exclusive to humans. It applies to everything in the natural world. When you slaughter cattle for food or fell a tree for heating, what happens to the free will of those organisms?’

‘I still don’t believe in fate. Perhaps it’s different for non-human beings. After all they have neither intelligence nor discernment. But our fate is what we make it, day after day, in our minds, by our own hand, in our constant striving for fulfilment and success . . . That’s why man is endowed with intelligence . . .’

‘Human intelligence? Let’s see . . . I’ll give you a true case and you tell me if intelligence played any part in it. A cousin of mine had to catch a flight to New York early one morning for an urgent business meeting. Having set his alarm for three hours before departure, so he could be up and ready and reach the airport in a leisurely fashion, he slept easy. But for some reason his alarm didn’t go off. He missed his flight and, as a consequence, an advantageous deal went down the plughole. That morning, when he woke and began to lament his misfortune, he saw on the news that the plane he was supposed to catch had hit a mountaintop due to intense fog. There were no survivors . . . I could give you dozens of similar examples. Isn’t the hand of fate on clear display there?’

‘No . . . That’s just coincidence . . . Where was the hand of fate for all the others who perished in the accident? Was it written that they should all die that day? And why was he the only one chosen to survive? What gave him that privilege, the benefit of the draw?’

‘I don’t know . . . Fate is a mystery, which our poor, weak human brain, despite all its intelligence, simply cannot fathom . . .’

‘Well, here we are almost at our station. Time to get off . . . We can continue our talk later on.’

‘Of course . . . See you at the Congress.’

\*\*\*

‘I saw Afonso Mendes at the Congress. Do you remember him, father? He used to come over all the time to study. Well, study is a figure of speech. We spent more time arguing than studying.’

‘Yes, I remember him very well. Quite the philosopher . . .’

‘We travelled on the same train and time just flew by. As always we soon found ourselves embroiled in a philosophical wrangle about . . . fate, in relation to Menezes’s accident. I couldn’t get him to change his mind. For him ‘so-called destiny’, as he calls it, doesn’t exist. Everything is coincidence, the fruit of mere chance. A freak event.’

‘Do you really want to convince him? I know someone who could . . .’

‘Who?’

‘Do you remember that classmate of mine from High School, Professor Baboni Gauncar? He’s a parapsychologist of great renown, has consulting rooms in the most upmarket neighbourhood in town.’

‘Yes, I remember.’

‘He’s an expert in these matters. After graduating he spent years wandering through north India, up into Tibet, living with sadhus and lamas, imbibing their vast knowledge of the mysteries of the arcane and the supernatural, the virtues of thought and introspection. They say his consulting rooms are always full and that grandees from the world of politics, high finance and big business are regular clients. But one must make an appointment far in advance.’

‘And could you put me and Afonso Mendes in touch with him, father? I really am keen to get my friend Mendes to understand the essence of “fate”.’

‘I can try. We were always good friends and he holds me in certain esteem. I’ll ring and ask if he can spare you a few minutes one of these days.’

\*\*\*

It was long past midnight when Professor Baboni Gauncar received us in his modest consulting rooms. He apologised for the lateness of the hour and, without further ado, took the bull by the horns:

‘Your father told me you and your colleague were in psychology and have doubts about predestination . . .’

‘That’s right, Professor. My colleague here Afonso Mendes doesn’t believe in fate and I can’t convince him otherwise. No doubt you’ll have more persuasive arguments than I.’

The professor fell silent for a moment, head bowed, deep wrinkles furrowing his brow as one engaged in profound introspection. At length, without addressing either of us in particular, he said:

‘Predestination is above all an attitude of faith. One needs an open mind to believe in fate. The philosophy of predestination has at its heart the existence of a Supreme Being who commands the universe—or all the universes if there happen to be more than one. It does so not only on a general level but also and above all on that of every single particle in existence. This Supreme Being does not concern itself with individuals, things, or being in itself, but rather with each individual particle that forms them. It is thus the fate of these particles that It commands, whether they be isolated or gathered in an object, being or planet, in the solar system or in some distant galaxy, in short in the Universe itself.’

‘Does that mean It doesn’t trace out a fate for us individually?’

‘No! What It does is to trace out a fate for each of the particles that comprise us.’

‘. . . and we can’t escape this so-called fate?’

‘Escape where? Escape how? That which we call fate is merely the sum of fates of every particle that comprises us.’

‘And so our individual will, our self-determination, doesn’t exist?’

‘It exists, of course it does, but at such a lowly, human level, that it cannot touch the splendour of the universal sphere of fate. It’s also something that concerns a fixed group of particles. As it’s not given to us to know our fate we can exercise our free will to our heart’s content. In the final analysis it will lead us to whatever has been preordained.’

‘That’s what I’ve tried to tell him, to no avail . . .’

Afonso Mendes shook his head in disagreement and replied confrontationally:

‘So, if tomorrow I throw myself under a moving lorry, I won’t die because it hasn’t been preordained that I should?’

‘I don’t know. Has it really been predestined that you should throw yourself under a lorry, my friend? I’m sure that you would be predestined to think you were. But between thought and action there is a vast gulf. If you are predestined, even if you follow your own volition, even if you exercise your free will, at heart, you shall, unwittingly perhaps, be fulfilling your fate as it was this fate that ordained your free will.’

‘But if it was predestined, then I didn’t exercise my free will.’

‘You did, because you didn’t know it was predestined. We are only aware of fate once it has occurred, never before . . . Thus free will exists on a human level, whereas predestination belongs to a supra-human, transcendental sphere.’

The professor went on:

‘We often say that not even a straw moves in the universe without it being so predestined, even if it appears that the straw is moving as a result of our will.’

‘So, my dear Mendes, do you understand what fate is now?’

‘In all honesty, I’m really confused. I need to think more deeply on the subject.’

‘Your colleague is confused indeed . . .’

‘You’re telling me . . .’

‘His ideas concerning fate and free will are so entangled that it won’t be easy to separate them . . . This idea of his to throw himself under a lorry worries me . . . I don’t tell fortunes or read palms, but, from our conversation today, I deduce that such a thought is the result of dark shadows looming over him. What shadows? I simply cannot say.’

It was almost morning when we left Professor Baboni’s consulting rooms . . . Afonso Mendes wavered still but from his silence I realised that a tiny shoot had sprouted in the depths of his mind. There was now a strong possibility it would grow and later become a tree that admitted without reserve the existence of fate.

\*\*\*

I was shocked to the core when, six months later, I read that a runaway lorry, whose brakes had failed, had crushed Afonso Mendes against a wall, killing him instantly. He hadn’t even had to throw himself under it. The lorry itself had found and crushed him. So it had been predestined . . . And he knew it, unwittingly . . . Perhaps that was what Professor Baboni Gauncar meant when he said Mendes had dark shadows looming over him.

—Translated from Portuguese by Paul Melo e Castro

**Paul Melo e Castro** is a lecturer in Portuguese and Comparative Literature at the University of Glasgow. He has research interests in literature, film and visual culture, is currently engaged in research projects on the post-1961 Goan short story and on postcolonial photography, and is an occasional literary translator.

**Agostinho Fernandes** (1932-2015) was a doctor by training. A native of Quepém, he studied at the Liceu Nacional Afonso de Albuquerque and the Escola Médico-Cirúrgica de Goa before leaving for Portugal to revalidate his degree. He started his medical career in Angola before moving to Portugal where he remained until his death. In 1962 he published a novel entitled *Bodki* (which was republished in Goa in 2014) set in the far south of Goa. Towards the end of his life he published two other novels on non-Goan, often paranormal themes.