

Room 54

Epitácio Pais

You know what the alleys of Dhobitalao are like, a real Bombay maze, where a stranger can't find his way to the main road without a local's help. The clear majority of its residents are Goan, transmigrants who have made this neighbourhood considerably their own, a projection of Goa with all its peculiar characteristics: the language, the food, the spirit that gives this place its joy and vivacity, the litanies sung before crosses niched in walls, the fireworks, and so much else.

You'll also know what the vast blowhole next to Dhobitalao is like, where a centuries-old edifice overlooks a stream of cars coursing past day and night. Well, it was next to the picture house on the square that this slip of a woman planted herself before me and, with a smile on her dry, colourless lips, asked if I could spare five rupees.

I found her request odd because it wasn't one of those studied pleas designed to tug at the heartstrings, but a simple, sincere request for help, almost entirely devoid of exaggerated humility. It was odd also that she should ask for what at the time was a pretty hefty sum, enough to feed someone in want for two or three days. Back then I was studying medicine in the cosmopolis and didn't really have the money to dole out. But the *capodd* she wore, the air of respectability emanating from her person, the language in which she addressed me that was my own, all this made me open my wallet and press the money requested into her hands.

Afterwards I asked her a few questions about where she was from, her family, whether she had anyone taking care of her, where she lived, if she was married. Her answers didn't go beyond insisting that I go home with her for a cup of tea.

Her home consisted of a single clean bedroom, with a double bed, a table and a couple of chairs. A corner cupboard displayed a foreign-brand radio set and a few garish knickknacks. A fan hung from a wall. In another corner, a short flight of steps led to an attic. Religious images adorned the freshly painted walls.

She led me through to the kitchen for that cup of tea. As the water boiled she explained that the bedroom was where her son and daughter-in-law ate and

slept. Her son? He worked for a shipping company, got home late overburdened with paperwork; his wife was employed in a bank, out early, home late too. They cooked, ate, went out for a stroll, came home, went to bed.

“What about you, aunty?” I asked.

Her daughter-in-law gave her a few measures of rice a month to cook. Curry she got from the leftovers of a hotel next to the church. It wasn't far. A few *paise* coins for fish, a couple more for vegetables, that was all she needed. There was no shortage of good souls like me who could spare her some coppers.

She opened a packet of tea, the sort that hang from strings in grocers', and made tea for two. She apologised for not having any milk.

I asked her where she slept. On these trunks, she replied, which her husband had bought. They contained all her belongings, brought up from Goa a long time ago. Her husband had been a seaman by profession. He bought the room she had lived in ever since for a pittance. When I asked why she didn't sleep in the loft to avoid the damp in the kitchen, she said she didn't want to disturb her son and daughter-in-law by opening and closing the door and climbing the stairs as they rested.

I left her, full of gratitude. As I walked out the words on a sign above the entrance caught my attention:

Joseph Aranja – Accountant
Mary Aranja – Assistant Bank Manager
Room No. 54

Five years later, after graduation, I found myself one day in the alleys of Dhobitalao, inspecting some clean-up work undertaken by the city council. Various new buildings had been put up in the area, new walls had been raised to replace old structures in danger of collapse, terraces had been repaired. That spot was now free of mice and rats and puddles of standing water. I recalled the old woman who some five or six years previously had asked for a five-rupee note and invited me back for a cup of tea. Where was that room and kitchen she called home? My curiosity enticed me to seek it out. Besides, I felt a pang of nostalgia for that kindly old lady, with her frank smile and words that harboured no second meaning or intention to cast blame. But I couldn't remember the exact whereabouts of her little place.

As I wandered I heard a woman's keening, the lament for someone's death. Guided by that expression of deep sorrow, I reached a covered cement verandah shielded by climbing plants, where two men had just laid out the body of an old lady in a coffin. By its side a youngish woman wailed, writhing and tearing at her own hair, staggering over from her chair to the corpse to stroke the old lady's face before collapsing back on the upholstered seat. She beat her fists on the side of the coffin with an anguished expression that was pitiful to witness. Her face washed in tears, her raw, red eyes, all this showed just how racked she was by the death of

that person. When the workmen with me told the mourners I was a city doctor, one of them asked that I administer a sedative to the distraught woman. A few moments later, as the drug took effect, she sat looking groggily around her.

I approached the coffin to pay my respects before leaving. The withered features and now stiffened wrinkles brought to mind fading images, vague outlines almost diluted in time, amidst which I seemed to make out the mummified face of that old girl who, once upon a time, had asked me for money and made me some tea. Could it really be the little old woman who had begged in the streets of Dhobitalao, scavenged leftovers from third-class hotels, bought with alms the fish and vegetables other customers rejected? Could it really be that old lady in her frayed *capodd* of cheap calico, trunks in a damp kitchen for a bed, who now lay in this magnificent coffin dressed in a fine sari, as wept for in death as she had been scorned in life? Who could say for sure? My memories of the little house and everything else had evanesced. At present a four-story hotel, a modern restaurant and a grocer's shop stood where I seemed to remember the little room of she who perhaps now slept for eternity. Could it really be her? Everything was muddled in my dysmnesia.

Just then I noticed a sign on the threshold of the verandah, which had originally belonged to the little old house:

Joseph Aranja, Accountant
Mary Aranja, Bank Manager
Room No. 54

—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.

Epitácio Pais (1924-2009), described by Vimala Devi and Manuel de Seabra as “a short story writer of great vigour, whose prose is terse and suggestive. He feels the world around him in all its poetry and tragedy”, began to publish his short stories after the end of Portuguese colonial rule in 1961. Appearing in the surviving Portuguese-language newspapers or broadcast on the programme “Renascença” of the Goa station of All-India Radio, Pais’s narratives deal with the shifting social, political and economic situation in the Goa in the first decade of Indian rule.