

## Lulu Dies Alone

Leopoldo da Rocha

It was his mother I met first. Already then she looked older and more careworn than her years. She had fled an ex-Portuguese colony in Africa during the upheavals after independence, just as thousands and thousands like her had abandoned everything and sought refuge in Portugal, “with one hand out front and the other behind” as the local expression had it. The phrase meant this: with almost nothing, just a few clothes and some almost worthless belongings. My friendship with the old lady had begun when I inquired during a chance encounter if she were Goan and she replied effusively that she was, from the village of Nerul. ‘Nerul?’ I exclaimed in surprise. I knew the imposing church of that once noble parish well. I had even carried out research in its registry. Dona Maria told me she had attended the village primary school and that Ilda Afonso had been her teacher. Another pleasant surprise, for Miss Ilda was my maternal aunt and godmother. The old lady added that her second primary school teacher had been Panduronga Pissulencar, future historian of great renown both under Portuguese rule and after. Over in Mozambique Dona Maria had suffered misfortune upon misfortune. Her husband had passed away unexpectedly and decolonisation soon followed. Her two adult sons had done military service in Mozambique and had both returned home with nerves shot to pieces. The eldest especially. For a woman, a matriarch in the old Goan style, to manage such a trying family situation was a deadly serious matter, not simply because it meant leaving house and home in Mozambique and departing for a country, Portugal, that she did not know, but also because the financial contribution of her children was so meagre. Perhaps the youngest, Lulu, helped out a little. But the eldest, Pedro, was a shambles, given to drink and maybe to drugs. He had been the apple of his mother’s eye, the bearer of all her hopes, the first born destined to perpetuate their family name and house in Goa, a storied house of ancient traditions, so much so that Dona Maria had not failed to bring from the house, now in the possession of cousins, the family crest granted to an ancestor of her late husband’s by the Portuguese Crown. How had this first-born son, who left high school with excellent marks and had only not entered university due to his military service, sunk so low? Friends who had known him in Africa and now wielded a certain influence, fully aware of the young man’s intellectual capacities, had found him administrative work in the office of a state school. There Pedro

and his talent had found appreciation and recognition. It was said that he knew all the relevant legislation like the back of his hand and if anyone had any doubts it was to him they came. The pleasure he took in helping his colleagues led him to compose an annotated primer on the statutes, which he left on open access in the school office. But the worst of it was when he fell off the wagon. Then he would skulk off without a word, and when he did come back, he would be pie-eyed. His superiors didn't fire him, showing laudable compassion, but instead gave him compulsory retirement. That wasn't so bad. One day I saw him sprawled in the street, filthy and soiled, near a hotel on the Praça da Figueira. Was this the brilliant high school student? The war had reduced him to tatters. On another occasion, as I walked down Rua Gomes Freire, I saw Pedro, unshaven but not a total mess, busy filling out forms for some hayseed who needed to collect his Identity Card from the issuing office located nearby. A few people hung around thereabouts, earning small change completing paperwork for the functionally illiterate. I noticed that these people didn't work alone. There was a short, stocky fellow, with a moustache and thick lips, who oversaw their activities. I struck up a conversation with the man. He was candid and well spoken, obviously a person of some education. He told me that he had served in the Foreign Legion. I made a gesture of surprise. "You mean", I said with distaste, "you were a mercenary! You must have killed lots of people . . ." To which he replied haughtily: "Yes, I did. Being a mercenary in countries riven by factions and wars is a profession like any other, no? That's what they paid me for". I changed the subject, as just then Pedro had appeared in the distance, handing a filled-out slip or form to a client before receiving his tip, head bowed. I remarked to the mercenary. "That fellow is a countryman of mine, or rather, his parents are. See him? He was quite brilliant as a boy". To which the mercenary replied curtly: "It was the war that did for him, wasn't it? It's obvious, that's why we leave him be. He's no competition anyway. We just turn a blind eye . . ."

Pedro's sad fate wasn't Dona Maria's only disappointment. Her roll of sorrows also included an only daughter with the pet name Buchona. Tall, big-boned, dark-skinned and pretty, with a strong personality, Buchona had studied languages and literatures at the University of Lisbon. I was told her undergraduate viva had been a master-class. She had discussed her topic in German, her specialism, before a jury that included an outside examiner from a German university. If she had returned to Portuguese Africa, where she had been born and brought up, she would have easily got a teaching position at the high school in the capital. There would have been no lack of suitors either. Her mother had anxiously awaited the return of her daughter with open arms. But Buchona preferred to go her own way. While she finished her course, with the full financial support of her father, her family had remained in Beira, Mozambique. The war hadn't yet made itself felt there, life went on as normal. But, once she secured her diploma, Dona Maria's daughter had opted not to return home.

She had left for Germany instead. Why? My gut feeling was that she had been taken by a sudden passion for the German professor. But I didn't dare check this hunch with her brother Lulu, who I knew would only have given me an evasive answer. So I never found out for sure. But the daughter didn't forget her mother, especially now she was in such dire straits in Lisbon, as were most returnees from the colonies, who had given up their homes and everything they had put aside for the future. One day, out of the blue, Buchona arrived from Germany to visit her mother, who was staying in a reception centre for returnees. She told me:

"I saw my sad, silent mother ironing a blouse on a table in the Returnee Reception Centre. Oh, mother, ironing on a table top?"

"Oh daughter, things here aren't like they were back there . . ." the old lady had said to her astonished daughter by way of explanation. Dona Maria's daughter told me:

"At that moment I had such an attack of nerves that I began to weep compulsively. Everything passed in a flash, without a moment's thought. I contacted the first estate agent I could find and agreed the purchase of a two-bedroom flat. Since I was paying up front in cash, in precious German Marks, the seller bent over backwards to facilitate the deal."

And so Dona Maria moved in with Lulu. When years later my sister Elsa came to visit from Goa, she also lodged with Dona Maria Augusta, as I already had my mother-in-law, a saintly old soul, staying with us at ours. That was why I had to ask Dona Maria Augusta to put my sister up. With her good, generous heart she readily agreed and got on very well with my sister. One time they went to the Lisbon Flea Market together, chatting about the good old days when Pissurlencar and my aunt and godmother Ilda Afonso had been primary school teachers together in Nerul, their common parish. My sister told me in private that she had greatly liked Lulu's mother. She found her soft way of speaking captivating. It was slow and full of tenderness, full of expressions like "my daughter" or "daughter", which weren't at all common in Goa. Goan mothers, whether elderly or not, didn't have this way of speaking to their children. My sister stayed at Dona Maria's for almost a week. Dona Maria's second son, Lulu, had by that time managed, through a friend, to find work as a postman. When he applied his qualifications were by far the best and he had even let friends up for the same job copy his application.

Being a postman for the Portuguese Mail was a secure job back then. It brought a decent salary and benefits, much better than he would have got working for an Indian tobacconist in Mozambique. Now that Lulu lived with his mother everything was going pretty well, or so it seemed until his elder brother, the apple of their mother's eye, found work in the office of the local preparatory school and came to live in the area.

Dona Maria spoke to me of this son with tenderness and admiration. If he hadn't fallen in with the wrong crowd, he would have been a great success. "You know, son, even when he's working he studies, he's enrolled on a course at

university. The other is the exact opposite, a lowly postman . . . Oh, son!” The traditional Hindu-Christian culture had struck deep roots in Dona Maria’s mind. For her, professions had no dignity in themselves. Some marked the holder like a brand. In an attempt to make her see she was mistaken, I said that here in Europe people pay no heed to such things, and gave the example of a neighbour who ran a cobbler’s. Even though he was a retired civil servant, and had studied up until the old second year of high school, he had gone back to cobbling because his father had been a shoemaker and he had learnt the trade as a boy and liked it. Nobody looked down on him. My word, did I put my foot in it! Dona Maria said nothing. She just fell silent. But when my wife went to visit a few days later the old lady, false teeth grinding, took out all her indignation for the apparent slight she had received:

“Can you credit it, daughter? Leopoldo giving me that *pakló* (white Portuguese) shoemaker as an example! Who does he take us for, eh?” For Dona Maria, shoemaker meant caste and nothing but. A few days afterwards I ran into Lulu. I liked talking to him about chess. He had a passion for the game and was a real whizz, while I was only a beginner. As we began a quick match, I told Lulu about his mother’s reaction and made my apologies, for I’d had no intention to offend. Lulu dismissed the subject in the following terms:

“Don’t listen to the old dear. She lives in the past, in Goa. Nothing has changed for her . . .” Between Lulu and his mother was a smouldering conflict of the generations. But his traditional upbringing in a Goan family overrode his feelings. He felt obliged to respect his progenitrix, though she had been a harsh parent, raising him in thrall to her principles even as he became increasingly enraged at his own lack of courage to leave his mother behind and live freely for himself. To top things off, now it was he who maintained the house, paying rent to his sister who lived abroad. And the old woman had the nerve to disparage him, at least according to Lulu, as that’s what friends and neighbours had told him. She praised his brother Arlindo’s intelligence to high heavens, though now he was little more than a drunkard or drug addict. Perhaps it was this oppressive atmosphere that made Lulu too shy to find a girlfriend. I’d never seen him with anyone. Yet he was a fine figure of a man. One time, when I was talking to Lulu’s mother, she told me just what she thought of white women as wives. It was an idea that had got stuck in her head after all those decades with her dear Goan husband over in Portuguese Africa:

“You know, my son, they (white women) are all syphilitic . . . and they aren’t true to their spouses . . .”

It was an understandable reaction on the part of a young Christian woman who had left Goa with the repressive, narrow-minded attitudes based on church doctrine that were traditional in Catholic families. In my limited circle of acquaintances here in Lisbon there were two Goans, both university graduates now retired from the civil service. Neither had been to Africa but had family in the colonies who stayed with them when holidaying in the metropole. One of these Goans, who happened to be married to a Portuguese woman—little

educated but an excellent wife—once told me how put out he had been by the behaviour of his niece. When under his roof, in his words, she was “too unrestrained and independent in her ways”. Perhaps Lulu had been stunted by the oppressive manner in which his mother had reared him. His awkwardness around friends and acquaintances his own age, of both sexes, led him to a sort of inner isolation that put girls off, be they locals or Goans.

Dona Maria was the product of Goa’s extremely conservative and puritan culture. Just as it is for Hindu communities, among Goan Christians marriage was a business arrangement between family groups. The betrothed only met face-to-face at the so-called ‘interview’. This had been the case for Dona Maria Augusta. She recalled with pride the approving comments her husband-to-be had made to her parents after their own ‘interview’. In Mozambique Dona Maria had been shocked by the liberal, uninhibited ways of the white women. Hence her opinion. When Dona Maria spoke of women in colonial society, she shared convictions based on her own lived experience in Portuguese Africa: she found the things she had witnessed or learnt of by hearsay scandalous, an affront to the repressive Christian upbringing she had received in Goa. “They are so free and easy. Never a word of justification . . . Swan around just as they please.” To my surprise, one day when I went to pay the old lady a visit, I found a young Goan girl lounging on the sofa smoking a cigarette and leafing through a book. I went to Dona Maria’s room and asked who the girl was.

“No idea, *babá*. Some friend of Lulu’s.” The terms boyfriend and girlfriend didn’t exactly trip off the tongue of Goans from Dona Maria’s generation.

“Do you like her?” I asked cautiously.

“Hmmm . . . She shows me no respect and smokes a lot.” To my suggestion that she not interfere between the girl and Lulu, Dona Maria hastened to reply:

“I don’t want to interfere, my son. Let them work things out and live as they see fit.”

But no sooner had the relationship begun than it ended. I never knew why they broke up. When I asked Lulu he hinted at some disagreement. He had tried to patch things up. But the girl had given him the cold shoulder and, pride hurt, Lulu had never looked back.

One day, I’m not sure when, perhaps Twelfth Night, my wife Zé had asked me to take the old woman a cake she had made for her. As I trudged over, I saw a frowning Lulu waiting at the bus stop. I asked if I could drop by his house with something my wife had baked for his mother. He was caught out but quickly regained his composure, and answered “Sure . . . Sure . . . Thank you”.

When I reached his landing, I found his brother Pedro, the brilliant student, apple of his mother’s eye, lying in a puddle of urine. I couldn’t get into the old woman’s flat as he was blocking the entrance. Even so, I managed to ring the bell. From inside, as soon as she realised it was me, the old woman called out in a distressed voice:

“Son, I can’t open the door as Lulu has given me strict instructions not to let his brother in. He’s out there drunk somewhere and won’t go away.”

Today I understand the pain she must have felt sensing that her beloved son was out there prowling around. But he wasn't prowling anywhere; he was just sprawled out on the floor in a puddle of piss and blood. I found out later that some tenants vexed by the presence of that intruder had called the police. With their habitual readiness for brute force, the constabulary had soon cleared the passage and left the doorway unimpeded. Some time passed before I visited old Dona Maria again. When I finally returned, she told me that Lulu had to go into hospital for an operation. That came as a surprise. But Lulu had seemed so hale and hearty, despite the stress caused by his elder brother! The next time we met I asked why he needed an operation.

'Ah, you know, at the Post Office we get these health checks and when I went in the doctor I saw (you'd have never guessed he was a surgeon, looked more like a hippy) found a small lump in my lung and asked if I wanted surgery.'

'But this lump thing, is it malignant?'

'He said that it was best to remove it, to avoid complications . . .'

By this time Dona Maria Augusta no longer left the house. She had grown very weak and looked like a skeleton. Prey to insomnia, at night she wandered like a ghost through the hall and kitchen mumbling to herself. Lulu complained that his mother—the old dear, 'as he would say— was disturbing his sleep. One night, as she paced back and forth from the kitchen, he had charged up, grabbed his mother and (she was as light as a bird) carted her back to bed. The way he related this incident showed his remorse for this aggressive behaviour. After all, she was his mother, wasn't she? About a week later I paid her a visit. I found her stretched out in bed with her long white hair hanging round her shoulders, her eyes full of tenderness when she saw me. The questions she asked are engraved on my memory:

'Son, is it true that we pay for the past? Have you ever heard the word "shirab"? Curses. Never? Ever heard of karma?'

'Why do you ask, Dona Maria?'

'See my predicament, son? Serving in Africa left Arlindo a wreck. A brilliant boy, a mathematician, became a filthy drunkard. The other one says he wants to have an operation. For God's sake, why? Because that crazy white doctor, who has the face of a lunatic, wants my son as a guinea pig for his experiments? He can't convince anyone of his own race, can he? If it were one of his own kind and things went south, he'd land himself in big trouble, wouldn't he? With someone who isn't one of theirs, small fry like us, it all goes unnoticed or can be hushed up, can't it? Isn't that right? Lulu's bursting with health, there's not a thing wrong with him. And that daughter of mine, so smart, so full of life, over in a foreign country, unmarried, childless, no chance of them now at her age. My family line will end . . .'

Her eyes resting on the ceiling, Dona Maria Augusta fell into a long silence. Her pain was as deep as her gaze.

About three days later, I received news that Dona Maria Augusta had passed away. During the funeral service, the parish priest, a very zealous cleric,

offered some edifying words about the deceased. He told a story about his last encounter with Dona Maria on the eve of her passing. As I listened I thought to myself, ‘that’s exactly what the faith and religious belief of that generation of Goans was like’. It had been the *mestiça* Dona Rosalina who had called the priest, at the old lady’s request, and asked him to give her communion and hear a last confession. She lived on another floor of Dona Maria’s building and was always ready to help the afflicted. When the priest arrived, Dona Rosalina opened the door and ushered him to Dona Maria’s room before taking her leave.

‘I heard our sister Dona Maria’s confession, I gave her communion’, said the priest in his brief address. ‘I was about to go when she asked for the sacrament of extreme unction. I don’t have the *corage*’, the priest went on in his Madeiran accent, ‘to advise extreme unction to terminal patients who are lucid. But that was what she wanted. After I had finished, our sister tried to sit up in bed so I helped her.

‘Reverend Father, do you fancy a quick glass of Port wine now?’

‘I was flabbergasted. I had just anointed her with sacred oils that very instant. But the lady got up, trotted over to the larder and took a bottle of Port down from a shelf. I accepted the drink to please the dear old soul. Little did I know that she would pass away that very night.’

About a month later, I learnt that Lulu had been released from hospital after his operation and was recovering at home. Unfortunately, he began to suffer complications not long after. He was alone at home and too proud to ask for help. The week before Christmas, Dona Rosalina and a teacher who had known Lulu knocked on his door on various occasions to find out how he was, but he refused to open up. At first, he would answer from his bed, but over the following days they were met by silence. Rosalina and the teacher alerted the Fire Service who came immediately, all bells ringing. They could only get access to the flat with a crane and by knocking out a little window, whereupon they found Lulu stretched out in bed. Dead. Bottles of medicine littered the floor, which reeked of eucalyptus or something. Set up along the whole length of one wall, the wall of the parlour that had been turned into a bedroom, was a model train set with a miniature station, electric engines, carriages, signals, a long line of track, the whole kit and caboodle. Model Railways were Lulu’s hobby and he ordered any new pieces that appeared on the market from the catalogue of a German firm. A German engineer, a friend of his sister who had the same interest also sent Lulu up-to-date catalogues and pieces. There were also books about chess, another of Lulu’s pastimes. A few months earlier he had gone to the National Stadium to watch an exhibition match with Kasparov. He had died alone, utterly alone. I only learnt of his sad end a few days later. The neighbour who gave me the news asked whether I knew any of Lulu’s relatives, as the local authority wanted to inform them but didn’t have a clue how.

‘Don’t you know any of Lulu’s people? Weren’t you both from the same place?’ he asked me.

That was how—after a few phone calls, one to an embassy abroad—I came to get word of Lulu’s death to his sister in Germany. All this is just one more example, identical to so many others, of an anonymous life lived out among ‘undistinguished men’, to use the title of a short-story collection by the Italian author Giuseppe Pontiggia.

—Translated from Portuguese by Paul Melo e Castro

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