

Praça

Barbara Duarte Esgalhado

Primeira parte

A pequina coaxed her mother into taking her to a land of adventure in the country that had launched the Age of Discoveries. Never before had the journey been made with a child. Mother granted her the wish to voyage to a place where vendors hollered, fishmongers boasted, and butchers concentrated deeply; their bushy black brows furrowed over cuts of meat carved with the precision of cartographers mapping uncharted territory into consumable terrain.

Together, *a pequina* and her mother ventured forth, their fingers interlocked with the devotion of two petitioners on their way to the shrine of the *Nossa Senhora*. Their free hands clasped well worn baskets of straw; the little girl's no bigger than a pocket squared, was lined with lemon yellow plastic and dotted with a single purple flower, a final gesture sewn on as a homage to innocence. The mother's basket was full and lush, its sides spilling over like the flesh of a sexy matron in a too tightly fitted dress with a body so straining against the seams of spun silk that even a Portuguese man would humbly cast his eyes downward like an undeserving pilgrim nearing a shrine.

In lieu of maps, they navigated with the unpronounced sense of direction and deliberation of a Lusitanian mother and child. Their sense of purpose was merely in the quotidian, in the necessary gestures that bound them to the ordinary and to each other. Hand in hand, *a pequina* and her mother set upon their unremarkable voyage through the cobblestone streets that quietly glistened from evening dew and diesel exhaust.

The cobblestones resurfaced around each bend like the surge of a tide against its shore as they wove up and down the mounds of Lisbon's undulating streets. Together, they navigated past well worn wayfarers blaring their horns and nearly sideswiping the two. Mother pulled *a pequina* back sharply as was the fashion from the school of commands with little explanation. (Salazar had always held strong views where it concerned the family.) She followed, obeisance in tow like a little fishing boat trawling behind a strong-brined tug.

Once they reached the shoreline of this land of adventure, the scent of wet washed cobblestones soaked with the smell of discarded flowers, decayed vegetables, and day old coriander beckoned them inside. While the mother had returned home to the familiar, *a pequina* began a life of living in memory.

Segunda parte

Thwack! The cleaver struck the pendulous sack of fur on the back of its neck leaving a limp carcass to be deftly skinned and swiftly shoved into a clear plastic sack. (At least the animal wasn't slowly tortured.) Mother handed the evening's dinner to *a pequina* while she reached for the money to pay for the slaughter and the fresh meat that

came along with it. For the first time *a pequina* felt the warmth of newly killed flesh and its blood in her hands as her mother dismally jangled the coins in her purse looking for exact change. The transformation of life into death with one swift blow came with no outcry. This was the way of life here. Resignation was built one day at a time.

Mother directed *a pequina* to a fish stand her grandmother had once owned, strategically positioned on a corner lot where the scrawny sardines of June lay in wait for impatient revelers or foreigners. Grandmother was no fool – so the story goes – and fierce in matters of the heart and the purse. Her husband underestimated her once and hit her hard – thwack – against her determined face. The first blow could have been the first of many, an endless life of -- thwack, thwack, thwack—as was the custom of the day in dealing with rebellious wives and disobedient children -- but grandmother rose up—her eyes as dark as the shadows cast across the jagged edges of the Serra at dusk – and alit with the smoldering flames of rampant rage from this cowardly insult, carved her nails as deeply into her husband’s wizened face as the creased crevices of the mountain range from whence she came.

Still, it was resignation that was the usual rhythm of the day. Once they walked past the cabbage and the coriander, the peaches and the cherries, the air appeared clear, pure, and as delicate as the cheeks of a Lucy, a Francisco, or a Jacinta, despite the near impossibility of redemption. Yet near impossibility did not prevent hopeful petitioners from traveling to the Shrine on that gravel road with bared knees, heads bowed, muttering prayers softly to themselves, trusting the Virgin would hear their muffled sounds and look down favorably upon them, their knees torn to shreds with devotion. After all, she had said: If My requests are

granted...there will be peace...

Before departing, a familiar sound made her mother stop, and smiling softly to herself, she stooped down in front of a clamoring crate of crickets and told her about the time that her mother had purchased the stridulating creature for her. She would carefully cover it each night with one single lettuce leaf, only to find that in the morning it had forged its way into the open air, chirping gleefully with renewed hope and expectation for more than what the cage had to offer.

A pequina was all too glad to take home something useful from the *praça*. She chose a petal pink plastic cage to house her tiny treasure, and, together, she and her mother left the land of adventure and began their journey home.

Terceira parte

A pequina in her attempt to live her life in memory placed her own single lettuce leaf on the creature that she had not heard chirp, since they had left the land of adventure. In fact, she was not sure she had ever heard it chirp, given the fact that it had been plucked haphazardly from the cacophonous crate of chitinous creatures and shoved into the petal pink plastic cage before anyone could even have heard the possibility of a song. Yet she remained hopeful (as had many of her generation), and once the cricket was properly tucked in for the night, sleeping soundly beneath its celestial landscape of crisp green and damp air, *a pequina* fell asleep to the sounds of warm rubber tires skidding over slick mounds of cobblestones, wailing police sirens, and the laughter of young men and the few colorful women who were permitted to walk the streets of Lisbon at night.

The next day, upon awakening, *a pequina* rushed to see if the memory had become hers. She found the ill fated cricket buried beneath its pale green coverlet turned deftly on its back, its stiff legs transfixed in mid air. It had hardly made a dent in the once luminous lettuce leaves and certainly did not appear, at this point, as if it was going to get much further in gnawing its way out of the wilted greens that had been held out to it with such promise.

A pequina began to cry—and continued to cry, tasting the salt of lament for the first time in her life. She cried not for the cricket, nor for leaving behind the lost land of adventure, but for her mother's memory and how it would never truly become her own.

