

*Tia Catarina*

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I waited alone in the small room that promised the comfort one might expect from someone's living room. There were a few bookshelves crammed with paperbacks frayed at the edges, perhaps left behind to be read over and over by strangers who maybe just found it helpful to flip through the pages while their minds worried over the reasons that had brought them there to wait. I sat on a sagging yet strangely comfortable sofa, looked out the window onto a barren winter garden, and for a moment tricked myself into believing I was still at home on that dull Sunday morning.

We had left for the long drive east to Cobourg minutes after the too-early phone call to be anything but bad news. Perhaps it's today, her husband hesitatingly warned my partner, Stephen. The knowledge that his Auntie Cathy was about to die came sooner than he was prepared to accept. We quickly got dressed and drove in silence from Toronto along the empty highway, the words failing to surface, just going through the motions of driving in order to arrive in time.

We walked along the empty corridors until we found the section where her name appeared outside the closed door of her hospice room. While Stephen went in, I waited here among these chairs and books and curtains for some signal that I too could go in to see her. A call for doctors over the intercom system broke the silence, and from the door I could see nurses appearing and disappearing, smiling and carefree, confident in their daily routine of helping dying patients.

I couldn't focus on reading any of the books I'd picked from the shelf. Instead, my eyes scanned the room until I noticed a small flowerpot of wilted African violets on a side table. The small purple blossoms brought to mind a memory that made me smile. I could vividly envision once more the purple wildflowers that Catherine had picked in the Monchique Mountains the year we vacationed together in the Algarve.

She and her husband had been going to Portugal's southern region every spring for many years, and she had convinced us to join them there for our vacation. She extolled the beauty of the place and how wonderful the people who lived there were, and how she found it the most peaceful place on earth, assuring us that we would also fall in love with the beauty of the pristine and wild Algarvian shore.

The morning of our arrival she went to pick purple wildflowers in Monchique, a short drive from the ocean but well into the interior. She wore her long brown-beige virgin wool tartan skirt topped with an angora white sweater, and her gold bracelets tinkled musically in the field of flowers, the way the sound of bells from a herd of goats far away might fill the air. Her fiery red hair was held stiffly in place, perfectly coifed as if she had just returned from a salon, resisting the flirtatious movement of the mountain air. Even her thin, elegant, elongated body could not be disturbed by the gusts of soft breezes that swirled around her graceful gestures. She moved as if one with the wind, gathering the purple blossoms like a conductor wielding a baton, and arranging them into a perfect bouquet in her hands. All of sudden she released into the whispering wind a musical shriek of laughter so piercing and high-pitched that it floated far off in the air into the neighbouring hills, and could be heard by the

villagers as they looked up into the sky wondering where the sound of that strange foreign bird had originated.

The thought of her nephew's reaction when he came across the flowers in the room had given birth to this delicious release of delight. Even though she would not be there to witness his surprise, she would experience the joy of it in her mind as she plucked each one.

Upon her descent of the mountain's winding dirt road, sitting in the passenger seat of their rented car, holding the bouquet in one hand and her husband's hand with the other, she smiled as she imagined how the concierge would later let her into the room, against regulations, but be unable to resist her hypnotic and determined request. She placed them in a red ceramic vase brought to her by the housekeeper. Over the years, the staff had become accustomed to the irregular entreaties from *Senhora* Catarina, such a pleasant lady, that they always catered to her amusing whims. After inspecting the room and being satisfied that it would visually please the boys, as she referred to us, she returned to her own room to await our arrival.

We were welcomed at Reception as if the personal guests of *Senhora* Catarina, the hotel's favourite guest, the concierge said while escorting us to our room. We were delighted with the ocean view and impressed that a vase of fresh flowers greeted us. That's when the concierge told us how *Senhora* Catarina had picked them herself that morning up in the mountains of Monchique. She had also left a card behind, resting against the vase, welcoming us and hoping we would enjoy our stay.

When we knocked on her door, she greeted us with her usual wide smile and delighted squeal, the way a child reacts upon seeing a favourite uncle hiding a present behind his back. "Ooooooh, you're here! How was your trip?" she asked in earnest, her question far from the obligatory greeting of casual conversation. She truly did want to know exactly how our trip had been, as she reached out to take her nephew's hands in hers and to greet me with the Portuguese salutation of kissing the air beside both of my cheeks. "Oh, we're so happy that you're both here, aren't we?" she said, looking to her husband, a tall, taciturn man with a shy smile, signalling with her eyes that he must concur; he quietly agreed with a nod. She had set a few appetisers of olives, goat's cheese with crackers, and a bottle of red wine on a small round table decorated with a scented candle. "We will have to wait until seven-thirty, but there's a breathtaking sunset every night that you boys must see before we go into town for dinner." She stood at a precise angle on the balcony, making sure that I too was facing the direction where the sun was about to splash its orange and red colour over the sky. "You must have seen so many of these before," she said to me, still amazed that I was Portuguese. She knew that my family did not come from the Algarve, nor any other part of mainland Portugal. I had reminded her often that the Azores, not the *continente*, were where we had emigrated from, but no matter. Portugal in all its ocean and sand and blue-trimmed white houses encompassed everything that was joyful to her, so having me there by her side as her personal translator for the next few days filled her with mischievous possibilities.

"Tomorrow I want you to go with me to this darling bakery where I buy fresh bread every morning, so you can tell them how much I love their beautiful quaint shop and ask how they make that wonderful bread." She then described how she spent her days in *Lagoes* while her husband went off golfing with several of the English expats who lived there year-round. "It's Lagos, like a *whoosh* sound, *Lagoosh*," I said, and she laughed her high-pitched sing-song, delighted to learn a new way of pronouncing the name of the town of which she was so fond, but giving the impression she was simply humouring my attempt to improve her pronunciation.

Every morning she walked along the town's narrow cobblestone streets, looking into small windows, trying to manage a peek at what lay behind the closed shutters or lace curtains; she entered shops to greet the clerks and praise them for the handmade lace towels and bedspreads on display that were made in Portugal. She tried to engage old women who stood by their front doors with her best *Bom dia* and usual smile, and received polite smiles in return.

She said she had searched for days until she found the perfect typical Portuguese restaurant for us to eat dinner. I found this amusing: Weren't *all* restaurants there inherently Portuguese? But I knew what she meant. She sought the traditional, the heart and soul of the culture, and during our shared dinner of *caldeirada*, as we spooned it into our plates from a pot full of assorted fresh fish and clams, a Beatles song filled the air and ruined her perfect notion of Portugueseness. With a serious look of concern, she demanded that I ask the waiter to change the music to something more suitable. "Don't they have any *fados*?" she asked, with the sincerity of a child who truly believes in the reasonableness of her request. But the waiter did not think they had any *fado* CDs on hand. "This is what we like to listen to," he said. She was disappointed. Her big eyes, if you could see them, disapproved of the answer and her mouth turned downward in a sad clown face. "Could they at least lower the volume? It's so distracting and spoiling the atmosphere. Tell him to turn it down a little," she insisted, and I, embarrassed to translate the request, came up with the brilliant explanation: "*A minha Tia Catarina sofre dos ouvidos e não pode ouvir música alta.*" Our waiter, solicitous to alleviate her hearing problem, went off to lower the music. Oh, she was delighted by my success, but then became embarrassed when she found out what I had said to the waiter. She looked at me with a look so accusatory that it told me I had been naughty but still approved-of, and from that moment on she became *Tia Catarina* to me and that's what I called her to the end.

During our *sobremesa* of *crème caramel*, her favourite, her eyes lit up when a beautiful voice came over the speakers. "Who is that singer?" she asked me. "She's singing in Portuguese, isn't she?" I could not make out who it was but could confirm the language she sang in, and once again, Tia Catarina recruited me to ask the waiter if he could, this time, turn the music up a little and tell us who this beautiful voice belonged to. "Mariza," he said, "a new *fadista*." And Tia Catarina was overjoyed that dinner had turned out perfect after all the surroundings, the meal, and the music, finally and aptly Portuguese.

We spent a week together exploring her Algarve, seeing all the little villages and beach coves she loved. One day she and I walked alone, taking in the architecture and colours that quaintly edged the old white houses. We approached an old woman standing outside her house, the way they do in these small towns, eager for gossip or to look at passersby to consume the time. Tia Catarina begged me to ask the woman to invite her inside her house. "I'd love to see what a Portuguese house looks like on the inside." I laughed and said probably like any other house and that it would not be appropriate to ask to go in, but she insisted. We stopped to greet the lady with a *Bom dia*. The old woman recognized the *Senhora canadiana* who passed by every day, always elegantly dressed, with such a lovely smile and so polite. "What is she saying?" Tia Catarina eagerly wanted to know. For ten minutes we conducted a conversation where I interpreted back and forth, but I never mustered the courage to ask the old lady to invite us in to look around. We finally said *Adens* and moved on, much to Tia Catarina's dismay. "Did you even ask her?" I knew she was disappointed, but sensed she wasn't about to give up so easily and that some other day she would gesture to the old lady to let her in, and the hope of it allowed her to forgive me for failing that small assignment.

Later, when we walked toward the beach, the sun and ocean breezes caressed her face, carefully arranged with thick lines of red lipstick and dark eye shadow accentuating its curves. We stopped to pick up sea shells along the beach. There were so many that it was hard to choose, but she took care to gather just the right ones to bring back to her room, as she did every day. It was not as though she would bring them back to Canada, for she could not allow their beauty to leave the country. On her last day, she planned to return them all to the sand where they could breathe again and feel the salt of the ocean.

On our last day there, we took a final walk along the beach, our conversation ending with an abrupt kick of sand toward my feet, and her gleeful laughter at seeing the surprised reaction on my face at her daring childish gesture. I could not figure out how this enigmatic woman who dressed up

for all occasions, whether for a walk along the beach or picking wildflowers in Monchique, could be both interchangeably elegant and playful as the whim struck her.

When it was time for us to leave, Tia Catarina and her husband came out to say goodbye to us as we got into the car and headed off to the airport. I watched them wave goodbye, holding on to each other as if still on their eloped honeymoon. I think this was their last trip to the Algarve. Illness came surprisingly fast after that and for the next few years, when we visited her between courses of treatment, those memories of adventure and fun could still make me laugh and smile.

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Stephen appeared at the door and said I could now go in to see her, so I went, reluctant to see what I would inevitably find. When I entered the room, I looked at her face, this time ashen, stripped of colour, as if someone had come by and removed all the makeup that had helped create her illusion of beauty; yet, even with her lips colourless and her eyes wide as a child's, her vulnerable and naked state revealed her inner beauty in a startling way that her former made-up face failed to do. She apologized for her state of disarray, and I smiled at her in return. I said she looked fine, lovely even. But she was too bewildered and unable to focus on me for more than a few moments, and my foolish attempt to distract her evaporated as she remembered she was dying. All that was left was to say was a deceptive goodbye, then I walked out the room with the resigned knowledge that this would be the last time I saw her alive.

I returned to the neutral zone of the waiting room, in anticipation of what would eventually come, not with the expected words but simply by the look in Stephen's eyes that would confirm the final truth; but while I sat there I could clearly hold so close the image of her bending over, picking wildflowers and laughing. It was uncanny how I could envision something I had not witnessed with my own eyes, but conjured in my mind as if I had been secretly there on the mountain, hidden from view, spying on Tia Catarina eternally meandering among the fields in those high hills, where her squeal of delight remains forever floating in the wind.