

## THE FLOWERED APRON

### A SHORT STORY

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Fixed. Nothing but fixed. Fair, actually.

He wouldn't dare put social dynamics any other way. What's all this fuss about? What is left there to contest? How come people all over the world have been trying to explain it so hard when it's this simple? You are what you should be – can be – have to.

Okay, I'll stand up now.

On his nightstand Nietzsche laid as nonchalant as a beautiful peacock among several featherless mockingbirds – shrieky mockingbirds. Death, for sure. Capital punishment is the answer.

His seventeen-year-old daughter would still run towards him in the morning singing some stupid wake-up song she had learned from Xuxa. Aren't you the most beautiful stupid girl there has ever been? He always spoke his mind, sometimes unconsciously, through his half-baked jokes. I can tell that behind his my-daughter-is-so-smart-and-not-at-all-like-her-mother speech there had always been a suspiciously familiar voice saying “stupid little girl.”

Laila was a blue-eyed Brazilian girl. Brazilian only by birth, he thought. With these eyes and her posh English – which she picked up from him, naturally – she was much more than a minor Brazilian female. She could be the next Thatcher! Well, David, had she not been stupid, eh?

Off he went. David, the English Literature Professor with Shakespeare under his arm.

At last she could be herself.

Then they would march out: solemn soldiers whose target was willing and able to be taken upon. They penetrated her core with utmost eagerness, filling her; impregnating her; using and shielding her – loving her as she was. And there she was, fostering all the kids she had been having with Machado, Eça, Pessoa, and especially Lima Barreto. A stupid girl indeed. Será? Será?

Now that she had already finished high school and had been accepted into this university far away from Rio, Birmingham University, just like daddy wanted, she could sneak her dirty little minor literature books away from her father more easily without having to hear: don't you have to read something that will get you somewhere?

She had had enough of missing Albees and Becketts already. Now her deviant soldiers were safely stored; mainly the ones in Portuguese. They cast an identity upon her. Estúpida! She had this crazy dream of taking her place at Rio de Janeiro State University, but no: next month, Birmingham. Family tradition. (whose family, anyway? – quieta, estúpida!)

Ismenia's husband made her wonder. Can anybody be this fake? The answer was deep inside pulsing along to her restless heartbeat; still, she looked for truth on the book shelves,

in their study, in the kitchen and eventually through the window into the matching blue sea. This is not it. It can't be. Não pode ser!

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The last thing she packed was her mother's photograph. She felt ambivalent towards it. It showed an apparently patriotic Brazilian feminist boasting over her Victorian house in England, wearing her famous flowered apron - the same apron Laila herself wore when she wanted to please her daddy. Laila came to the conclusion that Maria's photographs depicted the same thing: the glow of a superior mind trapped in the family sphere. A Lucifer in the House.

She had a hard time linking that image to the word mother now. She thought of Maria as a war companion who shielded her from a bullet with her own non-bulletproof body. Had she known that this bullet was programmed never to stop tracking her down with its unstoppable speed, going through whatever body got in its way, she would have made herself more useful.

They moved back to Rio after dad finished his practicum because he says she wouldn't have made it there. She couldn't make it here either, I guess. She ended up confused. That's why she sang that song and danced that dance - swinging bodies on a hot day; mingling bodies in a calm night. She's making it somehow... elsewhere... has she made it?

The bullet that left Maria's gun while Laila was still part of her body was destined for two; but, miraculously, it only hit the mother. Laila thought of herself as a representation of that bullet in the intelligible world, while several other unknown bullets aimed at her daily. I wonder what these other ones represent.

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"Silvia, is he meeting me at the airport?"

"Oi Dona Laila?"

"Ele vai me encontrar lá?"

"Claro, Dona Laila. Eu fiz mais bolinho de chuva pra sua viagem. Tão na bolsa... Jura que me liga quando a senhora chegar lá no estrangeiro? Tenho um medo desses avião..."

"Cross my heart and hope to die," she said as she left her apartment.

Turmoil inside. No tears. Longing to hold; to say something in Portuguese; to show unobstructed attachment to her native environment. I guess "hope to die" is appropriate enough, she thought dramatically.

"Cun you holl down de window pleas? Dis heat is crap!" The taxi driver said in his muddy Brazilian accent.

"Yes, Sir."

She could feel the bullets getting closer, moving as fast as the fare counter. She was suffocating with awareness. She needed at least unreal freedom, some unknowingly restricted leeway.

She hanged her head out and pushed her young body through the window, facing the sun.

"Ei, ei, ei!"

“Don’t worry, Sir. I’ve got it.”

Barefoot children ran at the sight of a suspended Greek Goddess soaking her hair with her own tears. A sad diva. A happy passista. A broken heart trying to mend its pieces together with the heat of the sun and maresia - other to her own country by fitting in anonymously.

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Laila denied her unhappiness until the day she died, leaving three well-educated British children. They still get together every Christmas at their father’s house in London and drink to the memory of their mother, perpetuated in the picture above the fireplace: a silent woman in an old flowered apron wearing a puzzling smile.

Maria, her youngest daughter, who moved to Brazil after the tragedy, is always the first one to break down. “Estúpida,” she says. None of them can understand why their mother did that.

Maria inherited her mother’s books while Laila was still alive and her apron after her premature death. She was the only girl Laila had and the only one to whom she spoke Portuguese. Maria never got to know the story of the woman whom she was named after, but she idealized her grandmother and thought of her as a strong independent woman for some reason. The only one who had the guts to face her otherness, regardless of the consequences.

Last year Maria didn’t fly to Europe. She found a cozy apartment with room for a garden in Ipanema – the perfect scenario for her ideal Christmas Eve.

Alone, in Rio and Redefining her Legacy.

Maria couldn’t explain how peaceful it felt to drink outdoors next to the garden she made out of the flowers she cut from her inherited apron and some red roses which were now starting to bloom. The plastic flowers seemed new again, and she felt as if she were part of the garden. This is Christmas, she thought.

She woke up the following morning with the Brazilian summer rain pouring on her. When she looked at her garden she realized that the tropical storm had nearly destroyed it. There were only two very familiar flowers still standing and she knew that somehow these flowers felt the same way she did. They were happy to be alive; happy to be extracted from the universe of the apron by their own hands. She shouted through her sobbing and her tears seemed to understand the scope of her foremothers’ existence, filling in all the hollow spaces of her being.

Free flowers at last. We are.