

Lazarus*

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“Yes, you can come get her; your grandma’s body woke up,” the IML¹ employee said on the phone.

The health protocols prevented relatives from waiting at the IML itself. Olga had to call every two hours and hope for a confirmation. Her mother and her aunts and uncles decided not to go. Everyone had something—diabetes, respiratory problems, an operation to remove cancer, hypertension—but the main reason, without a doubt, was Grandma herself, so loved by her granddaughters and so distant from her own children.

“You are the first-born granddaughter. You will go get her,” Mom told Olga, eyes red with tears.

The order was received grudgingly. Carrying the family on her back like this... She rehearsed a fight, but then she was tired. She also felt sorry for her mom. Olga even felt powerful: heroic, grown-up, valued.

At the IML, two conglomerations bothered her immediately: the press and the military. The two groups were planted in front of the building. There were vans, cars, sirens. A helicopter was circling the region. Between the journalists and the soldiers, like Moses dividing the Red Sea, three men, three gray and exhausted men, were waiting for her. They wore SUS² lab coats. Only one greeted her, from a distance.

* The original text in Portuguese is included in *Gótico nordestino* (Companhia das Letras, 2022), pp. 32–44.

¹ Instituto Médico-Legal (IML), roughly translated as the Institute of Forensic Medicine, is the Brazilian institute that conducts autopsies and investigates causes of death.

² Sistema Único de Saúde (SUS) is Brazil’s publicly funded health care system.

“Miss, are you the granddaughter of Maria Lutz?”

“Yes.”

The doctor—later she discovered she was dealing with a doctor—was looking at her with veneration. He explained some terms and protocols, spoke of the required blood collection from the family; he spoke of DNA, national security, and “extraordinary moments.” It was a progression: her grandmother had been promoted, in a few minutes, from baggage to be removed, from a nuisance for the IML employees, from a Zombie Big Mac, to Maria Lutz, The Miracle. At last, after the doctor finished his monologue, Olga noted the military’s suspicious, frankly hostile looks in her direction.

Within the IML, Olga was locked, with the three doctors and a half dozen soldiers, in a small stifling and musty room full of old tables and chairs. The doctor asked her profession. She responded: journalist. All the men—Olga was the only woman in the room—looked at each other.

Where do I work? I am a consultant for the press and I take care of digital media, she responded. I have a small company, she lied. “Company” left them more relaxed. The doctor cleared his throat and spoke about the immune responses to COVID-19. He spoke about inflammation process and inflammasomes, about NK cells, macrophages, T lymphocytes, and cytokines.

Your grandmother probably died as an outcome of a storm of cytokines, he continued, an exaggerated immune response to the pathogen, that is, to the COVID virus, in her organism. The cytokines are these molecules that signal to our various cells an immune response to the pathogen. However, at times, the response is exaggerated and the body recruits, that’s what we say, “recruit” (the doctor seemed to appreciate his own metaphor) an excessive battalion of defense cells. Uncontrolled cells!, he said, searching for support in the looks of his colleagues, generating cycles of hyperinflammation!

While he was speaking, Olga was scaring herself with the vision of a body as its own enemy, of a hysterical revolution of our cells destroying everything that they

encountered in the middle of their path. Cutting evil into the flesh, literally. A microcosmic dance of chaos, ending only when the last breath turned out the light.

“Grandma is alone?”

“Huh?”

“Grandma. Is she alone?”

The men became agitated cytokines. They murmured. One of them—uniformed—excused himself and left the room.

“Miss, do you know how our immune system works?”

The explanation continued and Olga only retained the terms “innate immunity” and “adaptive immune system”; it was the “miss” that caught her attention, because suddenly Olga realized the doctor’s age. The tiredness of that man, the anxiety... In his way, he tried to please, to demonstrate competency. Was he also a father to daughters and sons? Was he also a grandpa to some granddaughter? Was he imagining himself living something like what was happening with Grandma, sleeping an eternal night, and suddenly returning? Olga cherished the loners and was practically collecting them.

“... and thus gave your grandmother, Dona Maria, a *jolt*.” He also liked having found this word, he even made a dramatic pause. “We still do not know how to explain it, but we’ve already managed, soon after the patient arrived at death, to identify marks that can lead to this new, let’s say, ‘clinical picture.’ We suppose that there is a correlation of factors ... genetic, certainly, as well as mutation, it’s almost certain that it’s a new form, aggressive, however, yet ... a new form of the virus. And perhaps, this is my hypothesis, there is also a correlation with the body’s cellular memory from having been infected, in the past, by other HCoVs.... The jolt occurs when the immune system contributes to the restarting of the body’s vital activity, causing an unexpected, partial chain, partial, of *cellular regeneration* processes. And I said, ‘arrived at death,’ but even in this there isn’t consensus, we

do not know whether the patients in fact died, nor how, supposing the hypothesis of death to be correct, the body is reactivated ...”

“How long does it take for the body to ‘reactivate’?”

“What...? Oh, minutes, or at the most a few hours later.”

“So, Grandma was already ‘reactivated’ when she was brought from the hospital here, to this place?”

He didn’t respond. He tried to hold Olga’s hands. She repelled him.

“What is happening with people like your grandmother, this jolt, is a miracle, so ...”

“Doctor?”

“Yes.”

“Is Grandma alive? Did she regain consciousness? Was that it? What happened to her?”

He was searching for the best words. Not only precise, but also delicate. Olga almost apologized because she was recognizing the doctor’s effort in making her understand. At the same time, each minute in his presence was increasing her disgust. Not only of him, but of his companions, the room, the IML, of ... of imagining what would be the body—but she was no longer a body—of her grandmother. All that Olga wanted was to personalize her grandmother, to leave behind those cytokines. She started to cry.

“We are, as a precaution, using the term ‘post-life.’ But yes, your grandmother is another lazarus, without a doubt.”

The repeated noise of the pressed switch bothered her.

The doctor and his colleagues had led Olga, with solemnity, to an empty yet inhabited room. The limited illumination was coming as much from a single bulb hung from the ceiling—the others were refusing to wake up—as from the light outside from streetlamps that filtered through the window’s opaque glass and clung to the ceiling. Olga noticed various metal hospital beds, with a shower hose and head supports. She also registered what she supposed were refrigerators. The place had a hospital smell. But with a shift toward asepsis—a sweetly putrid exhalation, lightly rotten.

The dead, lying on their metal beds, were waiting for the living. Sheets covered them.

Her grandmother was also waiting. Enveloped in a thick plastic, which covered her head and descended to the ground like a veil, she was sitting at the table. The ceiling light, close-up, painted an aura; luminous amoeba-shaped stains were reflected on the twisted plastic.

Olga was almost pushed aside by the men. They were elbowing each other at the entrance to the room, and nothing would tear them away. The granddaughter crossed the dark room alone, hearing her own steps echo; she crossed with both fear and joy. Let the leukocytes get angry, and everything; life, when life exists, is always a happy ending, Grandma is here to prove I’m not lying!

“Grandma, Grandma...?”

The granddaughter remembered the games but also the sermons. Her grandmother was strict and had clear beliefs about right and wrong, and justice and injustice. She had a brilliant career as a federal judge. Dona Maria Lutz had pursued the career of her father, also a judge. His portrait, painted in oils, hanging for decades in the living room of her grandmother’s house, frightened generations. Your heart, my girl, her grandmother was telling her all the time, always speaks louder, you are a lot of heart! Olga stumbled over one of the beds—one of the few empty ones—and knocked something down (the sound was shrill, splintering, and it took

a while to dissipate). Some men at the door let out small cries of fright. Maria Lutz turned around; the plastic made a sound as it buckled with the movement.

Olga felt dread, dizziness. She forced a closed fist in her mouth, she didn't want the embarrassment of a scream. The *face*. How am I going to take care of this *thing*? Maria Lutz was living, it was undeniable.

And was she also dead?

Upon opening the door, Olga sensed a strong smell of flowers.

Through the large windows of the vast room were visible the lights of cars, of press vehicles, and the buzz of a ton of people, all gathered, with masks or without, in front of the building. Beyond the lights and the noise, the rhythm of the beach. The waves out there were agitated, noisy; the wind was shaking the windows. The day was dawning, already. Wreaths of flowers, from the canceled wake, shared the space of the room with the family: "Our thoughts." "Eternal love." "My deepest sympathy." "Gone too soon." Smells of food: her mother and aunts had prepared Grandma's favorite dish, parmesan filet with pasta, but she would not eat it. She never ate anything again, just like the other Lazaruses.

Maria Lutz paraded around the room, with baby steps, wearing a hospital gown. Sons, daughters, granddaughters, and three great-granddaughters were watching her without knowing how to react, how to understand what they were feeling. The Lazarus was moving all around, but without dwelling on a specific person or piece of furniture. Olga pulled out a chair so that she could sit in the center of the room. She was mindful to not touch her grandmother. Seated, Grandma said nothing. No one had the courage to initiate the first exchange. Olga sat distanced from everyone, at one of the tables. Exhausted, she massaged her own face.

"But Grandma isn't dead, right, Mom?" one of the great-granddaughters asked.

A miracle, sweet Jesus, the chorus of voices spent some time saying these sorts of things. And then the first fight started. Everyone agreed that they needed to thank

God. But how to thank him? Was that a Catholic miracle? Protestant? Spiritist? There were three religions in the family. The squabble was intense (the believers of the family were talking the entire time of avoiding the Devil) and Olga was controlling herself to not scream at everyone. She could not bear to face her grandmother; even so, she was unable to tear her eyes away from her. They will want me to kill myself with *this*, she thought. You aren't married, you don't have kids, you keep coming and going in life. Take the initiative now: it's not too much to ask!

When the feelings calmed down, Olga's mom suggested the diplomatic gesture of Our Father. They repeated the prayer twice while holding hands. Grandma didn't seem to care. After that, joy, opening champagne, toasts. Alive, she was alive. The children were running around. Some people were talking on their phones with the press. Miracle, blessing. On the TV, the scientific hypotheses. But spiritual hypotheses as well, echoes of the apocalypse. The sons and daughters were overcoming their repulsion, and were kissing and hugging their mom, which they had trouble doing when she was alive. They didn't have the habit of touching her, of stating, to her nor to each other, what they felt. Grandma didn't like it, Grandma didn't permit it.

“And this apartment?”

Perhaps we should think about some place, one of the uncles suggested, something appropriate to her condition. Place? What do you mean? But everyone knew what he meant: families were leaving their Lazaruses in rest homes hastily built by the government, most of them close to cemeteries. Some families abandoned them on the street or tried to sell them. They cast the resuscitated aside for various reasons, above all because they didn't have the conditions to keep them at home. Lazaruses didn't eat, but they needed to be hydrated, they required vitamins, mineral salts, creams for their dull skin and eye drops for their failing eyes. They needed to be accompanied, watched over, guided. The apartment was very good, valuable with pretty and expensive furniture. A beautiful view of the beach. The aunts and uncles were talking about debts and about dreams. Some had been laid off in the pandemic and they were wanting to set up their own business. Having a boss? Never again! The family's entrepreneurs remembered that there was some money saved, money

that she *always* denied them. She accumulated and accumulated it, pinching every penny, except for education and for spoiling her granddaughters and great-granddaughters. I harbor resentment, Olga heard. I want freedom, another person snorted. Elbows on the table, Olga was hearing everything with her head propped up by her hands. She knew, from journalist friends, of the terrible stories from the government rest homes.

“Well, I say that Mom stays here! In *her house!*” said Olga’s mother.

The granddaughter was asking herself if this really was the best solution. How would they live in the presence of that silence and of those dead-fish eyes? When her grandmother was hospitalized, unable to receive visitors, and then when she found out about her death, Olga lamented the many subjects that she still had to discuss with her. The two were the biggest readers in the family and they lived for sharing their impressions of novels, poems. Olga liked hearing stories from the past and she laughed at Maria Lutz’s harsh judgements of the ‘*pu-sil-la-ni-mi-ty*’ of her children. The hope of them having a conversation again had been short-lived. Her grandmother had been transformed into a somber diamond. Closed, dense, opaque. Forever set in her days.

“The problem is that we don’t know when Mom, when she ...”

The room became silent. No one wanted to finish the sentence. The word that was not being said had earned new fear.

Then, a laugh was heard. The adults became frightened. *She*, the returned one, the post-living, the Lazarus, had burst out laughing. A guttural, rough sound. The great-granddaughters, fed up with the fights, were speaking animatedly with Grandma and putting make-up on her.

“Look, Grandma, look at how pretty you are!”

In the building’s garage, it took a while to start the car. She spent a long time squeezing the wheel. She was imagining the relatives still discussing or trying to have a conversation with her grandmother. They would try to ask her questions;

they would point fingers; they would air out dirty laundry, throwing truths in the face of the un-dead, the same ones that they never had the courage to say. Olga wanted to call everyone hypocrites, even her mom—but what about me? Me, who is grossed out by her?

On the radio, the headlines revolved mainly around the lazaruses. One report addressed the controversy around medicines that, without scientific proof, were said to prevent the “resurrections from COVID-19.”

“I’m ready to die already,” an interviewee said. “Isn’t it crazy to stay in Heaven’s waiting room?”

Olga remembered the clinics that were promising to un-revive the lazaruses. There were groups, particularly religious ones, that were organizing protests against these places. Did the family have the right to choose to abandon the post-living? What would the lazaruses choose if they could? On the other hand, the rest homes were getting crowded; streets and highways, full of bodies walking directionless. The living and even the cadavers had rights, but the lazaruses? The following story was already announced on the news: “My father resuscitated. How does the inventory of his assets continue? From time to time, we talk with a specialist, the doctor....”

Enough news. She turned on some music and wandered through the neighborhood at dawn. She passed by blocks of high buildings, expensive restaurants, chic stores. There were few people and cars. She returned to the beachside avenue. She would park at the corner of her grandmother’s building, she would put her feet in the sand, she would enjoy the sun, and she would contemplate the sea. She would leave as soon as people started to appear.

But what did she see there, close to one of the stoplights on the beach boardwalk?

There were three lamentable shadows, neither alive nor dead, wearing rags. They were wandering together along the avenue, although they were, most likely, indifferent to the sun, the wind, indifferent to the curative beach. One male and two female lazaruses—and the group had been surrounded by three men without masks. They wore caps and expensive shirts. They had beards, tattoos. Olga

supposed that the group was returning from a clandestine party. They were, at most, twenty years old. They cursed the Lazaruses, pushed them, pulled their arms and hair, slapped them. In turn, not one demonstration of pain nor one attempt at self-defense.

Olga abruptly hit her brakes, almost driving onto the boardwalk, and started to honk.

“Leave them in peace!” she screamed, after lowering her window.

They laughed.

They were laughing as if Olga were a pink poodle, foolish and frenetic.

“Get out of here, you little bitch.”

She got out of her car to argue with them. There was no one on the beach nor on the boardwalk. The few cars that were passing sped down the avenue, taking advantage of the deactivated stoplights.

It didn't take Olga long to realize that the three were stoned. The group of Lazaruses did not continue their walk. They were observing the living fighting. They were discretely accompanying the movements of the four young people. Olga continued to curse them. Go fuck yourselves. You playboys. Limp dicks, mommy's little fools.

Suddenly, they started pushing and shoving each other, and Olga took a punch in the stomach. She doubled over: in absurd pain and lack of air. And the guys started to laugh.

The sun hit her face as soon as she stopped being bent over so much. The sun-spade, rusty bronze. At a glance, the Lazaruses. When she looked for medical assistance, Olga wouldn't know how to explain to herself how she found the strength to stand up, to stick out her chest, to face the aggressor and to spew spit in the face of someone who had punched her.

He tried to punch her again.

Olga, this time, was not caught by surprise.

The aggressor really seemed affected. Slowly, reeling, Olga, upon avoiding the hit, planted her leg and gave a shove in the middle of the road— his face landed against the stoplight post. She heard his shout of pain, the noise of his nose breaking. Blood was flowing down her enemy’s lips and chin when he got up. Quickly, she scratched his face.

His companions remained reactionless. When she felt that they would attempt to attack her, Olga screamed:

“INFECTED, I’M INFECTED.”

That was one way to escape from trouble.

The Lazaruses accompanied her in the screaming. And anyone who hears a Lazarus screaming does not forget it: they scream as if industrial machines had a soul.

The aggressor was trying to stand up with difficulty. His hands and feet were searching for support from the post, but were slipping from his own blood, making a noise like stirring a messy spaghetti marinara.

“Please, make these things stop.” The plea came from the other two. They were begging and crying to the sound of the resurrected troubadours.

Olga distanced herself from the three aggressors and, to her surprise, the Lazaruses stopped screaming. The two subjects fled as hurriedly as possible, carrying their semiconscious friend with them.

Olga’s entire body was trembling.

She felt a heat rising up her neck and covering her ears. She was breathing with difficulty, because her stomach was making her feel the punch, again.

She observed her hands dirty with blood—there were residues of skin hanging from the nails. The hot wind was stirring up litter in the street, as well as her hair and the palm trees on the boardwalk. She was imagining things: certainly, there wasn't a slight smile on the Lazaruses' faces. Olga had rarely felt so alive: so many times, I wanted to wake up and here I am, surviving. I am alive. And what about them? Upon looking at the Lazaruses, Olga thought of solitude, but also of memory. It was no use, dear aunts and uncles, the truth was written on my grandmother's face. She was a closed, sealed door. But, however strange, she would remain present. During the days and the nights. Grandma didn't have more answers. The worst and the best moments—could Dona Maria Lutz remember them? Did we succeed in seizing them, in bringing them back? On the contrary. Everyone already has their own burden and no more. Her grandma had transformed into a mirror of life and death. Her grandma was going back to being just a name.

What names, what pains, what fears had the one male and two female Lazaruses drifting in front of her lived through?

The sun had just slipped through the clouds and an intense shine was radiating over the Lazaruses. Olga was glimpsing a humanity, even if inside out, even if devastated, miserable, and stretched to the limit. And where there are people, problems, there are responsibilities.

She effortlessly placed the group in her car.

Time to return home.

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