

An Azulejo Embrace*

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She locked herself in the bathroom and thought, if she weren't allergic, she would have a cat named Expectation—after all, she was already used to tending to it. She surprised herself with her own thoughts in a moment like that, much more serious and monumental than an imaginary feline or one of those childhood crises, when her throat would swell and she'd invariably end up in the hospital, on her mother's lap, an IV in her vein. She didn't think of herself as selfish (she never thought much of herself and always so much about others), but she remembered with a certain discomfort two or three ex-boyfriends who called her something like that in a few (in many) fights. In the middle of a breakup. Where had her past romances gone? Experiences that had almost entirely transformed her into who she was today? Constructed her personality, even if by meandering paths? What had become of the people who had once occupied the main part of her life and the right side of her bed? She never understood why her relationships always ended so badly. Or tragically, as all things pointed to right now. But she was not awaiting an epiphany there, locked in the bathroom, against the azulejo tile, cold and blue and so out of style.

She hated everything in that apartment, that room especially. It was just a bathroom, a hateful little bathroom, full of everything most banal, pathetic, and humiliating that bathrooms have to offer. And the germs that grew there, or inside her, or in any place. She detested everything, except the brown stain that ran below the hot water faucet on the white tub. Three years had passed since she'd occupied the third floor of that faded building on Avenida Brasil and not a single day went

* Dantés, Marcela. "Abraço de azulejo." *Sobre pessoas normais*. Editora Patuá, 2016, pp. 18–22. Translator's note: I have chosen to leave the term *azulejo* untranslated, mainly due to its referential power in Luso-Brazilian culture. Use of the original term invites the reader to explore the significance of this artisanal Iberian tradition, brought to Brazil during colonial times, while also better contextualizing the protagonist's deeply personal trauma, which takes place in an intimate setting while surrounded by these tiles.

by without her cursing the former owner's decision to put a tub there. It was of average size—too small for a comfortable bath and too big for the half dozen square meters of the bathroom. She couldn't remember the last time she had used that thing without soaking the floor, without shivering from the cold, without being overwhelmed by a bad mood. But she found the stain beneath the faucet beautiful—a sincere blemish on that cold surface, undeniable proof that even pale porcelain carries some life, some history, a bit of imperfection. She wasn't a superstitious person, rather she was the exact opposite: she only believed in what she could understand, she understood almost the whole world, but it was undeniable that strange things were happening. She hated the fact that she didn't know how to deal with it. She, of all people, who always knew how to cope with everything. Except cold baths and those ex-boyfriends, but, really, who does?

It had already been decided: she would not say anything. If fate had chosen to toy with her, and it was only with her, no one needed to know that she didn't know how to play along. She had never known how. Let him seek her out, then. (Him, not fate.) Sooner or later, this would happen, and she was sure her silence would make sense. Whoever must forgive, forgives, in the moment or years later. Grief is something we do alone—and she liked being alone. We can even cry for our dead while holding hands, but when it's time to close our eyes and wait for a new day, head on our pillow, when each of us is alone, the pain comes on strong. That's when we feel only what we know. And she feels a lot. There, in that dubious bathroom, with the azulejo sustaining the pressure of her bare back, the cold chilled to the veins. Instinctively she grabbed a towel and threw it over her shoulders until remembering there was nothing left to protect. That was when it started to hurt. It wasn't the cats, the ex-boyfriends, the damned azulejo, too pale to be striking, too ugly to be modest. It wasn't the tub, the silence, the cold. It wasn't the peeling enamel, which she could see perfectly from there, or the cancelled lunch date, nor the migraine, her constant companion. It was a pain inside. Her uterus ached. Her ovaries ached. It hurt so much—this life. She could have said her heart hurt, but she wasn't one for romanticized metaphors—what she felt was pressure on her chest that left her breathless. And to weep without breath is a difficult task, like taking a cold bath. Or like rejection, but maybe worse.

She was still holding the envelope the secretary from the lab had given her fifty minutes before. She still felt in her throat the ragged discomfort of each uncoordinated word from that woman. Seek out your doctor as soon as possible. And way more staples than needed. She had counted seventeen, but only because she'd stopped before reaching the end. She couldn't remember the last time her heart pounded, she didn't normally notice her vital organs (or those of others). But it continued like that, at an accelerated rate during the two and a half minutes it took to remove all those (more than seventeen) staples. A painful prick to the finger, still marked where her wedding ring had once been—a reminder of everything that still needed to be forgotten for a few more (fewer than seventeen) days. We cannot guarantee fetal viability. We—who exactly? That impersonal plural only reminded her how alone she really was, as always, as to be expected. Isn't that what this ultrasound bullshit is for? What year are we in? So much innovation and you still can't guarantee anything? And he is my son, not a fetus; he has a name. Vicente, like his grandfather and great-grandfather. Such a beautiful name, for a future that never arrived. I tried to obey the awkward order from the equally awkward secretary, but before arriving, heavy bleeding had washed away the last glimmer of hope. It was then that so many uncertain and fearful dreams were left behind —thick, wet, and red—on the backseat of a black taxicab.