

# Marlene and Sofia

- A Double Love Story -

Pedro Barrento

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## *01 – Diary #1*

*Lisbon, 16 March, 2014*

I put my foot in it today and I'm afraid I've got myself in a real jam. I went up against some well-connected people, and I wouldn't be surprised if my career hasn't gone down the drain as a result.

It happened during the quarterly meeting of the Lisbon Chapter of the Portuguese Writers' Guild. I had put in a request to be assigned characters and locations for a book, but during the meeting things didn't go as well for me as I'd hoped. I got worked up, I lost it, I said stuff I really shouldn't have.

I'm still on edge, and I suppose this isn't making much sense to you, is it? You probably don't even know what the Guild is or have a clue what I'm talking about.

Just give me a moment. . . I'm still shaking like a leaf. Let me get a grip, try to calm down, and then I'll explain everything from the beginning.

If you believe what its high-ups say the Guild is practically as old as time, and certainly dates back to the origins of the written word.

It is present worldwide, embracing each and every country and region through its network of Chapters. Wherever there are authors, the Guild is active.

Four times a year the Chapters convene meetings, which always start in exactly the same way, with the solemn reading aloud of the Guild's statutes. The opening paragraph states:

“The Guild was founded by the first scribe in the history of Mankind. All

the great literary works were written under its auspices, from the Vedas, and Homer's epic poems to the most recent best-sellers."

Obviously this is complete bullshit. I myself calculate the Guild to be two hundred years old at most. But when I attend meetings I dutifully make out I believe this mumbo-jumbo, just like everyone else is busy pretending to do.

Because the Guild controls everything: the publishers, the writers' sites, the big graphics companies, the literary prizes, and God knows what else.

If I weren't a member, I couldn't be a writer. Independents are boycotted; it's as simple as that.

The original idea for a writers' regulatory association wasn't a bad one because if every hack could pen just what he/she wanted, everybody would pretty soon be writing about the same things, wouldn't they? Vampires in vogue. . . then I guess every book written would be about vampires. No, wait, it's all about romance now. Fine, let's all switch to writing romances then.

The Guild prevents this from happening by decreeing in advance exactly what each author is allowed to write about. The idea is to give the most popular themes to the most experienced authors, in order to increase the chances of a book's being a success. Newbies are directed to try their hand with the more obscure literary genres first, so as not to make a mess of best-selling themes.

As the saying goes: "The road to hell is paved with good intentions." The original idea might've been good, but it rapidly degenerated into an entrenched system of persistent lobbying, back-handers, and string-pulling by the faceless literary powerbrokers who operate in the shadows.

But let's get back to me, shall we? Today was the quarterly meeting of the Lisbon Chapter of the Writers' Guild, and, as I have already said, I had requested to be assigned characters and locations for a new book.

The meeting was held in a huge amphitheatre with hundreds of writers present, seated row after row. It was presided over by three eminent literary figures, placed above us on a dais furnished with a

table and comfortable lounge chairs.

While awaiting my turn, I had to sit through a seemingly endless number of assignments being handed out to other authors. I tried to appear interested and enthusiastic, clapping at the appropriate moments and smiling ingratiatingly at the colleagues seated nearest me. I don't know if it is true or not, but there are recurring rumours that spies are planted among us during meetings and I didn't want to risk any public show of disaffection.

The first author to be considered was a complete idiot and lickspittle, one who is known to me personally. He is Vice-President of the Chapter, and has never written anything that amounts to much. During the ceremony he was given the go-ahead to write a romance, located in Bora Bora, Polynesia, between the playboy heir to a mega fortune, and a princess from a dispossessed European royal family.

If they had given me a story like that, you can bet I'd turn it into a worldwide best-seller, but in the hands of that idiot it will amount to nothing.

I won't bore you with the long list of plots that were handed out and my thoughts regarding the authors who received them. Suffice to say that the best characters and locations fell into the hands of the most inept, but with the right "sponsors" and contacts, while promising newcomers were given the literary equivalents of Mission: Impossible.

Eventually it was my turn. A voice rang out, saying: 'Pedro Barrento.'

I stood up and tried to look humble (always the safest bet with these people), while I waited to hear my fate.

'Genre: romance,' announced the Chairman from his elevated position, nose still buried deep in my file, without having the common decency to meet my eye.

Great, I thought to myself. That doesn't sound too difficult, and allows me a decent shot at success. It looked like finally they had decided to be reasonable. I prayed for an exotic location, or maybe a world-famous city: New York, "the city that never sleeps", Paris, "*la ville lumière*", or even Venice, "*la città dell'amore*".

'Location: Lisbon and the South Bank of the Tagus,' continued

the Chairman in the same arrogant, monotonous tone.

Damn it, I should've known something like this would happen, I fumed to myself. It's always the same old scam. To he who can barely write his own name they give Bora Bora, the perfect setting for a romance, while to me, a reasonably gifted writer (though I do say so myself), all they're prepared to offer is his own back yard.

As a setting for romance the South Bank of the River Tagus could hardly be worse. It's a real black spot: architecturally impoverished; a miserable, blighted urban dormitory inhabited by people who can barely make it through to the end of the month on their meagre income. I guess the "Lisbon" part of the brief is my only hope, I told myself. Maybe there it will be possible to put something together. . . it all depends on the characters I'm allotted.

'Characters: in Lisbon, the residents of an old people's home. On the South Bank of the Tagus, two girls in their late twenties/early thirties, an old man, some construction workers, a computer whizz-kid and a high flyer.'

I just stood there, mouth agape, unable to believe the injustice of it.

In Lisbon, where I could still hope to base a proper romance with some substance and impact, they give me a bunch of old geezers, while the girls are confined to the South Bank of the river. Who the hell are they supposed to date? The construction workers? The computer geek? Romance and computer freaks don't mix so I'm left with the high flyer. What am I going to do with him? Get him dating the two girls at the same time?

To be honest, I flipped then. As they were about to call the next author I did the unthinkable, something that had never before happened in the entire history of the Guild. I raised my voice and made a complaint.

'I'm very sorry but I don't think this is fair.'

A deathly silence pervaded the room.

The Chairman, having just set my file aside, rested one hand on it, adjusted his glasses with the other, and fixed me with an incredulous glare.

'Would you mind repeating that, sir?'

I was shaking all over, cursing myself for the lack of self-control

which had led me to protest. But it was too late now for me to back down.

‘I am terribly sorry. I don’t mean to appear ungrateful, but it seems to me that the locations and characters I’ve been assigned don’t go together at all well. At least, not in the context of a romance. . .’ My voice faltered and broke off. I couldn’t imagine what they would do to me for daring to protest like this.

‘Mr Paulo Barreto, do I take it that you are lodging a complaint, questioning the story you have been given?’

‘It’s Pedro Barrento, not Paulo Barreto,’ I told him. ‘And. . . er. . . a complaint is probably not the way I’d put it. . .’

The Chairman cut short my clumsy attempt to defuse the situation and launched into a diatribe in which he denounced me for being of bad character, lacking in morals, someone who thought he was above his fellow Guild members, in shameless pursuit of special dispensation, etc., etc.

When this tirade came to a conclusion a buzz of approval swept through the hall. By then all I wanted was to forget it and take myself off, but that wasn’t allowed to happen. The three committee members conferred briefly, exchanging hushed whispers, then the Chairman resumed talking.

‘This assembly does not wish to be accused of stifling anyone’s creative freedom; therefore, the committee has decided that, in spite of the fact that the author in question is palpably undeserving, we will concede an additional few elements for inclusion in his book.’

I was on tenterhooks by now, not sure whether they were trying to be kind or if this was all a trap.

‘The committee has decided to permit two new plot strands, featuring a ghost and a journey by aeroplane.’

I couldn’t believe my ears. Everything suddenly became so much simpler. In the first two chapters I would kill off all the characters who didn’t interest me – in road accidents, shipwrecks, or something of the sort. Then the high flyer would jet off to Bora Bora with the hotter of the two girls, where romance would blossom.

At the tropical island paradise, they would then be chased by

the ghost of her ex-boyfriend (probably one of the men I had killed off in the early chapters). This scenario had all the blockbusting ingredients I could want.

The men on the dais watched and waited, imperturbable, for my sighs of relief to give way to an ear-to-ear grin. Then they added:

‘However, as this concession not only represents a huge departure from precedent, but also an injustice to other writers, who accept the elements they are given without complaint. . .’ here he emphasised the last word ‘. . . we are obliged to impose certain restrictions. The ghost must not appear before the last few chapters, and the aircraft may only be used at the very end of the book.’

I was gutted. They had made it appear as if they meant to help me out while all the time leading me on with false hopes. Instead of adding variety to the story, the two additional elements made it virtually impossible. What use could I possibly have for a ghost and a plane trip almost at the end of the book?

‘Is there anything else?’ asked the Chairman, a note of sarcasm in his voice. ‘Or may we continue, Mr Barreto?’

Fuming inwardly, I thanked him politely and resumed my seat. I felt the eyes of my fellow writers boring into me as I thought to myself: I’m totally screwed.

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Now I am at home, lying in bed, looking up at the ceiling. I can’t get to sleep.

I think I have come up with a plan though. I’ll start with the old age pensioners in Lisbon. I’ll get them playing around with some sort of irrelevant activity, just to keep them busy and out of the way of the main plot.

Then it moves on to the two girls and the high flyer. I need to capture the readers’ attention right away with a hint of romance, just to make sure I don’t lose their interest while I resolve my initial difficulties with the *dramatis personae* assigned to me.

Regarding those minor characters living on the South Bank of the river, I’ll see if I can find some subordinate role for them.



When I start writing, I'm sure the inspiration will come.

And after these opening chapters I'll finally be free to concentrate on the romance, preferably between the high flyer and one of the girls. This seems to me to be the only course with any commercial potential.

It is a bit of a slow preamble but it's the best course I can think of, considering what I've been handed. I've got to make do with what I've been given, there's no alternative.

As for the ghost and the air journey, I'm sure I'll get them into the story somehow. It almost goes without saying that it'll be a bit contrived, but what other course do I have? Best not to worry about it too much now. When the time comes, I'll think of something, God help me.



## *02 – Diary #2*

*Lisbon, 17 March, 2014*

Fortunately, I woke up in a better mood today. I'm a writer after all. Every day is a blank, waiting to be transformed by the power of my imagination.

I was still having breakfast when the phone rang.

It was a woman called Fátima, who said she was the secretary of Simone Garbert-Smithe, the President of the Writers' Guild in Portugal, and that her boss had asked her to schedule a meeting with me directly after lunch.

I hung up the phone feeling bewildered.

In writing circles Simone Garbert-Smithe is a distant and inaccessible figure, of legendary status. She belongs to a rich and important family whose history has been intertwined with that of the Guild for several generations. Her great-grandfather was President of the English Writers' Guild, her father was President in Portugal, and when he retired his daughter took over from him, in yet another scandalous instance of cultural nepotism, which was widely reported at the time.

To be honest, I was quite nervous at the prospect of meeting her. Could my protest have reached the ears of the President herself, and might she have decided to summon me in order to express her displeasure? I could not imagine any other reason why such a powerful person would want to meet me.

After lunch I arrived at the Guild's offices; they occupy a whole floor of the prestigious Amoreiras building, which gives them a fabulous view over Lisbon and the Tagus. Everything in that place

reeks of money: the wood-panelled walls are hung with signed masterpieces, and the furniture is aggressively designer, imported from several countries.

These people take good care of themselves, I thought, while I struggled to sit comfortably on a reinterpreted steel and leather “chair”.

As I was waiting for the President to see me, something rather strange happened. I’d decided to visit the men’s room, largely out of curiosity about their no doubt state-of-the-art *pissoir*, and, just after I’d entered, a man who looked like he worked there, came in after me and started looking at me with a quizzical expression on his face. As I am sure you can imagine, I felt a bit uncomfortable until he spoke.

‘Excuse me. Don’t I recognize you? You’re the one who complained during the meeting yesterday, aren’t you?’

I wasn’t really in the mood to strike up conversation with a stranger in this of all places so I did not answer him directly. I simply nodded and made it clear by my expression that I was indeed that person, and so what?

But the man did not give up. He let out a loud and annoying laugh.

‘That was worth seeing! An author gets top-notch characters and locations and *still* complains.’

That left me rather confused. I could not resist saying:

‘Top-notch, my ass. What are you talking about?’

He confirmed that he worked there, and then told me something I wasn’t aware of: the characters and locations that are assigned to its authors are the result of prior negotiation between various countries in the Guild’s international meetings.

Apparently, there is a limited batch or quota of characters / locations classified as grade-“A”, which are the most coveted, and the Guilds of each country fight tooth and nail to get their authors the greatest possible number of such stories. Obviously they are nearly all monopolized by the larger and more powerful countries, but Simone Garbert-Smithe had somehow managed to get one for Portugal, during the last international convention.

‘Have you any idea how long it has taken for us to get a Grade-

A goodie like that? – The man did not wait for my answer but continued, ‘Almost twenty years now!’

He went on to explain that he had been present at the last international meeting and had been involved in the debates. Apparently our President had fought tooth and nail to secure Portugal a grade-“A” story, in a complex game of alliances in which smaller countries had supported her claims, in opposition to the great literary powers such as the United States and Britain.

‘And then they gave you that story, and even so you complained,’ stressed my interlocutor, laughing more loudly and annoyingly than before.

‘I can’t see what’s so great about it, to be honest.’

He looked at me as if I were stupid.

‘It’s not just the characters and locations, it’s also the marketing package that was authorized. That makes all the difference, you know.’

‘Is marketing also regulated?’

‘Of course it is. What else do you expect? No use giving a beginner an obscure theme and then allowing him to plaster the whole country with adverts for a routine category read. All writing is regulated. Don’t you read our newsletter? Don’t you follow the forums. . . the blog. . . the site?’

To be honest, I didn’t. I was usually too busy writing. I came out of the men’s room completely confused, not knowing what to think about it all. It did not seem credible that the Portuguese Writers’ Guild had fought so hard for something everybody else seemed to want, only to assign it to me, a complete unknown, who to date had written only a couple of quite unsuccessful books.

Could it be that someone had appreciated the literary quality of my previous works, and recognized my value? It seemed too good to be true, but I was having difficulty coming up with any alternative explanation.

I returned to the waiting room and sat on the couch, entertaining myself by observing Fátima, who seemed friendly, efficient and very much in control.

Watching her work was impressive; she appeared to be able to handle any number of tasks at the same time without the slightest

difficulty, such as taking notes, writing on her computer, attending to telephone calls, and giving instructions to the other staff members – she seemed to run the whole place.

She was rather Rubens-esque but had potential. . . if she went on a diet, learned to dress better and got her hair done in a way which suited her, that is. If all that were fixed she could become a very interesting woman, but in her current state she looked more like Shrek's girlfriend.

She would have been an ideal candidate for one of those "before" and "after" makeover TV shows, where stylists somehow manage to transform a no-hoper into a princess.

I was completely absorbed in these hyper-critical and quite unfair thoughts (because the girl was undeniably cute) when I was finally called in for my meeting.

Simone greeted me with a huge smile. She was a woman of about forty, tall, blonde and blue-eyed, all of which attested to her Northern European ancestry, which was enhanced by an aristocratic manner and style of dress. Her clothes were rumpled, old and obviously very expensive at the time she'd bought them, which must have been some time in the previous decade. Thus effortlessly conveying the fact that people as important as Simone Garbert-Smithe could afford to ignore the vagaries of fashion.

'Please, do come in. And how is our most promising author today?'

I felt embarrassed to receive such an effusive welcome. After mumbling the usual niceties, I began to apologize.

'First of all I'd like to say sorry for having made such a fuss during the meeting yesterday. It was very remiss of me. . .'

'For heaven's sake, don't worry about that! They told me everything, and frankly, I thought it most amusing. So let's forget all about it, shall we?'

Needless to say I felt hugely relieved, but I became even more intrigued about the reason for this meeting.

The President began to explain, and more or less repeated what I had just discovered during my trip to the men's room: Portugal had been allocated a class-"A" package by the Guild, something that had not happened for quite a while and that had only been

possible after a mix of aggressive wrangling and diplomatic horse trading on an international level.

‘As I am sure you will understand,’ she continued, in a solemn tone, ‘the outcome is vital to our continued prestige. It will greatly affect our standing at international level and our capacity to obtain “A” packages again in the future.’ She raised her voice slightly, banging her fist on the table for emphasis. ‘It is essential that this book is a success, both in critical terms and commercially. We simply cannot allow ourselves to fail.’

I tried to interrupt, to assure her that I would do my best, but Simone gave me no chance. I got the feeling that she knew exactly what I was going to say (it was not difficult to guess) and purposely did not allow it.

‘To ensure the success of this book, we have already taken the liberty of drafting the first few chapters, which I’m going to give you right now. Will you take them with you and read them through at home?’

And, leaving me completely unable to answer, the President handed me a wad of A4 sheets.

I was astounded, completely taken by surprise, and incapable of understanding what was happening. Could it be that, contrary to what I had always thought, the process of assigning books to authors was, in fact, absolutely random, but they didn’t think I was up to the task? It was the only explanation I could find at that moment, and although I hated what they were doing to me, I decided to control myself this time. My answer was a masterpiece of caution and diplomacy.

‘Madam President, I thank you for the immense trust being placed in me. You can rest assured that I shall review and add these to the other chapters that I shall write, and it will all be done at a literary level guaranteed to increase the standing and prestige of the Portuguese Writers’ Guild.’

I was very pleased with myself, surprised even, by the fluency of my answer, which was certainly worthy of a seasoned politician. My real plan was to write a few chapters of undeniable literary merit, to settle whatever doubts the Guild might have about me, and then to rewrite, to my own taste, the chapters they were now giving me.

Because that was all I needed, someone else writing parts of *my* book.

Contrary to my expectations, Simone did not seem too thrilled by my answer.

‘Do as you think best,’ she said coldly. ‘Then we’ll see.’

I left the office not knowing what to make of our meeting.

I was shown to the main door by Fátima, who, with her impenetrable professional air, by way of farewell left me with this cryptic observation:

‘Senhor Pedro, you are an intelligent man. Take the easiest route. It will be better for you and for all of us in the long run.’

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As soon as I arrived home I started to read the chapters which had been handed to me, and as I had suspected they had nothing in common with my ideas for the book.

Some of the chapters consisted of a tortuous and somewhat heavy story that took place in Lisbon, in a retirement home for the elderly, and which paradoxically seemed to include a fair share of sex scenes. Others were about two characters called Manuel and Joaquim, who had long and boring conversations of a socio-political nature. I simply couldn’t understand what role the ramblings of two deadbeats could play in my story.

None of it made much sense. There was not a single chapter in the material I’d just been given about the two girls who lived on the South Bank of the Tagus. Now, in my opinion, that was the only strand with any commercial potential. The Guild might consider this the raw material for a Grade-"A" book – but to my mind it was still a lousy set of locations and characters.

I decided to call the two girls Marlene and Sofia and to write a few chapters about them and somehow try to link these with the chapters I had been given, which I would slightly adapt to my own style. Then I would send the combined material back to the Guild.

I was entirely confident of my ability to convince them I was up to the task, and that eventually I would be allowed to write the whole book in my own way.



The next day I re-read everything I'd been given, very carefully, and then I started to write.



### *03 – Virtual Tourism*

*Lisbon, 31 May 2012*

Frederico Teixeira was a lucky man. He was ninety-one years old, and in an enviable state of health and vitality. He had lived life to the fullest: was well travelled and had enjoyed much prosperity and success – both in business and with women.

His memory was excellent. Either that or he had a very fertile imagination, a possibility which could not be overlooked considering that the majority of the events described in his yarns took place decades ago and were well-nigh impossible to confirm. He was spending his final years in a luxurious old people's home: a converted palace, surrounded by lavishly planted gardens, right in the heart of Lisbon.

And as if all that weren't enough, he was a man who ensured he still received exactly what he wanted from life, unlike so many others.

For instance, Frederico had chosen to be where he was now. Had he wanted to, he could still have been living in his own home, a spacious and comfortable detached house with a beautiful view over the bay at Cascais. But he hadn't any family left, and being alone wasn't to his liking. Caution also played its part: after a certain age, being on your own can grow risky.

At the moment Frederico Teixeira was getting ready for lunch, served with unwavering punctuality at 12.30.

The ritual was always the same. The male nurse knocked on the door of his small suite, which comprised a bedroom, a living room, a kitchenette and bathroom. The nurse entered the room, and

helped the elderly resident off with his tracksuit, which he usually wore about the apartment. Afterwards he was assisted to dress in his invariably classic and impeccably well-pressed trousers, shirt, jacket and tie.

It may seem strange that Frederico needed any assistance at all, considering his much-vaunted health and strength. The fact of the matter was that he didn't; but he liked to be waited on, to be served, and to lord it over others – like the latterday princes who, even when young and in perfect health, always had a personal attendant at their beck and call.

During the process Frederico looked into the mirror several times and made small adjustments until he was completely satisfied with the appearance of his shirt, his tie, or the way his remaining hair was combed – asking the nurse now and then to change the angle of the mirror so as to ensure that even the parts of his attire that could not be seen directly were in perfect order.

The nurse had wondered, on several occasions, whether the *velhote* did this as a matter of self-respect, from sheer force of habit, or because the old man still genuinely believed he had a few tricks up his sleeve when it came to the ladies. However, it remained a mystery and the young man had never reached a definitive conclusion.

Although the third and latter hypothesis might have appeared, at first sight, the most unlikely, it shouldn't be dismissed out of hand: Frederico had always been a self-confessed aficionado of feminine charms.

Of late, however, he appeared to have suffered a certain erosion of the social veneer the rest of us have, which stops us from saying embarrassing, intimate or inappropriate things, so that, on a regular basis, he shared the more salacious memories of his youth with the reluctant nurse.

During mealtimes, Frederico's conversational gambits also tended towards the same subject. They usually began with a show of restraint, supposedly due to the presence of ladies, but these initial scruples rarely lasted for long and the stories themselves invariably degenerated into either the risqué or the vulgar, and were always embarrassing to everyone else.

‘When I was young, we lads had a damned good time of it,’ Frederico asserted to his blandly smiling nurse. ‘More than nowadays, I reckon. . . Maybe I’m mistaken but I see them glued to their computers and mobile phones, without showing a shred of interest in anything else.’ He looked sidelong at André, to make sure that he was paying attention, and continued: ‘Just the other day I was at the bus-stop, waiting for it to arrive. . .’

The nurse thought to himself that this must have occurred at least a decade ago then, but kept quiet.

‘. . . and there were three or four young lads. . . about twenty years old or thereabouts, and a young girl about the same age. They all looked bored, glancing round here and there, just killing time while they waited. The girl was wearing a skirt that was so short you could almost see her *cuequinhas*. But do you think any of those lads were looking at her legs? *Palermas!* Those fools didn’t take a single peek, or not while I was watching anyway. Hah! If that had happened in my day, a woman going out dressed like that, she wouldn’t have got away with it, I can tell you! And do you know what else I saw?’

‘What’s that, Mr Teixeira?’

‘I even looked at their trousers, to check if they had. . . you know?’ Judging by the expression on the nurse’s face Frederico assumed he didn’t, and decided to spell it out for him. ‘If they had *tesão!* Can you believe it, not one of those lads had a hard-on?’

The nurse laughed dutifully, apparently enjoying the old man’s no holds barred take on modern behaviour and dress codes.

‘The only one with a boner was me! But it made me angry when I thought about it. I felt like giving those nitwits a piece of my mind and a damned good thrashing. Bloody pansies! In my day it would have been unthinkable.’

Frederico’s formative years had been spent in an era when everything was either black or white: you were for the “Regime” or against it; you were either rich or poor; you were a man or you were a woman. At that time there were no shades of grey. Not officially, that is.

If he’d had the power to look inside André’s mind and check his sexual preferences, Frederico might have been more reserved,

and possibly have told the story differently. Better yet, not have told it at all. But Frederico was not imbued with such mind-reading talents, nor did he care for the politically correct approach that is the norm nowadays.

When he was young, being a homosexual, an atheist or a communist were not options open to decent young men. They were considered either sins against God or else morally wrong, and it was not considered necessary to censor one's self when talking about such types.

André didn't react to Frederico's thoughtlessness, though. He remained deliberately calm and unmoved, his standard response during the long drawn out tirades he endured from this most highly opinionated resident. Not that his charge was interested in receiving an answer anyway – all he wanted was an audience, and to be the centre of attention.

Frederico, realizing that the wheelchair in which he was sitting was now being pushed down the corridor, brought the conversation to a close.

Once again, it may seem strange that he was being pushed, but Frederico preferred to appear in public places in the role of a commander, pointing to wherever he wanted to go and loudly issuing orders, rather than walking slowly and alone with the aid of a walking stick, exposing his fragility for all to see. Actually, he wasn't that fragile for his age, but still somewhat more than he would have wished.

He remained motionless, chin held high with an air of authority, until they arrived in the big hall where the meals were served. The marble floor and chandeliers hanging from the ceiling gave the place the look of a grand hotel of days gone by.

They were now in the old part of the building, a palace dating from the nineteenth century, which had recently been extended with new wings at the rear, intended to house private apartments and medical facilities. In the palace itself there were only public spaces: lounges and dining areas.

Upon entering the vast restaurant, Frederico seemed suddenly to come fully to life, animated by the opulent atmosphere and the presence of the other residents. He always made a point of arriving

for meals slightly late. To arrive before someone else and have to wait for them to show up wasn't his style.

He inclined his head upwards and to the side as if to say something, and André leaned forward as if to listen, but it was the nurse who spoke first, in a low conspiratorial whisper:

'I assume you're joining Patrícia and Teresa at their table, right?'

Frederico smiled and his face lit up, glowing with the devilment of bygone times.

'That's the ticket, André. Let's seat me with the ladies.'

He pointed ostentatiously with his walking stick in the direction he wished to go. It was as if the discreet conversation had never taken place, and it was only now that he was deciding which table to sit at.

Patrícia greeted him effusively.

'A very good day to you, Mr Teixeira. Now *here* is someone to cheer us all up.'

She was a well-rounded woman, with blue eyes and dyed blonde hair, who still managed to look attractive at an age when the majority of women are fortunate if they can even hint at past beauty.

'Good afternoon,' said her friend Teresa, and discreetly glanced to her right, checking that she had laid her coat across the chair next to her to prevent anyone from sitting there.

The table was set for five. Two seats facing Teresa and beside Patrícia were vacant. André withdrew the one beside Patrícia, and replaced it with Frederico's wheelchair.

'With your permission, my dear lady?' said the old man, with a gentlemanly bow of his head which in turn elicited a smile from Patrícia.

Their choices from the menu followed a logic which was repeated at every meal. Some seemed unable or unwilling to ignore gluttony's prompting, while others were driven by different motives.

Patrícia, concerned about her waistline as always, ordered the sole *meunière*, accompanied by spartan boiled vegetables, followed by fruit for dessert. Teresa commented repeatedly, to all who were interested enough to listen, that she had to be careful about what

she ate. . . before eventually succumbing to chicken breast stuffed with bread sausage, to be followed, after further repeated bouts of theatrical hesitation, by a calorie-packed portion of *trouxas de ovos*, a rich dessert made from eggs and sugar.

Frederico, in a flagrant attempt to ingratiate himself with the diet-conscious Patrícia, ordered the same as her. However, having finished his fruit, he began to regret his own abstemiousness. He cast furtive looks at Teresa's plate and ended up also surrendering to the sweet temptation of the *trouxas*.

He didn't understand how Patrícia could eat so little, and decided it wasn't worth going hungry just to ingratiate himself further.

They drank white wine with their meal, a compromise reached so as to avoid ordering different wines with the meat and fish. Teresa felt it had been reached at her expense.

During the meal, as always, Frederico monopolized the conversation, which was only occasionally punctuated by smiles and small asides from Patrícia, or the occasional acerbic comment from Teresa.

She appeared distracted, ostensibly glancing to one side at the chandeliers, or attentively analyzing the veins that ran through the marble slabs covering the floor.

'When I was a lad I had a gang of mates, and the only thing we could think of was getting up to *ramboiada*,' the old man droned on.

Teresa, in spite of looking up at the ceiling and appearing not to follow the conversation, commented:

'Hanky-panky? What a silly word, I doubt it even exists.'

'Don't be like that, Teresa. Let him finish speaking. Frederico's stories are usually very amusing,' put in Patrícia, patting the back of her friend's hand in reproof.

Teresa shrugged her shoulders and nodded a greeting to a female resident who was getting up from a table at the other end of the room.

'One of those mates was Carlos, until he stopped going around with us so much. He no longer wanted to go to the *fado* bars, nor even to come out for a drink. We hardly saw him any more. The lads lambasted and cajoled him, until finally we discovered that he



was in love. He came clean then and told anyone who would listen that he had found the love of his life and intended to marry her.'

'Sounds completely normal to me,' Patrícia interrupted. 'What was so unusual about that?'

'What was unusual,' said Frederico, lightly resting one hand on her thigh and leaning closer to address her, 'was that the girl was a whore, through and through. Everybody tried to warn Carlos about her. But she had him wrapped around her little finger, and he would hear none of it. He got quite angry with us, but we just wanted what was best for our friend so we kept trying to tell him the truth. Eventually he stopped talking to us.'

'Is that it then, the full story?' a sharp voice broke in.

'No, Teresa. Not nearly. Here's the best part,' said Frederico gleefully. 'A couple of months went by, and then one day someone from our group turned up and told everybody that our friend was ill. He'd got the clap. You know what that is, don't you? Yes, a venereal disease that the tart had given him, obviously.'

Frederico paused for a moment, and very deliberately took a sip of wine. Then, having created a suitable air of suspense, continued his story.

'Our friend knew that Carlos had a doctor's appointment, and that the surgery was somewhere around the Fonte Luminosa district. As Carlos lived in Martim Moniz Square, he had to walk up Almirante Reis Avenue, almost until the end, to get there.'

'The poor dear. He was under the weather and he had to walk over a kilometre,' commented Patrícia, who always had a comforting and supportive word for any hapless soul who got into difficulty as a result of human frailty.

'There were about ten of us, spread out along the avenue, and we positioned ourselves leaning up against walls at various street corners, about every five or six blocks, on exactly the route that Carlos would have to take to reach the doctor's. He came out of his house and started up the road and saw the first friend. He said hello, thinking it was just a coincidence, but the other man, instead of greeting him back, said: "So, she's a good lass, right?"'

Frederico chuckled, savouring his own story.

'Carlos went on his way and after a while saw the second friend,

who said: “We told you so, but you just wouldn’t listen, would you?””

‘Good gracious! You really were quite horrid to him.’ But Patrícia laughed indulgently as she said it.

‘And it went on like that, all the way up the avenue, until he arrived at the doctor’s surgery. Every friend he passed bad-mouthed his woman. He arrived at the surgery completely down in the mouth. . . . But it was for his own good, you see, to make him come to his senses.’

Teresa sighed, long and loud: a not very subtle declaration that she considered the story to be absolute piffle.

Then she made to leave, saying that the conversation had been very interesting, but at the risk of offending anyone, and with great regret, she had to go because there was ironing to be done.

‘But the people here will take care of that,’ said Patrícia, visibly surprised and grabbing her friend by the arm to prevent her from leaving the table.

‘They don’t do my delicates, I don’t let them. Well, they wash some of them, but I iron them. That’s all I need, for these cack-handed idiots to ruin my best things. I won’t run the risk of that. I only buy the best labels, as you know. Sometimes I even wash things myself.’

‘Good heavens, you are so fussy! They wash and iron all my stuff, and I’ve never had a problem,’ protested Patrícia.

Teresa didn’t answer, but thought to herself: The more expensive the clothes are, the more care you have to take of them. Of course, if you only buy cheap and cheerful stuff, you don’t need to worry.

Frederico signalled to the nurse to take him back to his room. He said goodbye to Teresa with ‘I wish you an excellent ironing session, my dear’, which didn’t elicit any answer apart from a resentful glance, then kissed Patrícia’s hand, making her chuckle. After he had left, she commented:

‘Frederico is such a card, isn’t he?’

‘I don’t think he’s in the least bit funny. That man is completely vulgar. Didn’t you notice the way he put his hand on your thigh, halfway through that embarrassing story?’

‘Of course I noticed.’

‘And you did nothing? If it had been me, I would have given him a good slap.’

‘Don’t worry. You can rest assured he won’t be laying a finger on you,’ Patrícia told her, poker-faced.

‘No, he certainly won’t,’ replied Teresa, entirely oblivious to her friend’s *double-entendre*.

‘The poor old boy is going off his rocker,’ said Patrícia indulgently. ‘Why deprive him of his last little pleasures. So he thinks he’s a lady-killer. . . so what? If it doesn’t bother me, why should I send him packing? I actually think it’s quite good fun, playing along with him.’ Then, huddling closer to Teresa, she added *sotto voce*, ‘It reminds me of when I was young. I was quite a looker in those days, you know? I always had loads of suitors.’

‘You are still a very attractive woman, believe you me. And you know I don’t hand out compliments easily. But as I said, I have to get going. I have plenty to do this afternoon,’ Teresa insisted.

‘Leave the chores until tomorrow. Today I am going to show you something really interesting. We’ll spend the afternoon together. . . go for a walk in Lisbon.’

‘Go for a walk? Have you taken leave of your senses? Neither of us is in any condition to go out. No, I’m going to tackle my ironing. Iron a piece and take a rest, then iron another. That way it will all get done eventually.’

But Patrícia was so insistent that Teresa gave in. The ironing would have to wait. They both got up from the table and went off in the direction of Patrícia’s apartment, leaning on their walking sticks. Teresa, who when seated looked every minute of her eighty-two years, with her wrinkled face and misshapen body, walked slowly but without hesitation. Patrícia, however, who during luncheon had looked somewhat younger than her friend, with enviably smooth skin and the figure of a model, was paradoxically unable to disguise her age of eighty-one years while attempting to walk steadily and upright.

When they arrived at her room, Patrícia sat down at the table, and opened a laptop.

‘Oh, no, don’t tell me it’s got something to do with the internet.’

You know very well that I haven't the patience for that stuff,' protested Teresa.

'Has anyone ever told you that you can be a real pain sometimes? You've got a computer, haven't you, so why take that attitude?'

'Yes, I know I've got a computer, but only because that ingrate of a daughter of mine obliged me to get one. So now she doesn't come to visit me and she doesn't even phone. She just sends an email now and again. Apart from that I hardly ever touch it.' Then Teresa stopped talking, thinking that she wasn't being totally truthful. 'All right, maybe I am not being entirely honest and I don't like telling fibs. I must admit, I do occasionally use it for entertainment, but only rarely.'

'Doing what, for example?'

'I sometimes play games on it at night, when I can't sleep. Just the odd game or two.'

While her friend was making this confession Patrícia had entered a site: "worldfromyoursofa.com". She explained that she had just stumbled on it while she was online one day and that the site was still at an experimental stage. They allowed visitors to it one free trial apparently, and she intended to give it a go this afternoon. Teresa looked on disparagingly.

'Is this going to take very long? Look, I've got things to do. . .'

'Sit down here beside me and be quiet. It's going to take the whole afternoon.'

Teresa sighed long and hard while pulling up a chair, then focused on the screen with a disapproving look on her face, making it quite clear that she was making a big sacrifice by staying to witness such foolishness.

'You see? First you have to "log-on". My online name is "Pussycat".'

Teresa rolled her eyes, and pulled a face. She disapproved of Patrícia's permanent craving after youth and inability to stop acting like a teenager.

'Then you need to type in your password. Mine's "MarilynMonroe".'

The message "Welcome, Pussycat. Last log-on: yesterday, at

21h30" appeared at the top of the screen, and in the middle of the window a dialogue box reading: "Do you wish to start the planned tour?"

Patrícia explained that the site used a system whereby someone walked around places which had been pre-chosen by the user, and followed their orders. They used special spectacles that were equipped with two mini cameras, and the images were transmitted in real time over the internet, in this case to Patrícia's laptop.

'What a kerfuffle,' remarked Teresa. 'What's the point of it? I'd much rather watch a travel programme on the TV.'

'I don't think you're really getting the point. It's not the same thing at all. They go wherever *we* want them to go. It's just as if we were strolling through Lisbon ourselves, even though we're no longer up to it. Go on! Be a dear, keep me company.'

'So there's a person walking round town, doing whatever we want them to and letting us see what they see? That must cost a fortune. If you're expecting me to help pay for this, you're barking up the wrong tree altogether. I totally refuse to waste any of my money on this sort of nonsense.'

'Calm down, Teresa, they're not going to charge us a cent. The first time is free, gratis. It's just a demonstration. Don't be a killjoy. Otherwise I'll be really annoyed with you.'

A still image appeared on the screen. There was a table, a cup, and a cake – a custard doughnut. Then the camera slowly panned around its surroundings.

It looked like it was in a café-pâtisserie, with an interior that was exceptionally sumptuous and refined. Chandeliers with glittering crystal pendants hung from the elaborately sculpted stucco ceiling. The heavy wooden fittings along the wall behind the high glass counter were in the grand nineteenth-century style, and on them were displayed bottles of wine and liqueurs and boxes of biscuits and sweets and all the other products that the establishment sold. None of the usual type of commercial showcase for this grandest of cafés.

'It's the Versailles pâtisserie,' shrieked Teresa, leaning forward instinctively as if to touch the cake in front of her on-screen. 'I haven't been there for ages. I almost didn't recognize it. Now *that's*

what a patisserie should look like. It's the chicest place in Lisbon by far, and only the people who really matter go there. I do so miss the afternoons we used to spend in it, the two of us, just chatting. And those pastries, Patrícia! Such a temptation. . . '

Patrícia smiled to herself. Her friend could go on as much as she liked about her lack of interest in the website, but Patrícia knew better. It was just a matter of choosing the right location for their virtual tour.

'Tell them to take a walk around, I want to see if I recognize anybody,' Teresa was saying excitedly.

Patrícia gave the instructions out loud, speaking into the webcam microphone on the laptop. The image panned as the wearer of the camera moved towards the counter and then passed slowly between the tables with their pristine white cloths, the lens slowly directed towards the face of each customer.

'Hey, look over there by the pillar. Isn't that Dr Gertrudes Neves?' exclaimed Teresa. 'What time is it now? About half-past two, right? Of course, she was always there at that time! And still is, by the look of it.'

'We haven't seen her for about ten years,' commented Patrícia. 'But she still looks just the same.'

'What else do you expect? She's never done a day's work in her life. Her husband is stinking rich. Lead a life like that and it's easy not to show your true age. Personally, I was always very dubious about that title of hers. . . "Doctor". She's probably about as much of a medical authority as I am.'

'Don't take this the wrong way, Teresa, but you can't exactly claim to have led a hard life, can you? For a start, you never actually had a job.'

'I may not have had a job, but I am no stranger to hard work, I'll have you know. I had a husband to take care of, God rest his soul, and a daughter to bring up. . . '

'Look, there's a table that's not taken next to Dr Gertrudes. Tell your person with the camera to sit there and order something. A coffee or whatever. No, a coffee and a *palmier* pastry. I want to see if they still look like they used to. They were so good!'

Patrícia did as she had been asked. Teresa was now completely

absorbed by the image on the screen. The apartment where they sat faded from her mind and she felt she was immersed in the familiar atmosphere of the café, and drawn into the polite conversation of its select clientele. Her brain, deceived by the camera as anyone's might be, filled in the missing pieces for her: the aroma of the pastries, the warmth of the bodies, and a 180-degree view. She leaned forward, putting her ear closer to the screen.

'I can hardly hear what she is saying. I'd love to know if that woman still talks complete rubbish. She always got on my nerves.'

This time it was Patrícia who rolled her eyes, but she didn't reply. Instead she commented, 'Did you notice the man sitting next to her? That's her son. Must be fifty now. She was a mother late in life, you know. He is such a handsome man. . .' A subtle nuance of masculine eau de cologne assailed her nostrils. 'He always reminds me of that old Hollywood actor. . . What's his name?'

'Who? Clark Gable? He's nothing like him. Not even a little bit.'

Patrícia gazed, dumbfounded, at her friend.

'Teresa, really. If he doesn't look like Clark Gable, how did you know which actor I meant?'

But Teresa was distracted and didn't answer. Her gaze had wandered to tables further away, where she recognized some other people she hadn't seen for ages.

The afternoon passed quickly, in floods of cheerful chatter. They two friends recalled the faces and stories of a world they had long since ceased to frequent. Now here it was again, suddenly back within their grasp. They never left the patisserie.

Finally the image froze and a message popped up on-screen: "Session timed out. Your four hours' free demonstration is concluded. We hope you have enjoyed your trip. To take further advantage of our services please consult the attached price list."

'Four hours!' exclaimed Teresa incredulously. 'A whole afternoon wasted. And I've got so much to do. You've ruined my day and we didn't even get to leave the patisserie! I told you in the first place I wasn't interested in any of this.'

'What!' exclaimed Patrícia, genuinely taken aback by this accusation. 'We didn't get to leave the Versailles because you were always nagging to look more closely at this or that, and never shut

up the entire time we were in there! *That's* why we didn't have a chance to go anywhere else. I would really have liked a stroll around Lisbon.'

'I wouldn't shut up? I was always nagging? Quite honestly, Patrícia, you do say some stupid things. Who was controlling the camera? If we didn't go anywhere else it's *your* fault.

'But, look, let's not quarrel. Even I am ready to admit that it was quite entertaining, but just something you do once, surely. Do you really think I have nothing better to do with my time than spend the whole afternoon sitting in front of a computer screen?'

However, the following day the two friends returned to the site, in spite of Teresa's protests, which were quite clearly more of a formality than heartfelt. Patrícia paid as she was the one who had insisted that they should return. Each session cost 150 euros, and would last for, at most, four hours. Teresa was at pains to let it be known unequivocally that she considered it all not only a waste of money (although she was not paying for any of it), but also in some way immoral.

At times she exhibited a mind-set in keeping with an austere and old-style brand of Protestantism, in spite of her having been brought up in the Catholic Church. When faced with any idle frippery or pursuit she felt uncomfortable and uneasy.

Remaining oblivious to this, she had cultivated the extremely irritating habit of always justifying her actions as being necessary or, at the very least, useful. When neither of these explanations would do, someone else was inevitably to blame for her moments of self-indulgence in amusement or leisure.

With the help of the camera the two friends strolled leisurely along the Avenue da Liberdade, admiring the window displays of the innumerable luxury stores that in recent years had taken over all the prime real estate in the area. Mainly, these catered for a new clientele comprising Angolan, Brazilian, Chinese and Russian tourists, as well as, to a lesser degree, some Portuguese.

'Just look at it. They go on about the financial crisis, but there isn't a single luxury brand that doesn't have a store here,' Patrícia remarked.

'Yes, you're right, they're all here. We've gone past Escada,



Gucci, Hermès, and there are even some brands here that I have never heard of. I've seen a lot that in the past you could only find in Paris.'

They crossed Restauradores Square and Plaza Rossio, and began to climb in the direction of the Castle. They paused on the way at the Cerca Moura café, to have a coffee and admire the view. Even Teresa stopped making negative comments, absorbed by the sounds, smells and movement of the city; part of which came from the screen, and the rest from her imagination.

When the session came to an end, the magnificent view from São Jorge Castle, which took in a large part of the city of Lisbon, the river, the bridges, and the cities and towns on the South Bank of the Tagus, remained frozen on-screen while the two friends continued to gaze at it, as if attempting to delay their return to the physical constraints of reality for as long as possible.

Eventually, Teresa got up and went to her room to try and organize the pile of laundry she had collected to iron. But Patrícia remained seated in front of the computer, thinking about the other places she would like to visit – this site clearly had great potential.

She glanced towards the end of the room and saw her own reflection in the wardrobe mirror. She fixed her gaze on it and studied it despondently. Her youth had faded long ago, and her life expectancy was short. She called to mind a phrase inscribed on the grandfather clock in her mother's living room. It was a Latin motto about time: "*vulnerant omnes, ultima necat*" – all (the hours) wound, (the) last one kills.

She had no doubt that her last hour, the one that would kill, was approaching with long strides, and was overcome by a sudden urge to seize each moment of the time she had left.

Patrícia felt like a condemned prisoner who had been granted one last request. Only an idiot would have chosen to go window shopping or to sit in a patisserie. She could think of no good reason to settle for such banal activities or to feel restrained by moral scruples.

Why shouldn't she go on a safari, make a parachute jump, take part in an orgy?

Her mind awash with myriad ideas, the majority of them

anything but innocuous, she found herself looking around guiltily, as if to confirm that she was in fact alone and there was no one here to read her thoughts.

Her laptop still stood on the table and the thousands of minuscule pixels that together composed the view from the São Jorge Castle filled the screen.

Had it been possible to enlarge that image, one of those pixels would have been transformed into the window of an apartment in a tall building on the South Bank of the Tagus River.

In two hours, the doorbell of that apartment would ring.