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AUTHOR OF LIFE OF PI



THE HIGH



MOUNTAINS

OF



PORTUGAL



A NOVEL

The High Mountains of Portugal



Yann Martel



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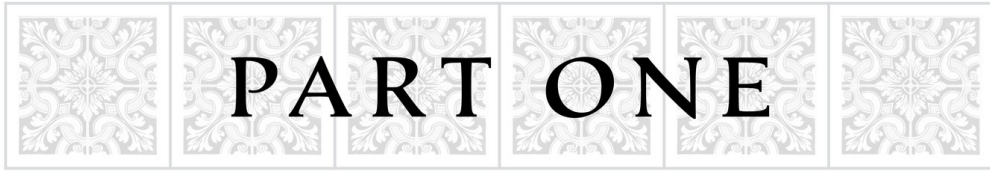
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PART ONE

Homeless

Tomás decides to walk.

From his modest flat on Rua São Miguel in the ill-famed Alfama district to his uncle's stately estate in leafy Lapa, it is a good walk across much of Lisbon. It will likely take him an hour. But the morning has broken bright and mild, and the walk will soothe him. And yesterday Sabi, one of his uncle's servants, came to fetch his suitcase and the wooden trunk that holds the documents he needs for his mission to the High Mountains of Portugal, so he has only himself to convey.

He feels the breast pocket of his jacket. Father Ulisses' diary is there, wrapped in a soft cloth. Foolish of him to bring it along like this, so casually. It would be a catastrophe if it were lost. If he had any sense he would have left it in the trunk. But he needs extra moral support this morning, as he does every time he visits his uncle.

Even in his excitement he remembers to forgo his regular cane and take the one his uncle gave him. The handle of this cane is made of elephant ivory and the shaft of African mahogany, but it is unusual mainly because of the round pocket mirror that juts out of its side just beneath the handle. This mirror is slightly convex, so the image it reflects is quite wide. Even so, it is entirely useless, a failed idea because a walking cane in use is by its nature in constant motion, and the image the mirror reflects is therefore too shaky and fleeting to be helpful in any way. But this fancy cane is a custom-made gift from his uncle, and every time he pays a call Tomás brings it.

He heads off down Rua São Miguel onto Largo São Miguel and then Rua de São João da Praça before turning onto Arco de Jesus—the easy perambulation of a pedestrian walking through a city he has known his whole life, a city of beauty and bustle, of commerce and culture, of challenges and rewards. On Arco de Jesus he is ambushed by a memory of Dora, smiling and reaching out to touch him. For that, the cane is useful, because memories of her always throw him off balance.

“I got me a rich one,” she said to him once, as they lay in bed in his flat.

“I'm afraid not,” he replied. “It's my uncle who's rich. I'm the poor son of his poor brother. Papa has been as unsuccessful in business as my uncle Martim has been successful, in exact inverse proportion.”

He had never said that to anyone, commented so flatly and truthfully about his father's checkered career, the business plans that collapsed one after the other, leaving him further beholden to the brother who rescued him each time. But to Dora he could reveal such things.

“Oh, you say that, but rich people always have troves of money hidden away.”

He laughed. “Do they? I've never thought of my uncle as a man who was secretive about his wealth. And if that's so, if I'm rich, why won't you marry me?”

People stare at him as he walks. Some make a comment, a few in jest but most with helpful interest. “Be careful, you might trip!” calls a concerned woman. He is used to this public attention; beyond a smiling nod to those who mean well, he ignores it.

One step at a time he makes his way to Lapa, his stride free and easy, each foot lifted high, then dropped with aplomb. It is a graceful gait.

He steps on an orange peel but does not slip.

He does not notice a sleeping dog, but his heel lands just short of its tail.

He misses a step as he is going down some curving stairs, but he is holding on to the railing and regains his footing easily.

And other such minor mishaps.

Dora's smile dropped at the mention of marriage. She was like that; she went from the lighthearted to the deeply serious in an instant.

"No, your family would banish you. Family is everything. You cannot turn your back on yours."

"You are my family," he replied, looking straight at her.

She shook her head. "No, I am not."

His eyes, for the most part relieved of the burden of directing him, relax in his skull like two passengers sitting on deck chairs at the rear of a ship. Rather than surveying the ground all the time they glance about dreamily. They notice the shapes of clouds and of trees. They dart after birds. They watch a horse snuffle as it pulls a cart. They come to rest on previously unnoticed architectural details in buildings. They observe the bustle of traffic on Rua Cais de Santarém. All in all, it should be a delightful morning stroll on this pleasant late-December day of the year 1904.

Dora, beautiful Dora. She worked as a servant in his uncle's household. Tomás noticed her right away the first time he visited his uncle after she was hired. He could hardly take his eyes off her or get her out of his mind. He made efforts to be especially courteous to her and to engage her in bright conversations over one minor matter after another. It allowed him to keep looking at her fine nose, her bright dark eyes, her small white teeth, the way she moved. Suddenly he became a frequent visitor. He could remember precisely the moment Dora realized that he was addressing her not as a servant but as a woman. Her eyes flitted up to his, their gazes locked for a moment, and then she turned away—but not before a quick complicit smile curled up a corner of her mouth.

Something great was released within him then, and the barrier of class, of status, of utter improbability and unacceptability vanished. Next visit, when he gave her his coat, their hands touched and both lingered on that touch. Matters proceeded swiftly from there. He had, until then, had experience of sexual intimacy only with a few prostitutes, occasions that had been terribly exciting and then terribly depressing. He had fled each time, ashamed of himself and vowing never to do so again. With Dora, it was terribly exciting and then terribly exciting. She played with the thick hairs of his chest as she rested her head on him. He had no desire to flee anywhere.

"Marry me, marry me, marry me," he pleaded. "We will be each other's wealth."

"No, we will only be poor and isolated. You don't know what that's like. I do, and I don't want you to go through it."

Into that amorous standstill was born their little Gaspar. If it were not for his strenuous pleading she would have been dismissed from his uncle's household when it was discovered that she was with child. His father had been his sole supporter, telling him to live his love for Dora, in precise opposition to his uncle's silent opprobrium. Dora was relegated to invisible duties deep within the kitchen. Gaspar lived equally invisibly in the Lobo household, invisibly loved by his father, who invisibly loved his mother.

Tomás visited as often as he decently could. Dora and Gaspar came to see him in the Alfama on his days off. They would go to a park, sit on a bench, watch Gaspar play. On those days they were like a normal couple. He was in love and happy.

As he passes a tram stop, a tram rumbles up on its rails, a transportation newness hardly three years old, shiny yellow and electric. Commuters rush forward to get on it, commuters hurry to get off it. He

avoids them all—except one, into whom he crashes. After a quick interaction in which mutual apologies are proffered and accepted, he moves on.

The sidewalk has several raised cobblestones but he glides over them easily.

His foot strikes the leg of a café chair. It is bumped, nothing more.

Death took Dora and Gaspar one unyielding step at a time, the doctor summoned by his uncle expending his skills to no avail. First a sore throat and fatigue, followed by fever, chills, aches, painful swallowing, difficulty breathing, convulsions, a wild-eyed, strangled losing of the mind—until they gave out, their bodies as grey, twisted, and still as the sheets they'd thrashed in. He was there with each of them. Gaspar was five years old, Dora was twenty-four.

He did not witness his father's death a few days later. He was in the music room of the Lobo house sitting silently with one of his cousins, numb with grief, when his uncle entered, grim-faced. "Tomás," he said, "I have terrible news. Silvestro...your father, has died. I have lost my only brother." The words were only sounds but Tomás felt crushed physically, as if a great rock had fallen on him, and he keened like a wounded animal. His warm bear of a father! The man who had raised him, who had countenanced his dreams!

In the course of one week—Gaspar died on Monday, Dora on Thursday, his father on Sunday—his heart became undone like a bursting cocoon. Emerging from it came no butterfly but a grey moth that settled on the wall of his soul and stirred no farther.

There were two funerals, a paltry one for a servant girl from the provinces and her bastard son, and a rich one for a rich man's poor brother, whose lack of material success was discreetly not mentioned.

He does not see an approaching carriage as he steps off a curb, but the driver's cry alerts him and he scampers out of the way of the horse.

He brushes against a man standing with his back to him. He raises his hand and says, "My apologies." The man shrugs amiably and watches him go.

One step at a time, every few steps turning his head to glance over his shoulder at what lies onward. Tomás makes his way to Lapa walking backwards.

"Why? Why are you doing this? Why don't you walk like a normal person? Enough of this nonsense!" his uncle has cried on more than one occasion. In response Tomás has come up with good arguments in defence of his way of walking. Does it not make more sense to face the elements—the wind, the rain, the sun, the onslaught of insects, the glumness of strangers, the uncertainty of the future—with the shield that is the back of one's head, the back of one's jacket, the seat of one's pants? These are our protection, our armour. They are made to withstand the vagaries of fate. Meanwhile when one is walking backwards, one's more delicate parts—the face, the chest, the attractive details of one's clothing—are sheltered from the cruel world ahead and displayed only when and to whom one wants with a simple voluntary turn that shatters one's anonymity. Not to mention arguments of a more athletic nature. What more natural way to walk downhill, he contends, than backwards? The forefeet touch down with nimble delicacy, and the calf muscles can calibrate their tensing and releasing with precision. Movement downwards is therefore elastic and without strain. And should one trip, what safer way to do so than backwards, the cushioned buttocks blunting one's fall? Better that than to break one's wrists in a forward tumble. And he's not excessively stubborn about it. He does make exceptions, when climbing the many long, winding stairs of the Alfama, for example, or when he has to run.

All of these justifications his uncle has waved aside impatiently. Martim Augusto Mendes Lobo

an impatient successful man. Yet he knows why Tomás walks backwards, despite his test interrogations and his nephew's dissembling explanations. One day Tomás overheard him talking to a visiting friend. It was the very dropping of his uncle's voice that made him prick up his ears.

"...the most ridiculous scene," his uncle was saying, sotto voce. "Imagine this: Ahead of him—there is, behind him—there is a streetlight. I call over my secretary, Benito, and we watch in silent fascination, our minds preoccupied with the same question: Will my nephew walk into the streetlight? At that moment, another pedestrian appears on the street, at the other end. This man sees Tomás walking towards him backwards. We can tell from his cocked head that my nephew's curious way of advancing has caught his attention. I know from experience that there will be an encounter of sorts—comment made, a jest thrown out, at the very least a bewildered stare as he passes by. Sure enough, a few steps before Tomás reaches the streetlight, the other man quickens his pace and stops him with a tap on the shoulder. Tomás turns. Benito and I cannot hear what the two say to each other, but we can watch the pantomime. The stranger points to the streetlight. Tomás smiles, nods, and brings a hand to his chest to express his gratitude. The stranger smiles back. They shake hands. With a wave to each other they depart, each going his way, the stranger down the street, and Tomás—swivelling round and moving backwards once more—up the street. He circles the streetlight without the least trouble.

"Ah, but wait! It's not over. After a few steps the other pedestrian turns his head to glance back at Tomás, and clearly he is surprised to see that he is still walking backwards. Concern can be read on his face—*Careful, you'll have an accident if you don't watch out!*—but also a measure of embarrassment because Tomás is looking his way and has seen him turn to stare, and we all know it's rude to stare. The man quickly turns his head to face forward again, but it's too late: He collides with the nearest streetlight. He hits it like a clapper hits a bell. Both Benito and I wince instinctively in sympathy. Tottering, he grimaces as he brings his hands to his face and chest. Tomás runs to help him—he runs *forward*. You'd think it would look normal, his forward gait, but it doesn't. There is no bounce to his step. He advances with great, long strides, his torso moving smoothly in a straight line, as if on a conveyor belt.

"Another exchange takes place between the two men, Tomás expressing great concern, the other man waving it aside while keeping a hand pressed to his face. Tomás retrieves the man's hat, which has fallen to the ground. With another handshake and a more muted wave, the poor man staggers off. Tomás—and Benito and I—watch him go. Only once the man has turned the corner of the street does Tomás, in his usual rearward manner, resume his course. But the incident has flustered him, evidently, because he now smartly bangs into the streetlight he so artfully avoided a minute earlier. Rubbing the back of his head, he turns to glare at it.

"But still, Fausto, he persists. No matter how often he bangs his head, no matter how many times he falls over, he goes on walking backwards." Tomás heard his uncle laugh and the friend Fausto join in. Then his uncle continued more somberly. "It started the day his little boy, Gaspar, died of diphtheria. The boy was born out of wedlock to a servant here. She died of the sickness too. Then, as fate would have it, my brother, Silvestro, dropped dead a few days later, midday, mid-speech. Already Tomás's mother had died when he was young. Now his father. To be so assailed by tragedy! Some people never laugh again. Others take to drink. My nephew, in his case, chose to walk backwards. It's been a year. How long will this bizarre grieving last?"

What his uncle does not understand is that in walking backwards, his back to the world, his back to God, he is not grieving. He is *objecting*. Because when everything cherished by you in life has been taken away, what else is there to do but object?

He takes a roundabout route. He turns off Rua Nova de São Francisco and starts walking up Rua of Sacramento. He is nearly there. As he swivels his head to see over his shoulder—he remembers there's a streetlight ahead—he looks up at the rear of his uncle's grand residence, with its elaborate cornices and intricate mouldings and soaring windows. He feels eyes upon him and notices a figure at a window on the corner of the second floor. Given that is where his uncle's office is located, it is likely his uncle Martim, so he turns his head back and strives to walk confidently, carefully skirting the streetlight. He follows the wall surrounding his uncle's property until he comes up to the gate. He spins round to reach for the bell, but his hand pauses in midair. He pulls it back. Though he knows his uncle has seen him and is waiting for him, he tarries. Then he takes the old leather diary from the breast pocket of his jacket, slips it out of its cotton cloth, puts his back against the wall, and slides down to a sitting position on the sidewalk. He gazes at the book's cover.

*Being the Life in Words
and the Instructions for the Gift
of Father Ulisses Manuel Rosario Pinto
humble Servant of God*

He is well acquainted with Father Ulisses' diary. Whole sections he knows by heart. He opens it at random and reads.

As slave ships approach the island to deliver their cargo, they have much accounting & housecleaning to do. Within sight of the port, they throw body after body overboard, both port & starboard, some of them limp & pliant, others feebly gesticulating. These are the dead & the seriously sick, the first discarded because they are no longer of any value, the second for fear that whatever illness is afflicting them might spread & affect the value of the others. It happens that the wind carries to my ears the cries of the living slaves as they protest their expulsion from the ship, as it also carries the splash their bodies make upon hitting the water. They disappear into the crowded Limbo that is the bottom of the Bay of Ana Chaves.

His uncle's house is also a Limbo of unfinished, interrupted lives. He closes his eyes. Loneliness comes up to him like a sniffing dog. It circles him insistently. He waves it away, but it refuses to leave him alone.

He came upon Father Ulisses' diary mere weeks after his life was irretrievably blighted. The discovery was a happenstance related to his work at the National Museum of Ancient Art, where he works as assistant curator. The Cardinal-Patriarch of Lisbon, José Sebastião de Almeida Neto, had just made a donation to the museum of ecclesiastical and non-ecclesiastical objects accumulated over the centuries from across the Portuguese empire. With Cardinal Neto's permission, Tomás was sent by the museum to do research in the Episcopal archives on Rua Serpa Pinto to establish the exact provenance of these beautiful artifacts, the story whereby an altar, chalice, crucifix or psalter, a painting or a book had come into the hands of the Lisbon diocese.

What he found were not exemplary archives. Succeeding secretaries of the various archbishops of Lisbon clearly did not dwell overmuch on the earthly matter of organizing thousands of papers and

documents. It was on one of the open shelves devoted to the patriarchate of Cardinal José Francisco de Mendonça Valdereis, Patriarch of Lisbon between 1788 and 1808, in a stuff-all section given the breezy title *Miudezas*—Odds and Ends—that he spotted the hand-stitched volume with the brown leather cover, the handwritten title legible despite the splotchy discolourations.

What life was this, what gift? he had wondered. What were the instructions? Who was this Father Ulisses? When he pried open the volume, the spine made the sound of small bones breaking. Handwriting burst out with startling freshness, the black ink standing in high contrast to the ivory paper. The italic, quill-penned script was from another age. The pages were faintly rimmed with sunniness yellow, indicating that they had seen very little light since the day they were written upon. He doubted that Cardinal Valdereis had ever read the volume; in fact, given that there was no archival note attached to the cover or anywhere inside—no catalogue number, no date, no comment—and no reference to the book in the index, he had the distinct impression that *no one* had ever read it.

He studied the first page, noticing an entry with a date and a place name above it: *September 1, 1631, Luanda*. He turned the pages with care. Other dates appeared. The last year recorded, though without a day or month, was 1635. A diary, then. Here, there, he noted geographic references: “the mountains of Bailundu...the mountains of Pungo Ndongo...the old Benguela route,” locales that appeared to be in Portuguese Angola. On June 2, 1633, there was a new place name: São Tomé, the small island colony in the Gulf of Guinea, “that fleck of dandruff off the head of Africa, long day north along the damp coast of this pestilential continent.” His eyes came upon a sentence written a few weeks later: *Isso é minha casa*. “This is home.” But it wasn’t written just once. The words covered the page. A whole page of the same short sentence, closely written, the repeated lines wavering up and down slightly: “This is home. This is home. This is home.” Then they stopped, replaced by prose that was more normally discursive, only to appear again some pages later, covering half a page: “This is home. This is home. This is home.” Then once more, further on, for a page and a quarter: “This is home. This is home. This is home.”

What did it mean? Why the manic repetition? He eventually found a possible answer on a page where the reiteration was the same as in every other instance, covering nearly two pages this time with one difference, a spillage at the end, a clue that the phrase on the page was an ellipsis that the author completed in his mind every time: “This is home. This is home. This is home where the Lord has put me until He takes me to His Breast.” Father Ulisses evidently had been racked by acute homesickness.

On one page Tomás found a curious sketch, a drawing of a face. The features were hastily outlined except for the mournful eyes, which were meticulously drawn. He studied those eyes for many minutes. He plunged into their sadness. Memories of his recently lost son swirled in his mind. When he left the archives that day, he hid the diary among innocuous papers in his briefcase. He was honest to himself about his purpose. This was no informal loan—it was plain theft. The Episcopal archives in Lisbon, having neglected Father Ulisses’ diary for over two hundred and fifty years, would not miss it now, and he wanted the leisure to examine it properly.

He began reading and transcribing the diary as soon as he found the time. He proceeded slowly. The penmanship went from the easily readable to skeins of calligraphy that required him to work out the meaning of this scribble represented that syllable, while that squiggle represented this syllable. What was striking was how the writing was poised in the early sections, then grew markedly worse. The final pages were barely decipherable. A number of words he could not make out, no matter how hard he tried.

What Father Ulisses wrote when he was in Angola was no more than a dutiful account and

modest interest. He was merely another minion of the Bishop of Luanda, who “sat in the shade on the pier upon his marble throne” while he worked himself to a listless stupor, running around baptizing batches of slaves. But on São Tomé a desperate force took hold of him. He began to work on an object, the gift of the title. Its making consumed his mind and took all his energy. He mentioned seeking the “most perfect wood” and “adequate tools” and recalled training in his uncle’s shop when he was young. He describes oiling his gift several times to help in its preservation, “my glistening hands of artisans of devoted love.” Towards the end of the diary, Tomás found these odd words, extolling the imposing character of his creation:

It shines, it shrieks, it barks, it roars. Truly the Son of God giving a loud cry & breathing his last as the curtain of the temple is torn from top to bottom. It is finished.

What did Father Ulisses train in, and what did his uncle’s shop produce? What did he oil with his hands? What was shining and shrieking, barking and roaring? Tomás could not find a clear answer in Father Ulisses’ diary, only hints. When did the Son of God give a loud cry and breathe his last? On the Cross. Could the object in question be a crucifix, then, Tomás wondered. It was certainly a sculpture of some sort. But there was more to it than that. It was, by Father Ulisses’ account, a most peculiar work. The moth in Tomás’s soul stirred. He remembered Dora’s last hours. Once she was bedridden, she held on to a crucifix with both hands, and no matter how much she tossed and turned, no matter how much she cried out, she didn’t let go of it. It was a cheap brass effigy that glinted dully, smallish in size, the type that might hang on a wall. She died clasping it to her chest in her small, bare room with only Tomás present, in a chair by her bed. When the final moment came, signaled to him by the dramatic stoppage of her loud, rasping breathing (whereas their son had departed so quietly, like the petals of a flower falling off), he felt like a sheet of ice being rushed along a river.

In the hours that followed, as the long night ended and the new day stretched on, as he waited for the undertaker, who kept failing to show up, he fled and returned to Dora’s room repeatedly, pushed away by horror, drawn back by compulsion. “How will I survive without you?” he pleaded to her one point. His attention fell on the crucifix. Until then he had floated along religiously, observant on the outside, indifferent on the inside. Now he realized that this matter of faith was either radically to be taken seriously or radically not to be taken seriously. He stared at the crucifix, balancing between utter belief and utter disbelief. Before he had cast his lot one way or the other, he thought to keep the crucifix as a memento. But Dora, or rather Dora’s body, would not let go. Her hands and arms clutched the object with unyielding might, even as he practically lifted her body off the bed trying to wrench it from her. (Gaspar, by comparison, had been so soft in death, like a large stuffed doll.) In sobbing rage, he gave up. At that moment, a resolution—more a threat—came to his mind. He glared at the crucifix and hissed, “You! You! I will deal with you, just you wait!”

The undertaker arrived at last and took Dora and her cursed crucifix away.

If the object that Father Ulisses had created was what Tomás inferred it was from the priest’s wild scribblings, then it was a striking and unusual artifact, something quite extraordinary. It would do nothing less than turn Christianity upside down. It would make good his threat. *But did it survive?* That was the question that gripped Tomás from the moment he finished reading the diary in his flight after he had smuggled it out of the Episcopal archives. After all, the object might have been burned or hacked to pieces. But in a pre-industrial age, when goods were crafted one by one and distributed slowly, they shone with a value that has faded with the rise of modern industry. Even clothing was no

thrown away. Christ's scanty clothing was shared by Roman soldiers who believed he was nothing more than a lowly Jewish rabble-rouser. If ordinary clothes were passed on, then surely a large sculpted object would be preserved, all the more so if it was religious in nature.

How to determine its fate? There were two options: Either the object had stayed on São Tomé, or had left São Tomé. Since the island was poor and given over to commerce, he guessed that it had made its way off the island. He hoped it had gone to Portugal, to the mother country, but it could also have gone to one of the many trading posts and cities along the coast of Africa. In both cases, it would have travelled by ship.

After the death of his loved ones, Tomás spent months seeking evidence of Father Ulisses' creation. In the National Archives of Torre do Tombo, he searched and studied the logbooks of Portuguese ships that travelled the western coast of Africa in the few years after Father Ulisses' death. He worked on the assumption that the carving had left São Tomé on a Portuguese ship. If it had departed on a foreign ship, then God only knew where it had ended up.

Finally, he came upon the logbook of one Captain Rodolfo Pereira Pacheco, whose galleon had departed São Tomé on December 14, 1637, carrying, among other goods, "a rendition of Our Lord on the Cross, strange & marvellous." His pulse had quickened. This was the first and only reference to a religious object of any kind that he had seen in relation to the debased colony.

Written next to each item in the logbook was its point of disembarkation. A great number of goods were unloaded at one stop or another along the Slave and Gold coasts, sold or replaced by other goods for which they were traded. He read the word next to the cross in Captain Pacheco's logbook: Lisbon. It had reached the homeland! He whooped in a way unseemly for a study room in the National Archives.

He turned Torre do Tombo upside down trying to find where Father Ulisses' crucifix had gone once it reached Lisbon. He eventually found his answer not in the National Archives but back in the Episcopal archives, where he had started. The irony was more galling than that. The answer lay in the form of two letters on the very shelf of Cardinal Valdereis's archives where he had found the diary, right next to where it had rested before he filched it. If only a string had attached diary to letters, he would have been spared much work.

The first letter was from the Bishop of Bragança, António Luís Cabral e Câmara, dated April 17, 1804, asking if the good Cardinal Valdereis might have some gift for a parish in the High Mountains of Portugal whose church had lately suffered a fire that destroyed its chancel. It was "a fine old church," he said, though he did not name the church or give its location. In his reply, a copy of which was attached to Bishop Câmara's letter, Cardinal Valdereis stated: "It is my pleasure to send on to you an object of piety that has been with the Lisbon diocese for some time, a singular portrayal of Our Lord on the Cross, from the African colonies." Next to a diary that came from the African colonies could the reference be to any other portrayal of the Lord but Father Ulisses'? Amazing that despite having it right in front of his eyes, Cardinal Valdereis could not see the thing for what it was. But the cleric did not know—and so he could not see.

An exchange of letters with the diocese of Bragança revealed that there was no trace of an African object per se going through their office during Bishop Câmara's years. Tomás was vexed. A creation that was strange and marvellous at its point of origin had become singular in Lisbon and then, at the hands of provincials, mundane. That, or its nature had been deliberately ignored. Tomás had to take another tack. The crucifix was meant to go to a church that had suffered a fire. Records showed that between 1793, when Câmara was consecrated bishop of Bragança, and 1804, when he wrote

Cardinal Valdereis, there had been fires of varying severity in a number of churches in the High Mountains of Portugal. Such are the dangers of illuminating churches with candles and torches and burning incense during high holidays. Câmara said the crucifix was destined for “a fine old church.” What church would earn that favourable description from the bishop? Tomás surmised one that was Gothic or perhaps Romanesque. Which meant a church built in the fifteenth century or earlier. The secretary of the diocese of Bragança did not prove to be a keen ecclesiastical historian. Prodding on Tomás’s part yielded the guess that five of the churches blighted by fires might be worthy recipients of Bishop Câmara’s praise, namely the widely scattered churches of São Julião de Palácios, Santalho, Mofreita, Guadramil, and Espinhosela.

Tomás wrote to the priest of each church. Their replies were inconclusive. Each priest heaped praise upon his church, extolling its age and beauty. By the sounds of it, there were copies of Saint Peter’s Basilica strewn across the High Mountains of Portugal. But none of the priests had much to say that was illuminating on the crucifix at the heart of his church. Each claimed that it was a stirring work of faith, but none knew when his church had acquired it or where it had come from. Finally Tomás decided that there was nothing to do but go and determine for himself if he was right about the true character of Father Ulisses’ crucifix. It was a minor annoyance that it had ended up in the High Mountains of Portugal, that remote and isolated region to the very northeast of his country. Soon enough he would have the object before his eyes.

He is startled by a voice.

“Hello, Senhor Tomás. You are coming to see us, are you not?”

It is the old groundskeeper, Afonso. He has opened the gate and is looking down at Tomás. How does he open it so quietly?

“Yes, I am, Afonso.”

“Are you not well?”

“I’m fine.”

He works his way to his feet, slipping the book back into his pocket as he does so. The groundskeeper pulls the cord of the bell. As the bell jangles, so do Tomás’s nerves. He must go in, it is so. It is not just this home, where Dora and Gaspar died, but every home that now has this effect on him. Love is a house with many rooms, this room to feed the love, this one to entertain it, this one to clean it, this one to dress it, this one to allow it to rest, and each of these rooms can also just as well be the room for laughing or the room for listening or the room for telling one’s secrets or the room for sulking or the room for apologizing or the room for intimate togetherness, and, of course, there are the rooms for the new members of the household. Love is a house in which plumbing brings bubbly new emotions every morning, and sewers flush out disputes, and bright windows open up to admit the fresh air of renewed goodwill. Love is a house with an unshakable foundation and an indestructible roof. He had a house like that once, until it was demolished. Now he no longer has a home anywhere—his flat in the Alfama is as bare as a monk’s cell—and to set foot in one is to be reminded of how homeless he is. He knows that is what drew him to Father Ulisses in the first place: their mutual homesickness. Tomás recalls the priest’s words on the death of the governor of São Tomé’s wife. She was the only European woman on the island. The next such woman lived in Lagos, some eight hundred kilometres across the waters. Father Ulisses had not actually met the governor’s wife. He had seen her on only a few occasions.

The death of a white man causes a greater breach on this pestilent island than it does in Lisbon. When it is a woman, then! Her demise is a weight that is most difficult to bear. I fear the sight of a woman of my own kind will never again comfort me. Never again beauty, gentility, grace. I do not know how much longer I can go on.

Tomás and Afonso cross the cobbled courtyard, the groundskeeper a deferential step ahead of him. Since he is advancing backwards in his usual fashion, they walk in lockstep back to back. At the foot of the steps to the main entrance, Afonso moves aside and bows. As it's a matter of climbing only a few steps, Tomás climbs them backwards. Before he has even reached the door, it opens behind him and he enters the house backwards. Glancing over his shoulder, he sees Damião, his uncle's long-time butler who has known him since he was a child, waiting for him, his hands open, a smile upon his face. Tomás pivots to face him.

"Hello, Damião."

"Menino Tomás, what a pleasure to see you. You are well?"

"I am, thank you. How is my aunt Gabriela?"

"Splendid. She shines upon us like the sun."

Speaking of the sun, it shines through the high windows upon the bounty of objects in the entrance hall. His uncle has made his vast fortune trading in African goods, principally ivory and timber. Two enormous elephant tusks adorn one wall. Between them hangs a rich, glossy portrait of King Carlos. His Majesty himself stood before this likeness when he honoured his uncle with his presence in the house. Other walls are decorated with zebra and lion hides, with mounted animal heads above them—lion and zebra, but also eland, hippopotamus, wildebeest, giraffe. Hides also provide the upholstery for the chairs and the couch. African handiworks are displayed in niches and on shelves: necklaces, rustic wooden busts, gris-gris, knives and spears, colourful fabrics, drums, and so on. Various paintings—landscapes, portraits of Portuguese landowners and attending natives, but also a large map of Africa, with the Portuguese possessions highlighted—set the scene and evoke some of the characters. And on the right, artfully set amidst tall grass, the stalking stuffed lion.

The hall is a curatorial mess, a cultural mishmash, every artifact ripped out of the context that gave it sense to it. But it lit up Dora's eyes. She marvelled at this colonial cornucopia. It made her proud of the Portuguese empire. She touched every object she could reach, except the lion.

"I'm glad to hear my aunt is well. Is my uncle in his office?" Tomás asks.

"He's waiting for you in the courtyard. If you would be so kind as to follow me."

Tomás does an about-face and follows Damião across the entrance hall and down a carpeted hallway lined with paintings and display cases. They turn in to another hallway. Ahead of Tomás, Damião opens two French windows and moves aside. Tomás steps out onto a semi-circular landing. He hears his uncle's loud, exuberant voice: "Tomás, behold the Iberian rhinoceros!"

Tomás looks over his right shoulder. Tackling the three steps down into the large courtyard, he hurries to him and spins round next to him. They shake hands.

"Uncle Martim, how good to see you. You are well?"

"How could I not be? I have the great pleasure of seeing my one and only nephew."

Tomás is about to inquire about his aunt again but his uncle waves these social niceties aside. "Enough, enough. Well, what do you think of my Iberian rhinoceros?" he asks, pointing. "It is the

pride of my menagerie!”

The beast in question stands in the middle of the courtyard, not far from the lean and tall Sabio, its keeper. Tomás gazes at it. Though the light is soft and milky, wrapping it in a flattering gauze, it is in his eyes a farcical monstrosity. “It is...magnificent,” he replies.

Despite its ungraceful appearance, he has always lamented the fate of the animal that once roamed the rural corners of his country. Was the Iberian rhinoceros’s last bastion not, in fact, the High Mountains of Portugal? Curious, the hold the animal has had on the Portuguese imagination. Human advancement spelled its end. It was, in a sense, run over by modernity. It was hunted and hounded to extinction and vanished, as ridiculous as an old idea—only to be mourned and missed the moment it was gone. Now it is fodder for fado, a stock character in that peculiar form of Portuguese melancholy called *saudade*. Indeed, thinking of the long-gone creature, Tomás is overcome with *saudade*. He is, as the expression goes, *tão docemente triste quanto um rinoceronte*, as sweetly sad as a rhinoceros.

His uncle is pleased with his answer. Tomás observes him with a degree of apprehension. Upon the solid frame of bones his father’s brother has padded his body with wealth, a layer of portliness he carries with jocular pride. He lives in Lapa, in the lap of luxury. He spends staggering sums of money on every new bauble. Some years ago his fancy was caught by the bicycle, a two-wheeled transportation device propelled by the rider’s own legs. On the hilly, cobbled streets of Lisbon, the bicycle is not merely impractical but dangerous. It can be used safely only on the pathways of parks, a Sunday amusement in which the rider goes round and round in circles, annoying walkers and frightening their children and dogs. His uncle has a whole stable of French Peugeot bicycles. Then he went on to procure *motorized* bicycles that went even faster than pedal bicycles, besides making much noise. And here is a representative of the latest of his expensive curios, recently acquired. “Uncle,” he adds carefully, “I see only an *automobile*.”

“*Only*, you say?” responds his uncle. “Well, this technical wonder is the eternal spirit of our nation brought to life again.” He places a foot on the automobile’s footboard, a narrow platform that runs along its edge between the front and back wheels. “I hesitated. Which should I lend you? My Darracq, my De Dion-Bouton, my Unic, my Peugeot, my Daimler, perhaps even my American Oldsmobile? The choice was difficult. Finally, because you are my dear nephew, in memory of my sorely missed brother, I settled on the champion of the lot. This is a brand new four-cylinder Renault, a masterpiece of engineering. Look at it! It is a creation that not only shines with the might of logic but sings with the allure of poetry. Let us be rid of the animal that so befouls our city! The automobile never needs sleep—can the horse beat that? You can’t compare their power output, either. This Renault is assessed to have a fourteen-horsepower engine, but that is a strict, conservative estimate. More likely it produces twenty horsepower of drive. And a mechanical horsepower is more powerful than an animal horsepower, so imagine a stagecoach with *thirty* horses tethered to it. Can you see that, the thirty horses lined up in rows of two, stamping and chafing at the bit? Well, you don’t have to imagine it. It’s right here before your eyes. Those thirty horses have been compressed into a metal box fitted between these front wheels. The performance! The economy! Never has old fire been put to such a brilliant new use. And where in the automobile is the offal that so offends with the horse? There is none, only a puff of smoke that vanishes in the air. An automobile is as harmless as a cigarette. Mark my words, Tomás: This century will be remembered as the century of the puff of smoke!”

His uncle beams, filled to the brim with pride and joy in his Gallic gewgaw. Tomás remains tight-lipped. He does not share his uncle’s infatuation with automobiles. A few of these newfangled devices have lately found their way onto the streets of Lisbon. Amidst the bustling animal traffic of the city

all in all not so noisy, these automobiles now roar by like huge, buzzing insects, a nuisance offensive to the ears, painful to the eyes, and malodorous to the nose. He sees no beauty in them. His uncle's burgundy-coloured copy is no exception. It lacks in any elegance or symmetry. Its cabin appears to him absurdly oversized compared to the puny stable at the aft into which are stuffed the thirty horses. The metal of the thing, and there is much of it, glares shiny and hard—inhumanly, he would say.

He would happily be carted by a conventional beast of burden to the High Mountains of Portugal, but he is making the trip over the Christmas season, cumulating holiday time that is his due with the few days he begged, practically on his knees, from the chief curator at the museum. That gives him only ten days to accomplish his mission. The distance is too great, his time too limited. An animal won't do. And so he has to avail himself of his uncle's kindly offered but unsightly invention.

With a clattering of doors, Damião enters the courtyard bearing a tray with coffee and fig pastries. A stand for the tray is produced, as are two chairs. Tomás and his uncle sit down. Hot milk is poured, sugar is measured out. The moment is set for small talk, but instead he asks directly, "So how does it work, Uncle?"

He asks because he does not want to contemplate what is just beyond the automobile, fringing the wall of his uncle's estate, next to the path that leads to the servants' quarters: the row of orange trees. For it is there that his son used to wait for him, hiding behind a not-so-thick tree trunk. Gaspar would flee, shrieking, as soon as his father's eyes caught him. Tomás would run after the little clown, pretending that his aunt and uncle, or their many spies, did not see him go down the path, just as the servants pretended not to see him entering their quarters. Yes, better to talk about automobiles than to look at those orange trees.

"Ah, well you should ask! Let me show you the marvel within," replies his uncle, leaping up out of his seat. Tomás follows him to the front of the automobile as he unhooks the small, rounded metal hood and tips it forward on its hinges. Revealed are tangles of pipes and bulbous protuberances of shiny metal.

"Admire!" his uncle commands. "An in-line four-cylinder engine with a 3,054 cc capacity. A beauty and a feat. Notice the order of progress: engine, radiator, friction clutch, sliding-pinion gearbox, drive shaft to the rear axle. Under this alignment, the future will take place. But first let me explain to you the wonder of the internal combustion engine."

He points with a finger that aims to make visible the magic that takes place within the opaque wall of the engine. "Here moto-naphtha vapour is sprayed by the carburetor into the explosion chamber. The magnet activates the sparking plugs; the vapour is thereby ignited and explodes. The pistons, here, are pushed down, which..."

Tomás understands nothing. He stares dumbly. At the end of the triumphant explanations, his uncle reaches in to pick up a thick booklet lying on the seat of the driving compartment. He places it in his nephew's hand. "This is the automobile manual. It will make clear what you might not have understood."

Tomás peers at the manual. "It's in French, Uncle."

"Yes. Renault Frères is a French company."

"But—"

"I've included a French-Portuguese dictionary in your kit. You must take utmost care to lubricate the automobile properly."

"*Lubricate* it?" His uncle might as well be *speaking* French.

Lobo ignores his quizzical expression. “Aren’t the mudguards handsome? Guess what they’re made of?” he says, slapping one. “Elephant ears! I had them custom-made as a souvenir from Angola. The same with the outside walls of the cabin: only the finest-grain elephant hide.”

“What’s this?” asks Tomás.

“The horn. To warn, to alert, to remind, to coax, to complain.” His uncle squeezes the large rubber bulb affixed to the edge of the automobile, left of the steering wheel. A tuba-like honk, with a little vibrato, erupts out of the trumpet attached to the bulb. It is loud and attention-getting. Tomás has a vision of a rider on a horse carrying a goose under his arm like a bagpipe, squeezing the bird whenever danger is nigh, and cannot repress a cough of laughter.

“Can I try it?”

He squeezes the bulb several times. Each honk makes him laugh. He stops when he sees that his uncle is less amused and endeavours to pay attention to the renewed motoring mumbo-jumbo. There are more venerations than clarifications. If his relative’s smelly metallic toy could show feelings, it would surely turn pink with embarrassment.

They come to the steering wheel, which is perfectly round and the size of a large dinner plate. Reaching into the driving compartment again, Lobo places a hand on it. “To turn the vehicle to the left, you turn the wheel to the left. To turn the vehicle to the right, you turn the wheel to the right. To drive straight, you hold the wheel straight. Perfectly logical.”

Tomás peers closely. “But how can a stationary wheel be said to turn to the left or to the right?” he asks.

His uncle searches his face. “I’m not sure I understand what there is not to understand. Do you see the top of the wheel, next to my hand? You see it, yes? Well, imagine that there’s a spot there, a little white spot. Now, if I turn the wheel *this way*”—and here he pulls on the wheel—“do you see how the little white spot moves to the *left*? Yes? Well then, the automobile will turn to the left. And do you see that if I turn the wheel *that way*”—and here he pushes the wheel—“do you see how the little white spot moves to the *right*? In that case, the automobile will turn to the right. Is the point obvious to you now?”

Tomás’s expression darkens. “But look”—he points with a finger—“at the bottom of the steering wheel! If there were a little white spot there, it would be moving in the opposite direction. You might be turning the wheel to the right, as you say, at the top, but at the bottom you’re turning it to the left. And what about the sides of the wheel? As you’re turning it both right and left, you’re also turning one side up and the other side down. So either way, in whichever direction you spin the wheel, you’re simultaneously turning it to the right, to the left, up, and down. Your claim to be turning the wheel in one particular direction sounds to me like one of those paradoxes devised by the Greek philosopher Zeno of Elea.”

Lobo stares in consternation at the steering wheel, the top of it, the bottom of it, the sides of it. He takes a long, deep breath. “Be that as it may, Tomás, you must drive this automobile the way it was designed. Keep your eyes on the *top* of the steering wheel. Ignore all the other sides. Shall we move on? There are other details we must cover, the operation of the clutch and of the change-speed lever, for example...” He accompanies his talk with hand and foot gestures, but neither words nor mummery spark any comprehension in Tomás. For example, what is “torque”? Did the Iberian Peninsula not generate enough torque with Grand Inquisitor Torquemada? And what sane person could make sense of “double declutch”?

“I have supplied you with a few items that you’ll find useful.”

His uncle pulls open the door of the cabin, which is located in its back half. Tomás leans forward to peer in. There is relative gloom within. He notes the features of the cabin. It has the elements of a domestic space, with a black sofa of the finest leather and walls and a ceiling of polished cedar strips. The front window and the side windows look like the windows of an elegant home, boasting clear, good-quality panes and gleaming metal sashes. And the back window above the sofa, so neatly framed, could well be a painting hanging on a wall. But the scale of it! The ceiling is so low. The sofa will accommodate no more than two people comfortably. Each side window is of a size that will allow only a single person to look out of it. As for the back window, if it were a painting, it would be a miniature. And to get into this confined space, one must bend down to get through the door. What happened to the opulent openness of the horse-drawn carriage? He pulls back and gazes at one of the automobile’s side mirrors. It might plausibly belong in a washroom. And didn’t his uncle mention something about a fire in the engine? He feels an inward sinking. This tiny habitation on wheels, with a bit of the living room, the washroom, and the fireplace, is a pathetic admission that human life is no more than this: an attempt to feel at home while racing towards oblivion.

He has also noticed the multitude of objects in the cabin. There is his suitcase, with his few personal necessities. More important, there is his trunk of papers, which contains all sorts of essential items: his correspondence with the secretary of the Bishop of Bragança and with a number of parish priests across the High Mountains of Portugal; the transcription of Father Ulisses’ diary; archival newspaper clippings on the occurrences of fires in village churches in that same region; excerpts from the logbook of a Portuguese ship returning to Lisbon in the mid-seventeenth century; as well as various monographs on the architectural history of northern Portugal. And usually, when he is not carrying it in his pocket—a folly, he reminds himself—the trunk would hold and protect Father Ulisses’ invaluable diary. But suitcase and trunk are crowded alongside barrels, boxes, tin containers, and bags. The cabin is a cave of goods that would glut the Forty Thieves.

“Ali Baba, Uncle Martim! So many things? I’m not crossing Africa. I’m only going to the High Mountains of Portugal, some few days away.”

“You’re going farther than you think,” his uncle replies. “You’ll be venturing into lands that have never seen an automobile. You’ll need the capacity to be autonomous. Which is why I’ve included a good canvas rain tarp and some blankets, although you might be better off sleeping in the cabin. The box there contains all the motoring tools you’ll need. Next to it is the oiling can. This five-gallon metal barrel is full of water, for the radiator, and this one of moto-naphtha, the automobile’s elixir of life. Resupply yourself as often as you can, because at some point you’ll have to rely on your own stock. Along the way, look out for apothecaries, bicycle shops, blacksmiths, ironmongers. They’ll have moto-naphtha, though they may give it another name: petroleum spirit, mineral spirit, something like that. Smell it before you buy it. I’ve also provided you with victuals. An automobile is best operated by a well-fed driver. Now, see if these fit.”

From a bag on the floor of the cabin, his uncle pulls out a pair of pale leather gloves. Tomás tries them on, baffled. The fit is snug. The leather is pleasingly elastic and creaks when he makes a fist.

“Thank you,” he says uncertainly.

“Take good care of them. They’re from France too.”

Next his uncle hands him goggles that are big and hideous. Tomás has hardly put them on when his uncle brings out a beige coat lined with fur that reaches well below his knees.

“Waxed cotton and mink. The finest quality,” he says.

Tomás puts it on. The coat is heavy and bulky. Finally, Lobo slaps a hat on him that has straps that tie under the chin. Gloved, goggled, coated, and hatted, he feels like a giant mushroom. “Uncle, what is this costume for?”

“For motoring, of course. For the wind and the dust. For the rain and the cold. It is December. Have you not noticed the driving compartment?”

He looks. His uncle has a point. The back part of the automobile consists of the enclosed cubicle for the passengers. The driving compartment in front of it, however, is open to the elements but for the roof and a front window. There are no doors or windows on either side. Wind, dust, and rain will easily come in. He grouses internally. If his uncle hadn’t cluttered the cabin with so much gear, making it impossible for him to sit within, he could take shelter there while Sabio drove the machine.

His uncle presses on. “I’ve included maps as good as they exist. When they’re of no help, rely on the compass. You’re heading north-northeast. The roads of Portugal are of the poorest quality, but this vehicle has a fine suspension system—leaf springs. They will handle any ruts. If the roads get too rough, drink plenty of wine. There are two wineskins in the cabin. Avoid roadside inns and stagecoaches. They are not your friends. It’s understandable. A degree of hostility is to be expected from those whose livelihood the automobile directly threatens. Right, as for the rest of the supplies, you’ll figure out what’s what. We should get going. Sabio, are you ready?”

“Yes, senhor,” replies Sabio with military promptness.

“Let me get my jacket. I’ll drive you to the edges of Lisbon, Tomás.”

His uncle returns to the house. Tomás doffs the ludicrous motoring costume and returns it to the cabin. His uncle bounces back into the courtyard, a jacket on his back, gloves upon his hands, his cheeks flushed with excitement, exuding a nearly terrifying joviality.

“By the way, Tomás,” he bellows, “I forgot to ask: Why on earth do you so badly want to go to the High Mountains of Portugal?”

“I’m looking for something,” Tomás replies.

“What?”

Tomás hesitates. “It’s in a church,” he finally says, “only I’m not sure which one, in which village.”

His uncle stands next to him and studies him. Tomás wonders whether he should say more. Whenever his uncle comes to the Museum of Ancient Art, he gazes at the exhibits with glazed eyes.

“Have you heard of Charles Darwin, Uncle?” Tomás asks.

“Yes, I’ve heard of Darwin,” Lobo replies. “What, is he buried in a church in the High Mountains of Portugal?” He laughs. “You want to bring his body back and give it pride of place in the Museum of Ancient Art?”

“No. Through my work I came upon a diary written on São Tomé, in the Gulf of Guinea. The island has been a Portuguese colony since the late fifteenth century.”

“A miserable one. I stopped there once on my way to Angola. I thought I might invest in some cocoa plantations there.”

“It was an important place during the slave trade.”

“Well, now it’s a producer of bad chocolate. Beautiful plantations, though.”

“No doubt. By a process of deduction involving three disparate elements—the diary I’ve just mentioned, the logbook of a ship returning to Lisbon, and a fire in a village church in the High

Mountains of Portugal—I have discovered an unsuspected treasure and located it, approximately. I’
on the brink of a great find.”

“Are you? And what is this treasure, exactly?” his uncle asks, his eyes steady on Tomás.

Tomás is sorely tempted. All these months he has told no one, especially not his colleagues, about
his discovery, nor even about his research. He did it all on his own time, privately. But a secret yearns
to be divulged. And in mere days the object will be found. So why not his uncle?

“It is...a religious statuary, a crucifix, I believe,” he replies.

“Just what this Catholic country needs.”

“No, you don’t understand. It’s a very odd crucifix. A wondrous crucifix.”

“Is it? And what does it have to do with Darwin?”

“You’ll see,” Tomás replies, flushing with zeal. “This Christ on the Cross has something important
to say. Of that, I am certain.”

His uncle waits for more, but more does not come. “Well, I hope it makes your fortune. Off we go
he says. He climbs into the driver’s seat. “Let me show you how to start the engine.” He claps his
hands and roars, “Sabio!”

Sabio steps forward, his gaze fixed on the automobile, his hands at the ready.

“Before starting the engine, the moto-naphtha tap has to be turned to open—good man, Sabio—the
throttle handle, here under the steering wheel, has to be placed at half-admission—so—and the
change-speed lever set at the neutral point, like this. Next you flick the magneto switch—here on the
dashboard—to ON. Then you open the lid of the hood—there’s no need to open the whole hood, you
see that small lid there at the front?—and you press down once or twice on the float of the carburetor
to flood it. See how Sabio does it? You close the lid, and all that’s left after that is turning the starting
handle. Then you sit in the driver’s seat, take the hand brake off, get into first gear, and away you go.
It’s child’s play. Sabio, are you ready?”

Sabio faces the engine squarely and sets his legs apart, feet solidly planted on the ground. He bends
down and grips the starting handle, a thin rod protruding from the front of the automobile. His arms
straight, his back straight, he suddenly snaps the handle upward with great force, pulling himself
upright, then, upon the handle completing a half-turn, he shoves down on it, using the full weight
of his body, before working the upswing as he did the first time. He performs this circular action with
enormous energy, with the result that not only does the whole automobile shake but the handle spins
round two, maybe three times. Tomás is about to comment on Sabio’s prowess but for the reason
attending this spinning of the handle: The automobile roars to life. It starts with a sputtering rumble
from deep within its bowels, followed by a succession of piercing explosions. As it begins to judder
and shudder, his uncle yells, “Come on, hop aboard. Let me show you what this remarkable invention
can do!”

Tomás unwillingly but speedily clambers up to sit next to his uncle on the padded seat that stretches
across the driving compartment. His uncle does a manoeuvre with his hands and feet, pulling this and
pressing that. Tomás sees Sabio straddling a motorcycle that is standing next to a wall, then kicking
starting it. He will be a good man to have along.

Then, with a jerk, *the machine moves.*

Quickly it gathers speed and swerves out of the courtyard, throwing itself over the threshold of the
opened gates of the Lobo estate onto Rua do Pau de Bandeira, where it does a sharp right turn. Tomás
slides across the smooth leather of the seat and slams into his uncle.

He cannot believe the bone-jarring, mind-unhinging quaking he is experiencing, directly related to the noise-making, because such trembling can come only from such noise. The machine will surely shake itself to pieces. He realizes he has misunderstood the point of the suspension springs his uncle mentioned. Clearly their purpose is not to protect the automobile from ruts, but ruts from the automobile.

Even more upsetting is the extremely fast and independent forward motion of the device. He sticks his head out the side and casts a look backwards, thinking—hoping—that he will see the Lobo household, every family member and employee, pushing the machine and laughing at the joke they are pulling on him. (Would that Dora were among those pushers!) But there are no pushers. It seems unreal to him that no animal should be pulling or pushing the device. It's an effect without a cause and therefore disturbingly unnatural.

Oh, the alpine summits of Lapa! The automobile—coughing, sputtering, rattling, clattering, jouncing, bouncing, chuffing, puffing, whining, roaring—dashes down to the end of Rua do Pau de Bandeira, the cobblestones underfoot making their presence known with a ceaseless, explosive rattat, then violently lurches leftwards and falls off the street as if from a cliff, such is the steepness of Rua do Prior. Tomás's guts feel as if they are being squeezed into a funnel. The automobile reaches the bottom of the street with a flattening that sends him crashing to the floor of the driving compartment. The machine has barely stabilized itself—and he regained his seat, if not his composure—before it springs up the last upward part of Rua do Prior onto Rua da Santa Trindade, which in turn descends steeply. The automobile gaily starts to dance over the metallic jaws of Santa Trindade's tram tracks, sending him sliding to and fro across the seat, alternately smashing into his uncle, who does not seem to notice, or practically falling out of the automobile at the other end of the seat. From the balconies that fleet by, he sees people scowling down at them.

His uncle takes the right turn at Rua de São João da Mata with ferocious conviction. Down the street they race. Tomás is blinded by the sun; his uncle seems unaffected. The automobile pounces across Rua de Santos-o-Velho and bolts down the curve of Calçada Ribeiro Santos. Upon reaching the Largo de Santos, he looks wistfully—and briefly—at the walkers indulging in the slow activities of its pleasant park. His uncle drives around it until, with a savage left turn, he flings the automobile onto the wide Avenida Vinte e Quatro de Julho. Lapa's lapping waters, the breathtaking Tagus, open up to the right in a burst of light, but Tomás does not have time to appreciate the sight as they hurtle through the urban density of Lisbon in a blur of wind and noise. They spin so fast around the busy roundabout of Praça do Duque da Terceira that the vehicle is projected, slingshot-like, down Rua do Arsenal. The hurly-burly of the Praça do Comércio is no impediment, merely an amusing challenge. Indistinctly Tomás sees the statue of the Marquis of Pombal standing in the middle of the square. Oh, if only the Marquis knew what horrors his streets were being subjected to, he might not have rebuked them. On they go, onward and forward, in a roar of rush, in a smear of colour. Throughout, traffic of every kind—horses, carts, carriages, drays, trams, hordes of people and dogs—bumble around them blindly. Tomás expects a collision at any moment with an animal or a human, but his uncle saves them at the last second from every certain-death encounter with a sudden swerve or a harsh stoppage. A number of times Tomás feels the urge to scream, but his face is too stiff with fright. Instead, he presses his feet against the floorboards with all his might. If he thought his uncle would accept being treated like a life buoy, he would gladly hold on to him.

All along, his uncle—when he is not hurling insults at strangers—is lit up with joy, his red face radiating excitement, his mouth creased up in a smile, his eyes shining, and he laughs with insatiable

abandon, or shouts a one-way conversation of acclamations and exclamations: “Amazing!...Glorious!...Fantastic!...Didn’t I tell you?...Now, *that’s* how you take a left turn!...Extraordinary, absolute extraordinary!...Look, look: We must be hitting *fifty* kilometres an hour!”

Meanwhile, the Tagus flows, placid, unhurried, unperturbed, a gentle behemoth next to the outrageous flea that leaps along its bank.

Next to a field, upon a fledgling rural road without any cobblestone finery, his uncle at last stops the automobile. Behind them, at some distance, Lisbon’s skyline stands, like the emerging teeth of a small child.

“See how far we’ve come—and so fast!” His uncle’s voice booms in the refreshing silence. He is beaming like a boy on his birthday.

Tomás looks at him for a few seconds, incapable of speech, then practically falls to the ground getting out of the driving compartment. He staggers to a nearby tree and supports himself against it. He bends forward and a heaving gush of vomit spews from his mouth.

His uncle shows understanding. “Motion sickness,” he diagnoses breezily as he removes his driving gloves. “It’s a curious thing. Some passengers are subject to it, but never the driver. Must be something to do with controlling the vehicle, perhaps being able to anticipate the coming bumps and turns. That, or the mental effort of driving distracts the stomach from any malaise it might feel. You’ll be fine once you’re behind the wheel.”

It takes a moment for Tomás to register the words. He cannot imagine holding the reins of the metallic stallion. “Sabio is coming with me, isn’t he?” he asks breathlessly as he wipes the sides of his mouth with his handkerchief.

“I’m not lending you Sabio. Who will look after my other vehicles? Besides, he’s made sure the Renault is in tip-top running order. You won’t need him.”

“But Sabio will drive the thing, Uncle.”

“*Drive it?* Why would you want that? Why would anyone want to delegate to a servant the thrill of driving such an astonishing invention? Sabio is here to work, not to play.”

Just then the servant in question appears, expertly directing the sputtering motorcycle off the road to stop it behind the automobile. Tomás turns to his uncle again. It’s his blistering ill fortune to have a relative with the wealth to own several automobiles and the eccentricity to want to drive them himself.

“Sabio drives *you* around, dear Uncle.”

“Only on formal occasions. It’s mostly Gabriela he carts about. Silly mouse doesn’t dare try herself. You’re young and smart. You’ll do fine. Won’t he, Sabio?”

Sabio, who is standing quietly next to them, nods in agreement, but the way his eyes linger on Tomás makes Tomás feel that he does not fully share his employer’s sunny trust. Anxiety roils his stomach.

“Uncle Martim, please, I have no experience in—”

“Look here! You start in neutral, with the throttle at half. To get going, you put yourself in first gear, then release the clutch slowly as you press on the accelerator pedal. As you gather speed, you move up to second gear, then third. It’s easy. Just start on flat ground. You’ll get the knack in no time.”

His uncle steps back and fondly contemplates the automobile. Tomás hopes that during this pause his kindness and solicitude will soften his uncle’s heart. Instead, he delivers a last blast of peroration.

“Tomás, I hope you are aware that what you have before your eyes is a highly trained orchestra, and it plays the most lovely symphony. The pitch of the piece is pleasingly variable, the timbre dark but brilliant, the melody simple yet soaring, and the tempo lies between *vivace* and *presto*, although it does a fine *adagio*. When I am the conductor of this orchestra, what I hear is a glorious music: the music of the future. Now you are stepping up to the podium and I am passing you the baton. You must rise to the occasion.” He pats the driver’s seat in the automobile. “You sit here,” he says.

Tomás’s lungs are suddenly gasping for air. His uncle gestures to Sabio to start the engine. Once again the roar of the internal combustion engine fills the exterior countryside. He has no choice. He has waited too long, understood too late. He will have to get behind the steering wheel of the monster.

He climbs aboard. His uncle again points, explains, nods, smiles.

“You’ll be all right,” he concludes. “Things will work out. I’ll see you when you return, Tomás. Good luck. Sabio, stay and help him out.”

With the finality of a door slamming, his uncle turns and disappears behind the automobile. Tomás cranes his head out the side to find him. “Uncle Martim!” he shouts. The motorcycle starts with a detonation, followed by a grinding sound as it moves off. His last view of his uncle is the sight of his ample girth overhanging both sides of the slender machine and his disappearance down the road in a thunder of mechanical flatulence.

Tomás turns his eyes to Sabio. It occurs to him that his uncle has departed on the motorcycle and that he is to leave with the automobile. How then will Sabio return from the outer northeast edge of Lisbon to his employer’s house in western Lapa?

Sabio speaks quietly. “Driving the automobile is possible, senhor. It only needs a little practice.”

“Of which I have none!” Tomás cries. “Neither practice nor knowledge, neither interest nor aptitude. Save my life and show me again how to use this blasted thing.”

Sabio goes over the daunting details of piloting the manufactured animal. He instructs with untiring patience, spending much time over the proper order in which to press or release the pedals and pull or push the levers. He reminds Tomás about the left and right turning of the steering wheel. He teaches him the use of the throttle handle, which is needed not only to start the engine but to stop it. And he speaks on matters Uncle Martim said nothing about: the difference between pressing hard or lightly on the accelerator pedal; the usage of the brake pedal; the important hand brake, which he is to pull whenever the automobile is at rest; the use of the side mirrors. Sabio shows him how to turn the starting handle. When Tomás tries it, he feels something heavy turning inside the automobile, like a boar on a spit being rotated in a vat of thick sauce. On his third turn of the spit, the boar explodes.

He stalls the engine again and again. Each time Sabio gamely returns to the front of the machine where he gets it to roar to life again. Then he proposes to put the machine into first gear. Tomás slides over to the passenger side of the driving compartment. Sabio does the necessary manoeuvres; the gears sigh consent and the machine inches forward. Sabio points to where he should put his hands and where he should press his foot. Tomás moves into place. Sabio works his way out of the driver’s seat onto the footboard, nods gravely at him, and steps off the automobile.

Tomás feels cast off, thrown away, abandoned.

The road ahead is straight and the machine grunts along noisily in first gear. The steering wheel is a hard, unfriendly thing. It shakes in his hands. He tugs it one way. Is it left? Is it right? He can’t tell. He’s barely able to make it move. How did his uncle do it so easily? And keeping the accelerator pedal pressed down is exceedingly tiresome; his foot is starting to cramp. At the first bend, a slight curve

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