

THE FIRST DAY

By Maria de Fátima Candeias

*“God said: Let there be light; and there was light,
And God saw that light was good.”
Genesis*

They say I'm special, unique. That I beautify, vivify, transform, finally, I'm helpful. That may be. Perhaps under the influence of the sea, the level of incidence of sunlight on the earth's crust. I do not know, but it interests me little. Importance lies at another level, more intimate, perhaps, or more humane, I am not quite sure.

What I care about is, for example, old Cacilda, eternally sitting behind the window, stretching her watery eyes on the perennial olive grove, attentive to foliage shivering in the passing breeze and the silvery flickers that I raise, in eager search for the first olives, still green, that will yield tasty olive oil, in which she dips bits of bread that make her nostalgic for the harvest, when her body was not yet complaining, the satisfaction of collecting blankets full of them after the branches were beaten, helping carry them to the press; those that her father brought home in a pail were used for brine, or eaten sliced, still acidic, sprinkled with oregano. Olive oil was gold, spared and idolised, gazed once and again in small bottles that I crossed, you would admire the colour, body, transparency, odour, and savour it softly, as a rare delicacy.

She is also happy about the birds flitting over the olive grove, hopping from branch to branch or drawing in the skies in their agile and light dances, acrobatic swallows, the tenacious and thoughtful kite, the canny blackbird, the cheeky magpies, the orange-chested robins, the skittish sparrows. The brothers, while young lads, pitilessly caught monarchs, in ribs where they would stick the bait, an alate, similar to a very large ant but with wings. The first would come, peck on it and wham, the rib would close on the poor thing, leaving it alive and yet within its concave. They would then take it out, pass a thread through the holes in its beak and lock it near the ribs, again armed with new bait. The hapless bird would hoot and call others, and you would see them running towards the bait and being hunted. They would twist their necks and keep them in a bag. When the amount was enough for lunch, they would hurry home and eat them fried with rice, they are chubbier than

sparrows and have more meat, but they are also more beautiful, with white chests, coppery heads, brown and white wings. But monarchs don't come until September, when swallows depart. Comb the earth, imagining childhood salamanders, hidden under rocks near the stream, which I wanted to catch because I found them beautiful with their yellow spots. But you won't see them here, they are creatures of water, not of this dryness where even heathers find it hard to grow. Sometimes a weasel is spotted squeezing through to its lair, but one disbelieves, this is a nocturne animal, it stops by the hill where there are gaps and slopes and cubby holes to catch its prey.

Furthermore, her eyes travel through the striking blue sky, the vastness spotted by cork oaks with their bark, which her father used to make houses and dolls for her, all the way to the horizon where the mountain is diluted. What would she be without me? Full days always there, a quiet sigh pacing her thought, trembling fingers brushing against the forehead or face, in a gesture of one that dives into ancient times when pain has blurred slowly and only benign memories remain. Cacilda is almost a centenarian. She hardly moves, has poor hearing, but her look retains the sharpness of old. So she sits down by the window at dawn and stays there until I withdraw complacently and night removes shapes and colours. Given that her house is one of the last in the village, few pass by it, but they always wave at her, with the smile of one that finds security in the immutable comfort of the hearth. And she raises her emaciated fingers as if to say 'I'm still here.' And she remembers. She remembers the past, when Ti Francisco dragged the loaded hinny to the mill and greeted feigning taking his hat. A hinny or jennet, her father used to say, is the offspring of a horse and a jenny. Or of a donkey and a mare, she would add. No, girl, the donkey is too short for the mare, he can't reach it. And the father would laugh. She was tiny then, she didn't have all the brothers that would come to be, but her father spoke as if she were grown up, put his hand on her head, and caressed her braids in which I would multiply golden sparkles.

If by chance Ti Joaquim prowled by, who as a kid helped in mass, he would release a laughing growl, proud of Latin from Ecclesiastes reduced to two words. 'Ah, *vanitas, vanitatis*, these braids will be your undoing, girl, if I were your father I would curt them, just in case...!'

But no, neither her father cut her braids nor were they her undoing, as one can't call that to the secret crush on one of the teacher's sons. I had my share of responsibility in the case, because it was June and I would begin the intense and

sharp morning and extol everything I touched, Cacilda was startled when I shined on the boy's blue eyes, as he came out the door she was about to knock on, eyes as the little girl had never seen, or so she thought, so fluid and gentle, so clear and bright, smiling at her with a cheerful voice.

'Hello, come in. My mother is around.' And taking a step back, he raised his tone. 'Mother, Cacilda is here!' Then, staring at her again, always with a smile. 'Good work and see you soon!'

And he left. She stood still, bound by those eyes that she would say were like the sea, if she had ever seen it, but she had never left there, she knew only what she had learnt at school, the scarce images that did not convey the immensity, movement and swell. And she imagined it as a very big river, so big that it scared her. The voice of Dona Leopoldina snapped at the top of the staircase to call her, and thus began her work at the teacher's home, and her passion, as all day long the boy's eyes wouldn't leave her, especially since she saw him again at lunchtime, albeit fleetingly. And summer slipped, passing each other in the hallway, the living room, the kitchen, with a mere. 'Hello, Cacilda,' or 'Good morning, Cacilda,' 'See you tomorrow, Cacilda,' which she would answer skittishly, her heart wildly stunning her, leaving her giddy and flushed. She would pay inordinate attention to dialogues in which his name arose, as she composed his story as the eldest son, preparing to go to Lisbon to study (and she would miss him in anticipation), a good boy, playful, well mannered, to whom every girl that he wanted would surely surrender, so beautiful was he and with those eyes. When he finally left for the capital, she thought she was going to die, lost her appetite, slept little and poorly, got baggy-eyed. The teacher called her father, telling him that maybe he should take her to the doctor. She feared the worst, her secret unravelled, shame annihilating her, and persuaded both men that it was the hot summer that made her ill, and had taken her appetite. And she promised that she would be fine in a week. Her father looked at her suspiciously, but the teacher smiled.

'Very well, I give you one week. If until then you are not better, you will go to the doctor, is that understood?'

The truth is that, whether or not it was the scare, Cacilda began to eat again and got better, although every night she would fall asleep on a silently tear soaked cushion. Shortly after New Year, the scandal burst. She heard one sentence here, another one there, and listened at doors, eavesdropping, because she realised that

the problem lay in his blue eyes. And joining pieces and conclusions, she learned that the teacher had received a letter from Lisbon, from someone warning him that his son was a rogue, spent his allowance in the theatre, on a carriage that he had hired, skipped school and was mired in debt. In a gust of wind, the teacher left for the capital, promising his wife that he would bring the child back, do or die. And so it was. Two days later they returned, José clogged and crestfallen. And it was revolution for the family: the elder left school, the youngsters would remain at the school where they were taught by their father; José and his brother would then take care of the ground-floor shop so that he could fire the employee, the third son would live in the hills, in the shepherd's hut, the latter also dismissed, to look after the little flock of goats, and come home on Saturdays only. The only girl would replace Cacilda in the housework, and Leopoldina would have to scrimp, contain all expenses, invent inexpensive meals.

'I gave my word,' the teacher said. 'We have two years to pay for what I borrowed, because the debts were cleared in Lisbon, and to restore our finances so that schooling can be resumed. The situation is serious, I hope you understand that it depends on each of us to make a success of this.'

Cacilda was stunned. Now that he was back, she would be leaving. She faintly crawled to the kitchen to capsize a mug of fresh water and sat, waiting. She knew that the lady would come from the room to dismiss her and had no energy to move.

She scurried home, to tell her parents what had happened. Her mother made a gesture of unimportance.

'Life is like that, when you least expect things happen. Don't worry, they will make do.'

Her father patted her head. 'Life is unfair, those that least deserve are those that suffer most, the teacher did not deserve this, he is a good man and righteous as there are few and well, he did not deserve this. But don't fret, lass, look, I for one am happy to have you back here all day, helping brighten the home. As for the money, we don't need it, we were gathering it for your future, not one penny was spent.' Her father smiled, 'Come on, throw it behind your back, let bygones be bygones, think of tomorrow, which will be better.'

I turned pale at supper, when the girl burst and let out what she had been churning all afternoon. 'O father! If you and mother let me, I could drop by the

teacher's in the morning to help clean, the girl is so small that I don't know how she will cope, they would not have to pay me anything, I would just help a little and leave.'

Then Cacilda stared at one parent and the other, the palms of her hands wet, hardly breathing. Silent, in a locked gesture of incomprehension and surprise, they also looked at her, her mother scrutinising what the words failed to tell, going after something that was hidden and unknown and eluded her, the father searching for the right answer.

'And do you think that the teacher would accept that, having you work without pay? Nah, I don't think so, he might even be offended...'

Determined, his daughter interrupted him. 'Let me go talk to him, Father, I will convince him, you'll see, at least let me try, you won't miss much...'

Father cleared his throat, scratched his head, looked out the window as the dark filled in, then took her hands. 'Do know what your problem is? You have too soft a heart, but I'd rather that than it be like stone. If your mother agrees, for me, you can go, but think through what you're going to reason about and how. So, woman, won't you say anything?'

She stared at him, determined. 'What do you want me to say? I don't agree, but if you consent, consented it is.'

He put a piece of bread to his mouth, like a full stop.

The next day, the girl stood at the school gate and as soon as the teacher left, said, 'Good afternoon, teacher, I am here to ask you a favour.'

The teacher stopped, puzzled. 'And what favour is that?'

Cacilda gained courage. 'But first, please, I must ask you a question.'

'Oh yes? Well, let it out.'

'Teacher, do you remember me at school, when I was your student?'

'Crikey, how could I not remember?'

'And how was I, I mean, was I a good student or not?'

'But are you right in the head? Did I not tell your father that you should carry on learning? That you were intelligent and hardworking and that it would be a shame to stop at fourth grade?!'

'You did, I know, this was just to see if you remembered... because the favour was ... I wanted to see if you could give me some lessons, sir, things I did not learn

at school, and in return I would work at your home, for example, you could give me one lesson per week and every morning I would help clean.'

The teacher looked afar, then at the floor, chewing on words that were stuck in his throat. Then stared at her. 'Look, Cacilda, I should ask you why you did not think of that until now, six years after having finished school, but I will not ask that, as goodness must be respected and revered. Just tell me, does your father know and consent?'

She did not hesitate. 'Yes, he does.'

'Then give me a handshake to close the deal, although it seems a bit unbalanced to me, so many mornings working for just one lesson.'

'No, no, it's nothing, because what you will teach me is worth a lot more than anything I can do at your place!'

The teacher laughed. 'Well, you have thought it through, I see. Very well, let's say Saturday, at around four o'clock, you knock on my door and I'll see what you can learn until supper. What do you think?'

'I think the world of it, teacher!' And stretching her neck she gave him a quick kiss on the cheek and ran away, still shouting. 'Tell Dona Leopoldina that I will be there tomorrow as usual!' And she ran down the street without feeling the ground beneath her feet.

This lasted for two years, José would come in a rush and then go away again, Cacilda rejoicing whenever she went to the shop to get something or run errands, her head telling her she was foolish, José hardly knew that she existed, and the heart screaming that it was him and him alone, and there would never be another. At the end of that time, with his finances recovered, the teacher moved with his family to Oporto, seeking to allow the older children to enter university, and she knew, with the hardness of a stone, that it was the end. Not of her passion, which would live on in the innermost of her heart for the rest of her life, but of that bewilderment, the dream she had lived, the magic that had suspended her reality and upheld her in a happy existence. And she clung to reminiscence, the drizzling memory not only of José but of his family, the lessons with the teacher, during which she had discovered a man that she had not met at school, in whom kindness mingled with irreverent humour and mischievous joy, tempering the seriousness and respect that he inspired. The lessons were fabulous conversations about various topics, roaming from science to geography, philosophy, literature, art, everything that, from a trifle

like my impact on the dial of a clock, gave the schoolmaster a pretext to teach. Cacilda remembered it all, mitigating the pain that would leave her mute and stung with the frenzy of work, unstopping, in the field with her father, at home with her mother, both introverted, unable to suspect what caused this to happen. And such was the girl's concern even towards neighbours, that she became a favourite in the village, because she helped everyone, in life and in death, in sickness and in health. She would deny nothing, she did not know fatigue. And they began to call her our guardian angel.

Time passed. Five years later, the anxiety and overwhelming pain that gnaws everything from the inside softened, she would fall asleep without tears, a little peace involved the memories of the past. Days were added to days, youth vanished and when her parents died she was alone. Later on, in old age, a niece took her home. She still lives there in a sweet understanding.

She spends her days inside the window, while I do not disappear. And she remembers, she remembers always, but for unseen reasons, is the teacher and his wife, more than José, that come to her, she lays out apple slices in the sun in trays covered with pure white cloths, which would become sweet and one would chew with pleasure, he, an uncommon personality, hanging from the ceiling bunches of grapes, with the same affection with which he threw into the well, with a naughty smile, to cool them off, watermelons that he knew would split in two, or pruning the peach tree insistently, because it always seemed dishevelled, until there was nothing left. And she laughs alone when she visualises it as if it were present, the scene several times repeated, he, on the street, facing a neighbour with whom he crossed ways and to whom he asked, politely, how she was, then having to listen to an endless list of complaints, ranging from toothache to rheumatism and from deafness to leg pain.

Then, with as serious a look as the situation demanded, he would reply, 'Look, I'll give you a prescription that will free you from all evil. Wash a pan very thoroughly, pour water into it, add a bay leaf and a drizzle of olive oil. Put it on the stove with three straws, three goat droppings, three of my farts and as many of yours.'

At which point the target of the joke turned her back and moaned. Fare thee well, there you are with your mischief, a creature can't complain.'

I care about Cacilda – as a part of the whole – because, more than being the Mediterranean light deemed special, I am the one that allows her to see beyond the window pane, and by seeing, remember, and by remembering, live.