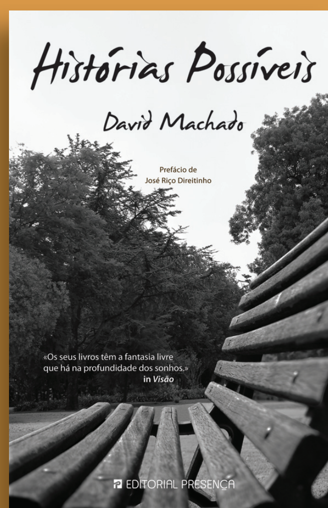
Possible stories
The giant's theatre of fantasy
David Machado

PHOTO: JOANA MACHADO



Histórias possíveis
[POSSIBLE STORIES]
Lisbon: Editorial Presença, 2008;
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O fabuloso teatro do gigante
[THE GIANT'S THEATRE OF FANTASY]
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David Machado

David Machado was born in Lisbon in 1978. He is the author of a novel, *The giant's theatre of fantasy*, and a book of short stories, *Possible stories.* In 2005 his children's story *The night of the invented animals* received the Branquinho da Fonseca Prize, awarded by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation and the weekly *Expresso.* Since then he has written two more children's stories, *The flying bed's four commanders* and *A green man in a very deep hole.* In 2007 his short story "A noite repetida do Comandante" [The Commander's repeated night] was chosen as Portugal's entry in the Scritture Giovani section of the Italian Festivaletteratura, in which the Guardian Hay Festival (UK), the Bjørnsonfestivalen Molde og Nesset (Norway), and the Internationales Literaturfestival Berlin (Germany) collaborated. He has translated works by Adolfo Bioy Casares and Mario Benedetti.

"David Machado's style is free of all pretentions, the style of someone who writes because he likes to write and tells stories because he must tell them. He recently published the book *Possible Stories*, a showcase for his exceptional talent for telling stories whose characters are influenced by subtle events that border on the bizarre".
"It is with satisfaction that we acknowledge David Machado's presence in the literary world. He is a breath of fresh air who reminds us, in his inventiveness, of the pleasure we get from reading good stories".
Semanário

"His stories have the free fantasy that is found in the depths of dreams".
Visão

"David Machado tells stories, the kind of which literature is made. But even more important than telling them is knowing how to tell them".
José Riço Direitinho

"Fabulous is the word for this book (...) with its contagious joy, and an ability to charm long absent from the Portuguese literary scene".
Actual/Expresso

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DIAMANTINO'S SILENT WORLD

The day I met Diamantino Lobo he hadn't heard anything that was going on around him for over six years. He spent his mornings like a palace guard at the entrance to the bus station, sitting on a three-legged stool that the ticket agents had put there for him because one day they were realized with a tremendous shock that this old man with the broad stare was on his feet from six in the morning until noon watching the commuters go off to work in Lisbon. They put it there so he could alternate between his lower back pain and the pain in his soul. At first they were suspicious about Diamantino's homeless air and the delirious intensity with which he watched the passengers march off like troops to the city. They had thrown him out of the station a few times, in the face of his absolute refusal to complain. Then one morning they realized there was nothing devious about his coming there. He didn't beg, he wasn't lost, he wasn't even hopelessly insane: he came because, like so many people, he was lonely. That's when they gave him the stool. He sat down on it and went on sitting there every morning without fail, and no one who spends time at the station doubts that he will continue to do so until the end of his days.

They told me that every afternoon, come rain or shine, he goes over to the abandoned dock on the other side of the wharf and stands there watching the flowing waters of the Tagus, thinking about love and death and the death of love. That's what people say in the city, because in point of fact no one ever kept him company during his evening solitude, so Diamantino's enigmatic afternoons are just more fodder for the gossip-mill, like the red-headed woman who weeps at her window every day around noon, or the three sardine fishermen who launch their boat at dawn and return an hour later with empty buckets and a look of virile lust on their faces. Many months later, when I had my first conversation with him, I couldn't resist asking him about this poetic rumor.

"They're not too far from the truth", he explained with sincerity in his whispery voice. "But in fact I'm more practical than that. When I look at the river I think about killing myself".

At the time I thought he was trying to shock me, or maybe to feed the slow-burning fires of gossip. As the weeks went by, however, I acknowledged that not only did he have every reason to contemplate killing himself, it was truly odd that he hadn't done it yet. Because although he wasn't crazy, he suffered as if he were.

It had all started with a stupid whim in his calm old age. Right before his seventy-second birthday he had felt the first pain of this agreeable age, a shrill, piercing whistle in his ears that made him want to bury his head in the ocean side sand and stay there forever. The doctor at the retirees' clinic had diagnosed the commonest kind of ear infection, which could be cured in a little over two months. He prescribed some miraculous pain-killing drops that Diamantino should put off using until he couldn't stand the pain any more. He should also plug his ears with cotton for as long as his agony lasted.

There followed two months of intense pain, which Diamantino only survived thanks to his wife's diligent care. Eugénia was a robust woman, ten years younger than her husband, whose dedication and devotion to him went beyond the bounds of common sense. They say she slept with her hands cupped over her husband's ears, to protect them from the night air, and that the morning he walked into the kitchen bleeding from his left ear she hauled him off to the clinic by herself, because she was afraid the speed of the bus would cause an explosion inside his head. Toward the end of his illness, he looked deep into her soul, thanked her, told her he loved her very much, and then informed her that he had decided not to remove the plugs from his ears because he had grown accustomed to living in that world of silence, and even water rushing through the drains in the walls bothered him. Eugénia worried, thinking that her husband's ears had become too sensitive. She feared that any particularly loud noise would make him deaf. She spoke with the doctor, and he explained that this wasn't the case, quite the opposite: Diamantino's hearing was weaker, and it was likely to get worse. "It must be some fixation of his", he concluded.

Indeed it was a fixation, but it was based – down to the most trivial logical detail – on arguments that left no room for Eugénia to object. Nevertheless she protested to the extent her strength and verbal powers allowed, until he abandoned logic altogether and asked her as sweetly as he had asked her to marry him forty years earlier: "Let me live like this. It's all so peaceful, I feel like a cloud". Eugénia got up without uttering a word, and he understood that he had her consent to go on levitating in his silent world. And even though that night Eugénia wept for hours on end, he didn't hear a thing because of the plugs in his ears.

A passenger I didn't know who rode into Lisbon one morning next to me told me that when Diamantino stopped listening to what was going on around him he became more free. He would walk into the local cafés, greet everyone with an almost childish glee, and speak with such complete honesty that it was annoying. Abandoning both bias and restraint, he would say things in public that before then he would hardly have said at home, unconcerned with what anyone said about his pronouncements because whatever it was, the cotton in his ears kept him from hearing it. Around this time he realized that he was hopelessly in love with Eugénia, and he took to making declarations of love like an infatuated teenager

whenever he felt like it and wherever he happened to be. It didn't matter if he was at the butcher's or the seafood restaurant on the wharf or the drugstore, he would come out with romantic claptrap like "It's love, love!", or "Come on and dance with me!" Eugénia would blush. She didn't know what to do with this man who in his dotage had started getting fresh with her in front of everybody! She usually had to drag him by the arm into the street and discipline him like a naughty schoolboy. "Maybe you don't hear what they're saying about what *you* say", she told him, "but I do, quite clearly. I can't take this, Diamantino". All the same, deep down, she adored showing off the love that existed between her and her husband.

They had to relearn how to live in each other's company. They both found ways to overcome the obstacles created by Diamantino's self-willed deafness. And they were happy all over again. Until the day when the vagaries of shortsightedness caused Eugénia to mistake the length for the depth of the step at the entrance to the kitchen, and she fell forever, in the final misfortune. Lying on the kitchen floor with two broken ribs perforating her lungs, she still had enough strength to call her husband's name three times. He was reading the paper on the living room porch, indifferent to the bustle of commercial activity on the street below, and he heard nothing. Three hours later he went to see what was the matter, as it was well past lunchtime and Eugénia hadn't come to get him. He found her in the same twisted position in which she had fallen, the skin of her face still burning from the effort she had exerted up to the last second.

"A few months later he showed up at the bus station like a bum, and that's when we decided to put the stool there for him", one of the ticket agents told me in dismay.

The first time he spoke to me, my bus was due to arrive in ten minutes. He came up to me and asked if I had change for a bill so he could buy some candy from the machine. We made the exchange without uttering a word, then he thanked me. I had already heard about this irretrievably lonely man, and impulsively I blurted out: "They say you spend the afternoon watching the river, thinking about death and love and the death of love". The cotton earplugs were crammed into his ears, so he shoved his face up close to mine in order to hear better, so close I could smell his despair. Nevertheless he smiled when I repeated what I had said, closer to his ear. His response was as straightforward and sincere as all the others he gave me over the following months. Because not only did he have no idea what people were saying about him, he could have cared less about it. Incapable of killing himself, he stayed alive for the sole purpose of confronting the ultimate dilemma of his life: whether or not to take the plugs out of his ears. If he took them out, he would hear the din of the world; if he left them in, he heard Eugénia crying "Diamantino" three times before she died.

CLEMENTE'S SCAR

"Difficult loves are always the most intriguing", Clemente explained to me one night.

It was four in the morning and his tireless night owl's soul had risen to its highest perch. He was twirling a glass of whisky in one hand, and his eyes revealed the happiness of the late-night enthusiast. He had one foot on an empty beer crate, like a hunter from another age posing for a photograph with his kill. He was trying to convince me that his most recent love was different from the ones that had gone before, for the simple reason that it was real, and the others hadn't been. He kept repeating himself, it was nothing more than a delirious sequence of cheap romantic metaphors, but I could tell from the gravity of his tone that he was serious. At that moment he pulled up his shirt and showed me the magnificent scar on his abdomen. It was several inches long, pink and protruberant because, as he pointed out, they had taken out the stitches less than a week ago. "It was a hell of night", he said with an eloquence inspired by the six glasses of whisky he'd drunk. He raised his index finger to the black sky: "I have two terrible wounds to remember it by: this one in my belly and another one in my heart". He raised the glass to his lips and left it hanging there for a moment, untouched. Then he closed his eyes and concluded, before downing what was left in the glass:

"The one in my heart I left open".

It had in fact been a disastrous night for him. Because the blow to his heart was fated never to heal. By around two o'clock he had drunk himself into a state of near oblivion with three friends from his high school in Beja. They got together from time to time to get dead drunk and reminisce about the long-defunct days of old. The bars started closing at two thirty, and he persuaded the others to move their operations to a disco at the end of the street. Inside, the music was shattering, making the dancers' eyes vibrate. While his three buddies headed for the dance floor to check out the girls, Clemente took a seat at the bar and ordered another whiskey. All at once his vision clouded over, the world suddenly gave way beneath his feet, and Clemente went looking for it in the sounds that filled the darkness around him until he lost touch with reality.

It was after six when the sharp voice of a janitor sweeping up the soggy litter of cigarette butts and broken glass woke him. He was sitting in a velvet armchair, the lights were on, and the dance floor seemed to have shrunk to the size of a small waiting room in a doctor's office. He went out reeling, lost in the maze of a morning drunk. Eventually he realized that he was also lost in the narrow streets of the most labyrinthine neighborhood in the world, without the faintest notion of how to get back to where he had parked his car the night before. It was the third time that month that he had found himself at dawn in the role of a shipwrecked sailor, so he let himself wander without direction or fear. The first light of the new day bounced off the asphalt a little before seven, and Clemente leaned against the wall of a building to drain the urgent pressure from his bladder. He was still relieving himself when he detected, behind him, the hollowest footsteps he had ever heard in his life. He turned around to face two individuals, who were looking at him wordlessly. A daring impulse surged through Clemente's muscles, and he took flight in the direction his instinct pointed to. He ran a hundred meters before he realized he was out of breath, and stopped. When he spun around the two men were so close he thought he must have only been running inside his head. In a fresh impulse he tried a bullfighter's moves on his attackers, but in the midst of the thrusts and parries he felt the knife blade rip his shirt and then the flesh of his abdomen.

Translated by Ken Krabbenhoft

THE GIANT'S THEATRE OF FANTASY (Excerpt from the novel)

CHAPTER I

He had just awakened from his customary three o'clock nap when they came to tell him that, two hours after celebrating his very first Mass, the new village priest had performed a miracle. He was sitting in a felt armchair inside the stuffy greenhouse he had built two decades earlier, dripping with sweat and drunk on the perfume of the hydrangeas that drooped above his head. He was there because it was the only place in the world where he was at peace. At eighty-four, old Father Augusto was tormented by ghosts that had haunted him his entire life: he saw demonic shadows hovering in different parts of the great house he had lived in for half a century. The greenhouse was a huge shed with glass walls and a zinc roof. In the winter, it was frozen; in the summer it was a steaming sauna refreshed by the scent of hundreds of flowers. A few years earlier, when he first sensed the presence of ghosts in the house, he had moved his desk to the greenhouse, along with a bookcase and a writing chair. There was an enormous window with a matchless panoramic view of the center of town, and he thrilled to watch life taking place in real time. When cataracts painfully affected his sight he slowly lost his taste for writing. By the time he had retired from the rigors of the religious life, he had almost completely forgotten how to compose a text. He had forgotten the alphabet itself, just as he had forgotten many things learned in the course of his life. He pushed the desk against a wall, pulled the books off the bookcase, and used the furniture for the overflow of flowers that travelers still brought him from the distant corners of the globe. Then he moved his armchair, the same one they had given him in Vigo when his influence still reached across the border. There he spent his afternoons, napping and contemplating his village domain, the view blurred by the tragic clouding of his eyes. From where he sat he could see the entire hillside, from the houses on the ridge to the national highway that bordered the village square. That had been his own idea, a failed scheme to put Lagares on the map. He could see the firehouse and men in shirtsleeves waiting for the August fires, and Arlindo's bar with its rowdy customers, and, down below, the Lantern Café, where the upper crust of Lagares congregated in the morning after Mass, and where the old ladies who didn't have a television of their own gathered in the evenings to watch the soap operas. He could see the butcher shop, the grocery store, the sculpture that the giant had created in the center of the square, and the elementary school. From the old days, before his clinical gaze and religious shrewdness had diminished, he retained the habit of predicting the future moral status of the children who were getting out of class: it was his way of gauging how much divine inspiration he had at his disposal. Few people had set foot in the greenhouse, with the exception of Miz Francisca, who had kept house for him his entire life, and Dr. Boaventura Mota, who looked after the plants in the gardens and the greenhouse. It was only many years after the greenhouse was built that the town realized his famous gift of prophecy was due in part to that amazing view. His legendary status prevailed, however, because he did in fact know everything that went on in Lagares, and in the surrounding mountains as well. This was true even though in old age he no longer lived up to the myth that had grown up about him.

Ever since his third heart attack his mind had been shrouded in fog, and his limbs were useless pulp. He stopped reading and writing at the same time, and he permanently forgot to take care of his appearance. In his last year he watched his body decline so far that he was sometimes shocked, upon waking, to find that he was still alive. In the midst of his confusion and fatal forgetfulness he unlearned the vast array of prayers he had memorized over seventy years of continuous devotions and stopped praying for once and for all. He spent his days in the armchair, reflecting on ancestral memories that he was no longer sure were his own. Out of nowhere, in no real chronological order, he dredged up the most sordid memories, thinking they were actual, ongoing events. Many days he woke up and did not know how old he was. He took all his meals there, delivered on a fancy tray by Miz Francisca, who prepared them with the same devotion as always and an endless love hidden from the world since its inception. He spent two hours over lunch because the shaking of his hands made it hard to keep the food on the fork, and he never allowed Miz Francisca to help him at mealtime or any other point of his stagnant daily routine. At the beginning he went to the bathroom twice a day, but he soon realized that the few minutes he spent locked in the toilet next to the kitchen weren't worth the trouble of rising from his throne and crossing the yard to the house, so he took to doing his duty behind the two fig trees at the back of the greenhouse. Aware that the priest was rapidly approaching senility, Miz Francisca ventured into the freezing darkness of the greenhouse at night, when he was asleep, to clean up the mess. He slept all the time: in the winter, underneath a mountain of blankets with a gas heater on either side of him, listening to the rain beat on the metal above, and in the summer in shirt and underpants, swamped by perspiration, though he also wore kneesocks, because ever since childhood he had held the private belief that death came through the feet. These were the clothes he was wearing when Dr. Boaventure Mota arrived with the story of the new priest's miracle.

Father Augusto stirred in place without paying much attention to the news. He felt his back rubbing against the sweat-soaked felt. Without opening his eyes he said:

"In this land of the accursed anybody can perform miracles. Who did he save?"

"It was the giant, Father", said Dr. Boaventure Mota, with a surge of excitement in his voice.

Father August woke up from his stupor.

"You mean Thomas?"

"Yes, Father, the giant. Nobody has seen him except his wife, but it seems he woke up".

Father Augusto yelled something that the botanist didn't understand, but there was no mistaking the rage that flooded his aging eyes. In his eighty four years he had fought terrible battles against men whose power greatly exceeded his own, and he was proud that he could count on one hand the battles he had lost. The extreme zeal with which he fought for his causes was common knowledge, as was the way he besieged his opponents and his childish glee when he won. The story was told far and wide of the cold-blooded, thirty-year long campaign he waged against António Colares Monteiro, President of the Vilar de Perdizes City Council and fellow seminarian from his days in Braga, simply because he refused to let him mount the platform and give a speech during a solemn cerimony in that town. In the days when his word was law in the mountains he let no offense go unpunished. This was the source of the legend that he could split himself into several priests and thus be present in different places at the same time. When he finally abandoned politics he was nevertheless so tired and spiritually depleted that he hardly cared if anyone defied him. He completely forgot all the disputes he was engaged in in his mountain realms, directing his remaining energy to the south. He kept fighting the powerful men in the capital: after the Revolution, he considered them his worst enemies. Over the next ten years, seated in his armchair, he wrote more than six thousand letters, posting them to Lisbon every day in an attempt to unite the decrepit factions of the old regime. He believed with all his heart that it was still possible to overcome the odds, and he believed the old Dictator was not dead but hiding on a secret island in the Azores, waiting for the right time to counterattack. But even this struggle came to an end. Three years earlier, at practically the same time the giant fell asleep, he had retired from the last official position he had held as priest of the Lagares parish, putting the religious life behind him forever and immediately losing his interest in and passion for involvement in any conflict whatsoever. He sank into social apathy. A month after he turned eighty-two, a respected newspaper in the north of the country published an article in which he was mentioned by name. Having always been a public figure, he was used to such reports, which were sometimes cutting or sarcastic but almost always favorable, even if this was only because the tentacles of his influence extended to the editorial offices of the newspapers. Never before, however, had anyone spoken of Father Augusto in such disloyal terms. The article cited in detail the countless controversies he had been involved in and sneered at all the socially-oriented service he had done in the mountains in the course of fifty years. "At last he is retiring", it said, "to enjoy himself at our cost, yet another of those men who took advantage the nation for his own profit". Miz Francisca, who had brought him the paper that morning and already knew what it said because it was the talk of the town, pretended to change the soil in the begonia pots so she could get a close-hand look at the effect it would have. But the priest didn't finish reading the article. He perused it line by line without changing his expression, yawning like a baby, until drowsiness overpowered him, his head rolled to one side, and he fell asleep. That was the day the housekeeper became convinced that her employer was closer to death than ever, and love for him burned in her heart.

The last time he was seen in public was after he celebrated an exuberant Mass much like the ones he used to say in the days when he was the pastor of seven local parishes. His eloquent phrases swooped like bats, back and forth between the church's granite walls: he was like a prophet looming above the altar. As soon as he had finished, however, they watched him shrink to half his size and walk away from them for the last time, panting like a stray dog, his hands weakly shaking and dragging his feet so slowly he wondered if they would get him home. He had a bitter taste in his mouth and felt an overpowering desire to sleep. He was happy nevertheless, rejoicing with an inner pride because in his heart he knew, with irrational certainty, that there would never be a priest like him in the entire history of this parish. In the depths of his senile conviction he went even further: after him, he believed, there would be no other priest in the parish at all, until the end of time. The mountains would always be his. As if the world would come to an end the day he died.

In reality they were his for another three years; after that he didn't have the strength to keep going. Even when he was floating on the swampy waters of indolence he stubbornly stayed in touch with the Archbishop of Braga on the subject of the priest who would be named to take his place. For decades the Archbishop had highly valued his opinion, and Father Augusto drew on his formidable powers of logic to point out problems with all of the names he came up with. In the meantime the church remained closed and unlit. The people of Lagares endured those three silent years with no spiritual leadership, until someone with a stronger will than his rose from the far side of the trenches. The Archbishop telephoned in person to give him the news. It was a young man fresh out of the Lisbon seminary. He was intelligent and well-spoken and extremely pure of heart. "But he lacks experience!" Father Augustus immediately protested. The Archbishop admitted as much but did not give in, because the truth was he had already made up his mind. He explained that it was the young man's obsession with the assignment that had made the greatest impression.

"Since you came on the scene, Father Augusto, I have not met anyone with such a strong desire to take over a parish in the mountains. In fact the similarities between you two are obvious".

Father Augusto's weary spirit was suddenly wary. He thought he would be able to resolve the issue the same way he had with dozens of other candidates – until, that is, the Archibishop told him the new priest's name. He knew then that this was a battle he could not win. The priest's name was Casimiro, and he was Miz Francisca's son.

The day Father Casimiro arrived in Lagares, for the first time in more than three years Father Augusto did not take up his position in the greenhouse: he insisted

on ignoring the event and did not want to witness the reception that had been planned for the other priest. He wandered around the house, leaning on the silver-handled cane bestowed upon him by a descendent of the Viscount of Provence. It had been so long since he had been in some parts of the mansion that he was a bit disoriented, even a little frightened. All those doors, and all those nooks made him feel he was teetering on the edge of an abyss. Father Casimiro rang the bell at the big front entrance a few hours after his arrival. Miz Francisca crossed the huge garden, driven by the yowling of the two lynxes. She took her little partridge steps, her eyes flooded with tears because she had last seen her son when she had gone to visit him in Lisbon, more than six years earlier. And yet she did not open the front door. She hugged him through the iron bars and kissed his face over and over again, then said: "I told them to make up a room for you in Social Center". The young man looked at his mother with incomprehension. He had been born in that house and lived there until he was ten years old, and his mother had lived there her entire life. As the new priest he was entitled to it, because the house Father Augusto lived in wasn't his, it belonged to the acting parish priest.

"He doesn't want you here", she explained. "Be patient, son".

Father August was eavesdropping behind the window curtain. He had been wondering how Miz Francisca would resolve this emotional dilemma, and he couldn't repress a smile of victory when he saw Father Casimir turn on his heel and walk away. He had won the first battle, though he knew that worse was to come. Two days later, when Dr. Boaventura Mota walked into the greenhouse to announce the new priest's miracle, he felt the same churning, childish excitement in his gut that he used to feel, because he knew that the final battle of his life was about to begin. And this time, he had a worthy opponent. His eyes twinkled with malicious pride, and he couldn't help uttering a popular saying which despite everything the botanist did not hear.

"When push comes to shove", he said, "the child of a fish knows how to swim".

When Father Augusto was born, his father – saddened by the harshness of life in the mountians and by his wife's three stillbirths – was so happy that in celebration he drank through the night and all the following day, and he kept on drinking nonstop until, four months later, they found him drowned in a wine vat in António do Mocho's cellar. This was how the prophecy was born that the completely bald infant with the vigilant gaze would be a highly successful man, because after the misfortune brought on by his father no one believed that the stars or the saints could have conspired to grant him the same fate. It would be many years before the prediction was confirmed, but the frequently-appearing signs of its truth were so clear that the entire village preserved its belief intact. When he was three he already spoke perfect Portuguese. At five, when the other children were running around in the dusty streets of the village, which were strewn with dry straw and moist cow patties, he spent his time reading Camões, solving mathematical puzzles, and studying Greek and Latin in moldy grammars of unknown origin that had been languishing on a classroom shelf. His mother was quite upset by this: her whole life she had suffered for her husband's bad luck and was the only person in town who mistrusted the public prophecy. She didn't understand why her son had to be so different from the other kids. She believed wholheartedly that the babble Augusto memorized by repeating it out loud would eventually drive him mad. Consequently she woke him up every day with a superstitious prayer. At ten, endowed with an invincible power of reasoning which he would later perfect, he told her he wanted to leave the town because he already knew everything there was to be learned there. Lagares at the time was a granite village lost in the middle of the mountains. The only way to reach it was by a ruinous dirt road that wound its way through the hills or on goat paths that changed location from year to year. It took several months for news to arrive from the rest of the country because the postal service did not deliver mail that far away, and very few inhabitants ventured beyond the village. Over the centuries the village had adapted to the harshness of the mountains and now lived in a closed circuit of self-sufficiency in which technological progress survived at the cost of local ingeniuity. The inhabitants lived in isolation from the rest of the nation. Time had stood still there since the beginning of the world.

Augusto's mother figured that a change of environment would expand the boy's one-track mind. She sent him to Oporto, to live with a cousin she had never met: all she knew was his name and his family relationship. Lourenço Amaral was a magistrate, well-respected in his field, a man of constrained demeanor and severe expression. He was a dictator in his own home, terribly strict with his six children, punctilious in his adherence to the teachings of the Church, which he followed with the faithfulness of a Franciscan monk. He agreed to oversee the boy's education on the condition that his cousin never question his decisions. Unlike his six cousins, who grew more wicked and rebelious with each passing year, Augusto was not bothered at all by his guardian's austerity. On the contrary, the perfect functioning of the house pleased him: Lourenço Amaral's rules were followed, and if anyone strayed they were cruelly punished. He never allowed himself to be upset by the ruler-blows on the hands, the mandatory fasting, or the hours that his cousins spent kneeling on their hands, until their fingers were ripped to shreds. For his part, Lourenço was delighted to observe how the boy followed his instructions so literally over the years, especially his teaching about religion, by contrast to the endless disappointments that his own sons were to him.

Augusto studied in the School of Commerce until he was sixteen. At that point his guardian took him aside and told him he had spoken with certain people to make sure there would be room waiting for him in the Braga seminary the following year. Under Lourenço Amaral's influence, Augusto was deeply involved with Scripture. He discoursed on the lives of the apostles as if he had lived beside them two thousand years before, and he solved complex theological problems without any apparent mental effort. His reasoning was clear, and he

used words so well that in his mouth it seemed the world was his for the taking. He accepted the seminary offer at once because his intellectual thirst was still unquenched but also because, the year before, he had gotten his hands on a copy of Plutarch's *Lives*, and an overmastering ambition began to grow in him, which he would only abandon a few years before death caught up with him.

In the midst of so many new activities, he always found time for Lagares. He believed that that land had given him life, and his gratitude bound him forever to the mountains. He took an active part in organizing the village feasts in August, inspired by his devout love of the town's three patron saints. His self-possessed way of addressing people and mastery of the written word quickly became apparent. As soon as he was confident of these abilities he began to collaborate regularly with several local newspapers, writing passionate denunciations of the centralization that was overtaking the country and defending the common folk, who were left to their own miserable devices. He supported all initiatives to improve the lot of the region's poor, never hesitating to show his face in public, even giving speeches when he was asked. He was never lacking in common sense, and his exceptional skill in verbal infighting enabled him always to maintain stable and friendly relationships with the institutions of power. With his unshakable command of public speaking he was able to please people in any context, hiding his less frank intentions behind the designs of the Church. At twenty he was the most noteworthy person in town, after a famous soccer goalie who played professionally in England. This is why, when he finished seminary and chose Lisbon for the debut of his priestly career, the news was received with displeasure by the mountain people, who were anxiously awaiting his return.

In reality he was also impatient to get back to Lagares: the years in Lisbon were nothing more than a necessary evil, a means to achieve long-standing goals. He wanted to expand the scope of his influence, to make the contacts he would need if he was later to govern the mountains with all the prerogatives and a minimum of unpleasant surprises. It was in this period that he met some of the most prominent businessmen in the country, as well as the nation's truculent political class and the entire Catholic establishment of the Iberian Peninsula, including the Patriarch of Barcelona, the Cardinal of Lisbon, and the Archbishop of Braga, who became his lifelong mentor. His greatest moment was the day he lunched at the same table as the Dictator. "We need more men like yourself, Father", the young cabinet member had said from behind glasses that hid his bloodsucker eyes, and wrinkling his buzzard's nose. That sentence stuck in his memory, superimposed on all the others he would hear in his lifetime. Many years later, as he observed the people of Lagares through his greenhouse window, it would be those words that kept him going.

He was about to turn thirty-four when he realized that there was nothing more for him in Lisbon. He was already quite famous: tales of how he fought for the people of the north had made him one of the most respected men in the mountains. His long-awaited return was the occasion for one of the greatest pilgrimages ever seen in the region. The festivities lasted nearly two weeks. His renown went far beyond the boundaries of the village, spreading throughout the countryside, and people came from as far away as Montalegre and Póvoa do Lanhoso: they came on foot, on horseback, and on donkeys, in wagons and beat-up cars and buses so crowded that the suspension scraped the asphalt, creating a trail of fireworks. They were all thirsty for faith. A number of families slaughtered steers which they roasted on spits for ten days in a row, and provided barrels of wine to refresh the throats of everyone who had made Lagares their destination. Even before the priest's entourage had left Braga, the thunder of the fireworks echoed in the skies of Cabreira.

Father Augusto entered the town with all the pomp of a royal procession. He arrived leaning out the window of a stylish red MG, slowly waving to the ecstatic crowds, his face wreathed in saintly tenderness. The most noteworthy men in the region paid hommage to him in lengthy speeches, and when they were over he mounted the platform to express his thanks. The silence of the grave descended on the mountains as if God himself were about to speak, and by the time he was finished the people had been carried away by emotion. The Philharmonic Band of Vilarchão struck a mighty chord and didn't let up until the very end, when there was nothing left but litter, well after Father Augusto had taken his leave. When the two weeks of celebration were reviewed, a total of four miracles, two resurrections, and the group appearance of the town's saints had been registered. These sacred deeds were credited to Father Augusto's holiness, even though he never claimed responsibility for them. The mountain people were in a truly delirious state for months, because people started showing up from all over the world to witness the priest's celestial acts. Newspapers sent reporters to stand guard over the village streets, waiting for a glimpse of the famous talking goat, and dozens of excursions were organized for the nuns who wanted to see the town saints up close, in flesh and blood. Nevertheless, when six months had passed Lagares lapsed into its customary silence, because no one ever glimpsed anything that could have been likened to a miracle, and the two respectful bishops sent by the Vatican to investigate the original events were unable to come to a conclusion due to the lack of incontrovertible proof or valid testimonies.

The gave him a three-room house on the grounds adjacent to the church plaza. The former priest had hidden fugitive anti-Francoists there and stored guns that he sold under everybody's noses. A devilish tangle of dense thicket completely surrounded the house; the brambles were so overgrown they had spread up the walls to the roof and wrapped themselves around the chimney. The air smelled of rot, which was later traced to a ferret burrow in the middle of the underbrush, which the other priest had burned out. Moss covered the walls inside the house. Father August threw up six times the first night he slept there, so upset was he by the ruin around him. He got up early the next day and went to Mota's tavern to post a notice that he was look-

ing for a housekeeper to take charge of the place. That very afternoon he interviewed nearly a half-dozen young women.

In all of the places he had lived he had never, until that moment, allowed himself to be tempted by the charms of the opposite sex, which he sincerely believed to be the cause of all the world's ills. After two hours of conversation with the girls he felt a quiver of electric shocks run down his back and legs. He knew instantly what it was: he had been preparing himself for some time now for this very encounter with the devil. In order to resist th repulsive urge, he hired what he thought was the ugliest and most uncouth of the girl. She was a tiny, stunted thing. One of her eyes was bigger than the other, her hair was like old straw, and she was as pale as a corpse. Her name was Little Francisca, and she would be his housekeeper for the next fifty years.

Several days earlier, mingling with the euphoric crowds, the girl had observed this good-looking man with pomaded hair and graceful gestures. She heard him speak from the platform, but not with the same blind attention as the rest of the people: what she admired was the firmness of his voice and the lilt of his words, which she was sure were meant specifically for her. She was eighteen and had some aquaintance with the adventure of desire, having occasionally lain in the corn cribs with local boys who used her solely to learn how the female body was constructed. That day in the crowd, however, was the first time she had felt the burst of love in her breast. Her first day on the job, Father Augusto watched her disappear into the tangle of brush. It took her six days to clear it, and everyone was amazed it took so long: they had no idea the property was that big. The priest's astonishment, however, was in the realization that this little woman's drive, which kept her from standing still, made her work into the night, spurred by a kind of boundless cosmic energy.

From the very first, Father Augusto's primary aim was to bring progress to Lagares. He had witnessed how the living conditions of city dwellers had improved, and he wanted the same for his own people. He also knew that in order to achieve this, he would first have to promote the mechanisms that would make it possible for the world's innovations to reach the town. His opening effort was to request that the little thirty kilometer long road connecting the town to the main highway be paved. The plan was later to extend the road north from the other side of town, thus creating the principal highway between Braga and Chaves. And though he never saw this second part of the project completed, he did succeed in having those thirty kilometers attain the distinguished rank of a National Highway. This was merely the first of many projects that Father Augusto saw through to the end, developing the village on the back of an infrastructure that many of the nation's cities lacked. Its three hundred inhabitants nevertheless turned out to be too few in number for the two gas stations, the Health Center, the branch office of the bank, the heliport, and the hundred and fifty seat movie theater whose wooden seats were only used on the hottest nights, since for many years that was the only air-conditioned place in town. The truth is that the village was the final destination of a modern road that nobody took, lost high in the mountains, destined to be forgotten because neither the almost Olympic-sized swimming pool, nor the riverside beach, nor the soccer stadium managed to attract people from the outside. It was the greatest disappointment in his life: you could get to Lagares from one direction, but not from the other.

Ten years after his arrival in Lagares, the priest found that the house he lived in was too small for the status that both he and the town were acquiring, and he had it enlarged. The work was on such a grand scale that many believed the pastor had invoked divine intervention to get it done. In a few months his modest two-bedroom house was transformed into what was for many years the largest mansion in the area. It stood on solid granite foundations quarried from the earth of Cabreira itself. It had a lovely view of the valley. Three large rooms and a porch that ran the length of the house were added to the front of the original building. Two stories were added for the bedrooms, an office panelled in dark wood imported specially from Finland, and the library, which eventually housed more than six thousand books. The priest had a garden planted in the patios that surrounded the house, although it lacked the magnificence that it would have under Dr. Boaventura Mota's care. When he took his first stroll through the symmetrical flower beds, the priest finally felt he had achieved the glories prophesied on the day of his birth.

His influence reached far beyond the walls of the church because he had spent ten years winning the support of powers-that-be in local politics. A year earlier he had been unanimously elected president of the Lagares Parish Board, a position he held for almost thirty years, which allowed him the freedom to pursue his megalomaniacal projects. At virtually the same time he was invited to join the Town Council, where he remained for the rest of his political career. He was an honorary member of most of the Alto Minho Volunteer Firemen Associations, of the Agricultural Society of the Cabreira and Gerês Mountains, of the Casa do Povo and the Farmers and Foresters Grange. For many years he was a benefactor of the Hospital of the Santa Casa da Misericórdia in Vieira, which he visited twice a month and supported with funds of mysterious origin. Eventually they asked him to be their Purveyor. He remained in the position for several years until the day he discovered that the smell of ether gave him headaches and temporary memory loss and, already an old man, he had no choice but to resign. He kept a close watch over the accounts of the regional Social Services Fund and the Lagares clinic, and he prepared the annual price schedule for the Alto Barroso Ranchers Cooperative. He taught Portuguese at the Lagares school on numerous occasions, and he rose to the position of principal of the Nossa Senhora da Conceição day school in Vieira. He was in charge of drafting the official documents sent by all of these institutions to the government in Lisbon, and after years of writing a daily column for local newspapers he was invited to contribute editorials to the paper in Vieira do Minho, in which he hotly attacked the Communists in the south who were carrying the country to hell in a hand basket.

He was a temperate politican. He avoided signing the most controversial decrees and only as a last resort, to justify decisions that were bound to provoke debate, evoked God and the country's Catholic laws. He had become an exemplary public speaker, an artful manipulator of words who kept faith and ideology separate. Like the assemblies and conferences in which he took part, his Masses were overflowing with people who came from far and wide to hear him. His homilies brought tears to the eyes of the most sceptical and inspired ecstasy in huge numbers of listeners. He provided inspiration for the grief-stricken and revived the most apathethic with nothing more than the gentleness of his flowing sentences. A single blessing from him was good for life: whoever received it judged himself ready to die. In the golden years of his religious work, when his divine energy reached to the heavens themselves, he spent mornings celebrating Mass in seven different parishes, every day of the week. This, too, fed into the legend that he possessed the power to multiply himself.

No one ever understood how he supported himself, how he paid the bills, how he provided food, drink, and gas for the car he used every morning to race from one village to the next, or where he got the money to pay Miz Francisca's salary, and, later on, Dr. Boaventura Mota's. No matter what position he held, he refused to accept the salary that came with it, claiming that everything he did was for the people; instead he presented the money to local charities, at elaborate ceremonies. At the same time everybody knew that his pockets were always full of crumpled banknotes and that he was an inveterate buyer of sacred art and statues of popular saints, with which he decorated his house. Evil tongues claimed that he took bribes from Lisbon for maintaining social stability in the north of the country, no matter the cost. When war broke out in the colonies, the rumor went around that he was involved in a lucrative traffic in Spanish weapons. Nothing was ever proven. No one ever believed that his activities were so extreme as to require a clandestine source of capital, and the story about the Spanish guns grew by association with the former priest's activities.

His greatest source of income were donations made by the people. He received baskets of seasonal fruit almost every day, or cauliflowers, tomatoes, mushrooms, radishes, and sprigs of parsley and coriander. They left sacks of potatoes at his door, and sheaves of corn and onions or barrels of wine and bottles of brandy, cured hams, chickens freshly plucked and gutted, bags of prime veal cutlets, and every once in a while a pig that had been slaughtered in his honor. They also brought him live animals, even though from the beginning Miz Francisca had categorically refused to kill any living creature whatsoever. She was terrified by the sight of blood and did not want to have nightmares about how the animals screeched when their throats were slit. So the animals were left to roam the gardens, eating the roses and digging burrows around the grapevines. This went on for a few years, until Father Augusto got tired of seeing his domain usurped by the animal kingdom and built a zoo whose fame grew until it was known all over the country. When this happened, people started showing up on the weekends for the express purpose of seeing the place, which housed the ordinary sort of local animals, like pidgeons, doves, pheasants, and partridges, sheep dogs and cross-eyes cats with regally-colored fur, polecats, porcupines, and wolves. There were also rarer specimens, like a hundred year old tortoise captured somewhere in the Pacific, a six meter long Burmese python, a parrot whose recorded chatter on several occasions nearly made public the twists and turns of the priest's secret life, a sloth, macaws, peacocks, and hummingbirds. A golden eagle lounged imposingly on an aluminum perch at the entrance, donated by an anonymous nest-robber in exchange for a lifetime absolution. At one time there was an ourangutan who shook children's hands for payment in coin. There were also two lynxes, hard to make out in the shade of the vines, who purred when visitors petted them.

Miz Francisca was the only person who was not at all pleased with the idea of all those beasts penned up only a few meters from her bedroom. After twenty-five years in the priest's service she had become his right arm, even though he had failed to notice this detail, and most of the people in the village had forgotten she existed. The priest no longer made any decisions about the household without consulting her. When it came to the zoo, however, despite her undaunted opposition he went ahead with his plan, which he expressed in a single statement that left no room for debate:

"I want to grow old as if I were in Paradise", he said.

One summer a circus that was passing through the town announced that the dancing bear had escaped and was no doubt wandering around the mountainside. No one in the village was perturbed by this. The circus staff organized searches, patrolling for hills for days to no effect. But the bear wasn't worth missing their scheduled shows, so eventually they went away. A few months later, after the first snow had fallen, the bear was seen poking through the garbage bins next to the butcher shop. People were content to watch its movements, anxious and confused as if they were in the presence of an alien. When the bear showed up the following day, however, they were ready for it. They had taken scraps of meat and sprinkled them with the same tranquilizer they used to knock out bulls. When the bear finally collapsed on the stone courtyard, they loaded it on a cart and took it to the priest's house, where he was waiting for them.

Miz Francisca suffered all night long from the roars it let out as it paced its new cage. Around daybreak Father Augusto woke up with a start, not because of the tune the bear's was singing but because of the girl's gentle weeping, which he could hear through the walls. He got up in the freezing winter darkness and went down to her room. He found her curled in a ball against the headboard of her bed, wrapped in blankets and on the brink of childish despair. The sudden fragility of this woman he knew to be full of courage released the electrical charges in his body once again. He had spent half his life avoiding this moment. Because of her he had felt carnal desire for the first time, a desire that became so intense with the passing years that he had

had to resort to willing women on the outside to douse the blaze. But that morning, spurred on by the grunting of the bear outside and by the girl's gentle weeping, he was no loner able to resist the urge, and wrapped her in the blessing of his arms. He went on wrapping her in his arms night after night, with the same unspeakable desire, until the terrifying dawn nearly two years later when in the midst of his explosive pleasure he noticed the rounded belly of her pregnancy. He had banned her from his bed from that day forward.

Father August had known the love of many willing women. He visited them quite often in his wanderings around the mountains, always in the dark so as not to be recognized, paying them measly fortunes in exchange for the peace they provided. The luxury in which he lived, both physical and spiritual, pushed him toward these nights of madness and sin. The first time he sought one of these women's lips it was out of pure lust. But as soon as he felt her tongue slither over his body, disquiet began to grow inside him, and in order to chase away his terror he reviewed all the prayers he knew in search of the one most suited to the occasion, only to discover, with even greater terror, that there was nothing, now, that could save him from this sweet delirium. After that night he went many years without repeating the experience, fearing he would plunge his soul into the realm of sulphur for once and for all. Then one winter afternoon on his way home he got lost on the roads around Montalegre and had to spend the night at a roadside inn. The sticky-sweet fragrance of the girl who served dinner upset him so much that, despite the frost that covered the mountains, Father Augusto felt his body burn beyond the limits of human resistance. He went to bed determined to deal with the problem before daylight. He waited until everyone had gone to bed, then got up. He crept slowly into the girl's room and went up to her.

"I'll leave some money on the nightstand if you let me lie with you with the lights off", he said.

She said nothing, merely pushed the covers aside to make room for him. The priest never knew if she had recognized him. He used the same silent approach with all the others who followed and never knew if any of them had known him. His habit took control of his will; only around Miz Francisca was he able to resist his body's urgings – until the day they brought the bear and at the peak of his agony he found her irresistable.

For two years they slept together every night. In the halflight of dawn Little Francisca crossed the silence of the house, went up the stairs, and entered the priest's room like a breath of wind. She got into his bed, slipped between the sheets, and lost herself in the heavenly peace of his splendor. Father Augusto didn't have the inner strength to resist the sour smell of her skin, the shy way her fingers caressed the wrinkled skin of his face, and the innocent groans that issued from deep inside her. They surrendered to crushing embraces that went on all night, coming to an end only when the first light of morning appeared. Then she got up and left his room as invisibly as she had arrived, to go back to sleep in her room. The priest forgot her almost at once. His day was filled with Masses and town business, with his virtuoso speeches, his animals, and his plants. But all he had to do was see her walk past balancing a bundle of freshly-washed clothes on her head, her face flushed by the sun and her hair still wet, and he was bewitched again and couldn't wait for night to arrive so Little Francisca could come to his bed again. In the grips of his excitement he even blamed himself for having resisted his employee's charms for almost thirty years. In the same way he was later overcome by guilt when he realized that her pregnancy could not be undone and threw her out of his bedroom at once, with a shout of terror that would echo in her heart forever.

Casimiro was born early one summer morning brightened by the golden light of the mountains, with no witnesses besides his mother and Fernando do Nascimento, the midwife who assisted at his birth, as she had done with almost all the children in the surrounding area. Those days Father August had given himself over to the world of flowers. He spent hours dissecting their petals, studying botanical manuals, and tending the great flower beds that surrounded the mansion. As soon as he heard Miz Francisca's cries he went off to the greenhouse, which at the time was still under construction. He spent the entire night there contemplating the town, the darkness of the valley, and the infinite black veil that stretched over the mountains, trying hard to forget that the child who was arriving in the world was his. He had avoided thinking about this for months. He had never dared raise the subject with Miz Francisca, never even looked her in the eyes for fear of seeing his own sin reflected in them. Fearing his reaction, she had also been unable to confront him. But the certainty nevertheless overpowered him.

Sitting in the greenhouse, observing the immensity of the day's dawning, Father Augusto heard the boy's first cry and cursed the bear. He was sixty-three years old, but he already had the air of exhaustion that would be his till the day he died. His dominion reached far beyond the horizon of the mountains: he had distinguished himself in different venues of northern society, and his name had risen to the timeless plateau of national History. Casimiro was his secret shame. In Lagares it was known that Miz Francisca had family in Braga and that she spent a few days' vacation there every year. When she returned pregnant, people assumed she had met some man there. It was rumored that Father Augusto slept with women, though in fact no one had ever seen such a thing, and none of his lovers had ever revealed herself as such. On top of everything, the notion that Father Augusto had slept with that frail creature with asymetrical eyes and hair like straw seemed too fantastic to be true. When all was said and done, Casimiro was born the son of an unknown father, and nobody really cared. The only thing nobody could figure out was why the priest had the bear put down.

Casimiro was a serious child. He had inherited his mother's funereal looks and stunted body and the taciturn expression that gave Father Augusto the chills. He was sickly, and this made him a prisoner of the house almost the entire time he lived in Lagares. He did not play with other children because Miz Francisca had

heard the story of Father Augusto's father and was terrified that her son had inherited his grandfather's unluckly genes. Because of his isolation, he didn't speak until he was seven years old, and he had the skittish, unpredictable movements of a wild animal. Because he was never exposed to sunlight, he grew up to be as pale as his mother. It was around this time that Father Augusto moved to the greenhouse for good, as he was scared half to death every time he walked into a room and the boy appeared before him. The old priest was constantly screaming for the housekeeper to get the child out of his way, complaining that his house wasn't a day care center. He was more sickened than angry, because at bottom Casimiro had also inherited from his mother the feeling of disgust that his father had for him. He gradually stopped living in the house altogether, going there only to sleep. The greenhouse became his sanctuary: enveloped in the lush exotic flora, he found that the air was purer there.

For his part Casimiro grew up surrounded by his father's things, living his life as if he were learning the role he would play in the giant's theater in years to come. He wandered from room to room, breathing the exhalations of the waxed wood, playing with the statues of saints who had been dead for a thousand years, lying in his father's bed, putting on his cassocks and parading in front of the huge mirror dressed like an apparition in black. When he was six, before he had learned to talk, he taught himself how to read. It was the first sign of the anxious intensity with which he pursued everything of importance to him in his life. He had been building forts out of books that he pulled from the library shelves by the hundreds, staging epic battles between them. At a certain point, between a surrender and the resumption of hostilities, he decided to open one of the books and check out what was inside. He discovered a mysterious code which a few days later he understood to be letters and words, because he had not rested until he was able to decipher it. In that instant, although he could not yet explain why, he knew for certainty that his entire life depended on the outcome of that investigation. After opening thousands of books in an attempt to discover the relationship between those symbols, he found a grammar and an illustrated dictionary that put an end to that game. His mother was not shocked by his ability the day she found him reading a life of Saint Gregory: despite the impression of fragility that he gave, she never doubted that Father Augusto's energy and genius were alive in him. Driven by his solitude, Casimiro had soon read all of the great names of world literature, all the great historians, and all the best poetry. A year after learning how to read Portuguese, he did the same with Latin and French. By then he had turned to theology, the lives of the saints, and the Bible, which he read and reread until he could read no more, since with each new reading he found details that helped him understand the world.

The day he read the last book in the library, he was frightened by the thought that his brain would stop growing well before he arrived at adulthood. He was ten years old. His appearance had become even more sinister, and the other children in the village made fun of him when they saw him walking hand in hand with his mother, imitating how he moved like a zombie. In fact Father Augusto had noticed the same thing the day Casimiro came timorously into the greenhouse for the first time, sticking close to the tulip vases. Even though he had lived in his father's world for four years, reading his books and playing make-believe in his clothes, he felt panic deep in his chest whenever he was in his presence. This was why he had never ventured into the greenhouse. The priest hadn't hear him come him, and his was back turned when Casimiro's grating voice called his name. Startled, he spun around and was even more appalled by the boy's squalid appearance. "There aren't any more books", Casimiro said. "What do you mean, there aren't any more books?" Father Augusto asked. "I read them all", was the simple response. Father August felt another chill go down his spine, as he realized that this little creature had been opening and going through his precious books. But he also remembered the days when he, too, had read everything he came across, and how he had hungered to learn more than the village could teach him. The solution he came up with therefore had more to with his own desires than with the boy's.

"You're going to Oporto, to study", he said, "like I did when I was your age".

In this unpleasant manner he hoped to rid himself forever of this physical manifestation of his greatest worry.

Casimiro left a few days later. The morning of his departure, before his mother took him to the bus stop, he walked into the greenhouse once more to say goodbye to Father Augusto and to thank him for his generosity in financing his studies. He did not know that with the passage of time they would become mortal enemies. They shook hands and looked each other in the eyes, both of them anxious to get away. This was the last time they met in person.

Translated by Ken Krabbenhoft

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