

Helder Macedo



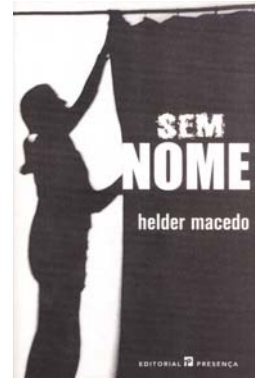
Helder Macedo was born near Johannesburg, South Africa, in 1935, and lived in Mozambique and in Lisbon before settling down in London in 1960. He is a highly acclaimed novelist as well as an essayist and a poet. The first of his five books of poems came out in 1957 and the first of his four novels in 1991. He was the founding editor of the journal *Portuguese Studies* and has published seven books of literary criticism. Helder Macedo has also had a distinguished academic career. He was the Camoens Professor of Portuguese at King's College London until 2004 and a visiting Professor at Harvard and universities in France, Spain and Brazil.

SYNOPSIS

José Viana is a successful Portuguese lawyer who has lived in London since the 1970s and has become accustomed to "considering appearances as the only meaningful way to live". His way of life is disturbed when he meets a young woman journalist, Julia de Sousa, who he sees as the living image of Marta, the girl he had left behind when he went into exile to avoid fighting in Portugal's colonial wars and who disappeared without trace. Julia is caught up in the story of the woman she's supposed to resemble and considers possible narratives of what might have happened to her, sending José a fictitious account of the death of his lost love. In an erotically-charged triangular situation, the ghostly Marta becomes the catalyst not only for the retrieval - or reinvention - of José's past but for Julia's own attempts to come to terms with her undefined and sexually manipulative life. The novel, which is set in the summer of 2004, uses actual political events as emblematic of a time when collapsing ideologies are being replaced by self-serving beliefs.

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Sem Nome

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1 RED OR WHITE

If a woman says she's younger than she is, fine, all well and good. Quite often she wouldn't even be lying, simply aligning truth and likelihood. And since, on the other hand, teenage girls have been turning into adults younger and younger, the wonder is that there are so many nubile young daughters, mothers, even grandmothers, all competing in the same game of false appearances. A wonder or the torments of Tantalus for those who submit to biological calendars, water, water everywhere and not a drop to drink, a lack of imagination or of filters that work. Not for José Viana, however, who had long been accustomed to considering appearances as the only meaningful way to live.

But when a pretty girl who can't be more than twenty-something turns all the possibilities upside down to the point of producing reliable documents to prove that she's old enough to be her own grandmother, or at least an elderly mother, things get complicated, make you suspicious. The immigration >>



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police at Heathrow airport were suspicious and things became complicated for Marta Bernardo, who couldn't possibly be who she'd proved she was. And later for José Viana, who found her again knowing it was impossible that for her to be who she appeared to be.

At this stage, the only explanation that can be offered is that it's dangerous to go through old papers. When you least expect it, out jumps a voice whispering maybe yes, maybe no, alternative lives muddling up the present and the past. If someone we think we knew as well as ourselves suddenly comes along and announces they're someone they never were, or, even worse, if someone we don't know suddenly comes and tells us they're someone they could never have been, it becomes a little more difficult to continue to believe that we ourselves are who we are being.

In fact José Viana's intention had been the exact opposite. He'd wanted to tidy his life away in half a dozen wine boxes, separating what could be left for others and what should go straight into the rubbish bin before he did. He'd spent the last two days feeling that he'd reached the age of pre-posthumous concerns. Although such things didn't normally bother him, it must be a passing mood. The truth was that he continued to look into mirrors with young eyes, it was the mirrors that had wrinkles and grey hair, not him, that was the truth of the matter. Or at least it had been until two days before.

But on Friday, in the democratic underground which he'd decided to take instead of his more usual taxi, a perverse little English girl with a smooth complexion and long flame-coloured hair had uncrossed her long legs not so that he could better appreciate the irresistible invitation of a tattooed flower glimpsed in the cleft, but to stand up and offer him her seat. Fuck democracy! And what about him? Not a lot he could do. He said thank you, accepted, sat down, opened the blushing pages of the Financial Times, and only took another look at the perfidious maiden from the other side of the door after leaving the carriage with chaste eyes. The sadistic little bitch must have been aware of everything, gone rushing off to tell her boyfriend, laughing uproariously in bed, you could see straight away she was a pervert, a tormentor of old men. So on Saturday José Viana began to go through the papers he'd thrown into empty wine boxes over many years.

His legal papers were, of course, properly filed away in the office by the indispensable secretary with whom he'd slept for too long a time for it to be easy to stop sleeping with her, even when he doubled her salary. Thirty years of legal cases from A to Z. He'd taken his law degree in Lisbon at the appropriate time despite his involvement in student politics as a Communist Party militant, had a passionate love affair with a comrade, Marta Bernardo, of whom he'd heard nothing since leaving Portugal in a Dutch cargo ship

to escape from war service and settling in London, recycled into a British solicitor via the Inns of Court.

It seems that in the Inns of Court qualifications are awarded on the basis of the twelve dinners eaten there, in the old monasterial tradition, to mark the rites of passage in the hierarchy of legal apprenticeship until the last meal grants access to the institutional tailoring establishments for black jacket and striped trousers, gown, white wig, gravitas. José Viana, being a greedy man, ate everything very quickly and still had enough appetite to complement his gastronomic training by doing a Ph D thesis on community law at nearby King's College. Since he couldn't go back to Portugal, this was how it was going to be: six foot two of solid legal expertise who soon became the best known defender of the Portuguese community in England. The Doctor.

Within the convoluted English legal system, there are two kinds of lawyer: solicitors and barristers. Solicitors are the ones who clients consult and who represent litigants in magistrates' and county courts. But only barristers, briefed by the solicitors, can represent clients in the higher courts. The vast majority of José Viana's clients could be represented directly by him, their cases didn't entitle them to the supreme judicial metaphysics. For those that did, José Viana had, in any event, tamed a barrister impoverished by his lack of legal talent but impeccably upper class, whose supposedly different functions he himself performed behind the scenes. The obedient barrister merely had to recite what José Viana told him to say in the correct accent of an Eton or Harrow old boy. In other words, for José Viana rules were made to be tweaked.

For this and other reasons, some people said that he never seemed to be taking seriously everything he always did with the utmost seriousness, the more malicious claiming that he was always showing off to the English and that, at heart, he continued to be the secret populist he'd always been, a crypto-subversive, an anarcho-legalist. Pure envy. The fact is that for him there were no lost or immoral causes, if a Portuguese citizen was in difficulties, Dr José Viana would defend him. He got on well with the police, had the confidence of the judiciary, made a good impression on juries, and charged his clients what they could afford to pay. So any Portuguese who happens to be in London and needs a lawyer just has to ask a fellow countryman for the Doctor, no need even to say his name. The office is in the Aldwych, that semicircular street off the Strand, where the overseas service of the BBC is located.

Or else he can be found down the road in the Wig & Pen club, where he often goes for lunch. It's almost opposite the Royal Courts of Justice, near the Wren church and just before the Strand becomes Fleet Street, a crooked little building that survived the Great Fire of London of 1666. Wig obviously refers to the traditional headgear >>

of the lawyers across the road, and Pen to the tool once used by the journalists traditionally associated with Fleet Street. Unlike other English clubs, the Wig & Pen never excluded women, which is commendable, but perhaps because of this it doesn't have rooms, which is imprudent. It consists of a little bar on the ground floor, a restaurant up the tortuous staircase leading from the cellar to the first floor, and a converted attic of suspiciously discreet appearance, with a round table for meetings that never take place and a divan disguised as a sofa where there are always stains which it's better not to query whether were caused by the impatience of the press or the slowness of justice.

The rule in the bar is that anyone who talks politics or mentions legal cases in progress must pay for a round of whatever everyone present is drinking. The fact is that no one talks about anything else, the plutocratic lawyers making room for sadistic steak and kidney puddings or masochistic fish pies washed down with copious quantities of champagne, and the dogged journalists downing warm pints of beer before, during and after, all of them practicing the sublimated art of talking about what they are not talking, saying what they are not saying. A little like Portugal under Salazar - José Viana couldn't resist the ironic comparison when they explained the rule to him. But in a consensually British and democratic version that would allow him to make good use of his old training in clandestine politics. The English appreciated his sense of humour and soon decided that Vi-ana was "one of us".

The Wig & Pen thus became extremely useful for his fictionalizing manoeuvring of real destinies. He won more than a few cases by obliquely suggesting to his learned friends for the prosecution that he was going to take a particular line of defence which he didn't follow afterwards, in court, catching them unawares and making all the counter-arguments they had laboriously prepared quite irrelevant. And so at least he was able to amuse himself a little in his professional life, making up for the everyday tedium of thefts, knifings, rapes, fraud, souls drained by the wretchedness of bodies. And also a way of making up for the emptiness of his own soulless existence, filled by increasingly obsessive casual sex. Age exacerbates what it hasn't managed to obliterate.

The secretary had been a mistake. After the Portuguese revolution of the 25 April 1974, José Viana could at last go back to Portugal and duly went, considering the possibility of staying on. But in London he was almost launched in his profession, so he decided to return and hire a secretary. He'd met her when she was working as a police interpreter on cases involving Portuguese immigrants. She herself was the daughter of immigrants, so proficiently bilingual that at times she translated what she was saying and then translated it back again in the same sentence. His

mistake wasn't that he'd given her a job but that he'd used her in his first confused years in London to enable himself to carry on living as if life had continued after Marta Bernardo's disappearance. The secretary was then quite an attractive young woman and, above all, had the great virtue of adoring him. But bringing her into the space of his emptiness had only served to make it more obvious, the poor girl ended up becoming the physical embodiment of his despair, making him detest the automatic compensations of his own sexuality, exercised with increasing reluctance, the opposite of the way he would have wanted to go on loving Marta, wanting to inflict pain even though this wasn't enough for him and failed to become his guilt-ridden way of desiring another woman.

José Viana became alarmed at what was happening to him and ended the affair. He didn't think he was by nature a bad man, he'd never been violent, he tried to be as kind as was needed to help his cast-off lover resign herself as best she could, he even succeeded in making her feel that at least her place in his life hadn't been filled by someone else, that there couldn't be anyone else since before meeting her there was someone else in the absent presence of his lost Marta. A convoluted form of insincere sincerity that might have hurt her more than it consoled her since she couldn't compete with a ghost.

Even so, at least it should help the secretary to stop feeling threatened by what he might or might not do with the passing others she suspected there were, her tolerance even becoming a form of almost conjugal power. And he, always trying not to hurt her any more than he already had, began to feel an almost conjugal need to be discreet. The congenital propensity to self sacrifice of the never wholly-anglicized Miss Lisa Costa did the rest, helping her to rationalize the situation by telling herself that Portuguese men were all like that. But because of this she also managed to persuade herself that she had time on her side, that as he grew older he would no longer need other women but would never stop needing her. And so she let herself grow older and fatter, taking charge of everything connected with his life in the office, without a life of her own, without any other identity, the indispensable and capable helpmeet of Doctor José Viana, who had come to think of her only as Miss Costa, the perfect secretary.

The boxes, at home, from the humble Periquita he'd bought with his first fees in the ides of 1974 to the sophisticated Meursault and Lynch-Bages of later years, took care of the rest. They were used to keep mementoes of those fleeting sexual encounters, of a few superficial friendships, of the life that only exists in being lived. In fact, there weren't that many of them, because he always felt that even in the occasional pleasures he persisted in cultivating he was living his life in passing, as if his three decades >>

in London were no more than a long parenthesis between Marta Bernardo and no one.

He had nothing of Marta's, not a letter, not a photograph. It would have been dangerous to have anything with him that could identify her if he were arrested trying to flee Portugal. In any case, he'd hoped that she would join him shortly afterwards. But he never heard from her again, nor did anyone else. It was presumed she'd been arrested. She had disappeared. Presumed dead. As if she had never happened. The presence of an absence.

So that all José Viana had succeeded in doing since his humiliation in the underground was to transfer some scanty evidence of his never sufficiently rewarding misencounters from an irrelevant box of Chablis to an unnecessary box of Pommard: letters from other women, photographs of other women, diaries, theatre programmes, itineraries of aimless journeys, brochures for hotel weekends shared with other women. And perhaps, like one of his favourite poets, he might also have concluded that it makes no difference whether the wine is white or red, if the telephone hadn't rung.

It's one of those phones that you never know where you've left because it can be taken all over the house. He found it prophetically buried with the mementoes in the old box of Periquita. He turned pale when the English policeman on the other end of the line asked him whether he would accept a call from a Ms Martha Barnardo who was being held at the airport. When a worried Portuguese voice came to the phone he didn't recognize it straight away, he hadn't heard it for more than thirty years. But then he thought it was really her, it could only be her voice.

2

FOUR AND SEVEN

The problem was that the girl had travelled with a passport. If she'd taken advantage of the benefits of the European Union and presented her identity card, where the date of birth is on the back, the easy-going immigration officer would at best have checked whether the pretty face in front of him looked like the one in the photograph before letting the full-length graceful original go through to baggage reclaim. But in passports dates are entered next to the photograph: 1948 leapt out at him from the half-opened page, he smiled at the obvious mistake of a careless foreign clerk and, in a kindly tone, advised her to have the 4, which could only be a 7 crossed through in continental style, changed at the Portuguese Consulate while she was in London. She might need her passport as proof of identity in a bank or some such.

But instead of saying thank you and going her way she demurred:

"No. I am she. She is me."

The immigration officer didn't understand whether it was a case of deficient grammar or a cryptic concept, and repeated: "I am she, she is me?" to see whether his English intonation would clarify the concept. And then, looking again at the photograph, he even made a good-natured little joke, fully satisfied that she could only be who she was.

"Of course you are yourself. I understand." But in any event she should get the date corrected.

But in the meantime the obstinate girl had reached into her handbag and pulled out the identity card with the same date of birth and all of the names coinciding:

"You see?"

The man did see. This time he wasn't amused and began to get suspicious, which, in the English, quickly turns into an irreversible process, setting a mental conveyor belt in motion. Until becoming a suspect, everyone is considered trustworthy. Except, of course, blacks, Irish, South Americans, Bosnians and, especially these days, Muslims. But she didn't appear to belong to any of these or other dubious categories, she was even wearing pale Italian jeans, T-shirt and blazer like any fair-haired and discreetly sophisticated cosmopolitan Miss. He asked her to wait a moment and wrote down her name on the appropriate form, leaving out all the names between the first and last. Unnecessary foreign nonsense.

From then on everything was done with icy correctness, officials addressing her as Madam at the end of every sentence. She was accompanied by a policeman and two viragoes to a small interview room lined with perforated panels of white wood, with a table, three chairs on one side for them and one on the other for her, a telephone in the corner. They told her to write down her home address on the form. And her address in London? She wasn't sure, she was going to stay in a hotel. Which one? She didn't know yet, she had a London guidebook, she always preferred to go and look first, she didn't have much luggage. Student? Oh, you're a journalist. Hum. Press card? I didn't bring it, I'm not working. I see. They asked for her baggage check so that they could have her luggage brought in and asked her again the reason for the journey, insisting that it was odd she didn't know which hotel she was staying in, she must know London very well then. Oh yes, of course, it was her first visit and she was going to look in the guidebook, of course, of course. So which countries had she visited recently, how much money did she have, credit cards, all of this as if they were deaf and hadn't heard her previous identical answers to the same questions, passing the passport and identity card from hand to hand to compare one with the other and both with her.

"So how old are you, Ma'am?"

"Twenty-six."

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“But according to your documents you’re fifty-six, Ma’am. How do you account for that?”

How should she know! If the documents said so she must be fifty-six, a hundred and six, whatever, she couldn’t care less. They’d always told her the English were very fussy, better to say whatever they wanted her to say.

“Yes, I’m fifty-six.” Her tone was aggressive. Could she go now?

“Not so fast, Ma’am.”

They emptied the handbag onto the table: address book, mobile phone, perfume, lipstick, handkerchief, wallet containing euros, envelope containing pounds, the credit cards she’d already listed. One of the viragoes began to leaf through the address book. Why wasn’t there a single English address in it? Yes, of course, she’d already said, because she’d come to do some sight-seeing on her own, without a hotel in a city where she didn’t know anyone and where she’d never been before. Perfectly normal. But was she absolutely sure she didn’t know anyone in London? Again she answered yes, she was sure, but then immediately corrected herself: no, she’d forgotten, she did have a contact. Well, did she or didn’t she know anyone? The other two officers went through the suitcase which had now arrived, not knowing what they were looking for nor how to find what they didn’t know they were looking for, with growing frustration. Everything seemed genuine except her. So drastic measures were needed: would she have any objection to their carrying out a body search? She didn’t really know what this was but going by the look on their faces she asked what she was accused of, which made them stop and think for a moment.

“We have our reasons”, said one of them.

But, whether or not they had their reasons, the innocently legalistic question unleashed the statutory Pavlovian response: she was entitled to make one telephone call. Did she have the telephone number of the person she knew? - asked the virago holding the address book. Yes, she thought she did. It had to be right there, in the address book, she recalled noting it down somewhere. Just a name and a number, she didn’t have the address. Could they check at the beginning or the end of the address book, please, it wouldn’t be in alphabetical order, it had been jotted down at the last minute, she hadn’t planned to use it, now that she thought about it, it was probably on the last page.

“Oh, Doctor Josie Vi-ana. But he’s known to us!”

Since they knew him, they themselves made the call, it wasn’t usual in cases like this but they were keen to sort out that absurd situation. It was clear that the girl couldn’t be fifty-six years old. It was clear that in Portugal they’d put the wrong number on one of the documents and this had been used as the source for the other one. But she hadn’t given a satisfactory explanation for the mistake,

at least acknowledged that there had been a mistake, had even agreed about the impossible age as if they were fools, in short, she had lied to Her British Majesty’s police officers. Nowadays, what with all the terrorism, drugs and sex trafficking, situations like these had to be investigated. And she didn’t even know where she was staying in London.

José Viana arrived just over half an hour later, record time even for a Sunday.

They explained the problem to him in the appropriate legal terms and took him to the interview room. He knew from experience that it had hidden microphones so they could listen from the room next door, with an interpreter who was certainly already in place, earphones at the ready.

“This is Ms Martha Barnardo, sir.”

“Marta!”

The shock, for José Viana, was that it was her but she couldn’t be. This was the young woman he’d known and loved thirty years ago, but at the age she’d been then and not the age she would have had to be now in order to be the woman he’d left behind in Lisbon, the woman who should have joined him but never came, the woman presumed arrested, disappeared, dead. José Viana looked at her very closely as if trying hard to remember. It was impossible that his memory was deceiving him. It wasn’t just the name that was the same, this was the woman the other had been. But she was talking to him as if she’d never seen him before, thanking him for having come so quickly, not explaining how she had his telephone number which his long-lost Marta couldn’t have had, too agitated for anything but her immediate problem, asking him the question which, from a professional point of view, he should already have been expecting: what ought she to say to the police? To which he replied, adopting his best honest lawyer manner: the truth, just the truth, she could trust the English police completely. It was what he always wanted the interpreters to say he had said. She insisted that from the very beginning she’d been telling the truth, her documents were genuine, she couldn’t understand why they didn’t believe her. Or was it a crime to be who she was?

“And the 4 and the 7?”

“What?”

Fine, never mind. That was no longer the problem, it was obvious she hadn’t committed any crime, but the police believed there was a mistake that she still didn’t seem to have grasped. Never mind, she’d been confused, quite normal under the circumstances, but not to worry, the absolute priority now was to avoid their insisting on the body search. Did she know what that meant? It was what they did to find drugs or diamonds inside women, quite barbarous. She should remain calm, it wasn’t going to >>

happen. But she would have to agree to being sent back on the same plane, leaving a few minutes later, with a written recommendation not to travel until she'd had the documents corrected. She should just say yes to everything, agree to everything. He would handle it, the police knew him. But there was no time to lose.

All went according to plan. She thanked him profusely for saving her from the threatened horrors, apologized for taking advantage, for the inconvenience, told him to be sure to look her up when he went to Lisbon, the address was on the police form he had in front of him, telephone, fax, mobile, e-mail, some day they'd still be able to laugh about what had happened. And he was once more so puzzled, so keen not to seem so, that he didn't ask her how she'd come to have his telephone number, his home number, how she'd known who he was, how to find him. Or perhaps he was afraid of the answer, and didn't want there to be a plausible explanation.

José Viana would have preferred to go back home without knowing what to think, knowing only that he couldn't accept the impossible evidence that he had found in that young woman the woman he'd loved thirty years ago, but also knowing, however reluctantly, that there had to be a plausible explanation. The most plausible, which would explain the name and the physical resemblance, was obviously that she was Marta's daughter. But no, nothing was obvious, the Marta Bernardo he had known couldn't have children. That he knew, they'd lived that impossibility together. Moreover, the name was not uncommon, there could easily be other women with the same name. And the physical resemblance, although certainly real, might also have been exaggerated by memory, if not by a guilt that had never been entirely resolved or, above all, by a nostalgia for what might have been, suddenly crystallized in that image of the lost love of his youth, at once tangible and illusory. All because of that bitch on the underground, making him feel he had no right to desire the nubile bodies he desired, making him aware of the grotesqueness of his flabby flesh pressed against smooth young bellies, firm buttocks, waists, legs, breasts, the soft source of secrets, lips tasting of the sea, the warm smell of summer after rain.

José Viana had copied down the telephone, fax, e-mail and mobile numbers which the girl had written down on the police form. When he got home, he also checked the address. Yes, against all probabilities, it was the same house in which he'd lived with Marta Bernardo. The same fifth-floor flat near the Cathedral, in the Rua do Barão. He imagined it again as so often in the past. The living room overlooking the river Tagus, the bedroom from which you could see the beginning of the wall of St George's Castle emerging from the rooftops.

3 DILETTANTES

Before the revolution of 25 April, or rather, from the end of the 1960s to the mid-1970s, there was a Portuguese Communist in London who was the only one that everyone knew to be a Communist: the redoubtable Dr Sereno, whose mission in life was to control the Portuguese political emigrants, whether they liked it or not. He'd given up a promising scientific career for the sake of the proletariat cause, or been forced to make that sacrifice by others – the PIDE, former teachers, colleagues, he even suspected comrades – justifying an indiscriminate persecution mania. Thin, austere, pitiless, he had a croaky little laugh – 'heh heh' – and a firm gaze modeled on Álvaro Cunhal, who had once shaken his hand, unforgettable glory! The Party must have sent him to London because they couldn't stand so much ideological purity, no harm done, a popular British uprising didn't seem imminent. And after the 25th of April they sent him to the back of beyond on the other side of the Marão, perhaps to see whether he could persuade the shepherd boys of Trás-os-Montes to fight for agrarian reform. He had a long list of "friends" – not everyone deserved to be called "comrade" – to whom he would regularly deliver *Ávante!* and other clandestine literature selected according to individual merit. Always by hand, he mistrusted the capitalist post.

For a long time, the meeting place was a pub in Baker Street – "Sherlock Holmes, heh heh" – which had two parrots that incited clients to alcoholic excess by competing to announce "last orders" and urging them to "drink up" whenever there was a silence. When it was time to deliver the papers Dr Sereno would call from a public telephone box never saying his name, just a confidential "Hello, friend, heh heh." And then, disguising his voice with a handkerchief: "Tomorrow, same time, the place with the animals."

But the parrot routine had to be changed when, three times in the same week, a number 82 bus had tailed his workmanlike little car, an ideologically correct Skoda with a broken exhaust pipe, and wouldn't overtake him no matter how much he slowed down and hugged the pavement. Conclusion: he was being followed.

"Beware of the number 82, friend, heh heh, beware of the 82!" This was said with his usual expression of knowing far more than he was letting on.

In any case, Dr Sereno serviced some twenty compatriots more or less exiled in London for political or military reasons, or both, one having led to the other, who, perhaps because they weren't real Communists – if they had been they would have had more direct access – always liked to receive the newspapers and pamphlets that he made available to them. And even to listen to him proclaiming the >>

triumphs of our glorious working class. They were homesick, it was better than nothing. The meetings invariably culminated with a recitation of the latest *mots d'ordre* from the Party, a firm farewell handshake and the encouraging incentive:

“Hope, friend, heh heh, hope!”

And he would go off to repeat everything, without ideological deviation or petit-bourgeois improvisation, to all the other “friends” he was enlightening throughout this vast city, one at a time, with or without parrots, working for the revolution.

In exchange, in addition to the small cost of *Àvante!* and the half pint of alcohol-free cider to emphasize the respectful sobriety owed to the Party, he liked his contacts to tell him whatever there was to know about the other Portuguese in London, which, apart from juicy gossip about who was fucking who that no one in their right mind would waste on his puritanical ears, it was obvious that he already knew long before everyone else. So much so that he would qualify every name mentioned with an epithet selected from his Richter scale of political contempt, ranging from “dilettante”, “opportunist” and so forth to “provocateur” and, the supreme insult, “Trotskyite”, for him even worse than “policeman”, since with the police you at least knew where you stood.

“Dilettantes”, in London, were everyone except him, beginning with the “friends”. For example, at a meeting of the so-called democratic unity, someone proposed that they should vote to decide on some triviality considered highly important at the time which had divided those present into two irreconcilable groups, those who followed the Paris line and those who followed the Algerian, with London undecided as usual. Dr Sereno spelled out the Party position, which didn’t coincide with any of the others. But which, for that very reason, as the well-intentioned “friend” argued, would permit a compromise solution “legitimated by the realities of the struggle within the country itself”. As if to say: “it’s the Communist Party that’s taking the rap in Portugal, not us”. He therefore proposed that they should vote for Dr Sereno’s “just alternative”. Which would almost certainly have won. But Dr Sereno thundered: “Voting is antidemocratic! Heh heh, you dilettantes!” And afterwards, unacceptably exaggerating what the diplomatic “friend” had left implicit, he ruined everything by scornfully reiterating that those present did not represent the true struggle in Portugal, the struggle of the urban proletariat and the rural proletariat, heh heh, never forget the rural proletariat like the martyred Catarina Eufémia, heh heh. The vote was taken, and Dr Sereno’s proposal obviously lost, all united against him, forgetting their initial disagreements. Which, for the supporters of Algeria, Paris or London, only went to show that unity among them was indeed possible, and con-

firmed for Dr. Sereno what he had always known, i.e. that as always he had been right.

When José Viana arrived in London at the beginning of the 1970s, after a few weeks in Rotterdam where, with no money for a barber, he’d begun to grow a spectacular head of black hair exaggerating the fashion of the still-swinging sixties, someone had the unfortunate idea of telling Dr Sereno, with evident enthusiasm, how the young man had gone to present himself at the Consulate, insisting with the terrified official that he write it all down on the registration form:

“José Viana. Graduate in Law. Deserter. Dangerous Communist in the service of Moscow. *Nom-de-guerre*: Bernardo.” And he added: “I’ve never understood why Bernardo is a better pseudonym than José or even Viana but I suppose the comrades know best. Don’t bother putting that on the form, it isn’t information for the PIDE, just an ontological doubt.” Having said this, he left, humming the *Internationale* as he went down the stairs. But from Dr Sereno there was not so much as a smile, let alone admiration. Lips pursed with contempt:

“Dilettantes! Provocations! Heh heh, Trotskyite! Provocateur!”

Nom-de-guerre Bernardo. True? False? Perhaps simply an irresistible desire to pronounce Marta’s name, to include her in the declaration of freedom he’d gone to make at the Consulate, to say out loud what in Portugal, true or false, would have got them both thrown into jail. It’s possible. Certainly less improbable than if he’d said that his secret name was Marta and that he was a sinister transvestite working for Peking. But it must be agreed that even uttering the name Bernardo could have been dangerous for Marta, who he assumed was in Portugal, not knowing where and in what circumstances. In short, a dilettante.

José Viana had in fact been a member of the Communist Party, in the university cell of the intellectual sector. The hot war in the colonies and the cold war in the rest of the world were at that time great catalysts, invaluable recruitment agencies for students with futures as doubtful as it was certain that no one could believe in anything that reeked of the regime’s propaganda. Officially there was no war in the colonies, notwithstanding the evidence of the amputees hobbling on crutches along the streets of Lisbon. The Americans were in favour and the Russians against. For the moment that was enough. José Viana, like so many others, persuaded himself that everything else, including Prague and the Gulags, should be left for thinking about later, even if the stories weren’t just anti-Soviet propaganda, even if he felt morally contaminated. But he also blamed the regime, censorship, the PIDE and the war for this, which didn’t leave him any less questionable alternatives. And so he was already an anxious and >>

somewhat ambivalent militant, one of those who always end up making problems for themselves and others. He might already have been on the way to doing so when he met Marta Bernardo, neither knowing that they were comrades, they worked in different sectors, self-contained cells.

She came from a different background, she'd reached the Party through more difficult paths, was from the so-called working class, though brought up in a family without any great political awareness and not much disposed to acts of heroism. An ambitious father, who had graduated from workshop to office at the firm of J. J. Fróis & Successors, in Barreiro. He had a basic education and treated his superiors with all due respect, a "thank you and excuse me" approach. A mother who feared God and her husband. Marta herself had tried to be a good Catholic girl. The magnanimous bosses paid for her secondary education in one of the convent schools that proliferated in the area in order to neutralize any latent subversive tendencies. At that time there were three organisations for young conformists, with acronyms that seemed to have been invented as a joke when said in rapid succession: JEC, JOC, JUC. The first, *Juventude Escolar Católica*, was for school children, the third, *Juventude Universitária Católica*, for university students, and the one in the middle, *Juventude Operária Católica*, served to humiliate people like her, even when they'd been to school, or perhaps precisely because of that, so that they wouldn't get above themselves: Working-Class Catholic Youth.

But the young Marta no longer fitted into that scheme of things and they humiliated her so much with their "Don't ever forget who you are and where you come from, young lady" that she lost her respect for her superiors and consequently her faith in God, the supreme boss up there, as the priests and nuns would like her to believe. Rebellious by nature, wanting to understand the whys and wherefores, with an insatiable intellectual curiosity, hardworking and fearless, she was the ideal Party militant. She completed her secondary education despite the nuns, distanced herself from her parents, who complained about such ingratitude, and moved to Setubal, with a job as secretary in the canning factory where she was recruited by the Party. As soon as she could, she moved to Lisbon as a militant, taking temporary secretarial jobs and never staying long in the same office. Party precautions. The great difference between the Catholics she had known and the Communists she came to know was that the former believed there was a reason for their faith while the latter had faith in their reasoning. This was much better, even when the explanations they gave her explained too much and too little at the same time.

There was a denunciation. The Party may have left her too exposed given her lack of experience, but she suspected that it might have been her mother, who considered her

a soul on the way to perdition that could only be redeemed by purifying therapy at the hands of the political police. Her father thought her beyond redemption, he only wanted his bosses to forgive him, "Thank you for everything".

Coming from the working class, even if she'd ceased to belong to it, was not a condition to be recommended in police interrogations. The PIDE also had its Richter scale of contempt, applying different methods according to social origins. Marta would have had little to say that the police didn't already know, but following the well-established rules that immediately confirmed her as a Communist, she refused to make declarations to a police force whose legality she did not recognize. It was the standard response. The duly authorized defenders of the State went from threats to actions. She was an attractive young woman, they became excited. What they did to her during those three weeks, penetrating her with and without instruments, one at a time or several at the same time, before they released her, satiated, meant that she could never have children.

Which was why José Viana knew for a fact that the Marta Bernardo at London airport was not his Marta's daughter, as would certainly have been the most plausible explanation and certainly the least phantasmic of the coincidences that had so disturbed him: physical resemblance, name, address. In the circumstances, it would indeed have been plausible that the Marta he had loved had managed to take up her life again in his absence, fallen in love with someone else, had a daughter to whom she gave the same name and who had grown up looking just like her, had in due course recovered the flat she'd had to give up when he left Portugal, and later passed it on to her daughter. Except that they couldn't be mother and daughter.

José Viana's first meeting with his lost Marta had happened by chance, a few months after she got out of prison, without their knowing anything about one another. They happened to be sitting side by side in one of the sessions at the semi-clandestine *Cineclub Imagem*. The film was *Les Visiteurs du Soir*, presented with the appropriately cryptic suggestion that it was a political allegory that could be applied to Portugal. José Viana never wanted to see the film again, he suspected that the cynical man he believed he had become would now consider it unbearably sentimental and ponderous, he didn't want to sully his memory of the past, when neither of them doubted that it was absolutely marvellous, his handkerchief passing to her hand and returning to his, she amazed and even more moved that there could be a man like him in the world, a great, big man as sensitive as she was, with whom she could share her tears so naturally. At the end of the film they forgot the handkerchief, leaving it behind on the arm between the seats, and walked out hand in hand. >>

Marta didn't yet know that she was as pretty as she later allowed herself to be, as intelligent as she had always been. José would go to the *Loja das Meias* to buy her French and Italian clothes, to the *Livraria Bertrand* to buy all the translations of Russian authors he could lay his hands on since, for ideological reasons, these were the only books she wanted to read: Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Chekhov, Turgenev, Gorky, Gogol and even Pushkin in an old prose translation that he found in a second-hand bookshop. There was nothing in Portuguese by Soviet writers, so thanks to the joint efforts of José Viana and the Censor, the young Marta Bernardo ended up with an excellent literary education. After the Russians came the poets that José knew by heart: Cesário, Nobre, Pessoa, Camões, Baudelaire, whose *Invitation au voyage* he translated word for word, telling her at the end that the country that resembled her was right there where they were, the country where they would go and live when the world had improved in the image of their love. Marta laughed, embarrassed and touched by José's unsuspected sentimentality, covering her mouth with her hand as if it were forbidden to feel that happiness was possible.

They rented the flat in the Rua do Barão in her name, because he was almost due to go into the army and then to the wars in Africa. When the Party found out, it disapproved of their living together in public, for reasons of security. But it was done, they'd found paradise in a fifth-floor flat without a lift. The stairs, were not the greatest obstacle to paradise, however, getting there must have demanded great sensibility on the part of both of them, an attentive and generous love, each desiring the other's body, though to begin with she was unable to make love, her belly contracting with the horror of what they'd done to her when she was in prison, the threat when she left that if they caught her again things would be worse, "Watch out how you behave!". Until suddenly everything happened as if no one had ever hurt her, they'd reached paradise.

For three days and three nights they'd interrupted their lovemaking only so they could begin again, in the bedroom, on the living room floor, leaning against the window with the river in the background, when they'd reluctantly had to go and eat something, drink lots of water, have a quick wash. Or else they simply stayed in bed, as much inside one another as nature would allow while they rested bodies too tired to go on, talking about what they didn't even know they were thinking, dreaming shared dreams out loud.

But the outside world intervened. José Viana finished his course and went to do his military training in preparation for the compulsory four years as a militia officer in a war that he considered unreasonable and senseless, in which the oppressors were also the oppressed. In the regiment they talked about going to Guinea or Angola, the

least worst posting would be Mozambique. The only thing they didn't talk about was deserting, which had been his intention from the outset. But the Party's position on this matter didn't make things easy: militants should go to war with the mission of subverting it from within and the others should be encouraged to desert, even helped if necessary, in order to undermine it from the outside. But José Viana was prepared to risk everything, even the Party's displeasure, though this worried him more than the inevitable military punishment and subsequent intervention of the PIDE if his plan should be discovered or should fail when put into effect.

He therefore took all possible precautions to protect Marta. The intention was for her to go as well, or, if that wasn't possible, to meet up with him afterwards wherever he might be and whatever circumstances, since she was sure that love should be above party loyalty. José stopped staying with her in the flat on his free days, they prolonged the nights with long lovers' strolls. They adapted the Party rules to their private life: meetings in a pre-agreed place; if that went wrong, because his free days did not always coincide with weekends, they would meet in another place at the same time on the following day; and if this also failed, they would begin all over again meeting in the first place on the next day. The initial meeting place was the *Praça do Príncipe Real*, because of the cedar, their favourite tree in the whole city, and the alternative was the *Jardim das Amoreiras*, where they had also done their courting on many occasions. For emergencies, they added another idyllic touch the arrangements: a drawing of a tree on a sheet of white paper which he would leave in the postbox or, if at all possible, on the living room table, indicating that the routine for meetings should begin right away.

José Viana's chance to leave the country came up unexpectedly: a cargo ship bound for Rotterdam, raising anchor at dawn on the following Friday, the 2nd of June 1972. A left-wing Dutch organisation had everything ready, there was no time to lose. Even so, he took the risk of going to leave the drawing of the tree on the living room table in the Rua do Barão on the Thursday afternoon. He waited for as long as he could in the *Príncipe Real*. He even went to the *Jardim das Amoreiras*. But he couldn't wait any longer, he had to go with the Dutch without even having been able to tell Marta where he was going. He wrote to her from Rotterdam and then from London, but there was no reply. The telephone suspiciously out of order.

To his parents, to whom he had never said a word about his plans to flee, he justified himself as best he could when he finally telephoned them from London, full of excuses, telling them he hadn't wanted to compromise them. But he couldn't resist asking them to look for >>

Marta, whom they didn't know, in the flat they knew nothing about. His father was ill, had difficulty in walking. But he went. The neighbours didn't say much, they seemed frightened, but an older woman who lived on the fourth floor mentioned that the girl on the floor above had gone away suddenly, her friend in the army would know. Desperate, José Viana turned to the Party, sought out Dr Sereno, who was initially willing to help him but, after receiving the information he requested from Lisbon, refused to have any further contact with him.

The first thing José Viana did when he was able to return to Portugal, on the 27th of April 1974, was to go to the house that he had lived in with the missing Marta Bernardo. With his suitcases unopened and the whole city celebrating the revolution, he sat on the doorstep of the street door, waiting for he didn't know what. In the early evening a young couple with two small children turned up, a little girl perched on her father's shoulders and a tired little boy clinging to his mother's legs, half-asleep and grumpy. Yes, they were the family living in the fifth-floor flat. But they didn't know any Marta or any Bernardo family. The flat was empty when they rented it, going on two years now.

The couple offered to help when they understood the sentimental circumstances exacerbated by the political connotations, full of revolutionary fervour. They'd ask the neighbours, perhaps some of them would know where Marta Bernardo had gone, what had happened to her. If anyone knew they'd certainly help now, there was no longer anything to fear, it was a house full of working people, no capitalist exploitation. Well, it was also true that the flat, with only two rooms – yes, José Viana remembered perfectly – was getting too small for the four of them and, besides, the children were always complaining about the stairs. But with the revolution they were bound to get something better, now the country would move forward. Down with Fascism! No more soldiers to

the colonies! Down with capital gains! Long live social justice!

José Viana went back next day and two days later. He talked to the neighbours, who were full of useless good will. The older woman his father had mentioned no longer lived there, the others didn't even know if she was still alive. He asked in the neighborhood shops whether they remembered Marta. Yes, some people did remember her, and even him, but sorry, they'd stopped seeing her from one day to the next, just as they'd stopped seeing him. One even remembered finding it odd at the time, he remembered that perfectly, what he couldn't remember was the year, things like that happened back in those days and it was better not to ask too many questions about things that happened.

But José Viana's first visit to Lisbon after the 25th of April was now thirty years ago when the young woman who had telephoned him from the airport in London because the suspicious 4 that should have been a 7 had not even been born. Meanwhile, the good people who'd been living in the fifth-floor flat in the Rua do Barão may indeed have done well out of the Revolution, moved to a four-roomed flat in a new residential area in Miraflores and vote for the Centre Right. Or perhaps not such a good deal, even politically, because their old flat, with its living room overlooking the river and bedroom facing the Castle, the same flat that had once been shared by José Viana and Marta Bernardo and now belonged to the young woman who seemed to be but couldn't be the same Marta, is almost unrecognisable in a building meticulously restored and worth a fortune, with a lift to the fifth floor and a silver Mini Cooper – the new version – parked outside the street door.

(...)

Translated from the Portuguese
by Patricia Odber de Baubeta, 2005