

(From **REVIEW: LATIN AMERICAN LITERATURE AND ARTS - NEW WRITING AND ARTS FROM BRAZIL** Nº 53 - FALL 1996

What follows, the novel's final chapter, is a son's settling of accounts with a father (Frederico Augusto Rennon) whose letters, involving adultery and murder, open gaping holes in a most decorous façade.)

## **A Night in Curitiba**

*Cristovão Tezza*

And I heard nothing more about Professor Frederico Rennon-unfortunately, this was more a desire than a truth.

On October 30, a Saturday, my father disappeared. Meaning we didn't notice his absence immediately because over the course of the week he disappeared a little bit every day: absent from a lunch, then the light's not being on in his study when it should have been, a necktie forgotten on the sofa for 48 hours, the rustle of slippers at 4:00 a.m., another kind of silence, infinitesimal, taking control of the spaces in the house, an open door, cereal in the kitchen before morning coffee. I made mental notes of these portents of the end. He only slept, when he slept, after Dona Margarida got up. The number of telephone calls shot up, and I already knew the sequence of things I had to say: "He's not in. I don't know. I'll give him the message."

And on Saturday, there were so many hints everywhere in the house, brutally obvious hints-even the absence of a small valise from a closet in the storeroom whose door was left open, just one more deliberate clue in this version of "Jeopardy." So obvious, that not even Dona Margarida could keep on believing that the earth was square, flat, and held up by ten elephants in infinite space. No, the earth really is round, spins on its axis around the sun, follows a curved path diabolically identical year after year, and is held up by nothing at all. Even so, it took us a while to accept the proof. The last question or rather the final answer that ended the game was the disappearance of a few (very few) items of clothing. through the halfopen door of their room, I saw my mother making an oral inventory of the underpants, socks, shirts, and trousers on the bed. I went back to the living room, thinking. Good, we finally had something concrete in our hands, something that allowed me to live with an exciting sense of abandonment. To defend myself, I ran to the study in the hope of reading yet another letter, perhaps the last one in that fantastic voyage, my father's hallucinating dream-perhaps in it he might dispose of the family property in his usual meticulous style (to my well-beloved son, I leave my gold watch and my library; to my unforgettable wife,

whose hands I kiss under a divine blessing, I leave my eternal love, my shirt studs, and the treasure chest; to my daughter and my little grandson, I leave my memory, my dresser, and my stamp collection; to... but there's no one left and nothing left to leave). No letter, all I found rooting around in the computer was that encoded draft of the letter of resignation. Thus ended my dishonest joy in-just as my father had always disappeared, always in the most implausible moments-running excitedly to the study and discovering what that doped-up head was inventing. My pleasure was all the greater because of my fear that he might return unexpectedly, the implacable Abraham pointing his finger at my moral misery (and I just missed being sentenced to death after one of those inexplicable returns: As soon as I heard those crazy footsteps coming down the hall, I turned off the computer and took up my post next to the bookcase, consulting a greasy dictionary of Greek mythology, my heart pounding so loudly that even he must have heard, unless he was completely deaf by then).

Nothing new on TV. The show-and my past-was coming to an end. I went back to the living room and patiently waited for Dona Margarida, counting my father's clothes for the tenth time, all to convince herself that a complicated page of our book was being definitively turned. But it's difficult to believe the obvious. We read and reread the same worn-out phrases we know by heart, we look for esoteric meanings between the lines, we think about other things while our eyes uselessly scrutinize the same letters, until we get to the point of grasping the tip of the sweaty, filthy page to turn it: Now!-but no, who knows if there's some hidden clue we overlooked. I calmly waited for her to find out on her own. As my father would say, destiny is pulling us along by the hand, it's useless to fight it.

It took a while. An hour later-all that time with ears burning, interrupting the tasty consumption of milk and cookies whenever I thought I heard weeping break out, which never happened, the old lady is solid-she reappeared, nicely turned out for another trip to the movies. Not a word. I mean, not a word did she say about the main subject of our lives.

"They're showing a French film at the Bristol. Want to go?"

It's obvious. Here I stand with the person who will be my ally until death. And she, more and more beautiful, more relaxed, more absolutely happy, is with no one. I'm only a good screen, and I can continue being a silent support for a good while, which I have done with a touch of fervor almost-doglike, I was going to say, as if the absent old man had whispered the word. As always, we, my mother and I, reenacted the beautiful, silent, and oppressive ritual. Time, this short time, was transforming my mother. It was as if the trips to the movie were the alibi she needed to think, actually think, about her new life, without concerning herself exclusively with the abstract, sterile, empty relationships our minds are always ready to produce in gushes as soon as we look away. She wept once again, in the dark, and the next day-and afterward, insofar as I know, never again, at least for

that kind of sadness.

The house became lighter. A misunderstanding, a small deception was resolved-as if, after coming back from the bathroom, we had sat down at the wrong table and begun chewing the same lasagna we ordered, but under the horrified gaze of someone else's dinner partner, someone who had only left his chair to chat with an acquaintance sitting ten feet away; or as if someone were speaking to us in the street in an absurdly familiar way, as if we were his cousin because we're identical to his cousin; as if someone had opened a car door right in front of our body, which only wanted to cross the street, saying: "Get in. Am I very late? Did you bring the envelope?" A small misunderstanding that laziness extends into 25 years of routine. Sometimes we never notice the deception. We come to live in another house, to eat someone else's food, to get into an unknown car, and get rich in one fell swoop in a completely different family, one that is much more amusing. Or we see the mistake, but it's already too late, we will never be set free, we're so interesting! Some lunatics put up a fight-Let me out of here!-to the consternation of the new setting, what to do to cure him? But there is no cure, no one in our former life would recognize us anymore. Light, lightness, air. The house, light now, rapidly filling up with lightness, curves, breeze, color, and sounds. A week later, Dona Margarida (no: Dida) turned up with half a dozen CD's of popular Brazilian music. Luminous. An almost aggressive light, almost a representation of light. Well, it's explicable. At the beginning, it's always that way. And for the first time in many years my mother-Dida-had a visitor, a lively girlfriend from highschool days, married to an architect who apparently, according to the lady's smile, never left home when young. How the two of them laughed! Hand in hand, they strolled into the Disneyland of youth. I actually became jealous of that jolly chatter, which from time to time I listened in on during strategic incursions from the study to the kitchen. At one point-holding the mouthful of milk in my swollen cheeks to listen-the ancient Rennon entered the circle.

"But dearie, can you believe I really don't know where he is?"

I swallowed the milk and missed the rest. Things were going well. And going well also from the practical point of view, or, to use my father's jargon, with regard to the economic infrastructure. After that tedious week when the Institute called Dona Margarida every hour on the hour tracking down the Disappeared Professor, perhaps by then with veiled threats of sinister, shameful consequences-expulsion, docking of salary, a civil suit, the road to bitterness-judging by my mother's increasingly harsh answers, a repetitive I don't know that got louder and louder until the phone was slammed down. Then a strange lull settled in. If we listened carefully, we would have been able to hear the whispers of the Corporation, deciding how to save the future-what future?-of the abominable man by using only that letter of resignation with no recognizable signature they'd received in the mail. And save they did. Also through the mail (but quite some time later) came a copy

of the Official Union List with the pension laid out in due form: full salary plus additional funds corresponding to this or that sabbatical prize or aid endangerment, I have no idea, but my mother confirmed it all in the bank, where her account was replenished the second working day of every month.

Was the professor living on air? No, by no means. We discovered-to tell the truth at the insistence of Fernanda, for whom my mother's indifference made no sense-that he sold the two properties we owned a few days before disappearing. Someone (I think it had to be Fernanda. That would explain why my mother still has some suspicions about her-Fernanda is very practical and objective) hinted that perhaps the transaction consummated exactly one year before might be invalid and could be contested in a court of law. Because of insanity? I thought, without saying it. No, because Dona Margarida's signature was missing from the contract, but after digging through the mound of papers in the files she discovered the copy of the power of attorney ad perpetuum that would have allowed him to sell Zacarias Plaza if he owned it and if there was a buyer. Fernanda still thought that the argument of bad faith could... but, happily, the matter died.

And after all that, where was my father, the repentant murderer?

During the first weeks, I'm not sure why, I would buy São Paulo and Rio newspapers with the money Dida now gave me regularly because I was so dedicated to my studies looking for news of our star. But the star seemed to be falling. I was running my finger over the casts in the theater, movie, and TV sections without finding Sara Donovan anywhere. Well, today I know that they had two properties worth of cash to spend before going to work. So we were all happy and forgetting things-my mother reading Anna Karenina, her beautiful profile under the light pouring out of the lampshade in the living room, I reviewing chemistry in the study, both of us breathing the softness of the air when thinking about life represented a joyful and generous activity. The only disagreeable moments in our lives took place in the elevator when someone else joined us. Where might Professor Rennon be? Such a nice man, going off to school early every morning, coming home at lunch, patting all the neighbors' children on the head, making wise comments about Curitiba's harsh climate, on the same day it rains, it's sunny, it's cold, hot, all it needs to do is snow, it's just terrible. Now, silence. I'm known to be a nut, and no one's weirder; my mother's disagreeable. So the smiles are always forced. But all I have to do is close the elevator door to hear the desperation of the gossip about our Shame, The Sad Fate of That Poor Woman and Her Abandoned Son-without mentioning the daughter who it seems was murdered or kidnapped, not sure which. It seems something came out in the paper about it at that time.

No ma'am, you've got it all wrong. The one mentioned in the paper was my father, but it took some time. The first news came absolutely by chance and not in a newspaper but in a shredded gossip magazine the barber put in my hand before

trimming my hair. I unwillingly skimmed that garbage-there is something about the barber chair that reminds me of concentration camps, with the most refined cruelty-until on one of the multicolored pages, I saw my father. Meaning that the story was about the Star; Professor Rennon only played the role of the pirate's parrot. I closed my eyes, I broke out in a cold sweat. Couldn't old Frederico Augusto find a more, let's say, fitting place to make his appearance? In the Bulletin of the Brazilian Society for the Progress of Science, for example, or as the author of some article in a popular science magazine, the kind put out for intelligent children? Or he could have been the object of a critical review in the cultural supplement in a São Paulo magazine, under the title, who knows, of The Echoes of Slavery: Roads and Detours of Brazilian Negritude during the Twenties. I turned the page as if none of that mattered to me, but two pages later I turned back-filial love is an atavistic thing.

There he was, same as ever, enjoying life, a cartoon-character smile on his face, wearing a suit and tie (at least that) sitting at a table in a noisy nightclub. At his side glittered the Star (I could barely recognize her; she looked like someone else, with different hair in a different tone-only her eyes were the same). Both were toasting for the photographer, who had also caught a fancy bottle of champagne at center stage slightly out of focus. The Star held the glass in her left hand, he held his in his right; they were clearly posed, awaiting the click. A premeditated photo.

The text was even worse, all two or three lines of it. It went something like this, if I remember properly: *The vivacious Sara Donovan, on a well-deserved vacation, enjoys the delights of her eighth husband, the elegant historian Frederico Renom* (sic).

Now it really was hard to get into the elevator. I closed the magazine, thinking. Things were going so well, and now. . I looked into the mirror. Maybe I should ask the barber to stop cutting. It looked fine just as it was, half done. Looking at me, with my Mohican, no one would be reminded of my father's shame. But I let time finish its work completely-time that became miserably slow, almost vengeful. I spent hours getting home, from Osório Plaza almost to the Social Garden in a straight line, appraising every face that passed. What were they thinking? Once again, the filament in my brain gave small electric alarm signals. I went on to deep breathing, looking for relaxation-I'm not going to poison our lives just because of a magazine photo. In this day and age, who worries about things like that? Not even the doorman, who surprisingly ran to open the door of the (empty) elevator for me, with an almost ingratiating smile: "Did you get a haircut?"

I didn't bother to answer. Should I tell Dida? Of course not. It had been a long time since I'd felt the impulse to show her my father's letters. To avenge what? In truth, the desire to reveal his madness had been only an attempt to show solidarity, completely unnecessary in any case-my mother knew who was on her side. But I

read the letters again, almost daily. I knew almost all of them by heart, the long series of sentences, the lengthy paragraphs interrupted here and there by rhetorical questions, that stylized rhythm, the embarrassed clichés of love, the sudden elegant passages, that Frenchified sense of humor, the pleasure of circumlocution, the shocked enumerations, the lies and omissions, sometimes well-intentioned sometimes not, the fragments of information to which I tried to give meaning in order to solve the puzzle, and, finally, the shocking revelation of the crime, in details, photogram by photogram. I was drinking in all of that, absorbing it. The supposed crime was what concerned me most. My father is a murderer. It's strange. What seemed tragic, arousing resentful darts of revenge- from what moral high ground could he complain about me?-now seemed funny. Isn't it funny-that your father should so unexpectedly turn out to be a murderer?

For a few weeks, I fantasized about telling the whole course (in the maritime sense of the word, as my father would say) of those years that have fascinated the memory of Brazil so much and to discover amid the whirlpool whose head it was my father smashed in the alley during that obscure student demonstration with no date (1969 is a very vague year). To investigate, to identify his friends from that time, and interview them coldly. But I couldn't do that, I thought, unless he died. Now that I'm free, the idea does not seem so attractive. Fernanda says the subject has been exhausted, and that perhaps I should specialize in the philosophy of history. She's probably right. I depend on her.

More than I do on my mother. When I got home after my haircut, with my father's toast hammering my memory, I found a note that informed me she'd gone out to renew her driver's license. Oh yes, there's a sausage in the refrigerator and bread in the cupboard. Dida.

The license business took a long time. At 11:00 p.m., taking advantage of the lower rates, my divorced grandmother, my mother's mother, called from Londrina, furious, demanding to know what that stuff was in the magazine-I could even hear the old lady smacking the page with the smiling husband and wife making their toast.

"I don't know, Grandma."

"Where's your father at?"

I hesitated.

"He's on a trip. A... a congress."

"A what?"

"A congress." I clear my throat. "A congress in São Paulo."

"Too bad. Call your mother."

"She... she went out."

"What!?"

Vulgar old woman! I shouted:

"Mom's not here. She won't be back until tomorrow."

Silence. I heard the massacre of the magazine page.

"Tell that ingrate to call me-it's urgent."

I felt an inexplicable malaise when my mother, tired and happy, opened the living room door at 2:00 a.m. She was still laughing to herself at some joke her girlfriends had made-she was presumably coming from some dinner or party. I didn't ask-of course-and went on studying trigonometry sitting on the sofa under my light. I decided not to give her the message. Always better to forget messages.

But the professor's photo went everywhere and certainly reached Dona Margarida. I both feared and desired that. I was afraid because the news would provoke more suffering, not mortal, personal, untransferable suffering, but the peripheral suffering of shame, which is the worst of all. My mother doesn't deserve to feel shame. Nor should she, but the others, all the others working hand in hand, looking at us, are powerful. They know it and use that power. To be fair, I think we do as well. And I wanted her to see the photo (just as I had wanted her to read the letters) for purely pragmatic reasons. That would accelerate the flow of time, unstick the gears of convenience, and in some way define and clarify my future in that (perhaps) provisionally vague space.

The suffering was immediately visible. From one day to the next, Dona Margarida decided to lock herself in her room much longer than usual. I never heard weeping, but she only left that room once or twice a day, to drink small cups of tea and eat unsalted crackers. She lost quite a bit of weight and wouldn't answer the telephone-which rang a good deal in pursuit of Dida. For an extremely short period of time, I was that exquisite figure, "the man of the house," an uncomfortable position because you don't know where the orders are coming from. They're in the air, silently waiting for you to recognize them and not to make mistakes. I tried to be the most nonexistent person possible, and I think I succeeded.

Suddenly, leaving the study after reviewing biology seven hours straight, I found my mother on the living room sofa, the new Dida, svelte and fixed up, her mature legs crossed under the side slit of her black dress. She was attentively reading the real estate section in the paper looking for apartments to rent, to buy, to exchange, drawing a red circle around one ad or another. I speculated that it wasn't the house she wanted to divest herself of but the elevator, especially waiting for the elevator in the lobby.

Changing houses! An idea, as soon as the shock of the novelty wore off, that didn't seem so good to me. What an annoying thing-leaving the place where you are! But that didn't last long-four days, 30 telephone calls, a couple of visits to real estate

agencies, some calculations written in pencil, and I never saw the real estate section again. Thinking it over carefully, why give up 130 square meters a year and a half before paying off the mortgage at a monthly rate that would be half the maintenance on a condominium? Shame is powerful, but even shame has its limits. We stayed put except that we were much calmer. And Dida's happiness after the shock-in colors and with nation-wide distribution-seemed surer, less, shall we say, extroverted, less aggressive, as she was in the first days of this war, when you've got to stamp your foot and convince the world by shouting that you're not even there-and no one believes you because it isn't logical, and the others notice the tremor in our hands.

Once this contretemps was passed, calm would ensue. And at the end of December my antenna picked up some different signals on the telephone. Lawyers. Two or three times I heard the word divorce spoken in an interrogative tone: divorce? Later I began to detect even weightier terms: trial, indemnization, divestiture, perhaps self-defense. Pension. That one I heard with each glass of milk I drank in the kitchen, in different rhythms. Pension?! Yes, pension. Ah, pension. Pension ... The old girl thought and weighed things-in silence. Today I know that some lawyer friends of hers, referred by her girlfriends, who were deeply upset by her sad fate, made a plan to help her. That she should take the initiative to untie the knot that Professor Rennon – in certain ways, let's agree, the generous Professor Frederico Augusto Rennon – had left behind with olympian indifference. Who knows, methodical, organized, and prudent as he always was, Professor Frederico Augusto had deliberately left the door ajar, just in case the delights of paradise might turn out to be a bit boring: those pomegranates devoid of flavor, that dullest of dull orchestras made up of harps, those naked women painted in oil by Renaissance masters, the tedium of Eden, the discomfort of bare feet on the dewy grass.

But the beautiful Dona Margarida – *How great you look, Dida!*, her girlfriends would say, girlfriends whose numbers increased – locked the door seven times over and tossed the key out the window. With the deposit receipt in her hand as regular as clockwork, there was nothing to complain about. And why get old before your time getting mixed up in court cases and other wretched things? My family always lived the delightful laziness of chance. Time is our master and our companion, as the poet says.

The old photograph continued making its way around the world-or perhaps it was another, a more recent shot, about which I knew nothing. A week before Christmas I opened the door, and there was my sister Lucila. A four-year-old boy forced his way between my legs, ran straight to the sound system, opened one of the new CDs, and tried to stuff the disk into every hole on the machine, all the while asking to be picked up and staring provocatively at his astonished grandmother, herself in a quandary as to whether she should save Brazilian popular music, smack her grandson, or hug her daughter, who was also becoming rather ill-mannered:



"Well, kids?! Does this mean the old man took off too?"

A shock. Here we have to interrupt the scene (for two seconds, be patient) so you can objectively see all the multiple variations the new factor imposed with no warning on the chessboard both I and Dida imagined to be completely under control. Let me list them:

1. A four-year-old plague, with no father and, apparently, no mother.
2. The first and only little grandchild.
3. A sister I hadn't seen for six years.
4. A concrete daughter.
5. The memory of someone who'd been a daughter for 17 years.
6. Forgetting someone who'd been a sister for 15 years.
7. A strange girl.
8. A woman who was deliberately ugly.
9. A familiar voice speaking in a foreign vocabulary.
10. A space, especially a space that shrank so much that I felt the pressure of the walls crushing my shoulders.

And so on. She looking at me with an excessive smile, and I feeling the complicated electricity of two children competing in the aggressive mist of childhood. She looking at my mother as if she'd gone out of the house yesterday afternoon and slept over at a girlfriend's house. Dona Margarida looking at her and trying to recognize in that sluttish being the traces of a girl in pigtails who no longer exists. The boy looking at Dona Margarida, a little rogue, smiling and charming, like someone who likes to share with others the pleasure of hearing the noise fingernails make on the surface of the shiny disk covered with rainbows. My mother's open mouth as she stretches out an arm to hold herself up; the wave of dizziness on her face. Lucila's sudden silence, the rapid disintegration of each feature on her face, the instantaneous perception of that other reality, in a flash, like a person adapting his eyes to sudden darkness. Doubt, the uncertainty of the next step, between my eyes and my mother's.

Two, three seconds. I clearly heard the fingernail scratching the disk, not as forcefully now, as if even the child felt the weight-it's funny but it did occur to me in that instant-the Anglo-Saxon weight of that family.

Then, quickly, the obvious: Mother and daughter threw themselves at each other in an embrace that would never end, tears flowing, the final scene, the happy ending of an edifying film for the whole family. With the lights on again, the credits running on the screen, we would bear on our retinas forever that picture of the immortal values of Christianity. Even the boy, tossing the disk on the floor and

trying to separate the legs of the two souls glued together and later, defeated, throwing himself against me to kick me in the shins, even he was a part of the picture.

I locked myself up in the study to think, but there was nothing to think about. With no options, I just let things happen, retreating even more furiously into my studies, an elegant way to point out the differences.

And the differences did the job for me on their own. Not even maternal love, the greatest of all, could escape unscathed from that aggressive increase in presences, the small savage avenging the injustices of life on every object capable of being broken and on every hair that could be pulled, always unexpectedly, as if negating Pavlov with a club, even in the case of the model electric train, the colored blocks, the battery-driven fire chief's car whose lights lit and that stridently wailed for two whole days until it fell out of the window (fortunately smashing in the patio without killing anyone, or in the case of the connecting plastic blocks that clogged up the bathroom drain, in the face of all that exaggeration of presents on that melancholy Christmas night. Maternal love was having difficulty flowering completely. And my sister didn't help much, obstinately refusing to be anything: To be the mother of her son, the wife of her second husband (as far as I understood things, they tried to live together in Porto Alegre with prolonged periods of violent separation), to be Dida's daughter, my sister, to be, in point of fact, anyone. That is, some personality recognizable by stable traits. Those grimaces on her face that appeared in her moments of ironic laughter, 60 times per hour, whenever she saw my mother's lipstick, my glass of milk, the television when turned on, or whenever someone suggested going to the movies, or that she buy a new blouse-those precocious wrinkles looked like a hiding place for a soul, a mysterious intention to disappear even before embodying itself. And, of course, she always refused to be the daughter of Professor Frederico Augusto Rennon.

The man who, after all, let justice be done, brought Lucila home, not to lament it but to justify objectively what was an excess. The jubilation of the reunion, by New Year, was giving way to some mutual reserves, on her part and on my mother's. Locked up in the study, I heard the prolonged rustle of their whispers at the livingroom table, in which both Lucila and Dona Margarida put their cards on the table. Rather, only my mother put her cards on the table because Lucila had neither cards nor table. Between two outbursts of tears by the boy, I clearly heard the suddenly loud voice of Dona Margarida accompanied by a slap on the table: "But he's not dead yet! Show some respect!"

During the days that followed, the funerary clouds briefly lifted when I passed the history course at the university-i'd taken second place: Someone had beaten me out by a few points. I'm no longer the same person. I got a prolonged hug from Lucila who, perhaps shocked by the excess emotion, fell back into her habitual style: "You were always the family's little genius. Just like Dad!"

Radiating light, Dona Margarida, turned back into Dida, offered her daughter a monthly allowance until things definitively cleared up—a Solomonic compensation for what might be taken as an unfair maternal preference. For the first time in my life I was personally consulted, almost as a vindication. Magnanimous, elegant, superior, I suggested an even greater sum, secretly dreaming about the void that—not Lucila, of course, after all, she's my sister—the little devil would leave in the house. When the practical side of things had been decided, all our relationships smoothed out, the air again became light, even the boy seemed to have some sparks of civilization. The remaining tension disappeared forever when Lucila, answering a long-distance telephone call, poured on her husband for 2 hours and 40 minutes the most hallucinatory declarations of love I'd ever heard in my life, something that would have made the professor mad during his greatest days, torrential, gauche vows primitively exaggerated, almost cowardly, shameless, the unhinged verbiage of someone with no experience, but so intense that it ended in an explosion of weeping, a happy cry, disorderly, deliberately indiscreet, with occasional shouts—"I love you, passion of my life!"—and it was as if we, nervous in the limited space of the living room, were the person for whom that brutish happiness was intended, as if the telephone were only another childhood hiding place for feelings.

Three days later, the house returned to its agreeable silence. In the following weeks, it was a comfort to discover under the bed, in the medicine chest, on a shelf in the refrigerator, one piece or another of a forgotten toy, signs of a storm that has passed without, happily, leaving behind any victims. Things became clear once and for all—I'm returning now to the main subject—when my mother was awakened at 3:00 a.m. by a telephone call. Her face, when she received the news, an image I won't forget when, still foggy with sleep, I opened the livingroom door. It had the absolute weight that only definitive facts (and I mean definitive) can reveal. She softened the impact of the news with a prolonged sigh and hung up the telephone while the other voice went on speaking all by itself. My mother stared toward the wall.

Happily, the impact rapidly dissipated. At the funeral our group consisted of my mother, one of her girlfriends and her husband, and me. And Fernanda, of course, my first and (probably) only girlfriend, a classmate, who conquered me in a week by following me everywhere and even walking me home, taking long strolls, as if she were the hunter and I the prey. (She thinks that's funny, but that's what happened.) It may not look that way, but I too am susceptible to passion.

As we were leaving the cemetery, slowly threading our way among the other tombstones, three professors from the university approached, all out of breath. They'd gone to the wrong cemetery, and their confused excuses for arriving late were quite opportune because they dissipated the natural discomfort of the object of the gathering. It's useless to pretend: The fact is, we aren't educated to fight with death. In three minutes, they were no longer there, and that too was a good thing.

There was no explosion of weeping-I think we were already well-prepared.

It happened this way: All alone in a São Paulo hotel room, my father wrote two words on a piece of hotel stationery, two words that went far beyond several vigorously crossed-out sentences, went to the window (eleventh floor), and threw himself out. According to the newspapers, a witness saw him sitting on the ledge for a few seconds before he jumped, but it's possible he was already there for some time before he was seen. These are the facts. A historian shouldn't opine about things he doesn't know, but I would like to venture a hypothesis about those final moments. He wanted to write something substantial, but he had nothing of substance left. He tossed aside the half-finished, disparate sentences, looked toward the window, and as an inexplicable distraction, opened the door of the minibar with no intention whatsoever, like someone who wakes up at daybreak and sleepwalks his way to the kitchen to open and close the refrigerator door in a single, useless motion.

He then went to the window, leaned out, and breathed in the incomparable vertigo of height, filling his lungs with it. It's possible he'd begun to lift his leg for the final step, but like someone who remembers an important meeting at the last minute, went back to the table and furiously crossed out the random sentences. Again he looked at the rectangular window, the metaphysical invitation, as he sat biting his pen. One more minor element is missing, a little nothing, he doesn't know exactly what it is, will never know, but tries anyway. Or not; he gives up. Yes, but more out of habit, the desire to leave a trace in the darkness, anything, he wrote the words already thinking about something else, the immediate future, to which he turned, throwing his pen on the floor the way someone might throw himself irresistibly into the tunnel in a void. Sitting on the ledge, I can see him reconnoitering the distant terrain, the outline of the hotel's abandoned pool, the white tables and chairs shining, small in the darkness, checking (of this I am absolutely sure) carefully that no one is in his path, that the leap will be only for him, and then nothing else-and that act of leaning out to check took him, finally, into space.

At first, the newspapers were discreet, no one understanding exactly what it all meant but respecting the relative importance of the historian in some sectors of the academic world. Beyond that the post mortem indicated nothing chemically newsworthy. Later, the professor leapt from the obituary page to the culture section. Two or three retrospective reviews of his work appeared; until then, everything known about his private life (that is, nothing) was that he had recently divorced his wife, Margarida da Silva Rennon, 43 years of age-who never gave any substantial or true information to the reporters who called for the next two weeks. Soon remarks appeared in a gossip column about a supposed connection with the Star, which aroused some yellow journalism: The matter was wildly spiced up for two weeks with hypotheses, as you probably know, and even his last words (it's over) merited a literary-graphological-psychoanalytic analysis on an illustrated

page. The absence of a period was supposedly an important fact. But unfortunately, the key element-as I read on-had already been in Europe for more than a month when my father committed suicide. And the emphatic, severe, almost menacing statement by her prominent lawyer, clarified once and for all that the actress Sara Donovan and Professor Frederico Augusto Rennon had in fact had a short-lived affair, a simple passing fancy that had ended a long time before, peacefully and by mutual consent. This put a definitive end to both speculation and public interest. But what a mess remained!

Such a mess that my mother went back to the real estate section, this time in another city. But that too passed from the tip of her pencil. So I don't emphasize the negative side of things exclusively, I remember that the University Council held a solemn session in honor of the deceased professor, to which we were invited and which, in truth because of timidity, we did not attend. But there it is, on the record books.

I thought it was the right moment, the way you might make a clean copy of your life, to show the letters to my mother. Fernanda agreed. I went through the motions I'd done so often of turning on the computer. She read two or three lines and said, in no special tone, almost bored: "Turn it off, son. Turn it all off."

I obeyed-after making a copy. And the national trait that my father left behind ultimately turned out to be useful, now that Fernanda and I are trying to live together. She had the idea of publishing the letters, appropriately annotated, and wrote up a professional editing project we sent to several publishers. She was right, and we've just signed a contract with one of them, for a reasonable sum-which for the two of us means a good start. But it isn't only that of course. My father's life, much more than the academic work he left, which as he knew, would inevitably age, has some touches of beauty, of literary value. No matter what people say, he was totally a man of his age, as the biographies of important people always say. Making him public, in all his words, is perhaps the best service apprentice historians, Fernanda and I, can render as a social contribution. Objectively, just as old Rennon would have wanted it.

Well, I think that's all.