

Everything Disappears

Eraldo Souza dos Santos

One

Ai, Eraldo, I think people have always made me a slave, in one way or another. After so many years, how many?, I don't remember..., Dona R. arrived at the puteiro and asked your aunt: Where is Nilva?

That was in 1971, I believe. Dona R. is still alive, you should go to Teófilo Otoni to ask her this before she dies. Your grandmother worked for her. She did the ironing, cleaned the house, that sort of thing. Your aunts and I worked in her house since we were small children. I worked for her until I disappeared and also when I appeared again, before your grandmother sent me to Rio. Dona R. went to the whorehouse, the whorehouse was full of men, she got your aunt out of there and made her tell where I was. That's all I know. Your aunt had come back to town very recently. A gentleman saw your aunt in the whorehouse area and told Dona R. They went there with the police, but the police had to stay outside.

I think the house and the farm were near Feira de Santana, but I could be wrong. Back then, my hair was very, very long, but as they didn't want to take care of it, they cut it short like yours. I couldn't comb my own hair alone either. I was very small. I could only see the town when they took me to the farm in their car during the holidays.

I don't know what they produced on the farm. It was a very small farm. I looked after the children in the family. They were four or five, I guess. Me? I was probably a bit older. They were already walking, and how they were walking...! All the time. And I had to go after them. Two children, that's it. Every night they would take a piece of an old mattress and put it in that little corner of the room for me to sleep on it. There was only room for my feet if I shrank down, and I didn't have a pillow.

I don't remember what they all looked like. Up until I was 20 or 21, I could remember their faces perfectly. Today I only see shadows. No, I don't remember their names. Everything disappeared from my mind. But if I close my eyes now, I can see your aunt's face perfectly.

Two

A police car was there when we returned from the farm. The policeman was kind to me. He asked: Is your name Nilva? I said yes. I don't think I was afraid. He said: I need you to tell me if you know some people. Then he went to the car, and your aunt got out of one of the back doors.

No, I don't remember realizing that Brazil was going through a dictatorship. I know because you have told me and because since Dilma was elected, they've been talking about it on TV all the time, haven't they? The dictatorship started the year I disappeared, is that it? Ai, I only started learning all these things when I became a dumb old woman...

I think I disappeared in 1968. I think I spent three years in Bahia, but your Aunt Nires said it was much, much longer. Seven, she says... I don't know now. Could it really have been that long? Who knows...

It was because the policeman arrived with your aunt that I tried to run away. I remember trying to run across the street. I shouted, It was her! I tried to get away from her. The policeman immediately grabbed my arm. It hurt. He said I shouldn't be afraid. Maybe it wasn't a policeman, but someone from the Juvenile Court?

Your grandmother got out of the police car, she was there too. I thought I'd never see her again. That she had forgotten me. I didn't even know where I was.

That was how I reappeared.

Three

It was a normal, white, lace dress that your grandmother used to make me wear on Sundays. The dress had disappeared, but when your grandmother decided to sell the house, your Aunt Nires found it in a box and threw it away. You know your aunt. She said the dress was grimy.

What she told me was that when I disappeared, your grandmother put a nail in one of the living room walls and hung that dress on it. She only took the dress off the nail when I reappeared. Maybe some kind of *simpatia*? It was just an old dress, and you love keeping old things. I can't wait to get rid of all those papers in your room to make room for the books in the boxes. The albums must be there. By the end of the month I want to clean the house, this house is filthy.

She left at dawn that day and went to the street market to buy food with Mom. She came back and left at about 11, 11 o'clock, and told your Aunt Nires to let her take me to your grandmother to buy a pair of shoes. Mom's orders, Nires wouldn't say no. Then she took me to a place where there were only truck drivers. And we traveled from Teófilo Otoni to Bahia by truck.

I don't know if she gave me to them, if she sold me to them... Perhaps "selling" is too strong a word... I don't think anyone knows, will ever know what really happened. Your Aunt Nires doesn't think she sold me... Whenever we passed a highway police station, she would gently lower my head so that the police wouldn't see me. I didn't think anything unusual was going on. I trusted her. I was used to going out with your three older aunts, I just couldn't go out alone.

No, it wasn't your aunt who drove the truck... It was a truck driver. Your aunt didn't even know how to drive. Today, I think they did get some money in exchange for me... That's at least what *I* think...

We arrived at a big house. Your aunt and the truck driver went in and talked to the couple who lived there. When the conversation ended, she said, Nilva, I'll be right back. Then the couple took me to a room with a little mattress in the corner. A mattress from a child's crib.

Then the next day, when I woke up, they said: Your sister's gone and she's not coming back. And I'm going to stay here? Then they said: Yes.

The bad thing was that it wasn't just looking after the children. They put me in charge of waxing the whole house, too. Especially a large room where they kept things like old furniture. This room was also used as a garage. I used to clean all the house on my knees. That's why, when your grandmother found me, my knees were so bruised, dark, to the bone. I never understood why they always asked me to wax everything all the time. I would put the wax on the floor, and the Black maid would wax it. The waxer was too big for me.

I liked it when they took me to the farm. I was freer there. I could eat fruits off the tree. The cooks treated me very well there. They were Black, too. Breakfast had cheese, bread, and cornbread. They would ask: Do you like this? If I said yes, they would always prepare it for me. Lunch was much better too, with chicken, pork, beef... Everything was very tasty. Maybe because they felt sorry for me... The other house also had a maid, but she was much more reserved.

I never understood why your aunt didn't come back to pick me up from there...

Your aunt told the police that we had traveled there by bus. But when the policeman, I'll never forget his nice suit, talked to me alone in a room, I said no that we had traveled by truck. He asked me, Do you remember the truck driver's name? I said no... The truck driver had vanished, never to appear again.

Four



It's been so long since I've seen these photos! Your Aunt Neuza, yes. She seems happy in these photos, right? I don't know who the rest of these people are, they're all whores. The bichinha loved to drink... That man must be the pimp, those are perhaps the clients. I think she preferred whoring because it was less work than being a maid cleaning a madam's house. Or she really liked it? I don't know. She loved drinking with these people. Your grandmother never said anything about it. She lived with us, for sure. Once she stopped drinking, she would suddenly start shaking a lot, looking sad. Then your grandmother would shout: Nilva, Tico, go and buy your sister a shot of cachaça at the little store! I would bring the glass from home. I carried the glass very carefully so as not to spill it.

She wouldn't let me get close to my boyfriends. She threatened to kill all of them. She said to Dica once: If I see you together again, my knife will find you!.. When I came back from Bahia, I only slept in her bed, afraid that your other aunt would kidnap me again, at night. I loved running my fingers through her hair before sleeping...

Once she put alcohol on her own body and set it on fire. I think it was because she fell in love with a man who cheated on her. She spent a long time in hospital... Several parts of her body became wrinkled after that. She was very, very beautiful...

Once she was in the city center and got into a fight with a woman. She stabbed the woman several times. No, I don't think the woman died... Neuza went home calmly. She hid the knife behind our big, old radio and went to sleep. Then the police arrived in the morning. Does Neuza live here? Yes. Can we talk to her? Yes. Then your grandmother woke her up. Did you stab so-and-so? Yes. And where's the crime weapon? Oh, just a moment. She gave the policeman the knife, full of blood. She was locked up for a long time...

She died of that *m*-disease that I don't like to say the name of.

Five

Imagine, if you're the grandson of a German or a Swiss! Your grandmother was very beautiful. Black but with big blue eyes, you can imagine. And she spoke German. I think she worked for some German family? Remember when she spoke German to you? She was illiterate but spoke German! Crazy.

I don't know who my father really was. All your aunts and uncles don't have their father's name on their birth certificates. Neither do I. I think each of us has a different father... You must meet Dona D., too, before she dies. It was her niece who bought your grandmother's house ten years ago. She loves a good gossip! She knows everything but only plays jokes. One day she said to

me: You have the same mark over your eye as your father. Could it be that my father, or your grandfather, is still alive?

Your grandmother always said that my father was J.L. He always hated me. He never lived in the same house as we did. He lived with another woman. I was good friends with his sons. I don't know why they put it into our heads that we had to call him dad. Maybe he was Neuza's father. Maybe also the father of that aunt of yours who stole me from your grandmother. I think he had her with another woman but didn't want to take care of her, and your grandmother decided to adopt her. You know, we love to adopt girls in this family. She was the only white one among us.

One day his children and I went to play. G. ended up hurting himself on the barbed wire on the farm. We carried him to our father's house. Your Uncle Tico ran because he couldn't tolerate blood, a coward as always. Dad took G. to hospital and then told your grandmother that I had been responsible for the accident. And she gave me the worst beating of my life. He kept smoking that pipe of his while she beat me until I pissed myself from the pain. When G. was discharged from hospital, he said it wasn't me. But it was too late. Your grandmother had decided to send me to Rio to work in the house of one of her sisters-in-law.

Six

I don't know why the police haven't arrested your aunt. I think your grandmother preferred not to press charges so as not to see her daughter spend a lifetime in jail... She got angry when we asked her about this. When I came back, your aunt was still living there, as I said... Life as usual. That's why I used to sleep in your Aunt Neuza's bed for fear of being kidnapped at night.

But one day she disappeared like dust. I think your Aunt Neuza threatened to kill her in revenge. Your grandmother looked for her for a long time, everywhere. In vain. Perhaps Neuza's knife found her.