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The Piano Is Always There: A Story of Lisbon

FOR THE PAST SEVERAL MONTHS I HAVE BEEN LIVING WITH MY PARTNER, Aara, in the old Alfama neighborhood of Lisbon, Portugal. A maze of tiny alleyways that turn into stairways as the streets climb up the steep hills from the Tejo river, the Alfama was once a Moorish quarter. Tucked behind the Sé, the city's squat cathedral, the neighborhood survived the 1755 earthquake pretty much intact, and today it is one of the oldest areas of Lisbon. It is a very humble neighborhood—there are pensioners here whose already meager checks are being reduced by the government on an almost regular basis—though I wouldn't call it "poor" outright. The people who live in the dark little dwellings that crowd these streets love the Alfama. They cannot afford to live elsewhere, but they don't want to. Most of them were born in the apartments they live in now. Some of them have probably never even been outside the city limits.

Because the cobblestone streets are so narrow and can become *escadinhas* (steps) at any turn, it is impossible for a vehicle with wheels to get through. Everything is done on foot, and everything is carried in and out, up and down the hill, by hand. At first I thought that this would be inconvenient, even impossible. But I soon adapted to what feels like a nineteenth-century pace of life, and it has become endearing to me, even when I'm carrying provisions and trudging up the hill under a hot sun.

But then, the Portuguese never seem to be in a hurry, except when they are behind the wheel of a car. On foot, they move at a steady, slow pace—perhaps because they have learned from long experience that this is the only way to get up the steep hills. Also, they are for the most part friendly and patient. They don't mind repeating what they've said, which is a good thing for me, because the Portuguese accent is difficult for foreigners to understand and often I only catch what someone has said the second time around.

I've never known a city that has as many old people as Lisbon. One of the most common sights in this city is an aged person limping up a steep incline or slowly mounting a long *beco*, a thin alleyway that leads up from the river between the buildings. The hills and stairs are challenging enough for young people—one often sees tourists huffing and puffing—and yet the old people of Lisbon simply take it as part of their lot, making their way up and down every day, carrying bags of groceries. I've never seen another city with so many people

with canes and crutches, limps, and bent or swollen legs. And yet the people keep trudging forward.

Because the streets are so narrow in the Alfama, the neighbor women shout from their balconies across to each other, holding their conversations from the second or third floor. You hear them in the morning, discussing the weather or the prices in the supermarkets. The sounds of the street filter into the dwellings. Some of the sounds leave you perplexed, and you only slowly come to guess at their origin. In the middle of the night you might hear someone dragging some heavy object along the cobblestones. What could it be—a dead body? a cart of some kind? precious belongings? At one point, every night at about ten thirty I would hear the long, mournful cry of a man shouting, “Catarina! Catarrrrinnna!” At first, I thought he was crying out for the woman he loved. But it happened with such regularity that after a couple weeks I figured he must be calling his dog home, since the dogs run loose in the Alfama streets like young children.

The dark streets of the Alfama are full of tiny, cavernous shops, which back in the Middle Ages were undoubtedly little more than caves in the hillside. Inside the dark *lojas* the shelves are stocked with wares from floor to ceiling. Astonishingly, you can get anything and everything you need right in the Alfama. Even washing machines and fridges. There is one shop in the Rua de São Miguel, just down the hill from our apartment, that has so many appliances of all makes stacked inside that you hardly have room to turn around. It is strange to see the latest-model Whirlpools and Kenmores heaped up in a dark space that seems straight out of an earlier century. Of course, since everything in this neighborhood has to be carried by hand from one place to another, getting the washing machine to an apartment two blocks up the hill will require a couple of strong men. Ditto for the remodeling jobs that seem to be going on in many of the boarded-up addresses in the Alfama. Men are constantly drilling and hammering, then carrying out heavy bags of rubble by hand. Lisbon has signs on dilapidated buildings that say, “Restore now. Pay later.” Pay when? I wonder. After all, the country is broke.

The other day Aara and I were heading out and as we came around the steep cobblestones by the Igreja de São Miguel, there was ahead of us an old woman dressed in widow’s black, gingerly making her way down along the side of the church. As I drew up beside her, I held out my elbow and asked, “*Posso ajudar um pouco?*” (“Can I help a bit?”). The woman made no pretense of first saying no or insisting that she was just fine. On the contrary, she latched onto my arm immediately, and as she began to murmur “*Obrigadinha, senhor,*” she also began to sob heavily. Through her tears she repeated over and over, “Thank you, sir, thank you.” But along with her thanks she also began to wail that she had no one, no one in the world to help her, that she was all alone. “*Não tenho ninguém,*” she kept crying, “*não tenho ninguém.*” Yes, she had one cousin, but the cousin lived across town. She was eighty-one and all alone, *senhor*, and it was hard, so hard, to walk. She just needed to go down and get some bread. “Thank

you, sir, *obrigadinha*, this is so very kind of you.”

Throughout all of this she kept looking up at Aara and interjecting, “*Desculpe, senhora*,” begging forgiveness for taking me away from my *mulher* for a few minutes.

I asked if she was from the Alfama.

Oh yes, *senhor*, she replied. She had lived her whole life here, in the same apartment, she said. She told me the exact address—right down to the number on her street and the floor she lived on—where she had been born and raised.

I then asked her name.

“Angela,” she said and looked at me as though it had been decades since anyone had bothered to inquire.

“A beautiful name,” I told her.

But that only made Angela begin to weep more.

When I asked if she had any children, Angela stopped for a second, stared straight at me, and said with surprising force, “*Não quis!*” (“I didn’t want any!”). I thought it best not to ask why, and so we continued on in silence. Finally we came around into the little street where her bakery was located.

“So thankful, sir, *obrigadinha*. I just need to get some *pão* here, some bread right in this little shop.”

I kept saying “*De nada, de nada*,” that it was nothing, that I was delighted to walk along with her. And she kept wailing at being so alone in the world.

I guided her up the steps into the *padaria*, where the woman behind the counter greeted her by name. Angela thanked me once more. As I turned away, I wondered how many lives are like hers here in the Alfama. How was she going to get back home? I had helped her down the steep cobblestones beside the church, but it would be even harder for her to make her way back up, carrying a bag with a loaf of bread. I could only hope that another elbow would present itself, but I had the strong impression that there were few arms left for Angela in this world.



I have fallen in love with Lisbon. I thought I was beyond the age for falling in love like this, but the two visits that I had to make to Lisbon changed all that. I wouldn’t say that I was “madly” in love—the love Lisbon inspires is not the sort of insane delirium that can deprive a person of sleep all night—but rather that this was a kind of mysterium of love, an enchantment that wound around me, entwining me, so that by the time I realized what was happening I was completely caught in the city’s web of sights and smells. The soft air of Lisbon, the diffuse light, so different from the hard Mediterranean sun of Spain or Southern France, the soft pastels of the *azulejos* (tiles) that cover the buildings, the smell of orange blossoms in the streets as the fruit trees bloom in the spring, and of course the glitter of the Tejo river—everything conspired to pull me in and seduce me. Lisbon never tried to overpower or impress me, the way some great capitals do; rather it just kept tempting me to walk up one more street, go

around one more corner, skip up one more flight of stairs, penetrate into one more alleyway. Before I knew it, I was completely lost and did not care. I had no desire to find my way out of Lisbon's back streets again.

When people think of Portugal these days, they think first of all of the \$78-billion IMF bailout the country received in 2009, of economic hardship, of unemployment, and of huge budget cuts. All of these are of course part of the daily reality in Portugal today, even though the economy is better than most people realize. Still, there are pensioners living on five hundred euros or less per month, which is a pitiful sum even in a land where food is very cheap (and very good).

But the European Union's economic reports bear little relationship to people's daily lives in what is—yes—a rather poor country. Indeed, Portugal has been poor for centuries, but what has seeped into the fabric of these people and stained it indelibly is a certain melancholy—what the Portuguese call *saudade*, a word that makes translators throw up their hands in despair and render it simply as “nostalgia.” Certainly, *saudade* can often be nostalgic, but it refers also to a deep longing, a pensiveness in which the whole country willingly—even happily?—indulges.

The capital of the country and the capital of *saudade* is Lisbon. Not that Lisbon is mournful. But its happiness, even in the best moments, is always somewhat muted. When the sun shines, there is also often a hint of a rainstorm on the horizon. One cannot imagine in Lisbon the kind of wild, late-night gaiety that Paris offers, and indeed the Lisboetas have always felt that their city lacks French excitement. In nineteenth-century Portuguese novels people often remark that to have a really good time you need to leave Lisbon and go to Paris. But while the Parisians try desperately to demonstrate to you that they are having a wonderful time precisely because they are afraid someone might see behind their mask, the people of Lisbon are not trying to impress anybody one way or another. They are comfortable with the almost oxymoronic culture of their city: the sad joy of their lives, the decaying beauty of their buildings, the ruined greatness of their history. What was once, at the height of Portugal's empire in the sixteenth century, one of the richest and most elegant cities in the world was reduced to rubble by the 1755 earthquake, and the city never recovered its preeminent position. It buried its dead, it slowly made peace with the tragedy, and then it lumbered on as a conservative, reserved, and chastened city.

Set out on the very edge of the European continent, Lisbon is far from the action of the great European centers. The language is a Romance language, like those of the fiery Mediterranean peoples in Spain, France, and Italy. When you see it written, it in fact looks almost like Spanish. But it sounds completely different. People often think they are hearing a Slavic language, not a Romance one. And like the language, the people are very different from those of the Mediterranean countries. As it lost its vast empire, the country began to turn inward, and the same has happened in the language: half of the vowels are completely swallowed.

Nevertheless, the Portuguese are proud of their language, in part because they have always been looked down upon by their neighbors, the Spanish. As with many siblings, the family tensions rise easily to the surface. When I mentioned to one Portuguese colleague that I had to make an effort at times to remember the differences between Spanish and Portuguese so as not to speak Spanish in Lisbon, he applauded my efforts, saying that it was true that the Portuguese don't like the Spanish language, even though it is very similar. Then he gave his reason why. "*O Espanhol é ridículo*," he said: "Spanish is ridiculous." He added that as a child, when they wanted to play at being clowns (*palhaços*) they would pretend to speak in Spanish. "The Spanish are all clowns," he concluded. Nor was his an unusual attitude. Another friend told me that when she heard Spanish tourists talking among themselves, they sounded to her like turkeys going "Gobble, gobble, gobble!" I had to confess that to the Portuguese ear, the loud voices, open vowels, and fast patter of the Spanish could indeed sound like fowl in a gaggle.

The light in Lisbon is always soft—as though it has passed through delicate fingers—and it is always changing. Clouds move in and out, fine drops of rain sprinkle, making for an atmospheric light. You can go down at the same time every day to the Cais das Colunas—the "Quay of the columns," just down from the Praça do Comércio, that was for centuries where important visitors disembarked to enter the city—and you will see that it never looks the same way twice.

In the winter the forecast calls for rain every day, and every day it indeed does rain at least a little. Once in a while the rain is hard and stormy and lasts all day, but most days it clears up for hours. In the winter you organize your day around the periods of rain and hope that you do not absolutely *have* to go somewhere right when the skies open up. One thing I have discovered, however, is that on any given day in the late afternoon, shortly before sunset, the sky clears up, and the sun, now low in the sky, comes in under the clouds and lights up the city, gilding it. This is in fact one of my favorite times to go down to the Cais das Colunas. The big square of the Praça do Comércio, with its arch under which you pass to enter the city, together with the quay could make a romantic of even the most cynical person. Friends, couples, and families take pictures of themselves and each other down on the quay, while a guitar player with a small amp plays Dire Straits songs. The effect should be kitsch, but somehow it is not—maybe because the air is fragrant and the light is soft.

In our *bairro* the housewives are very savvy about the rains, and on a winter day they are quick to hang out their laundry over the street as soon as there are a few hours with no precipitation. I think they always have some laundry washed and ready to hang. On days when it rains nonstop, they throw sheets of plastic over their hung wash.

On one of our very first days here in January the *previsão meteorológica* (weather forecast) was excellent: sun all day with a zero percent chance of rain. On this perfect day for a long walk, Aara and I left parkas and umbrellas at

home. If we stood in the sunlight, it was warm enough without a coat. We walked up toward the Sé, and near it we came across a charming little bookstore, the Livraria Fabula Urbis. The bookstore owner, João, said nothing but “good day” until, after I had looked around a fair bit, I asked him whether he had Tabucchi’s *Sostiene Pereira* in Portuguese. Suddenly he came alive. He began rifling through the *armário* where he kept the Portuguese books and pulled out Tabucchi’s *Requiem*, the first and only book Tabucchi wrote in Portuguese, not Italian. We now started to talk about literature, and were still at it forty-five minutes later.

In another bookshop across town I asked about Saramago one day, and to my surprise the owner said that he had tried several times to read Saramago and could never get past sixty or seventy pages. I told him that I had had exactly the same experience. “*Saramago não é bom escritor*,” he told me simply. “Saramago is not a good writer.”

Not a good writer! What a judgment about Portugal’s only Nobel laureate in literature! But the comment was good for another forty-five minutes on the topic of who was a great writer and who was not.

After our conversation about Tabucchi, João suggested we read the novel *Os Maias* by Eça de Queiroz, the “Flaubert” of Portugal. At seven hundred pages, the volume looked a bit daunting, but we decided to take the plunge. From the first pages, the novel immerses the reader into its teeming nineteenth-century world, in which horse-drawn carriages run up and down the hills that antiquated trams now travel. In truth, though, in terms of style Eça is much more like Balzac than Flaubert—not to mention that *Os Maias* is far longer than any novel Flaubert ever published. Eça’s characters are drawn with great nuance and complexity, and they undergo momentous and sometimes sudden changes. Perhaps the most delicious aspect, though, is that Eça was writing for a public that had read the great nineteenth-century French writers, so his characters can get away with making comments to each other on the order of “No, *mon cher*, you cannot do that! After all, this isn’t a novel by Balzac . . .”

João approved of our decision to live in the Alfama. He asked for the street name, and when we gave it he commented that we are “*mesmo no coração da Alfama*” (“in the very heart of the Alfama”).

At that point the skies opened up and it began to pour. Within seconds people had gathered under the awning of the bookstore to get out of the rain. João announced to us that we could not go out into rain like that. So he ran next door to grab a huge umbrella, telling us to take it and return it to him whenever we wanted. After much discussion, we agreed that I would use it to run back to the apartment and grab our own umbrellas. I raced back to our flat, then returned to the bookstore with Aara’s raincoat, my parka, and the umbrella. We thanked João for his generosity and headed back out into the city.

“You know what?” Aara asked me as we were walking down the hill to the Baixa. “While you were gone, João told me to watch the store while he went out and got a coffee!”

I could not imagine a bookstore owner in Paris or New York handing an expensive umbrella to a customer and saying to take it and bring it back some other time or turning over the store to an unknown foreigner for a half hour. To me this was a wonderful, serendipitous way to begin our stay in the city. I had the impression that a kind of magic had descended on us. Later that day, we passed by again and stopped in to thank João once more. His wife was now tending shop, and when she saw that I started to look at some piano scores for fado music, she asked if I played piano. I told her I did—but jazz, not fado.

“There’s a piano upstairs,” she said. “You can come here to play it whenever you like. Go try it out right now.”

After a bit of hesitation, I climbed the stairs to the second floor. I was expecting a beat-up old instrument, but to my surprise there was a good German upright. I ran through a few standards, and when I went back downstairs I mentioned that doing without a piano for several months was the one drawback I had anticipated to living in Lisbon.

“The piano is always here,” she said. “You are welcome to come play any time.”



Alfama is one of the two neighborhoods that gave rise to the music of fado. The other is the Mouraria which is also an old, poor neighborhood whose name comes from the Moors who lived there, just as they did in the Alfama.

Fado is to Portugal what jazz and blues are to the USA, flamenco is to Spain, and tango is to Argentina. Like the other three, it had its origins among the poor and the marginal, and an early Portuguese book defines a *fadista* as simply a criminal and suggests that all *fadistas* be rounded up and put in jail. José Malhoa’s larger-than-life painting *The Fado* (he actually painted two versions, one in 1909 and one in 1910) depicts two known characters from the Mouraria, one a petty criminal and the other a well-known prostitute. In fact, in order to complete his painting, he had to bail them out of jail several times. Need it be said that the painting was not well received by the critics of the time?

Fado was made respectable, however, and in fact became institutionalized, under the tutelage of Portugal’s long-ruling dictator, António Salazar. The Portuguese are fond of saying that Salazar kept the population in a docile position by promoting the three Fs: football (which, in Portugal, means soccer), Fatima (Our Lady of Fatima), and fado. After Salazar came to power in the late 1920s, fado was regulated by the government. Fado musicians and singers had to have a professional, government-issued card, fado could be sung only in designated clubs, and the lyrics to fado songs came under heavy government censorship.

Above all, fado became the great repertory of *saudade*. Fado songs are usually sad and emotional: love lost and eternal longing figure prominently. In the 1940s and 1950s major poets began to write fado lyrics, and films depicted the music. The great Amália Rodrigues (1920–99) is still considered the greatest fado singer of all time.

Because fado was associated with the Salazar regime, it fell out of favor

after the 1974 peaceful “Carnation Revolution.” In recent years, however, it has made a comeback, due to a generation of “new fado” singers who mix the traditional music with other elements (jazz, flamenco, etc.) and organize large, open-air concerts more typical of rock music. Of these new singers, the diva is undoubtedly Mariza, who enjoys an international reputation and is also at home singing American jazz standards.

Lisbon has a fado museum at the base of the Alfama. I went there one day with a group of Portuguese octogenarians. Short and stout, they could pick out all the faces in the old photos of *fadistas* on the wall. When our guide asked whether they preferred *antigo* or *novo* fado, they were, not surprisingly, vocal in their preference for the old, traditional style. As we went around the museum, one of them would occasionally break into a song, and almost immediately half of the others would join in. They not only knew all the lyrics (the way baby boomers know Beatles songs), but they all shared in the mournful sensibility that runs through fado. When our young guide asked if it was true that you could sing or play fado only if you had grown up with it your whole life, they assented immediately—the way people would have claimed half a century ago that jazz and blues could not be learned.

There was a sense of protectiveness regarding the music, or rather a sense that the music protected the Portuguese and their *saudade* from new, threatening ways. Curiously, the Portuguese are little interested in becoming “modern.” They have televisions and cell phones and new cars if they can afford them, but that is about it. A Portuguese colleague in Lisbon suggested that people dress simply not only because they don’t have much money but also because it is frowned upon to ostentatiously flaunt new styles. You ask any Portuguese who has lived abroad what he or she misses most, and the answer is always Portuguese food. At first, this stumped me, since Portuguese cooking is not particularly refined. In the main it consists of meat or fish accompanied by potatoes and vegetables (usually overcooked), all of it in portions so large that a normal person cannot possibly finish them. The Portuguese also make different kinds of stewed *feijoada* (beans). But that is precisely what the people are so nostalgic for when they go abroad: the assurance of abundant food that is simple and filling and cheap. I should mention also that when it comes to cooking fish the Portuguese are absolute masters; in even the cheapest Portuguese restaurants you cannot go wrong if you order any kind of fresh, grilled fish.

But the food in Portugal, as in so many countries, is more than food: it reflects a way of life. The dishes may not be refined, but in Portugal most people can order lunch in a little restaurant and afford more food than they will be able to eat. It doesn’t matter to them that they get boiled potatoes, French fries, and homemade potato chips all on the same plate—even, sometimes, a small pile of rice as well. They go away feeling rich and satisfied after a meal, and the bill never breaks the bank. In another country five potatoes, a pot of rice, and chips at a single sitting would seem strange. In Portugal it allows even the most humble person to feel like a king.

I wonder sometimes what the Portuguese must think if they go to France or North America and order a meal in a restaurant in which the plate has a few dabs of food on it with a bit of drizzle, and in which the prices get higher the less food you are actually served. What they would give then to have a thick *feijoada* of rice and beans, which always comes in a large pot of which you cannot even finish half.

Aara and I once tried a little restaurant in the Mouraria we had heard about—a tiny place that serves only lunches and has no sign outside. It’s called “Zé de Mouraria,” which is a bit like saying, “Bob of the Bronx.” A chalkboard lists the daily dishes—*os pratos do dia*—a different one for each day. Although the restaurant also had a menu, almost everyone ordered the daily special. The first time we went it was pork ribs and a *feijoada*. It could be ordered only for two people, so it was fortunate that I was not there alone. The *moço* (waiter) brought a platter stacked high with ribs and a huge pot of the beans and rice. It was more than we could possibly eat, of course. He jokingly scolded us for not being able to finish the servings and offered to bring more if we wanted.

We returned on a *quarta-feira* (Wednesday), which is the day when they serve *arroz de pato* (duck with rice). This time, the *moço* shook our hands, knew what we wanted to drink, and treated us as old friends. As usual, the restaurant was packed with both blue-collar workers and employees in suits from the nearby offices. For the men and women wearing office attire, the waiter would bring extra napkins to tuck into their collars.

At the table next to ours (the tables are pressed up against each other), three men sat down, laughing and joking, and ordered a bottle of wine before deciding on what to eat. When the *moço* poured it into small bowls instead of glasses, I leaned over and asked why.

“*Vinho verde tinto!*” the nearest one laughed. “Red *vinho verde!* It is traditional to drink it from bowls.”

I knew about white *vinho verde*, I told them, but this was the first time I had ever seen the red.

“*Moço!*” cried one of the men. “Bring another bowl!”

The next thing I knew, they were pushing a bowl of the wine at us, insisting we have some. *Vinho verde tinto* is not a “fine” wine. It is drunk young, is almost fizzy, and is low in alcohol. When they asked how I liked it, I pronounced it was interesting.

“Have more!” the men shouted, and now a conversation began in earnest. Who were they? Who were we? How did we know about this restaurant?

It turned out that the three had been in Angola together in the colonial wars in the 1960s, in the last years of the Salazar dictatorship. Public opposition in Portugal to the colonial wars was instrumental in the preparation of the Carnation Revolution of 1974.

“But we were musicians,” one of them said. “We played music more than we fought. Then we came back to Portugal and played basketball together.”

The *moço* had brought a big pot and set it down in front of the men.

One of the men introduced himself as Victor. “We’re having something different,” he said. Then he called for another plate. “You must try it!”

The next thing we knew, we were sharing their pork liver and potatoes. The *moço* laughed because we had not even finished our own *arroz de pato*.

“Another bottle of *vinho verde!*” Victor called, and almost immediately it was there before them.

After the pork they joked that they would have some dessert but instead ordered yet another dish with a large platter of French fries on the side. One of them began calling for another plate for us. But the truth was that we could not eat another bite.

Over coffee we sounded Victor and his friends out on the economic crisis, on Portugal’s place in Europe, and on what mattered in life. They said, as many Portuguese do, that the country should never have joined the European Union. But fortunately two of the most important things—wine and food—were produced close to home. The lunch ended with the men kissing Aara and pumping my hand. As I was leaving, the *moço* mentioned to me that we should come back the next day because the daily special was going to be his favorite dish of all: *bacalhau*.

Bacalhau—that is, cod—is the Portuguese national dish. You buy it dried and salted, soak it repeatedly in baths of fresh water, and then cook it. The Portuguese say that they have more than 365 ways of preparing it, a different one for each day of the year. Cod is part comfort food, part national identity. It is simple, ubiquitous, and much loved. The most important things on people’s minds in Portugal are not the latest model Apple products or the most recent films. They are food, wine, song—and of course football.

In this sense, Lisbon has somehow missed out on the enormous acceleration of materialism that hit Europe and North America in the 1980s. The bumper stickers that began to appear in the US in the 1980s and said “The one who dies with the most toys wins” would be incomprehensible to Lisboetas. When you arrive in Lisbon you return to a Europe of decades ago, a Europe you have seen many times in old black-and-white photos. Except for the late-model cars, Lisbon still looks much as it did half a century ago. Tourists are enchanted with the old, creaking streetcars—of which the most famous is “o eléctrico” #28, which goes from one end to the other of the city—but the Lisboetas are equally fond of them. In fact, the city has adopted an official typeface whose letters are made up of the shapes the electric cables above the trams form.



Aara and I are walking out toward the Sé when, again, moving slowly down the steps toward the Igreja de São Miguel, is Angela, dressed in black as always. As I pass by her, I hold out my elbow again and ask, “*Posso ajudá-la, senhora?*”

Angela looks at me, then looks at Aara, then at me again, and once again she latches hold of my arm.

“Ah, me!” she cries. “*Obrigadinha!*” To Aara she says, “*Senhora*, your husband has such a good heart! He is so helpful.”

Then once again, she begins to weep, and she wails, “*Senhor*, I am all alone in this world! Thank you so much!”

“Are you on your way to get bread?” I ask.

“*Sim, pão*,” she says. “I need bread. I have cleaned my house. I clean it every day. My house is spotless, *senhor! Limpinha!* But I need bread.”

“*Está bem*,” I tell her. “I’ll walk you there.”

“*O senhor*, you are so kind! I am eighty-one years old and I have no one. I don’t even have a dog! My husband died eleven years ago, and now I don’t even have a dog!”

Not having a dog brings back all of Angela’s sadness, and she begins to wail anew.

Just then, Aara asks if she can take Angela’s picture. “*Sim*,” Angela says, and she insists that I stand with her.

For a moment she forgets about the dog and her husband and being all alone. She forgets to cry. Pulling herself together, she stands at my side, clutching my arm. If she straightens up completely, she comes up to my shoulder (and I am, myself, only five-foot-seven). She manages a smile as Aara clicks the photo.

Eighty-one years old, Angela was thus born in 1933, right into the middle of the world’s worst economic depression. Salazar had come to power recently, and the dictatorship that was to characterize most of Angela’s life had only recently begun.

After Aara takes our picture, I ask, “Angela, do you ever wish that you lived in another neighborhood where you didn’t have to walk up and down such steep streets?”

Angela looks at me as though I have spoken blasphemy.

“*Não!*” she says emphatically.

“You like it here?” I continue. “You like living in the Alfama?”

We have arrived at the *padaria* now.

As I help her up the step to the shop, Angela turns to me and says, “*Adoro o meu bairro!* I adore the Alfama!”

With that she releases my arm, and as I turn away she is already calling her bread order to the baker.

I now have Angela captured in digital form, downloaded into my computer and available for e-mailing or uploading on social media sites. None of this is part of Angela’s world. She cannot imagine that I could send her image around the world, out to hundreds of Facebook friends, if I so chose. Her world is one of the narrow Alfama streets and the local bread shop; the steep cobblestones that she is slow to get up and down; the people who are more fortunate than she and have a *cão* (dog). Angela has a little apartment, she cleans it every day, and she cries when she remembers that she has no one. But she is one with her *bairro*. She is one with the Alfama.

In 2005 the fado singer Mariza gave an open-air concert in Lisbon, backed up by her usual guitarists and a small orchestra. Mariza, like many *fadistas*, grew up in the Alfama and the Mouraria. Angela may well have seen her running around the alleyways of the Alfama as a young girl. And Mariza may well have

had lunch in the little Mouraria restaurant where Aara and I met Victor and his friends. For her final song in 2005, Mariza sang one of the classics from Amália Rodrigues's repertoire: "Ó Gente da Minha Terra" ("Oh People of My Land"). The lyrics are simple, and part of the song goes:

Sempre que se ouve o gemido
De uma guitarra a cantar
Fica-se logo perdido
Com vontade de chorar
Ó gente da minha terra
Agora é que eu percebi
Esta tristeza que trago
Foi de vós que recebi.

(Every time you hear the wailing
Of a guitar for singing
Right away you feel lost
And want to cry

Oh, people of my land,
It is now that I perceive
That the sadness I carry
I received from you.)

In the middle of the song, Mariza was overcome and had to pause and wipe away tears from her eyes. The crowd went wild. They were one with her in their *tristeza* and *saudade*.



It is 2014 and Portugal is just about to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of the "Carnation Revolution," in which the dictatorship was peaceably overthrown after half a century. Banners have gone up, and speeches are planned. A glossy new book contains interviews with the "*rapazes dos tanques*"—the soldiers in the tanks who refused to open fire in support of the dictatorship on April 25, 1974. No one ever thought to search them out and interview them before.

The story they tell is remarkable. On that day, the tanks of the troops loyal to the dictatorship were faced off in the streets of downtown Lisbon against those of the soldiers in revolt. The leaders of the revolt had asked the populace to stay indoors, but instead the people poured into the street in support of the attempt to overthrow the dictatorship. A flower market nearby was selling fresh carnations, which had just come into season, and people bought red ones—red being the color of the banned Socialism and Communism—and brought them to the soldiers who placed them in their gun barrels.

On the government side, the order was given to open fire. In the interviews, former conscripts recall being told to shoot or be shot. One man, now retired, says he ducked back down into his tank and told the men inside to batten down

all the hatches. That way, their commander could not carry out his threat. They huddled in there for hours.

Amazingly, no one fired. The revolution was almost bloodless (the hated secret police, the PIDE, killed four people). By the day's end, the dictatorship had fallen, and democracy was proclaimed.

Most of the tourists snapping photos of the Sé or of the rooftops of the Alfama from the Largo das Portas do Sol probably do not think about how important the year 2014 is for commemorating the Portuguese democracy. But does it really matter? Perhaps the proof of democracy's success is that people do not have to call attention to it. Democracy has been assimilated into the national fabric.



I knew that leaving Lisbon would be painful, so Aara and I decided to spend a week in Amsterdam as an antidote. Aara had never been there, and I was sure that its charms—equal to Lisbon's but very, very different—would relieve some of the pain. I lived in the Netherlands for six months years ago, and I find it amusing to wrap my tongue around Dutch phrases.

What we didn't know was that our "painful leaving" would take a turn toward the literal. On our last day in Lisbon, Aara sprained her ankle on the stairs. We iced it, she took anti-inflammatories, and I went out to buy her crutches. Still, when it came time to leave she could put no weight on her foot. It took half an hour for her to hobble slowly up to the Largo das Portas do Sol, where we could get a taxi to the airport, clutching my arm the whole way. I made a couple trips back down into the Alfama to haul up our suitcases.

The Lisbon airport is in the heart of the city. When you take off, you fly right over the tops of its buildings. As our airplane climbed into the skies, I had a last look at the Praça do Comércio and the Discovery Tower at Belem. Then we were banking to the east, and soon we were flying over the mountains of Northern Spain.

As I write this, I am sitting in an apartment in Amsterdam, looking out over a tranquil canal. Aara has been to the hospital here for x-rays, and it turns out that a small bone in her foot is broken. She now has a long cast on her leg. The nurse had her choose one of three colors: red, blue, or white. She chose blue. These are of course the colors of the Dutch flag, as well as of the French flag. An old Dutch joke claims that the reason the Dutch flag has the same colors as the French is that the Dutch are so thrifty that they just take old French flags, cut off the good end, and rehang them at ninety-degree angle from the original. The result: the Dutch flag has horizontal stripes, while the French one has vertical ones.

I went out and rented a wheelchair yesterday, and today I pushed Aara along the canals and then through the Rijksmuseum. We gazed at the Rembrandts and the Vermeers and the Ter Boschs, and for a few hours the calm quays of

Amsterdam erased from our minds the chaotic patchwork of Lisbon, where haphazard streets go up and down in all directions. The Dutch Masters exuded a soothing calm. As Baudelaire put it in his great poem about Dutch painting, “Invitation to the Voyage”:

Là, tout n'est qu'ordre et beauté,
Luxe, calme et volupté.
(Over there, everything is order and beauty,
luxury, calm and sensual delight).

Aara says that her foot gives her no pain as long as she stays off it. The Lisbon break will gradually heal. It would be impossible to push her wheelchair up the steep hills of Lisbon, but here in flat Holland the *rolstoel* rolls along with little effort.

Last night I took Aara for a *rijstafel*, the classic Indonesian feast offered to the colonial masters hundreds of years ago. It was a delicious treat. But I cannot imagine feeling *saudade* for a *rijstafel* when I am far away from Amsterdam. I cannot imagine wanting to have it several times a week. But when I think of the sort of freshly grilled fish I could get for a song in Lisbon—a *douradinha* or a *robalo*—then I feel a certain nostalgia creep into my marrow. I can just see the *moço* sliding the plate in front of me. I can picture the two halves of the fish, splayed on the platter. And if I close my eyes, I can almost smell it.