

JÚLIA LOPES DE ALMEIDA

THE FAMILY MEDEIROS¹

Translation by

Michael J. Tufft

Brown University doctoral candidate

Chapter 1

Western São Paulo

The train was still juddering to a halt as Octavio Medeiros, brushing the dust from himself, passed his travel bag through the window to the hands of a porter. He was arriving, finally, in the city of his birth.

As soon as he stepped down from the carriage, he looked around in search of a friendly face, and, not recognizing any, he asked the porter to stow his bag and headed for the sun-drenched square.

Along the pavement, before the station, stretched a line of buggies and carriages, waiting for passengers.

Rejecting the offers of the coachmen, Octavio crossed the square in a diagonal line and headed down a small tree-lined street, towards a low, red-brick house with green shutters.

¹ Here are translated chapters 1 and 13. My translation is from the Editora Mulheres edition which is based upon the 1919 version of the novel, published during the author's lifetime and with significant alterations from the original text printed in the *Gazeta de Notícias* in 1891. *A Família Medeiros*. Florianópolis, SC: Editora Mulheres, 2009.

Arriving there, he leant against the ledge of an open window and said cheerily to a little old man who was reading inside:

“Good day, Dr. Morton!”

Dr. Morton turned and fixed his puffy blue eyes on the newcomer.

“Octavio Medeiros at your service.”

“Oh! My dear boy, come in, come in! What a surprise!”

And the old man went to the door to welcome his friend and former student.

“You’re the first person I’m stopping in to see, you know?”

“Really? You mean to say that your family isn’t aware...”

“No, they’re not. My father advised me to go on a tour of the principal countries of Europe after concluding my studies, but I decided to return as soon as I finished my course and I am arriving unannounced. Would you be so kind as to tell me, sir: are my parents at the plantation?”

“They are. Now I understand why you came to me first. Right you are. I’ll have my horse prepared for you. In the meantime, let’s talk.”

And, after having gone in to give orders, Dr. Morton took the black silk cap off his head and, stroking his beardless face, began:

“You’ll find things have changed a bit at home. Your eldest sister is ready for marriage. People say she’s one of the prettiest girls in the whole municipality. And she really is, as they say: quite the catch! The youngest has left the college at Itú and has a tutor now, whom I recommended myself by the way...”

“Tell me; is my mother very frail?”

“Frail? Your mother is the same as ever, resigned in moments of sadness, calm in happy ones. Generally speaking, ladies take great care not to show their feelings, and your mother seems to follow that principle with utmost diligence.”

“What I want to know is if she’s still healthy, in good spirits.”

“Yes, she is...”

There was a short silence, then the old man asked:

“And your travel companions? João Nunes, Caio Penteado and Rodrigo Costa, I believe?”

“Costa joined later.”

“Well. How did they get on?”

“They stayed out there.”

“Studying?”

“And squandering...”

“Their time?”

“And their money.”

“They need not have left to do that. It’s extraordinary! Most of the boys who go to study in Europe come back just the same, if not worse!”

“What do you expect? There are many ways to live in the great capitals, and most always the one that is most seductive is the one which leaves you with the least to show. Even I, who was the only one of the six companions to finish the course, could have come back earlier had I not wasted the first year, distracted by all things novel and new. I owe my recovery to an unfortunate circumstance...”

“Sometimes blessings come in disguise...”

“That was the case.”

“And what was this circumstance? Excuse the curiosity of an old friend...”

“My father took a big hit financially. 1880 was not a good year for him. A great frost spoilt the harvest, and on top of that, Elias Brandão, who was his correspondent and commissioner at Santos², went bankrupt, almost dragging our house into ruin.”

“I remember.”

“Well, that was what shook me awake and gave me the determination to study. They painted me a grim picture of our situation, which the distance rendered yet more frightful. My allowance was reduced by two thirds and I had to tighten the purse strings and change my habits. It was at that time that I met a student from Campinas, a talented lad of modest means. We lived together in a lodging house in a cheap, humble neighbourhood. I let his influence affect me; we both distanced ourselves from our compatriots and from the parasites who were exploiting them... And I’m convinced now, you know, that by will or necessity, one can learn equally well in any country.”

² An important port city on the coast of the São Paulo province.

“You’re mistaken, my friend. Believe me; in few places in this world can one study as well as in France. Although my friend Edward, a wise, old traveler and avid observer, always used to say: “In England they work, in Italy they dream, in France they laugh, in Russia they conspire, in Spain they talk and in Germany they study...”

“And, he should add: in Brazil they sleep.”

“He never came to Brazil; but do tell me, what are your plans here?”

“If you want the truth, I don’t yet know...”

Dr. Morton’s eyes widened, but he quickly hid his astonishment with a calm smile.

“Your father must have something in mind.”

“No. My father has nothing planned. I am determined to work; I just don’t know yet in what or where. It’s clear that I won’t be able to stay at the plantation, nor even here perhaps. It is a matter to be resolved. As of now, I confess, I don’t have much confidence in myself...”

“Now then, why’s that?”

“Because I am constantly shifting between ideas, unable to stick with any of them. I’m starting to fear that I wasted my time in Europe, can you imagine?”

“Don’t say that. You are a young man, you are intelligent, you had the good sense to choose a career in engineering, which I think is the most advantageous to your country, where there is a lot to be built, and soon you will have the opportunity to practice your profession successfully. Then you will understand the incredible advantage afforded to you by the admirable examples that you have seen and from the good instruction that you surely received. To tell the truth, there are good teachers and good students in Brazil too, but they lack the favorable environment that so many generations of scholars have fostered in Europe. You cannot sincerely judge the things that you saw in the Old World to be useless. The impression they left will tear open a broad horizon before your eyes. If, now, initially, all of that beauty is running riot in your soul, once the excitement matures and dies down, you will be able to admire it in all of its true dimensions. Look, a painter will undoubtedly do better spending a month in the Louvre than working for a year, in a city without museums. Despite my age, my soul still itches with ambition: to run about the world,

studying as I please, and if I am not to travel nor to see it, it is on account of one simple reason which prevents me... and it's easy to guess which that might be: poverty."

The professor smiled gently as he talked, showing his very healthy-looking, white teeth. He rested his short, stubby hands on the arms of the chair, illuminated by the light of the day, coming in through the window before him.

"I am astonished, Professor, sincerely, that you, educated and observant as you are, resign yourself to living in this little corner of the world, where, surely, there do not abound distractions for a mind like yours."

"You are mistaken, my friend. I live perfectly well. The Brazilian people are of an endearing kindness by nature; their sincerity is charming. Other than the country of one's birth there is no land more beautiful, nor one where one feels more at home. I have been here for many years, and I've not once thought of leaving without preemptively feeling an intense longing for the place. There is just one thing which sickens and saddens me here. I need not spell it out for you, you can guess what it is; but that should come to an end shortly, because, Octavio, Brazil is not sleeping anymore, it is working."

"I have been following the abolitionist movement in Brazil with much excitement; I searched avidly in the papers, always looking for everything to do with this great endeavor; yet, from such a distance, it is impossible to ascertain exactly what the papers are exaggerating and the translations distorting."

"Careful now! Don't go expounding ideas of progress and humanity on the plantation. Abolition will come, sooner or later; friendship in the family, once broken will never be truly solid again."

"What makes you say that?"

"Your father is one of the greatest enemies of abolition. Do you understand me now?"

"Perfectly; I shall be discreet, if you convince me that my hand is completely unneeded in the holy cause, as the journals call it."

The professor was about to start with his response, when a servant came to say that the horse was ready at the door.

"Well, Octavio, I don't want to be selfish and hold you here. You must be anxious to get to Santa Genoveva, my friend, no? Perhaps you'd like a companion to guide you there..."

“I beg you not to do me the injustice of suggesting that I’ve forgotten the way home!”

“Right you are. Were I able to go back to my village today, I would find my parents’ house with my eyes closed! That feeling is one that grows when one is exiled, voluntarily or involuntarily: the love for one’s family and for the home country.”

Then, taking out his pocket watch, he calculated:

“In an hour and a half you’ll be back with your loved ones... Safe travels.”

“Thank you, professor.”

“Drop in for a chat sometime!”

“Yes, sir. Farewell!”

The animal set off, clomping along the paving stones.

The professor went back into his office, stretched out on the rattan couch, took up his book and, covering his bald head with his black silk cap, started up again, in a monotonous drone, the reading in which he had been interrupted.

Chapter 13

Two days before Nicota’s wedding, the Medeiros family made the journey into the city. House slaves had gone ahead on foot, in scattered groups, carrying bundles atop their heads. Along with them went two carts loaded with trunks of clothes, big tins of candied treats and tapioca biscuits, and baskets of fruit, vegetables, and eggs. The overseer was tasked with sending along all the flowers that he could get his hands on over the next few days, and milk, lots of milk. Nicota’s wedding was emptying gardens and leaving calves with dry throats.

Two kilometers into the journey, they came across the fire at the Torres plantation. The forest which bordered the road was destroyed. In its place stretched a vast, barren, whitened field, covered in ash, sombre like a graveyard, where, here and there, a short trunk, ravaged, eaten away and black, resembled a poor, abandoned tombstone. And yet, within those charred stumps, the fire continued its destructive work, slowly, hidden away, sucking in all the life force from the earth, greedily feeding on the roots of all those lifeless plants.

The Medeiros family, accustomed to this kind of transformation, did not think much of it; Octavio alone lamented the change, recalling, bitterly, the night he had spent there. Once they arrived at the town house, which had been closed up for some time, they oversaw the cleaning of the floors, windows, and doors, the hanging of lace curtains on the windows and of red drapes at the doors; they then had the table moved from the large dining room to another inner parlour, to clear the space for dancing; the chairs that they had rented from the club were placed against the walls, which were papered in a glossy, cream colour, and in the space between the windows, side tables with mirrored doors and marble tops, upon which were displayed a tall, slender mirror and two porcelain vases.

The drawing room, at the front, was transformed into a chapel. They called in a decorator, a respected man who had been working in the city for quite some time in churches and private homes. Senhor João Coelho, very solemn and serious, with his face clean shaven, his waistcoat and white trousers impeccably starched, and his black alpaca coat spotless, answered the call without hesitation. Most economical with his words, he responded to the Comendador's questions with monosyllables, and, at the back of the room, he set up the same altar that he had been using for thirty years: a tall, flat backboard covered with silver gauze which was embroidered with little roses made of pink fabric, spread out among green leaves. Upon the table of the altar were fine linens trimmed with wide lace borders, the crucifix, the black, leather-bound liturgy book, leaves of angelica with their silvery florets, the small silver platter with the wedding rings, tall candle holders with wax candles and beside them the aspersorium and aspergillum. At the foot of the altar: a carpet, two satin cushions for the betrothed, and scattered flower petals.

In the front room, which was reserved for the men, decks of cards were laid out on the game tables, and in another, inner, room, the buffet.

The buffet room had a large table in the centre, in the shape of a horseshoe, and upon it were an infinite variety of delicious *paulista* desserts: pyramids of angel hair, sweet egg treats arranged to look like bunches of *caraguatá* fruit, elegant sugar rifles stood upright and tied in place with ribbon; puddings of all kinds, qualities, and sizes; cotton candy and sugar-apple candies; the famous velvet dessert and other such things; ivory towers, made with fine, transparent strips of coconut, secured gracefully in artistic lace structures; cups of

crystallized fruit; topaz and ruby colored jams; coconut flowers, ordered in advance from Itú, and from Dona Gabriela in Campinas, which were spread around the table in abundance, their stems in wreaths, garlands, and bouquets, some purple like the calyx of a bromelia, some white, silky and dewy like jasmine petals.

At either end of the table were two perfect, artificial coconut palms, mounted on grassy little knolls, upon which insects and spotted reptiles made of dough were happily lounging while a little monkey was reaching for a coconut from the tree above and a black and green viper with a flat head wound its way around the trunk beneath it.

This was the classic table set-up at these grand functions, illuminated by several candelabras.

In one corner of the room, there was another table laden with fruit: sweet-smelling mangoes, watermelons cut open, showing the dark seeds in their translucent, pink flesh; pineapples, *jabuticabas*, oranges, grapes, peaches, and figs, on plinths, on trays, in baskets, piled high! Next door, was a room transformed into a bar; upon the counter were dried fruits and sliced cheeses, and on the shelves, an abundant supply of wines, beers, and liqueurs...

Senhor João Coelho, the decorator, moved back and forth, with stately solemnity, between the bright, colorful labels of the bottles and the succulent pineapples or the delicacies of the main table, repairing symmetry wherever he spotted stylistic rebellion or an infraction against the established formalities always rigorously maintained at such distinguished gatherings.

In the pantry, everything was ready to go, as were the four chefs in the kitchen and their many assistants.

Gowns arriving from the dressmakers were carried on boards up to the bedrooms; houseboys carried boxes of gloves, fans, feathers, and satin shoes; right up until the last minute, items were called for that stockists would send, upon request, in great number, to be selected at home, and which would only be paid for at the end of the year, as was customary.

The day marked for the wedding had thus arrived. Octavio had not forgotten the anonymous letter which made accusations against Eva and denounced a revolt planned for

that same day at Santa Genoveva. Intent on speaking about this with his father, he went to find him in the parlor.

The Comendador was alone, rolling up a cigarette between his fingers. His son approached and asked what he intended to do: whether he would return to Santa Genoveva as soon as the marriage was solemnized, or whether he felt reassured by some order that perhaps he had given to the overseer.

The planter, very calmly, explained that he had informed Antunes of the situation and had had him prepare to surround Santa Genoveva with all of his men. "That way," he finished, "either the slaves won't make any trouble, out of fear, disappointing dear Eva, or they'll be caught and punished. "Antunes knows what he's doing; I'm not worried!"

Octavio was surprised that his father would entrust such a delicate task to Antunes. He hadn't given any credit to the letter and thus hadn't, until that moment, given thought to a plan; seeing now, however, that they were entertaining the possibility of a revolt, he decided that he would head to the plantation himself, as a precautionary measure.

The planter opened his mouth, taken aback. He then declared that Octavio was a weak little European who would be injured, abused, killed perhaps; he ought to leave Antunes to it.

"Now, that's a man worthy of respect! Our overseer is no fool..."

"Do not attempt to dissuade me, for it will be in vain," his son responded, "I will stay to see Nicota married and then head straight there."

"Nonsense! And if I forbid it?"

"On the contrary, you shall send me there, Father, seeing as you believe that the revolt is, in fact, going to take place, and you yourself would go if you were not tied up here with other duties! If I make a wasted journey this evening, it doesn't matter; I will not give any imbecile the right to call me a coward... I must see it to believe it..."

"Big talk!" murmured the older Medeiros, shrugging his shoulders; he went quiet and angrily bit his unlit cigarette. He realized that it was futile to try to detain his son in town and let him leave without uttering another word. All of his hatred was directed towards his niece, as he considered her to be the fatal catalyst of much future suffering in the family.

She loomed in his ailing mind like a specter of vengeance and hatred; he did not see in her his brother's daughter, the sensible and honest girl; he saw the granddaughter of the journalist, the sweet, tearful shadow of the murdered man's orphan, something superhuman, like a cry of indescribable pain which had taken the form and flesh of a woman and above whose head fluttered, like a portentous butterfly, a certain anonymous letter, that cursed writing...

The Comendador spent the rest of the day terribly afflicted; he tried once more to change his son's mind but, defeated by his arguments and his will, he retreated in dismay to his bedroom; he could not find a spot where he felt comfortable; he felt the urge to tear down the curtains and the new drapes, to stomp on the flowers that had been arranged in the vases and to kick all of the chairs, loaned from the club, which were neatly lined up in the ballroom, out of the door and onto the street.

Michael J. Tufft, the holder of BA and MA degrees from the University of Oxford, is a doctoral candidate in Portuguese and Brazilian Studies at Brown University