

Farewell, I'm going to war

Jacinto was so tender, so humble. Not one hair on his chin and he had to go, at the behest of the nation, to protect not what was his, but what they said belonged to Portugal.

How would he, so submissive, defend himself from the terrible death that lurked in every onslaught; where would he find the courage and skill to fire a weapon. If they asked him to handle a rake, a pitchfork, a hoe, then yes. He would know how to open wounds in the earth, rip open veins of water, fight off plagues of locusts, pull up weeds. But killing, killing to spill blood, killing to make people scream, killing to tear out guts, that he wouldn't be able to do.

Celeste was petite and round, with the look of a girl who brings freedom from the fields into her lap. She knew by heart the songs of the birds, the names of all the herbs and flowers, of the trees, of the animals, of things both large and small, of the night and of the day. There was nothing in the village of which she did not know the smell and colour. She sensed the rains were coming before they fell, the winds before they blew in gusts, the heat before everything burned. So young and she had to go, at the behest of hunger, to be a maid in the city.

Jacinto and Celeste were born on the same day and gave the first of many cries at the same hour.

They grew up together in the village of Monte Branco, which was brown for lack of rain. The houses that spread through the village were little more than a front door and a table of meagre food.

They were baptised together, went to school together, studied catechism and had their first kiss with promises at the altar.

Celeste was the youngest of twelve siblings: eight boys (one after another) and four girls. The bedroom of her very poor parents was next to the pigsty. Perhaps because of such proximity at night, they went about procreating like the animals

from which they derived much of their livelihood. Twelve children, more than the plates they had to put on the table, and much more than the food they had to put on the plates.

It was on Christmas Eve, while celebrating her 14th birthday with the cabbages and the potatoes steaming in the pot, that Celeste received the news:

- I was talking to the teacher today, Mrs. Cacilda - her mother said to her, with a slurring voice which disguised a deep pain.

- She knows a lady in town who needs a maid, a girl like you who is strong and energetic. You start work next week; it's already agreed.

Celeste listened and did not raise her eyes from the dish she shared with her younger sister. Today the dish was fuller, and she knew very well that when a sheep bleats, it loses its food. So she kept listening to her mother:

- You'll learn the housework and it'll always be one less mouth to feed. Your cousin Rosa has sent you this dress. My daughter won't go to the city badly dressed. For the rest of the outfit the Lady says she will go with you to the seamstress, you'll have a nice maid's uniform and a dress for mass. Then you can bring back Rosa's, which she needs.

Celeste listened and said nothing. It was already agreed, and once her mother had given her word, she knew very well that she would not take it back. It was a local saying, among the poor, that they might have next to nothing, but there was always honour in houses that had little else.

That night she had difficulty falling asleep. It was strange for her to imagine herself dressed in maid's clothes, other than the ones that had already been worn by other girls before her, and they were usually so worn out that they were of little use in protecting her from the winter cold and the summer sun. She had never been to a seamstress. She had never worn anything that had not been worn many times by others like her. She fell asleep, comforted by the unfamiliar feeling of having something new, just for her.

In the morning, when she saw Jacinto, she ran to him and told him the news.

He was going out into the fields, barefoot with his trousers rolled up to his knees. The sweat from his forehead running down to his neck already gave a hint that the work was going to be hard, and it was only seven o'clock in the morning.

- Jacinto, have you heard? I'm going into service in the city.

- What about me?

- What about you? You stay here and help your mother, take care of the fields and the cattle. We'll save some money and get married. We'll have a really beautiful wedding, with new clothes and cakes for the reception.

- You won't care about me, as soon as you're living in the city. You won't want to come back; there's no future here.

- Don't be silly, Jacinto. The Alentejo will never leave us, and we've been with each other since we were born.

Jacinto turned his face to the earth burnt by the sun, then looked at Celeste and said:

- You swear?

Celeste went to the city to be a maid, but in the village, food was still short. So she sent her family the leftover soft bread in the house where she had gone to be a maid; bread that was already hard and dry when it arrived.

Jacinto was called up to the army, to Cavalry Regiment No. 3 at Estremoz. At the weekends, he'd take the train to Soussel and date Celeste. They met on Sundays after Mass. The lady let them exchange a few words, sitting on the bench in front of the station. They would always ask the same questions:

'How are you doing? Have you heard from Monte Branco, and your mother, and your sisters?' The words were mixed with vows of love and their desire for marriage with a beautiful wedding feast. They just had to wait for her years of service to come to an end. The pair already had a little money put aside, and Jacinto's mother gave them the house and the fields. They had enough. They didn't want for so much; they only needed their health to be able to work.

It went on like this for almost two years, until Jacinto received a letter. The

country was calling him.

Mother and Celeste stayed behind, the future stayed behind. He had feared this moment, but believed that his turn would not come. He was an only child, his mother needed his arms for the wheatfield, not the battlefield.

That morning, after Mass, the two of them sat on the usual bench, in front of the train station. Celeste saw the sadness on his face and guessed the news before he announced it.

- Don't be sad, you'll see that time passes in an instant. In the meantime we'll be saving money and when you return, we'll get married straight away.

- And you, will you wait for me?

- Don't be silly. I wouldn't wait for anyone else. We've always done everything together, the first cry, the first laugh, the first kiss. Listen to me, I'll be your wife and you'll be my husband. You can write.

At that moment Jacinto, who had always been shy, stood up on the bench and shouted out loud, so that everyone would hear:

- I, Jacinto Manuel de Almeida, declare, before Heaven and Earth and anyone who is listening, that Celeste Maria is my lawful wife, and that no man shall put asunder what God, who is my witness, has joined together.

Moved, Celeste hugged him on that station bench in the middle of the arrivals, the waiting room and the departures. They kissed as husband and wife. They closed their eyes and imagined the beautiful wedding, both of their heads adorned with orange blossom and the table full of wine and cakes.

They went on foot and hand-to-hand to the train that was to take him to Angola. Once again they hugged, this time tighter; this time it hurt more. Fear and sorrow were etched on every face in the station. 146 men from that county were called to defend the country. There was no shortage of mothers crying. Holding their sons tight, they spoke to them as if they were still their little boys. 'Be careful, feed yourself well, don't get too much sun'. The girlfriends whispered to them, 'Don't forget to come back, I'll be waiting here for you'. 'Don't forget me, wait for me', the

men said.

Celeste could do nothing else in the months that followed. Nine months all told of a fruitless pregnancy. Celeste clutched that love to her breast like a mother who carries her child in her belly. Nine months of warmth and servitude in the lady's house.

After nine months, the letters stopped coming. No news, either of Jacinto alive or Jacinto dead. Some of Jacinto's companions returned, some in coffins, others without legs or arms, blind, others whole on the outside but broken inside (and never repaired).

But of Jacinto, nothing.

The war ended.

And of Jacinto, nothing.

Jacinto's mother got sick. Celeste was called to her side, and stayed with her until her death.

- Our Jacinto, do you have any news?

- No, mother-in-law, but he'll be back, I know he'll be back. He promised me, and I promised to wait for him, too.

Celeste is 83 years old now. Every Sunday she goes to the bench by the station to wait for Jacinto. She sits there alone, her eyes open, fixed on the entrance. Her gaze is the same, just like the day she watched him enter the carriage.

There are no guards now, no luggage, no passengers, no hustle and bustle of bags, no carriages, no train. Weeds grow between the rails. Everything else is the same.

Nothing has changed in her; her wish remain the same, her wish for Jacinto to come back from the war.

No one has the strength to tell her that the train no longer stops there.

Adélia Carvalho