'A masterly creation … Shows humanity at its most anxious, its most vulnerable and most true' *Independent*

# JOSÉ SARAMAGO

FROM THE AUTHOR OF *BLINDNESS*

# SKYLIGHT

VINTAGE

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# About the Book

**In 1953, José Saramago submitted a novel to his publishers. Thirty-six years later, he heard back.**

Called ‘the book lost and found in time’ by its author, *Skylight* is one of Saramago’s earliest novels. The manuscript was lost in the publishers’ offices in Lisbon for decades, and is only now being published in English.

Lisbon, late-1940s. The inhabitants of an old apartment block are struggling to make ends meet. There’s the elderly shoemaker and his wife who take in a solitary young lodger; the woman who sells herself for money, clothes and jewellery; the cultivated family come down in the world, who live only for each other and for music; and the beautiful typist whose boss can’t keep his eyes off her. Poisonous relationships, happy marriages, jealousy, gossip and love – *Skylight* brings together all the joys and grief of ordinary people.

# About the Author

**José Saramago** is one of the most important international writers of the last hundred years. Born in Portugal in 1922, he was in his sixties when he came to prominence as a writer with the publication of *Baltasar & Blimunda*. A huge body of work followed, translated into almost fifty languages, and in 1998 he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. He died in 2010.

ALSO BY JOSÉ SARAMAGO IN ENGLISH TRANSLATION

*Fiction*

The Manual of Painting and Calligraphy
Baltasar & Blimunda
The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis
The Gospel According to Jesus Christ
The History of the Siege of Lisbon
Blindness
All the Names
The Tale of the Unknown Island
The Stone Raft
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Small Memories

In memory of Jerónimo Hilário, my grandfather

# Skylight

José Saramago

Translated from the Portuguese
by Margaret Jull Costa

Harvill *Secker*
LONDON

*In all souls, as in all houses, beyond the façade lies a hidden interior.*

*Raul Brandão*

# The Book Lost and Found in Time

Saramago was shaving when the phone rang. He held the receiver to the un-soaped side of his face and said, ‘Really? How amazing. No, don’t bother. I’ll be there in about half an hour.’ And he hung up. I had never known him take a shower so quickly. Then he told me that he was going to collect a novel he wrote in the 1940s or ’50s and which had been lost ever since. When he returned, he had under his arm *Clarabóia* (*Skylight*) or, rather, a bundle of typewritten pages, which had somehow not grown yellow or worn with time, as if time had proved more respectful of the original than the people to whom it was sent in 1953. ‘It would be a great honour for us to publish this manuscript, which we found when we moved offices,’ they said graciously in 1989, when José Saramago was working hard on finishing *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*. ‘Thank you, but no,’ he said and left, taking with him the rediscovered novel and having finally received an answer that had been denied to him forty-seven years before, when he was thirty-one and still full of dreams. Being ignored by that publishing house had plunged him into a painful, indelible silence that lasted decades.

‘The book lost and found in time’ is how we used to refer to *Skylight* at home. Those of us who read the novel tried to persuade its author to publish it, but Saramago stubbornly refused, saying that it would not be published during his lifetime. His sole explanation – his main principle of life, often spoken and often written – was this: no one has an obligation to love anyone else, but we are all under an obligation to respect each other. According to this logic,

Saramago considered that while a publishing house is clearly under no obligation to publish every manuscript it receives, it does have a duty to respond to the person waiting impatiently and even anxiously day after day, month after month; after all, the book a writer submits in the form of a typescript is much more than just a collection of words: it carries within it a human being, with all his or her intelligence and sensibility. It occurred to us that perhaps each time Saramago saw a copy in print, it would be like reliving the humiliation of not receiving so much as a few short lines – even a brief, formal 'we are currently not open for submissions' – and so we, his friends and family, did not insist. We likewise attributed to that ancient grief the fact that he simply left the typescript on his desk to languish among all his other papers. José Saramago did not reread *Skylight* and did not miss it when I carried it off to have it bound in leather; when I presented him with the bound edition, he said I was being over-the-top, extravagant. And yet he knew – because he was the author – that the book was certainly not a bad one, that it contained themes that recurred in his later novels and that, in its pages, one could already hear the narrative voice that he would go on to develop more fully.

'But there is another way of speaking of all this,' as Saramago would say when he had crossed deserts and navigated dark waters. If, after presenting all these facts and suppositions, we accept that statement, then we must interpret all the various signs and his apparent obstinacy in the light of a whole life marked by a pressing need to share and communicate. 'Dying means that we were and no longer are,' said Saramago. And it's true that he died and is no longer here but, suddenly, in the countries where *Skylight* has been published, in Portugal and Brazil, the countries that speak his language, people are talking excitedly about this *new* book. Yes, Saramago has actually brought out a new book, a fresh, illuminating work that

touches our hearts and elicits cries of joy and astonishment, and then we realise that this is the gift the author wanted to leave to us so that he could continue to share his words with us now that he's no longer here. People keep saying: this book is a real gem; it contains all his later literary obsessions; it's like a map of the work to come: how could such a young man have written with such maturity, such confidence? Yes, that is the question his readers keep asking. Where did Saramago get his wisdom from, his ability to portray characters with such subtlety and economy, to reveal the profundity and universality of the most banal situations, to trample on convention in such a serenely violent way? This is a young man, remember, who had never been to university, the son and grandson of illiterates, a mechanic by trade and, at the time, an office worker, daring to take on the cosmos of a tenement building and its inhabitants, guided only by his own instincts and in the enjoyable company of Pessoa, Shakespeare, Eça de Queiroz, Diderot and Beethoven. This is our entry into Saramago's universe, which is already clearly delineated here.

In *Skylight* we find the prototypes of some of Saramago's male characters: the man known simply as H in *The Manual of Painting and Calligraphy*, Ricardo Reis in *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis*, Raimundo Silva in *The History of the Siege of Lisbon*, Senhor José in *All the Names*, the cellist in *Death at Intervals*, Cain, Jesus Christ, Cipriano Algor, that whole tribe of silent men, free, solitary beings who need to find love in order, however briefly, to break out of their focused, introverted way of being in the world.

In *Skylight* we also find some of Saramago's characteristically strong women. His treatment of them is even more unconventional: Lídia, for example, is a kept woman who gives lessons in dignity to her businessman lover; lesbian love is treated with remarkable frankness, as are the inherited submissiveness handed down within families, the fear of what others might say, rape, blind

instinct, the struggle for power, narrow lives lived honestly despite straitened circumstances and sundry misfortunes.

*Skylight* is a novel of characters. It is set in the Lisbon of the late 1940s, when the Second World War has ended, but not the Salazar dictatorship, which hangs over everything like a shadow or a silence. It is not a political novel, and we should not, therefore, necessarily conclude that the reason it remained unpublished was because it fell victim to the censors. And yet, given the prudish times in which it was written, its content must have had some bearing on that decision not to publish. The novel rejects established values: the family is not a symbol of hearth and home, but of hell; appearances count for more than reality; apparently praiseworthy utopian dreams are revealed for the hollow thing they really are. It is a novel that explicitly condemns the mistreatment of women, but treats love between two people of the same sex as natural, albeit, in the circumstances, anguishing. Coming from an unknown author, such a strong-minded book would have taken a lot of defending for very little reward. That is probably why the book was relegated to a drawer, without a firm yes or no. Perhaps, and again we are conjecturing, they put it off until later on, when times would have changed, never imagining that it would take decades for any so-called liberalisation to begin to make its mark and, meanwhile, in both the world and the publishing house, generations passed and any such good intentions were left to moulder in a drawer along with the typescript. Saramago, by then, had a new profession, that of editor. Having made his journey through silence and solitude, he was preparing to write other books.

Life was not easy for Saramago. Not only was his book ignored by the publishers – a book written at night after days spent engaged on unrewarding tasks – he was ignored, too, because he was unknown, had no university education, and wasn’t one of the intellectual elite, all of which were important factors in the small world of 1950s and ’60s

Lisbon society. Those who later became his colleagues made fun of him because he stammered, and his stammer, which he eventually managed to overcome, made him rather withdrawn; he let others do the talking, while he watched, living very much in his own inner world, which is perhaps why he was able to write so much. After *Skylight*, he published nothing for another twenty years. He began again with poetry – *Os poemas possíveis* ('Possible Poems') and *Provavelmente alegria* ('Joy Probably') – then wrote *O ano de 1993* ('The Year of 1993'), which is already on its way to becoming a narrative, followed by two collections of his newspaper articles, which are also fictions in embryo. *Skylight* is there in his articles too – even though no one knew it existed – waiting for the moment when it would reach the reader as something more than just a lost book.

*Skylight* is the gift that Saramago readers deserved to receive. It is not the closing of a door; on the contrary, it flings the door wide open so that we can go back inside and read or reread his other novels in the light of what he was saying even as a young man. *Skylight* is the gateway into Saramago's work and will be a real discovery for its readers. As if a perfect circle had closed. As if death did not exist.

Pilar del Río, 2012
President of the José Saramago Foundation

# I

THROUGH THE SWAYING veils filling his sleep came the clatter of crockery, and Silvestre could almost swear that light was beginning to filter through the loose weft of those veils. Just as he was starting to feel slightly irritated, he realised, suddenly, that he was waking up. He blinked several times, yawned, then lay quite still, as he felt sleep slowly moving off. Then he quickly sat up in bed and stretched, making the joints in his arms crack. Beneath his vest, the muscles in his back rolled and rippled. He had a powerful chest, solid, sturdy arms and sinewy shoulder blades. He needed those muscles for his work as a cobbler. His hands were as hard as stone and the skin on his palms so thick that he could pass a threaded needle through it without drawing blood.

Then, more slowly, he swung his legs out of bed. Silvestre was always deeply grieved and saddened by the sight of his scrawny thighs and his kneecaps worn white and hairless by constant friction with his trousers. He was proud of his chest, but hated his legs, so puny they looked as if they belonged to someone else.

Gazing glumly down at his bare feet on the rug, Silvestre scratched his greying head of hair. Then he ran one hand over his face, feeling his bones and his beard. Finally, reluctantly, he got up and took a few steps across the room. Standing there, in vest and underpants, perched on those long, stilt-like legs, he bore a faint resemblance to Don Quixote, with that tuft of salt-and-pepper hair crowning his head, his large, beaked nose, and the powerful trunk that his legs seemed barely able to sustain.

He looked for his trousers, but, failing to find them, peered round the door and shouted:

‘Mariana! Where are my trousers?’

From another room, a voice called:

‘Hang on!’

Given the slow pace of the approaching footsteps, one sensed that Mariana was fairly plump and could not walk any faster. Silvestre had to wait some time, but he did so patiently. At last, she appeared at the door.

‘Here you are.’

The trousers were folded over her right arm, which was considerably stouter than one of Silvestre’s legs. She said:

‘I don’t know what you do with the buttons on your trousers to make them disappear every week. I’m going to have to start sewing them on with wire . . .’

Mariana’s voice was as plump as its owner, and as kindly and frank as her eyes. She certainly hadn’t intended her remark as a joke, but her husband beamed at her, revealing every line on his face, as well as his few remaining teeth. He took the trousers from her and, under his wife’s benign gaze, put them on, pleased with the way his clothes restored proportion and regularity to his body. Silvestre was as vain about his body as Mariana was indifferent to the one Nature had given her. Neither of them had any illusions about the other and both were more than aware that the fire of youth had long since burned out, but they loved each other dearly, as much today as they had thirty years ago, when they got married. Indeed, their love was perhaps even greater now, because it was no longer fuelled by real or imagined perfections.

Silvestre followed his wife into the kitchen. Then he slipped into the bathroom and returned ten minutes later, having washed. He was still not particularly kempt, however, because it was impossible to tame the tuft of hair that dominated his head (and ‘dominate’ is the right word) – his ‘cockscomb’ as Mariana called it.

Two steaming bowls of coffee stood on the table, and the kitchen smelled fresh and newly cleaned. Mariana's round cheeks glowed, and her whole large body trembled and shook as she moved about the kitchen.

'You get fatter by the day, woman!'

And Silvestre laughed and Mariana laughed with him. They were like two children. They sat down at the table and drank the hot coffee, making playful, slurping noises, each trying to out-slurp the other.

'So, what's it to be then?'

Silvestre was no longer laughing. Mariana had grown serious too. Even their faces seemed paler.

'I don't know. You decide.'

'Like I said yesterday, the leather for soling is getting more and more expensive. My customers keep complaining about the price, but that's how it is. I can't perform miracles. Where are they going to find anyone to do the work more cheaply, that's what I'd like to know, but that doesn't stop them complaining.'

Mariana interrupted him, saying that moaning would get them nowhere. What they had to do was decide whether or not to take in a lodger.

'It would certainly be useful. It would help us pay the rent and if he's a man on his own and you don't mind doing his laundry for him, we could just about break even.'

Mariana drained the last sugary drop of coffee from her bowl and said:

'That's fine by me. Every little helps.'

'I know, but it does mean taking in lodgers again, when we've only just managed to rid ourselves of that so-called "gentleman" . . .'

'Oh well, maybe the next one will be a decent sort. I can get on with anyone, as long as they get on with me.'

'Let's give it another go, then. A man on his own, who just needs a bed for the night, that's what we need. I'll put an advert in this afternoon.' Still chewing his last piece of

bread, Silvestre stood up and declared: ‘Right, I’m off to work.’

He went back into the bedroom and walked over to the window. He drew aside the curtain that acted as a screen separating the window area from the rest of the room. Behind it was a high platform on which stood his workbench. Awls, lasts, lengths of thread, tins full of tacks, bits of sole and scraps of leather, and, in one corner, a pouch containing French tobacco and matches.

Silvestre opened the window and looked out. Nothing new to be seen. A few people walking along the street. Not far off, a woman was crying her wares, selling a kind of bean soup that people used to eat for their breakfast. Silvestre could never understand how she could possibly make a living. No one he knew ate bean soup for breakfast any more; he himself hadn’t eaten it for more than twenty years. Different times, different customs, different food. Having thus neatly summed the matter up, he sat down. He opened his tobacco pouch, rummaged around for his cigarette papers among the hotch-potch of objects cluttering the bench and rolled himself a cigarette. He lit it, inhaled the smoke and set to work. He had some uppers to put on, a job requiring all his knowledge and skill.

Now and then, he would glance out at the street. The morning was gradually brightening up, although the sky was still cloudy and a slight mist blurred the edges of things and people alike.

From among the multitude of noises already filling the building, Silvestre could make out the sound of an immediately identifiable pair of heels clicking down the stairs. As soon as he heard the street door open, he leaned forward.

‘Good morning, Adriana!’

‘Good morning, Senhor Silvestre.’

The girl stopped beneath the window. She was rather short and dumpy and wore thick glasses that made her eyes

look like two small, restless beads. She was nearly thirty-four years old and her modest hairstyle was already streaked with the odd grey hair.

‘Off to work, eh?’

‘That’s right. See you later, Senhor Silvestre.’

It was the same every morning. By the time Adriana left the house, the cobbler was already seated at the ground-floor window. It was impossible to escape without seeing that unruly tuft of hair and without hearing and responding to those inevitable words of greeting. Silvestre followed her with his eyes. From a distance, she resembled, in Silvestre’s colourful phrase, ‘a sack of potatoes tied up in the middle’. When she reached the corner of the street, Adriana turned and waved to someone up on the second floor. Then she disappeared.

Silvestre put down the shoe he was working on and craned his neck out of the window. He wasn’t a busybody, he just happened to like his neighbours on the second floor; they were good customers and good people. In a voice constrained by his somewhat awkward position, he called out:

‘Hello there, Isaura! What do you make of the weather today, eh?’

From the second floor came the answer, attenuated by distance:

‘Not bad, not bad at all. The mist . . .’

But we never found out whether she thought the mist spoiled or embellished the beauty of the morning. Isaura let the conversation drop and slowly closed the window. It wasn’t that she disliked the cobbler, with his simultaneously thoughtful and cheery air, she simply wasn’t in a mood to chat. She had a pile of shirts to be finished by the weekend, by Saturday at the very latest. Given the choice, she would have carried on with the novel she was reading. She only had another fifty pages to go and had reached a particularly interesting part. She found them very gripping, these

clandestine love affairs, buffeted by endless trials and tribulations. Besides, the novel was really well written. Isaura was an experienced-enough reader to be a judge of this. She hesitated for a moment, but realised at once that she did not even have time to do that. The shirts were waiting. She could hear the murmur of voices inside: her mother and aunt talking. They talked a lot. Whatever did they find to talk about all day that they hadn't already said a hundred times before?

She crossed the bedroom she shared with her sister. The novel was there on her bedside table. She cast a greedy, longing glance at it, but carried on. She paused in front of the wardrobe mirror that reflected her from head to toe. She was wearing a housecoat that clung to her thin, yet still flexible, elegant body. She ran the tips of her fingers over her pale cheeks, where the first fine, barely visible lines were beginning to appear. She sighed at the image shown her by the mirror and fled.

In the kitchen the two old ladies were still talking. They were very similar in appearance – white hair, brown eyes, the same simple black clothes – and they spoke in shrill, rapid tones, without pauses or modulation.

'I've told you already. The coal is nothing but dust. We should complain to the coal merchant,' one was saying.

'If you say so,' said the other.

'What are you talking about?' asked Isaura, entering the room.

The more erect and brighter-eyed of the two old ladies said:

'This coal is just dreadful. We ought to complain.'

'If you say so, Auntie.'

Aunt Amélia was, so to speak, the household administrator. She was in charge of the cooking, the accounts and the catering generally. Cândida, the mother of Isaura and Adriana, was responsible for all the other domestic arrangements, for their clothes, for the profusion

of embroidered doilies decorating the furniture and for the vases full of paper flowers, which were replaced by real flowers only on high days and holidays. Cândida was the elder of the sisters and, like Amélia, she was a widow, one whose grief had long since been assuaged by old age.

Isaura sat down at the sewing machine, but before starting work, she looked out at the broad river, its further shore hidden beneath the mist. It looked more like the sea than a river. The rooftops and chimney-pots rather spoiled the illusion, but even if you did your best to blot them out, the sea was right there in those few kilometres of water, the white sky somewhat sullied by the dark smoke belching forth from a tall factory chimney.

Isaura always enjoyed those few moments when, just before she bent her head over her sewing machine, she allowed her eyes and thoughts to wander over the scene before her. The landscape never varied, but she only ever found it monotonous on stubbornly bright, blue summer days when everything was too obvious somehow, too well-defined. A misty morning like this – a thin mist that did not entirely conceal the view – endowed the city with a dream-like imprecision. Isaura savoured all this and tried to prolong the pleasure. A frigate was travelling down the river as lightly as if it were floating on a cloud. In the gauze of mist, the red sail turned pink, then the boat plunged into the denser cloud licking the surface of the water, reappeared briefly, then vanished behind one of the buildings obscuring the view.

Isaura sighed, her second sigh of the morning. She shook her head like someone surfacing from a long dive, and the machine rattled furiously into action. The cloth ran along beneath the pressure foot, and her fingers mechanically guided it through as though they were just another part of the machine. Deafened by the noise, Isaura suddenly became aware that someone was speaking to her. She

abruptly stopped the wheel, and silence flooded back in. She turned round.

‘Sorry?’

Her mother said again:

‘Don’t you think it’s a bit early?’

‘Early? Why?’

‘You know why. Our neighbour . . .’

‘But what am I supposed to do? It’s hardly my fault the man downstairs works at night and sleeps during the day, is it?’

‘You could at least wait until a bit later. I just hate to annoy people.’

Isaura shrugged, put her foot down on the pedal again and, raising her voice above the noise of the machine, added:

‘Do you want me to go to the shop and tell them I’m going to be late delivering?’

Cândida slowly shook her head. She lived in a constant state of perplexity and indecision, under the thumb of her sister – three years her junior – and keenly aware that she was dependent financially on her daughters. She wanted, above all, not to inconvenience anyone, to go unnoticed, to be as invisible as a shadow in the darkness. She was about to respond, but, hearing Amélia’s footsteps, said nothing and went back to the kitchen.

Meanwhile, Isaura, hard at work, was filling the apartment with noise. The floor vibrated. Her pale cheeks gradually grew redder and a bead of sweat appeared on her brow. She again became aware of someone standing beside her and slowed down.

‘There’s no need to work so fast. You’ll wear yourself out.’

Aunt Amélia never wasted a word. She said only what was absolutely necessary, but she said it in a way that made those listening appreciate the value of concision. The words seemed to be born in her mouth at the very moment they were spoken and to emerge replete with meaning, heavy

with good sense, virginal. That's what made them so impressive and convincing. Isaura duly slowed her pace of work.

A few minutes later, the doorbell rang. Cândida went to answer it, was gone for a few seconds, then returned looking anxious and upset, muttering:

'Didn't I tell you, didn't I tell you?'

Amélia looked up:

'What is it?'

'It's the downstairs neighbour come to complain about the noise. You go, will you?'

Amélia stopped doing the washing-up, dried her hands on a cloth and went to the front door. Their downstairs neighbour was on the landing.

'Good morning, Dona Justina. What can I do for you?'

At all times and in all circumstances, Amélia was the very soul of politeness, but that politeness could easily turn to ice. Her tiny pupils would fix on the face they were looking at, arousing irrepressible feelings of unease and embarrassment in the other person.

The neighbour had been getting on fine with Cândida and had almost finished what she had come to say. Now there appeared before her a far less timid face and a far more direct gaze. She said:

'Good morning, Dona Amélia. I've come about my husband. As you know, he works nights at the newspaper, and so can only sleep in the morning. If he's woken up, he gets really angry and I'm the one who has to bear the brunt. If you could perhaps make a little less noise with the sewing machine, I'd be very grateful . . .'

'Yes, I understand, but my niece needs to work.'

'Of course, and if it was up to me, I wouldn't mind, but you know what men are like . . .'

'Yes, I do, and I also know that your husband shows very little consideration for *his* neighbours' sleep when he comes home in the early hours.'

‘But what am I supposed to do about that? I’ve given up trying to persuade him to make less noise on the stairs.’

Justina’s long, gaunt face grew lively. A faint, malicious gleam appeared in her eyes. Amélia brought the conversation to a close.

‘All right, we’ll wait a while longer. You needn’t worry.’

‘Thank you very much, Dona Amélia.’

Amélia muttered a brusque ‘now, if you’ll excuse me’ and shut the door. Justina went down the stairs. Dressed in heavy mourning, her dark hair parted in the middle, she cut a tall, funereal figure; she resembled a gangling doll, too large to be a woman and without the slightest hint of feminine grace. Only her dark, hollow eyes, the eyes of a diabetic, were, paradoxically, rather beautiful, but so grave and serious that they lacked all charm.

When she reached the landing, she stopped outside the door opposite hers and pressed her ear to it. Nothing. She pulled a sneering face and moved away. Then, just as she was about to enter her own apartment, she heard voices and the sound of a door opening on the landing above. She busied herself straightening the doormat so as to have an excuse not to go in.

From upstairs came the following lively dialogue:

‘The only trouble with her is that she doesn’t want to go to work!’ said a female voice in harsh, angry tones.

‘That’s as may be, but we have to treat her with care. She’s at a dangerous age,’ said a man’s voice. ‘You can never be sure how these things might develop.’

‘What do you mean “a dangerous age”? You never change, do you? Is nineteen a dangerous age? If so, you’re the only one who thinks so.’

Justina thought it best to announce her presence by giving the doormat a good shake. The conversation upstairs stopped abruptly. The man started coming down the stairs, saying as he did so:

‘Don’t make her go to work. And if there’s any change, call me at the office. See you later.’

‘Yes, see you later, Anselmo.’

Justina greeted her neighbour with a cool smile. Anselmo walked past her on the stairs, solemnly tipped his hat and, in his warm, mellow voice, uttered a ceremonious ‘Good morning’. There was, however, a great deal of venom in the way the street door slammed shut behind him. Justina called up the stairs:

‘Good morning, Dona Rosália.’

‘Good morning, Dona Justina.’

‘What’s wrong with Claudinha? Is she ill?’

‘How did you know?’

‘I was just shaking out the doormat here and I thought I heard your husband say . . .’

‘Oh, she’s putting it on as usual, but she only has to whimper and my Anselmo’s convinced she’s dying. She’s the apple of his eye. She says she has a headache, but what she’s really got is a bad case of lazyitis. Her headache’s so bad she’s gone straight back to sleep!’

‘You can’t be too sure, Dona Rosália. Remember, that’s how I lost my little girl, God rest her soul. It was nothing, they told us, and then meningitis carried her off.’ She took out a handkerchief and blew her nose loudly before going on: ‘Poor little thing. And only eight years old. How could I forget . . . It’s been two years, you know, Dona Rosália.’

Rosália did know and wiped away a polite tear. Encouraged by her neighbour’s apparent sympathy, Justina was about to recall more all-too-familiar details, when a hoarse voice interrupted her:

‘Justina!’

Justina’s pale face turned to stone. She continued talking to Rosália until the hoarse voice grew still louder and more violent:

‘Justina!!’

‘What is it?’ she asked.

‘Come inside, will you? I don’t want you standing out there on the landing, talking. If you worked as hard as I do, you wouldn’t have the energy to gossip!’

Justina shrugged indifferently and went on with the conversation, but Rosália, finding the scene embarrassing, said it was time she went in. After Justina had gone back into her apartment, Rosália crept down a few stairs and listened hard. Through the door she heard a few angry exclamations, then silence.

It was always the same. You would hear the husband tearing his wife off a strip, then the wife would utter some almost inaudible words, and he would immediately shut up. Rosália found this very odd. Justina’s husband had a reputation as a bit of a brute, with his big, bloated body and his crude manners. He wasn’t quite forty and yet his flaccid face, puffy eyes and moist, drooping lower lip made him seem older. No one could understand why two such different people had ever married, and it was true that they had never been seen out in the street together. And, again, no one could understand how two such unpretty people (Justina’s eyes were beautiful not pretty) could have produced a delightful daughter like Matilde. It was as if Nature had made a mistake and, realising its mistake later on, had corrected it by having the child disappear.

The fact is that, after he had uttered just two or three aggressive comments, all it took to silence violent, rude Caetano Cunha – that obese, arrogant, ill-mannered linotype operator on a daily newspaper – was a murmured comment from his wife, the diabetic Justina, so frail she could be blown away in a high wind.

It was a mystery Rosália could not unravel. She waited a little longer, but absolute silence continued to reign. She withdrew into her own apartment, carefully closing the door so as not to wake her sleeping daughter, always assuming she was asleep rather than merely pretending.

Rosália peered round the door. She thought she saw her daughter's eyelids flutter. She opened the door properly and advanced on the bed. Maria Cláudia had her eyes closed so tightly that tiny lines marked the spot where crow's feet would one day appear. Her full lips still bore traces of yesterday's lipstick. Her short, brown hair gave her the look of a young ruffian, which only made her beauty more piquant and provoking, almost equivocal.

Rosália glanced at her daughter, not quite trusting that deep but strangely unconvincing sleep. She gave a little sigh. Then, with a maternal gesture, she drew the bedclothes up around her daughter's neck. The reaction was immediate. Maria Cláudia opened her eyes and chuckled. She tried to suppress her laughter, but it was too late.

'You tickled me!'

Furious because she had been tricked and, even more, because she had been caught showing her daughter some motherly affection, Rosália said irritably:

'So you were sleeping, were you? The headache's gone, has it? Your trouble is you don't want to work, you lazy so-and-so!'

As if to prove her mother right, the girl stretched slowly and luxuriously, and, as she did so, her lace-trimmed nightdress gaped open to reveal two small, round breasts. Although Rosália did not know why that careless gesture offended her, she could not conceal her displeasure and muttered:

'Cover yourself up, will you? Young women nowadays aren't even embarrassed in the presence of their own mothers!'

Maria Cláudia opened her eyes very wide. She had blue eyes, a very brilliant blue, but cold, like the distant stars whose light we only see because they are far, far away.

'What does it matter? Anyway, I'm decent now!'

'If I'd shown myself to my mother like that when I was your age, I'd have got a slap round the face.'

‘That seems a bit extreme.’

‘You think so, do you? Well, I reckon *you* could do with a good slap too.’

Maria Cláudia raised her arms again, pretending to stretch. Then she yawned.

‘Times have changed.’

Rosália opened the window and said:

‘They have indeed and for the worse.’ Then she went back over to the bed: ‘Right, are you going to work or not?’

‘What time is it?’

‘Nearly ten o’clock.’

‘It’s too late now.’

‘It wasn’t a little while ago.’

‘I had a headache then.’

This short, sharp exchange indicated irritation on both sides. Rosália was seething with suppressed anger, and Maria Cláudia was annoyed by her mother’s moralising.

‘A headache indeed! You’re a malingerer, that’s what you are!’

‘Is it my fault I have a headache?’

Rosália exploded:

‘Don’t you talk to me like that, young lady. I’m your mother, remember.’

The girl was unimpressed. She merely shrugged, as if to say that this last point was hardly worth discussing, then she jumped out of bed and stood there, barefoot, her silk nightdress draped about her soft, shapely body. Her daughter’s youthful beauty cooled Rosália’s irritation, which vanished like water into dry sand. Rosália felt proud of Maria Cláudia and her lovely body. Indeed, what she said next was tantamount to a surrender:

‘You’d better tell the office.’

Maria Cláudia, apparently oblivious to that subtle change of tone, replied dully:

‘I’ll ask Dona Lídia if I can use her phone.’

Rosália grew irritated again, perhaps because her daughter had put on a housecoat now, and her more discreetly clothed body had lost its power to enchant.

‘You know perfectly well that I don’t like you going to see Dona Lídia.’

Maria Cláudia’s eyes were even more innocent than usual.

‘Why ever not?’

If the conversation was to continue, Rosália would have to say things she would prefer not to. She knew that her daughter understood perfectly well what she meant, but she nonetheless felt that there were subjects best not touched on in the presence of a young woman. She had been brought up with the idea that parents and children should respect each other, and she still clung to that. She therefore pretended not to have heard her daughter’s question and left the room.

Once she was alone again, Maria Cláudia smiled. Standing in front of the mirror, she unbuttoned her housecoat and her nightdress and looked at her breasts. A shiver ran through her and she flushed slightly. Then she smiled again, feeling vaguely nervous, but pleased too, something like a frisson of pleasure tinged with guilt. Then she buttoned up her housecoat, took one last glance at herself in the mirror and left the room.

In the kitchen, she went over to her mother, who was making some toast, and kissed her on the cheek. Rosália could not deny that the kiss pleased her, and while she did not reciprocate, her heart beat faster with contentment.

‘Go and have a wash, dear, the toast is nearly ready.’

Maria Cláudia shut herself in the bathroom. She returned looking fresh and cool, her skin glossy and clean, her now unpainted lips slightly stiff from the cold water. Her mother’s eyes shone when she saw her. Cláudia sat down at the table and began eagerly devouring the toast.

‘It is nice to stay home sometimes, isn’t it?’ Rosália said.

The girl giggled:

‘You see, I was right, wasn’t I?’

Rosália felt she had gone too far and tried to backtrack a little:

‘Yes, up to a point, but you mustn’t make a habit of it.’

‘The people at work won’t mind.’

‘They might, and you need to keep that job. Your father doesn’t earn very much, you know.’

‘Don’t worry, I can handle it.’

Rosália would like to have asked her what she meant by this, but chose not to. They finished their breakfast in silence, then Maria Cláudia got up and said:

‘I’m going to ask Dona Lídia if I can use her phone.’

Her mother opened her mouth to object, but said nothing. Her daughter had already disappeared down the corridor.

‘There’s no need to close the door if you’re not going to be gone very long.’

In the kitchen, Rosália heard the front door close, but preferred not to think that her daughter had done this on purpose, in order to go against her wishes. She filled the sink and started washing up the breakfast things.

Maria Cláudia did not share her mother’s scruples about their downstairs neighbour; on the contrary, she really liked Dona Lídia. Before ringing the doorbell, she straightened the collar of her housecoat and smoothed her hair. She regretted not having applied a touch of colour to her lips.

The bell rang out stridently and echoed down the stairwell. Maria Cláudia felt a slight noise behind her, and was sure that Justina was peering through the spyhole in the door opposite. She was just about to turn and look, when Dona Lídia’s door opened.

‘Good morning, Dona Lídia.’

‘Good morning, Claudinha. What brings you here? Won’t you come in?’

‘If I may . . .’

In the dark corridor, Maria Cláudia felt the warm, perfumed air wrap about her.