

Our spells

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I checked the time. Three in the morning. The hand holding the pen shook. A sheet of paper and a glass of wine sat next me. The wine tasted bitter as an ominous night, turning my lips into clay. Drinking at dawn was never my thing, and, let's be honest here, seemingly I had no place to aspire to be Audre Lorde. Unable to turn the pain into poetry. I threw the pen on the floor. I wasn't good enough, not even as a drunken writer; I felt useless.

I took a hand to my chest, trying to soothe the throbbing from my diaphragm, which was bouncing restlessly, it seemed it was about to slip out of my mouth. I was time traveling, falling and crossing the world so fast, like an asteroid immune to its own combustion.

Days were different. Some good, some bad. Today, for instance, was supposed to be a good day. I had just heard that I had passed almost all classes cum laude. But today is also the second anniversary of his passing. So, it's an appalling day. The hurt remembered leaves a hole in the pit of my throat. I have not yet learned that the sun also sets.

It wasn't a matter of not believing. It was a matter of seeing the plank and still sinking. It was to know that pain only knows one direction. People insisted that I needed to talk it out, like in therapy, but it was hard. Silence and paper ended up being a sheltering banishment.

The memories still haunt me. The accusations from relatives. The silent verdict. And between you and me, yes, I was guilty. I should have listened to Zach when there was time, time to have learned, early on, to save the victims from rodents. It is in giving that you receive, but my offer was too small. Losing my father is like being in a relentless fire.

I speak often of happiness. How can I? I'm unworthy; not tonight.

I moved out. Tiziane and I were now living in the city. It was a simple, but cozy apartment. My sister needed to be closer to her small studio. At the time she was abroad, enjoying her summer Fellowship in Fashion in Milan. This, after being the only Mozambican invited to present a collection in one of the biggest fashion events of the world: *São Paulo Fashion Week*. I had hoped my sister would go far, but had not imagined that she would go that far. Tiziane was a star. And I was still one of her biggest admirers.

Oh! And one more thing. We reconnected with Grandpa Lubrino. He is no longer an enigma in my life. I saw him for the very first time, when he came down to Maputo to console his daughter for the loss of her husband. Grandpa Lubrino reconciled with his daughter, Teresa. According to him, it was something that could no longer be postponed. Grandpa Lubrino also raised his hand and his voice to defend me from the relatives who accused me of bringing bad luck.

"Your siblings seem to be doing well, Laila. Danilo is an officer in the army, right? Tiziane, so young and already traveling around Europe... what about you, my granddaughter?"

The old man spoke like this, because he had no idea of the struggle; or how each of us would dig for hope in places no eye could peer into. Tiziane succeeded because she had worked hard to keep herself always in shape, in order to jump every hurdle of life. Danilo was also fine. Despite everything, I had never seen him so happy. The hurt sometimes

presented itself as a veil of light. I don't know when exactly he unveiled it; if it was when she sat beside him several times, quietly, holding his hand or if it was during the countless hugs she offered, helping him to stealthily cry for his father. The truth was, realizing that he wanted no other touch but Jamila's, he had asked her to consider giving him another chance.

"I embraced medicine, Grandpa, and I'm very happy."

I realized, however, the meaning of the old man's prostrated look. Disgust, because I had taken the worst of the Lubrinos: the mystic side.

"Of all of you, you are the one who took after your mother, did you know?"

It was not a compliment. And my assumption was corroborated by what he said next:

"I fear for you, Laila!", the smoke from the pipe scorched his lips and hovered over his face "It's a difficult world, this one you find yourself in. It may even be a blessing, but you will always be surrounded by dangers. I have seen and heard things that would not cross your mind. Your great-grandmother got into this. She left her family, traveled the world. And ended up alone. I'm afraid you'll end up like that. And you can't be happy alone, my granddaughter."

"Is that so, Grandpa? Are you rejecting me again?"

"My dear granddaughter," he scratched his thick, bushy beard, intertwining his wrinkled fingers to the back of his neck, before blowing out the smoke over his shoulder "I never rejected you. Did you know I sent letters? Your mother is very proud. She should have come back home, come to us, long ago. But she never did. Should I had kept waiting, I would have died without us being at peace. I'm only telling you this because I mean well for you. Think about what you are doing with your life."

That hammered conversation jolts in my head for several days.

I was about to finish my degree. And hoped that, one day, not too far away, I would be able to prove my grandfather wrong. I could and would be very happy, alone, yes, thank you very much. Don't get me wrong. It's just that all the rest sounded very distant to me. People wait for tomorrow to see things happen, to breathe, and they see things ending, without even breathing.

I liked the Laila looking back at me in the mirror. With all her parts, including the ones that had died and the ones that hurt. I loved medicine, and especially the endless possibilities that surrounded me. Sometimes a simple paracetamol and azithromycin would work and cure the disease. It was just malaria; it was part of nature. But other times, people carried strange things in their bodies. And paracetamol couldn't work by itself. I saved a few lives. Here is a recent episode:

I had gone to the hospital to donate blood. While waiting for the sampling, I felt a strong energy pushing me into the intensive care ward. It was a tremendous shock to find that patient struggling to take a lukewarm spoonful of soup. And I saw the probable reason on his face: a few weeks ago, in my dream, I saw him being gnawed by the rodent; yes, I kept seeing the rodent and so many other people being gnawed.

“Excuse me...”

The lady who was trying to feed the patient turned around. A nurse walked past me and let me in.

“I know you don't know me. I am a medical student, but...” I entered cautiously “may I take your hand? I would like to pray for you.”

Master Capri and Zach had already taught me how to remove the evil caused by a rodent. It required two steps. First, a Psalm. Then, a touch. The touch was essential, mixed with the special balm; it took a lot of work to make. Lastly, the words, spoken or chewed. Before I even entered the room, I had already rubbed the balm on my palm. I carried it with me in my purse for such eventualities.

I held the patient's hand firmly. A gentle rubbing and another for the preparation to penetrate. And I concluded:

"May you feel better and recover quickly."

The man moved under the sweaty sheets, as if his ribs were broken.

"Oh!", the falling breeze moistened his eyes "Thank you very much for your gesture, for the prayer. I'm ... touched".

As I walked out of the room, I heard the patient asking for his soup.

I stopped at the door and brushed a finger across my face to wipe away a sly tear. I knew that from then on, all the medications prescribed by the doctor would work. I also knew that the rodent was angry with my skills. I had just set free one of his victims. He was chasing me, and I was chasing him. For he had taken my father, I wouldn't rest until I discovered his appearance.

I still did not understand the reason behind my connection to the rodent. Master Capri thought it might be a blood connection. Zach thought it was something wrong I had done. Menalda suspected it was someone who didn't like me. Anyway, for me, it didn't matter. I just wanted to uncover his face.

I tried all spells, but he, or she, was quite strong. They were tricky, they were cunning, and knew very well how to hide their identity. This was a dangerous battle, and sooner or later one of us was, undoubtedly, going to lose.

As time went by, I realized that I was getting stronger and closer to discovering the identity behind the rodent. His, or her eyes were pretty familiar.

But the critter knew how to depress me, how to break me uninterruptedly.

It was on the first day of vacation, at the end of the first term. I was getting ready for a well-deserved rest. After a few margaritas with Jamila and Menalda, I went to sleep, looking forward to a relaxed sleep. But there it was, the portal door waiting for me. And I saw the next victim lying on the bed. Being eaten alive. Cold tentacles grabbed and wounded my heart.

Marcelo.
