

**THE MIDWIFE
OF TORMENT
&
OTHER STORIES**

60 Sudden Fictions

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paulo da costa



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*To the misfits, oddballs, geeks, rebels,
eccentrics and outside-the-box thinkers
(who make this world wondrous)*



Trago em mim o inconciliável e é este o meu motor.
I carry in me the irreconcilable, and that is my engine.

— **Pepetela, *Mayombe***

Le secret d'ennuyer est celui de tout dire.
The secret of being a bore is to tell everything.
— **Voltaire, “Sixième discours: sur la nature de l’homme,”**
Sept Discours en Vers sur l’Homme (1738)

Those who don't believe in magic will never find it.

— **Roald Dahl**

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I: AFFECTIONS



BREAK-IN



Night falls.

The man switches off his desk light, slides behind his drapes and peeps at the apartment across the street. In the lit window, he follows the woman removing the obstacle course of school backpacks along the living room floor. The man eyes a wall painting, a ghostly train charging, full speed, across a high canyon's bridge. Above the abyss, on the tracks spanning the void, stands a sinewy body. Ears covered, back turned to the metal beast, a body screams. In the painting's frozen moment the man realises what is to follow is never conclusive. He longs to tell the woman now picking up toys scattered on the floor that she mimics that scream every time she steps on a piece of loose Lego; but he suspects she knows because she freezes even before she begins to scream, her mouth open, staring at the painting.

He can recite the steps of her life, the patterns, conscious, unconscious. In his business he cannot afford surprises. As usual, on Wednesdays, she had arrived at The Manor exhausted, dropping a trail of groceries from the bus stop to the foyer of the old building and yelling to her oldest boy to pick them up before he sneaked away to the elevator. In no time the boy could be found one storey above already planted in front of the TV for the evening.

The woman stands at the stove stirring an instant macaroni and cheese dinner. Her youngest sticks to her leg. The two older ones stick to the TV in the living room.

Mid-week and both sinks already crammed with pots, dishes and glasses, she walks out of view into the washroom to fill a jug with water, for juice. No clean dishes again. From the cupboard she brings out the last three paper plates. She will have to wait for one of the children to finish supper before she eats.

The children fed, she kisses them good-night, and collapses onto the sofa, a soggy paper plate in her hand. The TV still blaring, she stares at the silent scream hanging on her wall.

The woman wakes up with the first rays of sun entering the living room. The morning commotion begins, herding the children around the apartment, from bedroom to bathroom, from bathroom to breakfast, faster, faster, a missing sock, a mismatched outfit, in and out of rooms, mostly out. Scattered laundry grows in colourful mushrooming piles. The man already fears walking through the minefield of Lego and slippery macaroni. He'll wear rubber gloves and avoid fingerprints. The children are late for kindergarten, the woman is late for work, they abandon a half-eaten breakfast and she hurries out wearing excessive make-up and excessive jewellery to conceal her tiredness.

The oldest boy pretends to have forgotten his crayons, dashes, back into the apartment, and leaves one balcony door ajar to free the meandering cat. The cat thanks him, as usual, rubbing fur on his leg and settles in the sun inside the flower pot with the dead sunflower. Soon the cat will jump from the low balcony to explore the parking lot and

locate the warmest car hood where he will lay for most of the day.

The man waits for their bus to arrive and disappear with the usual roar of lateness around the intersection. He runs down his building's staircase, crosses the street to arrive at the parking lot. He greets the cat. The entire day before him, he slides the rubber gloves on, and using the springboard of a car rack easily leaps over the balcony railings. For a moment he stops undecided, should he start with the dishes or the laundry?

CLOSER



Closer, the man encouraged, arm extended, fingers curled in a gentle domino tumble.

Standing by the door, the boy hesitated. Instead, he looked over the plush alligator clutched to his shoulder. Downstairs, from deep within the kitchen, the grave whispering voices, the smell of pizza and the clicking of glasses on the marble tabletop climbed the wooden staircase. He coughed a little, covered his mouth with the soft alligator jaws to muffle the sound.

I know, the man said, feigning a little cough himself, pointing his freckled nose in understanding toward the door. They just left. The doctor advised them I would be better off away from everyone. Especially from a certain snotty child, he added with a wink and a friendly smile.

The boy wiped snot trickling over his lip. He walked on tiptoes to the man's bedside.

I like my boy snotty anyway, the man said with a nod, a blink of the eyes.

The child smiled, relieved. Then he glanced over to the door again.

They will never know you were here.

Mother said I'm not allowed to come near you now.

I understand.

She said it's dangerous to play as we used to play. That you are a very sick person. She made me swear to it.

Yes, I understand.

The man and the child gazed awkwardly at each other.

But would you like to? The man opened his arms, leaving them open as a gigantic moth while making a cocoon, a space to embrace anything wishing to be embraced.

The child swayed his body, lowered his eyes and clung more tightly to his alligator. Moments passed and he again looked shyly at the man on the bed. Nodded.

The man offered his arm, again. His other hand patted the frayed velvet bed cover. This time the child clutched his hand, climbed the bed to his lap.

The man brought the tender face of his grandchild against his. Every breath of his life had been worth the journey to this moment, this last touch, the warmth of skin on skin. He did not want to leave this earth as a pestilence to be avoided by all. Some things in life were not worth preserving at this late stage to prolong time a worthless little longer. The child coughed a little, embraced him with the mighty small strength of his arms, not wanting even a whisper of air between them.

I miss you, grandpa.

I miss you too, Aiden.

Is it true they are taking you away?

The grandpa nodded, correcting: I am going away on my own.

A place where you'll get better?

The grandpa nodded again.

So that we'll be able again to play riding the horse?

I'll try.

Aware this would be the last time he would hold those silky hands, the man's chest tightened. He already missed the days when he would not wrestle with his grandchild, carry him on his shoulder or sit at the table with him on his lap pretending he was a tractor climbing the shifting, treacherous ground. At his ripe age touch became a rarity and children remained the ones offering him this elixir of life and asking for nothing in return. Through his grandchild he also travelled back to an age when his daughter had still embraced him with a clear feeling of surrender that pressed their love into every pore of skin.

He could die happily in the arms of this child smelling of angels. He found no vacillation in the love of a child. The purity and limpid emotion was a balsam to any sickness.

The child coughed.

He drew the deep breath of his demise. He kissed the child. He smelled the earth after a snowfall. Fresh. The smell of a pharmacy. The younger breath smelled of one who had yet to swallow death in the corpses of animals at the table and in the countless hurts of the heart.

Aiden.

Noses nearly touching, the boy looked into his eyes.

Grandpa, your breath still smells like the compost bucket.

Oh ... I'm sorry, the man said covering his mouth.

I still love you, the boy said nodding fiercely to leave no doubt. Then he paused to evaluate his words further. The compost not so much.

The man smiled. Promise me something, Aiden.

Yes.

Whatever happens, never tell your parents you were in this room.

The child nodded.

Remember, I was the one who called you in. There is nothing wrong in giving your grandfather a hug. There never was, and there never will be. And after today nothing that may happen to me will be your fault. None of it. Do you understand?

The child nodded, biting his lower lip.

You know your grandfather loves you more than alligators love the swamp, don't you?

The child nodded and stared at the alligator squeezed between them.

I love you and I always will. Wherever I'll be.

Will I see you again?

In your dreams, your memories. Whenever you want to.

Can I cuddle and lie next to you?

Only for a minute, this time.



When the boy returned from his aunt's, after a week recovering from his pneumonia, he walked up the stairs to his grandfather's empty room. A strange new smell in the house infused the curtains, the door knobs, burned his nostrils. Every window ajar, yet the breeze sweeping the air appeared powerless to erase that smell.

Clinging to his alligator, crouching inside his grandfather's closet, searching for the compost smell he so missed, the boy overheard his mother's voice climb up the staircase from the kitchen and telling his aunt.

We don't understand. He knew at his ripe age that any contact with the child would be fatal. Still, he refused to be sent away from the kid if only for a little while. He had promised to warn us anytime the child wanted near him so we could stop it. They were so close.

THE WAIT



You walk out. You walk out as if you had no plans to return. I say no, don't go. I say it in the only way I know: a sigh and a lowering of the eyes. That triggers a guilty glance over your shoulder, followed by irritation because you know you must leave me.

I press my nose against the window glass. My longing tracks you to the car while you avoid my eyes and disappear. I don't move. I hear the distinctive growl of the car engine above the city roar. Soon the TV, left on out of pity, drowns the faint echo of your heart. Trancelike, I stare out the window, hoping.

Who do you think you are? Telling me you love me, telling me no one understands you like I do. Telling me lies. Don't you know I would die without you? Die everyday a little? No, you don't know.

After an eternity of boredom, the sun disappears, and I hear the whine of your car engine. On seeing me, you wave, as if I had never moved and you had never abandoned me. I wave back. No one, but no one, runs to you like I do, starved after a day of emptiness, dropping everything to greet you. From room to room, I follow your every step. I cannot bear the separation, I cannot bear to miss a single crumb of attention.

Who do you think you are to keep me on a leash so I don't leave you like your last lover? What would I do without you? You complain to me. I don't judge. I don't interrupt. I do whatever you ask me to do. No questions asked. I don't inflict the insults your daughter does. I sleep with you. You cry to me. I see you naked and ask for nothing.

About the Author

paulo da costa was born in Angola and raised in Portugal. He is a bilingual writer, editor and translator living on the West Coast of Canada. paulo's first book of fiction, *The Scent of a Lie*, received the 2003 Commonwealth First Book Prize for the Canada-Caribbean Region, the W.O. Mitchell City of Calgary Book Prize and the Canongate Prize in Scotland for the title story. In Portuguese he has published a collection of poetry, *notas-de-rodapé* (2005). His poetry and fiction have been published in literary magazines around the world and have been translated to Italian, Mandarin, Spanish, Serbian, Slovenian and Portuguese. For more information, go to: www.paulodacosta.com

Bibliography

English Books

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