

**RB****REDGATE BOOKS**

ELOISA

She wakes, lies there, the folds of the white coverlet reflecting the contours of her body. Her mind chases the remnants of a dream – a sweet dream, a child laughing by the water, her laugh, the turquoise flash of a kingfisher winging down the great Brazilian river. Then even the remnants are gone and she wakes truly, realising that for once she has slept the night through. She did not wake in the small hours when the town is silent save for the occasional barking dog. She did not lie there unseeing in the dark, remembering how it was long ago and imagining for the thousandth time how it might have been. But she will not dwell on that now. She sits up, swings her legs off the bed and places her feet on the floorboards, feeling the wood's grain beneath her toes. As she stands and walks to the window, her shift falls straight from the tips of her breasts to just below her knees. The hem rises as she raises her arms to open the window. With the heels of both hands she pushes it up listening as the leaden sash weights rattle in their boxed courses. Eloisa takes a very deep breath, her nostrils flaring, drawing in the smells of the waking town – the tomcat smell of the box hedging in the plaza below, coffee brewing in the next door apartment, the acrid scent of the street cleaner's cigarette, and underlying them all the vapours lifting off the river, redolent of where it rises in the dank and distant Amazon forest. She hears the clop of donkey hooves and the squeal of an oxcart's wooden wheels, the cry of a baby wheeled out by a maid for early morning sun, the jingle of horse harness, then suddenly the stuttering roar as Antonio Klébart starts his lorry. Antonio, the

carter's son, so up to date, so modern, always back from the city with the latest thing. Today will be a good day, Eloisa is sure of it.

In her cupboard of a kitchen she prepares her breakfast, following the same routine she follows every day. Lid off the electric kettle, move to the sink, fill the kettle and plug it in. She is careful not to wet her hands. They installed electric light in the apartment block three years ago but the kettle is her first electric appliance, a gift from Antonio. She thought he was trying to court her until she learned better.

'Take care you don't get an electric shock,' he said when he showed her how to use the kettle.

'What's that, electric shock?'

'If electricity enters your body it gives you a buzzing burning pain. You jerk and shake, out of control. You could die.' His hand held hers on the kettle's wooden handle 'Just keep these pretty hands dry when you use it.' There was a tone in his voice she didn't like and she pulled away from him. Eloisa's hands are her life.

She cuts a slice from the loaf she baked yesterday, spreads it with soft curd cheese then a blob of guava jelly, '*Romeo e Julieta*' they call it. She likes that name and says it aloud to herself. The kettle hisses and spits as it boils. As she spoons fresh coffee into a jug and pours in the boiling water, she breathes in the rising scent. Suddenly her head is filled with memories of her mother. Every morning she too made coffee just so but in a bigger jug – a jug of family size although Eloisa was her only family. A week after Eloisa's birth, her father João Pinheiro, seduced by tales of distant gold, walked out of their mud-walled, tin-roofed cottage with nothing but a shovel and a gunny sack. He would make his fortune in the gold mines of the north: 'A fortune for my Eloisa,' he said. He never

came back yet Irene, ever expectant of his return, made him coffee every morning until the very day she died.

Eloisa sits at the single stool, enjoys the morning sun streaming through the kitchen window on to her face, bites into the bread, cheese and jam then sips the coffee. She sighs with pleasure. She is content, content at the night's good sleep, at the thoughts of the day to come, at what the day's end might bring. She would like to prolong this moment, the tastes in her mouth, the sharp cheese, the sweetness of jam, the coffee. But she must ready herself and the room for Dona Livia, her first client of the day. She stands, brushes crumbs from her lap, rinses her coffee cup then slips into the tiny bathroom. There she raises her night shift over her head, hangs it on the hook behind the door and steps into the zinc bath that sits under the tap set into the wall. She runs water into the bath, shivering as it covers her toes and begins to rise above her ankles. Once it reaches mid calf she squats, takes the rough soap from its tiled niche, washes herself all over then rinses under the flowing cold water, still shivering. Finally she dunks her head under the tap, her scalp tingling, water cascading down her face and from her long hair. She stands, turns off the tap and shakes her head so that her hair flies out in a wet whirling shroud and a rain of droplets splat on the tiled walls. Stepping out of the bath she tips it up and listens to the water gurgling down the drain in the floor, hoping that the cockroaches that lurk down there are washed away at least until tomorrow. More than once she has come barefoot into the bathroom and unseeing has felt a roach crunch beneath her foot. She shudders. She dries herself on the towel that hung from the open window all yesterday and still smells of the sun's warmth. At the tiny basin she cleans her teeth then with the tip of the middle finger of her left hand, she touches the four scars that pock her face, two on her forehead and two on her right cheek, and as she does every morning, wonders if they spoil her

beauty. She shrugs and wrapped in the towel, goes to her bedroom and dresses in a simple overall buttoned down the front and puts on the soft, sturdy nurse's shoes that will comfort her feet through the hours ahead. She brushes out her hair, pulls it back with both hands and with a deft twist, knots it in a chignon which sits softly on the nape of her neck.

In what once had been the apartment's living room, she pauses for a moment to run a hand across the supple leather of the bed, the bed she had bought with the last of the money Tia Iphigénia had left her. Tia Iphigénia, her mother's elder sister who had saved her from the bitter choice she faced when her mother died, penury or prostitution.

'Come and live with me, I am old now and you can keep me company,' Iphigénia said after the funeral, clutching Eloisa's arm with a bony hand as she hobbled to her waiting pony and trap. 'Your poor mother, she worked herself to death at that market stall of hers. That and waiting for that useless husband. For the love of God, a woman of her age standing in the heat of the day like that, never mind humping sacks of beans.'

Eloisa nodded guiltily. She helped at the stall whenever she had no clients but it was so difficult for her. Her mother could never remember to put the sacks in the same place and Eloisa could not tell one variety of bean from another. Then, on a sweltering January morning her mother simply collapsed and died in front of a queue of shocked customers. She was forty-eight and Eloisa just a girl. So she accepted her aunt's offer, abandoned both her work and the mud-walled cottage she was born in, and came to live in this little apartment sleeping on a day bed in the living room. But less than a year later Iphigénia was buried beside her sister in the cemetery where strangling figs and twisting vines covered the baroque and crumbling tombs of the town's illustrious founders. In her last days Eloisa had

comforted her aunt, fanning her in the heat of the day, bathing her sweat soaked body in cool water as she lay half upright gasping for air, burning with the final bout of a malaria that had tormented her for half her life.

‘It’s all yours, Eloisa,’ she said in a hoarse whisper and with a flutter of her hand. That was the last thing Tia Iphigénia said to anyone. And it was all hers, she just out of girlhood and the owner of Apartment 7, Praça Tiradentes 20a, Pitangueira and all that was in it, including her aunt’s crystal clock that chimed on the half hour. And there was money to keep her until she had clients enough to survive alone, and finally to buy the leather bed.

She unfolds a crisp sheet and flips it onto the bed, pulling down the edges until it lies smooth and taut. It still smells of the lemon grass sachets with which she perfumes her linen cupboard. As the clock chimes nine she recognises the clop of hooves and the clatter of steel shod wheels stopping in the square below. Dona Livia Gomes de Sá, wife of Colonel Rodrigo Gomes de Sá is arriving. She steps into the hallway, stands listening to Dona Livia’s laboured step on the marble stairs, her heavy breathing as she approaches the door. Before Dona Livia can knock she opens it.

‘Good day, Dona Livia, how are you?’

‘Ah these stairs of yours Eloisa. They will kill me.’

‘I think not, Dona.’ To be sure Dona Livia is overweight, her body heaving as she puffs and pants. But beneath a superficial layer of fat and female delicacy she has a will of steel and the constitution of one of her own oxen. Eloisa knows this well. Dona Livia has been her client for several years. One night a servant from the Colonel’s *fazenda* came knocking at her door.

‘Miss Eloisa, the dona has fallen and Dr Vianna is at the city. Will you help?’

And Eloisa sat astride the servant's donkey and rode out in the night to the great house where she ministered to a bruised and twisted ankle. Dona Livia had slipped on the stairs after too many of her own famous coffee liqueurs and could not walk. But under Eloisa's skilful hands she was soon mended and resumed her iron rule of her husband, the house and its servants, the plantation and its field hands. And impressed with Eloisa's skill she began coming to the little apartment every week.

Dona Livia lies face down on the bed entirely naked. Eloisa takes a flask, third from the left on the second shelf of the cabinet fixed to the wall and built for her by Chico Rei. Chico the town carpenter, who as a boy, in spite of everything, was briefly sweet on her. He even kissed her, just that once, on the night of the feast of St John. They stood hand in hand in the velvet dark and she remembers the warmth of his palm and the whoosh and crackle of fireworks streaking across the night sky. She unstoppers the bottle, holds it briefly to her nose and considers the scent. Mimosa, tuberose with a base note of cloves, mmm, just perfect for Dona Livia. She makes up these oils herself matching each to each client, their needs, their personalities. Stepping to the bed, she pours a drop of oil into each palm, rubs them briskly together then touching Dona Livia's flaccid flesh with the fingertips of her left hand she pours oil into the hollow of her back. With soft circular motions she spreads the oil then leaning her weight onto the heels of her hands, she pushes them, one after the other, up the ridge of Dona Livia's spine.

'Ahh, Eloisa,' Dona Livia murmurs.

The topography of the body beneath her hands, its secret curves and contours, the pressure on that point between the shoulder blades which always elicits a grunt, are so familiar to her that Eloisa's mind is only partially engaged.

So she lets it drift, to the vision of the bird she woke with, to Doctor Amilcar Vianna who will be today's last client, and finally as so often when she works, to the *curandeiro* who with a wizard's skill taught her hands everything they know.

'Who will have you, Eloisa my love. Who will have you?' her mother said the morning Eloisa turned fifteen. And that very evening as Eloisa cooked beans and rice with peppered greens for supper, a knock came at the wooden cottage door.

A man's deep voice called, 'Dona, I am here.'

Eloisa, near panic as her mother let him in, slipped behind the curtain that hid her bed.

'It's alright my love,' her mother called, 'It's only the *curandeiro*. He was at the market today selling his medicines from the forest. Come out, come out and meet him.'

So she came out, shy and barefoot in just a cotton frock and he took her out into the dying day, cupped her chin in a wrinkled hand and tilted her face to the setting sun. He said nothing. Eloisa listened to the soft whistle of his breath and the faintest creaking of his knees as he shifted his weight from one foot to the other. And she felt the warmth of the sun on her face and the steadiness of his gaze. Then he took her by the elbow and they went inside.

The *curandeiro* shared their meal and finished, sat back and took the glass of *pinga* offered. He threw it back and smacked his lips, the oily liquor purling from the bottle as he refilled his glass.

'Dona Pinheiro,' he said, 'I cannot cure her but I will teach her, just for food, a place to sleep and whatever else you might afford.'

And he taught her. For three weeks he stayed, sleeping on his woven mat before the stove, sharing their meals. Guiding her hands with his, using his own body as a template, his gnarled and wrinkled frame, his skinny muscles and the

washboard of his ribs. Working with her mother too, discreetly, showed her how to find the gristled knots of muscle, knead them free, to seek out pain between the joints smoothing it away with well oiled thumbs. And Dona Pinheiro groaned with pleasure at the ease her daughter brought her.

And so Eloisa became the only masseuse between the great river and the city. To begin with it was not easy. The matrons of the town tut-tutted disapproval, a masseuse in Praça Tiradentes. Why, wasn't that only a step from working at the Luna Bar on the edge of town? And they all knew and ignored what went on at the Luna Bar with its rooms at the back and the girls with heels too high and skirts too short, some refugees from the city, others abandoned country girls with nowhere else to go. It was a disgrace but men were men and it kept the poor creatures off the streets. But Eloisa proved them wrong. Sure, in the beginning men came to her expecting something else. Antonio Klébart for one, pretending an injured back from swinging the starting handle of his heavy truck, turned over on the bed, flicked off the towel and presented her with the rigid evidence of his sexual expectations. She wasn't shocked, just turned away and said, 'Antonio, get dressed and go.' And he did.

Colonel Rodrigo Gomes de Sá was more difficult. He spent the better part of most of his days in the Bar Isidora on the river front. By mid-afternoon he would weave drunkenly out, his small eyes dazzled by the shimmer of sunlight off the river, climb into his horse-drawn surrey and drive through the afternoon heat to the *fazenda*. In the pleasant shade of the surrey's canopy and lulled by its gentle rocking, the colonel would often fall asleep leaving the horse to find its own way home and deliver him still sleeping at the broad steps of his home. There Dona Livia would find him, reins still in his hands, head on his chest and dribbling.

'Wake up, you lazy sot,' she'd shout, 'Wake up and work.' But the colonel never worked. At the height of summer on a day when the bush sang with heat and

dust devils whirled their way across the backlands, a snake looped its lazy way across their road. The horse shied and bolted through the thorn scrub. The colonel woke, bellowed at the horse and hauled on the reins, all to no avail. A wheel smashed on a boulder and he was pitched from his seat. He turned once in the air and landed flat on his back. Breath driven from his fat body, he lay there mouthing soundlessly for air but being drunk was uninjured apart from a twist in his spine which pained him for weeks. Dona Livia, fed up with his complaining, sent him to Eloisa. That afternoon he lay face down on the leather bed as she worked her fingers deep into flesh of his back, ignoring the stink of sweat and alcohol rising from his body. After some minutes he began to shift his hips beneath her hands and he groaned,

‘That’s it, just there. Oh that’s good, Eloisa, very good.’

His movements increased, became rhythmic until suddenly rolling over, he grabbed her arms and pulled her to him. But Eloisa was strong, pulled back with all her weight and fetched the colonel a stinging slap across the face.

‘You little *puta*, you’ll pay for that,’ he shouted rising from the bed.

Eloisa, backed against the wall, said quietly, ‘Colonel, tomorrow Dona Livia will be here. Shall I tell her what you tried?’

The Colonel subsided fat and naked on the leather couch and without another word began to dress. Eloisa turned away and left the room and sat on the kitchen stool until she heard the front door open then slam and the colonel’s heavy tread down the stairs. He never returned.

The clock chimes and Eloisa counts the beats to ten as a soft snore emerges from Dona Livia.

‘Wake up Dona Livia, it is time.’

The widow Gomes, her second client of the day, lies face up on the couch. Her hands and feet are crooked with arthritis which Eloisa cannot cure. She can only bring relief and soothe the pain. She anoints her hands with oil of lavender and *gualteria* culled by the Guaraní from heathers in the highlands of the south, strokes the widow's gnarled old feet, feet she imagines that have walked a million bitter miles. She takes each wrinkled toe between thumb and fingers rolls it softly at the joints and hears the widow sigh as her pain eases.

At midday she closes the door behind her with a soft click. Stepping down to the pavement she opens her parasol, turns to her left and at an even pace walks towards the corner of the square. Heat from the granite paving slabs seeps through the soft soles of her shoes. A hot breeze lifts wisps of hair at the nape of her neck, tickles her ear lobes. The breeze carries the smell of cooking from Angelo's kitchen – seared garlic, rice and meat grilling over open coals. Eloisa swallows. She turns at the sound of a pony trap behind her – Sr. Carlos Sampaio, the town lawyer who like her, takes his lunch every day at Casa D'Angelo.

'Good day, Eloisa,' he calls as he passes.

She bobs her head and continues to the restaurant where Sr. Carlos already waits. Eloisa smiles as she folds the parasol and he takes her arm and shows her to her table beneath the slowly turning fan. He leaves her to join a colleague at the bar. Eloisa likes Sr. Carlos. He smells of eau de cologne and cigars and has a deep and friendly voice. He was a friend to Tia Iphigénia and ensured that her dying wishes were fulfilled. Even now he is the nearest thing to a father she has ever known. She smiles again. Fat Angelo stands before her, snaps open her napkin and lays it across her knees.

'Good day Eloisa. Your usual?'

‘Good day, Seu Angelo. Yes please.’ Within minutes a plate of food is placed before her. She takes a deep sniff – rice, beans, the sharp smell of freshly cut tomato, olive oil and overlying all this the rich savour of grilled meat fresh from the spit. Saliva fills her mouth and she takes up her knife and fork and eats. Eloisa’s lunch is the highlight of her day. The sound of company, (she can pick out individual conversations in the restaurant hubbub), the clink of cutlery and glasses, the hiss and sizzle of meat on the grill, the calls of the waiters and above all the smells and tastes of well-cooked food enchant her. As a child and growing up their food was the simplest – beans and rice their staple, from time to time stringy beef well stewed, and once in a while fish from the great river. Here in the Casa D’Angelo Eloisa feels close to heaven. She finishes her food, leans back with a sigh and wipes her lips with the crisp linen napkin. Her emptied plate is removed and replaced by a smaller plate of egg and coconut pudding, a *quindim* so sweet it makes her jaws ache as she spoons it into her mouth, biting down on the flakes of coconut.

Finally Angelo is at her side once again. ‘Good?’ he asks.

‘Very good,’ she says.

He slides a tiny cup of coffee in front of her, puts a hand on her shoulder, gives it the gentlest of squeezes. ‘Till tomorrow then.’

‘Yes, until tomorrow,’ she says and downs the coffee. It is thick with sugar and bitter-sweet.

Back in her apartment Eloisa sits at her bedroom window overlooking the square. She has only one client this afternoon and he is not due until four-o-clock but she will not think about him, yet. It is too soon. The window is in the shade now but the heat still radiates from the cobbled square below. The town is quiet, the only sounds the rattle of the breeze in the leaves of the palm trees in the middle

of the square. She rubs her hands together. They are soft and supple from the oils she uses on her clients. How long will I do this she wonders. Will I live alone like this until I am old like Tia Iphigénia, old and die? Will I never have a husband or children? Or will it all change, perhaps today? She runs her hands down her young body thinking how much she touches others, how little others touch her. There is a prickling behind her eyelids but she sniffs, stands from the chair and shakes herself. She leans on the windowsill. Perhaps she'll grow fat like Dona Livia, her body lose its youth and firmness. But Dona Livia has had six children, is rich and drinks too much. She should be fat. Eloisa doesn't drink. Perhaps I should she thinks as she turns from the window and marches to her treatment room. There she bustles around making up fresh oil for Dr Vianna. From the top shelf of the cupboard she takes base oil then adds the essentials from their vials, smelling each as she goes – cedar, bay and finally a single drop of vetiver.

At five minutes to four she hears footsteps on the cobbles below and the opening of the door. She resists the temptation to leap up from the leather bed, run down to meet him. She waits listening to his boots on the step, the door creak open and his uneven tread upon the marble stairs. His knuckles rap on the patterned glass of her apartment door. She waits another second, takes a deep breath and goes to let him in.

'Eloisa.' He takes her hand, lifts it as if to his lips but then lets it fall. Is there is something in his voice, a tone she has not heard before? Or is it her imagination?

'Doctor, good afternoon.'

'Are you well?' he asks.

'Yes, Doctor, I am as always.' She turns and walks into the treatment room. He follows, his walking stick clicking on the polished floorboards. Dr Amilcar

Vianna undresses and lies face down upon the bed. She pours a puddle of oil into the palm of her left hand, closes the other hand over it, feels it warm, then slides both palms across his back. Hands rotating in opposing directions, she works the oil into his skin, feeling as she always does, the corrugated scar above his hips. This was the injury that brought him to her, a wound from the Chaco wars where he volunteered, a doctor treating others. He was shy, embarrassed then, that first time, perhaps because he couldn't cure himself, or being revealed to a young woman he did not know embarrassed him. The wound pains him still and he limps to favour it. Leaning forward, her weight on the heels of her hands she feels his muscles flex beneath the pressure. She tries not to think about the man beneath her palms, but imagines healing flowing from her body into his. But the power seems to flow the other way and she steels herself, calms her breathing and wills her body not to tremble. She moves to the head of the couch. His breathing is regular, quiet, controlled she thinks. He is not asleep. She leans over him and starting at his neck presses her thumbs into his spine, and slides them slowly down, one following the other. They rise and fall over each vertebra, down into the small of his back and beyond then rise again until she feels the wound. Her hands circle back and her thumbs slide down once more. Does he tremble then? Does he catch his breath or is it her imagination? Could it be that she is more to him than just Eloisa, his masseuse? For he is more to her. Dr Amilcar Vianna is the man she loves but has never seen, nor ever will. For Eloisa, young and beautiful, is blind.

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