

A Christmas Tale

Epitácio Pais

Maria hit the big city with a ravening hunger to succeed, to consign to the darkness of oblivion her lowly birth and past. Now battle was about to be joined. Her weapons were beauty and youthful vigour, her arena the bustle of the levelling cosmopolis, the dazzling lights of its shops and houses, the exotic settings of its crowds and clubs. Having served in the house of her landlord *senhor* Abel, she came armed also with the countless little graces that lend one an air of style and elegance.

In the noisy polygon of villas where she had found a home her charms enchanted all and sundry. Her minuscule room had everything good taste could demand, from lead-grey Persian blinds to white sheets with blue stripes. Her clothes were an inspiration to the oily, dark-skinned neighbours who tottered to the bazaar in high heels when buying meat for supper. At the *tiatr*, Mári dazzled the rest of the audience, who paid her the same respect they showed the *grandes dames* of their native soil. It was Mári who wrote her neighbours' letters and taught them the rules of *savoir-vivre*.

Mári was thus grateful to *bai* Elena, the stern wife of *senhor* Abel, her *bhatkar*, who had unwittingly raised her up from nothing and made her a distinguished, respected and envied woman. It was to *bai* Elena she owed the glorious love of António, a blue-blooded young man she had met at a party and who now promised to marry her.

António! How long he was taking! He had promised her a spin in his car that evening. First they would stop in Marine Lines and make love. Then they would drive up to the Hanging Gardens, with their fine vistas, to watch the specks of light wink on and dapple the city, the very sea catch fire, transformed into gold as it danced around the ships. Up there the orchestra of city sounds was no louder than a murmur, and those who strolled along pressed tightly together seemed to perform the steps of a dance. Afterwards, as if on some ethereal pilgrimage, they would scan the whole of Bombay, relishing this prelude to their wedded bliss.

And so on that blessed night Mári's soul was filled with excitement, which overflowed and cascaded into everything around her. The hateful, nasal voice of the cane-juice wallah now sounded to her ears like a gently caressing tune by

Sinatra overheard in the Metro. The spark of the trams seemed to her as fireworks. She no longer loathed the scarlet and red turbans swarming along the avenues because these colours matched the joyful exuberance welling up inside her. Bubbles rose up into the air and kaleidoscopic visions revealed themselves in the buildings looming before her. Even that old smell of butter and garlic wafting up from the neighbourhood didn't provoke, as it did on other days, the anguished desire to flee that place for somewhere, anywhere else.

How long António was taking!

Suddenly a car pulled up outside and António raced panting up the three flights of stairs.

"Come on, Mári! Sorry I'm late," he yelled. "Do you know why?"

"No idea. Come on, let's go."

"No idea? My aunt arrived today. She's down in the car. Came to see how we're spending Christmas and for our wedding. She wants to meet you."

Mári took one last look in the mirror, touched up her lipstick, and pulled a comb through her hair. Then off down they went, swearing once more in the half-light of the stairwell that they would love each other forever and a day.

António opened the car door and they both climbed in.

That was when Mári, thunderstruck, saw that António's aunt was *bai* Elena.

Christmas! Christmas! The bells peal out their heart-warming carol and intense emotion hovers in the air, its wings extended out over men and things alike, for the men have tenderness in their eyes and the dew hasn't yet bleached the lanterns. Only Mári lies crumpled in her room, weeping at her misfortune behind those lead-coloured blinds. She has fallen defeated in battle, convinced she will never rise a second time to rejoin the fray.

—Translated from Portuguese by Paul Melo e Castro

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Epitácio Pais (1924-2009), described by Vimala Devi and Manuel de Seabra as "a short story writer of great vigour, whose prose is terse and suggestive. He feels the world around him in all its poetry and tragedy", began to publish his short stories after the end of Portuguese colonial rule in 1961. Appearing in the surviving Portuguese-language newspapers or broadcast on the programme "Renasença" of the Goa station of All-India Radio, Pais's narratives deal with the shifting social, political and economic situation in the Goa in the first decade of Indian rule.