

Emilia's heartbreak

Do you know why they say that Santo Amaro is the patron saint of the legless? Well, because Estremoz, down the road, was the army HQ in this part of the world. Men have been leaving here since the year 1400 to go off to war, and legend has it that soldiers who passed through Santo Amaro first, before leaving for the front, would never die.

The saying was that whoever had a dip in the Santo Amaro stream after being called up would celebrate come summertime! And they weren't wrong! Young men went swimming at night down by the stream, tied the scarf around their necks that their girlfriends had embroidered, and sang all night before they left!

In Santo Amaro, not a single soldier ever died. They all came back. Not even a casualty! Not one! Not even José, a boy born on one of the hill farms nearby who has been missing for decades!

He went swimming in the stream like all the others, but didn't have a scarf because he was not yet dating Emilia. José left his hat behind on the seat of his betrothed on Rua Velha, between the village of the Telheiros and Santo Amaro, not knowing if his beloved's family had given permission to date her.

Emilia, who had never properly said goodbye to José, kept in her memory the image of the love that had not yet been consummated, and spent her days sewing her trousseau, sitting in the chair where his hat had been, imagining the two of them growing old, walking down Rua Velha to the new bridge every day, and sharing their worries and cares, the usual joys of life. She wished for nothing more. But it didn't look like José was coming back, even after all his companions had returned. Emilia began to doubt the blessing of Santo Amaro. This was unacceptable blasphemy in a place where everyone had a relative in the war but knew not to fear his fate, such was their confidence that he would never die.

Soldiers might return without their legs, in trauma or excruciating pain, but never dead.

Emilia waited a year. Two years. Three years. Four. Five. Six. Every year she whitewashed her house on the day Joseph had left. The war ended and still she waited despite her doubt. Until the day when, overwhelmed by the lack of human warmth in her daily routine and from counting the years that simple arithmetic was teaching her about life, she married her boss. She darned his socks. Prepared his packed lunch. Looked after him when he was ill, assuaged his fears. And felt just as lonely, but with less room for despair. Until the day she met José again, on a street in Sousel, decades and a whole life later. José had returned, but not to her. José had not died, and smiled at her, vaguely remembering the day he had met her, but barely remembering her name.

Emilia returned home heartbroken. She prayed to a Saint to grant her a miracle. Emilia didn't deserve to live.

That same night, after swimming in the stream, she spread out the clothes for the child she had never had, and insulted the full moon. She cried and cursed her fate. She apologised to the saints for her lack of faith. And killed himself with rat poison. They say someone saw her and didn't go near, and that the sounds of her death would have scared the devil himself.

The next day, there was no trace of her body. But in that place there is a spring from which nobody drinks, in case they swallow Emilia's heartbreak and commit similar sins with the luck she had.

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