

SIMONE CAMPOS

The Time to Die

Translated by *Lisa Shaw*



COMPANHIA DAS LETRAS

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She went in, walked up to the table and sat down. She pulled off her beanie hat: her hair was flat against the nape of her neck and sticking out at the sides. The person in Tim Hortons on Queen Street that grey Wednesday was called Mark. Mark Lin.

“Sorry I’m late.”

She had seen Mark on other occasions. His face was oriental, perpetually curious, freckled. This time the conversation was slow to get off the ground. He still had not commented on her hair. Maybe he did not like it.

“I suppose you’ve noticed my hair”, she said sarcastically.

“You look like a totally different person. Who are you?”, he laughed.

“Well, what do you think of her?”

“I like her, a lot”.

And he fell silent. Izabel did too.

“You look like a goth.” He decided to be honest.

“I was a goth once.”

Mark pretended to inspect her.

“Where are the satanic tattoos?”

“I never wanted any. Or any piercings. I used to wear bracelets,

black clothes. The most I ever did – she showed him a mark on her shin – was scratch myself where I’d been bitten by a mosquito. It left a hole and then this mark.”

“A kind of tropical self-harming.”

“That’s it”, she smiled.

“Why did you used to do that?”

“Oh. Classic self-harming. I felt powerless. I used to bite my nails as well.” She showed him her long fingernails painted in a checked pattern. “Today no one would ever know, would they? But, funnily enough, you’ve had a tattoo done recently.” His arm was wrapped in cling film. “And a piercing. At the age of twenty-nine. Explain yourself, Mark.”

“It’s fashionable.”

“Does that attract female goths?”

“Sometimes.”

“Poser.”

He felt a bit offended, but did not say anything. Izabel giggled and grabbed hold of his hand, which was much hotter than hers.

“The noise of you having sex woke me up”, said Greg, with bags under his eyes.

Izabel grinned.

“Sorry, Greg.”

Greg was eating cereal and reading something on his mobile phone. He put it down and looked at her, as she was making coffee.

“I didn’t even see him leave. Was he good-looking?”

“Yes, he’s hot.”

Izabel remembered a few things about the previous night. She pursed her lips and took a deep breath.

“It was really loud, wasn’t it?”

Her roommate gripped his spoon tightly while giving her a dirty

look. Izabel stood side on to him, watching the coffee drip through the filter. He fiddled with the tabletop with his free hand:

"You can tell me more! Stop being mean!"

Izabel laughed and sat opposite him with her coffee cup, looking at him, complicit.

"I used that thing we bought that day."

"What? The toy? Did you fuck him?"

Izabel shrugged her shoulders slowly:

"How should I know! I felt an opening..."

"Oh my God!", Greg said. "It's just as well that they don't let you into MaleHunt."

"It's your loss", Izabel said, rolling her eyes. "He told me that no one had ever done that to him before."

Greg stared at her.

"There's money in that, you know."

"Absolutely. Some people just don't know how to earn money."

"I'm being serious. People will pay good money for that. Especially as you're hot."

"Thanks."

"Your nom de guerre could be Pegging Sue."

"Pff." She rolled her eyes again. "No way."

"Please. It's a compliment."

"You don't understand. It's not that the floodgates are now open and I'm gonna go around doing that to everyone. It's more that I got close to this guy, and I liked him, but at the same time I was a little bit annoyed by him. He irritated me, you know? He was always calling me, wanting to meet up, to know what I was up to. He was like a dog, always there, following at my heels. So..." Izabel took a breath, "You see? That's it."

Greg was about half the size of Izabel, but she was sitting down. When he hugged her and planted a kiss on her new fringe, she felt very small indeed.

“You’re beautiful”, he said. “I have to go. I’ll speak to you later.”

Izabel liked to drink her coffee slowly. She thought things over. The question is not what but how. She wondered if secretly she had found it fun to be sufficiently annoyed with someone to assault him. Or had she always wanted to assault someone and see how things turned out afterwards?

She suspected that it was neither one thing nor the other. A little bit of annoyance, for sure. She wanted to kind of use sex to show him her annoyance. It was a kind of test — not for him but for her. To see if you really like me even knowing that I think that of you. Even when I did that to you in response to your devotion. Maybe that’s what it was all about.

She felt a bit ashamed to admit it, but she had found it pleasurable. She had not had an orgasm but she had experienced pleasure.

She looked into the bottom of her coffee cup and wished she knew how to predict the future. But there were not even any coffee grounds in the cup.

She sensed that if she carried on daydreaming she would be late again. She went to unplug her mobile phone from its charger. She spotted a new text message, which had arrived in the early hours of the morning. She read it.

Darling, your grandfather has just passed away. Call me. Mum.

PART I

Tuesday, 30 December

The illuminated rectangles moved from side to side as the vehicles climbed the BR-040 road with its many twists and turns. It had gone dark at 21:00 and the scorching summer heat had remained back in the distance, on the red line of the horizon. Its silhouette could still be seen through the window in the darkness of the bus.

Izabel had got one of the last available seats, next to the toilet. Now and again she looked up from her book and tried to blur the image of the rectangles of light to imagine that she was in a space ship, a futuristic airplane, or anything more exciting than what awaited her.

It will soon be November. Friends that I meet up with all ask me the same question: where are you going to spend the summer? Going to spend the months of December, January, February and March, what Europeans refer to as the winter months, in the mountains is taken as read, or is at least an long-standing tradition that the emperor Pedro II of Brazil introduced into Rio de Janeiro society. In the Brazilian summer he used to transfer his residence to Petrópolis. The royal court accompanied him and the rest of society followed; all the embassies, delegations and ministries transferred their activities to that cooler garden-city near to the Brazilian capital that today, thanks to the motor car, is a kind of suburb of Rio.

Izabel went back to the beginning of her book: the date of publication was 1941. That was already true in 1941. Brazil, land of the future.

The road opened up to a cobalt sky. At any moment now the white construction that had replaced the old bus station, at least for those coming from Rio, would come into view. There it was, and then Izabel caught sight of the queue of taxis, also white, which charged per destination and not based on distance. The taxi from the bus station to Araras was always exorbitant. She normally preferred to continue her journey by bus. But on this occasion she had luggage and she was tired.

It was only when she went into the bus station that she noticed how thick the mist was. White flurries were invading the inside of the terminal. The cold was too. White cold.

Izabel put a jacket on and bought a savoury fritter. She ate it slowly,

paid to use the toilets and went to the taxi rank, on the other side of the bus station.

“Hello. How much do you charge to go to Araras?”

“Which part of Araras?”

“Ten kilometres in. The Bernardo Coutinho Road.”

By this she was making it clear that it was not an unpaved road. It is paved. It is not going to dirty your taxi or damage the suspension.”

“A hundred reais”, he said.

“No way. That’s very expensive.”

“That’s the price. Band two, on the taximeter... That’s what it comes to.”

“Can you do it for ninety?”

“I’m sorry. It’s a hundred.”

Izabel looked around. It was late. The three free taxi drivers were all following the conversation.

“Ninety five”, she suggested.

The taxi driver looked at her closely, at her shapeless holdall, and agreed.

“I’ll do it for ninety five.”

The light went out.

Izabel was pleased with herself at having foreseen this. Pleased and irritated. She walked along in the dark towards the candles that were already in the candelabra, and lit them with her cigarette lighter. The rain was heavy and incessant. The electricity company employees would be waiting for it to ease off before trying to fix the problem.

It was already raining hard when Izabel was dropped off next to the bottom gate of the farm. There was the ‘BEWARE OF THE DOG’ sign, still resolutely telling a lie. On the other side of the wall, the hedge, and behind that, the slope with two cement tracks for car tyres that extended as

far as the eye could see. She tackled the slope by holding out her mobile phone in front of her, her umbrella tucked under her neck, until she reached the camouflaged switch, only to discover that someone had either stolen the bulbs or that the wiring was faulty.

Up there she had taken shelter in the house. It was a state-of-the-art country cottage, with a well-equipped kitchen, two bathrooms, three bedrooms, a TV room, and wine cellar, and surrounded by a much larger plot of land than was necessary for someone who did not grow anything and lived alone.

Izabel took her jacket off and used her lighter to light her last-but-one cigarette.

The countryside is now just another place that is tedious when the lights go out. With one difference: the lights go out more often.

The countryside. This was not normal countryside. It was not a place with lots of large farms dutifully producing foodstuffs. There was nothing to harvest here. It was where you went to spend the holidays, or the weekend.

At the top of the hill, two numbers higher, there was the owner of a bank. A little further back, some two kilometres away, was the former pop singer, now a recluse, who could always be seen naked through the gaps in the hedge. More than one illegal gambling boss had a house there. There were also several actors, who got fed up with the place and sold their houses to other actors, which meant that Izabel could never say with certainty which famous people were her neighbours.

In addition to these owners, there were the caretakers, and their large families, who lived nearby. They attended the many local evangelical churches.

So what am I doing here?

The farm was her own, or rather it belonged to her family. Her grandfather bought it by saving hard towards the end of the dictatorship. Soon afterward the price had shot up. Then again. And again. It had

never stopped going up. In the 90s Araras had become an area of upmarket restaurants, a sophisticated weekend destination, a hangout for celebrities taking a quick holiday from the TV studios in Rio.

This was the story that people told her. She had been born in 1991, and it had always been like this in her lifetime.

When she became a teenager she virtually stopped going there. She preferred the beach. Actually during the time when Ivan was on the scene she still went there, to have sex in the bushes. But that was years ago, and without her own car or the inclination to drag herself up there, she had then gone travelling. Then her grandfather died.

Then my grandfather died.

She stubbed out her cigarette in the dark wood ashtray, very 1970s.

Of pulmonary emphysema.

She got up and stood in front of the glass wall consisting entirely of windows. She was sure that it had an architectural name – “winter garden”? Designed to allow people to enjoy the natural environment without feeling the cold. The only problem was that, in the pitch black, you could not see anything outside. That is not entirely true: you could see the threads of water, overflowing from the gutters and boring holes into the earth in the vases under the eaves. And, through each clearing in the trees, the mountain in the distance, where waterfalls cascaded down. But nothing else.

She went into the smallest of the bedrooms and opened the wardrobe. At the back were the orange flip-flops that had been hers since she was twelve years old. The iron bed that she sat on to put them on had been her mother’s until she married.

She thought that these things would smell of her grandfather. But she could only smell mustiness.

She left the room carrying her trainers and went into the main bedroom. She left them near the door and put her bag on top of the dressing table. She then opened her bag and took out smaller ones, which she

arranged alongside it. From one of them she took out a toothbrush, and she went into the bathroom to pinch some toothpaste.

The toothpaste was a bit dried up, but it was there. This was an odd but accommodating hotel.

The bed was made. And it was musty. She got undressed and into bed. She checked her mobile – it was relatively early, one in the morning. She took a while to drop off to sleep due to the intermittent barking coming from to the west of the house. It was the first time she had heard so much barking and so close by: that was not a stray dog – one of the neighbours must have been breeding dogs.

Wednesday, 31 December

She walked across the flagstones that separated the house from the swimming pool, stepping carefully over the tall grass. The hedges were overgrown, the forest was taking over the flowerbeds. More than six months without her grandfather. Almost a year without being cared for. The house had been entrusted to the occasional inspection of a female neighbour, but it seemed like she had not even set foot there.

When the light began to disturb her and it was not a working day, Izabel normally just turned over and went back to sleep. Today she did not. She had woken up with a start, put chlorine in the pool, turned the pump on. Then she had gulped down a coffee – not strained, as there were no filters. And now she was surveying her surroundings.

The pool was overflowing, topped up by the rain. It was green. Lake-green. The edging stones were rough and curved upwards, holding in the water above ground level. The damp deck was shining sadly without the PVC sun-loungers.

Around the edge there were hibiscus in flower, the magnolia tree, the assorted pine trees and the never-ending row of flamingo flowers. It was obvious that the farm had at one time belonged to a woman. It had

belonged to a man for thirty years, and even if he did not replace the flowers that died, he zealously fertilised and pruned those that survived.

The flat area where today the swimming pool was located was previously used by the neighbourhood for football matches, with the blessing of the former lady owner. It had been difficult to get the locals to forgo this habit, as well as that of using the farm as a shortcut between the upper and lower roads. But her grandfather's monumental unfriendliness eventually prevailed. That and the fawn-coloured Doberman that he acquired.

The dry part of the lawn had to be watered during the winter, and it obviously had not been. There were also ants' nests in the lawn, and Izabel discovered when walking around barefoot that some areas were full of a kind of weed with spines that got stuck into the foot of unwitting bathers. You could only get them out with poison. But the holes in the lawn were more worrying. Later, when she could, she would bring some new pieces of turf and replace the bald parts.

Her grandfather used to sigh: *If only you could do the same with hair.*

The magnolia tree at the far end had become definitively lighter and thinner with age. The moss-coloured swing that hung in its shade had been a present for Izabel. She thought for a while about having a go on it, but then remembered that the seat had not accommodated her hips since she was about twelve years old.

On the opposite side of the pool, there was a pitanga tree shading the floor of a caretaker's house that lay in ruins. In contrast the tree was still very green and flourishing.

The old satellite aerial was still sticking out of the slope. All rusted up. Trees had been cut down because of it. So that it could communicate with the satellite. Today they had the portable set-top aerial and its half a dozen free channels. Later they would have to get someone to take that away.

She went past the dog's grave, a circle of earth marked out with

round pebbles. Káli was her name. She had died about four years ago; her grandfather was adamant that he did not want another one (male or female). He stayed in that enormous farm on his own.

Izabel went down the internal road with her chin up and noticed that only one of the lampposts had a bulb in it. And that one was not working. Incredible.

She reached the lower entrance and then went all the way back up again towards the vegetable garden. She was eager to start working on it. It had become a mass of tangled vegetation with a few banana trees around the edge.

Behind the vegetable garden there was a loquat tree that was refusing to produce any more fruit. There was the mango tree. The vine that had never produced grapes. A row of lime trees whose fruit they would use to make caipirinha cocktails when they had guests. There was also the rock where she had drunk her first beer, smoked her first cigarettes and refused her second kiss, offered by Thales Nesser, a chubby boy with glasses from her old school who also had a house in Araras and who, although he barely spoke to her in the playground, kept turning up at the farm, with the effusive approval of Izabel's mother. Sometimes he came across Izabel on her own, on other occasions accompanied by some friend or other that he would always try to kiss, sometimes successfully. Izabel herself he never managed to.

After she had finished her inspection she went back to the house and opened the doors of all the wardrobes. She would take out all the clothes as soon as she could and would hang them out to get rid of the musty smell. There's time, she thought. First she would take care of the non-essentials.

Her hand was already beginning to display the same prominent veins that her forty-something aunts had. Now they were sixty-some-

thing aunts. When she was a child and they were in their forties she used to stare fascinated at their adult, female hands at rest, when they were talking, smoking, sometimes shaking, always with their nails painted. Now she looked at herself being smartened up by the manicurist who asked her which nail polish she wanted.

Young women everywhere get their nails done. Rural beauty salons smelled of the same chemical hair dye, steam and nail varnish as any urban ones. Having your finger and toenails done was cheaper than in the city, but the hair treatments were better business. There was no competition.

Every five minutes a different youth went past on his motorbike, tooting the horn and waving at someone inside the salon. During the split second that this took place somehow the hairdresser recognised him and waved back. *Hi, Marvinho!*

“Which polish would you like?”, the manicurist asked her again.

“Crimson?”, Izabel hazarded. “If you haven’t got it, Ecstasy and Touch of Rage will do. A coat of each.”

During the time she spent abroad Izabel had done her own nails. She had taken nail varnishes with her from here, the ones she considered the best (and still did). And the requisite orange sticks and nail clippers. Everything inside a toilet bag squashed at the bottom of her suitcase: she could not put it in her hand luggage — it was a weapon. At her destination she bought cotton wool and nail polish remover.

Ecstasy followed by Touch of Rage, like Crimson, gave you the red nails of a typical lady of leisure. White hands, blue veins, red nails: they went together. She looked at the result, satisfied, paid and left.

It was starting to rain again, this time just drizzling. She did not dare open the umbrella while her nails were drying — there, oddly, they did your toe nails before your finger nails because of the dust on the road, so she waved her hands around as she walked, treading carefully. Someone said hello and she answered. It was not true that people said

hello to each other more in the countryside than in the city. Or that they only said hello to people from there. She was not from there.

They did not sell cigarettes in the bakery. Izabel bought chewing gum. She was feeling the kind of hunger that only the combination of a meagre dinner followed by manual work the following morning can give you. The little food there was in the pantry was half past its expiry date, half useless — only the wine cellar was decent, actually very well stocked. She decided to make the most of being out and about to catch a bus into the small town centre. There she would find everything she needed.

The bus soon turned up and it sped along, throwing itself around the bends. During the journey one or two speeding cars had to brake abruptly on coming face to face with the bus on the wrong side of the road. The locals were cramming onto the seats, some in silence, others chatting away on their mobile phones. All the heads turned when they passed by a landslide, the orange-coloured earth spread across the surface of the road. A man in a hat pointed at a tall house with a wall that was propped up and about to fall down. It belonged to an old friend of his, he said proudly.

When she arrived in the centre Izabel could feel the coffee gnawing at the walls of her stomach. Her face and hands were frozen from the air-conditioning next to the bus window. She went into the first restaurant that she saw. Its name was the House of the Owl.

The restaurant itself was small, but there were free tables in the garden. Izabel chose one of them. A rotund young woman came over to hand her a menu.

“Hello, my name is Moema. I will be your waitress today. Would you like to try our appetisers?”

“Yes, please. Moema?”

“Yes?”

“Do you sell cigarettes?”

“No.”

“Then I’m just going to go and buy some while you bring the appetisers.”

She came back and smoked. She ate the coloured little crackers as if there were no tomorrow. She noticed that a river, the Araras river, flowed past the end of the grounds. And that the other tables were occupied by families with children or older couples. Izabel began to sense that it was going to be an expensive meal even before she had looked at the menu.

The simplest dishes cost around eighty reais. The picanha steak for two was an unspeakable price. A fruit juice cost more than ten reais. As if to compensate for this, there were exotic fruits.

Izabel ordered a graviola juice and a full feijoada stew.

She ate until she was fit to burst and turned down the dessert offered by Moema. She drank a coffee and paid on her card. She lit another cigarette and went for a stroll.

There were two butchers shops, one of which was advertising FROZEN CODFISH, three upmarket restaurants, a dive of a bar, a building materials shop, a chemists, several clothes and handicrafts shops, a small pink catholic church with a lawn at the front, an evangelical church that housed a school and an Alcoholics Anonymous group, a pet shop, an estate agents, a video rental shop and three completely different grocery stores. One of them was wood-panelled and had wines from all over the world displayed in the wide, spotlessly clean window. Another looked like half corner shop, half bakery. She decided on the intermediate one, which looked like a supermarket. In her basket she put cleaning products, fruit, vegetables, chicken wings, pasta and seasonings. Near to the till a display of several envelopes of seeds attracted her attention. She chose carrot, spring onion and tomato seeds, which she thought she would be able to plant. The cashier wanted to know where she lived.

“Why?”

“We deliver as far as Malta”, she said, handing her a fridge magnet.

But the charge was ten reais. She left carrying lots of plain plastic carrier bags and came across the video rental store. It was called Video-Cyber, which suggested it must also have Internet access. She went in.

The premises were air-conditioned and divided down the middle by a white Formica counter. On the far side there were computers lying idle on top of a bench. A sign advertised video game consoles for hire by the hour. The actual video rental section made exemplary use of the space available: DVDs, old stock and blu-rays were squeezed side to side on adjacent shelves. Only the new releases were worthy of being displayed face-on, on a shelf next to the counter.

“How much is the film?”

“It’s eight reais for a new release, four for one of the older ones. A DVD is three reais. Membership is free.”

Izabel put the box back on the shelf.

“I just wanted to know.”

“On Thursdays it’s half price”, said the young woman. “Well, apart from tomorrow, which is a bank holiday.”

“Ok. Another time.”

“Happy New Year!”

“Same to you.”

And with that she left. She walked along the street in the direction of the bus stop. It was no longer raining.

She saw her reflection in the window of the wine shop. Her svelte physique, her erect posture, the way she swung her umbrella as she walked along, without touching the ground. She was the image of her grandfather. The same protruding vein on her forehead, the same look in her eye. Sometimes she glimpsed herself in the mirror in the lift and was taken aback, as if she had been caught unawares by the old man himself.