

LOOKING FOR SOME DIGNITY

Clarice Lispector

Mrs. Jorge B. Xavier simply couldn't say how she'd gotten in. It hadn't been by one of the main gates. She seemed to have entered in a vague dreaminess through some kind of narrow opening past some construction work debris, as if she had crossed obliquely through some opening made just for her. The fact is that when she looked up she was inside.

And when she looked up she saw that she was inside, very much so. She walked endlessly through the underground passages of the Maracana Stadium which seemed to be narrow caverns leading to rooms which occasionally opened out onto the arena through a single window. The stadium, at that scorchingly deserted hour, shimmered beneath the noonday sun, uncommonly hot for the middle of the winter.

So the woman continued down a somber corridor. This one led her to another even darker. The ceilings of the passages seemed low.

And that corridor there took her to another which in turn took her to another.

The deserted corridor turned. And there she came to another intersection, which took her to another corridor which took her to another intersection.

So she continued mechanically entering corridors which always led to other corridors. Where could the meeting room for the first class be? She had agreed to meet some people there. The lecture might have begun already. She was going to miss it. She didn't allow herself to miss anything "cultural," since this way she stayed young inside. No one on the outside would have guessed she was almost seventy years old. Everyone thought she was around fifty-seven.

But now, lost in the internal dark windings of Maracana, the woman dragged her feet heavily.

It was then that in one of the corridors she suddenly ran into a man who seemed to have sprung from thin air. She asked him about the lecture, but he knew nothing of it. But he did try to find out from another man who suddenly appeared at the turn of the corridor.

The second man said that near the bleachers, on the right in the middle of the open stadium, he'd seen "a gentleman and two ladies, one dressed in red." Mrs. Xavier doubted that these were the people she was to meet before the lecture and, to tell the truth, she had lost sight of the reason she was taking this endless walk. In any case, she followed the man toward the naked, disgorged stadium where she stood bleary-eyed in the empty space, in a vast light and a boundless silence, no soccer game, not even a ball. Above all, no crowd. A crowd that made its presence felt through its complete absence.

Had the two ladies and the gentleman already disappeared down some corridor?

The man then said with exaggerated resolve, "I'm going to help you look, and some way or another I'll find those people. They couldn't have just vanished into thin air."

In fact they saw them from way off. But a second later they disappeared again. It seemed to be a child's game whose laughter bit into Mrs. Jorge B. Xavier.

Then she and the man passed through some more corridors. But then this man also disappeared at an intersection.

The woman gave up on the lecture which after all was not very important; not very important, that is, as long as she could finally get out of that scramble of endless paths. Could there not be some exit? She felt as if she were in an elevator stuck between floors. Could there not be some exit?

But all of a sudden she remembered the directions her friend gave on the telephone: "it's fairly near the Maracana Stadium." Remembering this, she understood the hare-brained, distracted way she only half-listened, with her other half immersed somewhere else. Mrs. Xavier was very inattentive. So, the meeting was not inside Maracana but near it. Meanwhile her little destiny had willed her to be lost within the labyrinth.

Yes, and the battle resumed, even worse now. She really wanted to get out and had no idea which way to go. And once again that man who was looking for the people appeared in the corridor, and once again he guaranteed that he would find them because they could not have disappeared. He said precisely that: "People just don't vanish into thin air."

And the woman said, "You don't need to bother looking any more, all right? It's all right. Thank you very much. The place I'm supposed to meet the people isn't in Maracana."

The man stopped immediately to look at her, with wonder. "So what are you doing here?"

She wanted to explain that her life was just like that, but she did not know what she meant by "like that" or "her life," and she said nothing. The man repeated the question, feeling curious and at the same time wishing to be discreet: what was she doing there? Nothing, she answered to herself, about to drop from fatigue. But she did not answer him. Instead she let him think she was crazy. Besides, she never explained herself to anyone. She knew that the man thought she was crazy—and who wouldn't? Wasn't she shamefully feeling what she just referred to as "that"? She felt this even though she knew how to keep her mental health on a par with her physical health. Her physical health now exhausted, she shuffled through the labyrinth on high-mileage feet. Her way of the cross. She was sweating and suffocating, dressed in very heavy wool during the unseasonably severe summer heat, that summer day misfiled in the winter. Her legs hurt; they hurt under the weight of the old cross. By now she had, in a sense, resigned herself to never leaving Maracana and dying there from her weak heart.

Then, as always, it was only after giving up our dreams that they come true. Suddenly an idea occurred to her: "What an old dummy I

am!" Why, instead of looking for people who aren't here, didn't she find that man and find out how to get out of those corridors? All she really wanted was to get out and not run into anyone.

Finally, she found the man coming around a corner. And she spoke to him in a voice turned somewhat tremulous and hoarse from fatigue and the fear that everything was in vain. The discreet man agreed immediately that it was certainly better that she go home and told her carefully, "You seem to be a little confused. Perhaps it's this terrible heat."

Saying this, the man then simply turned with her into the first corridor and at the corner they saw the two large open gates. Just like that: Was it so easy?

Just like that.

Then it occurred to her that she was the only one who could not find the exit, although she did not go on to draw any further conclusions. Mrs. Xavier was just a little frightened and at the same time accustomed to this. There's no doubt that each one of us has an endless road to travel, making this a part of our destiny, something she wasn't sure she believed in.

A taxi was passing by. She hailed it and told the driver with a controlled voice that she was getting older and more tired.

"Driver, I'm not sure of the address. I've forgotten it. But what I do know is that the house is on some street or another that has something to do with Gusmao, and it intersects a street which if I'm not mistaken is called Colonel-what's-his-name."

The driver was as patient as if he were with a child. "Well, don't you worry about a thing. We're calmly going to find a street that has Gusmao in the middle and Colonel at its end," he said turning around with a smile and a conniving wink of his eye that seemed indecent. They drove off with such a bouncing that her belly shook.

Suddenly she spotted and joined the people she was looking for on a sidewalk in front of a large house. It was, however, as if the aim were just to get there and not to listen to a talk which she had forgotten altogether by that time. Mrs. Xavier had lost sight of her objective. And she did not know why she had walked so far. She saw that she had worn herself out beyond her limits, and she wanted to get out of there. The

lecture was a nightmare. She then asked an important and vaguely known woman who had a car with a driver to take her home, because she was not feeling good with all this unusual heat. The driver would be there an hour from then. Mrs. Xavier then sat down in a chair they had placed for her in the corridor. She sat there stiffly in her tight girdle, removed from the culture which was unfolding in the closed hall, from which there came not a sound. Now "culture" meant little to her. And there she was in the labyrinths for sixty seconds and for sixty minutes which would lead her to an hour.

The important woman arrived and told her her ride was waiting outside, but that since she was feeling so bad and the chauffeur would take a long time, she had stopped the first taxi that passed by. Why hadn't Mrs. Xavier herself had the idea of calling a taxi, instead of submitting to the vagaries of waiting? Mrs. Jorge B. Xavier thanked her with exaggerated courtesy. The woman was always very courteous and well-behaved. She got into the taxi and said, "Leblon, if you please."

Her mind was blank. It seemed her brain was fasting.

After a while she noted that they drove and drove but once again they kept returning to the same plaza. Why didn't they get anywhere? Once again, was there no way out? The driver finally confessed that he didn't know the south side of Rio and that he only worked in the north. And she didn't know how to tell him the way. The cross she bore for years weighed more and more, and absence of an exit simply revived the black magic of the Maracana corridors. There was no way to get free from the plaza! Then the driver told her to take another taxi, and he even beckoned one over to their side. She thanked him coolly; she observed the social graces, even with those she knew well. More than this, she was very kind. In the next cab she said fearfully, "If it's all right with you, could we go to Leblon?"

And they simply left the plaza and drove through other streets.

It was on opening the door to her apartment with her key that she imagined that she wanted to cry out loud. But she wasn't one to sob or complain. She informed the maid in passing that she wouldn't take any telephone calls. She went straight to her bedroom, removed all her clothes, took a pill with no water and waited for it to take effect.

In the meantime she smoked. She remembered that it was the

month of August, and they say that August is bad luck. But September would come one day, like a way out. And September was in some ways like the month of May: a lighter and more transparent month. She was vaguely thinking about this when drowsiness finally came, and she fell asleep.

Hours later, when she woke up she saw that a fine, cold rain was falling; the cold was like the edge of a knife. Naked in bed, she was freezing. And she thought how an old naked lady was quite odd. She recalled that she had planned to buy a woolen shawl. She glanced at the clock: she'd still find businesses open. She got a cab and said, "Ipanema, if you please."

"What's that? The Botanical Garden?" the man asked.

"Ipanema, please," the woman repeated, quite surprised. It was the absurdity of the complete lack of communication: after all, what did the words "Ipanema" and "Botanical Garden" have in common? But again she vaguely thought that "that's just how her life was."

She made another purchase quickly and saw herself in the street, now dark, with nothing to do, since Mr. Jorge B. Xavier had traveled to Sao Paulo the day before and wouldn't return until the day after.

Then, again at home, between taking another sleeping pill or doing something else, she opted for the second, remembering that she could return to look for the lost bill of exchange. What little she understood of it was that that piece of paper represented money. Two days ago she searched the whole house carefully, including the kitchen, but in vain. Now it occurred to her, why not under the bed? Perhaps. She knelt on the floor. But being on her knees quickly tired her out, and she bent down and leaned on her two hands.

She then noticed that she was on all fours.

And so she stayed for a while, perhaps meditating, perhaps not. Who knows, Mrs. Xavier might have tired of being human. She was a dog on four feet. With no dignity whatsoever. Her pride a thing of the past. On all fours, a little pensive perhaps. But under the bed there was just dust.

She stood up with some effort, caused by her stiff joints, and saw that there was nothing more to do but consider realistically—and it was only with painful effort that she could view reality—that the let-

ter was lost and that to continue looking for it would be the same as never getting out of Maracana.

And just as always, as soon as she stopped looking, as she opened her hanky drawer to pull one out—there was the letter of exchange.

Then the woman, tired from the effort of being on all fours, sat on the bed and for no apparent reason began to cry softly. It seemed more like a monotonous Arabian chant. She hadn't cried for over thirty years, but she was so tired now. If this was indeed crying. It wasn't. It was something. Finally she blew her nose. Then she thought that she would take her fate in hand and improve it somehow. "Where there's a will there's a way," she mused (without actually believing it). And all this about being a slave to a destiny occurred to her because without wanting to, she'd already begun thinking about "that."

But it happens that the woman also thought: it was too late to have a destiny. She thought that any kind of switch with another human being would do her good. It was then that it occurred to her that there was no one else with whom she could trade places. Despite what she would wish, she was who she was and couldn't become another. Each one was unique. Mrs. Jorge B. Xavier was unique too.

But everything that occurred to her was preferable to being "that." And that came from her long exitless corridors. "That," now with no sense of decency, was the painful hunger of her insides, the hunger of being possessed by the unattainable television idol. She never missed his television program. Now that she couldn't stop thinking about him, the trick was to allow herself to think about and recall the girlish face of Roberto Carlos, my love.

She went to wash her dusty hands and saw herself in the wash basin mirror. Then Mrs. Xavier thought, "If I want him a lot, really a lot, he'll be mine for at least one night." She believed vaguely in the force of the will. She got tangled up again in choked and twisted desire.

But, who knows? If she gave up on Roberto Carlos, then things between him and her would happen. Mrs. Xavier meditated a bit on the matter. Then she cleverly pretended to give up on Roberto Carlos. But she knew well that the magical abandonment only gave positive results when it was true, and not just a trick as a means to an end. Reality required a lot of the woman. She examined herself in the mirror to see if

her face would turn hideous under the sway of her feelings. But it was a quiet face which long ago had ceased revealing her feelings. Besides, her face never expressed anything but good upbringing. And now it was just the mask of a seventy year old woman. Then her lightly made-up face seemed clown-like to her. The woman made a half-hearted attempt to smile to see if it would help. It didn't.

On the outside—she saw it in the mirror—she was dry, like a dried fig. But inside she wasn't parched. On the contrary. Inside she was like moist gums, soft like toothless gums.

She then pursued a thought that might spiritualize her or dry her up once and for all. But she'd never been spiritual. And because of Roberto Carlos the woman was wrapped up in the darkness of the matter where she was profoundly anonymous.

Standing in the bathroom she was as anonymous as a chicken.

In a split second she unconsciously glimpsed that everyone was anonymous. Because no one is the other and the other didn't know the other. Then—then that person is anonymous. And now she was tangled in that deep and mortal well, in the body's rebellion. Body of invisible depths in which the rats and lizards of her instincts scurried about veiled in malignant shadows. And was everything out of time, fruit out of season? Why hadn't the other old women advised her that this could happen until the end? In old men she had seen many lecherous eyes. But not in old women. Out of season. And she was alive, as if she were someone, she who was no one.

Mrs. Jorge B. Xavier was no one.

And she wanted to have beautiful romantic feelings about the delicacy of Roberto Carlos's face, but she couldn't. His delicacy just took her to a dark corridor of sensuality. And the damage was lasciviousness. It was a vulgar hunger. She wanted to consume the mouth of Roberto Carlos. She wasn't romantic, she was ill-informed on the subject of love. There, in the bathroom, before the wash basin mirror.

With the indelible mark of age.

Without even one sublime thought to serve as a rudder and ennoble her existence.

Then she began to undo her French knot and to comb her hair slowly. She had to dye it soon; her white roots were showing now. Then

the woman thought: never in my life have I had a climax as in the stories you read. The climax was Roberto Carlos.

She thought. She concluded that she was going to die as secretly as she had lived. But she also knew that every death is secret.

From the bottom of her future death she imagined she saw the coveted image of Roberto Carlos in the mirror, with that soft curly hair of his. There she was, a prisoner of desire as out of season as a summer day in midwinter. A prisoner in the tangle of corridors of Maracana. A prisoner of the mortal secret of old women. It's just that she wasn't used to being almost seventy years old. She lacked practice and didn't have the least bit of experience.

"My dear little Roberto Carlos," she said loudly and quite alone.

And she added: my love. Her voice sounded strange to her as if with no sense of decency or shame it were the first time she were confessing that which after all should have been shameful. The woman imagined that it was possible that little Roberto might not wish to accept her love because she herself was aware that this love was silly, saccharinely voluptuous and gluttonous. And Roberto Carlos seemed so pure, so sexless.

Would her lightly colored lips still be kissable? Or would it, perhaps, be repugnant to kiss the mouth of an old woman? Showing no emotion, she examined her lips carefully. And still showing no emotion, she softly sang the refrain from Roberto Carlos's most famous song: "Warm me this winter night, and everything else can go to hell."

It was then that Mrs. Jorge B. Xavier abruptly doubled over the sink as though she were going to vomit out her viscera and she interrupted her life with an explosive silence: there!—has!—to!—be!—a!—way!—out!

TRANSLATED BY LELAND GUYER