

Humana Festa, A Novel

Regina Rheda

Translated from the Portuguese by Charles A. Perrone

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The animals of the world exist for their own reasons.
They were not made for humans any more than
black people were made for whites or women for
men.

Alice Walker

Never again may blood of bird or beast
Stain with its venomous stream a human feast
To the pure skies in accusation steaming.

Percy Bysshe Shelley

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Do

“Fuckin’ animal!”

Megan glared at Diogo with razors in her eyes. He had just committed the same old error. He had called a bad driver an animal. Megan checked a box in her notepad:

“One more point for me.”

“Sorry, Megan, animal’s not an insult, I know. But when you’re in a hurry to cuss someone out, you don’t always get the vocabulary right and you end up using some reactionary word.”

Megan softened the censure in her eyes, nearly closing them as she smiled like a girlfriend should. She understood. Most people take a while to learn new things. And Diogo’s task was two-fold: he had to speak English and to avoid speciesist language at the same time.

The bad driver passed on the right, in a cloud of dust and strident tires.

“Watch out, you stupid hog!” shouted the Brazilian.

Another quick cut from her green eyes. Another point for Megan. Diogo said he was sorry, It’s the last time, honey, I swear.

Megan accepted his apology with a lateral hug. It’s OK, just for now, for my boyfriend to refer disrespectfully to an innocent pig. The most important thing — for now — is that he no longer eats pork.

“Holy cow!” Diogo exclaimed, and this time Megan’s look, like that of a saintly cow, was fine with it all. “Did you see that guy lying on the sidewalk?”

“What guy?”

Diogo came to a stop. They walked back a few yards. He pointed to the sidewalk:

“That guy there.”

Megan didn’t see any man lying there. But she did see a little bird.

“Poor thing,” she whispered. “Do you think she’s hurt?”

“She’s breathing. Must be learning to fly. Let’s go.”

“But what if she’s hurt?”

That’s what it was like to go out with Megan, having to get all worried about animals in trouble. They were already sharing a house with seven cats and three dogs that she had rescued.

“It’s illegal to keep wild birds, Megan. Leave ’em alone. We’re in a hurry.”

“I don’t want to keep her at home. I was thinking I could take her to the veterinarian and then to a rehabilitation center for wild animals if necessary.”

“You’re thinking of doing that now? What about the surgery?”

Megan shrank beneath the shade of her straw hat. Her agenda had its own rhythm, different from ordinary ones that schedule appointments beforehand. In her agenda there was a decree to give immediate aid to animals in danger found along her way, in unpredictable situations. And at that moment, Megan’s agenda coincided with that of a certain Dr. Stanley: she was the animal who needed urgent care. No, the bird probably wasn’t injured. In most cases, free baby birds on the ground should be left alone. They end up flying.

Diogo looked around. He didn’t see any cats, dogs or kids. It was a neighborhood with large houses on big spreads, lazy lawns stretching out, long-legged pine trees, oaks covered with Spanish moss. The little bird was safe.

“She’s safe for now,” said Megan. “But we could get her farther away from the road. Or put her back in the nest.”

She tried to pick up the little ball of feathers, but she scared it underneath a bush. All the nests hid from invaders like Diogo’s eyes, which couldn’t locate a single one in the tangle of branches of the older trees, in the hollow trunk abandoned by a woodpecker, in the roots of an oak tree overturned by the latest hurricane.

A car was coming. The couple linked their legs to form a protective wall for the bird. The threat of the car passed.

“After the surgery we’ll come back here,” Megan decided.

They arrived at the manor house of what used to be a farm, identified on the roadside sign as Alligator Plantation. They crossed what was left of a Southern woodland domesticated by herbicides, pesticides, and undocumented Mexican workers, where proud turkeys and cranes strutted about in a constant state of alert because of the frenzy in the parking area. A new boat named Leah rested on the grass next to two imported sports cars. Up against the Roman columns of the veranda of the big house, two motorcycles, wide as refrigerators and loud with colors, shouted: A winner works here.

The decoration of the big house displayed the taste and the joie-de-vivre of the owner. In the foyer leading to the waiting room, balanced on its hind legs on a little table and dressed as a Rastafarian, the stuffed cadaver of a raccoon greeted the patients with a mock human smile that the taxidermist had tried to chisel in its mouth, torn and deformed by the actions of the hunter. Above the horrendous smile, the rigidity of the glass eyes made the motives of both the assassin and the decorator even more macabre. Next to the reception counter, an embalmed polar bear brandished teeth and claws in attack position to alarm the infirm. On the mantel, the severed head of a moose branched out. And in the middle of the room, beneath the intricate crystal chandelier, stuffed cranes and turkeys kept watch over the carcass of an African crocodile, foreshadowing the future of the fowl strolling with fear on the property grounds.

“I thought it was illegal to keep wild animals in your house,” Diogo joked with Megan. But he was the only one who was amused.

A photo gallery showed a smiling Dr. Stanley standing next to his victims. He full of vigor, haughty, firearms held erect; the victims listless, laid out on the ground, covered in blood. In their faces, the horror of death, the humiliation of the taxidermy.

“Let’s get out of here,” said Megan. “I don’t want to give money to this criminal.”

“And cancel the surgery? He’s the only specialist in Florida, Megan. Maybe the best in the South.”

Dr. Stanley was head of a commission of dermatologists for the prevention of skin cancer, and he appeared in a local TV commercial saying that in Florida the problem had reached epidemic proportions, that one fifth of Americans and one third of Caucasians would get the disease, that never before had one seen so many young people with skin cancer as today, use sunscreen and wear a hat, stay out of the sunlight between ten and four, further information at so-and-so website or consult your dermatologist. He had also removed a basal cell cancer the size of a dime from the governor’s nose, assuring journalists that the chances for a complete recovery were a hundred, ninety-eight, ninety-six percent, more or less. Among the photos of the surgeon with the fallen animals, there figured one of a smiling Dr. Stanley with the governor restored to health.

Megan observed the patients. No one was less than sixty years old. The one closest to her had dark blotches on his face. Sweet and gooey like grandmothers, the blotches turned toward her:

“And how old are you, dear?”

“I’m twenty-three,” Megan responded.

“Too young,” said the dental stains. “But Dr. Stanley will take good care of you. He’s very competent, very nice, sweetheart.”

The stains on his teeth were brown. The ones on his face had varied coloration and irregular shape: melanoma, the deadliest of the three, Megan thought to herself.

A year ago, while she was washing her face, Megan had noticed a little mole on her right eyelid. The mole grew slowly. It didn’t really hurt. But if it continued to grow it might affect her vision or make her eye look a little strange. Cosmetic surgery, no big deal, she told Dr. Kim’s nurse on the phone, health insurance doesn’t even cover it.

Dr. Kim showed up at the exam room with standard delay plus the haste to squeeze in one more fifteen-minute appointment, and just past the threshold of the door, having set her trained eye on Megan's little mole, she said unceremoniously, Oh, it looks like we have a basal cell cancer here.

"What? A cancer? That can't be," Megan groaned.

"It doesn't spread through the body, it's not fatal," Dr. Kim quickly came back. "I mean, it can spread and be fatal. But only very rarely. The chance for a complete recovery is a hundred percent. Or ninety-eight, ninety-six percent. More or less. If you have to have a cancer, the basal cell cancer is the best one for you to have."

Megan didn't have to have a cancer. She was not like "that other" category of humans, the one that has cancer. Beneath her little mole, her eye dripped.

"Let's do the biopsy. It might not be anything at all," said Dr. Kim, who needed to calm the patient down and had just about ten minutes to remove the visible part of the little tumor. And she handed her a brochure explaining the three types of skin cancer.

The truculent, predatory hands, now light and good like angels, were taking care of Megan's eyelid. Dr. Stanley was doing Mohs micrographic surgery. He was taking out the rest of the tumor in stages, examining each slice of the removed tissue under the microscope.

"This way I preserve as much healthy skin as possible and avoid disfigurement," he explained, bent over the right eye of the patient, who opened her left eye at him.

Opening an eye was good to keep thoughts in check. In the dark they would take off and run into paradoxes and fears. In the light they could breathe, gain punctuation and logic. Basal cell cancer is less serious than squamous cell cancer comma which is less serious than melanoma semi-colon if you have the first kind you're more likely to have the other two period. Megan's eye tried to catch some happy thoughts on the ceiling. Basal cell cancer doesn't generally kill, but it disfigures, and it tends to reoccur and, if it's not treated right away, it can destroy nearby nerves, cartilage, and bone period. On her forehead,

Megan felt the hot air that Dr. Stanley exhaled through his nose. That hot air took forever to get to her forehead, and when it did it was as if Dr. Stanley were not close by. Impossible to cross the void that forms between a frightened being and the rest of the universe. Excruciating pain and mortal fear belong only to those who feel them. Megan could share with Sybil or Diogo the pain of cancer or the fear of death, but only on a conceptual level. Each one of the billions of beings who suffer at the same time and die at the same time suffers and dies alone, everyday in war, in slaughterhouses, in jail cells, in cages. Her eye moved from the ceiling to the surgeon's face. Good-looking face. Thank goodness. What if it were gross? Having to look at some gross-looking guy at such a critical time would be more pathetic. Dr. Stanley was forty-something with the body of an athlete and hair. His blue eyes were fixed on Megan's eyelid, and she imagined that they could venture out to other parts of her body, given the right opportunity. His hands were soft like a puff of breath — and criminal. They cured but they also killed. Dr. Stanley was contradictory. Is there anyone who isn't? In a culture totally built on the exploitation of vulnerable beings, there seems to be a lack of ethical consistency even in the most correct humans. Dr. Stanley smiled and winked at her, and Megan's eye escaped to the wall. Her thoughts marched in formation to the ceiling. No one is pure. She, for example, advocated the abolition of the use of animals in scientific research, but she couldn't escape from the same mistaken medicine that sacrificed millions of animals in laboratories. What to do? Commit suicide? Things don't change overnight, and as long as a whole lot of people haven't learned that animals are not means to human ends, an activist worth her salt has to stick with her journey, even going lame, her good foot on the straight and narrow path, the other stuck in a crooked one. Her eye dragged back to the surgeon's face and tried it out for a little while longer. Age lightly etched the skin around his slightly annoying mouth, an annoyance like cherries that are just too sweet, almost like lipstick. At what point did those etchings cease to mark Dr. Stanley's cures and begin to mark his crimes? All human beings have their contradictions. Megan, for example, who fought for the prohibition of hunting, was now getting excited by the proximity of a good-looking hunter's face,

forgetting her boyfriend who was waiting for her in the other room and who had offered to pay for her surgery. Megan pushed her eye back against the wall with the force of remorse. Maybe Dr. Stanley wasn't contradictory, but consistent in his cruelty, violating sentient organisms with his rifle and his scalpel. Dr. Stanley, sadist in the hunt and in Mohs surgery, would purposely leave on Megan's eyelid a tad of cancer that would spread through her organism and kill her. There would be no proof of the crime, no one could do anything for her, a prisoner of war in a cold and isolated laboratory full of suffocating fear and chemical stench, where pity is not permitted, no request for help escapes, and animals only leave dead.

"Is everything OK, Megan?" asked Dr. Stanley, concerned with the tears rolling down his patient's face.

"I'm OK, Dr. Stanley. You don't have humans stuffed too, do you?"

On the way out of the clinic, Diogo gave support to a never-before-seen Megan, a depressed one. He helped her to adjust the brim of her straw hat over the bandage of the mummy-eye. He avoided her free eye, a green grape moistened with red and fixed on his face. He decided that in deference to his girlfriend's stress, he would demonstrate perfect manners, he would shout no insults at bad drivers nor would he employ names of animals to express negative thoughts.

"Now we can see if the little bird that fell has already taken off," he proposed.

The green grape lit up, the redness receded. Nothing like helping an animal to make Megan happy. Diogo felt a little jealous. Sometimes he thought that Megan liked beasts more than him. Not beasts, she would correct him. The word beast has a derogatory connotation and tends to exclude. Nonhuman animals: that's a more appropriate term, a linguistic tool to use in the current stage of the struggle, until some better sign emerges.

Megan was quite happy to see the effort Diogo was making to spare her further anxiety. He crossed paths with four classic types of barbarians in local traffic with nary a squeak. He followed ever so slowly a meek old man in his wavering

Oldsmobile as if in a funeral procession. He let pass an impatient college student fueled by testosterone and beer. He surrendered to the unconditional love of a mother parked in the middle of the street in front of her kids' school. Without making a face, he inhaled the cigarette smoke of a redneck in a pickup covered with bumper stickers against abortion and in favor of beef. Megan thanked him for his demonstrations of affection with kisses and sniffs on his neck. His hair on end, Diogo responded to his girlfriend by discreetly stroking her breasts with the back of his hand. In that goodwill exchange between lovers, in that solid proof of cooperation between true friends, Megan saw an opportunity to get something else off her chest — a liberating insight, actually — without the risk of being taken for a fanatical preacher:

“That Dr. Stanley has some nerve, to impose the barbarity of his taxidermied victims on defenseless sick people! It's just like those hosts who think they're making an excellent impression on their guests by offering them murdered animals to eat.”

For Diogo that comparison was hard to swallow, but he did so in silence. He still couldn't help feeling that his girlfriend's comments about the institutionalized exploitation of animals sounded like a personal attack. After all, of the flesh of all the *friends*, as Megan would say, that he liked to eat, so far he had only managed to trade beef and pork for vegetables. One of his three daily meals was composed entirely of plant-based foods, but he couldn't imagine the concrete possibility of having two meals of this type in the short term, let alone three in the median term. He was a closeted vegan and thought it was better not to set a date to come out of the closet. And if on one hand he admired Megan's attitude, on the other he felt relieved that she didn't speak Portuguese to be able to express her convictions in that language. The date of their trip to Brazil was drawing closer. They were going to spend the week of spring break with his family at one of their cattle and hog farms, located inland in the state of São Paulo. The Bezerra Leitão family, famous throughout the region for putting on rodeos and monumental barbecues, were planning to celebrate Diogo's birthday then. The airplane tickets, a gift from Mrs. Marcela, his mother, would be arranged as soon

as Megan agreed to behave diplomatically and accept the invitation.

Diogo applied the brakes to avoid hitting an obese woman who had decided to cross the road far from the crosswalk. You cracker pig, you killer whale, you dairy cow, elephant, hippopotamus, blubber ball, the repertoire of banned abusive language vociferated in his head. He bit his tongue, which was raring to pounce. He was determined not to see Megan score another point on that damned notepad and take another dollar from him.

Megan rewarded his tolerance with another kiss. More comfortable with Diogo's granting of neutral territory, she continued:

"It doesn't ever occur to people like Dr. Stanley that there are others with an aversion to hunting and dishes made with dead animals."

"Well, many people like them, Megan!" a startled Diogo let slip from his lips. He felt his face turn red. "There are many people with cancer who like the display of animals hunted by Dr. Stanley. And there are many dinner guests who like the meat served by the hosts you refer to. The truth is that most people like to eat dead animals, a lot."

"Tastes can change!" Megan shot back, a little loudly. "And the pain of defenseless beings is much more relevant than the mere pleasure of self-indulgent people!"

"Pass me the notepad!" said Diogo, pulling over. "Pass me the notepad, I want to record a point for me! Your preaching is a real bother."

"Don't worry, I'll score your point," she sulked. "Let's go check on that little bird before it's too late."

Diogo got back on the road. He felt a little guilty. Not even cancer could make him stop challenging the noble determination of his beloved to end the suffering and death caused by human arrogance. He wasn't a bad guy. So why did he always quarrel with Megan, such a sweet thing? Why did he waste time defending a world that was already so solidly

established? It would be smarter to support changing things that were wrong.

Megan added up the points in the notepad. Diogo was losing. There was a greater number of comments on his part that made less of animals because of their species, speciesist comments, than there were attempts to preach veganism on her part. Preach? She wondered how long simply expressing her ideas would be considered pamphleteering. How long would the defense of animals be considered more illicit than cruelty to animals? How long would vegans be considered extreme, and humans who exploited and killed animals, sensible? She asked herself once again why she had decided against a flight toward love at the side of River, who was an activist too, and why she had continued her journey on foot, limping between the right way and the mire of Diogo. One answer was always obvious, like a slap in the face: when he was still going with her, River had flirted with Sybil. But there were other answers, those that transpired from analogies, slow slaps like massages lightly sizzling instead of popping. Megan rethought the analogy between a mire and her courtship with Diogo. It was a little unfair. Diogo gave her shelter, like a broad and sturdy stonewall. But would the translucent River, the partner in creative practical applications of revolutionary theory, ever be capable of offering to pay for a surgery? She bet not. And River was ready to go, he precipitated astounding newness and perfection. Diogo, in his primitivism of stone and shadows, in his musty freshness, submitted to Megan's influence to reinvent himself. Megan really wanted that mire that little by little was being dredged and made landfill.

Diogo stroked his girlfriend's knee and tried to attract her eyes to his. Megan's only eye was still stuck on the notepad. Diogo hoped he was really in the hole. Ten, maybe twelve dollars that he would offer to pay with interest, as the best way to say he was sorry and make up with his girlfriend. Megan would be happy. That month she'd be able to donate fifteen dollars to the group that trapped feral cats to sterilize them, helping to prevent overpopulation, and let them go when they had recovered.

"How much do I owe you, honey?" he asked sweetly.

“You owe me twenty dollars.”

Diogo’s hand sprung off her knee and grabbed the steering wheel. His voice shook as they went over a speed bump:

“Twenty? No way! You must have made a mistake.”

Megan’s numbers were never wrong. That American woman was a computer. Could she be stealing?

“Listen here, honey,” Diogo continued, his face heated up half way out of the window in search of fresh air and a bad driver to cuss out. “I think it’d be better for us to add another column next to the points column. A column called memo, where we’ll note carefully the date and the rationale for each point. Write it all down.”

“Why not? Seems fair,” she said, pretending to be distracted by the application of another layer of sunscreen on her face and hands. For pride, to be polite, or for lack of patience, or maybe for a combination of the three, she preferred not to criticize one more time Diogo’s hereditary fear. He was going to inherit one-fourth of the estate of Mr. and Mrs. Bezerra Leitão, when the day came. But the fear of losing wealth — the ancestral fear of rich property owners, made ever stronger from one generation to the next by the process of selective breeding — was something Diogo had received as an advance, in his mother’s womb. He and fear came into the world together, fear his invisible twin. They grew up together and now they were becoming mature, inseparable. Be wary of friends and girlfriends, fear whispered to him, They want to usurp the wealth accumulated by the Bezerra Leitão family. Beware of Megan, she wants to steal a few stupid dollars from you.

Diogo woke up his girlfriend’s knee with light taps. Somewhat clumsily, he looked for vestiges of resentment in her features. He found a smile as wide as a bandage on an eye would permit. He parked, tamely, near the spot where the little bird had fallen. He drew his girlfriend’s chin toward his lips. The kiss was smeared with perfumed sunblock. Diogo grimaced and withdrew his face from Megan:

“Tastes bad, honey. Next time use an edible sunscreen.”

Megan didn't even know if they had already invented an edible protective lotion. She did know that she would never again be able to receive the light of day on her skin without protection. Sunscreen, water, air, food and hats: these were her basic necessities. Until she could find an edible sunscreen, she wouldn't be able to kiss Diogo on the mouth, outside during the day. From the glove compartment she retrieved the binoculars she used for birdwatching in the park and swamps. She lifted them to her eyes but bumped the bandage, so she handed them to Diogo.

"I can barely see anything from here," he said, twisted up, the binoculars two protruding eyes. "You go look for the bird, you're better with one eye than me with four."

Megan silently left the precarious observatory. The sunny chill of the Florida winter played in her eye and burnt the grass. Megan lowered the brim of her hat. Under the bush where the bird had hidden earlier, she found only dry grass. She stepped softly on some sycamore leaves fallen on the native carpet of low-lying winter plants. She crossed a wire fence and a Mesozoic fantasy of ferns and palms. She tangled with azaleas and ligustrums. Her eye was drawn to a mushroom. She almost lost her hat to a dry crape myrtle branch. She stepped on some poop, of a big dog, and shattered the silence with a shout of disgust, Yuk! Something startled in her path, shook itself, and scrambled beneath a magnolia. The little bird. The little bird, Diogo!, she wanted to shout. But she couldn't. She had to stay still until the bird calmed down. Better yet, she'd stay there until the bird took flight. Sybil would do the same thing in her place. Sybil and she were so much alike, maybe even in the will to be together. The little bird put her feathers on end and chirped a brief tune. Megan held her breath to hear it better. Diogo would be able to tell what key it was in. Maybe C or D, do or re, just like Sybil's companions Do and Re, who got so excited when they heard wind instruments. The little bird's song could help identify what species she was. What were her habits? Native or exotic? Male or female? Just in case, Megan referred to the bird in the feminine. Was she really not hurt? Megan was worried, she was an animal advocate who knew very little about animals. Wasn't it enough to respect them? She sat down on a log, a fallen pine, picked a twig

off the ground and began to scrape out the dog poop from the grooves of her anatomical walking shoe. Man, did that stink! Her eye went back and forth from the sole of her shoe to the little bird, from the little bird to the soiled sole. She imagined how disgusted Diogo would be when he saw her come back to the car: a one-eyed ragdoll of a woman smelling of shit, breeding cancer, her skin eternally goopy, her mouth unkissable in the light of day. I deserve more than that, he would conclude. Megan covered the dirty twig with leaves and fixed her gaze on the little bird. The bird would scare off her fear of abandonment by flapping her wings.

Diogo had missed his morning classes to take his girlfriend to the clinic. He was beginning to feel pangs of hunger, and if Megan didn't come back soon he'd have to choose between lunch and his first afternoon class. He looked for her one last time with the binoculars and put them back in the glove compartment. He saw the notepad. He decided to check the score she had been keeping. The result was twenty-five. He counted twice more. Twenty-five on the nose. Diogo owed her five dollars more than she had charged.

Birds are born to fly, Megan had been taught when she was a girl. Now she was musing that birds aren't born to fly but to try to learn to fly. She toyed with composing these and other aphorisms with teetering logic until the bird jumped and fell, tottering. Megan's heart almost leapt. On the ground the little bird was palpitating. How many times had she fallen since leaving the nest? How many times had she jumped between the sidewalk and the field of ferns? Birds are born to try to free themselves from branches and from the ground. The little bird jumped one last time, fell again, then managed to take off and navigate the ways of the wind.

Diogo had just gotten out of the car to go look for Megan when she emerged from the modest jungle of ferns. She hastily hopped over the wire fence and skipped toward him. She held her hat to her head with one hand and rubbed one foot on the carpet of plants. Beneath the straw brim, she was a lamplight.

"I saw the bird fly!" she shouted, panting. "She wasn't hurt. Learning to fly is a tough job!"

A tad envious of having missed the flight of the baby bird, Diogo opened his arms to the joyous thrust of his beloved. Her face reflected the sun in the shiny lotion:

“Too bad you didn’t see it.”

He held her against his chest and exaggerated a laugh, not to leave any doubt about his satisfaction with what had happened. He suggested a commemorative lunch at her favorite Thai restaurant, which was close by. He even tried to kiss her on the mouth, but she turned her face to the side and took the kiss on her ear. Before getting into the car, she took off her soiled shoe and said that she had to make a stop at home to get a clean pair. She held the dirty shoe, sole up, the whole way home.

“The one to blame for that smelly crap on your shoes,” said Diogo after a little while, his voice slightly off-key in a show of good will, “is not the dog, but his guardian, who neglected to pick up the poop and put it in a plastic bag.”

Megan caressed his neck with the tip of her nose, thankful for the fairness of his comment. A few months ago, had he been in a similar situation involving stepping on shit, Diogo would have made an offensive remark about animal advocates since they insisted, as far as he could tell, on a dog’s right to shit exactly where humans are going to walk. Diogo continued:

“Actually, if I had said in Portuguese what I just said in English, I would have used sexist language. That’s because, in my language when I refer to humans and nonhumans whose gender I don’t know, I use words in the masculine case. In Portuguese, to be fair linguistically to the two genders, I would have to say ‘*a culpada ou o culpado*’ for that smelly crap on your shoes is not *a cadela*, the bitch, *ou o cachorro*, or the male dog, but his or her *guardiã ou guardião*, who didn’t pick up the poop and put it in a plastic bag...’ Maybe you should score a few points in the notepad for my macho demonstrations too, honey.”

He chuckled. Megan soon did so too, not really knowing why. Playing around with politically correct things wasn’t so funny in the opinion of this activist. Much less in Portuguese, which was Greek to her. But in her estimation, that observation of Diogo’s represented considerable progress, compared to his

speciesist remarks. Diogo was getting one foot out of the mire and giving it a try, muddy and all, on the clean path.

“Speaking of scoring points,” he purred, overflowing with affection, “thanks for wanting to charge me five dollars less than I owe you.”

“You checked...”

“Three times. You’re so generous.”

“I didn’t want you to get irritated. You’re always fighting with me.”

“Sorry, baby. I’m really not very delicate. Sometimes I wonder if I deserve a cool girl like you. I try to be worthy. And I’ll make more effort.”

One corner of Megan’s mouth smiled at Diogo’s tenderness. The other one stopped halfway, held back by the bandage and by her hurt feelings. She and Diogo had been going together for two years and he still wasn’t completely convinced of her honesty.

Thai restaurants were sprouting up everywhere in the country, they were inexpensive and offered some vegan dishes. Megan found their food delicious. On that occasion, Diogo ordered the same thing she did. The appetizer was steamed whole-wheat flour dumplings stuffed with cilantro and chives. The main dish, curry tofu and vegetables in coconut milk. Dessert was similar to a Brazilian sweet-corn pudding, but made of sweet sticky rice filled with a tiny slice of banana and wrapped in a banana leaf. Diogo left the restaurant satisfied. The sweet fragrance of the rice pudding and the coconut milk spread inside his head, sharpening his ideas. It had been a perfect meal. Were not the four food groups that nutritionists assure us are necessary and sufficient for good human health all there? Cereals, vegetables, legumes — represented on this occasion by the soy in the tofu — and even fruits, even if only a slim slice of banana. Megan seemed to be so contented. Diogo’s conscience rocked him between felicity and ecstasy. Not to mar the delicate experience, he refrained from using a toothpick while he was driving.

“Pay attention, honey,” he said solemnly. “I promise something to the both of us. I’m going to stop consuming everything that comes from animals. From this point on, I’m vegan, just like you.”

Megan loved hearing that. If he kept his promise, just during meals Diogo would spare from servitude and death the equivalent of at least a hundred and fifty animals the size of a chicken every year. And there would be a little bit more with his decision not to buy any more wool or silk clothes, leather shoes, soaps with animal ingredients or tested on animals, tickets to zoos or films with trained nonhumans, and so many other iniquities. Getting medicine with no ingredients tested on animals would be tough. Even more difficult, though, would be for Diogo even to need medicine once on his new diet. His initiative called for another commemoration. If the couple lived in San Francisco, Megan would opt for a banquet at the vegan restaurant Millennium, chosen as one of the best in the United States by a gastronomical arts magazine in France. But, as the pair lived in the remote Weekeewawkeeville, Florida, she herself would prepare the dinner, following recipes in a book authored by the head chef of the renowned California establishment.

Diogo started feeling hungry an hour and a half after lunching at the Thai place. A meal without meat is an incomplete meal, creaked the old habit in his stomach. He didn’t manage to pay much attention in his class on Conservation of Forest Resources, and even less in the seminar Gender, Rural-Urban Migration and Land-Use Change in Acre. His uneasiness increased during the lecture Amazon Agri-silviculture and Pisciculture: Land- and Water-Use Systems, Healthier and More Sustainable, or Not?, given by a guest lecturer from Peru in the School of Forestry. While the Peruvian environmentalist emphasized the pollution that could come with the intensive farming of fishes like *tambaqui*, *pacu* and *matrinxã*, which investors and the Brazilian government were planning to implant in the Amazon, Diogo dreamt, full of remorse, about the diverse ways those animals could be prepared as meals, be it by a river-bank Indian, a cosmopolitan chef, or even by Megan, if Megan didn’t believe that fish have the right not to be used as human resources. And if Diogo felt weak, almost dizzy, with the

nightmare of hunger, he felt even worse with the carnivorous dreams that were trying to sabotage his recently affirmed veganism. Cereals, vegetables, fruits and legumes, he repeated to himself, anxious to eliminate dead fish from his imaginary dish of pleasures, eager to find in the environmentalist's lecture inspiration to fancy gastronomical delights without a nervous system or a brain. The market potential of *Theobroma grandiflorum*, or *cupuaçu*, a very tasty fruit, the Peruvian was saying, is substantial, and Diogo salivated, managing for a few moments to immerse himself in the redemption of guilt-free vegetable dreams. The fruit is produced in Acre, Rondônia, Pará and Amazonas. In the rain forest, the *cupuaçu* tree is twenty meters tall; on a farm, grown rationally, it reaches eight. Twenty in the forest, eight on the farm, Acre, Rondônia, Diogo made an effort to retain, but his brain let the information get away, distracted by the growls and complaints of his stomach. Deaf to these appeals, the speaker continued his exposition with the loquacity of those without hunger. A Japanese company registered *cupuaçu* as a food brand and patented the manufacturing process of chocolate made with the fruit; some suspect that the company stole the patent of that chocolate from the Brazilian environmental agency. Japs sons of bitches, Diogo thought, wasn't it enough for them to have the world's best food, sushi and sashimi? They were probably already developing in the Amazon a globalized riverbank gastronomy, a fusion cuisine combining Japanese culinary arts and the local. Ah, the enormous economic potential of sashimi of *cará*, *jamuqui* and *curimatã*, Diogo fantasized, without noticing that he was getting up from his chair. In a jiffy, he was out of the room, attracted by the smell of food wafting from the closest restaurant. The potential for juices, sorbets and preserves of *camu-camu*, the Peruvian speaker went on, farther and farther away. The potential for *pupunha* hearts of palm. The *açaí*, and the Brazil nut.

On the wall of the restaurant, a fat and sweaty clock was nodding off five o'clock. The establishment was full of students and other customers who, for a wide variety of reasons, are willing to trade good health for fast, cheap and rudimentary service. Diogo sat down in the no-smoking section, where the smoke released by those who indulged arrived thinned out. The

kitchen emitted a thick steam, escorted by a noise fest of motors and clanking, to impregnate his skin, clothing and hair with the odor of over-used cooking oil. He investigated the sticky menu looking for vegan options and found only two. He decided to get both: an order of French fries and no-mayo cole slaw. When the waitress came over, he heard himself order:

“A cold beer and fried chicken.”

The waitress took his menu and went off. Diogo looked at his empty hands. He could raise one of them to beckon her back over; he would cancel the chicken and order the French fries and cole slaw. But his hands continued as they were. The waitress brought the bottle of beer and a glass, and Diogo's hands put themselves to work right away. Before his mouth could articulate a request to change his order, they capped it with the glass. Affected by the alcohol, his stomach stopped crying and allowed him to hear Megan, who was emerging from a forbidden corner of his memory to do some of her damned consciousness-raising preaching. Fried chicken is the bodies of creatures capable of feeling, socializing and learning, treated like objects. The merchants of their bodies mutilate their beaks without anesthesia and raise them in overpopulated, overheated, dark and excrement-filthy barns with blinding and suffocating emanations. They bombard them with antibiotics and double their weight with hormones. Many can't even stand up. A lot have heart attacks. But lucky is the chicken that dies in the barn and avoids the horror of being transported in overloaded trucks, in extreme temperatures, to be hung by the leg over a conveyor belt toward the impassive blades of the slaughterhouse.

Diogo decided to cancel the fried chicken and he called the waitress. From a distance, she signaled to him to wait a bit and went into the kitchen. Seconds later, she came out with the plate of chopped and crunchy creatures that he had chosen to savor.

He got ready to ask for the check and leave without eating. But the steaming golden fried pieces on the plate before him did not resemble the fowl that hangs by its legs in the slaughterhouse and struggles, terrified, against death. The chicken on his plate had arrived dead at the restaurant and it

wasn't his fault. Diogo was incapable of killing a fly. He loved animals. He'd taken in seven cats and three dogs at home, he treated them like royalty and he'd helped to give them names in homage to the great talents of humanity listed on the Internet as vegetarians. He even had a live-in girlfriend who was an animal rights activist, and he almost missed class just to wait for her to see a little bird take off from the ground. The chicken in front of him had been dead for days. It would be a waste not to eat it.

He sank his teeth into the first piece and began to chew. He felt the burnt cooking oil of the frying pan and the pure cholesterol of the bird's skin inundate his mouth and lubricate his throat to aid the passing of the masticated pulp. He reflected on his gastronomical experience. The food might be saturated with oppression, bad cholesterol, hormones, antibiotics and carcinogenic substances, but indeed it was delicious. He chewed one more piece and then another.

He hadn't stopped being vegan, he assured himself. This was an exception, a special occasion in which a serving of fried chicken had put itself in front of him, for some special reason, if not by pure chance. He'd never again be faced with a similar situation. One by one, the pieces of bird disappeared from the oil-drenched plate, where a limp slice of lemon was drowning. With repeated gulps of beer, Diogo washed down the flesh stuck in his esophagus and with a toothpick he removed strands left in his teeth. He would not let Megan make him feel like a criminal. He would not allow her to abuse him psychologically. He wasn't a pervert, a psychopath who brutalizes innocent beings for his own selfish pleasure. He knew what he was doing. That was his last meal made of beings capable of feeling pain and with an interest in staying alive. And, things being that way, he'd have seconds. One for the road. His hand shot up to call the waitress over.

As he was waiting for his order, he called Megan:

"Hey babe, how are you doing?"

"I'm a little sleepy because of the painkiller."

"Then go rest, honey. No need to cook. Let's postpone our dinner until you're all better. The Thai lunch was so nutritious that I'm not really hungry."

Re

With their eyes closed, they were twelve shadows. With their eyes open, they were twelve dark figures leaking green light. During the day, those twelve pairs of eyes moved about the house in all rhythms and directions, conducted like Japanese puppets by the black-robed bodies. At night, they sparkled going after lures that the humans would strew around the room just to see pairs of them in motion, in firefly flights, free of the bodies that melted into the darkness. In the morning, just before feeding time, the black bodies painted musical notes in the parallel lines of the kitchen, tails hanging from the surfaces as straight as in a score. Do and Re almost always sat on the floor and on the first step. Mi stayed on the second step and Fa, in the chair. So, La and Ti liked to vary their spots and sometimes usurped others' places. Treble Clef, Quaver and Bass Clef preferred on top of the cupboard and the freezer, not to be bothered. And the two still nameless ones would stay on the washer and dryer. As soon as food was served, their voices would vibrate like violins, drum rolls and whistles and they would leap toward their bowls, like those little bouncing balls on the screen in old movies that would teach viewers to sing a song.

Throughout the rest of the house, rooms without pictures on the wall or carpets on the floor, there were twelve convex shaded lamps always on, fastened to tables and aimed at twelve patchwork cushions that Sybil, Megan's mother, had had made with colorful old scraps. Next to each lamp, a plastic vase with a harmless plant trying to add a taste of forest to that home for felines and primates.

"There's no room here for knick-knacks and fragile art objects," informed Megan's mother. "Black cats under lamps next to plants are prettier compositions than a cemetery of sculptures broken by awkward leaps and games of hide-and-seek."

Sybil only had older furniture, some inherited and some from antique fairs. She only purchased second-hand clothing, and

only when really necessary. Megan had told Diogo that her mother liked to live with the minimum so she could dedicate maximum time to the pleasures and duties that were truly worthwhile, without wasting natural resources or adding to the pollution of the planet. A good home, in her opinion, was a combination of practicality, comfort, respect for the environment and conditions for the free expression of all residents. It shouldn't have objects from the outside, with purely aesthetic function, but rather forms of art that flowed naturally from within, from and with the interaction of those four factors. Thus, her furniture and bed linen were pieces of process art (or art in constant transformation, as opposed to the finished artistic product) made by cat-scratchings in supports as diverse as tables, wardrobes, sofas, dressers, tablecloths and bedspreads. Those pieces comprised a set of organic abstractions in which one could observe how the backdrop of a centennial hand-woven lace tablecloth and diverse pulled-out threads enter into dialogue, the tension between the various textures obtained from liberating perforations and aleatory scorings in a cherry-wood dresser from two centuries ago, and the impetus of the gesture that, motivated by the need to stretch the muscles, to demonstrate contentment, to mark territory or dispose of old claws, engraves a whole spectrum of aesthetic possibilities on the surface of cardboard cat scratchers sprinkled with catnip or a 1900 mahogany Edwardian table. If asked to situate those works in an artistic trend, a critic would perhaps choose abstract expressionism, not without running the risk of being guided by anthropocentric thought.

Bob, Sybil's new partner, found it painful to see her allow a gang of cats to scratch up her precious furniture and to tear up her rare pieces of cloth, all for her notion that the high value of the supports raised even higher the quality of the artists who work with said supports and of the works carried out on them. But he didn't get involved in that issue. He preferred to remain absorbed in his own artistic specialty, the culinary arts. He expressed his talent at the sink, the oven and the stove. The kitchen was his studio, gallery and space of intervention. For a gastronomist married to a feminist, it was a pretty good deal.

"I don't set foot in the kitchen," said Sybil. "I'm very busy."