

## At the Foot of the Emerald Bed

The fluorescent lamps reflected harsh, white light off the grease on my keyboard. Below and to the left of the rickety chair I was sitting on, there was a door that appeared to have been through multiple termite infestations, and to my side was the old hospital bed where my grandfather slept. Among his laboured breaths were the horns of the arrogant drivers that occupied Sao Paulo sounded from outside. The most intolerable part of that room, though, was the sickly sweet stench that grew every day I sat in that chair.

As the harsh sound of high heels clacking in the hallway intensified, the calm in the room faded. The door was nearly ejected from its hinges.

“Did you feed him the vitamins?” my aunt asked accusingly.

“What vitamins?”

“Don’t get smart with me, Lucca. You just don’t care about him.” I stared at her in disbelief, expecting an explanation. “Are you going to apologise or what?” she asked with her eyebrows furrowed.

I hadn’t even noticed my mother leaning on the doorframe, listening to my aunt berating me. She spoke. “Alexandra, who was here watching over father all night?” my aunt turned away from me to face her sister, lost for words. “It was Lucca,” my mother continued. “Now, we’re going to take this argument outside so father can sleep.”

My mother grabbed my aunt’s arm and dragged her into the hallway. She closed the door behind her. Soon, the hushed voices outside joined the ranks of the flickering lights and the obnoxious drivers within the decaying inner city.

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I heard the rumbling of the rusty lift stop before the door to my decrepit apartment opened. The late autumn afternoon sun shone through the windows at the end of the hallway, reflecting off the water damaged walls before casting a silhouette on the two figures standing before us. One that had the figure of my mother stood with a man I didn't recognise. He was crooked—the bones in his arms and legs appeared as if there had never been any skin or muscle there. If it weren't for the hospital gown he was wearing, I guarantee I would have been able to distinguish individual ribs. He stumbled towards my sister and me, leaning on my mother for support.

Colour slowly seeped into their figures as my eyes adjusted to the lighting. Black spots that didn't appear to be freckles or moles littered his sickly yellow skin. The hair on his arms and legs appeared patchy and thin. He shuffled forward and put his hand on top of my head.

“Grandpa!” yelled my sister in excitement. She grabbed his arm and dragged him into the guest room as fast as his frail legs would allow – he didn't have the strength to resist. I watched as she guided him to his bed while the rickety lightbulb in the middle of the room swung perpetually from its place in the ceiling. The door shut behind her.

The whistling of the kettle from the kitchen grew into a screech. The light from the candles on the mantelpiece intensified. The floor got closer and then farther away.

*That was my grandfather?*

Marisa, my great aunt, opened her door for the first time in days. The smell of cat shit and rot emanated from within. She staggered towards my mother. “Why did you bring him here to die?” she asked.

I left before the yelling started again, running into my room, past my bed, into the bathroom, and behind the curtains to the shower. The cold tiles of the bathroom floor pressed

against my legs as tears flowed from my eyes. I heard a fight breaking loose from beyond my bedroom door. I felt nothing.

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The plate of food on my nightstand grew colder by the minute. The streetlamps outside illuminated the pages of my book. My door opened, breaking my immersion. “Hey, mum.”

My mother ignored my greeting. She looked like she had aged ten years in the two weeks since we came to Brazil to assist with my grandfather’s cancer treatment. “Lucca, eat your food.” My stomach rumbled. She left the room.

I flushed my dinner down the toilet. I couldn’t eat it.

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The late afternoon light bore into my eyes as I awoke. My sister’s bed had been vacant for hours. She had better things to do than lounge around, waiting for the inevitable to happen. I looked at my body as I lifted the covers; I could count each of my ribs.

I heaved myself off my bed using the little muscle I had left and walked to the kitchen. My family was preoccupied with creating a meal that my deteriorating grandfather would be able to stomach so I opened the pantry door and examined the cereal section for some quick food. I saw row after row cereal boxes. None of it was even remotely appealing so I walked back to my room with an empty stomach.

“Lucca, come see your grandfather,” my mum barged through the door. I went without hesitation.

I immediately felt the draft, accompanied by the eternally swinging lightbulb that scattered light throughout my grandfather’s room. His skin became more like the emerald bed he laid on every day. Surrounding him was nearly his entire extended family, minus my aunt and her

husband; they were too busy having a fancy steak dinner. The sickly sweet stench was so pungent now that it made me want to gag when I approached the foot of his bed. His breathing was heavy and unstable—every inhale took a toll on his body. His sister Marisa sat at the edge of his bed, now indifferent to any arguments they had in the past, and held his hand tight as tears streamed down her face.

My grandfather stopped breathing.

My great aunt turned to face me with a look conveying conflicting emotions: anguish, acceptance, regret, and many more I couldn't begin to explain. My grandfather's best friend fainted on his feet. As he fell, my mother, who was luckily standing by, dove for the splintered wood floor under him to keep him from injuring himself, but hurt herself in the process. My sister started sobbing, and I finally threw up the only thing that remained from my stomach—bile, as the light bulb continued to swing and the birds continued to chirp outside on that sunny autumn afternoon.

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The seat belt was fastened over my brand new black suit. Despite the appearance of my clothing, the body it covered was filthy. My hair was messy, my face was oily, and my breath was intolerable. The rest of my family matched me in composure and silence. The sun shone outside as we drove home from the funeral.

“What was the smell in grandpa's room?” I asked.

My mother immediately started sobbing. She knew what I was talking about. I shifted my eyes towards my window where I saw a green car drive past us.

“When will we see the rest of the family again?”

“We won't.” My mother wiped her eyes.

“It was the smell of death, Lucca.” she finally responded.

I took a bite of the granola bar that had been sitting in my lap for the last fifteen minutes and reclined my chair until I faced the grey fabric of the car’s ceiling. It was undamaged by water and mould.

I closed my eyes and finally, I rested.