

Doña Mabel, Unpublished manuscript, © Jean-Paul Martinon, 1999.

10 November 1969

My dearest Peter,

I'll be dead by the time you read these lines. Your family's solicitor will have given you this letter on your thirtieth birthday. I hope this is indeed the case. Why did I ask him to wait eleven years? Because it seems to me that certain things can only be understood at a certain age, and thirty years of age seems to be the right time in life for getting this kind of letter. Why didn't I simply give this letter to your parents, you will no doubt ask yourself? Well, as you will see later on, I simply do not trust them.

Peter, if I write to you, it is because I see in you someone of my ilk. Oh I don't pretend to be an example or that you and I are exceptional in any way. No. However, the little I know of you reminds me of my youth. Take this morning, for example, when you were by yourself in your parent's garden. You seemed so absorbed by your own thoughts that you reminded me of my own adolescence in Icarahy Niterói, near Rio de Janeiro. Many years have passed since. I was then embarking on this odd thing we call life, full of hope and dreams. Don't we all start the same? I bet you were also full of hopes and dreams on this sunny spring morning in your parent's garden in Sao Paulo. And this is the reason I decided to write you this letter. My aim is only to warn you of the dangers that playing games can often lead to, even later on in life. I didn't see the consequences of these games only much later in life. Perhaps you will have by the time you read this letter, but perhaps not. If the latter is true, then hopefully this letter will help you before it's too late.

I know, I'm making many assumptions, but what can I do? I'm too old to change. My projections are perhaps only fantasies. But I will nonetheless pray that, in any case, you will indulge me in assuming these similarities between us. I know, of course, that some of my assumptions are nonetheless true. I know, for example, the kind of mental image you must have of me. Your parents, no doubt, painted a very dark picture of your grandmother. This letter is intended to redress the picture so to speak; to give you another image of Doña Mabel—a kind of self-portrait, if you will. You will then have the choice: either the image that your parents will have given you or the one that I am making here for you. Which one will you choose? I have no idea and to some extent I don't care because my aim is not to embellish my life or to pretend that what happened didn't happen. I think I'm wise enough to know that editing the bad out of one's life is pointless. I'm no saint; I'm the first one to admit it and this letter, no doubt, will only confirm it. But in making your choice, you will at least be able to make a sound judgment on the reasons that led me to live my life in the way I did.

First of all, I'm not ending well. I have now reached the grand old age of 81 and I can't seem to be able to go through the day without the help of a bottle of gin. I know it's not a glorious admission. So how did I arrive at this recurring state of

intoxication and why does it help me, day after day, to heal the emotional pain that assails me every morning? This is what I want to explain to you. I also want to explain how I see our family. I do not pretend to tell “the truth” about our family. No. I only want to give you my version of the story of our family. I won’t tell you a long history as such, only the crucial things that matter to me, that made me who I am. I was lucky enough (or perhaps unfortunate enough...) to be quite clearheaded from an early start. This perhaps explains the reason why, contrary to my brother and sister, I ended up somewhat a recluse, unable to cope with the demands of the world. Clear visions always shatter life’s delusions. I realize that this conscious reclusion was perhaps my biggest mistake. But without a proper education and above all, without the emotional support of a caring family, how could I have done otherwise? So if at any time, you feel the need to avoid other people and retire from the world, think of your grandmother, this old lady who never had any moral support. Hopefully, this thought will help you face the world, valiant and strong.

All this, I’m sure, must seem very strange to you. Hopefully, you will appreciate my intentions once you’ve finished reading this letter.

Peter, I’m approaching the end of my life, you are at the zenith of yours; so listen to me, let me tell you a little about your grandmother.

The day your great-grandfather died was the single most important day of my youth. As I said earlier, we then lived in the small town of Icarahy Niterói, near Rio de Janeiro. It was a hot and humid summer day. The sea breeze that swept the coast on this somber 28 of December 1897 brought little respite. I can still remember my father’s bedroom, darkened with four tall freestanding candlesticks surrounding his large bed. My mother was kneeling on the floor facing him, praying. I understood then and there what death meant. It wasn’t a passage into oblivion and it wasn’t the negation of life. No, death didn’t concern the one passing. Death was about the ones left behind. Death meant mourning, the sorrow of the ones still alive. It also meant scrambling for the deceased’s last possessions, dealing with official men and women suddenly in charge of what was until then private and confidential, and showing the right amount of mournful decorum so as to comply with social norms and etiquette. It was a sad moment, but for all the wrong reasons because the management of our grief was much more important than the remembrance of my father passing away.

I particularly remember the family reunion that took place the day following his burial. We were all gathered in the living room. The heat that day was particularly unbearable. We were all fidgeting with our ice-cold drinks, trying to catch the feeble breeze coming from the ceiling fan. The women were the lucky ones: we all had our own “ventilador da mão” and our dresses were loose enough to deal with the heat more or less comfortably. The men, by contrast, were forced to wear black suits. Besides the ineffective ceiling fan, their only source of cold was the lemonade they were clutching in their hands. We all sat there in silence, not knowing exactly what to expect. Suddenly the family solicitor turned up with my mother looking as if she had just seen a ghost. They

sat without saying a word. It was clear that they were waiting for Raymundo, the house servant, to bring them their own glasses of lemonade. We all waited. Raymundo finally arrived with the drinks. Once he was out of the door, my mother began telling us how sad she was to see us all in such unhappy circumstances and proceeded to introduce the solicitor. Once he cleared his throat, he said:

—Boa tarde... I have the unfortunate duty of explaining the situation your family finds itself after the tragic death of...

He went on and on about my father, his life, his work, his achievements, his kindness to others, etc. I knew it was all good form and nothing he said had any truth to it. I guess it was a necessary formality. However, although I can't speak for everyone in that room on that day, I'm pretty sure we all knew that behind the tall tale of virtues, the news weren't good. To put it in a nutshell, the family was ruined. The most devastating aspect of the solicitor's long-winded tale was the fact that it was no longer possible to keep the cane plantation that had been the pride and joy of your great-grandfather. It had to go to pay for the family's mounting debts. Everyone that day was devastated, but not at the thought of losing the plantation, but at the idea of suddenly no longer being able to live rent-free with all expenses paid. The sale of the cane plantation meant we all had to find other ways of living. I realized then and there what the news of the passing of your great-grandfather meant not only for me, but also for our way of life.

You see, things were very different in those days. A cane plantation in Brazil at the turn of the century meant having a family of slaves living under the same roof. "Slaves" is obviously the wrong word because, as I am sure you know, slavery was abolished in Brazil the year I was born (1888), so the people we employed weren't actually slaves, but "employees." However, the habit of thinking of them as slaves remained because, after all, they were the descendants of the slaves we used to own before 1888. Of course, as employees, they were free to leave and do as they please. The problem was that there wasn't much else they could do. Looking after a cane plantation was the only thing they knew and the prospects in town for illiterate people weren't great. And so they stayed on. They lived in the small wooden shack at the end of the property and we lived in the large colonial mansion at the front. They did everything for us, looking after the cane plantation, cleaning the house, tending the garden, doing the laundry, shopping, etc. With the sale of the plantation, all this had to go. Your great-grandfather's death effectively brought the end of slavery finally home.

I'll never forget the day the property was sold to a large cane manufacturer from Rio. We were all there standing on the porch looking bewildered at the arrival of men in grey suits with their teams of experts measuring the size of the plantation, testing the soil, verifying the quality of the crop, and dismissing the tools we used. A few days later, the tractors, sprayers, and harvesters arrived and what we called home suddenly became another world, mechanized, automatized, alien. With a fence now erected between the fields and the house, our old world was suddenly gone. If I am honest, all this didn't bother me much. I

always thought that the use of slaves in agriculture could not go on in the way it had since the abolition of slavery. The demand was too high and our response was too slow and too antiquated. What bothered me most was the way we dismissed the family that worked for us. My mother decided that it was best if they left at once, that it wasn't necessary to drag this on for longer than necessary. So she called them and told them their services weren't needed any longer and that they had to pack their bags and leave before the end of the day. I'll never forget the look of contempt they gave us. Their family had worked for us for over three generations and there we were, dismissing them overnight without a word of thanks. Slave owners we remained in spirit even though the world was changing and we were on the losing end.

I guess it was the same for many other plantations in Brazil at the time, so it wasn't all that unusual after all. For me, it was the departure of Oligaria that affected me most. Peter, do you recall Oligaria? You will probably remember her as the silent and hardworking old lady always dressed in white who, with infinite patience, looked after me in my old age. Well, Oligaria came from this family that your great-grandmother dismissed on that summer day of 1897. We were both born the year slavery was abolished. She and I grew up together and because her family was no longer our possession, we were given the same governess and were allowed to play together. Oh, you should have seen us! We were inseparable. Although, we were told every night to each return to our own respective homes, we used to sneak out after everyone had gone to bed and meet in that little hut your great-grandfather had built for us in the orchard. There, we would spend many hours contemplating the night sky or enacting the stories we read in the children books we were given. In our world, princesses didn't end up with princes and fairylands were somehow always devastated by fairy-eating dragons... We laughed much and were also much reprimanded on not waking up every morning in our respective beds.

All that came crashing that fateful day when Oligaria and her family left us. It was one of those humid days when you sense that a storm is coming and yet it only skirts around menacingly on the horizon. Everyone was expecting the rain and yet nothing happened. After my mother made that hideous announcement and Oligaria's family were ready to leave, I was so dumbfounded that the only thing I was able to do was to stare at them devastated and above all embarrassed. Oligaria came to the porch to bid me goodbye and there I stood cold and emotionless as if all that we had shared was suddenly of no importance. I didn't even return the kiss she gave me. I couldn't even look at her. I was so ashamed of what my family had done, that I could only freeze in horror, knowing that her gaze was one of reproach and pity. The colour of my skin had kept me in my house, safe and privileged. You cannot imagine how this affected me. I was suddenly robbed not only of my friend, but also of my entire childhood and of this naïveté that had protected me from the realities of the world.

I know what you are thinking. Why didn't I say something? How could I have been so heartless? Well this is precisely what I would like—no, what I *need* to tell you. The shame that I experienced on that day was so unbearable that the only thing I could do, once they were gone, was to pretend nothing ever happened,

the past had never occurred. I know this sounds strange, but remember that I was only seventeen, a privileged girl with scant in-house education and who had only known plantation life. The idea that my family had suddenly taken part in the dismissal of (what I personally considered to be) a part of my family was so unbearable that pretense was the only option left. So instead of rebelling or calling for justice, instead of chasing them down the driveway or even joining them as a mark of solidarity, my only option was to speak and act so as to make it appear that nothing had ever occurred, that no one had been made to feel any kind of distress and that everything was absolutely fine with our family.

And so began my adult life. I asked to be sent to school, I got good grades. I grew up; I started flirting with the men at the British Club. I learned how to drink; I attended the rallies and parties of Rio. I carefully confined myself to a world of expatriates, free of any actual contact with Brazil. I lived in Rio, but I could as well have lived anywhere in the world. It no longer mattered. I was above all that because I belonged to an elite. Oh I knew it was all a game, that I was playing a part and that none of this was real. The way I walked was affected, the way I spoke was unnatural, the way I laughed was fake; even the glittery dresses I wore reflected a bright artificial light that had no intrinsic reality. All that was an attempt to forget what had happened, but also and above all to forget who I was. I took on this role with extraordinary gusto also because that's exactly what we all did. I cannot speak for my brother or sister. They coped in their own ways. They often reproached me my lifestyle and life choices, but I never questioned them in return; I never challenged the way they bottled up and pretended that we never made part of our family homeless overnight. I've carried this facade and this game all my life and it's only now that I realize the damage it has caused.

Years went by. In 1910, I decided to move into my aunt's house in Rio de Janeiro. Do you remember Della, your great-grandaunt? She was an uptight starched grand dame that worked Rio's social calendar like clockwork. She knew the places to go, who mattered and who didn't. While my mother couldn't care less about my future, Della was determined to give me the life that suited a young girl my age. I was 22 and because it was inconceivable that I worked, Della was determined to get me married. Every Sunday, Della and I would meet and she would draw an imaginary table of all the suitors we had encountered during the week. The list wasn't long because the number of unmarried expats more or less my age was relatively small. We laughed at some of those who wooed me with too much zeal and cried at those who I longed for, but were either taken or on their way back to the homeland. Your grandfather was in the former category. Once at the British Club, he chatted me up for so long that I had to leave the room to get some air. His courtship was obsessional, but he was charming. Eventually, I fell for him because his uptight Britishness suited the façade I put on and the game I played. We got married in 1915.

Your mother probably told you that our marriage wasn't a happy one. She probably also insisted that I never loved him. Unfortunately, she was right. Although I fell for the stiffness of his character, I quickly grew tired of his excessively orderly and fussy disposition. As soon as we returned from our honeymoon, our whole life became disciplined and regimented: my tasks as a

housewife, the places we would go, those we wouldn't, the time we could spend abroad, the vacations we took, nothing was spontaneous or arbitrary. I quickly realized that your grandfather was also fighting a demon of his own, but his façade was much tougher than the one I had invented for myself. So in order to create some distance between us, I gave him a son, Charles—your father. This allowed me to have a break from the disciplined routine and a reason to escape his controlling grip. Unfortunately, I wasn't made to be a mother. I admit it; I was incapable of responding with love when your father cried as a child. Della spotted this a few days after giving birth. It was then that Oligaria returned.

She had met Della by chance a few months earlier on the streets of Rio. They had a brief conversation about their homelessness, their hunt for a cheap accommodation, their search for work and the difficulties they experienced ever since they left the plantation. Oligaria was still unemployed and Della immediately suggested that I'd take her on as a housemaid and nanny. Considering what had happened, I hesitated at first. I certainly didn't want to revisit the past and show regret or remorse at what happened. I had built a new life and I couldn't suddenly care for the misfortunes that befell our extended family. So I agreed to meet her, but only as an applicant for the job of nanny and maid. I set up a date and found another unfortunate young black woman to pretend to apply for the same job so as to give Oligaria the illusion that others were being considered. Oligaria arrived on a drizzly autumn day of 1918, twenty-one years after my family had dismissed them. We were both then thirty, the age you will have when you will read this letter. She was visibly nervous. I hid my anxiety under a pretense of self-possession and exaggerated cheerfulness.

—How are you, Oligaria. It's so good to see you!

—Very well, Ma'am.

That "Ma'am" was all I needed. From that moment onwards, the past was sealed and became "the unspoken," what could never be recalled, ever. Our relationship morphed into a kind of charade, both of us acting out the roles of master and servant. The games we played as children became real games as adults, except for the fact that neither of us took any pleasure in them. It's now fifty-one years since Oligaria re-entered my life. At first, she looked after Charles, then, when your grandfather's work led to a busier social agenda amongst Rio's expatriate society, she took on the role of house cook. She's now looking after me in the same role, with the same devotion. Throughout all these years, we each played our part, never daring to recall the injustice of what happened on that summer day of 1897. But the playacting also betrayed a much more painful reality, that by being my employee, Oligaria constantly reminded me of the pain my family had inflicted onto hers. In a way, it was like a form of revenge slowly and painfully unfolding over the course of several decades. Every time she brought me tea, every time she served at dinner, brought laundry into my room, changed the sheets, swept the floor, every time, her gaze reminded me of what had happened.

You are probably thinking that I'm exaggerating. And you are also probably asking yourself, why I never broached the subject with Oligaria? We've been living in the same house for over five decades and yet, we never recalled the main event of our adolescence. The answer is simple: by keeping her as our house cook, she kept reality in check; she reminded me that I was just an actress, that my life was simply a game of pretense. In a way, she allowed me to continue to live the lie and to always remain aware of it. In a way, she's been the silent witness of my fake existence, the only true spectator of my fantasy. To try and talk to her now would be pointless because we are both old and life-long lies and deceptions can only be buried at death. To make a last attempt at healing the wounds of the past is equally useless because you can never redeem what you have done. By simply acknowledging her "Very well, Ma'am" all these years ago, I accepted that the scar would never heal and that with every order I gave her, I ensured it never healed. This was not some masochistic game, only the rightful payback for an unspeakable deed.

Death is now all I care for. The drinking is part of it. Ever since my husband's death, ever since your father got married and left us, the reality of my life with Oligaria became stuffily more pronounced, more unbearable. I now drink not so much in order to forget, but to speed up the process, put an end to this sad comedy. I neither blame nor pity Oligaria. She knows the part she is playing, but not in an evil way. On the contrary, she acts as a way of confirming the reality of the world we grew up in, which is also the world that gave her freedom, a freedom that I curiously never experienced. By a strange twist of fate, I am the one who is now a slave, but with just one owner: myself. While Oligaria is free, I carry alone the burden of being the daughter of a long line of slave-owners. By continuing to play my part in these times of transition, I acknowledge this heavy inheritance, one that was given to me by my father and before him by our ancestors who emigrated from the southern states of the USA once the Secession War was lost. As you can see, this isn't a glorious history, but it's the only one I have. Drinking helps me to finally rid the world once and for all from what has always been utterly unbearable, idiotic, absurd: slavery.

Of course, there was no reason I should have taken all this on. I could have easily forgotten the past and assumed a new identity free from those heavy chains. But to accept this inheritance, carry on with Oligaria, and pretend that everything was fine, was a way of keeping me in check, so to speak. To retain the leash has curiously saved me from losing my mind altogether. Unfortunately, I never shared this burden with anyone, least of all your parents. And this is the reason I cannot trust them—however much I love them. Having played for so long, they have no grasp of the pain that has burdened my life. They only see the decrepitude and the feeble mind, the alcohol and the tantrums. I don't blame them. What else could they have done? Against an embarrassing relative, you can only pretend that everything is fine, even if there is suspicion that the misery is based on a monstrous past, on a dark family history. Unfortunately for them, they didn't have an Oligaria to keep them in check so they bottled up and continued the pretense I taught them, not in order to absolve an unbearable past, but simply for the sake of convenience. A terrible admission, I know.

And with this, I will end this letter. I could tell you much more. I could tell you, for example, of that fateful year of 1943 when both my husband and my other child—your uncle Leonard— died. I could tell you how this devastated me and how it intensified the sad reality of my life with Oligaria. I could tell you more, but what's the point. As I said at the start, my aim was simply to warn you of the dangers of bottling up, of never showing your emotions, of carrying on the game of pretense that seems to come with this family, as if a badge of honour. A life can easily be ruined. This is perhaps meager teaching, but I hope it will have the merit of rectifying the vision you have of your grandmother and also to give you a different version of our family history. Our family solicitor gives you this as another form of inheritance. I concede, it is not very promissory, but at least it has the advantage of ringing a little closer to reality. Oligaria will no doubt remain with me until I die. She is at once my companion and my downfall, and underneath the years of protracted pain, submission, and role play, I still love her.

I hope you will forgive this long letter. It's the first time I tell this story. Peter, take great care of yourself. I wish I was there to hug you.

With much love,

Doña Mabel.