



www.andotherstories.org

from *The Forest in Bremerhaven (A Floresta em Bremerhaven)*

By Olga Gonçalves

Translated by Amanda Hopkinson

Porto Covo – Tuesday 1st July 1975

Good afternoon, Madam. Yes, I do have rooms. Only right now none are available. From the middle of the month onwards I should have some free. Last year I was even asked if I would let some people sleep on the floor! And how well they slept, even there. They slept and slept! Would Madam like to take a look at this room? It's a big room, fully furnished, with a wardrobe so tall it reaches the ceiling. We bought it together with the house. That was when we arrived back from Germany, a year ago now. Come in, this way, and mind the step. It is not worth Madam's while to look at this room, it faces inwards onto the central well, and it only contains two small beds. Madam wouldn't like a room like that, would she? This one here is a good room. It has a double bed. Although at times we've let it to a single person. Excuse me. I'll go ahead as it's very dark as the windows have their curtains drawn. The window gives onto the street. The bed is a high one. It's like a couch. Yes, it's an old one. Madam can see it's made of cane! It is the way it is. They put a special varnish on it, or that's what they told me. So there you have it! They had fine furniture because they were very well-off. Oh yes they were! Now it would seem that the funds have run out, or else they are wary of showing off too much. My husband says the rich never used to feel self-conscious. To tell you the truth everything is changing right now! Has Madam noticed the fragrant scent in here? I was going to mention that. On the chair you'll see a handful of walnut leaves, some peasants up in the mountains gave them me. I keep them on top of this clean cloth. Once they dry you can make a herb tea that's very good for the liver. If Madam would like this room, I'll give it a quick dust

and remove the leaves. That's why there's this smell in here. It doesn't worry you, does it? Perhaps you may even like it? Of course, I can open the window and leave it open while you go to the beach. You are still going to the beach today, aren't you? Yes, you go as far as Praia Grande. You go straight out of the front door and carry on to the main street. There you turn left, continue to the end, and there you turn right. But take care! Make sure you turn right because, if you turn left, you'll end up in the fishing port. If you follow my directions, you'll reach the "vila turística". Madam will see the signpost. Keep going straight ahead, until you come to the car park. You have a car outside, don't you? Mena! Don't go out into the street! Come here. Yes, this is my daughter. We gave her that name after a local saint called Saint Philomena, although nowadays they say she never existed. But one gets used to the idea of her, and when problems arise, you still turn to her. My husband doesn't approve of all that kind of thing. Nor do my parents. Down here in the Alentejo the men are like that. In the north, it seems they go to church more often, and still believe in the saints. Maybe that's lucky for us women, or maybe not. Madam is very quiet, you're not saying what you think. Would you like to take a rest, and I'll open the window for you? There. Now I've opened them both. Here we are! Over there you can see the little patch of garden we bought. And beyond that, you can see as far as the sea. As well as the lands of the Cercal do Alentejo, which is like a large village. You mean the island over there? That's called Pessegueiro Isle. Yes, it has beaches and also a fortress. Madam ought to visit it one day. We can accompany you. They have made a new road there. There's plenty of traffic because the beach runs all the way to Milfontes. There are good beaches all the way down. So you like this room? I reckon it has to be because you fell in love with the bed! Is it really also because of the table? No, none of the other rooms have tables. Is it so that Madam can write at it? Do you write a great deal? In which case, you'll do well, this is such a big table I had to bring it here, because this is the largest room in the house. I covered it with this cloth because it's made of a fine hardwood, so dark it shows every speck of dust. Madam can use it as much as she likes, it does me good to know someone is making good use of it. Sometimes the old owners used to write at it too. Let's move on now. My husband would like to meet with Madam later. He talks a good deal. He likes to explain what he's thinking. However often I tell him that it might be better to keep quiet sometimes, it makes no difference. Oh well, the truth is that he doesn't really talk all the time, and he knows what he's talking about. He can be very fault-finding! No –

perhaps Madam has not noticed – he’s not someone who easily gets angry, I just meant that he finds a lot to talk about. Madam will be pleased to get to know him. So you are staying? I’ll go and get the suitcases. Madam should go first. I noticed you came alone in the blue car, almost a shade of electric blue, isn’t it? It’s almost as small as the one our cousins have. At about this time last year, we arrived back from Germany. Later on my husband will tell you all about it. As we had the keys to the house, they let us rent out two of the bedrooms. No. The tenants were German. Two married couples. Nice people. They were very quiet. We only spoke to them in what we knew of their language, since they didn’t understand any Portuguese. They spent all day on the beach, eating out in the restaurants. They only got back late, at around eleven o’clock, even at midnight. And they got up early, at around eight or nine o’clock in the morning. The kind of people that when the weather was fine, wanted to spend the entire day outside. That’s the way they were. Never any trouble. Mena! Who told you to go out onto the street, or to try on the lady’s hat? Give me that hat here at once! No, I won’t let you, no, one has to teach the children to do as they’re told, and her head is filled with tricks and games she’s been taught over the years. Look, Madam is going to be staying here in our house with us, but you’re not to go bothering her! And don’t you ever touch her hat again! Mena! What did I just tell you, my girl? There now, I’ve fixed the room, including making up the bed, and I’ll leave you in peace to get ready for the beach.

The above extract was kindly funded by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation as part of its support of the 2011 Portuguese reading group.

*It appears here by kind permission of the copyright holder who retain all rights:
© Olga Gonçalves*

Supported by



**CALOUSTE
GULBENKIAN
FOUNDATION**