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*Gente Melancolicamente Louca (Melancholically Mad People)* by Teresa Veiga is one of the books featured in the autumn 2019 Portuguese reading group run by And Other Stories. <https://www.andotherstories.org/reading-groups/portuguese-reading-group-2019/>

## ***Gente Melancolicamente Louca (Melancholically Mad People)***

**Teresa Veiga**

**Excerpt (chapter 4) translated by Bruna Dantas Lobato**

Sister Saint Suspiro

Manuela, at fifteen years old, was a young woman split in two. And she carried this doubleness with the cunning of an adult and the levity of a child who believed no one could see her when her eyes were closed, that is, if that cliché about childhood has any validity at all.

All day, she studied, ate, and walked around at the catholic school where she got her centuries-old traditional education, offered to the most distinguished girls who were destined to mate with future ministers and managing directors, to whom they were only attractive because they couldn't be found anywhere else, and that was what made them so desirable and special.

At night, Manuela went to sleep at home, to help minimize her mother's loneliness, a woman who became a widow much too soon and put all her pride and hopes for the future in her only daughter.

Unfortunately, adolescence didn't keep any of the sweet promises of childhood, and her mother saw with disappointment her daughter move each time farther away from where beauty and an abundance of talent made all the girls uncannily similar and

interchangeable amongst themselves. She couldn't even tell her daughter the source of her disappointment, and exhausted herself with futile efforts of reconciliation.

In reality, Manuela's golden curls had turned into dull, limp strands, giving her the perpetual look of a drowned girl wrapped in vines, as if her mediocre hairdresser were an envious evil witch instead.

There was also the issue with her glasses, bulky like a diving helmet, underneath which two tiny dots shone, bright and agile, like two glow worms.

Her legs and arms, on the other hand, thick and strongly built, collected approvals from connoisseurs and even got the occasional catcall from men in the street.

Fully aware that she would probably never be an object desired by men whose entire imagination was limited to cataloguing half a dozen of women's attributes, she didn't feel like putting effort into becoming a scientist, a teacher, a lawyer, or some kind of con artist, after which she decided she'd make up for her long and tedious days with frenetic and exhilarating nights, or at least nights as interesting as those psychological novels told in such detail that nothingness ended up becoming more and more interesting over the course of forty chapters, not including the epilogue and prologue.

As such, bedtime was sacred to her, and no offer, no matter how tempting, would shake her commitment.

While sleep didn't come, and sometimes after it did, which wasn't her sleep per se, but the sleep of who she became after she put on her nightgown, Manuela had another family, another body, other thoughts. If she sometimes fell into refined introspections and didn't mind spending the night as if she had centuries ahead of her, other times she gave into the pleasure of fully developing characters for herself. She made like a man, a woman, a street kid, a gypsy, a cellist, a tennis player, a cabaret singer, a restaurant server, all in one night. As a result, then, she awoke each morning with giant circles under her eyes and a hatred toward school, which made her wish for an earthquake that would only spare herself and her bed, the only safe place on earth, and where she always found a way to be happy.

It was clear that Manuela was the kind of lonely girl classmates ostracized, as if they could sense in her a threat, the potential to blackmail them if she knew of their secrets, and that teachers went after her relentlessly, always making up new kinds of misdemeanors.

They called her excessive, unsettling, obsessive, and manipulative, in order to justify the incredibly low grades on her transcripts.

While the more graceful and carefree girls could bring the poor children a layette from home to be blessed by the archbishop of Mitilene, Manuela was forced to hem hundreds of throws and cotton diapers herself, so real they almost stank of pee, and to crochet sets of doilies for charity raffles, and to take them to homes in neighborhoods where you could have caught the plague.

The gymnastics teacher, the kind of woman who looked like she saw female bodies with the eyes of a man, made her practice her dismount from the pommel horse over a hundred times, and pushed her with an open palm over her butt every time she stayed straddled in the middle of the saddle.

Manuela protected herself with passivity, full of the masochism of victims who give into their fates without hesitating or complaining.

Soon she was forced to jump on the middle of the spring floor, instead of sneaking around in the shadow of people who seemed entitled to inhabit the world's stage.

The gymnastics teacher, not knowing how else to torture Manuela, and having failed at her previous elaborate tyrannical attempts, chose her to take part in the group that would represent the school at the big patriotic exhibit at the National Stadium on June tenth.

At this Roman circus performance of great exuberance, the girls would perform in green skirts, white shirts, and red scarves, not tied around the neck or draped over their shoulders, as was in good taste, but wrapped around their heads like an old Caneças washerwoman's, making their faces look like meatballs with no hair and half their foreheads missing.

Manuela never managed to learn the performance's routine, despite the many rehearsals. But she got each time better at throwing the hoop in the air and catching it on her knees or in a forward lunge.

The deafening music coming from the record player impaired all her mental faculties and reduced her to a robot stuck in a magnetic field where there was no room for abrupt movements. On the eve of the celebration, the prospects of the next day seemed so

grotesque to her that she began studying possibilities of escape, all fallible except for suicide, which as a catholic-school girl she promptly rejected.

Out of options, she ended up going with the easiest solution, which only crushed her hopes and, worse still, intensified her distress. She dropped her glasses on the floor, stepped on them, and went to show the lenses looking like two fossilized spiders to her horrified mother, convinced that maternal love would supersede games of convenience. Her mother's reaction wasn't what she expected. "If you don't have your glasses," she said, "you'll have to do without them. It's not like you have to spot mosquitoes flying across the stadium."

Therefore, there was nothing to do besides following her mother to the car, already all decorated with little heads covered in red behind the windows. Since she couldn't see anything, she stepped on the footboard as if she were a queen stepping onto her throne, and naturally adopted a defensive pose as she took her seat, bending over her arms and chest as if to protect her own integrity.

Some young girls got up from their seat to admire her grayish eyes, which had never caught anybody's attention before, and soon other girls followed their lead, spreading the word about the transformation she'd gone through and giving her attention that came from the hidden place inside themselves where they carefully kept their jealousy, swarming all around her like around a woman in labor.

As they entered the stadium under the harsh sun, they looked like an elite squad obfuscated by promises of glory. But right during the first break, dehydrated bodies lay scattered over the lawn, while guys from Mocidade showered them with water bottles, and the more serious cases were collected by ambulances disguised as food trucks driving off with no siren.

The whole universe burned like a giant furnace. Manuela had in her favor a large amount of water and ions stored in her body and a completely blurred eyesight, which allowed her not to see the crowd, except in the form of a distant commotion, and to completely forget the rhythms and appearance of her routine. She even found from time to time a moment to rest, leaning against her hoop, while, all around her, circles, ellipsis, and squares were made and unmade.

When the performance came to an end, it became clear that it must have been a wonderful one, because the crowd got up and applauded the supreme chief of the Nation, until the speakers broadcast the message that they should be quiet and disperse before the water cars got started with their powerful water jet lances, sweeping off the floor little pieces of paper and other residue, restoring the cleanness of the original cement.

Manuela found herself in the middle of a row of young couples, with the girls standing on the shoulders of the sturdiest male specimens of the Portuguese youth. With words of encouragement and manly hands, the boys held onto the girls even as they threatened to melt in the collapse-inducing heat. If Manuela could see beyond half a meter, she would have noticed that as the group moved deeper into the green blur of pine trees they called Lisbon's Lungs, there were braids coming undone and girls being carried off by men like delicate prey exhausted from the chase, having just walked into the trap they'd spent their entire lives trying to escape. Manuela, by contrast, sensing that her partner was out of breath, went out of her way to make sure her body felt even lighter than it was. Her biggest concern was not producing any body odor, which made her stand with nearly military stiffness, and diminished her mental faculties. The lack of glasses, however, was what most restricted her already limited strategies of self-defense, because contrary to what's generally said, the loss of eyesight seriously hinders the other senses. When a near-sighted person takes off their glasses, there's disorientation and confusion of perspective, to the point that it can often feel like falling off the earth's orbit or at least like they're walking upside down.

This situation lasted no more than ten minutes, because soon the sirens went off. As the girls took their places in the pickup truck again, they noticed one of the spots had yet to be filled, precisely Manuela's. Empty as it was, it seemed in its bareness to point to Manuela's non-presence while also surreptitiously to accuse the school's administration of failing in its mission of producing an institution that was immune to false steps, since a single dissonant note was enough to destroy the school's harmony, so painstakingly put together.

The incident produced tears and anguished screams, and it only didn't have more serious consequences because the rescue team, which included the driver, the teachers, and two first aid-certified students, barely walked into the woods and they already came

across Manuela's arms, around which they spun a protective circle, as if they were a very fragile relic.

They carefully lay her on the seat in the back of the pickup truck, and then, her head having fallen over the edge, it revealed a slight crease in her skin like a pencil shading or a fading line, in such a shape that even someone not well-versed in detective novels would suspect it was made by a criminal hand. The red scarf had gone missing. Fans flapped rapidly, fortunately, like a spell designed to ward off evil spirits, and breathed air into her tight throat. Her face, white as a swan, gained more color as her blood rushed back. A sigh, long and deep, more like an oh of divine rapture than a perfunctory sigh of relief from physical suffering, marked her return to life, now in the shape of another, never to be confused with the old Manuela split in two, rejected and harassed and so used to having nobody but herself.

Even though both the family and the school swore to keep this a secret, information got out and soon Manuela left anonymity to become a media sensation for a few days. Opposition newspapers described her as a young woman of classical beauty, involved in a case of pathological jealousy that ended up in a strangulation attempt. And they connected the case to another example of disrespect to the regime—when a group walked in front of a school bus and screamed fascists, fascists, making the girls hide behind the windows, scared of their hideous appearance. Going from one theory to another, the newspapers ended up unearthing the strange incident of a student who lost the skin of her hands upon bumping (or was she pushed?) into the red-hot iron fence.

The São Domingos Sávio newspaper bet on the careless virgin version and compared Manuela to Saint Maria Goretti, whose screams, “Mother, Mother, Alexandre killed me,” had shaped generations of teary-eyed catechism teachers.

But, from Manuela's point of view, her odyssey had only truly begun when she was called into the principal's office one morning and felt the woman's eyes judging her. The principal wished the victim could have been a more aggressive girl with unmistakable signs of vanity. Her entire being rejected the idea of elevating this girl, a tomboy with rustic stockiness, to the level of tragic heroine.

As such, the first words she uttered to the girl came with a mark of resentment that would be hard to explain, if it weren't for her strong and very reasonable belief that ugly girls can't get in trouble.

"Ah, are you the girl who lost her scarf and was attacked by a pervert who then used the scarf to strangle her, whom he didn't even know? That's not a police matter, it's a puzzle that sounds a lot like it's made up, my dear," she mocked. "But if it's true, tell me your version of the facts without leaving anything out, from the moment you went into the truck. Tell me. I'm all ears."

Manuela quickly realized her reputation was low and nothing she said would be judged in her favor. For that reason, choosing between sadness or regret and playing the role of the tortured sinner, she thought it was best to just answer truthfully and in complete sentences, like an impartial witness who has no choice but to assist in investigation.

"I didn't think anything of it. The scarf must have fallen off my head because of the heat and then just hung around my neck like a collar."

"The heat, always the heat! Many of you like to justify and excuse everything with the heat! So, you mean that as you walked into the woods, you had your hair down and your tight shirt unbuttoned, soaked in water that came out of your mouth and that your partner was giving you to drink?"

"I don't remember this part. There's a gap between myself and what happened that day, maybe because I didn't have my glasses, now thanks to which I can talk about this as if it had happened a long time ago to some other girl who wasn't me."

"Describe the man, if you can."

"Very well. He was taller than me and had a large shadow that got even bigger in the darkness of the woods. He walked so fast that to keep up with him I had this sharp pain stabbing me under the ribs."

"Have you considered that a bird might have been attracted to the red of the scarf and pecked it off your neck, then producing the result that we're all already familiar with?"

"It's very possible. I hadn't thought of that."

"Well. Hope this serves as a lesson. If anyone asks you any questions, you should say that you experienced some memory loss and don't know anything."

She raised her hand and waved it in an autocratic manner. But she wasn't satisfied. She made up the bird story because she didn't like to admit that it was the least interesting and most peaceful sheep of her flock that had incited both the impulses of Eros and the instincts of a predator. Unless this was some mentally unbalanced man who could only get aroused by girls who he somehow wanted to strangle. The principal liked to read stories about the dark passions that lurked in the most secret corners of the human soul, and even had some theories about the profile of murderers. At night, while she rode the bus, she got suspicious of the quiet, the anxious, those who seemed insincere in their extreme niceness toward older ladies. She obviously wouldn't let this go on. Rewarding ugliness was unthinkable, and she often bragged about how moral she was. So, she sent away the stranger who came wanting to return the scarf to its rightful owner, like a prince bringing Cinderella's slippers to see if they fit, without even speaking to him.

Still, cautiously, she issued a message through the speakers above each classroom door, which allowed her to exercise her power without leaving her office. She said no student should approach any man or let themselves be approached by any man within the entire perimeter of the block surrounding the school.

Her right-hand woman, the chaplain, took upon herself to convince Manuela that she had barely escaped the Antichrist's claws, whose order, the opposite of the Divine Order, was characterized, among other things, by the destruction of people, where they had, deprived of God's grace, fallen into temptation.

Under her guidance, Manuela was convinced that she had lived through a mystical experience, and then unified her many selves, and joined the convent as Sister Saint Suspiro.

It's said, however, that every year on the tenth of June, when silence hugged the branches of the trees in the garden like a shroud, and all who were living experienced a brief fainting spell as they got ready for eternity, one could hear whispers coming from the convent, which some called sighs and others called laments of despair or nostalgia, and a small black line took form in the pale neck of a nun, much for the joy of the community that followed the procession and kneeled to kiss the mark, before it faded away at dawn.

*The above extract was translated by Bruna Dantas Lobato*

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