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Luck by Nara Vidal is one of the novels featured in the autumn 2020 Portuguese reading group run by And Other Stories.

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Sorte (Luck)

Nara Vidal

Translated by James Young

From chapters 1, 2, 3, 10 and 11

Chapter 1

Ireland 1806

In our house we knew that the rain, the flooding, the ruined furniture, the rats that came up from the cellar to escape drowning, was all the wrath of God. Our poverty, too, was the punishment of the Lord. We agreed from an early age that waking up and making it through the unfortunate hours until we could close our eyelids again was our greatest blessing.

Martha, her weird hands flapping as though she was listening to music, stamped her feet and laughed. Not a big laugh. More of a giggle. A nervous giggle. With her back to me, she didn't even notice that I'd halted behind her thin, graceful body. I craned my neck to see what she was laughing at. In the

old basin in the yard, full of rainwater, a large rat was dying.

Mesmerized by the gruesome spectacle, I watched the scene unfold. The ugly eyes of the animal, already swollen from the flesh contaminated by the filthy water, began to bulge. The rat struggled ceaselessly; she managed to right herself, only to swivel again, seeking an elusive breath of air. Her feet and paws made my knees tremble. They thrashed, defying the death that mocked her, like Martha from the window.

First the rat's tail, exhausted from the struggle, went limp. Bloated, plump, it looked like the animal would burst. The skin of her belly was stretched so tightly it shone. Within her, death lived.

Chapter 2

Almost every day the house echoed with shouts of admiration for the Napoleonic wars. Our father had a longstanding frustration that the commotion had never made it to Ireland. "Not even the war wants anything to do with this country." He cried out in revolt, and a hope for horizons new. Any horizons. "Even elusive Brasil, that phantom island, would be better than here. If it weren't for my leg, I'd drag the lot of you there."

Our father's appreciation of military matters was a foolish indulgence interspersed with harsh, crude realities that fitted him like a glove. A man familiar with poverty of both property and emotion, he stumbled his way through life. He had grown up in an Ireland the colour of ashes, ravaged by famine and the plague, a patchwork quilt made from battles in the name of God and his son, Jesus Christ. "The only honourable war for a man is that in the name of

God". This was the unsmiling figure in our house. He scolded us at the slightest sign of joy. He had moved from Clare to Cork when he was a skinny lad of sixteen, his stomach always empty. He discovered another, greater hunger, the blight that afflicted the potatoes, along with a coldness that never gave us peace. He never left home except for an operation to amputate his left leg, which gangrene had devoured like termites that ravage all before them. It took place in Dublin. He was twenty eight years old, and had accumulated plenty of bitterness and half the number of children he'd once had. At one time there had been six of us. Four of us, shamefully, girls. Imprisoned by blindness and hostile traditions, we were trapped between family and church. On the eve of his journey to Dublin, our father dressed in his wedding suit. He took up a position in the middle of the living room and told our mother never to forget who was in charge even if he came back the next day missing a leg. He had pride, but he also had typhus. I was five when I watched the scene from the top of the stairs; to me my father seemed all-powerful. I was wrong.

Chapter 3

Rattling towards Dublin in the cart, our mother clung tightly to the hand of the man who meant everything to her. Through choice and through love. Her hands shook less because of the potholes in the road than because of the sobs she stifled in her chest, clogged like the typhoid veins of Mr. Cunningham's leg, claimed by gangrene from top to bottom.

As they set off, I had stayed in the front room with Martha, who at the age of six still couldn't count. That's how my sister went through life, always on the outside looking in. I felt so sorry for her. My father was ashamed of her,

though, luckily for the girl, my mother loved her. The poor thing was the butt of laughter and jokes in the street. The other children asked her to play odds or evens, then laughed at the weird numbers she plucked from the air. She tried to lose just to get out of the game. Each day of the cruel, social affair of her childhood brought pain and not one person cared how she suffered.

Mary was two years old and wailed from the lap of Mrs. Betty Mahoney, a stern, Catholic matron who lived two houses down from us. On the left were the Protestant Whites, a family for whom our father harboured a considerable hatred, even though they were as Irish as we were. His express, fiercely Catholic orders forbade us from greeting them. "A family that questions the word of God doesn't deserve the ground it stands on." Every blessed day, at dinner, our father dispersed his hatred for the neighbors with the same words. His interest in them was so great it bordered on disgust.

Our father returned from Dublin with neither complications nor his left leg, as we'd expected. If possible, he became even bitterer still and took to shouting more, to bring some order to the house, as his body had begun to recognise its limits. He never dreamt of actually talking to his children. It was our fear of him that upset us so. The fear of punishment, or the torture of seeing our mother trapped, accepting the tyranny of a man for whom, despite everything, she still cared. "Martha, Margaret, Mary and another in the belly. By God's grace this house will one day be blessed with a boy." Our father didn't hide his desire for a son. I didn't feel he was especially interested in me, nor in Martha or Mary. We were a first attempt, an error, a blot, something to be redone, refined, improved until a son appeared.

Our mother brought Monica into the world in the early hours of a cold,

rainy November morning. Our father, who had been drinking whiskey by the river as he waited for his son to be born, came home and launched a torrent of insults at our mother. For him, Monica was an embarrassment. Another woman in the family. Who would work, or bring in money? We were all disgraced by our poverty and femininity. Only a man would save us from our misery. Or as it turned out, would sow a misery in me that would last until an end which never came.

Chapter 10

We arrived in Rio de Janeiro under a fearsome heat.

During the crossing, we lost the heart of our family: our mother died.

One of a number of bodies sacrificed to yellow fever during the crossing, my mother's corpse took the route of the destitute. A cart came to collect those who hadn't made it and, in a cemetery far away, they were all buried together, marked only as "Ireland, 1827".

There was no time for further details of identification. The country was at war and we finally accepted that there, we were to live in poverty once again.

I stepped on the ground that burned the soles of my feet through my flat, thin shoes, as old as my hopes of ever getting a new pair. Daniel and James were met by soldiers and immediately taken off to the Cisplatine War.

My father, missing a leg, was identified as an invalid. Worse still, he had four daughters, no wife and was poor. Meanwhile, at just twenty-four, I was old enough to take care of everything. With no husband and no money, our hopes lay in Mary and a marriage of convenience, since Monica would vanish from

our sight in a matter of weeks to study with the Carmelites.

What was guaranteed was that eventually only my father and I would be left. A chill ran down my spine. I would rather have Ireland with its rain, its belligerent people, and its hunger, than have to look after my father and Martha until the end came for whoever was the first to go. My eyes flitted around, seeking somewhere to rest. It was impossible: upon arrival at the port of Rio de Janeiro, we found every type of person, all kinds of colours, black eyes, brown eyes, brown skin, white skin. This could not be just one country. The noise was deafening. Everyone spoke at the same time, no one understood what was being said. Silence was impossible. There was no order. There were more than five hundred of us coming ashore and it was there that I lost Orlando for good. The only thing I knew was that he would continue his journey along a river with an indigenous name that I'd forgotten.

While the officials checked our documents and took our mother away, a nearby dog tried to get under my skirt. A black woman with trinkets in her dirty, curly hair cried out that I had a child in my belly. That was how the official in charge of landing translated it. Enraged, my father's face crumpled in fury. The woman laughed. The dog wouldn't let go of me. I managed to get the address of the cemetery where our mother had gone. Her body had been taken to the Island of Paquetá. We headed towards our supposedly new life, exhausted and abject right from the start.

Chapter 11

With Daniel and James on the border with Uruguay, it was we womenfolk who pushed our father towards a farm in the Catete region that was looking for

hired help. There, I made jam, and spoke Gaelic with rich children from Portugal. In exchange, Monica, Mary and I learned to read and write in Portuguese. Part of our earnings included a place to live with an orchard and a huge guava tree.

Mary was put to work in the pottery next to the farm and helped to make decorative bricks. Rio de Janeiro simmered with promises and new buildings to house all those coming from Portugal and around the world. Mariava was the black girl who helped me look after Martha. Her mother Dolores, meanwhile, kept our father company.

With the posture of a princess and a long, slender neck, Mariava knew all the names of the rivers and waterfalls. She had come as part of a trade from Minas Gerais, a land of emeralds, just like Hy-Brasil. She wouldn't make the sound of the letter "F", so Mary teased her and asked her to repeat the names of the waterfalls in her town in Minas – Heron (F)alls, (F)ive Step (F)alls, Smoke (F)alls.

One day, Mariava said, she would go back where she'd come from. Even though Brazil treated her badly, it was the land she spoke of when she said she wanted to go home. In the middle of the forest, on the banks of the Pombas River, where there were only farmworkers, Indians and slaves to be found. She and her mother had ended up in Catete after Mariava's father had been whipped to death. A negro, he had defied the foreman's orders and spat in his face. The *mestizo*, who thought himself white, tore the skin off Mariava's father and left him to dry in the sun as a trophy, an example of poor servitude and affrontery. Rubião de Gregório had become engraved in his daughter's memory due to his terrible, cowardly death. Madame Lucinda de Monteiro Pontes

Carvalho, who had watched Mariava grow, organized the trade. She wanted to save the mother, her daughter and her sons from seeing Rubião's ghost with their every step on the farm.

Mariava de Gregório had the headstrong idea that she would go back home. She knew she had to reach the mountains, which Minas has instead of the sea. One day she would lay a flower on the ground where her father died. One day she would go. One day.

Martha would not leave her in peace. She took the scarf from Mariava's head just to touch the cloud of dark cotton she bore on her head. Mariava was beautiful! Unlike us, with our fiery hair, her colours were absolute; a deep blackness. She was dazzling.

Which is why, perhaps, she drew stares all day long. Particularly from Dom Vaz Peixoto, which is a story that ended with Mariava lying, whipped and wounded, in a clearing in the forest beside the big house.

The above extract was translated by James Young

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