

Monalisa

She woke up as if to save her life, sitting up, gasping for air, and clutching the sheets around her. One second longer, and she would have been unable to come back to herself. But she did. Her surroundings looked unfamiliar. She had arrived the night before, exhausted, and had only had a chance to leave her luggage in a corner, take a cold shower, and go straight to bed. Now, sitting in bed in a dark room, she heard the sound she had been missing. She got up, pulled the blackout curtains open, and greeted not only the sun rising before her, but also the sea that was growling like a bear leaving its cave after the hibernation period.

She was famished. The hotel was near the Mangai Restaurant, which had been no coincidence. On the self-service buffet, she picked tapioca and cheese curds drenched in molasses. She put a slice of cassava bread on the plate and spread some shredded beef with cream on top. Before sitting at the table, she looked around to confirm she didn't know anyone there. Just to be sure, she was wearing sunglasses and a straw hat that covered most of her face. She called one of the servers, who was dressed up as a traditional social bandit of the North, and ordered some coffee. It was hot and threatened to burn the tip of her tongue. The steam went up her nostrils and left a layer of warmth on her face. She smiled to herself. Laura was indeed incognito in João Pessoa.

She walked down the shore. Even though it was early in the morning, it was hot already. There were only a few people on the sand. After all, it was a weekday. Those were most certainly tourists. Just like her. *Can two years turn you into a foreigner in your own land?* she wondered, carrying her flip-flop sandals and feeling the little warm waves touch her toes before completely covering her foot, just to retreat back to the sea and

leave her wet feet behind. Could those little warm waves have taken something away from her?

She went back to her hotel room leaving a trail of sand on the ground. Before she could give it a second thought, she decided not to worry about it at all. Someone would clean it up later. She sat on the edge of the bed and, instinctively, reached for her phone, which she had left in the room. No messages. That was exactly what she wanted: zero messages. That's all she wanted. If she repeated it several times, she could end up believing it. She opened up the last chat she had had with her daughter three months earlier. "Where are you?" her daughter had asked. "Thailand," Laura had replied, laconically. The conversation died then and there. They were moving further away from each other each day. Before she could feel compelled to type something, she threw her phone on the bed, away from her.

She took her clothes off and changed into a light, spaghetti-strap green dress. It left her almost flaccid arms were exposed. The sagging skin on her neck seemed to want to drip away. She looked good for someone who was pushing fifty, but she would soon need to touch up the work she had already gotten done. Since she was back, she would get an appointment with Dr. Celso. He was always discrete. She grabbed the Kindle Reader she had bought the last time she visited New York, mesmerized by the possibility of carrying so many books with her wherever she may go, like a turtle that carries its own shell on its back. She was about to close the door, but went back in to get the cell phone she had thrown in bed, she put it in her purse.

She picked a calm beach bar by the shore. She buried her feet into the warm sand and ordered some coconut water. Apart from her, there were only two other people

nearby: a bored teenager with earphones on, staring at a phone with his back to the ocean, and another woman closer to where she was, who scribbled away on a notebook. Laura didn't know either of them, so she decided to take off her hat and sunglasses and let the breeze caress her face.

The woman seemed to be taking some notes and, once in a while, would look up and glance at the calm, green sea, as if recording what it was whispering to her. Maybe she was drawing what she saw. Laura wondered whether the woman was drawing the sea in movement while trying to hold on to the paper that insisted in shaking. She would probably give up soon, accept she couldn't do it, and take a plunge into the sea of sheets, skipping the blue lines as if they were waves, and--

“Your coconut.” Chilling cold.

Laura stopped daydreaming, came back to her own mind, and thanked the server. Sweet. She wanted to drink it all in a single gulp, but held back. She had just arrived. She glanced at her purse. She should keep it out of sight. She put it on a chair. *But, what if...?* Before she could change her mind, she opened her purse and fished out her phone. It was there, right before her, the black screen acting as a mirror. Her reflection on the screen seemed to be trying to tell her something. The mouth was moving, but she couldn't understand what it was saying. She turned the screen on, and her reflection disappeared. In bold, there was an unread message sent by her brother, Caco. He must have felt she was geographically closer to him. She really loved her brother, but she didn't want anyone's company at the moment—not even his. Maybe she would change her mind, lie, *I just got here today, come and visit me*, give him her hotel address, or maybe she wouldn't lie and tell him, laughing, *I got here two weeks ago and was incognito, walking around town all*

that time. Her brother wouldn't be upset and would actually try the same strategy as soon as possible.

“coulduwritealettertomyson?”

Her phone jumped out of her hands with a fright. There was a man standing right in front of her, bending forward, holding a bag in one hand and what looked like a card in the other. She didn't understand what he had just said. She wasn't sure whether he was selling postcards or asking for money. She replied, *No comprendo*, using her limited knowledge in a foreign language, putting the phone away, and placing her purse back on the chair. The man was probably around her age, but looked much older. He nodded, thanking her, even though he didn't get what he wanted before he walked away. He was walking slowly, but definitely wasn't a hobo: denim pants, a light polo shirt, a bag in one hand and a postcard in the other.

He tried to talk to the boy with the earphones on, who ignored him and kept staring at his screen while listening to music, pretending nobody was waving at him only a few feet away, showing a postcard and a pen. Still, the man thanked him for nothing. Laura felt like slapping that kid around. *Hey, have some manners, would you?* However, if she started talking, she would make it clear that she had just been rude herself.

The man walked toward the woman who was taking notes from the sea. She smiled at him and listened to what he had to say. Since she was so close, Laura could hear the man's request this time around. *Could you write a postcard to my son?* “Of course!” she said, and flashed a broad smile to reassure him she could certainly help him.

Laura listened closely and, without realizing it, she forgave herself. It was a way to apologize to the man and listen to him. The woman got the pen and started to write down what he wanted to say:

Antônio, your son is fine. I know you hate this name, your name, the name I chose for you. Maybe you're using another name there in São Paulo, but I hope you don't think I started this letter with a word you can't recognize as your own name, as if I were forcing you to accept it, as if I were pretending I don't know you hate it. Your mother chose it. Yes, I agreed to it, so we both chose it. What I'm trying to say is that we both chose your name even before you were born, before we saw your face, but even if we had looked at your face for a moment and associated it with a name, it would've taken us some time to realize we were making a mistake. I'm not sure it's right to leave it up to children to name themselves. We grow up so full of doubts and we're constantly changing our minds about who we are. Could you imagine if we had no name or changed what we call ourselves every year, after each heartache, after each lesson we learn? Maybe it wouldn't be a problem at all, and we could change names as we accept our changing nature. It seems lighter to carry our own nature than to carry a name on our shoulders. Accepting changes must feel like being carried away by a river, and rivers never stop running. Sometimes, rivers can feed us; other times, rivers can drown us. But we could keep going, if only to return to the source, where we could be born again. You were born again over there, I know. In São Paulo. You can be whoever you want there, away from us. You can be something you had never planned to be. You had a lot of plans, didn't you? Your son has them, too. Sometimes I think he's actually you. Sometimes, I think he also thinks he's

actually you. He'd return from school saying he was back from São Paulo. Saying that he's a cosmopolitan man. I don't know where he learned this word, "cosmopolitan," and I didn't know he considered himself to be a man when he was only eleven years old. Or, in your absence, maybe he'd rather be both at the same time. It must be a way not to miss you so much. One feeding off the other.

Some time ago, I woke up in the middle of the night, hearing voices in the living room. I thought it was odd, so I got up without making any noise. And, there he was, your son, talking to you—I mean, to your picture hanging on the wall since the day you left. Do you remember that picture? A traveling photographer took it, the one we met a block away from our house. He used a pretty good camera for back then. We scraped some money together, but he said we didn't need to pay. *Your boy is so handsome, this one will be a gift.* You had a serious look on your face. You didn't even smile, even though you seemed happy. Brown jacket, dress shirt underneath, shorts that made your legs look thicker and exposed all those mosquito bites. In the background, there's a small plant here from the garden. The next day, I went to pick up the picture, but he had already left. We asked the neighbors and most of them said they didn't know who he was, that they had never seen a photographer in the neighborhood. When I got home, you asked me about the picture and I lied. I said I had forgotten it at the bar and, when I went back to get it, it had disappeared. You cried the entire night. After that day, you were a feeling down, sick, and your voice was breaking a little. When I realized you were a little off, I turned on the light and understood that you were sad, most of all. I took you to the doctor and, after he examined you, he asked if you had had your picture taken recently. Even though I didn't understand why he would ask something like that, I said you actually had. He asked, "Where is it? Did you bring it?" I explained the photographer had

disappeared, or maybe not even existed in the first place, and taken your picture with him. He looked at you and, in all seriousness, he said we had better find that picture before you disappeared for good. I left you with your mother and asked her to keep an eye on you at all times. I spent an entire month running around the hinterlands of Paraíba, going through every flea market, going into every little shop, asking people if they had seen a photographer around. Some people would point me at one, others would point me to another. I had been in that pilgrimage for 63 days, until I met Damiana. She sold fruit at a farmer's market in Itabaiana and, when she saw I was so desperate, she offered me some sugar apples, saying it was the kind of fruit only rich people get to eat, but that I didn't need to pay her for it because I looked like I was a good man. Then, we went to her house and we had sex for three days. I couldn't say we "made love," even though she did say she loved me on our second day together, when she brought me some cold hog plum juice for me to cool off. I said, "Thank you" and, before I could feel guilty for thanking her when she had just said that she loved me, she said, "You're welcome" without being offended at all. We went on having sex, until I fell asleep and only woke up when she told me she was going to the farmer's market, but that I could stay there, it was not a problem, and that there were many sugar apples on the fruit bowl. There were rose apples, too. A week later, Damiana came back saying she was pregnant. I doubted it was mine, but I kept quiet. She kept repeating, "Yes, it is yours!" even though I hadn't said a word. When her belly got too big, she stayed home, and I'd be the one going to the farmer's market all by myself to sell some fruit. Those were great times, because I was eating better. Do you remember I used to eat so much fried, fatty food? But, because of the farmer's market, I had to prove to people walking past me that the banana was indeed sweet, that the guava was indeed firm, that the red mombins were juicy. I started

trying some of the fruit, even though I was disgusted at first, but soon I had to hold back not to eat half of what I was displaying on the wooden benches. On the day the baby was due, Damiana was feeling lazy and said she wanted to stay in bed. “The boy wants to be born, Damiana!” She corrected me, saying that we didn’t even know if it was going to be a boy, that it might as well be a girl. And she stayed in bed, refusing to go to the hospital. I kept insisting, “C’mon, woman! My boy is about to be born!” She asked for more time, saying that she wanted to take another nap. The baby was born right there, in our bed, as she turned to the other side and kept snoring. It was only when the baby was born—and it was indeed a boy—that I acknowledged that the kid was not mine. I realized that because, as I picked him up from between her legs and placed him on her chest, his face didn’t look like yours at all. I also picked you up from between your mother’s legs and, despite your wrinkly face, it was as if I had just watched myself being born. That’s why I passed out. I wasn’t because of the blood. I was ceasing to exist because I was being born again, without any prior notice. Since Damiana was sleeping and the baby had fallen asleep to, I packed a bunch of sugar apples and left. I had to keep looking for that photographer. I made my way back home and the land looked drier than when I had started my journey. I remember I hadn’t seen rain in quite some time. I was drier, too. I dusted off my shoulders and, for a moment, I wondered if I was turning into sand. On a Tuesday, at the Itabaiana street market, I found him. The photographer. This time, he had a moustache and was wearing a black cape, despite the heat. He was in front of a stand full of pictures, photographs, and frames. I got closer to him, quietly. He wouldn’t remember me. And there you were. Your large picture was in a golden frame. You were looking at the camera, not a smile on your face, but I remembered how happy you were to have your picture taken. That picture was so vivid that I almost reached out to grab

your hand and take you out of there. When I touched the picture, he slapped my hand away. I asked him how much it was, that I wasn't looking for any trouble, but he said it wasn't for sale. That was his Monalisa. I wanted to tell him that you were my son, that it was your picture, but I couldn't even tell if he was the same photographer—because of the moustache, or maybe it was the cape that had changed him into someone else. In doubt, as he yelled to all the people walking around the street market to come and see the Monalisa of the Hinterlands, I took a chance and ran away carrying you under my arm. I must have run for four hours without stopping, as he was chasing me closely, until he finally gave up. Actually, some raindrops started to fall, and heavy dark clouds formed in the sky, and he finally acknowledged he had been defeated. At first, I was afraid the rain would take me away, that is, if I was really made of sand now. As the rain ran over my body, I was still standing. I smiled as I got drenched. I remembered I was carrying the frame with your picture, and you still looked serious, but you were in one piece. I hitched a ride back to João Pessoa and, when I arrived home, your grandmother came to the door. She just stood there, didn't want to open, looking at me through the gap. She didn't recognize me. I pushed the door open and she fell on her back. I showed her your picture. She said your mother had left, *That ungrateful woman!*, I thought. Then she told me you had been in bed for a long time, very, very weak, almost translucent. I stood by your bedside and hanged your picture on the wall. I don't know, I had no idea what I should do. Maybe looking at your picture would remind you of who you were supposed to be like, of who you once were. That's what pictures are good for, right? I've spent a few weeks by your bedside. Your grandma stayed in the living room, eating up all the sugar apples I had brought with me. Little by little, you started to shape up, and your color looked better. As I gave you some chicken soup—you used to love chicken soup!—I told

you all about my adventures, about Damiana, about your almost-brother, and how street markets in the hinterlands are so much fun. You loved my stories and asked me to tell them to you over and over again. Each time, I'd add some more details, change something here or there, just so I could watch you smiling. The story you liked the most was the one about Monalisa. It was your story. Once you got better, had some color in your cheeks, and was ready for the world, I'd often see you staring at your photograph as if it were a mirror. You even stopped watching TV and would rather look at your picture while you were eating. Your grandma couldn't understand it and said you were a strange boy. She decided to hide your picture. That day, you yelled and screamed so much, she put the picture back on the wall and left the house. Once again, it was just you and me. That same way you use to stand there and face the wall, that's how I found your son in the middle of the night, talking to your picture.

It didn't even cross my mind he could be going crazy. No, I just thought he was indeed your son, because people around here doubted he was yours because you're a sissy, and I know one thing has nothing to do with the other, but you know how people can be sometimes. I know how people can be because I used to be one of those people. I just never suspected he wasn't actually talking to himself. Whenever I'd go into the living room, he'd stop talking. I'd think, well, it's okay, after all he's aware of what he's doing. Then he started to tell me you were doing well, that you had gone on a trip, but I shouldn't worry, because you were seeing someone, but then you got a divorce, and I thought it was all child's play, I don't know. You were an imaginative child, too. One Saturday night, though, he mentioned Monalisa. I have never told him about that story.

That's when I knew for sure he wasn't talking to himself in front of the picture—he was talking to you.

The woman stopped taking notes to allow the man to recompose himself. He had gotten emotional. That story had brought to the surface some emotions that had been buried or were completely unknown to him. He asked for some water and someone soon brought him a glass. He realized Laura was watching them. He nodded, as if to apologize, “You know how these things are.” The man thanked them for the water and excused himself, saying he was going to the restroom. The woman looked at her watch, with a smile on her face, as if saying, *I want to help, but I don't have all the time in the world, you know?* He nodded again, thanking her, and this time he had a reason to be grateful. The woman turned to the sea once again, but this time she no longer took notes and seemed to be apologizing for dedicating herself to another activity. The sea looked calm, less green, but still calm.

Taking a break from the man's story, Laura reached for her phone again before he could return from the bathroom. Something was happening inside of her, stirring around, asking to come out. She clicked one more time on her messages and, there it was, Cecília's face. Her daughter, who had looked so much like her since she was little— and still did—seemed almost like remnants that could replace Laura if needed, when the time came. The round picture on the app showed Cecília smiling, flashing her large white teeth. It was the permanent smile of someone who knew that life could be a gift. It was the smile of someone who nearly perished as a child. Every time Cecília looked at herself

in the mirror or ran her hands through her face, instead of being ashamed, the scar near her mouth actually reminded her that life is a balancing act.

The word “Typing...” suddenly appeared next to the picture, below the contact name. It was as if Cecília could feel that her mother was thinking of her on the other side. It was as if she could reach out through that cold screen and bring her closer to her. She’d ask where her mother was, and Laura would tell her the truth, that she had returned to João Pessoa after her sabbatical. The daughter would then rush to see her mother, apologize for doing what she had done to her father, saying that she had been so stupid, that her mother had been right all along. Then they’d hug each other and spend the entire afternoon holding each other, until the absence they had felt could be washed away by their tears. However, the word “Typing...” remained on the screen for a few seconds more before it went back to “Online.” Then the word disappeared and Cecília seemed to move away, as if a portal were closing, and only the smiling, scarred avatar remained on the cell phone screen.

The phone felt heavy in Laura’s hands, as heavy as only absence can feel. Drained, she placed the device on the table. The man left the restroom and slowly made his way back to the table. The woman said goodbye to the sea, noticing the break hadn’t slowed the man down. She didn’t know what he had thought about or seen while in the restroom, but the man seemed even more restless. There was still room in the small postcard for him to continue to tell his story.

Yes, I was worried, because he was the kind of boy who doesn’t have many friends. At least they could keep each other’s company that way, but for the love of god, he only

talked to that picture, he was limiting himself. I was afraid he'd somehow find a way to get inside the picture and stay with you there in São Paulo, because I'd be all alone then. I will not lose anyone else. I never wanted anyone to remain by my side, but this time I did demand it, I'm not ashamed to say it. I hid your picture and the boy cried the entire day, the entire week. I only put the picture back on the wall when he started to fade away like you once did. He was turning more transparent each day and, at first, I pretended I hadn't noticed, I pretended I didn't care, and he could really disappear if he wanted to. He was your son, indeed—the apple doesn't fall far from the tree. I finally gave in and put the picture up on the wall again. But he changed. I thought he would be mad at me, but after I put your picture up, he tried to talk to you for a few day—you must remember that—but it must have been one of those days when you were on another honeymoon, and you didn't have time for him, who knows? He started to get some color on his cheeks, his flesh was solid again, and he'd cross the living room right past you. He started to ask if he could watch TV again. I had already sold our TV set, since nobody had been using it, so I had to sell the rest of my sugar apples to buy a new one. He stopped telling me what had been going on with you, and I missed news from you because I liked knowing about your life, but at the same time I was happy to see he'd be staying there by my side.

I don't know, maybe you think I'm being selfish, but, give me a break, I raised your son and you didn't even give him a name. Don't get me started on how you didn't choose a name because you didn't want to make the same mistake with your son that we made with you, because you weren't even there when he was born. You ran away as soon as you found out that girl was pregnant. I won't even ask you how you got a girl pregnant, since you're a sissy, because I know one thing has nothing to do with the other. After all, your mother didn't even like me and there you are, you were born. The only thing I always

wonder about is how someone can run away. Okay, I understand running away. My problem is that you're so shameless you don't even pretend that you care about him. I'd rather think you're a cynic, a liar, a psychopath who, despite leaving, wanted to check on him, "*How has he been? Does he need some money?*" No, not even that! And I know you had money, because he told me. He told me about your trips all over the world, that you have a lot of clients, that you have short hair, but sometimes you wear something that makes your hair look long, even look different colors. Maybe that's why you haven't named him: That way, he won't hear someone calling him in the middle of the night and think it was you. That way, he can't walk down the street and have to cross to the other side when he hears someone calling his own name. Nameless. Your son will continue to be a noun that is not capitalized, so he can get used to the idea and never grow up.

The thing is that your son did grow up and, last week, he was released from prison. Don't even look surprised, because I know what kind of face you're making right now, and it's not because I'm talking to you through your picture. If you want to talk to me, you can be a decent person and talk to me here, because I refuse to talk to a picture. Still, I know you have a surprised look on your face because I did it on purpose and skipped years of this story, because we never know who people will become if you haven't known them from the very beginning. And, even when we've known them all along, we're still caught by surprise. And you haven't been in your son's life all along. Before you blame me, keep in mind I raised you, too. Are you like that because of me? If you're proud of yourself, am I the one to blame? If you hate the person you've become, am I the one to blame? Did you notice I mentioned "blame" for both options, even though one is good and the other one is bad? That's it. Parents are the ones to blame from the very moment our children are born and—regardless of what we do, we'll always be in

debt. You must think you're so special. Back when he used to talk to you, he told me you wrote some things about me, that everybody praised you and sympathized with you, they hated your dad, the monster. But, if they praise you so much, if you're such a good person, how come I'm always mentioned after the word "in spite of"? *In spite of his father, he made it.* Whatever, I don't care, I won't carry this blame. If I've done you wrong, if I gave you the name I shouldn't have given you, at least I raised your son, I respected your decision not to name him, and I didn't give him a name either. They said it was a good thing, because they'd forget all about him in prison when there was a fight, or when they needed someone to hide drugs up someone's ass. But they said it was bad, too, because they forgot him in prison longer than they should, since he didn't have a name and he wasn't on the list, so there wasn't a release date next to his name. Even I forgot all about him, until the day someone told me he looked so small it was disturbing. He looked so small and insignificant that it revolted people. Your son was so revolting that, sometimes, people thought he was a latrine. Tell me, who's the one to blame now? Before you say it, let me tell you that he came back home. I bathed him for three days, left him soaking up some bleach, and yes, I gave him chicken soup—the chicken soup you liked so much when you were little. He was very small when he returned, but soon he shaped up, and now I'm sure it's indeed him.

What I'm trying to say is that he's alright, in spite of you, in spite of me. He is himself, without any "spites." He talked to you yesterday, asking for your address, so he could send you this postcard. After that, he broke your picture. I was worried, because I know what happened last time that picture disappeared. He knows it, too, and maybe that's why he put an end to it. But you're my son, without any "spites," you're my son, even if you stop existing. The only thing I ask of you is that, if you really disappear, tell

me first what your current name is. Is it still Antônio? Is it Monalisa now? If I know your name, I can tell everyone how handsome you were. Even from far away, even dead, you'll go on living, if only through my words.

The woman who was taking notes gave him back the postcard. Every single inch of it was covered in letters and lines. Even though she gave it back to him, the story stayed with her and, after that day, she was no longer able to hear what the sea had to tell her. The man thanked her and put the postcard inside his bag. He said goodbye and walked away. Laura watched as he took those steps, until he turned around a corner and was out of sight.

A car came around that very same corner, tires screeching, and it hit her hard, without a warning, leaving tire marks on her insides. She remembered when, years earlier, she opened her eyes, and everything was white. The airbag was covering her face, and she wished it had continued to blind her, but she ended up pushing it away with her hands and saw Cecília next to her, covered in blood. As a baby, Cecília used to irritate her so often. Her daughter cried, asked for food, or wanted to sleep, or had an inexplicable pain, or just felt like crying. However, this time, at six years of age, the girl was quiet, her eyes closed, sitting still, her face painted in red. Laura called out her daughter's name, but the girl remained motionless, as if she didn't recognize her own name, or as if no sound were coming out of her mother's mouth. Laura would carry that soundless, frozen image with her, as if her memory could turn it into a picture. Every dream would turn into a nightmare. At each nap, she'd remember how dangerous it was to close her eyes, and she'd force them open, apprehensively—her eyes brought back the stench of death.

The girl spent three months at the hospital. She was released in one piece, alive, without noticing the large scar near her mouth, flashing a broad smile whenever she saw her mother and father, as if nothing had happened. Things would never be the same again.

The car went past Laura—maybe through her—and the screeching tires kept on moving until the sound could no longer harm her. Her voice came back. As she asked for the check, the woman who wrote down the man’s story got up as well and waved at her. The boy with earphones on had already left. She paid the bill, got up, and hid behind her hat and glasses. She fished her phone out of her purse.

On the sidewalk, with her phone in her hands, she decided it was time. She needed to forgive and reunite with her daughter. She needed to be forgotten. There was no longer a father or a husband, just the two of them. You can still write a story with two people. There’s still continuity. The warm breeze coming from the sea caressed her face as Laura typed “d a u g h t”...

Before she could send a message and turn her yearning into a word, she watched as her phone moved away from her in the hands of a boy who went past her on a bicycle. Laura tried to run after him, but something froze her in place, despite the bubbly sidewalk. It was as if the skinny boy were carrying her daughter away on his bike. She had always had limited maternal powers. She had always been paralyzed by fear. She didn’t even scream.

At night, at the hotel, she took a cold shower and was getting ready for bed when the phone in her room started to ring. It was the reception desk, saying the police had found her phone. She asked them to keep it at reception, she’d pick it up in the morning. She had better get some rest. Three times she was about to fall asleep, but became alert

again and talked to herself, unsure whether she even had a voice still. Then she finally fell asleep. She woke up the next morning with a fright, in that eternal shock that she was still alive.

She repeated the same steps she had followed the day before. Who knows, maybe she could keep her feet firmly on the ground, even if it were by force of habit. The food, the hot coffee, the sunglasses covering her face, the wave—which was different from the day before, even though her feet didn't notice it, because they got wet the same way—changing her clothes. When she rushed past the reception desk, she pretended she didn't remember her cell phone was there. She carried on.

Even though it was so early in the morning, it was very hot already. A few steps were enough for Laura to start sweating. Luckily, she had put sunscreen on and her large straw hat offered some protection. She went to the same beach bar she had gone to the day before, ordered some coconut water and, this time, drank it in a single gulp. Mercilessly. After the very last drop, she asked the server to break the coconut open. He brought the coconut back in two halves, with a spoon. She ate every single piece of that translucent slimy flesh. She wanted to eat that coconut to make it forget what it had been before. Every piece went down her throat without asking for mercy, accepting the course of nature.

Even the sea was melting because of the heat. It looked drier today, with less sea. Laura tried to listen to it, but it only moaned in lassitude. Before she felt sorry for herself, she remembered the sea would soon be full again, dancing with its wave, roaring loudly—if it didn't happen the next day, it would happen soon.

She was drying the sweat off her face when that same man from the day before went into the bar. *What is he doing here? Has he lost his postcard?* When the server picked up the coconut from her table, he realized Laura was looking at the man with interest. He warned her before the man came any closer.

“He does this every day, but he’s harmless. I think he’s just lonely. Who knows?”

The man stood next to her and, when he said “coulduwritealettertomyson?” she wasn’t even frightened. She smiled a broad smile, showing her teeth, and said yes, she could help him. As he sat at the table, Laura saw many other postcards inside his bag—a large volume that seemed to want to jump out to be written on and be given life.

This time, she didn’t need to listen carefully. The man told her a story that had nothing to do with the story from the day before. It was about a forgotten brother, an apology, a polar bear hiding behind a wardrobe. Still, Laura wrote it all on the postcard and the man smiled, fully aware of what was going on.

The sun was melting the sidewalk, making the air turbulent, making images doubt themselves as if they were mirages in the desert. Miles away, Cecília was making her way towards Laura, her arms open, with a double, scarred smile on her face. The frozen world fell quiet, waiting for the two of them to be reunited.