**A stroke, serial killers and our immense solitude**

**Paulo Faria**

Translated by Patricia Ann Odber de Baubeta

I have a Portuguese friend who teaches in a university in Holland, in Amsterdam. I really enjoy talking to him. I like him a lot. Some days ago he phoned me and told me a story. He wanted to get something off his chest. He'd invited a German colleague to give a lecture series at his university, held over two days. We'll call the German professor Wolfgang and my friend Tiago. Tiago is thirty something, Wolfgang is in his fifties. They'd met at a conference, some years before, they do research in similar areas, and they immediately got on well together. They're not friends as such. Their relationship, though friendly, is circumscribed to the academic, professional sphere. For them to be friends, Tiago told me, something else would be needed, one of them having confessed a weakness to the other, or their sharing a great love. Wolfgang arrived in Amsterdam, gave two lectures on the first day and everything ran smoothly. Tiago and a group of colleagues dined with him, then Tiago drove him back to his hotel.

"He phoned me at midnight," Tiago told me. "He apologised for calling so late, but said it was urgent, he needed to fine-tune a technical issue for the following day's lecture. Then, at the end of the conversation, almost like someone who remembers an anecdotal detail, he complained about a tremendous headache. And he added, very oddly, that he hadn't managed to send an email to his daughter. He'd begun to write the message, but the words got jumbled up and he hadn't been able to continue. He said this quite naturally, a little worried but playful. "It must be because I'm tired, I've been working too hard," he concluded.

Next day, Wolfgang arrived at the university in the morning and gave the third lecture. It went well, as on the day before. At the end, while they were having a coffee before a meeting to line up future

projects, someone quietly let Tiago know he'd noticed something strange in Wolfgang's gait, different from the previous day. One could say he was limping, dragging his left leg slightly. They all went into the room and the meeting passed normally. Tiago said goodbye to Wolfgang, who took a taxi to the airport.

I have a friend who worked for three years on the Social Security help line, line 144. We'll call her Mariana. The line is toll-free. She and her colleagues received two and a half euros per hour. They didn't work for the Social Security, they had zero-hours contracts with a company which had subcontracted the service from the Social Security. Everything was timed to the last second. In every hour of work, each operator was entitled to two minutes to go the bathroom, no more. The company had established a duration of twelve minutes as the average time for each phone call, regardless of what it was about. It could be a child who was the victim of sexual abuse, a woman who was the victim of domestic violence or someone just asking for information about access to the income support allowance. Whatever it was about, the call could not exceed twelve minutes. If this happened, the operator missed out in the performance reward scheme. The computers recorded everything. Mariana told me that she frequently went over the limit, whenever she thought it was necessary. After every call, the system went into pause mode for two minutes, then the operator had to take another call. She might have had to deal with a very hard call, but at the end of two minutes, she had to be ready for the next one. Fortunately, the supervisor sometimes had the good grace to let Mariana go and unwind a little, going over the two minute limit, when the conversations were especially disturbing. But it was a simple gesture of good will, infringing the rules that had been laid down.

On the day after Wolfgang's departure, at the end of the afternoon, Tiago received an email from him. As soon as he had got home, his wife had taken him to A&E. They'd diagnosed a stroke.

"I failed," said Tiago. "I failed abysmally."

He told me that at one point, towards the end of the meeting, before Wolfgang left for the airport, he plucked up the courage to ask him if he was feeling all right. He reached the point of telling him that his walk seemed odd. Was his leg hurting? With the utmost candour, Wolfgang answered him, “Oh no, it’s nothing. It must be a nerve. It’ll soon pass.”

“He was denying the evidence,” Tiago told me. “When something like that happens to us, we always try to deny it. It’s up to others to shake us, force to come back down to earth. We feel that if we put an illness, a catastrophe into words, it becomes real, it comes into existence. He refused to give substance to the illness, and I refused as well.”

When Tiago told me this, a scene from a film by David Fincher—*The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*— flashed through my mind. The protagonist of the story, an investigative journalist, played by Daniel Craig, is hanging around the serial killer’s house in search of leads. He doesn’t yet know that the man is the serial killer, he just has vague suspicions. The other arrives home, surprises him there and invites him to come in. Minutes later, already bound and gagged in the cellar, the journalist hears the murderer, played by the sinister Stellan John Skarsgård, tell him: “Why is it that people don’t trust their instincts? You sensed that something was wrong, but even so, you accepted my invitation to enter my home. It’s hard to believe that the fear of offending other people is stronger than the fear of pain, but… do you know what? It actually is.”

I didn’t discuss this with Tiago. At the precise moment when the scene occurred to me, I realised that there was something spurious about the parallel that my brain had immediately drawn. Tiago was telling me that he hadn’t helped Wolfgang out of an excess of delicacy, scruples or decorum. In the scene I recalled, the murderer says that people become victims because of an excess of delicacy, scruples or decorum.

When she worked on line 144, Mariana was finishing her degree. The company preferred to recruit students from the social sciences so they didn't have to invest a lot in their training. Before they began to work, the operators had two days of preliminary training. Two days. There was a man who called every day from a phone box in Avenue Almirante Reis, masturbating. They knew he was calling from Almirante Reis, because he made a point of telling them. When, by chance, it happened to be a male operator who took the call, he hung up straightaway. When it was a woman who picked up, he began the ritual. As soon as they realised who it was, they would hang up, but it wasn't always immediately obvious. As soon as the operator disconnected, he would call again. He called repeatedly, at various stages of the act, speaking to successive operators, until he climaxed. Another man also used to phone up while masturbating, with traffic noises in the background. They realised he was a taxi driver.

"And to cap it all," Tiago told me, "Wolfgang sent me a veiled cry for help, that night-time phone call, at that unearthly hour. It was as if he was trying to make me responsible for what was happening to him, which is perfectly understandable, he must have been feeling scared. And I dodged that responsibility."

There was another reason for my not talking to Tiago about that cinematographic incursion in my brain during the conversation with him. It was because Fincher's film irritates me. It made a visual impression on me, it took up residence in my subconscious, but it annoyed me because it contained two elements that colonise our present-day imagination, that flood countless contemporary narratives and that say a great deal about our world. On the one hand, the figure of the serial killer, on the other, the millionaire-dollar hit, through electronic means, that allows someone to make a fortune in the blink of an eye, at the expense of the villains of the piece, leaving no trail. At the end of the film, a girl, the intriguing (I refuse to write words like 'iconic') Lisbeth Salander, played by Rooney Mara, does exactly that. Furiously typing into her laptop, she transfers an enormous fortune into her own

bank account, seizing untold millions from some ex-Soviet oligarch. All that is missing from Fincher's movie is the third fetish of popular modern films, series and novels: the solitary marksman, the sniper.

"I could have said to him 'Let's go to the hospital. It may be serious'," continued Tiago. "If he'd tried to make light of it, and he did try, I could have insisted, I could have pushed him. But that would have meant going over an invisible line, crossing a barrier. It would have meant, to all intents and purposes, ruining that man's happiness. That man had a life, and after the stroke, a new life began for him. And I didn't want to be the person who started off his new life. I didn't want to be forever in his thoughts as the man who caused him to be born again into a diminished, second-rate existence, a substitute for his previous life. I didn't want to be the gate-keeper between those worlds."

Mariana told me there was a madwoman who used to call line 144. She would say, "I'm very good. I sing very well. I'm going to sing." And she would start to sing. "The truth is," she said, "the woman sang well, she had a beautiful voice." And there was a man called Armindo who phoned every day from the Azores, twice, first in the morning then at night. All the operators knew him, he'd already talked to everyone. In the morning he would greet them and at night he would say goodbye. He had a childlike voice, you could tell that he had a mild cognitive impairment. The operators would ask him, "So, what are you going to do today?" And at the end of the day, "So, how did your day go?" And he would recount his daily tasks, his worries, always polite, quite childish. Mariana told me that on some occasions, when it fell to her to talk to Mr. Armindo, the conversation would extend beyond the twelve regulated minutes, causing her to miss out on the performance bonus at the end of the month. But she couldn't hang up on him just like that when the countdown on the monitor was approaching zero. They'd all realised that those conversations were the only agreeable interaction that man had with other people.

I've given a lot of thought as to why my brain, against my will, should have made that direct connection between Tiago's story and

Fincher's film. In the end I managed to find the link between the two narratives, the subconscious tie holding them together. I think it was the immense loneliness I sensed underlying them both. The serial killer, the hacker in pursuit of a fortune and the marksman are the compulsive fictional translation of the absolute solitude to which we are consigning ourselves at the beginning of the 21st century. None of them is politically motivated. Nor indeed have we the least interest in political narrative, ideological struggles or collective utopias, either perverse or redemptive ones. Evil is individual, salvation is individual. We don't want to hear political speeches, we aren't inclined to let ourselves be mobilised. It's no coincidence that serial killers like Fincher's are always verbose, subjecting their victims to long speeches before torturing and killing them. As if in the middle of the solitude in which we are floundering, the only way to force others to listen attentively to our theories, our action programme, our five-year plan, would be to kidnap them, tie them to a chair and lock them in a cellar. The parallel my brain established is not, after all, so far-fetched. But the serial killer in the film and Tiago said the same thing: that we are inclined to run all the risks to keep a healthy distance between ourselves and others, a distance made of aseptic delicacy. Which was why I said nothing to Tiago, so as not to compare his words with those of the icy Skarsgård. I chose to tell him that in his place, I would have done exactly the same, which is actually true. I would have let Wolfgang leave for the airport, dragging his leg.

"Everything I'm telling you," Tiago explained, "is a rationalisation by me, after the event. If it weren't, if these thoughts had passed through my mind at that moment, if I had expressed these ideas coherently during Wolfgang's midnight telephone call, or when I saw him dragging his leg, then I would be a psychopath. And I don't think I am."

Some time ago, my wife and I went to the home of acquaintances of ours, a couple. They live in an obscenely opulent apartment, like something in a film, in the centre of Lisbon. No sooner did we enter, the

host began to speak in English to a gadget, a kind of speaker sitting on a table, that he called 'Siri'. We'll call the man Júlio. In velvety tones, Júlio ordered 'Siri' to switch on the living room lights and put the music on. Before obeying, the machine replied in a feminine, cyber-slave's voice. That disturbed me so much that I had to leave the room. I fled to the kitchen, but Júlio followed me. He really wanted to talk about 'Siri'. He began to list all the things she did. He said that there was only one function of the machine that he didn't use: locking the street door by voice command. He was afraid that a hacker might sneak into the system and break into their home. When we left, I said to my wife that I wasn't going back there. There was something sinister in 'Siri's' voice and in Júlio's when he addressed her, that horrible affability with which we try to disguise an unbridgeable distance. Or even, worse still, the mellifluous tone that I imagine in the opening sentences of the men who called 144, masturbating. Or even the pedantic and slightly bored voice of the serial killer played by Skarsgård, drawing out the monologue before unleashing the ferocious violence. What troubled me most was the realisation that for Júlio, 'Siri' meant he had achieved his own little utopia and that from now on, he will consider himself diminished if he does not possess that presence in his home. He told me that his oldest son already had a 'Siri' in his house, and his youngest son hastened to say that when he lives on his own, he'll want to have one too.

I have a friend who gave me a beautiful photography book he had written. In this case it isn't necessary to say 'We'll call my friend Humberto.' His name is precisely that: Humberto Brito. Humberto photographs inhospitable, solitary or devastated urban landscapes. In a brief, luminous text at the end of the book, at one point he wrote: "For example, now nobody really knows who tore that landscape apart. Obviously someone must have done it, but when the photographer arrives the damage seems to have been wrought by invisible hands. And it occurred to me how similar it is with people."

I constantly find myself embellishing the past, above all the one I never lived. Only the one I never lived, incidentally. Then I read books

and talk to people older than me and I realise that it doesn't make sense, that the world has always been a place of unspeakable pain and the pain never brings people together, it always drives them apart. John Banville wrote that "the present is the place where we live, the past is the place where we dream." But I live in the here and now and it is here and now that I need miracles, hope, dreams. Sometimes, it seems to me that we are all like Wolfgang: we are now living a diminished, second rate existence. In truth we don't really know who tore our lives apart. Clearly someone did it, but when we come to our everyday lives, like a photographer coming to a landscape, the damage seems to have been wrought by invisible hands. It's as if someone had witnessed but not intervened, out of delicacy, scruples or decorum, in the transition between what could have been and what we have now, this organised, solitary unhappiness. Everything happened slowly, in slow motion, there was a headache, a dragging leg, but once it had occurred, it seems it was in the blink of an eye. And it seems irreversible. But it could have been different, and, furthermore, it is not irreversible. I refuse to accept the irreversible.

In a lecture given a few months ago in the Gulbenkian Foundation, Lilian Thuram, World Cup soccer winner, said: "Being alone is the equivalent of madness. Alone, a man goes mad. We live in a society in which people are moving towards loneliness. Therefore, towards madness."

I collect all the signs that give me hope. I surround myself with them like someone collecting memories, like a neighbour of mine whose car is full of booty brought from the beach, a desiccated starfish, shells, sea urchins, exoskeletons lined up on the dashboard, in the sun. I collect moments I witness or episodes someone tells me about, and one and the other have the same value for me. Mariana letting Mr. Armindo's telephone call extend, going over the twelve prescribed minutes, which no one knows who established. The supervisor letting her go and smoke a cigarette after a hard phone call. The films that affect me and which don't have serial killers or hackers or snipers. The

moment when Júlio addressed 'Siri' and the machine didn't understand the order and he had to reword it and the machine still didn't understand and he looked lost and finally human. The end of Humberto Brito's text, which is the extract from a letter addressed to his wife, Djaimilia Pereira de Almeida: "You, me, everyone everywhere, Cruz de Pau or New York, everyone on the waiting list in the long process of breaking down. And then I began to see that — the anonymity of the breakdown — in everywhere I went, in everything, in everybody, in my own life. I miss you. Hurry back." And the last sentences of Tiago's telephone call.

"I know I failed completely. But I don't think I'll fail again. Maybe it wasn't that serious. At least, Wolfgang managed to send me an email from hospital. But I've promised myself that if something similar happens in front of me again, I won't be afraid to be forever inscribed in someone else's life."

This, my collection of magical moments, may be either the collection of the last appearances of an endangered species, or a catalogue of the first instances of a new phenomenon emerging in the world. There are days when it seems like the former, others when it seems like the latter. Days of black despair and days of radiant hope. And those same signs, now they discourage me, now they help me to carry on.

Paulo Faria
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