

The Right Order

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Retorno Programme, Derby Unit, Recife. Family Conversation under Article 9 of the Return Law. Transcript produced automatically. Counsellor's observations in brackets.

First session. Tuesday 4 March. Present: Maria das Graças Ferreira (candidate, 81), Rosângela Ferreira (daughter, 58), Iolanda Paiva (counsellor).

[The candidate arrives eleven minutes early with a plastic bag of oranges and a paper fan printed with Saint Anthony. The daughter arrives four minutes late, having had to park twice. The air conditioning in room 3 is broken again. I apologise for it. The candidate says she has been hot since 1966 and is not going to start minding now.]

PAIVA: Thank you both for coming. First I want to say what this is and what it isn't. It isn't an exam. Nobody passes or fails. Before anyone over seventy five begins Retorno, the law gives the people closest to them a chance to be heard, because the treatment changes their lives too. At the end of the third session I sign a certificate saying that Dona Graça's consent is free and informed. That is my whole job. I'm not here to talk anyone into it, or out of it.

GRAÇA: She's not going to talk me out of it. Are you, Rosa?

ROSA: I haven't said anything yet.

GRAÇA: You said plenty in the car.

PAIVA: Let's start with the informed part. Dona Graça, can you tell me in your own words what the treatment does?

GRAÇA: A needle every two weeks for nine months, and my body forgets how old it is. My heart stops being a bag of water. My knees go back to how they were when I could kneel in church. The doctor said about forty five, maybe fifty, depending. My head stays mine. I remember everything, the good and the other. Then I start getting old again from there, like a clock somebody has wound back.

PAIVA: That's very close. And afterwards?

GRAÇA: Afterwards my pension stops. Two years after the last needle, because as far as Brasília is concerned I'm a working woman again. (laughs) Thirty four years I cooked lunch for six hundred children at the school on Estrada do Arraial. Now they want me back at the pot.

PAIVA: The law calls it a return to active life.

GRAÇA: The law has never stood at a pot.

[The candidate takes a small knife from her bag and begins to peel an orange without looking at it. Her hands shake. The peel does not break.]

PAIVA: Rosângela, you're the registered carer?

ROSA: Six years. Since she fell in the bathroom. Before that it was shopping and the medicines. Then it was everything.

PAIVA: The law asks me to hear you, so I'd like to hear you. What do you think about your mother doing this?

ROSA: I think it's unnatural.

GRAÇA: So is the pacemaker. So is your hair.

ROSA: Mãe.

GRAÇA: I'm only saying.

ROSA: I think there's an order to things. You're born, you get old, you die, and your children bury you. That's the order. My grandmother buried two of her children and she said it was like being made to eat backwards. Now my mother wants to sign up for it. If she does this, she'll be fifty and I'll be sixty. Then she'll be sixty and I'll be seventy. It's me who goes first. She'll bury me. She's choosing that.

GRAÇA: Nobody chooses who goes first. Your father didn't choose.

ROSA: Pai had a heart attack on a bus. That isn't the same as a lottery.

PAIVA: You mention the lottery. Dona Graça, public places are given by a draw from the register. How did you feel when you heard you'd been drawn?

GRAÇA: Like you feel when you win anything. Surprised, and a bit guilty. There's a woman on my street, Dona Socorro, who has been on the register since the beginning. She prays to Saint Expeditus about it every Friday. She hasn't spoken to me since.

[The candidate finishes the orange. The peel comes away in a single ribbon, and she holds it up to her daughter.]

GRAÇA: Olha.

ROSA: I see it, Mãe.

GRAÇA: Your father could never do that. Not once in forty years.

[She divides the orange and puts two segments in front of each of us. The daughter does not eat hers.]

PAIVA: Rosângela, what are you most afraid of?

ROSA: That's a counsellor question.

PAIVA: I'm a counsellor.

ROSA: (pause) I call her every night at midnight. I live on the next street, Rua das Pitangueiras. I call at midnight and she picks up and says, go to sleep, menina, I'm not dead yet. And then I can sleep. Six years.

Some nights she doesn't pick up, because she's in the bathroom, or the phone is in the kitchen, and I put my sandals on and go round in my nightdress and let myself in, and I stand in her bedroom doorway and listen until I hear her breathe. I've done that, I don't know, two hundred times. Every time I think, this is the night. I've said goodbye to her two hundred times. And now she wants forty more years of it.

GRAÇA: You won't have to call. I'll be fine.

ROSA: That isn't the point.

GRAÇA: Then what is the point?

[The daughter does not answer. We agree on a second session.]

[Observation: the candidate's understanding of the treatment and its consequences is good. There is ambivalence in the family, which is normal. I note that the daughter spoke mostly about herself and the mother spoke mostly about other people. In my experience it is usually the other way round.]

Second session. Tuesday 11 March. Present: Rosângela Ferreira, Iolanda Paiva. (Article 9, paragraph 3: each party may request one session without the other.)

[The daughter requested this session by message on Saturday at 00:14. The air conditioning has been repaired. She takes the chair nearest the door and keeps her bag on her knees.]

ROSA: Is this recorded?

PAIVA: Transcribed, like the first one. It goes in the file. The file is confidential. Your mother can't read it unless you agree.

ROSA: And you?

PAIVA: I read it. I have to.

ROSA: (long pause) I registered her.

PAIVA: For the draw.

ROSA: You knew.

PAIVA: The system shows the registration came from the carer's login. It doesn't show anything else, and I don't draw conclusions from it. A lot of carers register their parents. It's usually the carer who reads the news.

ROSA: She thinks the government just called her. She told the whole street it was luck. Saint Anthony did it, she says. Dona Socorro crosses the road.

PAIVA: Why did you register her, Rosângela?

ROSA: Because I read the news. (a sound that is not a laugh) No. Because one night in January I didn't go round. She didn't pick up, and I lay there in the dark and I didn't put my sandals on. I lay there and thought, if she's gone, she's gone, and in the morning I'll know, and I'll do all the things you do. The doctor. The funeral people. The plot she's already paid for at Santo Amaro. And then I will sleep. I'll sleep for a week. And I lay there wanting it. Wanting my mother dead so that I could sleep. For about twenty minutes. Then I got up and went round, and she was asleep in the chair with the television on and the phone under her leg, and I stood in the doorway and I was so ashamed I thought I would be sick. The next morning I made the account and put her name on the register.

PAIVA: So that she would live.

ROSA: So that she would live and I could stop being the one who keeps her alive. Those aren't the same thing. I know they're not. If she's fifty she can carry her own shopping. She can climb her own stairs. She can find her own phone. She won't need me in the doorway. I could go back to work. I could go to São Paulo and see Caio and the baby for longer than a weekend. I'm fifty eight. I wanted ten years of my life before I'm the one who needs a doorway, and the only way I could find to get them was to give her forty.

PAIVA: Last week you said it was unnatural.

ROSA: It is unnatural. I believe that. I believe both things. I sit in this room and hear her talk about her knees, and I think, she'll bury me, I'm doing this to myself, and I mean it. Then I go home and sleep four hours and lie there thinking, please God, let her say yes.

PAIVA: Then why tell her you're against it?

ROSA: Because if I'm against it, it's her choice. If she says yes while I'm against it, she's doing it for herself. She's brave and a bit selfish and the street can talk. If she knows I want it, she'll do it for me. She has done everything for me. She'll do this too, and she'll have forty more years of a life she never asked for because her daughter was tired. I can't carry that. I would rather she thought I was a coward about death.

PAIVA: You'd rather she thought you were against it.

ROSA: I'd rather she was free. That's your word, isn't it? On the certificate.

[I explain that what she has told me is protected and that I will not repeat it to her mother. I also explain that my certificate concerns her mother's consent, that her mother is entitled to any fact that bears on it, and that if she asks me a direct question I will not lie to her. The daughter says her mother has never asked a direct question in her life. She goes round things, like water.]

ROSA: Can I ask you something? Do people regret it?

PAIVA: Some do. Most don't, at least in the first years. It's still new. Our longest follow up is eleven years.

ROSA: Do the children regret it?

PAIVA: Nobody asks the children.

ROSA: You're asking me.

PAIVA: Before. Not after.

[She leaves at 10:52.]

[Observation: I have no grounds to stop the process. A carer's reason for registering a parent is not a matter for this certificate, and if it were, I do not think many certificates would be signed. I have rewritten this sentence three times.]

Third session. Tuesday 18 March. Present: Maria das Graças Ferreira, Rosângela Ferreira, Iolanda Paiva.

[It has rained since dawn, the first of the winter rains, early this year. The candidate has brought no oranges. She is wearing a navy dress with white buttons that I have not seen before, and earrings. She sits, lays the fan in her lap and does not open it.]

PAIVA: This is the last conversation. At the end I'll ask Dona Graça whether she wants to begin. If she says yes, she signs and I sign. If she says no, that's also an answer, and it's final for this draw. The place goes to the next name.

GRAÇA: Dona Socorro.

PAIVA: I don't know whose name is next.

GRAÇA: I do. I asked at the parish. She's next on our street, anyway. Saint Expeditus is very quick. It's his whole reputation.

ROSA: Mãe, what are you saying?

GRAÇA: I'm saying no.

[Pause. The daughter does not move.]

GRAÇA: I thought about it all week. I didn't sleep. No, that's a lie, I slept fine, I'm eighty one, I sleep in the chair like a cat. But I thought. I'm not afraid of dying, Doutora.

PAIVA: I'm not a doctor.

GRAÇA: I want to say this properly, because young people always think the old are lying when we say it. I'm not afraid. I have the plot at Santo Amaro next to Severino, paid in instalments for nine years. I gave

my sewing machine to the girl at number twelve who does alterations. I've written down who gets the blue dish. I've had a good life and a hard one, and I've had enough of both. Forty more years? What would I do with forty more years? Cook? I cooked.

PAIVA: You don't have to justify it.

GRAÇA: I know I don't. She does. (to Rosa) You were right. It's unnatural. I'm not going to make you bury me. It's the one thing left I can do for you. You won't stand at a grave with my name on it when you're seventy and your knees are gone. I'll go in the right order, and you can stop being afraid.

[The daughter begins to cry without sound. The candidate takes her hand.]

GRAÇA: There. It's done. Soon you can stop calling at midnight, too. Soon enough.

ROSA: (inaudible)

GRAÇA: What?

ROSA: I registered you.

[Silence. Forty one seconds by the transcript clock.]

ROSA: It wasn't the government. It wasn't Saint Anthony. It was me. I made the account and put your name in. In January.

GRAÇA: But you said...

ROSA: Because I'm tired, Mãe. Because I'm so tired. One night I lay in bed and I didn't come round. I didn't come round. I wanted it to be over. I wanted to sleep. And then I was so ashamed that I signed you up for forty years. That's who I am. That's the whole of it. Say no. It's right, say no, give it to Dona Socorro. I just couldn't let you say no to protect me from something I did.

[The candidate lets go of her daughter's hand. She opens the fan and closes it. She looks at me, not at her daughter.]

GRAÇA: Doutora. Can I have five minutes with you alone?

[The daughter goes out into the corridor. She leaves her bag.]

GRAÇA: Is it allowed, changing your answer?

PAIVA: Until you sign, you haven't given one.

GRAÇA: Then yes.

PAIVA: Dona Graça, I have to ask this and I need you to really answer. Is that because of what she just told you?

GRAÇA: Of course it is.

PAIVA: Then I'm not sure I can certify that your consent is free.

GRAÇA: (laughs) Free. How old are you, minha filha?

PAIVA: Forty one.

GRAÇA: Children?

PAIVA: No.

GRAÇA: Your mother?

PAIVA: She died at seventy one. Four years too young for the register.

GRAÇA: And did she do anything free, your mother? Anything at all, after you were born?

[I do not answer. The transcript records nothing for nineteen seconds.]

GRAÇA: Sixty years I've been doing things because somebody was tired. I got up in the night for that one out there. I got up at four to cook for six hundred children because their mothers were tired. I married Severino partly because my own mother was tired of feeding me. Every yes I ever said was for somebody who was tired, and nobody once asked me if it was free. Now, at the end, the government sends a nice girl with

a broken air conditioner to ask. (pause) You understand I was saying no for her as well? This morning. So she wouldn't have to bury me. It was never going to be for me. The only question was which way round.

PAIVA: You could say no for yourself. You told me you were ready.

GRAÇA: I was ready. (pause) Two hundred times she stood in my doorway. She thinks I didn't hear. I heard every time. Do you know what it is, to lie in the dark pretending to sleep so your daughter can listen to you breathe? She gave me six years of nights. I can give her some back. If I'm fifty, she can sleep. Write that it's free. It's as free as anything a mother ever said.

[I asked her the six questions on the certificate form. She answered all six correctly. She signed at 11:37. In the field for my observations I wrote: candidate fully informed. At the box marked free I stopped, for long enough that she noticed, and she reached across and tapped the screen with her fingernail, on the box, twice, the way you tap a pot lid to tell a child the rice is done. I signed at 11:41.]

[When I left for lunch they were sitting together in the corridor, on the plastic chairs under the programme poster that says *Tempo Devolvido, Time Given Back*. The daughter had fallen asleep with her head on her mother's shoulder. Her mother was sitting very still, the way you do, so as not to wake someone.]

Follow-up. Year nine (Article 14, long-term outcomes). Home visit, Casa Amarela. Present: Maria das Graças Ferreira, Rosângela Ferreira, Iolanda Paiva.

[Long-term visits are not normally made by the original counsellor. I asked for this one.]

[It is the same house. There is now a concrete ramp to the front door, uneven, its edges finished with a trowel by someone who is not a builder. The candidate opens the door in a canteen apron. Her hair is black at the tips and grey at the roots: she grew the old grey out, she says, and then went grey again by herself, so now it is the wrong way round.

Her markers put her at fifty four. She works breakfast and lunch at the municipal school on Estrada do Arraial, starting at five. Her pension ended in year three. She does not mention it.]

[Rosângela is sixty seven. She had a stroke in year seven. Her left hand lies in her lap and she lifts it with her right when she wants it somewhere else. She lives here now. Her own house on Rua das Pitangueiras is let to a couple with twins.]

PAIVA: The form starts with a question for you, Dona Graça. Do you regret the treatment?

GRAÇA: Every morning at half past four. Then I have my coffee and I stop.

PAIVA: And the rest of the time?

GRAÇA: The rest of the time it's my life. You don't regret your life. You just have it.

PAIVA: There is still no question on the form for the family.

ROSA: Still?

PAIVA: I'm going to ask anyway. Rosângela?

ROSA: (Her speech is slower than it was, and careful.) I wanted ten years. I got seven. Seven good ones. I went back to the school office. I went to São Paulo four times, once for a whole month, and the baby is eleven now and taller than me. I learned to swim at fifty nine, at Boa Viagem, inside the reef, where the signs say not to. Mãe stood on the sand shouting the whole time like I was eight.

GRAÇA: There are sharks.

ROSA: There were no sharks.

GRAÇA: Because I was shouting.

ROSA: (pause) And then I needed a doorway after all. Just sooner than I meant to.

GRAÇA: Sooner than anybody meant.

ROSA: She built the ramp. From a video.

GRAÇA: Three videos. The first was a man in Portugal and I couldn't understand a word. Caio lent me those earbuds that translate, and the man came out in Brazilian, half a second late, with a voice like a priest. Very polite. Still couldn't understand him. In the end I just did what his hands did.

[While we talk the candidate peels an orange. Her hands no longer shake. The peel comes away in a single ribbon, and before she can say anything her daughter says it.]

ROSA: Olha.

GRAÇA: I see it, menina.

PAIVA: And Dona Socorro?

GRAÇA: She got her place the year after. Saint Expeditus, very quick, like I said. She dances frevo in Olinda at Carnival now, with an umbrella the size of a satellite dish. We speak. We argue about the parish. It's nicer than not speaking.

PAIVA: One last thing, for my own notes. Do you still call each other at midnight?

GRAÇA: We live in the same house.

ROSA: She comes to the door.

GRAÇA: I don't call. I go and stand in her doorway and I listen. That's all.

ROSA: And I pretend to be asleep.

GRAÇA: She pretends to be asleep so that I can listen to her breathe. She thinks I don't know. (pause) Of course I know. I invented it.

[Rosângela laughs, properly, for the first time in the file.]

[At the gate, the candidate walked me to the car with her apron still on. She told me, as though it were a recipe, that she has asked the stonemason at Santo Amaro to leave a space on the stone above her own name, and to take his time over it. She said she is not sad, and I believed her, or I believed she had decided not to be, which at her age, either of her ages, may be the same thing.]

GRAÇA: Somebody always has to stand in the doorway, Doutora. At least now it's the right one of us.

[The follow-up form ends with a field marked Outcome, with room for one word. I sat in the car outside the ramp for a long time with the engine running. Then I typed the word I had stopped at nine years ago in room 3, and this time nobody had to tap the screen.]

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