

"Light thinks it travels faster than anything but it is wrong. No matter how fast light travels, it finds the darkness has always got there first, and is waiting for it."
- Terry Pratchett, *Reaper Man* facili.s.

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SUBURBAN WITCHCRAFT

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literature

art and

between these pages you will find

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The Abandoned Convent

*Desires are the flowers of the living,
they do not bloom in the realm of death*
Giovacchino Forzano and Giacomo Puccini, "Suor Angelica"

The architectural firm of which I am a member received a grant from the State Secretariat for Culture to perform an evaluation of the feasibility and cost of renovating and turning into a hotel a ruined convent in northwest Portugal, near the border with the Spanish province of Galicia. The convent was the main structure in a complex that had been abandoned for over two centuries, after a massive fire ravaged the convent and destroyed its upper floors.

To carry out my commission, I traveled to Braga and spent nearly a month inspecting the site and reviewing official records in the nearby localities as well as in Porto and Lisbon. My investigation revealed that in the fourteen eighties king João II granted land for the construction of a convent to house a chapter of the Poor Clares, an order of contemplative nuns established following the example of the Franciscan Order created by St. Francis Assisi. I found no details on the circumstances under which the convent had been abandoned other than the occurrence of a fire in April 1748 and the fact that six nuns had perished in the disaster and the rest had disbanded and moved to other convents.

The convent was built around a quadrangular cloister. The confessional room and the ancient chapter house were located on the west side of the cloister. On the east side were the sacristy and the presbytery. To the north was a large room that served as a refectory and the kitchen, characterized by a high fireplace and various rooms used as warehouses.

To the south, there was a ruined chapel and a corridor running from it to the remains of a wide staircase, which had led to the upper floor where the dormitory was located. All the second floor and the rooftop on that part of the complex had disappeared. Near the foot of the staircase, I found a large pile of rubble piled against the wall. The pile did not seem to be the remains of any structure and its symmetrical beehive shape suggested that it was not random debris but had been erected on purpose. I approached the pile and, as I lifted a piece of plaster, I noticed it was slightly warm.

The pile was too large for a single person to remove it by hand, but I was intrigued by it so I returned the following day with a local crew armed with picks, shovels, and wheelbarrows. It took over an hour to remove the stones and pieces of masonry and clear the area. What was revealed under the pile was a trap door that, when pried open, uncovered a wooden staircase that dropped to an underground chamber. The chamber was pitch dark and a wave of heat and a revolting smell of decay emerged from it.

I returned the following day to continue my exploration of the newly-discovered room. Wearing a gas mask and armed with a camping lantern I went gingerly down the staircase, which creaked threateningly as if it was ready to collapse. I then reached a dirt floor, discovering that I was standing in a room that was nearly, but not entirely, empty. In the center of the room was a stone altar, the surface of which was covered by a charred substance. A column of heat rose from the altar and traveled upwards; tilting my head I observed how the heat disappeared through the open trap door and rose into the open area that once had been the nuns' dormitory.

I moved closer to the altar to inspect it and for the first time noticed a figure that lay on the floor behind it. It was a skeleton, still dressed in the remains of a brown tunic; it was the source of the pestilence that pervaded the chamber. I am a man of science and not impressionable by nature, but I was assaulted by an overwhelming feeling of revulsion.

A wave of panic then seized me and I turned around and fled upstairs, oblivious of the dangerous creaking of the staircase.



My initial impulse was to report my discovery to the authorities, but I had a premonition that this matter was too sinister to be entrusted to government grunts. Instead, I flipped through my rolodex and conjured the name of one of my oldest college acquaintances: Dr. Teófilo Eusébio Gonçalves (Teo Gonçalves to his friends). After graduating from medical school, Teo had spent a year at the University of Virginia pursuing psychical research studies and was perhaps Portugal's leading expert on paranormal phenomena. In addition to his private practice as a psychiatrist, he lectured at the Universidade de Lisboa, where his course on unexplained phenomena was always oversubscribed.

Teo and I were not close friends and his initial reaction to my call was rather cool. He was at the point of hanging up when I described my discoveries at the abandoned convent and he perceived my agitation. He agreed to receive me and, two days later, I showed up at his office with the files of my investigation. I had no pictures of the contents of the underground chamber but my description, more detailed than my telephone narrative, left a puzzled expression on his face. "Did you try to find out the origins of the fire that destroyed the convent?" he asked.

"I looked at the written records of the times and could find nothing" I reported.

“Perhaps you were not looking in the right places” he countered. “Did you look in the Arquivo Nacional da Torre do Tombo?”

“What is that?”

“The central repository for Portuguese Inquisition records.”

“Why would I look there?”

“What you describe to me sounds like it may have involved a witchcraft ceremony. The Inquisition pursued cases involving witchcraft practices.”

“Witchcraft? Among the Poor Clares? They are contemplative nuns who live a closeted life of prayer, work, penance, and fasting!”

“If I were the devil, I could not think of a more desirable surrogate. A deranged nun could have been a fearsome witch.”

“How do I go about searching those Inquisition records?”

“It will be easy. Auto da fé records were meticulously detailed, for they were intended to educate the masses. For a particular case you may find both the summary of the punishment ceremony and the “processo” that contains the details of the case, including the witness testimony, accusations, denunciations, interrogations, and so on.”

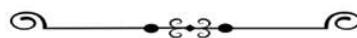
“Sounds like a lot of work.”

“You only need to look at the relevant period, 1740 – 1750. That late, most cases involved religious offenses like fake conversions by Jews and discovery of closeted Lutherans. Witchcraft cases should be few. If you find something of interest, let me know.”

I did not blame Teo for not wanting to get involved in the search details; neither did I, since I had a lucrative architectural practice to occupy my time, but I was captive to my horrific memories and decided to press on with the research.

Two weeks later, I placed a call to Teo: “I think I found something.”

“I see my last client at 5:30. Come to my office at six and tell me about it.”



“There is a record of an Inquisition proceeding in Braga in 1745. In it, one Teresa Sanches, daughter of one of the wealthiest noblemen in the city, was accused by a disgruntled former maid of being a sorceress and having conceived a child from the devil. The proceeding was long and heavily contested; finally, Teresa was convicted of witchcraft based on the testimony of several witnesses and sentenced to be burned at the stake. At that point, her father

offered to make a large donation to the church in exchange for a modification of Teresa's sentence to lifetime commitment to the Poor Clares nunnery, where she would be admitted as a novice. The Archbishop of Braga intervened, accepted the offer, reduced Teresa's sentence, and the girl was delivered to the convent to become Irmã Angústia and remain closeted for the rest of her life."

"Is that all that the records say?"

"Yes. Presumably Irmã Angústia was still at the convent when it caught fire three years later."

"Very interesting. Would you be willing to take a short trip to Braga to look further into the mystery?"

"Only if you would go with me."

"I usually take some vacation in mid-July, when the weather is the hottest. Does that work for you?"

I shuddered but replied: "Sure."



When I drove to Teo's apartment to pick him up for our trip north to Braga, he brought with him, besides a suitcase with his clothing and travel items, several pieces of the hardware he used in his paranormal investigations: a field meter capable of detecting any electromagnetic energy released by spirits; a digital audio recorder in case the spirits emitted sounds not detectable by human ears; an infrared video camera capable of recording in darkness; some fancy thermometers; and other cameras and sensing devices whose use I never learned. I chided him gently: "What makes you think there will be ghosts or poltergeists at the convent? I saw or heard nothing of that sort."

He gave me a typical hoarder's response: "Better to have it and not need it than the other way around."

The weather in Braga was typical of summers in northern Portugal: it was sunny, clear, and warm and the city was full of tourists from all over Europe and beyond. That was good, because we would pass unnoticed among the crowds of visitors. We spent the night in a guest house on the north end of the city and the following morning, after an early breakfast, drove the short distance from Braga to the ruins of the convent. As we had hoped, it was too early for any visitors to show up for a tour of the ruins, and we proceeded in complete solitude to the southern corner of the cloister and started down the rickety staircase to the lower level.

Little seemed to have changed. Perhaps the chamber was a bit warmer, the reek emanating from the corpse more nauseating, than during my earlier visit. Aided by hand-held flash-lights, we set up Teo's ghost-detecting hardware throughout the room. When we were done,

Teo declared: "It's time to take a closer look at the corpse." He approached the cadaver and, with a pickup stick, gingerly lifted the decaying brown garments, revealing a crumbling, almost pulverized set of bones from which rose an unbearable stench that made me gag and nearly lose my breakfast.

Teo lifted the remains of the nun's habit and shook them gently. They disintegrated, releasing a small rectangle of parchment which seemed in almost as decayed a condition as the clothes that had contained it. Teo lifted the sheet and brought it close to his eyes as he attempted to read the faded characters. After a while, I was unable to contain my curiosity: "What does it say?"

"It is a summons to the Devil."

"What do you mean?"

"The fire happened in April. I am sure it was during Holy Week. Tradition has it that every year, during the time between Jesus' crucifixion and his resurrection, the Devil and his minions are abroad spreading evil. That belief has inspired witches to conduct satanic rites during those days. We will never know what really happened here, but my guess is that Irmā Angústia managed to bring her child to the convent and sacrificed him in this altar during Holy Week, perhaps to summon her demonic lover."

"But she could not have done all of that by herself. She must have had help."

"True. There is also the fact that someone came to the ruins after the fire and had the stairs to the underground chamber blocked and hidden. I suspect there was a conspiracy to hide whatever matters had transpired in this convent."

"But how does the summons read?"

"The text is written in Latin and reads something like: *"Vani ad me, dilecti me, in hoc die vestro sacro, et epulare carne filii nostri."*"

"What does that mean?"

He hesitated for one moment and then translated in a shaky voice:

"Come to me, my beloved, on this your holy day, and feast on the flesh of our son."

I shuddered. "That's impossible!"

After Teo read the invocation, the temperature in the chamber rose significantly and the ground beneath our feet started shaking.

Teo must have realized that something dreadful was about to happen, for he ordered: "Get out of here, quick!"

By the time I was halfway up the staircase, flames were enveloping the altar and fragments of burning matter were flying throughout the chamber. I felt a blinding stab of pain as something hit my shoulder, but panic overrode all sensations and I continued to rush upwards until I was standing on the floor of the chapel. Then I glanced down: Teo was trying to come up after me, but a circle of flames was surrounding him. He was limping, for the flames had burned through his pants and his flesh was sizzling as the water content within his tissues was rapidly heating up and turning into steam.

I stood for a moment, not knowing what to do, and then Teo screamed again: “Save yourself! Run!”

I rushed down the steps and somehow managed to get hold of Teo and drag his body out of the chamber. A burst of flame rose from below and smote Teo again. He howled in agony as the flames rose from his body and ascended the cloister walls towards the open air, where the fire extinguished itself.

I bent over Teo’s body. He was hideously burned and his flesh smelled like bacon frying or meat cooking.

“I’m so stupid!” wailed Teo. “I should have never read that summoning aloud!”

“Do you think that your reading of those words caused that eruption?”

“Of course!”

I felt a stab of guilt pierce my heart. “And I made you do it!”

Teo barely had enough strength left to assuage my remorse: “The Devil reacted violently to Irmā Angústias’ offering, but should not have exploded at me when I read his summons two centuries afterwards.”

“Perhaps some crimes are too appalling to be countenanced, even in recall” I offered.

I don’t believe Teo heard my words. He uttered a deep sigh and expired in my arms.

Matias Travieso-Díaz