

## Star Short Story Contest 2015 winner: ‘A Dragonfly Dashed by My Face’

In this story by Carmelinda Scian, an adolescent Portuguese girl learns about the adult world and sexuality.



**By:** Carmelinda Scian Published on Sat Apr 25 2015



My mind was made up. Not like the times before when I'd told myself over and over to speak up, only to see my resolve leap out under my mother's stare. Today I'd do it, even if it meant getting a beating. The pain would be awful, as it was each time, making it impossible to keep those shameful tears from betraying me. But I'd endure. I always did. Afterwards my mother would likely come home with pretty packages of candy or chocolate or material for a new dress or a new pair of shoes. Her voice would be high-pitched, endearing, "Look, look at what your Mãezinha has for you!"

I'd waken earlier than usual. The light coming in through the hair cracks in the shutters was still a dim grey, the newborn day barely out of the darkness. The night had been hot and humid, the air thick and still. The walls of my small bedroom seemed to be pressing in on me. I stepped onto the cement floor, its coolness offering some relief.

I placed my ear to the wall dividing my bedroom from that of my parents. No sound.

This was my favourite time of day, before my mother and younger brother got up. Most mornings my father had already left for his shift work at the cork factory.

I walked to the window and carefully opened it. A whiff of hot air hurled me back, the day's heat already smothering. Temperatures reaching 30 C for the last two weeks had already killed many animals and some people. The sparrows and robins that usually gathered in the quince tree in the middle of the garden weren't there this morning.

My father had planted the tree soon after we'd moved into our new house, built with my grandfather's help, who was a builder. He'd heard the quince tree brought good luck to a marriage. The tree never grew very big. This summer, the leaves had all been burnt by the scorching sun but a few fruit had managed to hang on, ripening early. The fruit couldn't be eaten; something in it choked you. It was only good for compote. "What a useless tree," my mother said each summer when she picked the quinces. My father never said anything.

I leant my arms on the window sill, bracing myself against the heat, waiting for the birds to arrive. But the birds never came, probably already having staked out a place in some cool shade.

Sunlight began to break through the murky light, bringing everything into focus. It was as if the world was being formed right before my eyes.

I looked at the vineyard across from my house, the large orange grove to the right, the row of tall eucalyptus to the left, the shimmering river in the distance, and took in the familiarity of the landscape. I could count on it like a good friend.

I turned again toward the orange grove. The haunted mansion's decaying roof loomed in the distance, rising up above the trees. No one in town had ever been in it or even remembered when it had been built. It had simply become part of the landscape. Every day, after midnight, a man with a gaunt face and hunched shoulders was said to walk the grounds. He carried a lantern and wore a long black cape. The mansion faced the river. Fishermen had seen him trying to enter the front door several times. They'd heard the knocking from a distance away. I'd seen the outside of the mansion only once when a friend of my parents took us for a ride in his fishing boat. It stood forlorn on the wild and empty river bank, its ornate design strange in a town of plain fronts. People feared the place. The oranges fell to the ground every year, going to waste. Not even thieves and beggars dared jump the high concrete wall around it.

The story was that one man had murdered his brother after he had run off with the other one's wife. No one had ever seen the living one or knew anything about him. It was believed that he was scared to return.

Growing up I'd felt sorry for the murderer. Wives were expected to be faithful and chaste, brothers were to respect one another. But now I thought him a coward. If he'd decided to kill his brother, he should have the courage to live by his decision.

The grove's rusty iron portal was directly across from Casa Rosa, the whorehouse, located at the beginning of the old dirt road, running by my house. It was kept locked by a heavy, rusty iron chain with a large padlock. One night, a drunk on a dare tried to break it, only to be flung back by two icy hands. He'd sobered instantly. That's what he told everybody.

This past Christmas my mother and I had to walk by a large crowd of men waiting their turn outside Casa Rosa. My father had been working his late shift that night, and the only access we had to the new asphalt highway, running along the railroad in front of my grandparents' house, was through their property. But my grandfather didn't like us taking advantage of his generosity too often. He never said it, but I felt that what he

didn't like was my mother going out in the evening without my father. Women belonged at home. My mother had been helping our aunt Isabel, who was a dressmaker, to finish her work in time for the holiday.

The men whistled, meowed, barked and honked, as we passed. We kept our heads down. Once we were at a safe distance, I asked my mother why the men, who'd stood so close to the iron gate, weren't scared of the ghost.

"Oh, men," she said. "They're all pigs. Sex makes them forget everything else."

"But aren't they married?"

"Most are. Men marry virgins but like having whores in bed. That's enough now. You're still too young for this talk." She remained quiet the rest of the way.

I closed the window and turned toward the old armoire with its undulating mirror. The distorted reflection of my skinny legs poking from underneath my thin cotton nightgown, my high forehead and sickly dark circles under my eyes made me glance down. I looked nothing like the beautiful blond women in the French catalogues my aunt had for her customers.

"Too bad you take after your father's side," my mother often said. "All the Faíscas are scrawny and have ugly high foreheads."

Never mind. I opened the rickety doors of the armoire with great care, not to make noise. There — all my dresses. Some with bows and frills no longer fit me, but my mother kept insisting on keeping them.

Today I'd choose a dress that would make me look pretty but grown-up. My mother would likely choose the blue organza with the puffy sleeves that made me look like a baby. It was the most expensive. It'd taken one year of 20 escudos per month to pay for it. But I'd insist on the new white poplin with red polka dots and scooped neck.

I placed my hands over my breasts. I could feel the two bulging lumps that kept growing like bread dough. Only a few months ago, there were only two tiny nipples.

Today was the last day of school. Tomorrow, the girls in my class and I would become part of the adult world. We would all be going into different apprenticeships and trades, except Luisa, the doctor's daughter, of course. Everyone knew she'd be going to high school in Montijo and then university in Lisbon or Coimbra to become a doctor like her father.

We talked of nothing else — the adventure, the experience, the dreams of love, romance, marriage, children, waiting for us now that school was ending. The thrill of sex, that dark, unspoken mystery we could never talk about, hovered over us, making us giddy, silly, unnerved. We all knew that honest women weren't supposed to even think of it. Only whores liked sex and men didn't marry whores.

A strange restlessness was keying up my movements, making my voice, my laughter shrill, turning my mother ever more watchful.

"Empty your potty before school," she said. "Don't expect me to do it."

I stepped back with a jolt. I hadn't heard her come into the room.

I picked up the chamber pot, my heart thumping, thankful it was only piss. I carried the pot at arm's length all the way to the manure pile at the back of the garden, next to the shed, where my father keeps his rabbits and

chickens. The manure was composed of food leftovers, weeds, plants, piss and s--t. My father used it to fertilize his flowers and vegetables.

One day, this past spring, my father had been busy hoeing his garden. His back was turned away from the shed and hunched over his spade. I approached quietly, walking behind him. I knew that the hen (his best one) that he'd placed on eggs, resting on a bed of straw, wasn't to be disturbed. He'd warned me often enough. But I wanted to see the baby chicks rise out of the eggs as they hatched. I opened the shed door one centimetre at a time, so the hen wouldn't notice. But to my surprise, the hen and chicks were already waiting by the door. They shot out and ran straight to the shitty mound. It was as if they'd known all along of its existence.

I ran after them, trying to catch each one with my bare hands, but to no avail. They all escaped.

My father came closer. "What have you done?" he said, in his usual mild tone. I started to cry. It wasn't that I was afraid of him — he'd never hit me before or even threatened to do so. That was left to my mother. My tears came from a feeling I didn't quite understand. There was something disturbing, sad, about the tiny newborn creatures getting mired in the stinking filth. I said this to my father. He laughed. "You silly girl," he said. "Chicks like manure."

Carrying the pot back to the house, I promised myself that someday I'd have a bathroom like Luisa. No more smelly piss pots and fly-infested dung heaps.

Luisa had invited me once to her home. I'd been mesmerized by the flush toilet, the fluffy pink towels, the little heart shaped pink soaps in a shiny glass dish, the white bathtub.

Luisa's house spoke of elegance, softness, kind words trimmed with sweet smiles. It was as if it was protected from anything bad or shameful, so different from my own world. Her life seemed legions away from the ugly gossip, the rough language around me, my grandmother's talk of farts and the laughter that followed.

The moment I stepped into the kitchen, I smelled the hot milk and coffee my mother had poured over chunks of bread left over from dinner the night before. Breakfast was always the same. It was mostly just the two of us, my father having left early for work and my younger brother still asleep.

"If I had more money," my mother said, "I'd make French toast or bake a pound cake." She said the same thing every day.

Once breakfast was finished, I returned to my bedroom. The blue organza dress waited for me on the bed next to a new pair of white sandals. I picked up the dress; rumped it into a ball. Then I sat on the bed, bracing myself. I decided to miss school.

"Hurry up," my mother yelled from the kitchen. "It's getting late."

I smoothed out the dress. The humidity made it difficult to pull the dress down over my head. It was tight around my chest.

"When you walk by the whores, don't look in," my mother said as I walked into the kitchen. "If you do, you'll suffer the consequences."

She said the same thing every morning since my period had arrived.

"What about the new sandals?"

“Thank you,” I said in a meek voice. No kiss or embrace. My mother wasn’t that type.

Outside, a dense haze hung in the air, making everything appear distorted. I crossed the road quickly to the shady side provided by the wall along the orange grove.

There was a murmur in the distance, like the buzzing of bees. I could detect a group of people gathered near the brothel. The road was empty, except for the odd stray dog or cat, most people walking along the new highway.

A dragonfly dashed by my face; my heart skipped a beat. Their long wings had always scared me. They were supposed to murmur stories, tales of when they were dragons and the far-away land where they came from, if you got close enough. But I never had. It flew for awhile ahead of me, as if pointing the way. I tried to hit it with my satchel. Missed.

I began to distinguish men’s voices. Some were yelling, but I couldn’t hear what they were saying.

I increased my pace. The dirt began to fill the fresh creases on my white sandals, probably ruining them forever. The dust, the heat, the perspiration, the clinging dress, made me feel soiled.

As I got closer, I saw that women and children formed part of the crowd. I pushed my way to the front.

A man in a blue shirt drenched with perspiration held a stick about six or seven feet long. He prodded a black horse, trying to force it to enter a deep, dark corridor, about five feet wide, right next door to the brothel.

The crowd yelled, “Hit him! Hit him!” Some people lifted their arms high above their heads and punched the air to show how it ought to be done.

But the harder the man hit the horse’s rump and the more the people screamed, the more the horse neighed and reared onto the crowd in a primal refusal to enter the black space.

The horse turned its head toward me. His large eyes were wide open. Frantic.

I knew the look.

“Hit him harder,” a man bellowed behind me. He was so close I felt his warm breath on my neck, sending a shiver down my spine.

I turned around.

The man was unshaven, long greasy black hair hung over his forehead. Our gazes locked for a second. We both quickly looked away.

“Pretty,” he murmured in a husky voice, his moist lips touching my right ear. People pressed tighter. I felt something hard rubbing against my back. Then the man’s warm hand reached under my skirt, moving slowly, tenderly, up my leg, his breath turning to gasps.

I was sure I’d be late for school. But it was the last day.

*Carmelinda Scian decided to take up writing five years ago. The Toronto hairstylist has a master’s in English from the University of Toronto. She won the 2013 Open Seasons Award from the Malahat Review. After being told she was a finalist, she said, “It doesn’t even seem real yet, especially considering how many entries there were. It feels almost like it’s not happening to me.” “A Dragonfly Dashed by My Face” was inspired by*

*Scian's own childhood in Portugal.*