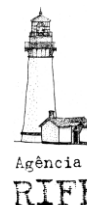


OPERATION UNTHINKABLE (*Operação impensável*)

Vanessa Barbara

Intrínseca, 2015

224 pages



Two weeks after the end of the World War II, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill ordered the military to draw up a surprise plan of attack on the Soviet Union. The offensive, which would surely spark World War III, was codenamed Operation Unthinkable. For historian Lia, this would be the most symbolic marker of the beginning of the Cold War, the conflict between communist and capitalist countries that lasted 45 years.

Operation Unthinkable is also the name of a plan devised by Lia during a marital battle that lasts for 43 agonizing days.

In this novel, winner of the Paraná Prize for Literature in 2014, Vanessa Barbara follows the five-year relationship between Lia and Tito, a programmer, a love peppered with witty e-mails, vocabulary of their own invention, many movies and long, contested board game battles. With dashes of biting humor, she uncovers the slow disintegration of a marriage. Affection and closeness give rise to distrust, a climate of tension and implicit threats. As in the Cold War, the subject of Lia's master's thesis, there is no declared military conflict, but something always seems ready to explode.

Vanessa Barbara (São Paulo, 1982) is a journalist, translator, and writer. She is also the publisher of the *Hortaliça* newspaper (www.hortifruti.org), a prestigious and irreverent media outlet that celebrated its ten years of existence in 2012. She was selected as one of the twenty new promises in *The Best Young Brazilian Novelists*, published by *Granta*. Vanessa has a monthly column at *The New York Times*.

Sample available in English.

Selected titles by Vanessa Barbara

Noites de alface

Alfaguara, 2013

Czech Republic: Albatros Media

Denmark: Anton Ludwig

France: Éditions Zulma

Germany: Al Verlag

Italy: Corbaccio

Sweden: Natur & Kultur

O livro amarelo do terminal

Cosac Naify, 2008

-Winner of the Jabuti Prize

-Best book of journalism by the APCA

O verão do Chibo (with Emilio Fraia)

Alfaguara, 2012

-Shortlisted for the São Paulo Literature Award

On Operation Unthinkable

“Operation Unthinkable is sincere and profound.”

Gazeta do Povo

On Summer of Chibo

“A little gem about the mysteries that surround becoming a grown-up.”

O Estado de S. Paulo

“Another world in miniature, with lyricism and absurdity to match the fantasies and traumas of childhood.”

Folha de S. Paulo

On Lettuce Nights

“A story that starts with a bereavement: already I’m drawn in. The real story is always in the aftermath, and here’s a young writer who not only understands that, but expresses it with tender humour too. So it’s the socks that miss Ada first; Otto notices them swollen in mourning, untended in the wash. The tone has been set, wry and gentle, even in the first paragraph, and we’ve been taken straight into that intimate, domestic space expressive of a long and contented marriage.”

Rachel Seiffert introducing Vanessa Barbara in Granta’s *Best of Young Brazilian Novelists*

“Lettuce Nights has humour with substance.”

Folha de S. Paulo

“Bizarre, ambiguous, absurd and with a hint of magic realism. The village of the novel lies in a kind of land of milk and honey for good stories, in close neighbourhood to Fargo by Joel and Ethan Coen.”

taz

OPERATION UNTHINKABLE (*Operação impensável*) – sample translation

Vanessa Barbara

Translated by Zoë Perry

“Sleep, male cabbage.”
(F. Scott Fitzgerald)

I think back with astonishing frequency about a documentary that aired on the Discovery Channel, months ago, in which a soft-spoken lady told the cameras she loved her husband. He was thoughtful and kind. He took his wife camping, taught her the pasodoble, looked after the couple's poodles, and loved planning romantic bike rides. They were together for fourteen years and she never had reason to doubt his sincerity.

His name was Gary and he later confessed to being the “Green River Killer”, a serial killer who strangled at least 48 women over nearly two decades of activity – several dozen during the time they were married. “The only thing I found odd when I moved in with him was there were no rugs in the house,” she recalled. Detectives later told her Gary must have used the rugs to wrap up the bodies.

The story I'm about to tell is not nearly as extreme, but it does have to do with the sudden absence of rugs and the certainty that something, somewhere, isn't right. It's the story of 43 days and 42 nights of doubts, between bouts of insomnia and moments of calm. This account is an attempt to absorb what happened.

PEACETIME

Five years earlier

May 24, 2006

He'd say: “Look, a toucan! Run”.

Tito would point to the bird with a look of genuine terror – I wonder what you call a phobia of toucans –, then pull me by the hand toward the giraffes, the lions or the exit, where he would let out a sigh and call a cab.

Tito was afraid of toucans, nuns, cockroaches, and flying on planes. I was scared of clowns, interactive theater, amateur street poets and swallowing overly large pills. I was a historian and he, a programmer. I liked watercress, he, arugula. I was a fan of old musicals and film noir, and he, post-Coppola contemporary cinema. “Together we make up the

history of cinema”, he used to say. Our salads were always mixed greens, and we avoided any sort of leafy distinction.

The first time we met, walking downhill after leaving a bar, he went off on a theory that “not all dwarves were fathered by David Rappaport, but many were”. I didn't pay much attention because I was startled by the boy's degree of extraversion, but I bet the logic was solid and it made sense. Without pausing for breath he told me about statistics, chaos theory, and the mysterious Tortelvis, whose mission, “entrusted in him by aliens, was to play reggae versions of Led Zeppelin songs, dressed as Elvis”. At one point, he randomly remarked that the German language was nothing more than an excuse to spit on people.

Waving his arms all around, he bumped inadvertently into trees and scraped his elbow against the walls.

He tried to explain the Barber Paradox: there's a village where, every day, a barber shaves all males who do not shave themselves and he does not shave those who do shave themselves. That said, who shaves the barber?

In Prolog, according to notes scribbled on a napkin:

shaves(barber,X) :- male(X), not (shaves(X,X)

male(adam).

Thus the clause shaves(barber,adam) will be proven as true, since shaves(adam,adam) cannot be proved. However, male(barber) creates a never-ending contradiction.

I didn't understand a word, but pretended I did. I tried to argue that the barber must be shaved by his parrot, a character the narrator had as yet neglected to introduce to the story, or rather that a professional with such expertise should be fully aware of the importance of facial hair for the dapper appearance of a human being of the male species, and would, therefore, refuse to trim his beard. Conclusion: the barber would be bearded.

The same night, Tito was impressed because I knew the spiritual distinction between assumption and ascension, and also when I reenacted the scene where Marty McFly cries out to Dr. Emmet Brown, hanging from a clock tower about to be struck by lightning: "I have to tell you about the future!", and Doc: "Whaaat?"

"The future!"

As the subway barreled through the station, kicking up a gust of wind, I desperately wanted to tell him about the future: we would be together five years, have three cats and two turtles, one Twilight Struggle board game, walls lined with books, an unfinished puzzle, a marriage, a divorce and an abyss. Tito swore he would love, honor and respect

me until one of us killed the other by food poisoning or was hit by a breadfruit torpedo. (Both options came close to occurring and would have been preferable to what ended up happening.)

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

June 11, 2006

From: Lia

To: Tito

You are cellophane! You are flannel pajamas, you are white chocolate, the smell of pancakes, a fine-tipped pen and a Dictionary of Ancient Greek. You are grated cheese and winter sun, blank paper and bicycles. You are a film noir character narrating the story in voiceover. You are a hero in black and white who knows how to dance and twirl, and wears a hat. You are Jack Lemmon draining spaghetti on a tennis racket for Shirley MacLaine. You are a floor of bubble wrap and a planetarium ceiling. You are a chair on wheels and somersaults. You are a snorkel with a seagull on top. You are a potato roll filled with catupiry cheese, a tunafish sandwich and a bottle of Xereta guaraná soda. You are fresh water and goldfish. You are my North, my South, my East and my West, my working week, my Sunday rest...

August 2006

From the very beginning, our relationship was based healthily on insults, such as "Your mother has a smooth forehead" (Klingon greeting), "Torment yourself until your heart bursts" (unknown origin), "You're a cognitive abomination" (Marilena Chauí), "And you are also condemned to itchy palms!" (Shakespeare, loosely). Even more so when we decided to start playing pinochle – a card game played in 90% of US nursing homes, second only to bingo.

Every Wednesday evening we would meet to study the theoretical aspects of pinochle and join in bloody matches of varying duration. We shouted with one other and discarded our good cards just to make the game more fun. "My hand looks more like a foot!" he'd cry, tossing everything in air and kicking over the table. Just like in nursing homes, the winner earned the privilege of taunting his opponent and stealing his vitamin C tablets.

"Of course you shall be the great King of Pinochle," I sneered. "Because I shall be the great Queen, with my hair piled high on my head like a nest of slithy toves – and you know exactly who's boss in these royal marriages. With hair like that, it's easy to get the upper

hand in a relationship. Insult me and I'll pull a Swiss Army knife out of my hair. Call me vile names and I'll whip out a brick from my hairdo. Our pinochle matches will be the liveliest in the neighborhood."

Over the years, Tito and I competed at many things: computer games and alpine landscape puzzles (I was an expert in completing skies and roofs), ping pong tournaments, basketball games in the living room, and intricate board games with eighty-page manuals.

The best one was Twilight Struggle, a game about the Cold War where one player is the Soviet Union and the other, the United States. It's an insidious battle of domination without a single declared military conflict between the main players, but that doesn't prevent them from starting wars in isolated regions to increase their influence and perhaps gain control of strategically important countries. The game is very believable and, like the Cold War, has three stages: "Early War", in which the USSR is still very strong and the Bolsheviks must make use of an offensive strategy, "Mid-War", more balanced, and "Late War", when circumstances are more favorable to the Yankees. There are cards like "John Paul II", which weakens Russia's influence in Poland, while "liberation theology" thwarts imperialist activities in South America. You win either by triggering a thermonuclear war or after several successful coups.

Challenging Tito was very funny, especially when he lost. There were time-outs to consult the manual, shouting matches, acts of highway robbery and broken alliances late until the wee hours. Often our games would go on for days and we would leave the board out on the table, untouched, for when there was time to continue. Due to his militant activist past, he usually chose to lead the reds. Whenever he'd draw the "Allende", "Fidel" or "Warsaw Pact" card, he would bolt out of his chair and sing the Internationale, spouting off Lenin and Trotsky quotes. I sang the Star Spangled Banner, backed the Marshall Plan and invested heavily in the space race. I tried bribing him with dollar bills and promises of trips to Disneyland. I boycotted the Olympic Games. I gleefully funded military dictatorships and death squads in Latin America, decimating anyone who opposed my schemes and refusing to return the Panama Canal.

I won most of the time, to Tito's chagrin, and, in the end, crushed communism with my Margaret Thatcher card. The few times we exchanged roles and I commanded the Red Army while he led the Free World, Tito would hide a trump card up his sleeve and imitate Richard Nixon: "I am not a crook". Then he would open his arms wide and, smiling, wave the V for victory sign. I liked to see him win. His joy was contagious, and to this day I can still hear Tito's laughter echoing through every room of the house.

The name Twilight Struggle comes from a something John F. Kennedy said, calling the Cold War "a long twilight struggle, year in and year out, rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation – a struggle against the common enemies of man: tyranny, poverty, disease and war itself."

Night after night, our game tackled prolonged tensions between the two countries, a veiled war and power relations with their neighbors. ("Like a married couple!" he used to say.) It

was a time of implied threats and great sorrow, in which, at every moment, something appeared about to explode.

According to many historians' calculations, this anguish lasted for 45 years. According to my own, it was 43 days.



Ap/Wide World Photos

August 22, 2006

From: Lia

To: Tito

Tito, who looks so handsome in kitchen gloves, come tell me some long story about Turkish loves or English potatoes, put me to sleep with your huge hands and an embrace to sink us down to the apartment below, give me a salty kiss and sing a lullaby to fly a kite and soothe mosquitoes. Close your eyes with mine and take a deep breath, and when sleep comes, leave your red shoes under the bed, talking about insoles and cliffs with my blue sneaker, the cat quietly sneezing outside, the keys, the lighter and the phone on the floor. Let me invade your world with pajama pants, contact lens cleaners and laziness, sleep with me every day and take me by the hand when I get scared – a nightmare about me and you, that vanishes for good when I see you by my side, breathing heavily, opening your giant eyes underneath five bedsheets.



October 2006

From: Tito

To: Lia

One of our main resolutions for the future: rely less on one another, and more on an alarm clock.

P.S. I took the sweet potato for a walk. I hope you don't mind.

November 20, 2006

From: Lia

To: Tito

I don't know if it's because I'm sick, and cold, and my throat hurts and I'm sad I didn't go with you to see Richard III (who I get mixed up with the II). I don't know if it's because I listened to "Breathless", and it blew me away, and I watched the Angolan national team, which broke my heart; I don't know if it's because I realized I can no longer watch a soccer match without feeling maddening empathy for the underdog and a defender named Jamba; I don't know if it's because I close my eyes and see you sitting on the couch, smoking and watching a soap opera. I don't know if it's because I'm scared, and sick, and hungry and sneezing, I don't know if it is because I'm afraid, I don't know, but today I sat down on the bedroom floor and sat there quietly, trying to understand, trying not to be afraid, trying not to think about Jamba. I can't help but be afraid, Tito. I can't help thinking I'm jumping in head first and putting my trust in you, and it scares me, and that makes me happy, and it makes me sick and confused. I'm so scared.

For a second I saw you looking at me, coldly, from the future, and telling-me-we-need-to-talk. I saw you not liking me anymore and telling me so with dry eyes. I saw myself on my knees, against a pink toilet, while you were outside, smoking and waiting for me to leave. And I heard your arguments, your head saying no, me hugging my knees and feeling a wave thrusting me from the ground up as you presented me with your reasons. I saw myself cast aside, and with nothing to cover me when you turned on the light. I threw a key onto the floor and tried to push you away, but I couldn't. And besides, it's cold. I think about me curled up on the shag rug in the bathroom and all the drawers open, sobbing while you check your watch and say I should go, that it's late, that today is Francisco's birthday and you have other places you need to be.

I'm not writing this for you to tell me something, there's nothing you can say that hasn't already been said, and you said it so well. I just wanted – dammit – I just wanted to tell you it hurts, and that this is always with me, and that it hurts now, this morbid outlook of mine that expects rain to come pouring down again at any moment. ("We are alone, my dirty shoes – me and a red umbrella in full atomic spring, the city oddly covered with bitumen, respectable trees printed on carbon paper, buildings with stiff necks and Scottish state park walls – I look down trying to guess what time it is, and I see a raincoat so long it won't let me dance the twist. We are alone and it is daylight, we are alone and I stop walking for a moment trying to find the street.")

I also wanted you to know – it's too early on to be saying these things, and I'm so stupid to be doing this – the fragility of what you have in your hands, the enormity of what I feel for you, my stumbling ways, the desire I have to tell you: take care of me, don't let me hug my knees and feel all alone, and don't leave. Don't ever leave.

L.

December 2006

We didn't stop talking for one minute. At our dinners to go down in history, conversations ranged from ping pong grips to Olbers' Paradox, Stanley Kubrick to Maoism. Tito talked about his co-workers and never-ending meetings, where he amused himself doodling Soviet leaders in a notebook, thinking about movies we had to see and funny codes he'd like to show me – he loved to insert easter eggs in the programs he developed, with our own little inside jokes and silly messages for whichever programmer had the misfortune of needing to log into the system next.

Tito was always stressed out about his job, but he liked what he did and didn't complain about having to program even on weekends. He used to go to bed late, around three in the morning, involuntarily quoting Richard Nixon, for whom "Communism isn't sleeping; It is as always plotting, scheming, working." He used to call me every afternoon, even when he was busy, and liked to ask if I had any new anecdotes about the Cold War to brighten our meals, like this particularly silly one about Trotsky:

"Storming out of the conference room where he'd just fallen out with Stalin, he goes to slam the door like any good, surly communist, only he didn't realize it weighed around eight tons. So he pushed it as hard as he could but, according to two witnesses, the door swung slowly closed and shut with a humble click."

We used to mimic this scene during our fake fights, ending them with: "And you better not come back here anymore, okay?", and then pretending to slam the door, but just pushing it à la Trotsky, with the obligatory final click.

During my master's research, I compiled as a gift for Tito a series of anecdotes involving Soviet leaders, like the one about the door and others to do with tomatoes hidden in Mikoyan's pocket. While working on it, I also came across a number of jokes popular at that time, each with its own peculiarity. Jokes about Stalin remarked on his cruelty and were told with a thick Georgian accent; the Khrushchev ones were merciless and made him out as a rude, angry farmer, given to swearing and prone to making stupid decisions. The jokes about Brezhnev alluded to his senility; the Gorbachev jokes made fun of his temperance policy; those about Yeltsin emulated his drunken behavior and slurred speech.

In my favorite, Brezhnev is giving the opening address at the 1980 Olympics. He takes the paper in his hands and reads: "O-O-O-O-O". An alarmed aide whispers to him: "No, no! That's the logo."

According to historian Roy Medvedev, in consultation with the records of political prisoners during Stalinism, 200,000 people were arrested for telling jokes about the regime.

January 2007

Phone conversation

Tito: "Ever since I met you, there's no room in my heart for anything else but you. You occupy every corner of my mind, every place that was stuffed with lines of code and to-do lists – now there's only you. You arrived like an avalanche."

Lia: "I'm not fat".

Tito: "...You go and make a whole declaration and just look what this imbecile holds onto."

February 2007

Today we bought a new couch and began writing a film guide called The Big Book of Cinema, to log our long cinematic forays into every genre of world cinema. The list features the date of the screening, production credits and a detailed synopsis for each film, as well as comments like "Today's date marks the first display of disregard for the new DVD player" or "First drop of the remote control", naming exactly who was at fault. Of course we used it to provoke one another, implying that somebody didn't get the film, or failed to identify the killer or snored through the middle of it.

The Big Book of Cinema was noteworthy for its unparalleled irrelevance, and was for many critics a veritable compendium of events void of any historical interest, focus, congruence or charm – in short, a document worthy of being shared.

The following are some examples.

April 6, 2007

War and Peace II: Natasha Rostova (Voina i Mir II: Natasha Rostova, 1966, Sergei Bondarchuk)

Demonstrates the character of Pierre's strength as the mainspring of the plot, Russian cinema's most beloved golden boy. Moral of the story: never ask for a rooster then turn it down, your marriage might fly the roost. Red epic!

April 7, 2007

War and Peace III: 1812 (Voina i Mir III: 1812, 1967, Sergei Bondarchuk)

Once again the character of Pierre shows us what he's got, prowling about in a top hat and glasses through the flanks of battle. Also, Bolkonsky gives us an example of inertia. Great episode. One in six of the world's inhabitants took part as an extra, and the film cost mother Russia the Cold War. Too many resources were spent and too many horses, wasted. The lumpenproletariat did not approve.

April 12, 2007

War and Peace IV: Pierre Bezukhov (Voina i Mir III: Pierre Bezukhov, 1967 Sergei Bondarchuk)

Finally, an episode named after the Soviet Union's most beloved golden boy: Pierre Bezukhov. All that was missing was "Previously... on Tolstoy" to situate the unsuspecting viewer, or someone who waited a whole week to watch the last part. Once again, the proletariat pays for the production of the film with the sweat of their lathes, but is rewarded with the glorious scene of Moscow in flames. In short, the epic concludes with panache, the war ends and Pierre survives, which was to be expected (after all he is the director of the film).

Scattered notes

"Third things are essential to marriages, objects or practices or habits or arts or institutions or games or human beings that provide a site of joint rapture or contentment. Each member of a couple is separate; the two come together in double attention. Lovemaking is not a "third thing", but "two-in-one". John Keats can be a third thing, or the Boston Symphony Orchestra, or Dutch interiors, or checkers. For many couples, children are a third thing. Jane and I had our cats and dog to fuss and exclaim over—and later five grandchildren. We had our summer afternoons at the pond, which for ten years made a third thing. After nap we loaded up books and blankets and walked across Route 4 and the old railroad to the steep slippery bank that led down to our private beach on Eagle Pond.

"[...] But there was also ping pong. When we added a new bedroom—turning the old master bedroom into a bathroom and laundry—we extended the rootcellar enough to set a ping-pong table into it, and for years we played every afternoon. Jane was assiduous, determined, vicious, and her reach was not so wide as mine. When she couldn't reach a shot I called her "Stubbsy", and her next slam would smash me in the groin, rage combined with harmlessness. We rallied half an hour without keeping score. Another trait we shared was hating to lose. "

(Donald Hall, *The Best Day the Worst Day*: Life with Jane Kenyon)