

DEEP DIVES

The Brazilian Grandmother Who Took Down Drug Trafficking Ring With a Camcorder

For years, Dona Joana begged police to stop the dealers terrorizing her Rio neighborhood. When no one listened, the 80-year-old grandmother decided she would take matters into her own hands.

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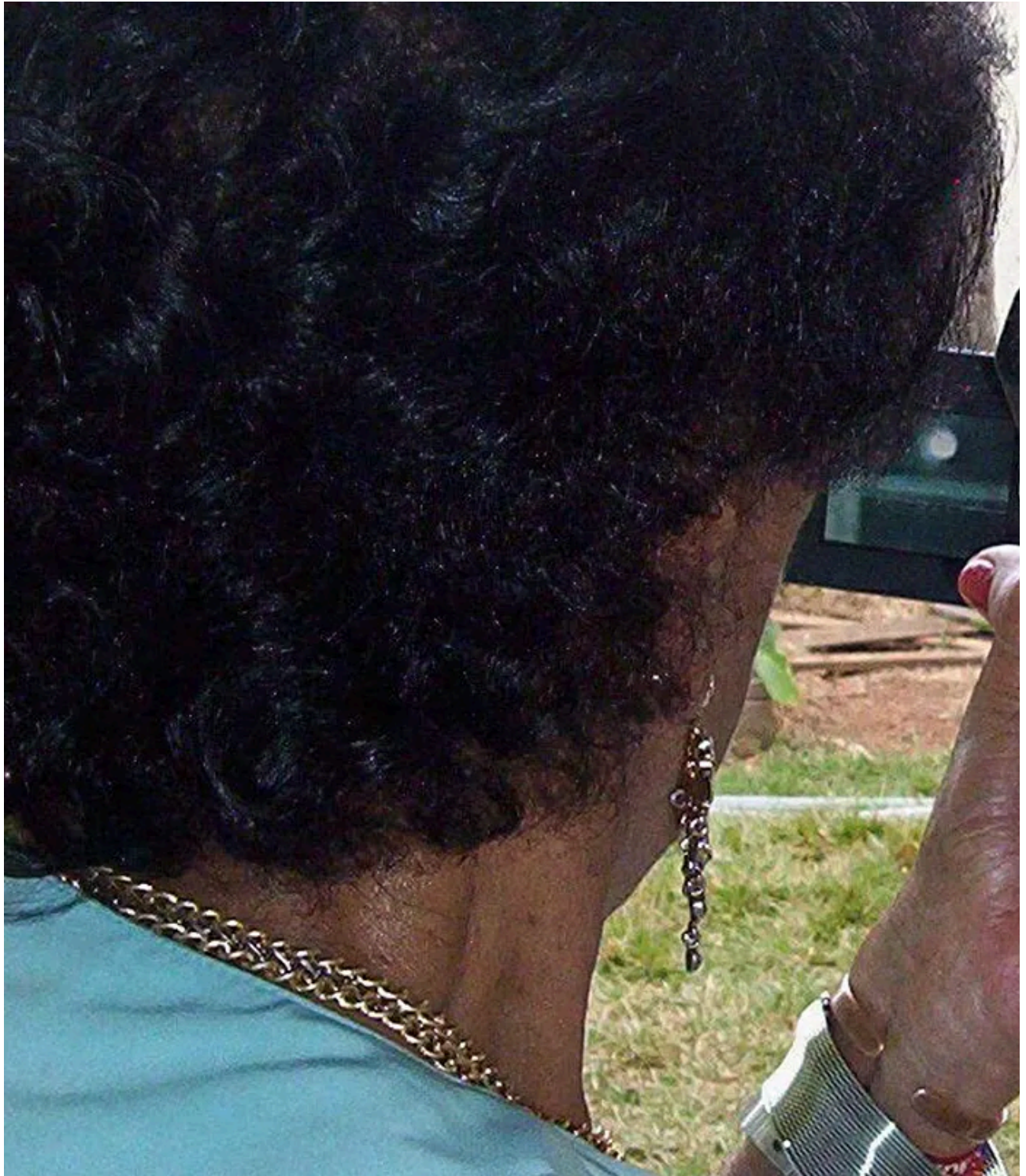


Photo courtesy of Fábio Gusmão/O Globo Agency | Story edited by Brendan Spiegel

On a clear August morning in 2005, the sun rose over Ladeira dos Tabajaras, a favela perched above Copacabana Beach, casting light across Rio de Janeiro's rooftops and winding streets. The air hummed with everyday life. The laughter of children, the chatter of neighbors and the rush of passing cars blended into a hypnotic symphony, a familiar rhythm that was abruptly broken when the piercing shriek of police sirens cut through the air.

The wails grew louder as patrol cars climbed the hillside. Tires scraped asphalt as doors were slammed as armed squads leapt from their vehicles and moved in with practiced precision to arrest 13 unsuspecting drug traffickers who'd long terrorized the neighborhood with impunity.

At the same time, across the city, seven military police officers were taken into custody on corruption charges tied to the same trafficking network. Two other officers had already been arrested the night before, marking the start of a coordinated operation.

Behind the sweeping arrests stood an 80-year-old Afro-Brazilian woman armed with nothing but a camcorder and courage that bordered on delusion.

PART 1: A Woman on a Mission

At first glance, Joana Zeferino da Paz (better known by the honorific Dona Joana) might have seemed like any ordinary grandmother. Small and slender, she had dark skin and short-cropped hair that she hid under different wigs. Laughter came easily to her, and she walked upright and with confidence.

“Initially, you had the image of a fragile elderly lady,” says Danielle Gomes, Dona Joana’s neighbor toward the end of her life. “But when you began to speak with her, you saw that she was a very strong woman.”

Even at 80, Dona Joana worked as a masseuse and spent her free time painting, writing, and exercising. She had expressive eyes that lit up when she smiled and gathered dark storms when she was angry. Despite her vitality, she kept mostly to herself, leading a quiet life in her small studio apartment, one small space divided into a makeshift living room and bedroom. All she wanted was peace.

When Dona Joana bought her apartment nearly 40 years earlier, the hill in front of the building was covered in trees that brought numerous bird species to the area. Her

mornings were filled with their cheerful chirps and whistles.

She'd toiled for decades to find this paradise. Born in 1925 as the youngest of six children in an extremely poor family in the state of Alagoas, she'd suffered from repeated sexual abuse that began when she was around 13. Her abuser was a cruel powerful landowner who threatened violence against her family to force her into silence. When he realized she was pregnant, he kidnapped her and took her by train to a different state, far from anyone who could protect her. At seven months pregnant she managed to escape and willed herself to walk alone along the railway tracks for three days until she reached her home. Dona Rosa, her mother, denounced her rapist to the police at a time when that was almost unthinkable, teaching her to seek justice even against the powerful.

This lesson would remain with Dona Joana throughout her life. And so would the will to survive through anything, even the loss of her daughter before she turned 2.

She spent years saving up the money she earned as a masseuse to buy an apartment near the beach with a view of the mountains. In her little haven, she felt safe for the first time in her life.

But slowly, people pushed to the margins by Brazil's extreme inequality began settling on the hill in front of her building. Concrete gobbled up the forest. Gunshots replaced birdsongs. And her window now faced a favela where drug traffickers operated openly.



Dona Joana next to her window with her recording camera. (Photo courtesy of Fábio Gusmão/O Globo Agency)

Angered by what she saw as a failure of the state, Dona Joana spent almost a decade reporting the crimes she witnessed to the police. Little changed. Terrified of retaliation, her neighbors told her to stop stirring trouble, even after stray bullets hit one of their windows. Yet she kept calling the police, showing up at stations, pressuring officers to do their jobs, complaining, complaining, complaining — desperate for something to change and refusing to accept that it wouldn't.

She even sued the government, arguing that its failure to secure the area had devastated her apartment. Dona Joana lost the case, but during the proceedings, something happened that pushed her to take even more drastic action. In court, the Copacabana chief of police denied that the situation in Ladeira dos Tabajaras was as bad as she claimed. He called her a liar who made wild accusations without proof.

The fire in her soul now burned brighter than ever. She was insulted, but she'd already been shown a path forward. Determined to prove her hellish reality, she walked into a store and bought a camcorder that was so expensive for her, she spent the next year paying it off in installments.

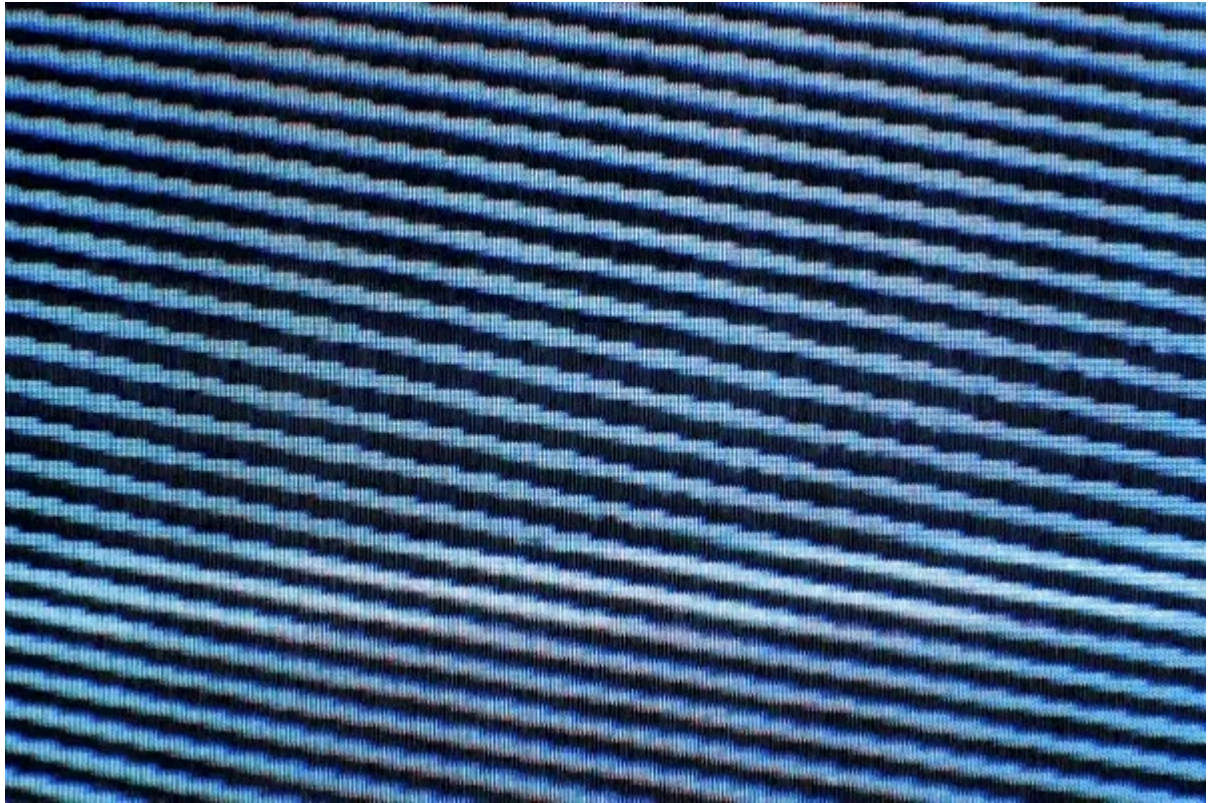
PART 2: The Tapes

From December 2003 onward, Dona Joana dedicated much of her free time to film. Her makeshift bedroom became an improvised spying spot. She stacked books on top of a stand under her window to support and stabilize her camera and would pull up a dining chair so she could sit, observe and film for hours. Her blinds and curtains would be drawn just enough to allow a good shot while keeping her mostly hidden.

Surrounded by the religious figurines and her own landscape paintings, the octogenarian witnessed and captured horrifying scenes: children appearing as young as 8 snorting cocaine, minors on street corners with semiautomatic weapons and traffickers selling drugs with a gun in their hand and a child on their lap. Piece by piece, she assembled a mosaic of a neighborhood held hostage by state neglect and mercenary drug lords.

The tapes also captured her anguish.

“What a disgrace, my God! What have we come to?” she can be heard saying on a tape where a man waves a firearm around and a younger one with hollowed cheeks openly carries drugs.



Scenes of criminal activity seen through Dona Joana's window. (Images courtesy of Fábio Gusmão)

In another, she laments, “Those poor children passing through there...what a vile scene, what a nightmare for those kids.”

Sometimes her indignation was so great that she wasn't content with just filming; she resorted to throwing stones, hurling insults and dumping water on the people who sold and bought drugs near her window.

By March 2004, she had eight unlabeled cassettes of evidence. She put them in a bag and carried them to the Twelfth Precinct police station in Copacabana, where she triumphantly handed them over. In total, she would tape 33 hours on 22 cassettes over the course of almost two years.

The tapes could've easily been tossed into a dusty collection of forgotten evidence; this is a story of fortuitous chance encounters. On the very day she dropped them, a 28-year-old crime reporter named Fábio Gusmão, who worked for Grupo Globo's prestigious newspaper *Extra*, walked into the station looking for a scoop.



Dona Joana and Fábio Gusmão in 2006. (Photo courtesy of Fábio Gusmão)

One of the officers mentioned the tapes and let him watch them without sound. The images were all too familiar for a crime journalist, but something told him to investigate further. He followed his gut and filed for permission to take the evidence home.

Sitting alone in his living room, Gusmão picked up one of the tapes inside the bag and played it. The appalling images were nothing new to him. With the volume turned low, however, he could hear Dona Joana's distressed commentary. Her voice transported him, making him feel as if he were almost standing next to her, watching her slip the camcorder through the curtain.

"It wasn't what she saw, but what she lived, what she felt: the fear, the denunciation, the anger at the absent state, the police not being present. All of that was very visceral," Gusmão recalls. "And we're talking not in 2026, but in 2005, when you could not have so many smartphones, videos of every moment, people narrating their lives."

all the time. An 80-year-old woman in 2005 buys a camera and makes a document of her own life — that is very powerful!”

Immediately, he realized that the real story wasn’t outside the window, but behind it. He felt in his bones that the story of this elderly woman whose name he did not yet know would be one of the most important ones of his career.

Determined to meet the mysterious grandmother, Gusmão reached out to Civil Police Inspector Marina Maggessi, who agreed to set up a meeting with Dona Joana. It took several months for this encounter to happen, but once their paths finally crossed, their lives converged forever.

Gusmão began to visit Dona Joana frequently, posing as her nephew with the documents so no one would suspect he was a journalist or that she was up to something. They slowly formed a strong friendship over shared afternoon biscuits and coffee. They talked about the tapes, the violence she witnessed, her paintings, and, with time, her past.

Gusmão also helped Dona Joana in the process of demanding an investigation based on the evidence she’d captured. Together, the pair was able to reach Marcelo Itagiba, who at the time was the high-ranking public security secretary for the state of Rio de Janeiro.



Recording taken by Dona Joana outside her home in Copacabana. In the background, Dona Joana rants in Portuguese about the men with guns on their waistbands. (Video courtesy Fábio Gusmão)

“They came to my office, showed me the videos, told me the story,” Itagiba says. Unlike many of the officers Dona Joana had tried speaking to, Itagiba took his job heart and actually had the power to get things done. He recognized that her tape provided rare “living evidence” of crimes that were not easy to film back then. The images were so clear that it would’ve been almost impossible to dispute or dismiss their validity in court.

A man of action, Itagiba got to work right away. “I thought it was important to immediately open an investigation because it seemed to me that at that time she already gone to the police, and they had not done anything,” he states. Besides, Dona Joana’s tapes proved that the Copacabana chief of police had lied about the state neighborhood, which raised suspicions. This was too serious to ignore.

After years and years of hopeless attempts, Dona Joana's pleas for justice were finally heard.

PART 3: The Investigation

Although Itagiba is adamant that Dona Joana's tapes were "fundamental" to the investigation, they presented incomplete evidence. Luckily, two almost unbelievable coincidences would provide the police with everything the tapes were missing.

About a month before Dona Joana and Gusmão walked into Itagiba's office, the police had arrested one of Ladeira dos Tabajaras' kingpins. "He didn't have any kind of ID or anything on him, but he had a cell phone," recounts Carlos Gadelha, one of the main police detectives who were assigned to the investigation.

Itagiba had recently purchased new technology capable of wiretapping. This made it possible to spy on the lines connected to the kingpin's phone. Thinking themselves safe from police surveillance, the traffickers spoke without reservations, openly using names and aliases. These conversations didn't just expose a network of drug dealing but also the complicity of several police officers who'd been receiving bribes and selling weapons in the favela.

The wiretaps recorded faceless names mentioned in incriminating circumstances. Dona Joana's tapes showed nameless people committing crimes. Yet it wasn't easy to match the names to the faces. "The images were very, very clear," says Gadelha. "What we needed was someone who recognized the people."

This exact person appeared around two months after the investigation had launched. Gabriel Santos (whose real name has been changed to protect his identity) was wrongfully arrested for motorcycle theft. But before realizing that they'd made a mistake, the police had run a routine background check on him that revealed his background as an underage dealer in, yes, Ladeira dos Tabajaras.

A former gang member and a current favela resident, Santos knew most people in the neighborhood from their tapes and could identify the aliases used in the phone conversations. Better yet, he offered to collaborate before the police even asked him. The investigators recruited this stranger on the spot.

“It was God. It was God who put him there,” Gadelha still believes.

The police soon had everything they needed to make arrests, and Gusmão had enough information to write a story, but neither party would take action while Dona Joana remained in the neighborhood for fear of putting her life in danger.

Although Itagiba had offered Dona Joana protection, she refused to move. “I wanted them to leave,” Gusmão recalls her saying, speaking of the criminals. She would tell him, “It’s not me who needs to abandon my home. I’m not a fugitive.”

Yet in his transcripts of her tapes, she describes constantly feeling unsafe because gang members threatened people in the neighborhood. In one, she claims that a man with a gun in his waistband told her to poke her face out the window so he could see her.

“Honestly, I don’t know why they didn’t kill her,” Gusmão confesses. “Everyone thought she was a crazy old woman.”

Dona Joana waved the police and Gusmão’s worries away, insisting that they were not responsible for her, and growing increasingly annoyed at their inaction. In her eyes, they were going back on everything they’d promised her they would do.

Her refusal to leave put everything on hold. The police had pressure to provide results; Gusmão’s editors were eager to run the story; and Dona Joana wanted the drug trafficking to stop. But no one would budge.

The standoff lasted months, and became worse when Dona Joana kept filming and antagonizing drug dealers by throwing rocks and water at them. Tensions were so high that she and Gusmão stopped speaking for six months, each too frustrated with the situation and the endless bickering it caused.



Recording of a man with a gun seen from Dona Joana's window. Dona Joana comments man being released from jail for drug trafficking and other criminal activity. (Video courtesy of Fábio Gusmão)

Meanwhile, violence continued interrupting the stubborn grandmother's life. The constant gunshots affected her nerves so much that she lost her ability to paint or sleep well. After a bullet hit her window frame (it's not clear whether it was stray or intentional), she stopped opening her blinds altogether unless she was filming.

"I can't paint anymore. I can't paint with the window closed," she says in one video. "I'm not in the right psychological state to paint, my hand trembles, I ruin everything....I can't paint with a gun pointed at me." The constant violence ended by breaking her will to stay. When Gusmão reached out again, she agreed to enter witness protection — but not before she'd secured her financial future by selling her apartment, a process that would take several more months.

In July 2005, while Dona Joana was in the process of selling, Gusmão got a call from the Copacabana police commissioner, Fernando Veloso, warning him that they were going to make arrests in Ladeira dos Tabajaras the next day. Veloso urged him to get Dona Joana out that night.

Itagiba states that these arrests were part of a different investigation in the favela; they had nothing to do with Dona Joana, but that staying was very dangerous for her. "They could've put her at risk because they might [have thought] it had come from the complaints she had made," he says.

Gusmão felt so betrayed that he stopped delivering Dona Joana's new tapes to the police. He still believes that the police acted wrongfully. "What is more important: The life of a citizen who is collaborating with justice, or to arrest a person?" Despite their protests, the arrests were carried out, increasing the chance that the dealers would realize Dona Joana was collaborating with the police.

Stubborn as always, Dona Joana remained in the apartment, causing everyone to live in daily fear for her life.

Finally, on August 10, the sale went through.

After almost a year of stagnation, the operation moved at the speed of light.

On Tuesday, August 23, Gusmão got word that the arrests would happen the next morning. He sat down and poured out the story that had consumed him for so long. When he typed the final period, he burst into tears.

To honor Dona Joana's victory while still protecting her, Gusmão changed her name to "Dona Vitória da Paz," the alias by which she'd be known for the rest of her life.

In total, Dona Joana's tapes and the investigation would lead to the arrest of 36 people, including nine military police officers.

PART 4: The Fallout

Gusmão's report was published on August 24, 2005, the same day the first arrest happened in Ladeira dos Tabajaras. The story blew up immediately. "I remember color of the blue sky, the heat coming in through my open window and my cell phone ringing nonstop," the journalist recalls.

Capturing Brazil's heart with her courage and audacity, Dona Joana instantly became a Brazilian hero, and was granted two prestigious national awards. But the price she paid was dear. She was forced to flee her apartment on the morning of the arrest, going into witness protection and leaving everything behind, even her name. It was Dona Vitória, not Dona Joana, who got credit.

"They honored me there in Rio, they put a square in my name, but it was not in my name, because my name is not 'Vitória,'" she would later complain to her neighbor Gomes.

"She was very proud of her story, very proud of what she did. But at the same time she had a certain sadness because she did not have recognition," Gomes states. "She asked, 'What use is this victory if I have to walk hidden?'"

Never one to follow instructions, Dona Joana didn't adapt well to the restraints of witness protection. She kept compromising her cover by telling people who she was and had to be relocated several times. Fed up, she even left the program once for a couple of months, only to return to it with Gusmão's help. Eventually, she landed permanently in the northeastern seaside city of Salvador de Bahia, a 24-hour drive from Rio.

Gusmão dealt with challenges of his own. As the public face of the story, he received the credit he deserved, winning journalism awards, achieving promotions and winning

a book, *Dona Vitória da Paz*. This same attention also made him a target for every grievances.

First, the investigative police team felt that he had not acknowledged their work enough. (To this, he replies that the police were merely doing their job, and that Dona Joana who made this story grand.) Then, Veloso, the police commissioner, denounced him for disobedience for refusing to provide Dona Joana's tapes after unrelated arrests in the favela. Two arrested police officers who'd been acquitted sued him for defamation. He won each case.

Yet none of these issues would come close to the shock and heartbreak he experienced on April 30, 2009, when he learned that Dona Joana was suing him.

She'd hated his book, complaining that he'd put too much of himself in it and that she had changed her name. Her lawsuit requested the cancellation of any copyright contract and looked for compensation for moral damages and illicit enrichment.

The pair had kept in touch when she was in witness protection through prearranged phone calls from pay phones and anonymous letters. After the book was published, Dona Joana began what Gusmão describes as a harassment campaign — writing accusing emails and letters, and screaming at him over the phone — until he decided to stop responding.

“She would say, ‘Look, he took my story and traveled, went to Europe, gave lectures in various places,’” Paulo Bevilacqua, Gomes' ex-husband and Dona Joana's neighbor in Salvador, explains. “‘I gained nothing from that. What I got was very little.’”

Gusmão defends himself. “Dona Joana thought that I got rich with her story because of the book, but I did not get rich.” He states that he gave her 20 percent of the roughly \$5,000 (in today's dollars) book advance.

When the story initially broke, a production company bought the film rights, paying each of them separately. Gusmão claims that Dona Joana also got money from the citizen awards and that individuals moved by her story sent her donations on a card.

of occasions. When the movie rights expired and a different production company bought them in 2016, they both got a separate payment again.

“I think her life was so hard, she found so many people who tried something against her, that she began to function [with the thought] that ‘everyone wants to deceive’,” Gusmão says.

After a costly six-year legal battle, the law sided with Gusmão in 2015. The outcome brought relief, yet came at a high cost. “What I regret is that this caused a distance that wasn’t necessary,” he laments. “We could have had a life where we remained close.”

Five years would pass before they spoke again.

PART 5: The Rebirth

In Salvador, Dona Joana seemed to have finally found a peaceful life: She went to church and continued to work as a masseuse. Her apartment had a giant window that looked out to the sparkling Atlantic Ocean. Determined to keep up with the times, she even took computer classes to learn how to digitize the videos she’d taken in Rio

Bevilacqua and Gomes, who were then married, moved into Dona Joana’s building in 2017. They found a woman in her early 90s who was full of joy. She constantly laughed, danced, painted and wrote stories, mainly depicting her lost childhood.

As neighbors, their lives began to intertwine, and a strong friendship bloomed. Over time, Dona Joana trusted them enough to confess that she was the legendary Dona Vitória, a shocking revelation for people who remembered hearing her story on the news. She showed them her old camcorder and newspaper clippings that she’d collected.



Dona Joana and Danielle Gomes. (Photo courtesy of Danielle Gomes)

After the pair separated, Dona Joana invited Bevilacqua to live with her, cementing a bond that he describes as “unconditional love.” Though he naturally became her caretaker, she looked after him as well by giving him massages when he came home exhausted from work. Seeing him lovestruck for a woman who lived in another state, she also lent him money to bring her up for visits. The two had a daughter together who was named Joana after the adoptive grandmother who’d made her life possible.

For her part, Gomes helped Dona Joana heal another deep wound: the rift in her friendship with Gusmão.

In 2020, Gomes wrote to the journalist on Instagram to ask if he wanted to get in contact with Dona Joana. “I got scared,” he confesses, “I didn’t know how she would

react.” But he was also eager to hear news of his old friend.

“I [get on] the video call. I get very emotional. She does too. [She says], ‘Boy, you disappeared!’” he remembers, laughing.

With relieved hearts, they made up, not knowing that it would be the last time they spoke.

Three years later, Dona Joana, then 97, suffered a stroke in her home that caused her to fall and hit her head. She arrived at the hospital conscious but soon fell into a coma.

On February 22, 2023, Gusmão opened Instagram at 10:30 p.m. and saw a message from Gomes.

Dona Joana had passed away.

More than 20 years have gone by since the story first broke, yet Dona Joana’s indomitable spirit and unfailing sense of justice continue to capture the public’s imagination. Her life was the inspiration for the 2025 Brazilian movie, *Vitória*, starring the legendary Fernanda Montenegro (a casting choice that thrilled Dona Joana when she learned of it during production), as well as the new TV Globo documentary titled *Vitória da Paz*.

Unable to get a last-minute ticket to Salvador, Gusmão couldn’t attend her wake or funeral. Instead, he honored her by finally revealing her identity and giving her the recognition she’d yearned for so earnestly. He titled the obituary he wrote about her “**Dona Vitória Dies, Dona Joana Is Born.**”

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