

## THE ATTACK

by Luiz Ruffato

Translation by Rex P. Nielson

In the summer of 1972, my parents had the opportunity to shake the hand of happiness. In January, while dark clouds over on the side by Barbacena startled the riverbanks, fearful of the treacherous waters of the Pomba River, we crammed Mr. Zé Pinto's little International delivery truck with all our stuff. Finally, our small four-room house over in Paradise was ready. Two years spent in that fluster, from purchasing the land to connecting the power lines; two years of thermoses of coffee for the mason, for his assistant, for the well-digger, for his helper, for the electrician, culminating with the bags of bread with tomato sauce and onion and the liters of Kool-Aid on the Sunday scheduled for mixing the cement. My dad, who had supervised step by step the construction, from pouring the concrete foundation to the installation of the toilets, from positioning the asbestos sheets over the porch to applying the sealing at the feet of the basin for washing clothes, was beside himself with joy. He was hugging everyone, people he knew or people he had never seen before; he talked loudly, which was unusual for him; he laughed at nonsense, at twaddle...

My mom, a sensible woman — Yes of course I'm happy!, it's silly, ridiculous really to be crying — she explained. They had lived twenty years in Vila Teresa — Reginaldo was still a babe in arms, just a tiny thing —; it's true, the floods were what ruined everything — I lost count of the number of mattresses thrown out — these would be left behind, but even this, she knew, she would miss, even this; and also that camaraderie of over the wall,

sneeze-bless you!, she would miss: in Paradise, the houses separated, embarrassed of each other; and the fights, the confusions, the he-said-she-said, the gossiping... They were a family, after all: the old man, the old girl. But, what was important was that they would be free from the rent, a sweat sweated for nothing but to satisfy the thirst of the landlord, Yes, this is what was important, she repeated, straightening out the wrinkles of the burlap bag stretched on the floor of the truck which careened and spurted through the neighborhood streets.

In February, my dad, with the help of Reginaldo and Mirtes, my brother and sister, purchased by installments a television, a twenty-three-inch Telefunken, so my mom could watch the soaps, A rest for your head, you have no idea, and for your legs troubled by veins. But nothing made sense when compared to the dream she had had, from when she was a little girl and lived in a wood-planked house, earth-beaten floor, in the middle of nowhere, she didn't even like to remember it: living beneath a decent roof, her own, with a beautiful yellow smooth cement floor, this, her only extravagance. Thrifty, she had saved dollar by dollar, separated them out from the payments for washing clothes, and she ran all over from store to store for the construction material to find the exact color of the cement powder she wanted.

After the move, every Saturday morning, taking advantage of the absence of Reginaldo and Mirtes, away at work in the factory, and my dad, busy at the little grocery store, my mom would set to work cleaning the house. Early early, she would send me on my bicycle to the gas station to buy some gasoline. Wearing a dress of threadbare calico, a cloth tied around her head, she would tackle each room: using the remnants of an old knit shirt, she dusted the furniture and polished them with mahogany oil; she moved them from one side to the other to get to the corners; she soaked the yellow Cristal wax in gasoline and spread it over the floor. I always wanted it this way... a house all my own... Where I nail a nail, it stays... there... forever... no one will remove it... no one...

Around this time, my dad became possessed by the idea of changing his line of work, to move the little business to a single storefront in Vila Minalda and open a shop selling odds and ends at a spot closer to Commerce Street. He felt dissatisfied, the end of the month barely covered the rent, and, above all, he had developed a name, reputation,

respect, so it would be a big leap forward. In the meantime, he spent his days mixed up in farm-raised eggs, citrons, country oranges, avocados, mangos, guavas, pipes, straw-filled pillows, liquids, flint lighters, a mishmash of products. At noon, among drooping vegetables, he tuned in to Aparecida Radio to listen to Father Victor, *The hands are pointing to infinity*. At three in the afternoon, among agonic rejected vegetables, he tuned in to Our Lady of Aparecida Radio to listen to Father Victor, *Blessing of Our Lady*.

Mirtes turned sixteen and was on the hunt for a young man who could lift her up out of the condition of factory worker to the fine life. In the textile room of the factory, far from the noise, the heat, the stifling and stale air of the wiring and the weaving, all of the family's recent achievements meant little. She wanted to meet someone as soon as she could who lived in the center of town, the owner of a Standard Optical or an appliance store, so, dating someone from the factory?, just like here?, no way! And she wanted nothing to do with the owner of a bar, a Portuguese thing, no one gets ahead that way. In the meantime, she made herself comfortable on the sofa-bed in the front room and secretly made out with some Joe Schmoe in the dark corners of the Santa Rita plaza ...

I was almost eleven years old and was studying in the Cataguases Public School in the mornings. In the afternoons, I joined the others and played shirtless in the little Paradise field from right after lunch until the hour of Ave Maria. At night, I'd go down to the riverfront, like a fish out of water, walking around, suspicious, doing nothing, watching the bands playing their accordions up and down, mindlessly, a game of button football, a fight among waste pickers, a new car on the street, a funny show on television, an angry drunk man, a naked woman on a magazine, an organized fight, a game of hide-and-seek, an upset stomach, a window broken by a rock, a sock-filled ball, a shard of glass in the toe, a decked out bicycle... The older kids peacocked in front of the homes of possible future girlfriends, guitar, untuned voices, the girls sighing, mocking, dreaming, ridiculing, fainting, leaning out the window. There the couples fermented that would light up the dances on Saturday night in the parish dance hall.

Reginaldo, my older brother, back from Natal had announced, to the great joy of my parents, that he had broken things off with Rejane — You were right to warn me, Mom, he acknowledged; My son, a mother's heart doesn't make mistakes; God has heard my

prayers!, my dad concluded. What had truly bothered them, they claimed, was not the fact that she was black, but that she regularly accompanied her mother to Sá-Ana's voodoo. It is not a question of color, my mother stressed, it's that these people are messing with what they shouldn't, witchcraft, the Devil, God save and protect me!, she raised her eyes to the heavens, crossing herself and then kissing the small pendant that always hung around her neck. In Paradise, Reginaldo, after changing out of his greasy coveralls, slipped into the battles of the house with a passion: he cleaned up the yard with a homemade broom that my mom had spent a whole afternoon cutting from the high grass of the pasture; he ran after the little hills, the poison sprayer attached to his back as he chased the ant colonies; he surrounded the recently planted seedlings with small circles of cut up bicycle tubes; he looked after the Marumby pump, which pulled water from the twenty-meter-deep well and poured into the cement tank up on the roof, always careful to make sure that the valve didn't choke. At bedtime, he took a shower, swallowed a piece of bread with butter and a glass of Toddy chocolate, brushed his teeth, laid down, turned on the battery-operated red Semp radio, and turned and twisted the dial in search of a short-wave station that was transmitting in Portuguese at that hour, and along the way stumbled upon unpronounceable languages, strange sounds, exotic music, bizarre noises...

We slept in the same room, beds separated by a little desk full of the labyrinthine trails of termites, with a drawer that locked with a key where he kept a nail cutter, a jar of pomade, a shaving brush, a razor, a box of Gillette blades, a tube of shaving cream, a bottle of Aqua Velva, some vials of Prince of the Night, a swiss army knife, a pipe wrench, a caliper, a magnifying glass, a money wallet with plastic sheets to protect his cards. On the opposite wall, we shared a dresser, which we used to keep our folded clothes.

One frigid night in May, I woke up in a panic, the chickens fussing in the coop, heart pounding, a shiver in my spine, legs wobbly, a buzz buzzing in my head, my tense body stuck to the cold cement floor, surrounded by a blackness so thick I could feel it between my fingertips, the darkness, the smell of the Devil, my eyes bulging, the horror, then I heard the fleeting voice, the batteries almost spent, whispering, in the middle of an ocean of interference: Here, BBC Radio, trans(.....) from London (.....)ssion in Portuguese (.....)ew instructions (.....) for Cataguases. The att(.....)ing

agents from the cit(.....) should occur (.....) east, to the squadr(.....). And, like an unsteady boat that tips over and goes under, silence caught the world and everything became liquid, sticky, viscous, ominous, fatal.

Early in the morning, the alarm went off. My mom got up, opened wide the kitchen door, began filling the basin to wash the clothes, filled the kettle with water, came back in, put in sugar, lit a burner on the stove, set the pot on the trivet, entered the bedroom, murmured, “Reginaldo!, oh, Reginaldo!, Five o-clock!”, entered the front room, whispered, “Mirtes!, oh, Mirtes!, Five o-clock!”, returned to the kitchen, put the corn in a tin can, went out into the yard, called the chickens, “Here chiki-chiki-chiki, Here chiki-chiki-chiki”, my father coughed ... then ... the smell of coffee ... my sister grumbling ... my brother opens the drawer of the little desk ... the smell of toasted bread on the skillet “...cold spell...” “...this year...” “...to pay on time...” the sound of the colored beads on the spokes of Reginaldo’s bicycle ... Mirtes’s wooden heels ... “Goodbye, mom... Goodbye, dad...” My skin burned my clothes, sweat soaking the grass inside of the mattress. Fire. Water. Death. I took Melhoral and I took Novalgina, I took Coristina and I took Conmel, I had a cup of orange-leaf tea, and some ironweed tea, the fever broke, muscles exhausted.

After lunch, my mom, “I’m going to step out, run some errands, I’ll be right back,” I slept, a bowl of cornstarch porridge lining my stomach. The wind mischievously swept through the yard: it tipped over the board of meat drying near the well, yanked off clothes from the clothes-line, raised up a cloud of dust from the pasture, spread dirt over everything, startled the chickens, how long would this zig-zag last? My head lay in my mom’s lap, “He’s delirious, Tião, I’m going to make some melon tea for him, the poor thing.” I gripped my dad’s arm, “...they’re going to attack...”, “What, my son?” “...they’re going to attack” “Who is, my son, who’s going to attack?” “They... by plane...” “What are you talking about, son?” “The radio... the man said... on the radio...” He pressed his hand to my forehead, called out for my mom, “Ismênia, come quick... the boy... the fever...”

Once the scare was over, we plunged into the blue serenity of June and the gentle holidays of July.

During the second week back in school, at the beginning of August, one afternoon up on the top of the hill, I was examining a little trail of ants, a little black organized two-way highway, trying to find the opening to the anthill, the erratic row disappearing into the depths of the earth, so that by finding it, I could better combat them, when suddenly, the unusual white-rose clouds that lazily stretched towards the south reminded me of planes, the snorting of engines... one early morning... the radio turned on... no, no it hadn't been a nightmare, I was not delirious... Cataguases was going to be... really... bombed! I ran down the hill at a gallop, and as I entered the kitchen gasping, I ran into Reginaldo, "This boy only moves at a run..." "Reginaldo..." "What happened?" "It's... that... Nothing... Nothing happened..."

— What's going on, my son, what's hurting you inside?, my mom asked, while she applied the bleach to the white clothes hanging to dry.

— Nothing, mom.

— Son, don't lie to your mother... You have been so... sluggish... depressed... Are you not liking the new house?, is that it?

— That's not it, mom...

— So then... Are you in love?, hmm!?

— Stop mom! It has nothing to do with that! It's serious, mom... It's not a joke...

My mom threw the remaining soapy water in the basin on the high buffalo grass, she dried her hands on her soggy apron and sat in front of me.

— Son, has something happened?

I tried to avoid her, but she held my arms, held my gaze.

— Answer!, oh son of god: has something happened?

Seated around the family table, my dad asked that I share what I knew.

— I've already said, dad...

— Say it again... Reginaldo and Mirtes haven't heard yet...

Head down, ashamed, trapped, *They'll laugh at me...*, I sputtered:

— I heard... on the radio... they're going to drop a bomb... on Cataguases... and that it's for everyone

Reginaldo slammed the table:

— Drop bombs on Cataguases?! The boy's in fantasyland, dad, he's always dreaming up new things...

— To me he's, he's sick in the head, said Mirtes.

I ran out flying towards the planted field on the hill up above Paradise, wanting never to step foot in that house again, angry at Reginaldo and Mirtes, who, after all, were probably not even blood-siblings but were just being raised in the same house... I found the little foot path that squinted up the hill, the ground furrowed by the rains, pebbles hurting my toetips poking out from my flip-flops, up a steep bluff, frail little homes obstinately bound to the yellow sawdusty earth, bricks piled ready to be laid, the stench of fenced pigs, a little patch of manioc, a spread of thin green shoots, a cat stretched out in the window, another curled at the door on a filthy rug, two kittens rolling in the dust of the yard, and dogs, dogs, dogs, angry, silly, barking, quiet, yapping, cautious, growling, daring, stupid, itching, playful, mean, long-tailed, stumpy, skeletal, big-bellied, lame, ears folded, in pain, flea-filled, hollow-eyed, white, black, speckled, yellow, grey, striped, spotted, faded, reddened, zebra-like, masked, clayish, woody, leaden, dirty, smelly, stinking, dogs, dogs, dogs, all of them in mongrelitude, I kept walking, the dwellings became more spaced, a shack here, another there, down below the tangled bank along the Pomba River, I entered the forest, once in the company of my mom looking for firewood, in a place where the ridgeline intertwined with the leaves, and the sun could barely shine its raise in the thick brush, Mom, are there wolves here? No, my son, I climbed a pitanga tree, the fruit smeared all over me, I half-slept stretched out in silence, my eyes bewitched by the luminous serpentine floating in air did not even notice the night invading the afternoon.

I passed by twice in front of my house, where's your courage?, the smell of garlic toasting to make cornmeal cakes and the promise of taking a shower, changing clothes, and snuggling down beneath warm covers convinced me. Full of excuses, I entered, step after step, the kitchen, my mom, as if warned, pinched my left ear, "And where have you been, you pest?", she scolded, "Ow, ow, mom, my ear!", "You left everyone worrying, oh, you scoundrel!", she yelled, her lips turning colors, "Do you want to kill me by fright!" her finger lifting up my nostrils, "Go take a bath!", a slap on the bum, "Your father is losing his

mind! He's been all over the city, up and down... and nothing! Where were you hiding, hmm? What, oh, my Lord! That's how ... kids... Oh, oh, oh". At dinnertime, eyes creeping, Reginaldo's indifference, Mirtes's grimace, the silent sermon of my dad, sharper than a beating with a quince tree switch.

In the middle of October, the buzz of the radio jerked me from sleep. Fearing to startle Reginaldo, I crawled in search of the receptor in the darkness of the early morning, I caught it between my fingers, pulled it over, I sat on the edge of the bed, searched for the on-off button, but before finding it, I heard, clearly, Here, BBC Radio, transmitting from London, another release in Portuguese. Here follows new instructions for the people of Cataguases: the German attack, according to CIA agents, should take place at the end of December. Coming from the east, a squadron will mercilessly bomb the city, opening the way for the Cavalry and Infantry. Once again, we recommend: mobilize yourselves! My body, an unsteady spinning top, heart pounding, a shiver in my spine, legs wobbly, a rattle in my head, darkness, my eyes bulging, I ran to the curtain that separated the kitchen from my parents' room, I entered:

— Huh?! What is it?

— It's me, mom...

— What is it, Ismênia?

— It's me, dad...

— Come here, my son... What's happened?

— Mom... Dad... I... I... I heard... that thing... again...

— The war?, my dad, distressed, dressing his teeth with his dentures.

— It's... the war, I answered, burrowing in between them.

The next day, my father began a pilgrimage, in an effort to be heard by the proper authorities:

The mayor, Dr. Armando Prata, in Juiz de Fora, "Out for medical treatment", they explained, "Do you know when he'll return?", "I couldn't say";

The city councilor Levindo Novaes, well-known by sight, listened impatiently while greeting people along Commerce Street, "Mr...Sebastião? Sebastião! Mr. Sebastião, sincerely, I think all of this... how can I say it?, is strange... but you can rest assured, I will



propose, during the next session, that the topic is put on the agenda... You can relax... Well, Mr. Sebastião, I need to be going... If you need anything else, don't be shy, you can come to me...";

Father Heraldo, from the church of Saint Joseph the Worker, led my dad to the door of the sacristy, hand on his shoulder, he said, understandingly, "Mr. Sebastião, this is imagination... the boy's pure imagination...";

Zé Pinto, his long-time friend, "Give him a sound thrashing with a leather belt, put pepper on his lips so that he stops telling lies. And, oh, do you want some advice?, do it now because... because later it's too late... Listen to what I'm saying...";

The mayor, Dr. Armando Prata, in Belo Horizonte, "He went to resolve some problems there," they explained, "Do you know when he'll return?", "I couldn't say";

The principal of the Cataguases Public School, Guaraciaba dos Reis, sitting behind an enormous rosewood desk adorned by an empty bud vase and a small Greek bust, "Mr. Sebastião, Mr. Sebastião... Before anything else, let me clarify one thing: ever since they lost World War II in 1945, in 1945!, I repeat, the Germans don't even have Armed Forces anymore,... And, apart from that, imagine, Mr. Sebastião, this information would certainly be known at least by the President of the Republic, don't you agree? Furthermore, between us, if someone were going to attack Brazil, why start with Cataguases?, hmmm, Mr. Sebastião, explain to me why start with Cataguases? Look, your son is a good student, he behaves well... perhaps it would be better, Mr. Sebastião, if you were to take him to a doctor... a psychiatrist... perhaps it's something silly... a simple little treatment could take care of it... If you want, there is a good doctor, he sees patients at the INPS... the problem is getting an appointment... but if you get in line very early... His name is Dr. Gilson Machado";

The chief of police, Dr. Aníbal Resende, shook my father's hand: (friendly)

"Thank you, Mr. Sebastião, for having accepted our invitation. This only increases my conviction that this is all a big misunderstanding... And that is, after all, what we're going to clarify right now... (He lights a cigarette) You can sit, Mr. Sebastião, breathe easy. Well, not to go on too long, let's get right to the point: (ironic, his voice changed) What crazy story is this that you're spreading out there, Mr. Sebastião, that Cataguases is going to be

invaded by Germans? Who invented such nonsense, Mr. Sebastião? (sympathetically, his voice a little lower) Mr. Sebastião, let me explain one thing: you, your family, you are good people, you are well-known, orderly, you do your duty, everyone knows this... No, have you ever heard people talk about communists? (didactic) There are people in our country who want to implant terror, brother killing brother (his voice amplifying, the sweat running down his forehead, his hands gesticulating, theatrically), people who want to give Brazil to Russia, Mr. Sebastião, to Russia!, where Christian values have no worth, where men share their women with friends, where daughters sleep with fathers, where priests are hanged for fun, where there is no law, where anarchy reigns, confusion, perdition... (yelling) It is these communists, Mr. Sebastião, who spread information, like what you are going around propagating, for the purpose of provoking panic, disorder, distrust... (he slams the table) (He stands up, walks around the room) Mr. Sebastião, Mr. Sebastião... Let me ask you a question and I would like you to answer in all candor: Do you know any communists? Have you ever seen one? No? Do you know who is a communist? No? (He sits, wipes his face with a handkerchief, stuffs it back into his back pocket) (sarcastically) Neither do we, Mr. Sebastião... Neither do we, the police... Do you know why? Because communists do not have this written on their foreheads... How can I be certain that you, Mr. Sebastião, are not a communist if you are going around acting like one? Sincerely, I do not think you are a communist, and to prove this I am going to give you a vote of confidence. (authoritatively) But from this day forward, you are prohibited, prohibited, do you understand?, from opening your mouth to talk about this piece of stupidity. Another thing: we are going to confiscate all the radio and television sets you have in your home... (yelling) I have nothing to do with that, whether you are still paying for the television! I'm being your friend, Mr. Sebastião, I don't know if you have perceived this!? If I were someone else, you would already be rotting behind bars! (He lights another cigarette, takes a little notebook from a drawer) (his voice softer, confident) You have a son... Reginaldo... I had an uncle named Reginaldo... Good, well Reginaldo works at the manufacturing plant, right? And you have a daughter... Mirtes... Mirtes works in the textile works of the Industrial?, a beautiful job, right, Mr. Sebastião?, a beautiful job! Your kids are on the right path, thanks to god... (furtively) And there are people who swear that you are a communist,

just to see your children fired, just to see your family having difficulties... What a world this is, Mr. Sebastião, what a world! Well, Mr. Sebastião (he stands up and walks to the door) do we understand each other? (friendly) And don't forget to take the boy to doctor Gilson, like Principal Guaraciaba recommended...";

The doctor, Dr. Gilson Machado, "The boy, it seems, has a tendency towards... schizophrenia... We'll monitor things... keep an eye on him... see what happens..."

Had we ever once glimpsed happiness?

My mother yearned for it. Late in the afternoon, seated in the chair in the front room, the door ajar, no breeze to dust off the heat, her pale eyes stumbled over the needlework designs of the towel that covered the little table where up until recently the television had rested, our television, which we had not even paid off yet. Then, her thin hands, hurt by the hot cleaning water, raised to cover her sun-kissed face, trying to understand what was going on, what evil had befallen her house, her family, what power was it that threatened to bring to the earth what had taken a lifetime to build, what, my God, is happening, what? She couldn't make sense why the neighbors avoided her, why her girlfriends disappeared, why the boys in the street pointed at her, mocking... Did everyone know something that she couldn't see? She felt like she had tuberculosis, leprosy, she stood up, breathed, looked through the window for an explanation, the laundry hung on the line drying, clothes piled in the closet waiting to be ironed, the dinner needing to be made, the dust gathering on the yellow floor, thin, nauseated, hair unkempt, varicose veins bulging, "Tião... the boy... is the boy crazy, Tião? Is he crazy?"

My dad was worn out. He stroked the days, sullen inside the four walls of the little market, reading and rereading the old newspapers that would later be used to wrap up vegetables, greens, and fruits, entrenched in a decrepit silence, less and less drawn in by the things of the world, in the late afternoons pouring whiskey in the neighboring bar, eating appetizers, cooked gilo, deviled eggs, fried sausage, digesting nonsense, the ins and outs, the news of those who had left working at the factory, scraping his arm on the plastered wall of the house, evening complete, smelling of alcohol, exhaling vomit, dodging the dreams that haunt the pre-dawn hours.

Reginaldo fell for a Spiritist girl, even started talking about trousseaus, buying furniture, marriage... Mirtes had second thoughts, hooking up with an equal might not be such a disaster after all...

Time pushed on, I dropped out of school.

With a chisel, I marked out in the cement beneath my bed a forty-centimeter square. With a spade, I increased the hole. At first, blood-filled callouses burst, the work only advancing guided by my mummified hands; at night, my muscles pulsed, head pounding, stomach aching, kidneys hurting, teeth grating. I carried out the dirt in a zinc bucket, the handle tied to a cord, pulled it up the side of the humid walls of earth, emptying it into a wheelbarrow, one, two, three, four trips, until filling it, then I took it out behind the house, scratching the floor in the bedroom and in the kitchen, piling it into what was now a pile of waste, previously a small garden, and then I went back to work. When I had reached a depth of two meters, I wielded a little hoe and excavated laterally, day and night, furious, body foolish, machine-like, until I sculpted out a small room, a meter twenty high, a meter wide, and a meter deep. Then, the decoration: wood planks to support the roof, boards to line the floor, an extension cord, my grass-filled mattress, my feather pillow. A tin cover closed the opening of the hole.

On the little tear-off calendar, December folded in half.

**Luiz Ruffato** is a contemporary Brazilian novelist, essayist, and public intellectual. Born in Cataguases, Minas Gerais, to a working-class family of Italian immigrants, he has described himself as the son of an illiterate washerwoman and a semi-illiterate popcorn vendor. Ruffato's poignant writing communicates the experience of Brazil's underclasses while attacking social injustices. His award-winning novel *Eles eram muitos cavalos* (2001), which has been translated into English as *There Were Many Horses* [2013], has been lauded as one of the defining novels of contemporary Brazilian literature. In 2016, Ruffato was awarded the International Herman Hesse Prize for Literature in Translation. The short story "The Attack" was originally published in collection *Geração 90: manuscritos de computador* (2001), edited by Nelson de Oliveira. Ruffato later

incorporated the story into his sweeping series *Infêrno Provisório* (2016).

**Rex Nielson** is an Associate Professor of Spanish and Portuguese at Brigham Young University. He has previously translated the work of Bernardo Carvalho, Raul Brandão, Luís Filipe Silva, Eça de Queirós, Sérgio Sant'Anna, and Machado de Assis.