



Cadernos de Tradução
do Instituto de Letras

Número 39, jul/dez — 2016

Mário de Andrade's *Tales of Belazarte* in English

Rosalia Neumann Garcia, ed.

Translators

Rosalia Neumann Garcia

Aline Lampert

Cristina Bordinhão

Regina Caballero Fleck



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THE TRANSLATION TO ENGLISH OF *CONTOS DE BELAZARTE*

Rosalia Neumann Garcia, editor

Mário de Andrade was born in São Paulo, Brazil, in 1893 and, throughout his lifetime was a part of the literary and artistic scene of the city and of the nation as well. After having published *Há uma gota de sangue em cada poema*, in 1917, he was among the organizers of one of the most expressive artistic movements in Brazil in 1922, the *Semana de Arte Moderna* (Modern Art Week), an event that officially marks the beginning of the Modernist movement in Brazil. The event took place in São Paulo and included visual arts exhibitions, lectures, concerts, and poetry readings. The Week was controversial and incited a great deal of debate over the nature of art and its manifold manifestations in Brazil at the time.

Tales of Belazarte (*Contos de Belazarte*) was published in 1934, though the stories were written between 1923 and 1926. In tune with one of the main discussions taking place within the Modernist Brazilian movement, Andrade defended the use of Brazilian elements as a factor that could differentiate national art from that produced in other countries. He truly believed in incorporating Brazilian culture and language in all possible artistic manifestations - whether literature, music, visual arts. Those who participated in the Week attempted to draw a “Brazilian essence” into art, recognizing the multivariate forms of the different Brazilian regions and bringing them together. As Andrade wrote the stories, he was imbued with this spirit, actively experimenting with the possibilities of expressing this so-called Brazilianess.

The stories Belazarte tells (to an external narrator or a narrate) are not marked by any stereotyped exoticism, perhaps something to be expected in literature coming from what, in comparison to the center of the literary system, i.e., Europe and the United States, is deemed quaint, foreign or unfamiliar. These stories take place in the industrial neighborhoods of the Lapa and Brás in São Paulo, both originally made up of working class residents at the beginning of the 20th century, both known for their initial Italian immigration (as well as other European ethnicities) and gradual addition of migrants coming from the Northeast of Brazil, all in search of a better life in a new land. The industrialization of São Paulo brought with it the usual activity of businesses, streetcars,

crowds and popular entertainment in the form of movie theaters and, once in a while, circuses. This is the landscape of Andrade's *Tales of Belazarte*.

Andrade's short stories present Belazarte as a sort of go-between in the telling of the small and large tragedies of these people, all characters of dramas any reader can recognize. The stories are connected, sometimes by a character that acts in the different narratives in various roles, sometimes small, sometimes more in evidence. The language is at times simple, expressing more of an oral register (especially in the speech of the characters), at times more elaborate in the descriptions of melancholic settings where factory chimneys are set against a grayish sky, or a woman's dress evokes a feeling of longing. The narrative indicates a clear interference of the external narrator, a resource Andrade used in the storytelling, to organize and give greater insight into the possible motivations of the several characters for their decisions, or, even, for actions that do not spring from clear decision, but mostly as a reaction to factors they cannot control. Thus, it is a curious narration in which Belazarte, as a storyteller, knows much more about the going-ons of the characters than any mere narrator-witness could possibly know. Another important element of the narrative is the shift in perspective, or focalization, to use the term developed by Gerard Genette and, later on, Mieke Bal, between the narrator/Belazarte, the external narrator, and the characters. This indicates a change in linguistic choices, in the register, becoming more oral and often, due to this, with the inclusion of fragmented sentences, misspellings and common expressions in the Portuguese language.

The first story, *The Beetle and the Rose*, emphasizes the naiveté of Rosa at the beginning of the story with a number of uncommon phrasings to describe her lack of knowledge of the workings of the world. As Belazarte includes in the narration some of his opinions and thoughts on human nature and life (a recurrent resource in the stories in general), the metaphors given are unusual, requiring some thought and presenting quite a challenge in the translation of this tale. Though the urge to "correct" was present, the realization that the awkwardness, so to speak, was in the source text gave the translators a guideline to follow. If one understands that Rosa is an expression of complete and utter innocence at the start, it is essential to keep not only the vocabulary that forms the comparisons used to describe her, but also the rhythm of the narrative which, at first, reveals an easy-going flow that will contrast later with the sharpness of words and sentences, to reflect the changes the girl goes through. If at first Rosa is inexperienced even regarding her emotions, for "whenever she saw others crying she supposed crying was due, and in a twinkle, there would be endless boohooing...", and her activities as a servant to two old-maids is reported as being absentminded and lacking in purpose, her radical change brings us to actions that are unexpected: "Rosa yanks off the last of [the doll's] curly hair, a cold gesture. She pierces one of her eyes, Portuguesely, *à la* Camões...".

The second story, *Cunning Jabiru*, brings back the character of João, who in the first story ends up in a blooming friendship with Carmela, a main actor in this one as well. Once again, the beginning presents us with a small description of a "tidy drawer" and "how easy it is to find underwear even in the dark, even at the very back! But then a sloppy person

comes around, turns everything upside down, where's that underwear?" to later inform the reader of the purpose of this image in the undoing of the beautiful Carmela, the beloved daughter of an Italian immigrant. Carmela, not being acquainted with disorder, grief or the ways of men (or life itself, for that matter) comes face to face with a most attractive individual in the figure of the Snake Man, a Brazilian from the Northeast, resourceful, handsome and skittish.

The third tale is *Cain, Cain and all the Rest*. One of the most intriguing stories of the collection, it tells of the falling out of two close brothers, for no apparent reason. The characterization of Aldo and Tino places them physically as two Brazilian types, the former with all the features of an Italian, "strong, more like his mother than his father... the maternal paunch [becoming] muscle in his red body", while the latter is "the darker, grumpier one. He took after his father's Brazilianess, that blistered color that never changed and those undeveloped muscles that no hard work could build". The outcome of the brothers' enmity seems to bulldoze not only the family, but others ("the rest") who are merely standing on the sidelines, initially not having anything to do with the disagreement. This involvement will lead to the sixth story.

Deep-eyed Girl takes place in the Bras, among a different class of people. These members of an emerging middle class are interested in their daughters' education, though the ultimate purpose is the rise in social class that this education can give them through marriage. Thus, Dore, the young girl at the center of the narrative, is primed for a better future, one in which her beauty and improvement will allow her to make a good marriage. Though she is portrayed as being charming and seductive towards Gomes, her music teacher, the narrative offers us much more of what he goes through in the relationship and how he manages to survive his ambiguous feelings.

One Grave, Two Graves, Three Graves, is the only story in which Belazarte is a homodiegetic narrator, being part of the drama of his servant Ellis. The descriptions of Ellis's blackness, as well as his wife's, Dora, seem strange to our ears today, though here we must remember how literature is not an expression of the culture and thoughts we express, but that of its own time. Belazarte's relationship with Ellis and his family is filled with mixed feelings on the part of the narrator, one in which the master-servant relation is questioned.

Little Boys don't Cry... do they? picks up where the events of *Cain, Cain and the Rest* ended. The main focalization is that of Paulino, the four-year-old son of Teresinha and Alfredo. The material and spiritual poverty of the family is touchingly seen through Paulino's eyes, the little "leftover" amongst adults who barely understand what moves them and why they suffer at all.

The last story, *Nizia Figueira, at your service*, takes us back to the nineteenth century when "silence would snuff out São Paulo so early, not even nine o'clock", though the town is referred to as a "city" in the story. The neighborhood of Anastácio is still filled with ranches and small-town life, the setting for Nizia's story of happiness and unhappiness, but above all, of acceptance.

The translator's job here was not an easy one, though I fail to find one translation done with care that is ever easy. To the cultural elements sorted out initially with the use of Peter Newmark's categories of ecology, material culture, social culture, customs/activities/procedures, concepts and, finally, gestures/habits, were added those strategies that any translator makes use of and which Newmark also refers to, such as naturalization, footnotes, compensation, as well as others. In the initial phase of our group's research Newmark served as a guideline for the type of decision to be made when facing major cultural items. At times, the translators decided to maintain the item as it was in Portuguese, to keep the "strangeness" of the text. After all, we did not want to naturalize a work whose particularity was to call attention to the Brazilian quality of its theme and language. However, this decision was always made when the comprehension of the term would not compromise the general understanding of the narrative, either because of the context or because of the possible familiarity of the term to an English speaker.

Another guideline used was the theory on narratology developed by Gerard Genette and Mieke Bal. The use of narratology enables the translator, as a specialized reader of the text he or she is translating, to perceive several aspects of the source text that might otherwise go unnoticed. As an example, we can refer to the narrator's desire to emphasize a specific event to the reader through the focalization of a character (the focalization will bring to the narration a particular aspect of the story whether through the perspective of a character or a narrator). This happens, for instance, when Joao sees Rosa differently from all the other times he has seen her before. Before, Joao sees her neutrally, so much so that she is not described in any particular way. At one point, things change:

However, one day, while he was wrapping the loaves in his cart he noticed Rosa who was coming back from the store [...] The sun shone directly on the body that was coming, It was then that João noticed Rosa had changed. She was another person. Entirely a woman with shapely legs and two noticeable breasts under the smoothness of her blouse, like a ruby ring inside a glove...

In narratological terms, there is a deceleration of time with Joao's focalization. Something that might take no more than a few micro seconds in "normal" time, is described in detail to highlight Joao's new view of Rosa's beauty. Right after this moment, the rhythm changes from one of mesmerization (Joao's focalization) to the narrator (Belazarte, though I suspect the external narrator has a hand in it) who has comments to make that break the spell:

That is, João didn't see any of this; I am embellishing the story. From the nineteenth century on, story tellers seem to feel the need to specify these naughty details. Neither did he see the clear amber *camoesa* apple color of her skin, ... nor the eyes of sunny radiance... João only realized he felt uncomfortable and figured that the discomfort was Rosa's doing. Curiously, though the narrator is criticizing all the frill, he still can't resist "embellishing" himself as he refers to the color of Rosa's skin and her eyes.

There are innumerable ways narratology can help in translation and the stories presented here are a testimony to many possibilities.

The final product we have here, of course, is never final, as any translator of literature knows. We hope, nevertheless, that readers can have their first contact with Mário de Andrade, if this be the case, through these stories that register a time in which Brazil was attempting to build its own cultural references. It is the result of two years (2010–2012) of research in a group made up of three students of Translation at Letras/UFRGS, namely, Aline Lampert, Cristina Bordinhão and Regina Fleck under my supervision. We all worked together on the project, translating and revising. It took a good amount of time to translate, a great deal of thought and, above all, courage to face the challenge, which these students had.

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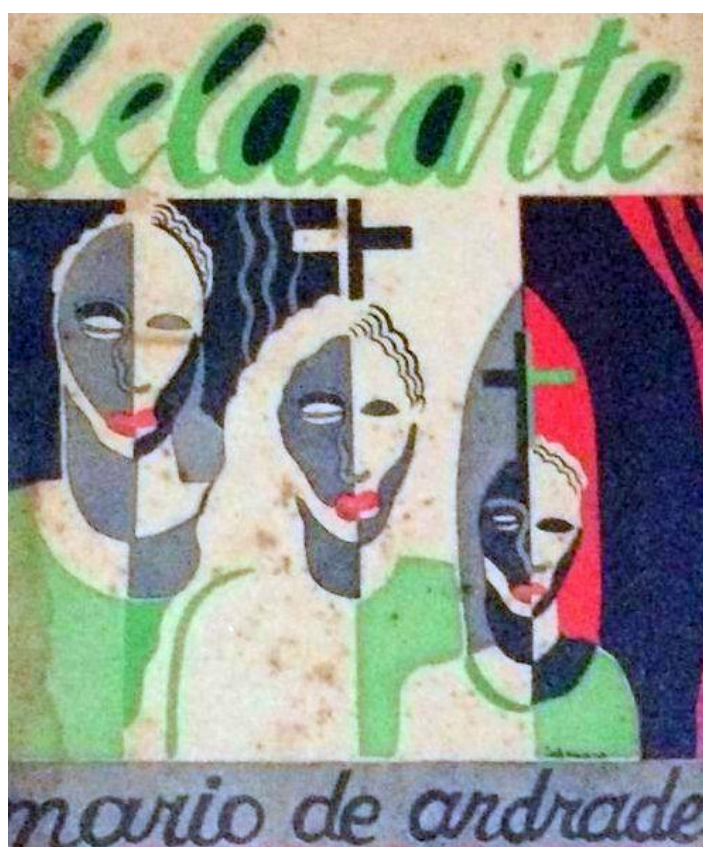
GENETTE, Gerard. **Narrative Discourse**: an Essay in method, Ithaca: Cornell University, 1980.

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Some interesting reading material about the *Contos de Belazarte* can be found in:

1. <<http://www.seer.ufrgs.br/cadernosdoil/article/viewFile/25317/pdf>> (on the role of Belazarte as a narrator).
2. <http://www.abralic.org.br/eventos/cong2008/AnaisOnline/simposios/pdf/040/IRENISIA_OLIVEIRA.pdf> (on the modernization of Sao Paulo).

Mário de Andrade's *Tales of Belazarte* in English



Rosalia Neumann Garcia, ed.

THE BEETLE AND THE ROSE

Belazarte told me this story:

I don't believe in the Beast, but beetles... I don't know. Look at what happened to Rosa... Eighteen years old - and she had no idea. No one else had noticed. Neither Dona Carlotinha nor Dona Ana, both beyond their prime and old maids, both in their late forties. Rosa had come to keep them company, at seven, when her mother died. She died or gave her daughter away, which is the same thing as dying. Rosa grew and grew. Her lovely Portuguese type was gradually unfolding out of the physical vagueness of childhood. Ten years old, fourteen, fifteen... Finally, eighteen last May. However, Rosa was still seven, at least in terms of what souls are made of. She served the two old maids with the same meticulous fantasy of the old Rosinha. At times, she cleaned the house well, sometimes she didn't. Sometimes she would forget the toothpick holder while setting the table for lunch. And in her bedroom, she fondled the same doll, with the same incapacity of a pretend mother; it had been so long ago, I don't even know! that Dona Carlotinha had given her the doll to show what a kind person she was. Isn't it amazing? Yet, our world is full of these amazing incidents: Rosa, almost a grown woman, childlike and of a childish virtue. For virtues, like morals, are vast and varied... They change as time goes by and as we get older... It shouldn't be so, but it is so, and it's not our place to argue. But in 1923, when Rosa was eighteen, she had the virtue of the children who lived... at around the time of the Battle of Riachuelo¹... Yes: the children of 1865. Rosa... What an anachronism!

In the little house where the three women lived, halfway to Lapa², her womanliness had developed only physically. She hardly ever went out and, to her, going to the city was a once-a-year outing on All Soul's Day's³ if ever. Dona Ana and Dona Carlotinha would then wear black silk, yes, sir! They would wear silkish black rustling in such an uncalled-for flutter. Rosa escorted her mistresses wearing a brand-new muslin dress, carrying calla lilies and maidenhair, all from the garden. They would go to Araçá⁴ where the memory of the two old ladies' father, Captain Fragoso do Vale, rested. Dona Carlotinha and Dona Ana would cry over the thin marble slate. Rosa would cry as well, to keep them company.

¹ The naval Battle of Riachuelo was a key point in the War of the Triple Alliance. By late 1864, Paraguay had scored a series of victories in the war; on June 11, 1865, however, its naval defeat by Brazil began to turn the tide in favor of the allies. (source: Wikipedia)

² Lapa is a neighborhood in the city of São Paulo.

³ All Souls' Day commemorates the faithful departed. In Brazil, it is a widespread tradition to visit deceased loved ones.

⁴ The Araçá cemetery is in São Paulo and was built in 1887. The mausoleums of important and traditional families from São Paulo are found there.

Whenever she saw others crying she supposed crying was due, and in a twinkling, there would be endless boohooing ... she let out the waterworks from her black, black eyes, and they would glisten so much more. Then they would make comments by each Sunday decorated grave. And that scent... Melted candles, families bivouacking out in the open, such a fluster to catch the streetcar... What bewilderment, my goodness! The atmosphere full of fright was unpleasant.

This was Rosa's big annual trip. Aside from that, going to church at Lapa on some random Sunday and on Holy Week. Rosa neither dreamed nor mulled over anything. She was always tending the garden and over Dona Carlotinha. Tending for dinner and for Dona Ana. Everything done with the same childish parity that never once meant a lack of affection. Neither was it indifference; it was simply not imagining differences. We use ten fingers to prepare food, two arms to sweep the house, a tiny bit of friendship for John, three tiny bits of friendship for Jack who is nicer, a sideways look at the beautiful view of the big tenon of Our Lady of Ó with lingering aloofness, and suddenly, whoosh! We bet all our chips on Love. That's how we do it. Rosa did no such thing. It was always the same bit of body that she put into everything: fingers, arms, eyes and mouth. She cried about something and with that same something she took care of Dona Carlotinha. She was undefined and well swept. Empty. A little nun. The world didn't exist for... no, not a nun! She was a little saint in a church lost near Évora⁵. What I mean is the figurative little saint on the altar, made of painted plaster. The other one, the one being represented, as you very well know, is in heaven never intervening on our behalf. Rosa, if requested, would intervene. However, never knowing why. She intervened with the same portion of body, fingers, arms, eyes and mouth, nothing more. Her purity, childishness, poverty of spirit, were encased in a glass dome that withdrew her from life. Neighbors? Only the tiny house further up on the same street with no cobblestone, dark clay, green from the grass. The lane was suddenly swallowed by the unexpected civilized uproar of the streetcar road. But right on the corner, *seu* Costa's little grocery store blocked Rosa from walking onto that road. And *seu* Costa was in his mid-fifties, a widower, no children, puffing on a stinky pipe. Rosa stopped there. That grocery store propelled the entire dietary dynamics of Dona Ana, Dona Carlotinha and Rosa's existence. And this, all in the rush of the morning hours, after boiling the milk the delivery man would leave very early by the gate.

Rosa would greet the neighbors who lived in the other house. From time to time she would stop a minute to talk to Ricardina. But she didn't know what to say, what could she do? She'd leave hastily. With no concerns about living and enjoying life, how could she ever notice her own youth! She certainly could not. The only one who did notice was João. At first, he'd wrap two loaves of bread in grayish paper and throw the package onto the porch. He then clapped to let them know and rode away, ring-aringring ... on his cart. When there was a windy rain, though, he'd wait with the package in hands.

"Good morning".

⁵ Évora is a Portuguese city in the municipality of Évora.

“Good morning”.

“Awful rain!”

“Awful!”

“See you tomorrow!”

“See you!”

However, one fine day, while he was wrapping the loaves on his cart, he noticed Rosa, who was coming back from the store. Naturally, he waited; after all, he was no ill-mannered goon. The sun beamed on the body coming down the road. It was then that João noticed Rosa had changed. She was another person. Entirely a woman with shapely legs and two arresting breasts under the smoothness of her blouse like a ruby ring inside a glove. That is... João didn't see any of this; I'm embellishing the story. From the nineteenth century on, story tellers seem to feel the need to lay out these lewd details. Neither did he see the clear amber *camoesa* apple skin ... nor the eyes of sunny radiance... João only realized he felt uncomfortable and figured that the discomfort was Rosa's doing. Rosa was making him feel that way, no doubt. A stray smile spread from ear to ear. He left feeling dizzy without even saying a proper good morning. But from that moment on, he no longer threw the loaves of bread onto the pavement. He waited for Rosa to come and get them from his hands.

“Good morning!”

“Good morning! Why didn't you throw them?”

“Well... They could get dirty!”

“See you tomorrow”.

“See you, Rosa!”

He felt that so-called discomfort and was on his way.

João was almost a Rosa himself. Only he had a mother and a father, and that does teach us. And maybe because he was twenty years old... He had actually reached this age without any contact with women. But dreams incited him, and he constantly felt bitten by short temper. Still, he would bake bread, deliver bread, and sleep early. On Sundays, he would play soccer for *Lapa Atlético*. When he realized he couldn't live without Rosa, he came clean to his father.

“Well, son, get married. She's a good girl, isn't she?”

“Yes, father”.

“So, get married! The bakery is yours anyway... You're my only son... And if she is a good girl...”

On the same afternoon, Dona Ana and Dona Carlotinha received João's abashed visit. What an ordeal to speak! Finally, when they guessed that this tongue-tied boy with serene gestures was taking Rosa away from them, they were truly touched. They were touched because they thought the story was so beautiful, so touching. And in a split second they realized their little maid was almost a woman now. She must marry. How wonderful! Rosa was getting married. She would have children! They would be the godmothers... They were almost deflowered by the blissful thought of being the mothers of Rosinha's children.

They felt embraced and squeezed, and, Good God!, committed some awful wickedness unconsciously...

“Rosa!”

“Yes, ma’am?”

“Come here!”

“Right away, ma’am!”

They didn’t know yet if João was a nice boy but he looked as if he were.

And they wanted to wallow in the bashfulness of Rosa and the boy, how wonderful!

Pressed against the doorway beamed eighteen blooming years.

“Listen, Rosa! The boy came to ask you to marry him”.

“Ask me what...!”

“The boy says he wants to marry you”.

Rosa had made her mouth into a red wheel. Her straight teeth, extremely white. She wasn’t embarrassed. She didn’t look down. Rosa started to cry. She ran off inside, sobbing. Dona Carlotinha found her sitting on a stool by the stove. She was whimpering and sobbing, moving her shoulders, helpless.

“Rosa, please! Is this any way to behave?! If you don’t want to, just say so!”

“No! Dona Carlotinha, no! What’s going to happen now? I don’t want to leave you!”

Dona Carlotinha deliberated, teased, advised... Rosa didn’t know what would happen if she got married; she knew only how to take care of Dona Carlotinha...Rosa started to weep loudly. Her mouth had to be covered, Lord Almighty, so the boy wouldn’t hear, poor thing! Finally, Dona Ana came in, burning with curiosity, to know what was going on.

João was left alone in the living room, he didn’t know what was going on in there, though he guessed Rosa didn’t like him. Now more than ever he was truly dazed. He felt embarrassed in the room, of being alone, I don’t know, he slowly picked up his hat and left at the pace of a cart-ox. His eyes were round with bewilderment. Now he realized he really liked Rosa. The blow stung, poor thing...

It was a silent afternoon in his house. His father cursed, insulted the girl. Then, realizing he was doing more harm than good to his son, he clammed up.

On the next day, João threw the bread onto the pavement and left. Without warning, something odd filled his body, coming from all the way below, tight, almost suffocating, and Rosa’s image emerged from his eyes, meddling with the uncaring life of the street and the bread delivery. Thank God, he was finally home! But he was too unrefined and non-urban to nurture sadness. And Rosa didn’t show to nurture desire... That Sunday he was a wonderful defender. Because of him, *Lapa Atlético* won the game. It won because, out of the blue, she appeared in his body and kindled that urge, I mean, two urges: the one... already mentioned, and another, of forgetting and holding the reins of his life... So he saw the ball, guessed what side it was going to, threw himself at it, so what if he was

kicked in the face! broke his back! Let it all break down! Let him die! The ball would *not* cross into the goal area. João naturally thought it was all because of the ball.

When Rosa realized she wouldn't leave Dona Ana and Dona Carlotinha, she was on cloud nine. She sang. Now, this is when the beetle comes into the scene. Rosa felt immensely calm. And she didn't think of João any longer.

"You forgot the toothpick case again!"

"Sorry, Dona Ana!"

She went on cleaning the house, sometimes well, sometimes not. She went on lulling the porcelain doll. She just went on.

That night was so hot she wanted to sleep with her window open. She rolled over, filled with pleasure, her naked body inside her nightgown, and she fell asleep. A beetle flew in. Zzz, zzz, zzz, buuuuzzz, flap! Rosa, asleep, shuddered at the sensation of those metallic legs on her bosom. She opened her eyes in the dark. The beetle walked around slowly. He found the opening of her nightgown and went on through the burning valley between hills. Rosa imagined a horrible bite on her breast, she sat up quickly, her hands to her chest. With the movement, the beetle unfurled from her smooth skin and fell on her belly, zzz, tzzz...tz, etc. Rosa let out a sharp scream. She fell on the bed, curling up. The creature kept moving downwards, tzz... Finally, it got tangled, tzz... tic, it was stuck. Rosa stretched her legs, stiffened by a seizure. She rolled over and fell.

Dona Ana and Dona Carlotinha found her spasmodic, with froth dripping from the corner of her mouth. Lucid eyes burning like fire. But how could they guess what it was! Rosa couldn't speak, her body twisting this way and that. Then, Dona Ana, guided by the repeated gesture of the poor girl, found the creature. She plucked it out harshly to set the girl free as quickly as possible. And it was so hard to calm her down... She would slowly settle down... all of a sudden, everything would start all over again, like a seizure, she threw off the blankets, growling, twisting, eyes rolling up, hmm... A terror with no cause, as you can see. Again, they had a hard time calming her down. They bathed her; Dona Carlotinha even went to the trouble of lighting the fire for warm water, it's more comforting, they say. They changed her nightgown, a ton of sugar water...

"Why in God's name did you leave the window open, Rosa...?"

Only two hours later was everything at peace in the house again. Well, not everything. There were two eyes staring into the murk, watching for any lost sign of light and for silent figures in the dark. Rosa can't sleep all night. Finally, she hears the noises of the house awakening. Dona Ana comes to see her. Rosa pretends to sleep, unreasonably enraged. She hates the old hag! And Dona Carlotinha disgusts her... She hears the snap of wood in the fire. She hears the noise of the bread being thrown onto the pavement. Rosa rubs her fingers hard against her body. She stretches. Finally, she gets up.

Now she walks with deliberation. In the slit of her lips she carries a seriousness never seen before. What shadows on her eyelids! She thinks of work, and she works. She diligently cleans the entire house, putting ten fingers into preparing the food, two arms into sweeping, her eyes on the table so she won't forget the toothpick holder. Dona Carlotinha

has a cold. So, Rosa gives her a portion of her friendship. She makes tea for her. She sits by the headboard keeping watch without talking. The two old women look at her, warily. They don't recognize her anymore, and are afraid of this stranger. Indeed, Rosa has changed. It's another Rosa. She is an open rose. Imperative, alive. She is assertive. Dona Carlotinha is afraid to ask her how she spent the night. Dona Ana is afraid of advising her to get some more rest. It's Saturday; but she could clean the house on Monday... Rosa cleans the house like never before. She cleans her own bedroom thoroughly, as well. The doll... Rosa yanks off the last of its curly hair, a cold gesture. She pierces one of her eyes, Portuguesely, *à la* Camões. But she thinks Dona Carlotinha might be upset. We should never cause needless grief to others, life is already so full of sorrow!... she thinks. She sighs. She hides the doll at the bottom of the basket.

When she goes to bed, she is suddenly gripped by fear: to sleep alone! And what if she never gets married? This thought pops into her head just like that, for no reason. Rosa has a gripping fear of becoming an old maid. She has an avid fear, above all avid, of becoming an old maid. This is dreadful! HOW HUMILIATING!

It's clear that she had never suffered before, the poor thing. All night, not a wink. I don't know what time it was when the bed became unbearably lonely to her. She sits up. She leaves the window wide-open, her chest braving the night, desperately brash. Rosa waits for the beetle to come. There are no beetles that night. She gets tired, staying in the same position, waiting. She doesn't know what she is waiting for. But we do, don't we? But the beetle didn't show. It was a warm night... Life throbbed in the ardor of static bursting stars. Such silence!... The slumber of all men, sleeping unaware, heedless of her... The smell of burned soil thickened the air that had stopped circulating, it didn't enter her chest! There was really nothing in the empty night. Rosa waits a bit more. She then goes to bed, disappointed. She falls into a troubled sleep. She dreams of impossible combinations. She dreams that all the beetles in the world had disappeared and that a group of girls makes fun of her, buzzing; old maid! in peals of laughter! She cries in her sleep.

On the next day Dona Ana thinks they should take the girl out. They go to mass. Rosa walks in front of them to flirt with every man she comes across. She has to catch one. Any one. She has to catch one so she won't become an old maid. At *seu Costa's* store, Pedro Mulatão is already there to drink the first *pinga* of the day. Rosa gives him a line that sounds more like something a whore would use. Pedro Mulatão feels an easy desire for that body and follows her. Rosa is aware of this. Who is this man? She doesn't know. Even if she knew he was a bum and a drinker, he's the first man she meets, she has to catch him or she'll die an old maid. Now she won't be anybody else's girl. She pretends to be innocent, a virgin, virtues she no longer has!... But she's an actress and plays the role well. Once in a while, she turns around to look. To look at Dona Ana. She laughs at her with a saucy smile that fills bodies with urges.

At the end of Mass, another even dirtier look. Pedro Mulatão stops by the store. He drinks even more and is up to no good. Rosa pretends they are out of sugar just to go to the store. Pedro carries her package, talking to her. He invites her over for the night. She

refuses because she would never get married that way. To him, it makes no difference: married, not married ... He'll propose.

This time the old ladies don't even call Rosa; what a repulsive man, really! How could they marry her to those thirty-five years! He was at least between thirty-five and forty! And he was a mulatto, pale yellow, already weathered... by *pinga*, Our Lady!... They were sorry, but Rosa didn't want to get married. Then she shows up and tells them she wants to marry Pedro Mulatão. They couldn't advise her in front of Pedro Mulatão, so they show him the door. They'd get more information. He could come back on Thursday.

The information is as expected: terrible. A bum, a drunkard, a ruffian, not worthy of her. Rosa cries. She will marry Pedro Mulatão and if they don't let her, she'll run away. Dona Ana and Dona Carlotinha give in with death on their souls.

When João found out Rosa was going to get married he felt a terrible knot in his stomach. He went out, dizzy, to get some air. He ran into some buddies and started boozing. At dawn, they left him right there by the sidewalk, drunk out of his mind. The policeman made him stand up.

"Young man, you can't sleep here! Go home!"

He walked away weeping, claiming it wasn't his fault. Later, he lay down on a field by a street and fell asleep. The sun woke him. He had a headache, a bad taste in his mouth... and the shame! He doesn't even know how he'll face it at home. His father's anger was a thing to reckon with. What insults! You son-of-a-this, you son-of-a-that, shocking curses! Nobody ever imagined that such a good man could say such terrible things. Well! Every man knows how to swear; it's just a matter of feeling terrible pain and the words come out. The truth is, João's father's in a great deal of pain. As much as his mother, who can only cry. She cries and cries. João is disgusted with himself. That afternoon, when he's back from work, Carmela calls him at the hedge. She tells him that he shouldn't drink like that ever again, cause his mother had cried so hard. Carmela cries as well. João realizes that if he ever drinks again, he'll only do harm to himself. He swears he'll never fall so low again. He and Carmela sigh, staring at each other. They stand there.

Rosa was slipping my mind... I'll tell you about what else happened to João another day. A trousseau was quickly prepared for her, in less than a month. On the day before the wedding, Dona Carlotinha still insisted that she break up with her fiancé. Pedro Mulatão was infamous, a weasel even, God forgive me! Rosa didn't want to hear a word. She set her foot down. She wanted to get married and she would. She had a feeling she was wrong, but didn't want to think and so she didn't. The two old maids cried their eyes out when she left, married and victorious, without a tear on her face. Tough.

Rosa was very unhappy.

O BESOURO E A ROSA

Belazarte me contou:

Não acredito em bicho maligno mas besouro, não sei não. Olhe o que sucedeu com a Rosa... Dezoito anos. E não sabia que os tinha. Ninguém reparara nisso. Nem dona Carlotinha nem dona Ana, entretanto já velhucas e solteironas, ambas quarenta e muito. Rosa viera pra companhia delas aos sete anos quando lhe morreu a mãe. Morreu ou deu a filha que é a mesma coisa que morrer. Rosa crescia. O português adorável do tipo dela se desbastava aos poucos das vaguezas físicas da infância. Dez anos, quatorze anos, quinze... Afinal dezoito em maio passado. Porém Rosa continuava com sete, pelo menos no que faz a alma da gente. Servia sempre as duas solteironas com a mesma fantasia caprichosa da antiga Rosinha. Ora limpava bem a casa, ora mal. Às vezes se esquecia do paliteiro no botar a mesa pro almoço. E no quarto afagava com a mesma ignorância de mãe de brinquedo a mesma boneca, faz quanto tempo nem sei! Lhe dera dona Carlotinha no intuito de se mostrar simpática. Parece incrível, não? porém nosso mundo está cheio desses incríveis: Rosa mocetona já, era infantil e de pureza infantil. Que as purezas como as morais são muitas e diferentes... Mudam com os tempos e com a idade da gente... Não devia ser assim, porém é assim, e não temos que discutir. Mas com dezoito anos em 1923, Rosa possuía a pureza das crianças dali... pela batalha do Riachuelo mais ou menos... Isso: das crianças de 1865. Rosa... que anacronismo!

Na casinha em que moravam as três, caminho da Lapa, a mocidade dela se desenvolvera só no corpo. Também saía pouco e a cidade era pra ela a viagem que a gente faz uma vez por ano quando muito, finados chegando. Então dona Ana e dona Carlotinha vestiam seda preta, sim senhor! botavam um sedume preto barulhando que era um desperdício. Rosa acompanhava as patroas na cassa mais novinha, levando os copos-de-leite e as avencas todas da horta. Iam no Araçá aonde repousava a lembrança do capitão Fragoso Vale, pai das duas tias. Junto do mármore raso dona Carlotinha e dona Ana choravam. Rosa chorava também, pra fazer companhia. Enxergava as outras chorando, imaginava que carecia chorar também, pronto! chororó... abria as torneirinhas dos olhos pretos pretos, que ficavam brilhando ainda mais. Depois visitavam comentando os túmulos endomingados. Aquele cheiro... Velas derretidas, famílias bivacando, afobação encrocada pra pegar o bonde... que atordoamento meu Deus! A impressão cheia de medos era desagradável.

Essa anualmente a viagem grande da Rosa. No mais: chegadas até a igreja da Lapa algum domingo solto e na Semana Santa. Rosa não sonhava nem matutava. Sempre tratando da horta e de dona Carlotinha. Tratando da janta e de dona Ana. Tudo com a mesma igualdade infantil que não implica desamor não. Nem era indiferença, era não

imaginar as diferenças, isso sim. A gente bota dez dedos pra fazer comida, dois braços pra varrer a casa, um bocadinho de amizade pra fulano, três bocadinhos de amizade pra sicrano que é mais simpático, um olhar pra vista bonita do lado com o espigão de Nossa Senhora do Ó numa pasmaceira lá longe, e de sopetão, zás! bota tudo no amor que nem no campista pra ver se pega uma cartada boa. Assim é que fazemos... A Rosa não fazia. Era sempre o mesmo bocado de corpo que ela punha em todas as coisas: dedos braços vista e boca. Chorava com isso e com o mesmo isso tratava de dona Carlotinha. Indistinta e bem varridinha. Vazia. Uma freirinha. O mundo não existia pra... qual freira! santinha de igreja perdida nos arredores de Évora. Falo da santinha representativa que está no altar, feita de massa pintada. A outra, a representada, você bem sabe: está lá no céu não intercedendo pela gente... Rosa si carecesse intercedia. Porém sem saber por quê. Intercedia com o mesmo pedaço de corpo dedos braços vista e boca sem mais nada. A pureza, a infantilidade, a pobreza-de-espírito se vidravam numa redoma que a separava da vida. Vizinhança? Só a casinha além, na mesma rua sem calçamento, barro escuro, verde de capim livre. A viela era engulida num rompante pelo chinfrim civilizado da rua dos bondes. Mas já na esquina a vendinha de seu Costa impedia Rosa de entrar na rua dos bondes. E seu Costa passava dos cinquenta, viúvo sem filhos, pitando num cachimbo fedido. Rosa parava ali. A venda movia toda a dinâmica alimentar da existência de dona Ana, de dona Carlotinha e dela. E isso nas horas apressadas da manhã, depois de ferver o leite que o leiteiro deixava muito cedo no portão.

Rosa saudava as vizinhas da outra casa. De longe em longe parava um minuto conversando com a Ricardina. Porém não tinha assunto, que que havia de fazer? partia depressa. Com essas despreocupações de viver e de gostar da vida, como é que podia reparar na própria mocidade! não podia. Só quem pôs reparo nisso foi o João. De primeiro ele enrolava os dois pães no papel acinzentado e atirava o embrulho na varanda. Batia pra saberem e ia-se embora tllindliirim dlimdlrim, na carrocinha dele. Só quando a chuva era de vento, esperava com o embrulho na mão.

— Bom-dia.

— Bom-dia.

— Que chuva.

— Um horror.

— Até amanhã.

— Até amanhã.

Porém duma feita, quando embrulhava os pães na carrocinha, percebeu Rosa que voltava da venda. Esperou muito naturalmente, não era nenhum malcriado não. O sol dava de chapa no corpo que vinha vindo. Foi então que João pôs reparo na mudança da Rosa, estava outra. Inteiramente mulher com pernas bem delineadas e dois seios agudos se contando na lisura da blusa, que nem rubi de anel dentro da luva. Isto é... João não viu nada disso, estou fantasiando a história. Depois do século dezenove os contadores parece que se sentem na obrigação de esmiuçar com sem-vergonhice essas coisas. Nem aquela cor de maçã camoesa amorenada limpa... Nem aqueles olhos de esplendor solar... João reparou

apenas que tinha um mal-estar por dentro e concluiu que o mal-estar vinha da Rosa. Era a Rosa que estava dando aquilo nele não tem dúvida. Alastrou um riso perdido na cara. Foi-se embora tonto, sem nem falar bom-dia direito. Mas daí em diante não jogou mais os pães no passeio. Esperava que a Rosa viesse buscá-los das mãos dele.

— Bom-dia.

— Bom-dia. Por que não atirou?

— É... Pode sujar.

— Até amanhã.

— Até amanhã, Rosa!

Sentia o tal de mal-estar e ia-se embora.

João era quase uma Rosa também. Só que tinha pai e mãe, isso ensina a gente. E talvez por causa dos vinte anos... De deveras chegara nessa idade sem contato de mulher, porém os sonhos o atiçavam, vivia mordido de impaciências curtas. Porém fazia pão, entregava pão e dormia cedo. Domingo jogava futebol no Lapa Atlético. Quando descobriu que não podia mais viver sem a Rosa, confessou tudo pro pai.

— Pois casa, filho. É rapariga boa, não é?

— É, meu pai.

— Pois então casa! A padaria é tua mesmo... não tenho mais filhos... E si a rapariga é boa...

Nessa tarde dona Ana e dona Carlotinha recebiam a visita envergonhada do João. Que custo falar aquilo! Afinal quando elas adivinharam que aquele mocetão, manco na fala porém sereno de gestos, lhes levava a Rosa, se comoveram muito. Se comoveram porque acharam o caso muito bonito, muito comovente. E num instante repararam também que a criadinha estava uã mocetona já. Carecia se casar. Que maravilha, Rosa se casava! Havia de ter filhos! Elas seriam as madrinhas... Quase se desvirginavam no gozo de serem mães dos filhos da Rosinha. Se sentiam até abraçadas, apertadas e, cruz credo! faziam cada pecadão na inconsciência...

— Rosa!

— Senhora?

— Venha cá!

— Já vou, sim senhora!

Ainda não sabiam si o João era bom mas parecia. E queriam gozar o encafifamento de Rosa e do moço, que maravilha!

Apertados nos batentes da porta relumearam dezoito anos fresquinhos.

— Rosa, olhe aqui. O moço veio pedir você em casamento.

— Pedir o que!...

— O moço diz que quer casar com você.

Rosa fizera da boca uma roda vermelha. Os dentes regulares muito brancos. Não se envergonhou. Não abaixou os olhos. Rosa principiou a chorar. Fugiu pra dentro soluçando. Dona Carlotinha foi encontrar ela sentada na tripeça junto do fogão. Chorava gritadinho, soluçava aguçando os ombros, desamparada.

— Rosa, que é isso! Então é assim que se faz!? Si você não quer, fale!

— Não! Dona Carlotinha, não! Como é que vai ser! Eu não quero largar da senhora!...

Dona Carlotinha ponderou, gozou, aconselhou... Rosa não sabia pra onde ir si casasse, Rosa só sabia tratar de dona Carlotinha... Rosa pôs-se a chorar alto. Careceu tapar a boca dela, salvo seja! pra que o moço não escutasse, coitado! Afinal dona Ana veio saber o que sucedia, morta de curiosidade.

João ficou sozinho na sala, não sabia o que tinha acontecido lá dentro, mas porém adivinhando que lhe parecia que a Rosa não gostava dele. Agora sim, estava mesmo atordoado. Ficou com vergonha da sala, de estar sozinho, não sei, foi pegando no chapéu e saindo num passo de boi-de-carro. Arredondava os olhos espantado. Agora percebia que gostava mesmo da Rosa. A tábua dera uma dor nele, o pobre!

Foi tarde de silêncio na casa dele. O pai praguejou, ofendeu a menina. Depois percebendo que aquilo fazia mal ao filho se calou.

No dia seguinte João atirou o pão no passeio e foi-se embora. Lhe dava de sopetão uma coisa esquisita por dentro, vinha lá de baixo do corpo apertando, quase sufocava e a imagem da Rosa saía pelos olhos dele trelendo com a vida indiferente da rua e da entrega do pão. Graças a Deus que chegou em casa! Mas era muito sem letras nem cidade pra cultivar a tristeza. E Rosa não aparecia pra cultivar o desejo... No domingo ele foi um zagueiro estupendo. Por causa dele o Lapa Atlético venceu. Venceu porque derrepentemente ela aparecia no corpo dele e lhe dava aquela vontade, isto é, duas vontades: a... já sabida e outra, de esquecimento e continuar dominando a vida... Então ele via a bola, adivinhava pra que lado ela ia, se atirava, que lhe incomodava agora de levar pé na cara! quebrar a espinha! arrebentasse tudo! morresse! porém a bola não havia de entrar no gol. João naturalmente pensava que era por causa da bola.

Rosa quando viu que não deixava mesmo dona Ana e dona Carlotinha teve um alegrão. Cantou. Agora é que o besouro entra em cena... Rosa sentiu uma calma grande. E não pensou mais no João.

— Você se esqueceu do paliteiro outra vez!

— Dona Ana, me desculpe!

Continuou limpando a casa ora bem ora mal. Continuou ninando a boneca de louça. Continuou.

Essa noite muito quente, quis dormir com a janela aberta. Rolava satisfeita o corpo nu dentro da camisola, e depois dormiu. Um besouro entrou. Zzz, zzz, zzzuuuuuummmm, pá! Rosa dormida estremeceu à sensação daquelas pernas metálicas no colo. Abriu os olhos na escuridão. O besouro passeava lentamente. Encontrou o orifício da camisola e avançava pelo vale ardente entre morros. Rosa imaginou uã mordida horrível no peito, sentou-se num pulo, comprimindo o colo. Com o movimento, o besouro se despegara da epiderme lisa e tombara na barriga dela, zzz tzzz... tz. Rosa soltou um grito agudíssimo. Caiu na cama se estorcendo. O bicho continuava descendo, tzz... Afinal se emaranhou tzz-tzz, estava preso. Rosa estirava as pernas com endurecimentos de ataque. Rolava. Caiu.

Dona Ana e dona Carlotinha vieram encontrá-la assim, espasmódica, com a espuma escorrendo do canto da boca. Olhos esgazeados relampejando que nem brasa. Mas como saber o que era! Rosa não falava, se contorcendo. Porém dona Ana orientada pelo gesto que a pobre repetia, descobriu o bicho. Arrancou-o com aspereza, aspereza pra livrar depressa a moça. E foi uma dificuldade acalmá-la... Ia sossegando sossegando... de repente voltava tudo e era tal-e-qual ataque, atirava as cobertas rosnava, se contorcendo, olhos revirados, uhm... Terror sem fundamento, bem se vê. Nova trabalhadeira. Lavaram ela, dona Carlotinha se deu ao trabalho de acender fogo pra ter água morna que sossega mais, dizem. Trocaram a camisola, muita água com açúcar...

— Também por que você deixou janela aberta, Rosa...

Só umas duas horas depois tudo dormia na casa outra vez. Tudo não. Dois olhos fixando a treva, atentos a qualquer ressaibo perdido de luz e aos vultos silenciosos da escuridão. Rosa não dorme toda a noite. Afinal escuta os ruídos da casa acordando. Dona Ana vem saber. Rosa finge dormir, desarrazoadamente enraivecida. Tem um ódio daquela coroca! Tem nojo de dona Carlotinha... Ouve o estalo da lenha no fogo. Escuta o barulho do pão atirado contra a porta do passeio. Rosa esfrega os dedos fortemente pelo corpo. Se espreguiça. Afinal levantou.

Agora caminha mais pausado. Traz uma seriedade nunca vista ainda, na comissura dos lábios. Que negroses nas pálpebras! Pensa que vai trabalhar e trabalha. Limpa com dever a casa toda, botando dez dedos pra fazer a comida, botando dois braços pra varrer, botando os olhos na mesa pra não esquecer o paliteiro. Dona Carlotinha se resfriou. Pois Rosa lhe dá uma porção de amizade. Prepara chás pra ela. Senta na cabeceira da cama, velando muito, sem falar. As duas velhas olham pra ela ressabiadas. Não a reconhecem mais e têm medo da estranha. Com efeito Rosa mudou, é outra Rosa. E uma rosa aberta. Imperativa, enérgica. Se impõe. Dona Carlotinha tem medo de lhe perguntar se passou bem a noite. Dona Ana tem medo de lhe aconselhar que descanse mais. E sábado porém podia lavar a casa na segunda-feira... Rosa lava toda a casa como nunca lavou. Faz uma limpeza completa no próprio quarto. A boneca... Rosa lhe desgruda os últimos crespos da cabeça, gesto frio. Afunda um olho dela, portuguesmente, à Camões. Porém pensa que dona Carlotinha vai sentir. A gente nunca deve dar desgostos inúteis aos outros, a vida é já tão cheia deles!... pensa. Suspira. Esconde a boneca no fundo da canastra.

Quando foi dormir teve um pavor repentino: dormir só!... E si ficar solteira! O pensamento salta na cabeça dela assim, sem razão. Rosa tem um medo doloroso de ficar solteira. Um medo impaciente, sobretudo impaciente, de ficar solteira. Isso é medonho! É UMA VERGONHA!

Se vê bem que nunca tinha sofrido, a coitada! Toda a noite não dormiu. Não sei a que horas a cama se tornou insuportavelmente solitária pra ela. Se ergue. Escancara a janela, entra com o peito na noite, desesperadamente temerária. Rosa espera o besouro. Não tem besouros essa noite. Ficou se cansando naquela posição, à espera. Não sabia o que estava esperando. Nós é que sabemos, não? Porém o besouro não vinha mesmo. Era uma noite quente... A vida latejava num ardor de estrelas pipocantes imóveis. Um silêncio!... O

sono de todos os homens, dormindo indiferentes, sem se amolar com ela... O cheiro de campo requeimado endurecia o ar que parara de circular, não entrava no peito! Não tinha mesmo nada na noite vazia. Rosa espera mais um pouquinho. Desiludida, se deita depois. Adormece agitada. Sonha misturas impossíveis. Sonha que acabaram todos os besouros desse mundo e que um grupo de moças caçoa dela zumbindo: Solteira! às gargalhadas. Chora em sonho.

No outro dia dona Ana pensa que carece passear a moça. Vão na missa. Rosa segue na frente e vai namorar todos os homens que encontra. Tem de prender um. Qualquer. Tem de prender um pra não ficar solteira. Na venda de seu Costa, Pedro Mulatão já veio beber a primeira pinga do dia. Rosa tira uma linha pra ele que mais parece de mulher-da-vida. Pedro Mulatão sente um desejo fácil daquele corpo, e segue atrás. Rosa sabe disso. Quem é aquele homem? Isso não sabe. Nem que soubesse do vagabundo e beberrão, é o primeiro homem que encontra, carece agarrá-lo sinão morre solteira. Agora não namorará mais ninguém. Se finge de inocente e virgem, riquezas que não tem mais... Porém é artista e representa. De vez em quando se vira pra olhar. Olhar dona Ana. Se ri pra ela nesse riso provocante que enche os corpos de vontade.

Na saída da missa outro olhar mais canalha ainda. Pedro Mulatão pára na venda. Bebe mais e trama coisas feias. Rosa imagina que falta açúcar, só pra ir na venda. É Pedro que traz o embrulho, conversando. Convida-a pra de-noite. Ela recusa porque assim não casará. Isso pra ele é indiferente: casar ou não casar... Irá pedir.

Desta vez as duas tias nem chamam Rosa, homem repugnante não? Como casá-la com aqueles trinta-e-cinco anos!... No mínimo, de trinta-e-cinco pra quarenta. E mulato, amarelo pálido já descorado... pela pinga, Nossa Senhora!... Desculpasse, porém a Rosa não queria casar. Então ela aparece e fala que quer casar com Pedro Mulatão. Elas não podem aconselhar nada diante dele, despedem Pedro. Vão tirar informações. Que volte na quinta-feira.

As informações são as que a gente imagina, péssimas. Vagabundo, chuva, mau caráter, não serve não. Rosa chora. Há-de casar com Pedro Mulatão e si não deixarem, ela foge. Dona Ana e dona Carlotinha cedem com a morte na alma.

Quando o João soube que a Rosa ia casar, teve um desespero na barriga. Saiu tonto, pra espairer. Achou companheiros e se meteu na caninha. Deixaram ele por aí, sentado na guia da calçada, manhãzinha, podre de bebedeira. O rondante fez ele se erguer.

— Moço, não pode dormir nesse lugar não! Vá pra sua casa!

Ele partiu, chorando alto, falando que não tinha a culpa. Depois deitou no capim duma travessa e dormiu. O sol o chamou. Dor-de-cabeça, gosto ruim na boca... E a vergonha. Nem sabe como entra em casa. O estrilo do pai é danado. Que insultos! seu filho disto, seu não-sei-que-mais, palavras feias que arrepiam... Ninguém imaginaria que homem tão bom pudesse falar aquelas coisas. Ora! todo homem sabe bocagens, é só ter uma dor desesperada que elas saem. Porque o pai de João sofre deveras. Tanto como a mãe que apenas chora. Chora muito. João tem repugnância de si mesmo. De-tarde quando volta do serviço, a Carmela chama ele na cerca. Fala que João não deve de beber mais assim, porque

a mãe chorou muito. Carmela chora também. João percebe que si beber outra vez, se prejudicará demais. Jura que não cai noutra, Carmela e ele suspiram se olhando. Ficam ali.

Ia me esquecendo da Rosa... Conto o resto do que sucedeu pro João um outro dia. Prepararam enxoval apressado pra ela, menos de mês. Ainda na véspera do casamento, dona Carlotinha insistiu com ela pra que mandasse o noivo embora. Pedro Mulatão era um infame, até gatuno, Deus me perdoe! Rosa não escutou nada. Bateu o pé. Quis casar e casou. Meia que sentia que estava errada porém não queria pensar e não pensava. As duas solteironas choraram muito quando ela partiu casada e vitoriosa, sem uma lágrima. Dura.

Rosa foi muito infeliz.

CUNNING JABIRU

Belazarte told me this story:

Well, well... there're lives that are so settled, no surprises... Like seeing a tidy drawer, how easy it is to find underwear even in the dark, even at the very back! But then a careless person comes around, turns everything upside down, where's that underwear? – Maria, did you see my blue striped underwear? – It's right there, yesiree! – It isn't! I've looked and looked, it isn't... And so, it's a torment to find the underwear. Do you remember João? Course you do! the baker who liked Rosa, that girl who married the mulatto... Well then, when I told you that story I said João wasn't urbane enough to wallow in the pangs of love... He bled for a couple of days, even took to drinking, do you remember? and ran into Carmela who began to lighten his burden. In no time, his burden was lighter. The two of them spent manifold twenty minutes at the fence, talking about those trivial things that nurture love among the poor.

And, Carmela... did she really love João? Hard to tell. She was a beautiful girl, that she was, the Italian kind that ages fast, I mean, they don't really age, they grow fat, become nasty, unbearable. But at nineteen, what a dish! Strong, a bit short, lips parted in the middle, like a scarlet clover! Not one Brazilian girl with hair as black as hers! But what was sublime about her was her skin, with all the variables of pink, from the pinkish-blue of her chin, with all her capricious little veins from here to there, to the red splendor at the side of her eyes ready to flow onto her forehead on scorching summer days. You know how the daughters of Italians are...

But Carmela didn't have the insight of the other Italian girls who live here. Small wonder, the other girls left every blessed day, they regularly went to sewing workshops, the poorer ones were in the tanneries, or at spinning, and what came of all that? They got the hang of life. There wasn't a man that wouldn't flirt, or at least look at them in a way that opens the door to realization. They got to know everything right away and even passed on to each other the secrets of infamy through their eyes. They became sharp with all the bluntness around them. Vulgarity came, and pow! hit them. Usually it fell to the ground. Very few girls, if you consider the number of them, very few lowered themselves to raise vulgarity. These girls were lost, poor things! If they didn't marry a policeman, which was a rare stroke of luck, they'd be giving their all in fleahouses.

With the others, the bluntness just slightly touched them, slipping to the ground. But the shock scraped off a bit of that needless crust of innocence that covers us all at the beginning. They were informed, easily got used to the handlings of life and later would choose the young man who was most convenient to them, natural selection. They married and destiny was fulfilled. From elegant and winged, they went on to become annual

mothers: a babe in their bellies, a babe at their breast, a babe clutching their legs. On Sundays, they'd go to the city, unkempt, hair falling over their faces. That didn't matter none. What the workmen wanted was a mother for the eight to twelve children destiny had in store.

Not Carmela. Next-door to her was the bakery, she lived in her own house. After all, her father had some cash, with the number of bad calks he had passed on, and the number of wheels and traces he had fixed. And besides the two younger daughters, who didn't even go to school yet, the rest of the lot were sons, half a dozen brawny fellows who worked hard. Two were already married. Only one of them nobody knew the whereabouts of, maybe he was roaming some farms... I heard he was seen in Botucatu once. He was the family's affliction. If his name came up in a conversation, all you heard was the father's insults, *porca la miseria*. Then there was half of half a dozen, all younger than Carmela, thirteen, fourteen and sixteen years old, following the same good path as their elders. And, with all of them flourishing so, they figured, by mutual agreement, that Carmela wouldn't have to work. They gave her a fine station, the very best! Her father looked at his daughter and felt uncommon tenderness. And to vent all the tenderness, he bought her lace, white leather shoes, ribbons, things like that.

The greenhorn baker and the Italian smith were such good neighbors they became friends. When Serafino Quaglia noticed his daughter was partial to João, he liked the idea. After all, a settled and well-attended bakery could not be cast aside at times like these... However, the fact is that Carmela, having been snatched from life like that, even though she was in a position of command in her house, which made her the queen bee at home, had a heart that didn't know anything. João was nice, that he was. Strong, with his long, dangly arms, and his mustache beginning to grow, those greenhorns sure grow mustaches... Carmela liked João. When she asked him to stop drinking, João was moved. He began to have feelings for Carmela. The parleys by the fence became routine. There was nothing definite, nobody was against it, and they went in and out of each other's houses without formalities, but that's how it goes... You don't have to be book learned, nor polished, to discover poetry in things, love has always kindled inspiration... Well, you have to admit that those rendezvous by the fence had their appeal. For them and for others. There, they had more privacy, didn't have their siblings about. And they could spend countless minutes without saying a word, which is the best way to feel the pulse of it all. Those who passed saw that adorable couple, playing with the creeper, removing splinters of dried wood... It makes us feel at peace with the cruel world.

"Did you know?... Carmela and João are courting!"

"Did I know!... You think that's news, but I was the one who found out first!"

Bam, bam, bam, bam... Bambambam!... everybody ran to the corner to see. The circus rode down slowly.

Garcia Brothers present
GREAT CIRCUS BAHIA!

*Today! Première serata! Wise dogs and monkeys!
The Acrobatic Fo- Hi Brothers! Great numbers of world-wide renown.
Presentations of the entire company!
New premières every day!*

*The Snake Man. Malunga, the wise elephant!
All ending with the great pantomime*

*THA BANDITS FROM CALABRIA
Three clowns and Tony the Fly Eater
Fun for all! Come one and all to see the Great Circus Bahia! Today!
(at the corner of Guaicurus)
Only 2\$000 – Chairs cost four
Taxes paid by the wonderful Public!*

And hooray!

The Circus Bahia was here to change the neighborhood's routine of always going to the movies. Bam! Bam!... Bam!... And there went the advertisement car amid yearnings. Carmela went to tell João that she was going with her three *fratelos*. João would go too.

The circus was crowded. Popcorn! Roasted peanuts! Freshly Bake' Potataaaas!... A small yellow voice: *Nugá! nugá! nugá!*⁶... A denture in the dark: Candy! Coconut, chocolate, cinnamon candy!... And the band bespeckling the calm night with a saxophone. Stars. They went to their seats, Carmela beaming with beauty. The circus was no shabby act!

"All the numbers are great, don't ya think? I'm coming back, what about you?"

The Fly Eater wanted to look into the large box all covered with spangles, green and yellow, that the staff was carrying to the middle of the arena; he caught his foot under it. There were roars of laughter with the howl he gave.

"I'll be back too".

Music. The scarlet curtains opened. The artist came running from inside dressed in a maillot covered with spangles, striped in green and yellow. It was the Snake Man. He bowed in a curved gesture, arms in the air, a warped kiss of yore to the audience... what a shame... another tradition vanishing... The Snake Man was an odd type... lanky, real lanky. And in his maillot like that, he looked like a blade. He was all spangles, except his head, even his hands! You couldn't call him ugly. A Brazilian type, tending towards white, real pale. Straight hair, thick, shining blue. The nose had lost its flatness, it was kind of delicate, being so small. You could really only see his eyes, gosh! dark, huge! Looming larger cause of the dark circles. They filled his entire face. Carmela was in awe of him. And she felt some discomfort. It wasn't apprehension, or curiosity... discomfort.

The number caused a sensation. Just to climb onto the box, you had to see what the Snake Man did! He fell on the carpet, one leg started crawling up the box, then the other,

⁶ Or *nogado*. Name given to a type of candy made of honey or sugar, egg whites and pistachios, almonds or some other nut.

then the body, just like a snake! until he was on the top. It seemed like he didn't have any bones, that's how flexible he was. He did amazing things! he knotted his legs, turned into a little package on top of the box... there was clapping all over. Then the music stopped, this was it! He lifted his body into a curve, his belly towards the air, feet and hands on the corners of the box. The Garcia Brothers came out in dress-coats, and Dr. Cerquinho, known by all, the neighborhood doctor. – Look, it's Doctor Cerquinho! Doctor Cerquinho!... He was such a good man, charging only three *milréis* an appointment... When you couldn't pay, it didn't matter, you could pay next time. The Garcia brothers pulled Snake Man's head, there was a drum roll with the music and his head hung, like putty, swinging. Trrrrrrrr, drums. The head started to turn around. Trrrr... My God! it turned faster and faster! Trrrr... "Enough! Enough!" everybody screamed. Trrrr... It was slowing down. The Garcia Brothers straightened his head, and Dr. Cerquinho helped. When they were done, the young man got up, kind of dizzy, laughing. There was cheering. I don't know how many times he came back out to thank the audience. His eyes kept coming, and kept coming, with that warped kiss of a gesture, and then he was gone. Applause all over again, Carmela, so small, holding onto João, he felt a delicious warm glow! He turned around, kissed her on the eyes, openly, without any shame, despite all the people around them.

"The poor thing..."

"Capital!"

On the next day, this is what happened: they were all having lunch when the door opened - Pietro! He was ungrateful, he was everything you could think of, but he was their son. It was a celebration. It's been so long, why hadn't he warned them! He was so grown! Well, it's been six years already!

"I'm sorry, Father..."

The old man muttered, but his son was well-dressed. He was no bum, no sir, he had studied. He had learned music and come back directing the circus band, scared to death. Right away the old man spat out what he thought about circus folk. Then, Pietro kind of got angry, they were all so wrong! Look: the woman who walks on the ball is the acrobat's wife, the Amazon was married to the older Garcia, Dolores, an Uruguayan. They were honest people, even the two Japanese men. They were all astonished.

"Father, come with me to the circus and see for yourself, they're all honorable people. As for me, I haven't gotten married yet because, with my life – here today, God knows where tomorrow - I still haven't met a girl I have a liking for. What about you, Carmela?"

She smiled, bowed her head, proud of having already met someone.

"There's something going on, isn't there? Why didn't you go to the circus yesterday? Really?... I didn't see you! Well, with the crowd there! I brought you tickets for tonight."

Their talk eventually led the subject of the Snake Man. It wasn't as if his number was more important than the others - even Carmela's brothers had liked other artists

better, mainly the sixteen-year-old who wouldn't stop going on about the dancer, what a charmer! who could stretch her foot above her own head. The others had liked the pantomime better. But, as for the pantomime, Carmela only saw - only followed - the heroic, mechanical gestures of the leader of the highwaymen, that pale brown, lanky, flexible man and his big eyes. When he died from the shots fired by the *bersagliere* police, wriggling on the floor and making it seem so real, Carmela felt mighty sorry. Unwittingly, she had hoped for the highwaymen to escape.

"Almeidinha...Alright! an excellent fellow! he's from the North. Everybody likes him. He does all those wonderful things, you saw how he performs, and he's not uppity at all, he's a Jack of all trades. He works with the staff without any trouble... He was invited once to join a drama company, a good opportunity, in Vitória, Espírito Santo, but he didn't take it. He's a good friend of mine..."

Carmela gazed at her brother gratefully.

Well, to make a long story short, you can be sure that Pietro's father eventually got used to his son's job. It gave him a great deal of clout in the neighborhood... When, during their break, Pietro came home with the elder Garcia to meet the family, he won his father over. Everyone looked at them with admiration. To have met the owner of such a great circus... that was something after all. And João, he was all smiles. He was a childhood friend of Pietro's, who was older. Right away they agreed to meet the following afternoon. Pietro would show him everything inside the circus, João was curious. And Pietro should also show up at the bakery... João's parents would be pleased to see him all grown up, yes, my friend, time flies!...

Late in the afternoon of the next day, João started to feel kind of dizzy with all the introductions. Finally, in the empty circus ring, they came across Almeidinha, whistling. He was untying a knotted rope.

"Afternoon. Sorry, my hands are dirty".

He was smiling. He had the barely-traced face of a child, lacking a profile. When he laughed, the sound was like clear musical notes without concern. He was easygoing, Our Lord! - Meidinha, can you fix this sock for me, the mesh is lost... Almeidinha would pull the sock's mesh, whistling. - Meidinha, can you feed Malunga, please, I have to get the tickets. There he went, whistling, to feed Malunga. And there was nobody like him for carrying Dolores' little daughter, ten months old, the baby would fall asleep at once with his sweet, sweet whistle. And he spoke so gently! João had a very good feeling about Almeida. And, on the next evening, when the Snake Man, receiving the applause, made a special gesture of affection directed to him, João felt happier than king Dom Carlos. Naughty king, that Dom Carlos...

Carmela gabbed so, Pietro insisted so, that old Quaglia welcomed Almeidinha into his home with all his hospitality. In ten minutes of talk, the fellow was esteemed by all. Carmela couldn't go to the fence, of course, they had a guest. João could come in, didn't he know Almeida already?

And, let's face it, the Snake Man, with his mien of indifference, ended up receiving special attention from Carmela. No one noticed because, after all, Carmela was almost engaged to João.

A woman had never paid Meidinha any special attention. Carmela was the first. And he noticed. Just him, cause the others knew she was almost engaged to João. And there are things that are only noticed between two people. All of a sudden, Carmela - and you know how it is when we become criminals - became skilled. The same skill could be found in Meidinha, who would do everything she did first. Even the business with the flower went unnoticed, but who would ever notice a strawflower of that size! The fact is that, at night, when the Snake Man worked, it was among his spangles. Only an eye that really wants to see could notice a poor little flower surrounded by so much artificial shine.

It was one in the morning, an entirely quiet night in the Lapa neighborhood, when the lanky man went whistling down the street. Carmela - I don't know what craziness got into her, she didn't want to turn on the lights, someone could see - jumped out of bed and, with her velvet wrap on her back, half opened the window. She opened it. She waited. The lanky man came back, hands in his pockets, whistling. When he saw Carmela, he became silent. The houses of semi poor people are so close to street level... He touched his hat as he passed.

"Hey..."

He came closer.

"Good evening".

"You imp! you haven't gone to bed yet!"

"I was sleeping. But I heard you, and got up".

"It's a beautiful night".

"It is".

"Well, good night".

"Leaving already... Stay awhile..."

He leaned against the wall, hands stuck in his pockets. He looked at the street, probably wanting to go. Carmela was the one who played:

"I saw the flower on your chest".

"Did you?"

"I felt so grateful".

"Well".

"Why did you wear the flower, huh?... Someone could have noticed!"

Almeida turned to her, astonished:

"And what's the problem with that?"

"Well, it'd be a big problem, you know!"

He took his hands out of his pockets. He leaned against the window again, looking down, his foot was poking some small leaves, his hand resting on the window sill. Carmela already knew the sweetness of holding hands with João, so she softly placed the young man's hand between her burning hands. Meidinha stared at her straightforwardly,

laughing. He turned at once and returned the affection by putting his free hand on Carmela's hands.

"Your hands are burning, imp!"

And they didn't stop looking and smiling at each other. However, artists, even when they're witless about life, know so much because of their job... it didn't take long for Carmela and Meidinha to exchange kiss no. 1. Then he left.

Was she angry?... Her coldness made João decide to propose that very night. Although - and it was good thing, otherwise the story could have gotten even worse - I don't know what made him go talk to her first. At the fence? that was a place Carmela hadn't visited since last Wednesday. João asked Sandro to call her for her. She was too busy, couldn't come, what was going on!... she hadn't done anything!... he decided to go in, he wasn't a man to haggle with complications. But the girl didn't even react to his looks. Pietro sure had fun with the quarrel, he started teasing them. João was pleased, he liked it. But Carmela was discomposed. Her lips turned up in contempt and she went inside. She didn't know very well why, but she started to cry. Then their mother scolded Pietro, fuming. Dona Lina didn't know, in truth, what had happened, but she saw her daughter crying and came to her rescue. When João heard his sweetheart was crying, he had a sinking feeling, a feeling of what, my God!... just a sinking feeling. He went home in a daze, walked to the window dumbfounded, and gazed at the street for a while. Every streetcar that passed by was like a volcano of dust. The air was blemished, like a face full of spots. The jasmine shrub in front, and even the one across the street, over the wall, the first tree branches, everything was red. When would City Hall ever remember to pave these streets! Asphalt was for the streets around Campos Elíseos... Poor people could swallow dust all day long! If he ate any dinner, João didn't even notice. Then an unbearable night with no air fell. João by the window. Seeing him in this state, his parents started to love him. He wasn't sick, so it was surely some sorrow... Carmela. It couldn't be anything else. But what could have happened! And because poor people also show some tact, they asked gently; their son answered "no". They didn't know how to comfort him. They didn't even have anything to comfort him for, he sulkily denied everything. So, they decided to love him.

That's how love takes revenge for our indifference. Life runs so smoothly, nobody doesn't notice love. Oh, yes... that's the way it is!... wait, and you'll see!... love grumbles. And it remains forgotten in the corner it was given. Suddenly, a loved one, son, wife, someone suffers, and it's then, when we most need the strength to fight evil, that love reappears, troublesome, blocking the way, making a mess of everything, adding more pain to this life, in itself so hard to be lived.

That's what happened to João's parents. Their son suffered, that was noticeable... So, they lacked the ease, cause of the energy accumulated after years and years of the toil that hardens us all... Instead, they saw that something else had accumulated, growing without them noticing, and now it was *guaçu*, powerful, gigantic! they loved João! they adored João! How adorable he was, all bundled, eyes closed, little hand closed, right after he was born!... the crying, the sleepless nights, finally the first laugh, the stammers, his first

tooth, the little pink satin clothes, Rosa who didn't want to marry him, school, illness, beatings, First Communion, his work, his kindness, his strength, soccer, his eyes, those dangling arms, my God! everyday: João!... If they had lived this love day by day, you see; now they could love just this sorrow, this instant, that's something a God-fearing soul can bear the weight of. But the days had gone by without them caring for love, and now, for no reason they could understand, because of those elbows rooted to the window, that chin furrowing his wide wrist, his eyes opening to the night without answers, all that immense love of a thousand days multiplied by a thousand rushed in. They loved with despair, desperate for love.

When João saw his neighbors going to the circus, he didn't even reason with the truth in his chest: I'm off too. He took his hat. He smiled at his mother as if it were possible to deceive a mother.

"I'm going to the circus... To have a little fun".

After what had happened between the two of them, going in her company would be wrong, so he went after his pals on the bleachers.

"Hey, aren't you going with Carmela?"

"Don't bother me no more about that dago".

"You had a fight!"

"Don't bother me no more, I said!"

But to watch the show... who could really watch in such a state of mind! Snake Man, with the strawflower on his chest. Gestures, inconvenient looks, none were suggested, but João realized everything. You can't blame Meidinha, he didn't know the fellow liked Carmela. A young man can be sitting next to a girl with no intention of wooing her...

On that evening, the whistle called two people to the window. To beat, pummel that blundering good-for-nothing! I confess that while João was spying, he thought of all this. Then he thought better, Carmela was her own woman, and if she wanted to fool around, better now than later! He was wising up to what he was getting into, shaking it off! they're all loose women! And that was it. He went to bed, apparently serene. But as for sleeping...! Out of nowhere came that urge to see, he had to peep. He couldn't see very well, it looked like they were kissing... oh! what a knot in his stomach!

Finally, parting was imperative, and Meidinha's steps sauntered in the choreography of the flexible. Right at the corner, he absentmindedly started the convoluted whistling of a Rio de Janeiro-like *maxixe* which pierced the night's senses. Carmela... you can imagine what nights those were!

Let's admit that habit is the higher law. João barely caught a wink at around three o'clock, and at four thirty he was up. His head weighed a ton, no doubt, but he had to work, and that he did. He hitched the horse to the little wagon with the aroma of fresh bread and clang, clang... clang, clang, there he went, making merry with the bell, getting the prisoners, one by one, out of bed. It's five o'clock, the baker drove by.

"Well! Circus, the circus every night! No more of that now!"

Now he wasn't even bothered that his mother forbade him to see the show. He only really, really enjoyed it on the first night. After that, a turmoil of apprehensions, inclinations, remorse, not remorse, small doubts... took over the whole time at the show and he no longer had any fun.

Dona Lina was right. When Carmela came in the irregular blushing and random spots revealed that this was no life for a nineteen-year-old girl. By the look in her eyes, though, no one could say that, because they shone more than ever. They were slanting towards the sides of her face, with the sweet, rested sway of a happy person. I won't say she was more beautiful, but you know, Carmela's loveliness had... become human. That's it: it had lost that conventionality of a painting, and had taken on a certain violence of corruption. I don't know if it was because of Carmela's looks, or because of the pantomime, you started mulling over the bandits from Calabria. There was no reason for that, her parents were from the surrounding area of Genova...

As for João, I'll tell you what he felt and what happened to him another day, now, the only thing I can still remember about him is he was the first to see Almeida arriving that evening. As usual, he came with his hands in his pockets, whistling through the center of his mouth, swinging with the short hops and small steps of a goat. He sure had rubber feet... João quivered in anger. He took his hat and walked away, a very far distance. The trouble was not love itself... The trouble was draping the loved one with an abundance of divine attributes that might triple the amount of love, and then what? A natural person is easy to replace for another natural person, it's a matter of letting one go and letting the other come in... But the person who leaves our heart represents love of an idealistic gigantism, and you can't find another with as much fat to fill in the vacant space. That's why an emptiness remains, hurting, hurting... So, we take these long, long walks... That lasts a long time, until the emptiness, thanks to the breezes at nightfall, fills with dust. Until it fills with dust.

We're getting to the end. Mothers are funny creatures... They forbid the circus, make girls go to bed early, and think that going to bed is the same as going to sleep. This is one of the most unchangeable weaknesses of mankind, by the way... Usually we don't seek evil, we seek relief. So, there you have thirty percent of the trouble that could be avoided - thirty is too high, twenty. Carmela being part of this estimate. And how could Dona Lina imagine that being in bed is not the same as sleeping? she could not. But no sooner did the whistle come around the corner, Carmela was up. The kissing started. Even when she moved her face a little for a breath of air for more kissing, he stretched out his neck to sprinkle hummingbird kisses on her lips. He was always scanning her face, exploring, with curiosity. But the big fat kisses, the gobbly kisses, that was all the little imp. And he would just let her slop him. The master and the pupil, right? That pure little girl who never worked at the factories, who would know!... That's what innocence leads to: you see now, the skilled girl was exchanging João for Snake Man... If he slid into her room, I don't think he would find one gesture of refusal in his way, Carmela was nuts. Only madness can explain all this madness. But even desire grows weary, for all that, and there came a

moment when she was worn down with love. They began to talk. Meidinha, hands in his pockets, leaned against the wall and looked down. Carmela bothered him with the viscid snake of her embrace, her face against his. And some deep-felt words slipped out. She moaned:

“I really, really like you!”

“Me too”.

The ambiguity of elliptical answers is a funny thing! Who did he like? his girlfriend or himself?...

“Did you work today?”

“I did. We’ll present a new pantomime. I play the violist of Cubatão, you should come”.

“Oh, honey!”

Kiss.

“I noticed that João is nowhere to be seen anymore... He’s your relative, isn’t he?”

“Relative? God forbid!” She gave out a chuckle.” I don’t know where he’s been. I don’t like him!”

Silence. Carmela felt a vague urge to make things right. After all, her situation had become one of those drawers where everything had been turned upside down, where we can’t find underwear anymore. She proceeded:

“He wanted to marry me, but, you see, I don’t like him, he’s silly. I’ll only marry you!”

Meidinha was looking at the ground. He kept looking. Then he turned gently and faced the beautiful girl. His eyes, big, even bigger, swallowed the girl’s eyes, he contemplated her. He contemplated her, enraptured. Carmela laid the wet fire of her lips on his half-open lips. Now Meidinha let his eyes fall to one side. In each other’s arms like that, facing each other, Carmela rested her head on the boy’s shoulder and peacefully breathed in the aroma of life that came rising up from his neck. And he, with his constant big eyes, even bigger now, falling to one side, lost in the darkness of the indifferent bedroom.

“We’ll be very happy, I don’t mind if you work at the circus... I’ll go wherever you go. If daddy won’t consent, I’ll run away. Mmmm...”

She managed to kiss the back of his neck. Meidinha... his lips moved, though they didn’t say a word. Suddenly, a feeling of surprise vibrated in the muscles of his face. It was vanishing, no, it was going down to his lips that were turned down, in pain. Some force almost joined his eyebrows sharply together. He calmed down. A smile emerged. He moved Carmela away from his shoulder. In fact, that was the first gesture of command he made, he held her head. He gazed upon her. He smiled at her.

“I’m leaving. It’s really late...”

He held her. He kissed her mouth passionately and then did it again. Carmela felt such happiness, that if she were one of those girls who read books, it would be a lifetime remembrance. She remained still, watching him leave. There was no whistle.

On the next day, where was Snake Man?

"Have y'all seen Meidinha?"

"He didn't sleep at home!"

"No, he didn't!"

"He probably went on a spree".

"No way!"

Where was Almeida? Only that afternoon a group of people from Lapa found out that Snake Man had embarked to I don't know where, Abraão was the one to tell. They had been on the first early morning "Anastácio" streetcar together. When he saw the fellow with a suitcase, he asked him:

"You're traveling!"

"I am".

"You're leaving the circus!"

"I am".

"Forever, is it?"

Snake Man looked at him, he seemed angry.

"I don't have to explain anything to you".

He turned away, his face towards the district hanging on to Perdizes.

"Suddenly, can you believe it, he started to whistle, happily! the trilling of a whistle. I've never seem someone whistling so well! I work at Avenida Tiradentes, so I followed him. He walked into the Sorocabana station".

"He was the circus' best number..."

At this point, hot hell broke loose at the Quaglia household, Pietro broke the news. Carmela opened her mouth to rant, nothing came out; fits of rage, that's something poor people don't know how to have, she burst into tears of despair, you should have been there! they found out everything. Not that she told them, but it was easy to guess. She sobbed, screaming and wanting to run out to call Meidinha. They were sure there would be overblown, dreadful slander, that only time would make right. Old Quaglia lost his mind for good, he beat his daughter soundly, it was no joke. Carmela shouted that it wasn't what they were thinking... but it was only when his energy mixed with pain was spent that the old man stopped. He stopped to bawl like a child. Pietro had been closing doors, closing as many windows as he could, so nobody would hear from the street, but, nobody knows how, rumors are spread, walls have ears... And tongues love to wag, that's it. Boys started to look at Carmela in a special way, and would laugh among themselves. They even propositioned her. And nobody wanted to marry her anymore. And she sure tried and tried! She was a real... I don't even know what!

Until she became... I don't-know-what for real. And do you know what they spread around? That it was her brother himself who was the first, the one with the dancer... But that was something I didn't see, I can't swear on it. And I always say I don't know.

What I know is that Carmela was very unhappy.

JABURU MALANDRO

Belazarte me contou:

Pois é... tem vidas assim, tão bem preparadinhas, sem surpresa... São ver gaveta arranjada, com que facilidade você tira a cueca até no escuro, mesmo que ela esteja no fundo! Mas vem um estabanado, revira tudo, que-dê cueca? — Maria, você não viu a minha cueca listrada de azul? — Está aí mesmo, seu dotoire! — Não está! Já procurei, não está... E é um custo a gente encontrar a cueca. Você se lembra do João? Ara, se lembra! o padeiro que gostava da Rosa, aquela uma que casou com o mulato... Pois quando contei o caso, falei que o João não era homem educado pra estar cultivando males de amor... Sofreu uns pares de dias, até bebeu, se lembra? e encontrou a Carmela que principiou a consolá-lo. Não durou muito se consolou. Os dois passavam uma porção de vinte minutos ali na cerca, falando nessas coisas corriqueiras que alimentam amor de gente pobre.

Ora a Carmela... será que ela gostava mesmo do João? Difícil de saber. Era moça bonita, isso era, desses tipos de italiana que envelhecem muito cedo, isto é, envelhecem não, engordam, ficam chatas, enjoativas. Porém nos dezenove, que gostosura! Forte, um pouco baixa, beiços tão repartidinhos no centro, um trevo encarnado! Cabelo mais preto nem de brasileira! Porém o sublime era a pele, com todos os cambiantes do rosado, desde o róseo-azul do queixo com as veinhas de cá pra lá sapecas, até o rubro esplendor ao lado dos olhos, querendo extravasar pela fronte nos dias de verão brabo. Filha de italiano já se sabe...

Mas Carmela não tinha a ciência das outras moças italianas daqui. Pudera, as outras saíam todo santo dia, frequentavam as oficinas de costura, as mais humildes estavam nos curtumes, na fiação, que acontecia? Se acostumavam com a vida. Não tinha homem que não lhes falasse uma graça ou no mínimo olhasse pra elas daquele jeito que ensina as coisas. Ficavam sabendo logo de tudo e até segredavam imoralidades umas pras outras, nos olhos. Ficavam finas, de tanta grosseria que escutavam. A grosseria vinha, pam! batia nelas. Geralmente caía no chão. Poucas, em comparação ao número delas, muito poucas se abaixavam pra erguer a grosseria. Essas se perdiam, as pobres! Si não casavam na Polícia, o que era uma felicidade rara, davam nas pensões.

Nas outras a grosseria relava apenas, escorregando pro chão. Mas o choque desbastava um pouco essa crosta inútil de inocência que reveste a gente no começo. Ficavam sabendo, se acostumavam facilmente com o manejo da vida e escolhiam depois o rapaz que mais lhes convinha, seleção natural. Casavam e o destino se cumpria. De chiques e aladas, viravam mães anuais; filho na barriga, filho no peitume, filho agarrado na perna. Domingo iam passear na cidade, espandongadas, cabelo caindo na cara. Não tinha importância, não. Os trabalhadores o que queriam era mãe pros oito a doze filhos do destino.

Carmela não. Vizinhas com a padaria em casa própria. O pai afinal tinha seus cobres de tanta ferradura ordinária que passara adiante, e tanta roda e varal consertados. E, fora as duas menores que nem na escola inda iam, o resto eram filhos, meia-dúzia, gente bem macha trabalhando numa conta. Dois casados já. Só um ninguém sabia dele, talvez andasse pelas fazendas... Sei que fora visto uma vez em Botucatu. Era o defeito físico da família. Si o nome dele caía na conversa, a gente só escutava os palavrões que o pai dizia, porca la miséria. Restava a metade de meia-dúzia, menores que Carmela, treze, quatorze e dezesseis anos, que seguiam o caminho bom dos mais velhos.

Assim florescentes, todos imaginaram de comum acordo que Carmela não carecia de trabalhar. Deram um estadão pra ela, bonita! O pai olhava a filha e sentia uma ternura diferente. Pra esvaziar a ternura, comprava uma renda, sapatos de pelica alvinha, fitas, coisas assim.

Padeiro portuga e ferreiro italiano, de tanta vizinhança, ficaram amigos. Quando o Serafino Quaglia viu que a filha pendia pro João, gostou bem. Afinal, padaria instalada e afreguesada não é coisa que a gente despreze numa época destas... Porém a história é que Carmela, sequestrada assim da vida, apesar de ter na família uma ascendência que a fazia dona em casa, possuía coração que não sabia de nada. O João era simpático, era. Forte, com os longos braços pendurados, e o bigode principiando, não vê que galego larga bigode!... Carmela gostou do João. Quando pediu pra ele que não bebesse mais, João se comoveu. Principiou sentindo Carmela. As entrevistas na cerca tornaram-se diárias. Precisão não havia, ninguém se opunha, e um entrava na casa do outro sem cerimônia, mas é sempre assim porém... Não carece a gente ser de muitos livros, nem da alta, pra inventar a poesia das coisas, amor sempre despertou inspiração... Ora você há-de convir que aqueles encontros na cerca tinham seu encanto. Pra eles e pros outros. Ali estavam mais sós, não tinham irmãos em roda. Pois então podiam passar muitos minutos sem falar nada, que é a melhor maneira de fazer vibrar o sentimento. Os que passavam viam aquele par tão bonito, brincando com a trepadeira, tirando lasca do pau seco... Isso reconciliava a gente com a malvadeza do mundo.

— Sabe!... a Carmela anda namorando com o João!

— Sai daí, você... Vem contar isso pra mim!... Pois se até fui eu que descobri primeiro!

Pam!... Pam!... Pam!... Pam!... Pampampam!... toda a gente correu na esquina pra ver. O carro vinha a passo.

GRANDE CIRCO BAHIA
dos irmão Garcias!

Hoje! Serata de estrea! Cachorros e maccacos sabios!
Irmãos Fô-Hi equilibristas!
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Só 2\$000 — Cadeiras a Quatro
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E viva!

O circo Bahia vinha tirar um pouco o bairro da rotina do cinema. Pam! Pam!... Pam!... Lá seguia o carro de anúncio entre desejos. Carmela foi contar pro João que ela ia com os três frateros. João vai também.

O circo estava cheio. Pipoca! Amendoim torrado!... Batat'assat'ô furrn!... Vozinha amarela: Nugá! nugá! nugá!... Dentadura na escuriza: Baleiro!... Balas de coco, chocolate, canela!... E a banda sarapintando de saxofone a noite calma. Estrelas. Foram pras cadeiras, Carmela alumeando de boniteza. O circo não vinha pobre nem nada!

— Todos os números são bons, hein! Eu volto! Você?

Come-Mosca quis espiar a caixa tão grande toda de lantejoulas, verde e amarela, que os araras traziam pro centro do picadeiro, prendeu o pé debaixo dela. Foi uma gargalhada com o berro que ele deu.

— Volto também.

Música. O reposteiro escarlate se abriu. O artista veio correndo lá de dentro, com um malhê todo de lantejoulas, listrado de verde e amarelo. Era o Homem Cobra. Fez o gesto em curva, braços no ar, deformação do antigo beijo pro público... é pena... tradição que já vai se perdendo... Tipo esquisito o Homem Cobra... esguio! esguio. Assim de malhê, então, era ver uma lâmina. Tudo lantejoula menos a cabeça, até as mãos! Feio não era não. Esse gênero de brasileiro quase branco já, bem pálido. Cabelo liso, grosso, rutilando azul. O nariz não é chato mais, mesmo delicado de tão pequenininho. Aliás a gente só via os olhos, puxa! negros, enormes! aumentados pelas olheiras. Tomavam a cara toda. Carmela sentiu uma admiração. E um mal-estar. Pressentimento não era, nem curiosidade... mal-estar.

O número causou sensação. Já pra trepar na caixa só vendo o que o Homem Cobra fez! caiu no tapete, uma perna foi se arrastando caixa arriba, a outra, depois o corpo, direitinho que nem cobra! até que ficou em cima. Parecia que nem tinha osso, de tão deslocado. Fez coisas incríveis! dava nós com as pernas, ficava um embrulhinho em cima da caixa... Palmas de toda a parte. Depois a música parou, era agora! Ergueu o corpo numa curva, barriga pro ar, pés e mãos nos cantos da caixa. Vieram os irmãos Garcias, de casaca, e o Dr. Cerquinho tão conhecido, médico do bairro. — Olha o doutor Cerquinho! — O doutor Cerquinho!... Homem tão bom, consultas a três milréis... Quando não podia pagar, não fazia mal, ficava pra outra vez. Os irmãos Garcias puxavam a cabeça do Homem Cobra, houve um estalo no bombo da música e a cabeça pendeu deslocada, balanceando.

Trrrrrrrr... tambor. A cabeça principiou girando. Trrr... Meu Deus! girava rapidíssimo! Trrrrr... “Chega! Chega!” toda a gente gritavam. Trrrrr... Foi parando. Os irmãos Garcias endireitaram a cabeça dele e o Dr. Cerquinho ajudou. Quando acabaram, o moço levantou meio tonto, se rindo. Foi uma ovação. Não sei quantas vezes ele veio lá de dentro agradecer. Os olhos vinham vindo, vinham vindo, aquele gesto de beijo deformado, partiu. As palmas recomeçavam. Carmela pequitinha, agarrada no João, que calor delicioso pra ele! Virou-se, deu um beijo de olhos nela, francamente, sem-vergonha nenhuma, apesar de tanto pessoal em roda.

— Coitado não?

— Batuta!

No dia seguinte deu-se isto: estavam almoçando quando a porta se abriu, Pietro! Era um ingrato, era tudo o que você quiser, mas era filho. Foi uma festa. Tanto tempo, como é que viera sem avisar! como estava grande! Pois fazem seis anos já!

— Meu pai desculpa...

O velho resmungou, porém o filho estava bem vestido, não era vagabundo, não pense, estudara. Sabia música e viera dirigindo a banda do circo, foi um frio. O velho desembuchou logo o que pensava de gente de circo. Então Pietro meio que zangou-se, estavam muito enganados! olhem: a moça que anda na bola é mulher do equilibrista, a amazona se casara com o Garcia mais velho, Dolores, uma uruguaia. Gente honesta, até os dois japoneses. Todos espantados.

— Meu pai, o senhor vai comigo lá no circo pra ver como todos são direitos. Eu mesmo, si não casei até agora é porque nesta vida, hoje aqui, amanhã não se sabe onde, inda não encontrei moça de minha simpatia. E você, Carmela?

Ela sorriu, baixando o rosto, orgulhosa de já ter encontrado.

— Temos coisa, não? Por que não foram no circo ontem? É!... Pois não vi não! Também estava uma enchente!... Trouxe entrada pra vocês hoje.

Conversa vai, conversa vem, caiu sobre o Homem Cobra. Afinal não é que o número fosse mais importante que os outros não, até os irmãos de Carmela tinham preferido outras artistas, principalmente o de dezesseis, falando sempre que a dançarina, filha-da-mãe! botava o pé mais alto que a cabeça. Os outros tinham gostado mais da pantomima. Porém da pantomima, Carmela só enxergara, só seguira os gestos heróicos, maquinais, do chefe dos salteadores, aquele moreno pálido, esguio, flexível, e os grandes olhos. Quando morreu com o tiro do polícia bersagliere, retorcendo no chão que até parecia de deveras, Carmela teve “uma” dó. Sem saber, estava torcendo pra que os salteadores escapassem.

— O Almeidinha... Está aí! um rapaz excelente! é do norte. Toda a gente gosta dele. Faz todas aquelas maravilhas, você viu como ele representa, pois não tem orgulho nenhum não, pau pra toda obra. Serve de arara sem se incomodar... Até foi convidado pra fazer parte duma companhia dramática, uma feita, em Vitória do Espírito Santo, mas não aceitou. É muito meu amigo...

Carmela fitou o irmão, agradecida.

Afinal, pra encurtar as coisas, você logo imagina que o pai de Pietro foi se acostumando fácil com o ofício do filho. Aquilo dava uma grande ascendência pra ele, sobre a vizinhança... Quando no intervalo, o Pietro veio trazer o Garcia mais velho pra junto da família, venceu o pai. Todo mundo estava olhando pra eles com desejo. Conhecer o dono dum circo tão bom!... já era alguma coisa. O João, esse teve só prazer. Fora companheiro de infância do Pietro, este mais velho. Já combinaram um encontro pro dia seguinte de-tarde. Pietro mostrará tudo lá dentro, João queria ver. E que Pietro apareça também lá na padaria... Os pais ficariam contentes de ver ele já homem, ah, meu caro, tempo corre!...

No dia seguinte de-tardinha, João já estava meio tonto com as apresentações. Afinal, no picadeiro vazio, foram dar com o Almeidinha assobiando. Endireitava o nó duma corda.

— Boas-tardes. Desculpe, estou com a mão suja.

Sorria. Tinha esse rosto inda mal desenhado das crianças, faltava perfil. Quando se ria, eram notas claras sem preocupação. Distraído, Nossa Senhora! “Meidinha, você me arranja esta meia, a malha fugiu...” Almeidinha puxava a malha da meia, assobiando. “Meidinha, dá comida pro Malunga, faz favor, tenho de ir buscar os bilhetes.” Lá ia o Almeidinha assobiando, dar comida pro Malunga. Então carregar a filhinha da Dolores, dez meses, não havia como ele, a criança adormecia logo com o assobio doce, doce. E conversava tão delicado! João teve um entusiasmo pelo Almeida. E quando, na noite seguinte, o Homem Cobra recebendo aplausos, fez pra ele aquele gesto especial de intimidade, João sentiu-se mais feliz que o rei Dom Carlos. Safado rei dão Carlos...

Carmela tanto falava, Pietro tanto insistiu, que o velho Quaglia recebeu o Almeida em casa mas muito bem. Em dez minutos de conversa, o moço já era estimado por todos. Carmela não pôde ir na cerca, já se vê, tinha visita em casa. João que entrasse, pois não conhecia o Almeida também!

E, vamos falando logo a verdade, o Homem Cobra, assim com aquele jeito indiferente, agarrou tendo uma atenção especial pra Carmela. Ninguém percebia porque, afinal, a Carmela estava quase noiva do João.

Nunca mulher nenhuma tivera uma atenção especial pro Meidinha, Carmela era a primeira. Ele percebeu. Só ele, porque os outros sabiam que ela estava quase noiva do João. E tem coisas que só mesmo entre dois se percebem. Carmela dum momento pra outro, você já sabe o que é a gente se tornar criminoso, ficara hábil. Mesma habilidade no Meidinha, que fazia tudo o que ela fazia primeiro. Até o caso da flor passou despercebido, também quem é que percebe uma sempre-viva destamanho! O certo é que de-noite o Homem Cobra trabalhou com ela entre as lantejoulas. Só olho com vontade de ver é que enxerga uma pobre florzinha no meio de tanto brilho artificial.

Era uma hora da madrugada, noite inteiramente adormecida no bairro da Lapa, quando o esguio passou assobiando pela rua. Carmela, não sei que loucura deu nela, acender luz não quis, podiam ver, saltou da cama, e, com o casaquinho de veludo nas costas, entreabriu a janela. Abriu-a. Esperou. O esguio voltava, mãos nos bolsos,

assobiando. Vendo Carmela emudeceu. Essas casas de gente meia pobre são tão baixas... Tocou no chapéu passando.

— Psiu...

Se chegou.

— Boa-noite.

— Safa! A senhora ainda não foi dormir!

— Estava. Mas escutei o senhor, e vim.

— Noite muito bonita...

— É.

— Bom, boas-noites.

— Já vai... Fique um pouco...

Ele botara as costas na parede, mãos sempre nos bolsos. Olhava a rua, com vontade de ir-se embora decerto. Carmela é que trabalhou:

— Vi a flor no seu peito.

— Viu?

— Fiquei muito agradecida.

— Ora.

— Por que o senhor botou a flor, hein?... Podiam perceber!

Almeida se virou, muito admirado:

— O que tinha que vissem!

— É! tinha muita coisa, sabe!

Ele tirara as mãos dos bolsos. Se encostara de novo na janela, e olhava pro chão, brincando o pé numas folhinhas, a mão descansava ali do peitoril. Carmela já conhecia a doçura das mãos dadas com o João, de manso guardou a do moço entre as ardentes dela. Meidinha encarou-a inteiramente, se riu. Virou-se duma vez e retribuiu o carinho pondo a mão livre sobre as de Carmela.

— As mãos da senhora estão queimando, safá!

E não pararam mais de se olhar e se sorrir. Porém os artistas, mesmo ignorantes de vida, sabem tantas coisas por profissão... não durou muito, Carmela e o Meidinha trocaram o beijo nº I. Então ele partiu.

Estaria zangada?... Aquela frieza decidiu o João: pedia a moça nessa noite mesmo. Mas, e foi bom sinão a história ficava mais feia, não sei o que deu nele de ir falar com ela primeiro. Cerca? era lugar aonde Carmela não chegava desde a quarta-feira. João mandou Sandro chamá-la. Que estava muito ocupada, não podia vir. O que seria!... pois si não tinha feito nada!... resolveu entrar, não era homem pra complicações. Porém a moça nem respondeu aos olhares dele. Pietro é que se divertiu com a rusga, até fez uma caçoadinha. João teve um deslumbramento, gostou. Mas Carmela ficou toda azaranzada. Desenhou um muxoxo de desdém e foi pra dentro. Não sabia bem por quê, porém de repente principiou a chorar. Veio a mãe ralhando com Pietro, onça da vida. E verdade que dona Lina não sabia o que se passara, viu a filha chorando e deu razão à filha. João, quando soube que a namorada estava chorando, teve um pressentimento horrível, pressentimento de que, meu

Deus!... pressentimento sem mais nada. Entrou em casa tonto, chegou-se pra janela sem pensamento, e ficou olhando a rua. Cada bonde, carroça que passava, eram vulcões de poeira. Ar se manchando, que nem cara cheia de panos. O jasmineiro da frente, e mesmo do outro lado da rua, por cima do muro, os primeiros galhos das árvores tudo avermelhado. Não vê que Prefeitura se lembra de vir calçar estas ruas! é só asfalto pras ruas vizinhas dos Campos Elíseos... Gente pobre que engula poeira dia inteirinho!

Si jantou, João nem percebeu. Depois caiu uma noite insuportável sem ar. João na janela. Os pais, vendo ele assim, se puseram a amá-lo. Doente não estava, pois então devia de ser algum desgosto... Carmela. Não podia ser outra coisa. Mas o que teria sucedido! E afinal, gente pobre tem também suas delicadezas, perguntaram de lado, o filho respondeu “não”. Consolar não sabiam. Nem tinham de que, ele embirrava negando. Então puseram-se a amar.

É assim que o amor se vinga do desinteresse em que a gente deixa ele. A vida corre tão sossegada, ninguém não bota reparo no amor. Ahn... é assim, é!... esperem que hão-de ver!... o amor resmunga. E fica desimportante no lugarzinho que lhe deram. De repente a pessoa amada, filho, mulher, qualquer um, sofre, e é então, quando mais a gente carece de força pra combater o mal, é então que o amor reaparece, incomodativo, tapando caminho, atrapalhando tudo, ajuntando mais dores a esta vida já de si tão difícil de ser vivida.

Assim foi com os pais do João. O filho sofria, isso notava-se bem... Pois careciam de calma, da energia acumulada em anos e anos de trabalhadeira que endurece a gente... Em vez: viram que uma outra coisa também se fora ajuntando, crescendo sem que eles reparassem, e era enorme agora, guaçu, macota, gigantesca! amavam o João! adoravam o João! Como era engraçado, todo fechadinho, olho fechado, mãozinha fechada, logo depois de nascido!... os choros, noites sem dormir, o primeiro riso enfim, balbucios, primeiro dente, a roupinha de cetineta cor-de-rosa, a Rosa que não quisera casar com ele, e escola, as doenças, as sovas, a primeira comunhão, o trabalho, a bondade, a força, o futebol, os olhos, aqueles braços dependurados, meu Deus! todos os dias: o João!... Si tivessem vivido esse amor dia por dia, se compreende: agora só tinham que amar aquele sofrimento do instante, isso inda cristão aguenta. Mas os dias tinham passado sem que dessem tento do amor, e agora, por uma causa que não sabiam, por causa daqueles cotovelos afincados na janela, daquele queixo dobrando o pulso largo, olhar abrindo pra noite sem resposta, vinha todo aquele amor grande de dias mil multiplicados por mil. Amaram com desespero, desesperados de amor.

Quando João viu os vizinhos partindo pro circo, nem discutiu a verdade do peito: vou também. Pegou no chapéu. Pra mãe ele se riu como si fosse possível enganar mãe.

— Vou pro circo... Divertir um bocado.

Depois do que se passara, ir junto dela também era sem-vergonhice, procurou companheiros na arquibancada.

— Ué! você não vai junto da Carmela?

— Não me amole mais com essa carcamana!

— Brigaram!

— Não me amole, já disse!

Mas ver circo, quem é que podia ver circo num atarantamento daqueles! O Homem Cobra com a sempre-viva no peito. Gestos, olhares inconvenientes não fez nenhum que se apontasse, João porém descobriu tudo. A gente não pode culpar o Meidinha, não sabia que o outro gostava de Carmela. Um moço pode estar sentado junto d'ũa moça sem ser pra namorar...

Nessa noite o assobio chamou duas pessoas na janela. Bater, arrebentar com aquele chicapiau desengonçado! confesso que o João espiando, matutou nisso. Depois imaginou melhor, Carmela era dona do seu nariz e se tinha que fazer das suas, antes agora! aprendia a ver adonde ia caindo, livra! são todas umas galinhas. E bastava. Foi pra cama aparentemente sossegado. Porém que-dê sono! vinha de sopetão aquela vontade de ver, tinha que espiar mesmo. Não podia enxergar bem, parece que se beijavam... ôh, que angústia na barriga!...

Afinal foi preciso partir, e o Meidinha andou naquele passo coreográfico dos flexíveis. Ali mesmo na esquina distraiu-se, o assobio contorcido enfiou no ouvido da noite um maxixe acariocado. Carmela... você imagine que noites!

Convenhamos que o costume é lei grande. João mal entredormiu ali pelas três horas, pois às quatro e trinta já estava de pé. Pesava a cabeça, não tem dúvida, mas tinha que trabalhar e trabalhou. Botou o cavalo na carrocinha perfumada com pão novo e tlim... tlrintintim... lá foi numa festança de campainha, tirando um por um os prisioneiros das camas. São cinco horas, padeiro passou.

— Ê! circo, circo toda noite!... Pois agora não vai mais!

Também agora pouco se amolava que a mãe proibisse espetáculo. Gozar mesmo, só gozou na primeira noite. Depois, um poder de inquietações, de vontades, remorsos, remorsos não, duvidinhas... tomavam todo o tempo do espetáculo e ela não podia mais se divertir.

Dona Lina tinha razão. Quando Carmela apareceu, o irregular do corado, manchas soltas, falavam que isso não é vida que se dê pra uma rapariga de dezenove anos. Pelos olhos ninguém podia pensar isso porque brilhavam mais ainda. Estavam caindo pros lados das faces num requebro doce, descansado, de pessoa feliz. Não digo mais linda, porém, assim, a boniteza de Carmela se... se humanizara. Isso: perdera aquele convencional de pintura, pra adquirir certa violência de malvadez. Não sei si por causa de olhar Carmela, ou por causa da pantomima, a gente se punha matutando sobre os salteadores da Calábria. Não havia razão pra isso, os pais dela eram gente dos arredores de Gênova...

João, outro dia hei-de contar o que sentiu e o que sucedeu pra ele, agora só me lembro dele ainda porque foi o primeiro a ver chegar o Almeida de-tardinha. Veio, já se sabe, mãos nos bolsos, assobio no meio da boca, bamboleando saltadinho no passo miúdo de cabra. Tinha pés de borracha na certa, João tremeu de ódio. Pegou no chapéu, foi até muito longe caminhando. O mal não é a gente amar... O mal é a gente vestir a pessoa amada com um despropósito de atributos divinos, que chegam a triplicar às vezes o volume do amor, o que se dá? Uma pessoa natural é fácil da gente substituir por outra natural também, questão de sair uma e entrar outra... Porém a que sai do nosso peito é amor que

sofre de gigantismo idealista, e não se acha outra de tanta gordura pra botar logo no lugar. Por isso fica um vazio doendo, doendo... Então a gente anda cada estirão a pé... Aquilo dura bastante tempo, até que o vazio, graças aos ventinhos da boca-da-noite, se encha de pó. Se encha de pó.

Estamos no fim. São engraçadas essas mães... Proíbem circo, obrigam as meninas a ir cedo pra cama, pensam que deitar é dormir. Aliás, esta é mesmo uã das fraquezas mais constantes dos homens... Geralmente nós não visamos o mal, visamos o remédio. Daí trinta por cento de desgraças que podiam ser evitadas, trinta por cento é muito, vinte. Carmela entra na conta. Também como é que dona Lina podia imaginar que quem está numa cama não dorme? não podia. Mas nem bem o assobio vinha vindo pra lá da esquina, já Carmela estava de pé. Beijo principiou. Até quando ela retirava um pouco a cara pro respiro de encher, ele espichava o pescoço, vinha salpicar beijos de guanumbi nos lábios dela. Sempre olhando muito, percorrendo, parecia por curiosidade, a cara dela. Mas os beijos grandes, os beijos engulidos, era a diabinha que dava. Ele se deixava enlambuzar. Mestre e discípulo, não? Aquela inocentinha que não trabalhava nas fábricas, quem que havia de dizer!... Eis a inocência no que dá: não vê que moça aprendida trocava o João pelo Homem Cobra... Si este penetrasse no quarto, creio que nenhum gesto de recusa encontraria no caminho, Carmela estava louca. Só a loucura explica uma loucura dessas. Mas até os desejos se cansam porém, a horas tantas ela sentiu-se exausta de amor. Puseram-se a conversar. Meidinha, mãos nos bolsos, encostara as costas na parede e olhava o chão. Carmela o incomodava com a cobra aderente do abraço, rosto contra rosto. E perdidas, umas frases de intimidade. Ela gemendo:

— Eu gosto tanto de você!

— Eu também.

Engraçado a ambiguidade das respostas elípticas! Gostava de quem? da namorada ou dele mesmo?...

— Você trabalhou hoje?

— Trabalhei. Vamos dar uma pantomima nova. Eu faço o violeiro do Cubatão, venha ver.

— Querido!

Beijo.

— É verdade! não se vê mais o João... É parente de você, é?

— Parente? Deus te livre! deu um muxoxo. Não sei onde anda. Não gosto dele!

Silêncio. Carmela sentiu um instinto vago de arranjar as coisas. Afinal, o caso dela se tornara uma dessas gavetas reviradas, aonde a gente não encontra a cueca mais. Continuou:

— Ele queria casar comigo, mas porém não gosto dele, é bobo. Só com você que hei de casar!

Meidinha estava olhando o chão. Ficou olhando. Depois se virou manso e encarou a bonita. Os olhos dele, grandes, inda mais grandes, enguliram os da moça, contemplava. Contemplava embevecido. Carmela pousou nesses beijos entreabertos o incêndio úmido

dos dela. Meidinha agora deixava os olhos caírem duma banda. Abraçados assim de frente, Carmela descansou o queixo no ombro do moço, e respirava sossegada o aroma de vida que vinha subindo da nuca dele. Ele sempre de olhos grandes, mais grandes ainda, caídos dum lado, perdidos na escuridão do quarto indiferente.

— A gente há de ser muito feliz, não me incomode que você trabalhe no circo... Irei aonde você for. Si papai não quiser, eu fujo. Uhm...

Até conseguiu beijar o pescoço dele atrás. O Meidinha... os lábios dele mexiam, mas não falavam porém. Uma impressão de surpresa vibrou-lhe os músculos da cara de repente. Foi-se esvaindo, não, foi descendo pros beijos que ficaram caídos, com dor. Duramente uma energia lhe ajuntou quase as sobrancelhas. Acalmou. Veio o sorriso. Tirou Carmela do ombro. Na realidade era o primeiro gesto de posse que fazia, segurou a cabeça dela. Contemplou-a. Riu pra ela.

— Vou embora. É muito tarde...

Enlaçou-a. Beijou-lhe a boca ardentemente e tornou a beijar. Carmela sentiu uma felicidade, que si ela fosse dessas lidas nos livros, dava recordação pra vida inteira. Ficou imóvel, vendo ele se afastar. Assobio não se escutou.

No dia seguinte, que-dele o Homem Cobra?

— Vocês não viram o Meidinha, gente!

— Pois não dormiu em casa!

— Não dormiu não!

— Decerto alguma farra...

— Que o que!...

Que-dele o Almeida? Só de-tarde, alguns grupos sabiam na Lapa que o Homem Cobra embarcara não sei pra onde, o Abraão é que contava. Tinham ido juntos, no primeiro bonde “Anastácio” da madrugada. Vendo o outro de mala, indagou:

— Vai viajar!

— Vou.

— Deixa o circo!

— Deixo.

— Pra sempre é!

O Homem Cobra olhara pra ele, parecendo zangado.

— Não tenho que lhe dar satisfações.

Virou a cara pro bairro trepando das Perdizes.

De repente, vocês não imaginam, principiou a assobiar, alegre! um assobio de apito, nunca vi assobiar tão bem! Trabalho na Avenida Tiradentes... fui seguindo ele. Entrou na estação da Sorocabana.

— Era o melhor número do circo...

A essa hora já tivera tempo quente na casa dos Quaglias, Pietro levava a notícia. Carmela abriu uma boca que não tinha; ataque, gente do povo não sabe ter, caiu numa choradeira de desespero, só vendo! descobriram tudo. Não que ela contasse, porém era muito fácil de adivinhar. Soluçava gritando, querendo sair pra rua, chamando pelo

Meidinha. Tiveram certeza duma calúnia exagerada, pavorosa, que só o tempo desmentiu. O velho Quaglia perdeu a cabeça duma vez, desancou a filha que não foi vida. Carmela falava berrado que não era o que imaginavam... mas só mesmo quando não teve mais força misturada com a dor, é que o velho parou. Parou pra ficar chorando que nem bezerro. Pietro andava fechando porta, fechando quanta janela encontrava, pra ninguém de fora ouvir, mas boato corre ninguém sabe como, as paredes têm ouvidos... E língua muito leviana, isso é que é. Os rapazes principiaram olhando pra Carmela dum jeito especial, e ficavam se rindo uns pros outros. Até propostas lhe fizeram. E ninguém mais não quis casar com ela. E só se vendo como ela procurava!... Uma verdadeira... nem sei o que!

Até que ficou... não-sei-o-quê de verdade. E sabe inda por cima o que andaram espalhando? Que quem principiou foi o irmão dela mesmo, o tal da dançarina... Porém coisa que não vi, não juro. E falo sempre que não sei.

Só sei que Carmela foi muito infeliz.

CAIN, CAIN, AND ALL THE REST

Belazarte told me this story:

Maybe nobody really remembers, not even they themselves, but I'm sure it was after that night they began to fight for no good reason. Two brothers fighting like that, unheard of! Before, they were the very best of friends... But, it was that night. Seated side by side, watching the carnival scene. The auction was fun. Sadresky had paid three *milréis* for a carnation from Flora, what a sassy mullata she was! No wonder, with those big sliced *jaboticaba* eyes, white and glossy black, just like the sweet juice of the fruit... I wonder where she is now... Maybe even with Doctor Cerquinho...!

"Did you pay the bill, Aldo?"

"Yeah".

They were contemplating the tangled crowd at the town square. They gazed at one person, then another, taking it in with their eyes. They didn't exchange a word, there was no longer any need: they knew each other inside and out. Out of the blue, they turned to each other, trying to follow the other's gaze. Aldo stared at Tino. Tino didn't want to look away first. Eyes that don't blink soon get tired, burning like they've got sand in them, and then flashing with lightning. Four rifles, my man, four angry rifles. Not anger, more like rage. Aldo made a tutting sound at his skinny brother, let out a despicable laugh. Tino perked up his nose like a conceited cat.

They moved away from each other. Aldo started talking to some fellows, Tino to others. At ten in the evening everything would be over anyway... They went back home. But they each walked on opposite sides of the road. Giving in was out of the question, you see! Once inside their bedroom, they squabbled. For no good reason, clothes on the bedhead. In bewilderment, Dona Maria came in to see what was going on. It was a terrible row.

From words to blows took no more than three days. And why? Nobody knew. The truth is that life changed for those three. Their mother cried, wailed, even cursed her sons, to no avail! Lord! Not even her husband, if he were still alive...! Things caught fire and their old life would never be the same.

And before that they were so close...! Aldo would protect Tino, who was the darker, grumpier one. He took after his father's Brazilianess, that blistered color that never changed and those undeveloped muscles that no hard work could build. When he took off his shirt to bathe on Saturday, Jesus! Even in shirt and jacket, his shoulders were like two closed wings on his back.

And Tino was a real angel, so quiet and humble; he could have been a sacristan. He sang with a soft, beautiful voice, especially "Mamma Mia" in a doubtful Neapolitan dialect

with a Lapa tone. When doing some chore inside the house after supper, he would sing. By the window, Aldo felt proud whenever some passerby stopped to listen. If the person didn't stop, Aldo thought to himself: "That type doesn't like music... what an idiot." The notion of someone not enjoying Tino's voice was unbearable to Aldo because he loved his brother. He was strong, more like his mother than his father. But the maternal paunch had turned into muscle in his red body. So, when he realized that others were abusing Tino, Aldo didn't let his brother get a job on his own, they were always together in building the same house. They were well paid.

In that small house in Lapa, life was paradise. Dona Maria washed more clothes than she could handle in 24 hours. Her deceased husband, a pity to die so young! hadn't been too bad ... he had been a good man, in a way, after all, everyone has a drink now and then on a Saturday ... Nothing could be done, washing was a living too. Besides, early on, her sons, those loving boys, also started working. If only Lina were alive... such a beauty!... Thankfully her sons were a comfort to her. They gave her all the money they earned. Poor people like this were rare.

"Oh, my sons, you might need it... Here, take it back".

Those two ten *milréis* bills were enough for almost the entire month. They never smoked. A *guaraná* on Sunday, once in a while, a ticket to the Recreio or Carlos Gomes, recently inaugurated, on the days the movie came with a lot of commercials.

But, in general, the brothers spent their free time with their mother. In the summer, they would sit at the door, on those mild, immense Lapa evenings... Plam, plam, tram, trampling... the streetcar drove by. And then silence. The house was set apart with no walls attached to their neighbors'. Across from them, on the other side of the street, was the factory wall, like a leather belt, dividing the land from the foggy chalky night. Chimneys. Fifty meters away, some other houses. The dog barked, woof, woof... woof...

"Pedro says he's leaving his job".

Silence.

"Let's go to the game on Sunday, Tino?"

"It's useless, Palestra's gonna lose. Bianco won't play".

"But Amílcar..."

"You and that Amílcar!"

Silence. Tino didn't want to go.

"There will be too many people, Aldo..."

"If you want, we can leave early".

Silence. Aldo always gave in to his brother.

Sometimes, a friend would come over to chat.

And now? People had started talking... A mother scolding, cursing... Weeping more than scolding, the poor thing! And there they are, the brothers, arguing, no one knows why. Suddenly, whacks. And don't think Tino is getting the worst of it, his wickedness is extraordinarily inventive. His brother always bears the brunt of it. Aldo is stronger and, naturally, more dimwitted. But, patience has a limit, and when Aldo reached

it, he beat his brother senseless! Tino was red in the face from being slapped so hard. And a little dizzy from the punches. Aldo, on the other hand, always had a bite mark, a stab, something dangerous that could tip things over. The damage took its toll on him.

They no longer spoke to each other. And now each had a different job. The funny thing was that when one of them went to the movies, so did the other. Tino was the one who always waited for Aldo to leave, and then would follow.

They never went to Mass. Their piety came down to taking off their hats when passing by a church door. Why they did it, they didn't know, they had seen their father and a number of people doing the same, so they did it as well, it was a habit. Except when they were in the company of some anticlerical, fascist buddy who read the "Fanfulla"⁷. Then they would pass by indifferently, hands in pockets, maybe. And they felt no remorse.

So, on that Sunday they went to Our Lady of Lapa Church again. Now that they were such bad sons, bad brothers, bad men, they decided to go to Mass! When the praying was over, they stood there in the churchyard of the unfinished building, each on opposite sides, mind you. Tino on the left of the door; Aldo on the right. Everybody was leaving, then everything was over. Just some fellows lingered, to talk.

Aldo went back home, his heart aching, Tino's heart, as you might guess, was the same. They even felt they were close again, like brothers, for a minute. A minute and a half. Wanting to go back to their old life... It was just a matter of walking to the middle of the road, and, done: they would embrace, crying, "Fratello...!" What a feeling of peace would come after that! But, the despair? Where does it lead? They reacted against that good feeling. Rage for his brother... rage on the verge of boiling over. After that, all they needed was a reason, and now that they had all this unvented sadness added on, blows would follow.

They arrived home and, no sooner said than done, they attacked each other with a vengeance. *Porca la miseria*, it was frightening! They wrestled in silence. His blood rushing to his face, Aldo's eyes were like two fireballs. He took his brother down, pinned his body between his knees and bam! Tino trying to wriggle, grinding his teeth, real pale, being beaten to a pulp. The window was open... In the yard was Dona Maria, I don't know if she heard anything, but she certainly had a bad feeling, poor thing! as a mother... she was going in. But first she had to say hello to the acquaintance who was walking across the street. She made an effort to smile, to keep up appearances.

"Did you know, Dona Maria", the woman yelled from across the way, "Teresinha is going to get married! With Alfredo".

"Oh..."

"It's true. Maybe. Well, see you".

"See ya".

⁷ A newspaper focused on Italian immigrants in Brazil that was very popular in the first half of the twentieth century.

A punch stopped in midair, pointless, the two brothers looked at each other. They clearly saw there was no reason to fight any longer. There was no reason at all, they should be brothers again. Happiness would certainly reign again, and that old peace... The punch followed its route, pounding Tino's forehead, bam! A dry, dry sound. Tino, in a quick, hysterical move, I don't know how, turned his body between Aldo's legs. He managed to grab his brother's wrist with his free hands. He rolled into a ball and bit wherever he could, and what a bite! Aldo pulled his hand desperately, crack! He smarted from the cracking sound his finger made, though it was no matter of life or death. But when he saw the blood, he went blind.

"Bite, you son of a bitch!"

On the throat. He pressed. Dona Maria was entering the room.

"My son!"

"Bite me!"

Desperately Tino tried to use his hands to loosen the knot that was suffocating him. His hands came across his brother's hand and a dangling, wet thing that was kind of loose. He grabbed on to it... In a last effort, he pulled to see if it would open the tongs that were strangling him. Dona Maria couldn't tear them apart. Tino pulled, like I said, and suddenly, his hand, without any resistance, drew a circle in the air. It dropped to the floor, bloody, throwing Aldo's ripped finger afar.

"Bite me!"

Tino was triumphant. He opened his mouth in a crooked smile, even blushed a little. Dona Maria reached the entrance, screaming. She couldn't go any farther, but her loving curiosity got the better of her, she went inside again. And Tino triumphant. Then she'd leave again:

"Help! My son!"

Oh God, it was Sunday! She went back in. She was pounding her head with her fists. She could have beaten Aldo's head with a wooden board! But it didn't even occur to her to beat him!

"Help! My son's dying!"

In. Out. She looked like she was dancing... *Balancez, tour*, it was awful.

The first man who came to the rescue was already too late. And only the effort of three men managed finally to set the dead man free from the hands of his brother. Aldo looked like he had gone crazy, his eyes steady, centered, his mouth open with breathless murmurings.

He was arrested. I don't know how Dona Maria didn't lose it. She screamed over her son's dead body; but, when her other son left in the ambulance, she beat the soldiers. They were boorish with her. Those police officers are just like that, the coarsest people there are! She was a mother... you had to understand her thoughtless behavior! They should have been patient with her! But no, not in the least! At times, they would push her away violently, poor thing...

"Shut up woman, or I'll take ya too!"

They closed the door and the siren sang an "Addio"'s *fermata* on the way to prison.

All the misery of the legal system followed. Loneliness. Reasoning. The trial. Aldo got out free. What was a ripped finger for? It was a case of self-defense complicated by a loss of the senses, logically! Article 32, Art. 27, [fourth paragraph]. The chanting of the lowlife lawyer saved the defendant.

He went back to work. Always real quiet, peaceful, he looked alright. Sometimes he would stop what he was doing in midair, as if he were thinking. After a while, everybody at the construction site forgot the past and Aldo found some goodwill. Comradery even. No, not comradery, because he never exchanged more than two words with anyone. But many of the workers liked him. These things happen, they said, and his brother was to blame; the proof was that Aldo got out free. And the finger.

But the case wasn't over. One day, Aldo disappeared, and not even a week had gone by when he was found dead; by then, rotting in a field. Who could have done it? Searching here, searching there, the São Paulo Police Department, you know, sometimes gets it right. They found out the murderer was Teresinha's husband.

And, why? Nobody knew. Poor Teresinha wept, holding on to her two children, wondering why her husband would kill this fellow. From what she could vaguely remember, did I ever dance with him at a party? But she couldn't remember real well, so many fellows... And he wasn't part of her group. But she could swear Alfredo was a good man, she could.

"My husband's innocent!" she repeated a hundred useless times a day. Alfredo yelled that he had been provoked, that Aldo had invited him to go see a house, for some reason! To see a plot, and, out of the blue, he threw himself on him when they crossed the field... So, why hadn't he told anyone sooner? Instead, he kept going to work calmly every single day... what a scoundrel! Everybody was against him, Aldo was minding his own business!

The lawyer explored the whole set of arguments claiming self-defense. And he reminded all, in the most convincing terms, that Alfredo was a good man. After all, twenty-two years of honesty and good behavior do prove something, gentlemen of the jury! And Teresinha there, with the two little ones, weeping... Such a moving scene. The eldest, fifteen months old, wanted to put his red rattle in his mother's mouth. Don't start snickering every time I talk about mothers, it's a sad case. Well, it was all useless, the criminal still had all his fingers. He was condemned to I don't even know how many years in jail.

Teresinha washed clothes, sewed, but it was no good. With a toddler and a baby, she could barely make ends meet. And, what's worse! To top it all, her mother leaned on her, the useless, old shrew... If she only knew where her brothers were, with their farms... But they wouldn't help, I'm sure, soulless beings who never showed up... So she despaired, cursed her mother, beat her children, it was a crying shame.

Her mother-in-law, whenever she did walk up to her daughter-in-law's gate, would bring a pittance and her curses, she hated the girl. She had hunches, with a mother's instinct, and hated the girl. She cursed her grandchildren. The ten-*milréis* over a pile of

curses lay there, humiliating, lingering in the dark. Teresinha would take it and buy something for herself, for her children, it was such a help! Some would be left over to ease the next month's rent. But the money didn't relieve her disgrace.

Men propositioned her, after all, there was still a whole lot of woman there. She refused, afraid of her husband after he came out, a murderer, Jesus!

Teresinha was very unhappy.

CAIM, CAIM E O RESTO

Belazarte me contou:

Talvez ninguém reparasse, nem eles mesmo, porém foi sim, foi depois daquela noite, que os dois começaram brigando por um nada. Dois manos brigando desse jeito, onde se viu! E dantes tão amigos... Pois foi naquela noite. Sentados um a par do outro, olhavam a quermesse. O leilão estava engraçado. O Sadresky dera três milréis por um cravo da Flora, êta mulatinha esperta! Também com cada olhão de jabuticaba rachada, branco e preto luzindo melado, ver suco de jabuticaba mesmo... onde estará ela agora? até com seu doutor Cerquinho!...

— Você foi pagar a conta pra ele, Aldo?

— Já.

Contemplavam o povo entrançado no largo. Seguiam um, seguiam outro, pensando só com os olhos. Nem trocavam palavra, não era preciso mais: se conheciam bem por dentro. De repente viraram-se um pro outro como pra espiar onde que o mano olhava. Aldo fixou Tino. Tino não quis retirar primeiro os olhos. Olho que não pestaneja cansa logo, fica ardendo que nem com areia e pega a relampear. Quatro fuzis, meu caro, quatro fuzis de raiva. Nem raiva, era ódio já. Aldo fez assim um jeito de muxoxo pro magricela do irmão, riu com desprezo. Tino arreganhou o focinho como gato assanhado.

Se separaram. Aldo foi falar com uns rapazes, Tino foi falar com outros. As vinte-e-duas horas tudo se acabava mesmo... voltaram pra casa. Mas cada qual vinha numa calçada. Braço a torcer é que nenhum não dava, não vê! Dentro do quarto brigaram. Por um nadinha, questão de roupa na guarda da cama. Dona Maria veio saber o que era aquilo espantada. Foi uma discussão temível.

Da discussão aos murros não levou três dias. E por quê? Ninguém sabia. A verdade é que a vida mudou pra aqueles três. Inútil a mãe chorar, se lamentar, até insultando os filhos. Quê! nem si o defunto marido estivesse inda vivo!... Pegou fogo e a vida antiga não voltava mais.

E dantes tão irmãos um do outro!... Aldo até protegia Tino que era enfezado, cor escura. Herdara o brasileiro do pai, aquela cor cainha que não dava nada de si e uns musculinhos que nem o trabalho vivo de pedreiro consertava. Quando tirava fora a camisa pra se lavar no sábado, qual! mesmo de camisa e paletó, as espáduas pousavam sobre o dorso curvo como duas asas fechadas.

E era mesmo um anjo o Tino, tão quietinho! humilde, talhado pra sacristão. Cantava com voz fraca muito bonita, principalmente a Mamma mia num napolitano duvidoso de bairro da Lapa. Quando depois da janta, fazendo algum trabalhinho, lá dentro ele cantava, Aldo junto da janela sentia-se orgulhoso si algum passante parava escutando. Si

o tal não parava, Aldo punha este pensamento na cachola: “Esse não gosta de música... estúpido.” Que alguém não apreciasse a voz do Tino, isso Aldo não podia pensar porque adorava o mano.

Era bem forte, puxara mais a mãe que o pai. Só que a gordura materna se transformava em músculos no corpo vermelho dele. Pois então, percebendo que os outros abusavam do Tino, não deixava mais que o irmão se empregasse isolado, estavam sempre juntos na construção da mesma casa. Ganhavam bem.

Naquela casinha do bairro da Lapa, a vida era de paraíso. Dona Maria lavava o que não dava o dia. O defunto marido, uma pena morrer tão cedo! fora assinzinho... Homem, até fora bom, porque isso de beber no sábado, quem que não bebe!... Paciência, lavando também se ganha. Além disso, logo os filhos tão bonzinhos principiaram trabalhando. Si a Lina fosse viva... que bonita!... Felizmente os filhos a consolavam. Lhe entregavam todo o dinheiro ganho. Gente pobre e assim é raro.

— Meus filhos, mas vocês podem precisar... Então tomem.

Aqueles dois dez milréis duravam quase o mês inteirinho. Fumar não fumavam. Uma guaraná 110 domingo, de vez em quando a entrada no Recreio ou no Carlos Gomes recentemente inaugurado, nos dias dos filmes com muito anúncio.

Mas no geral os manos passavam os descansos junto da mãe. No verão iam pra porta, aquelas noites mansas, imensas da Lapa.. . Pião, tlão, tralharão, tão, plão, plãorrrr... bonde passava. E o silêncio. A casa ficava um pouco apartada, sem vizinhos paredes-meias. Na frente, do outro lado da rua, era o muro da fábrica, tal-e-qual uma cinta de couro separando a terra da noite esbranquiçada pela neblina. Chaminés. A cinquenta metros outras casas. O cachorro latia, uau, uau... uau...

— Pedro diz que vai deixar o emprego.

Silêncio.

— Vamos no jogo domingo, Tino?

— Não vale a pena, o Palestra vai perder. Bianco não joga.

— Mas Amílcar.

— Você com seu Amílcar!

Silêncio. Tino não queria ir.

— E tanto pessoal, Aldo...

— Você quer, a gente vai cedo.

Silêncio. Aldo acabava fazendo a vontade do irmão.

Às vezes também algum camarada vinha conversar.

Agora? até já se comenta. Mãe que descomponha, que insulte... Mais chora que descompõe, a coitada! Lá estão os dois discutindo, ninguém sabe por quê. De repente, tapas. E Tino não apanha mais que o outro, não pense, é duma perversidade inventiva extraordinária. O irmão acaba sempre sofrendo mais do que ele. Aldo é mais forte e por isso naturalmente mais saranga. Porém paciência se esgota um dia, e quando se esgotava era cada surra no irmão! Tino ficava com a cara vermelha de tanta bofetada. Um pouco

tonto dos socos. Aldo porém tinha sempre ãa mordida, ãa alfinetada, coisa assim com perigo de arruinar. Os estragos da briga duravam mais tempo nele.

Não se falavam mais. E agora cada qual andava num emprego diferente. O mais engraçado é que quando um ia no cinema o outro ia também. Sempre era o Tino que espiava Aldo sair, saía atrás.

Nunca iam à missa. De religião só tirar o chapéu quando passavam pela porta das igrejas. Por que tiravam não sabiam, tinham visto o pai fazer assim e muita gente fazia assim, faziam também, costume. Isso mesmo quando não estavam com algum companheiro que era fachista e anticlerical porque lera no Fanfulla. Então passavam muito indiferentes, mãos nos bolsos talvez. E não sentiam remorso algum.

Pois nesse domingo foram à N. S. da Lapa outra vez. Agora que estavam maus filhos, maus irmãos, enfim maus homens, davam pra ir na missa! Quando a reza acabou ficaram ali, no adro da igreja meia construída, cada um do seu lado, já sabe. Tino à esquerda da porta, Aldo à direita. Toda a gente foi saindo e afinal tudo acabou. Ficaram apenas alguns rapazes proseando.

Aldo voltou pra casa com uma tristeza, Tino com outra que, você vai ver, era a mesma. Até se sentiram mais irmãos por um minuto. Minuto e meio. Desejos de voltar à vida antiga... Era só cada um chegar até no meio da rua, pronto: se abraçavam chorando, “Fratello!...” Que paz viria depois! Mas, e o desespero, então? onde que leva? Reagiram contra o sentimento bom. Uma raiva do irmão... Uma raiva iminente do irmão. Dali, iam só procurar o primeiro motivo e agora que tinham mais essa tristeza por descarregar, temos tapa na certa.

Chegaram em casa e dito-e-feito: brigaram medonhamente. Porca la miséria, dava medo! Se engalfinharam mudos. Aldo, subia o sangue no rosto dele, tinha os olhos que nem fogaréu. Derrubou o mano, agarrou o corpo do outro entre os joelhos e páa! Tino se ajeitando, rilhava os dentes, muito pálido, engulindo tunda numa conta. A janela estava aberta... Dona Maria no quintal, não sei si ouviu, pressentiu com certeza, coitada! era mãe... ia entrar. Porém teve que saudar primeiro a conhecida que vinha passando no outro lado da rua. Até quis botar um riso na boca pra outra não desconfiar.

— Sabe, dona Maria, a conhecida gritava de lá, a Teresinha vai casar! Com o Alfredo.

— Ahn...

— Pois é. De repente. Bom, até logo.

— Té-logo.

O soco parou no ar, inútil, os dois manos se olharam. Viram muito bem que não havia mais razão pra brigas agora. Não havia mesmo, deviam ser irmãos outra vez. A felicidade voltava na certa e aquele sossego antigo... O soco seguiu na trajetória, foi martelar na testa do Tino, peim! seco, seco. Tino com um jeito rápido, histérico, não sei como, virou um bocado entre as pernas de Aldo. Conseguiu com as mãos livres agarrar o pulso do outro. Encolheu-se todinho em bola e mordeu onde pôde, que dentada! Aldo puxou a mão

desesperado, pleque! sofreu com o estralo do dedo que não foi vida. Mas por ver sangue é que cegou.

— Morde agora, filho-da-puta!

Na garganta. Apertou. Dona Maria entrava.

— Meu filho!

— Morde agora!

Tino desesperado buscava com as mãos alargar aquele nó, sufocava. Encontrou no caminho a mão do outro e uma coisa pendente, meia solta, molhada, agarrou. E num esforço de última vida, puxou pra ver se abria a tenaz que o enforcava. Dona Maria não conseguia separar ninguém. Tino puxou, que eu disse, e de repente a mão dele sem mais resistência riscou um semicírculo no ar. Foi bater no chão aberta ensanguentada, atirando pra longe o dedo arrancado de Aldo.

— Morde agora!

Tino se inteirando. Abriu com os dentes uma risada lateral, até corara um pouco. Dona Maria chegava só ao portãozinho, gritando. Não podia ir mais além, lhe dava aquela curiosidade amorosa, entrava de novo. Tino se inteirando. Ela saía outra vez:

— Socorro! meu filho!

Meu Deus, era domingo! entrava de novo. Batia com os punhos na cabeça. Pois batesse forte com um pau na cabeça do Aldo! Mas quem disse que ela se lembrava de bater!

— Socorro! meu filho morre!

Entrava. Saía. Às vezes dava umas viravoltas, até parecia que estava dançando... Balancez, tour, era horrível.

O primeiro homem que ocorreu já chegou tarde. E só três juntos afinal conseguiram livrar o morto das mãos do irmão. Aldo como que enlouquecera, olho parado no meio da testa, boca aberta com uns resmungos ofegantes.

Levaram ele preso. Dona Maria é que nem sei como não enlouqueceu de verdade. Berrava atirada sobre o cadáver do filho, porém quando o outro foi-se embora na ambulância, até bateu nos soldados. Foram brutos com ela. Esses soldados da Polícia são assim mesmo, gente mais ordinária que há! ãa mãe... compreende-se que tivesse atos inconscientes! pois tivessem paciência com ela! Que paciência nem mané paciência! em vez, davam cada empurrão na pobre...

— Fique quieta, mulher, sinão levo você também!

Fecharam a portinhola e a sereia cantou numa fermata de “Addio” rumo da correição.

Seguiu-se toda a miséria do aparelho judiciário. Solidão. Raciocínio. O julgamento. Aldo saiu livre. Pra que vale um dedo perdido? Caso de legítima defesa complicada com perturbação de sentidos, é lógico, art. 32, art. 27 § 40... A medicina do advogadinho salvou o réu.

Recomeçou no trabalho. Muito silencioso sempre, sossegado, parecia bom. Às vezes parava um pouco o gesto como que refletindo. Afinal todos na obra acabaram esquecendo o passado e Aldo encontrou simpatias. Camaradagens até. Não: camaradagem não, porque

não dava mais que duas palavras pra cada um. Mas muitos operários simpatizavam com ele. São coisas que acontecem, falavam, e a culpa fora do mano, a prova é que Aldo saíra livre. E o dedo.

Mas o caso não terminou. Um dia Aldo desapareceu e nem semana depois encontraram ele morto, já bem podrezinho, num campo. Quem seria? Procura daqui, procura dali, a Polícia de São Paulo, você sabe, às vezes é feliz, acabaram descobrindo que o assassino era o marido da Teresinha.

E por que, agora! Ninguém não sabia. A pobre da Teresinha é que chorava agarrada nos dois filhinhos imaginando por que seria que o marido matara esse outro. De que se lembrava muito vagamente, é capaz que dancei com ele numa festa? Mas não lembrava bem, tantos moços... E não pertencera ao grupinho dela. Mas que o Alfredo era bom, ela jurava.

— Meu marido está inocente! repetia cem vezes inúteis por dia.

O Alfredo gritava que fora provocado, que o outro o convidara pra irem ver uma casa, não sei o quê! pra irem ver um terreno, e de repente se atirara sobre ele quando atravessavam o campo... Então pra que não veio contar tudo logo! Em vez: continuou tranquilo indo no serviço todo santo dia, muito satisfeito..., que “fascínora”! Toda a gente estava contra ele, o Aldo tão quieto!...

O advogado devassou a série completa dos argumentos de defesa própria. E lembrou com termos convincentes que o Alfredo era bom. Afinal vinte-e-dois anos de honestidade e bom-comportamento provam alguma coisa, senhores jurados! E a Teresinha com as duas crianças ali, chorosa... Grupo comovente. O maior, de quinze meses, procurava enfiar o caracaxá vermelho na boca da mãe. Não brinque com essa história de isolar sempre que falo em mãe, o caso é triste. Pois tudo inútil, o criminoso estava com todos os dedos. Foi condenado a nem sei quantos anos de prisão.

A Terezinha lavava roupa, costurava, mas qual! com filho de ano e pouco e outro mamando, trabalhava mal. E, parece incrível! inda por cima com a mãe nas costas, velha, sem valer nada... Si ao menos soubesse aonde que estavam esses irmãos pelas fazendas... Mas não ajudariam, estou certo disso, uns desalmados que nunca deram sinal de si... Então desesperava, ralhava com a mãe, dava nos pequenos que era uma judiaria.

A sogra, essa quando chegava até o porão da nora, trazia ãa esmola entre pragas, odiava a moça. Adivinhava muito, com instinto de mãe, e odiava a moça. Amaldiçoava os netos. Os dez milréis sobre um monte de insultos ficavam ali atirados, aviltantes, relumeando no escuro. Teresinha pegava neles, ia comprar coisas pra si, pros filhos, como ajudavam! Ainda sobrava um pouco pra facilitar o pagamento do aluguel no mês seguinte. Mas não lhe mitigavam a desgraça.

Também lhe faziam propostas, que inda restavam bons pedaços de mulher no corpo dela. Recusava com medo do marido ao sair da prisão, um assassino, credo!

Teresinha era muito infeliz.

DEEP-EYED GIRL

Belazarte told me this story:

You're a musician, from that big conservatory on São João Avenue, so you'll have fun with this story...

Conductor Marchese was a conductor, my foot, he was really a violinist with an operetta company, that was who he was. I was told that in Italy he would wear down a fiddle in a Genoa pub or something. He came here, became a conductor. But, since he didn't have enough private students, he opened a music school of sorts, *diurne e serale*, in a small house on Rangel Pestana Avenue, in Brás. Five *milréis* monthly, per person, bring your own instrument. The conductor would teach anything: singing, piano, violin, *cavaquinho*⁸, accordion. People flocked to the school, like Negro River birds during migration season. Marchese was no longer able to deliver, so he needed to take on some teachers to help.

Right there in Brás there was this very nice boy, poor thing! Who studied the violin with Mr. Bastiani, an acquaintance of yours. Long story short: Mr. Marchese, the conductor, called Carlos da Silva Gomes to be a *viola caipira*⁹ and *artinha*¹⁰ teacher at the conservatory. By the way, the school was called Giacomo Puccini Conservatory.

The company was growing. Even the neighborhood's wealthy people started enrolling their children there - it was closer and nobody needed to chaperon anyone else into the city. Marchese, well, the fellow became the king of music in Brás. He would turn his nose up at the movies because the small orchestra was bad and the saxophone was out of tune. The next day, everybody would tell *Seu Fifoque* that the saxophone was out of tune, and cockadoodledoo! Things didn't go the saxophonist's way. *Seu Fifo* told someone to tell him the saxophone was no longer needed in the orchestra, and who would get hold of a new saxophonist? You know it: Mr. Marchese, now with a big diamond ring on his finger and four little spaghetti-filled Marcheses at home. He even had a parlor at home, with a piano paid for in installments, and a Giacomo Puccini portrait.

The conductor would really have liked to keep to himself all the girl students who seemed better off; however, when Bermudes' daughter went to enroll, he racked his brain and finally thought it would be best if the girl went to *seu* Gomes' class. You see, Dolores

⁸ The *cavaquinho* (pronounced [kavɐ'kiɲu] in Portuguese) is a small string instrument of the European guitar family with four wire or gut strings, like a ukulele.

⁹ The *viola caipira* (Portuguese for "country guitar") is a ten-string, five-course guitar. Unlike most steel-string guitars, its strings are plucked with the fingers of the right hand similarly to the technique used for classical and flamenco guitars, rather than by using a plectrum.

¹⁰ A music method to learn *viola caipira* very common in 1920s Brazil.

would make eyes at him, and Pascoalina was not to be trifled with: her suspicion might spur a hullabaloo. That's why the conductor told the young lady's mother, *signora*, you'll see, in *uno instante* your daughter will become *una artista*, *io swear!* *Seu Gomes* is a very good teacher, *ah questo! Proprio la mia scuola!*

Dolores' mother left quite satisfied because she had moved to the neighborhood a long time ago, as a newlywed... She knew that *seu Gomes'* family was well-bred, related to the Prados. They had remained poor. From a little one door-one window house, she had risen to the multi-storied house at number 25. And now her daughter was taking lessons with a relative of the Prados. She smiled, all pleased, puffing up her meatiness, all 195 pounds or more. She removed her black lace hat, looked for her handkerchief marked M.S.B – Marina Sarti Bermudes - in her sleeve, and cleaned the dew from the down over her lip. She went to the yard, picked I don't know how many dozen daisies, putting them in a basket and telling her maid to take them to *seu Gomes'* house, that her daughter had sent them.

Dolores was one of those types resulting from Brazil importing mothers and fathers to prove that it too could produce beautiful girls. Just like some companies in São Paulo... She was nothing like the native born of our land, but rest assured she was all too Brazilian, there was no one more Brazilian than her. If someone spoke ill of Brazil near her, there was hell to pay! She would put down the rascal, coming here to live off our land, now! Why didn't you stay where you were, you moocher! Begone!... Oh, no, sir! You won't say a word against Brazil near me, no because I *will* hit back, you know! I've heard how Italy is more beautiful - more beautiful? Really?... a bunch of dilapidated old houses, that's what, and low-lives, all you saw were murdering Calabrians!... Here there are such lovely bungalows!... and there's the Luz Station¹¹! I bet you never visited the Municipal Theater¹²! If you did, you went straight to the chicken coop, you didn't see the foyer! Italy... our cathedral... that's gothic for you, you know! It's not finished, but I was told that it's going to have the tallest towers in the world!

And Dolores was very pretty when she was mad, with her big eyes sparkling deep down like emeralds. She was gorgeous. Slim, nice body, with everything standing out where it should, narrow shoulders, *ierere*¹³ downy neck hair. And from the neck up! A brunette, with tanned cheeks like two mature *jambinhos*¹⁴ that would turn into a flagrant *ijucapirama*¹⁵ of love if we ever tried them even once. Her hair was the color of a Brazil nut,

¹¹ The Luz Station (Portuguese: Estação da Luz, IPA: [ista'sẽw da 'lus]) is the common name for a train station in the Luz neighbourhood in São Paulo, Brazil.

¹² Municipal Theatre in São Paulo, Brazil. It is regarded as one of the landmarks of the city, significant both for its architectural value as well as for its historical importance, having been the venue for the Week of Modern Art in 1922, which revolutionized the arts in Brazil.

¹³ There are two or three meanings; probably the closest to the idea given here is "chuvisco" which means drizzle or sprinkle. Seems like something Andrade would tend to do, include words from indigenous languages in his stories.

¹⁴ A diminutive for jambo, a delicious red fruit of the jambo tree.

¹⁵ The hero of an epic short Indianist poem from Brazilian Romanticism, written by Gonçalves Dias in 1851.

though lighter, full of real ringlets that she hadn't had the heart to bob and follow the trend her friends had tried. If I feel I need to pull my hair up, I'll bob it, she would say. And that curly hair matched her color so perfectly! It gave her loveliness a rare peculiarity that requires getting used to. Her mouth was no big deal, but it didn't spoil the rest. And the eyes, Jesus! There was green amaranth in them, with a starry firefly here and there, like a Southern Cross, night and day.

She was about to turn seventeen; somewhat polished, I mean to say... she had studied at a low-cost school which was well attended. She still stuck to her French lessons, like her friends, and tried the new dances with the best teacher in town. She had lots of friends in Vila Buarque, a neighborhood of covert poverty, and the respectable ascendancy of those who don't alter dresses. She dressed up to the nines!

It was natural that she transform *seu* Gomes' class, and that's what happened. She knew her vibratos, learned in school, and would go up to third position with no trouble. Fine tuning was wanting, but not intelligence. Gomes started nurturing the idea that Dolores might just be the one to make him a famous teacher.

He liked her right away. But don't take it the wrong way, it was only a friendly kind of liking. And a little ambition as well. That's how teachers are: no matter how pure their affection towards a student, there's always the hope of perpetuity staining it all. It goes unsaid, but we know they're acting as if saying: this is my work. *Seu* Gomes imagined Dolores would bring him fame and liked her. He didn't think about love and, frankly, felt nothing in her presence. He was relaxed, kind of shy, and, at twenty-four, had had no romantic entanglements.

He didn't know if he should get married or not. First, he had to make his name as a good teacher, which was hard enough for master "Juvenal", as they called bachelors in the Northeast. As a matter of fact, one day, without meaning to, *seu* Gomes looked up and greeted a neighbor, a dressmaker, I believe. He was a bit puzzled because he never took his hat off to any neighbor. He didn't even know why he had, he was walking absentmindedly, it was unawares. But, he greeted her once, and then went on greeting her.

There was another important reason that ended any desire to be mixed up with Dolores. She was sassy and soon began coming over to get closer to him. What could he do? He had to say, "thank you very much" for the daisies, for the carnations, for the muffins that would arrive at his house almost every week.

"So glad you liked it! I'm going to send you a cake that I myself make, yes sir! But I need crystalized figs and the grocery store didn't have any. When I go to the city, I'll bring some. Or Daddy? We can ask him, poor soul! Forget it".

"But, Miss..."

"Why do you keep calling me Miss, it's so awful! Aren't I your student? Say "Dores", "Dores" like I prefer to be called at home. "Dores", "you" and that's that!"

He was amused by her childlike voice.

"Alright, it's a deal. What I meant to say was you shouldn't trouble yourself with me..."

“Trouble myself! Don’t say that, *seu* Carlos!”

“But your mother, Dolores...”

“Dores! “Dolores” is Spanish, I don’t like it! I’m as Brazilian as you are, just so you know! It’s enough I have this ugly Bermudes that I can’t change... Say “Dores”! Brazilian names are so pretty... Carlos da Silva Gomes! Oh, if I had a name like that!”

“But I think Dolores is a pretty name.”

“Please, *seu* Carlos! You’re going to call me “Dores”, aren’t you? It’s nothing to you and it would make me so happy! Tell me you will!”

“Alright, I will... Miss...”

“Hey! “Dores”, ‘you’”.

“You have to be patient, alright? Let me get used to it. It’s confusing in the beginning... Dores”.

She shrugged in a happy gesture. And laughed.

“What are you laughing at?”

“I always say that I get everything I want from my teachers! At school, it was like that. My Math teacher warned me that I was bombing, and I would, because I hate Math, jeez! Well, I made a bet with my classmates, didn’t study, and passed anyway!”

“And how did you do it?”

“Well ... that’s my little secret! We may not study but... teehee... what’s the point of having eyes, right!”

“Dolores!”

“Really, *seu* Carlos! They are such nitwits, those teachers, for any little reason they think we’re all crazy about them... and we enjoy it, of course!”

“But Dolores...”

“Dores!”

“You’re just a child, Dores! Did you have the nerve to flirt with your teacher just to pass?”

“Flirt? I do no such thing! I’d look at him in a special way and he thought I was sweet on him. Teehee... When I had to take the exam, he completed the test and put it on my desk on the sly – all I did was copy it! Flying colors! The other girls grumbled! The other nitwit is the French teacher, that old man!... Once he complained to mother and she hit me! You just wait, four-eyes, I’ll teach you who’s boss!... why are you laughing so hard, *seu* Carlos!”

“Dores, I ‘m your teacher and yet you’re telling me all this!”

Dolores was suddenly serious. And, holding his hand tightly, said:

“*Seu* Carlos, I don’t want you thinking that I’m treating you that way when... oh no!”

She was laughing again. She took her hand off his. And gayly, in a gesture of feigned innocence, said:

“I can tell you because I know who I’m dealing with”.

“Oh, that you can be sure of, *Dores*! I told you that you have what it takes for music but, if you don’t study, you won’t pass with me even if you send me the world’s naughtiest look!”

“Teehee... It’s not a naughty look, *seu Carlos*!”

“Then what is it?”

“There’s no word to explain it, I’d have to do it... But I am so embarrassed here with you!”

And just like a *genipap*, she turned purple with shame, for no reason. And the deep green of her eyes shooting sparks... *seu Gomes* thought of the word “beautiful” and made the girl repeat the D Major scale three more times.

“*Dores*, you need to study more! You sure taught me a lesson today! We can’t go on like this, after all, it’s a waste of our time. And I’m not here to waste time!”

“Ooohh, *seu Carlos*...”

And, in an instant, he saw himself covered in sad emeralds. Realizing he had been harsh, he mellowed...

“*Dores*, you have to understand... a teacher, if he’s truly a teacher, loves his students as, well, as if they were his daughters, *Dores*. He wants them to improve, to learn to play well... And, you, *Dores*... you must use the talents you have! Of all my students, you’re the most talented, you’re... the best; study, please! You told me you really like me as a teacher...”

“I really do!”

“... so then, study... to make me happy!”

“*Seu Carlos*, I’ll study real hard now!”

“So do it!”

“See you Thursday, *seu Carlos*!”

“See you”.

He was alone in the room, full of happy emeralds. He didn’t realize he had completely overcome his annoyance, that’s how affairs start, my man. We start mellowing and then all hell breaks loose! *Seu Gomes* had become annoyed out of shyness. The word “beautiful” was a sign that if he didn’t pull himself together, he would be the next nitwit. And, then, there was that class spite in seeing teachers being played by a child, and, then, he got angry for no apparent reason. But who can be tough in the face of deep-eyed sadness? *Seu Gomes* soon calmed down. He no longer saw anything more in the word “beautiful”, and he wanted, devotedly, to encourage this student, of whom much was expected, to study more. He added ambition to his musing and the silly girl felt a good nudge coming from his impatience. She was happy without knowing why as she left but, still, on that day there were almost two hours of D Major.

Seu Gomes sullenly got out his cigarette case for a smoke. He saw his blurry face in the silver cover. And beneath that ordinary pale olive face, with curly hair blackening the receding hairline, there was a body that was not weak: it was able to handle any lady who touched him. And when *seu Gomes* was a tyke, he had especially bruised one of his nails.

He had a big black spot which actually gave his hand some character. He left sullenly. That girl might really make him... no, anything but that, he was no idiot! Serafina. (the neighbor). It couldn't be just chance. At first it was only in the afternoon, a regular time for people to be at their windows, but now, at midday... there we go: a feeble smile at his greeting. Serafina... Sweet name... All races are equal... *seu* Gomes ebbed in an unhurried calm, very gently. He smiled easily, thinking once more about Dolores, what a tease! Well, it was good, because now he knew whom he was dealing with. And he taught Dolores with tenderness, unlimited friendship, increasingly more intimate, increasingly more friendship. And with it all, she progressed. She was very lazy; but *seu* Gomes soon found out that, if he spoke in a certain way, in a lower voice, aloof... just by doing that, Dolores would study up to four hours per day during a week. So, did he want her to study? Well, two or three times a week he would speak that way. And emerald girl-scout green was showered on him in abundance. Even at the end of that same year, when Mr. Marchese said that it was *necessario arrange musicas ferla signorina* to play at the party, *seu* Gomes didn't have to worry much: *la signorina* was a hit with her transcribed *Nocturne* by Chopin.

Now three years after that moment, in December, Dolores is receiving her Giacomo Puccini degree. She's always the same pretty face, but she's been left aside lately. She studies a great deal nowadays, and plays heartily whatever she does play. She's considered "Giacomo's" best student, as they say in Brás, honoring the good name of the Conservatory. Marchese was feeling jealous and called some of Dolores' classmates to his office, asking about this and that, the bastard!...

Uhm... I forgot to mention... months before, she had become engaged. *Seu* Gomes had gone to her house to decide on some music and, out of the blue, she showed him a silver engagement ring on her right hand:

"Did you see?"

"Yes. I didn't know my Dolores was married; what you really need to do is to study more, you know?"

"I'm not married, *seu* Carlos! Brides wear silver rings".

"You're engaged, Dolores!"

She bowed her head, laughing gently, and sent him a deep, beaming emerald gaze. He was serious. First and foremost, he remembered her as a student, so much hard work and studying, and just like that! she falls in love with the first *sarambé* to cross her way.

"Congratulations. I didn't know".

"You... look as if you aren't pleased, *seu* Carlos!"

"I am, Dolores. But I think it is a shame, you getting married, so young. And especially because of your studies, that are going so well".

"If it doesn't please you, *Seu* Carlos, I won't get married!"

"Please me? God forbid, Dolores! You know... I want you to be happy. You love him, of course, he's a good fellow..."

As he spoke, the uneasiness of the beginning of the conversation was replaced by the image of his neighbor, the dressmaker. He got hold of this image and felt he was on solid ground.

"I don't feel particular about him... Mother and Father both wanted it, they say he's a catch. He is very nice, sweet..."

"So be happy, *Dores*. But let's keep on with our lessons".

And the lessons took off, despite a sense of distraction in the room. *Dolores* played like never before. Humble, wryly smiling, very calm. *Seu Gomes* felt immensely satisfied.

"I shouldn't say this, *Dores*... but it is such a shame, you getting married so soon! Two more years and I'd make you an *artiste*, I assure you.

"And I told you! You say the word, and I won't get married, *seu Carlos*!"

"Do get married, God forbid me from ruining anybody's wedding! So long".

"See you Thursday, *seu Carlos*!"

Seu Gomes left. Covered in sad emeralds. The strangest thing was that shortly after, a person who was close to the *Bermudeses* told him that *Dores* was not engaged. He was confused and, when he asked her, she maintained that she was. So, that was that, and he didn't bother with it any longer. *He* was the *sarambé* who didn't have a clue, not those young men who lured young ladies out of their parents' homes! *Dolores* went on pretending to be engaged for another month. It was the excuse that allowed her to say that she was marrying this fellow or anyone else, and she had no more illusions in this world. One day she showed up in class without the ring.

"Where's the ring, *Dores*?"

"It's all over, *seu Carlos*! Now you can settle down, because I won't be married, did you hear? If I ever do, it'll be with your approval!"

"But *Dores*, I don't want that responsibility! Look, would you like a friend's advice? You can't just do and undo that sort of thing on a whim!"

"Oh, it was just to try it out a bit... I didn't really like him!"

"But you put the poor boy through hell!"

"Cripes, we all go through a lot, *seu Carlos*! We can't expect to have feelings for somebody and be loved right back!"

And she started crying, upset, right then and there, in plain sight. *Seu Gomes* was incredibly shocked.

"Now there, *Dores*! Don't be like that!"

"Ah, *seu Carlos*... I'm so unhappy!..."

"Calm down, *Dores*! Someone could hear you, it would be so improper to see you cry like this!"

Dolores, sobbing in distress, wiped off emeralds in her handkerchief. She smiled then.

"You're nervous, go home. And remember, don't forget to rehearse the *Ave-Maria* for Sunday's Mass".

"I know, *seu Carlos*".

She sighed so deeply it hurt, and left.

Not twenty days later, *seu* Gomes received a card which said, “we are delighted to announce the upcoming marriage of our beloved daughter Dolores Sarti Bermudes and Mr. Agostinho Nardelli. Alonso Bermudes”, x street, etc. This time it was true. He wrote thanking them and wishing them the best.

Marriage... well. *Seu* Gomes had already saved four hundred *milréis* from classes. And with a nice, hard-working girl... Even if she couldn't help with the income, at least she would sew her own dresses... one hundred and fifty for the rent, one hundred and fifty for groceries. There would still be one hundred left for whatever came up. That night, *seu* Gomes had a very unpleasant dream... It was on a street, in an alley, blocked by a large house at the back. His neighbor was at the window, rented for around three hundred *milreis* a month. But on the other side of the street, *Dores'* mother stood, shaking her blubber and laughing coarsely, saying “That's too much!” *Seu* Gomes, despite his embarrassment, kept on walking and greeted the dressmaker, but then! From inside his hat, a parrot with a silver ashtray came out. All my money is inside this ashtray, the dreamer mused in alarm. *Seu* Gomes started to despair and decided to climb the light post to try and catch the parrot. The neighbor, smiling faintly, said:

“Do you want any help?”

Seu Gomes begged:

“Help me, *Serafina!*”

He had barely said that and the dressmaker was already clutched onto his back, *lord...* it was hard to climb the light post with the extra weight on his back, it was impossible to climb. It was also no longer necessary because the parrot had disappeared, and it felt so good that *seu* Gomes moved on his bed until the floor opened. *Seu* Gomes and *Serafina* fell and the dreamer woke up incredibly thirsty.

Dolores explained about the first secret engagement. The second one hadn't lasted three months, *dona* Marina told *seu* Gomes that they had broken up because the young man was no good. These things did not upset *seu* Gomes because, in a curious change of hearts, the shy fellow secretly replaced *Dolores* for *Serafina* in the I do-I don't conundrum, and all that wedding talk made it plain, in his hesitation, what the wedding made clear: he needed to get married. And it also proves that he wasn't that innocent about *Dores*. But what really mattered then and there was to be totally prepared with the Pugnani-Kreisler for the graduation party. He was working all that out when *Dores* showed up in a state of anxiety for the lesson. This was a time when she looked thinner, her eyes set even deeper, everybody thinking it was study-related. Another classmate was there, so she said in a low voice:

“I really need to talk to you!”

“So, sp...”

“Shush! I have something very important to tell you. Be at Mass tomorrow and go to the choir, I'll be playing. This is very important, *seu* Carlos!”

He noticed that it was a truly important matter indeed. Those eyes, that mouth trembling, both in anguish and insistence... He spent part of that night ill at ease. He went to Mass.

Dolores spilled out a bungling creed, full of ellipses, of shame, saying that people were talking about them a great deal, that nothing was going on, but you know how people talk, my classmates, *seu* Carlos!... and her eyes filled with tears, my classmates won't stop teasing me, saying that you're sweet on me, but I know you're not! They told Mr. Marchese, he had me called, he told me that... that... sniffle, sniff... I know you're such a good, serious person, but he keeps telling me that you're no good, that you're leading me on because of my money, that it looks really bad for me!... Everybody knows! And that I should stop coming to classes here, and after everything, you won't marry me, you're just having fun, *seu* Carlos!... I know you're incapable of fooling me, but he had mother called, told her everything, she beat me, *seu*... *seu* Carlos! Slapped me twice right on my face, sniff, sniffle... and she cried so hard she couldn't say another word.

"But what's all this you're telling me, Does?...? Is it true?"

"Yes, it is! Everybody makes fun of me because of you! I've never told you a thing because I really care about you, I didn't want you to be sad. You know? My engagement was broken off only because of you, they told Agostinho everything! The other day, at the ball, nobody wanted to dance with me because they said I was engaged! 'Engaged'! *seu* Carlos! They used that exact word! And today, when you came in, you didn't see the look on the piano player's face!"

"Good heavens! But nothing has ever happened, Does! How..."

"I've been so distressed, *seu* Carlos! I've been truly distressed...! they say I'm sick, but that's not it!... It's all because of you...! but I know you don't love me and I didn't want you to know this but... sniff... I can't take it anymore...! and mother told me she wants to talk to you..."

"And so I will, Does! I always treated you as my student and I'm not afraid of anybody!"

"Go to my house tomorrow but... *seu* Carlos! I don't want to leave you! Don't let them pass me on to another teacher! I won't study with anybody else!"

Seu Gomes pitifully looked at her thin body. He held the hands that were pressing her lips, in an attempt not to scream. He wanted to lift her head, but she was helpless, she let it fall, her lips pressed his hand in a kiss that was moist fire. Quickly, he took away his hand. He climbed down the choir steps and left. His hand felt unbearable with the memory of the kiss, he was dizzy. He hurried out, longing to be home, because it always seems that our home protects us from everything.

Once home, he was given the message that Mr. Marchese wanted *seu* Gomes to talk to him, and so he off he went.

"Good-morning".

“Good-morning, *s’accomodi*. *Professore*, I had you called here because of something *molto serio*! *Il Giacomo* is a serious establishment! *Qui non si fa scherzi* with ladies, *signor professore*! If you had the *intenzione* of flirting, you should work somewhere else...”

“Mr. Marchese, watch your words, you hear! Did you even trouble yourself to find out if I am really doing anything, huh? I’ll have you know that under no circumstances will I put up with anyone’s insults, and I’ll make you shut your mouth right now!”

“*Ma non git angry*! *Non git an-gry, signor professore*! There’s *no male in quello* that I said! I know *molto bene* that you are an honest man, very honest, but what can *io* do? All people are talking! *S’accomodi, per favore*!”

“I’ll remain where I am”.

“*Ma non git angry, signor professore*!... I’m very *serio*! *Io sono uno* poor *uomo* with four kids at home, *si*! *Signor professore*, such nice kids! *Io* can’t *expulsare* this *ragazza* Bermudes or I’ll have *mi vita tutta* messed up! *Sono inrovinato, Dio santo*! *Io* can’t send that *ragazza* home! Am I right or am I wrong?”

“That’s the least of it, Mr. Marchese... you... put Dolores in your class, I don’t mind”.

Seu Gomes had first thought of leaving the *Giacomo*, but the he remembered the one hundred *milréis*, and shirked. The thing was for Dolores to go to some other class and everything would be settled.

“*Ma, signore professore*, it’s not enough! Bermudes *stá una* beast! And *io* afraid of a *scandalo*!... *Bisogna* give some satisfaction to *tutto il Brás*!”

Seu Gomes was tired. He was too weak to keep up the fight.

“Alright, *seu* Marchese, I’ll leave the *Giacomo*”.

“*Bravo! Si vede* that you are a brave young man! I’ve always said you were a brave young man!”

“I know. Farewell”.

“Ah, but you forgot the money, *isto nó! Mancano* five days *ma* *Giacomo* pays *tutta la mensalita*. *Tante grazie, signor professore, tante grazie*!... *á rivederlo*!”

He had to shout the “*rivederlo*”, *seu* Gomes had left. He arrived home crestfallen, didn’t even have lunch. Suddenly he had an intense desire to solve everything that the same day, so he grabbed his hat and went to *Dores*’ house.

The violin stopped playing and two eyes flashed from the shadows of the window. Dolores came running to open the door.

“What’s the matter?”

“I want to speak with your mother now”.

“Sit down, *seu* Carlos. Mother’s not here, but I’ll have her called, she’s nearby! And that’s good because now we can decide things first. Maria, go call mother at *seu* Almeida’s house, tell her that Gomes is here, she knows what it’s about”.

There was a moment of silence. She took on the air of a shy deer, her small face looked down. Suddenly, *seu* Gomes was all covered in happy emeralds. *Dores* smiled.

“So...?”

"There's nothing we can do, Dore, you can't fight gossip. But you need to be patient too!"

The sentence left the poor girl in agony again. *Seu Gomes* had such an urge to hurt the person who was robbing him of those steady one hundred *milréis*.

"I've just been kicked out of the Giacomo".

"*Seu Carlos!*"

He felt sorry for her. He continued more kindly:

"Don't worry! That's life... We put so much hope in something and... it all slips away in an instant".

Dore was crying.

"You need to be more resilient, study with some other teacher, that's all. Why don't you go on with Bastiani? At least you're going on to someone better".

"I don't want to, *seu Carlos!* Don't leave me!... Let me stay with you!"

He was very calm, sweet, making everything worse.

"I wish I could stay with you, Dore, but it can't be, calm down! Look, after you graduate, you can go on with..."

"I'll go on with nobody! *Seu Carlos!*... it's mother! Tell her, I know you can, tell her!"

Dona Marina's fat greased the door.

"She's crying again! What am I going to do with her... don't bother, *seu Gomes*, etc".

It was a very simple explanation, both proceeded very beautifully. The plain loyalty of the lady made *seu Gomes* strong. They were only a bit ticked off by Dore who interrupted crying, talking nonsense, until *dona Marina* slapped her on her mouth. Then, *seu Gomes* had enough!

"*Dona Marina*, I didn't come here to see you hit your daughter. I don't think we have anything else to say. As for her studies, come to my house whenever you please so I can give you a recommendation for Bastiani. Farewell. Goodbye, Dore".

And that's when the story hits a high spot. She grabbed his hand, his arm, her eyes followed, facing him straight and steady like a green spotlight.

"No! Don't you leave me! Take me away from here! It's all a lie!"

She could barely speak, she was out of her mind.

"It's a lie! Don't leave me, I like you so very much! I'll die! It's all a lie! Nobody is gossiping about us! I was the one who told my classmates! ME! I can't live without you! Even if it means just having lessons! Mother! I was the one who told the principal, it was me! Let me leave with you!"

Her voice was turning into a wail.

Seu Gomes turned back, feeling bitter pity.

"Dore, you..."

She held onto him, and because she was shorter, rubbed her chin on his chest. *Dona Maria*, the brute, grabbed her daughter. *Seu Gomes* tenderly letting go. Dore screamed,

stabbing her elbows into her mother, “let me go! Let me go!”, her voice completely hoarse. “I want to go with him!”

But *seu* Gomes realized it was too late for their love. There was the dressmaker between the two, with the three years of habit that had kindled his feelings. With a half-smile of disappointment, he said:

“What a baby you are, Dores!”

“No!!”

That was the loudest yell, it was heard on the street. *Seu* Gomes ran out the door. She remained standing, held by the waist in her mother’s arms, breathing hard, her eyes big and round, externally glowing very, very bright. She only snapped out of it with the slap. It didn’t hurt. Nor did the other slaps, nor the cuffs, nor punches on her back chest head. She went to bed crying, with deep pangs of wretchedness, with no one inside her body.

But three months later, she was over it.

MENINA DE OLHO DE FUNDO

Belazarte me contou:

Você é músico, e do conservatório grande lá da avenida São João, por isso há de se divertir com o caso...

O maestro Marchese era maestro uma ova, foi mas violinista duma companhia de operetas, isso sim. Até me contaram que na Itália ele esfregava rabecão num barzinho de Gênova, não sei, Chegou aqui, virou maestro. Mas como não tinha bastante aluno particular, botou uma espécie de escola de música diurne e serale numa casinha da avenida Rangel Pestana, lá no Brás. Cinco milréis mensais por cabeça, trazendo instrumento. O maestro ensinava tudo, canto, piano, violino, cavaquinho, sanfona. Choveu aluno que nem passarão no rio Negro tempo de migrar. O Marchese não dava mais conta do recado e precisou de tomar uns professores de ajuda.

Mesmo no Brás tinha um moço muito bonzinho, coitado! que estudava violino com o professor Bastiani, colega de você. Pra encurtar: o maestro Marchese mandou chamar o Carlos da Silva Gomes, e lá ficou seu Gomes como professor de viola e artinha 110 conservatório. Ia me esquecendo de contar que a tal escola se chamava Conservatório Giacomo Puccini.

A empresa progredia. Até a gente mais endinheirada do bairro principiou botando os filhos lá, ficava mais perto e não carecia de acompanhar ninguém na cidade. O Marchese, esse então virou rei da música do Brás. No cinema torcia o nariz porque a orquestrinha não prestava e o saxofone tinha desafinado. No dia seguinte toda a gente falava pra seu Fifo que o saxofone estava desafinando e crocotó! maré vazava pro pesado do saxofone. Seu Fifo mandava falar pra ele que não careciam mais de saxofone na orquestrinha e quem que arranjava saxofonista novo? já sabe: o maestro Marchese já de brilhantão no dedo e quatro marchesinhos com bastante macarrão na barriga lá em casa. Até sala-de-visitas arranjou no lar, com piano a prestação e retrato do Giacomo Puccini.

O maestro bem que gostava de ficar com todas as alunas que lhe pareciam gente mais arranjada, porém, quando a filha do Bermudes foi se matricular, parafusou, parafusou e afinal achou melhor colocar a moça no curso de seu Gomes. Não vê que a Dolores sempre botava umas olhadas pra ele e a Pascoalina não era coisa de que a gente não fizesse caso não: desconfiando, era capaz dalgum escândalo dos diabos. Por isso o maestro falou pra mãe da mocinha que a senhora vai vedere que num stantinho sua filha fica una artista, lo giuro! Seu Gomes é un professore molto bon, ah questo!... proprio la minha scuola!

A mãe da Dolores até saiu bem contente porque tinha vindo pro bairro, fazia tempo, recém-casada ainda... Sabia que a família de seu Gomes era gente fina, parente dos Prados. Tinham continuado pobres. Ela, da casinha de porta e janela fora subindo até

aquele número 25 assobradado. E agora a filha estava aprendendo com o parente dos Prados. Sorriu numa satisfação que lhe inchava toda a banha, oitenta-e-nove quilos pra mais. Tirou o chapéu de renda preta, procurou na manga da blusa o lenço marcado M. S. B., Marina Sarti Bermudes, e limpou o orvalho do bigodinho. Foi no quintal, colheu não sei quantas dúzias de margaridas, botou numa cesta e mandou a criada levar na casa de seu Gomes que a filha mandava.

Dolores era um desses tipos que o Brasil importa a mãe e o pai pra bancar que também dá moça linda. Direitinho certas indústrias de São Paulo... Da terra e da nossa raça não tinha nada, porém se pode afirmar que tinha o demais, porque não havia ninguém mais brasileiro que ela. Falassem mal do Brasil perto dela pra ver o que sucedia! Desbaratava logo com o amaldiçoado que vem comer o pão da gente, agora! pra que não ficou lá na sua terra morrendo de fome! vá saindo!... Ah! perto de mim você não fala do Brasil, não porque eu dou pra trás, sabe! Eu sei bem que a Itália é mais bonita, mais bonita o quê!... uma porcariada de casas velhas, isso sim, e gente ruim, só calabres assassino é que se vê!... Aqui tem cada amor de bangalozinho!... e a estação da Luz, então! Você nunca, aposto, que já entrou no teatro Municipal! Si entrou, foi pro galinheiro, não viu o fuaiér! Itália... A nossa catedral... aquilo é gótico, sabe! não está acabada mas falaram pra mim que vai ter as torres mais compridas do mundo!

E Dolores ficava muito bonita na irritação, com cada olho enorme lá no fundo relumeando que nem esmeralda. Era uma belezinha. Esguia, bem feita, com tudo saltadinho, ombros descidos, pescoço penujado de iereré. Então do pescoço pra cima! Morena, com cada jambinho madurando nas faces que si a gente provasse uma vez só, virava no sufragante ijucapirama do amor. Cabelo cor-de-castanha pra mais claro, cheio de muitos cachos de verdade que ela ainda não tivera coragem de cortar pra seguir a moda das amigas. Quando for pra suspender, eu corto em vez de suspender, falava. E aqueles crespos lhe rodeavam tão bem a cor! dando pra boniteza dela uma esquisitice rara com que a gente primeiro carecia se acostumar. A boca não era grande coisa mas não prejudicava. E os olhos, Nossa Senhora! tinha verde de brejo com vagalume estrelando por cima, num Cruzeiro do Sul de noite e dia.

Estava pra fazer dezessete. Era bem educadinha, isto é... tinha seguido o curso dum colégio meio econômico mas bem frequentado. Ainda se obstinava no francês, como as amigas faziam, e experimentava as danças da moda com a melhor professora da cidade. Contava muitas amigas ali da Vila Buarque, que é bairro de pobreza escondida, e tinha sobre elas a ascendência respeitável de quem não manda reformar vestido. Andava nuns trinquês!...

Era natural que revolucionasse o curso de seu Gomes, pois foi. Já sabia seus vibratos de violino aprendido no colégio e até terceira posição ia bem direitinho. Faltava afinação mas não faltava inteligência. O Gomes principiou alimentando a idéia de que a Dolores era bem capaz de fazer a notoriedade dele como professor.

Logo simpatizara com ela. Mas não envenene o caso não, era simpatia de amizade apenas. E um pouquinho de ambição também. Professor é sempre assim: por mais pura

que seja a amizade dele por aluno, há sempre uma esperancinha de perpetuação enfeitando o sentimento. Não dizem, porém a gente percebe que estão procedendo como si dissessem: Isto quem fez fui eu. Seu Gomes imaginou que a Dolores ia fazer a celebridade dele e teve simpatia por ela. Em amor não pensou e, franqueza: nem sentiu nada diante dela. Era sossegado, meio tímido e chegara aos vinte- e-quatro sem nunca ter chamego por ninguém.

Nem sabia se casava ou não. Tinha primeiro que arranjar reputação de professor bom, o que já é bastante difícil pra mestre “Juvenal”, como chamam aos solteirões no Nordeste. Aliás, sem querer, outro dia, seu Gomes levantara os olhos, saudara a vizinha, uma creio que modista. Até encafifara porque nunca tirava chapéu pra vizinho. Não sabia por que tirara, ia tão distraído, foi de repente. Mas, saudara uma vez e continuou saudando.

Outra razão importante acabou por destruir qualquer vontade que ele pudesse ter de se enguçar pela Dolores. Ela era vivinha, foi logo se chegando pra maiores intimidades. Que que ele havia de fazer! tinha que falar “muito obrigado” por causa das margaridas, por causa dos cravos, por causa dos bolinhos que era quase toda semana iam parar na casa dele.

— Então o senhor gostou, é? Ainda hei-de mandar pro senhor mas é um bolo que eu faço, esse sim! Mas precisa figos cristalizados e o empório não tinha. Quando eu for na cidade, trago. Papai? a gente encomenda pra ele, o pobre! esquece.

— Mas dona Dolores...

— Pra que que o senhor me chama “dona”, fica tão feio! Pois não sou sua aluna! Fale “Dores”, “Dores” como fiz me chamarem lá em casa. “Dores”, “você”, e pronto! Ele achava graça naquela voz de criança.

— Pois então chamo. Ia dizendo que você não deve se incomodar assim comigo...

— Me incomodar! Não fale isso, seu Carlos!

— Mas sua mãe, Dolores...

— Dores! “Dolores” é espanhol, não gosto! Sou tão brasileira como o senhor, fique sabendo! Já não basta esse Bermudes tão feio que não posso mudar... Fale “Dores”! São tão bonitos os nomes brasileiros... Carlos da Silva Gomes! Ah, si eu tivesse um nome assim!

— Pois eu acho Dolores um nome bem bonito.

— Ora, seu Carlos!... O senhor vai me chamar “Dores”, chama? Não custa nada pro senhor e fico tão feliz! Diga que chama!

— Pois chamo... a senhora...

— Olhe! “Dores”, “você”.

— Espere um pouco também! deixe eu me acostumar. No começo a gente confunde... Dores.

Ela fechou os ombros numa expressão de gosto alegre. Riu.

— Do que você está rindo?

— Eu sempre falo que consigo tudo dos meus professores! Já no colégio era assim. O professor de aritmética me avisou que eu tomava bomba, e tomava mesmo porque tenho horror de aritmética, credo! Pois apostei com as colegas, não estudei mesmo nada e passei!

— E como é que você fez!

— Ah, isso... são cá uns segredinhos! A gente não estuda mas... ihi... então pra que que a gente tem olhos então!...

— Dolores!

— Ora, seu Carlos! são uns professores coiós, qualquer coisa já pensam que a gente está doida por eles... a gente aproveita, é lógico!

— Mas Dolores...

— Dores!

— Você é uma criança, Dores! Teve coragem de namorar o professor só pra passar!

— Namorar? que nada! Olhava dum certo jeitinho e ele é que pensava que eu estava namorando. Ihi... quando chegou no exame, fez a prova e disfarçando botou na minha carteira, foi só copiar! Distinção! As outras é que estrilaram! Outro coió é o professor de francês, tamanho velho!... Uma vez se queixou pra mamãe e ela me bateu. Espera aí, seu caixadóclos, que eu faço você ficar manso!... do que que o senhor está se rindo tanto, seu Carlos!

— Pois Dores, eu sou seu professor e você vem contar isso pra mim!

Dolores ficou séria de repente. E apertando a mão dele com força:

— Seu Carlos, o senhor não vá pensar que trato o senhor desse jeito quando... ah, não!

Já se ria outra vez. Retirou a mão. E por faceirice, num gesto de inocência fingida:

— Posso contar pro senhor porque já sei com quem estou tratando.

— Ah, isso, você pode ter certeza, Dores! Já falei que você tem jeito pra música mas si não estudar, comigo é que você não passa nem que remexa os olhares mais arrevesados desse mundo!

— Ihi... não é arrevesado que a gente faz, seu Carlos!

— Então como é?

— Não tem palavra pra explicar, só fazendo... Mas diante do senhor tenho vergonha!

E ficou talqual um jenipapo, roxa de vergonha sem razão. E o verde fundo dos olhos fuzilando... Seu Gomes pensou a palavra “bonita” e fez a menina repetir mais três vezes a escala de ré maior.

— Dores, você carece estudar mais! Olhe que lição você me trouxe! Assim não serve porque afinal nós dois perdemos tempo à toa. Não estou aqui pra isso não!

— Oh, seu Carlos...

E num átimo ele se viu todo coberto de esmeraldas tristes. Percebeu que fora ríspido demais, melhorou:

— Dores, você não sabe... Um professor, si é deveras professor, quer bem as alunas como... filhas, Dores. Quer que elas progridam, que fiquem tocando muito bem... Você, Dores... você precisa aproveitar os dotes que tem! De todas as minhas alunas é a mais bem dotada, é... é a melhor, estude, faz favor! Você já me disse que gosta muito de mim como professor...

— Gosto muito!

- ...pois então, estude... pra me fazer feliz!
- Seu Carlos, eu vou estudar muito agora!
- Então vá!
- ‘Té quinta, seu Carlos!
- ‘Té mais.

Ficou sozinho na sala, todo cheio de esmeraldas alegres. Não percebia que tinha melhorado por demais a zanga, eis como os casos principiam, meu caro. A gente vai melhorar e daí que a joça destempera duma vez. Seu Gomes ficara zangado por timidez. A palavra “bonita” avisou que si ele não pusesse reparo seria o bobão próximo. E ainda restava um certo despeito de classe por ver os professores tão brincados por uma criança, então zangou meio sem razão. Mas tristura de olho no fundo quem que aguenta? Seu Gomes acalmou fácil. Não sentiu mais nada que continuasse a palavra “bonita” e quis carinhosamente fazer estudar mais, uma aluna de que esperava muita coisa. Pôs ambição no conselho e a boba da mocinha sentiu um golpe bom dentro da impaciência. Saiu feliz sem saber de que, porém mesmo nesse dia inda foram quase duas horas de ré maior.

Seu Gomes sorumbático puxou a cigarreira pra fumar. Viu a cara embaçada na tampa de prata. E daquela cara regular dum moreno pálido, com o cabelo crespo negreando sobre as entradas, descia um corpo que não era fraco não: capaz de aguentar com a dona que encostasse nele. E seu Gomes piazinho inda machucara muito uma unha. Ficara aquela mancha preta grande que até dava espírito pra mão. Saiu sorumbático. Aquela menina era bem capaz de fazer dele... isso não, que não era nenhum lesão! A Serafina. (É a vizinha). Não podia ser acaso não. De primeiro inda era só de-tarde, hora mesmo da gente estar na janela, mas agora ao meio-dia, pronto: sorrindo pálido pra saudação dele. Serafina. Doce nome... Todas as raças são iguais... Seu Gomes entardeceu num sossego largado, muito suave. Sorriu livre, tornando a pensar na Dolores, que sapequinha! Enfim, fora bom porque agora sabia com quem estava tratando.

E ensinou a Dolores com muito carinho, com imensa amizade, cada vez mais íntima e mais amizade.

E depois: ela progredia. Muito preguiçosa, porém seu Gomes logo descobriu que falando com certo jeitinho, voz mais baixa meio surda... só fazendo, a Dolores saía dali e estudava até umas quatro horas por dia durante uma semana. Pois então, queria que ela estudasse? duas três vezes por mês falava do tal jeitinho. Isso chovia esmeralda de bandeirante numa conta em cima dele. Até, no fim desse mesmo ano, quando o maestro Marchese disse que bisognava arranjare qualche músicas pra la signorina tocare náa festa, nem seu Gomes precisou se incomodar muito: a signorina teve um sucesso com o Noturno de Chopin transcrito.

Estamos três anos depois dessa festa e lá por dezembro Dolores recebe o diploma do Giacomo Puccini. E sempre a mesma coisa como carinha bonita mas anda mais desmerecida. Estuda muito agora e toca de deveras com espírito o que toca. Era considerada a melhor aluna do “Giacomo”, como se falava no Brás, deixando rabi o nome

do conservatório. O Marchese andava enciumado e sei que andou chamando umas colegas da Dolores na sala da diretoria, perguntando umas coisas, filho-da-mãe!...

Uhm, me esquecia... meses antes ela ficara noiva. Seu Gomes fora na casa dela acertar umas músicas, de repente ela mostrou a aliança de prata na mão direita:

— Já reparou?

— Já. Não sabia que a minha Dorés estava casada, o que você carece mas é estudar mais, sabe!

— Não estou casada não, seu Carlos! As noivas é que usam aliança de prata.

— Você está noiva, Dorés!

Ela abaixou a cabeça, rindo manso e mandou lá do fundo um feixe de esmeraldas pra seu Gomes. Ele estava sério. Antes de mais nada, se lembrou da aluna, tanta trabalhadeira de estudo e pronto! se apaixonava pelo primeiro sarambé que aparecia.

— Meus parabéns. Não sabia.

— O senhor... parece que não gostou, seu Carlos!

— Gostei, Dorés. Mas acho que é uma pena você casar já, tão moça. E depois: por causa dos seus estudos que vão tão bem.

— Seu Carlos não quer, eu não caso!

— Não quero? Deus me livre, Dorés! Pois... eu quero é que você seja feliz. Você gosta dele, naturalmente é rapaz bom...

Falando, o mal-estar em que ficara desde o princípio do diálogo foi se substituindo pela imagem da vizinha costureira. Apoiou-se na imagem e sentiu chão firme.

— Não gosto nem desgosto... Mamãe com papai que quiseram, diz-que é bom partido. E muito simpático, bonzinho...

— Pois seja feliz, Dorés. Mas vamos continuar a lição.

E a lição voou apesar duma certa distração na sala. Dolores tocou como nunca. Humilde, riso impassível meio amarelo, muito calma. Seu Gomes saiu satisfeitíssimo.

— Eu não devia dizer, Dorés... mas é uma pena si você casar logo! Com mais dois anos eu punha você artista, garanto.

— Já falei! é só o senhor não querer que eu não caso, seu Carlos!

— Case sim, Deus me livre agora de andar desmanchando casamento de ninguém! Té mais.

— Té quinta, seu Carlos!

Seu Gomes saiu. Todo coberto de esmeraldas tristes. O mais engraçado é que pouco depois uma pessoa que conhecia bem os Bermudes afirmou pra ele que a Dolores não estava noiva. Não compreendeu nada e, indagando, ela tornou a afirmar que estava. Então é porque estava e não se incomodou mais com aquilo. Sarambé era ele que não entendia, e não os moços que tiram as moças da casa dos pais! Dolores continuou representando o noivado por mais de mês. Era assunto que lhe permitia dizer que casava com aquele como podia casar com qualquer um e não tinha mais esperança neste mundo. Um dia apareceu sem aliança na aula.

— Que-dele o anel, Dorés?

— Acabou-se tudo, seu Carlos! Agora o senhor pode ficar sossegado que não caso mais, ouviu! Si um dia me casar há-de ser com o consentimento do senhor!

— Mas, Dolores, eu não quero tomar essa responsabilidade, não! Olhe, você quer uma palavra de amigo? essas coisas a gente não vai fazendo e desfazendo assim à toa!

— Ah, só pra experimentar um pouco... eu não gostava dele!

— Mas fez o pobre moço sofrer!

— Ara, isso todos nós sofremos, seu Carlos! Porque a gente não há-de gostar duma pessoa e ser logo correspondida!

E principiou chorando, muito nervosa, ali mesmo na sala, podiam ver. Seu Gomes espantadíssimo.

— Que é isso, Dolores! não faça assim!

— Ah, seu Carlos... sou uma desgraçada!...

— Sossegue, Dolores! Pode passar alguém, não fica bonito ver você chorando assim!

Dolores soluçando muito sacudida, apagava esmeraldas no lençinho. Já sorria:

— Você tá nervosa, vá pra casa. Olhe: não se esqueça de repassar a Ave-Maria pra missa de domingo.

— Sei, seu Carlos.

Suspirou fundo que doía, foi-se embora.

Pois não durou nem vinte dias, seu Gomes recebeu o cartão em que “Temos a honra de participar a V. Excia. e Exma. Família que contratamos o casamento de nossa adorada filha Dolores Sarti Bermudes com o sr. Agostinho Nardelli. Alonso Bermudes”, rua tal, etc. Desta vez era certo. Escreveu agradecendo e com os votos.

Casar... é. Seu Gomes já estava com quatrocentos milréis das lições. E com moça boa, trabalhadeira... Mesmo que não ajudasse no ganho, ao menos que fizesse os próprios vestidos... Cento-e-cinquenta pro aluguel, cento-e-cinquenta pra comerem. Inda restava cem pro que desse e viesse. Nessa noite seu Gomes teve um sonho bem desagradável. Era uma rua, num beco, tapado por um casarão no fundo. A vizinha estava numa janela alugável aí por uns trezentos milréis por mês. Mas na outra calçada a mãe da Dolores sacudia as banhas numa risada sem educação, dizendo: “É muito!” Seu Gomes apesar da vergonha continuou andando e saudou a modista, pra que saudou! Saiu de dentro do chapéu dele um papagaio com um cinzeiro de prata no bico. Dentro do cinzeiro está todo o meu dinheiro, pensava o sonho assustado. Seu Gomes ficou num desespero enorme e resolveu subir pelo poste pra ver si agarrava o papagaio. A vizinha rindo pálido falou assim:

— Quer que ajude?

Seu Gomes implorou:

— Me ajude, Serafina!

Nem bem falou, a modista já estava agarrada nas costas dele. Chê... ficou difícil de trepar no poste com mais aquele peso nas costas, ficou impossível de trepar. Também não era preciso mais porque desaparecera o papagaio e estava tão bom que seu Gomes mexia na cama até que o chão se abriu. Seu Gomes com a Serafina caíram e o sonhador acordou com uma sede louca.

Dolores se explicou bem sobre o primeiro noivado secreto. O segundo é que não durou três meses, dona Marina contou pra seu Gomes que tinham desmanchado porque o moço não prestava. Essas coisas não aborreciam seu Gomes porque por uma curiosa inversão de papéis o tímido substituíra secretamente a Dolores pela Serafina naquele casanão-casa e tanto falar em casamento cotidianizava na hesitação dele a evidência do casamento: precisava se casar. E tudo isso prova também que ele não estava de todo inocente a respeito da Dolores. Mas o importante no momento era preparar bem o Pugnani-Kreisler pra festa de formatura.

Estava nisso quando a Dolores apareceu inquieta na lição. Era nesse tempo que parecia mais magrinha, olhos cada vez mais no fundo, toda a gente imaginando que era o estudo. Outra aluna estava ali, falou baixinho:

— Preciso falar muito com o senhor!

— Pois fa...

— Fale baixo! Tenho um assunto muito importante pra dizer pro senhor. Vá amanhã na missa e suba no coro, vou tocar. É coisa muito séria, seu Carlos!

Ele reparou que era coisa muito séria mesmo. Aqueles olhos, aquela boca tremendo entre angústia e autoridade... Passou meio inquieto uma parte da noite. Foi na missa. Dolores desfiou uma lengalenga muito atrapalhada, cheia de reticências, de vergonhas, que já estavam falando muito deles, que não havia nada porém o senhor sabe como é boca do mundo, as colegas, seu Carlos!... e os olhos dela encheram-se de lágrimas, as colegas vivem bulindo comigo, que o senhor gosta de mim, mas eu sei que não gosta! foram contar pra seu Marchese, ele mandou me chamar, vive falando pra mim que, quihhi... eu sei que o senhor é tão bom, é tão sério, mas ele vive me falando que o senhor não presta, que está me namorando por causa do meu dinheiro, que ficou muito feio pra mim!... Toda a gente já sabe! que eu devia largar da aula com o senhor, e que depois o senhor não casa comigo, tá só se divertindo, seu Carlos!... eu sei que o senhor é incapaz de me enganar mas ele mandou chamar mamãe, falou tudo pra ela, ela me deu uma surra, seu... seu Carlos! me deu duas bofetadas na cara, quihhi, quihhi... e chorava de não falar mais.

— Mas o que você está me contando, Dolores!... Será possível!

— É possível sim! Toda a gente caçoa de mim por causa do senhor! Nunca falei nada porque eu gosto muito do senhor, não quis que o senhor ficasse triste. Sabe? meu noivado desmanchou só por sua causa, foram contar tudo pro Agostinho! outro dia no baile ninguém mais não queria dançar comigo porque diziam que eu estava ocupada! “Ocupada”! seu Carlos! falaram assim mesmo! De já-hoje quando o senhor entrou não viu a cara que a organista fez!...

— Meu Deus! mas si nunca houve nada, Dolores! como é que...

— Tenho sofrido, seu Carlos! tenho sofrido muito!... dizem que estou doente, doença nada!... É tudo por sua causa mesmo!... mas eu sei que o senhor não gosta de mim e não queria que o senhor soubesse disso mas... quihhi... não posso mais!... e mamãe me falou pra mim que quer falar com o senhor...

— Pois falo, Dores! Sempre tratei você como minha aluna e não tenho medo de ninguém!

— Vá amanhã lá em casa mas... seu Carlos! eu não quero largar do senhor! não deixe me darem pra outro professor! com outro eu não estudo mais!...

Seu Gomes olhou com dó aquele corpinho magro estalando. Segurou-lhe as mãos que apertavam os lábios querendo gritar. Quis levantar-lhe a cabeça, porém estava desamparada, tornou a cair pra frente com os lábios colados na mão dele num beijo de fogo molhado. Tirou rápido a mão. Desceu a escadinha do coro, partiu. Estava com a mão insuportável com a lembrança do beijo, estava tonto. Estava nem querendo pensar. Seguia com muita pressa, louco pra chegar em casa porque parece mesmo que a casa da gente nos protege de tudo.

Em casa lhe deram o recado que o maestro Marchese pedia pra seu Gomes ir falar com ele, foi.

— Bom-dia.

— Bom-dia, s'accomodi. Professore, mandei chamar o signore por causa dum assunto molto serio! Il Giacomo é un stabilimento sério! Qui non si fa scherzi com moças, signor professore! Si lei aveva l'intenzione di namorare careceva de andare noutro...

— Seu Marchese, o senhor dobre a língua já, ouviu! O senhor tirou alguma coisa a limpo pra saber si estou namorando, hein! Fique sabendo que eu não estou disposto a aguentar insulto de ninguém e faço o senhor calar a boca já!

— Ma non dzangate! non dzan-ga-te, signor professore! non cé mica male in quello que eu disse! Sei molto bene que lei é honestissimo ma che posso fare, io! todos falam! S'accomodi, per favore!

— Tou bem de-pé.

— Ma non dzangate, signor fessore!... Stó falando sul serio! Sono un povero uomo con quatro figlioli in casa, si! signor professore, che bellezza de criancinhas! non posso expulsare questa ragazza Bermudes sinon m'isculhamba tutta la vida! Sono inrovinato, Dia Santo! non posso mandare la ragazza s'imbora! é ó non é!...

— Isso é o de menos, seu Marchese... o senhor... ponha a Dolores no seu curso, não me incomodo.

Seu Gomes tinha pensado primeiro em se retirar do Giacomo, porém lembrou dos cem milréis, se acovardou. Pois é: Dolores passava pro curso do outro e tudo se arranjava.

— Ma, signore professore, non basta! Bermudes stá uma fera! e io ho paúra dun scandalo!... Bisogna dare una soddisfazione a tutto il Brás!...

Seu Gomes estava cansado. Era muito frouxo pra pelejar mais.

— Está bem, seu Marchese, eu saio do Giacomo.

— Bravo! Si vede que lei é um bravo moço! sempre falei pra todos que lei é um bravo moço!

— Já sei. Passe bem.

— Ah, ma o signore si esquece o dinheiro, isto nó! Mancano cinco dias ma il Giacomo paga tutta la mensalitä. Tante grazie, signor professore, tante grazie!... Á rivederlo!

Careceu de gritar o “rivederlo”, seu Gomes já ia longe. Chegou em casa abatido, nem almoçou. De repente lhe veio aquela vontade de resolver tudo aquele dia mesmo, pegou no chapéu, foi pra casa da Dorés.

O violino parou e dois olhos relampearam na sombra da janela. Dolores veio correndo abrir a porta.

— O que foi!

— Quero falar com sua mãe já.

— Sente, seu Carlos. Mamãe não está mas eu mando chamar, é aqui pertinho! E foi bom porque assim a gente pode combinar primeiro. Maria, vá chamar mamãe na casa de seu Almeida, fale pra ela que seu Gomes está aqui, ela já sabe.

Houve um momento de silêncio. Ela tomara um ar tímido de viada, rostinho baixo. De repente seu Gomes ficou todo coberto de esmeraldas alegres. Dorés sorriu:

— Então?...

— Não tem nada, Dorés, não se luta com boca de povo. Mas você carece ter paciência também!

A frase deixara a coitadinha supliciada de novo. Seu Gomes sentiu uma vontade de machucar inda mais quem lhe roubava tanto cem milréis seguro.

— Acabo de ser expulso do Giacomo.

— Seu Carlos!...

Ele ficou com dó. Remediou:

— Não se incomode não! A vida tem mesmo dessas... A gente põe tanta esperança numa coisa ahn... tudo escapa de repente.

Dorés chorando.

— Você que carece de ser mais enérgica, vai pra outro professor, paciência. Pra que você não continua com o Bastiani? Ao menos vai pra melhor.

— Eu não quero, seu Carlos! não largue de mim!... deixe eu ficar com o senhor!... Ele estava muito calmo, carinhoso, piorando tudo.

— Tomara eu ficar com você, Dorés, mas não pode ser, se acalme! Olhe, você se forma e depois continua com o...

— Não continuo com ninguém! seu Carlos... é mamãe! fale pra ela, o senhor consegue, fale!

A gordura de dona Marina enlambuzou a porta.

— Já está chorando outra vez! que menina.... Não se incomode, seu Gomes, etc.

Foi uma explicação muito simples, os dois procederam bonito de verdade. A lealdade sem recantos da dona fortificou seu Gomes. Só que um pouco atrapalhados pela Dorés que se metia chorando, falando bobices até que dona Marina lhe deu aquele tabefe na boca. Então seu Gomes não pôde suportar!

— Dona Marina, não vim aqui pra ver a senhora bater na sua filha. Acho que não temos mais nada pra explicar. Quanto aos estudos dela, quando a senhora quiser, vá lá em casa que dou a recomendação pro Bastiani, passe bem. Adeus, Dorés.

Então é que foi a história. Ela agarrou na mão, no braço dele, olho veio vindo e ficou saltado bem na frente feito holofote verde.

— Não! o senhor não larga de mim! Me leve daqui! é mentira!

Nem podia falar, feito louca.

— É mentira! não largue de mim, eu gosto tanto do senhor! Eu morro! É tudo mentira! Ninguém está falando mal de nós! Fui eu que falei pras colegas! Eu! Eu não posso ficar sem o senhor! Nem que seja só pra estudar! mamãe! Fui eu que falei pro diretor! me deixe com o senhor!...

Era grito já.

Seu Gomes voltou com uma piedade amarga.

— Dorés, você...

Ela apertou-o nos braços, mais baixa, esfregando o queixo no peito dele. Dona Marina brutaça arrancando a filha. Seu Gomes com doçura se desenlaçando. Dorés gritava, dando cotoveladas na mãe, “Me largue! me largue!” rouca duma vez. “Eu quero ir com ele!...”

Mas seu Gomes bem percebia que agora era tarde pra começar o amor. Havia ãa modista inteirinha entre os dois e três anos de costume com a modista no sentimento. Meio sorrindo desapontado:

— Que criançaça, Dorés!

— Não!!

Foi o grito maior, se escutou da rua. Seu Gomes fugiu pela porta.

Ela ficara parada, presa na cintura pelos braços da mãe, ofegando, boca aberta, cada olho destamano bem na frente brilhando claro claro. Só deu tento de si com a bofetada. Não ardeu. Nem essa nem as outras nem os cocres e tabefes pelas costas peito cabeça. Foi chorando pra cama, com uma dor de angústia aguda, sem ninguém dentro do corpo.

Mas três meses depois estava curada.

ONE GRAVE, TWO GRAVES, THREE GRAVES

Belazarte told me this story:

It was the saddest thing, what happened in my own home... I always say that you have to be resilient, never lose heart, that giving up hope is for cowards, but, when things really take a bad turn, there is no will or patience that can stop disaster.

Some time ago I was better off in terms of money - I had a good job; more than that: I was always finding some extra work here and there and that allowed me to live a life of ease. Money is like an itch in the pockets of Brazilians, we don't feel right until we've spent it all, so I figured I should have a servant all to myself. I found those scenes in movies to be very pleasant: the master leaving the house, the servant coming in with hat and cane in hands, "Prudêncio, today I won't be having lunch at home, if you feel like going out, you may. See ya later." "See ya later, *seu* Belazarte."

A servant showed up, but I couldn't take a liking to him, no I couldn't. Dunno if he noticed, though. One night he asked me what I owed him and I thanked God. I spent a couple of days idling until I decided to take a look at some plots of lands at some distance from where I lived. I was sitting in a streetcar next to an extraordinarily likeable *tiziu*¹⁶. What peaceful eyes! You can't imagine. They could sweeten anything, just like lines from Rilke. I got off wondering, looked at the lots and got on the same streetcar on its way back. Instinct is a funny thing: when the driver came to charge the fare and I noticed he was the same as the one before, I was sure that the black boy'd be in the car. I looked back, and there he was! I met his eyes, and no sooner said than done: I felt such gentleness within, an easy peacefulness, I thought, that's it, that's what you need for a servant. I changed seats and cautiously I stroke up a conversation:

"Tell me, do you happen to know a young man that would want to be my servant? But he has to be Brazilian and black".

He tittered, lowering his eyelids. He looked at me, answering with a silent voice, the voice of people who neither think nor lived the past:

"There's me, yes sir. If you don't mind..."

"Who me? sure I don't, why would I mind? How much are you asking?"

Etc. And he started to work for me.

When I asked his name, he said it was Ellis.

Ellis was black, as I already mentioned... But his blackness was the most beautiful black I have ever seen. His features were not that extraordinary, he had a jaw that stuck out somewhat, but the color made my servant stand out as an example of the beauty of the

¹⁶ Popular name of a bird in the family Fringillidae, of black coloring.

black race. He was nineteen years old with no beard at all, Ellis's epidermis was splendorous. It didn't shine, not even one bit. Even if he was working hard, no sweat flowed, a trace of a drop could be seen like a snail's path, and that was it. It was enough for him to wash his face and *voilà*: the flat blackness was back again. It was pleasant and velvety, Ellis's blackness... I even started to wonder how pleasant it would feel to place my hand on that humble color, the same hand that spent the whole day shaking the hands of so many arrogant, white bastards in greeting. Ellis wore his hair always cut down, enveloping his skull. It was kinky and very thin, as soft as *piri*¹⁷ by the riverside. His lips weren't noticeable, black as well. Only the yellowish gaze, of an aloe oil color, lay amidst that perfect uniformity. His teeth were white, that's true, but you rarely caught a glimpse of them, because Ellis displayed only a half-opened smile. He had too much understanding of the workings of poverty to be showing his gum at every step. You had the feeling that nothing could astonish him any longer, and that Ellis saw everything black, with the same precise blackness of his epidermis.

As a servant, truth be told, he was not entirely what you would call a *good* servant. It's not that he was bad, no he wasn't, but he had his boils, idleness gradually took over, and there it stopped. He cleaned things well enough, but would take a lifetime to clean a window. And later on, he started going out a great deal, there wasn't a night he'd stay home. But in the sense of being a virtuous servant, Ellis was sublime. He was fully reliable, discreet, and a friend above all. Whenever I cursed him, he'd listen to all with an air of such mortification. I know that I lambasted him, and lambasted him, till I wondered what it was I was scolding him for, pitying the man, humble as he was, realizing that he hadn't done anything out of spite. I ended up arguing with myself:

"I know very well that with washing so many glasses and all, sometimes one can slip out of our hands... Fine, but don't break any more glasses, you hear?"

"I won't, *seu Belazarte*".

And he just stood there, so downcast it made me feel sorry for him. And I was the one who ended up feeling ashamed. With those pigeon eyes following me, cooing through my body, woefully beating with worn affection, I didn't even know what to do. I picked up a tie, knowing that I had done that just to have something in my hand, dropped it, straightened my hair, settled I-don't-know-what, and ended up always finding dust on some piece of clothing, a stain, anything:

"Ellis, clean this for me".

He came nearer, kind of bashful, and cleaned it. Then the aloe eyes asked for my judgment, trembling:

"Is this good, *seu Belazarte*?"

"It is. You can go".

¹⁷ Or piripiri (*Cyperus giganteus*) is a plant that grows from Mexico to Argentina. Its leaves produce a fiber like flax and supply cellulose of excellent quality.

He'd go. However, he hovered. Even if he went downstairs to work, he'd keep me on his mind, imagining a way to please me. And there was no end to his attempts at small treats until I smiled at him. Then, his gum would show. When night came, as I said, he would ask to go to the movies, I pitied him and let him go. And the number of times I even ended up giving him some spending money!

At this pace, it became clear that I was doing my best to lose my servant. And that's what happened. Ellis took absolute control of me. It didn't get much worse, but it sure was hard to tell who the servant was between the two of us. Yes, because, after all, who is the servant? The one who serves or the one who can no longer bear to be without service, and, I dare say, without company?

"Ellis, do you know how to read?... Hmm... I think I'll teach you French, because if someday I go to Europe, I won't go without you".

"If *seu* Belazarte goes, I'll go too".

He always showed the same respect. Sometimes I was moody when I got home, beaten by the day's hard work; Ellis didn't say a word, nor did he pester me, but stayed near, trying to find out what I wanted, to go off and do it. It was at one of these moments that I heard him talking to a fellow by the gate:

"Not today, *seu* Belazarte needs me".

I thought that was rich. And I then realized it was hopeless, Ellis wouldn't work. He was taking a bigger and bigger place in my life. So, let's do something for his future, I decided. The two of us began to air things which made me unsure because of the diverging feelings that went through me. Ellis confessed he was thinking of being a chauffeur, but he didn't have the money to get his license. I was jealous, upon my word! Secretly, I believed he should only think of being my servant. But I overcame this foolishness and told him that could be easily solved, because I'd lend him the money. I just couldn't overcome the itch and, with the excuse of clearing the air, I added:

"You think about it, decide and come tell me. Being a chauffeur's a good job, you can make good money, but it's also dangerous and there are already plenty of chauffeurs around. We often think we are moving up and it's more like we're moving down. In the end, it's all up to you. I told you I'd help you and I will".

That's when he confessed that he needed to earn more because he wanted to get married.

"Ellis, really... how old are you, Ellis?"

"Nineteen, yes sir".

"Gosh! and you want to get married, so young?"

He gave me that half-opened, easy smile of his:

"Poor folk need to get married young, *seu* Belazarte, otherwise they turn into dogs with no masters".

I didn't understand the comparison right away. Ellis explained:

"It's like this: doesn't a dog without an owner keep eating out of other people's garbage?"

It also vexed me somewhat, that Ellis could like anyone other than his master, but I had learned how to rid myself of these selfish feelings. I asked him who the young lady was.

"She is *tizia* just like me, *seu* Belazarte. Her name is Dora".

He became bashful when talking about his girl. I told him again to think about what he was going to do and tell me.

A few days later he came to me:

"*Seu* Belazarte, I've been wondering about what you told me, some weeks ago..."

"Have you decided?"

"Well, I was thinkin' we could do this: I could wait till your birthday and then I'd leave".

I felt spite shooting through me. I was certainly unkind:

"If you say so, Ellis".

He didn't move. After a while, he spoke almost soundlessly:

"*Seu* Belazarte..."

"What is it?"

"But... *seu* Belazarte... I want to leave your house on good terms... even Dora told me... told me you would certainly accept being our best man..."

It was hard for him to speak, such was his commotion. I looked at him. The aloe oil poured two black tears onto the smooth blackness. I was moved too.

"You'll leave on good terms, of course! I have no complaints about you".

"If you need anything, you call me and I'll come do it. You've been very good to me..."

"I wasn't good, Ellis, I acted like I should because you acted right".

I placed my hand on his shoulder to calm down the commotion of the sobbing man, he was choking, the poor thing! Unexpectedly, he quickly turned his face, lifted his shoulder, kissed my hand, and left, closing the door.

I had already seated myself, thinking about that kiss that had so rewarded my hand in the name of all humanity, when the door opened lightly. And from behind the door I heard him say:

"*Seu* Belazarte, you didn't say if you accepted my invitation..."

I had to laugh.

"I do, Ellis! When are you getting married?"

"If I get my license soon, I'm getting married on December 8th, yes sir, on the day of the Virgin Mary".

He didn't cheat me, but he certainly cheated the Virgin Mary. He left the house a few days after my birthday, and Lady Republic¹⁸ had barely celebrated her birthday when he married Dora, on a bright day that seemed to want to last forever. I got home from the wedding with an artistic joy inside me. You can't imagine what a beautiful thing it was, Ellis and Dora together. A smooth-skinned *mulatta* girl, gold-colored skin, I mean, aloe oil

¹⁸ The First Brazilian Republic was established November 15, 1889.

colored, the color of Ellis's eyes! And her eyes, well, they contained all that impossible blackness that fear casts in the color of the woods at night. I'm sure you've seen it before: we see a good girl's black eyes and swear, "Upon my word, I've never seen eyes as black as these", and what is it really? Those eyes are no darker than the color of Mapingui tobacco. It's our misgiving that sees dreadful darkness in the eyes of all our sins... Dora was scrumptious! She was a *pretarana*¹⁹ with soft hair and the body of an independent little filly. She had an air of not caring, capricious, winsome in a jaded way, moving-in-the-breeze like, and she had the slenderness of a stretched-out S, which made her look taller than she was, a supple gracefulness... I can't even say what was special about her body, I only know that it was so astounding to desire, that desire gaped in wonder, ecstatic, without a gesture, respectfully allowing her to walk amid all Christianity... Beautiful Dora!

Ellis made himself scarce for a few months and I forgot him. Life's been so kind that I've never missed anyone. He showed up again. It was funny, to tell you the truth. I got up late, went down to drink my *mate*, there was Ellis polishing the hall floor.

"Good morning, *seu* Belazarte".

"Well! what are you doing here!"

"*Dona* Mariquinha called me to clean the house".

"But don't you have a job?"

"I do have a job, yes sir, but life is really tough these days, *seu* Belazarte, we have to do anything we can".

The rush of getting married had blurred his dreams of becoming a chauffeur. He made a living as a mason. Mother ran into him and thought of giving some weekly money to this near beggar. A ragged Ellis, he had lime dirt all over him. Dora was feeling nauseated, with the baby coming. She didn't work anymore. Ellis had little work to do. He was thin and looked unwholesome. Then, suddenly, he didn't show up for one week. What was it? What could it be? Finally, an acquaintance came to tell us that Ellis had fallen ill, he was coughing a great deal, some lumps were coming out on the side of his face. When I saw him, it startled me, it was a big hideous lump, looking like an abscess. He went to see a dentist, I don't know... the dentist lead Ellis on for a long while, another lump began to come out on the other side of his face. Mother thought it was anemia. We sent Ellis to see our doctor, with recommendations. The result: his chest was very weak and if he didn't take care of himself, well!

Then affliction began. He didn't know very well what he should do, nor could I take two people into my home. Much less sick people! I was also going through a tight spot those days... it was very distressing. Ellis wandered from here to there, doing everything and doing nothing. He brought over his mother who lived in a small borrowed country house in Botucatu. The three of them went to live in the remoteness of the *Casa Verde* neighborhood, so they could raise chickens, they say, and because of the good air. Neither

¹⁹ All references to this word lead back to the story by Mario de Andrade, therefore, it might have been a word created by the author. From "preta", which means "black". In this case, the narrator is appraising Dora.

the chicken nor the air did any good. They came back to the city. They went to live near my house, in a basement, and when I saw the basement, my goodness! All of them were living in an armadillo's cave, Ellis, Dora, his mother, and two more little grasshoppers conceived in transit.

Ellis was back to his job as a mason, he polished our house and others we arranged for him, he fixed drains, later he worked at the gas company... He was never in one place, he was getting thinner, and nothing could be found to end with his lumps for good.

It wasn't yet seven in the morning, when, laughing a bit, but serious as well, he showed up to tell me he was now a father. He came to announce it and more:

"*Seu* Belazarte, I also need to know if you want to be the little *tiziu's* godfather, with you already being my everything and all".

I said yes, though neither liking the idea nor disliking it really. At that point, I was getting used to it all. I gave him twenty *milréis*. Mother, who was the godmother, visited their basement sometimes, arranging some wool clothes for the new little unfortunate soul.

Not even a week later, I got home and mother told me Dora had fallen ill. I asked her to go there again, she did. We sent them a doctor. Dora got worse overnight and the person we least expected to die, did. Number one.

And, now what? What about the little one? The truth was that Ellis's mother still had a child to breastfeed, but she weaned the little trickster who was already getting his Portuguese all wrong, and her breast milk moved from one basement to another.

At the Baptism, I endured one of those unpleasant moments, taxing, because I'm always taking notice of things. First, I wanted the boy's name to be Benedito, a blessed name for all honest slaves, but Ellis's mother muttered that we shouldn't disrespect a dead person's will, and that Dora wanted the boy's name to be Armando or Luíz Carlos. I then decided to have the say-so in the matter, but also gave in a little. We ended up branding the little unfortunate child with the name Luíz.

There was so much to remind us of Dora in all of it, it had only been two days that she had rested. We went through the ceremony in a hurry, because the boy was so feeble. Odd person, Ellis... Even today I can't say for sure if I quite understand what his feelings for Dora were. When he came to announce the poor woman's death, it looked like *I* was the one who really loved her, because my reaction, whenever something sad happens, is to be outright astonished.

"Dora is dead, *seu* Belazarte".

"Dead, Ellis!"

I can't even explain how much feeling there was in my cry. Ellis wasn't calm himself, but it seemed more like the inability to suffer than any real sorrow. The yellowish color of his eyes was encircled by empty whiteness. He'd miss Dora physically, how would he deal with his desires now? This was what Ellis's suffering seemed to be asking me. And to end once and for all with his indecision, he came to me, whose friendship he treasured. And was it really all out of friendship? As for that, not even I know any longer, since benefits were so entangled with gestures and determined Ellis' search for comfort in me. I

was his friend, no doubt about it, but on an occasion like this, it isn't a friend that's needed, but a person who knows things. I knew things, and I'd find a way to make his indecision lighter.

...and who says that friendship is free of the need to help?... It isn't, and it's more beautiful than with love, because the need is far removed from the body, it's all a mystery of the silent spiritual life alone. And, love, well... It's useless for the pretentious to try to mystify it all, to fill love with a hundred *aurora borealis*. They either fall into the territory of friendship, which can also exist between mustaches and breasts, or they try to be subtle about the physical gestures of love, and it comes down to mere mischief. As the observer that I am of uneducated love, I've realized that there is no metaphysics in it: it's a choice emerging from the feeling that love takes from an unfamiliar body, and then Whoooopee! The power of love is that it can be friendship as well. But everything beautiful about it isn't in the love itself but the friendship that goes along with it. When love sees imperfection in the beloved being, it goes blind: "It doesn't matter!" But a friend feels: "I forgive you." That's what's so sublime in a friend, this constant sharing of oneself, a deeply human action, that makes us live as two, splitting ourselves into a couple of lover souls that hover low, like birds flying over the ground without touching it...

Dora was body alone. And an unconscious kindness. I had no body, but I was protective. And mainly, I was the one who knew things. This time love and friendship did not join: the love was Dora's and the friendship was mine. It was natural that Ellis should act like this, being weak as he was.

It was a tiresome baptism. There is no purpose in imagining that we're all equal, what a stupid notion! Mother, because of too much religion, imagined that we were. She decided to invite Ellis, his mother and "tutti quanti" to eat some dessert at our house, so they came. It was ridiculously oppressive for us, their betters, and depressing for them, who were unfortunate in everything. They were clumsy, not knowing what to do with their hands, not knowing how to hold the cup. And as for me! Any gesture we make, holding some bread, a biscuit, that's it: because of class, it's different from the same exact way the poor do these things. It's like a lesson. We're afraid of humbling others and don't even know how to hold a cup anymore. I was having a hard time coming up with something amusing to say, but then I noticed it wasn't funny at all because of Dora who was hanging on, not letting the joy have a laugh. Suddenly I left.

It didn't even take a week and the unfortunate little tyke started withering more and more, and kicked the bucket. Number two.

Ellis couldn't even arrange the funeral. It wasn't that he was grieving a great deal, but now there was a lump swelling on the left side. On the day before, he had had a dizzy spell, nobody knows why, by his dying son. He went to bed with a high fever of forty-one²⁰, his body trembling.

²⁰ In Celsius.

It was a galloping consumption that was racing, with no respect for city laws, at a hundred and twenty per hour on the race-course of that afflicted chest. When Ellis found out about it, he became my son once and for all. He had everything reported to me. But I don't know through what sublime attentiveness, or the mysterious workings of friendship, he understood I wasn't very fond of TB... The truth of the matter is that he never asked me to go see him. But I did. I also visited once very quickly, saying it was time to get back to work. But I didn't let him run short of anything. I did everything within my means, of course, I was living lean.

The thing lasted three months, not even that long, eleven weeks during which time it seems to me that he was happy. Yes, because he had become a child again, and, maybe for the first time in his life, he charmed us with those little tricks we use to capture the love of those we know love us back. Food, medication, clothes, everything was provided by my mother, according to my will. Unexpectedly, he'd ask for something odd, like soup made in my house, or having me send him socks just like the ones he wore at the baptism of his unfortunate little son, with yellow stripes and purple stripes going all the way up... Once he sent someone to ask me to lend him a cushion that was in my den and which, he said, was quite old. I obviously sent him the cushion, but as a present and for good.

Now everything on my part was the mechanical gesture of the protector, and by God! how life becomes mechanical when there is only the expected before us... I don't know... I don't think Ellis felt it, but for a while now I had gotten used to feeling Ellis as dead. And for me, waiting for his death was like a long death, like loafing with death, which only made me feel a warm longing for the past. I was his friend, I swear, but to me Ellis was dead, and in the face of death, we don't have the right to count on living life. I later learned that he did live his death as something present and alive, in a sublime contemplation of the past, the only reality to him. Dora had been a function. His practical life had been nothing but eating, sleeping, working. What could that dead man on vacation hold onto? Me, of course. I learned all this much later... He'd spend the whole day talking about his friend, thinking about his friend. And all that cheerfulness of wishing and those little childish whims were just ways of objectively remembering me. Of getting closer to me, who wouldn't visit him.

I went home to have lunch and Ellis's mother came to say he was calling for me, I didn't like that at all. If he were to start asking me for this now, me, who hates TB with all my might... I ended up telling the maid to go there, to say that I'd go after lunch.

When I got to the door, his mother's cries broke the unexpected news to me. Yes, unexpected, because I had gotten so used to waiting that I had forgotten that what was expected would eventually happen. I walked in. There was an Italian lady, red faced from all the second-hand crying and two *tizius* smoking.

"He's dead!"

"Oh, *su* Belazarte, the *povero* called so long *per te*".

"But he's dead now?"

"No such luck! Since early morning calli..."

“Where is he?”

One of the *tizius*:

“He’s inside, yes sir”.

He threw his cigarette away and showed me in. I followed. I jumped over the cries coming from a den that had never seen daylight, and there in a bigger room, with an arched entrance without a door, leading to an indoor yard, in an invisible corner, was a candle crying, it was there. Ellis agonized, the edges of his lumps hanging sideways, awfully skinny. He had been dying since morning, always calling for me.

“But why did nobody tell me!”

Over and over, the candle was held straight in his hands, already crossed, forever outfitted for death. Suddenly, the moaning stopped. The dying man swallowed and then started calling for me again. An hour had gone by without his voice calling for me. It seemed that the time was near. I spoke low, unintentionally modulating my voice to the silence of death:

“Ellis!... oh Ellis!”

Nothing. Only his breath sawing the dry wood of his throat. The others were looking at me, waiting for the good I’d do the poor man. It almost seemed as if I was the one who mattered there. I insisted, battling with the friendship of death which was steadier than mine. With lies and all else, it seemed to me I was insisting so I would beat death’s hold there, so those watching wouldn’t see me lose a fight. I put my hand on Ellis’s tepid forehead; he would certainly feel I was there.

“Ellis, it’s me, Ellis!... You calm down now, I’m here, see! I’m right here with you, see! Ellis!”

The moaning stopped.

“See! That’s what he doin’ since morning, *povero*!... Take the candle ‘way, Maria!”

“Leave the candle, oh Ellis!”

Ellis opened his eyelids, he started opening them, seemed like he would never stop opening them. They were wide open, but no more aloe oil was flowing out! The pupils were steady, looking straight ahead, like darts piercing the black ceiling. I placed my face where they could focus on me.

“I’m here, Ellis! Don’t be afraid! You can see me, can’t you?”

“He can, *seu* Belazarte. See! His eyes have been closed since mornin’. He was very fo... fond of you! a course, you’ve been so generous to my poor... son, oooh! oooh! my son is dying, oooooh! Oh...!”

“Ellis! Whatever you need, I’ll get it for you, see? I’ll do it!”

The gelatin took me in without shining. The eyelids were closing considerably. Instinctively, I hurried my speech, so the eyes would still take in my kindness:

“I’ll do everything for you! I don’t want you to run short of anything, see!”

His eyes closed for good, very calmly.

“My son is dead! oooooooh!... Oooh...!”

For a moment, I felt hopeless because Ellis didn't seem to be feeling my presence. I insisted some more, kneeling beside his bed.

"What's all this, Ellis...!"

"He only spoke of you, ooh... only yesterday he told me that, waah ... if he got better he'd dig a deep...hole, oooh... to bury all the germs so that he could ask to live, waah... in your basement... ooooh!"

"Get her out of here! He shouldn't be listening to all this crying!"

They carried all the wailing outside. Was he still able to hear? I insisted, hopefully, peeved by the black woman's story, unintentionally perverse, with a clear voice, sweetly caressing:

"Ellis! you really won't answer me!"

He opened his eyes a little, again. He could see me!

...he was so humble that he wasn't selfish enough to use death's indifference against me. His eyes pulsed sincerely for me. Ellis still obeyed me with that look. Be it because of friendship, or because of servility, he did as he was told. This made me mistake his death with life's handlings in an extraordinary way. Mystery, fatality, everything that was magnificent about death, vanished. It was a familiar death. It was a death between us, between friends, just like that day when we planned, on my last birthday, that he'd get married and that chauffeuring was the way to earn more money.

He was closing his eyes, serenely. I weighed my hand on his body so he could feel me more. At least, Ellis could be sure to have beside him his friend who knew things. And he wouldn't let him suffer. Because he knew things...

Number three.

TÚMULO, TÚMULO, TÚMULO

Belazarte me contou:

Caso triste foi o que sucedeu lá em casa mesmo... Eu sempre falo que a gente deve ser enérgico, nunca desanimar, que se entregar é covardia, porém quando a coisa desanda mesmo não tem vontade, não tem paciência que faça desgraça parar.

Um tempo andei mais endinheirado, com emprego bom e inda por cima arranjando sempre uns biscates por aí, que me deixavam viver à larga. Dinheiro faz cócega em bolso de brasileiro, enquanto não se gasta não há meios de sossegar, pois imaginei ter um criado só pra mim. Achava gostoso esses pedaços de cinema: o dono vai saindo, vem o criado com chapéu e bengala na mão, “Prudêncio, hoje não bóio em casa, querendo sair, pode. Té logo”. “Té logo, seu Belazarte.”

Veio um criado mas eu não simpatizava com ele não. Sei lá si percebeu? uma noite pediu a conta e dei graças. Levei uns pares de dias assim, até que indo ver uns terrenos longe, estava no mesmo banco do bonde um tiziu extraordinário de simpático. Que olhos sossegados! você não imagina. Adoçavam tudo que nem verso de Rilke. Desci matutando, vi os terrenos, peguei o bonde que voltava. Instinto é uma curiosidade: quando o condutor veio cobrar a passagem e percebi que era o mesmo da ida, tive a certeza que o negrinho havia de estar no carro. Olhei para trás, pois não é que estava mesmo! Encontrei os olhos dele, dito e feito: senti uma doçura por dentro uma calma lenta, pensei: está aí, disso é que você carece pra criado. Mudei de banco e meio juruviá puxei conversa:

— Me diga ãa coisa, você não sabe por acaso de algum moço que queira ser meu criado? Mas quero brasileiro e preto.

Riu manso, apalpando a vista com a pálpebra. Me olhou, respondendo com voz silenciosa, essa mesma de gente que não pensa nem viveu passado:

— Tem eu, sim senhor. O senhor querendo...

— Eu, eu quero sim, por que não havia de querer? Quanto você pede?

Etc. E ele entrou pro meu serviço.

Quando indaguei o nome dele, falou que chamava Ellis.

Ellis era preto, já disse... Mas uma boniteza de pretura como nunca eu tinha visto assim. Como linhas até que não era essas coisas, meio nhato, porém aquela cor elevava o meu criado a tipo-de-beleza da raça tizia. Com dezenove anos sem nem um poucadico de barba, a epiderme de Ellis era um esplendor. Não brilhava mas não brilhava nada mesmo! Nem que ele estivesse trabalhando pesado, suor corria, ficava o risco da gota feito rastinho de lesma e só. Bastava que lavasse a cara, pronto: voltava o preto opaco outra vez. Era doce, aveludado o preto de Ellis... A gente se punha matutando que havia de ser bom passar a mão naquela cor humilde, mão que andou todo o dia apertando passe-bem de muito

branco emproado e filho-da-mãe. Ellis trazia o cabelo sempre bem roçado, arredondando o coco. Pixaim fininho, tão fofo que era ver piri de beira-rio. Beiço, não se percebia, negro também. Só mesmo o olhar amarelado, cor de óleo de babosa, é que descansava no meio daquela igualdade perfeita. E verdade que os dentes eram brancos, mas isso raramente se enxergava, porque Ellis tinha um sorriso apenas entreaberto. Estava muito igualado com o movimento da miséria pra andar mostrando gengiva a cada passo. A gente tinha impressão de que nada o espantava mais, e que Ellis via tudo preto, do mesmo preto exato da epiderme.

Como criado, manda a justiça contar que ele não foi inteiramente o que a gente está acostumado a chamar de criado bom. Não é que fosse ruim não, porém tinha seus carnegões, moleza chegou ali, parou. Limpava bem as coisas mas levava uma vida pra limpar esta janela. E depois deu de sair muito, não tinha noite que ficasse em casa. Mas no sentido de criado moral, Ellis foi sublime. De inteira confiança, discreto, e sobretudo amigo. Quando eu asperejava com ele, escutava tudo num desaponto que só vendo. Sei que eu desbaratava, ia desbaratando, ia ficando sem assunto pra desbaratar, meio com dó daquele tão humilde que, a gente percebia, não tinha feito nada por mal. Acabava sendo eu mesmo a discutir comigo:

— Sei bem que de tanto lavar copo vem um dia em que um escapole da mão... Está bom, veja si não quebra mais, ouviu?

— Sei, seu Belazarte.

E ficava esperando, jururu que fazia dó. Eu é que encafifava. Com aquele olho-de-pomba me seguindo, arrulhando pelo meu corpo numa bulha penarosa de carinho batido, eu nem sabia o que fazer. Pegava numa gravata, reparando que tinha pegado nela só pra gesticular, largava da gravata, arranja cabelo, arranja não-sei-o-quê, acabava sempre descobrindo poeira na roupa, ùa mancha, qualquer coisa assim:

— Ellis, me limpe isto.

Ele vinha chegando meio encolhido e limpava. Então olho-de-babosa pousava em minha justiça, tremendo:

— Está bom assim, seu Belazarte?

— Está. Pode ir.

Ia. Porém ficava rondando. Mesmo que fosse lá no andar térreo trabalhar, me levava no pensamento, ia imaginando um jeito de me agradar. E não tinha mais parada nos agradinhos discretos enquanto eu não ria pra ele. Então gengiva aparecia. Quando chegava de noite já sabe, vinha pedindo pra ir no cinema, eu tinha pena, deixava. E quantas vezes ainda não acabei dando dinheiro pro cinema!

Nesse andar é lógico que eu mesmo estava fazendo arte de ficar sem criado. Foi o que sucedeu. Ellis tomou conta de mim duma vez. Piorar, piorou não, mas já estava difícil de dizer quem era o criado de nós dois. Sim, porque, afinal das contas quem que é o criado? quem serve ou quem não pode mais passar sem o serviço, digo mais, sem a companhia do outro?

— Ellis, você já sabe ler?... Uhm... acho que vou ensinar francês pra você, porque si um dia eu for pra Europa, não vou sem você.

— Si seu Belazarte for, eu vou também.

Sempre com o mesmo respeito. Às vezes eu chegava em casa sorumbático, moído com a trabalhadeira do dia, Ellis não falava nada, nem vinha com amolação, porém não arredava pé de mim, descobrindo o que eu queria pra fazer. Foi uma dessas vezes que escutei ele falando no portão pra um companheiro:

— Hoje não, seu Belazarte carece de mim.

Até achei graça. E principiei verificando que aquilo não tinha jeito mais, Ellis não trabalhava. Estava tomando um lugar muito grande em minha vida. Pois então vamos fazer alguma coisa pelo futuro dele, decidi. Entramos os dois numa explicação que me abateu, por causa dos sentimentos desconhecidos que me percorreram. Ellis me confessou que pensava mesmo em ser chofer, mas não tinha dinheiro pra tirar a carta. Tive ciúmes, palavra. Secretamente eu achava que ele devia só pensar em ser meu criado. Mas venci o sentimento besta e falei que isso era o de menos, porque eu emprestava os cobres. Só que não pude vencer a fraqueza e, com pretexto de esclarecer, ajuntei:

— Você pense bem, decida e volte me falar. Chofer é bom, dá bem, só que é ofício perigoso e já tem muito chofer por aí. Muitas vezes a gente imagina que faz um giro e faz mas é um jirau. Enfim, tudo isso é com você. Já falei que ajudo, ajudo.

Foi então que ele me confessou que precisava ganhar mais porque estava com vontade de casar.

— Ellis, mas que idade você tem, Ellis!

— Dezanove, sim senhor.

— Puxa! e você já quer casar!

Deu aquele sorriso entreaberto, sossegado:

— Gente pobre carece casar cedo, seu Belazarte, sinão vira que nem cachorro sem dono.

Não entendi logo a comparação. Ellis esclareceu:

— Pois é: cachorro sem dono não vive comendo lixo dos outros?...

Meio que me despeitava também, isso do Ellis gostar de mais outra pessoa que do patrão, porém já sei me livrar com facilidade destes egoísmos. Perguntei quem era a moça.

— É tizia que nem eu mesmo, seu Belazarte. Se chama Dora. Encabulou, tocando na namorada. Falei mais uma vez pra ele pensar bem no que ia fazer e me comunicasse.

Dias depois ele veio:

— Seu Belazarte... andei matutando no que o senhor me falou, semana atrás...

— Resolveu?

— Pois então a gente pode fazer uma coisa: espero o dia-dos-anos do senhor e depois saio.

Tive um despeito machucando. Decerto fui duro:

— Está bom, Ellis.

Não se mexeu. Depois de algum tempo, muito baixinho:

— Seu Belazarte...

— O que é.

— Mas... seu Belazarte... eu quero sair por bem da casa do senhor... até a Dora me falou que... me falou que decerto o senhor aceitava ser nosso padrinho...

Custou ele falar de tanta comoção. Olhei pra ele. O óleo de babosa destilava duas lágrimas negras no pretume liso. Me comovi também.

— Sai por bem, é lógico! Não tenho queixa nenhuma de você.

— Quando o senhor quiser alguma coisa, me chame que eu venho fazer. O senhor foi muito bom para mim...

— Não fui bom, Ellis, fui como devia porque você também foi direito.

Botei a mão no ombro dele pra sossegar o comovido soluçante, estava engasgado, o pobre!... Sem se esperar, rápido, virou a cara de lado, encolheu o ombro, beijou minha mão, partiu fechando a porta.

Já me sentava outra vez, pensando naquele beijo que fazia a minha mão tão recompensada por toda a humanidade, a porta abriu de leve. E ele, não se mostrando:

— Seu Belazarte, o senhor não falou que aceitava...

Até me ri.

— Aceito, Ellis! Quando que você casa?

— Si arranjar licença logo, caso no 8 de dezembro, sim senhor, dia da Virgem Maria.

Não me logrou, porém logrou a Virgem Maria. Saiu de casa dias depois do meu aniversário, e nem bem dona República fez anos, casou com a Dora, num dia claro que parecia querer durar a vida inteira. Cheguei do casamento com uma felicidade artística dentro de mim. Você não imagina que coisa mais bonita Ellis e Dora juntos! Mulatinha lisa, lisa, cor de ouro, isto é, cor de óleo de babosa, cor dos olhos de Ellis! E nos olhos então todo esse pretume impossível que o medo põe na cor do mato à noite. Você decerto que já reparou: a gente vê uns olhos de menina boa e jura: “Palavra que nunca vi olho tão preto”, vai ver? quando muito olho é cor de fumo de Mapingui. É o receio da gente que bota escuriza temível nos olhos desses nossos pecados... Que gostosa a Dora!

Era uma pretarana de cabelo acolchoado e corpo de potranquinha independente. Tinha um jeito de não-querer, muito fiteiro, um dengue meio fatigado oscilando na brisa, tinha uma fineza de S espichado, que fazia ela parecer maior do que era, uma graça flexível... Nem sei bem o que é que o corpo dela tinha, só sei que espantava tanto o desejo da gente, que desejo ficava de boca aberta, extasiado, sem gesto, deixando respeitosamente ela passar por entre toda a cristandade... Dora linda!

Ellis desapareceu uns meses e me esqueci dele. A vida é tão bondosa que nunca senti falta de ninguém. Reapareceu. Foi engraçado até. Me levantei tarde, desci pra beber meu mate, Ellis no hol, encerando.

— Bom-dia, seu Belazarte.

— Ué! que que você está fazendo aqui!

— Dona Mariquinha me chamou pra limpar a casa.

— Mas você não está trabalhando então!

— Trabalho, sim senhor, mas a vida anda mesmo dura, seu Belazarte, a gente carece de ir pegando o que acha.

A fúria de casar borrara os sonhos do chofer. Vivia de pedreiro. Mamãe encontrou com ele e se lembrou de dar esse dinheiro semanal pro mendigo quase. Um Ellis esmolambado, todo sujo de cal. Dora andava com muito enjôo, coisa do filho vindo. Não trabalhava mais. Ellis com pouco serviço. Estava magro e bem mais feio. De repente uma semana não apareceu. Que é, que não é, afinal veio uma conhecida contar que Ellis tinha adoecido de resfriado, estava tossindo muito, aparecendo uns caroços do lado da cara. Quando vi ele até assustei, era um caroção medonho, parecendo abscesso. Foi no dentista, não sei... dentista andou engambelando Ellis um sem-fim de tempo, começou aparecendo novo caroço do outro lado da cara. Mamãe imaginou que era anemia. Mandamos Ellis no médico de casa, com recomendação. Resultado: estava fraquíssimo do peito e si não tomasse cuidado, bom!

Calvário começou. Ele não sabia bem o que havia de fazer, eu também não podia estar recolhendo dois em casa. Inda mais doentes! Vacas magras também estavam pastando no meu campo nesse tempo... Foi uma tristeza. Ellis andou de cá pra lá, fazendo tudo e não fazendo nada. Mandou buscar a mãe, que vivia numa chacinha emprestada em Botucatu, foram morar todos juntos na lonjura da Casa Verde, diz-que pra criar galinha e por causa do ar bom. Não arranjaram nada com as galinhas nem com os ares. Vieram pra cidade outra vez. Foram morar perto de casa, num porão, depois eu vi o porão, que coisa! Todos morando no buraco de tatu, Ellis, Dora, a mãe dele e mais dois gafanhotos concebidos de passagem.

Ellis voltara pra pedreiro, encerava nossa casa e outras que arranjamos, andou consertando esgotos, depois na Companhia de Gás... Não tinha parada, emagrecendo, não se descobriu remédio que acabasse inteiramente com os caroços.

Meio rindo, meio sério, nem eram bem sete da manhã, um dia apareceu contando que era pai. Vinha participar e:

— Seu Belazarte, vinha também saber si o senhor queria ser padrinho do tiziu, o senhor já está servindo de meu tudo mesmo.

Falei que sim, meio sem gostar nem desgostar, estava já me acostumando. Dei vinte milréis. Mamãe, que era a madrinha, andou indo lá no porão deles, arranjando roupas de lã pro desgraçadinho novo.

Nem semana depois, chego em casa e mamãe me conta que Dora tinha adoecido. Pedi pra ela ir lá outra vez, ela foi. Mandamos médico. Dora piorou do dia pra noite, e morreu quem a gente menos imaginava que morresse. Número um.

Agora sim, e a criança? É verdade que a mãe do Ellis tinha inda filho de peito, desmamou o safadinho que já estava errando língua portuguesa, e o leite dela foi mudando de porão.

O dia do batizado, sofri um desses desgostos, fatigantes pra mim que vivo reparando nas coisas. Primeiro quis que o menino se chamasse Benedito, nome abençoado

de todos os escravos sinceros, porém a mãe do Ellis resmungou que a gente não devia desrespeitar vontade de morto, que Dora queria que o filho chamasse Armando ou Luis Carlos. Então pus autoridade na questão e cedendo um pouco também, acabamos carimbando o desgraçadinho com o título de Luís.

Havia muita lembrança de Dora naquilo tudo, há só dois dias que ela adormecera. Fizemos logo o batizado porque o menino estava muito aniquiladinho.

Engraçado o Ellis... Até hoje não me arrisco a entender bem qual era o sentimento dele pela Dora. Quando veio me comunicar a morte da pobre, até parecia que eu gostava mais dela, com este meu jeito de ficar logo num pasmo danado, sucedendo coisa triste.

— Dora morreu, seu Belazarte.

— Morreu, Ellis!

Nem posto explicar com quanto sentimento gritei. Ellis também não estava sossegado não, mas parecia mais incapacidade de sofrer que tristeza verdadeira. O amarelão dos olhos ficara rodeado dum branco vazio. Dora ia fazer falta física pra ele, como é que havia de ser agora com os desejos? Isso é que está me parecendo foi o sofrimento perguntado do Ellis. E pra decidir duma vez a indecisão, ele vinha pra mim cuja amizade compensava. E seria mesmo por amizade? Aqui nem a gente pode saber mais, de tanto que os interesses se misturavam no gesto, e determinavam a fuga de Ellis pra junto de mim. Eu era amigo dele, não tinha dúvida, porém numa ocasião como aquela não é muito de amigo que a gente precisa não, é mais de pessoa que saiba as coisas. Eu sabia as coisas, e havia de arranjar um jeito de acomodar a interrogação.

...e quem diz que na amizade também não existe esse interesse de auxílio?... Existe, só que mais bonito que no amor, porque interesse está longe do corpo, é mistério da vida silenciosa espiritual.

Depois, amor... É inútil os pernósticos estarem inventando coisas atrapalhadas pra encherem o amor de trezentas auroras-boreais ou caem no domínio da amizade, que também pode existir entre bigode e seios, ou então principiam sutilizando os gestos físicos do amor, caem na bandalheira. Observando, feito eu, amor de sem-educação, a gente percebe mesmo que nele não tem metafísica: uma escolha proveniente do sentimento que a babosa recebe dum corpo estranho, e em seguida furrum-fum-fum. A força do amor é que ele pode ser ao mesmo tempo amizade. Mas tudo o que existe de bonito nele, não vem dele não, vem da amizade grudada nele. Amor quando enxerga defeito no objeto amado, cega: “Não faz mal!” Mas o amigo sente: “Eu perdôo você.” Isso é que é sublime no amigo, essa repartição contínua de si mesmo, coisa humana profundamente, que faz a gente viver duplicado, se repartindo num casal de espíritos amantes que vão, feito passarinhos de vôo baixo, pairando rente ao chão sem tocar nele...

Dora era corpo só. E uma bondade inconsciente. Eu não tinha corpo mas era protetor. E principalmente era o que sabia as coisas. Desta vez amor não se uniu com amizade: o amor foi pra Dora, a amizade pra mim. Natural que o Ellis procedesse dessa forma, sendo um frouxo.

Batizado fatigante. Não paga a pena a gente imaginar que todos somos iguais, besteira! Mamãe, por causa da muita religião, imagina que somos. Inventou de convidar Ellis, mãe e tutti quanti pra comer um doce em nossa casa, vieram. Foi um ridículo oprimente pra nós os superiores, e deprimente pra eles os desinfelizes. Estavam esqueléticos, cheios de mãos, não sabendo pegar na xicra. E eu então! Qualquer gesto que a gente faz, pegar no pão, na bolacha, pronto: já é diferente por classe da maneira, igualzinha muitas vezes, com que o pobre pega nessas coisas. Parece lição. A gente fica temendo rebaixar o outro e também já não sabe pegar na xicra mais. Custei pra inventar umas frases engraçadas, depois reparei que não tinham graça nenhuma por causa da Dora se dependurando nelas, não deixando a graça rir. De repente fui-me embora.

Não levou nem semana, o desgraçadinho pegou mirrando mais, mirrando e esticou. Número dois.

Ellis nem pôde tratar do enterro. Não é que estivesse pensando muito, mas o caroço tinha dado de crescer no lado esquerdo agora. Na véspera tivera uma vertigem, ninguém sabe por que, junto do filho morrendo. Foi pra cama com febrão de quarenta-e-um no corpo tremido.

Era a tuberculose galopante que, sem nenhum respeito pelas regras da cidade, estava fazendo cento-e- vinte por hora na raia daquele peito apertado. Quando Ellis soube, virou meu filho duma vez. Mandava contar tudo pra mim. Mas não sei por que delicadeza sublime, por que invenção de amizade, descobriu que não me dou bem com a tísica. O certo é que nunca me mandou pedir pra ir vê-lo. Fui. Fui, também uma vez só, de passagem, falando que estava na hora de ir pro trabalho. Mas não deixei faltar nada pra ele. Nada do que eu podia dar, está claro, leite de vacas magras.

Durou três meses, nem isso, onze semanas em que me parece foi feliz. Sim, porque virara criança, e talvez pela primeira vez na vida, inventava essas pequenas faceirices com que a gente negaceia o amor daqueles por quem se sabe amado. Mantimento, remédios, roupa, tudo minha mãe é que providenciava pra ele, conforme desejo meu. Pois de sopetão vinha um pedido engraçado, que Ellis queria comer sopa da minha casa, que si eu não podia mandar pra ele ãa meia igualzinha àquela que usara no batizado do desgraçadinho, com lista amarela, outra roxa até em cima... Uma feita mandou pedir de emprestado a almofada que eu tinha no meu estúdio e que, ele mandou dizer, até já estava bem velha. E lógico que almofada foi, porém dadinha duma vez.

Da minha parte era tudo agora gestos mecânicos de protetor, meu Deus! como a vida esperada se mecaniza... Não sei... Ellis creio que não, mas eu já fazia muito que estava acostumado a sentir Ellis morto. E aquela espera da morte já pra mim era bem ãa morte longa, um andar na gandaia dentro da morte, que não me dava mais que uma saudade cômoda do passado. Era amigo dele, juro, mas Ellis estava morto, e com a morte não se tem direito de contar na vida viva. Ele, isso eu soube depois, ele sim, estava vivendo essa morte já chegada, numa contemplação sublime do passado, única realidade pra ele. Dora tinha sido uma função. A vida prática não fora sinão comer, dormir, trabalhar. No que se agarraria aquele morto em férias? Em mim, é lógico. Isso eu sube depois... Levava o dia

falando no amigo, pensando no amigo. E todas aquelas faceirices de pedidos e vontadinhas de criança, não passavam de jeitos de se recordar mais objetivamente de mim. De se aproximar de mim, que não ia vê-lo.

Cheguei em casa pra almoçar, a mãe do Ellis viera dizer que ele estava me chamando, não gostei nada. Si agora ele principiava pedindo mais isso, eu que tenho um bruto horror de tísica... Enfim mandei a criada lá, que depois do almoço ia.

Quando cheguei na porta, os uivos da mãe dele me deram a notícia inesperada. Sim, inesperada, porque já estava acostumado a ficar esperando e perdera a noção de que o esperado havia mesmo de vir. Entrei. Estavam uma italianona vermelha de tanto choro por tabela e dois tizius fumando.

— Morreu!

— Ahm, su Beladzarte, tanto que o povero está chamando o sinhore!

— Mas já morreu, é!

— Que esperandza! desde manhãzinha está cham...

— Onde ele está?

Um dos tizius.

— Está lá dentro, sim senhor.

Jogou o cigarro e foi mostrando caminho. Segui atrás. Pulei por cima dos uivos saindo duma fumaça que nunca viu dia, e lá numa sala mais larga, com entrada em arco sem porta dando pro quintal interior, num canto invisível, chorava uma vela, era ali. Ellis vasquejava com as borlas dos caroços dependurados pros lados, medonho de magro. Estava morrendo desde manhã, sempre chamando por mim.

— Mas por que não me avisaram!

Eram não sei quantas vezes que agarravam a vela nas mãos dele já em cruz, pra sempre fantasiadas de morte. De repente soluço parava. O moribundo engolia em seco e pegava me chamando outra vez. Afinal parara de chamar fazia mais de hora. Parece que a coisa estava chegando. Falei baixo, sem querer, me acomodando com o silêncio da morte:

— Ellis... ôh Ellis!

Nada. Só o respiro serrando na madeira seca da garganta. Os outros me olhavam, esperando o bem que eu ia fazer pro coitado. Até parecia que o importante ali era eu. Insisti, lutando com a amizade da morte, mais uniforme que a minha. Com mentira e tudo, até me parece que eu insistia mais pra vencer a predominância da morte, e aqueles assistentes não me verem perder numa luta. Botei a mão na testa morna de Ellis, havia de me sentir.

— Ellis! sou eu, Ellis!... Sossegue que já cheguei, ouviu! Estou juntinho de você, ouviu!... Ellis!

O soluço parou.

— Pronto! Ansim que está fatchendo desde de manhán, ô povero!.. Tira áa vela, Maria!

— Deixe a vela, ôh Ellis!

Ellis abriu as pálpebras, principiou abrindo, parecia que não parava mais de as abrir. Ficaram escancaradas, mas óleo de babosa não vê que escorrendo mais! pupilas fixas, retas, frechando o teto preto. Pus minha cara onde elas me focalizassem.

— Estou aqui, Ellis! Não tenha medo! você está me enxergando, hein!

— Está sim, seu Belazarte. Viu! desde manhã que está de olho fechado. Ele queria muito be... bem o senhor! também... também o senhor tem sido muito bom pro coitado... de meu filho, ai!... aaai! meu filho está morrendo, ahn! ahn! ahn!...

— Ellis! você está precisando de alguma coisa, hein! Eu faço!

A gelatina me recebia sem brilhar. As pálpebras foram cerrando um bocado. Instintivamente apressei a fala, pra que os olhos inda recebessem meu carinho:

— Eu faço tudo pra você! não quero que te falte nada, ouviu bem!

Os olhos se esconderam de todo com muita calma.

— Meu filho morreu! ai, ai!... Aaai!...

Tive um momento de desespero porque Ellis não dava sinal de me sentir. Insisti mais, ajoelhando junto da cama.

— Ora, o que é isso, Ellis!...

— ahan... só falava no senhor, ahn... ontem mesmo disse pra mim, ahan, que, ahn, melhorando cavava um poço... fundo, aáin... pra enterrar todos os mi... micróbios pra depois, pedir pra morar, ahn... no porão da casa do senhor... aai!

— Levem ela! não vale a pena ele estar escutando esse choro!

Transportaram os uivos. Estaria escutando ainda? Insisti numa esperança exacerbada pela anedota da negra, sem querer, perverso, voz pura, doce de carícia:

— Ellis! você não me responde mesmo!

Abriu um pouco os olhos outra vez. Me via!

...foi tão humilde que nem teve o egoísmo de sustentar contra mim a indiferença da morte. O olhar dele teve uma palpitação franca pra mim. Ellis me obedecia ainda com esse olhar. Fosse por amizade, fosse por servilismo, obedeceu. Isso me fez confundir extraordinariamente com os manejos da vida, a morte dele.

Desapareceu mistério, fatalidade, tudo o que havia de grandioso nela. Foi ãa morte familiar. Foi ãa morte nossa, entre amigos, direitinho aquele dia em que resolvemos, meu aniversário passado, ele ir buscar o casamento e a choferagem de ganhar mais.

Cerrava os olhos calmo. Pesei a mão no corpo dele pra que me sentisse bem. Ao menos assim, Ellis ficava seguro de que tinha ao pé dele o amigo que sabia as coisas. Então não o deixaria sofrer. Porque sabia as coisas...

Número três.

LITTLE BOYS DON'T CRY... DO THEY?

Belazarte told me this story:

Do you still remember Teresinha? The one who unintentionally murdered two men, the brothers Aldo and Tino, and was left with two children when her husband was arrested?... It seems like her husband's sacrifice took away the evil eye that was on her: she was wretched as no other woman, but nobody else murdered anyone because of her, nobody else suffered. Alfredo, on the other hand, was kept in the pompous palatial Prison, ruminating the twenty years behind bars his calamitous partner had made him swallow. Injustice, bitterness, desire... so much that could not be digested patiently by so many other maws... the result: Alfredo experienced such an indigestion that he turned out to be one of the most uncongenial men in prison. No one liked him, and the sour fellow spent his prison time wallowing in an endless and harsh mire of petty penalties. But I'm wasting my time talking about him.

Teresinha did feel wretched, poor woman! Her body was still half-good and many a braggart would ask her for at least a roll in the sack for a buck. She refused, at first thinking of the beloved Alfredo, then thinking of murderous Alfredo. She was almost giving in, but there was always that idea of Alfredo leaving prison with a new knife to slit her open. And so, virtue prevailed in a cold fright, without any joy or feeling. Teresinha would come home in a senseless rage, and vented her spleen on the first thing that was weaker than herself. She saw her mother practically dying as she stood there, because of her precocious old age, taking a whole five minutes to get some underwear off the clothesline, and that did it: she threw a bundle of dirty clothes at the old woman:

"You'll end up falling asleep with those boxers in your hand!"

She stepped in. Could she even call it a home? It was a drover's shack unfit for anyone to live in, that's how dirty it was. Two objects standing in for chairs, the table, the bed. On the floor there was another mattress, the home of cockroaches which at night danced on the old woman's face, the natural playground of tiny little animals in this life.

Nobody slept in the other room. It became sort of a kitchen for the family, often not seeing a lit match for days. A lit match meant coal in the little portable stove and some kind of food that could be cooked. And often there would be no food to prepare... But that was no problem in Teresinha and her mother's dictionary: wasn't the stove right there? Their dictionary gave that narrow space of a few cubic meters of moldy air the preposterous name of kitchen.

In this hut-like home the young woman lived with her mother and her leftover son. He was certainly a leftover in so many ways. He was a leftover because, after all, love to Teresinha, my dear Lord! Experiencing all types of unfairness, wanting a man physically,

with no man to be had, forgetting Alfredo, loved by Alfredo who threatened, and with a death on her conscience... whose hands' only consolation was crystal-clear water on boxers, slacks, socks, with seven days of body sweat... and, to top it all, hating some customers who always owed last week's wash ... Teresinha had to bear it all. And to slam anything near to love, adding insult to injury, there came her nagging blasted mother-in-law, hated but welcomed for bringing a monthly ten *milréis*. The *figlia dun cane* strutted in, for she had her own means, at about thirty *contos*, who knew? and told her off for no reason.

Could that full-blown woman feel any love, at thirty and a dry spell, a body from Ceará, and a soul now long gone!... And Paulino, now almost four years old, had never known, since he was eight months old, what it was to feel a warm bosom, with breasts, two arms squeezing him, a word *figliuolo mio* to top this delight, and a mouth eventually drawing nearer to our face, puckering up lightly, making a sweet sound, the sound of a mother's kiss.

Paulino was a leftover in that house.

And he was so much more than a leftover since his smarter older brother, seeing that all was going downhill from there, was lucky enough to have the microbe of the typhoid fever deposited on his tongue by a guardian angel. The microbe reached his tiny little belly, started having more and more babies, a million per hour, and not even two nights later there was inside of him such a promenade of stomping microbes that the asphalt of his tiny guts was run through. And the unbaptized child went to the limbo of the guiltless pagans. Paulino was left over.

Of course, he still didn't know he was such a leftover in this harsh world, but, he did know very well that in that house there was nothing left to eat. He was raised on hunger, starvation was his sustenance. Unaware of the mysteries of his body, he would wake up frightened. It was the Guardian Angel... Hell no! it was the Angel of Malice who would wake Paulino during the wee hours so that he wouldn't die. The wretched little boy would open his eyes in the darkness that stank of the room, and sort of realized that he was eating himself up from the inside. At first, he would cry.

"Be quiet, guadion!"

"Be quiet" my foot! Hunger was pressing... Paulino would stand on his bow legs and, swaying, eventually reached his mother's bed. Bed... she had sold the large bed when once she was at the end of her tethers and the doctor gave her a choice to either give him the bed or pay twenty bucks for healing her wounded foot. She gave him the twenty by selling the bed. She cut the mattress in half and put one of the halves on three boxes. This was her bed.

Teresinha would wake up fatigued, with her son's tiny little hand slapping her face. She was overcome with rage. She slapped her hand in the air, not caring where it landed, on eyes, at the pit of his stomach, thump!... Paulino rolled away with a well-founded longing to bellow at the top of his lungs. But then his body remembered a time when his bellowing had resulted in a clog heel striking his mouth and he gave up on crying... He would

whimper so mildly it even lulled Teresinha to sleep. Tiny, round, pinched, just like a roly-poly.

The suffering was so intense that it ignored the huge throes of hunger, Paulino would fall asleep in pain. At daybreak, the cooler temperatures aroused his body all over again. In a daze, Paulino was astonished to see he was sleeping on the floor, far from grandma's mattress. He felt a tiny little ache on his shoulder, another tiny little pain on his knees, another tiny little pain on his forehead, right where it touched the floor. He barely noticed these tiny little pains because of the *guaçu*²¹ pain he felt from the cold. He crawled fearfully because the dark was all alive with the shadows of dawn, opening and closing the eye of crevices here and there. He shooed the cockroaches and nestled in the illusory warmth of grandma's bones. He could no longer sleep.

Finally, around six o'clock, having become familiar with life because of the bakers, dairymen and all the men loaded with food who would pass at a distance, a dreary warmth would germinate in Paulino's body. His mother was also waking up with the struggles of life. Sitting up, vibrating with the sensuality of the morning which fills us with unbridled desire, Teresinha almost burst, squeezing her arms against her breasts, belly, everything, pressing one leg against the other with such steam that her kidneys hurt. An impatient and aimless hatred, stemming from virtue maintained at the expense of a great deal of misery, sprouted inside her, a virtue which she herself was certain would sooner or later have to come to an end. She would look for her clogs, bellowing at her mother, "didn't she know it was time to get up", that she should fill the pail with water, etc.

Paulino then let go of the emerging warmth in his body before the two women did. He would patrol the kitchen because the happiest moment of his life was at hand: a piece of bread. And what a Sunday it was to Paulino when, because a client had paid, because the mother-in-law had showed up, or something like that, they would drink coffee with sugar besides the bread!... He would quickly sip, burning his tongue and his tiny white lips, the hot water which was sublimely delicious because of a hint of coffee. And he would go outside to eat the bread.

Not in front of the house, no, that was the place where the faucets, the vat and the clothesline were. The women were doing their laundry and it was all unyielding harshness: fights and reproaches, non-stop. And Paulino's leisure bore the brunt of it. He always ended up with hardly any bread and someone's knuckles at the top of his head, a sharp pain throughout.

He stopped going there. He would open the kitchen door, which was closed but not locked, would walk down a step, and run off laughing to the delight of his pal, the cold, among the tufts of grass and the first bur bushes. Those bushes behind the house were the forest. There Paulino enjoyed his aches without disguise. Sitting on the ground, or hitting the eye of the anthills with his heels, he would start to eat. Suddenly he almost fell lifting his tiny leg, ouch! off the ground, to kill the ant biting at his ankle. He would pick up his slice

²¹ "Big" in tupi.

of bread and restart lunch, amused at the scrunch-scrunching of the sand stuck on the bread, now rattling on his little teeth.

But he would not forget the ant. Bread gone, needing to distract his hunger, the warrior boy would arise. He looked for a splinter of wood, he would hunt for ants in the bushes. It was not, after all, such a small wooded area, for behind it came the floodplain, and there was nothing but a hint of fence sealing off the grounds. But Paulino never entered the floodplain, which was too big for him. The bushes with nameless plants, where the sun added to idleness, was enough for him.

Stick in hand, there he would go in search of ants. The tiny ants, he didn't care for them. He would only pounce on the big ones. When he found one, he would chase it patiently, breaking through the twisted branches of the bushes, from where oftentimes he would come back with hand and leg burning from having scraped them on some *mandarova*²². He would bring the *saúva* to the clearing and spent hours playing with the tiny wretched thing, until the tiny wretched thing died.

When the *saúva* died, Paulino's suffering was renewed, he was hungry again. The sun was already high, but Paulino knew that only after the factories whistled would there be rice and beans during times of abundance, or another piece of bread during scarcer times, fortunately fewer and fewer. He was struck by such woeful hunger that no defeated *saúva* could take his mind off it. He was in a funk of misery, heavy-hearted with the repetition of daily sorrow. He would sit on anything, his cheek in hand, the tiny head turning to one side, dejectedly. Eventually, in some laced shadow he learned to sleep off his hunger. He fell asleep. He had no dreams. Flies would come with wings and buzzing and embroider his open little mouth where sweetish remains could be found. Asleep, Paulino suddenly closes his bashed lips, moves, opens his contracted legs a little and warm piss leaks down his shorts.

Short nap. He woke up long before the factories whistled. He chewed on his starving mouth, his tongue licking the juices lost on his lips. The scrunching of sand and something that tasted kind of sweet. He removed it with his hand to see what it was, there were two flies. Yes, flies, but they were slightly sweetish. He put the flies on his tongue again, savoring them, then swallowed.

And that is how camouflaging hunger began, by means of all the swallowable things in the bushes. It didn't take long until he became "a gobbler", as they say: he replaced *saúva* hunting for damp soil picnics. As for ant eating, well... He would place his face on the ground close to the little anthill mounds, his tongue positioned. When an ant came out, Paulino released his skilled tongue, glued the ant onto it and, rubbing it against the roof of his mouth, felt an infinitesimal roundness. He would put that tiny little roundness between his teeth, crush and swallow the illusive spit. And what a fortune it was when he ran into a bunch of ants moving in line together! Crawling on all fours, with his tush spying up at the

²² Poisonous lizard.

clouds, he would lick the floor, ant-eater-like. He would snuff out a live line of ants in a wink.

In this hope of appeasing his stomach, Paulino sank to the most disgusting things. No, sinking is not the right word. He was unable to establish a hierarchy for disgust, and the lowliest eatable object he thought of was the ant. However, I can't deny that once, even a cockroach... He caught it and walked off chewing, more innocently than ye, children of disgust. However, one thing must be understood: this food was far from filling. The factory would whistle and the rice and beans would find Paulino stuffed full of illusions, not starving at all. He started to wizen, darkening like a winter's day.

Teresinha never noticed. At this point, the muzzle of virtue was so worn out that you could foresee the moment in which the woman would break out, free, into the world. This was a time in which blows came down on every part of Paulino, blindly, no matter where they landed. When she came home, she could hear Fernandez's bell ringing on his wagon. He was a lank fellow with some background, a bit slow, though very vigorous. He was around twenty-five, if a day older! And he became smitten with the worn-out woman, who knows why. The muzzle broke. As he carried the bundle of clothes for her, he stepped into the hut as if he were a guest. Teresinha then offered him coffee and consent. The granny, soiling her tongue with the most incomprehensible cursing, settled in the kitchen to sleep with an astounded Paulino.

In any case, the grub got better, and the paunchy little fellow discovered the secret of pasta. But he was very afraid of the man. Fernandez was more than congenial to him the first time he appeared, and when he left the room in the morning and they drank coffee together, Paulino trustfully played with the man's long leg. But he then received such a blow that he felt down in the dumps for a while.

Of course, the mother-in-law was bound to find out, she did and came for a visit. Teresinha, with feigned cheer, said good morning to her and the large *mulatta* answered back bitchily. But now Teresinha didn't need her anymore and replied as furious as a weasel. What a heated squabble! Paulino couldn't even find a way to slip off, for the old woman would point at him saying "my grandson" and again "my grandson" on and on. And she told Teresinha she was on her own, because she would not sponsor the dirty business of an Italian now entangled with a Spaniard. Teresinha yelled back that Spaniards were much, much better than any Brazilian, you know! You daughter of a negro! Mother of a murderer! I don't need you, you know! *Mulatta!* Big old *mulatta!* Mother of murderer!

"You're the mother of murderer, you sow! You made my son unhappy, you curse of the devil, you stinking wop!"

"Get outta here, you mother of a murderer! You never cared about your grandson, and now you strut in all high and mighty! Take your grandson if you want."

"I think I'll do just that! Poor innocent child, who doesn't know the mother he has, you sow! You sow!"

She picked up Paulino, who was kicking, and off she went, heels beating the pavement, arranging her Sunday shawl, as she passed the few curious faces at midday. She then turned to make the most of the audience and show how decent she was:

“Listen! You, there, I won’t pay any more rent, d’you hear me! I protected you because you were my wretched son’s wife, but I’m not here to harbor a mare!”

Teresinha, madly enraged, was already looking around to find a stick, something that would kill the *mulatta*. The lady decided it would be best to leave once and for all, triumphant, click, clack.

Paulino was surging and swelling on the warm flesh. He cried, scared, no idea of what was going on, on an unknown street, and all those people, that strange woman and him without a mother, without bread, without the bushes, without grandma... he didn’t recognize a thing anymore! My God! How wretched he was! He felt horrid fear through his tiny little blue body. What’s more, he couldn’t cry with all his heart, for he had clearly seen that the old woman had a big shoe with a really big heel, worse than any clog. It would probably hurt so much, that heel hitting the tiny little teeth, ripping his lip... And Paulino, horrified, almost stuck his hands whole in his mouth, quite artistically creating what could be a damper.

“My grandson, poor thing!”

With her big, hot hand she held his tiny little head, settling it on her rubber neck. Carried in a delightful way in those good arms, the shawl adding even more warmth to our absolute joy... And the old woman looked at him with a comforting piety... My God! What could that wonderful feeling be!... It’s an outburst of tenderness, Paulino. The old woman crushed him against her chest, hugging him, pressed her face to his and then kissed and kissed him, unveiling this major mystery to the child.

Paulino felt he might relax. For the first time in his life, the concept of future expanded until the next day on his mind. Paulino felt he was protected, and the next day there would certainly be coffee with sugar. Hadn’t the old woman approached his face with her lips pressed together, and hadn’t she given him a smooch that sounded so good? Yes, she had. And Paulino’s mind extended to the next day, imagining a huge cup, the size of the old woman, full of coffee with sugar. He felt like laughing at two pious tears she shed, but right in the middle of the drop, a boot appeared. It grew and grew and turned into the size of the old woman. Paulino took up a soft whimpering again, like on the nights his whinny lullaby would rock Teresinha to sleep.

“Damn it! Enough with the crying now! Walk a little, c’mon!”

The boot heel stretched up enormously and became the chimney across the street. Paulino’s crying stopped, but it stopped choked with fear. They had arrived.

This was a real home... You walked into a garden so full of flowers you felt like yanking out all the strawflowers and, after climbing some steps, there was a parlor with two portraits on the wall. A man and a woman who was the old woman. Chairs, a big chair with room enough for many people. On the tiny little table in the middle, a vase with a pink

flower which never withered. And little white towels on the chairs and on the table, which would be fun for cutting out a bunch of tiny pellets...

The rest of the house equally astonished the little exile. Then, two other very beautiful women, who always wore navy-blue skirts and white blouses, showed up. They stared coldly at him. Those four big black eyes descended from up above and zap! They swatted Paulino's soul. He was dizzy, motionless, stuck to the ground. All at once, there was terrible arguing. I don't know what the old woman said, and one of the students answered back cheekily. The old woman answered roughly with "my grandson". The other answered in a loud voice, and a storm of "my grandson" and "your grandson" flashed over Paulino's head. The story increasingly got worse. When there were no longer any more high pitches for the three voices to climb to, the old woman slapped the daughter who was closest, and the other ran off, thus, managing to escape from being hit with a spoon on her noodle.

The emergence of Paulino couldn't bring together any more horrors. And the funny thing is that, for the first time, the horror awakened his intelligence to new heights. The concept of future, which had reached the next day only a while ago, extended and extended far too much, and Paulino noticed that he would spend the whole next day, and the next, and the next, and all the next days, amidst anger and abuse, and days like that would probably never end. Evidently, unaware how numbers added up, more than three thousand years of next days gathered in the child's feeling of panic.

"Go pick up that spoon!"

No one knows how those half bows moved, but Paulino picked the spoon up from the floor and gave it to the old woman. She stored the spoon and went inside. The porch was empty. Everything was neat, and the shadows of the rapidly closing afternoon pulled in, erasing all the unknown objects. Just the table in the middle was clearly still there, striped red and white. Paulino got closer, to lean on its leg. He trembled in fear. A delicious smell sizzled inside, and from the porch's shadows, a monotone, tic-tac, noise settled his emotions. Paulino sat on the floor. An enormous calm started covering his quelled thought: he was free from the old woman's heel.

She wasn't like his mother, no she wasn't. When she felt angry, she wouldn't throw a boot, she would throw a light spoon, shining in silver. Paulino rolled up and lied down, resting his head on the floor. He felt awfully sleepy, with so much exhausted feeling. There was no longer any risk of being hit with a clog on his tiny little tooth, the big mulatta only threw that silver spoon. And Paulino didn't know whether spoons hurt when they hit. He fell asleep peacefully.

"Get up! What are you doing? This boy must've had a hard time, Margot! Look how skinny he is!"

"No wonder! What can you expect from a mother always whooping it up, partying day and night, nothing good could come out of that!"

"Margot... You know the exact meaning of bitch, don't you? I think we could say Paulino is a son of a bitch."

They laughed.

“Margot!”

“Ma’am!”

“Send Paulino here for some food!”

“Step in, boy! ”

His bow legs swung faster. A kitchen where you couldn’t even move. The old woman pulled up the doormat with her foot.

“Sit yourself down here and eat up, do you hear?”

It was rice and beans. The meat Paulino saw from the corner of his eye disappeared through the porch door. A four-year-old boy probably doesn’t eat meat, imagined the old woman, who was always in some kind of agitation, with her daughters’ upbringing.

And life’s miseries changed for Paulino, but went on being miserable. The grub was a lot better and plenty, but Paulino was being haunted by the vices of the bushes. The big mulatta didn’t have any more of those outbursts of tenderness of the first day, she was one of those people whose mechanisms for living don’t go beyond the fulfillment of duties. That kiss was sincere, but only within the conventions of the tragedy. The tragedy was over and, with it, the tenderness too. And, still, Paulino kept within him a longing for those kisses.

He wanted to approach the girls, but they hated him and would pinch him whenever they could. Nevertheless, the youngest, Nininha, who was wickedly curious, and whose grades were never as good as Margot’s, was the one who took on the responsibility of bathing Paulino. When Saturday came, the little one, a bit astounded and afraid of being pinched, would feel the caress of a beautiful, fiery face rubbing against his little body. Every time that was over, the girl, feeling a beastly anger, dressed him in his little nightshirt, hurting him, “stay put, you little brat”, and there it came: a pinch that hurt so much, my God!

Paulino went down the kitchen steps, in a flunk as he walked down the little corridor that lead to the front garden; he pulled open the gate, always closed, with an effort, and sat down, hands on cheeks, his little head turned to one side, and there watched the world ebb.

And thus, between pinches and harsh words he couldn’t understand at all, “tiresome urchin”, “murderer’s son”, he was ebbing, just like the world: thin dark and earthy, obliterating himself more and more. But what could he do? He would drink his coffee and right away they told him to eat his bread in the backyard, otherwise, pig! he would dirty up the whole house. He’d go to the backyard, and the ground was so humid, a blasted temptation! He didn’t even realize it was a temptation, since no cuffing, no spoon slap forbade him from eating earth. Grind, grind, he chewed a tiny bit, swallowed, chewed another bit, swallowed. And invariably around ten o’clock, as the students’ rush came haunting the serenity of life, he had to sit on that scratchy doormat, swallow the rice and beans, in hopeless fatigue.

“My Lord Jesus, this boy doesn’t eat a thing! Lookit how he stares at the food! Why on earth do you git your face soiled like that, you pig!”

Paulino felt scared and instinct made him swallow hard, waiting for the coming spoon slap that never came. However, this time a light flashed in the whole mechanism for the old woman:

“Could you be...! You’ve been eating soil, haven’t you? Let me see!”

She pulled Paulino towards the kitchen door with her two huge hands burning hot:

“Open your mouth, boy!”

She pulled up his lips. Soil on his tiny little teeth, on his gums.

“I said open your mouth!”

And her finger opened his little soiled mouth wide, his tongue showing down to the root, which was all clay-colored. The licking he took, Lord Jesus! It began with a slap right on his open mouth, which gave off a funny kind of sound, bop! And I balk at how it ended, there was such a medley of cuffing pinching slapping. And endless cursing, which is, after all, just like a slap for a small child.

That was when Paulino’s biggest martyrdom began. None of them wanted him to stay inside the house, he would really have to live in the backyard. But, before the bread, there would a pummeling of threats, word-of-honor: Paulino would go down the steps completely empty-headed, feeling the world was beating him. What now?... Bread was gone and the soil was there, provoking, calling him... But those three pinchers didn’t want him to eat the tasty earth... Oh, temptation, for the poor little cherub! He wanted to eat, but he couldn’t. He could, but then there would come the old woman’s thumb every other hour to drill his tiny little mouth... To eat? Or not to eat? He would run from temptation, climb the little steps, stay at the top, staring at the wall so as not to see. And the earth always calling him there, the good earth, all his, five easy steps below...

Fortunately, he didn’t go through too much. Three days later, I don’t know whether he played at the door with the boys from across the street, he showed up coughing. The cough got worse, kept on getting worse, and eventually Paulino heard the old woman say, in a wild rage of displeasure, that it was a dog’s cough. Now they’d have to take the boy to the doctor - instead let’s give him the syrup Dona Emilia showed us. Neither Dona Emilia’s syrup, nor the five *milréis* spent at the neighborhood’s cruddiest apothecary healed the tiny little tyke. He’d really have to bear with the disease that would go away by itself after finding no more resonance for the cough.

The poor thing barely felt his throat scratching and he would quickly put his hands on his head, restless, and how! hastily swallowing to see if it would go away. As soon as he went looking for a wall to lean on, the fit would come. Slobbering, eyes slobbering, nose slobbering, his mouth open and no longer able to close, heaps of slobbering. The poor little thing would sit right where he was, otherwise he’d be sure to fall. The chair would spin, the table would spin, the smell in the kitchen would spin. Paulino, nauseated, dizzy, his whole body broken.

“Poor thing. Hey, go cough outside, you’re messing up the floor, go!”

He found a way to build strength from fear and left. Another coughing fit came, and Paulino would lie down, his mouth kissing the ground, though now he didn’t feel like

eating the soil at all. A very long time would go by. Paulino, stayed in the same position. His body didn't even ache anymore, such was his abjectness, his head couldn't think anymore from having taken so much injury. He would lie there; the moisture from the ground might worsen his cough and possibly kill Paulino. But after a while, a tiny spark of strength would emerge and the drive to get up. He starts getting up. Feels like going in. But he could dirty up the house and there would be that pinch on his tiny little chest. And it was no good because they would send him out again anyway.

It was late afternoon and the workers passed by in all those streetcars... all in all, he could amuse his rheumy eyes somewhat. Paulino sat at the front gate. Night fell, life bustled. A dusty April wind rose to put its hand on our face, gently. The sun, clinging to the far-off crest of the floodplains, stained the weary space red and green. The groups of workers passing by looked almost black against the light. All was very clear and black, puzzling. Monsters ran darkly, with young men hanging on stirrups, whipping up clouds of red dust on the sidewalk. People, more monsters and large horses on beautiful carts.

At that moment, Teresinha walked by. She came looking real smart, I kid you not, with yellowish shoes, stockings giving her beautiful legs a rosy hue, knees showing. Above that, a light blue dress, more beautiful than the April sky. Above it all, mommy's face, beautiful! With that dark hair forming a pompous knot and the hair scarf beaming Neapolitan blue on the dark skin flushed by the colors of Paris.

Paulino got up, unaware, feeling a baffling spark of festive reactions in his body, "Mamma!" he yelled. Teresinha turned upon being called, it was her *figliuolo*. I don't know what plummeted on her conscience, she ran, the silk kneeling on the sidewalk and enraptured, she pressed Paulino against her full bosom, hurting him quite deliciously, one had to say. Teresinha cried because she was very unhappy as well, after all. Fernandez had dumped her and the undecided girl had buckled under once and for all. Seeing Paulino dirty, abated, she felt all her own misery, and kind of pulled herself away from the bedecked life she has been living. She cried.

Only then did she cry for her son, who looked horrendously thin, and was more fragile than virtue. He was probably going through hell with his big *mulatta* grandma... For a second she mulled over taking Paulino with her. However, keeping the thought even from herself, it was undeniable that Paulino would be a huge pain in the arse. Then she looked at his clothes. It wasn't made of very good fabric, but, after all, it would do. She clung to this disguise which erased her conscience, "my son is being well treated", and, thus, never thought of him again, ever. She kissed him on his mouth, still wet with snot, swallowed her tears, *figliuolo*, she couldn't, hugged and hugged him, covered him in kisses. She left smoothing down her dress.

Paulino standing there, without a gesture, without moving, saw the blue dress disappear in the distance. He turned his little face. There was a piece of wrapping paper, all greasy, rolling comically on the floor. He could take three steps to catch it. It wasn't worth it. He sat down again on the step. The afternoon colors were graying placidly. Paulino pressed his cheek against the tiny little palm of his hand and half seeing, half, listening in

exhausted indifference, sat still. Even the snot flowed from his open mouth to his hand. Then it dripped on his nightshirt. Which was dark, so it wouldn't stain.

PIÁ NÃO SOFRE? SOFRE

Belazarte me contou:

Você inda está lembrado da Teresinha? aquela uma que assassinou dois homens por tabela, os manos Aldo e Tino, e ficou com dois filhos quando o marido foi pra correição?... Parece que o sacrifício do marido tirou o mau-olhado que ela tinha: foi desinfeliz como nenhuma, porém ninguém mais assassinou por causa dela, ninguém mais penou. Só que o Alfredo lá ficou no palácio chique da Penitenciária, ruminando os vinte anos de prisão que a companheira fatalizada tinha feito ele engulir. Injustiça, amargura, desejo... tantas coisas que muito bucho não sabe digerir com paciência, resultado: o Alfredo teve uma dessas indigestões tamanhas de desespero que ficou dos hóspedes mais incômodos da Penitenciária. Ninguém gostava dele, e o amargoso atravessava o tempo do castigo num areião difícil e sem fim de castiguinhos. Estou perdendo tempo com ele.

A Teresinha sofria, coitada! ainda semiboa no corpo e com a pabulagem de muitos querendo intimidades com ela ao menos por uma noite paga. Recusou, de primeiro pensando no Alfredo gostado, em seguida pensando no Alfredo assassino. Estava já no quase, porém vinha sempre aquela idéia do Alfredo saindo da correição com uma faca nova pra destripá-la. E a virtude se conservava num susto frio, sem nenhum gosto de existir. Teresinha voltava pra casa com uma raiva desempregada, que logo descarregava na primeira coisa mais frouxa que ela. Enxergava a mãe morrendo em pé por causa da velhice temporã, pondo cinco minutos pra recolher uma ceroula do coaral, pronto: atirava a trouxa de roupa-suja na velha:

— A senhora é capaz que vai dormir com a ceroula na mão!

Entrava. Podia-se chamar de casa aquilo! Era um rancho de tropeiro onde ninguém não mora, de tão sujo. Dois aspectos de cadeira, a mesa, a cama. No assoalho havia mais um colchão, morado pelas baratas que de-noite dançavam na cara da velha o torê natural dos bichinhos desta vida.

No outro quarto ninguém dormia. Ficou feito cozinha dessa família passando muitas vezes dois dias sem fósforo acendido. Porque fósforo aceso quer dizer carvão no fogãozinho portátil e algum desses alimentos de se cozinhar. E muitas vezes não havia alimento de se cozinhar... Mas isso não fazia mal pro dicionário da Teresinha e da mãe, fogareiro não estava ali? E o dicionário delas dera pra aqueles estreitos metros cúbicos de ar mofado o nome estapafúrdio de cozinha.

Nessa espécie de tapera a moça vivia com a mãe e o filhote de sobra. De sobra em todos os sentidos, sim. Sobrava porque afinal amor pra Teresinha, meu Deus! vivendo entre injustiças de toda a sorte, desejando homem pro corpo e não tendo, se esquecendo do Alfredo gostado pelo Alfredo ameaçando e já com morte na consciência... E só tendo na

mão consolada pela água pura, ceroulas, calças, meias com mais de sete dias de corpo suado... E além do mais, odiando uns fregueses sempre devendo a semana retrasada... Tudo isso a Teresinha aguentava. E pra tampar duma vez todos os vinhos do amor, inda por cima chegava a peste da sogra amaldiçoada, odiada mas desejada por causa dos dez milréis deixados mensalmente ali. A filha dum cane vinha, emproada porque tinha de seu aí pra uns trinta contos, nem sei, e desbaratava com ela por um nadinha.

Podia ter amor ãa mulher já feita, com trinta anos de seca no prazer, corpo cearense e alma ida-se embora desde muito!... E o Paulino, faziam já quase quatro anos, dos oito meses de vida até agora, que não sabia o que era calor de peito com seio, dois braços apertando a gente, uma palavra “figliuolo mio” vinda em cima dessa gostosura, e a mesma boca enfim se aproximando da nossa cara, se ajuntando num chupão leve que faz bulha tão doce, beijo de nossa mãe...

Paulino sobrava naquela casa.

E sobrava tanto mais, que o esperto do maninho mais velho, quando viu que tudo ia mesmo por água a baixo, teve um anjo-da-guarda caridoso que depositou na língua do felizardo o micróbio do tifo. Micróbio foi pra barriguinha dele, agarrou tendo filho e mais filho a milhões por hora, e nem passaram duas noites, havia lá por dentro um footing tal da microbiada marchadeira, que o asfaltinho das tripas se gastou. E o desbatizado foi pro limbo dos pagãos sem culpa. Sobrou Paulino.

É lógico que ele não podia inda saber que estava sobrando assim tanto neste mundo duro, porém sabia muito bem que naquela casa não sobrava nada pra comer. Foi crescendo na fome, a fome era o alimento dele. Sem pôr consciência nos mistérios do corpo, ele acordava assustado. Era o anjo... que anjo-da-guarda! era o anjo da malvadeza que acordava Paulino altas horas pra ele não morrer. O desgraçadinho abria os olhos na escuridão cheirando rúim do quarto, e inda meio que percebia que estava se devorando por dentro. De primeiro ele chorava.

— Stá zito, guaglion!

Que “stá zito” nada! Fome vinha apertando... Paulino se levantava nas pernas de arco, e balanceando chegava afinal junto à cama da mãe. Cama... A cama grande ela vendeu quando esteve uma vez com a corda na garganta por causa do médico pedindo aquilo ou vinte bagarotes pela cura do pé arruinado. Deu os vinte vendendo a cama. Cortou o colchão pelo meio e botou a metade sobre aqueles três caixões. Essa era a cama.

Teresinha acordava da fadiga com a mãozinha do filho batendo na cara dela. Ficava desesperada de raiva. Atirava a mão no escuro, acertasse onde acertasse, nos olhos, na boca-do-estômago, pláa!... Paulino rolava longe com uma vontade legítima de botar a boca no mundo. Porém o corpo lembrava duma feita em que a choradeira fizera o salto do tamanco vir parar mesmo na boca dele, perdia o gosto de berrar. Ficava choramingando tão manso que até embalava o sono da Teresinha. Pequenininho, redondo, encolhido, talqualmente tatuzinho de jardim.

O sofrimento era tanto que acabava desprezando os pinicões da fome, Paulino adormecia de dor. De madrugada, o tempo esfriando acordava o corpo dele outra vez. Meio

esquecido, Paulino espantava de se ver dormindo no assoalho, longe do colchão da vó. Estava com uma dorzinha no ombro, outra dorzinha no joelho, outra dorzinha na testa, direito no lugar encostado no chão. Percebia muito pouco as dorzinhas, por causa da dor guaçu do frio. Engatinhava medroso, porque a escuridão estava já toda animada com as assombrações da aurora, abrindo e fechando o olho das frestas. Espantava as baratas e se aninhava no calor ilusório dos ossos da avó. Não dormia mais.

Afinal, ali pelas seis horas, já familiarizado com a vida por causa dos padeiros, dos leiteiros, dos homens cheios de comidas que passavam lá longe, um calor custoso nascia no corpo de Paulino. Porém a mãe também já estava acordando com as bulhas da vida. Sentada, vibrando com a sensualidade matinal que bota a gente louco de vontade, a Teresinha quase se arrebatava, apertando os braços contra a peitaria, o ventre e tudo, forçando tanto uma perna contra a outra que sentia uma dor nos rins. Nascia nela esse ódio impaciente e sem destino, que vem da muita virtude conservada a custo de muita miséria, virtude que ela mesma estava certa, mais dia menos dia tinha de se acabar. Procurava o tamanco, dando logo o estrilo com a mãe, “si não sabia que não era mais hora de estar na cama”, que fosse botar água na tina, etc.

Então Paulino, antes das duas mulheres, abandonava o calor nascente do corpo. Ia já rondar a cozinha porque estava chegando o momento mais feliz da vida dele: o pedaço de pão. E que domingo pra Paulino quando, porque um freguês pagou, porque a sogra apareceu, coisa assim, além do pão, bebiam café com açúcar!... Chupava depressa, queimando a língua e os beicinhos brancos, aquela água quente, sublime de gostosa por causa duma pitadinha de café. E saía comer o pão lá fora.

Na frente da casa não, era lá que ficavam a torneira, as tinas e o coaral. As mulheres estavam fazendo suas lavagens de roupa e era ali na piririca: briga e descompostura o tempo todo. Quem pagava era o reinação do Paulino. Acabava sempre com um pão mal comido e algum cocre de inhapa bem no alto do coco, doendo fino.

Deixou de ir para lá. Abria a porta só encostada da cozinha, descia o degrau, ia correcorrendo se rir pra alegria do frio companheiro, por entre os tufo de capim e as primeiras moitas de carrapicho. Esse matinho atrás da casa era a floresta. Ali Paulino curti as penas sem disfarce. Sentado na terra ou dando com o calcanhar nos olhos dos formigueiros, principiava comendo. De repente quase caía levantando a perninha, ai! do chão, pra matar a saúva ferrada no tornozelinho de bico. Erguia o pão caído e recomeçava o almoço, achando graça no requetrequê que a areia ficada no pão, ganzava agora nos dentinhos dele.

Mas não esquecia da saúva não. Pão acabado, surgia, distraíndo a fome nova, o guerreiro crila. Procurava uma lasca de pau, ia caçar formigas no matinho. Afinal, matinho não muito pequeno porque dava atrás na várzea, e não havia sinão um lembrete de cerca fechando o terreno. Mas nunca Paulino penetrou na várzea que era grande demais pra ele. Lhe bastava aquele matinho gigante, sem planta com nome, onde o sol mais preguiça nunca deixava de entrar.

Graveto em punho lá ia em busca de saúva. As formiguinhas menores, não se importava com elas não. Só arremetia contra saúva. Quando achava uma, perseguia-a paciente, rompendo entre os ramos entrançados dos arbustos, donde muitas vezes voltava com a mão, a perna ardendo por ter relado nalgum mandarová. Trazia a saúva pro largo e levava horas brincando com a desgraçadinha, até a desgraçadinha morrer.

Quando ela morria, o sofrimento recomeçava pra Paulino, era fome. O sol já estava alto, porém Paulino sabia que só depois das fábricas apitarem havia de ter feijão com arroz nos tempos ricos, ou novo pedaço de pão nos tempos felizmente mais raros. Batia uma fome triste nele que outra saúva combatida não conseguia distrair mais. Banzava na desgraça, melancolizado com a repetição do sofrimento cotidiano. Sentava em qualquer coisa, descansando a bochecha na mão, cabeça torcidinha, todo penaroso. Afinal, nalguma sombra rendada, aprendeu a dormir de fome. Adormecia. Sonhava não. As moscas vinham lhe bordando de asas e zumbidos a boquinha aberta, onde um resto de adocicado ficou. Paulino dormindo fecha de repente os beiços caceteados, se mexe, abre um pouco as perninhas encolhidas e mija quente em si.

Sono curto. Acordou muito antes das fábricas apitarem. Mastigou a boca esfomeada, recolheu com a língua os sucos perdidos nos beiços. Requetreque de areia e uma coisinha meia doce no paladar. Tirou com a mão pra ver o que era, eram duas moscas. Moscas sim, porém era meio adocicado. Tornou a botar as moscas na língua, chupou o gostinho delas, enguliu.

Foi assim o princípio dum disfarce da fome por meio de todas as coisas engulíveis do matinho. Não tardou muito e virou “papista” como se diz: trocou a caça das saúvas pelos piqueniques de terra molhada. Comer formiga então... Junto dos montinhos dos formigueiros encostava a cara no chão com a língua pronta. Quando formiga aparecia, Paulino largava a língua hábil, grudava nela a formiga, e a esfregando no céu-da-boca sentia um redondinho infinitesimal. Punha o redondinho entre os dentes, trincava e engulia o guspe ilusório. E que ventura si topava com alguma correição! De gatinhas, com o fiofó espiando as nuvens, lambia o chão tamanduamente. Apagava uma carreira viva de formiga em três tempos.

Nessa esperança de matar a fome, Paulino foi descendo a coisas nojentas. Isto é, descendo, não. Era incapaz de pôr jerarquia no nojo, e até o último comestível inventado foi formiga. Porém não posso negar que uma vez até uma barata... Agarrou e foi-se embora mastigando, mais inocente que vós, filhos dos nojos. Porém, compreende-se: eram alimentos que não davam sustância nenhuma. Fábrica apitava e o arroz-com-feijão vinha achar Paulino empanturrado de ilusões, sem fome. Pegou aniquilando, escurecendo que nem dia de inverno.

Teresinha não reparava. O buçal da virtude estava já tão gasto que via-se o momento da moça desembestar livre, vida fora. Foi o tempo em que tapa choveu por todas as partes de Paulino cegamente, caísse onde caísse. Quando ela vinha pra casa já escutava a companhia do Fernandez, carroceiro. Era um mancebo de boa tradição, desempenado, meio lerdo, porém com muita energia. Devia de ter vinte-e-cinco anos, si tinha! e se

engraçou pela envelhecida, quem quiser saiba por que. Buçal arrebentou. Quando ele pôde carregar a trouxa pra ela, veio até a casa, entrou que nem visita, e Teresinha ofereceu café e consentimento. A velha, sujando a língua com os palavrões mais incompreensíveis, foi dormir na cozinha com Paulino espantado.

Em todo caso a bóia melhorou, e o barrigudinho conheceu o segredo da macarronada. Só que tinha muito medo do homem. Fernandez fizera uma festinha pra ele na primeira aparição, e quando saiu do quarto de-manhã e beberam café todos juntos, Paulino confiado foi brincar com a perna comprida do homem. Mas tomou com um safanão que o fez andar de orelha murcha um tempo.

E lógico que a sogra havia de saber daquilo, soube e veio. Teresinha muito fingida falou bom-dia pra ela e a mulatona respondeu com duas pedras na mão. Porém agora Teresinha não carecia mais da outra e refricou, assanhada feito irara. Bateboca tremendo! Paulino nem tinha pernas pra abrir o pala dali, porque a velha apontava pra ele, falando “meu neto” que mais “meu neto” sem parada. E mandava que Teresinha agora se arranjasse, porque não estava pra sustentar cachorrice de italiana acueirada com espanhol. Teresinha secundava gritando que espanhol era muito mais melhor que brasileiro, sabe! sua filha de negro! mãe de assassino! Não careço da senhora, sabe! mulata! mulatona! mãe de assassino!

— Mãe de assassino é tu, sua porca! Tu que fez meu filho sê infeliz, maldiçoada do diabo, carcamana porca!

— Saia já daqui, mãe de assassino! A senhora nunca se amolou com seu neto, agora vem com prosa aí! Leve seu neto si quiser!

— Pois levo mesmo! coitadinho do inocente que não sabe a mãe que tem, sua porca! porca!

Suspendeu Paulino esperneando, e lá se foi batendo salto, ajeitando o xale de domingo, por entre as curiosas raras do meidia. Inda virou, aproveitando a assistência, pra mostrar como era boa:

— Escute! Vocês agora, não pago mais aluguel de casa pra ninguém, ouviu! Protegi você porque era mulher de meu filho desgraçado, mas não tou pra dar pouso pra égua, não!

Mas a Teresinha, louca de ódio, já estava olhando em torno pra encontrar um pau, alguma coisa que matasse a mulatona. Esta achou melhor partir duma vez, triunfante ploque ploque.

Paulino ia ondulando por cima daquelas carnes quentes. Chorava assustado, não tendo mais noção da vida, porque a rua nunca vista, muita gente, aquela mulher estranha e ele sem mãe, sem pão, sem matinho, sem vó... não sabia mais nada! meu Deus! como era desgraçado! Teve um medo pavoroso no corpinho azul. Inda por cima não podia chorar à vontade porque reparara muito bem, a velha tinha um sapatão com salto muito grande, pior que tamanco. Devia de ser tão dóido aquele salto batendo no dentinho, rasgando o beijo da gente... E Paulino horrorizado enfiava quase as mãozinhas na boca, inventando até bem artisticamente a função da surdina.

— Pobre de meu neto!

Com a mão grande e bem quente pegou na cabecinha dele, ajeitando-a no pescoço de borracha. Carregado gostoso naqueles braços bons, com o xale dando inda mais quentura pra gente ser feliz... E a velha olhou pra ele com olhos de piedade confortante... Meu Deus! que seria aquilo tão gostoso!... É assomo de ternura, Paulino. A velha apertou-o no peito abraçando, encostou a cara na dele, e depois deu beijos, beijos, revelando pro piá esse mistério maior.

Paulino quis sossegar. Pela primeira vez na vida o conceito de futuro se alargou até o dia seguinte na idéia dele. Paulino sentiu que estava protegido, e no dia seguinte havia de ter café-com-açúcar na certa. Pois a velha não chegara a boca ajuntada bem na cara dele e não dera aquele chupão que barulhava bom? Dera. E a idéia de Paulino se encompridou até o dia seguinte, imaginando um canecão do tamanho da velha, cheio de café-com-açúcar. Foi se rir pras duas lágrimas piedosas dela, porém bem no meio da gota apareceu uma botina que foi crescendo, foi crescendo e ficou com um tacão do tamanho da velha. Paulino reprimou chorando baixo, que nem nas noites em que o acalanto da manha embalava o sono da Teresinha.

— Ara! também agora basta de chorar! Ande um pouco, vamos!

O salto da botina encompridou enormemente e era a chaminé do outro lado da rua. O pranto de Paulino parou, mas parou engasgado de terror. Chegaram.

Esta era uma casa de verdade. Entrava-se no jardimzinho com flor, que até dava vontade de arrancar as sempre-vivas todas, e, subida a escadinha, havia uma sala com dois retratos grandes na parede. Um homem e uma mulher que era a velha. Cadeiras, uma cadeira grande cabendo muita gente nela. Na mesinha do meio um vaso com uma flor cor-de-rosa que nunca murchou. E aquelas toalhinhas brancas nas cadeiras e na mesa, que devia distrair a gente cortando tantas bolotinhas...

O resto da casa assombrou desse mesmo jeito o despatriado. Depois apareceram mais duas moças muito lindas, que sempre viveram de saia azul-marinho e blusa branca. Olharam duras pra ele. Aqueles quatro olhos negros desceram lá do alto e tuque! deram um cocre na alma de Paulino. Ele ficou tonto, sem movimento, grudado no chão.

Daí foi uma discussão terrível. Não sei o que a velha falou, e uma das normalistas respondeu atravessado. A velha asperejou com ela falando no “meu neto”. A outra respondeu gritando e uma tormenta de “meu neto” e “seu neto” relampagueou alto sobre a cabeça de Paulino. A história foi piorando. Quando não teve mais agudos pras três vozes subirem, a velha virou um bofete na filha da frente, e a outra fugindo escapou de levar com a colher bem no coco.

A invenção de Paulino não podia ajuntar mais terrores. E o engraçado é que o terror pela primeira vez despertou mais a inteligência dele. O conceito de futuro que fazia pouco atingira até o dia seguinte, se alongou, se alongou até demais, e Paulino percebeu que entre raivas e maus-tratos havia de passar agora o dia seguinte inteiro e o outro dia seguinte e outro, e nunca mais haviam de parar os dias seguintes assim. É lógico: sem ter a soma dos números, mais de três mil anos de dias seguintes sofridos, se ajuntaram no susto do piá.

— Vá erguer aquela colher!

As metades do arco se moveram ninguém sabe como, Paulino levantou a colher do chão que deu pra velha. Ela guardou a colher e foi lá dentro. A varanda ficou vazia. Estava tudo arranjado, e as sombras da tarde rápida entravam apagando as coisas desconhecidas. Só a mesa do centro inda existia nitidamente, riscada de vermelho e branco. Paulino foi se encostar na perna dela. Tremia de medo. Chiava um cheiro gostoso lá dentro, e da sombra da varanda um barulhinho monótono, tique-taque, regulava as sensações da gente. Paulino sentou no chão. Uma calma grande foi cobrindo o pensamento aniquilado: estava livre do tacho da velha. Ela não era que nem a mãe não. Quando tinha raiva não atirava botina, atirava uma colher levinha, brilhando de prateada. Paulino se encolheu deitado, encostando a cabeça no chão. Estava com um sono enorme de tanto cansaço nos sentimentos. Não havia mais perigo de receber com tamanco no dente, a mulatona só atirava aquela colher prateada. E Paulino ignorava se colher doía muito, batendo na gente. Adormeceu bem calmo.

— Levante! que é isso agora! Como esse menino deve ter sofrido, Margot! Olhe a magreira dele!

— Pudera! com a mãe na gandaia, festando dia e noite, você queria o que, então!

— Margot... você sabe bem certo o que quer dizer puta, hein? Eu acho que a gente pode falar que Paulino é filho-da-puta, não?

Se riram.

— Margot!

— Senhora!

— Mande Paulino aqui pra dar comida pra ele!

— Vá lá dentro, menino!

As pernas de arco balançaram mais rápidas. Uma cozinha em que a gente não podia nem se mexer. A velha boa inda puxou o capacho da porta com o pé:

— Sente aí e coma tudo, ouviu!

Era arroz-com-feijão. A carne, Paulino viu com olho comprido ela desaparecer na porta da varanda. Menino de quatro anos não come carne, decerto imaginou a velha, meia em dificuldades sempre com a educação das filhas.

E a vida mudou de misérias pra Paulino, mas continuou a sempre miserável. Bóia melhorou muito e não faltava mais, porém Paulino estava sendo perseguido pelos vícios do matinho. Nunca mais a mulatona teve daqueles assomos de ternura do primeiro dia, era uma dessas cujo mecanismo de vida não difere muito do cumprimento do dever. Aquele beijo fora sincero, mas apenas dentro das convenções da tragédia. Tragédia acabara e com ela a ternura também. E no entanto ficara muito em Paulino a saudade dos beijos...

Quis se chegar pras moças porém elas tinham raiva dele, e podendo, beliscavam. Assim mesmo a mais moça, que era uma curiosa do apá virado e nunca tirava as notas de Margot na escola, Nininha, é que tomara pra si dar banho no Paulino. Quando chegava no sábado, o pequeno meio espantado e muito com medo de beliscão, sentia as carícias dum rosto lindo em fogo se esfregando no corpinho dele. Acabava sempre aquilo, a menina com

uma raiva bruta, vestindo depressa a camisolinha nele, machucando, “fica direito, peste!” pronto: um beliscão que doía tanto, meu Deus!

Paulino descia a escada da cozinha, ia muito jururu pelo corredorzinho que dava no jardim da frente, puxava com esforço o portão sempre encostado, sentava, punha a mão na bochecha, cabecinha torcida pro lado e ficava ali, vendo o mundo passar.

E assim, entre beliscões e palavras duras que ele não entendia nada, “menino fogueto”, “filho de assassino”, ele também passava feito o mundo: magro escuro terroso, cada vez se aniquilando mais. Mas o que que havia de fazer? Bebia o café e já falavam que fosse comer o pão no quintal sinão, porco! sujava a casa toda. Ia pro quintal, e a terra estava tão úmida, era uma tentação danada! Nem ele punha reparo que era uma tentação porque nenhum cocre, nenhuma colherada, o proibira de comer terra. Treque-trrleque, mastigava um bocadinho, engulia, mastigava outro bocadinho, engulia. E ali pelas dez horas sempre, com a pressa das normalistas assombrando a calma da vida, tinha que assentar naquele capacho pinicando, tinha que engulir aquele feijão-com-arroz num fastio impossível...

— Minha Nossa Senhora, esse menino não come! Ôi só com que cara ele olha pra comida! Pra que que tu suja a cara de terra desse jeito, hein, seu porcalhão!

Paulino assustava, e o instinto fazia ele engulir em seco esperando a colherada nunca vinda. Porém desta vez a velha tivera uma iluminação no mecanismo:

— Será que!... Você anda comendo terra, não! Deixe ver!

Puxou Paulino pra porta da cozinha, e com aquelas duas mãos enormes, queimando de quentes:

— Abra a boca, menino!

E arregaçava os beiços dele. Terra nos dentinhos, na gengiva.

— Abra a boca, já falei!

E o dedo escancarava a boquinha terrenta, língua aparecendo até a raiz, todinha da cor do barro. A sova que Paulino levou nem se conta! Principiou com o tapa na boca aberta, que até deu um som engraçado, bóo! e não posso falar como acabou de tanta mistura de cocre beliscão palmadas. E palavreado, que afinal pra criancinha é tabefe também.

Então é que principiou o maior martírio de Paulino. Dentro da casa, nenhuma queria que ele ficasse, tinha mesmo que morar no quintal. Antes do pão porém, já vinha uma sova de ameaças, tão dura, palavra-de-honra: Paulino descia a escadinha completamente abobado, sentindo o mundo bater nele. E agora?... Pão acabou e a terra estava ali toda oferecida chamando. Mas aquelas três beliscadoras não queriam que ele comesse a terra gostosa... Oh tentação pro pobre santantoninho! queria comer e não podia. Podia, mas depois lá vinha de hora em hora o dedão da velha furando a boquinha dele... Como?... Não como?... Fugia da tentação, subia a escadinha, ficava no alto sentado, botando os olhos na parede pra não ver. E a terra sempre chamando ali mesmo, boa, inteirinha dele, cinco degraus fáceis em baixo...

Felizmente não sofreu muito não. Três dias depois, não sei si brincou na porta com os meninos de frente, apareceu tossindo. Tosse aumentou, foi aumentando, e afinal Paulino

escutou a velha falar, fula de contrariedade, que era tosse-de-cachorro. Si haviam de levar o menino no médico, em vez, vamos dar pra ele o xarope que dona Emília ensinou. Nem xarope de dona Emília, nem os cinco milréis ficados no boticário mais chué do bairro sararam o coitadinho. Tinha mesmo de esperar a doença, de tanto não encontrando mais sonoridade pra tossir, ir-se embora sozinha.

O coitado nem bem sentia a garganta arranhando, já botava as mãozinhas na abeça, inquieto muito! engulindo apressado pra ver se passava. Ia procurando parede pra encostar, vinha o acesso. Babando, olho babando, nariz babando, boca aberta não sabendo fechar mais, babando numa conta. O coitadinho sentava no lugar onde estava, fosse onde fosse porque sinão caía mesmo. Cadeira girava, mesa girava, cheiro de cozinha girava. Paulino enjoado atordoado, quebrado no corpo todo.

— Coitado. Olhe, vá tossir lá fora, você está sujando todo o chão, vá!

Ele arranjava jeito de criar força no medo, ia. Vinha outro acesso, e Paulino deitava, boca beijando a terra mas agora sem nenhuma vontade de comer nada. Um tempo estirado passava. Paulino sempre na mesma posição. Corpo nem doía mais, de tanto abatimento, cabeça não pensando mais, de tanto choque aguentado. Ficava ali, e a umidade da terra ia piorar a tosse e havia de matar Paulino. Mas afinal aparecia uma forcinha, e vontade de levantar. Vai levantando. Vontade de entrar. Mas podia sujar a casa e vinha o beliscão no peitinho dele. E não valia de nada mesmo, porque mandavam ele pra fora outra vez...

Era de-tarde, e os operários passavam naquela porção de bondes... enfim divertia um bocado pelo menos os olhos ramelosos. Paulino foi sentar no portão da frente. A noite caía agitando vida. Um ventinho poento de abril vinha botar a mão na cara da gente, delicado. O sol se agarrando na crista longe da várzea, manchava de vermelho e verde o espaço fatigado. Os grupos de operários passando ficavam quase negros contra a luz. Tudo estava muito claro e preto, incompreensível. Os monstros corriam escuros, com moços dependurados nos estribos, badalando uma polvadeira vermelha na calçada. Gente, mais monstros e os cavalões nas bonitas carroças.

Nesse momento a Teresinha passou. Vinha nuns trinquês, só vendo! sapato amarelado e meia roseando uma perna linda mostrada até o joelho. Por cima um vestido azul claro mais lindo que o céu de abril. Por cima a cara da mamãe, que beleza! com aquele cabelo escuro fazendo um birote luzido, e os bandós azulando de napolitano o moreno afogueado pelas cores de Paris.

Paulino se levantou sem saber, com uma burundanga inexplicável de instintos festivos no corpo, “Mamma!” que ele gritou. Teresinha virou chamada, era o figliuolo. Não sei o que despencou na consciência dela, correu ajoelhando a sedinha na calçada, e num transporte, machucando bem delicioso até, apertou Paulino contra os peitos cheios. E Teresinha chorou porque afinal das contas ela também era muito infeliz. Fernandez dera o fora nela, e a indecisa tinha moçado duma vez. Vendo Paulino sujo, aniquiladinho, sentiu toda a infelicidade própria, e meia que desacostumou de repente da vida enfeitada que andava levando, chorou.

Só depois é que sofreu pelo filho, horroroso de magro e mais frágil que a virtude. Decerto estava sofrendo com a mulatona da avó... Um segundo matutou levar Paulino consigo. Porém, escondendo de si mesma o pensamento, era incontestável que Paulino havia de ser um trambolho pau nas pândegas. Então olhou a roupinha dele. De fazenda boa não era, mas enfim sempre servia.

Agarrou nesse disfarce que apagava a consciência, “meu filho está bem tratado”, pra não pensar mais nele nunca mais. Deu um beijo na boquinha molhada de gosma ainda, procurou engulir a lágrima, “figliuolo”, não foi possível, apertou muito, beijou muito. Foi-se embora arranjando o vestido.

Paulino de-pezinho, sem um gesto, sem um movimento, viu afinal lá longe o vestido azul desaparecer. Virou o rostinho. Havia um pedaço de papel de embrulho, todo engordurado, rolando engraçado no chão. Dar três passos pra pegá-lo... Nem valia a pena. Sentou de novo no degrau. As cores da tarde iam cinzando mansas. Paulino encostou a bochecha na palminha da mão e meio enxergando, meio escutando, numa indiferença exausta, ficou assim. Até a gosma escorria da boca aberta na mão dele. Depois pingava na camisolinha. Que era escura pra não sujar.

NÍZIA FIGUEIRA, AT YOUR SERVICE

Belazarte told me this story:

Well, I think it's so. You know I'm a Christian... Happiness, unhappiness, it has no meaning whatsoever if you're using yourself as comparison. Unhappiness is a phenomenon of analogy, you can only say "attendite et videte" once you take a look at your neighbor. Monkey, look at your tail! is really Christian philosophy meeting the need for happiness in this cruel world. It's even better when you believe in the illusion of vanity, so, instead of saying you're more unhappy, you say you're happier... I mentioned a tail and now recall the story of the elephant, you know? Well, you see, one day the elephant bumped into a tiny hummingbird fluff laying on a leaf, then he tied the fluff to his tail with a thick rope and started strutting around the greenery of the jungle. A young elephant who was in need of a male to fulfill her destiny, saw the beautiful creature swaying this way, swaying that way, billowing like a calm wave, and was smitten. She said, "What a good-looking elephant, *porca la miseria!*" He promptly turned to her, irked, and, "Bite your tongue, will you? I'm no elephant, no ma'am! I'm a hummingbird." And off he went. There's a type who at least knew how to invent happiness with a bespeckled illusion. It's ridiculous, I know, but dang it! Not everyone is able to reach the greatness of having himself as a reference. As for what might happen, like with Nízia, well, my man! I can imagine only she herself will know... Who's Nízia?

...her name was... I can't remember if it was Ferreira, Figueira... something with "eira", I believe it was Nízia Figueira. She belonged to an authentic Brazilian family, *carijo irumoguara*²³ with the Figueira ascendancy going back to the 17th century.

In 1886, after having sold a worthless farm near Pinda, her father came to São Paulo and hemmed and hawed until, with the money he saved, he finally had the guts to buy this thin stretch of low land, which back then was far from the city, in what today is the Lapa neighborhood. In '88, Nízia, sixteen years in bloom, kept in check under old Figueira's eye, who was always at home, left with her old man and the black servant they had, to live in the ranch they had just bought. No sooner they arrived, old Figueira fell ill due to an infection that the scamp of a young apothecary thought was a boil. The result was that the infection took over and Figueira rotted till he kicked the bucket. His pain was such that, if he had any

²³ The *carijós* were an indigenous group that lived in the area that goes from the territory of Cananeia, in the state of São Paulo, down to the Lagoa dos Patos in the state of Rio Grande do Sul, in the 16th century. Irumoguara, according to the tipi dictionary found at <<http://www.brasiliana.com.br/obras/o-tupi-na-geografia-nacional/pagina/254/texto>>, means the companion, the one who lives with others. If one considers how important it was for Andrade to include Native Brazilian vocabulary, thought the combination is new, it reinforces Nízia's Brazilian background.

close neighbors, they wouldn't be able to sleep with all the moaning that not all the pride held in his traditional body could avoid from leaving his mouth, ripped from his heart with no little shame, to tell the truth.

Nízia was all alone in the world, only seventeen years old and offensively naive, peeling with stupidity, let's be honest. Alone with "cousin Rufina", as she was used to calling the black servant since she was little. Cousin Rufina was twenty something and full of energy... They planted pear trees, peach trees, in a large orchard. Nízia knitted and knitted booties, suits, wool caps for the children of other people. Cousin Rufina sold everything in the city, kale today, green peaches for stewing the next day, wool knits every day. I know that it was more than enough for them to make a living and even for Nízia to save some for her old age.

Cousin Rufina would go out carrying a chest, visiting one house, then another; she soon had a bunch of customers, she was full of guile. A pear as a gift for *dona* Maria's daughter, sugar candy for *seu* Guimaraes' children, and how was *seu* Quitinho feeling; she always brought home money for their keep. Except for the nickel that stayed at the store, of course, in exchange for a shot of good *pinga*, in God's name.

Nízia would look at all the dough becoming more massive, but she didn't know that money should be spent on other things; so, the *milreis* kept on piling up in the drawer of the bureau. Cousin Rufina started to know things... She never said anything, quietly preparing dinner, a pipe on her thick lips. But she was getting better at knowing... Soon enough, she was stuck on a crafty *canhambora* who lived in the surroundings of the city. The son-of-a-whore used her to his heart's content, leaving her big-bellied and, to top it all, disappeared suddenly, taking thirty-six *milreis* he had asked her to lend him. Nízia looked at that belly, as round as a saucepan, and finally asked.

"Lawd, miss Nízia! It's an ailment! You work n' work, yer belly pop up! Massa Marconde's wife promise me sea lemon, sea lemon fix me right!"

Nízia thought of her father's infection and was scared.

That belly grew so that one day it became pressing for the tiny tot to come out. Cousin Rufina came running to the ranch, leaving the chest somewhere, she didn't even know in whose house, just stopping at the store on her way for a bottle of *pinga*²⁴.

"Well, aren't you on the right path, young woman!"

"Mind yer own bizniz, will'ya?"

She got home, closed the door to her room and her baby started making its way out, without cousin Rufina letting out a groan, just like the creatures in the woods. Nízia kept asking her to make dinner. "I can't! You make it!", she grunted, strangled. Whatever could be going on with cousin Rufina? It was the infection, without a doubt. Nízia was dying with the fear of ending up alone.

"You jus' lie down, don't you worry 'bout me!"

²⁴ Booze.

is what she heard whenever she went to the door, drawn by muffled cries, like the bawling of a baby. It wasn't bawling, naturally cousin Rufina was agonizing with the infection... what could she do? Since she had been told to lie down, that's what she did. She asked the darkness. There was no more crying in the other room. It was probably nothing. A bit distressed, she fell asleep.

When cousin Rufina realized there was absolute silence in the house, she got up. *Pinga* now filled the place the little black baby, dreaming in a checkered blanket, had come out of. She needed courage. So, she went to the kitchen cabinet and took out the wine, guzzling from the bottle. She bundled up the baby and went out, yes, she did! Occasionally, she would sit down on the side of the road, sweat pouring because of the pain, her eyes like clouded glass... The sun hadn't even come out yet, and the black woman no longer had her baby in her arms. Money? She had forgotten to bring any, you see. The first half open store she saw and that was it: she went in. It was quite a bender. Only when the sun was high in the sky did she push open the door to the house, laughing foolishly, her eyes melting into random tears, singing "Our people are free, play the Zumba, Zumba, Zumba..." Nízia fell into tears with fright, thinking that cousin Rufina had gone berserk. She was far from berserk! It was all the misfortune mixed with the booze being driven out.

Cousin Rufina was ill for a few days. Then she got better and learned. When she had an urge, she would go to the watering holes to find herself a man who'd be willing. I don't know how she did it, but she never had an infection again. And it was from that night on she started calling Nízia "my girl".

Nízia was twenty, twenty-one, twenty-two, still forgotten at that godforsaken ranch. She was far from ugly, started to pretty herself up, went to the city a couple of times... She'd stand at the gate, every hour on the hour, someone was sure to pass by. They did, but barely took notice of her.

Well, until one day she went to a busy store in the city, leaned on the counter and waited. The salespeople passed, assisting everyone, can you believe they forgot to assist Nízia? They simply forgot, my man! I'm not kidding you! So, she called and asked for lace.

"Yes, ma'am, right away!"

Another salesman asked him to straighten out a pile of calico that was almost toppling over, he did, then someone else asked him for lace, he assisted the other customer and forgot Nízia. She stood there serenely waiting. When she realized that she wouldn't get her lace, she left, dejected. And Cousin Rufina went on buying whatever Nízia needed.

Desire, I can't say she didn't have any, she did. She'd look at the men passing, some were real nice, it might be good with them... But they passed so absentmindedly on the public street! Nízia would go back inside, in the dumps, always pondering the idea that it might really be good with them. But that was all a damp squib, woolen booties need attention or you might miss the number of stitches. Was there any time to think of men...?

What did grow was her friendship with cousin Rufina, they started talking more. Nízia would bring up questions after dinner, seated on the porch: *nhô*²⁵ Guimaraes daughter had finally gotten married with the young doctor; the case of the woman who had killed her husband on Major Quedinho Street, and so on. Then, when she had a toothache after sucking on some green lemons and they ate away at the enamel on her canine, cousin Rufina made her take a hefty shot of spirits. Nízia almost died of anxiety, got dizzy, hurled to high heavens. Cousin Rufina was always by her side, comforting, cleaning her soiled blouse, laying her down with such care... Her toothache got better, is what I know. And the friendship between the two grew tremendously. Nízia never drank again, but the other woman spilled her guts out with the booze and Nízia eventually found out all about the sadness in the world.

There was a moment in which humanity seemed to remember the existence of the exile, it was with *seu* Lemos, this moment. *Seu* Lemos was from Rio de Janeiro, don't know exactly where from, he was kind of pale, had a gnarly mustache and curly hair divided on one side. He'd come down the road, his short body at an easy gait, let's see, twice, three times a week to see how his sponsor was doing, at a huge farm that used to be where the Anastácio neighborhood is now. Maybe the bigshot, who had used his contacts to get him a job as a mailman when he had just arrived from Rio, could find something better for him. Man... did *seu* Lemos really want something better? He was placid, a man of few words, never lifting his gaze. He'd sit, stayed half an hour, answering what was asked of him, that he was doing fine, that Mother was doing fine, that work was fine... everything was fine for *seu* Lemos! Then, he'd pick up his hat and was on his way to his little rented house under the Chá Bridge.

"Your blessing, Mother."

"How's *seu* Anastácio?"

"He's fine."

They ate. So, I'm guessing that's the Anastácio that gave the neighborhood its name, right? Afterwards, *seu* Lemos would pick his teeth at the window. Night would fall, covering the Anhangabau with solitary darkness. The damp yards of the valley shed a *paina*²⁶ of fog over everything and stayed still for warmth. It was so quiet! Clack clack clack... Someone walking under the bridge. Frogs a heap. A light here, a light there, more frogs wanting to startle the silence, but it was no use! Silence would snuff out São Paulo so early, not even nine o'clock. *Seu* Lemos had nothing else to ruminate. He went off to throw the rest of the chewed pick in the garbage, crossed himself and fell on the bed half asleep.

His mother would still go on praying a couple of hours to some odd saints she uncovered from who-know-what corners harbored by Paradise. Saint Anastácio, the martyr; the novena of St. Nicolas; a prayer to ward off snake bites; a prayer to avert stomach cramps; eight I-b'lieve-Godabove so the city wouldn't catch fire. She ended with

²⁵ From "senhor", meaning "sir" or "mister".

²⁶ Silky fibers that envelop the seeds of several plants in the Asclepiadaceae, Bombacaceae and Typhaceae families, used in manufacturing.

the mass for the souls of the afterlife, of which she was scared to death. Candles were also melted till there were no more. There was such an expense with candles in that household, but São Paulo never burned to the ground, nobody never had stomach cramps in the family, and *seu* Lemos was never bitten by a snake when he delivered letters on Carmo Street, Santa Teresa Street and anywhere else.

He wasn't really a good son... He respected his mother, that he did, when it came to asking for her blessing, not smoking in her presence, saying good morning, good evening, taking her to see the dead Lord on the eve of Good Friday. But it was the poor woman who cooked, and washed, and starched all her son's clothes, etc. There was no talk. To tell you the truth, *seu* Lemos didn't talk to anyone. And when his mother died out of the blue, what he felt was the uneasy emptiness of someone who had never had to deal with rent or laundry.

It was then that, while picking his teeth, he began to take notice of the girl by the gate. Frankly, the next day, he went by just to see if there really was a girl by the gate at that ranch. There was Nízia, out of habit, kind of listless, very meek, not asking for anything, a neglected soul who wasn't waiting for anyone anymore.

When he picked his teeth again with the frog's racket that night, *seu* Lemos started to think that there was a good girl to get married to. He didn't reflect, or compare, or judge, or decide anything much, *seu* Lemos' thought came spaced out in decrees. Well, a decree came up in sluggish letters in his noggin: *that there's a girl who could be a good wife*. When tooth-picking the next day, he saw *You will marry the girl by the gate* written in his head. So, *seu* Lemos went to see Anastácio and, when he passed, he said hello to the girl at the gate. Nízia had forgotten herself so completely that she wasn't even startled with the greeting and answered. *Seu* Lemos, who saw no reason to visit his godfather at the farm every day, would walk by, greet her, amble on for another half a kilometer just as an excuse, loiter, his feet in the dusty weeds, stare at some harrow bush on the road, turn back and greet her again on his way to Anhangabaú.

After a month and a half of all this walking, when picking his teeth, *seu* Lemos spelled out a new decree that suddenly popped up in his noggin: *tomorrow is Sunday, smoking pipe day,*²⁷ *and you will ask for the hand of the girl at the ranch*. Notice the delight in these decrees: first, they just talk about the girl at the gate, now they're all the girl at the ranch, so much more useful for marriage.

At around midday cousin Rufina, bewildered, came see who was knocking; it was *seu* Lemos. Cousin Rufina almost sent the fellow on his way, but, after all, *dona* Nízia needed to know what it was about... probably a delivery.

"Come on in, mister!"

Seu Lemos waited less than two minutes on the porch; Nízia came as she was, with her knitting in her hands. He said he had come to ask for her hand in marriage, she

²⁷ In Portuguese this is a popular Brazilian rhyme: "Hoje é domingo, o teu pai é um gringo, na porta da venda, fumando cachimbo, o cachimbo é de barro, bate no jarro, o jarro é de ouro, bate no touro, o touro é valente, bate no tenente, o tenente é fraco, cai no buraco, o buraco é fundo, acabou-se o mundo...!"

answered, that's fine. She went back in to tell cousin Rufina to make some donuts with the coffee and stepped out again. They walked into the sunroom. Nízia went on knitting the booty she had started.

"What's your Christian name?"

She looked at him, befuddled, to ask what her Christian name was... she sure didn't know! *Seu* Lemos explained:

"My name is Lemos, José Lemos, at your service. I'd like to know what your name is."

"Nízia Figueira, at your service."

"Yes, ma'am."

Seu Lemos stopped twiddling his fingers on his legs.

"Do you enjoy knitting booties, *dona* Nízia?"

"I've gotten used to it."

"That's a real pretty one you're making, is it a gift?"

"No, sir, I sell them."

"Oh..."

"Cousin Rufina sells every single one I make."

"Really... Who's cousin Rufina?"

Seu Lemos went back to twiddling his fingers on his legs.

"The black lady who showed you in."

"Oh... but she's not really your cousin, right?"

"She's the help. I got used to calling her cousin Rufina ever since I was a child. And it stuck."

"That's funny."

Thirty-six, thirty-nine, forty-eight, done, she had finished a row.

"It's a beautiful day, don't you think?"

"Sure is."

"The sun's so bright, isn't it?"

"Oh, is it bothering you? I can close the window..."

"No, ma'am, it isn't really bothering me."

Then the coffee and milk with donuts were brought. They drank the coffee with milk and each ate two donuts. It was a splendid day outside, very bright, the hot sun spiraling like a boa constrictor over the fields. And in the spirit of Sunday that nature seems to embrace, the valley was utterly peaceful, with an air of laid back tranquility, voluptuously laid back, overflowing on the ground. They remained closed up in that dining room, *seu* Lemos picking his teeth, Nízia knitting, until they saw the first signs of crimson in the distant horizon bringing the day to an end.

"Well, I'll be on my way."

It was then that Nízia realized the unconceivable venture that this *seu* Lemos had brought her. She looked. She saw in front of her the affable mustache and hair, she smiled at them. Her muslin dress contoured the roundness of her body, a shape that was natural

then, almost plump, more plump than thin, full breasts, thick legs, short, hands stationed in the middle. On her face, brown eyes blurred a smooth flush that faded into a chin that looked like a Phrygian cap. A simple nose with largish nostrils that quivered in the same rhythm as the brown hair around her head. The smiling mouth was pale, her teeth closed and monotonous. She answered with an “already...”, part question, part assent, as calm as a Sunday.

“Yes, *dona* Nízia, it’s getting late. I’m pleased to have met you.”

An old disquiet discomposed her face.

“But you’ll be back!”

“I will. I can’t come too often because I believe I’ll be getting a new job, I work at the Post Office, you see. I think my godfather is going to get me something or other at the Treasury Department, but I’ll be back. Take care.”

She gave him her hand and her life.

“Take care...”

She walked him to the gate, and stood there while he went off on the dirt road. When he got to the main road, *seu* Lemos didn’t even look back to wave goodbye. Nízia went in. She walked around the house with little to do.

“These crochet doilies need washing, cousin Rufina.”

“Well, dinna I wash them week b’fore last, Godsake!”

“But look at the state they’re in!”

“I can’t see nothin’, but give ‘em here, I’ll wash ‘em! What I do see is that that there *seu* Lemos came over to mess up wi’ our lives here ‘n this house! You look like you can’t sit yerself down! There’s plenty o’ chairs! Sit, best if ya simmer down!”

“Why, didn’t you like my getting engaged?”

“I sure did. You need a man here to protec’ you, but like this? First man tha’ come knockin’, you go off and git engage’? You don’t even know who *seu* Lemos is, fer cryin’ out loud! Is he all square wi’ de police? That, I can’t tell you fer sure if he is!”

“You’re so vexed with me, cousin Rufina! He works at the Post Office!”

“Is that any job fer a decent fella? Decent folk ain’t got no need to be writin’ letters! Lookit us here, jus’ fine in our corner! My girl, you know nothin’ ‘bout this worl’, it’s more bad than good... This thing, ‘bout havin’ a job at the Posoffice, don’t seem proper, you hear, anyway...”

The went to bed. Nízia’s happiness had made her wretched. She couldn’t remember the past or the lapses of memory long gone, but the present was making her suffer. Once engaged, *seu* Lemos didn’t think it was necessary for him to go to his bride’s far off house every single day; the afternoon dragged itself in, but not *seu* Lemos. Nízia lived the concurring feelings of happiness and agony. That he loved her, I can’t say, but there was someone who remembered she existed. That gave her a funny taste, a taste of comparison, a taste of someone else, I don’t know if I’m making myself clear. All of a sudden, she was miserable. “He’ll be here tomorrow”, she murmured, agonizing in pleasure. And she repeated, “He’ll be here tomorrow” till Thursday.

Seu Lemos arrived just before six, having already dined. He handed her a gold brooch that said REMEMBRANCE.

"Thanks very much, *seu Lemos*."

"Have you been doing well?"

Etc.

He stayed till eight, I believe. *Nízia* working under the kerosene lamplight, he, observing the shadows in the ceiling. Once in a while, they would utter a comment that required no reply, just so they could acknowledge their coexistence, a little about the Post Office, a bit about the wool knitting. Cousin *Rufina* smoking in the kitchen. *Seu Lemos* stated he'd be back on Sunday and then they would settle the wedding.

He didn't show up on Sunday, he did on Tuesday. He had been harried about a visit he had had to make. Then he was required to take a letter from there to a big shot, the position at the Treasury Department was almost in his pocket. He had brought half a dozen handkerchiefs, he was sorry. *Nízia* went inside, genuinely happy, and brought back a scarf she had made by hand. *Seu Lemos* thanked her and said it was very pretty. And it was. All in tan with black stipes, the fringe was wool and silk.

Seu Lemos spent a week without coming around. He popped in at the ranch on Tuesday of the following week, all flustered, he had only had time to get her these carnations, he had been so tied up, he was sorry. His appointment had come out, the following day he would take office.

"It wasn't easy, but, finally!"

"Good things come to those who wait."

"Right, but it sure wasn't easy. I was almost giving up."

Seu Lemos was chattering more that day. On that day, woolen booties weren't part of the conversation, it was all about how bad work at the Post Office was, how good it was at the Treasury, wages were a lot better, his department boss, "I was told", and other things in this tune.

Nízia, just listening. The words settled inside her just like *paina* flowers, slowly coloring her soul in pink. Was he going to leave so soon? No matter! She didn't even realize it was nine, it was ten and much later, she was alone at her work, not knowing she was working, finishing row after row without end, finishing the booty, then another, listening. There was no commotion in the night. Men were asleep in São Paulo. There was no dust, or crickets, or wind, nothing at all! Enough silence to stop a gesture. *Nízia*, knitting without knowing. The glow of the lamplight fluttered around her head and, in the dry heat of the room, *seu Lemos'* words went on ringing, truly sonorous, like the sweet caress of a partner. *Nízia* suffered, you can't imagine how. She suffered for the woolen booty, she suffered because of cousin *Rufina* who was aging so fast, she suffered for those muslin dresses, always the same, she needed to make new ones; the crochet doilies hadn't been washed properly; she was a little - but much more - fatter than *seu Lemos*; and cousin *Rufina* had never brought carnations to be planted in their garden! Such a pretty flower...

All this unhappiness she had never felt, and that hurt so for those who can't have no other: it was *seu* Lemos' voice that produced it, placing, her partner's body like a mirror before her. She went to her bedroom and, for the first time since the black woman's infection, she didn't fall asleep right away. She didn't think, really, she was also the type for decrees. As no decrees came to her, she remained dispelled in the darkness, feeling only that she was alive, happy, leaning on her partner's life.

Seu Lemos didn't show up for two weeks.

"Well, now, if y'had ask him already where he live, I'd go there an' see if he was sick..."

On a Wednesday, *seu* Lemos appeared. His face was unshaven and his hands were empty, goodness! There was so much work! He expressed regret. And, so much responsibility! Delivering the mail was just that, done, but now? Taking down numbers here, taking down numbers there, and you can't make mistakes, because the book at the Department wasn't something you could scribble in and then cross out. Also, he still didn't know everything about the job, what a bother! He never thought it was so hard...!

The funny thing is that, right there, in front of Nízia, without taking notice of her, *seu* Lemos was reading the decrees in his head. Not that he read all of them in a loud voice like I'm doing, no! He'd stop speaking at times and read them to himself. And the difference now in *seu* Lemos' head, it was striking! Before, it was a great emptiness, vacuous, every three to five tooth pickings, a short decree. Now? Like reading the *Correio Paulistano*²⁸, "what a bother!", like he said... He left mulling over decrees nonstop.

Nízia stood by the door, part of her body in the night, part of it inside the house, split in two. She could honestly feel that *seu* Lemos, the poor thing! without intending to, but in fact, was slipping away from her. She went back in and had a hard time remembering what *seu* Lemos had talked about. She wanted to simmer down... poor thing! So much to do... She simmered down, but it was a lonely hush, of death and disintegration. When she felt totally alone, she no longer suffered and slept.

Seu Lemos only came back twenty days later, thin, just passing by. He saw Nízia by the gate and stopped to greet her. He had to see his sponsor because of a predicament over at the Department. She just stood there, a bit startled with the bearing of this stranger. She felt an excruciating pain.

"On your way back, will you come in as always, *seu* Lemos?"

"To tell you the truth, dona Nízia, I don't really know if I can stop; if I can, I will. But don't trouble yourself on my behalf, please. Take care."

"Take care,"

Seu Lemos had stirred a terrible unhappiness inside her. But she didn't wish *seu* Lemos not to come back, which would be – and in fact, was – better for her. *Seu* Lemos didn't come back. His godfather upbraided him due to the predicament, *seu* Lemos got

²⁸ Launched in June 1854, the *Correio Paulistano* was the first daily paper published in São Paulo and the third in Brazil.

angry with his godfather, *seu* Lemos left the Department, *seu* Lemos was dumbstruck with no decrees for a number of days, *seu* Lemos found a job at a fabric store... The poor man didn't want money, he wanted peace and quiet... He found a fat *mulatta* to cook for him, slept in Sebastiana's room one night and, after that, Sebastiana slept every night in his, which was so much roomier. Sebastiana would cook, but she wasn't a cook any longer: now she was a housewife, always wanting new clogs on her *sapota*²⁹ colored feet.

Nízia... A man came to live not far from her ranch. Soon after, a family became that man's neighbor. And, gradually, Guaicurus Street was formed, another neighborhood grew in this magnificent city. Some got along with each other, others didn't; nobody didn't get along with Nízia; cousin Rufina got along with everybody. Nízia serenely continued forgotten by the world.

What she did get into was booze. Loitering about the house, she wanted to kill a roach and found, under cousin Rufina's bed, the good-night bottle. She took some out of curiosity. Just a tiny bit, ashamed of the other woman finding out. The first sensation is awful, but the warmth that comes later is good.

Not a month later, cousin Rufina noticed. She didn't say a word, but brought a big jug of *pinga* and they started to drink together, the drinking sprees they had! I'm not saying it was every day, quite the contrary. Nízia worked, cousin Rufina sold, always the same. Their thirties, forties, that is, cousin Rufina was always much older than Nízia. She started to age fast, she did, a poor soul forgotten not by the world, but by life, almost senile, dragging her tormented body, huge knots in her ankles, cause of the arthritis. When the pain was too much, out came the heavy jug.

"You want some too, my girl?"

"Give me some, to warm me up."

"There ya go, my girl, drink up! The world is rotten, booze makes it all pretty for us."

It was a bender day. Cousin Rufina would start to talk and cry out loud. Nízia drank slowly, serenely. She never lost her cool, or let her features fall apart. Her mouth would open a little and the edge of her nose and veiled eyes were outlined in red. She placed her hand on the hair that was up on the left side of her head and shuddered. She sat on a chair, curved over, her hands on her knees, rocking her unsteady body, her eyes fixed on an otherworldly vision. Cousin Rufina, leaning on any wall she could find, bumping into the furniture, would pull Nízia up. Nízia stood, held on to the jug between the two of them and, leaning on each other, they'd go to the bedroom.

Cousin Rufina almost dropped her partner. She rolled on the bed, all out of her mind, crying, her leg hanging, one of her feet scraping the floor. Nízia would sit on the floor, her head leaning on cousin Rufina's leg. She drank. Would give the other woman the jug. Cousin Rufina would stroke Nízia's head clumsily and soothe her serene friend:

²⁹ The sapota (from the family Sapotaceae) tree produces an edible fruit called sapoti or sapota. It is brown inside and out and oval in shape.

“Tha’s right, m’girl... no more cryin’! Y’drink to yer heart’s content and all yer sorrow’s gone... You thought boozin’ weren’t no good... but it is! Booze... boozy... to comfort all the sorrow in this here cruel world... Yer son, I dunno where he at, nope. Yer son mus’ be ‘round an’ about, a young man, all grown up... betcha bumped inta ‘im and dinna even know ‘im, and yer son dinna know you...Don’t cry no more like that! The booze’ll make y’forgit yer son... booze, boozy, booze...”

Nízia blinked her dry eyes, blurred, half asleep. She was sliding. She drooled a wet kiss on cousin Rufina’s fat foot. Cousin Rufina wanted to stroke Nízia’s head to comfort her, she came to the edge of the bed and fell on top of Nízia, both fusing into one body. The jug fell and rolled a little, stopping in the middle of the room. Cousin Rufina still moved, disturbing Nízia. She ended up snuggling between Nízia’s legs, the gorged belly became a cozy headrest. She said “booze” a number of times and fell asleep. She slept with her body all contorted with all the life that had gone through, a body spent, her eyes half-open, crying.

Nízia was blinking, blinking, slowly, calmly. What peace in that room with no voices sounding in the house... How peaceful the nonexistent world was to her. She blinked some more. Her partially loose hair blended with the floor in the darkness of the evening. But there was still enough light on the Earth to outline that clear face on the floor. She was very serene, a small reflection of drool on her chin, a highlighted blush on her youthful face, not one wrinkle, pretty. Her lips opened for the sleepy sigh that would come out. She slept, calm, no dreams, no gestures.

Nízia was very happy.

NÍZIA FIGUEIRA, SUA CRIADA

Belazarte me contou:

Pois eu acho que tem. Você já sabe que sou cristão... Essas coisas de felicidade e infelicidade não têm significado nenhum, si a gente se compara consigo mesmo. Infelicidade é fenômeno de relação, só mesmo a gente olhando pro vizinho é que diz o “atendite et videte”. Macaco, olhe seu rabo! isso sim, me parece o cruzamento da filosofia cristã com a precisão de felicidade neste mundo duro. Inda é bom quando a gente inventa a ilusão da vaidade, e, em vez de falar que é mais desinfeliz, fala que é mais feliz... Toquei em rabo, e estou lembrando o caso do elefante, você sabe?... Pois não vê que um dia o elefante topou com uma penuginha de beijaflor caída numa folha, vai, amarrou a penuginha no rabo com uma corda grossa, e principiou todo passeando na serrapilheira da jungia. Uma elefanta mocetona que já estava carecendo de senhor pra cumprir seu destino, viu o bicho tão bonito, mexe pra cá, mexe pra lá, ondulando feito onda quieta, e se engraçou. Falou assim: “Que elefante mais bonito, porca la miséria!” Pois ele virou pra ela encrespado e: “Dobre a língua, sabe! Elefante não senhora! sou beijaflor.” E foi-se. Eis aí um tipo que ao menos soube criar felicidade com uma ilusão sarapintada. É ridículo, é, mas que diabo! nem toda a gente consegue a grandeza de se tomar como referência de si mesmo. Quanto a que lhe suceda como com a Nízia, homem! isso estou imaginando que só com ela mesmo... Que Nízia?

...se chamava... não me lembro bem si Ferreira, Figueira... qualquer coisa em “eira”, creio que era Nízia Figueira. Essa sim, de família nacional da gema, carijó irumoguara com Figueira ascendente até o século dezessete.

Quando em 1886, tendo vendido o sítio porcaria perto de Pinda, o pai dela veio pra S. Paulo, virou mexeu até que teve coragem de comprar com o dinheiro guardado esse fiapo de terra baixa, então bem longe da cidade, no hoje bairro da Lapa. Em 88 Nízia com dezesseis anos de mocidade, guardada com olho de Figueira pai sempre em casa, foi com o velho e a criada preta que tinham, morar na chacinha recém-comprada. Figueira pai, nem bem mudou, deu com o rabo na cerca, por causa dum antraz que o panema dum boticário novato imaginou que era furúnculo. Resultado: antraz tomou conta de Figueira que morreu apodrecido. Dores tamanhas, que si tivesse vizinho perto, não podia dormir de tanto gemido que todo o orgulho daquela carne tradicional não podia que não saísse, arrancado do coração meio com bastante vergonha até.

Nízia se via só neste mundo, contando apenas dezessete anos e uma inocência ofensiva, bimbando estupidez, valha a verdade. Só, mais a “prima Rufina”, como ela desde criancinha se acostumara a chamar a criada preta. Prima Rufina tinha vinte e muitos, e era bem enérgica... Plantaram pereira, pessegueiro, uma horta grande. Nízia tricotava,

tricotava, fazendo sapatinho, palitozinho, touquinha de lã pros filhos desses homens. Prima Rufina vendia tudo na cidade, couve hoje, pêssego verde pra doce amanhã, trabalhinho de lã todos os dias. Eu sei que chegava muito pra elas viverem e até Nízia guardar um pouco pra velhice.

Prima Rufina saía com o baú na mão, ia na casa dum, na casa doutro, se afreguesou num instante, com tanta lábia... Pêra de presente pra filha de dona Maria, bala-de-açúcar pros filhos de seu Guimarães, saber seu Quitinho como passou: trazia sempre dinheiro para o sustento. Menos o tostão ficado na venda, está claro, em troca de boa pinga de Deus.

Nízia olhava a dinheirama se engrossando, porém não sabia que dinheiro se gasta noutras coisas; e os milréis continuavam empilhados na gavetinha da cômoda. Prima Rufina é que aprendeu a vida... Não contava nada, quieta, preparando a janta, cachimbo no beijo grosso. No entanto bem que aprendeu... Não durou muito, se enrabichou por um canhambora safado que vivia ali mesmo, nas barbas da cidade. O filho-da-mãe abusou dela quanto quis, deixou prima Rufina barriguda e inda por cima desapareceu de repente, levando trinta-e-seis milréis que pedira de emprestado pra ela. Nízia olhava aquela barriga redondinha que nem arandela, afinal perguntou:

— Uai! nhá Nízia, é doença! estamo trabaia má, barriga empina. A muié de nhô Marconde já me prometeu limão-brabo pra mim, limão-brabo sara eu!

Nízia pensava no antraz do pai e tinha medo.

Barriga, de tanto crescer, teve um dia em que careceu de botar o desgraçadinho pra fora. Prima Rufina veio correndo pra chacra, deixou o baú por aí, nem sabia mais na casa de quem, só portando na venda pra comprar a garrafa de caninha.

— Olha que tu vais por bom caminho, rapariga!

— Cuide de seus negóçu, viu!

Chegou, fechou-se por dentro no quarto, e o filho veio vindo sem que prima Rufina desse um gemido, tal-e-qual os animais do mato. Nízia mandava ela preparar a janta. “Não posso! perpare mecê!” ela roncava apertado. Que seria que tinha sucedido pra prima Rufina!... era o antraz, na certa... Nízia teve mortes, do medo de ficar sozinha.

— Mecê se deite, num s’incomode cum eu!

escutava, quando vinha chamada por aqueles guinchos abalados, que nem choro de criança. Não era choro não, naturalmente prima Rufina que sofria com o antraz... Que havia de fazer? a outra mandava ela deitar, deitou. Perguntou pra escuridão. Não tinha nem guincho mais no outro quarto. Decerto não era nada. Meia inquieta adormeceu.

Prima Rufina quando viu que não tinha mais vida na casa, se levantou. Pinga já estava toda no lugar do tiziu saído e sonhando na capa de xadrez. Carecia de coragem. Pois foi na guarda-comida buscar o espírito-de-vinho e mamou na garrafa mesmo. Enrolou bem a criancinha e saiu, saiu sim! De vez em quando sentava no caminho, suor correndo bica de dor, vista feito vidraça de neblina... Não era madrugada ainda, a preta já não tinha mais filho no braço. Dinheiro? não vê que se esquecera de trazer! primeira venda entreaberta, pronto: entrou. Foi um pifão daqueles. Só dia velho, empurrou a porta da casa, rindo boba, com os olhos derretidos num choro sem querer, cantando o “Nossa gente já tá livre, toca

zumba zumba zumba”... Nízia até chorou de susto, pensando que prima Rufina estava maluca, que maluca nada! era mas era a desgraça, saindo de mistura com bebida.

Prima Rufina ficou doente uns dias. Depois sarou e aprendeu. Quando tinha vontade, ia nas vendas procurando homem disposto. Porém não sei como fazia, sei que nunca mais teve antraz. E foi desde aquela noite que ela pegou chamando Nízia de “mia fia”.

Nízia, vinte, vinte-e-um, vinte-e-dois anos, continuava esquecida naquela chacinha sem norte. Não tinha nada de feia, principiou se enfeitando, foi na cidade algumas vezes... Ficava no portão parada, sempre de hora em hora alguém havia de passar... Passava porém mal reparava em Nízia.

Pois até, uma feita, ela foi numa loja concorrida da cidade, se encostou no balcão esperando. Os caixeiros passavam, serviam todo mundo, pois não é que esqueceram de servir Nízia! esqueceram, meu caro! não estou fantasiando não! Então ela chamou um e pediu entremeio.

— Sim, senhora, já trago.

Outro pediu que ele endireitasse a pilha de chita quase caindo, começou a endireitar, endireitou, não sei quem pediu entremeio pra ele, serviu a outra freguesa e esqueceu Nízia. Ela ficou ali muito serena, esperando. Quando viu que entremeio não vinha mesmo, desolada foi-se embora. E prima Rufina continuou comprando tudo quanto Nízia precisava.

Desejos, não posso dizer que não tivesse desejos, teve. Olhava os homens passando, alguns eram bem simpáticos, havia de ser bom com eles... Mas iam tão distraídos na rua republicana já!... Nízia voltava murcha pra dentro, sempre matutando que havia de ser bom com eles. Porém isso era fogo-de-palha, sapatinho de lã toma atenção sinão a gente erra o número dos pontos. Que-dê tempo pra imaginar nos homens?...

O que cresceu foi a intimidade com prima Rufina, principiaram conversando mais. Nízia inventava curiosidades depois do jantar, ali sentadas na varanda: a filha de nhô Guimarães enfim tinha casado com o moço médico; o caso da mulher que matou o marido na rua Major Quedinho, e assim. Então quando teve aquela dor-de-dente, por causa duns limões verdes que andou chupando e comeram o esmalte dum canino, prima Rufina fez ela beber um trago importante de cachaça. Nízia quase morreu de angústia, ficou tonta, lançou que foi um horror. Prima Rufina sempre junto dela, consolando, limpando a blusa suja, deitando a bêbeda com tanto carinho... A dor-de-dente passou, isso é que eu sei. E a intimidade entre as duas aumentou muito. Nunca mais Nízia bebeu, mas a outra contava as razões da pinga, e Nízia acabou sabendo as tristezas do nosso mundo.

Teve um momento em que a humanidade pareceu se lembrar dessa apartada, foi com seu Lemos o caso. Seu Lemos era Fluminense não sei donde, meio pálido, com bigodinho torcido e cabelo crespo repartido do lado. Vinha pela estrada, sem custo carregando o corpo baixote, saber duas, três vezes por semana o protetor como passou, lá num sítio enorme que ficava mais ou menos onde é o bairro do Anastácio agora. Assim também o graúdo, que já dera pistolão pra ele entrar como carteiro do Correio nem bem

chegadinho do Estado do Rio, não se esquecia de arranjar coisa melhor. Homem... será mesmo que seu Lemos queria coisa melhor?... Indivíduo macio, fala rara, não olhando. Sentava, ficava ali uma boa meia-hora, respondendo si perguntavam, que ele ia bem, que mamãe também ia passando bem, que o serviço ia mui to bem... tudo ia bem pra seu Lemos! Depois pegava no chapéu, ia-se embora pra casinha, alugada debaixo do viaduto do Chá.

— Sua bênção, mamãe.

— Como vai seu Anastácio?

— Bem.

Comiam. Estou pensando que foi esse Anastácio que decerto deu nome ao bairro, não?... Depois seu Lemos ia palitar o dente na janela baixa. A noite vinha descendo, tapando o Anhangabaú com uma escuridão solitária. Os quintais molhados do vale, botavam uma paininha de névoa sobre o corpo e ficavam bem quietinhos pra esquentar. Era um silêncio!... Poc, pocpoc... Alguém passando no viaduto. Sapo, que era uma quantidade. Luzinha aqui, luzinha ali, mais sapo querendo assustar o silêncio, qual o quê! silêncio matava São Paulo cedinho, não eram nem nove horas. Seu Lemos não tinha mais no que imaginar. Ia direito botar o restico de palito mastigado no lixo, fazia o Nome-do-Padre e caía na cama já dormindo.

A mãe inda ficava rezando, uns pares de horas, pra cada santo esquisito que ela escarafunchava lá de quanta alcova tem o Paraíso. Santo Anastácio mártir; novena de S. Nicolau; oração pra evitar mordedura de cobra; oração pra evitar esbarro-de-estômago; oito Cre'm-dos-padres pra não pegar fogo na cidade. Acabava rezando a missa das almas do outro mundo, de que ela tinha um bruto dum pavor. Vela também se acabava. Era um despesão de vela naquela casa, porém São Paulo nunca pegou fogo, ninguém não teve esbarro-de-estômago na família, e seu Lemos nunca foi mordido de cobra quando ia na rua do Carmo, rua de Santa Teresa, por ali, entregando carta.

Filho bom ele não era não... Respeitar a mãe, respeitava nisso da gente tomar a bênção, não fumar na frente dela, falar bom-dia, boa-noite, levar ela ver Senhor Morto na noite de Sexta-feira Santa. Mas a pobre que cozinhasse, inda lavava e engomava toda a roupa do filho, etc. Nem conversa. Aliás seu Lemos não conversava mesmo com ninguém. E quando a mãe morreu de repente, o que sentiu foi o vazio inquieto de quem nunca lidara com pensão nem lavadeira.

E foi então que, palitando dente na janela, ele afinal principiou reparando naquela moça do portão. No dia seguinte, francamente, foi até lá só pra ver si tinha mesmo moça no portão daquela chacra. Nízia estava lá meia lânguida, mui mansa, não pedindo nada, só por costume duma esquecida que não esperava mais ninguém.

Quando palitou de novo a barulhada dos sapos nesta noite, seu Lemos começou a pensar que ali estava uma moça boa pra casar com ele. Não refletiu, não comparou, não julgou, não resolveu nem nada, seu Lemos pensava por decretos espaçados. Pois um decreto apareceu em letras vagarentas no bestunto dele: “Ali está uma moça boa pra casar com você.” Na palitação do dia seguinte, estava escrito na cabeça dele: “Você vai casar com

a moça do portão.” Então seu Lemos foi visitar o Anastácio e, passando, cumprimentou a moça do portão. Nízia estava já tão esquecida de si mesma que nem se assustou com o cumprimento, respondeu. Seu Lemos, que não via razão pra visita todo dia na chácara do padrinho, passava, cumprimentava, andava mais meio quilômetro pra disfarçar, ficava por ali dando com o pé na tiririca poeirenta, olhava qualquer pé de agarra-compadre do caminho, voltava, e cumprimentava de novo, rumo do Anhangabaú.

Depois de mês e meio de tanto bate-perna, seu Lemos, palitando, soletrou o decreto novo aparecido de repente na cachola: “Amanhã é domingo pé-de-cachimbo, e você vai pedir a mão da moça da chácara.” Note bem a graça desses decretos: de primeiro só falavam em moça do portão, mas agora vinham falando em moça da chácara, mais útil pra casar.

Ali pelo meio-dia, prima Rufina muito espavorida veio ver quem que estava batendo, era seu Lemos. Prima Rufina quase que dá o suíte no indivíduo, mas enfim dona Nízia havia de saber o que era aquilo. Decerto encomenda...

— Mecê entre!

Seu Lemos não esperou nem dois minutos no copiar, veio Nízia, assim como estava, com o trabalhinho no colo. Ele falou que vinha pedir a mão dela em casamento, ela respondeu que estava bom. Foi lá dentro dizer que prima Rufina preparasse também uns bolinhos pro café e voltou. Entraram na varanda. Nízia continuando o sapatinho principiado.

— Como é a sua graça?

Olhou pra ele espantada, perguntar como era a graça dela... decerto que ela é que não sabia! Seu Lemos esclareceu:

— Me chamo Lemos, José Lemos, seu criado. Queria também saber o nome da senhora.

— Nízia Figueira, sua criada.

— Sim senhora.

Seu Lemos parou de brincar com os dedos em cima das pernas.

— A senhora gosta muito de fazer sapatinho, dona Nízia?

— Já estou muito acostumada.

— Muito bonito esse que a senhora está fazendo, é presente?

— Não senhor, eu vendo.

— Ahn...

— Quantos eu faço, prima Rufina vende nas casas.

— Sei... Quem é prima Rufina?

Seu Lemos recomeçou brincando com os dedos em cima das pernas.

— A preta que recolheu o senhor.

— Ahn... mas ela não é prima da senhora, não?

— É minha criada. Me acostumei chamando ela de prima Rufina desde criança.

E ficou.

— Engraçado.

Trinta-e-seis, trinta-e-nove, quarenta-e-oito, pronto, acabava mais uma carreira.

— Está um dia bonito hoje, não?

— Está mesmo.

— Que sol mais claro, não?

— Quem sabe si está incomodando o senhor? eu fecho a janela...

— Não senhora, até nem me incomoda.

Veio o café-com-leite e bolinhos. Tomaram café-com-leite e comeram dois bolinhos cada um. Fazia uma tarde sublime lá fora, claro, claro, com o sol quente jiboando sobre os campos. E por esse instinto de domingo que a natureza parece ter, aquela baixada estava num sossego imenso, tomava um ar de repouso largado, voluptuosamente largado, esparramado no chão. Eles ficaram ali fechados naquela sala-de-jantar, seu Lemos palitava, Nízia tricotava, até que enxergaram os primeiros ruivores passarem longe no horizonte, entardecendo o dia.

— Bom, já vou indo.

Então Nízia percebeu a ventura inconcebível que lhe trazia aquele seu Lemos. Olhou. Viu na frente o bigode e o topete simpático, sorriu pra eles. O vestido de cassa recortava as redondezas do corpo dela, feito como era costume naquele tempo, quase gordo, mais gordo que magro, peitos enchumachados, pernas grossas, curtas, mãos parando no meio. Na cara, os olhos castanhos embaçavam o rubor liso que vinha empalidecendo até um queixo feito barrete frígido. Nariz simples, com as narinas quase grandes, ondulando nas mesmas curvas dos bandós castanhos. A boca sorrindo era pálida, com dentes cerrados e monótonos. Falou um “Já vai” meio pergunta, meio aceitação, duma calma dominical.

— Já vou sim, dona Nízia, são horas. Tive muito prazer em conhecê-la.

Inquietação antiga desmanchou a cara dela:

— E o senhor volta!

— Volto. Não volto sempre porque creio que vou mudar de emprego, trabalho no Correio, é. Meu padrinho parece que vai arranjar qualquer coisa pra mim na Secretaria do Tesouro, mas volto. Passe bem.

Ele entregou-lhe a mão e a vida:

— Passe bem.

Acompanhou-o até o portão. Ficou ali, enquanto ele partiu pelo caminho rúim. Tomando a estrada larga, seu Lemos nem se voltou pra dizer outro adeus. Nízia entrou. Andava meia sem serviço pela casa.

— Essas toalhinhas-de-crochê estão carecendo lavar, prima Rufina.

— Antão num lavei elas na semana retrasada mêmô!

— Mas olhe como estão!

— Num inxergo nada não, porém mecê qué eu lavo! Tou vendo mas é que seu Leme veio atrapaiaá tuda a vida nesta casa! Mecê inté parece que nem num sabe adonde assentá! cadera num farta! Sente, fique sussegada que é mió!

— Você não gostou de eu ficar noiva, é?

— Até que gostei bem. Mecê carece dum home nesta casa que lhe proteja mas porém ansim! premero que aparece, vai ficando noiva! nem num sabe si seu Lemos quem é, arre credo! Será que anda de bem cum os puliça! isso é que num posso assigurar pra mecê!

— Como você está braba comigo, prima Rufina! ele é empregado no Correio!

— Isso antão é imprego que se tenha! Gente boa num carece di andá iscrevendo carta não! véve que nem nois mêmo, bem assussegado no seu canto! Mia fia, vassuncê num conhece nada desse mundo, mundo é mais rúim que bão... Essa história di sê impregado no Correio, num mi parece que seja coisa direita não, infim...

Foram deitar. A felicidade de Nízia fizera dela uma desgraçada. Do passado e esquecimento de dantes não se lembrava, mas o agora é que fazia ela sofrer. Noivo, seu Lemos achou que não carecia mais de passar todo santo dia pela casa tão longe da noiva, a tarde veio e seu Lemos não veio. Nízia vivia num deslumbramento simultâneo de felicidade e amargura. Que amasse não digo, mas tinha alguém que se lembrava da existência dela. Isso lhe dava um gosto inquieto, gosto de comparação, gosto de mais de um, não sei si explico bem. De repente ficara desgraçada. “Vem amanhã”, murmurou sofrendo de prazer. E repetiu “Vem amanhã” até na quinta-feira.

Seu Lemos chegou não eram bem seis horas, jantado. Entregou pra ela o brochinho de ouro, escrito LEMBRANÇA.

— Muito obrigado, seu Lemos.

— A senhora tem passado bem?

Etc.

Ficou lá até oito, creio. Nízia trabalhando, sob o lampião de querosene, ele assuntando as assombrações do teto. Falavam de vez em quando aquelas frases de companheiro que não esperam resposta, só pra reconhecimento de existência junta, um pouco de Correio, um pouco de trabalhinho de lá. Prima Rufina pitando na cozinha. Seu Lemos afirmou que voltava no domingo e então haviam de combinar o casório.

Não veio no domingo, veio na terça-feira. Que andara muito atrapalhado por causa duma visita que fora obrigado a fazer. Depois tivera de levar uma carta do tal pra um gráudo, estava quase arranjado o lugar na Secretaria. Trazia aquela meia-dúzia de lencinhos, desculpasse. Nízia foi lá dentro e voltou, feliz duma vez, com o cachênê feito por ela na mão. Seu Lemos agradeceu e achou que estava muito bonito. Estava. Era pardo, todo com listas pretas, barra de lã-com-seda.

Seu Lemos levou uma semana sem aparecer. Só na outra terça-feira estourou na chacinha, muito afobado, apenas tivera tempo pra arranjar aquelas cravinas, de tão atrapalhado que andava, desculpasse. Saíra a nomeação, e no dia seguinte tomava posse.

— Custou mas enfim!...

— Quem espera sempre alcança.

— É mesmo mas custou. Já ia desanimado.

Seu Lemos estava mais tagarela. Nesse dia sapatinho de lã não entrou na conversa, era só serviço rúim do Correio, serviço bom da Secretaria, ordenado bem melhor, seu Chefe de seção, “me disseram” e outras coisas nessa toada.

Nízia escutando. As palavras caíam dentro dela talqualmente flor de paina, roseando a alma devagar. Foi-se embora mais cedo? Não fazia mal! Nem soube que eram nove horas, que eram dez e muito mais, ficou sozinha no trabalho, sem saber que trabalhava, acabando carreira numa conta, acabando sapatinho, acabando outro sapatinho, escutando. Não tinha nem bulha na noite fora. Os homens estavam dormindo em São Paulo. Nem poeira nem grilo nem vento, que nada! um silêncio de matar gesto do braço. Nízia tricotando sem saber. A luz do lampião mariposava em volta da cabeça dela e, no calor seco da sala, as palavras de seu Lemos se pronunciavam ainda, sonoras de verdade, como afago doce de companheiro. Nízia sofreu que você não imagina. Sofreu aquele sapatinho de lã; sofreu por causa de prima Rufina que estava envelhecendo muito depressa; sofreu aqueles vestidos de cassa eternamente os mesmos, carecia fazer outros; as toalhinhas de crochê não ficaram bem lavadas; ela era um poucadinho bem mais gorda que seu Lemos; também prima Rufina nunca trouxera uns pés de cravina pra plantar no jardim! flor tão bonita...

Todas essas infelicidades que nunca sentira, e que doem tanto pra quem não pode ter outras: era a voz de seu Lemos que trazia, pondo como espelho diante dela o corpo do companheiro. Foi pro quarto e pela primeira vez depois do antraz da preta, não dormiu logo. Pensar não pensou, era também do gênero dos decretos. Como decreto não vinha, ficou espalhada na escuridão, sentindo apenas que vivia, feliz, encostada na vida do companheiro.

Seu Lemos levou duas semanas sem aparecer.

— Puis é! si mecê já tivesse priguntado pra ele adonde que ele mora, eu ia inté lá sabê si é duença...

Numa quarta-feira seu Lemos apareceu. Vinha com barba por fazer e de mãos vazias, puxa! que serviceira! estava arrependido. Depois, tanta responsabilidade!... Entregar carta, a gente entrega e pronto, agora? escreve número aqui, escreve número noutra parte, e não se pode errar porque livro de Secretaria não é coisa que a gente ande rabiscando nem raspando. Depois: ainda não estava bem enfronhado do serviço que barafunda! nunca imaginei que fosse tão difícil!...

O engraçado é que ali mesmo, diante de Nízia, sem se lembrar dela, seu Lemos estava lendo os decretos da cabeça. E não pense que lia todos em voz alta que nem estou fazendo, não! Parava de falar às vezes, e lia só consigo. E que diferença agora a cabeça de seu Lemos! Antigamente era um vazio grande sem nada, só de três em cinco palitações um decretinho curto. Agora? era ver página do Correio Paulistano "que barafunda!", como ele dizia... Foi-se embora remoendo decreto sem parada.

Nízia ficou na porta, metade do corpo na noite, metade dentro de casa, partida pelo meio. Bem sentiu que seu Lemos, coitado!

não era por querer, porém, estava escapando dela. Voltou pra dentro, e custava se lembrar do que seu Lemos falara. Quis sossegar-se, coitado! tanta ocupação... Sossegou-se, mas num sossego sozinho, de morte e de desagregação. Quando ficou bem só, não sofreu mais, dormiu.

Seu Lemos só apareceu vinte dias depois, vinha magro, passando. Viu Nízia no portão, parou pra saudar. Tinha que ir ver o protetor, por causa duma embrulhada que sucedera lá na repartição. Ela meia que ficou até espantada com a figura do estrangeiro. Teve uma dor horrível.

— Na volta o senhor entra sempre, seu Lemos?

— Pra falar verdade, dona Nízia, não sei si posso parar, si puder, paro. Mas não se incomode por minha causa não. Passe bem.

— Passe bem.

Seu Lemos tinha revivido nela uma infelicidade pesada. Mas não desejou que seu Lemos não voltasse, como seria melhor pra ela e foi. Seu Lemos não voltou. Padrinho deu o estrilo com ele por causa da tal encrenca, seu Lemos zangou com o padrinho, seu Lemos saiu da Secretaria, seu Lemos banzou sem decretos uma porção de dias, seu Lemos arranhou emprego numa loja de fazendas... O coitado não queria riqueza, queria era sossego... Arranhou ãa mulata gorda pra cozinhar, dormiu uma noite no quarto da Sebastiana e depois todas as noites a Sebastiana no quarto dele, que era mais espaçoso. Sebastiana cozinhava, porém não era cozinheira mais: dona-de-casa, sempre querendo chinela nova no pé cor-de-sapota.

Nízia... Teve um homem que veio morar bem perto da chacinha dela. Não durou muito uma família vizinhos com o tal. E aos poucos foi se fazendo a rua Guaicurus, foi se fazendo mais um bairro desta cidade ilustre. Uns se davam com os outros; uns não se davam com os outros; ninguém não se dava com Nízia; prima Rufina se dava com todos. Nízia serenamente continuava esquecida do mundo.

Deu mas foi pra beber. Banzando pela casa, quis matar uma barata e encontrou debaixo da cama de prima Rufina a garrafa que servia pra de-noite. Roubou um pouco por curiosidade. Muito pouquinho, com vergonha da outra. A primeira sensação é ruim, porém o calor que vem depois é bom.

Não levou nem mês, prima Rufina percebeu. Não falou nada, só que trouxe um garrafão de pinga, e principiaram bebendo juntas, cada mona!... Não digo que fosse todo dia, pelo contrário. Nízia trabalhava, prima Rufina vendia, sempre as mesmas. Trintonas, quarentonas, isto é, prima Rufina, sempre muito mais velha que a outra. Dera pra envelhecer rápido, essa sim, uma coitada que não o mundo porém a vida esquecera, quase senil, arrastando corpo sofrido, cada nó destamano no tornozelo, por causa do artrismo. Quando a dor era demais, lá vinha o garrafão pesado:

— Mecê também qué, mia fia?

— Me dá um bocadinho pra esquentar.

— Puis é, mia fia, beba mêmo! Mundo tá ruim, cachaça dexa mundo bunito pra nós.

Era dia de bebedeira. Prima Rufina dava pra falar e chorar alto. Nízia bebia devagar, serenamente. Não perdia a calma, nem os traços se descompunham. A boca ficava mais aberta um pouco, e vinha uma filigrana vermelha debruçar a fímbria das narinas e dos olhos embaçados. Punha a mão na cabeça e o bandó do lado esquerdo se arrepiava. Ficava na

cadeira, meia recurvada, com as mãos nos joelhos, balanceando o corpo instável, olhar fixo numa visão fora do mundo. Prima Rufina, se encostando em quanta parede achava, dando embigada nos móveis, puxava Nízia. Nízia se erguia, agarrava o garrafão em meio, e as duas, se encostando uma na outra, iam pro quarto.

Prima Rufina quase que deixou cair a companheira. Rolou na cama, boba duma vez, chorando, perna pendente, um dos pés, arrastando no assoalho. Nízia sentava no chão e recostava a cabeça na perna de prima Rufina. Bebia. Dava de beber pra outra. Prima Rufina punha a mão sem tato na cabeça de Nízia e consolava a serena:

— E isso mêmo, mia fia... num chore mais não! A gente toma pifão, pifão dá gosto e bota disgrça pra fora... Mecê pensa que pifão num é bom... é bão sim! pifão... pifãozinho... pra esquentá disgrça desse mundo duro... O fio de mecê, num sei que-dele ele não. Fio de mecê deve de andá pur aí, rapaiz, dicerto home feito... Dicerto mecê já isbarrô cum ele, mecê num cunheceu seu fio, seu fio num cunheceu mecê... Num chore mais ansim não!... Pifão faiz mecê esquecê seu fio, pifão... pifão... pifãozinho...

Nízia piscava olhos secos, embaçados, entredormindo. Escorregava. Ia babar num beijo mole sobre o pezão de prima Rufina. Esta queria passar a mão na outra pra consolar, vinha até a borda da cama e caía sobre Nízia, as duas se misturando num corpo só. Garrafão, largado, rolava um pouco, parava no meio do quarto. Prima Rufina inda se mexia, incomodando Nízia. Acabava se aconchegando entre as pernas desta e fazendo daquela barriga estufada um cabeceiro cômodo. Falava “pifão” não sei quantas vezes e dormia. Dormia com o corpo todo, engruvinhado de tanta vida que passara nele, gasta, olhos entreabertos, chorando.

Nízia ficava piscando, piscando devagar, mansamente. Que calma no quarto sem voz, na casa... Que calma na terra inexistente pra ela... Piscava mais. Os cabelos meio soltos se confundiam com o assoalho na escuriza da noitinha. Mas inda restava bastante luz na terra, pra riscar sobre o chão aquele rosto claro. Muito sereno, um reflexo leve de baba no queixo, rubor mais acentuado na face conservada, sem uma ruga, bonita. Os beiços entreabriam pro suspiro de sono sair. Adormecida calma, sem nenhum sonho e sem gestos.

Nízia era muito feliz.

PRESENTING THE TRANSLATORS

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