PAPER RAIN

Martha Batalha

Sample translation by Eric M. B. Becker

7

**1.**

When Joel walks through Copacabana, he has the tendency to looking up to see where he might jump. The oldest buildings are the best, free of bonded windows and away from the main thoroughfares. He knows how passersby react to a dead man and doesn’t wish to frighten others. A retiree steps out to buy milk, crosses a cadaver and there goes the day or the rest of his life. Also, the fewer people on the streets, the smaller the chances of landing on someone. These things happened, he’d seen it, a jilted wife landing on top of a family man. One person’s suffering ends and three others’ begin, a widow in shock, the children explaining to classmates how their father went splat on some street downtown. Lunchtime on a work day, a sea of passersby— someone was bound to get hit.

Penthouses were attractive, he knows from New Year’s parties he’d covered for work, hosts striving to fill salons and verandas with the right set. A celebrated economist, a minor poet, a former government minister, businessmen, socialites, artists. At parties like this, waiters

**8**

chased hands holding empty cups, restoring spirits in ample doses. Such generosity was extended to him, the poorly dressed reporter, who for reasons superior to good manners never denied an imported whiskey. Joel would withdrew from the rest to lean on a windowsill**,** metalgrade’s touch cool against his forearms**.** The nighttime views at the parties of Rio’s wealthy invariably featured some combination of Sugarloaf/Corcovado/Beach/Lagoon/Two Brothers Mountain. Joel looked down and the sidewalks seemed to be beckon, whispering how easy it was.

No one would be waiting up for him at home. He has no home. After his last eviction he had rented a room in Lapa. Every morning he wakes before eight, gets dressed, and leaves the boarding house as though he were still expected in the newsroom. He crosses the city on foot, waits at a bus stop, jumps on and takes it to the end of the line. There, hesits on a bench in some park or church, rests his elbows on a lunch counter to eat a snack. At night he coils up to sleep, pillow covering his ear while the couple next door moans or argues. He knows how it is, and he doesn’t miss it. When he talksto God it’s to speak of death. **Oh my Lord**, he says. T**his time I’m gonna make the call – or I am making the call.**

Joel would make the leap from a building in Copacabana. An instant and painless death, without the preamble of goodbyes or a will drawn up before a notary. There’s no need for that, all he owns is a nightlamp.

It had to be in Copacabana, where the tragedy of a suicide can be drowned out by the neighborhood’s excesses. Childbirth, aneurysms and heart attacks, cancer diagnoses, root canals treatments, mediums contacting spirits, priests performing exorcisms, robberies, scams and thefts, fights and truces, betrayals and first loves, endless traffic jams, mothers begging at supermarket doors, street kids selling gum, people getting it together and others losing it, while in a few blocks or feet away students do homework, maids fry steaks, manicurists paint nails, prostitutes name their price, bodybuilders admire themselves, tourists buy T-shirts, and old ladies knit useless ~~yet more useless~~  footies.

**9**

Joel has picked out a building on Rua Santa Clara**.** On each floor a pivot window is always open for ventilation. He tells the front desk about an appointment with Dr. Perdigão. He’s waiting on the elevator when the phone vibrates in his pants. No caller ID. Recently, Eliane was in the habit of using a neighbor’s cell phone so he would answer when she called to demand their grandkids’ tuition money. Two hopeless losers, backs hunched from staring at phones and games. At their age Joel had already married, had an affair and become a widower, had been sued and threatened, got into who-knows-how-many fights and was deepinto payments for an apartment in the suburbs. But it would make no differenceto pick up this time. He is a man on the brink of death, and if his ex-wife wished to keep nagging she could take it up with his coffin.

“Hello?”

“Joel?”

“Eliane, darling.”

“It’s Beatriz.”

“Beatriz. How’s the boy?”

“They boy’s name is Marceu and he’s your son.”

“How’s the boy, Beatriz.”

“Ha! As though you cared. The last time you promised to show up, Marceu told his friends he was going to spend the day with his dad. It killed me towatch the boy sit on the couch waiting for the doorbell to ring.”

“I had an emergency.”

**10**

“They have this thing now, it’s called a cellphone.”

“What do you want, Beatriz.”

“Piano lessons for Marceu. I bought a second-hand keyboard, but the classes are expensive.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

“If you don’t, your son’s nevergoing to learn.”

“I’ll see what I can do.”

“Marceu’s got talent. He wants to be a musician.”

“Beatriz, I should have been a better husband.”

“Are you drunk?”

“And a better father. Or at least a better ex-husband.”

“You know your problem, Joel? You only grow a conscience once you’ve started drinking, and when it’s over everything goes back to the way things were.”

“I’ve got to go. I have an interview, I’m in the elevator.”

“Who’s the nut who hired you?”

“I’m about to lose you. Send a kiss to the boy.”

“Don’t go to work drunk. You’ll get fired again.”

Joel puts the phone in his pocket and steps into the elevator. The car is full, heavy with the scent of people, laden with sweat and perfume. He reaches for his ID, hanging from a lanyard around his neck. He hasn’t lost all love for his carcass and has no desire to end up like the corpses he’s seen, stitched up the middle like a zipper, laying on a drawer at the coroner’s office.

He’s the last to get off, on the tenth floor. The hallway is old, floor covered with grimy white tiles, a fire extinguisher on the wall, a round trash can between the elevators. He walks over to the window.

He’s an old man. Bags under his eyes, unshaven, greasy and disheveled hair, faded jeans and a polo shirt with tattered collar, shabby shoes with holes in the soles. He closes his eyes.

**11**

On rare occasions, Joel had worn a suit and tie, and even a tuxedo once. But none occasion had never felt as sacred as this one, as he stood unkempt, next to a fire extinguisher and a trash can covered in lumps of sand, gum, and phlegm, in the dilapidated hallway of a mid-rise in Copacabana. He deserves this moment as a eulogy, a prelude to a peculiar end.

He hears a drumbeat, then another, and another. Joel opens his eyes. Residents from buildings on the other side of the street appear in their windows with wood spoons and frying pans. He can hear jeering, horns, shouting against the president. The noise is also coming from the building he’s standing in. In the office spaces**,** people bang on take-out boxes, staplers, whatever’s within reach.

In Copacabana, there are more tenantsthan windows, so people start to filter out, taking their protest to the hallway.

“Need a frying pan, pal?”a man offers.

Joel does not need a frying pan.

The noise is unbearable. The line of mid-rises reverberates with banging and shouting. Joel needs to move before he regrets the best decision he’s ever made. He takes the stairs down to the ninth-floor hallway, where more people are protesting in the window. Eight, seven, six, he opens the emergency exit to the backsides of people shouting.

The fourth-floor hallway is empty.

Joel heads for the windowand heaves one leg toward it, but his legs are short and he doesn’t reach the opening. He stands on tiptoe and soldiers on, trying over and over again. He should have brought a stool. One more try, and he notices his jeans restricting his movement. He angrily removes his moccasins and his pants, as his rage propels his leg upward. His foot lands like an anchor on the window frame. He slides his leg over to the other side and sets his hands

**12**

on the metal sill. He wipes the sweat from his brow, catches his breath, curses the hellishRio heat for the thousandth and final time.

Now the other leg. He shifts his weight to his arms, squeezing and contorting his body until his foot reaches the opening. His leg slides across to the other side. Here we go.Joelreadies himself for the fall. Half his body inside the building and facing the hallway, back to the clamoring pots and pans of Copacabana.

A relief to be leaving this world behind. The best decision he’d ever made, on the brink of realization. He’s sure of it. It’s a good decision. The best. Better not to think much about it, this best decision. Joel takes a deep breath, closes his eyes, and releases his grip.

Nothing happens. He’s sandwiched there. Bare legs dangling from the building, belly lodged in the window frame.

If lung cancer didn’t take him, Joel had always been certain he would die from arteries clogged with fat, and here he is, barred from death by fat.

Joel sucks his belly in. The woman from the studio next door screams. More people scream. Some yell, “Jump,” others yell, “Don’t jump.” Still others yell, “He’s a perv.” The clean-shaven face of an evangelical minister peeks out from the floor above.

“Repent, brother!”

Joel sucks his belly in further. He starts to slide, distracted by one last feeling of vanity, satisfaction at not being that fat. There’s one advantage to having started to smoke again.

In the1990s, a phlegmy cough and a wife intent on celebrating their silver anniversary pried Joel from his Marlboros. Replacing the cigarettes in his shirt pocket was a bag of cookies bought from Carmen, the newsroom secretary. He put on forty pounds in six months. At the time, he drove a Puma sports car, and the day headjusted the seatback for the third time to fit his belly behind the wheel, his feet couldn’t reach the pedals. To hell with

**13**

cookies. He left his wife, bought a carton of Malboros, and ever since he smokes a half-pack a day to balance out the bar food.

A man appears in the hallway. “Please help, he’s falling!” says a woman behind him. The man runs to the window and grabs Joel’s hand.

He had not expected this. The warmth of the hand, the texture of the skin, thedetermination with which the other man grabs him so as to keep him in the world they know. The instinct and the effort to save a life. Joel is surprised to see his own hand grabbing onto the stranger’s wrist.

“Repent,” the pastor shouts.

“The break of the down on the hill, what a beauty . . .”

“He’s singing. Theperv sings!”

“Brother, you are loved! Repent!”

“The son coloring, the nature smiling . . .”

“You’re gonna fall!”

“He’s falling.”

“He’s singing.”

“No tears, no sadness and no sighs. . The break of dawn . . .”

His body slips, his hands lose their grip, Joel is alone inmidair. He tries to recite the verses, tofall without thinking, but it’s impossible. They say that we can see our whole lives before we die, and he’s discovering that’s true. In the endless seconds comprising his fall, Joel mentally prepares his own obituary.

**CHAPTER 2**

**14**

**15**

Joel Nascimento, an award-winning reporter, loving father, and model citizen, died last Tuesday, February 18t, 2020. Joel was one of a kind. Known as the Don Quixote of Praça Onze, the Superman of Água Santa, until recently Nascimento could be found arriving at the newspaper each morning with beignets for his colleagues, made by a friend in Lapa. Jacinta was a cook for the German Ambassador, he tells them. She spent many years making milk jam for the diplomat’s children. The ambassador returned to Germany; Jacinta never learned about diabetes. Ever since her leg was amputated she fries the beignets as she leans against crutches, selling them out of a [her?] window. That was Joel. He could imbue a doughy ball with the singular taste of an elaborate backstory.

Joel’s story is the story of Rio. Not just the bucolic, elegant and charming city, ~~which from high atop an overlook appears in the midst of beauty res~~t, stretching in serene magnificence from the dense green of the forested mountains to the tranquil waters of the Atlantic. Joel’s Rio was different. A seedy place, documented by him in the pages of the city’s newspapers.

There was a time, not so long ago, when Rio boasted a newsstand on every corner, shielded from the sun beneath the shade of an almond tree. On either side of the stand, newspapers lined up, their headlines crying out to readers.

*Troubled man throws himself from cliff*

*Boy Chained Up Like Beast in Backyard!*

*Runaway wife Last Seen in Red-Light District!*

*Man-Eating Lion Terrorizes Santa Cruz!*

It was Joel behind these headlines. Hunched over a wooden desk in a newsroom reeking of cigarettes, banging away on a Remington typewriter, and later on lighter computer keyboards. There was Joel, time after time, the man behind the words, pen and pad in hand, standing before a body covered in earth (dirt?), chain marks on the boy’s arms, the teary woman in her camisole, the lion. He was like bait on a hook: casting the line, coming back with a story to others.

It began one morning in October 1963, when tin soldiers were hiding behind wads of tobacco as they crossed the parquet to domino trenches. Not so much as a pinch of tobacco remained to fill a pipe for an afternoon smoke. The owner of said tobacco, Joel’s father—Renê Rubirosa, a former jockey, by then a bookie with a limp—took out his frustrations by beating his son in the name of discipline.

When Renê and Joel showed up at the *Luta Democrática*newsroom, the boy was black and blue.

“You take it from here.” As though the boy were a road full of potholes to avoid. Cristiano Mota, the editorial director and an acquaintance of Renê’s from the brothelon Rua Alice, took things from there. He offered Joel the night shift listening to the police blotter.

Never again did a tin soldier wage battle on the parquet floor.

Mornings: change out of his street clothes, don his school uniform, walk along Rua Conde de Bonfim and climb the steps of the Colégio São José*.* Afternoons: sleep for six hours on the pull-out couch in the living room. Nights: put on his first pair of creased pants and polyestershirt, take the tram downtown to listen to police conversations over the blotter. Give Farinha the heads-up about an armed robbery in Caxias. Thieves had plucked some Turk clean, taking even his gold teeth.

At five in the morning, the tram back home. Brown locks framing a handsome face, feet swinging, hands between his legs. Little more than a runt, he was often the lone rider. Joel watched the morning light advance on the streets and the buildings, took in the empty sidewalks, the bakery owners raising the shutters, the paper boys dumping

**17**

morning editions at thenewsstands, the crisp air of dawn, and the silence of collective slumber accentuating the gentle sound of the tram. It was the ideal city, his alone, before people began their assault from all angles.

Such mornings forged his contentious relationship with Rio. The ugly, vile city of the overnight police blotter rendered harmless and spellbinding beneath the rising sun.

Half a century later, and at least once a month, Joel would walk out of the newsroom to a waiting crowd of students. The old chronicler of Rio’s dog-eat-dog world, keeper of the unpublishable actions and reactions of the agents of order and chaos, the last of his breed, a living archive of the heinous and degrading aspects of the human condition (and also the most virtuous and miraculous), would place his hand on one of their shoulders, and with the tender look of a kindly grandfather would issue an invitation.

“Around the corner there’s a joint serving ice cold beer. What day is it, Thursday? Thursdays they have the best stew in town.”

The students would smile, the way only the unseasoned can. Wandering down the narrow sidewalks, the group would slow its pace to match the reporter’s.

“I’m slower now,” he would explain. “Years living off hardboiled eggs and bar food. And cigarettes,” he would add, tapping the pack in his shirt pocket. “I used to smoke Marlboros, now it’s this menthol crap.”

As they strolled, the students listened with the outsizedconsiderationafforded the greats. The fugitive Nazi official who became a beekeeper and sold honey in Petropolis: Joel figured him out. The Italian mafioso, living in a luxury seafront condo, a regular at the sauna and pool, not to mention the Golden Age Bingo Parlor:

**18**

Joel. The dictatorship-era torturer turnedcultural attaché in Rome: Joel put an end to the man’s European vacation.

There was more, too, unbeknownst to the students. Episodes that ran through the mind of the old reporter as he strolled the city center or took a bus from one end of Rio to the other. Street corners and high-rises unveiled their own private histories, like notes of a melancholy tune only Joel could hear.

Minutes later Joel and the students would be sitting on plastic stools around a rickety bar table.“Aristides, my man!” he cried out to the owner walking out from behind the bar, beer and mugs in hand. Bars like that served as a transition point between the city and so-called domestic comfort. In the bars, he would tell his tales. Up to a point, so as to avoid being branded a liar. What Joel did share evolved into a repertoire. He would start with the case of the umbrella, move on to floods and mudslides, the woman who lived in the tree, the boy.

This would stretch until the wee hours, when the prostitutes and drag queens rolled in, leaning against the bar to drink coffee on their way home, filling the narrow space with the scent of work, sweat, and sex. If Marli or Sandra showed up, Joel would interrupt his tales for an embrace, the two women scolding him as though he were a child. He had diabetes, a feeble heart—he ought to be at home in bed.

“Don’t worry. God’s forgotten to take me,” he would say.

“He’s forgot because of this boyishface of yours,” Marli would respond, mussing Joel’s hair.

It’s true, the students would think to themselves. Joel looked more like a sad little boy than a hardened man.

**19**

After the first bottle of beer, two platters of stew wiped clean with a hunk of bread, Joel would order another beer and light a cigarette. Peer into the distance. Turn back to the students.

“I’m going tell you all about the first piece that stuck with me. I was cub reporter for a newspaper called the ***Luta Democrática*.** Heard of it? Of course not, your mothers were still in school when it folded. It was a . . . peculiar little newspaper.If daily paperswere cuts of meat, *Luta*would be the tripe. The mouthwatering filet mignon you find at trendy restaurants—that was other papers. ***Luta*** reported the tragedies, the other papers reported the other news across Rio. The same Rio cooked up a filet mignon of politican’s promises and celebrity gossip on the one hand, and the tripe**—** rapes, murders, suicides, so on. People used to say that if you squeezed a copy of **the *Luta***, blood would come oozing out. Let me tell: not only would there be blood, but the tears and sweat of hardworking men.

“This story begins one spring evening in Rio. It’s Thursday, October 1964. On Rua Uruguaiana, men and women parade about in the era’s elegant attire. At restaurant doors, waiters in white tuxedos awaited the arrival of clients for happy hour. The city’s first street vendors offer buy-one-get-one-free. The city is young, vibrant, pulsing, its sidewalks punctuated by stationery shops, pharmacies, lunch counters, boutiques and restaurants, elegant **porticos** of mid-rises housing medical offices, law firms, architecture studios. Buses, cars, and taxis carry on morosely toward Avenida Rio Branco, a flock of pigeons flies by on its way to the Largo da Carioca.

“Along comes this handsome guy. The body of a Greek statue, headful of hair, unlined face.This guy was, he was . . . I was . . .

**20**

a kid. He . . . I was still playing slapjack and button soccer. I carried a cheese sandwich my mother made in my pocket every day for dinner . . .”

As Joel reaches this part of the obituary he is contriving midair, he gets the full picture of himself. He sees the faithless man leaping and recalls the boy he once was. The boy walking along Rua Uruguaiana under the illusion that Rio was a fighting ring, heroes on one side and villains on the other. He sees the reporter with a pack of cigarettes in his pocket and chain necklace across his chest, sitting on a barstool, right hand holding a glass of beer. The guileless, rapt eyes of those gathered around. His own intense gaze, saturated with a past that encompassed the charming downtown dive bar, a suicide in Copacabana, his last stroll as a child beneath the sunset on Rua Uruguaiana. He’s overcome with sadness, because the minute he hits the ground, a precious piece of Rio will cease to exist.

“Anyway, where was I?” Joel continued. “Right, Rua Uruguaiana. On my way to thenewsroom, ready to give notice. Son, I’d spent more than a year listening to the police blotter, writing out horoscopes, fetching coffee for the reporters at the bar around the corner. I wanted to report, but the boss kept saying I was not ready. So I said to myself: I’m going to quit and stand up to my father, study to be an eng . . .”

**Chapter 3**

**21**

Turns out there was a vanparked in front of the building, and the combination of fourth-floor plunge with van hood broke the fall, transforming Joel’s suicide into a mere scare involving pan-banging neighbors, abent van hood, and a half-naked man on his way to the hospital. Joel opens his eyes the next day to see a former colleague, Leandro, standing before him and to be informed he needs to pay to fix the van.

“The owner was still making payments,” Leandro tells him.

Payments. The minute he regains consciousness, Joel is reminded he has payments to make. Ever since his first raise, these monthly installments had latched on to his paycheck like parasites. Mesbla, Tele Rio, Ponto Rio, Casas Bahia—Joel had played his part in the rise of all of Rio’s home appliance chains. Now, not only had he not died, but he would have to keep making payments, and scrounge up the money someone else could make his.

**22**

“Apparently, the guy sells oranges at the market with his brothers.”

Joel’s eyes wander the room. There’s a flower arrangement on the table.

“A wreath of flowers. . .”

“A *bouquet* of flowers. From us editors at the paper. Your broke your leg, you’ll need to stay off it for three months. You’ll be discharged in a couple days, but you’ll need to find someone to live with. Do you have any idea where you might stay?”

“I’ll need to make some calls.”

A man moans softly in the bed on the other side of the room. A nurse pushes a cart down the hallway, wheels whistling as they turn.

Leandro leaves and Joel falls asleep. He wakes to the groans of the man in the next bed, dozesoff again, and when he wakes, it’s night. His roommate has gone quiet. Joel feels alone, as per usual. He ought to be awash with some sort of sadness, but all he feels is exhaustion. Which is a sort of sadness. He tries to move. There’s a shooting pain, his leg throbs. He lifts an arm, runs his fingers along the stitches in his forehead.

The next day, his roommate seems to have improved. On the third day, the roommate neither eats nor speaks. By lunchtime on the fourth day, he is himself again. He looks over at Joel to praise the seasoning in the pea soup. Joel has no opinion of the soup. This afternoon, the man tilts his head toward the wall opposite Joel and launches into a long conversation with Cleide who, Joel gathers, had every right to take those English classes. This night, the nurses don’t check in on the patients. It is also the night the man dies.

Joel watches the morning light shine over the dead man. A miracle in reverse, of a

**23**

man transformed into a motionless heap, with pea soup inside, and all that never reached Cleide’s ears.

Joel has gotten used to Leandro’s visits. He stops by every day on his way to the newsroom.

“I called Eliane,” Leandro says that morning. “She’s coming to visit.”

“I’ll bet she asks for money,” Joel says.

“She’s worried about you.”

Joel shuts his eyes and pretends to nap. When he opens them again, Leandro is no longer there.

That afternoon, they bring an unconscious man to the other bed. His wife arrives soon after. She pores over every cut and bruise on Joel, and leaves when night falls.

The next morning, several people come into the room and assemble around the other man’s bed. It looks like a tour group.

“They removed a stone this big,” the wife whispers. “Suitable for a slingshot.”

Joel smiles for the first time in weeks. Rio’s penchant for exaggeration can be found even into whispers, he thinks.

In the afternoon, the visitors leave. Only the wife is left. She closes the curtain between the two beds to ensure privacy for some harsh conjugal commentary. “You’re never touching a sausage again, Lourival. You’re going to drink two liters of water a day. Even if you have to wear a diaper to bed.”

Joel smiles a second time. He has a broken leg, three cracked ribs, eighteen stitches on his forehead, bruises everywhere.His only visitor is Leandro, the intern turned reporter and the boss who he helped to make. His roommate’s got unobstructedkidneys and company. And yet, in the other bed was everything he had no desire to be. A sad, defeated man, face etched with decades’ worth of sacrifices to pay for an apartment where he avoided his own wife. A man who would live his last and

**24**

most trying years alongside someone determined to make them worse. His entire life spent working toward a comfortable retirement, and yet all he got was attitude, dieting, and diapers.

That was why, when Joel still had plans for growing old, he was intent on finding a caregiver. Like the young nurse who comes to take his blood pressure. Now and then she returns his compliments with a half-smile.

“Why should I grow old with a wrinkly**,** miserable woman with dentures floating in a jam jar?” he would ask his friends at the bar. “Someone nagging me about my cholesterol. Don’t drink this, Joel, don’t eat that, Joel, get out, Joel, come here, Joel. The only rest I’d get is during the evening soaps. When I reach a ripe old age and need someone to help me with my shoes, I’ll find a caregiver. Young, curvy, everything where it ought to be. She’ll know what to cook so I don’t get heartburn or gassy. After dinner, we’ll watch the news together. She won’t mind, if I need to rest my hand on her leg. *Need anything else, Mister Joel?* she’ll ask me, in a sweet little tone. Now and then I’ll give her some extra cash. *Take this, Katilene, go buy yourself some lipstick. Now get over here, show me a little love.* God save me from old women. Look, there’s one crossing the square. Her body looks like spoonfuls of mashed potatoes. Hair stringy ascorn silk, oyster eyes on a swollen face.Surly. That lady’shad such a bad life she can’t unscrew her face.”

Eliane hadn’t visited or called. The flowers the paper sent had wilted.

A week into his hospital stay, his phone vibrates on the bed tray.

**25**

“Joel?”

“Eliane!”

“It’s Beatriz, Joel.”

“Beatriz, my love. I’ve been meaning to speak with you. How’s the boy?”

“His name is Marceu and he’s your son.”

“How’s the boy, Beatriz?”

“Are you going to be able to pay for piano lessons?”

“I’ve hit a bit of a rough patch.”

“You’ve always hit a rough patch.”

“Did you manage to rent the bedroom out?”

“How do you think I bought the keyboard? I’m renting to a student. Why?”

“It’s for a friend in need. A friend of yours, actually. I had an emergency.”

“You always have an emergency.”

“Did Leandro call you?”

“He said you had gotten hurt. I barely heard the message, I was on the way back from work, the bus backfired. You better?”

“More or less. I was thinking that this room . . .”

“You’re not getting any further than reception . . .”

“I never actually hurt you, Beatriz.”

“Because the vase hit the wall. Piano lessons, Joel, at least that much. For your son.”

The next morning the doctor informs Joel he’ll be discharged in two days. Leandro is sitting in the chair next to the bed. It’s Leandro the doctor tells about the coming weeks, the list of medications, the recommendation for both a psychologist and physical therapy. Joel moans, ask for more pain meds to help him sleep. When he wakes up, Leandro is gone. His roommate’s wife smiles,

**26**

bouquet in hand. He returns the smile. Human warmth**—**he had found it time and again, and where he least expected it.

“Can I use the table?” she asks. “More flowers arrived for my husband.”

Six kids surround the other patient’s bed. He seems happy.

One day to discharge. Joel has never again seen the young nurse, who according to the new nurse asked to be reassigned. She wasn’tbeing paid enough to work like a dog and put up with sweet talk from some creepy old man**.** The new nurse delivered the news like a sucker punch, without the least bit linguistic care to soften the blow. Ah, he knew the type. The kind that think they’re liberated. Let’s talk again in a few years, honey, when you’ve got a kid, food on the stove, a full-time job, and a husband demanding applause for washing a glass.

After six, his roommate surrenders to the soaps. Joel looks at the man bathed in the TV light, surrounded by flowers and get well balloons, and is irate at his own jealousy. Hehas no desire to have a niggling wife or a dull existence.No desire for the cheap distraction of TV melodramas, the façade and the pathetic romances. But a mattress that conformed to his body and the man’s bank account,that was another matter.

A dead man has no need for savings, and ever since Joel had picked a day to end it all, he had made the most of his situation. He ordered the steak and the cod for lunch, goat with broccoli rice for dinner at Capela, the late-night restaurant frequented by reporters. From the corner table, utensils at rest, he observed the ~~waiters and~~ other diners, extending his meal until the fat of the goat meat turned white beneath the blast of the air conditioning.

**27**

His world was disappearing, lurching toward oblivion, leaving Joel behind. When the waiter announced closing time, Joel snapped back to reality and reached into his pockets.

One Sunday afternoon he shaved, applied a dash of Paco Rabanne cologne, and walked right past security at the Copacabana Palace. He sat down at the swanky bar and ordered a double whisky. He sat there and sipped, distracted by the irreproachable aesthetic of the ultra-wealthy, the beautiful, rested faces of the highborn.

These days of plenty were funded with two credit cards. Unpaid bills were left unopened atop a past-due rent notice. His bank account was headed toward negative figures. The night before his fall in Copacabana, Joel stopped by an ATM, more out of curiosity than hope. He entered his PIN; the machine responded with the delightful rustling of bills being counted. Out popped ten notes of fifty.

What an unexpected pleasure, this last dark night in Lapa spent beneath a new moon, after accepting the ATM’s generous offer and putting the dense wad of bills into his pocket. Wealth was calling out, “Hey, buddy, bring the bill,” barely glancing at the numbers, then pulling a wad out of his pocket to leave twice what he owed.

Had he been an accountant, a lawyer, a postman, perhaps money would have stayed put in his account, each statementrecordingimperceptible increases thanks to his hard work. But a police reporter traffics in the fleeting**.** One minute people were there, the next they weren’t. One minute they were on the solid path defined by family, work, and healthy living, the next they were dealing with absurd and the unpredictable.

The headlines sold death as the exception. In truth, it was the opposite. The headlines told of the inevitable,

**28**

the fate that sooner or later would befall readers. Everyone had a calling for news, even if it was to flesh out the obituaries. It was not the end that was extraordinary, but the everyday.

That’s why he appreciated the tangible. A wad of bills in his pants pocket. The anxious gazes of men glued to the bar’s tiny television. Juninho coming up on the right and dribbling to a goal for Flamengo. Four beers, followed by a shot of Steinhäger. Drunk, Joel transformed into sage, and saw himself as a sort of metaphysical bureaucrat among the bar’s community of strangers. Drunk, he saw himself as a simple scribe, a recorder of public life, documenting the predictable, headlong decline of the human race. The miracle of existence happened there at the bar. The news was just the paperwork.

After his last ATM withdrawal, Joel set off through the city center doling out bills to beggars. He found it amusing when they called him a saint.

“There’s this aunt of mine,” Leandro tells him the next morning.

**29**

**CHAPTER 4**

Suitcase, box, lamp. Crutches. There was Joel with everything he owned, riding in Leandro’s car on his way to live off someone else’s kindness. His friend’s aunt’s, to be specific . He was supposed to accept it with the apathy of those who have given up on the world. But there was this anger, something tangible. He could almost chew it.

Had it not been for the kindness of others, he would be on the street. Or in a shelter, lying on a mattress wrapped in plastic. An old man next to him, asking his name. Forty times. Rotting in a room reeking of dandruff and athlete’s foot, a sadistic nurse waiting until the soup’s gone cold to serve dinner.

Leandro smiles. Joel smiles back. Did it hurt?

One day you’re playing god at a bar, the next you’re a cripple living off favors. With someone’s aunt.

“You’re quiet, Joel.”

“I am all right.”

One day you’re jangling the keys to a new home before your wife, the next you don’t have two bucks for the kid scrubbing the windshield. On your way to live with somebody’s aunt.

**30**

Rage like that he’d never experienced. Not even the time Beatriz grabbed her lipstick, saying, “What you’ve got down there, handsome, is much smaller.” Not even the time the general censored the piece about families with malnutrition. “There are no poor people in Brazil,” he decreed, tearing up the pages. A month of work—visiting the cardboardhovels at the edge of favelas, the bony women, the kids too weak to play, and everything else he’d witnessed would waste away inside him. Rage like that he’d never felt, not even . . .

“We’re almost there.”

Wipe that look off your face. Like you’re smelling shit. But what good can come of it—me, a visitor in someone else’s apartment.

Ingrate. Think about the homeless shelter. Thick plastic wrapped around the mattress, toothless old fartsstaring off into space. And you there with them, your plumpcheeks sagging for lack of decent food.

The car pulls up to a building sitting on pilotis on Rua Itacuruçá. An elderly lady in a flowery dressstands up from a stool next to reception. She walks to the car and opens the freeloader’s door.

First, a wrinkled face. Then the sweet smell of clean skin, made damp and leathery with body lotion. Her tiny, dark eyes appear at window-level and settle on Leandro.

“Leandro, my boy. I was starting to think you’d had an accident. You told me ten. It’s almost eleven.”

She offers a hand to Joel.

“I know how to walk.”

Joel shifts his weight to his arms, but his arms are weak and he remains in his seat. He accepts Leandro’s help. “I know how to walk,” he says, standing up. He leans against the crutches and lifts his chin Masks his labored breathing, avoids the woman’s gaze.

“You two go on ahead while I grab the suitcase,” Leandro says.

**31**

And so, at eleven forty-five on a cloudy summer morning, in an apartment building in Tijuca covered in yellow mosaic tiles, Joel crosses the white marble lobby toward an ancient elevator, plodding unsurely toward the rest of a life he neither wants or planned for, and which he plans to escape as soon as he can.

They are in the elevator. Gloria with her arms crossed, fingers drumming against her flesh, eyes gluedon Joel. He reads the metal plaque listing the elevator’s weight limit.

“Leandro told me you are a writer.”

“He did?”

“Famous. I am too. Not famous. A writer. I’m going to publish a book year after next. Gonçalves Publishing. A boutique publisher, you’ve probably heard of them. They’re waiting for me to deliver a draft.”

The old metal plaque smelled like polish.

“Initial print run of five hundred copies. They can print much more. The young man there explained everything.”

The elevator jerks to a halt. Joel nearly loses his balance.

“Let’s see if he makes it to the first floor,” Gloria says, casting her gaze upward. “This old elevator breaks once a week. Last month Aracy got stuck. The repair guy was on another job, ran into traffic, took his time to arrive. Aracy fainted. Ever since her assault she has panic attacks.

The elevator starts again, then jerks to a halt. The accordion door opens with a shrill metalic sound.

“We made it this time,” she says.

They walk down a dark hallway. She opens the door to the first apartment on the left. There, Gloria’s scent is even stronger, almost like there’s another person in the room.

“Let me show you the room. It’s quiet, looks out

**32**

toward the back of the building. It is not a suite because, well, you know how it is. The building is old, from the time they only built one bathroom per apartment. There’s another, close to the maid’s room, but whoever built it clearly thought women pee standing up. It’s so tiny I turned it into a closet. Cleaning supplies and whatnot. Not that it doesn’t get used. To think the neighbor’s maid raised two kids in there. They must have slept like dinner plates, one on top of the other.”

Joel follows Gloria into a cool room darkened with wooden blinds. A pink piqué coverlet sits atop the twin bed, its white headboard painted with a wreath of roses. A side table with gold knobs. A single, faded poster, a black-and-white photo of a girl. Dark curls, milk teeth framed by smiling lips. A thick layer of white paint covers the four doors of the built-in closet. In the middle of the ceiling a round antique chandelier, the bulb concealed behind rows of glass prisms.

“Here’s the last of it,” says Leandro, leaving the suitcase and box in the corner of the room.

“What about the move?” Gloria asks.

Leandro tells her that’s everything.

“Everything?” Gloria repeated, in a way that made Joel’s belongings even more meager.

“I have a table lamp,” Joel says.

“Everyone has a table lamp. And your books?”

“There’s a dictionary in the box. A backgammon board, a few papers.”

“Leandro, you told me this man was a journalist. An award winner! I even told Aracy, said I had an intellectual moving in with me. Look at all the space I cleared for his trophies!” she said, opening the doors of one closet. “I gave a good number of things to the thrift store. Comic books, Cláudia’s clothes from when she was little.”

**33**

“I can put my dictionary there,” Joel says.

“I never met an intellectual who had no books,” Gloria says.

Alone in the bedroom, Joel walks on crutches until he reaches his belongings. He performs a balancing act as he grabs a lamp with a pink shade and places it on the bedside table. He plugs it in, turns the light on. His breathing slows, his shoulders relax. Gloria’s scent hovers in the air. Joel lies down, hands on chest. It must have been something, he thinks, to grow up in a room like this. Every detail suggests the utmost care. He glances toward the closet with the white doors and imagines the girl who used to sleep in the same bed. Her life must be half-over. There is still plenty of time for her, he thinks before falling asleep.

He wakes up to a knock on the door.

“It’s almost two in the afternoon. Do you want me to reheat lunch?” Gloria asks.

“I’m not hungry.”

“Well, you’re not some wall decoration. You have to eat.”

“I’m not hungry.”

He listens as Gloria’s footsteps disappear down the hallway. Then her voice, speaking into the telephone. The tone and cadence of far-offwords, the bedroom made dark by wooden blinds, the comfort and freshness of clean, crisp sheets lull him to sleep once more.

It’s nighttime when he wakes. The TV is on in the living room. Joel rises slowly, his movements restricted by his body’s pain. The doctor said he had been lucky, falling from such a height and surviving was a miracle. Just his luck,to spend his days in an unwanted place with unwanted company, with no end in sight. He needs to go to the bathroom but wants to avoid Gloria.He decides that it’s the endless availability and the insistence on people-pleasing, so common to women, that he has been keeping at bay.

**34**

He leans into his crutches, carefully opens the bedroom door. The TV screen lights up the hallway. He makes it to the bathroom as fast as he can and locks the door.

He flips on the light. It is a small, old-fashioned bathroom, covered in blue tile, with the dark stains of longstanding leaks around the fixtures. Beneath the window looking onto the patiois a bathtub covered with plywood, home to dozens of perfume and lotion bottles. In a corner, a little doll dressed like a woman from Bahia. Gold necklaces, white clothes and turban made of lace. The bathroom smelled more than Gloria than Gloria herself, with its mixture of talcum powders, new and old fragrances,lavender, eucalyptus, milk of roses, almond oil, baby powder.

The nurse had recommended he sit to urinate. Not the pretty one who, to his understanding, had been reassigned before she had time to say goodbye. The other one. But Joel is a man. He leans his crutches against the wall and unzips his pants. When he’s ready, he realizes he didn’t lift the seat. He strains and focuses on the water. He finishes, pulls up his pants and proudly zips them. He hears a soft scraping sound. The crutches are slipping.

His pulse quickens. There’s nothing he, hands on his zipper and weight on his healthy leg, can do. The crutches begin their slow downward descent, a preview of the crash to come. The metal crashes against the white tile floor. Here she comes.

Except the hallway remains silent. Joel crouches down and stretches to grab the crutches, leans them against the wall, closes the toilet seat for somewhere to sit. He opens a few of the bottles on the plywood, brings them to his nose. Some lotions are so old they have lost their scent. Now, for a look at the cabinet.

Bathroom cabinets, refrigerator shelves, and footwear: show me yours and I’ll show you who you are, he muses. A rusted razor,

**35**

lotion bottles, an ancient rash ointment. Toothpaste and brush. Floss. He closes the cabinet and sits again on the toilet seat.

A bath would be nice, but he doesn’t want to ask for a towel. It’s all so ridiculous. Once, he was capable of approaching anyone, no matter the situation. How many times had he gone right up to a widow in tears? How many times had he been the cause of a widow’s tears? My condolences, madam, your husband was shot, run over, wiped out during the kidnapping, torched between four tires until he turned to rubber, knifed on a corner in Sulacap. And then the woman would weep in Joel’s arms. When she finally came up for breath, he would ask, “Would you happen to have a photo of the deceased? It’s for tomorrow’s paper. Three-by-four would get the job done.”

Joel goes back to the bedroom. He sits on the bed, plugs in the lamp. A soft light glows from the rose-colored lampshade. He lies down, hands on chest. Then gets up and leaves the bedroom, making his way to the living room.

Gloria sits transfixed in front of the TV, gaze intent and eyebrows raised, as though someone were telling her over and over that the neighbor had gone to buy bread in the nude.

He settles in on the opposite end of the couch.

“They’re going to try to drown Soninha,” she tells him.

“The blonde girl with the beach bag?”

“Her own brother, flesh of her flesh, sent her out in the sailboat. Gloria thoughtlessly scratches at her arm. “What an evil little . . .”

“Why is she packing her bag in such a hurry?”

“Shhh. It’s the final episode.”

“That’s an awful lot of police cars to arrest a single thief.”

“Shhh.”

At the next scene change, Gloria relaxes. It’s the first time Joel sees her smile. She mustn’t have been ugly, he thinks, but at her age she might have been any of the students in the graduation photo sitting on the bookshelf. The wrinkles encircling her eyes and the lips confirmed the futility of the half-used creams littering the bathroom. Orange and pink tulips sprouted from her belly, the dreary style of clearance-rack garments. Long nails without nail polish, backs of hands stained by old age. A furrowed brow, scars left by worry. But what woman at Gloria’s age could emerge unscathed from the private disappointments and collective terrors of Rio and its chaos? The city’s women carried the marks of a shared melancholy, which they attempted to disguise—quite possibly from themselves—with floral outfits and extravagant bijoux.

She turns off the TV.

“Jorge’s still alive.”

“But the soap’s over.”

“Did you see a cremation? Did you see a funeral? When there’s not of that stuff, it’s because the character might come back. They do it on purpose, so that the storyline sticks with us. Brazilians have a whole slew of people inside them, it comes from the soaps. They provide company, distraction. Are you hungry?”

Joel nods.

She disappears into the kitchen. Oh, the sounds and smells of the womanly gestures that precede a good meal, he thinks. She sets some chicken soup down on the table.

“Leandro told me.” Gloria says, sitting in front of Joel. “What happened. Don’t worry, no one in the building will know. If we’re not careful, people examine our lives like a bank statement. I did have to tell the co-op president because—you know how it is—small building. He might grow suspicious seeing someone new prancing around, even at your age. I told him you’re my cousin. Removed his appendix, I said, and he had a fall at the hospital. What a

**37**

setback, he left the hospital worse than he went in. Rodnei, the doorman, knows too. I told him you fell from the bed after a nightmare and broke your leg. Better story, I thought.”

The soup is hearty and warm, with big chunks of chicken breast in a thick broth.

“If you need to talk, about why you did what you did, I’m here. If you prefer to keep quiet, that’s fine too. What’s important is that you res. . .”

“Is there salt?”

“There is.”

“More salt. To put in the soup.”

“It’s not soup, it’s stew.”

“Is there more salt?”

“You’re a journalist. You must know all about hypertension. But as I was saying, you need to res . . .”

“I don’t believe in that baloney. Is there salt?”

“There is.”

“Is there salt in the kitchen?”

“There’s salt in the kitchen and in the stew. But if you’re asking whether I’m going to give you the salt shaker, the answer is no.”

Joel pushes the bowl away.

“This stuff’s worse than hospital food.”

He uses his hand to get up from the chair and goes to find the crutches leaning on the wall. Gloria is faster and grabs them both.

“I’m not giving you the salt shaker. And you’re not grabbing the salt shaker.”

“A hostage! You are making me a hostage.”

“You’re making yourself a hostage to your bad manners. Forget the stew, you can go hungry,” she says, grabbing the bowl. “You’ll have it for breakfast tomorrow. House rules. I was going to explain earlier but you came in here like some grumpy armadillo and shut yourself in Claudia’s room. In this house, there’s no wasting food or getting drunk. I’ll make up the bed as long as you’re on crutches. Same goes for sweeping the floor and washing dishes. After that, it’s all you.

**38**

The armchair’s old so I covered it with a sarong that belonged to my daughter. It’s worn thin, careful when you sit down so you don’t tear the fabric. When you go to the bathroom, please raise the seat. Lower it when you’re done.”

His appetite whet by three spoonfuls of stew, Joel realizes he’s famished. He thinks about asking for a glass of water to trick his stomach.

“You can trick your stomach with this,” Gloria says, placing a glass in front of Joel.

“I’m not thirsty.”

“As you wish,” she says, taking back the glass.

“How am I supposed to take my pills?”

“Let’s get a few things clear, mister. I offered a good deal here out of consideration for my nephew Leandro.”

“A good deal?”

“I could have rented the room to two very nice young ladies. Vegans.”

“I don’t need any favors.”

“Because you have a friend like Leandro. I’m going to leave the glass of water in your room for your medicine.”

Gloria goes to the room. When she returns, she sits on the couch, crosses her legs, and grabs a celebrity magazine off the center table. Joel stands up. He wanders around the room and then decides to sit on the armchair covered with the sarong. As he lowers himself, he’s assailed by sudden pains, which compel him to moan and gasp. Gloria interrupts her reading and watches Joel carefully. He knew she would take an interest.

“The pain is unbearable,” he says. “It starts in my knee, joins up with my sciatica, then shoots all the way up my spine.”

“Careful not to tear the sarong,” she says.

“Absolutely unbearable.”

Gloria thumbs through her magazine.

**39**

“People really go heavy on the Botox and next thing you know they look like they’ve just come out of a coma and have no idea what the hell’s going on,” she says.

Joel settles into the chair, moaning. She looks at him again.

“I cant find the right position,” he explains.

“Careful with the sarong.”

“Take the stupid thing off if you’re so worried.”

“Happy to, if you pay for the upholstery.”

She goes back to her magazine.

“Look at these girls. Fake lips, big boobs, nasty little faces. It’s like they think they invented the pussy.”

Out in the hallway, dogs bark.

“I hate dogs,” Joel says.

“All they bring you is work and trouble,” Gloria says.

“The tiny ones are the worst.”

“People get attached to them, and next thing they’re blowing the bank on this and that, and then when the thing dies, they start balling like they lost a son. That was Aracy and her chihuahas. But I have to say, she’s much happier since she started picking up dog shit. My daughter, Claudia, always wanted a dog. I let her keep some tadpoles she found at Tijuca National Park. On weekends, we’d take the bus to the park on the Alto and walk through the forest. I haven’t been in some time. When you’re on your feet again we can take a walk around there.”

“When I’m on my feet again, I’m out of here.”

“Godspeed.”

**40**

**CHAPTER 5**

Anyway, where did I leave off?

On Rua Uruguaiana, on the way to the ***Luta*** newsroom. Ready to give my notice. Six months spent listening to the police blotter. Transcribing horoscopes. Fetching coffee for reporters at the bar around the corner. I wanted to be a reporter, but the boss always changed the subject. So I said to myself: I’m going to quit and face my father, study engineering like my mother wants. Make decent money, drive a new car, and marry a girl from Sacré-Coeur, live in a nice neighborhood and vacation overseas.

And then the wind started to pick up, whirling trash all over while thesky went dark. It began to pour. I ran from portico to portico. When I got to the newsroom, I plopped down in my chair, sopping wet.

Half an hour later, Cristiano opened the door to his office. He was a man of about forty, round spectacles, curly hair like a baroque angel. The sensitive type, an autographed Manuel Bandeira poetry collection in his desk drawer. The only one in the whole place who had gone to college. Cristiano came to Rio with the excuse of studying law and dreams of becoming a poet. He suffered for love, but never could translate it into verse.

**41**

To avoid growing old behind the counter at his parents’ pharmacy,he became a journalist. Now and then he still scribbled verse into his notebook. As he opened his door, Cristiano shouted.

“I want a body!”

I looked up, and then went back to pounding out the horoscope.

“It’s five o’clock and we don’t have a body,” Cristiano said. “I need a headline. Get back out on the streets, call the hospitals. I need a body in the next hour.”

“One’s bound to show up,” said Farinha, hanging his blazer across his chair and his wet umbrella in the corner.

“Speaking of which, you haven’t found us a lead story in more than a month.”

“I’m in a slump.”

“This isn’t roulette. Bring me something decent. I only published your story about the pickpocket because it was a slow day and the poacher was French.”

“What about the blackie lynched from the lamppost, doesn’t that count?”

“There was no photo.”

“You weren’t going to want to publish a photo like that. Hey boy, go to the Turk’s and fetch me a coffee. Heavy on the sugar. What’s gotten into him?”

“He wants to hit the streets.”

“Let the boy get his start, Cristiano.”

“I’ll worry about that.”

Cristiano looked after me. Because of my mother. As soon as she learned I’d got the job she marched into the newsroom while I was in school, asking where she could find the cartel leader.

“The boss?” they asked her.

“Of the mob, I want to speak to the mob boss!”

Mama burst into Cristiano’s room without knocking.

**42**

“I changed the lock!” she said. “Things are going to be different now. Let the boy’s father go live with his sluts. It may have taken a while, but I woke up alright.”

This is what I’ve been told, anyway, and I’m able to imagine Mama insisting she’d woken up, eyes wide open. Cristiano listening from behind his desk, no less alert. Mama never did learn to get to the point, and before she bothered saying who she was talking about and why in God’s name she was shouting, she took the opportunity to blow off some steam.

“Things are gonna be different. From now on, the only men in my life are either doctors, doormen, or drivers. He invited me to see the stars out on theAvenida Niemeyer. And this idiot fell for it! I thought we’d have an innocent dinner at Palacio de Veneza. The waiter showed up dressed like a gondolier; Renê ordered the couvert, an appetizer, and the lobster. Two bottles of wine. I started feeling sick, he took care of me, took me to see the stars. Ha! What a stupid, stupid mistake. Pregnant at sixteen. A secretary at eighteen. Secretary at twenty-two, twenty-five, and at thirty. Meanwhile the bastard was in and out of the house like it was a revolving door. Came and went as he pleased. It wasn’t enough he destroyed my life—he had to go and get my son involved in this sleazepit of yours. This devious, bloodthirsty, dishonest newspaper. I forbid it, but now that Joel’s got a bit of fuzz on his chin, he thinks he’s a man and ignores me.”

The entire newsroom came to a halt. The only other women were there to empty the ashtrays. And here was my mother, **incensed,** raging in her high-heels and godet skirt, seeing to her own liberation.

“That man will never foot in my house again! And if he comes begging at the window I’ll dump piss on his head. A newspaper full of crooks! And exploiting children, no less! I’m going straight to the precinct to report you.”Only then did she pause and decide to sit. “Joel never told me a thing, I only recently discovered it and on account of marks.” She pointed to Cristiano. “You, sir. You’re going to look after my son. You’re going to protect him at all costs. So he doesn’t end up traumatized. More than he already is. The only dead person Joel’s going to see is me when I go, and I plan to make it past 100.” She lowered her voice and changed tone. “He’s just a boy. Spends Sundays reading the comics. He still drinks chocolate milk before bed.”

**43**

“Let him hit the street with me, Cristiano,” said Farinha. “I’ll look after the boy.”

“*I*’ll look after the boy,” Cristiano responded. “I want a body. Find me a lead story.”

There are days when Rio assumes European airs. Buses don’t break down, trains run on time, cars proceed with caution. The only kids in the emergency room have either fallen from the slide or stuck a button up their nose. The staff from forensics plays euchre in the lobby. A policeman cleans his finger with a paperclip, a fireman yawns. Nobody kills anyone. No one sets anybody on fire. Nothing explodes or collapses. Knives come out to cut steaks. Pills for headaches. Revolvers are tucked away in dark drawers. Instead of quarreling, the drunks embrace. The electricity doesn’t fail, the water isn’t cut, people conduct affairs discreetly, abusers take a day off. A calm, rainy day, then, is worse. Pedestrians amble aboutmoroselyand large waves hit the beach, warm light emerges from houses. A tropical manger. There is no news, the city in a lull.

Sometime around six they got ahold of their police report and were able to write a piece.

Severino Souza (22 years old, dark-skinned, married, stonemason, of Rua da Gama) stabbed his wife, Maria de Nazaré (16, dark-skinned, maid, and resident of the same house) and wounded Aguinaldo Torres (known as Mr. Good Hair, white, age and address not taken) in the lumbar region. The crime occurred yesterday afternoon, when the assassin came home after a long day of honest work and found the vile adulteress in the arms of her heartless lover, both in a state of undress. Unit 19, led by Corporal Ismael, responded to the scene of the crime, but the assassin had already disappeared into the cold dark night. His wife died on the way to the hospital, her body sent to the morgue. Her lover remains under medical observation.

**44**

Now. Was there an axe buried in the woman’s head? Pesticides in the lover’s cup? Had anyone been scalded, burned with a clothes iron, fingers ground up in the blender? In the *Luta Democrática* such news merited a brief. A small tragedy in the eyes of others, a common occurrence among the rabble.

Later they managed a wife in a camisole on a ledge in Flamengo. A rich neighborhood—even better. The husband said he was leaving, she said she was too, but out the window.

The headline read:

**WOMAN IN NIGHTGOWN MAKES ATTEMPT ON OWN LIFE**

***A Failed Sensual Suicide***

They still needed a photo. And for something else to happen. But the woman had changed her mind and gone back to the room, taken a tranquilizer, and slept.

“Call the precincts again, see if anything better turns up,” said Cristiano.

Farinha stood up with the phone book and went over to a telephone desk. Madureira. There’s always something happening in Madureira. He looked for the number of the precinct, and as he was grabbing the telephone to make a call, it began to ring.

The problem with newspapers are its readers. Not the ones who buy the paper and read quietly to themselves, but those who materialized,with their fingerson the telephone dial, the number for the newsroom, and instructions for reporters. Readers calling with urgent news: “I got into a fight with my mother-in-law for the best spot on the sofa, and she pulled outa bread knife.” Or “I’m calling with a hot tip, my neighbor’s got an illegal tap on the power lines.” This in a city where half the population only sees their family’s faces at night thanks to pirate electricity. Those annoying readers were lucky. If they were ignored or mistreated, they would call again right when the editor-in-chief happened to be passing by and decide to pick up the phone.

Farinha lifted the phone from the hook and then placed it back down, disconnecting on the reader. He toggled the hook hoping to hear the signal. On rainy days, it could take a while to get a line. He tried dozens of times. At one point the phone rang again. He ignored it and pressed the hook to disconnect.

“I want that lead story!” Cristiano shouted.

Farinha pressed and released the hook several times. The telephone started ringing again and he answered by mistake.

“Hello? Is this the ***Luta***?”

“*Luta Democrática*, newsroom here.”

“Is it pouring over there?”

“ . . .”

“Is it pouring over there?”

“Quite a bit, sir.”

“Here the streets are flooding. We’ve lost power. Before long the cars’ll float away.”

“Can I help you?”

“If I were mayor I’d roll up my sleaves. Clean the gutters. Clear the mountains of trash in the favelas. But the politicians in Rio only look after their own pocketbooks. To hell with the rest of us.”

“I’m busy, my friend. I’m going to have to hang up.”

“Wait. Whom do I have the pleasure of speaking with?”

“Whom do you want to speak with?”

“Good one. If I called the newspaper it’s because I want to talk to someone who works there, no? You a reporter?”

“If I work at the newspaper, I must be.”

“Are you a reporter?”

**46**

“It depends.”

“What’s your name?”

“Machado de Assis”

“I´ve heard this name before. A police reporter?

“The very same.”

“I really love the work you guys do. There’s a newsstand on my corner, I buy the morning edition.”

“My friend, I’m a bit busy, you excuse me but I have to hang up.”

“Easy there, Machado**.** You want news? I’ve got some for you. But if you’re not interested, I’ll phone your competitor. Or your boss.”

“Go ahead.”

“Someone took advantage of the storm to dump a body nearby.”

“Where? When?”

Farinha scribbled down the details, grabbed his umbrella, and told Godofredo, the photographer, it was time to go. They swung by Cristiano’s office.

“I’m off to get your body,” Farinha said.

He was coming down the stairs just as I was bringing up the coffee.

“Come with me, kid.”

Boy, was I happy. My pulse quickened, my mouth opened in a smile. I was still capable of such bursts of joy. Shadowing Farinha was a dream. He was friends with gambling bosses, policemen, pimps, detectives, pickpockets and safecrackers. He knew how to sniff out contraband deliveries, and who was who in the whole chain, from the sailor who did the unloading to the hotshotowner of the merchandise, sipping brandy at his posh apartment in Flamengo. The only reporter who could disappear for two or three days while Cristiano pretended not to notice. I sent him on a major assignment, Cristiano would say, even when everyone knew that this major assignment was Farinha’s detour to a bar at the foot of the Morro de Fátima.Either Farinha didn’t drink, or he drank for two days straight. He was the best reporter

**47**

the paper had, and the kind of drunk who woke up beneath a blazing sun, his lips glued to the asphalt with his own dry saliva.

Now imagine me, a pipsqueak in the back seat of the newsroom Jeep, face sore from so much smiling. Next to me Godofredo, legs spread and camera in his lap. Up front, Farinha, griping to the driver about his mother-in-law. Me riding with the big boys. My heart swelling in my chest, leaping with joy.

It was getting dark. The rain would not let up. A sheet of rain was forming around the marquees of the buildings along Avenida Presidente Vargas. Just head, the gleaming timepieces of the Central Station clocktower announcing six in the afternoon. The tender melody of Gounod’s “Ave Maria” interrupted the news on the radio.

The jeep turned down Leopoldina before taking Avenida Brasil. Rows of houses, followed by stores, followed by walls, followed by factories, followed by houses, followed by stories. I had no idea Rio could stretch on like that. I’d never ventured past Grajaú, the tram route to school and the newspaper, and the streets of the old city center. Forehead resting against the cold window glass, chest filled with expectation, my mind meanding like the route. I was beginning to understand that Rio was much greater and more complex than I could imagine.

Twenty minutes later the jeep turned right down a dark street full of potholes, punctuated with warehouses, high walls, and empty lots. Then turned again, down a narrow street. More warehouses and dark buildings. It drove a few more blocks—tossing me from side to side at each bump in the road. We drove by a tiny park with broken swings, arriving at a row of boarded-up business fronts. Next to a lamppost was a heap in the shape of a body, and I say that way because it I had a hard time believing it.

I had never seen a dead man, the motionless, strangely real volume of a dead man. My mouth was dry, my pulse

**48**

was still racing, but now was different. Farinha turned to me.

“Kid, here’s how it works. Not a finger. Not a word, either. Stay by my side and out of trouble.”

I nodded. I felt like a fraction of myself, and even that much felt like a nuisance. The driver pulled up to the curb and turned the car off. The rain was coming down in sheets.

“Ready to get baptized?” Godofredo asked.

Farinha stepped out of the car and opened his umbrella. We walked over to the body. It was a middle-aged man in supine position**.** Arms spread wide, legs atop the curb. Farinha smiled. A dignified dead man**.** White, wealthy-looking, coat and tie, expensive leather shoes with lightly-worn soles.

But the body was intact. No knife wound, no bullet hole, not even a bruise. The dead man even looked content, like he was napping in a hammock. Farinha checked his watch. Two hours until deadline. He couldn’t return to the newsroom with the non-news of a man who died of natural causes.

Now I couple of things I learned later. Farinha was the grandson of an emancipated slave and son of a washer woman. Third generation struggling for a foothold in the middle class. That week he had been fired from his morning job. His rent was past due, his wife had tuberculosis, his son was trying to get into college, his diabetic mother-in-law had moved in.

It had been a month since he’d turned up a lead story. He only wrote about homeless found dead on park benches, drunks hit by cars in Copacabana, another dark-skinned man found disfigured on the train tracks. None of the recently departed

**49**

had a sordid past, money, or something mysterious to justify a larger story. There were younger, ambitious reporters. Farinha’s wife required treatment, the clinic cost more than a hotel. His son wanted to be a doctor, had a lighter skin thank his and could go places. His mother-in-law took endless showers, left the lights on, ate for two. The bills increased.

And so, on that dark, deserted street beneath the unceasing rain, Farinha closed his umbrella, clutched the handle and sunk it into the dead man, puncturing his chest with the metal tip. One, two, three times. All his strength, hole after hole, the dry, cracking sound of bones breaking.

There I was. Rain dripping from my nose. With each blow my eyes tried to shut. I noticed something inside me, stirring. I vaguely understood I was becoming another person. Not older, or better, I was becoming . . . different. It took years to make sense of that scene, and part of me never bothered.

I’ve since forgotten the details, but I can still see myself froma bird’s-eye view. I’m next to Farinha (he, six feet tall, me, four-foot-eleven). The two of us in front of a defiled body. Him, catching his breath. Me, standing there. Small, soaked, stone-still. Fourteen years old. In my pants pocket, the cheese sandwich my mother made, flat.

Farinha called Godofredo over (until then uninterested, contemplating a wall) to take a photo.

Five minutes later the flashing lights of a police car came down on the dead man. Out stepped two-hundred-fifty poundsof a desk-bound investigator wearing a cheap suit— Detective Peixoto. Peixoto opened an umbrella and walked up to Farinha. They shook hands.

“Tell me, when’s the dance?”

“Helena makes her debut next week. The wife is anxious, chuggingpassion fruit juice to calm her nerves. And your boy?”

**50**

“Likes to study, is thinking about college.”

Peixoto’s youngest got a mini-laboratory for a gift.

“Gonna be a scientist,” the man says.

“What do we have here?” Peixoto asks, tapping the body with his foot as though it were a flat tire.

“Fat-cat. Shot dead.”

Peixoto looked at the dead man, who even punched full of holes looked like he was napping. He studied the suit jacket, frowned approvingly at the quality of the cut. He kneeled down with some difficulty, his remarkable bellyworking against him. He tried to fit his pointing finger inside one of the holes. The hole was narrow, the finger didn’t fit. He tried other fingers and they didn’t either. He stuck his pinky in.

“Twenty-two caliber. A small gun, a woman’s firearm. A crime of passion,” he concluded, taking a hankerchief from his pocket to clean his pinky.

“So the redhead we passed driving a white Cadillac might be the assassin,” Farinha said to me.

I didn’t answer.

“Look at this boy” Peixoto said.“You never forget your first dead man.”

On the drive back the men didn’t speak. The rain drummed on the jeep’s hood, the wipers scraped the windshield.

“You’re quiet,” Farinha said, looking at me through the rearview mirror.

“What you did was wrong.”

Godofredo started laughing.

“You have a lot to learn,” Farinha said.

“It was wrong. There was no bullet. He died of something else. That’s the truth.”

“And who are you to say what’s true?”

“I saw it. I know. The paper has to publish the truth.”

**51.**

“Ah, that’s a good one. Tell me, what’s the truth in the serious newspapers the hotshots read? That the minimum wage covers the bills? That Rio is going to stop rationing electricity? That this shitty military government is only temporary? Newspaper headlines are made of lies. About the way things ought to be but never are. And I’m not about to let some kid who’s barely learned to write tell me what’s true.”

“The holes. You made them.”

Farinha turned around, the fierce white of his eyes stark against the darkness in the car.

“I’m going to tell you something, boy. The *Luta* might exaggerate a little here and there. But there’s nothing truer in this city than the bodies we show. Don’t you ever forget it, as long as you’re a reporter. The bodies are real. Their pain is always real.”