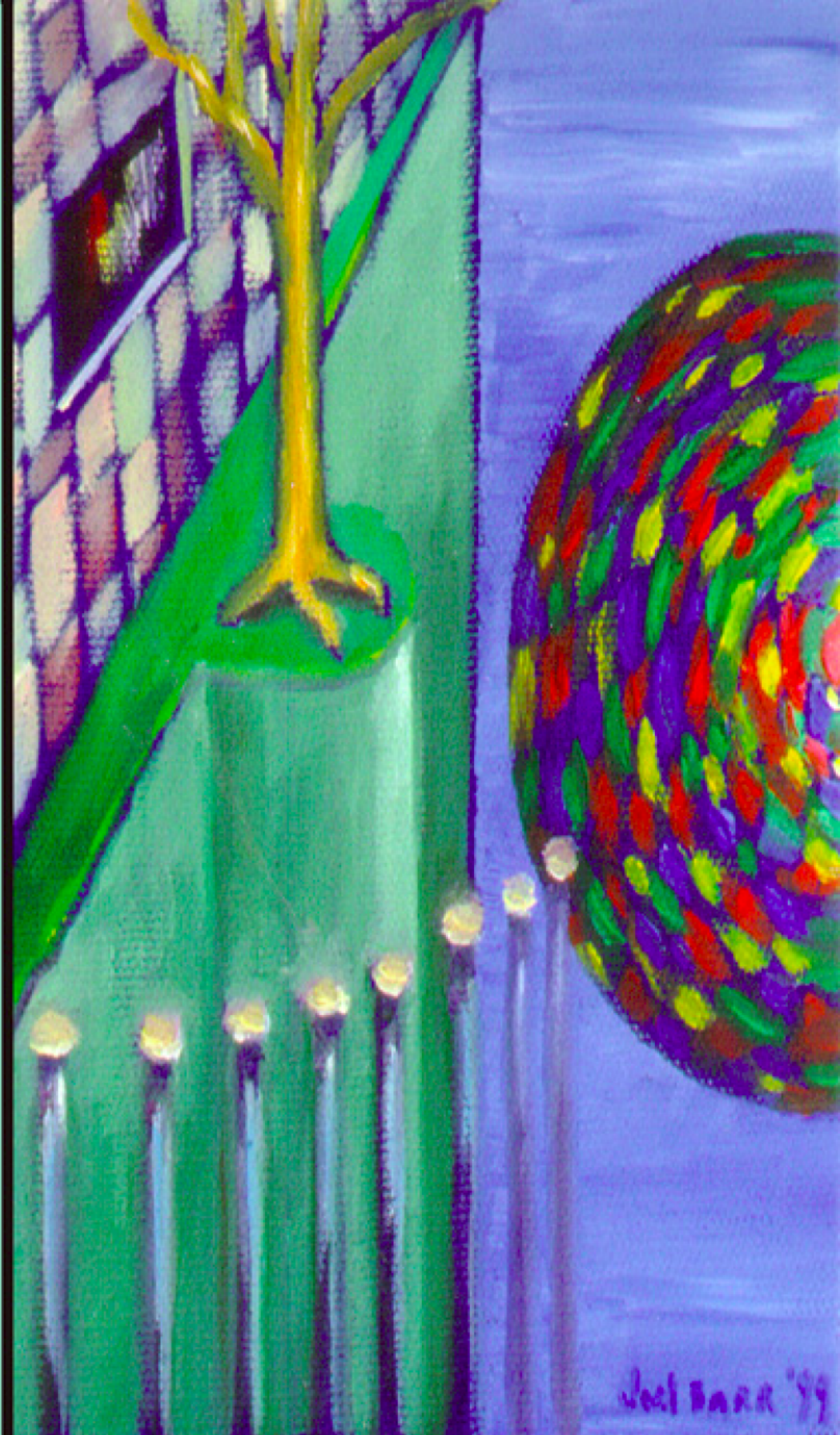


CHILDHOOD
OF THE
DEAD

by
Jose
Louzeiro

Translated by
Ladyce Pompeo
de Barros

BOSON BOOKS



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JOSE LOUZEIRO

Translated into English by
LADYCE POMPEO DE BARROS

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For Information contact
C&M Online Media Inc.
3905 Meadow Field Lane
Raleigh, NC 27606
Tel: (919) 233-8164
e-mail: boson@cmonline.com
URL: <http://www.bosonbooks.com>

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To Eduardo Tavares

The facts which substantiate this narrative were taken from our bitter daily experience. The author did not worry about arranging them chronologically nor did he abstain from describing brutal situations which show well the level of dehumanization at which society has arrived.

“There are 15 million needy or abandoned children in Brazil, waiting for help. They represent about one third of the 48 million 226 thousand 718 Brazilians [48,226,718] between the ages of zero to 18, geographically distributed as: North (3.83%), Northeast (31.64%), Southeast (42.91%), South (16.64%) and Center-West (5.08%).”

—Jornal do Brasil, April 5th, 1976

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CHAPTER ONE

I

The morning was cool and clear. Pichote shoved aside the newspapers, looked at the day just beginning and at the people who rushed in and out of the train station. He got up before the policemen arrived, around six in the morning, to beat up whomever they could catch. This was the fourth time he'd slept at the station and escaped the guards. Dito would not believe it. When he woke up on the first morning it was still dark. In fact, he'd not been able to sleep well. On the second, he woke up with the noise of the newspaper vendors and the barman raising their shops' iron doors. On the next, he'd felt someone rummaging through in his pockets. It was a black dude, smiling and drunk, pocket knife poised. He didn't shout, didn't say anything, as the guy went through his pockets until he found the one thousand cruzeiros bill. Pichote felt like running after him, swearing, but he knew that would be risky. That's why he curled up again. He'd cried quietly, and crying, fell asleep. He then woke up with the noise of trucks delivering newspapers.

This time, what made him get up so early was the appointment with Dito, Manguito and Smokey. Crystal would show up, deliver the stuff; they would return to the station and go as stowaways to Sao Paulo. Pichote had never been there. The plan fascinated him. He couldn't remember greater excitement: to travel, to walk in unknown streets, with taller buildings than Rio. He was left speechless, just listening to Dito's descriptions. He rejoiced in having met him, and was even happier realizing they had become friends. Though he was the youngest in the group, it was he whom Dito had chosen.

Pichote was eleven and feeling rather cocky for his three years in the streets. Sinking his hands in his pockets, he hopped around the crowd arriving at the station, he twirled and laughed at their serious faces and at their severe looks. His canvas shoes were frayed, his pants revealed most of his skinny shins. He stuck a dirty yellow hand out to beg, a fat man shoved him with indifference, women who walked by talking loudly and laughing made an effort to ignore his presence; but Pichote did not give up, until an old woman in mourning opened her purse and took out a worthless bill. He

held it with a smile showing his tiny teeth, two of them overlapping on the side of the mouth. Before walking away, the woman's eyes ran over his filthy clothes, his buttonless shirt exposing his belly.

He skipped about in the crowd, he sang dirty little songs, laughed, pulled a student's skirt, messed up the dessert tray the Bahian woman carried, stopped at the door of the bar, the owner sending him away; he slipped among students and decided to say he hadn't eaten in two days and had no change for coffee. The tallest student gave him some coins, another was hard pressed to find a small bill like the one the woman in black had given him.

Pichote had no complaints that fresh and clear morning. Now he just needed to get on a bus and pay for his ticket. He needed to avoid any problem with the ticket taker. To go from the station to the cemetery on foot was impossible. He'd already walked longer distances, but he couldn't get there on foot and be on time to meet Dito. No doubt about it: with the old woman's bill he would have a coffee and with the rest he would make sure to have a place on the bus.

Putting the cup back on the counter, which was almost as tall as he was, he ran to the line and disappeared in the crowd formed suddenly at the bus door. He shoved and got shoved. A young woman in glasses called him a punk; a man with an attaché case tried to thump him on the head. He dove in the confusion of legs and bodies, resurfacing next to the ticketeer with money in hand; the stupid-looking guy was grateful he didn't have to come up with change.

He pushed through turnstyle and sought the seat next to the driver. The running engine caused the entire chassis to shudder. The seats were progressively taken, when none were left, passengers held on as they could, some grabbed the overhead rail, others the edges of their seats. The driver vaulted into his seat like a gymnast, and engaged the gear. Pichote paid no more attention to the people elbowing each other in the aisle.

He looked at the streets full of cars, at the avenues, at the public squares and the sleepy air the city seemed to have. There were streaks of fog in the *oiti*-tree branches around the church, there were cottony flakes floating in the waters of the lake where he'd often washed himself. The driver was oblivious to Pichote's little discoveries. He used the brakes brusquely at the avenue's light, in front of the movie theater and swerved

violently into a curve underneath the overpass. Then, they passed mansions surrounded by trees, a police barracks, repair shops and one or two schools where students on the sidewalks waited for the bell to ring.

Close to the cemetery, Pichote pulled the cord and other people did the same. He stood up, almost sorry not to go to the end of the line, and hurried to step out. He took a side street where the cement sidewalk had holes and burned-candle stubs at the foot of the long lugubrious wall. Heavy iron gates were covered with sheetmetal painted in black.

He imagined the gates and the wall were to keep the souls from running away, just as they did in prisons or in the children's home, where he had lived for six months until Starry managed to spring him.

He stopped where the candles were more numerous, started to mash the melted wax with the toe of his shoe and to remember Starry's life, who was in there, way beyond the large tombs. At night was his soul able to jump over the wall and the tall gates?

He would have remembered more things about Starry, from the time he got to know him at the children's home, had he not heard Dito's whistle and seen him together with Smokey in front of a florist. He didn't know why they were there, but he hurried over.

II

"Hey man, you're already screwing up," Dito said when Pichote arrived. "I didn't know where you was at."

"I had to get some dough."

"What about the other day's ten thousand cruzeiros?"

"I got me some chow, and for Encravado and Mother's Scourge. It was just enough."

Dito found that funny.

"Never mind. There's still time for Crystal to show up. Cool it."

"Why do we have to wait here?"

"Cause we do," Smokey answered, his pockets full of cookies.

"When Manguito shows up we go."

"Where's he at?"

"Coming around by the side of the cemetery. I don't trust Crystal. He's already screwed us up once," Dito explained.

“And why do we have to fuck with him?” asked Pichote a little alarmed.

“He has the dough, we got to chance it. Shut your face and everything will be fine,” Smokey insisted.

His friend’s confidence pleased Pichote. He took the cookie Smokey offered him while Dito got another one. Pichote wished to ask for more but was afraid of being yelled at. Dito got more cookies again. Pichote watched Smokey go through his pockets.

“Want some?” Smokey asked.

“Give him more, this guy ain’t had a nibble today,” said Dito.

Smokey found that funny.

“Eat, or you kick the bucket, man. You’ll go there to stiff city, like Starry.”

Pichote was about to answer when Manguito showed up running, shirt in hand, sweating and breathless.

“Crystal is calling us to the bar.”

Dito sat on the curb. At first he said nothing. Manguito played with his shirt. Pichote and Smokey sat beside him.

“What’s he up to?”

“I dunno,” answered Manguito, still breathless. “He said he has the weed.”

“And who is at the bar with him?” Smokey asked.

“From what I saw, nobody. He’ll be playing pool until we show up.”

“Did you case the outside of the bar? That’s what we wanna know, man,” Dito said angrily.

“Sure! Do you think I am dumb?”

“Then, let’s go,” Dito said. “We’ll go through the cemetery or we won’t get there on time.” “There’s a good place on the other side,” explained Manguito, taking the lead.

The first to try climbing was Smokey. He was barefooted, his feet calloused; he supported himself as well as he could in the fence’s iron curls; going up he waved for his companions to follow. Then, it was Pichote’s turn. Dito helped him.

As they jumped into the cemetery they tried to hide behind the tombs and the tall grass. They sprinted in small stretches and went back to crouching to escape the workers.

They arrived at an alley of big trees planted in careful lines. Dito spotted an old man with a mean face and told the others to keep down. After a second sign they resumed walking. They'd already covered a good part of the way, but still had far to go.

"Jeez, so many stiffs around here!" said Smokey.

Dito looked at him but made no comment. He didn't want jokes at a time when they had to be so careful.

When they crossed one of the alleys they saw a cortege going by, men leading the coffin carrying flowers. Pichote's eyes opened wide. He didn't like being there, crawling among the tombs. And at each inscription he saw and could barely read, he remembered Starry.

He'd like to know where his friend was buried, he would like to put flowers on his grave on the way back. When Dito ordered them to walk faster, he forgot Starry. He mustn't lag behind, nor go too far ahead. It was silly to be worried about Starry, when he needed to be on the alert.

Smokey sneaked by his side. By now Pichote didn't recall why they hadn't gone around the outside. He'd like to know why. They were taking too many risks and for nothing. He'd ask Dito the reason for that as soon as they set foot outside the cemetery.

They reached the sector where there were no imposing tombs. Common now were the low graves, where grass grew. Some still showed old paintings, others were completely blackened. The flower vases had been broken or simply didn't exist. The inscriptions were covered by moss and there were no trees around to give them shade.

That state of abandonment left Pichote alarmed. If they had buried poor Starry there, then he had been practically thrown away. And despite knowing Dito would be angry, he could not avoid the question:

"Is Starry around here?"

Dito looked at him without anger, shook his head silently, while observing the alley of loose dirt, for he was sure he had caught sight of a caretaker behind a pile of dirt and bricks.

They crawled for a little longer. Dito told them to stop. Despite his effort he could not see the man again. He even thought he was wrong. But at the same time, he was sure he'd seen him. He couldn't be confused.

The space they had to cross, the last one before reaching the foot of the wall, was very open. They could easily be seen. That was why he had to be

sure about that caretaker. And what was worse: if he were hiding, it would be because he wanted to surprise them. Perhaps he saw Manguito go by and wanted to catch them, take them to the administration office, and accuse them of coming to steal marble.

Dito watched and grew certain that was it. Even if they ran, they wouldn't have time to jump. Soon the employee would come, perhaps with two or three others. He was sure he would be able to jump over the wall easily but he didn't think Smokey and Pichote could do it.

He got a stone and threw it toward the pile of dirt and brick. He saw clearly when the man's cap appeared. There was no question he was waiting for them to run. He looked at Manguito, Smokey, Pichote, and thought it best to tell them what was going on. He did it as if telling a secret.

"We have to run as hard as we can. I'll help Pichote, you push Smokey up to the top," he said to Manguito.

There was no waiting. The longer they waited, the worse it would be. He looked at Pichote again, saw him holding some drooping flowers he wished to place on Starry's tomb.

"Throw that away!"

Pichote shook his head.

"If we pass by his grave, I'll put the flowers on it."

Dito knew that wasn't possible. They couldn't go about looking for Starry's inscription, even if there was one. But, by the same token, he didn't want to pass on to his friends the fear that had come over him. Few times had he felt this way, driven into a corner, with no chance of escaping.

What if the custodian were in fact a security guard?

The guard would wait for them to climb the wall, to have a better target. Why hadn't he thought about this before? The other option was to retreat cautiously to the alley where they'd seen the cortege following the coffin. They could probably hide. On the other hand, they wouldn't reach the slum where Crystal was. No. The idea of retreating didn't appeal to him. It was a kind of defeat. They'd have to reach the slum by the steep alley at the end of the stone paved street, where the stoolpigeons and dealers were. They'd want to know about things, would force an answer, and then all work would have been lost. There was only one way left: each one, by himself, would run to the wall and would try to jump over it. If the guy with the cap got out of his burrow, Dito would be able to hit him with a stone. If there

were two, Manguito would help. They wouldn't be the ones to screw up a deal with Crystal.

Speaking as quietly as he could, Dito tried to explain the plan. Smokey's eyes appeared scared but, even so, he was able to show a bright smile. Pichote didn't seem bothered. The wall he saw two hundred meters away didn't look difficult for him to jump. He had already faced worse situations, and he couldn't be unworthy of his companions' trust, especially now.

"Do you think you can jump?"

Pichote smiled, showing only his tiny yellow teeth.

"When you get there, don't panic. When it's time to jump to the outside, don't fall apart because it seems high."

None of this appeared to scare Pichote. He tightened his belt, and was ready to go. Dito, for his part, grabbed stones, looking towards the dirt pile. Pichote ran, at first squatting and later, freely. He was already close to the wall and not a sign of the man in the cap. Yet, they heard two dry shots.

Pichote swayed. He fell and stood up again, managed some steps as if he didn't know which direction to take, fell again. Dito had the stones in his hands without knowing at whom to throw them.

"They shot Pichote!" Smokey said alarmed.

Dito knew he couldn't lose his cool even though he felt himself fuming.

"Let's go, before they catch us!"

The three started running, crouching as much as they could. Other shots were fired, but no one got hurt. Dito approached Pichote. He had his eyes open, threads of blood flowing from his neck. His yellowish hand had opened, releasing the drooping flowers he'd been taking to Starry. Manguito and Smokey had already scaled the wall. Dito stood up and flung some stones not knowing what he wanted to hit. Realizing the pointlessness of his gesture, the impossibility of taking Pichote away from there, he ran to the wall and jumped.

III

"Dr. Alencar, there's a little problem here to be taken care of," said the supervisor, a powerful looking mulatto.

The man who had just arrived kept quiet. He put on his glasses to read an invoice of materials, after which he asked if the truck had already unloaded the bricks. His aide answered by telling him the bricks were being stacked up in a pile in the same sector where there was a problem. Dr. Alencar showed some nervousness.

“What problem is this you’re talking about, *Seu Laerte*?”

The mulatto smiled.

“Galego and Big Jet followed the orders”

“Which orders?”

“To stop urchins from robbing the cemetery. At least one of them won’t bring us any more problems.”

Dr. Alencar set his glasses down on the table. He was a bit apprehensive.

“How did this happen, *Seu Laerte*?”

“It’s hard to tell. But from what Big Jet tells me, Galego hit one of the punks. To avoid complications, I sent the body to the third chapel.”

“Let’s see how this happened,” Dr. Alencar said, standing up and leaving the room.

The supervisor followed him.

The third chapel was the smallest of all. It had not been used in years. Nowadays, only unused material was stored there. The manager entered with care to avoid staining his clothes on the shovels and hoe handles in the room.

“How old could this boy be?”

“About ten. But they know how to do things you wouldn’t imagine.”

“Where is Galego?”

“He’s left. Both he and Big Jet.”

Dr. Alencar wasn’t concerned with the boy’s death; what bothered him was how to get rid of the body without problems.

“Get me Galego and Big Jet. No matter where they are.”

Dr. Alencar returned to his office. He turned on the air conditioning, answered the phone, took notes, smiled, spoke softly. The supervisor called a man in uniform, and told him to find Galego and Big Jet’s whereabouts.

“Dr. Alencar wants to speak to both of them.”

The manager stayed on the phone, apologized for something he wasn’t able to do — which the security supervisor couldn’t figure out and was not

interested in knowing — took from his pockets other invoices for delivery of materials and set them on the table.”Each one says three loads of stone, but it was only one.”

Dr. Alencar looked at the receipts and smiled.

“And when does the driver want to be paid?”

“He said he’ll stop by next week.”

“And alley 125 is already all cemented?”

“No. The two masons haven’t shown up since last week. I think I’m going to get others. Someone willing to work hard.”

“I don’t understand, *Seu* Laerte, how it is that we can let custodians go about armed in the cemetery.”

The mulatto pulled a cynical smile and clapped once.

“Well, *doutor*, that’s what we’d agreed. A caretaker is much cheaper than a guard. And it doesn’t cost to do both things at once. What we didn’t foresee was this swarm of punks showing up. It is unbelievable what they’ve robbed from the graves. Now, maybe things will get better. It is an ill wind that blows nobody good.”

“I hope you’re right. Can you imagine if this gets out? If Big Jet and Galego talk?”

Laerte looked at Dr. Alencar incredulously. “Do you think they are crazy? Who would be the losers but them?”

“And have you thought about how to dispose of the body?”

“Yes, but I was waiting for a word from you. Who knows, you may have a better idea.”

“Seek an out-of-the-way place and have it buried tonight.”

“You’ll excuse me, but I believe that, in cases like this, the more discreet we are, the better.”

Dr. Alencar settled back into his chair. “What do you suggest then?”

“That we open an existing grave and place the body there. It’s safer.”

Dr. Alencar smirked. “That’s a good idea. Do this yourself; don’t let Galego or Big Jet know about it. If tomorrow, then, they decide to accuse us, they won’t have a way to prove anything.”

The supervisor grinned again and Dr. Alencar turned his attention to the phone.

Dito shook the dirt from his clothes. His eyes were still red. They had crossed a long stretch of woods, up to the foot of the hill. No one felt like talking. When they got to the main ascent up into the slum, where there was no more danger of being caught by the snitches and dealers, Manguito decided to break the silence.

“Do you think we should return through the cemetery?”

“No. We escape by the other side. Only later, I’m going to show up there. They’ll have to tell me who shot Pichote.”

They arrived at the bar. Manguito and Smokey went around behind the small shack, while Dito went in cautiously, and approached Crystal who was still playing pool.

“Hey, man! I thought you’d forgotten our appointment.”

Dito remained quiet.

“Where’re your little friends?”

Crystal noticed Manguito and Smokey approaching. He sat on the pool table and began talking.

“It’s gonna be a big job. First some free samples. After, when they are well hooked, things thicken. But in this small job only, you will take five hundred grand. It’s enough to keep the wolf away from the door for a long time.”

“And what do we have to do to get so much money?” Dito asked.

“As I said,” Crystal answered, “almost nothing.”

Dito didn’t much like this guy, who talked incessantly and acted as if he knew everything, and thought everything would be easy. They hadn’t even begun their first job and he was already absorbed with their future.

“And where will we get the money?” Dito asked objectively.

“Two hundred thousand cruzeiros from me and the rest in Sao Paulo. At this address.”

Crystal took a card from his pocket showing it to Dito.

“Do you know where it is?”

“Of course I know.”

“Well it’s there. A big house that’s ready to be demolished. There is work going on there, but the workers are all part of the group. You go in and ask for Deborah. Then one of the workers will stop what he’s doing and ask you to follow him to her presence. You’ll like it. Fine people, who don’t

begrudge payments. You might even earn a bonus. It will all depend on you.”

Dito reached for the card but Crystal pulled it away, smiling and gesturing.

“None of that. Material proof is dangerous. You have to memorize: 1072 Lavapés Street, two houses before the gas station.”

“And what’ll we take?”

Crystal pulled small bags from his pockets.

“This stuff. I will sew them to the inside of your pants myself.”

While this man with strange mannerisms and a pock-marked face, always smiling, fidgeted around, Dito thought about Pichote: his wide-open eyes, his hand unfurled with Starry’s flowers.

“First you,” said Crystal addressing Manguito.

The boy took off his pants, keeping his undershorts. Crystal turned the clothes inside out, opened a small box, where there were more little bags, thread and needle.

“I have to make like I’m a tailor for everything to work out. The goods will be secure like this. Even if they put their hands in your pockets, they won’t find anything.”

Dito continued to observe this man so patient and talkative. When he finished sewing the bags to Manguito’s pants, it was Smokey’s turn. Only, he had no undershorts. He was embarrassed to be naked, so Crystal found him a towel.

“When you come back, I swear I’ll buy first-class clothing for everybody. Clothes and shoes.”

Dito wasn’t worried about that. He was worried about returning through the cemetery and, from there, to try to take the train to Sao Paulo. His thoughts appeared to echo those of Crystal.

“Don’t even dream of catching a bus at the bus station. You would be caught, easy.”

Dito said he knew that. Crystal wasn’t satisfied.

“The policewomen would try to see your travel permit and they’d end up taking you to juvenile court. The route for you is the train. Unless you can get a ride, which is just as dangerous.”

“You can leave it to us. You don’t need to worry about this,” Dito said a bit fed up with Crystal’s anxiety over petty details.

By the time Crystal finished sewing the bags into Dito's pants, Smokey remembered having to return via the cemetery, because Crystal himself argued that it would be dangerous to go back past the snitches again. Soon after, he showed the money, almost all in thousand cruzeiro bills.

"Look," he said, "if something happens because you don't do it right, it's your problem. For all intents and purposes I know nothing. That's why you can't be too careful. And don't get yourself in a mess."

Manguito appeared cheerful, while Crystal proceeded with his admonition. Dito's interest picked up only when he heard threatening words.

"Any fuck up will cost you. Get the picture: you're not working only for me. There's a lot of people in the organization. You can have a great life or be done away with."

V

"So, how did this happen, *Seu Galego*?" Dr. Alencar wanted to know.

The man was white and nearly bald. His colleague, whose nickname was Big Jet, was seated. He had muscular arms and didn't seem disturbed by his superior's worries.

"Look, boss," Galego said, "we've done what we should have done long ago. Have you noticed how these punks are about to drive us all nuts? The other day they ruined a whole tomb. They took away the crosses and even the metal inscription. That's why I followed the orders to a tee. I wasn't going to hit the little fucker, but then the shot went wild."

"And now, what do you think should be done?"

"Very simple, *doutor*," Big Jet said. "We put the punk in a hole and that's it."

"I don't believe it's that simple," Dr. Alencar remarked.

"These kids are all abandoned in the world, *doutor*. I doubt somebody will show up to complain," Galego said.

The telephone rang, the supervisor answered and said Dr. Alencar was in a meeting.

"What if tomorrow you two have a fight and decide to squeal?" the manager challenged.

"Talk about this? Us? Cut it out, *doutor*," Big Jet said smiling.

“If you like, we’ll bury the punk later. Over there where he died.”

The manager stood up, and poured some coffee in his cup.

“It’s already been taken care of, but you must keep quiet. I want this to be kept secret, or I’ll have to take it up with the proper authorities. That wouldn’t be good for me, but it would be much worse for you two.”

Shrugging his shoulders with indifference, Big Jet stood up waiting for his colleague who was still listening to Dr. Alencar’s concerns. Not knowing why he asked, Big Jet posed his supervisor a question just as challenging.

“From now on should we do as we did, or should we let that bunch of delinquents take over the cemetery?”

Dr. Alencar winked, then smiled. The custodian understood well what that meant.

VI

Dito, Manguito and Smokey veered in a wide turn around the slum, finally leaving by the side far from where they’d entered. Dito couldn’t forget Pichote, his words, his gestures, his baby-toothed smile. At times, he felt responsible for his death. Had he imagined another plan, Pichote could still be alive. But he also knew he did all he could to protect him. He couldn’t have remained there, without reacting, waiting for the caretakers to come and kill them. The mistake had been to go through the cemetery, in the first place, to fear a confrontation with the snitches. Smokey was also sad. Manguito was the only one who appeared reconciled to the loss.

“It happened. What can we do?”

Dito didn’t think like that.

“For the time being we’ll stay cool. We have to take Crystal’s goods. On the way back I’m going to the cemetery again. I may even sleep there. When is dark, I’ll get the guy who killed Pichote. They won’t get away with this.”

“And do you know who did it?” Smokey asked naively.

“Anyone I catch will be fine. I just want them to know we’re not dogs they can kill without punishment.”

They were seated beneath some bushes enjoying a light breeze; the slum shacks had been left behind. This was a quiet place, covered with wild flowers. Smokey and Dito talked about Pichote until Manguito interfered.

“And that woman in Sao Paulo! What do you reckon she’s like?”

Dito looked at him. Smokey cut in.

“Well, she must have a big butt and she already owes us three grand.”

Manguito smiled, Dito felt like laughing but tried not to. He didn’t want to cheer up. For a long time he thought about Pichote, about his almost incessant questions and his foolery. He had learned to like him and admire him for his courage: Pichote feared nothing. How many dangerous escapades had they faced together! Again, he heard dry shots; he saw Pichote running and suddenly, as if he had lost direction and consciousness, he saw him fall, lift himself again, and then fall once more. No. This wouldn’t stay like that. He would return from Sao Paulo and go to the cemetery. He would bring with him a sharp pocket knife and do in the first person he met.

When Dito woke up to his friends’ talk, Smokey was asking about the train trip.

“Well, there is nothing hard about it, man. We find out the schedule and keep a low profile. Then we sneak through the platform and get in the restaurant car. That is the safest one. If we can’t,” explains Dito further, “we look for a freight about to leave. That might even be better.”

Smokey smiled, Manguito spoke lewdly:

“What I worry about is how to spend the dough. Who knows, maybe Deborah will get us some girls?”

“Sao Paulo has lotsa girls. You only need cash. If this is your problem, I know a bunch of places.” Dito said.

Manguito was enticed.

“So, we can spend a whole day at a cat-house before coming back. What do you think?”

“May be,” Dito answered drily.

“What about me, how do I get in on this?” asked Smokey.

“You’re a kid. You still smell of diapers. If you go to a real woman’s house, she will put you in the crib.”

Dito thought this provocation funny. He looked at Smokey, knowing that he, himself, was not much older. At most he might be fourteen. To show off, Smokey talked about the intimacies he’d already had with a woman.

“She called me in to give me some clothes and then wanted something else. And do you think I wasted time?” he said, excited.

Manguito and Dito laughed again. They stayed under the bushes waiting for the day to cool off some.

“I think that from here we should look for a restaurant and get some hot food.”

“I’m gonna have me some black beans,” Manguito said.

“And we also have to buy jackets for the cold weather. Sao Paulo at night ain’t easy.”

“If we buy clothes we’ll spend almost all our money,” Smokey complained.

“We’ll get more later in Sao Paulo. Didn’t you hear Crystal say they owe us three hundred grand?”

“And a wool shirt should be cheap. We should buy it over by Alfa^ndega Street.”

“Then, I’ll buy some shoes also. I’m tired of walking barefoot,” Smokey said.

They stood up and went down through the underbrush; later they got to a bus stop, where uniformed bus drivers stood joking, laughing.

“Where are we going now?” Manguito wanted to know.

“To the Chinaman. After lunch we stay around Paris Square or we go to a movie. If Smokey can’t go in, he stays walking around while we watch the movie.”

Smokey didn’t like the threat.

“You only have to look for a film I can see!”

“You can’t go in barefoot,” Manguito explained.

“Then, let’s buy clothes and shoes first.”

Dito smiled stroking Smokey’s head. He wasn’t very different from Pichote.

VII

After lunch they went for a walk. Whenever they arrived at a store salesmen would throw them out. Dito began to think they were taking too many risks, and so he sent Manguito and Smokey to wait for him at the street corner. He guessed his friends’ sizes and bought them jackets. Seeing his money the

salesclerk whistled loudly prompting the boys to come up from the sidewalk.

“Now you find a pair of shoes for this guy!”

“What size?”

“He has to try them on.”

The salesman was impatient. He didn't want Smokey to sit down where other people tried on shoes. He took the measurements carelessly, said that a 32 was okay. He went to the back of the store and returned with two boxes. Smokey chose the brown pair with wide shoelaces. Dito didn't think they should loiter around there: someone might call the juvenile court, telling on them. He pulled out one more bill and paid for the shoes. The salesclerk watched them as if wondering how they came to have money. Despite his dirty legs and wrinkled pants, Smokey put the shoes on immediately. He stomped out into the street and began to regret his notion of going around with shoes on.

Hours later they hid in a shattered warehouse. Tall weeds clustered around its gate, and a good part of its roof had no tiles. They checked again the little bags stitched to their britches. After initial discomfort, Dito had soon got used to them.

“Now, we scout the area. Each goes his own way, until we discover if there is a freight to Sao Paulo. If there ain't any, we'll have to catch a passenger train, tonight.”

“Won't the freight take too long?” Manguito wanted to know.

“It's all the same junk,” Dito answered. “If it leaves today, it'll only get there tomorrow. If the piece of crap doesn't break down.”

“But first, we should hide the clothes,” Manguito suggested.

“I'll stash my shoes,” said Smokey, taking his shoes off.

“You mean you spent the money but can't bring yourself to leave with them on?” Dito commented.

“I have to get used to them slowly.”

“Let's go. Be careful of wrong information. Or else, instead of Sao Paulo we'll end up in hell,” Dito warned.

Going one way until he found the tracks, Dito saw Manguito taking another direction and, further down, little Smokey. A freight was moving about, the railroad switchman switched the frog, some cars entered the sidetrack, the locomotive stopped, the frog was switched again; a black man

with short pants and a greasy blue cap showed up and uncoupled the engine. The locomotive accelerated, leaving three cars behind. Dito wished to talk with this old man, but he knew that he'd only want to know why he was interested in the freight, and it could all end in a terrible mess.

He passed by a worker dressed in khakis and noticed the man had a crabby expression. Abruptly he asked where Dito thought he was going. Getting no answer, the man continued in an ill temper.

“This is not a place for punks!”

Dito wished to get an iron bar, to assail this useless, worthless crud, to club him to pieces. But he controlled himself. The worker continued to grouse. Dito made as if he didn't hear, climbing a pile of rails, coming down on the other side near the station. Then, when he saw a group of mechanics washing their hands and arms with gasoline, he had an idea. Why not approach them and ask? He would invent a story. He would say, his widowed mother lived alone in Sao Paulo, that he had come to Rio looking for work, to get money from a relative, but he ended up not finding him. Now, he had to return and had no money. That's why he was there, hoping to get a free ride on a train to Sao Paulo.

A black man observed him attentively. A fat white man laughed at his tale.

“I'm tired of that old story, boy. Keep moving.”

Dito didn't budge. The black man dried off his hands on rags, pointed toward a line of cars and two locomotives.

“I believe that train leaves before sundown. I think the engineer is a man called Evangelist. Go there. He might help you out.”

Seeing the mechanic's good will the others stopped laughing and joking. The boy went away, thanking him. He walked alongside the railcars and observed how high they were, the huge size of their steel wheels, bolted to enormously thick axles. There was no one in the locomotives, though one of them had its engines running. He went to the place where a pale thin man sold desserts from a tray covered by a white cloth; he sat down on the sidewalk, waiting for the engineer to appear. When Dito was eating a slice of manioc cake, he saw men walking toward the locomotive. He ran after them. All he needed to know was whether this was the train about to leave for Sao Paulo. The rest would be more or less easy to resolve. He ran the risk of getting the wrong information, but he had to chance it.

VIII

He sat on the wide sidewalk by the crumbling warehouse, sucking on hard milk candies, while he waited for Manguito and Smokey. After a while, he saw Smokey, running, his shirt flapping on his back. Dito offered him some candy when he arrived, but even before speaking, Smokey was already pointing in the direction of the train.

“That’s the one going. I asked three guys.”

“They didn’t suspect anything?”

“I don’t think so. I said there was a man who wanted to know. He had a package to ship.”

Smokey laughed at his own imagination. Dito was even more pleased. He never thought that this boy could be so spirited. He himself had not been that clever.

“Then what did they say?”

“That’s the train and it will leave right after sundown.”

“I was told that too.”

Manguito showed up, sat down. He was always tired. Any little run and his tongue would be hanging out.

“That one is the freight. The one with two engines.”

Dito was sure that was the train. So, he lay down on the large sidewalk, and stared at the disintegrating roof. Smokey whistled, counting the money again. Manguito dreamed about the girls he’d get to know and began talking trash.

“Have you humped a woman in your life, man?” Dito asked suddenly.

Manguito got stirred up. “Have I! And a good one too.”

“Where was this?” Smokey wanted to know, feeling somewhat suspicious and jealous.

“At the children’s home. She was blind but delicious.”

Smokey laughed, still counting his money. “I bet she only went with you ‘cause she couldn’t see your face.”

Manguito didn’t like the joke. “Shut up, shrimp. When we go after girls in Sao Paulo we’ll have to find a crib to leave you sleeping.”

“Hey dude, I’m a man,” Smokey said. “I can handle anything.”

Dito continued to observe the ceiling which threatened to fall, chuckling at Manguito and Smokey’s jive. But by Smokey’s answers he

perceived the little black boy was brighter than he'd imagined. And because they were only talking trash, he began to tell them what to do in Sao Paulo.

"Over there we can't screw up. Any mistake and there will be a bunch of hawks all over us. First we try to find Deborah, at the Lavapés Street. We get the money and hit the road. We might spend an entire week doing nothing before looking for Crystal again. Then, I'm going back to that cemetery and close accounts."

"I'm going also. Pichote was my friend," Smokey said.

Dito lifted himself onto his elbows.

"This job is mine alone."

"But who had the best idea to discover which train would go to Sao Paulo?" Smokey asked defiantly.

Dito laughed. He knew Smokey was right.

"OK. You can come."

The station's lights were turned on, later the street lights, the lights at the public square seen in the distance, lights at some points in the road on posts, shining only on clumps of broad-leaf grass.

"I think it's time to split. Look alive, now, this is the real thing. I think it's better to go underneath the cars."

Smokey put on his new jacket, Manguito tied his around the waist. Dito tucked his in his pants' waistband. They walked down the warehouse's wide sidewalk, mingled with the darkness that slowly erased the differences between grass clumps and heaps of tracks and sleepers.

Dito went ahead, followed by Manguito. They walked at first by the side of the cars, jumping at the end of the sleepers. When they saw the signalman's lantern, they tried to hide.

"Be careful with your head, Smokey. Don't hurt the train," Manguito joked.

Dito told them to be quiet, and the march proceeded. Once in a while they came out from under, hoping to find one of the car doors open. But again, it was Smokey who discovered what they were searching for.

"On the other side there's a door open a bit. I think we can get in and open it more."

"How do you know this?"

Smokey didn't answer. He came out from under the car again and showed them.

“Look!”

Dito was excited. Manguito joked.

“This imp has such sharp eyes”

Dito listened, concluding there was no one in the car. He examined whether the car could be locked from the outside. He helped Smokey climb, and the boy disappeared.

“It’s dark as shit in here. I can’t see nothing!”

Manguito asked Dito to open the door a little more. From an awkward position outside Dito strained. The heavy sliding door opened so they could squeeze in. Manguito thought it was dangerous to stay for a long time in the dark.

“I’m gonna buy cigarettes and matches.”

Dito thought this was a good idea.

“Don’t let anyone see you coming in this direction. Go the long way around.”

Manguito jumped out of the wagon again, creeping in between piles of tracks, sleepers and grass clumps.

“What if the train leaves before he comes back?” Smokey asked.

“I don’t think it will. When it’s supposed to go the signal and lantern people will show up.”

A few minutes later Manguito came back. Besides cigarettes and matches, he’d brought a bag of sandwiches and candies.

“Hey man! That’s cool. If you hadn’t remembered this, we would die of hunger!”

Putting the sandwich bag aside, Dito tried to close the door as tightly as he could. A match was struck; the wagon was full of boxes. They could stay there for the entire trip without fear of being bothered.

“What if the freight goes to some other town before Sao Paulo?” Manguito asked.

Dito was free of worries now.

“We’ll get down, we’ll move to another car. There’s no reason to get the jitters.”

Manguito passed out the sandwiches while Dito shared the hard milk candies he still had in his pockets.

* * *

CHAPTER TWO

I

Manguito found a place in a seat behind the bus driver. Smokey sat behind him and next to Dito. This was Smokey's first time in Sao Paulo. The crisscross of overpasses, the tunnels, the large avenues, all filled the boy with curiosity, and Dito answered his questions.

They got out in a street of old houses, where tall buildings were rare and where they saw Japanese people in almost all street corners and in bars. The street was dirty and the sidewalks had potholes. They went into a luncheonette where Dito paid for coffee with cream. Manguito asked for bread and butter. They chose a table and carried with them cups and a glass with coffee. Smokey laughed every time the Japanese at the cash register spoke with another behind the counter. He couldn't understand anything they said and he found that comical.

"Do you think we'll find Deborah?"

"If she's not there, we'll wait."

Manguito kept on eating his bread.

"Are we still very far from her house?"

"I don't think so."

The short, strong Japanese man, with a dirty towel tied over his belly began collecting the cups and the glass. The boys stood up and left. The day was somber, puddles in the sidewalks revealed it had rained the day before.

The boys passed by a large house being demolished, then by a salvage yard where a truck manoeuvred, and finally arrived at a small two-story building with workers on scaffoldings.

Dito spoke to one of the men, as Crystal had advised; the man stepped down some stairs and told them to follow him. They went through a long corridor. Dito had all his senses alert now, realizing how naive he'd been not anticipating this situation.

The stranger, covered in paint stains, had on old shoes and walked noisily on the worn hardwood floors. At his side, Manguito didn't seem to find anything disturbing. Smokey followed behind. The man pushed a door open. They saw some old chairs with ripped upholstery and grimy curtains. "Wait here a second. They'll come soon."

The boys sat down and listened to the man's steps out in the corridor. Dito believed Smokey was scared. Manguito whispered, "I'm not liking this, man!"

Manguito looked down the corridor. Soon after, the three of them heard steps again. More than one were coming. Dito stood up and saw two women. The tallest and fattest had make up on and a professional-looking hairdo. She looked as if she had an evening gown on. She smiled widely, when she saw Dito.

"It was Crystal who sent you," she said entering the room. "Welcome."

She asked for details about the trip. But Dito, who wasn't disposed to disclose anything, went directly to the main topic.

"Crystal asked us to give you some things, and to get the rest of the money."

The woman smiled again, asking for the goods. Manguito pointed to his trousers.

"They've been sewed here."

"That's Crystal, always on the lookout," she said. "Stay behind that curtain and give me the pants." Celina, the other woman, pulled out the stitches.

Dito looked at the woman who had come in with Deborah. She was thin and very wrinkled, silent the whole time.

"He's the only one who has to stay behind the curtain," Manguito said, smiling. "We have shorts on."

"That's good. While Celina takes care of this, I'm going to get the money and call for coffee."

Dito thanked her, Manguito did the same, but the woman didn't seem to hear them. She walked down the corridor, high heels clacking on the floor. Celina cut the stitches with a blade, returning Manguito's and Smokey's pants. Dito's was last. As he put his pants on, he felt one of the little bags had not been taken.

"You forgot one."

"Deborah said to leave it. You'll deliver it someplace else."

That wasn't in Crystal's agreement, but he his complaint would have to wait until the other woman reappeared. He couldn't resolve this with Celina who didn't appear to be in charge. She had simply followed

Deborah, and she'd moved about the room as silent as a statue, cutting the threads sewn in by Crystal.

After Smokey put on his pants, Manguito teased him saying that if he didn't want to be embarrassed, he needed to buy some underwear. Dito heard all this joking about, but grew suspicious of Deborah's disappearance to get coffee. Celina had also gone away silently. Ten minutes had gone by and only then did Dito notice they'd taken the little bags. Even though the boys had heard no noise, at that moment a big fat and bearded man in a light colored suit and black tie showed up. He came in and locked the door. The boys ran to one side, Smokey hid behind the curtain. The man grabbed Dito by the arm, sat in a chair and jerked him.

"Let's talk, punk!"

Saying this he twisted Dito's arm. "Where is the cocaine?"

Dito was horrified. A wave of heat came over his body, his ears caught fire, his eyes burned as if he were about to cry.

"I don't know what you're talking about!"

"You know very well, you son of a whore!"

The huge man gave him the first blow. Manguito jumped on him, but was pushed aside with a kick. And twisting Dito's arm up behind his back, the stranger also grabbed Dito by the hair.

"Answer me, or I'll beat you to a pulp! If you loosen your tongue, things may improve."

Dito didn't know what to do. He couldn't figure out if the guy was a cop or one of Deborah's dealer friends, who wanted to cut Crystal out of the deal. He was confused and stunned. His arm was being twisted more and his hair was being pulled out with each silent moment.

"Talk, punk, before I get mad."

"I gave everything to Deborah," he said almost crying.

"That's a lie, you dog! Don't bring the woman into your mess!"

With this, the man's attitude changed. He began to squeeze Dito by the neck, and when Manguito and Smokey tried to intercede, they were stepped on. Finally he pushed the boy onto one of the chairs. Dito was breathless. Smokey saw when the man opened the door and two other men came in. A tall, skinny man began to search Dito.

"Take his clothes off," ordered the bearded man.

The short dark man pulled Dito by the legs onto the floor. His pants were pulled off, and the skinny guy searched them. When he found the little bag that Celina had left stitched on, his eyes lit up. He turned the pants inside out and showed it to the big man.

“Look!”

The dark guy opened a pocket knife in a key ring and cut the threads. The little bag ended up in the bearded man’s hands. He smelled it and behaved as if he were examining a precious thing.

“Coke. Just as we suspected!”

II

Dito left the building crying with pain and anger. He wished to die. He had been so stupid! Why had he believed Crystal, a man he barely knew? Why had he believed Deborah when she said she would get the money and coffee? Why had he let Celina take away the goods, before they got paid? And who were those men? He was confused. Seldom had he felt this way, sad and defeated. He was still more distressed, listening to Smokey’s low sobbing. How could his friends have believed in him, he, who let himself be caught like a little fish? It couldn’t be. Crystal shouldn’t have done that.

The VW bus had uncomfortable side seats. Dito needed to hold on to his seat with both hands. The car’s interior was dark and he could barely see his friends’ shadows.

“What a bitch that woman, hunh?” It was all Manguito said.

Smokey stopped sobbing.

“I’ll bet they are taking us to juvenile court.”

Dito didn’t know what to say. If that were so, it wouldn’t be the worst case scenario. He feared worse complications.

After a lot of riding around, the VW bus’s doors were opened. The men secured the three boys by the waist band of their pants. They took a few steps, went up a stairway, and walked into a large empty room. The big man took off his jacket, hung it on the mirror by the chair, rolled up his sleeves, and let his thick hairy arms and gold wrist watch show.

“Take them to the confession booth”

The men began pushing Dito. Now the boys knew they were at a police station, exactly what Dito had feared most. They went down an iron stairway, passed by two bathrooms reeking with urine, entered a

windowless room brightened by a single large bulb. The only chairs were around the table.

“It’s better to open your mouths soon. Dr. Mauro doesn’t play around. He’s already skint many a bad character, so you have no chance,” said the skinny man, with a cynical smile.

“Don’t say that, man. The kids here have personality. That’s the way I like to see them,” said the short dark man provocatively. “This one has the looks of a macho man,” he said and he tried to touch Dito, who avoided the intimacy.

The thin guy said the police chief was coming. Smokey felt a cold chill down his spine, Manguito got scared, and Dito knew then what was going to happen.

The door opened, the big man still had his sleeves up and had taken his tie off. He sat down, the skinny man shut the door, while the short man took a piece of garden hose from a drawer.

“I usually keep my promises. I promised a beating, and that’s what you’ll have. Unless you give me the name of the guy who gave you the cocaine. Let’s begin with the smallest one.”

Smokey’s eyes got round. The thin man pulled him close to the table.

“Where’d you find the cocaine?”

Smokey looked at Dito, then at Manguito, and shook his head. The dark man didn’t wait any longer but gave him the first blow on his back, then he hit him in the chest, on the head and legs. He held Smokey with one hand and beat him with the other until the big man told him to stop.

“I don’t want any screaming around here.”

The skinny man got a dirty napkin from the drawer, and gagged Smokey’s mouth. The dark man smiled and resumed the beating.

“When you think it’s time to stop, you talk,” the police chief said to Dito.

Smokey could no longer move. He was standing up only because the dark man held him by an arm. Dito knew they would kill Smokey, if he didn’t talk.

“He had nothing to do with this. The deal was all mine,” he said to stop the beating.

“That’s the way to talk,” said the police chief. “And who is the supplier?”

“A man called Crystal. He hangs around the Sao Joao slum, in Rio de Janeiro.”

The policeman’s eyes brightened. He lit a cigarette.

“Don’t tell me that you are interstate dealers.”

The skinny and short men also found the idea hilarious.

“And who are Crystal’s contacts here in Sao Paulo?”

“Deborah!”

The police chief stood up awkwardly and punched Dito’s face, sat down again, wiping his hand with a handkerchief.

“Don’t lie to me. Don’t you try to implicate that poor woman.”

“But Crystal ordered me to give the goods to her,” Dito said again.

The dark man clubbed him on the head with the garden hose.

“Didn’t you hear the *doutor* say not to involve the woman? Are you deaf?”

The police chief passed his handkerchief over his face.

“I want to know who Crystal’s contacts are here in Sao Paulo”

Dito had no idea of what to say, since the policeman didn’t accept Deborah as one of the contacts.

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know? See if you two can help the young man’s imagination.”

The skinny guy tore off Dito’s clothes. The dark one helped take off his underwear. Dito fought as he could but got a blow in the kidneys, and his underwear was ripped off.

“Look at what a big stick he has, chief!”

“Let’s see if he is a real man.”

The skinny man got him by the hair, and put Dito’s head in between his legs, while the dark strong man began the beating. The blows left red marks. Dito couldn’t scream; each movement he made, the thin man squeezed his head. Suddenly, he released Dito, who fell to the floor. But the beating didn’t stop until the police chief gave a signal. “And now? Who are Crystal’s friends?”

Dito shook his head.

The policeman rummaged through a drawer.

“You do know. You will know!”

He found a ball of string and threw some handcuffs to the skinny man.

“Let’s get going, Caramel. Make this guy sing. Like in the old days.”

The thin man smiled while he cuffed Dito’s arms behind the back. His back was covered with blood and one of his eyes was very swollen. He tried to escape, but couldn’t — unless he invented some senseless thing which the police chief would believe. But even then, he wouldn’t know what would be right to say. He feared falling into a contradiction and screw things up.

Caramel doubled a long piece of string, then holding Dito’s balls, tied them up and gave the string to Dr. Mauro.

“Do you know how to dance? If you don’t you will learn.”

He gave the string a first tug, Dito trembled with pain. The policeman laughed, Big Purple pushed a chair in front of Dito. The string was tugged again, but Dito couldn’t move anymore. Caramel caught him by the hair, so that Dito couldn’t get close to the police chief’s table. Later, Caramel got the garden hose and gagged his mouth with it. Big Purple helped pull the string, Dito’s face turned red and tears fell down. When he was about to faint, the string was released and Caramel took the hose from his mouth. Dito fell seated. Big Purple came down next to him, and said in a friendly tone. “Come on, big boy. Give the name of the guys or you’ll end up castrated!”

Dito couldn’t stand it anymore. He had to invent something.

“One lives in Cambuci, two others in Bra’s.”

“Is that true?” asked Dr. Mauro addressing Manguito this time.

He only nodded.

“And what’s their name?”

Manguito was panicked.

“I know who they are, but I don’t know their names.”

“If you go there would you show them to us?” insisted the police chief.

The boy said yes.

“Then, it’s all arranged. The one with a loose tongue stays here on the top floor!”

“And where do we put the others?” asked Caramel.

“In the corral. That’s the only place for animals.”

Big Purple left, pushing Smokey and Dito, the police chief again dried off his face and hairy arms with his handkerchief before lighting another

cigarette.

III

While Dr. Mauro went to his office, Caramel took Manguito to a dark room, opened the door and shoved him inside. Big Purple led the boys down several flights of stairs and now pushed Smokey who refused to go ahead.

“Straight ahead, or I finish you off right here and now.”

The boy panicked, Dito tried encourage him. Without another word, But Big Purple kicked Dito. The boy fell down. Big Purple caught him by the jacket and pulled him into a cell.

“Open this, Grandpa!” he said to the old man who came by with the keys.

And he shouted to the men behind the bars:

“Two young cockerels to be plucked!”

With the door shut, Dito leaned against a wall and Smokey dragged himself into a corner. For some moments the inmates remained still, staring at Big Purple and at the old jailer. Smokey was crying. A tough-looking guy, his belly exposed, yelled, “We don’t want no crying in this pigsty. That’s just what we need now!”

A prisoner, blind in one eye, laughed and clapped his dirty hands. “This looks like a maternity ward!”

And the one with crutches and a large moustache put his two cents in. “We got to find out what Big Purple’s game is. These two little angels didn’t get here by chance!”

“What do you mean?” asked the man with his gut hanging out.

The man with crutches grimaced, while man blind in one eye crouched next to Dito. He touched the boy with his finger, as if he didn’t believe Dito knew he was there. “What are you up to? Why did you end up in this chicken coop?”

Dito didn’t want to talk. Bare-belly also approached the newcomer. “Let’s open the book. It’s not going to be you who’ll beat me in here.” He nudged Dito with his foot.

“They caught us with narcotics,” said Dito.

“How funny. So innocent and already in jail,” said the one-eyed man.

“Tell this story straight!” the man with crutches said in a mocking tone.

Dito didn't know what to say. He'd already been in many jams. He was fifteen and had ten years in the streets. In all this time he'd never had a moment like this. He mulled over a way to escape, imagined the difficulties Manguito would be having, and heard the laughter and provocations from other prisoners. A kind of profound torpor overtook him and, slowly, he felt as if he were dying. He remembered Pichote and envied him for having died while running, on that cool clear morning. Some simple gunshots, coming from nowhere and Pichote stumbling, falling never to get up again. Why wouldn't the same thing happen to him? Why should he have to face all these dumbasses and still give explanations to the police chief? Ah, how he'd like to escape from it all, to run free again in the streets and reach that two-story building, go in without being seen and surprise Deborah. Ah, he really would like that!

When he paid attention to the prisoners again the big bellied one was stroking his back. "Poor thing. Got a beating. It wasn't easy." He got close to Dito's head. Picked up one of his hands, and tried to make the boy stroke him. Dito pulled his hand away and there was general laughter.

"Tomorrow or the day after he will be used to it," said the one-eyed man.

"I'm the first one to go with this little doll," warned Bare-belly, who behaved like the cell's sheriff.

"Then, it's my turn," shouted a big black man, whom Dito hadn't seen until then.

The man had only shorts on, hairy legs and a large metal chain around his neck.

"Okay, I'll be third," said the blind man.

"If there is any left over, I want some too," said the guy on crutches.

The one who looked like an Indian wasn't interested in having Dito. His interest was in Smokey. "He will suck me whenever I want and he can take care of the cell. Anyone can shit as he pleases, 'cause this Little Monkey will take care of the cleaning up."

Smokey had never been so frightened. He saw those men around Dito and felt sorry for his buddy. Once in a while Dito had an angry outburst, standing up, fretting and fuming, trying to punch and kick: the group opened up, the men found it all funny. Bare-belly simply said that's the way he liked a cockerel.

“If he didn’t protest, it wouldn’t be fun.”

“But I’m going first,” said the big black man again.

“We’ll draw straws,” Bare-belly said.

The Indian was out of this dispute. He pulled Smokey’s thin arm and opened his own pants.

“Come on, Little Monkey. Start playing there. Don’t let the dove get away.”

Smokey was horrified and tried to resist.

“Stop being silly. Do as I say, or I throw you in the group over there.”

The other five or six prisoners that didn’t participate in either activity just laughed. A blondish youth, with a distant air, was the only one who didn’t find anything funny. When he was thrown in that jail, two months earlier, he had gone through a similar sacrifice: first Bare-belly, then the Indian, the one-eyed man, and the black man, who had been transferred from Gallery B. With time, he was available to all who sought him. In his first week he tried to react against it. But besides ending up subjected to it, he would still get beaten. The mark on his face was from the bite the black man had given him. He had no more hope of recovering from this. He no longer knew why he ended up there. He didn’t even make an effort to remember. Daily, he tried to find ways of killing himself, but always someone would intervene. Most of them wanted him to stay there. Anyone who wanted him could pull him by the hair, and he would just stoop over. The others would stand up in front, so the guard couldn’t see. He believed they would try to do the same to the boy who had just arrived. He was fighting, giving punches and kicks in the air, but the men with lewd eyes and just laughed. The Indian was keeping Smokey’s hand inside his pants, squeezing his arm.

“Rub it as I wish or I’ll break your bones, Little Monkey!”

Smokey began to make light movements with his fingers, while tears dripped onto his thin chest.

IV

It was beginning to get dark when the police chief called for Caramel.

“Bring the little muggers here. Let’s keep all three in the car. If one doesn’t deliver, another will just have to.”

Caramel left the office calling for Big Purple. He opened offices, went down stairs, until he reached the holding pens. Grandpa showed up with the key ring. When he pushed the barred doors open, he said in mockery.

“The party is over. The cockerels will fly!”

Bare-belly protested. “That’s not fair! How can you do this, now, when I’m winning the game?”

The Indian straightened his pants, giving Smokey a push; Caramel noticed the filth in Smokey’s hand, and told him to go under the shower. He himself opened the faucet, the water fell strongly.

“Grandpa! Ask Big Purple to send some shorts for our little friends!”

Big Purple showed up with shorts and tee-shirts.

“Take it. It’s on the house!”

Dito rushed to dress himself, Smokey did the same. Dito had the feeling that this was a great opportunity, maybe the only one he might get. If he returned to jail he would be finished. He had to run away, even if he weren’t able to take his friends with him. At any rate, in prison he wouldn’t be of any use to them.

“Shoes are upstairs!” said Caramel again when he saw them dressed.

The two boys followed the corridor to the office. Dito’s left eye was swollen. Dr. Mauro asked Caramel to get some ice to put over the eye. Dito was surprised by such consideration. He couldn’t figure out what might have happened. He wanted to ask about Manguito but refrained from it. At least the police had some plan; that’s why all this attention was being wasted on them.

Dr. Mauro got off the phone and addressed them.

“Got the picture now? That’s where you will stay for some time, if your little friend isn’t telling the truth.”

Caramel came back with the ice and Big Purple with Manguito. Smokey looked at him as if to ask what had happened. But no one said a word. Manguito was pale and distant.

“Let’s begin by Bra’s, ‘cause it’s further away,” said the police chief to Big Purple, who’d already picked up the car keys. “Bring the car to the back patio; I don’t want anyone seeing us.”

They went down some dark stairs, until they saw a VW bus backing up. The side doors were opened and the boys were shoved inside. This was the opportunity Dito had waited for.

“We have to run away at all costs, guys. If I can I’ll run away with you. If not, it’s every man for himself.”

Dito’s words left Smokey disappointed.

“I dunno nothing about this city.”

“Then I run away with you both,” Dito said.

He knew now, more than ever, that it would be impossible for him to leave his friends behind. They wouldn’t know where to go, and they’d be easily captured again, perhaps by policemen still worse than Dr. Mauro and his aides. The engine was started and the car left.

“Our chance will come when they stop. That’s when we’ll escape. I’ll kick the one who comes first and you run away.”

Inside the VW bus they couldn’t see where they were. In some instances the engine pulled with strength as if climbing a hill, at other times it ran easily and the roar diminished. Dito didn’t know what else to say. It was important for him to concentrate and to believe in his exploit. If it went wrong, he’d be skinned alive.

The VW bus stopped. The engine was turned off. Dito told Manguito and Smokey to be glued to the door, and he got in position. When the outside latches were turned and the door opened, he didn’t see what happened to Manguito and Smokey. He only knew that he hit Big Purple’s face with the point of his shoe. He only saw the man put a hand over his eyes. From then on it was the jump, the fall, the entanglement on the ground, the legs moving rapidly, the shouts.

“The muggers are running away, Chief!”

He didn’t look back, he jumped to the high sidewalk, saw his friends, passed in front of them, entered an empty, abandoned lot and stopped to catch his breath. He knew that, now, they would have trouble reaching him. Manguito came up and Smokey followed panting. They walked through tall grass, Smokey complaining about the money that Caramel had stolen from him, Manguito saying that he had hidden a bill of one hundred in his shoe. Dito slapped his back.

“Jeez, you’re smart, man! That bill will get us out of misery!”

They walked through the underbrush, until they reached a dirt road with many stagnant water puddles.

“We must be close to Estado Avenue. If we take a bus we can get back to Deborah’s house.”

“What if the police are there?”

“We will check it out first. I’ll go up with Manguito, you’ll stay below on the lookout. That bitch will regret having been born.”

“I’m dying to put my hands on her,” Manguito said.

“We won’t enter the building right away. First we keep a watch out, and let the time go by. Late at night we do this job,” Dito said a little nervously.

“This eye of yours will mess it all up,” Manguito said.

“When we go by a pharmacy, we’ll get some adhesive tape. If we put a piece over it, we will be able to hide it.”

“Are you seeing well?” asked Smokey.

“Better than I need to. Well enough to know where Deborah has put our money.”

“After we settle with that bitch, what are we gonna do?” “I’m going to call together the rest of the group,” said Dito. “Encravado, Mother’s Scourge, Brown Sugar, Pin and Figurinha. We can only go about in a gang. We will get down to Crystal’s place and mess his life up good.”

They got to a busy street, then another; they passed by a bakery, where Manguito went in and bought sweets. They sat on the street curb, and took their time savouring the food. A little further down they found an open pharmacy; Manguito rushed in to buy adhesive tape. They tore some pieces off with their nails and covered Dito’s wound.

“Now we can face a bus. But it isn’t good for us to be close to one another,” Dito warned.

Manguito gave Smokey part of the money, Dito kept five for himself. They got in the first bus that passed toward downtown.

“From there we get another, to Lavapés Street,” said Dito. “There’s a bunch going by there.”

V

They arrived at Cambuci Square around two AM. The stores on each side of the two-story building were closed; only their windows were lit. Dito asked the others to wait while he inspected the place.

“We can get in, going up by the scaffolding!”

He waited for a moment until no one was around. He clung to one of the wooden supports and began to climb. He got to the planks stained by

cement and paint splashes, then to the second story. He forced open a window, going in silently. He took his shoes off, reached a bedroom where there were some chairs, an armoire and a sewing machine. He opened drawers and discovered a pair of scissors which he slipped into his pocket. He advanced through the corridor to the stairs. He went down, opened the door, letting Manguito in and leaving Smokey outside on watch. Dito gave the scissors to his friend and began to inspect the rooms on the first floor. In one of the bedrooms there was light. They looked in through the cracks, and confirmed the woman inside was Celina. Dito looked in again. She was drinking and watching television. He got the scissors back; Manguito went to the fuse box and turned it off. Suddenly, the house was left in darkness. At this moment Dito went in and ran into the woman. She didn't understand what was happening. When the light came on again, Dito was already holding her from behind. He drove the scissors into her chest. She tried to escape but couldn't; she'd been pierced underneath her ribs. She fell struggling into a stuffed chair. Dito noticed he was covered in blood, but didn't worry about it. In Celina's bedroom he found a couple of knives and a gun. He gave one of the knives to Manguito and stuck the other one in his waist band. He continued to survey the rooms, until he was sure all of them were empty. Then, he went upstairs. The whole house was silent. Only television voices disturbed the peace. At the end of the corridor he saw light. He squatted down, Manguito too. They advanced almost lying down on the floor. Dito let his friend climb on his back to look through the transom.

“She's with a guy!”

There couldn't be anything better for Dito's anger. He just had to decide what to do. Should he knock on the door and wait until they opened it, or should he simply break in? The opportunity was too good to rush it. He doubted he could break down this door with a shoulder push. That's why he decided to knock. Lightly. As if it were Celina.

“Who's that?”

He knocked again. The door opened. It was the guy Manguito had seen. Dito pulled the trigger. The stranger didn't have time to utter a word. One shot in the belly, two in the chest. Deborah yelled in anguish, but Dito was already by her side, while Manguito finished off the guy to avoid any surprises. Deborah looked much younger now than in the morning.

“We came to get the money.”

“I’ve had it from early on. I don’t know why that crazy police chief got involved in what was none of his business!”

The woman said these things and opened drawer after drawer. Manguito went over to the telephone and cut the wire. “We’ll talk better this way.”

“Are you expecting anyone?”

The woman, in rattlebrained nervousness, said she didn’t know. Dito pointed a knife at her neck.

“Your death will be slow, bitch. And instead of three grand we want six.”

Deborah found the purse with the money and gave it all to Dito.

“You can keep it. It has more than ten thousand. It’s all yours but don’t kill me!”

“See if she’s not lying again. I bet this is funny money.”

He forced the woman to sit down. With the point of the knife, he ripped her blouse, cutting off her slip straps. Two large soft breasts were exposed.

“Slut!”

Manguito finished counting the money.

“Nine grand here!”

“See, she just said there was more than ten,” said Dito nervously.

“It was a misunderstanding,” the woman said crying.

“But we’re the ones who suffer.”

She tried to run away when she thought Dito was distracted. He pulled her by the hair and stuck his knife in her back, then in her belly. She raised her arms, Manguito covered her mouth, she began then to lose strength. Now, Dito was really covered with blood. He went in Deborah’s bedroom, opened the closet, searched for a shirt, changed, combed his hair, fixed his eye bandage, turned off the light and closed the door from the outside.

Manguito put all the money in his pocket. They joined Smokey, who’d remained seated at the doorpost.

“Everything OK?”

“Better than we expected,” Dito answered.

“Now, we only gotta get away,” Manguito stressed.

Outside, they hailed a cab passing by and disappeared.

In the early morning hours they were asleep on benches in the train station. Dito had already got the information about a freight leaving at five for Rio. He tipped the clerk and even discovered the train's number. By four o'clock he would wake up Smokey. They would disappear in the sidings and get into a wagon. They wouldn't return to Sao Paulo soon, at least until the large police chief had forgotten them. Thinking about these things, Dito leaned his head back on the seat and fell asleep for some moments.

VI

He woke up with the arrival of a passenger train, the first departing train of the day. If only they had permits for travelling minors, they could have got tickets easily. But he hadn't wanted to risk it. Any carelessness could result in prison for sure. An old man carrying a bag and a suitcase stopped close by, setting his load on the ground. There were two girls and a boy with him. The older girl stared at Dito whenever he was not paying attention. When he looked at her, she turned her eyes away. A man selling candies and sweets came by; Dito offered some to the girl and her brother. The little boy accepted it, dividing the chocolate bar with his sisters while the old man looked at Dito thankfully.

"Do you know if the second class coach has arrived, already?"

Dito shook his head. He didn't know. "Where are you going?"

"Itapecirica. We're coming from Joao Pessoa. A long ways!"

The station was filling up with people, the railroad workers arrived, the women who swept the cigarret butts from the floor started to work. Dito decided to wake up Smokey and Manguito.

"Come on, it's almost morning."

Once again he looked at the pale girl with long straight hair. He walked to the end of the platform, jumped over the tracks, closely followed by his friends. They stopped behind a partial wall and looked to see if they were being followed. They eventually reached the sidings and the train. There were fifteen cars, more or less, pulled by only one locomotive. They slid below the wagons, and climbed over couplers. They forced the first door they found unlatched and sat down among bales of merchandise.

"Your eye is getting to be all purple, man," Manguito said.

"By the time we get get there it should be better."

Manguito cut his speech short, understanding that Dito didn't like that observation. He then reclined against a bale, playing with some kernels of grain he had found loose. Smokey was joking around. Manguito smiled. Dito was distant. His thoughts were scattered among Crystal, Pichote and the girl with straight hair. He tried to cheer up, to laugh at Smokey's silliness, but what he saw was Crystal gesticulating, talking smoothly, rubbing the chalk on the end of his cue stick for one more play. Above this calm image of calculated words, Pichote ran: thin legs, the fabric of his cheap shirt quivering on his back, a baby-toothed smile. Why did they kill him? Why, when they had only been crossing through, to avoid the snitches and criminals? He couldn't find an explanation, however much he thought about it. "We should have bought a sandwich," said Smokey.

"When the train stops, we can buy bananas," Manguito said.

"And until then?"

Manguito found the boy's worry comical.

"You dream that you're drinking coffee with milk, eating buttered bread. That's all you need to do and your hunger will go away."

Smokey frowned, Dito smiled.

"When we get the entire gang together," he said, "we won't get into these deals with people like Crystal. We have to think about another way to get some money!"

"Sell things in the streets."

"We steal from the stores and sell," Smokey said.

"They will book us in a second."

"I think it's better to control two or three large parking lots."

"Good idea. We clean the outside of the car and take the things from the inside," Smokey suggested.

Dito laughed again.

"Man, you only think about stealing!"

The train began to move. The wheels made piercing noises, clacking on the tracks.

"How long will it take us to get to Rio?" Manguito asked, without expecting an answer.

"Anyday now we'll get there," said Smokey, who appeared very happy.

“The best thing for us to do to make easy money,” Dito continued, “is to do business in the open-air markets. The ladies need boys to push their carts, and that’s us”

“You think this is great?”

“It may not be, but it is profitable. When Deborah’s cash is spent, we will need reinforcements. Better not wait till it’s gone.”

“What about the police?”

“Cut it out! There won’t be police officers who would want to bother people helping housewives.”

“I think it’s a good idea,” Manguito said.

“I do too!” said Smokey.

The freight made a curve, Smokey looked out. The region they were crossing was filled with clay banks and there were shacks in the distance. For a moment his eyes caught a dog running after a boy.

“Bring your head in. The brakeman spots you, it’ll be hell,” warned Manguito.

Smokey sat down again and began to play a game with the loose kernels. Dito paid no attention, he lay down on his back, over the bales and followed the noise of the wheels against the joints in the tracks. Some quick and dry clicks, similar to those he had heard before Pichote stumbled into death, falling in that cool and clear morning, his hand filled with dead flowers.

* * *

CHAPTER THREE

I

Dito looked at himself in the bar's mirror, where they announced in large painted white letters the plates of the day. He saw his eye was less swollen. The blue color was disappearing, giving way to a yellowish green. He pulled off another piece of adhesive tape and covered the bruise. He asked for coffee and bread, flashed his money first so the man behind the counter would serve him. Finally, he sat at the table with Smokey. Manguito had gone away early looking for Encravado and Mother's Scourge. Dito hoped to find the others before the end of the week. Then, they could begin with the business at the market. They would collect the money and divide it in equal parts. If that wasn't enough, they'd get some flannel rags and they would clean the windshields of cars stopped at red lights; sell newspapers, peanuts at doors of movie theaters and night clubs.

Smokey complained of too much milk in the coffee so Dito called the waiter back. Later, for no reason, Dito asked Smokey if he wouldn't want to visit his home.

"What home?"

"Your family's!"

Smokey showed his teeth.

"Get out of here. I have no family. My father fell from a building under construction when I was two. My mother was left alone. She washed clothes, and made candy for sale at the Maracana~ Stadium. People would buy the candy but not pay her. One day she was taken away in an ambulance and never returned."

"What happened?"

"I don't know, man. She didn't show up anymore. Neighbors took care of me, until they found out what had happened and they ran away.

Smokey ate a hunk of bread and drank his coffee with milk.

"And your people, where are they?"

Dito appeared somewhat embarrassed.

"They're all over there in Sao Paulo. It's been a long time since I've seen them. They wouldn't know me anymore."

The waiter brought the change. After counting it, Dito pocketed it and left the bar with Smokey. They walked along a street with filthy gutters and entered an alley of irregular paving. Everywhere there were decayed houses with large dilapidated windows where women's clothes hung out to dry. Dito suggested a swim in the sea.

"Let's enjoy the sun. We can wait for Manguito at the public square."

"What if Crystal shows up?"

"Why should he?"

"I dunno. These people don't forget."

"Then, we do him in. We can't lose nothing by waiting"

Smokey threw a stone at some pigeons scratching the earth below the almond trees; they flew up only to land further away. He ran threatening to catch one of them and returned.

"Have you ever eaten roasted pigeon?"

Dito said no.

"It's very good."

They crossed the freeway, Smokey hopped into an ornamental garden of grasses and flowers. Dito took off his shirt, climbed some rocks, reached the sand where the waves drove ashore throwing up seaweed and foam. They hid their clothes in the rocks' crevices and got into the water. Dito's first care was to wash his wound well, then his arms and legs.

"Jeez, we will get out of here whiter," he said laughing at Smokey.

"I'm gonna get blacker, with so much sun."

When they got tired of the water, they stretched out on the sand.

"Later on we can eat at the Italian woman's boarding house."

"Where is that?"

"Close to Arcos. It's great!"

"But before, we gotta find Manguito."

Smokey enjoyed throwing stones in the water, while Dito sunned his face. With his eyes closed he could still see the huge police chief asking Caramel to get the piece of water hose from the drawer. Then the beating. And every time he said Deborah's name, the man appeared to be even more furious. He couldn't understand.

He sat down when Smokey called him to show the beach towel he'd stolen. They dried themselves off, cleaned their feet, and put on shoes.

"Let's come back some other day."

“Not a bad idea,” Dito answered. “It’ll depend on the kind of work we’re going to get. This thing of being at the beach is not for us.”

They climbed back over the rocks, crossed the expanse of grass, ran in front of the cars and reached the square where they spotted Manguito.

“Hey, how’s it going?”

Mother’s Scourge said nothing, simply making a face. Encravado babbled something, Pin said Brown Sugar couldn’t be found.

“I think he flew the coop. No one has seen a sign of him in the slum.

“He’ll show up. He knows he’s one of us,” Dito said.

Smokey talked again about the Italian woman’s boarding house. Encravado knew where it was.

“It’s time for us to act as a group,” Dito warned. “There’s only one thing: we can’t screw up. We’ll either come here or go to the rocks at the water’s edge, late afternoons. When they find us, we change meeting places.”

“Early tomorrow, the whole gang goes to Glo’ria’s market, to work. We got to sweet-talk the housewives, so they’ll spill the money,” said Manguito.

Dito returned to planning lunch, deciding that Smokey, Encravado and Manguito would eat first. When they returned, Mother’s Scourge, himself and Pin would go.

II

The first morning at the market was lively. The sun was warm, and the stalls’ awnings shaded the vegetables, tomatoes, oranges, bananas, pumpkins and watermelons piled up underneath. Among the booths, strong men scaled fish; a woman filled up baskets with string beans; an old retiree chose a head of lettuce carefully; a street vendor sold lemons gathered on a broken plate; a paralytic dragged himself along the asphalt, selling rolls of lottery ticket. A red tent was decorated with strings of braided onions and the smell of fish, ripe mangoes and guavas permeated the air.

Encravado had already snared a housewife who’d entrusted her purchases to him. Manguito walked up and down with a basket on his head. Smokey held on to an old man’s paper wrapped fish while Pin pushed a cart filled with watermelons and green bananas. Meanwhile, Mother’s Scourge had disappeared. Dito was asked by a farmer to help him unload pork from

a truck. He promised Dito twenty for the work, Dito thought this was a good deal; after all he'd be free in less than one hour. When the truck was unloaded the man asked him if he wouldn't like to help on other days.

"It depends."

"Thirty plus lunch."

"Deal. At what time do I get here?"

"Five thirty, six. You have to wake up early and work hard. On the other hand you have the rest of the day to relax."

Dito went away certain it wasn't a bad proposition. He sat in the square, around the fountain, waiting for his friends. The first to show up was Mother's Scourge, happy. He showed Dito his money and from a bag he took out the items he had snatched: cigarettes, pears and a pack of hard candy.

"It looks as if we've found a mine, little brother!"

Dito didn't like that.

"I think we should worry only with carrying groceries. Or soon someone will be onto what you're doing and they'll get you."

Mother's Scourge didn't believe that.

"Cut it out! I look ahead and behind me. Like a crab. No tide is gonna drown me."

"That's what everybody says. Sooner or later it's all over."

Dito stretched out on the stone bench, staring at the yellow leaves falling from the trees. Scourge opened the cigarettes offering one to Dito who accepted, puffing out the smoke as if he were the happiest young man in the world.

"The rest of the group will be getting here soon. Pin is gonna to be late. The lady wanted him to go up to her house... I never get so lucky."

"When we have more money," Dito said, "we can put up a real business. Then we'll say good bye to misery."

"Many people have tried," said Mother's Scourge.

"That doesn't matter. It's our turn now!"

"What kind of business?"

"Hot dogs and steamed corn: street vendor."

"You think it will bring money?"

"It has to."

"If you try the animal lottery you line your pockets faster!"

“But we would still end up in shit,” Dito said. “I don’t want no business with them people.”

Smokey arrived happy, followed by Encravado and Pin, who still pushed his cart.

“Where’d you get this?”

“I bought it from some dumbass.”

“Can you make it work for you?”

“Sure. It rolled all the way to Flamengo.”

Dito stood up, got the money he earned and added it to theirs. Together, they’d had ninety. He divided by six, giving fifteen to each one. When Mother’s Scourge grumbled, Dito foresaw problems.

“For your information, the loser today was me. I earned twenty and I now am getting only fifteen, just like everyone else.”

Mother’s Scourge smiled awkwardly.

“Let it be. Tomorrow is another day.”

Smokey wanted to go to the movies; Pin talked about dinner.

“I’m gonna stuff myself. And then, maybe depending on the way things turn out, we can try a movie.”

“No way man. I’m gonna get me some woman in a corner. With these fifteen and the change I have, it’s more than enough,” said Encravado.

“If it continues to trickle in,” said Dito, “I might be able to rent a vacant room. Nothing like a night in bed. I am tired of sleeping on park benches or on church steps.”

“That’s right,” Manguito agreed. “It’s about time to stop this bum’s life.”

“I don’t live with jerks I don’t know,” said Pin. “It’s worse than sleeping outside.”

“Such a suspicious man,” exclaimed Mother’s Scourge ironically.

Smokey pushed Pin’s cart from side to side and Dito stayed sprawled out on the stone bench, thinking of nothing. Encravado found an excuse and left with Mother’s Scourge. Manguito sat at the edge of the pool to wash his dirty shirt, now almost as dark as asphalt. Listening to the noise of Smokey’s rocking cart and to the beating of the wet shirt at the edge of the pool, Dito began to consider the possibility of going to live in the caves formed by the rocks at the edge of the sea. They could take up several of them. If by chance they ended up surprised by the police, they would have

ways of escaping. They could organize passages, linking one cave to another, and keep their exit well disguised. They could escape at the least sign of trouble. He felt like laughing at the possibility. Why hadn't he thought about this long ago? Pin was right. To get himself in a rooming house, with people he had never seen, wasn't the safest deal. He had exposed himself too much to risk that. The police chief in Sao Paulo should be after him. By now he'd have talked to the people from the juvenile courts, other police stations in different cities would already know about the problem. At the smallest mistake he would be caught. The caves offered security. He'd see about this the following morning. He'd take Encravado, Smokey and Manguito with him. The others would work in the market. They needed a place to stay. They couldn't continue for much longer to gather in that square full of people and policemen as soon as it got dark.

III

Dito pulled his feet from the sack and saw that Smokey and Manguito were still asleep. The day had dawned in a drizzle. Dito had awakened with rain drops on his face and arms. He leaned against the heavy church door, embellished by round pointed spikes and iron bars. He called Smokey and nudged Manguito.

"Let's get out of here. Get coffee in Lapa, and go to the caves in Aterro.

"Caves?"

"That's right. Over there we can sleep late, without being scared of the police."

"What about the open market?"

"We'll miss it today."

They started to walk, Manguito had no energy, Smokey walked flat-footed because his new shoes were already well broken down. They passed by a movie theater, by a newspaper stand where two men were organizing the counter; they passed close to a garbage truck, by the bus stop where people appeared sleepy, especially the women who were leaving the cabarets.

Café Indi'gena had its lights on but few people were at the tables. Dito chose a secluded spot. He didn't sit by the door because the waiter would fear serving him. He placed a bill of ten on the table. The waiter was dark

and thin. He had thick veins in his neck and one eye consumed by trachoma. He was wearing a white shirt, a little black bow tie, black trousers, shoes worn down at the heels. He shouted Dito's orders through the port-hole, from which came buttered toasts, cups of coffee, soft boiled eggs, sandwiches.

"Three coffees with milk, and bread with butter!"

Dito felt ravenous. Manguito mentioned Encravado's plan, saying he'd been asked to take part but didn't know what to do. "We could free up a lot of money!"

Dito listened quietly. Smokey stated his opinion: "Don't do it. I've heard a lotta guys who came out of it bad."

But Manguito objected: "Encravado knows guys who are rolling in dough!"

"I think we can pull it off with no problem," said Dito.

"From what he tells, he's rolling in it!" said Manguito.

"And what's the plan?"

"He hits on the woman, takes her to a hotel and then stiffs her."

"And who pays for the hotel?"

"He does, man. When he is hard up for money, he goes to the street corner."

"When a woman lowers her panties, she can't run ...," Smokey laughed at his own joke.

"Do you know what this is called?" Dito asked. "Mugging!" "So what? The one time they got me, I was booked for assault, and I hadn't done nothing."

Dito asked for more bread, the waiter shouted the order again.

"In my group I don't want anyone doing this kind of thing."

Manguito understood he shouldn't insist.

"If Encravado has gone crazy that's his problem."

"I think that's right," Manguito said. "To each his own."

"That's why Zebra got screwed. Do you remember him? He tried to be a smartass and showed up riddled. Like Swiss cheese."

"All I know is, Encravado's always got money. He's gonna do this market thing — sell things in the street — because he's our friend" said Manguito, showing loyalty to his friend.

"I'm only saying this for his own good," Dito remarked.

While they ate, two men in white suits, with carnations in their lapels, came in with noisy women wearing heavy make up. They talked about the orchestra, and about the dance. Dito knew these were people just leaving the cabarets. Smokey observed the man with a wrinkled face and red eyes. The woman with him was white and beautiful. She passed her arms around his shoulders and kissed him. The waiter stood at their service. The red-eyed man said in a slurred voice, "I'm gonna make the night last" And addressing the waiter, he said, "A double cognac."

"For me too," said the woman.

The other man hadn't decided yet and the women didn't stop talking. The waiter knew that this would be a long session, so with their consent he pushed the tables together. Dito used this time to pay and the boys left silently.

IV

"Look at the size of this cave!" Dito observed.

Manguito whistled, stepping under some rocks; Smokey's eyes widened. Dito went ahead, reaching a passageway obstructed by a granite block.

"Squeezing up, we can pass."

"I can get in easy," Smokey said.

"It ain't too bad for me neither," said Manguito.

"But a cop can't," Dito remarked.

"Jeez, it's so dark here!" Manguito observed.

They went to the end of the gallery, which ended in a culvert.

"We'll have to work right here. We gotta to dig till we make a passage. Later on we can hide it with a bush."

"It's the best house I've ever seen," said Smokey.

"We can sleep safe here. Better than a rooming house. If some jerk shows up or gives us a hard time, we can escape by the tube."

"At the entrance we can put a big stone for a door."

"Great," said Manguito.

"We oughta be able to stay here begining tomorrow. It's big enough for everyone," Dito observed.

Saying this, he took off his shirt, and began to shove the smallest stones to the outside. Manguito wanted to help but Dito didn't accept it.

“Go to the square and keep an eye on everybody. Tell them to get over here after their day at the market is done. I’m sure that Pin and Encravado will like it.”

Smokey found an iron stake and showed it to Dito.

“We can use this to break that stone.”

“No way! It’ll take a steel chisel and a good hammer.”

“We can lift ‘em at a building site or maybe even buy ‘em.”

Dito sensed the boy’s enthusiasm. This was the first time they’d have a real home. He didn’t say it, but he even thought of buying mattresses to put over some dry hay. Then, he could sleep as he hadn’t in years!

After removing the stones, they needed to find some driftwood planks along the beach to help level the sandy floor. Dito couldn’t remember anymore how it felt to live in a home. He could remember the long time he spent sleeping underneath the broken bus on a dead end street; the public square benches; the bus station; the staircase in the building whose windows were falling out. He also remembered his anger that night he searched for shelter, in a fine drizzle when, a woman with a big ass offered him a toy, telling him it was Christmas. She asked him to choose from among the little plastic cars the one he liked the most. He knocked her basket over hard, the toys all fell on to the wet pavement. The woman began to call him an insolent punk, even ran a bit to try to get him but failed. Passersby were filled with compassion for the woman, and a strong young man leaped after Dito, shoving him hard. In the meantime, the woman gathered up her toys and shouted.

“You can see how despicable they are. A person bothers to come here to do some good and look at what happens! My husband was right. He thinks I’m very stupid!”

When the policemen arrived and the woman began to gesticulate, pointing in his direction, Dito fled.

That cave would become his home. With time, who knows, he could have a table, cans to keep food in, an alcohol stove. If they didn’t like the idea, they could get lost. He could hardly count on Mother’s Scourge or even Encravado’s help. But Brown Sugar and Figurinha would stay by him. He had no doubt.

He spent the entire morning cleaning out the cave. Covered in sweat, he asked Smokey if he didn’t want to swim some, while Manguito checked

out the market. After the swim he counted the money. There was enough. There was no need to rush.

Hiking up over the stones, in front of a flower garden, Smokey saw Encravado. He was on the other side of the high speed traffic lanes, waving his arms. He was cupping his hands around his mouth shouting, but Dito couldn't hear. He hurried over. They didn't even wait for the traffic to slow down.

"They caught Manguito. I didn't see how it happened. Some plain clothes cops. One of those who got in the car looked like Crystal. I ran after the car to get a better look and I really do think it was him."

"Where'd they go?"

"To juvenile court, I think."

"In what direction?"

"Through Mem de Sa'."

At a loss for a moment, Dito didn't know what to say. He knew what they would do to Manguito until he spilled his guts.

"We have to take care. We can't stay in the cave anymore. Manguito won't be able to take it without breaking."

"Why don't we look for Crystal?"

"I'll go also. Seeing him up close, I'll know if he was the one with the pigs."

Dito was sure it was Crystal. He'd been naive to think that he could escape. They don't give up. He had to keep himself on the lookout. One slip would be enough for what happened to Manguito to be repeated. It was always like that. Crystal had, in fact, ordered Dito's death. Saying nothing to his friends, Dito realized that, before a hammer and a chisel, what he would have to buy was a knife. It'd been stupid to think of a place to live without first doing away with Crystal.

He hadn't been able to guess the motives behind Crystal's plans. He had met Crystal sometime ago in Sao Paulo, at the Arouche Square. While drinking beer, he had watched Dito sell little porno magazines. Later, he had asked Dito to sit down at his table and when the waiter showed up to complain, Crystal told him not to bother. Dito had never received so much attention. At first he thought the guy was gay. Then he noticed that he was no sissy and that he was quite smart. He wanted to get Dito involved in a deal that could only begin in Rio de Janeiro. And that same afternoon he

promised to meet Dito and drive him around in a car. He kept his word. He picked Dito up, and the two went for a ride, Crystal talking about nice things such as he had never heard. The car was a new Galaxy, plushly upholstered, with a cassette playing soft music. The city was soon left behind. Crystal had straight well-combed hair and a white shirt, white on white with the cuffs carefully folded back, a watch on one arm, on the other a silver ID bracelet. Once in while he pressed a lighter on the dashboard, the button remaining sunk in until it warmed up and clicked. He would then take the lighter and touch it to his cigarette. Dito was amazed! He also offered Dito a cigarette. Dito had never been treated so nicely. After a few quiet moments Crystal talked, chatted, said he was getting older and had to find himself a suitable substitute.

“I’ve been in your shoes,” he said and stared at Dito through expressionless eyes set in lightly purpled eyelids. “What saved me was this.” He’d pointed to his head. “This is what puts a man ahead of losers. From what I saw at the bar, you’re a smart kid. You can go far. How old are you?” After Dito told him, he continued, “at your age I also didn’t know very well what I was gonna do. Until the day opportunity knocked. Each person is born under a star. Mine shone that day.” The man looked far off, as if remembering. “And I didn’t waste time. I jumped in with both feet. No indecisions. Today here I am. I’m not rich, but I have enough to live on.

“What do I have to do?”

“Come sometimes to Sao Paulo and then return to Rio. Travel and earn a lot of money.”

Dito had smiled. He doubted there could be something that good for him. At any rate, that didn’t seem to be the best moment to discuss his doubts. He preferred to let the guy talk; to observe his hands, his polished nails, his creased pants and white shoes and socks.

After about a two-hour trip the man manoeuvred through a detour, and took the road to the gas station. He got out, Dito followed him. He was neither tall nor short, he had a kind- hearted manner of speaking, and called everyone friend. An attendant took off the gastank cap, another threw water at the windshield. Crystal wasn’t concerned with topping off the car; he told them to check the tire air pressure, especially in the front tires. He put his arm around Dito’s shoulder, and they went to the bar. He asked for a shot of

cognac and a Coca-Cola. Besides the soda he told Dito to choose a sandwich or a sweet.

“Go on, eat up, ‘cause we still have a lot of road ahead of us.”

Dito accepted the grilled ham and cheese, for he had not had lunch. He had liked being with this stranger, who talked to him about everything, and who gave him a vision of a grand future. He even got the feeling that just one step, one movement, was enough for him to leave his misery behind and become an important person like Crystal. Crystal pulled out from his pocket a wallet full of large bills. Dito also saw credit cards and check books in the glove compartment. He was certainly an important man, who knew what he was doing. And Dito thought he was lucky to have fallen into his good graces. On the road again the Galaxy rolled so smoothly that Dito couldn't hear the engine. When he became important, this would be the car he would have. He would take long trips, just to check out the car's performance. By afternoon's end, after the intense sun shine waned, they were still far from Rio. Dito thought this had been the happiest day of his life. From as far back as he could remember, he couldn't recall anything like it, nor a person who had treated him with such kindness. There was no doubt Crystal was his friend. Otherwise he wouldn't be doing all that. Even if the work were difficult, it would be worthwhile staying with him.

V

Walking side by side, Dito listened to Encravado's description of Manguito's arrest.

“I think he was sleeping. I saw the police car come up to the sidewalk, and Manguito didn't do nothing!”

“How could he have known?” Smokey argued.

“I dunno. I'm smart. I don't walk in the streets with my eyes closed.”

“What do you think we should do?” asked Encravado.

“I'm gonna speak with Crystal, for him to find a way for Manguito to escape. Later we'll take care of Crystal,” said Dito.

They went up Assembléia Street. While Smokey kidded around, Encravado lagged behind to look in the store windows, and Dito considered whether to take the bus now or later. He was sure of one thing: he could not go talk with Crystal up in the slum without a weapon. It was possible that Crystal didn't give a damn about Manguito's booking; in which case Dito

would have to kill him. There was no reason to wait. And, this time, would Crystal be alone to receive Dito or very well protected? His thoughts were confused. What if they tried to find out where Crystal lived? It might be possible to surprise him. But either way he would have to go into the slum. He wouldn't go directly to the bar. He would bide his time, play around with kids, check the place out. If he found Brown Sugar or Pin everything would be simpler. They could help locate Crystal. Otherwise he would have to go back to Sao Paulo. What he couldn't do was to leave Manguito in the hands of the police.

In Tiradentes Square, Encravado asked him if he didn't want to take a bus going through the slum's edge. Dito had imagined going alone, but ended up accepting the idea.

"When we get there we must stay apart, at least while we find the guy. If there is a problem, we send bullets in his direction," said Encravado squeezing his pocket and showing the small volume of a 32. "Look! This never fails to fire!"

"Who sold it to you?" Smokey wanted to know.

"Some dude in Lapa who was desperate."

"When we get close by I want you to lend it to me. I also wanna buy one," said Dito.

"If you want to do this job with this one, there's no problem. I'll find the guy and get me another one."

"Okay. Done. I'll give you the money in the bus."

Dito paid for the bus tickets and sat down next to Encravado, who pulled the gun from his pocket. It was nickle-plated and wrapped in plastic.

"It's brand new!"

They got out close to some skyscrapers, in between which there was a narrow and steep climb, and they went up.

"It's much closer through the cemetery," Smokey complained.

"But it's safer here. Have you forgotten Pichote?" Dito walked, feeling the gun in his pocket. He didn't know why, that gave him a sense of security. They stopped once when Smokey went ahead to see if the snitches and dealers who charged a pedestrian toll were around. He disappeared in an alley but returned soon, with a smile, his eyes shining.

"The coast is clear. No one to bother us."

VI

Dito approached the mini-market. A few kids played outside, a pig rooted around dirty drain pipes, a woman sang while hanging out clothes on a fence. The slum was calm, the sun was hot and sultry. An old man dressed only in pants sitting at the door of his shack carved with a shoemaker's knife soles for his sandals. Dito entered the pool room: no one was there. A man with strong arms, bent over the thin planked counter and asked what he wanted. Dito remained quiet for a while, then he realized there was nothing he could do but ask.

"Where is Crystal?"

"Who?"

"Crystal! The guy who plays pool here."

"I've never seen him."

Dito didn't take his eyes from the pool table and remembered in detail that day when he'd been there with Smokey and Manguito. Crystal would rub the chalk on the cue, studying his shots cautiously. Each point he made he would mark on the board.

"His name is Crystal."

"I don't know who you're talking about, boy."

"The guy, always in white, who plays here. You know him."

The man smiled. "Get a life!"

Dito stayed, scratching with his nail some dirt from the wooden plank, while his mind worked on a way to squeeze that guy, force him to talk. Two little girls came by, one very black and barely dressed, the other with her hair in braids; they asked for soap, 250 grams of sun-dried meat and half a kilo of rice. The older one asked for the items to be put on account. The shopkeeper gave out the merchandise mumbling; when they left he opened and made notes in a long book. Nearly eleven, the morning was still calm and warm. From where he was Dito could see Encravado and Smokey coming in. He decided he couldn't miss this opportunity. He pulled out the gun, and came closer. With a shocked look the man watched the weapon.

"Let's go to the back room. We can talk better in there."

Encravado passed to the place behind the counter. If anyone showed up, he'd say the man had gone out for a second and would return soon. Smokey began to play with the billiard balls, rolling them against each

other. But both he and Encravado were on the alert. There was no noise coming from the back, and Smokey felt like going there to see what was happening. A little later he thought he heard Dito's voice, some nervous bleats by the shopkeeper and two muffled shots. Then Dito showed up at the door.

"He wanted to grab me, and got fucked."

"Did he spill it?"

"Of course. Crystal has changed places. He's at Rocinha.

They left the market cautiously, then got down among the bushes; Dito was sure that, for now, they were safe. They sat down just below the *carrapateiro*-tree.

"Crystal is putting the whole police against us," Dito said. "We gotta fix this guy."

Dito never felt so emptyheaded. He knew it wouldn't be easy to find the guy and, in the meantime, Manguito would be getting beaten at the police station.

"What if I go to Rocinha and try to find him? I think it's a good idea" Encravado said.

The suggestion cheered Dito.

"That's right. Take some money. When you see him, come tell us. We'll wait around the Glo'ria market."

Walking again among the bushes, Smokey felt glum because the cave plan would not work out, Dito was concerned that at every turn things were getting more difficult. Encravado didn't show any anxieties. He only complained he hadn't heard any shots, though he was happy the gun had worked so well.

"That son of a bitch deserved that!"

VII

Dito and Smokey sat on the sidewalk, amidst the market's confusion. Some women pulled little carts filled vegetables and flowers, while others put their purchases into baskets carried by boys.

"Look who's there," said Smokey.

Dito saw Mother's Scourge balancing a basket on his head while he followed an old sour-looking woman. He had a cynical expression on his face.

“Go tell him about Manguito.”

Smokey slipped into the crowd but soon returned.

“Are we gonna do anything?”

“I’m not up for working,” Dito said. “I want to get my hands on that son of a bitch.”

“What if he’s skipped town?”

“I don’t think he would.”

“What if we go visit Manguito?”

Dito couldn’t but smile at Smokey’s crazy idea, who laughed and flashed his eyes.

“So, we just walk right into the police station and say we want to see Manguito”

“No, that’s not what I mean, man. I know a woman in Mangué who can help. She deals with a number of policemen.”

“How come she likes you?”

“Well, I used to hang around there until she got tired of feeding me. She thought I was just like her son who ran away.”

Dito wanted to laugh. But it was a good idea and it could work, while they didn’t know of Crystal’s whereabouts.

“And when can we see your friend?”

“After lunch.”

“What if she’s not there anymore?”

“Get serious, man. She is one of the oldest ones.”

“What’s her name?”

“Mother Dolores,” Smokey answered with conviction.

“Why Mother?”

“That’s what she told me to call her. I think she’s the owner of one of the cat-houses.”

“Is she a foxy?”

Smokey smiled, tried to express his answer in gestures, threw a stone at a dog going by and said: “She’s worn out. She takes care of the young ones.”

“Okay, then, I want to meet this Mother Dolores.”

Pin showed up, sweating, with a dirty face and an empty basket.

“Where is the money?”

“There ain’t none. Today it was shitty. I carried this basket for half an hour for some slut and when I was finally going to her home, some guy showed up and gave her a ride. Can you believe that?”

“She didn’t give you any tip?” Pin was so resentful he only shrugged his shoulders with indifference.

“Well, if it was me, she would have to,” Dito said. “I’m not nice to these assholes.”

“Did Scourge leave?”

“I saw him going around after a woman beggar who was driving him crazy.”

Pin fired up a cigarette, gave another to Dito; Smokey gestured eagerly for one too, but was refused. “You’re too young to smoke.”

“I’m a man, Bro’: I know a thing or two.”

Eventually he got one and lit it off Pin’s cigarette.

He amused Pin, this little black boy so full of sassy talk and brass. Then, Pin sat down on the curb too.

“I think this work in the market is no good,” Pin said to Dito.

“Let’s try it for a little while longer. But we can’t make no mistakes, right now. If we find out that Crystal is in a deal with the police, then we’ll have a bloodbath.”

“How so?”

“We’ll make our move and fill our pockets with money.”

“Do you think Manguito can hold out that long?” Pin wanted to know.

“If they send him to the detention home, he might. If they discover he’s involved in the Sao Paulo case, we’re fucked!” said Dito.

“Which case?”

“We did in two bitches who fingered us.”

“Phffff!” said Pin, considering this a grave situation. “So, John Law is out in full force!”

“When have they not been after us?”

Pin didn’t know what to say.

“It’s a one way street. Find yourself a rich daddy to take care of you or you’ll always be their target. The thing is, you just got to know what to do and when to do it.”

Pin tapped the ash from his cigarette while Smokey sat on the asphalt facing them watching what was said.

“Just yesterday a dirty cop came to me and sang his tune. If I didn’t give him one half of what I was getting as a carrier, he would put me in detention for vagrancy. I left him waiting for me there and ran away. Today, there was another one after Scourge. He said that without some kind of permit we can’t do the toting.”

“There’s a whole gang of them. What they want is money,” Dito said, angrily.

“If they keep hassling us I’m gonna do something else,” Pin said.

“What else?”

“Zebra’s deal. The only problem was he rushed it,” Pin explained.

“And what did he do?”

“Rolling Johns. He got two girls and was getting some good money. Then he wanted to show he had balls and just fucked himself.”

“Another good scam is to get tourists at Corcovado and at Vista Chinesa,” Smokey reminded them.

“You need to know Rio very well to do well,” said Pin.

“I think the most important thing is to try to live in peace,” Dito said.

“You think they’ll let us? Get off it, man. Wherever we turn up they’ll be after us. When it’s not the police, it’s the guys from the Juvenile Division or even that bunch from the Salvation Army.”

“There were days Zebra made up to five hundred, after paying the girls. Easy,” said Smokey.

“What girls are we talking about?”

“I dunno,” said Pin. “When we decide, we just need to find other girls.”

“I think we should first try to do the market.”

“Around here, the way things are, they’ll end up putting their hands on us. We’ll go to some detention home. And we won’t get out easy.”

They talked a while longer, until Mother’s Scourge showed up. He frowned from afar. Taking the basket from his shoulder, he threw it to the ground.

“Shit! I am retiring today. I can’t do it, man. I walked for two hours after that old bitch and do you know how much she wanted to give me? A deuce. Then I said: what’s your problem, grandma, I ‘m sweating like a pig, the least I want is ten. She haggled, looked into her purse, and couldn’t find the dough. So, you know what I did?”

Smokey and Pin chuckled as they imagined Scourge's decision.

"Snatched her purse and shook everything out of it. She wanted to grab me so I shoved her aside, and she fell over her groceries. Then I got me a hundred note."

He put his hand in his pocket and showed the bill.

"With this bunch it has to be by force. Or we turn into beasts of burden, with lots of police and inspectors around to take half of what we make."

And a little less angrily, as if speaking only to Dito, he said, "It's over, man. We're risking ourselves to get some honest money and everyone laughs at us. We can't be honest. No one believes us. It's a waste of time. It's like beating a dead horse."

"What else is there to do?"

"What Zebra was doing. Without his clowning around. With a half a dozen good girls. Some young ass to make the old men desperate. Just any girl won't do."

"Later on when we go over to Mangué we can talk to Mother Dolores," Smokey said.

"What is this all about?" Mother's Scourge wanted to know.

"A way to help Manguito."

VIII

The sun was hot. In the wide, dirty street, groups of men stood around. The women were only in panties, seated at the windows and on the front steps of the run down houses. They talked loudly, laughed, told jokes. Smokey leaned against a doorway and one of them was disturbed by the boy's presence.

"What do you want, nose?"

The little black boy wasn't intimidated. A woman with droopy breasts told Dito to come closer.

"This one can come in."

"I wanna see Mother Dolores," Smokey said.

"Are you her son?"

Smokey didn't answer. He shook his head. The woman shouted for Mother Dolores. Getting no answer, she told Smokey to go on in. He signaled to Dito, and they passed by a dark woman with exposed breasts

and thick thighs, and entered a corridor where there were bedrooms separated by wooden planks. In bedroom with an open door, a woman was being humped and groaned. The corridor ended in a kind of open terrace, beside which was a veranda. They saw refrigerators, a broken radio, tables, empty and full bottles. In a wide backed wicker chair sat Mother Dolores. She was fixing some clothes. She took off her glasses when she saw the boys. She recognized Smokey. "It's been such a long time! Where have you been?"

"All over."

"Why don't you ever show up around here?"

He shrugged his shoulders and smiled.

"This here is my friend. From Sao Paulo." And poking his buddy, he said, "Give her your name, man!"

While Smokey continued to talk, Dito had a chance to observe the woman, her grey hair, the blue shadows under her eyes. She was at least 55. She was black, with a serene face. She must have been pretty when young.

"And what do you need from Mother Dolores?"

"That you help us," said Dito. "The police put their hands on a friend of ours. They will kill him."

"And how can I help, God's child?"

"Smokey said you know a bunch of people."

The woman smiled, her eyes becoming happier. "Where did they take him?"

"To the Mem de Sa' station," Smokey said as if he were sure of it.

"I'm gonna ask around. Come looking for me on Thursday."

They were leaving when she asked if they'd eaten. Smokey grimaced and she understood they hadn't. She called them to the kitchen. Two women worked over pans there. One of them, whom Mother Dolores called Zefa, set out the the plates and the spoons. Dito was a bit shy, but he served himself some meat, rice and beans. When they finished, the black woman insisted they eat more. Smokey had more but Dito accepted only a little dessert with cheese. They followed the corridor out past the rooms, where Dito tried to spot the woman who'd been groaning, but he couldn't find her.

At the front steps there were now three or four women. A beautiful blond who kept staring at Dito, a dark one with large breasts and a tall thin one, with black stockings and high heels. In the street, he recalled Pin's

comments. And, while he walked, among groups of men who had considerably increased in number, he began to admit that Pin might be right. With rolling johns they could earn much more money without so many difficulties. He needed only to find the women — two of them who looked like the dark one with stockings and the blond one with heavy make up.

Below the trees, in Campo de Santana, Dito sat down and counted his money. He saw that it was dwindling fast. Two more weeks and it would be gone, and without money things would be much worse. He would have to spend hours and hours washing cars, or work with the vendor at the open market. The problem was that at the end of the day, they'd only pay one half what they'd promised. Even so, it was better than nothing. As if he had read his thoughts Smokey said, "Pin knows some good girls who are willing to play."

Dito cheered up. He was almost sure that was the way. There weren't many choices. And it didn't matter whether he was or wasn't involved in pimping: if the pigs got him, he would suffer the same way.

"What if on Thursday, Mother Dolores hasn't resolved nothing, man?"

"Let it be. At least she will tell us where he is."

Dito didn't comment, remembering they had to return to Glo'ria Square.

"Encravado should be coming back soon."

"He also knows a good girl. We can fill our pockets," Smokey said.

IX

Dusk was falling and sparrows began to roost in the oiti- trees. Boys in uniform returned from school. Dito was lying down at the edge of a now completely dry fountain. In the center stood the image of a nymph, in bronze. She had a vase on her shoulder and showed the side of her breast. He looked at that and remembered the dark woman in black stockings and the made up blond, who kept looking at him. He would like to go to bed with one of them. Smokey jabbered, while smashing bottle caps with a rock. The Glo'ria Tavern was beginning to fill up with customers. Some sat on chairs on the sidewalk, others got up close to the counter. Dito wished to sit over there, but he couldn't. The waiter would call the cops immediately.

Pin showed up before Encravado and sat down beside Dito.

“I think we’re onto something good.”

Dito sat up.

“I’ve got two good girls. One of them knows of another who is willing,” said Pin. “The oldest one lives in a rooming house, in Santo Amaro Street. Let’s go over there at sundown.”

“I can only go after Encravado gets back.”

“And where did he go?”

“To Rocinha. He should be back soon.”

“Jeez, man, you’ve really got Crystal under your skin!”

“Not him, no. What I have to do is to take Manguito out of jail.”

Pin kept quiet. “That’s why I like you. If they get their hands on me, some day, I’ll count on you.”

“If I’m still around, I’ll do the same for anyone.”

“Do you still have some dough?”

Dito took the small pile of money and gave him fifty.

“We’ll have to have some advance money for the girls. Until the business brings a profit.”

“How much would that be?”

“Two hundred. If you don’t have it all, Mother’s Scourge can make up the difference.”

Dito could do it, he still had enough money for this.

“Where will the johns be taken to?”

“To her rooming house. If there is a problem, the cops won’t find anyone there. The girl who lives there is moving tomorrow. She’ll only use the room for this business.”

It was dark when Encravado showed up. He’d brought some packages of sweets and candy with him.

“Look at what your friend has sent you!”

Dito was amused and held one of the packages; Smokey wanted to see them also.

“Candy! Great!”

“And what’s the message?”

“Crystal don’t know nothing. He changed places because the creeps were after him. He left a message with the mini-market man, to tell where he was and everything.”

“And why, then, didn’t that son of a bitch say something?” “Perhaps he wanted money. Or he wanted to find out what the action was.”

“What did you think of him?”

“He does look like the guy I saw with the cops.”

“Did you talk about Manguito?”

“He said that he’s gonna move walls. At least he can get Manguito transferred to the detention home.”

“This guy is tricky. I’ll only believe him after I know for sure where Manguito is.”

Encravado took a newspaper clipping from his pocket. “Look what he sent you.”

Dito looked at clipping. The article was about the killing of two women and an unknown man. Two unidentified minors appeared responsible for the crime.

“He wants you to go talk to him, so you won’t get in trouble.”

Dito didn’t know what to do. What if it was a trap? “How long’s he gonna be there?”

“All week, then he travels.”

Dito lay down again at the edge of the fountain, feeling confused. He couldn’t figure out Crystal.

“Tomorrow or so I’ll go there. I just want to see what story he’s gonna tell me.”

Encravado threw the candy bag and the sweets to Smokey. The little black boy smiled broadly and began to dance, to jiggle as if he were in the front row of a samba parade.

“And what are we gonna do today?” asked Encravado.

Pin explained.

“We already got the women ready. We can earn money by day, by night, and hump the girls in the off hours.”

“I’m gonna bang them too,” said Smokey.

“Forget it, shrimp. Go suck your candy and don’t bother us,” Pin said.

“We get some action for a while in one place and later we move,” said Dito.

“I got me some hardware in Rocinha today,” said Encravado.

Dito wanted to see the gun. So did Pin.

“Great. It’s gonna help a lot!”

“What about Mother’s Scourge? Where is he?”

“I don’t know. Let’s just go see the girls,” Pin said. “Smokey stays here.”

X

Encravado sat down on the sidewalk at the curb, in front of the rooming house.

“Jeez, man, this place is falling apart,” Dito said.

“At night all cats are brown. The john who comes here only has eyes for the woman.”

The big house sat on a large open lot. Props and rafters supported much of the ceiling and some of the walls. Most of the bedrooms were empty. Pin walked towards one of them and knocked at the door. Dito followed some steps behind. A young woman showed her head.

“Come in.”

She told Dito to sit down. She had sad eyes, a thin face and long hair. She was just getting dressed.

“Sueli went to call Carla.”

“And what’s your name?” asked Dito.

“I’m Beth.”

She put her foot on a chair whose stuffing was falling out, raised her dress and hitched up her stockings. Dito observed the well shaped leg, the manicured hands. Pin seemed to be intimate with her. When he put his arm around her shoulders, she made sure not to muss her hair.

“When can we start out, doll?”

“Let’s see what Sueli says. She’ll be right here.”

“I think it’s gonna be good for all of us,” said Dito.

He wanted to talk some more, to say a bunch of things that crossed his mind, but he didn’t know why the presence of that young woman inhibited him. When he was least prepared for it, she looked at him sadl and sweetly. Pin opened a cabinet looking for something to eat. Beth asked Dito to pull up the zipper at her back. He came closer and saw himself in the mirror lighted by two bulbs. His face looked angry, with narrow eyes as if he were an Indian, thin lips, straight hair falling over his forehead. Very few times had he ever seen himself in a mirror. Beth smiled and squeezed his hand.

“I want you to be my friend.”

He didn't understand the spontaneous request, didn't know how to respond immediately. So, he just nodded, agreeing with the girl. She smiled, posed for him, and asked how he thought she looked. Pin hurried to whistle, Dito only smiled. "You're the most elegant woman I've seen."

"Jeez, no fair! You're gonna turn everybody's head," said Pin excited.

Someone knocked at the door, Beth opened it, Sueli and Carla showed up. Pin whistled again. Sueli was dark, strong. She had put on some tight pants, modelling her thick thighs. Carla was blondish. She had a beautiful smile and appeared sociable. She kissed Pin, sat on his lap in the chair, and smiled. Beth explained the arrangement of the house.

"Ain't but two bedrooms here. It was just an apartment Sueli and I once shared. We can bring only two guys at a time. The extra one has to wait."

"That's no problem. If the two bedrooms are occupied, one of us stays outside. That'll be the red light."

"And how are the guys gonna leave?" Beth wanted to know.

"One at a time," Dito explained, "to avoid confusion."

She smiled. She came closer to him and began playing with his hair. "How old are you?"

"One hundred and sixteen, just about. I'm getting old!"

"And how do we begin?" Carla wanted to know while being fondled by Pin.

"Right now," said Dito, searching his pocket and pulling out a bill of one hundred.

Carla kissed the money she got, Sueli cheered up.

"I'm a little afraid," said Beth.

"Don't be silly," said Pin. "Everything is gonna be all right."

The women got ready to leave. Dito observed that Carla continued to laugh, that Sueli had an attractive body and that Beth kept looking at him.

"Call Encravado."

Pin went to the door. Dito stayed for some moments in that little room with the two bulbs lit over the mirror. He glanced at the peeling walls, at the pictures of naked women and soccer players tacked to the walls, at the woman's hair ribbons hanging from a nail. He pushed open the door. In the other room there was the bed. A stale and musty smell exuded from it. The big house was quiet, but Dito wasn't worried about that. He took his gun

from his pocket, examining the bullets in the cylinder. He locked it again and put it back in his waistband. Encravado arrived with Pin and explained how the plan would work.

“The girl comes with the guy. We hide. She takes the john directly to the bedroom. They begin to hump, and we come in. The girl gets out, we wait a bit, and finally send the duck out alone. You stay cool, outside. Any false move, you give the alarm and we run.”

“And where do we take the girls tomorrow?”

“Don’t think about tomorrow. If tonight’s harvest is good, we spend a couple of days out of circulation.”

“I think this is gonna be better over by Aterro,” Encravado said.

“We can discuss this later. We have to use several places. Now go on. Pin will stay with you for a while. When the first girl shows up he goes to his position and brings the gun. If he doesn’t wanna do it, you come in his place. I am gonna be getting some ropes. We may need to hold some of these guys longer. We never know.”

* * *

CHAPTER FOUR

I

Beth sat alone at one of the tables in the Glo'ria Tavern, Carla went to get a place on the other side, and Sueli thought it better to stay at the bus stop: "That's where the old men go after women."

There were always lots of people at the stop, so she kept some distance from it. The first car that went by, the driver just offered her a ride. She wasn't interested. Two buses showed up, one after the other, and took away half of the people at the stop. A second car appeared, with only its parking lights on; Sueli bent over to talk to the guy, and he promised to park and come back. She was tired of this routine. She wasn't going to wait. She walked to the door of Sao Joaquim Palace, then down the street. From where she was, she could see Carla, and noticed her friend already had a man with his arm around her shoulders. Beth remained alone, the waiter serving her glass after glass of beer. An old man passed Sueli with his eyes fixed on her legs. He stared at her dark face, at her hair bound up in an elegant ponytail.

"Where is the princess going?"

"Wherever daddy wants me to."

She said this and smiled, flashing her white teeth. The old man, who carried a briefcase, didn't know what to do. He had not expected a challenging answer. For a couple of moments he thought of his alternatives: continue his walk, or accept the provocative invitation?

"And where can we go?" he asked shyly.

"Close by, where I live."

He had a fat and pinkish face, greying hair, and wore glasses. Because he made nervous gestures when he spoke, Sueli knew he was embarrassed. He searched for words, wishing to kid around, but he was unable to find any. She didn't wait for him to decide. She grabbed him by the hands, noticed they were cold and asked, "What's the matter, love?"

The man laughed and didn't know what to do. It would be difficult to explain. At his age, instead of being on his way home, he was getting himself in an adventure with a foxy lady. She had a beautiful body and hair that fell to the middle of her back.

“What is it you like to do the most?”

The sucker only smiled.

“Then, let’s go. I’m gonna be all yours, for as long as you want.”

The old man couldn’t stand it anymore. His lips trembled, he was breathless. He calculated, mentally, how much he had in his wallet, and how much he could spend on the girl. Sueli was talking, laughing, chattering on; the man recollected the slippers his wife put at the bathroom door whenever he got home. In twenty-odd years of marriage he had never been late, except for the days he brought the accounting up to date. Even so he used to call. Therefore, one time only wouldn’t be a problem. He had almost forgotten these girls, it had been such a long time! And while he fantasized and laughed, he went on agreeing with Sueli, feeling the heat of her soft young hand on his arm. It was, however, as if he knew the people who met them in the street. Some, mostly women, looked at him, as if accusing him of adultery. He wanted to hide his face until they got to Sueli’s street. Then, they could go slowly. At the bus stop, in front of a pharmacy, passing by the bakery, he was red with embarrassment. What if someone he knew, should see him? How would he explain that?

“Would you like to have a drink first?”

“If you have cognac at home, I’d be thankful.”

“Cognac, I’m not sure, but scotch I can guarantee. I got a bottle for my birthday.”

The old man felt his tongue loosening up. Now, he could say some things and even be a little blasé.

“How old are you?”

“A woman shouldn’t have to answer this question but, for the time being, I have no reason to hide it.” Both Sueli and the old man laugh.

“Eighteen. I’m Pisces. And you?”

“Me?”

He didn’t know what to say. He was disturbed again. After enunciating the word Pisces, Sueli had stretched her body as if to tell him a secret. And he didn’t know his sign and was embarrassed to tell her his true age. That’s why he reduced it by five years.

“I’m fifty-one, I’m Aquarian.”

“Huhn, how wonderful!”

As he was about to say something, Sueli interrupted him, pointing, “That’s where I live,” she said of a big house with two or three windows lit up. “It’s better than a hotel!”

The old man agreed. He had never liked to expose himself in hotels, to sign the registration book, show his identity card, or subject himself to such police sweeps as he frequently read about in the newspapers. It would be a nightmare if he were taken to a police station, for being in a bedroom with a prostitute. The scandal would ruin his prestige in the company, his wife would have a heart attack, his married children would stop talking to him. His picture could even appear in the tabloids. He was sure Sueli’s choice of a place was the best option.

“A modest big house, but comfortable. You’ll like my home.”

“And you,” he ventured a little more at ease.

Encravado observed Sueli and her man coming in. They climbed the steps, passed the patio, and walked by the closed bedrooms. She took the key from her purse, turned it in the lock. The door opened with smooth clicks. She turned on the light and hugged him. He rushed to shut the door. The sensation of that young woman, glued to him, so warm and slim, stirred the man up. Sueli loosened his tie and he placed his briefcase on a chair before she helped him take off his jacket. He wanted to say that the room was too small, that the heat was suffocating; but he didn’t dare, for the girl was all over him. Now, he only had his pants on and was barefooted; she pulled him to the bedroom and then to bed. She didn’t turn on the lights, the brightness of the lamp in the living room was sufficient. Sueli, in blouse and panties, unbuckled his belt, and as he sat on the edge of the bed, took his pants off. He wore boxer shorts, open in the front. When the girl pushed him, his clothes came off and he had no time to fold them, nor did he worry about it. Seldom had he met a girl like this one, and he let himself be guided. The old man kicked his underwear aside, as Sueli took off her blouse. Firm, tanned breasts appeared and the old man touched them with trembling hands, as if afraid of damaging them. He leaned over to kiss them, Sueli supporting his head, and he closed his eyes, overcome with delight. But a light was turned on and he was caught by surprise while Sueli caught her breath. The old man opened his eyes wide and couldn’t believe what he saw.

“What are you doing with this creep?” asked Dito, angrily.

Sueli fled to the other room. The old man tried to stand up, but Dito didn't let him, pointing his gun.

"You make a move and I'll burn you!"

Pin was in charge of the clothes. He took the pants and the coat to the sofa in the living room, while Sueli got dressed. She winked and left the house through the patio, barely lit by the street lights' glow. An agenda, a wallet, a check book and various papers were taken from the clothes. Pin opened the wallet, when Dito's threats began, followed by the old man's lamentations. He took out the bills and was undecided about keeping the documents. He called Dito and exchanged places with him. Holding the gun he pushed the old man back down when he tried to sit up.

"Keep quiet if you don't want me fill you full of lead!" Dito counted the money Pin had put on the bed and examined the papers. Then he had an idea: he would let the man go but would keep his underwear, his documents and his money. Pin mocked the old man, and Dito calculated the odds of exploiting that jerk forever.

The old man was nervous. He showed up at the door, completely naked, and Dito threw him his clothes. He didn't say a word. He put on his socks and searched for his underwear.

"We'll keep it. It proves you've been here, after the little girl. You make any mess, and your family will know all about it."

"If it's money you want, I can give."

"You had what we needed for today. We'll need more on Thursday," Dito said coldly.

The guy was now dressed. He had put on his tie carelessly and Pin helped him return the papers to the briefcase.

"The photographs and the club card will also stay with us," Dito said.

The man opened the door, leaving nervously.

"What if he talks?"

"He won't."

Dito pulled a cushion off the sofa, threw the underwear there, then lay down for a moment."Actually, it wasn't difficult."

From where he was on the sidewalk, Encravado saw the frantic man trying to grab a taxi. When he left, Encravado came running in through the patio.

"How was it?"

“Cool,” Pin answered.

“He left his underwear and a thousand bucks.”

“Then let’s go,” Encravado suggested.

“No need to. He’s going straight home.”

“What if he goes to the police?”

“He is not the type that’ll get involved with the police.”

Dito gave money to Encravado.

“Go on back. Tonight we’ll make a bundle”

As soon as Encravado got back to his lookout post, he saw Carla approaching with a strong man in dark clothes. He couldn’t see his features, but he saw her talking and laughing as they crossed the street embraced, the man’s arm on her shoulders. They entered the big house, and she turned the key in her lock. She held on to his body tightly and seeing he wasn’t amorous sat on the sofa. Carla then took the initiative, taking off her shoes and skirt. Slowly he unbuttoned his shirt and she asked if he would like to have a drink, which he accepted.

She opened a cabinet, as old as every other faded thing in that small living room, to get a scotch bottle and a glass. The man smiled. She chatted, not liking his behavior, since it appeared he was not attracted to her body. The man poured a good shot in the glass and offered some to her which she sipped to please him. And she kissed him. When he tried to hold her, she slipped away to the bedroom. The man remained on the sofa. He didn’t seem at all excited. Carla kept calling him, the weak light shining on her tired body. The man took off his shoes, looked to see if the door was well locked, put his shirt on the back of the chair and folded his pants. He sat next to Carla, whispered in her ear, melting her away in laughter and murmurs. The john stretched himself out next to Carla and kissed her with fervor. From behind the curtain, where a chair could barely fit, Pin and Dito stepped out.

“Stay where you are!”

The stranger didn’t seem bothered by the threat and tried to stand up. Dito shot him. The bullet hit him in the leg.

“Son of a bitch, what do you think you’re doing?”

Dito had not foreseen that reaction and cocked his pistol again. Pin interceded as the big man wanted to stand up. Dito hit him on the head with the gun. Carla could not leave the bedroom. There was no space for her to

pass but she wanted to disappear. Dito was also very nervous, for he didn't know exactly what to do next. He had not counted on the guy's reactions, and the only solution he saw was to kill him, though Pin was against it.

"You'll make problems for Beth!"

The stranger, though dizzy, was still mumbling words that made no sense. Dito composed himself.

"Let's tie him up. Then we leave."

Pin found some rope. Dito wrenched the man's arms to his back and made the first knot; with a piece of fabric they gagged him and tied his legs.

"We should pull him out back and leave."

"What for? Leave him right there," Dito said.

Pin was nervous but Dito looked as if he had regained his composure. He looked for documents in the man's wallet and discovered the guy almost didn't have any money. He couldn't even have paid Carla. That was very disappointing. He felt like hitting the guy over his head. Since he didn't want to make problems for Beth, he instead destroyed the man's documents. He also tore up his clothes and told Pin to throw his shoes and socks in the trash can by the building's entrance.

They didn't know where Carla had gone. Dito called Encravado, asked him to look for her.

"Tell her it's over for today."

"I'm gonna tell Sueli and Beth."

Dito entered the bar exhausted and somewhat disappointed. He was aware of his wrinkled pants and his dirty canvas shoes. His checkered jacket began to emit a foul odor. People close by stared on. The waiter had to be convinced to serve him some coffee, by asking him to pay at the cashier beforehand. Everyone was suspicious of him. People didn't believe a street kid. He knew that's what they thought of him. When he put sugar in his coffee and began to swirl it with the little coffee spoon, he noticed Pin walking by. He made two decisions then: to get better clothes and to find Crystal. Rolling joints could not go far. What happened to Zebra could happen to him.

Pin came up and asked for another coffee, while Dito listened to what he had to say about Beth and her foreign pick up. Although her situation might be profitable, as Pin was saying, he, Dito, didn't want to risk himself. She would be better off taking the man to a hotel.

“The guy is full of money! He’s a gringo, speaking funny and everything.”

Dito shook his head.

“She has to go to another place.”

They went by the Glo’ria Tavern, when Encravado showed up.

“Sueli is at Paris Square. She says that nothing else happened. Before midnight she’ll go to Copacabana. She wants her part.”

Dito got the money from his pocket and asked Pin to exchange it, saying:

“It’s a good idea to make the division now!”

“Three hundred and some for each one,” Pin said.

“The change is because of that bastard who was gonna gyp Carla,” Dito explained.

Beth remained seated with the gringo, the table still decorated with bottles. Dito looked at her with spite, feeling the badly healed cut over his eye burn. He would buy some new clothes to meet her, to sit down in a place like that one and talk about things.

II

Encravado and Pin decided to spend their money at Machado square’s stores, but Dito was too tired to go with them. “I’m gonna look for Smokey. See you tomorrow,” he said as they walked away.

Glo’ria square at that hour was dark and deserted. Beggars sought accomodation on public benches. A woman with young children tried to find leftovers in a dumpster. Dito followed the action for awhile. As the woman pulled the trash out to the ground, the kids began to pick through it. All of it in silence, as if they were stealing. Dito called one of the boys, the woman stopped.

“Go talk to the man.”

Dito gave him a bill. It wouldn’t resolve anything but it would help a little bit. The boy went back to his mother, showed her the money, and she gathered her bags with rubbish and walked away, her children following behind.

When Dito had already lain down on a bench, a drunkard showed up saying that place was his. He wanted to talk back but restrained himself. The guy barely knew what he was saying. He complained a while, a

newspaper pack under his arm, and he left, limping, seeking another vacant bench.

He gazed for hours at the moon appearing and disappearing behind the *oiti*-tree branches. He listened to the traffic noise and heard again Carla's customers' outrage. Would he still be bound and gagged? What about Beth: what hotel would she have gone to with the gringo? Why did she look at him so sweetly? And why did he feel pain in the cut above his eye whenever he thought of her? He didn't want to concentrate on her. He didn't want to get mixed up with women. At least not until he was able to straighten things out with Crystal. After all, what kind of business was he in? Why did he send the merchandise to Deborah if she could resolve not pay what had been agreed? Was Deborah responsible for the deal or was it all planned by Crystal? More people were probably involved. Maybe that was it, and Crystal didn't want to say it, so he wouldn't appear so unimportant. And now, without Deborah what would Crystal think? Would he give him another chance?

His wasn't able to sleep. The folded newspapers he had placed under his head as a pillow weren't sufficient. He planned to seek Crystal and go back to talk to Mother Dolores. He thought about her sad face, her distant eyes, remembered the brunette with black stockings, and visualized the other one who had called him and showed off her breasts. He thought of the grunting woman he had heard being fucked, in the room with a door ajar. All of that felt so strange, and yet he'd felt so much at home.

He now realized he could easily pull the trigger on that jerk who killed Pichote in the cemetery, or on Crystal, in the same way he'd killed Deborah and Celina. They didn't need to live anymore. Or did they? He didn't know. He didn't want to deal with such questions. Deborah had planned for him to disappear inside the police station and the prisoners would have made him a fag. He would have had no way of resisting. The day he rebelled he would be beaten to death, just as Dr. Mauro had wanted. But everything went wrong, Mauro's girlfriend became a stiff, the blood basting her droopy breasts, her eyes stunned.

These memories brought bursts of rage in Dito, and while he was enraged he wouldn't be able to sleep. But he preferred it this way. He had no doubts about the future. Sooner or later they would hit him, but until then, only the most agile would prevail. Cock and pull the trigger first,

before anyone else. Stick the knife with gusto, when least expected. He, Smokey, Encravado, Mother's Scourge, all would have the same future. Each day another caught, just like Zebra, Pichote and now Manguito. If he ever got out of jail, he wouldn't be good for anything. He knew how things were.

The cut above his eye was burning and itching again. He had always heard that a cut was healing when it began to itch! That must be it. The idea of living in the cave had been pushed further and further back. Everything seemed very far away. Even his friends did not get along among themselves. Mother's Scourge wishing to be independent and doing things he didn't agree with. Encravado accepting his advice only to please. Pin was a mysterious guy: friendly with women and with some gloomy types he had seen one day at the market. And why did he want his friends to follow him? Follow him where? That was it — where to? The moon had plunged in a dark mass of clouds, the lights of the square went out. Lying down, Dito looked dead. Who knew about his existence? Was the Sao Paulo police still searching for him? Was the big man still furious with what he had done? Of course he was. They don't forget. People like us don't have the slightest chance. Both big and small mistakes have to be paid for. In the same currency. That's why it would be best for him to become independent, to deal with his friends strictly as business. Perhaps Smokey would be the only exception. Did he like Encravado? Did he like Mother's Scourge or Pin? No. His eyes filled with tears. The moon disappeared and he realized he was crying. That seldom happened. And he cried because he didn't like anyone. Perhaps he liked Pichote a little and now Smokey. The others he barely remembered, or remembered with hatred. Like Zé Ina'cio, Armadillo and Black Fly. Again the moon got lost in the dark mass of clouds and, with it, Dito plunged into sleep.

III

Smokey was jumping and climbing back on the street car's step. They were going to Mangue, where they would talk again with Mother Dolores. Dito had curled up at the end of a seat without energy for anything. Since morning he almost hadn't talked. Not even when they had breakfast and the black boy wished to know about his previous night's adventures.

"Wow! Did you hit the guy?" Smokey asked, later.

Dito smiled, "It was only a scratch. He wanted to be a wise guy."

They came to the wide street, busy, with large billboards. The men were again standing around, and there were tents set up by fruit vendors. At almost all windows naked women showed themselves off. A man shouted for Smokey to get out of there. The boy ran away fast, but returned later. They went in Mother Dolores big house. The women seated on the steps were not the same; Dito didn't see either the brunette with black stockings, or the large-breasted one. Mother Dolores was talking to some weird guys, and she asked them to wait. Later, when they came in, she started saying that life for Manguito was now very hard.

"The worst has already happened. He was sent back to SAM."

Dito knew that could not be so bad, if compared to living in a jail in the police station. Naturally she couldn't imagine what that might be. His spirits were lifted a bit and he even asked, "But are you sure?"

"That's what the detective who was here yesterday told me. Now you only need to get confirmation."

Dito was relieved, though he could not have it confirmed. How could he go to SAM and ask about Manguito? Mother Dolores had notions he could never understand.

When the woman offered food, Smokey thought it was a little early to eat, he wasn't hungry.

"One of these days we'll come back," Smokey said.

Dito only smiled and left. The woman stared at them as if lamenting. They mingled among the men and returned to the street where streetcars passed. They took the first one that showed up.

"Where are we going, man?"

"Anywhere. When we get tired, we come back. I'm going to Rocinha to look for Crystal in the afternoon, if you wanna come you have to be strong. He'll probably turn on us."

"I'll kill his ass," Smokey threatened.

At Sans Pen~a square they got out. Dito went into a store, and stared at the windows, fascinated with the large quantity of toys, roller skates, bicycles.

"What if we bought a bicycle?"

"Cool, man! But some guy would immediately show up to steal it," Smokey said.

Dito knew it was true. They left the store, ran to the other side of the square. Dito jumped over the flowering bushes, while Smokey asked the gardener to let him drink some water from the hose, but the man sent him away. The little black boy went back to walking, always jumping and laughing. They went into a bar where Dito asked for coffee and a *guarana*' soda.

IV

It was a sunny afternoon. The roads to Rocinha were very steep. By the time they arrived at the community fountain they had passed by the place where men played the numbers; had gone in narrow alleys between shacks; seen small exposed-brick houses with television antennas and observed groups of children playing ball. Smokey looked inside the first store, but Dito was almost sure Crystal would be in the other one, the larger one, with two front doors, which had been painted in blue. Some men had gathered close by, while others passed carrying water. As Dito and Smokey went in the store they saw him. Crystal saw Dito but acted as if he hadn't. A tall and thin black man played pool against him. Dito stayed in a corner. Crystal rubbed chalk on his stick. When he positioned himself to play, he smiled. Dito also tried to smile.

"You've finally shown up! We need to talk. Are you in a hurry?" Crystal asked.

Dito shook his head and sunk his hands in his pockets. On the third stroke Crystal missed his shot, and the black man began to sink the balls. The two boys looked for a table and sat down. Crystal asked the barman to serve them softdrinks.

"Take good care of them, they are my friends!"

Dito drank *guarana*' while observing Crystal's elegant clothes. He hadn't change a bit. The light colored pants, white shoes, white shirt with the sleeves turned up, hair well combed as if just out of the shower. He didn't know how Crystal was able to look like that all day long. A good hour later the tall black man left his cuestick on the table.

"That's enough for today. It's your bill!"

He bellied up to the counter and asked the barman to serve him a mixed drink. Crystal asked for a cognac and then came to Dito and Smokey's table.

“Today, I’m not having a good day,” he said referring to the game he had just lost.

He drank some, smacked his lips, and continued to sip his drink.

“How did it happen?”

Dito didn’t know whether to answer.

“What?”

“With poor Deborah.”

“Poor, my ass. Look at what I got.”

He shows the cut above his eye.

“And if I didn’t take care, I would have rotted in jail.”

“She didn’t pay what I told you?”

“She didn’t pay shit. What she did was to put the police on us. He and I went to the police station, and later on we went to jail with a bunch of criminals.”

“You just needed to come and see me and we would have closed accounts. You didn’t need to do away with the woman. She was important. A bunch of people are after you now. Mostly after you.”

Dito shrugged his shoulders, as if it were not important.

“How much did she have to pay you?” Crystal asked, unexpectedly.”

“Three thousand.”

“Here it is.”

Dito and Smokey couldn’t believe what they were seeing. Crystal opened his wallet, chose the bills and began to place them on the table. At first Dito didn’t have the courage to pick them up.

“Come on, it’s yours!” Crystal insisted.

Dito grabbed the money. Thrown off by this, he couldn’t understand why this guy was always able to manipulate him.

“And where is your other little friend?”

“Canned,” Smokey answered.

“We’ve been told he is in SAM.”

Crystal frowned.

“He’s up the creek.”

“Without him we can’t do nothing. He helped a lot!” Dito said.

Now Crystal was the one surprised. But he didn’t show his displeasure.

“You think he will be there for a long time?”

“I’ve got no idea.”

“Do you know which building he’s in?” Crystal asked interested.

“It is easier to identify him by name....”

“Manguito...,” Crystal repeated. “I’m gonna move mountains to get that boy released. See? Just by talking we get things done.”

Dito understood him to be referring to Deborah again, her boyfriend and Celina.

“She fingered us, so that we wouldn’t come out of prison alive,” Dito said.

“Let’s forget that,” Crystal concluded, leaving the boy even more annoyed.

“And what’s gonna happen now?”

“Sometime I’m still gonna need you again. By then Manguito will be free. During that time we’ll talk, get things straight. The only thing is, you can’t show up in Sao Paulo any time soon. And it’s there that the greatest volume of business is done.”

“Why didn’t Deborah do what you told her to do?” Dito insisted.

“I can’t imagine. Maybe she didn’t have any money at the time.”

“That was not it,” Smokey argued; “she left us waiting and said she would get the dough. Then the big man showed up and caught us.”

“I think it was all planned,” Dito stated.

“Well if she was trying to go behind my back, well, she paid for that. Let’s talk about less sad things.”

Crystal lit up a cigarette, the barman brought another shot of cognac, and offered the boys soft drinks.

“The next gig will probably be in Belo Horizonte. A few hours of travel and you will be there. It’s a good market. I might even find an authorization for you to travel by bus. Then you won’t have to run after trains. There’s no sense in risking your lives, man.”

“Bus would be great,” Smokey says.

“And you can get more cash. It will only depend on you.”

Some strange men showed up and talked to Crystal, one of them hugged him. The boys stood up, understanding it was time to go. Dito was pleased with the stack of money he had just received and Smokey was also as happy. Now he wanted to disappear from there as soon as possible, take

the direct route to the square and to the stones in Aterro, and to stay there thinking of how to spend so much money.

Smokey believed Crystal was not such a bad guy, “Another one,” he said, “wouldn’t have given us any fucking money!”

Dito didn’t agree. He only knew he couldn’t understand Crystal. The more he tried the less he understood.

They passed the men again who waited for the results of the numbers’ game and the public fountain now surrounded by women and children. They got to the concrete road, when they noticed a car coming down slowly. Dito and Smokey got closer to the stressed concrete wall. The car’s door opened up; Dito wanted to run but couldn’t. Two men grabbed him, a third one grabbed Smokey.

“Come here, you son-of-a-bitch! We want to hear your story!”

The guy saying this was strong, had his shirt out of his pants and wore a fedora. The other one was white and fat. The one who grabbed Smokey, a tall black, had a cap on.

The car went down the hill. Dito didn’t feel like fighting them off, or try to escape. He knew that was impossible and that he was stupid to believe in Crystal. The black man with a cap extended his arm to the back seat.

“Give me the man’s money, tough guy.

Dito did not move. The big man holding him put his hands in Dito’s pockets.

“Three thousand, brother! Not bad!” The policeman said, passing the bills to his friend.

The fat white man mocked: “Where you’re going you won’t need this.”

Dito looked at Smokey, he was pale and scared. He suspected Crystal, but had not imagined that he could have done so much. His eyes were filled with tears, and the cut above his eye began to hurt. The policemen spoke among themselves. He knew the comments were about him. Now, even the driver, a little man, wanted to know the details. The white man, jokingly, explained what they had done Sao Paulo.

“They did in three of them, brother. Without a moment’s thought.”

Dito remembered the face of the Sao Paulo delegate, of Caramel and Big Purple. If he were sent there again, he was sure that would be his end.

Crystal would be free, playing pool in the afternoons, without worrying whether he won or lost. Actually that was his other profession, only now did Dito understand it clearly.

V

The stolen Ford rode around and stopped often, but there were always two policemen to take care of the prisoners. There was no way they could escape. Later on, they began to go up a road that appeared to go up to Corcovado. The white policeman asked the driver to stop. The car stepped on the grassy shoulder.

“I think it’s time to search this punk well.”

They got out of the car, the big man holding Dito’s arms behind his back. The policeman examined his pockets and laughed. He took out the gun, showed it to his colleagues who were inside the car.

“Look at this guy’s cannon!”

He threw the gun to the driver, put his hands on his waist and started to laugh, sarcastically, cynically.

“Aren’t you afraid of getting hurt, you bastard?”

Dito didn’t answer. He was grabbed by the hair, pulled forward and given a kick in his stomach. Though Dito protected himself as he could, the big man got him with a kick; he turned around, a new blow landed on his back; now the big man took off his belt, and beat Dito with the belt buckle. With the punch in the face Dito went down as the white man went back to holding him by his hair.

“I think he is ready to talk!”

“Who ordered you to finish off Deborah?” The big man asked him.

Dito has no answer and got a kick in his back, as the white man squatted in front of him.

“Talk or we will finish you off right here.”

“Who asked you to kill the woman?” The big man shouted.

“She didn’t wanna pay what was owed us and called the pigs.”

“That’s why then you decided to take her off the planet,” the white policeman said with a smile.

“You will tell the entire story. We’re not liking what you’re saying.”

“Hold the punk there by your side, Eyelash. Let’s break the back of this son of a bitch,” the big man said, while he asked the driver to back the

car up slowly.

Dito noticed the manouevering and attempted to escape; Eyelash didn't have the strength to contain him.

“Come here, Overtime, the dude is wiry.”

Dito was caught now, his arms twisted, one of his legs was straightened out. The car was getting close.

“Hold your horses, Xereta,” said the heavy man to the driver. “Now, you boy, pay attention. Either you spill the beans, or you'll end up with your foot under the car. And don't you think we're in a hurry. The car will stand on your foot, until you talk.”

Eyelash insisted, “Who asked you to burn the woman?”

Smokey was terrified. The driver with his arm hanging outside the window looked toward the back making sure not to miss his target, while the big man waved for him to continue backing up. Dito shouted and continued to scream. When the policeman released him, he tried to pull with his own hands his foot from under the car. He struggled against the bumper, fell down and stood up again, raised his arms and covered his face. Smokey cried just hearing his friend suffer, the man with the fedora told him to be quiet.

“Just wait for your turn. Don't waste your energies. You also helped in the scheme to kill the woman.”

Overtime signaled the driver, the car moved, the tire freed the boy's foot. But the policemen held him again. He continued to groan and cry.

“So what happened? Who sent you to kill Deborah?”

Dito had one leg retracted. His tears were mixed with the saliva in his mouth. The white policeman continued to smile.

“Speak, or we'll do the other foot.”

Dito shook his head. He didn't know what to say. He had nothing else to say.

“I killed her because she didn't pay me. I killed her because she sent a dirty pig to beat us up.”

“Dirty pig!” Overtime repeated.

Saying that, he stepped on Dito's bloody foot. Dito bent over, the white man gave him a karate chop to his neck, and Dito fainted.

“Bring out the other one, Panther.”

The black man with the cap moved out of the front seat of the car. Smokey began to yell, holding on to the car as hard as he could.

“Come on, little devil!”

The boy was dragged out and thrown beside Dito. Smokey looked at the flattened foot, at the running blood, and begged, saying he didn't know anything, that he was not with Dito when Deborah died. Overtime was amused by Smokey's distress, the fat white man held him by his ears. He pulled Smokey's head down, violently kneeing him in the face. The boy fell backwards on the grass. Overtime raised him up.

“The boy doesn't like it this way!

He pulled a pocket knife while Smokey's shouts echoed from afar.

“Shut this pest up!”

Xereta offered a handkerchief. Panther gagged the boy.

“Now you can dance!”

Overtime was ready. He put the knife under Smokey's chin, Panther pulled the gag away.

“One more scream, you chickenshit bastard, and I'll slit your palate.”

Smokey stood on his toes, Overtime began to raise his hand slowly, forcing him to step from one side to the other.

“That's it. Quiet and obedient. Like a good boy.”

“Who ordered Deborah's death?”

Smokey wanted to talk, Overtime pulled the blade away. The boy was exhausted.

“It was a man from Sao Paulo, but I don't know his name.”

“And the other one: does he know who he is?” Panther asked.

“He knows. We talked and he promised us good money.” The fat white guy helped pull Dito inside the car. Smokey continued under the power of the black man with a cap.

“Let's go, Xereta,” Overtime said. “We're already half way there. At the police station we'll discover the rest.”

“What about the punk's foot?” Xereta asked.

“Leave him at the emergency room in the hospital. He was run over by a car, and that's it. In his hurry to run away from us, he preferred to go under a car.”

The others laughed. Smokey continued to cry in silence, his eyes red, his body shaking.

* * *

CHAPTER FIVE

I

Dito woke up still dizzy with anesthesia. He looked at the low ceiling, at the dirty white walls, at the lighted lamp. He tried to move and noticed that one of his arms was tied to the bed. The large room was a kind of infirmary, although all other beds were empty. He noticed that there was no one walking by and he felt an unbearable thirst. He couldn't remember having had so much thirst. He even had a dream that the earth around him had dried up, its surface had broken. He could feel the sun burning while he walked, and his hands tried to grab bushes which had in turn dried up. He saw water among dunes, and he ran in its direction. It was a mirage. He rid himself of the nightmare, of his sleep, but the thirst didn't go away and there was no one, no functionary to be seen. There should be a bell to call the nurse. That was precisely it. The button should be close by. He looked for it searching around with the hand without handcuffs, but he only felt the bed's metal bars. He found nothing. He would have to shout. He thought of the problem this would create and resigned himself to wait. Someone would pass by, if nothing else, a janitor. His lips were more and more dry, his throat burned. It must be the medicine they had given him causing this reaction. Him! Who didn't even take that much water, not even in the hottest days when he cruised the streets for hours on end! He would make an effort, now, to resist the thirst. He wouldn't shout. He wouldn't give them reason to hate him. He moved the right leg. His left one was in a cast. Slowly he remembered: the men in the car, one with a fedora, the other with a cap; Smokey with his arm locked behind his back, being beaten by fedoraman and by the other, the white scoffer. Where had they come from? What kind of connection did they have to Crystal? When he left this place he would never again believe Crystal. This was the second time he got screwed because of that guy, who appeared to be one thing, when in truth he was another. He had proven he was just a boy; an adult wouldn't have risked a second rub-in with Crystal. He had been stupid, subjecting himself to this. He had gone to get the money from hands that were ready to kill him. Still worse, he took Smokey with him. Where could that little black boy be? Smokey, who always looked astonished; Smokey, who believed in

him so much. He tried again to remember the sequence of events, from the moment in which the smiling white man had given him a knee in the face. There was a hiatus. He must have fainted, for he couldn't remember things after that. That was when Smokey disappeared. Did they put an end to him, or was he in another room in that huge building? His thirst continued to dominate his thoughts. No matter how much he tried to shift his attention, he felt his tongue dry, his throat parched. He heard voices, laughter, and perked up. He would ask for a bit of water, from whoever showed up. He wouldn't be able to resist for much longer. Unbelievable how that physical sensation took over entirely. He had never desired water this much. He remembered Smokey jumping over the bushes at the square, bending over to drink that water from the gardener's hose, while the man who pulled the rubber hose away let that water go to waste. How could there be so much wasted water? And there he was burning, his lips dried up, while his eyes following the rain outside the window noticed that not even a drop would fall on his body.

Talk and laughter continued at a distance. But he was sure someone would come by. It couldn't take too long. Then, he would ask for water, if only half a glass. It wouldn't be a problem. Any water, even unfiltered. Supporting himself on his elbows he rose away from the bed to see if there was a sink close by, but he only saw beds. Beds and beds, all covered in white and empty. Where could the other patients be? He couldn't understand this. He didn't worry about being there alone. He didn't care what might happen to him. It couldn't be worse than having the car parked on his foot. The pain had driven him crazy, tearing him from the inside, his hands had uselessly tried to pull his leg out from under, but he could still hear the laughter from the guys inside the car. Laughter like the one he could hear now. Was it coming from the hallway, from the lounge or from some other infirmary? What if he tried to break open the handcuff? Wow, why hadn't he thought of it before? Would one of Crystal's friends have placed him there so he could run away? They couldn't have been so kind. He couldn't imagine kind people could exist. People are always wanting something, and as a rule they always want more than they can give in return. He wouldn't fall for it. If he ran away he would return to Sao Paulo, no matter what. He knew that city better, he could more easily hide. The pigs had been able to put him in jail very few times. In Rio it was different. He

had fewer chances. If he were able to discover Smokey's hiding place, he would invite him to go also. But for now, he couldn't worry about this. He wanted water or he would go crazy. He didn't know that thirst could be so painful.

The laughter began to dwindle away, dying out, and it was morning again, a silent and warm morning, the sun reaching the bedroom through the iron bars in the window. Then, when he least expected it, an old man showed up, pulling a bag filled with paper. He got up on his elbows. Finally someone would help him. The old man was all wrinkled up, his skin was yellowish, his face dried up, and he wore blue overalls too big for his shriveled body. He had flip-flops on and pulled the big bag slowly.

"Hey, you, get me some water, please!"

The old man didn't seem to hear, although he looked at him.

"I'm dying of thirst. It can be from any faucet."

The old man smirked showing his rotten teeth and a red tongue. He didn't answer, he didn't agree to get the water, nor did he disagree, he only smiled, a stupid smile, as if he were a madman pulling that very large bag. The man stepped toward the bed, gathered some cotton pieces from the floor, and said in a weak tone: "Try to forget the water and remember the brothers who have already gone."

There was no doubt. He was in front of a lunatic. The old man turned around, pulling the bag, and disappeared from the infirmary as silently as he had come in.

Dito felt his eyes tearing up and imagined he might be in an abandoned pavillion or in some insane asylum, where there might be other people like that, who didn't know what they were doing or saying. Would this be a section of the Department of Correction for Minors? Or would this be another agency he might not know? He was left with almost no hope that someone else might appear and get him some water. He would have to try to break the handcuffs. He only needed to find a piece of wire or perhaps even a wooden match. He would work calmly. He would try to resign himself to the agonizing thirst he felt, until he was able to get rid of the handcuffs. Another way of escaping would be to slip a pillowcase inside the handcuff's ring and pull on it. That might make the central hook give. And why not try this since it would be difficult to find a match or a wire? He slipped the pillowcase through the ring to protect his arm. The pressure

would be the strongest he could muster, and that could open a sore on his wrist. He would bleed at the sore and there would be no one to help him.

He tried to sit as comfortably as possible shifting his body weight to help him increase the impact on the handcuff's central axis. He pushed and let his weight down. Even having his wrist wrapped in the pillowcase he felt great pain and the handcuffs did not break. He would have to try another time and folded the pillowcase in still smaller sections to give more protection to his wrist. He pulled even harder this time but the handcuff's ring did not open. That would be a very difficult way to break it. While he thought of another way to escape, he stretched himself on the bed, breathing with difficulty, his lips trembling with thirst. It was possible that he might be in some kind of isolation, where people were not permitted to come by. Perhaps once a day there would be a man bringing in food and nothing else. And what would he do to go to the bathroom? Where could the bathroom be? Who would open the handcuff? These were other things that alarmed him. He made himself comfortable and tried to think about his friends, to forget the painful thirst. The sunlight's patch had already moved quite enough on the floor, and he calculated that it might be close to noon. Looking at the ceiling he felt confused and aware he was sweating for it was a muggy morning. He had the impression he heard some shouting. He tried to listen carefully, but he was surrounded again by calm — the calm of a lake's tranquil waters. If he could only pull that bed, he would go with it from this floor to the water fountain. There had to be one. That was certainly an idea. To pull his own bed. He got down to verify if the iron legs were bolted to the cement floors like all the other beds were. He lay down again. He had never seen beds bolted to the floor, as if there were never a need to move them. What if he were able to break the lever that made the head of the bed rise and with this metal scrap he were able to open the handcuff? That's another idea. He looked at the lever for a long time and tried to feel how resistant it was with his fingertips. What if he were able to kick it with the foot not in a cast? He turned the lever until its handle was in the up position. He put his foot over it, pulled out, he felt the mattress slip. The holder supporting the wooden lever twisted but did not break. It would be foolish keep on trying. He went back to looking at the ceiling, at the sunspot. He saw the gardener's waterhose pouring water, Smokey jumping over the flowering bushes. He could go crazy if he didn't have water. He

would have to shout, to call for someone, whether they liked it or not. He no longer worried about what they could say. After all he would be only another case. If they punished him for having had some water it wouldn't be that bad. It would be a kind of compensation. Nothing more.

He shouted once, twice. Strongly. Very strongly. His appeals filled the infirmary but even then no one showed up. Not even to reprimand him. Were there other people there or only the crazy types that pulled the bag filled with paper? Would there be other rooms like the one where he was, or was he in some sort of isolation, surrounded by woods, far away from any town? He could no longer think straight. His throat hurt, it appeared swollen. Shouting was useless; he would have to find a way to break his handcuff.

In the afternoon, as soon as the sun began to set, he fell asleep at the edge of a lake. The grass was green and tender. He would put his feet in the water and bathe. But if he got his mouth close to the water the lake would dry up. How could such a thing happen? He woke up, surprised by the lake, and listened to the sparrows chirping outside. Perhaps — who knows? — after nightfall someone would come? He should be on the alert. He couldn't continue to sleep. He searched for the sunspots over the other beds, but didn't find any. The afternoon was ending. For a long time he stared at the handcuffs, at their thin rings, so difficult to break in. He didn't have any new ideas on escaping. His thirst began to take away his ability to think. Then he heard voices again. But he no longer believed his hearing. With the voices he heard steps. There were at least two men. He raised his head from the mattress and saw them come in. One was very fat. He was in uniform and carried a tray. The other had a sports jacket on and a little felt hat. He felt like laughing when he saw them coming. From where had they come? So late? When his faith had already faltered by thirst? Now, they were close to him. Very close. The man with the fedora picked up a stool, placed it by his bedside, while the other man placed the tray on it. Dito's eyes were fixed on the water jar with ice cubes on the tray. And childishly he began to laugh and say: water! water!

The guy in the fedora came closer, while the one who had brought the tray only smiled.

“I know. You want water. But here, if you want something you must give something else in return.”

Dito didn't understand. What did they want in exchange for a few sips of water? The guys didn't seem to be in a hurry....

"You can drink this entire jar and I'll still find you another one," the fat man said.

"You must tell me who deals with Crystal," said the man in the hat.

"Who deals with him?"

"That's right. Their complete names. If it matches up with our information, you get the water."

He didn't know what to do. He had no idea who supplied Crystal. That was something he had never wondered about.

"So you can't remember?"

"Only with a little bit of water."

"So you'll have it," the man in uniform said picking up the jar.

He got closer to Dito and poured a good part of the water over Dito's head, who hurriedly tried to catch as much as he could with his tongue. The water ran down his clothes and disappeared into the mattress. Dito's eyes bulged, his ears popped and his thirst became even greater.

The man put the water jar back on the tray.

"We're leaving. When you want to talk, shout," said the man in the fedora.

As soon as they left, Dito had a raging spell, his eyesight dimmed and he couldn't say exactly how he was able to stand up on the bed and shout louder than he ever thought possible. When the pain in his arm was so great he could no longer feel his thirst, he knelt on the mattress, his hand holding the bloody wrist. But to his happiness the handcuff's central ring had broken. He wasn't sure how it happened. Now, he cried low, nursing his arm that was beginning to feel dormant. He dried up his blood with the pillowcase, and went to the waterjar. He turned it into his mouth letting the ice cubes fall at his feet. He was breathless, dizzy and his pain enhanced his fear the two guys might suddenly reappear. When he replaced the half empty jar again on the stool, he saw a plate with food. He picked up a piece of meat, eating it, while looking through the window's iron bars. He saw only a few lights on, far away, probably in some other building.

He walked through the dark veranda, saw the wall, the wires, the dim lights. He wouldn't be able to run away easily. He would have to cross the patio and, after that, to climb the wall. Since one of the guards was coming in his direction, he went in one of the buildings. It was all dark. A little boy cried, other boys moaned. He was sure this was some kind of solitary. Would Smokey be there? What if he found the light switch and turned the lights on? Would he find Smokey, or would this make his escape more difficult? Before he made a decision his hands were already feeling the walls. Only one weak light came on. The cells appeared. There were many boys in each cell. Most of them just lay on the ground. Only some resisted languor. Thin with eyes deeply set, they leaned against the walls, their legs stretched as if they no longer had the strength to stand up. One of the boys followed Dito's movements with his eyes. Even if he were able to open the iron gate, the boy wouldn't be able to leave, he no longer had the ability to move. Dito made an extra effort. He picked up a piece of wood and managed to pry up the gate's locking bar. He pushed it open with a grating noise. He got close to the boy, whose voice was weak and sorrowful:

“They haven't fed us since they put us here. Every week they take away those who die.”

“Who's doing this?”

“The Inspector General.”

Dito tried to raise the boy, but realized he couldn't help him. What mattered was to get him some food. For him and for the others who could still move. He would go back to the infirmary. If his plate were still there, he would have a chance.

He moved cautiously, after turning off the light. The wood stick he had found close to the solitary would be used as cane for his broken foot was very sore and his arm was beginning to swell.

He found the infirmary in almost complete darkness, he advanced in between the beds up to the stool. The tray with the food plate and the water jar were still there. He drank a little more water, and left carrying the tray. Now, he was in even greater danger. Had he been able to fool the guards, or were they just letting him move around only to show up later on? It wasn't that. He observed carefully each angle of the building and couldn't find the slightest movement.

He followed through the veranda to the low building with its iron gate. He gave the tray to the listless boy who could barely keep his eyes open. The boy began to eat with a faint smile on his lips.

He kept the wooden stick for support, and thought of the Inspector General, and wished to surprise him before leaving that place. But where would he find him, with so many sinister- looking buildings around? He was sure, however, that he would find him. Who knows if Smokey would not be found stretched on the floor of one of those cells? That's what the Inspector General would have to explain.

He walked away, without knowing exactly where he was going. He came close to two doors where he could read *storage* and *closet*. He pushed the first one, but it was locked. He went around the back. A barking dog showed up, but soon quieted down. The back door gave in. Dito passed by shelves and cabinets, feeling the musty smell of locked up objects. In one of the cabinets he found what he'd been looking for: a knife. He put it in his waistband and began again to search for other lodgings. They would probably be at the other end of the compound. His wrist was painful, his cast heated up his leg. Even so he had to go on. They were so sure no one could escape, they were inattentive in their security. This was his opportunity, his and all the others who were dying of hunger. He had to gather his courage to cross the open space. The buildings were lined up far away and some had lights on. That's where they were, he was sure. He crawled on the ground, slowly. He could feel the smell of the earth, of the grass, coming through his nostrils. At the slightest noise he would stop and remain frozen for a few moments. He got to the side of one of the buildings, hiding himself in the doorway. He observed the written signs, the posted material which he could barely distinguish, the warning posters, a broken water fountain, the corner where barrel carts were parked and the other corner with bush axes and tillers. So, this was an prison farm! It was exactly that. He had been in such bad shape when they brought him in, that he didn't understand where he was. When he came to his senses he was already in bed, handcuffed to the metal frame. The boys in the cells must have been paying for mistakes made at work. It had to be this; there was no other explanation. And he advanced, eyes and ears alerted.

Close to the light post there was a door, two lit up windows and he could hear laughter and joking coming from the inside. On a narrow plaque

in well painted letters he saw the expression he sought: Inspector General. He had to go in there. He would look for the darkest place and would hide out, until he could discover the boss. He wouldn't be interested in anyone else. He was making all that effort to meet with the boss; to meet the person who ordered those boys to die of hunger. It was a long death, one that slowly makes you crazy until you are demented, overcome by sleep and by a brain which refuses to think. It had been happening to himself, as they wanted it to be, until he decided to point a finger at Crystal's friends.

He forced open a narrow door under which he could see no lights. He stumbled over tables and chairs. He could now hear better what they said. There were three men talking. One of them laughed more than talked. One recounted tales in his quiet voice, while the third one added his observations.

“She will be a foxy woman. I'm already training her in what I want.”

“And she doesn't complain?”

“In the beginning she didn't want it, but later realized she had no options.”

The one who spoke the least, laughed loudly.

Dito could look in from the keyhole. He wasn't able to see all of them, but he knew that one sat at the edge of the table, the other was comfortably installed in a swivel chair. The third one was at his side.

“And the little black girl in building 3? Have you already been with her?”

“Hey man, do you think I'm going to waste time with the ugly ones?”

“You are mistaken. I had her for about two hours and almost stayed for the night.”

“I prefer the little blond one, who looks like a crying doll.”

“From which building?”

“Seven. She takes it in the front and in the back without complaints.”

Dito perceived that this place was much bigger than he had imagined. From what they said, there were buildings for girls and for boys. In his understanding they were probably in the male section. He would know the location of the other buildings only after getting hold of one of these guys. His hope, now, was that at least one of them would remain behind, when the others went away. Or would they all be on call? He couldn't know, unless he stayed and paid attention to their conversation, which appeared endless.

The man in the swivel chair, whom Dito saw very well from his back, laughed shaking his entire body. He was a voluminous type, with big arms. He was blond, dressed in a pair of dark pants and a light blue shirt. At first he thought this might have been the guy who brought him the tray, but he realized he was mistaken. It was someone else. So this place had many employees, and probably, all men. At least he had not seen a single woman yet. Unless they stayed in the girls' buildings. He would have time to find that out. The first one he got would end up making a complete description of how this prison worked. He might even be able to find Smokey's whereabouts and leave this place in his company. He was not in a hurry to finish off his mission, nor did he have the strength to control the anger that swelled in his veins. The cut above his eyes began to burn again, but he no longer felt any irritation on his plastered leg and his wrist had stopped hurting. Before any conversation took place, he would knife the man. And he would then watch him complaining. Then he would demand the entire story about that place and about the Inspector General. He wouldn't sleep that night until he found the inspector. He should be somewhere in there, in some building, perhaps closer to the girls the three men talked about.

The man seated at the edge of the table stood up, and left Dito's angle of vision. When he reappeared he was drinking from a glass. He didn't sit anymore. The one he could barely see laughed again, while the blond man spoke in low tones:

"Cause problems? No way, man! The only thing that can happen is for an inquest to be opened."

"And who would direct the inquest?" the fat man asked.

There was general laughter. The man who had been seated at the edge of the table emptied his glass.

"I'm going for a walk," said the man Dito could barely see. "Aren't you gonna fuck the black girl?"

The blond one shakes his body with laughter.

"I'm going with you," he said, leaving his glass on the table.

The room remained silent for some moments. The fat man then stood up, closed the door and went back to his chair, supporting his feet on the table. He opened a newspaper, letting some pages fall to the floor. He didn't seem attentive to what went on around him. That's exactly what Dito had hoped for. He opened the door. He waited only for the moment to surprise

him. What if all of a sudden the others came back? He would have to act quickly. He would stab him and pull him into the room with the tables and chairs. But he believed the man's companions wouldn't come back soon, mostly because they left together. They probably had gone to the girls' building. There was nothing else to do there, in that God forsaken place, as they themselves had said. Dito only needed a couple more seconds to make sure of his plan, he would trust his instinct. He took the knife from his waist, pushed the door ajar silently, stepped forward and thrust the knife. The blade sunk in between the man's ribs, he fought back, falling to the ground. Dito repeated the strike again, this time into the man's chest. The guy tried to stand up, moving about but falling afterwards. Dito held him by the hairs and kept the knife in the man's neck.

"Where am I, you son of a bitch?"

The man's eyes had rounded up, and his words were almost inaudible. But slowly Dito began to have confirmation of his suspicions: it was prison farm for delinquent minors, from where no one ever left alive.

"And who is the Inspector General?"

The man appeared as if he didn't want to say, opening and shutting his eyes, while his blood stained the floor. Dito, afraid that his friends might turn up, that they might have heard the man's shouts, puts more pressure on the knife, hurting the fat man's muscles, who at once begins to explain that they were in the Inspector's office but that the inspector would usually sleep in the girls' building. Either in ward three or ward five.

"What does he look like?"

The man's strength was vanishing fast, Dito wanted quick answers.

"He is short and strong. He wears sideburns and has thick eyebrows. He always has his shirt sleeves folded up."

"And you, you piece of shit, what do you do?"

The fat man didn't know how to explain. He tried to surprise Dito with a movement of his body, only to receive another knife wound in his chest.

"I asked you a question, sucker!"

The man explained he was an assistant to the inspector. So were the others who had been in the room.

"What about the boys dying of hunger in the cells?"

"We do what the inspector tells us."

Dito couldn't suppress a smile of satisfaction.

“And how do we get out of here?”

“It’s tough. There are many guards around the bridge. A fugitive has never been able to escape. If they don’t get the guy with a bullet, they put the dogs after him. It’s worse. Much worse.”

“How long have the boys been without food?”

“More than a week.”

Dito didn’t know what else to ask. The man, bleeding profusely, realized this, and with a frown says:

“I helped you, don’t kill me!”

Dito smiled again. He felt the same kind of happiness at the time he pulled Deborah by her hair and she began to shout and to implore for her life. Later the happiness changed into hatred, caused by his memories of Crystal’s ambush, of the car with its wheel on his foot, of the handcuff holding him to the bed, of his maddening thirst. The cut above his eye hurt. His hand held the knife’s handle strongly and the blow was sudden. The fat man only moaned once and closed his eyes. Drops of blood ran down the corners of his mouth.

Dito opened the door to the room with table and chairs widely and pulled him there, placing some furniture in front to hide the body. With a flour bag he cleaned up the floor. It was important that they didn’t discover his intentions. In this way he could get to the Inspector General free of worries. The blood stains did not disappear completely, he went to the bathroom and from there he brought a wet rag, for scrubbing. He cleaned up what he could. Now it appeared OK. Soon, it all would be dry.

III

“He is short and strong, has sideburns and thick eyebrows.”

He repeated the description constantly while he walked, supporting himself on his cast leg. He had no idea how all of this would end. This might even be his last night. It didn’t matter. He had to go on, to reach the girls’ ward, to get into the Inspector’s big house. Ah! He was anxious for that moment! It didn’t matter if he had to die. He only wished for death to surprise him after he had been able to put his hands on the inspector. He would do the same thing he had done to the fat man. Only, it would be slower. He wouldn’t ask questions. He had nothing to ask. He would use his

knife as he had never done before, and he would feel the man tremble with fear. This would be the moment he'd regret all the miseries he had inflicted.

He arrived at a shed with several doors, then at the low building, just as the fat man had explained. He entered by a window, his plastered leg knocked about hurting him. He pushed himself through the dark rooms, among some empty chairs, passed some clothes hanging on a closet door, and stepped over socks and shoes. This should be the right place. He would hide and wait. Just like an animal in the dark.

He heard the noise of a shower being turned off. The lights were turned on and then he saw the man he waited for. He was wrapped in a towel, getting ready for bed. Dito wouldn't have much work. He felt he had help from heaven. May be it was due the Mother Dolores' prayers, or perhaps the angels who guided Smokey.

He stayed hidden in a corner, behind the armoire, following the man's movements. The guy stopped in front of the dressing table, straightening his hair and drying it up. He looked to see if the doors and windows were well locked, threw his towel aside and lay down on the bed. Dito never expected to be so lucky. There he was, the man who caused all this evil. And he looked healthy. If someone made him talk he would certainly have many interesting things to say. How funny it would be to listen to his complaints! Dito would demand a case by case account. An account of the boys whom he executed, of the girls whom he prostituted. It would be a long overdue demand. Then he would do the same with Crystal and to the man at the cemetery who had killed Pixote. He had decided: he could no longer avoid what was happening. That was his work; his profession had the color of blood. No more pulling carts in the markets, no more cleaning rich people's windshields, no more selling of newspapers or of lottery tickets. He had been tied to blood early on and could no longer avoid it. Hatred exploded inside of him, his only moment of happiness had been like that one in which Deborah, kneeling on the floor, had begged him; or when the fat man had told him a long story so as not to die; the moment in which Celina had run, desperate, opening up her eyes as if that would scare him off.

He would move cold and hard, as he was just about to do. Not the slightest tremor in his hands or voice. That's the way he was. It didn't matter what, in the future, any one of the group would think of him. In the end they would all respect him. He would no longer accept Mother's

Scourge's suggestions, nor Encravado's, nor anyone's. He would return to Sao Paulo and become one of the greatest. Just as he had been imagining being for a long time. He felt renewed from inside out and hatred dominated him as easily as the shower had bathed his enemy. His temples throbbed, his lips had become dry, the cut above his eye itched. He didn't feel his legs and knew that his wrist was more and more swollen. But whatever happened, nothing would make him stop. The knife's handle was firmly grasped by his fingers and he would drag himself to the bed. His first blow would be on the back. Then another in the chest. He hoped they wouldn't be decisive, for he wanted the inspector to talk.

The bedroom disappeared in the dark. The little light it got came from outside. He dragged himself, his eyes fixed on the stretched body trying to sleep. Dito raised his arm, squeezed his fingers, the blade descended fast, the man moaned and tried to turn around. Dito stabbed him twice again and found himself on the bed. The man tried to stand up. Dito carved his chest. He heard nothing but a murmur, he turned on the lights, only to verify with sadness that the man was already dead. The Inspector didn't have time to confess. He looked at the man's ribs, at his thick eyebrows. If the description the fat man had given him was correct, there was no doubt he had hit the right man. He opened a drawer and found the keys. He would not leave this place without opening the cells and throwing the keys away. If on the way to the bridge there were problems, if the guards there hunted the fugitives with dogs, that wouldn't interfere with his desire for freedom.

He walked limping through the building which had laundry rooms in the front. He entered a gallery and turned on the light. There he saw the first girls. Some were bone thin and naked. Others offered themselves, hoping not to be punished. The vast majority had demented laughter, with eyes lost in some distant point. He turned the key in the first keyhole, in the second, the doors opened noisily but the girls remained in their corners as if they couldn't absorb what was happening. Some wanted to run away but were afraid of the consequences. Dito shouted:

"You can leave. I am releasing you. Be careful when you get to the bridge. Try not to go over it."

He exited into the patio, hurrying to reach the boy's building. He would do the same there. At least for some moments they would have the feeling they could run away. He opened the first door. The boy he had given

food to had fallen on the ground, having been hit on the head. The others had also been massacred. Dito's eyes got red. He felt his ears hot. He knew it would be useless to open the doors, but he went ahead with his task. A superior force pushed him to do it. He squatted exhausted at the end of the corridor, and looked back at the boys who continued to sleep, indifferent to the freedom he had given them. He cried and left supporting himself on a wooden stick. He went through the woods up to the wall. He heard girls' shouts and the barking of dogs. The shouts became louder and louder almost hysterical. He knew well what was going on, but he had no energy to go there. Nor enough strength to defend them. But it would be better for them to die that night, than to dry up behind the doors, without food or water.

The bushes scratched his legs but he barely noticed it. His eyes were fixed on the wall and the concertina wire. It would be very difficult for him to escape if he tried to do it like the girls. He would try to keep as far away as possible from the bridge; he would open a hole in the wall. The wires were obviously electrified. That's why there were no guards around. Just like in the Reformatory. But he wouldn't fall for such a trap. He had been trapped many times before, but that one wouldn't work with him. He didn't even need to try. He felt the wall with his hands up to the place where the trash was deposited. There, he searched for some kind of scrap iron bar with which he could open a cut in the wall. Even if he had to spend the entire early morning hours doing it, it would be better than to risk the bridge. He had a lot to do. He would look for Zé Ina'cio, Armadillo, and Black Fly. He would gather a gang who demanded respect. Even the pigs wouldn't want to face them. And if by chance these guys were not up to getting into heavy trouble, he would look for others, more willing. The fact is, he would stop being a pick pocket, of the type the pigs catch and drag into the police station. Things would be different for him. They would have to think twice before trying to arrest him. Manguito was right. This is what he decided to do, to be ruthless. He should have thought about this beforehand. But he kept on, weakening, it had been crazy to put the boys working, to earn money honestly. How could anyone be honest when people like Crystal, the police chief Mauro, Big Purple and Caramel existed? They killed Zebra; did away with Pixote; Smokey and Manguito had disappeared. He hoped Zé Ina'cio and Black Fly would agree. If Armadillo didn't want to chance it, he

should find some other group. He was sure that at least those two would be by his side. Now, he knew exactly what he wanted and how to proceed. No crazy plans, no off the wall ideas, such as living in a cave, at the edge of the sea. He had to impose himself for the pigs to feel who he was. "I have a wife and kids and don't want to be in this crazy dog's track." That's what the pigs would say any time they had to find him. He would have fun with that. Let those who doubt him just try to get him!

He rummaged through the trash as much as he could, and the only iron object he could find was a lock. If he were not able to find anything else, that what have to do. But later on, in another part of the pile, he found a short piece of a train track, eaten out by rust. That was the instrument he needed. He went close to the wall and began to beat at it. At each blow he looked around to make sure there was no one around. The electric wire on top was his guarantee that the guards should be having a good time with the girls they were able to catch, before the dogs. He beat strongly. He knew it would take him at least three hours until he was able to open a big enough hole. The wall was made out of mortar and stones, resistant to the blows. But he was patient. He didn't despair easily. That was one of his traits. He could have stayed one full night and one full day there, standing, behind the armoire, to catch the Inspector General. Fortunately everything turned out easier than he imagined. It was not this wall that would disturb him, and much less to make him change his course. Everything was determined. It had been planned in that prison farm, among the dark buildings and barely lit patios. His hopes increased when when one of the stones crushed and behind it he saw bricks, which were much easier to break.

He kept beating strongly with the track, his hands were hurting, the repeated blows applied regularly, saved him as much energy as possible. He would still have a long stretch to go, after the hole was made. He would have to be cautious for the swampy area fell between the prison farm and the river. But he would find a way of conquering it. He would go up-river and away from the bridge, until he was able to throw himself in the water, holding to a tree trunk. He would be able to get to the other shore far from the bridge with its sentinel guards and their trained dogs. He bent over to take the earth from the hole that was getting deeper, his hands were dirty and pained. However, he saw the work was going faster than he imagined. A little more and he would be seeing the other side. A couple more firm

blows and the hole would widen easily. That would be the moment to pass through, to observe the landscape and to run away, always through the bushes.

IV

Dito reclined on the bed as Mother Dolores brought warm water in a basin, gauze, cotton and adhesive tape. A dark and heavily made up woman had offered to help her.

“First we have to take the plaster off. It’s too dirty.”

While she said that, she tried cut through the plaster with a pair of scissors.

“Where have you been, God’s child?”

The question was not to be answered. Dito knew it. What he said was of no importance either. He wouldn’t make clear any of the things he had done.

“Neither Smokey or Manguito showed up?”

Mother Dolores shook her head. The dark woman said the leg was emitting a foul smell. Dito looked at the serene face of the black woman. He noticed her nervousness at the sight of his grossly swollen foot.

“Virgin Mary! How could you stand something like this, my boy?”

She didn’t have to say anything else. He understood the wound was an ugly one.

“If you take off the plaster it will help a lot,” the dark woman said.

“You will have to rest for about three days,” said Mother Dolores.

Dito felt relieved when they finished taking off the plaster. But he was soon in pain when the cotton with hot water touched his skin.

“Hold on! This is the only way to care for this swelling!”

Mother Dolores told the woman to run to the pharmacy to buy a tube of cream. As the dark woman went away, she closed her eyes and prayed over the sore. While she prayed Dito admired her serene face and her kindness. How could a person like that exist, in a dirty underworld filled with women showing themselves off? When he finished praying, she took out a candle from the chest of drawers, she lit it up, and placed it behind the door.

“Make an offer to Yemanja, son. She will save you!”

“I’ve already made one, Mother Dolores.”

The black woman smiled, her eyes appeared even more sad.

“With the first money I get I will have a small boat made and will release it on her feastday. If I am in Rio, I’ll release it here. Otherwise, it will be in Praia Grande or in Santos.”

Mother Dolores was still smiling, “She likes you.”

Dito didn’t know how to answer. So he said, “That’s how come I was able to get out of one of the worst places ever. There was almost no one else alive, where I’m coming from. Those who didn’t die of hunger or thirst were cut open by dogs.

The woman was surprised, “And where was this place?”

“I don’t know this area well enough to place it. But it was a prison farm.”

While Dito spoke, as if remembering his own adventures, Mother Dolores knelt in front of her devotional saints and began praying. She lit up more candles, and placed them in front of the image of Saint George.

“All the roads will be favorable to you,” she said standing up and coming close to the bed. “But it’s important to get well as soon as possible. When Magda gets here, we will put on the cream. Tomorrow or the day after you will be fine.”

“But I need to go, Mother Dolores.”

“I won’t hear of it. You’ll stay until you’re somewhat better.”

Dito smiled. It had been such a long time since he felt like laughing without being overcome immediately by rage. Mother Dolores laughed along with him. Then Magda showed up with the cream. The black woman took the lid off, took a portion of the cream with her finger and applied it over the sore. She then put on some cotton and gauze.

“There is no point in wrapping it tight, it should be able to breathe. It’s enough to protect it from flies.”

The dark woman wanted to know who Dito was in relation to Mother Dolores. She answered without taking her eyes off the dressing and didn’t appear surprised with the question, either.

“He’s my son. My adoptive son. He has been in Sao Paulo, trying to make a living there.”

Dito was overcome with gratitude, his eyes were filled with tears, and he felt a knot in his throat as if he were about to cry. He remembered the first day he saw her— when he had come with Smokey — and the other day

when they came back. It was a pity the boy was not there to see how close he had become to Mother Dolores. Smokey would certainly have liked it.

The women went away, Dito stayed in bed, looking at the ceiling, listening to street noises and to the women in the doorways and at the windows, waiting for customers. Some would chat loudly, others only laughed. Once in a while he would hear steps in the hallway, followed by whispers behind the plank wood walls and short giggles. He looked at the candle burning behind the door, already well reduced in size, and noticed that the afternoon was ending; in other parts of the house lights had been turned on. He had no fear of staying there. He didn't doubt Mother Dolores once. If policemen showed up to catch him, she would never give him up. Neither she, nor the women who saw him go in.

In the early hours of the morning, when the house had become totally silent, he woke up with the presence of the dark woman by his bed. She placed her hand on his forehead and said he was running a fever. Mother Dolores showed up with ice cold water, where she sunk a handkerchief to wet his forehead. Mother Dolores then left, leaving the other one in the room. She would look at him and smile without saying a word. She had a youthful face, with long hair and very sad-looking eyes. Dito couldn't remember seeing her leave. When the fever went down he fell asleep.

He woke up with the sun invading part of the room. Only then could he see the room Mother Dolores had given him. It was spacious, had many images of saints on the walls, heavy and old furniture, a writing table, and a lot of odd junk in the corner. A cat rested on a chair, sunbathing. Mother Dolores came in wishing him good morning and placed a tray with coffee, milk and bread on a chair near the bed. He asked her where the bathroom was and she showed him the corridor. He dragged himself to it, passing through several bedrooms, which showed through their open doors, bed spreads and linens in disorder. When he returned she was gone. He drank his coffee and ate half of the bread. He wasn't hungry. His mouth felt bitter; he missed his companions. When Mother Dolores came back again, he would ask her about Manguito.

He lay down and tried to follow the sun light moving away. He looked at the cat stretching his paws, and heard the first noises of the women arriving and going to the kitchen. Mother Dolores served coffee to some of them.

The cat jumped off the chair when he saw Mother Dolores come in. Dito hurried to thank her for the coffee. She had combed her hair and changed clothes. She had on a colorful print dress and appeared as happy as usual. Instead of taking the tray away, she sat by his bed, “What about that foot. Is it still hurting?”

Dito shook his head, a couple more days and he would be fine.

“May God keep you, to protect you from the same fate as your friend’s.”

“Smokey?”

“No. The one you came here trying to find out why they had taken him to jail.”

“What do you know about him?”

“He spent some days in jail, they placed him in the Reformatory. One day he ran away with a group of other boys. He ended up in Santa Teresa neighborhood where he killed a young man who was walking in the street with his fiancée. All the newspapers covered the story, last week. A corporal was here and said they had taken him to a prison farm. How old is that boy?”

“He’s about fourteen. No more than that.”

She grabbed the tray and said, “Don’t let them touch you, son. Things are getting worse every day. I know how it is. I was raised in the streets. I didn’t die of hunger because God was with me and Yemanja protected me.”

When she went away Dito remembered the prison farm. He wondered if it had been the one he came from. Would Manguito have been one of the boys in the cells, who had nothing to eat or drink for over a week? Possibly. But the evil they had done to Manguito had been avenged. Would Manguito be able to return to the streets, just as in the days they had tried to make a living at the market? He didn’t know what to think. It would be better if he didn’t think about those things that made him waver in his goals. He was sure that just like Manguito, Smokey wouldn’t return. That’s why his route was the one he decided upon in the infirmary, when he had wanted a sip of water so much and the men came in placing the water jar in his field of vision but just out of reach. He wouldn’t forget that for a long time. The ice floating on the water in the metal jar and his lips dry, his throat burning, all that for one lousy sip of water. After the men left he had to use all his luck and his wits not to end like the boys behind bars. And because they had

shackled him on that bed, they must have had even worse objectives in mind. But he didn't give them time to go ahead with their plans, just as Crystal, the police chief Mauro, Big Purple and Caramel wouldn't have time. Neither would the guy from the cemetery who hit Pixote. He would forge cautiously his own destiny. With or without Armadillo's, Black Fly's or Zé Ina'cio's help. And who could say if Encravado, Pin and Mother's Scourge would not be interested in joining the group in Sao Paulo? He would look for them. He would talk to Figurinha and Brown Sugar. He wasn't going to give up that idea. So, it was good not to talk to anyone about it, above all Mother Dolores.

V

On a warm and sunny afternoon when the trees appeared luminously green, Dito told Mother Dolores he was ready to go. His foot was almost well, and he couldn't keep on using a room without paying. She listened and said nothing. She had very little to say. She couldn't even ask boy to stay on as an employee, because she'd have problems with the inspectors from the Agency of Protection to Minors. He had to go.

“Whenever you feel like showing up, don't be bashful.”

Dito knew that he could, “If I find Smokey I'll come back to tell you. I'll also come back if I am about to leave Rio.”

He then told her he was from Sao Paulo state. Born in the town of Bauru' at an early age moved to Sao Paulo city. His parents had left him in the care of an aunt. That's all he knew. He vaguely remembered a thin and pale woman, who had a very weak voice. One day she disappeared and he began to wander the streets. He no longer remembered how difficult the first months had been.

“If we didn't forget, son, we would all have already gone crazy,” Mother Dolores said.

Dito left through the hallway, paid attention to the last sounds of that big and pleasant home, got to the door where he saw the dark woman. She shook his hand as if he were about to take a long trip. In the wide street there were several groups of men. He passed by them looking down at his very dirty canvas shoes and realized the first money he got would go into a new pair of shoes. He checked his clothes and saw that the shirt and the blue sailcloth jacket were still in fair condition. He was able to put weight

on his foot quite well, but knew he would have to be careful for another week to be completely recovered. That's what he would do. He would not risk trying to find Crystal before he had healed. He would first try to find Mother's Scourge, Encravado and Pin. The others he would find later. He went through the wide and narrow streets, crossed avenues, searching for an open market. There he would stay for a while. He would look for work, to get some money. Right now, that's what he needed the most. Mother Dolores had offered him some, but he lied, saying he had money owed him by a friend; he only needed to show up at his house. Now, he felt like laughing at this lie. His friends were just like him. No one knew where his closest relative lived.

He went by the Esta'cio Square, took a trolley to relax his legs and just before the stop, when the ticket man was approaching, he got out. The uniformed man, holding a purse with change, told him off. He wished to jump into the car again and beat him up. But what for?

He continued his way along a dusty street surrounded by old buildings. Clothes hung out to dry from old decrepit windows. In Catumbi he found the market he'd been looking for. It had been almost all dismantled. There was a great confusion of crates, wood supports and sheets of waxed awnings. Shirtless men, sweaty, moved about, while others disconnected guy wires from their wood supports. Women and the elderly took care of repacking the vegetables. Street gutters were filled with left over cabbage leaves, lettuce, rotten tomatoes, pieces of watermelon and green bananas. In the middle of that chaotic atmosphere, poor old women and young boys, picked through the refuse placing their findings in bags. Dito approached a farmer who was having trouble with the wood supports of his stand and offered to help him. At first the guy distrusted Dito.

"I need to make some money. I'll put all of this in the truck for you!"

The farmer finally smiled toothlessly and offered him ten bucks, "If you must have more than that, I'd prefer to do the job myself," he added.

Dito took his jacket and shirt off, threw them over some crates. He then began to push the awning supports and table tops into the truck. The old man kept reminding him that the supports and the table tops should be piled up in one single place, in the truck, to ease the unloading. Dito repeated this recommendation to the men working in the truck, and, instead

of saying anything, they just laughed about that man's worries. One of them repeated everything as if he were mocking the orders.

"Let it be, granddaddy. We'll make a pack and put a ribbon on it, for you."

The others laughed. Dito couldn't stay serious. The dismantling of the market lasted until three in the afternoon, when the first trucks began to leave, and the city garbage men arrived to clean up the street. Dito received his money, put on his shirt, but carried the jacket. It was too hot for clothes.

After wandering quite a bit, Dito arrived at the square where there was a monument whose back side cast a deep shade. He sat down on the monument's steps, enjoyed the cool breeze he could feel, and read the bronze plaque, which spoke about the moral and social rebuilding of the nation. He opened up the jacket over one of the steps and lay down, looking at the cloudless sky, at the rare vultures crossing that infinite plane of blue. A very dirty man approached him. His pants were torn and almost nothing remained of his shirt. He carried a pack of newspapers with him. He wanted a cigarette. Dito told him he didn't smoke. The man kept repeating senseless words in a low voice. He sat down close by and the smell he exuded was that of someone who hadn't bathed in months. Dito remembered that he himself hadn't seen clean water and soap for some time. At night, he decided, he would wash himself in the fountain in Paris Square, just like Encravado and Pin used to do. He could not let his foot be exposed to dirt. But before that he would go up the slum and try to find out something about Crystal. Doubtless he no longer expected Dito's return. If you go to the prison farm, you don't return. That's what the fat man had told him before receiving the deathly blow. He was wrong. They didn't know what they were talking about. There he was, to prove them all wrong. For some moments he observed the smelly tramp, who had gone crazy; the man unfolded some of the newspapers, said unconnected things and laughed. Dito couldn't stand the noise, got his jacket and went away. He got into a trolley. The ticket man complained about the ten cruzeiros he handed him. Dito counted the coins received as change while the trolley moved and stopped, moved and stopped. At a certain point the driver, sweaty faced, his knotted tie loosened at the chest, his hat pushed back, pulled the bell several times to warn the hangers-on of the truck parked on the right.

Dito got out, entered a narrow street of low houses, took a cut through the woods soon reaching the trail to the slum. He didn't see any snitches, nor outlaws who charged a toll. A few young boys, a woman carrying a bundle of clothes and a tall thin man peddling aluminum pans were also climbing their way up. He saw the store from afar, the one whose he'd killed. A woman now kept the store. But the billiard table remained in the same place. There was no one playing. He felt like going in to try out his game. Perhaps Crystal would show up. What if he asked about Crystal? He went in and asked for a pack of cigarettes. The woman searched and searched, but it turned out the store didn't have this brand. Then he saw a young black boy, who looked like Smokey. He called him over thinking of offering him some money.

"What other store is there around here?" he asked.

The boy appeared cautious at first, not willing to give any information. Dito then showed the money and the boy's eyes sparkled.

"Over there, on the top of the hill. It belongs to *Seu Tercio*."

"And what's it like?"

"It's OK. He does business only with the people from the slum."

Dito saw the boy going away with the money and didn't regret having given it. Perhaps Tercio might have something to say.

As he went up he passed by a shack where a woman was singing; another where a woman hung clothes out to dry; some chickens pecked on the washboard dirt road; barely dressed girls appeared in doorways. Dito went into the store. The counter was well arranged, the sweet desserts displayed were covered by clean, lacy doilies. *Seu Tercio* had high cheekbones, grey hair and a mustache. He had a firm stare and didn't appear very talkative. He took care of an old woman with a white bandana covering her hair, giving her the merchandise, scribbling the accounts with a pencil stub and giving her the result. The woman opened her little purse, searched for the money she had folded up, and while the storekeeper waited for her, he turned to serve Dito.

"I'd like a piece of cake!"

The man took the lacy napkin from the cake, picked up a piece with the stainless steel tongs, placing the doily back to protect the cake from flies. Dito ate the first bite, said it was good and asked for a *guarana*' soda. There were billiard tables in another room. Dito thought the best way to

make this guy talk would be to appear as if he knew about Crystal's life and about his business. He remembered Crystal liked cognac and thought that might be the way into the conversation. That's would certainly be the easiest way, he thought. He finished eating and asked for another piece. He felt comfortable to talk now; the old woman was gone and the storekeeper had sat down on a stool.

"Do you have cognac for Crystal? Either tomorrow or the day after he's gonna come here again. He wants to hustle a man in this slum who says he is better than Crystal in billiards."

"We've plenty of cognac. But he isn't always pleased with the brand we have."

"Which brand do you have?"

"Dreher. It's the most popular around here."

"When he doesn't find what he likes, I think he drinks any one."

The storekeeper smiled. Dito drunk his soda, slowly. The beginning of the conversation pleased him. He never thought it might be so easy.

"Night before last he was here and lost big."

He had more questions. He didn't know Crystal had changed meeting places, that he changed constantly. So, that was it. Sometimes in the stores at Rocinha, sometimes in the ones closer in, sometimes in *Seu Tércio's*. And in the other slums, how would he act? That's what he was going to discover. This time he wouldn't escape. And he wasn't going to finish him off with anger. That would be childish and, since the prison farm, he didn't feel like a boy any more. When he learned to laugh while full of hatred, he knew he had become a man.

"Either today or tomorrow he'll be around. He has to pick up a shirt with *Dona Eufrosina*," the store keeper said.

This was a chance he couldn't miss. "Do you think she makes pants?"

"I think so."

Dito made sure to get her address. The storekeeper gave him directions and gave him the house number. Dito placed the soda bottle down on the counter, pulled the money out, got back a few coin in change, and departed in the direction he had just been given. The seamstress' shack was painted in yellow and had a wooden plaque announcing that besides women's clothes she also made men's shirts, she fixed men's pants and she darned. He knocked on the door and heard the sewing machine stop. An aging

mulatto woman with unkempt hair showed up. She took off her glasses and asked what he wanted.

“I’m hoping to have a pair of pants made.”

The woman told him to come in, and explained that she would do it only if the pants were already cut or if he could wait for her to send it out to have it cut.

“I am afraid to cut and damage the fabric. I am used to working for women. In men’s clothing what I know how to do is shirts.”

Dito talked about Crystal, and the seamstress showed him a shirt already finished and another still in the making.

“Well. He’s a friend. I even have a package to deliver to him; the problem is that I can’t find his address.”

“Let me see if I have it here.”

She came back with a notebook with torn up pages, searched here and there for it, and put on her glasses. “It’s in Copacabana.”

Dito asked to write it down. “That’s great. I’ll be able to go by there today.”

The woman was not curious. She gave him a piece of paper, searched for a pen that was difficult to find, she opened a small drawer where she kept threads and bobbins and found the pencil stub. Dito asked her to tell him.

“Dias da Rocha Street 121, apartment 910.”

Dito folded the paper, put it in his pocket, and went back to the subject of the pants.

“Let’s do this. I’ll look for someone who can cut and then I’ll bring it to you. I am always coming around here.”

She smiled. Dito had nothing else to say. He couldn’t contain his happiness. He went down the hill, he met the boy he’d given the money, and he noticed two strange-looking men paying attention to his movements. He got to the point where snitches and criminals usually gathered and hurried up. His foot was hurting. He went back through the narrow street of low houses without fear, he was now sure no one could have imagined his intentions. He wished he could go to a bar and ask for a *guarana*’ soda, but he was running out of money. He barely had enough to take a bus to Copacabana. After he surprised Crystal, it would be different. At first he

thought of taking a bus, but then decided for a trolley. It was cheaper and it would get there all the same.

He would get into the building at nightfall. If he could he would try to get in without being noticed by the porter. He would sit down in the stairway, waiting. He could also get a lockpick with Mother's Scourge or Encravado. Then, he wouldn't have to wait for so long. He would force the lock, and would lock it from the inside, and he would wait for Crystal comfortably. That would be best. The greater the surprise the worse it would be for Crystal's health. That's the way he was used to dealing with the others. He would get what he deserved.

* * *

CHAPTER SIX

I

When they stopped listening to Brown Sugar's story, silence reigned. Pin used his dirty nails to scratch his head, Mother's Scourge sniffled and Encravado asked, "And you're gonna to wait for them to catch you?"

Brown Sugar looked at the motorcycle parked nearby before answering, "I liked her. I must face the dance."

"Pffh!" Pin exclaimed. "Will you tell the cops you fucked both of them?"

No one found that funny.

"What will happen if the cops prove you're the one to finish off the girl?" Dito asked.

"I spent the entire morning fixing the fucking bike at the shop. The cop just needs to go to the shop and confirm it."

"And what are you gonna do with the dude?" Mother's Scourge wanted to know.

Brown Sugar felt dizzy.

"I dunno."

"Why don't you fence the bike and run away?" asked Pin.

"'Cause then they'll think I did it, man!"

Silence took over the group.

"Did you like her?" Dito asked.

Brown Sugar nodded affirmatively, and his eyes teared up. He got up, leaving the others sitting. No one said a word. He got on the bike and rode away. Traffic in the streets was busy, but everywhere all he could see was the smiling face of Vera: her dimples, her perfect teeth. He didn't know why Fla'vio had done that. He couldn't believe Fla'vio might be such a cold criminal, but somehow he couldn't feel angry with him. He got to the wide side walk at the beach and gazed at the sea. Hiding his pain from passersby he cried, loudly, as he should have done a long time ago.

When he felt better he tried to put his thoughts in order. He didn't want to stay in the streets anymore, like the others. He would go the police station to tell them what he knew about the case. But he didn't muster the courage do to it. He didn't know what to say, how to begin. It would be

better if they came looking for him. But where would they find him? He didn't have a permanent place. The few months in his life he could have given out an address was when he stayed at Fla'vio's apartment. But he would not return there; he didn't want to see him again. He didn't even want to keep that bike, which reminded him of so many unpleasant things. He should have stayed with Pin and Encravado and continued to wander about as they did. But his wish to improve his life had made him get into some serious complications. He wouldn't go to the police. They would want to know details of his life, he would end up talking about his friends and about what they did. That was not his role. He didn't have anything to explain. Fla'vio should tell what he knew.

At the door of the morgue a group of men approached him, without his noticing it. They showed their badges. "Come with us. You have a lot to tell us in Homicide."

Brown Sugar wasn't surprised.

"Don't worry anymore about her." — the short and strong man told him.

Brown Sugar looked at him gratefully, went into the car and observed a morgue employee take the bike to the patio.

"For how long did you fuck that fag?" one of the policeman asked him.

"We were only friends."

"Don't make me laugh. Gifts and gifts, all because you were friends?" argued the policeman.

Brown Sugar repeated what he had already said. The short and strong man reminded him, "If you liked the girl, you must say what you know."

The car stopped in front of an old building, and they went up the stairs. Brown Sugar's mind was absorbed with the distant day he met Vera. She had invited him to go swimming. It had been a beautiful, luminous morning and the sea appeared transparent. Each time he dove he saw her moving like a fish or a mermaid. He wasn't paying attention when he sat down in front of the fat man in a suit. He couldn't exactly understand what he wanted with so many questions.

“You see what happens when you get involved with women?” Encravado said.

“That’s not true. It’s just that Brown Sugar had always been a softie. If it was me, I wouldn’t have got into this mess,” said Mother’s Scourge.

“I only deal with them to diddle,” Pin said.

“And which one have you plucked?” Encravado asked making fun of him.

“I think what you really like is to beat your meat.” Dito said smiling. Pin didn’t like the joke.

“I dunno. But I’m alive. It’s not gonna be any joy hole that’s gonna make me throw myself under a truck.”

“And who said he threw himself?” asked Encravado.

“The pigs plan one thousand and one tricks and it all stays the same: no one gets caught.”

“How come he jumped and the bike remained intact?”

Pin didn’t know what to say. He looked at the newspaper and passed it along to Mother’s Scourge, saying:

“I think that what’s in there is right.”

Mother’s Scourge began to read. He had a gloomy expression in his face, for having learned about the death of a friend.

“And what was he doing at Brazil Avenue?”

“Who knows?” Encravado said, “Brown Sugar got himself involved in the big leagues. He would either climb mountains or end up the way he did.”

“It was better this way. No one can suspect he was the killer,” Dito said.

Pin talked senselessly for a while, remembering that life would go on, that he would meet with Sueli and Carla. Mother’s Scourge promised to go along with him. Pin had no maney, Dito lent him one half of what he had. He had been able to sell one of the guns, keeping only the 22 with which he had done Crystal in. But he didn’t talk about his deed. He didn’t like to open himself up to anyone. Different from the others, he was getting to an age when he didn’t need to talk anymore. He would spend hours listening to the others shoot the breeze, but only rarely did he make his opinions known. Pin invited him to go see Beth, but he said he wasn’t up to it; he would talk to her some other time. He went away along a very dark street, and thought

of the days he used to see Brown Sugar regularly, the friendship he appeared to have for Smokey. He crossed the square with the water fountain already lit up and had a coffee in a bar. When the street car came by, he decided to go visit Mother Dolores, and stay there for some time, to see if she had news of Smokey or Manguito.

Her street was brightly lit. There were stands selling fruits and skewered meats and a greater number of men in front of the houses. Women appeared everywhere, in the windows, at the doors. As Dito walked along the sidewalk, a woman tried to hold on to him, showing her naked torso. He spoke of Mother Dolores and the woman began to laugh. Mother Dolores' large house had the hallways crowded with people: there were couples coming in and out, almost all bedrooms had their doors shut. He could hear murmurs and laughter dwindling in the warm air of the night. When he knocked at a door, Mother Dolores showed up. She had red eyes and she was dressed in white. She didn't answer Dito's greeting. Her room was poorly lit. It held a profusion of old furniture, and two cats sprawled on the sofa.

"Is something wrong?" asked Dito.

She nodded, came into the bedroom, and Dito followed. He saw a small coffin, candles, and three seated women. Approaching the coffin Dito recognized Smokey. He looked at Mother Dolores as if he couldn't understand. She rubbed a handkerchief on her face and said, "A friend of mine found him. They were going to bury him as an indigent. Then they remembered me. I agreed to do the wake for his soul. I was afraid you might not come."

Dito couldn't take his eyes from the small boy, and reaching for the coffin, he touched Smokey's cold forehead.

"Do you know how it happened?"

Mother Dolores shook her head.

"They only told me he was found dead. He had been in a police precinct jail all this time."

Dito looked at the women again who remained quiet. They had make up on and were wearing low cut dresses. He sat down at their side and concentrated on a candle about to burn out, when Mother Dolores came up with one to replace it.

"Did you know anyone of his family?"

Dito said that he didn't.

"We have no one," he added, a little disturbed.

An old woman showed up serving coffee. Dito got a cup and felt the atmosphere very heavy with the mixed smell of candles and flowers. While he awaited for the second round of coffee, he observed Smokey who looked as if he were asleep. Mother Dolores had knelt in front of the images of the saints, and after she stood up she said unintelligible things aloud. Dito followed the ceremony closely until he had to go to the bathroom. He crossed the partially dark hallway and got in a small room that stunk of urine. The tiles on the walls were loose and falling. A scantily dressed woman showed up at the door of a bedroom, saying something to the man who was leaving her room.

Dito pissed, thinking of Smokey's bad luck. If Crystal had been involved in that deal, he had already paid for it. He now had to know of Manguito's whereabouts. If he was still alive.

When he returned to the room, other people had shown up. A bald black man had brought his *atabaque* drum. He held it in between his knees and, at the request of Mother Dolores, he began to beat on it lightly while singing a melancholy song. His melody escaped the room through the half-open door and joined the other sounds coming from the heart of the old house.

When he began falling asleep, the old woman took him to a long folding chair for him to lie down. It was in a small and crowded room. He loosened up the knots in his shoes, put his gun in the back pocket of his pants and fell asleep. He woke up at daybreak. Movement in the house had increased. The women who were tired of hooking were ready to go away, but before that they were coming to see the young boy. Dito looked at those strange faces, showing marks of sleeplessness with dark circles under their eyes and smeared make up. Mother Dolores did not appear to have slept for a moment; she satyed in front of the saints' images. The *atabaque* man beat his drum as smoothly as the night before and appeared to be singing the same song. When a far away clock struck six AM, Mother Dolores stood up and invited all to pray. She closed her eyes and raised her arms. The *atabaque* was silenced. A smoke cloud began to rise from a small grill placed in the corner of the room. In an instant the house was filled with incense.

III

Dito stayed behind when the women left the cemetery. He observed how odd figure of Mother Dolores and all the others looked. He wrote down the number of Smokey's burial place to play it in the numbers game. He was almost sure he would win. He went into a restaurant and the waiter asked him to pay beforehand for the plate he chose.

"What's the big deal, man? What if the food ain't no good?"

As the man was indifferent to his protest, Dito had no other solution but to show him a bill of fifty. The waiter picked up the money and began to set the table.

Finishing lunch he went to look for his group. He was only able to find Encravado and Pin. He told them about Smokey. Pin couldn't believe it.

"Gosh, they are rubbing us out!"

Dito thought like that also.

"Every time they get their hands on one of us, it's to kill."

"That's why you can't play with them," Dito said.

"And what do you suggest? Pin asked.

"To set up a gang, to get a lot of money and to disappear for some time. It's the only way."

"It won't work," Encravado said.

"What won't work is this rolling johns. In no time every one of you is gonna be in the cage."

"So, what's the plan?" Encravado wanted to know.

"Pull a job on the supermarket. Get a million and disappear!"

"Pffh! This is for big fish!" said Pin.

"Of course. It ain't for babies. It will take balls to pull this off," argued Dito nervously.

"I'm in," Encravado said.

"Then let's wait for Mother's Scourge."

"Figurinha may also want in," Pin said. "I saw him yesterday."

"What about you?"

Pin was in doubt: "It's too big, man."

He frowned, scratching his head, then said, "Damned if I do and damned if I don't! I'm in."

"After we talk to the others we make our plans." Dito said.

Encravado began, then, to enumerate frustrated robberies, while Pin, echoing his friend, stressed what was said, “But I won’t be soft. If people cross me, they’ll eat bullets. You’ll see.”

Dito reclined on the bench, as was his habit, and looked at the sky, at the clouds, at the black wings of vultures flying in circles. He thought of Smokey and remembered the guys in the car: Xereta’s smiling face, at the moment he backed the car over his foot; Panther’s hat; Eyelash’s face and Overtime’s gestures. If he stayed longer in Rio he would seek them out. One at a time. He would have enough money to attack them and to spend many days in hiding. If he were to return to Sao Paulo he would settle accounts with Big Purple and Caramel. He didn’t feel good knowing they were alive, catching other boys, doing to them what they did to him and to Manguito and Smokey.

“Friday would be a good day,” Encravado said suddenly, as if he were continuing the earlier conversation.

“I prefer Saturday,” Dito argued. “It’s easier for us and more difficult for them. Women go out shopping with their children. We can get one of them and use him as a shield, if things get out of hand. I think it’ll be easy.”

“And who will get the money?”

“Leave it with me. The important thing is to get the manager. Having him in hand, the money will show up. Otherwise the manager is a goner.”

Pin found that very funny. He clapped his hand and laughed loudly, “This is a cool dude, man!”

Encravado didn’t find that funny, “What if we can’t hang on to the manager?”

“Can’t hold him? What kind of fucking robbers are you? Or would you rather to pull a job at an old folk’s home?”

“We have to use our heads,” Pin said.

“First we check out the supermarket. We ain’t going there, like a bunch of crazies, without studying the place, man. We can even make a drawing of the building. Then, we go in. I bet it’ll work,” Dito said.

Encravado began to trust Dito.

“I’d been thinking of something like this for a long time. I only needed the partners.”

“Now you have them, and everything will be cool. By next week, we’ll already have the dough in our pockets. Not small change to make us

have to beg from one of these sons of bitches around here. Big stuff.”

“If we can get some real dough, I’ll buy me a boat and become a fisherman,” Pin planned aloud.

“I’ll stop working.” Encravado said ironically.

“Tomorrow I’ll check out a supermarket. Later on we gather here and make a drawing of it,” Dito continued.

“Almost all of them have a mezzanine for the manager. One of us will hold the manager while the others run away.”

“And why not bring the manager out in the street with us, to give us cover?” Dito wondered.

“Cool, man. I hadn’t thought about this,” Pin replied.

“One of us will stay at the door to keep on the lookout.

“And the weapons?” Pin wanted to know.

“That’s easy.” Scourge will know where to find them. I got a gun. Two more will be enough. With the rest of the money we buy toy guns, just to scare the fools,” Dito said.

“And how do we escape?”

“How? We run. Each one to his favorite place. Later we meet here.”

There was nothing else to be discussed. They needed to wait for Mother’s Scourge and Figurinha. Dito knew thwy would be coming along. If his clothes had been a little cleaner he would have gone to the movies. He had the money. But he couldn’t risk being caught. With that shirt and that jacket almost black now, he wouldn’t be able to buy a ticket. He would end up making a scene at the ticket office and a policeman would show up. It would be better just to stay put.

A blond woman went along the opposite sidewal; Pin whistled, putting both index fingers in his mouth. It was a very loud whistle, of the kind that hurts the ears. No one in the group knew how to whistle louder than Pin. He was proud of it. The woman turned back and, looking at him, smiled.

“Where’s Sueli?”

“She’s coming in no time.”

The woman walked away.

“There it is man. Want to fool around with Beth? She’ll be alone in about two hours. And Sueli is coming to Cinelândia.”

“It’s not a bad idea.”

“Go on. You don’t need to be introduced. It’s the building after the little bar.”

Dito carried his jacket over the shoulders, after tying up his shoes and asking Encravado to talk to Mother’s Scourge and to look for Figurinha.

“We’ll see each other later.”

He left kicking the ficus seeds that covered the sidewalk. He crossed the street at the light among the rushing people. The stores had already closed for the day, their windows lit up. The buses went by very crowded while a traffic policeman whistled nervously at the intersection. He moved away from the noises of the street and from those of the bar filled with men drinking beer; he climbed the wooden stairs and met a fat woman who was just leaving, carrying a bag.

“Where’s Beth’s apartment?”

The woman looked at him with disdain and pointing to the end of the hallway, said, “It must be number 125.”

Dito passed by several closed doors. Lights were turned on in 125. Dito knocked at the door lightly, and when the door opened he saw the girl he had not seen in such a long time.

“Hi,” she said smiling.

“Hi,” he answered asking if he could come in.

“Please, feel at home. It’s not a big place but it’s functional.”

He threw his jacket on the ripped sofa and asked for a glass of water.

“I don’t think I have water, but if you want rum and peach juice, I have it, it’s really better.”

She opened the bottle and served the glasses. All the while Dito looked at the posters she had plastered on the walls, at the paper and plastic knick knacks, at the wicker lamp, the small colorful rugs and at the mirror in front of which Beth would put her make up on. After the first sip Dito smacked his lips in approval, which prompted Beth to explain it was a brand from Petro’polis, where she had friends. Dito smiled in courtesy, uninterested in the subject. When she asked him about his life, he stood up shrugging his shoulders with indifference. She offered, then, to wash his shirt.

“It will be dry by the time you leave,” she said.

At first he didn’t accept the offer, which he found a bit humiliating; but she insisted, opening his shirt buttons. That intimacy, her touching him with her long colored nails, excited him. He shuddered once and touched her

face. They looked at each other intently until Beth moved her lips closer to his and they kissed. Dito, who had tried to control the drink in his hand, pulled away to place his glass on the floor. They rushed back to kissing, though Beth, this time, slipped her hands underneath his shirt. Dito held her tighter than he ever thought possible. They laid down on the sofa. When Beth took her blouse off showing her rosy breasts Dito shoved aside his pants. She tickled him as she played with his hairs and he hugged her again. Beth let herself be caught, stretching her legs. She stirred and moaned. Dito felt a strange sensation, as if he were losing control. He saw the mist of perspiration on Beth's face as the rest of her clothes fell to the ground. The lamp's light shone on her rounded thighs and on the arms that squeezed him with frenzy. He heard the dissonant sounds of the sofa's springs and felt her nails scratching his back. The more ardent she became the greater his appetite for her body and the more intense his regret for not having looked for her earlier, when Pin had first told him of her desire.

When Beth cried quietly Dito felt his body quake. Soon after, they stretched, exhaustion taking them over. Dito rolled down to the rugs on the floor but Beth remained breathless on the sofa, looking at him, smiling, whispering sweet nothings to him. Dito didn't feel like saying anything. He wanted only to look at her, observe her naked body, feel her within the reach of his hands and his desires. He realized she probably liked him, or she wouldn't have given herself up so easily. Now he wanted her to wash his shirt, to have a justification for staying; to be able to roll with her again; to sleep there, and who knows, perhaps wake up late when the sun was up high and the streets were already crowded.

Beth asked him things he didn't want to answer. He stood up and filled their glasses with the peach drink. They feel less ceremonious drinking together, now. Dito told her of the first day he arrived in Rio, and she told him at that time she lived in Cruzeiro. All the time, she talked, he was thinking of the people one meets and never sees again.

"I like you because you are not like the others," she said.

Dito was playing with her hair. He felt like giving her a gift, something she could wear on her arms or on her neck. She told him not to worry, not to spend money foolishly.

"I would like it if you came here more often," Beth added.

Dito nodded, still feeling he would like to buy her either a goldchain necklace or a bracelet. If it were expensive, he would just take it from a showcase. It wouldn't be difficult and Beth didn't need to know how he acquired it. She finished her drink and had another one. Then, she sat on the floor, passing her legs over Dito. Feeling her skin pleased him and slowly his body waked up again. He kissed her on her belly, on her breasts; he lightly bit one of her thighs. Beth moaned sweetly letting her hair fall down, covering Dito's back. They hugged: their bodies intertwining. Dito fell backward on the wooden floor, Beth riding him. The room's ceiling appeared to Dito to be turning around, the light oscillating. And again, with their fingers interwoven in anxiety and nervousness; with Beth's body shaking, her hair covering his face; with his pulling her closer and closer to his body; with their voracious kissing where trembling tongues exchanged breaths and saliva; her entire body was taken over by a tremor that made Dito come again and left Beth moaning and holding on to him, her knees firmly grounded on the wooden floor.

She laid down over him, and played with his eyes, his thin nose, following with her nails the contour of his lips.

"I think you're great!"

Dito answered praising her.

"Each woman is beautiful in her own way," she answered.

Dito told her, then, she was beautiful.

"How many women have you had?"

He didn't answer right away, then he raised two fingers.

"Two?" Beth found that funny. "I can teach you lots of things. You come here, whenever you want."

He promised her to come, perhaps twice a week. But she wasn't satisfied, she wanted it to be more frequently.

"I am usually alone in the first hours of the morning."

"I don't want to mess up your life."

Beth's smile sparkled again. Her eyes appeared to close. They kissed and hugged again. She stood up going to the bathroom and mentioned that she needed to wash the clothes. He only followed her with his eyes.

"Sleep here tonight. The clothes will be dry in the morning."

Dito stayed lying down on the parquet floor. He heard Beth's talk along with the sound of the few cars passing in the street, the sound of a far

away radio or television, the water in the bidet and the toilet flush. When she asked whether he was hungry he found himself surprised by her interest. She went on about her business naked, getting the pans, opening cabinets. Dito stood up catching her from behind and as they hugged, Beth bit his hands. On the table she had laid out a margarine stick, a Vienna sausage can to be opened and potatoes to cook. In the sink she had left the washed up rice, draining.

“Don’t you want to be mine only?” She asked him.

Her face was close to his eyes and, for the first time, she spoke without smiling. Her lips approached him, touching his skin. Dito stayed quiet, not knowing how to answer. She repeated her question, facing him squarely.

“I can make you happy!” She tempted him.

“And what would I do for you?”

She embraced once again. Beth was enchanted by his sincerity.

“Later on, you find a job and forget street life,” she said.

He didn’t say anything else. He was sure she was right. That’s what would have to happen. He smiled, feeling the aroma of Beth’s skin; the brushing of her buttocks on his body, her thin and warm body. She managed to put the rice to boil and to open the margarine stick. He decided then to go to the bathroom. Beth kept on talking.

“If you want it, everything can turn out fine!” She said. “I think it’s a good idea,” Dito answered without thinking.

“We can even move to another city!” She continued.

Dito thought of his friends, of the plans he had made; of going to Sao Paulo; of meeting Zé Ina’cio, Black Fly and Armadillo; of killing Big Purple, Caramel, and possibly Dr. Mauro. He would have to find out where he lived, how he went home, where he would be with friends, which club he frequented. He could spend years doing that, but one day he would be able to surprise the man. And then he wouldn’t be able to do anything. So, Beth’s invitation would go against all his decisions. He didn’t know if he was accepting them or just agreeing with her not to displease her. He wanted to stay for the night, next to her kisses and to her warm body.

IV

Dito pushed the cart in between the aisles, along the shelves where products were presented in ostentatious packaging. He remembered to shop for Beth

while casing the strategic places in the supermarket. He went to the deli counter and noticed a door behind it. Clearly it was the way to the manager's office. After he believed he had enough items in his cart, he gathered his courage and asked an employee to use the bathroom. The man showed him the way.

He went through the door, disregarded the instructions he received, and climbed up the stairs. As he had imagined, the stairs led him to a room with a plaque: *office*. He went in and walked down a narrow hallway. Several people worked at tables covered with papers. He counted them: five men, plus the man behind the counter. He went on, one of the men asked him what he wanted. He said he was looking for the bathroom. An older man told him it was on the other floor. Dito apologized, but while the man talked to him, he was alerted to all the details in the office, including the fact that no one else appeared to notice his presence.

While he urinated, he realized the plan would not be difficult to carry through. Leaving the bathroom he used the opportunity to observe the supermarket's back door. He concluded it would be easier to get inside through that door, without security noticing. But he would look from the outside after finishing shopping, just to make sure. He was already feeling that they wouldn't run into many problems. If successful, then, only then, he would be able to give Beth an answer. She could be right: it might be a good idea to forget street life. He would forget also the people who were after him. Even if he killed all of them that would not bring back Starry, Zebra, Pichote, or Smokey. He would move to another city, as Beth had suggested, and would spend some time out of circulation.

He went back to his cart, passing close to the canned goods shelves. He picked up ham and sausages, then, figs and peaches in heavy syrup. Beth would like that. He also got a plastic bag with pens. He took one out, and made a drawing in one of the packages. Those were his notes on the building's plan.

He got in line observing some kids who took advantage of the supermarket's slow movement to ran around with a couple of carts. He also considered the bald man who turned the book stand again and again, examining one volume, than another, only to decide not to take any. He saw a woman leave her children in line to go pick up a forgotten egg carton and a black man pushing beer bottles to the side of the cash register's clerk. Dito

used the time to study the people coming in and out; the uniformed security and the other plain clothes security men. Nothing would go wrong, he was sure. They would only need to be cautious, and they would be able to act without worries.

After they bagged his purchases, he walked on a side street next to the supermarket; passed a section of the side walk under construction and stopped next to a truck looking to the deserted square. He noticed the Italian ficus tree and the street's lack of movement. The supermarket's loading doors were very tall. A VW bus was about to leave. He watched closely. The gate looked as if it opened and closed automatically. He approached the entrance, still carrying his bags and waited for another car to show up. This time it was a truck filled with boxes. One of the men got out, pressed a button and the doors opened slowly. That's what he had to do. He would choose a time when the cars were expected to go in and out. This way, no one would be suspicious.

V

"You bought all that for Beth, man? She's enchanted!"

Dito heard Pin's observation, and felt the disdain in the comment. He knew the girl was rolling johns for Pin, but he didn't want to get closer to Pin. It was a matter of compatibility.

Dito was scribbling on a paper, the others encircled him in silence. Mother's Scourge thought the idea to do a job on the supermarket was great. Encravado had his doubts: he wanted to be included only if it were not dangerous. Slowly, Dito got annoyed.

"Well, if you are afraid, you get out."

Encravado didn't like it. "Afraid my ass! I just don't want to repeat the mistake of the first night of rolling johns."

"But that was always bad, I've always found it risky!" Dito said.

"If we had done it as we planned, we would be still at it."

"This is small potatoes," Dito said nervously. "Time has come for us to think big, to have a real man's plan. Something that will bring profit. Or we will just end up like beggars.

"You're right," Scourge agreed, to Dito's surprise.

"I am in," said Pin.

"Figurinha okayed it. He'll be here later on," Scourge said.

Dito finished drawing on the paper.

“That’s it,” he said. “We have thirty per cent chance going in the front and seventy per cent going in the back. There is a gate that automatically opens and shuts. Delivery trucks must go through them. The only problem will be to cross the warehouse and go up the stairs without being noticed.”

Scourge suggested they steal a VW truck and enter as if they had a delivery to make.

“We could stay there until the time to attack,” he added.

“What if someone finds out?” Encravado questioned.

Dito thought Scourge’s was a good idea.

“You stay at the wheel, Pin and Figurinha in the outside, Encravado and I get the money.”

Scourge rubbed his hands, Encravado asked Dito if he still had the lockpick. Dito said he hid it somewhere, but wasn’t sure where. He would try to remember.

“I am sure the money will come,” Dito said.

“What if the manager says he has no money in the office?” asked Encravado argumentatively.

“Well, we just burn him, man,” Pin replied.

“Not so,” said Dito. “We ask him to order the money brought up from the cash registers. And it has to be quietly, or he just gets fucked. We just grab the clerk with the money.”

“And where do we put all these people when it’s time to leave?”

“We put everyone in the bathroom. There will be no one to run after us or to ring the alarm.” “From the beginning Encravado should cut any wire he sees,” Scourge suggested.

Dito listened to their conversation. He was aware of Encravado’s reservations and admired Scourge’s courage. He felt like changing Encravado’s role, only to conclude that Scourge would be better behind the wheel. They would need hi to escape. Pin said he considered the plan perfect, adding:

“But everyone needs to study his role. Or it will be a big mess!”

“There is no way to go wrong,” Mother’s Scourge added.

“We must look for a delivery van,” Encravado reminded them.

“How about finding one with the name of the supermarket?” joked Mother’s Scourge.

Dito and Pin laughed.

“Are you losing your nerve, man?” Pin asked.

Encravado did not like the joke.

“You all talk tough, now. I want to see it when we do the job.”

Dito felt Encravado’s caution was prudent.

“There’s no point in anyone getting mad. All this talk is just to make the plan better. It’s risky. But it can bring a lot of dough,” Dito reminded them.

“That’s what we need,” Mother’s Scourge commented “I need to take a vacation.”

“How much do you think we’ll get?” Pin wanted to know.

“I have no idea. But I think a supermarket like that can sell almost a million cruzeiros on Saturdays. Dito’s little purchase was more than two hundred, wasn’t it?”

Dito confirmed it.

“I think it may be one and a half million. If we get one half of it, it would already be quite a sum.”

“Enough to keep the wolf from the door,” said Mother’s Scourge, lying down on the ground.

“I would move to a far away town,” Encravado said.

“That’s stupid, man,” Pin said. “In a small town evryone will be looking at you. The first big bill you get out of your pocket, they’d put you in jail.”

Dito found those worries funny. He knew the plan was good and it should not fail. He thought about his cut. One thing he knew: he would buy a gift for Beth and he would look for Mother Dolores to ask her to order grave markers for Pichote and Smokey. They deserved to have their part. He wouldn’t tell the others, because he didn’t want them to laugh at him, but he knew the dead boys had a right to the money.

“Now, we must get the lockpick and leave,” Mother’s Scourge said.

Dito stood up, went under some nearby bushes and returned with the lockpick, giving it and the file to Scourge.

VI

Mother’s Scourge left with Encravado and Pin to look for Figurinha, while Dito stayed stretched out on the bench, thinking of his plan, of Mother

Dolores, of the graves for his friends, of Beth's gift. He remembered her body; the way her buttocks felt against his thighs; of his entering her and feeling the aroma of her skin and breath.

Birds leaped in silence from branch to branch in the *oiti*- tree, while Dito thought of the transformation in Mother's Scourge and in Encravado's fear. How come he was pulling back from such a good idea? Since Brown Sugar's death he wasn't the same. Sooner or later he would leave the gang and disappear. Dito wasn't worried about this. At the moment, the important thing was the plan. After they pulled the job, each one could do as he pleased. He would stay with Beth, as she herself had chosen. He went back to thinking about her, of being there at night. He would knock on her door and be able to feel her close to him. Ah! Then, time could pass by. Tired they would sleep embracing, without worrying about the cold of the wee hours of the night. It was clear to him that one day Beth would get tired of him, but until then he would have lived well enough. He wasn't worried about the future.

While Dito was daydreaming on the park bench, Mother's Scourge suggested something to Encravado:

"What if we get one of these guys by force?"

Encravado couldn't understand.

"We kick him out and stay with the bus," Scourge explained.

"That will be a big mess."

"It's nothing. Let the chickens stay at home."

Encravado was alarmed by the idea, though he knew it was a good one.

"That's much better than to break into a car, and run the risk of not being able to get it moving," Mother's Scourge said.

"And where would we do this?"

"Anywhere," Scourge continued. "It doesn't matter. You call a guy, ask him to help you light up your cigarette, and I give him a blow in the head."

They walked along a busy street, crossed a square, an overpass, finally reached a section of businesses and dry goods stores, where there were plenty of parked cars and trucks loading and unloading. They continued their search until they found a VW bus with commercial logos painted in the outside.

"That's the one," Mother's Scourge said.

Encravado felt a chill go down his spine.

“No problem.”

They approached the bus. Mother’s Scourge picked up a crate to hide his intentions and asked a short and fat man about another bus. The driver didn’t know what they were talking about, when Encravado joined in the conversation. The man tried to understand, to remember the bus the boys were talking about, Mother’s Scourge intervened, opening his pocket knife. “Get in and not another word.”

The man tried to escape. Scourge scratched his belly with the point of his knife and the driver obeyed him. The keys were in place. Encravado turned on the engine and they went away.

“Where are we going?”

“Straight ahead,” Said Mother’s Scourge.

The VW bus crossed the speeding lanes, went through the tunnel, went up and down overpasses. The kidnapped driver told them they were wasting their lives. Mother’s Scourge found that funny.

“We don’t like advice, man. You can keep that to yourself. Our life is fine just as is, until it ends.”

VII

The gang had gathered again. Dito and Pin were interested in the story Figurinha was telling. Encravado cleaned his teeth with a toothpick, Mother’s Scourge smoked, trying to draw the alphabet with his exhaled smoke.

“And how is this Galego?” Dito wanted to know.

Figurinha got a bit confused in the description. “I don’t know very well. It’s Edu who knows him.”

“When we need to can Edu take us there?”

“Sure. Pichote was his friend,” Figurinha answered.

As soon as the boy stopped talking, Encravado informed them that the VW bus was ready.

“Scourge had a great idea, to take the car by force,” he explained.

“And did it work?” Dito asked.

“It’s parked close to the airport. In a stretch no one will look for.”

“Brand new, it even has a company’s name on the outside.”

Dito wanted to know the day of the week. None of them knew it for sure. Pin ran up to the newspaper stand and came back saying it was Wednesday.

“That gives us a lot of time. It will be better to move the bus from this place, tomorrow.”

“We’ll move it everyday. This way they won’t be able to find it right away,” Dito explained.

He took a paper from his pocket and began examining the plan again.

“Pin and Figurinha will stay outside. Mother’s Scourge will be the driver, Encravado and I will get the manager.” He said.

“You’ll need a good gun.”

Dito drew out his gun, unlocked it and rolled the drum.

“This one has never failed.” He said.

Dito put the weapon back, while Mother’s Scourge promised to lend his pocket knife to Encravado, for he would be getting a gun the following day.

Figurinha went on remembering the days he had been in jail, and the prisoner who talked about Galego.

“He killed two little girls and nothing happened. He was taken to the police station, but they cleared him of any wrong doing.”

“After we finish the supermarket job, I’ll go get this Galego,” Dito threatened.

“I’m going with you,” said Mother’s Scourge. “Pichote was my friend too!”

Dito was happy with the solidarity. He remembered that he didn’t always think well of Mother’s Scourge, and he wondered if his reservations had been caused by distrust or if Mother’s Scourge was changing.

“Sunday I wanna do something special. I’ll invite Sueli to go with me to Bu’zios,” Pin said suddenly.

“That place is tough. The police are always there.” Encravado explained.

“Then, I’ll stay here, humping Sueli,” Pin said, not concerned. “This way my money will last longer.”

He looked at Dito and winked. Dito didn’t appear bothered, but he didn’t talk about Beth either, which is what Pin wanted to know about. Dito knew it, and he thought of the small town he would take Beth to and the

return to Sao Paulo. He could open a shop to fix bikes, and he wouldn't have to worry anymore. He would live like German, with the little money of his work, without getting himself into trouble.

As soon as it began to get dark, Dito went to see Beth. She wasn't home. So he sat down on the curb in front of her place and waited for her to show up. Passersby appeared to be surprised by his presence, but he didn't mind; he knew he wasn't creating any problem. He liked to sit on the curb and observe the people going by, just as he was now doing. Cars went up and down the street, sometimes backing up at the red light. He suddenly saw a brown cab, with its light's on. Beth came out of it, accompanied by a guy who passed his arm around her shoulders. Dito felt his blood boiling, his eyes reddened, and the scar over his eyebrow hurt. He saw them going into the big house and disappear. He didn't have the courage to stand that kind of thing. Perhaps the bitch would say the same things to the guy that she had said to him. How could he have believed her? He was disturbed and remembered what Pin and Mother's Scourge had said.

"I only want them to fuck, nothing else!"

They were probably right. But Beth had not told him she would change her life around. After all, what could she do so suddenly? He tried to resign himself, wishing to knock at the door and interrupt that romance. At the same time it could be worst. He didn't want to see her embracing the stranger. He would go far away and would not return soon. He would come back only when he had enough money to propose a new life to her. She could choose then either to stay with him or to sleep with those that passed in the streets. At any rate, it would be important to talk to Beth that evening and let her know of his plans. He would not want this kind of life. Pin could enjoy it, because he didn't like Sueli. But he was different. He believed that Beth was a great girl, who looked as if she understood him, someone to treat him kindly. He was not going to let her give herself to just any one. He walked through the busy street, his eyes tearing up; he kicked a trash can; crossed dangerously in front of cars; entered a bar; thought of asking for some *cachaca*, but he knew the barman wouldn't serve him. In the small square, at the bus stop, he stayed put watching the people who came in and out of the buses; looking at the cars that rode slowly with the drivers propositioning young women. His thoughts however were still on Beth, her naked body, her pinkish breasts, her warm buttocks and flat belly. The same

words she had pronounced in his ears would now be heard by someone else. He would never again go back there.

VIII

They gathered in the early morning, under the *oiti*-trees. Mothers' Scourge had the VW bus's keys. To keep the bus out of sight from the police, he'd moved its parking spot several times. It was now parked on a side street, not far away. Meanwhile, Dito explained to them, once again, each one's positions:

"First I get out, and make the gate open."

Pin was eager, Encravado had lots of questions, Mother's Scourge didn't appear to have any doubts.

"No one needs to be rushed. If things get tough, I'll take prisoner one of the guys and he will leave with us."

"This rain doesn't help!" Mothers' Scourge observed.

"What's the problem?"

"It's more difficult to speed up in the rain. Mainly in a shitty VW bus!"

"We don't need to go far. In the first deserted place we get out and run away," Dito explained.

They walked towards the van: Encravado and Dito next to Mother's Scourge. Dito noticed they were all nervous, as soon as the car was in motion. Even Pin stopped to joke around.

Several traffic policemen were at an intersection, when the light turned red. Mother's Scourge stopped the car, eyes fixed on the policemen. Anxiously Dito waited for them to get moving. Encravado, on the other hand, had been so nervous he couldn't talk. When the light turned green the car ahead of them did not move. One of the policemen approached it while the cars behind honked their horns. Mother's Scourge backed up a little and then drove away. Dito and the others felt a great sense of relief.

"Glad to see you kept your wits," Dito said, leaving his friend proud.

"One mistake and we would be in the cage."

Encravado said he wasn't nervous, "I am always like this, before I begin anything. I warm up later on."

Pin just smiled, while Figurinha kept quiet, until the bus went around an island covered in full blossom flowers, passed by a street heavily shaded by centuries old trees, ending up in an avenue with a canal in the middle:

“It’s there!” he said.

The VW bus continued on, went around the supermarket, avoiding crowded parking, went up a side street, approaching the gate. Dito got out and pushed the button. He returned to the bus. Before he sat down the gates slid sideways, slowly. Mother’s Scourge accelerated. It was a large warehouse filled with crates and bags. They chose to park close to a stairway. Before the gates closed back up, Figurinha and Pin ran to escape to the outside.

Dito and Encravado checked their weapons one last time, and quickly climbed the stairs, stopping at the office level. Dito was the first one in. He passed through the hallway until the large room. He noticed that the cashier was not in and that there were fewer employees this time around. He feared everything would go to waste with that change of circumstances, but he knew that one way or another the supermarket had to have money. He leaned against the counter when a young man asked him if he could help him. As the guy approached him, Dito pulled his gun. Encravado jumped over the counter and two other employees were caught by surprise.

“I want money!”

“There’s no money here.”

Dito didn’t let that bother him. He didn’t flinch. He just cocked his gun.

“Too bad!”

The man got scared and raised his arms.

“Money, only downstairs, at the cash registers.”

“Let’s first look around here.” Dito said, pushing the man into the screened cage.

“Open the drawers. I wanna see it. If you make any suspicious move, I’ll burn you,” he ordered.

The man pulled out the first drawer: there they were, rolls and rolls of bills. Dito couldn’t refrain his anger, at the man’s lies and gave him a blow in the head. Seeing the guy had lost his balance Dito then kicked the man in the stomach with his knee. Then, he was upset with himself for not having brought a bag. He picked up a towel hanging on the back of a chair, and began putting the rolls of bills in it. He emptied the first drawer, then the others. Those were clean. He saw there was a safe in the room, but believed there was no time to open it, for he didn’t think it a good idea to stay much

longer. He went back to the table where Encravado had kept two employees under the gun, and told them to open the drawers. One of them obeyed. It uncovered a little more money. Dito thought of insisting they open the safe, but he was worried that time was escaping him and that the third man might recover from his beating any time soon.

“Let’s go to the bathroom!”

Dito gave this order but he wasn’t sure if he should go along or if he should ask the man lying on the floor to open the safe. He believed that to be the manager, therefore the keys would be with him. He told Encravado to keep control over the others while he went back to the man on the floor and began shaking him.

The guy didn’t understand what Dito said, or he made as if he didn’t. Dito slapped his face. The man stood up trying to attack. Dito showed him the weapon.

“Open the safe. I won’t say it again.”

The man took some keys out of his pocket, then he unlocked the safe, opening up the heavy door.

“Now, let’s go to the bathroom.”

Dito saw that there was more money there than he could have imagined. He had never seen so much money in all his life. They pushed the workers to the bathroom, and tried to lock them there. The key didn’t appear to work. Encravado got the key from another door, the lock turned and locked. They go back running to the safe. Noticing Encravado’s nervousness, Dito felt hurried. It appeared as if they had taken too much time. Dito’s ears burned and the scar above his eye hurt.

Encravado opened the safe’s door slid with his foot. Dito immediately put the rolls of bills on the towel. They lifted the towel by its corners, and tied them as a sack. They went down the stairs and got into the VW bus. They didn’t perceive anything different in the warehouse. Mother’s Scourge turned the key in the ignition and the engine didn’t turn over. He tried, quickly again, with the same result.

“Shit!”

Dito tried to be calm. The gate had begun to open, just as they had agreed with Pin and Figurinha. Now, they were all nervous. They thought of running away before the gate closed back again. But Dito was afraid of crossing the warehouse’s entire extension, without protection. Encravado

believed they should leave the bus behind. Mother's Scourge turned on the key again. The engine turned, euphoria took over.

"Quick! The gate is closing!" Encravado shouted.

Dito had noticed it closing, but had not wanted to scare Mother's Scourge. The VW bus went by as fast as possible, however, the gap left by at the closing gate was narrow. Mother's Scourge decided maybe the car could pass anyway. Then, they heard the machine guns fire on the VW bus body. Mother's Scourge turned the wheel to change the direction of the car, as they collided the gate stopped but left the car caught in between and one of the doors could not be opened. Mother's Scourge broke the windshield with his foot, jumping immediately through its opening. Dito saw him receive the machine gun's fire on his chest. The police had also placed themselves on the other side of the street. Encravado also tried to escape and he was hit in the head.

The police got close to the car, weapons in hand. Dito saw so many things in those few seconds: Pichote falling and trying to stand up in the cemetery; Caramel pushing him towards the other prisoners; Mother Dolores crying for Smokey's death; Beth's dreaming of a life they would never have. He also saw the face of the man he had just beaten. He appeared disturbed. His shirt was blood-stained and he headed a group of people. The supermarket's security service opened the gate, and pushed back the bus. One of the men pulled Dito from his seat, while the man with a stained shirt approached. He was biting his lips with rage and gave Dito a blow, then a second, and a third. Others beat on Dito's back and stomach, someone gave him a blow in the forehead with the machine gun barrel. For Dito, the warehouse began to turn around. Dito felt a profound sleep take him over as if he had dived into a deep lake. Everything around him became cold, he no longer saw his friends. He only retained the image of Mother's Scourge holding his belly, as the machinegun fire began.

IX

Dito woke up some days later, on a rainy morning, staring at the burning lights. He tried to find out where he was. He saw men and women in white uniforms moving about. They called in some visitors whom Dito could hardly see. When they got closer, he recognized them: Big Purple and Caramel, from Sao Paulo.

“Can he come with us, doctor?”

The doctor told them to wait a minute while he looked over the charts. Dito imagined the waste of all that. He knew what would happen to him. All the treatment he had received there would be for nothing. Before he got out of the bed, he felt the adhesive tape on his head, the chest wounds, the cut on the right side of his ribs. He stepped with difficulty while Big Purple watched him, his eyes mocking him.

“Let’s put some clothes on,” said the male nurse.

Dito dragged himself to the space behind the screen, Caramel followed him. He could hardly slip on his pants and shirt, then he asked for his shoes.

“That’s silly, you won’t be needing them,” Caramel said.

Dito didn’t insist, unsure if the nurse had heard him anyway. He, Caramel and Big Purple walked in the ample passage between the beds, from one side of the room to the other, away from the big window in the back wall that let the light in that silent room of white walls and uniforms. Close to the door Big Purple slipped him into handcuffs. They went down a stairway, out on a patio where there were only tree stumps and a pile of trash, and pushed Dito into the police wagon.

Dito held on the edge of the seat when the car moved, going fast in the turns, speeding up only to brake suddenly and then speeding up again. He knew he was being taken again to the police station in Sao Paulo, where he would see Dr. Mauro one more time. That’s where his end would come. He remembered Mother’s Scourge holding on to his belly while his legs weakened; remembered Encravado fainting, the blood going down his back; and he envied them for having died so quickly. He closed his eyes, opened them again and saw Beth hugging him; the dark woman at Pichote’s wake; saints at Mother Dolores’ and her praying to Yemanja.

Dito was neither revolted nor afraid. At the first chance he would kill himself. That would be the only way to escape. Before that he would like to surprise Dr. Mauro, just as he had done with Crystal, Crystal and his soft talk, his games, his unreasonable plans. He remembered the hair tufts on his back, his promises and lies. What a liar he had been! Even at the very end he still found the energy to muster up lies. With the police chief it wouldn’t be any different, Crystal and Dr. Mauro were alike in everything.

After several hours travelling they arrived in Sao Paulo. The doors were opened and Big Purple told him to get out. When he jumped out of the

car, he received the first blow and fell down. Caramel then stepped on the wound he had in his ribs.”Stand up, big boy. Don’t act so weak, because no one will fall for it here.”

Policemen at the entrance to the building laughed. Big Purple caught him by the waistband and dragged him, while Dito tried to stand up, lost his balance, and fell.

“What has he being doing?” One of the policemen at the door asked.

“Bunch of little things.” Caramel said.

They pushed Dito onto the bench, Big Purple went to the other side of the counter and, sitting in front of a type writer, began to fill out a form, which after typing he took to another room. After Caramel told Dito to stand up, they walked through a dark hallway, up to a large room, filled with piles of old newspapers in one corner and in the other some cleaning material. Caramel disappeared for a minute, only to show up carrying two chairs saying,” Dr. Mauro is coming.”

Big Purple shut the window and turned on the light. “It won’t be easy, big boy. The man is dying to put his hands on you.”

Caramel looked for something behind the newspaper pile and brought out some nylon cords which he threw in Dito’s direction. The door opened and the big man with a mustache came in. He had on a long overcoat and appeared irritated, as he stood in front of Dito.

“Take his clothes off and tie him up to the chair.”

Big Purple followed the orders.

“The doctor said he must take it easy.” They laughed when Big Purple said that.

“We’ll see.”

Dito was naked. The wound at his ribs was covered with gauze and adhesive tape. The police chief held with his thick fingers the edge of the adhesive strip and pulled it all out with a single move.

“Let’s start here. You won’t need to get better.”

Dito howled and bent over.

“Break the stitches, Big Purple.”

The black man said he would look for a pair of scissors.

“Fuck the scissors, man! This we push with the fingers.”

And to set the example, he held one stich pulling it with his nail. Dito’s body shook. He shouted and tried to stand up.

“Stop the scene, this doesn’t hurt that much.”

The stitches were pulled and blood came out of the wound.

“You finish it off, Big Purple.”

Caramel brought a handkerchief and gagged Dito.

“I want to see this wound open again.”

Dito’s ribs and legs were covered in blood. Caramel picked up the adhesive on Dito’s forehead, and pulled it off. The boy didn’t know what hurt the most but he couldn’t move, his shouts he was sure were not being heard. The floor around his chair was slowly being covered with pieces of gauze, cotton and adhesive beyond the blood drops.

When the undressing of the wounds was almost completed, Dr. Mauro told Caramel to take off the gag.

“Who told you to end with *Dona Deborah*? Speak, because this time I ‘ll end with you. You won’t escape.” Two black men came in with a table and the type writer. The police chief asked them to leave everything close to the pile of newspapers, where the light was stronger. Caramel rushed to take one of the chairs to the table.

“Sit there, Big Purple. Write down the story our little friend will tell us.” Saying that Dr. Mauro gave Dito a blow on the boy’s head wound. The blood stream increased.

“Put paper in the machine, because he’s dying to talk.”

Dito repeated the story he had given many times. The police chief didn’t believe him, but Big Purple continued to write. The blows Dito received hit him on the head, on his back and on the face, but above all in the ribs, over the open wound.

“This is a lie. I want facts,” the police chief repeated.

Dito cried, blood had covered his legs completely, and now began to run onto the floor.

“Some drug dealer sent you to end with this woman’s life. This is what I want to know.”

Dito didn’t know what to say. He only shook his head. He didn’t say anything about Crystal’s death, nor about the wish he had to kill all of them. It didn’t matter whether he remained quiet or not, he would be beaten up all the same. Caramel took a broom handle from behind the newspapers and began beating on Dito’s back.

“Leave this infected animal. When you get tired, take him off the chair.”

The police chief was disappointed. He hadn't been able to get anything more than he already had heard from the boy the last time around.

Caramel followed his instructions.

“Clean the blood from his body with newspapers and throw him in the cell. Put him in cell 152, which is the most crowded. He will later on have a surprise.”

Dito could barely stand up. Caramel wiped his face, back and legs with newspapers. He then held him by one arm, and Big Purple by the other; and they took him away. The jailor opened the door and they pushed Dito inside. He was so wounded that even the prisoners felt sorry for him. At first, no one dared to say or do anything to him, even though the boy had fallen on his back and exposed his naked body. An older man, with grey hair, bent over Dito. Two others had arranged newspaper sheets in a corner, pushing him over to them.

“This one won't last long.”

Dito was still bleeding and almost unconscious. When it began to get dark, bowls with a dark colored water passed from hand to hand. The grey haired prisoner brought Dito's bowl closer to him, putting it close to the boy's mouth, but Dito did not move. Late that night Dito began to moan and on the following morning he was completely swollen. Some inmates called the jailor. The old fat man asked them to get out of the way for him to see through the iron bars. He stretched his neck but didn't see anything serious.

“It's always like that. He got a few blows, he's making a scene.”

A heavy black man, pushing his arm through the bars, tried to hit the jailor, who in turn blew the whistle, calling the shock troops. Three or four men showed up, machine guns pointed to the inside of the cell. The prisoners quickly got their backs against the walls and calm returned.

On that afternoon, Dito's body began to react. He opened his eyes and saw a bunch of men looking down at him. One smiled. the youngest one took off his pants and toffered him his underwear. The grey-haired man began to dress him up. Dito wanted to thank him, but didn't know how. He only made an almost imperceptible gesture with his head. When the dark colored water they called soup was distributed, one of the prisoners was

able to steal a spoon. He passed it to the grey haired man who then fed some spoon fulls of the warm soup to Dito.

“Someday, if you leave this place, don’t let them put their hands on you again. It’s better to die.”

Dito felt thankful to that man, and he didn’t even know his name. He also wished to thank the one who gave him his underwear. But he couldn’t move.

X

Dito’s health showed improvement in the second week after hw was jailed. The grey-haired man had been able to get an empty can to boil water in and wash off Dito’s wounds. The jailor had left behind a little creosote-based desinfectant soap. The grey haired prisoner would wet rags in the boiling water, wash Dito’s wounds, and then apply the desinfectant. Another prisoner had torn his shirt in pieces and covered the open wounds to protect them from flies. From that day forward Dito felt as if his health had been improving. Only then, did he become aware of his cellmates. The grey haired man’s name was Uncle Zé, the young man of the underwear Gabriel, the thin black man who had torn up his shirt was Ghost, and Cleaner was the man who had wanted to punch the jailor.

Gabriel was always coughing and Uncle Zé had told him he had tuberculosis.

“The other day they took two of them from here. Now it’s him. Later on it will be me, or one of our mates. They are trying to finish us off, slowly, without anyone noticing.”

The young man would sit in a corner, rest his jaw on his bone thin knees and cough. At night it was even worse. Dito felt sorry for having contributed to his being without a shirt. He approached him trying to return those rags, but the man only smiled, saying:

“It doesn’t matter. You keep it. I’m half way gone anyway.”

Cleaner didn’t like to hear such talk: “Before they finish with me I’m gonna break the balls of a couple of them. If I get hold of a knife, I’ll cut the head off of the first one who crosses my path.”

The old janitor had not been there to clean for three days. The cell’s toilet had clogged and overflowed. The stink of feces was so strong that

even the jailor, who would frequently walk along gallery, complained. “An infernal race!”

Then he would leave laughing. The prisoners didn’t say anything. They just waited for an opportunity to get him close to the iron bars, when he least expected it. But this day was taking a long time to come and Gabriel was getting worse by the hour.

Uncle Zé would stay seated at Dito’s side, talking. Sometimes he would tell him about his childhood in the country: his games, his running after animals or in the fields.

“I liked that easy-going life. I’ve always liked it. It’s what makes me the saddest about being here.”

Dito wished to ask him questions, to talk to him, but he didn’t feel the strength. It just was easier to look at that kind-looking man with wrinkles etched in his cheeks.

“If I am able to get out of here, I am going back to the country. Far away. I’ll get me a little house on a little piece of land and just stay put.

“You think people are better there?” Cleaner asked ironically.

“I don’t know. It feels as if people know each other better.”

Dito didn’t know how he found the guts to ask, “Why are you here, Uncle Zé?”

“One of those crazy moments, boy. Something I can’t explain. Life every day got more difficult. Bills piling up. The children sick, my wife sick, the eviction day set.... From that point it’s easy to find your hand grabbing onto something that’s not yours. That’s what happened. And everything went wrong. I don’t know what has happened to my folks, nor what will be happening to me. I’ve given up on expecting anything. I’ve left it all in God’s hands.”

Gabriel’s coughing spell got worse, prompting Cleaner to say, “Tonight neither he nor we will be able to sleep.”

“And how did you get to be here?” Uncle Zé asked Dito.

“I’ve done a lot of wrong things, and it all began because I believed a son of a bitch who gave me away”

“And where is this guy?” Cleaner asked.

“I’ve sent him to hell.”

Cleaner smiled, while Uncle Zé remained serious.

“Murder doesn’t accomplish anything.”

“I don’t know. We at least feel free from these types.”

Dito felt, after many weeks a certain vigor. His blood felt warmer in his veins, his ears began to burn and his wounds were hurting.

“When and if I leave here, I’m gonna kill a bunch more of scum.”

“If your situation improves it’s quite probable you might change your way of thinking.” Uncle Zé suggested.

“You’re mistaken. They wanna finish us off.”

Cleaner smiled again at the youngsters attitude, “Right on!”

“You didn’t see what they did to Pichote, Manguito, Smokey and the others.”

Uncle Zé asked for more information on the friends Dito mentioned but Dito didn’t feel he had to add anything else to the story.

The boy continued to talk, Cleaner giving him incentive. Uncle Zé looked through the iron bars to the other side of the somber gallery, as Dito talked. Dito’s eyes reddened with anger. Then the grey-haired man turned his attention back to Dito’s comments, for he didn’t know that this boy, who had been so quiet, hovering there between life and death, could be so full of hatred.

“If I could I would finish them off with boiling oil, so they could remember everything they have done.”

“There you have it, Uncle, the boy is right,” Cleaner said. “They messed around with him, now he is an angry man.”

“Do you know how many we were in this cell?” Gabriel asked, feeling a little better after his last coughing spell. “About eighteen. One week later two went to interrogation and didn’t come back. Another fell ill with a fever and he has also disappeared. Four have left with tuberculosis. Now it’s my turn. One or two more weeks and I’ll disappear.”

Dito listened. Uncle Zé wanted to intervene, but he didn’t know what to say, recognizing the uselessness of anything he might say.

“There’s only one way: trust God. To Him there are no guilty nor innocent people!”

Dito smiled in disbelief. When Gabriel had another coughing attack, the jailor showed up to say the toilet would be fixed with a hot water jet the following day, and it was possible they would all end up covered in shit. He said that and smiled, while the prisoners glared at him through the iron bars.

XI

It was still dark when the men arrived with the hose. They slipped the brass nozzle through the iron bars and opened the strong hot water jet, against floor and walls. The prisoners defended themselves as they could: Gabriel was partially scalded; Cleaner pushed Dito to the side. The stink of shit increased as the water filled up the cell. Two lights above were turned on and slowly the shit began to disappear. The prisoners changed standing places several times, but the water jet was very strong. Another hose was brought in and turned on, this one with cold water.

“It’s time for the scums’ bath!” the police controlling the hoses shouted.

And this time there wasn’t a single one of them who had not been totally soaked. The jailor laughed and clapped from his spot behind the hose handlers.

“You needed a bath!”

For hours no one was able to sit down, because the floor was still wet. They also hoped that by standing up the clothes on their bodies would dry faster. This morning there was no coffee served, since the people in the kitchen had been told the prisoners would be moved to another cell for the cleaning to take place. But they didn’t complain. The old hands in the cell joked about it with the jailor and received other jokes in response.

“Since coffee is free, we give it when we want to.”

At nine o’ clock, Dr. Mauro, Caramel and Big Purple showed up. The police chief had his suit jacket opened, showing the handle of his gun in its holster. Big Purple had a print shirt and a felt hat on, while Caramel was dressed in a well-worn, light-colored suit. He was tall and had a small hump on his back. His sweet manner of speaking had been the source for his nickname. The police chief was straightening his mustache with his fingers and appeared to be contented. He came to the iron bars and shouted:

“Look, I finally have good news.”

The prisoners didn’t move. They had never seen that policeman so euphoric. They knew something was up and it wasn’t good.

“We’ve decided: I am going to open the door, for a game to begin. The guy pushed from the inside out will go to the solitary. The guys who are

able to stand the fight, will change cells and will get lunch and dinner every day.”

There was a faint manner among the cellmates.

“Pay attention!” The police chief continued. “If someone tries to escape, we will put the dogs on him.”

He then put the key in the lock and opened the cell, giving the key back to the jailor.

“So, haven’t you understood the game?”

There was only one who attempted to make a move but he was restrained by Cleaner’s strong arm. The police chief showed his surprise.

“What’s the matter? You are not believing me?”

Silence again. Big Purple looked at Dr. Mauro. Caramel frowned.

“Well, then this must get serious.”

The police chief called the jailor and two guards.

“Bring the guys from cell 18. That’ll be better. I want to know what they will do.”

The prisoners show up, walking in line. The chief himself opened the cell door.

“I sent for you to play a game. Cell 18 against cell 152. The ones able to stay inside the cell will get one month of lunch and dinner. The guys thrown out won’t have either. They won’t be my problem anymore.”

The men who had just arrived begin the aggression. A strong one got Uncle Zé by the hair and threw him against the wall. A shorter man held the boy, a third one knocked Gabriel’s head against the iron bars, a big fat black man pulled Dito by his legs. The door opened for the first time and Uncle Zé was thrown out backwards into the gallery. The policemen held him and put handcuffs on his wrists. Next, out came an older man. Cleaner punched furiously a strong man, but ended up being dominated. The guy gave him a waist lock and he felt slowly his senses disappearing. Finally with one heel kick he was able to hit the giant in the balls, the man bent forward and Cleaner was able to hit him in the neck. The guy was not overcome yet. He grabbed the can in which Uncle Zé boiled the water, flattening it and tried to use it as a weapon. Cleaner gave him a head kick and attacked his back. Other groups fought, the quiet mulatto knocked out two weak men, dragging them toward the door and throwing them into the gallery.

Cleaner jumped, ramming his heels into the giant's kidneys. He shouted and kicked his head on the floor. Cleaner pushed him to the outside of the cell. The police chief was not happy with Cleaner's show of strength, and ordered the police to go in the cell and finish him off. Four big men showed up. Cleaner tried to defend himself but was dominated by nightsticks' blows in his head and shoulders. He was finally shoved out and handcuffed. At this moment Dito was also pushed out. He had his face wounded and blood streamed out of his nose.

"The ones who have fallen inside have to be brought outside," The police chief announced.

The guards began pulling out those who had fainted. The guards themselves didn't understand the order. The little group was put standing up, led by Uncle Zé who was limping.

"I don't want anyone getting fat in my police quarters. They will all go to cell 96."

The jailor walked ahead, some guards behind him, then the prisoner, followed by other guards and the dogs. Dito had no idea what else could happen. The cell was square with cement walls, it had a sink and the Turkish toilet. There were no beds, nor newspapers to cover the floor.

"Here you'll turn to seed," the jailor said, "Dr. Mauro had a eye out for you guys."

Listening to the guy talk Uncle Zé thought for a second he was a lunatic. But he said nothing. Cleaner wiped his face with the back of his hand. Gabriel couldn't stand his pains and Dito was still bleeding through the nose. But he felt lucky: he was the one who'd received fewest blows throughout the session.

At lunch time the guards passed through the gallery with food, but they didn't stop at cell 96. "This group is in quarantine. They ate too much," they said, and continued pushing the cart and laughing. Cleaner knew they would make it all more difficult; Gabriel only coughed, no longer hungry. At the end of the day, Dito began to think of ways to escape. He looked around for something to open the door lock, but didn't find anything. He tried to imagine some situation that could attract the jailor to the cell, but he couldn't come up with a way to do so.

Dito's stomach was howling with hunger. As night began to fall he noticed that cell 96 was much hotter than 152. Cleaner sat with his back to

the wall and recounted the fight he had with the big man, “I can’t believe I’m still in shape!”

Uncle Zé smiled vaguely and Dito had nothing to say. Gabriel was coughing covering his mouth so as not to bother his cell mates.

“They are planning to do something awful to us.” Uncle Zé said.

“That’s all they ever do.”

Much later, when the prison had been silent for a long time, they heard steps in the gallery. They put their backs to the walls. Policemen came with lanterns and trained dogs. One of them called out the numbers, as they approached the doors.

“Let’s go. The trip will be long.”

They focused their lights on the prisoners. Dito’s number was called and soon he felt the dogs next to his legs. No one said a word until they got to a police van. A short, strong man, who had his shirt out of his pants, opened the door. Dito noticed there were others in the car. Gabriel continued to cough. The car move off fast, tires screaming against the asphalt. After about an hour, it stopped. At that point there were guards with machine guns in hand showing them the way to a bus.

“That way, scum!” The man with the loose shirt shouted.

A sort of line was formed and Dito could see then a bunch of young man. He could see only a few that were about his age; others were much younger, like Pichote and Smokey. The oldest ones were about Gabriel’s age. He had no idea where they were taking him. He imagined it might be a prison farm, like the one he had been at in Rio. But why worry? They couldn’t be sending the bus to a good place.

It was his turn to get in. Gabriel had already been pushed to the front. He continued to cough and that had been irritating the guards. One of them had shouted for him to stop that. It was a regular bus, but the windows were covered with curtains and the guards who had been watching over them had already warned: “The first one to open the curtains will get beaten.”

That’s why no one dared to move them. Some dogs had also climbed on the bus. Some of the guards who were in the back of the bus talked and laughed loudly. Some told jokes. The bus driver shut the door that separated his driving seat from the rest of the bus. The engine was turned on and the bus moved. Though Dito knew Sao Paulo well, he had no idea of where they could be. He tried to find Gabriel but he couldn’t see him; he only

heard his cough. In the seat in front of his there were three boys whose ages were approximately 6,8 and 12. They were very quiet and looked very scared with such trip at that time of the day. Dito was sure that all of them had been in the prison cells of Dr. Mauro's precinct, just as he and Gabriel had been pulled for this trip.

When they had already been riding for a long time, Dito noticed it was raining. The bus had slowed down and was crossing a flooded area. The water reached the bottom of the bus chassis, the engine complained, the tires were sliding and for the first time Dito felt the drops of water, from the storm, beat against the window glass. Strong winds invaded the bus when one of the guards opened the door to speak with the driver and Dito's curtain moved briefly. He saw only some solitary and distant lights. Then, as if they had been able to go back to an asphalted road, the speed of the bus increased. Even so, it was possible to notice that the rain had become even more intense.

One of the boys from the seat ahead said something. Only the other two could hear him. The youngest one turned to look back. He looked a little bit like Pichote, and he was very scared. The one who travelled next to Dito was also a quiet type, a black boy of about 16. Dito had not paid attention to him yet, but now, seeing him better, he noticed that he cried silently.

"What's the matter?"

The young man would only shake his head, without answering.

"Where are they taking us?"

He cleaned his eyes and Dito saw his hands wounded, as if he had grabbed something and had been pulled from it violently. He spoke very low.

"They are gonna kill us."

Dito relaxed back into his chair. He should have imagined something like that. It would be much worse than the prison farm.

* * *

CHAPTER SEVEN

I

Considering the engine noise, the bus had to be climbing a steep road. Gabriel was still coughing, while some boy Dito wasn't able to see began to laugh nervously. The policemen in the back of the bus started joking and one of the dogs appeared very agitated.

The door between the driver from the rest of the bus opened again. From the front cabin the short and strong man with his shirt out of his pants emerged rubbing his hands, warming himself up. It was cold.

"We're almost there," he said to the policemen holding the dogs.

"Are we still going to make another trip today?"

Dito couldn't see who had asked, but he understood, then, that it was a kind of regular program. They wouldn't be the only ones expelled from the planet. There were many people on the list. Then, for no apparent reason, he remembered Uncle Zé, his patience and tranquil face, his hands holding the can with warm water to clean his wounds. And beside Uncle Zé, he saw also the image of Mother Dolores, her voice, her sad eyes and kind features.

"It's Yemanja, who protects us, son. Think always about her."

Dito remembered the image of Yemanja on the wall where Smokey spent the night in his coffin, surrounded by candles and by the silence of those heavily made up women, while the sweaty black man beated smoothly the *atabaque* drum singing a sad song.

He felt his courage come back thinking about Mother Dolores. He wasn't going to let things get to him like the kid seated at his side had done. He would neither open his mouth, nor act as if he were weak. The important thing, until the bus stopped, was to imagine an escape plan. The best opportunity would be at the time to get out. He would jump out, no matter the consequences. If they were slow in catching him he would disappear into the night. He doubted very much that some dog would get him. What if they handcuffed them on before they were to leave the bus? That, he feared. Then, it would be very difficult to escape.

The bus shook all over, shock absorbers banged the frame as the wheels went into potholes splashing lots of water. There was no doubt they were leaving behind the main road. They were taking a shortcut, or

something like that. The galloping went on for a good half hour until the brakes were applied and the driver's cabin door was opened and closed several times. New guards, whom Dito had not seen before, had come in. They were big and were covered in a plastic capes. They all had hats of the same material as the capes or they were wearing wool hats. Cold wind invaded the bus, and Gabriel had another bout with coughing. The cop with his shirt in the outside of his pants was very agitated, saying:

“Now, scumbags, take your clothes off. Where you're going, you won't need them.”

His order was not immediately followed. Some of the caped police caught several boys and began tearing off their clothes. They pulled the fabric from pockets and the ripping textile made a squirming sound as they were pulled apart. The boys who attempted to resist were pulled out of their seats and were slapped in their faces.

“Let's go, you sons of bitches! No special privileges here!” the same man continued to shout.

Dito rushed to take off his clothes before they caught him. After a couple of minutes the policemen with capes and hats began to back up to the driver's cabin. The back door also opened, while the man with his shirt out of his pants, continued to shout and clap his hands. He was close to the police in the back of the bus.

“Let's do, scumbags. Everyone is going to leave here with one jump. You've already warmed up too many spaces!”

One of the boys tried to escape and he was caught by policemen who began to beat him up and threw him over the seats. That was just the signal for the dogs to attack. Great confusion reigned for the next few moments. There were boys shouting everywhere, trying to escape, some trying to climb up the seats, others holding on to one another, the vast majority trying to face up to the dogs who jumped from one side to another, above and in between the seats. Dito was soon bitten on his arm; even so, he was able to push the dog away with his feet. The policeman close by hit Dito on the head with a nightstick. Dito lost his senses for a moment, but came to and discovered that the best way was to lay down quietly on the bus floor while the confusion lasted. There was a great melee of sounds between the high pitched shouts of the boys, the dogs barking and the man shouting orders.

In the tumult the first boys rolled through the door, out of the bus. The policemen were already awaiting them and continued to beat and kick them. The few who tried to escape by going around the bus had their arms twisted, received blows in the face and were pushed off the side of the road. Dito couldn't understand exactly what was taking place. He kept just dragging his body on the bus floor. He was already covered with footprints, when a dog bit him on the leg. A policeman caught Dito by the neck and pulled him up to the door. From there he pushed him with his foot. Dito felt the earth give way beneath his feet. The night was dark. The first sprigs of grass that passed by his body and by his face at a fainting speed, appeared to him to be cold. As he covered some distance, he lost consciousness, just as if he were diving looking for the depths of a river. He didn't feel anything, because he suddenly fell asleep and everything was definitely distant and silent. He didn't see his travelling companions, he didn't feel the dogs' bites, he no longer heard the orders from the man with his shirt out of his pants.

When he felt the cold on his feet, he imagined he was asleep in a public bench, the same one he had always taken in Glo'ria. He remembered his work at the market, Pin pushing his cart, the basket he had carried for the demanding housewives who stopped everywhere discussing the prices of things with the vendors. He opened his eyes only to discover he was not at the bench nor was he in prison. He touched his body. His head felt as if it were very big. He couldn't perceive very well what had happened. He tried to keep his eyes open and felt the smell of wet soil in his nostrils. He discovered he could move one of his arms, and a little bit of his body. Then, slowly, it appeared that his pains were also waking up with him, both in his face and arms as well as in his legs. He remembered the bus that had been crowded with boys and had parked somewhere around there, so they could be thrown away. He remembered the dogs jumping, biting indiscriminately, biting Gabriel's face. He remembered the boy being thrown over the seats, and the shouts because he had fractured his spine, while the policeman kicked him to stop the crying and to stand him up.

The pain was stronger in his right leg. He thought he might have broken the other one, and that's why he wasn't feeling any pain yet. He tried to move it slowly, and to his surprise it was intact. All he needed to do now was to stand up. He moved a little and rolled several feet more down

the cliff. Only then did he realize they had been thrown down a mountain side. He had, evidently, got stuck on some bush and not rolled on down to the bottom.

It was still raining and dawn approached. Dito remembered what had happened, in every detail. He hadn't forgotten the incident of the tearing of the clothes, nor the dog biting Gabriel's face. Where would he be now? Where would the three little boys be, the ones who travelled in the seat in front of his? Where would the one who looked so much like Pichote be?

He grabbed onto some bushes, aware now that the bite he had on his leg hurt and that his arms, scraped by the underbush, burned like fire. He would try to go down to the bottom of the cliff. A great number of them should be there. Holding on to whatever was available, he went down until he found the first bodies. Some were hanging from tree trunks that had been cut by lumber jacks, others had fallen on stones. A little more and he would be at the bottom of the hill. He went around a big stone and found other companions. On the side, where there was a flat plane, some were already trying to stand up. He approached them. One whose arms had been dislocated was in great pain. Another one, who had a broken leg, only moaned. A little blond boy had been bit on the back and he was bleeding. A black boy had one arm broken. A strong young man had a wound in the head. Dito couldn't stand dragging himself around so much moaning. Then, behind a thick leaf bush he heard Gabriel's cough. He was lying there with a cut in his chest, one eye shut and his face very swollen.

"Let's go, friend. I'm gonna help everybody leave this place."

"How many survived?"

"I don't know... But there's a lot who can at least stand up."

"Do you think they'll come back?" "I don't think so," Dito said.

"If I can't get up, can't you do me a favor?"

Dito could hardly believe his ears, and his eyes filled with tears.

"Will you do it, man?"

Dito nodded.

Gabriel looked around in the grass, searching for something, "It must be here. I had it in my hand when I fell down."

"What is it?"

"It's a pocket knife. Would you cut my wrist with it?"

Dito didn't know what to say. Gabriel's hand continued impatiently looking for the knife, feeling among grass tufts all around.

"You promise me this favor?"

Dito agreed, tears running down his painfully tired face.

"Then help me find the knife. I won't be able to go back up the mountain."

"You can be cured, man!"

Gabriel opened his arms and just smiled, "You're kidding, man. I'll just stay around here."

Dito crawled searching for the pocket knife.

"If you can't find it, get me a piece of glass."

II

Gabriel extended his arm to Dito. The piece of glass was a little larger than a fingernail. It was the only thing Dito could find. Gabriel prepared himself for the pain. He had always had fear of shots, and he imagined this would be no different. But, it had to be done. He couldn't just stay alone there, when all who could move would have gone on. He didn't want to think about Dito's cutting his veins. Perhaps the first cut would not be enough, but he knew the boy had the guts to try another one. He would only have to withstand the pain. He twisted his face in pain, moaned, and then calmed down. Dito released his arm and stayed there for some seconds looking at him. The blood drained, dripping over grass leaves. Gabriel smiled again, his eyes appeared sleepy. Dito knew he had been right. He would not have been able to go up the mountainside. He would have been an extra burden. And the sickness that was rotting him away from the inside — it would have been foolish to have insisted on anything different with Gabriel. He had chosen the best way out. There was no doubt. He stood up and walked towards the moans he could hear. He gave Gabriel one last look. There was daylight. The rain beating on his face was now stronger.

He went back to the flat landing, and there he found some other boys. One of them, a blond one, said that there were three or four others who were trying to go up the mountain. Dito shouted for them to come back.

"We have to go together, or we'll be caught again!"

The small boys began to show up, among them one who travelled in the seat in front of his.

“Who is better off?”

“I only had a scratch on my back,” the boy said. “I can help.”

“First we must see who is unconscious.”

They began searching among all the bodies. Dito had been right. With a few light touches, some who appeared as if sleeping did wake up. But for many there was nothing else that could be done. They would just stay there like Gabriel. Among them was the black boy who had travelled at his side crying quietly.

They gathered at the bottom of the cliff and Dito explained what to do to reach the road.

“We don’t climb in a straight line. We weave back and forth, not to tire ourselves.”

Then, five other boys showed up. One of them had his face nearly deformed by the beating he had received.

“When we get to the road, we look for transportation. There must be a town close by.” As soon as the climb began the rain became even stronger. Dito tried to secure his footing, but often he would just slide back.

“Careful! No one should roll back down again!”

One of the boys fell and couldn’t hold on to the bushes. He somersaulted three or four times. Dito went to help him. The boy had now several new cuts on his body, but he would continue to try. He wasn’t going to give up easily. Dito knew it. He looked back and saw at least one half of the boys were there. When they found larger bushes, they were able to get firmer footing, holding on to thicker branches and the climb became easier. One by one they arrived at the road. At that time it was deserted. A long black strip, the shiny road, reflected on its surface the eucalyptus trees and disappeared in a foggy hillside.

“Where are we?” A little boy wanted to know.

“Anywhere, man. Why would it matter?” A dark haired boy answered nervously, his face covered with scratches.

“Let’s go to the shoulder on the other side of the road.”

They crossed the road. They were about fifty boys, Dito looked as if he might be the oldest. They were all naked, bleeding, hungry and cold.

They had been walking for about twenty minutes when Dito saw a gas station sign.

“Before we get there, gang, let’s grab some sticks and any iron bar we might find. We’ll invade the place and break anything we find.”

They went back to the woods, this time looking for sticks and iron bars, parts of any old car or a truck. Now, whoever saw them would have the impression that they were a bunch of lunatics, armed with wooden sticks.

The gas station had its lights on. Dito told the group to go around the back to the office. There were only two employees at work at that time. At the office’s side and in front of the pumps was the restaurant, still closed. They advanced cautiously, almost dragging themselves on the soil. It was still raining. One of the men warmed himself up by keeping his heavy raincoat on while snoozing close to the office’s door; the other was cleaning the windshield of an old Willys van. They had no customers. Cars passing by were probably rare. The kids by now were very close to the restaurant’s door. Dito tried to open the door, but it was locked. He shoved it with his shoulder and the glass door clicked, and the glass panes broke. The man woke up in a flash, calling for his colleague and they ran toward the boys. The kids had invaded the restaurant, the big kids faced up to the gas station employees with sticks and stones. Dito grabbed hold of one of them by his shirt.

“Look here, you son of bitch,” Dito said angrily, “we need food and clothing. We came here to get them and we don’t intend to be challenged.”

The big and strong black kid kept his eye on the station employees with more than twenty boys around them. Dito jumped over the counter, opened drawers and distributed as many knives as he could find. He went to the tables, where plates had been piled up and began pulling the tablecloths. As he did this, plates would fall off and break on the floor, an action that made the smallest boys laugh continuously. Dito began cutting the tablecloths in eyeballed sizes and gave them to the boys to cover themselves. He went back to the big one who dominated the men and said:

“Take them to the office, lock the office and take the key with you. If there is a telephone, pull it from the wall.”

The men were taken by the black boy and a group of another ten boys who shouted and begged to beat the guys up with their sticks and bars.

While Dito tried to find more cloth, some of the boys had found food in the kitchen cabinets and began to eat ham slices, bread, drinking soda

pops and eating chocolate candies and chewing gum. Dito went to the office and found one of the men trying to break the lock.

“Look here, man, don’t be a fool or we’ll finish you off, right now. Stay calm because we are here only temporarily. We don’t want money. I only want to know what place this is.”

The man didn’t at first understand the question. He kept looking at Dito, at the piece of tablecloth covering his partially naked body.

“We’re over a mile away from Camanducaia.”

“This here, is along Minas state border,” the one who appeared calmer said.

“Then, that’s where we will go.”

“What happened to you?” One of the men, surprised with so many naked boys, wanted to know.

“The police threw us over a cliff.”

“But we are so good that we escaped,” the small blond boy said. He might be the smallest of the group, and yet he carried a heavy wooden stick.

“Whose restaurant is this?” The black boy asked.

“The firm’s. I don’t know the name of the owner.”

“We’ll eat what we can find there,” Dito said.

The man shrugged his shoulders, indifferent. Part of the group was still in the restaurant, opening cabinets and refrigerators. Once in a while more plates would get broken.

A truck passed slowly on the road. The children didn’t notice it, but the driver saw all that action and found it strange to see so many boys gathered there, at that time of the morning, many without clothes on. He knew the restaurant only opened for lunch, and it had done so for the past ten years, since it had opened. He felt like pulling into the station, but he went ahead, because the rain had delayed him considerably. He was going to arrive in Camanducaia much later than usual.

Some of the boys gathered around the Willys truck. Dito came to look at it. He got in and saw that it was in good condition. He called to the guy in white overalls with blue and red emblems.

“We’ll take the truck, where’s the key?”

The man agreed and gave him the keys. Dito looked for the ignition key and turned the engine on. The other boys are enthralled by Dito’s action. But Dito knew this was crazy, only eight kids at the most would be

able to fit in the car. Not more than that. They would end fast in the hands of the truckers. He turned the car off and returned the keys.

“Not even one half of us would fit in here!”

He went back to the restaurant and asked the man in overalls to look for more cloth, old pants, flannel rags. The guy disappeared in the back but came back bringing what he could find. The kids began to feel that he was helping them out. He wasn't such a bad guy, after all.

On the counter and on the tables were now a large number of open bottles. The bigger boys had been able to get some wine, vermouth, Sao Paulo's fire, rum drinks and cognac. The glasses passed from hand to hand.

“This warms you up better than any clothing,” the dark haired boy, who was always smiling, said.

Dito took several drinks. A boy who was probably younger than eight years old was also taking a drink. It looked like cognac. Dito thought of taking it away from the boy, but he figured it would be better to leave him alone, the cold was getting worse by the minute, the rain had increased and they still didn't know where they were they would go from here.

“How are things in Camanducaia?”

The man in overalls answered as he could:

“I don't live there, but I know it's a small town. It has a square and a few streets. Nothing more.”

“That's funny. We'll surprise them all,” the black boy said. He was probably about Dito's age, but taller.

“If we need clothes and money, that's where we have to go.” Dito said.

They waited for the rain to decrease to begin the walk to Camanducaia.

The ones who had tired of eating and drinking, lay down on the wooden floor and under the tables. Others, more cautious, made packages of left over foods.

“We may need it later.”

III

The truck driver entered Camanducaia still thinking of the naked and noisy boys he had seen. The town was sleepy and the rain was very heavy. It thundered. The wind was so strong as to render the windshield wipers useless. The truck driver couldn't see well because that truck also had only

one windshild wiper working. He only remembered the other needed fixing when it rained like now and the water was so voluminous he couldn't see.

He went along a stone paved street, narrow and flanked by old one-story houses. He didn't see the ditch and the front wheels of his truck fell with one shock into the ditch. He began to fear some problem with the shock absorbers and suspension. He decided to stop by the police station to report the boys he had seen and also to take a look underneath his truck. He was worried about it. He couldn't take a whole day off for the truck to be in the shop.

The police station was also closed. It only had one light on in the outside. He knocked at the door and a policeman opened it still very sleepy.

"Gosh, what a rain!"

The policeman opened his mouth but didn't say anything.

"Do you think we could bother the police chief at this hour?"

The policeman frowned. The truck driver readjusted his rain coat, the water poured down into his old shoes. He mentioned what he had seen at the gas station, the policeman didn't appear interested.

"I didn't stop, but it looked as if there were more than forty street kids. And they were all naked, in this cold!"

"Forty?"

"Thereabouts. A bunch!" the truck driver said.

The policeman thought the case might be serious.

"Have you drunk something by any chance?"

The driver laughed and the policeman joined him.

"I've been driving for more than twenty years; I like to take my drinks, but never when I am at work."

"So, you say that if we go to the gas station we'll find a bunch of kids!"

"That's right!"

The policeman sat down and opened a note book, searching for the chief's telephone number.

"He'll be furious. But I have to do it."

His thick finger picked out the numbers in the telephone disk, rotating it slowly. He put the phone to his ear and waited. The telephone rang and rang. Until it was answered, finally.

"Doctor, this is 25. There is a problem at the gas station just outside of town. We have a driver here saying he saw some forty or so naked kids

there, raising hell.

There was a moment of silence. “Hello?!”

“Right 25. Tell the driver to wait and you get the car ready. Let’s go see what’s going on.”

The policeman hung up, stretching himself in the chief’s chair and listened to the driver, who appeared to be the type given to long tales, filled with details.

“I just don’t know where they could have come from.”

“When they least expect it we’ll put our hands on them.”

The policeman said, rocking himself back in the swivel chair. He finally stood up and asked the driver to wait.

“It will rob you of some time, but the chief asked for you to wait here.”

The driver was beginning to regret having taken a detour to the police station.

“I’m going to call Joao Domingo. He will come with us.”

Saying that the fat policeman went slowly through a corridor, knocking at a door.

“Domingo!”

The door opened. A mulatto came out, sleepy and red eyed, wanting to know what was going on.

“Get ready. We have a small job in sight.”

The policeman went back to seat at the chief’s chair and asked:

“Is your truck all right?”

The driver explained he had fallen in the ditch but he knew now that everything was fine.

“It just happens that the truck won’t be good for this job. The best thing to do would be to get Pedrinho Tara’s bus. Then it will be difficult for the boys to run away.”

The driver agreed with the policeman’s reasoning, and was glad to free himself of this extra work.

“If you want I can look for Tara,” he said to the policeman.

“No!” The policeman said. “Just stay put until the police chief gets here. Then you go with us. If there is no driver available you’ll drive us.”

“I’m here to help,” the driver said resigned.

A car stopped in front of the police station. It was the police chief. He is still young and of average height. He didn't appear anxious for having been called so early in the morning. The policeman introduced the truck driver to him. Joao Domingo was awake now, a belt with the holster on one side and a .38 caliber on the other. The chief took a weapon from the drawer. The fat policeman opened a closet, looking for a raincoat and a hat.

"It's pouring outside," the driver said, for conversation's sake.

"I think it will be better for us to take Pedrinho Tara's bus," the fat policeman said.

The police chief agreed.

After making sure he had locked the truck, the truck driver and the policemen leave. They drive through narrow streets of irregular pavement up to a gas station where two buses are parked. The fat policeman spoke with a worker then called the truck driver, making sure he would drive the bus. He came back to the car where the police chief was and said: "We can take that one!"

The bus pulled off ahead of the police chief's car, its windshield wipers scratching against the glass perturbed the fat policeman. Nevertheless, he opted not to complain to the chief.

The bus led the way slowly, through strong and relentless rain. They passed the ditch the truck driver had fallen into and reached the deserted road, where they drove for about twenty minutes.

"It was a good idea to bring the old man," the fat policeman said. "If he is lying, he'll have to pay for it."

The police chief didn't say anything. Joao Domingo in the back seat found the entire idea funny.

"The poor man has already lost it!"

They saw the gas station's signs, and the lights on in the building. The police chief then, thought of a strategy.

"We let the bus stop and we pass by, then we manoeuvre around and come back from the other side."

They passed by the bus that had already stopped by the gas pump. The truck driver saw the delegate's car pass by and didn't understand what was going on, but still asked the station worker approaching his truck:

"What are all these children doing here?"

The gas station worker didn't know exactly how to answer:

“All I know is that they showed up here, all naked. They tore the tablecloths up to cover themselves. But I have no idea where they came from.”

He picked up the pump hose, and the driver told him to stay calm, for the police chief was about to arrive.

The boys didn't notice the policemen arriving with their guns drawn out.

“All right. The party is over!” The police chief said.

The young boys turned around, but Dito decided to confront the newcomers.

“Aren't you going to shoot us?”

The police chief asked his men to put down their guns.

“Where are you coming from?”

Dito explained. The strong black boy at his side reinforced every point.

“I have a bus outside. Let's go. In Camanducaia I'll find clothes for everyone. Then we will see what can be done.”

The bus driver helped organize the seating.

“No pushing and shoving!”

The boys sat down, some had already forgotten the beatings they had received, others, with broken arms and dislocated shoulders, were the last ones to get on the bus.

“These two must go to the hospital,” the police chief said.

He asked them to stay in the front seat. He touched one boy and noticed he had been running a fever.

“Let's go!”

He went back to the car and followed the bus.

IV

The driver talked and talked, filling in the conversation with unnecessary details, according to the fat policeman. But Joao Domingo agreed once in a while with the driver, though he wasn't always able to get the point of the conversation. He kept looking at the boy with dislocated arms and eventually said:

“You know, if we push, this will go back into place. It'll hurt a lot, but it goes back.”

“It’s better to let the doctor take a look at it,” the fat policeman said.

“What if there are no doctors there today?”

“Then, we’ll talk to the chief.”

The bus got through the detour, the narrow street of one- story houses whose doors and windows were shut against the water cascading from the eaves to the sidewalk. The police chief knew that the boys could run away easily when getting out of the bus. The two policemen and the talkative driver would not be sufficient help to contain the boys.

Joao Domingo pulled out his .38 and oversaw the unloading of the prisoners, saying, “Everyone in the police station. If you try to run away, you’ll get shot!”

The boys began to get out and enter the station. The fat policeman helped and so did the police chief. At first all of them stayed in the small front room.

“First, I want to know your story. How did you end up here?”

Dito was the first one to speak. He explained how police chief Mauro had made the prisoners play a game, about those who were going to stay in prison and those who were going to be expelled. He told him about the guys from the other cell at the end of the gallery who had come to fight them, with kicks and blows, for a guaranteed of lunch and dinner for a month. He talked about Uncle Zé and Gabriel. Then, he told them about the meeting in the prison patio, where he met the boys he had never seen before, and about being placed in the bus with policemen and trained dogs. He described the bus travelling through the darkness and the thunderstorm, and the final beating.

“It was then,” he said, “that they broke the arms of this boy and dislocated the other one’s.”

The black boy didn’t forget the details adding:

“A policeman picked up the six-year-old, the little one, and threw him against the others, inside the bus. His spine broke when he landed.”

Joao Domingo was surprised with the tale, and the fat policeman didn’t believe one word they were saying.

“They’ve got to be lying with such a story!”

The police chief continued to ask questions to each one of the boys. He asked for the wounded ones to be set aside, and he counted fifteen

needing medical attention. The smallest one had a dog's bite on his right thigh.

"I need a list of names. Let's begin by the oldest ones." He began taking notes. Each boy gave his full name and stepped aside. The fat policeman kept order among the boys. Only at that point did the truck driver decide to go away. He interrupted this process to bid farewell to the police chief, who smiled at him and thanked him for his help. He left wrapped in his waterproof cape, still wet.

When the list was completed, the police chief counted fifty-two boys. The youngest was six and the oldest seventeen.

"The wounded will come with us to the hospital. The others must stay at the jail, while we get clothing and food."

The boys were not opposed to this idea. Not even Dito appeared to mind. They went to the hallway where they entered into the cell, whose door Joao Domingo kept open. In the meantime the fat policeman tried to pull from the corner some old mattresses with the help of some of the boys.

"Also get some newspapers," the chief said, reminding them that it got pretty cold at that time of the year.

The wounded boys were taken away. The one with broken arms and the one with dislocated arms were seated in the front seat. They no longer had energy even to moan.

V

The only nurse on call at the health center did not know whether the doctor would be in. The police chief didn't say anything, he just listened to the excuses.

"It's too early for the doctor to be in. If he's in town."

"Who's on call in his place?"

The police chief knew only too well as not to pin his hopes on the answer. The nurse shrugged his shoulders, twisted his mouth and said:

"You know how it is..."

He knew it. He would have to go along with Joao Domingo's suggestion to set the boy's arms back in place, cold blooded.

The boys who only needed light dressing or bandaging of cuts and scratches went right into the infirmary. While speaking, the nurse, opened up iodine, mercurochrome and alcohol bottles; he picked up cotton balls,

wet them in mercurochrome for the light scratches, and in iodine for the dog bites.

“This really deserves a vaccine!” he said, as the little blond boy kicked and cried everytime the man touched his dog bite with the cotton soaked in iodine.

“Be strong!” the police chief said.

The nurse put a bandage over the cut on a boy’s face, excusing himself:

“I can’t do this for everyone because my supplies are running low. I’ve already ordered some more, but they haven’t arrived yet. I can see that the chief is very concerned with this situation...”

The police chief had nothing to say. The boys got back to the car, squeezing themselves as much as possible to fit in.

“If you’d like, we can stop at the doctor’s home, which is on that corner!”

The police chief was already too angry. He didn’t want to wait for any other excuses. He looked at the little boy, at his swollen chest, and he decided he wouldn’t go to the doctor’s house. Let him sleep while the health department didn’t send supplies to the health center, he thought.

At the station the fat policeman received the chief with a smile. “Did you find the doctor?”

“Joao Domingo will take care of the boy. Call him up.”

The fat policeman walked down the hallway, calling for his colleague. “We’ll have to pop the boy’s arms back in place,” he announced.

The round faced mulatto only listened. The police chief explained, then, they would have to act fast.

“Or,” he continued, “the boy won’t last.”

“He’ll survive,” Domingo said, “but he may faint.”

The fat policeman found that funny, while the police chief asked them to prepare the bench. Joao Domingo was in charge.

“We must put him lying down on his back. Then, I’ll raise his arms and pull them. I had a brother to whom this happened.” Joao Domingo showed off his abilities. After all, this was his moment. Usually at work, only his colleague would be called to do things; he was always in the background. Now it was his turn, and the police chief would see that he was also capable of resolving some cases.

The police chief called the fat policeman by his nickname:

“That’s not the way, Twenty-Five, he has to lie down on his back!”

The boy was scared, shrinking away to protect himself from Joao Domingo.

“It’s for your own good,” the policeman said. “It’ll hurt, but the pain will go away in a second!”

The police chief and Twenty-Five bent over the bench to hold the boy down. Joao Domingo had picked up several old newspapers, folded them and piled them under the boy’s shoulders, who laid down, his eyes wide-open in fear.

“Hold him, Twenty-Five,” Joao Domingo said.

Then, he held the boy’s hands and began to raise his arms. The boy started to cry, shouting, trying to get out of there. The police chief held his legs in place with strength, while Twenty-Five held down the rest of the body. The boy’s screams were louder and louder, alarming all of those who were in the next room. But the boys behind bars were the ones even more frightened, not knowing what was going on. The left arm was the first one to be set back in place. The other one was more difficult. Joao Domingo had to stretch it again along the boy’s body and then raise it again. The boy ended up fainting, his head falling to the side.

“Let’s do it now,” the police chief said. “When he comes to, he’ll be fine.

Joao Domingo pulled the arm forcefully, squeezing with his large hand the shoulder articulation, and said happily, “It went in!”

“Get some cold water, Twenty-Five,” the delegate asked.

The policeman got moving. He had not expected Joao Domingo’s ability. He noticed also that the chief treated Domingo with greater respect, after all, he did something quickly that not every doctor could have done so well. He came back with the water, more relaxed, sure that in other aspects of the profession, Joao Domingo was no good. The police chief would find himself at a loss, if Domingo were to answer the phone. He remembered the time the Secretary General decided to call the station at an odd hour, looking for the chief. Joao Domingo had answered the phone, and though it was only four in the afternoon, he almost said that the chief was asleep. The police chief knew the mistakes Joao Domingo was capable of. It wasn’t going to be that little deed, this morning, that was going to put him above

the fame he had earned in his many years of service for Dr. Joao Emiliano. Whenever they left the station, and when by chance the car broke down on the way, that's when Domingo usually demonstrated all of his stupidity. But he, Twenty-Five, was always asked to do tasks. The police chief knew he was an asset and wasn't going to mistake him for the other.

He brought the water bowl and the police chief soaked a rag, placing it on the boy's forehead and face. Joao Domingo tapped the boy's cheeks and legs lightly. The boy moved his body, cried, opened his eyes and sat up.

"Raise your arms," the police chief said.

Crying, the boy obeyed. And, still crying, tears mixed with drooling, he smiled widely.

"Didn't I tell you it would hurt?" Joao Domingo said in a friendly way.

The police chief asked Twenty-Five to take the boys to the cell.

"We'll get them food and clothing. For all."

Twenty-Five answered the phone. He pushed it aside and said, "It's a newspaper man from Sao Paulo."

The police chief told him to say he wasn't there and Twenty-Five answered the call as he could.

"We don't know anything. Right now, everything here is quiet."

"Someone called the press. Either the truck driver or the workers at the gas station."

The police chief was for the moment concerned with his list:

"I don't know how I'll get so many things."

"Let's go around asking," Twenty-Five said.

"Go first to the ladies of Parochial Assistance!"

VI

The fat policeman wore his raincoat open, showing beneath it his print shirt of green leaves and the handle of his gun in the holster. His beard needed trimming, and his eyes were red, as if he were permanently sleepy. It was still raining, drizzling, and it was cold, intensely cold. The entire town appeared introverted.

He knocked twice at the door. The hinges scraped and the door opened on an old woman with a kind look and grey hair. "Good morning, *Dona Chiquinha*."

Before she answered, she made him come in and sit down. It was a large room, filled with old furnishings. The ceiling was very high, tongue and groove wood, painted white. On the walls, there are images of saints and two large oval portraits, one of a young man with a mustache and high collar, the other of a young woman smiling. That had been *Dona Chiquinha* years ago.

“The police chief needs your help, Ma’am.”

The woman sat on the sofa and arranged a small pillow behind her back.

“How can I help Dr. Emiliano?”

Twenty-Five explained. He said that since five in the morning they had been trying to solve a problem which was out of Camanducaia’s jurisdiction. The old woman asked brief questions, and he went on, without broaching the main subject.

“That’s how the police station got filled with boys, now. There are fifty-two of them.

“All naked!” *Dona Chiquinha* repeated, with a sorrowful look, “and with this weather...”

“You can’t imagine it. When we went to get them, it must have been 42 degrees, outside.”

“Oh, my God!”

“That’s right,” Twenty-Five continued, “now we have the following problem: the police chief has to find clothing and food for the boys.”

Dona Chiquinha adjusted the pillow again behind her back. The policeman sniffed, looking at his dirty soaking boots, and noticed the wide planks of the wooden floor.

“And how is he going to do that?”

Twenty-Five had not counted on that kind of question.

“If you could see if the people of parochial assistance could chip in, you would be of great help to us.”

“The only problem is that the priest is not in town. He went to Belo Horizonte, yesterday.”

“What about the other people?”

“Well, I can always talk to them. In a little while I’ll look for Engra’cia and Maria Quitéria. They are two people with golden hearts.”

“They boys are technically naked,” the policeman reminded her.

“Poor things. I hope God is looking after them!”

The conversation didn't seem to get well off the ground; it got practical. Twenty-Five didn't know what else to say. He stood up, adjusted the gun in its holster. *Dona Chiquinha* followed him to the door.

“Please, tell Dr. Emiliano that I am very shocked About the fate of these boys. Later on in the day, I'll go there looking for him. I hope we can do something for them.”

Twenty-five was nervous. He sniffed several times, rubbed a handkerchief over his face, sat down on the bench in front of the police chief, and said, “I think nothing will come of it.”

The police chief stopped writing and looked at him worried, “What did she say?”

“A bunch of things, but nothing substantial. She'll talk to someone, then someone else; they will make an effort; we must have faith in God.”

The police chief was irritated with *Dona Chiquinha's* lack of concern, “Old hag. When she wants a donation, she asks so many times, night and day...”

“That's right,” Twenty-Five said; “it looked as if she didn't want to get involved.”

The police chief sat down again, throwing a black book to Twenty-Five.

“Look up the Secretary-General's phone number. Call his office. Let's see what he can do.”

The policeman looked through the pages with his thick fingers going down the lines. Finding the number he called and waited, then he passed the phone to the chief. “He's coming.”

The chief greeted the Secretary-general. They talk about several pending subjects, of delays in weapons delivery; of the police car in need of repair, and of new tires. The Secretary- general promised to see to these things. Then, the chief mentioned the boys.

“What boys?”

The chief explained, always repeating the number: fifty-two, as if to impress it on his superior's mind.

“Our problem is to be able to get them food and clothing.”

The Secretary told him to make an effort within the town, while he called on the State of Sao Paulo authorities.

“They can’t be laying their eggs here. That’s all we needed!”

The police chief agreed, saying he would call him back in one hour to know what to do, then he added:

“If you would like, I myself can talk to the people in Sao Paulo.”

The Secretary-general was tempted, his day was very full.

“OK. You call them and I’ll call you later.”

They hung up. Twenty-Five got the phone back. Joao Domingo came in bringing news: “*Seu Assunc,ao*, from the bakery, can chip in with bread and coffee for all. He can also give us some flour sacs to make clothes with.”

The fat policeman, seated in a chair said, lazily: “It’s better than nothing.”

“Joao Domingo went back to the bakery.

“I think the weather will get better,” Twenty-Five said looking out the window.

The police chief went through the hallway to the cell. The boys were restless. The boy who had his arms put back in place, had found space on a mattress and the boy with broken arms was whimpering softly.

“Let’s have a bit of patience, and everything will be fine!”, the police chief said. “Later on we’ll go back to the health center,” he told the boy with broken arms. “The doctor should be there. We’ll put the arms in a cast.”

VII

Dona Chiquinha left her house, with an open umbrella, and walked through the strets of *Camnducaia*. There are mud puddles everywhere. Some houses had opened their windows, but there were very few people in the streets. She went about slowly, telling herself that this was a sacrifice coming from the Highest Power. She opened the little iron gate of *Engra’cia*’s home and went in. Cleaning the soles of her shoes on the entrance’s mat, she complained of the rainy morning and of the cold. Her friend was alarmed by her being up so early in the day and about her having to walk in the streets in such heavy rain.

“We turn our weakness into strengh, my dear!”

They went in. *Engra’cia*’s home was a little more modern. Her furniture was not as heavy and as dark as *Chiquinha*’s. There was a crystal

case with bevelled glass, where one could see many glasses and colored crystal chalices. In the living room, there was a marble topped table, covered by an embroidered and lacy cloth under the telephone. That was one of the few homes in Camanducaia with a telephone. That had happened when Engra'cia's husband, now diseased, had been the mayor of Camanducaia. It was then, he had had a heart attack, and later died.

Dona Chiquinha sat down in a comfortable chair and uncerimoniously took off her shoes.

"The streets are awful!"

Engra'cia called the maid, a black woman with a white apron on, and asked her to bring some coffee.

Dona Chiquinha appeared more at ease, and began telling her about the visit she had from Twenty-Five.

"Finally! Dr. Emiliano has finally asked us for something!" Engra'cia exclaimed.

"But I think it will be difficult to help him."

Engra'cia didn't understand.

"This is a horrible thing, Engra'cia, a sign of the times. This is the result of a society that's getting rotten by sin. A bunch of irresponsible women, spitting out kids and not having ways to raise them. That's the result, you know!"

Engra'cia didn't say anything, but would like for *Dona Chiquinha* to come direct to the point.

"What did he ask that's so difficult, then?"

"The police station is filled with boys. More than fifty, according to Twenty-Five. These youngsters were found in a gas station not far from here. And do you know how they were? Naked! Completely naked!"

Her friend covers her mouth in surprise.

"And we were lucky. Had it not been for the chief, they would have come to Camanducaia. All hell would have broken loose!" *Dona Chiquinha* was silent for a moment, her eyes wondering about the room, stopping at the telephone and at the colorful crystal chalices. "I don't think our prayers are being heard, Engra'cia! Now," she continued, "the police chief wants food and clothing, for the boys. I don't know what to do."

"You think Maria Quitéria will help?" "That's what I thought. After all, she is richer than us." *Dona Chiquinha* said.

The maid came in with coffee on a silver tray. She brought also a plate with pastries and cornmeal cookies.

“I’ve been dizzy,” *Dona Chiquinha* continued, since the policeman talked to me. I’ve been thinking about helping, but I don’t see how. To go out asking for these things, never!”

“Yes, it’s very humiliating. Old people used to say never to take away from someone to give to another.”

Dona Chiquinha didn’t understand the meaning of that sentence.

“These boys who arrived naked, may look like angels, but that’s only appearances. They are the kind of kinds parents throw away in the streets.”

In the meantime, the police chief waited for *Dona Chiquinha*’s telephone call, and it’s already, almost three in the afternoon.

He knew it would be very difficult to have help from the church ladies, as a result he shouted nervously to Twenty-Five:

“Let’s resolve this problem, without them. Go to the Red Light district and tell *Elizena Mendes* to come by.”

The fat policeman opened the door letting the cold wind blow in. He hurried to close his jacket’s zipper, and marched out to *Usina Street*.

In less than thirty minutes he was back, with a tall, dark haired woman.

“At your service, chief!”

“Sit down, *Elizena*. I have a problem only you can solve.”

Elizena Mendes listened to the case’s description and accompanied the police chief to the cell’s door. She looked at all those boys, naked or semi naked, piled up against the cold. She no longer listened to what *Dr. Emiliano* had to say. He knew he didn’t need to say anything else. She felt like crying, mostly whe she saw the little boy twisting in pain, with a broken and swollen arm. She left the police station in a hurry, exclaiming:

“My *Virgin Mary!*”

The police chief called *Joao Domingo*:

“Go back to the bakery. Pick up the flour sacs and take them to *Elizena*’s house. We will transform every piece of fabric we can put our hands on into clothes.”

Usina Street was the unpaved portion of another, paved street. It was made up of tiny low shantys of fragile building materials. These houses were lined up on one side of the street, facing a wooded hill on the other side. The light posts in the street were different from the rest of Camanduacaia's streets. They were twisted tree trunks, with lights and wires precariously hung up. They could all fall with any stronger wind. Inside the houses, there were at most three rooms. And the bed was its most important piece of furniture. Some were so big as to occupy the entire bedroom or on occasion, half of the living room. The left over space was enough only for the dressing table, covered with lipsticks, cheap talc, hair brushes. There was at least one chair in each room, for the client would usually leave his clothes there.

Elizena Mendes owned one of these houses. She used to say that in the past the women's street was much longer than today. But as time passed some of her colleagues had given up on the town. Their houses remained closed for many months without re-opening. They showed cracks on the exterior walls and rain water got inside, leaking into the walls. The houses eventually fell. The first one to fall was the source of great happiness to the married women of Camanduacaia. The women from the Parochial Assistance Service thought this had been God's punishment.

During the following winters more houses fell to the ground. It was no longer news, nor did the mayor's office permit them to be rebuilt. That's why Usina Street had been reduced to half a dozen houses, all of them with old ceramic tile roofs, aged, windows and doors of old crate wood. Some had a small backyard, where sometimes bushes were planted. But others didn't even have that.

When she got back from the police station, Elizena met Maria de Jesus, Ofélia Pinto, Maria da Glo'ria, Nilva Barbosa and Edna de Oliveira. They were curious. They couldn't understand why their friend was coming home so dejected.

"The police station is full of little boys, whom the police chief called 'pickpockets'. They were pitched off a cliff outside of Camanduacaia," Elizena said. "You gotta see it to believe it. Some are wounded; one has a broken arm. They were thrown out in the early hours of the morning, and they're totally naked. The police chief has already asked the saintly women

of the church for help, but they didn't make any commitment. He's counting on us!"

"I'm only gonna help 'cause they're children," Ofélia Pinto said.

"Dr. Emiliano only gives us any attention when he needs our help. The other night he saw me at the church square, and he wanted me to explain what I was doing there. I felt like slapping him in the face, but I explained. And then he repeated the rule: a woman who is seen outside of Usina Street, goes to jail." "In the decent streets, only those women who screw in secret can go about without fear," Nilva Barbosa said.

"That's right," Maria da Glo'ria added. "Those, the law protects."

"That's why next year I'm going away. I'm tired of this pitiful little town," Edna de Carvalho said, "I'm tired of so much hypocrisy."

While they talked, Elizena had already gathered up some bed sheets, had shouted for Dina, and had asked Maria de Jesus to get some thread and a pair of scissors.

"Nilva," Elizena said, "ask to borrow Dina's sewing machine."

The woman left to do what their friend had asked. They were all about the same age, except for Elizena who was older than thirty-six.

Dina showed up, wearing a brown blouse, very low cut. She was blond, had green eyes and was usually very well dressed. She seldom got herself involved with the street's dos and don'ts. The men who looked for her were usually truck drivers. She had a solid clientele and rarely would she let herself go to bed with one of the married men who wandered into Usina Street having forgotten to go home to their wives.

Elizena cut a bed sheet and explained to Dina the situation at the police station and how the little thieves showed up in Camanducaia and ended up in jail.

"For us to make these clothes right, they'll have to try them on, or we'll end up wasting the fabric," Dina suggested.

"Ofélia, go tell the police chief to send the boys in small groups. We will write down their names and sizes."

Ofélia changed her clothes and combed her hair asking: "I wonder if that pain in the ass, Twenty-Five, will be around."

Elizena didn't answer, so she didn't insist. Maria da Glo'ria and Edna de Oliveira came back carrying the sewing machine. Dina explained the bobbin needed new thread.

“I think that by nightfall we should have been able to fix up several outfits, don’t you?” Elizena wondered.

“I have an appointment for eight thirty. We are going out for a ride,” Dina said.

“Wow, that’s class!” Nilva kidded.

Ofelia got to the police station and gave the chief Elizena’s message. The telephone rang and Twenty-Five answered. Joao Domingo looked at Ofélia with a lecherous smile and touched her on her buttocks while the chief was distracted.

“It’s a journalist who just got here. In a little while he’ll be here and be a pest,” Dr. Emiliano said to Twenty-Five.

“Joao Domingo, take ten kids to Elizena’s house, and tell them it’s for clothes.”

The policeman walked out into the hallway. Ofélia made a movement to go away but Twenty-Five stretched his leg and put his foot in her way. She smiled at him.

“Look here, guys, I need ten on this side,” Joao Domingo said to boys, gathering up as many pieces of tablecloths and other fabrics the boys had brought from the gas station as he could. Then, he made them cover themselves as they could.

“We’re going out, to make you some clothes.” He left accompanied by ten boys. They went through the town to the street without pavement. The boys could have run away if they wished, but they didn’t want to. They knew there was no point in trying to do so. They needed clothes, or they couldn’t go far.

At Elizena’s house, Joao Domingo was different, more expansive. He hugged Maria de Jesus and touched Maria da Glo’ria’s breasts. The boys were curious and joked with one another. Elizena told Joao Domingo to behave.

“Clothes for everyone,” he said jokingly, “and if you can add some shoes, also, it would be helpful.”

“Clothes, we may get some, my darling, but shoes, those you get only with the church mice,” Ofélia said.

“The old women left the chief in want,” Joao Domingo said.

“Aren’t they compassionate? They’re always praying, saying that we spread sin around the town,” Dina complained.

“They’re smart,” the policeman said. “They get money all year long, and when they have to do something, they run away. I only know that the chief is waiting for *Dona Chiquinha* to show up.”

Elizena laughed. She felt doubly devoted to the work, because it made her feel able to prove they were not the only black sheep of Camanducaia.

Dina got some paper and pencil and began taking the boys’ names down, who had been very quiet. Edna de Oliveira had been able to find a bench where they could sit. Nilva and Maria da Glo’ria took their measurements; Dina wrote them down.

Elizena put the first pieces of fabric in the machine, moving the pedal with energy. She remembered the time when she used to do that night after night, in Extrema to help her husband. And now she had nothing. He had gone to look for a job in Belo Horizonte, the state capital, and stayed there. At first he came back home, a couple of times, but the visits became rarer and rarer, until she understood he was no longer the same. She had waited for him many years, but no more.

Dina gave her the measurements of the biggest boy of the group.

“This shirt will fit him,” Elizena said pushing away her memories.

Dina turned to the smallest boy and asked for his name.

“Zelito,” he answered.

“And how old are you?”

“Eight.”

She didn’t have to ask so many questions, but she enjoyed talking to the boy. He had very round eyes, and appeared fairly happy. She wanted to ask him more, but she refrained. She stood up carrying the paper with her notations and went to the kitchen, where Maria da Glo’ria prepared some coffee, to hide her tears.

As soon as the boys had their measurements taken, they were returned to jail, accompanied by Joao Domingo. One of them thanked the ladies for the coffee and kissed Dina and Elizena. The women smiled and followed them with their eyes, while they went away much more noisily than when they had come.

IX

Around five in the afternoon the news van had stopped in front of the police station. Three men got out: the driver; a man who carried the camera and

the flashlight; and a bearded man, who should be the reporter. Leaning at the door, Twenty-Five followed their moves. The bearded man asked for the police chief. Twenty-Five answered a bit testily. He knew the chief was busy and could not waste time giving explanations. When the reporter insisted, Twenty-Five, unconcerned, sat down and made a phone call.

Later on, the reporter got out a cigarette pack and offered Twenty-Five one. Since the photographer took one, Twenty-Five felt he couldn't refuse it and they began talking.

“What's the story on these boys?”

“All we know is that from the moment they showed up at the gas station, they made a big mess. It's been said they were disposed of by the State of Sao Paulo police.”

“How many are there?” the photographer asked.

“Fifty-two. Two or three of the bigger boys claim there were about one hundred of them in the bus, and then all were thrown off the cliff.

“Can we talk to them?”

The policeman was a little embarrassed.

“Yes, you can. But it would be better if you asked the chief, first.

The reporter understood it was a matter of hierarchy. And he didn't want to put the policeman in a bad situation.

“What about the others?”

“What others?” Twenty-Five answered a bit absent-mindedly.

“Well, if the boys say there were one hundred of them in the bus. We're missing forty-eight.”

The policeman shifted positions in his chair, and shook his hands impatiently. “This matter I don't know. This is a problem for the people in Sao Paulo. When you get there you ask them. Here, we are taking care of fifty-two.”

When Dr. Emiliano showed up, reporter and photographer stood up, telling the chief the name of the newspaper they worked for.

“What are you going to do with all of these boys?”

“I've already called the Secretary-General and he gave me authorization to take any measures I see fit. I've called the Minor's Department of Sao Paulo, and things will be resolved. They might be going back tomorrow morning.”

“Why do think this disposal happened?”

“This is an old problem,” the police chief said patiently, “when things get too tough in certain centers, this is their way out. The thing is that in my case, the boys will be sent back. In Sao Paulo they can decide whatever they want, but they can’t cross the state line to mess up my jurisdiction.

“Have you been to the place where they were discarded?”

“Not yet. I intend to go, as soon as possible. First I’m trying to get them some clothing. We’ve already got food, and later in the day we’ll have a good dinner. Tomorrow I’ll go down to bottom of the cliff.

“Can we see the boys?”

The police chief stood up and went to the cell, followed by the reporter and the photographer. Some of the boys were lying on the mattress; others had their feet wrapped in newspaper; most were playing quietly or were telling each other jokes.

The police chief asked Joao Domingo to open the door. The reporter pointed to two or three boys with whom he would like to talk. Dito was among the boys brought out. The group went back to the chief’s office, where the boys sat down on a long bench. Joao Domingo leaned against the wall, while Twenty-Five stretched his legs forward from his chair. The police chief began taking care of paperwork, while the reporter questioned Dito.

“How did you get into the bus?”

“I’ve already told him,” Dito said, pointing to the police chief.

“The reporter would like for you to repeat the story,” the chief said harshly.

Dito didn’t like that.

“OK. I was in a police station jail. And the police chief took me out of there. Me and some others. Uncle Zé and Gabriel, for instance.”

“What do you mean, for instance?”

“Only Gabriel and I ended up in the bus. The others, I don’t know.”

“Where was the bus?”

“I don’t know. We changed cells. The change was made during the day, but we had to wait until night time. Then the guys showed up and took us: Gabriel and I. The bus was in a very large courtyard. There were lots of policemen. Some had trained dogs. It looked as if there were police cars coming from other places. I saw a bunch of kids come out of a police van. All very small. Then they told us to get into the bus. It was raining when we

left Sao Paulo. We couldn't open the window curtains. I tried to calculate the time it was taking us, but I couldn't. Then I got lost. When they threw us out of the bus, I had no idea where we were."

"What did they do to you in the bus?"

"They beat us, they broke one boy's spine, and they put the dogs on us. Then, they took our clothes off, and ordered us to jump. Those, who didn't want to do it, were thrown off with a kick. I rolled down the cliff. I got all scratched," he said showing his arms and legs.

"From what height did you fall?"

"Three hundred feet."

The reporter also talked with the other boys. All repeated the same story. The black boy with reddened eyes, had only one worry.

"Yes, you'll go back," the reporter said, "but this time it'll be for the Minor's Department."

"And what's the difference?" Dito asked smirking.

The reporter didn't know what to say. Twenty-Five smiled. The police chief made as if he had not heard it, saying:

"Take another group of children to Usina Street, Joao Domingo."

X

It was dark, when the rain came back. Camanducaia had a different aspect: in the streets there were numerous people with opened umbrellas and several news cars had parked in front of the police station. The stores which would usually close their doors and windows earlier in the day were still open and lit by low voltage lights. In the bar pinkish and toothless men, drinking *cachaca*, talked about the children and about the help given to the boys by the women from Usina Street. They would have another round and expound as they could the town's gossip. They weren't sure about the number of dead at the bottom of the cliff, but rumors were that in the morning, there had been cars taking the corpses away. The oldest man said a truck driver had told him the story, "He saw them pulling out the bodies."

The others appeared worried with that story and the subject went back to the boys in the station's cell. Joao Domingo who had been drinking there with them, confirmed the number at fifty- two.

"Virgin Mary!" was heard all over.

The bar owner refilled the glasses with *cachaca* and the guys gossiped and kept on drinking.

At the same time, in another part of town, *Dona Chiquinha* had visited *Engra'cia*, meeting there *Maria Quitéria* who had just arrived.

"It was a tiresome day," said *Dona Chiquinha*.

"Just to know about the boys made me sick. Things are really crazy all over. God help us!" *Maria Quitéria* said.

"I think we can only give the police chief spiritual help," *Engra'cia* said while serving coffee her maid had brought out for the guests.

"I thought of taking apart some undershirts to make a few shirts, but who can sew like that at a moment's notice?" *Dona Chiquinha* considered.

"I collected a bunch of postcards with the image of Jesus Christ as a child, which I am sending to the police chief. We shouldn't only think about material things." *Maria Quitéria* said.

"But people nowadays don't understand that. I think they will not be satisfied," *Dona Chiquinha* added.

"If the priest was here, he could go to the police station and celebrate a mass there!" *Maria Quitéria* suggested.

"Well," *Engra'cia* said. "We can also pray, but instead of going there, we could do it right here."

The three women knelt in front of the small home altar where the images of several saints could be found, including the image of St. Sebastian pierced with arrows. They all mumbled something in silence, only her lips moving. Their prayers went on for about twenty minutes. When they finished, *Engra'cia* called her maid and asked for more coffee.

Dona Chiquinha got on the phone to the police chief.

"Look, Dr. Emiliano, only now have I been able to gather my friends to help you out. But our help can't be material. We are praying for the kids, for all the wrongs they have suffered and for their futures. I am sure God will listen to us." The police chief listened to *Dona Chiquinha* while straightening out some papers on his desk. The reporter who was interviewing him was impatient because the woman never stopped talking. She told the chief about their prayers, told him the stories of saint's sacrifices and especially that of Saint Sebastian, of whom she was a personal devotee.

Dr. Emiliano thanked her for her good intentions and told her the women of Usina Street had helped him solve the problem. Many clothes had been made and others were being finished as they talked. *Dona Chiquinha* shut up. The police chief smiled and told the reporter they could continue their interview, after he hang up.

Dona Chiquinha, straightened up her hair, immediately after hanging up, saying “Insolent man, this Dr. Emiliano! When he showed up here, he was always bothering everyone asking for this or that. Now he’s showing his claws.”

Engra’cia wanted to know what happened. Maria Quitéria, who was still drinking her coffee, was also curious.

“What an arrogant manner,” *Dona Chiquinha* said, “the police chief has just informed me that those tramps of Usina Street were solving the children’s problem. It’s really a pity the priest is not in town. We can’t let those lost women contaminate those children’s lives.”

“They are always ready to do something, just to show they can be nice people,” Maria Quitéria said.

“I think we should go to the police station and have a talk with Dr. Emiliano. After all, above him, in this town, is Judge Galdiano. And we cannot allow them to shame us in this manner,” *Dona Chiquinha* suggested.

Engra’cia, who was much heavier than the others, who had a calm expression in the eyes, and greying hair, had no intention of making that kind of a sacrifice, of leaving her house now that the rain had began again.

“What if we just make a representation and wait for the priest to come back?”, she suggested.

Dona Chiquinha thought about it for a while and was convinced that a representation was indeed the best thing, for to get to the police station they would have to cross several streets, go over mud puddles, wet their feet. And what for? To explain themselves to a poor police chief, nothing more than a simple lawyer. Never! They would talk to the judge, the greatest authority around.

“And we can use this occasion to straighten a number of things. The limits those sinful women must observe, for instance. At first they could only be at Usina Street. This police chief was appointed, got here, and look, they have advanced up to Tiradentes Street. Now, I’ve even found some of them occasionally, in the Church Square.”

“Oh!” Maria Quitéria exclaimed, desolate.

“The police chief cannot change the habits of the people in town. We must worry about taking the tramps out of the streets, and keep order around. This, he doesn’t do.” Engra’cia added.

“I never liked him very much.” *Dona Chiquinha* said. “Once, I saw him at Jacira’s home and thought he was obnoxious,” said Maria Quitéria from the pulpit of her thirty- eight years of spinsterhood.

Dona Chiquinha was angry. Her eyes were moving fast from corner to corner, her usually slow gestures had disappeared. She picked up the phone, searched for the judge’s phone number and made her call. The judge she was told, was not at home. He hadn’t arrived home yet.

“I don’t know where this judge goes when we need him the most!”

The rain increased. They could hear thunder, and lightning illuminated the room. The lights flickered, threatening to go out. Engra’cia asked the maid to make sure they have candles available, just in case.

“We must do the representation.” *Dona Chiquinha* concluded.

* * *

CHAPTER EIGHT

I

Close to midnight Elizena and her friends had finished their task: clothes had been sewn by machine or by hand and some were barely basted, but Twenty-Five had been able to pick up the order, taking the chief's car filled with shirts and pants. Elizena was happy for having helped the boys. Maria de Jesus, Ofélia and Dina felt the same. They hadn't occupied themselves with men this evening.

"I wish I could see them all dressed up," Edna de Oliveira said.

"If you want, we can stop by the police station," Nilva Barbosa suggested.

Elizena arranged her dress and washed her face as the others changed. Dina even put on a new blouse. In a few minutes they were at the police station. The chief had left but Joao Domingo was on call.

"We want to see the boys dressed up."

He laughed and said: "They are not here anymore. A bus from Sao Paulo took them away, as soon as they'd put their clothes on. The police chief went with them to the outskirts of town."

"How did they look?" Nilva Barbosa wanted to know.

"They looked like nobility," said the policeman winking at Edna.

"It was a pity we came, then." Elizena said.

"No. Stay a little longer until the police chief gets back."

But they didn't like Joao Domingo and so returned home. The rain had stopped but the streets were still covered with plenty of puddles. Dina walked carefully to keep her sandals clean, while Ofélia held her skirt away from wet walls.

"One of these days I'm gonna slap the face of that man," she said referring to Joao Domingo. "Every time he sees me he wants to squeeze my ass."

The others laughed.

"He looks stupid."

At the time they arrived at Usina street and turned on the lights in their homes, in the outskirts of town the Sao Paulo bus passed by the gas station where the boys had first been found, in the wet and cold wee hours of the

day just ending. Dito didn't feel like talking. He was travelling in a seat by himself. There were only two policemen overlooking the boys. He thought about the things he had done, rehearsed in his mind once again the supermarket assault. He remembered Mother's Scourge holding on to his belly and falling, and Encravado jumping out of the VW bus and being hit in the head. He could not understand Encravado's obstinacy. He knew they would kill him and he jumped anyway. Dito, on the other hand, had kept quiet, raising his arms above his head, when the policemen opened the bus's doors. They would have killed at the slightest movement, but he had not wanted to die then. He still had much to resolve. They covered him with beatings and here he was, reborn from the ashes. How much further would they let him go? He didn't know and didn't want to worry about it. The important thing was to return to Rio and look for Pin and Figurinha. Perhaps they had been able to save their asses. He would like to find them. There was no point in staying in that bus. He would run away before they got put back in jail. As soon as they arrived in the city, he would find a way of escaping. At the first sign, in a close turn, he would leap out. The boys who were able to get to the Juvenile Division would end up in other prisons. They would never have peace. Never. Other problems would appear, and they would be each time more and more involved in them. He didn't belong with that group. He didn't know anyone. The only one who had become his friend had stayed at the bottom of the cliff, with his weak voice, and his veins opened at the wrist.

He read several times the white with red letters: *Emergency exit. In case of accident, pull the lever upward.* He only needed to know if it worked. The trip continued. Some of the boys were making great noise, singing and laughing, as if they were returning from a picnic. He didn't see anymore the one who had had his arms dislocated, nor the one with broken arms. One of the policeman asked them to be quiet. For more than half an hour the bus kept going at very high speed. Dito now realized how far they had been taken. He adjusted his pants and noticed he had no pockets. First thing he had to do was to get better clothes. He remembered the gun he had lost in the supermarket and the money the policemen had taken from him in prison. He was clean, not a nickel. After he got clothes, he would have to get money. After that he would go to Rio, probably by train, as he had already done several times, or, perhaps hitchhiking, helping some truck

driver? He would try. The important thing was to get to town, pull that lever and run. He would let the naive boys be happy going back to jail.

He relaxed against the seat. The night was very dark and the few cars that met them on the road passed at high speed. A little after that the city's mercury vapor street lights began to show up, and in the distance, more lanes also well lit appeared. They went over an overpass, and then he recognized the beginning of the city proper. He looked at the policeman talking, and at the other who had sat in the back seat and napped.

He pulled the lever, as the sign indicated, and there was a noise at the door. He felt it was open but stayed seated, holding on to the lever. This was not the best time to get out. The bus went through an avenue, turned right, turned left, went up a steep hill, slowly. At an intersection there were several cars and a garbage truck stopped. That was the opportunity he had been waiting for. He pushed the door open and jumped out. He ran in front of the garbage truck, got up a narrow street, ended up in a little square, took the underground street crossing, and got out close to a church, where he hid himself. He made himself comfortable in the church's stairway. Later on, when he discovered a niche in the wall close to a side door, he realized he could stay there safely. He sat down, leaned against the wall and fell asleep.

He woke up with sun already up, hearing the noise of cars passing by. The church bells tolled a few times, and he thought it was time to go. He walked through the streets, one after another until he reached a square where there were some fruit stands established. People were going back and forth buying fruits, carrying bags with their purchases inside. He walked a little further to the heart of the open market, approached some vendors, offering his help. But some of them didn't even answer him. Then he got hold of an old basket and walked behind shopping housewives. One of them, who appeared angry, accepted his help. She had a discussion with the fresh fish vendor and with the tomato man; she spent ten minutes deciding between two lettuces and complained with the man who sold her lard. Dito would pick up the purchases and put them in the basket he was carrying. The woman also asked him to hold on to the cart she had brought, whose wheel had come loose.

"A cheap cart," she said, "I wasted money buying it."

Dito thought it was good the cart had given problems, for otherwise he wouldn't have the job. But the woman didn't let go of the subject,

complaining about it to everyone she met, to the vendors, and Dito found that very tiresome. About two hours after Dito started to work for her, she decided to leave. The basket was heavy now. Dito was sweating, although the morning had been chilly. He asked where she lived; she answered him in a bad temper and refused to take a cab. They walked. Dito had not imagined it would be so far. But he got excited at the possibility of a tip. Perhaps the woman saved money on the taxi to be able to give him a better tip.

They went into a street of one-story houses, surrounded by yards and garages. Children played riding bicycles, and there were cars parked on both sides of the street. The woman walked about thirty feet ahead of Dito. They passed all the houses and reached a small four-story building. She opened its gate and said.

“It’s on the top floor.”

They went up the stairs, landing at an apartment with wooden floors, which the woman told him to enter through the service door. The kitchen was large, with formica cabinets and on the table were the remains of breakfast. Dito lowered the basket, and the woman told him to start taking the packages out and place them on the table. He didn’t refuse. After that he got his basket and waited for her to pay him. The woman gave him two bills of one cruzeiro each.

He shook his head, but the woman made as if she had not understood.

“My service is more than that. I’ve been following you since eight in the morning.”

“I don’t give more than that to anyone,” she said, putting the bills on the table close to Dito. Then she added, “it was just to pick up a few things and bring them, it’s not worth more than that.”

“You should have asked my price.”

The woman insisted she was used to paying this and that this was not her first time. Dito smiled nervously and pushed the money to the center of the table, “I don’t think you are doing right.”

The woman stopped arranging the packages, and, putting her hands on her waist, said, “Look here you punk...”

Dito felt his ears burn, and so did the scar above his eye. His face contracted and the air he breathed felt warm. He wasn’t going to stand for

that kind of insult, and he wasn't going to let that little woman talk to him that way. He pushed her, and she lost her balance, falling over the chairs.

“Go push your mother! You, sassy punk!”

Dito was overwhelmed by rage. He gave the woman a blow to her face and she fell to the ground. He then pushed all her purchases from the table to the floor. He picked up a broom, and breaking its handle, beat the woman up. Her husband woke up and came to see what was going on. He was an old man and heavy set. He saw the boy beating his wife and entered into the fight, taking some blows also. He left saying he was going to get his gun. Dito got her purse and took away all the money he found and disappeared. He went out through the kitchen door, locked the door from the outside, and threw the key in the yard.

Far away, he counted his money and began to feel better. The job had brought him more than he could have hoped for. With that kind of money he would be able to buy a good pair of pants. If necessary, he could always steal a pair of shoes.

II

It was a street of small stores, filled with vendors trying to attract customers by shouting their specials in the sidewalks. They invited people to come in and check the merchandise, which they said was of prime quality. Some clapped their hands, others walked up and down, while from some doors there was loud music filling the street. The loudest man was also the tallest. Mounted on stilts, with very long striped pants he announced his bargains, through a megaphone, which drowned out the sounds of his competitors.

Dito approached a store. The young women observed him. He saw the cheap pants, and asked to try them on. One of the girls matched a pair of pants to his body, to find out the width he needed and then sent him to the back room to try it on. He hurried back when he saw that pair was too loose in the waist. The young woman gave him another pair, which fit so well he wouldn't need a belt. He asked the price and was happy to realize he had the money. He became interested in the canvas shoes, choosing a brown pair with rubber soles. The young woman gave him the bill and painfully he gave her the bill of one hundred he had with him, waiting for his change of six cruzeiros back.

After he got dressed he realized he didn't have money for a sandwich, but reasoned that the most important thing had been done. From then on he had to get some more money, get a gun and go to Rio, unless he were able to find his old pals, Zé Ina'cio, Armadillo and Black Fly.

He decided to pass by the parking lots of Sao Joao Avenue and look for them. If they were not there, they would certainly be around Ju'lio de Mesquita Square or in the neighborhood of the flower market, in Arouche Square. He would probably meet them there if he just waited long enough.

He took a bus, always very aware of the people around him, and he went to the front to sit next to the driver, where people would have a harder time observing him. The bus went by numerous streets, got caught a couple of times in traffic jams, passed by the sky scrapers of downtown where the big banks were established, arriving at Anhangabau'. He got out, drank a glass of sugar cane juice, thinking continuously about how to get more money. Zé Igna'cio could possibly help, maybe some kind of work might show up.

He went by a parking lot and saw Hat in the same place as always. He didn't know how someone could spend year after year doing the same thing, looking after cars that entered or left the parking lot. He approached him and asked about Black Fly. Hat stood up to help a woman who was not able to park her car in the narrow space he had directed her to and returned to chat again.

"He was too dumb. I got tired of telling him things. He ended up in a bad deal. He ran away from here to there and back again, but they caught up with him. I don't know where he's at."

"And Zé Ina'cio?"

"He was here yesterday. He's doing okay. He takes care of those two cars, and when the owner goes to Santos he takes Zé Ina'cio with him."

Dito looked at the cars pointed out by Hat. One was a Sport Mercedes the other was an imported Ford. He was glad his friend was doing well.

"If you wait a little bit, he'll be around," Hat told him.

Dito walked for a while in Duke of Caxias Avenue. Stopping at a grocery he purchased a pear, which he ate on the sidewalk as he observed a street woman trying to put a crate with her stuff over her head and couldn't. He found it amusing that every time the woman tried to raise the crate up, something would fall off.

He soon tired of that and went toward Minhocao, close to the repair shop and the Nac,ões Theater. He saw an old man who was surrounded by dogs. There were at least six dogs, some well fed, some thin and dirty. The man was eating from a can and dispensing the leftovers to the dogs.

He went around them, deciding to take a look at the theater posters. There were women in bikinis, some with their breasts exposed; one even looked like Beth: similar face, similar distant air. He continued to walk through the wet sidewalks, filled with cigarette butts, and thought of Beth, of the night they spent together, of her saying delicious things. He would have liked those moments to last. Then he remembered Beth getting home with that other guy who had his hand on her shoulders. And she smiled at him. He wouldn't like to see her again. He would like to see Pin and Figurinha and figure out why the supermarket job hadn't worked out. He remembered his hands filled with money, the gate closing, the car that didn't get started, the hurried pull off, the shots, time going by, the narrow passage for the car, his face on the glass, Mother's Scourge's feet against the windshield, the machine gun shots hitting him across the waist. He tried to hold Encravado back, but he was also scared. Encravado hurried. The shot to his head, the body falling. He still didn't know how the policemen had arrived so soon. Neither Pin nor Figurinha had been able to escape.

He felt strange, when in the street he met a woman with a shiny pocket book who also reminded him of Beth. He didn't want to think about her. He remembered what happened to Brown Sugar for having fallen for a woman. He remembered Pin's jokes and Encravado's motto:

“Women are only for fucking!”

At Deodoro's Square children were playing in the playground. The sun escaping through the branches of the ficus trees shone on the old men reading newspapers on the park benches; on the nursemaids pushing babies' carriages; on the young boy throwing a ball for the hairy dog to catch. In the side streets traffic was heavy, and he saw the boy afraid to go pick up a loose ball that had fallen in the midst of traffic.

Dito continued on in Palmeiras Street stopping next to men, who, shirtless, took out a VW engine from a car chassis, and spread their tools and car parts on the sidewalk. He squatted among them and was ready to be of service. Who knows if he wouldn't be able to get some money from that?

The men took out the engine, examined the parts that weren't good, threw aside some rubber rings and cursed.

Dito began to think: they are going to need some parts and there are no stores close by. If they want to ask him to run those errands they will have to tip him. If they wanted something else, heavier work, they could ask. A sweaty and tense man asked him if he knew Arnaldo's shop.

"Over by the bakery."

Dito nodded.

"Go there and bring me three washers of this type and rubber gaskets like these."

He gathered the samples. His hand was immediately covered with grease, but he didn't mind. Crossing the street he put the bill they had given him in his pocket. At the store the salesman got little rubber gaskets and the washers from drawers filled with such things and patiently selected the ones needed and wrapped everything afterwards. Dito gave him the money but when the man gave him the change back Dito thought it might be easier if he could give him a receipt. The man didn't like that, but wrote him a receipt.

Dito went back hurriedly to the guys, gave them the package, the receipt and the change. The tense man found all correct and gave Dito a bill. He stayed around looking at their work, but got tired and decided to go back to the parking place to find Zé Ina'cio. His friend was happy to see him.

"How's it going, man?"

Dito smiled, looking at Zé Ina'cio's new cap and recognized the friend. The same freckles on his face, the same blond eyebrows and arms covered with gold colored hair.

"Hat told me you're doing well..."

"The man is fine. Once a week he shows up and we go to Santos. He does what he needs and I take care of the cars."

"Is it good to drive a Mercedes?"

"It's great. You don't even want to drive another car."

While Zé Ina'cio continued to talk about his employer, who was great, Dito thought of the similarities the man had with Crystal. He had also been kind; had looked as if he didn't mind spending money; and drove a car that felt like a feather mattress. The problem was that he only brought him, Dito, problems. Had he not been tough, he would have been a goner. But he hoped Zé

Ina'cio's guy was different. Zé Ina'cio deserved something good. But what he wanted to propose to his friend didn't really involve the way he made money. He had plans to do another job on a supermarket, and maybe Zé Ina'cio might be game. Dito didn't know how to broach it. Perhaps he should talk about it another time. Perhaps the following day. He didn't want to look hurried. And he knew that would please Zé Ina'cio.

They sat down on the curb, on the less busy side of the street. Zé Ina'cio got an American cigarette pack from his pocket and offered Dito one.

Dito smiled, taking his first draw.

“Wow! What a luxury!”

Zé Ina'cio smiled and continued to talk, this time about the woman the rich man would meet in Guaruja' whom he had seen a couple of times.

“Is she the one who drives the Ford?”

“No. That's his wife. I'm talking about his outside dessert. She's great!”

Zé Ina'cio paused, inhaling deeply and exhaling the smoke from his lungs slowly.

“Can you believe she's been putting the makes on me?”

Dito didn't say anything. He just looked at his friend.

“I went to deliver some packages the man sent her. And do you know how she received me? She had her bra and panties on. That's all.”

“Panties or a bikini?”

The two were quiet for a while, Zé Ina'cio with a distant look as if he were still remembering the woman.

“She must be about twenty-six, and she has everything in the right places, man.”

“The man doesn't need a helper?” Dito asked jokingly.

“I think he's getting fed up with me. I am gonna have her.”

A van arrived looking for parking. Zé Ina'cio stood up to tell him only sedans were permitted in the lot. The man didn't like that answer, but Hat showed up and confirmed the restriction. Dito continued seated, knowing that interruption wouldn't last long. The driver backed up and pulled away in a great fury.

Dito thought this might be a good moment to talk to Zé Ina'cio about his plans. His friend still showed a distant look, as if he thought of the

woman in her undies.

“And what are you gonna offer her?” Dito wanted to know.

“That’s the problem. With this shitty life, I can’t even try with her.”

“She’ll see you’re small potatoes. If she lets you go to bed with her, it will only be a one shot deal,” Dito said.

“Yeah, it sucks!”

“If you were willing to be part of a job, you could have some dough to impress her.”

“What job?”

“To get the dough of a supermarket. On a day of great business.”

Zé Ina’cio smiled in disbelief.

“It’s sure money, man.”

Zé Ina’cio wasn’t convinced.

“Armadillo got mixed up with something like that... Fucked over... Got no money, got nothing. Nothing, man!”

Dito insisted.

“In Rio, we almost put our hands on a big score. I had the money all the time with me. We got screwed because one guy rushed.”

“What guy?”

“Mother’s Scourge. At the time to get away with the car he freaked out.”

“So?”

“He fucked himself and we all went to jail.”

“Doesn’t that always happen?”

Dito was upset with Zé Ina’cio’s obstinacy.

“You need to try to get something. You think that woman will have anything to do with you knowing you are a scumbag?”

Zé Ina’cio looked as if he were seeing the woman again: thick thighs, flat belly, pink breasts. There was only a little pair of panties separating him from that body, covered with French perfume. When he paid attention to Dito he heard:

“Lots of money, man. I had a bunch of money in my hands. Luck was close to me. It will come back. I know our time is coming.”

“And how did this plan work in Rio?”

“I looked over a supermarket and studied the manager’s office. Then, I just had to wait for the right opportunity.”

Zé Ina'cio got another cigarette out. Dito just thanked him.

“It’s the only way to get our lives straight. Or we will always be among the lowest of the low. We’ll end up like Hat. Looking at other people’s cars coming and going from the parking lot, all our lives.

III

On a dark and rainy morning when Sao Paulo’s streets lights were still on, Dito and Zé Ina'cio went to supermarket. Dito picked up a cart and pushed it through the aisles of canned goods and bottles. In a few moments, when they got to the deli counter, they discovered the manager’s office was not there. That was something Dito had not counted on, but he didn’t feel perturbed.

“Ask at the cash register how we can talk to the manager. Say it’s the guy who came to talk about a job. The woman will tell you.”

He went about pushing his cart, putting a few things inside it, and following from afar Zé Ina'cio’s approach to a young woman at the cash register, speaking with her, and then leaving the store. Dito realized Zé Ina'cio would be waiting for him on the outside, so he pushed the cart through the cash register, paid, and waited for the redheaded girl put his purchases in a bag.

“The manager’s office is in that building,” Zé Ina'cio said, when they met.

They went into the building. Dito looked in the panel above the elevator, for the manager’s floor. He couldn’t find it. A man, behind the lobby’s counter told him it was on the third floor. Dito told Zé Ina'cio to stay behind minding the grocery bag.

“I’m going, just to take a look.”

Dito went up the stairs, while Zé Ina'cio stayed at the door of the building watching cars passing by in the street. After Dito arrived on the third floor, he followed a long hallway with a counter and glass wall-divisions. He saw several young women typing and men busy with paperwork. A few people were making payments, while a bald man counted money next to a dark man with uncombed hair.

The office was large and Dito realized the job would be dangerous. He walked up to the bathrooms at the end of the hall and found another stairway, which he climbed up to the next floor. He was nicely surprised: it

was there, and not on the third floor, that the money was kept. There was a security guard and a fat man counted piles of money, passing them to an older man with a black case. The fat man was protected by a screen and his compartment had a locked door. On his side there was a fan, which on this cool dark morning was not working.

Though he tried to absorb all the details on this floor, he was at a loss on how to proceed. He decided to go up another flight of stairs but soon realized that it was not part of the supermarket anymore. Doors with small signs indicated a floor devoted to small businesses and doctors' and dentists' offices. He returned to the bathroom on the fourth floor, noticed they were large and that their doors had keys. He took and kept them, after making sure they locked the doors. This was the first sign he had that things might work out. He went down the stairs to the ground level. Zé Ina'cio had been impatiently waiting for him; and as soon as they left the building, Dito began explaining the plan's possibilities to his friend.

"We'll make a drawing when we gwt to your parking lot," Dito said.

"You think they keep the money there?"

"I saw the guy counting a pile of cash," Dito explained.

"And what would be the best day?"

"Maybe Thursday?"

"Why Thursday?"

"I don't know," Dito argued, "this we can decide later."

"I think it a good idea to go back there again and again.

"That's what we'll do. But what I'm thinking of is how to get inside that office."

"How, man? Are you crazy?"

Dito smiled. "The bunch of dough the fat man was counting would let us take a vacation for several years."

Zé Ina'cio felt more attracted to the plan now. It was true he wouldn't amount to much by parking and washing cars. Dito was right about it. And since it was possible he might meet that woman again, how could he impress her if he didn't have any money? If the plan worked, it would be different. He would invite her to come to a hotel with him, and then she would know he had money, that he wasn't just a helpless case.

Dito began to scribble on a paper. He drew the stairway, and the bathroom doors. Then, he had an idea he thought was important:

“Depending on the time the office closes, we can wait for the attack in the bathroom.”

Zé Ina’cio didn’t venture any opinion, for he had never been good at thinking.

“Another idea is for us to open one of the offices in the fifth floor, using a lockpick. We lock the people in the bathroom and then wait in an office, until the entire affair is over. Then we go to the top floor and jump to the neighbouring building.”

Dito wasn’t sure whether the next building was built attached or separated from the manager’s office building.

“Do you remember if they are next to each other?”

An imported car arrived at the parking lot. Hat stood up to give instructions to the driver, Zé Ina’cio kept looking at the car as his thoughts wandered from the new car, to the woman in panties, and to the supermarket adventure.

“While everyone is looking for us, we’re gonna be only a few feet from the office.”

Zé Ina’cio smiled nervously. “It’s very dangerous, man!”

“Oh, fuck it. Tell me something that’s not dangerous.”

The driver got out of the car. Hat was being very nice to him and asked Zé Ina’cio to finish parking the car. Dito noticed his friends’ pleasure in driving that car, as he moved it forward and backward. When he came back to sit down, Dito said:

“With your part in this job, you’ll be able to buy two of those cars. You hide the dough for a couple of years and then let fly with it.”

Zé Ina’cio had other plans, closer to reality: “Not a car! If I get some real money, I’m buying an apartment for auntie.””Who is auntie?”

“The old woman who raised me. When I left her she cried a lot. Then I promised her that one day I would help her out.”

“And where does she live?”

“In a slum, close to Continental Park.”

Dito looked at his friend as if he had never known him. He envied him for having someone about whom he could worry. And he repeated the plan. Zé Ina’cio already knew how to behave, and got impatient.

“Don’t get mad, man,” Dito warned, “we must know this in our sleep. Or they will catch us.”

“And the guns?”

“I’ll get them.”

“Who will go in first?”

“I will,” Dito answered. “I’ll get one of the women, put a gun to her head. You get the rest into the bathroom. Then we clean out the cashier. We let some bills fall in direction of the elevator and we return by the back stairs.”

Zé Ina’cio smiled. He seemed convinced of the plan’s virtues.

“Where do you think they will be looking for us?” Dito asked.

Zé Ina’cio smiled again and asked: “What if the guys from the fifth floor show up, where do we go?”

“That’s why I think the best day would be a Friday. Saturday the offices aren’t open. We can stay in the offices all day long if necessary.”

“But what if someone arrives?”

“What if he does? We grab the son of bitch and lock him up in the bathroom.”

Zé Ina’cio leaned against the wall covered by old, colorful advertising posters, played with a beer bottle cap he found on the ground and said, “If it works, I’ll leave this city.”

Dito who was also leaning against the wall, cleaned some dirt off his shoes.

“I’ll go to Rio. I was doing well with a gang there. I met a really nice girl. Maybe we’ll live together. But before that, I have to square some accounts.”

Zé Ina’cio was finally able to bend the beer bottle cap, “What accounts?”

“With the cemetery dude who killed Pichote.” Dito knew Zé Ina’cio didn’t know who Pichote was, but he didn’t feel like explaining either. “His name is Galego. I’ll meet him, face to face. Then I’ll kill him.”

“What if they catch you?”

“I doubt they will. With money in the pocket everything is easier. I’ll kill Galego and then I’ll look for another guy called Eyelash. He, Xereta, Panther and Overtime left me this memento.” Dito raised up his pants leg and Zé Ina’cio saw the foot deformity. “They will get it one way or another. Here in Sao Paulo, I’ll give good money to the person who can get me the address of police chief Dr. Mauro. I’ll enjoy meeting him.”

“Wow, you’ll have a lot to do!”

“With money, man, we don’t need to hurry. It will be one at a time, according to God’s wishes. No rush.” Zé Ina’cio’s plans did not include vengeance. He only wanted to escape away with the woman he had seen in her underwear, because he felt she wasn’t in love with the owner of the cars. “I’m gonna give Hat some money too,” he said. “He helped me a lot. At first I didn’t know how to move a car.”

They both stayed quiet, until Zé Ina’cio asked him a question he didn’t know how to answer.

“What if Black Fly shows up and wants a piece of the action?”

“We tell him there are no openings.”

IV

That night Zé Ina’cio showed up again, a little nervous but happy. He found Dito lying underneath a broken down van, that had been abandoned for many weeks.

“Look here, man!”

Dito came out from under the car. Zé Ina’cio opened up a package wrapped in newsprint, and several guns appeared. One of them was new.

“Where did you find them?”

His friend explained. A car had parked and the driver had gone away. After a few minutes Zé Ina’cio got the courage to open the glove compartment. He took out a pair of sun glasses, a lighter and the package. “I thought it was pretty heavy and tried right off to know what it was and saw the weapons.”

“Wow, man, everything is going in our favor. This is proof that the plan will work.”

“What are we gonna do with the guns?”

“We hide them under the van, until tomorrow.”

Zé Ina’cio looked at the guns again, while Dito reminded him:

“Now we gotta get some money for a lockpick and bullets.”

Zé Ina’cio and Dito pulled all the money they had out of their pockets.

“It’s enough for the pick. The bullets we get by force.”

The two walked down the Sao Joao avenue, Dito kicking bottle caps. When they reached a convenience store run by a Japanese family, Zé Ina’cio joked that maybe they could buy the bullets there. They went in and

the Japanese woman came out to serve them. In truth, she didn't like their presence there. They walked among the aisles and shelves filled with candies and chocolates. Zé Ina'cio grabbed some chocolate bars, Dito picked up some mint and cream hard candies, placing a pile of coins by the cash register. The Japanese woman tried to count the change as fast as she could, but when she discovered the money was not enough — not even for half of what they took — they had gone.

The woman got to the door, went out into the sidewalk, but they were already far away, either jumping or springing into short runs, until they finally disappeared among the hurrying crowd on the sidewalks, indifferent to what occurred around them.

They passed by the door of the targeted supermarket. Dito studiously observed all entrances to the building, and sent Zé Ina'cio to look and see if they could go from one building to another up on the roofs. Dito sat down by the curb at a gas station and looked at the traffic in the streets and below *Minhocao*. Zé Ina'cio came back in a rush, crossing dangerously the street's several lanes, and sat next to Dito.

“There is no space between the two buildings. It'll be easy to get from one to another.”

Dito didn't say anything. He was pleased with his friend's enthusiasm. It was rare for him to get excited.

“What about the back of the buildings, d'you know what's back there? An old house.” Zé Ina'cio continued animated.

Dito knew this would make the plan's execution even easier.

“And is there a garage entrance?”

“Yes, but I didn't see any cars.”

“Do you know what I'm thinking?” Dito asked. “What if tomorrow the building's custodians don't let us come in?”

That doubt appeared to pierce Zé Ina'cio's brains. “What should we do?” He asked.

“We'll attack today. We've already got the guns; we've got until later this afternoon to get hold of some bullets. Then, we can get a bag. And that's it.”

Zé Ina'cio felt a cold chill go up his spine. He had never been involved in a plan of such magnitude. When Dito, Black Fly and Armadillo had broken into a bakery, he, Zé Ina'cio, had been in jail. He had only heard

them talk about it. Black Fly used to lean against the wall and recount their adventure. And whenever he could, he would exaggerate the details, making it seem as if he, Black Fly, had been the leader of the group. But Zé Ina'cio knew all along that Dito had been the planner. That's why he wasn't scared now.

“Then, I'm gonna get us some bullets, while you get hold of the lockpick.”

“Done!”

They stood up. Zé Ina'cio crossed the street again, in between speeding cars. Dito ran to catch a bus.

V

Pa'dua's mechanic shop was located in a narrow alley populated by cats and dogs hiding behind large garbage cans, and a bunch of boys playing an improvised game of soccer. On the sidewalks several cars were parked, some waiting to be worked on, others simply rusting out, exposed as they were to the prolonged effects of sun and rain. The location served also as home to several street people. Pa'dua was glad to see Dito.

“You! Where have you been?”

Pa'dua was a bald Italian, short with energetic eyes, who always smiled, as if he had no problems. The shop was small and was lit only by two light bulbs. Along the walls there were narrow counters and from the ceiling hung several objects, some of which had become part of the decor, while others just waited to be picked up by their owners. There were also small and large refrigerators, tricycles' wheels, chains, pulleys, spiral springs, compressors, serpentine and all kinds of tools.

The Italian would spend most of his time seated on a bench, where he puzzled over broken objects. When Dito came in, he was studying a defective generator.

“I'll have to have this disassembled again to see what in hell is the problem,” the Italian said.

Dito talked to him about the lockpick. The man frowned at that idea.

“Again?”

Dito shrugged his shoulders and smiled. “This will be a good one. You can take a part of the profit, easy!”

The Italian was pleased. He opened a drawer and began to show Dito some keys, until the young man found one similar to the one he might need.

“This would work.”

Pa’dua continued to go through his drawer, which was full of little things. Then, he showed the true lockpick for that kind of lock. Dito was happy.

“That’s it!”

“You can use up to twenty different variations with it,” the Italian told him. “If after that you still can’t open it, it would be better to give up.”

The man smiled, his small eyes shining. Dito smiled also and put the key in his pocket, listening to the Pa’dua’s story of how Armadillo had got him into trouble.

“I won’t work with him any more,” he said, “at the last moment he gets out and still fingers you.”

Dito listened but refused to make any accusations about his friend.

“He ended up getting into real trouble.”

Pa’dua turned on the generator one more time, but it didn’t turn. Dito used this moment to leave, promising to return. He passed by a car inhabited by a homeless man, whose bald head, dusty eyes and hair were the only parts he could see as he walked. Some boys still played with a ball, while cats were sifting through the garbage and dogs were holding on to bones on the ground.

He returned to the square where he should meet Zé Ina’cio, sat on a bench and stared at the children playing in the playground, enjoying the dark but warm afternoon. Behind them city gardeners sprinkled flower beds with water, ignoring the ficus seeds that covered the ground. There were many cars in the surrounding streets and once in a while he could hear them brake at the red lights. On one side of the square under the sign of a photo lab, he spotted Zé Ina’cio coming along slowly, unhurried, crossing the street without waiting for the cars to stop at the light.

“It was tough, man,” he said as he sat down.

“But did you get it?”

“Of course!”

“I got the lockpick also,” Dito replied.

Zé Ina’cio took out a pack of bullets from his pocket, saying: “I think there are about thirty-eight.”

“That’s OK. We’ll keep the rest.”

Dito opened the package and asked Zé Ina’cio to make cover, so no one would be able to see him load the drum.

“Done!”

They wrapped up the left over bullets again. Dito sighed with relief.

“Later on we go to the building. Pray for everything to work,” Dito said.

Zé Ina’cio felt a cold chill through his spine. “I’m a little scared.”

“That’s normal, man. Think about the woman and your fear will go away.”

“And what do you think about?”

Though the question took Dito by surprise, he answered:

“I don’t know. Perhaps about Beth, Mother Dolores or even about Magda, who lays everyone in Manguê.”

“And did you fuck her?”

“When I was there I couldn’t. I was there for something else.”

Zé Ina’cio took out his American cigarettes and offered one to Dito. They smoked, blowing the smoke lazily in the light air of the afternoon.

“You go in first,” Dito said, “we buy a newspaper and put it under the arm. If the jerk in the lobby wants to know what you’re doing, you say you are taking the newspaper to your boss in the office. Go ahead, because it’ll work.”

“What about you?”

“I’ll follow you. He won’t try something funny with me. I won’t let him,” Dito said.

“What if there’s no money around, today?”

“Ppfff!... Do you think these sons of bitches pass one day without money?” Dito paused then continued. “We can’t work out every possibility, man. We have to act.” Saying that he stood up and walked away. Zé Ina’cio followed him.

They crossed Minhocao’s several lanes, until they reached the supermarket, which at that time was full of customers.

“See how crowded it is?” Dito remarked. Zé Ina’cio’s courage was renewed. He got into the building putting the newspaper under his arm, as Dito had suggested. There were other people waiting for the elevator. He stood in line. The porter didn’t say anything. Zé Ina’cio got on the elevator.

Dito's turn came later. He was worse dressed than his colleague. The porter observed him but didn't say anything. He played around with the package where he was carrying the guns. But as he got out of the elevator on the fifth floor, the elevator operator asked him: "Who are you gonna see here?"

"The dentist." Dito said.

"I think he has not come."

"I talked to him downstairs. He's coming."

As soon as the corridor was left in silence, Dito looked for an office where he couldn't see any lights. Then he told Zé Ina'cio to pick the lock of that office, while he, Dito, would go take a look at the fourth floor. He disappeared in the stairway, returning soon afterwards to say everything was going according to plan. The door opened, and Zé Ina'cio didn't know what to do.

They went in and shut the door. Inside they experimented with the lockpick several times. They were sure they could open and lock the door as they wished. Dito examined the room. There were dusty cabinets, a telephone on the floor, books and a thick layer of dust on the table.

"I think no one has been coming here at all."

"Could we have this much luck?" Zé Ina'cio said in a low voice.

Besides the bathroom there was also a closet with a small stove and a sink.

"If someone shows up, we can hide here," Dito said of the closet.

"We don't need to hide. We take the guy down." Zé Ina'cio said with conviction.

Dito unpacked the guns and gave one to his friend.

"The bag stays with me."

"Won't it be better to wait until six, when there will be fewer office workers?"

"It makes no difference. Besides we'd run the risk they might have locked the safe."

"Then, let's go," Zé Ina'cio said, as if he would like to end the job as soon as possible."

VI

Dito shut the office door and went with Zé Ina'cio down the stairway. There was nothing else they had to say to each other. Any wrong move would be

trouble. They walked as lightly as they could, their ears alert to the smallest noises. Dito realized Zé Ina'cio was scared; but he was also scared, though, as usual, he was putting up a good front. He wasn't going to panic now. He knew, however, that any shift in plan would alarm Zé Ina'cio so much as to render him incapable of action.

They reached the counter, at the wire cage protecting the cashier. One more step and they would jump inside. Dito was the first one to jump, and he heard the woman's scream as soon as he landed. The other woman who saw him with gun in hand, tried to rush out, but he held her back. Zé Ina'cio, ran in a different direction, to where three or four men were.

"One word and you die!"

Dito had the weapon pointed at the woman's back.

"Let's go to the cash register, beauty."

The woman was shaking. The cashier tried one move, but Dito pointed the gun at him and he gave up. He told him to sit down on the floor, with his arms above his head. Then, he gave the bag to the woman.

"Fill it up with dough!"

She cried and begged. Dito told her to shut up. She picked up the rolls of bills and began putting them in the bag. Zé Ina'cio was tense.

"Open that drawer," Dito ordered.

The woman obeyed. She turned the key and a strong siren, very loud began to scream. Dito pushed the woman aside, shut the drawer but couldn't turn off the siren. The noise scared him. The cashier tried to hold him by the legs, he cocked the gun, while the woman threw herself on the floor.

Dito perceived the plan had gone wrong. The only thing to do was to plan his escape as coldly as possible. He put some rolls of money in his pocket and made a sign to Zé Ina'cio.

He jumped back over the counter. His friend did the same. They ran through the corridor, but heard the security guards galloping after them, as they reached the fifth floor. Hurriedly he looked for the lockpick in his pocket while damning himself for having asked the woman to look into that drawer. He inserted the lockpick in the lock but was too impatient to try several times until the key worked. Zé Ina'cio tried the same thing, but the lockpick ended up breaking. He tried still to push through the piece left inside the lock but couldn't make it work.

Dito picked up what was left of the lockpick and lamented not having asked Pa'dua for a file. It had been a simple mistake and they would pay for it. How could he have forgotten such important thing? Dito's eyes were very red and his hands began to tremble. He didn't have the courage to face Zé Ina'cio.

The siren continued to sound. Louder and louder. The noise was entering his ears and exploding inside his brain as a veritable bomb.

They would have to go on, climbing the stairs, up to the roof, and from there to the neighboring building. There was no other alternative. Zé Ina'cio went ahead. He ran and crawled, for he knew they were being stalked. One error would be enough; they would die. Dito didn't have as much energy for the escape as in previous times. The money had been so close to him, so secure, and there had been so many rolls in the bag. Why had he asked the woman to open that drawer? His recriminations wouldn't stop.

"Let's go on up," Dito said angrily, "we can escape from there."

Zé Ina'cio wasn't sure any more. He was confused. He knew very well what awaited him when the police reached them. After they jumped the wall they were able to reach a terrace. But, to their surprise, they could not go to the other building, because it was much taller than the one they were on. The wall up was smooth and about thirty feet tall. Dito looked to the back of the building where they were and saw the square down below. They had to backtrack. He tried to put some wood planks on the wall they had jumped over, but they couldn't finish the job, being surprised by voices, the growling of dogs and orders of command. The siren was still ringing. Both he and Zé Ina'cio had their guns in hand, with their eyes transfixed on the cement wall over which they saw the police coming. Zé Ina'cio saw the wooden ladder being brought in. What if they killed the policemen one by one as they climbed the ladder? If they were good shots, they could kill at least eight. What then? Zé Ina'cio had his head filled with such questions. He felt like crying and insulting, even killing Dito. He looked at Dito and saw him also crying. He was sorry. He was sure there was no escape. He was involved in the greatest mess of his life and saw no way out of it. Their best hope would be to be dragged off the building, down the stairs, put in the police van and be taken to the police station. He could remember well the last time he had been in jail.

Dito, though scared, was more emotionally distant than Zé Ina'cio. He was crying for the things he wouldn't ever do: punishment for Galego, Xereta, Panther and Overtime; the scars Dr. Mauro, Caramel and Big Purple would never acquire. He lamented not being able to talk to Mother Dolores, and ask her about Manguito, and he probably would never again have news of Pin and Figurinha. He felt as if a black curtain was rolling down around him, separating him from the world. The first policeman showed up and Dito didn't stop to think. He cocked the gun. The policeman's hat disappeared down below. They heard voices and new orders. The top of the wooden ladder showed up again and Dito and Zé Ina'cio shot at it.

Dito imagined that, if they could find a piece of cord, they might attach it to something on the terrace and slide down to the floor below. But he gave up this idea knowing they would be caught by the people in the offices. It was the same thing. He looked around the terrace and didn't see anything useful, only a can with hardened cement; several others with tar; broken roof tiles and bricks, some wires, scraps of wood. He looked inside his pocket and calculated how many of the bullets they had left. He understood then that his life and Zé Ina'cio's would depend on six more bullets. After that, the police would come.

VII

There was a moment of silence. Dito knew they were preparing some kind of surprise. Zé Ina'cio continued to cry. They didn't talk to each other. They heard the dog barking. Zé Ina'cio was the first one to shoot. The animal turned away, jumped back then advanced. Dito hit him on the back, but that didn't stop the police from jumping over the wall. The policeman ahead of the group was tall and had a mustache. When Dito faced him, he remembered Dr. Mauro.

“Let's go. Put the gun down, and you can escape.”

Dito didn't know whether he should obey. He looked sideways and saw that Zé Ina'cio had been bitten several times, though the dog he killed was down in front of him. The policeman advanced, crawling as if he were ready to jump when Dito pulled the trigger. Other policemen were following him, and still others were coming down the wall. Dito knew it would be impossible to continue to shoot. It wouldn't work. Zé Ina'cio didn't resist the pressure, nor the mustachioed man's orders.

“Let’s go, man. Do as your friend is doing.”

Dito had no way to resist and threw his gun on the ground. Meanwhile, one of the policemen picked up an iron bar and laid the first blow on Zé Ina’cio.

“Let’s go, you son of a bitch. Let’s see if you know how to fly!”

The man with a mustache held Dito by his hair, and the policeman behind him used his knee to kick Dito in the stomach. Dito felt a violent pain but didn’t faint. He could still see what they were doing to Zé Ina’cio. A man whacked him with the iron bar and pushed him towards the street. One of the blows was on the head, and Zé Ina’cio held his own head with both hands, while blood covered it. Dito was trying hard to escape from the arms of those holding him down. But he couldn’t move. They laughed at his efforts, while one of the dogs went on smelling the dead dog.

“Just stay calm, and soon it will be your turn!” The policemen told Dito.

Zé Ina’cio was jumping around and had already reached the edge of the roof. The beating continued. He got up on the parapet and still looked downward. Dito knew they were on a twelve-story building and that on the back there was no half story, otherwise they would have risked the jump. Down there there was only the street, the square and parked cars. Zé Ina’cio was still jumping about on the parapet while the policeman laughed and hit him with the iron bar. The first few times, Zé Ina’cio was able to escape by jumping, but soon one of the blows caught him in the shins, he lost his balance, and with a scream he fell. Dito kept on hearing that shout for the entire time the body went down. The policemen leaned over the parapet to see the fall. Dito heard the scream and remembered his friend’s doubts about this job.”It’ll work, man. We’ll be rich!”

The policeman with a mustache pushed Dito. The dog made a move to snatch him, while another policeman held the animal back. A third one cocked his gun.

“Let’s go. To the same place where your little friend left the planet!”

Dito didn’t want to go. The guy with the iron bar stood close by.

“You don’t have a choice, darling. You’ve screwed around too much.”

The iron bar hit him on the back. The pain made him quake. He avoided the next blow by jumping aside, fell down, stood up and was smashed in the chest. He saw his own blood pour out.

“Let’s go to the parapet, or you’ll end up torn up by the dogs.”

Dito couldn’t choose, he received another blow on his chin. It had just grazed his chin, but enough to hurt him badly. The policeman was turning the bar around, while all the others backed away leaving a space in the middle. Dito tried to run over to the wall, but he wasn’t able to do it. He ended up being forced back to the parapet.

“Get up there, or I finish with you right here!”

He remembered the useless fight Zé Ina’cio had kept up and now he was going through the same thing. He never imagined he would end that way. He looked at the guy with a mustache and remembered Dr. Mauro: his laughter and the laughter of Caramel and Big Purple. The tears were running down his face and he felt a great knot in his throat.

“You’ve already given us too much trouble! Let’s go to the starting point.”

The iron bar hit him several more times, on his thighs, arms and legs. He was covered in blood.

“If you don’t get up on the parapet, we’ll let the dogs loose!”

Dito couldn’t resist any more. Any slash of the iron bar now hit him easily. He had no reflexes left and he knew he was losing his strength. And when he noticed, he was almost on top of the parapet. One strong smash on his hand and he climbed it. He jump a bit as Zé Ina’cio had done and, like him, he lost his balance and fell.

He didn’t see any more the face of the man with a mustache, nor the dog running to reach him, he didn’t remember Beth. He only heard Zé Ina’cio’s scream and his objections to the plan. In a twist in space he saw Mother Dolores putting flowers over Smokey’s coffin.

Instantly the square was filled with curious people. Drivers had come out of their cars to see up close the supermarket thieves. Young girls in school uniforms were silent. An old woman came close to Zé Ina’cio’s body and put a flower over his body. Dito had his face turned to the place where the sun was going down. A man in a raincoat took notes, while his companion gave an interview.

“He preferred to jump instead of going to jail!”

The man in a raincoat shook his head in disappointment. The money Dito had placed in his pocket now littered his bloody clothes and at each

breath of a light breeze it threatened to fly up like useless papers caught in a whirlwind.

END