

NOWHERE PEOPLE

Paulo Scott

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**whatever happens there's
always something left
over to happen again**

nineteen eighty-nine

If he'd had to summarise his days as a political militant, Paulo would have said that he went from total idealism to unparalleled cynicism, then finally to the melancholy escapism of these last months. That's not how it should have been, just when the Workers' Party won the Town Hall elections in Porto Alegre and he became known up and down the country as a student leader, a key figure with a good chance to try for a seat on the City Council three years from now, and only twenty-one years old, about to graduate in law at the end of the year from the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul, and for whom it took the whole of last year to realise this fact: that despite his *great potential*, he is no more than a minor foot-soldier, a pawn among the other pieces on the board, not greedy enough to challenge, equal to equal, the schemings of the gang on the second echelon, many of them creeps he had already hated even before he joined, back in eighty-four. His current difficulty in getting more deeply involved in political life, in making a career of it and fighting for it, would only end up in physical dependency, and its price already seems to him to be too high; and he knows that if he does not push himself forward and just allows himself to be carried

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along by the party's almost inevitable ascent he runs the risk of one day having to cling shamefully to the coat-tails of one of the creeps he so despises in order to get himself a place in the administrative machine and support himself financially. Just as hundreds of his fellow activists are doing, throwing themselves into the contest in the pursuit of positions in the state administrative departments, in the mayor's office, the deputy mayor's office, in foundations, public institutions and joint public-private enterprise; people who until recently, especially over a beer, would insist on beating their chests and declaring they were only there to rescue Brazil from exploitation by capital. In a way, he can understand: he is asking too much of himself and is unable to face up to the days that have finally arrived with any sense of calm, these days towards which his physical, mental and emotional energies have been channelled over the past four years. What is certain is that since the beginning, when he took part in that first local party meeting in Glória in eighty-three, he had promised himself he would not allow his theoretical unpreparedness and almost complete innocence in relation to politics to be transformed into mediocrity. Already he can't help seeing most of the leadership as members of a Machiavellian and tightly-knit little fraternity of opportunists carrying forward their own plans in order to attain power and, consequently, some money as quickly as possible. He has lost his capacity to assimilate contradictions. He has stopped believing. Which is why his focus on what needed to be done and the resulting calm of *belief* have disappeared. This anxiety remains. Less than a month ago at a consultation with Doctor Geraldo, who has been looking after his family for three generations, he heard: 'Paulo, this stress of yours is manifesting too severely in physical symptoms; it's all going to your stomach. It's not normal for a big lad of your age to have chronic gastritis as advanced as yours.' The doctor spoke with his measured border accent and looked at Paulo until he said yes, I

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know, doctor, I'll try and take care of myself. He left the surgery with a prescription for an acid blocker even stronger than the Cimetidina he was already taking and an absolute ban on consuming any kind of alcoholic drink or spicy food for a fortnight, at least. He doesn't feel comfortable. And even having decided to cut himself off from the party completely, Paulo still has not cancelled his membership and remains bound to the Trotskyite-based organisation with which he has been involved for three years, and last Saturday (despite being deliberately late and missing the ten-thirty bus that had left Porto Alegre the previous night for the city of Rio Grande, carrying another fifteen militants who were taking part in the year's first clandestine meeting of his organisation), he woke up before six, washed his face, packed his law-trainee rucksack with three changes of clothes and left the house in his Durepox-grey Beetle, an eighty-three model, to pull in half an hour later at pump number four at the Ipiranga petrol station on the corner of Santo Antônio and Voluntários da Pátria and ask the attendant to put in thirty litres of petrol which he would split with his two acquaintances from São Lourenço do Sul, Eduardo 'Blondie' Vanusa and 'Handlebar 'Tache' Nico, dressed up as the Beagle Boys, slumped in the passenger seat and the back seat respectively (and still drunk from the rounds of beer with Steinhäger they'd consumed at Bar Lola while they waited for a certain Neide from the Porto de Elis Cocktail Bar – who was going to show up dressed as Dr Frank-N-Furter, the cross-dressing Transylvanian from *The Rocky Horror Show* – to get them into the invitation-only fancy dress party taking place in the Bar Ocidente; Neide, as it turned out, never showed up), and at quarter to seven cross the Guaíba drawbridge and head towards the south of the state for what might be his last meeting as a member of the organisation, driving without worrying about his passengers, who had already given up and were drooling into the upholstery of the seats; driving without having to put up with three hundred

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kilometres' worth of feeble talk about revolution and the Fourth International, about which of the Workers' Party girls they'd had and, with the help of the most preposterous Reichian arguments, about the ones who might have started off stubborn but were now desperate to give up their pussies. Saturday passed slowly. He struggled to stay awake during the debates; he couldn't bear to look at those people any longer. It was not a coincidence that at night, as soon as the last panel discussion came to an end, he slipped away, got his car, went to Cassino Beach. There he came across the birthday party in the ballroom of the Hotel Atlântico where he happened to run into Manoela, a producer two years older than him, with whom he had fallen in love at the end of a summer on the Ilha do Mel three years back. She was the one who spotted him and came over delightedly and after the requisite where have you been what have you been up to how have we left it so long, and as soon as he said he'd driven down from Porto Alegre, told him she was working as a theatre producer and was currently touring with a group who were due to be on stage at the Sete de Abril Theatre in Pelotas on Sunday and she needed someone reliable to take the costumes for the play back to Novo Hamburgo, where they were based, bemoaning the fact that the original budget was inadequate and that no delivery company would do it quickly enough without charging an arm and a leg and, not letting him respond, said she would give him seven thousand *cruzados* if he would drop the clothes off at her assistant's house to be washed and mended in time for Friday's performance at the University of Vale do Rio dos Sinos; she said that she and the actors would be staying in Pelotas till Thursday night to see to certain commitments they were obliged to honour for the local town hall, and no sooner had she asked would you help me out on this one? than he accepted. It was then that, skilfully, she adjusted the details: the clothes would actually only be ready for him on Tuesday, late in the morning on Tuesday, as there

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was a workshop, and he knows what they're like, these things to do with didactic stimulation and learning strategies and all that. Paulo felt like he'd been duped. On Monday afternoon he had to be at the law firm where he was doing an internship. He considered for a few moments – there's nothing that needs doing that can't wait till Wednesday (he'll phone to let them know that he'll only come in to work on Wednesday). He let Manoela keep talking until he interrupted. 'I don't have anywhere to stay Sunday night or Monday night.' She smiled (smiling is part of the process by which she senses an opportunity appearing). 'We're in the best hotel in Pelotas,' she said snobbishly. 'Space won't be a problem. The lighting guy's room was vacated yesterday, the nights have already been paid for, it's all settled. You needn't worry, you can take his place . . . and I've got to say, you're in luck: the son of a bitch bagged himself the best room of all.' The truth was, he loved watching her in action, doing whatever she wanted to make her plans happen right away, even when he was the victim. They exchanged small talk, they joined the people shaking frantically on the dance floor. He considered making a move on her, putting his arms round her waist, pushing things a bit just to see where it might go, but there was no point. Manoela had always been out of his league, she always would be. And as a song came to an end, in a blasé tone of voice that made him feel confusingly mature, rather like Manoela herself, he said I'm going to go for that walk now, Manu, she stroked his face affectionately, and each went their own way. He got a beer from the pantry, struck up a conversation with a girl who looked just like the actress Malu Mader and who seemed to have had too much to drink. This pretend Malu, who was really Ana Cristina something-or-other, said some nonsense that really annoyed him; all the same they walked together to a party that was happening two blocks from the hotel and where to his misfortune they were only serving a sweet red wine. He lied about having already graduated and said

that he was travelling to Cuba in a few weeks and then to Spain and Portugal to do a master's in comparative law at Coimbra. Lying, lying out of spite, was what the situation called for, it was the only way to be affectionate, responsive. Even though she was pretty out of it, she said that she so loved his *dynamism*, and he kissed her unenthusiastically (her resemblance to the goddess Malu Mader was not close enough). Then he listened to her country-girl inanities until he was convinced that it would be better to get back to his accommodation once and for all and make sure he was in a suitable physical condition for the following morning's debates. Contrary to his expectations, the Sunday debates were worse than Saturday's. He didn't stay for the end. He had no qualms about slipping away early, his fuck-it switch was activated; in his mess of a life nothing would go back to the way it used to be. He wanted madness, impetuosity – like he found in all those French writers he read, in the English bands from the sixties, Spanish comic books, the rhythmic ferocity of rap, the words and attitudes that should be current and brilliant, endless and impossible. He rushed to reach Pelotas before it got dark. The hotel and the room were indeed very nice, and on Monday – after finally managing to park his car in the guest car park which had, according to the manager, been full all weekend because of the National Festival of Desserts – spent his day wandering the city's streets and squares and around half past six in the evening went into Aquários, the café-diner on the corner of Quinze de Novembro and Sete de Setembro, for an espresso. The counter, the tables, all occupied. He thought about turning around, yet instinct made him walk over to the table by the side door, where a teenage girl with short black hair wearing glasses with funny white frames was busy reading an issue of *DUNDUM* magazine (what girl from the interior would be sitting blithely reading *DUNDUM* in this place, the absolute domain of middle-aged men?). He approached, asked if he might sit down, she threw him a suspicious glance, said

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nothing, he assured her he wouldn't take up more than a few inches of the table, explained that he had been walking all day and wouldn't be able to enjoy his coffee if he had to drink it standing up. She nodded, making no effort to hide her surprise at the sheer nerve of this guy, he thanked her and seeing that her cup was empty asked whether he could buy her a drink, she said she'd have a tea. It was easy enough for them to start up a conversation that would reveal her name, Angélica, and her odd, ironic, rude, dry sense of humour. They talked mainly about poetry (she was much more comfortable on this subject than he was). At a certain point in the conversation she took a spiral-bound exercise book from her bag, the kind that schoolchildren use. She didn't make any fuss, just opened it at a page near the middle and (after giving him a meaningful stare) began to draw him. Paulo didn't want to ask, didn't want to interfere, he kept talking. She finished the drawing, closed the exercise book, put it down on the table. Even after other tables had become free and the activity in the café had thinned out, they remained sitting there together till the place closed, at which point they paid the bill and left. The moment they set foot on the pavement, Angélica handed him the exercise book, said that he would be part of a new game which one of her school friends had made up and that she'd thought was really cool. 'You get an ordinary exercise book, like this one, you find someone you like a lot, you draw that person as best you can, then you give it to them, on condition that they'll write something on the following page and, without waiting too long, a week at most, they then pass it on to someone else, who passes it on to someone else and so on. I'm not sure I've explained it clearly. Have I?' He said it was a bit like a promissory note to the bearer, a promissory note that would never be paid and, as soon as she was done smiling, he asked whether he was allowed to believe that she liked him a lot. She took a cigarette out of her bag and shrugged just the way someone old and weary of life would shrug

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after revealing their affection for someone who wasn't expecting it (or who didn't deserve it, but it happened anyway). She changed the subject. 'There are some poems I wrote in the first dozen pages.' He didn't wait, he tried to give her the kind of hug a friend would give her but she moved away saying, frowning, that she was really late for a family engagement, before turning her back on him sharply and walking off towards Praça Coronel Osório. He went back to the hotel, opened a few cans of beer, and spent the rest of the night reading and re-reading what was written in the exercise book. Then on Tuesday morning (as soon as the actors had released the costumes) he took all the various bags they handed him, folded down the back seat of the Beetle, arranged the luggage, covered it with a dark grey cloth that Manoela had insisted on giving him, stressing how useful it would be in stopping all that gear from attracting the attention of the highway police, and, just minutes before it started raining, he, Paulo, turned right onto the BR-116 towards Porto Alegre. And at Cerro Grande, even with the limited visibility due to the rain that had now become a storm, he saw a shape, a person crouching by the side of the left-hand lane. He braked without stopping completely. It was a little Indian girl holding a pile of newspapers and magazines to her chest. Beside her, two white plastic bags on the ground. He lowered the car window and let his gaze rest on her, wondering, struck by the sight of her, how far she'd have to walk to find somewhere dry where she could take shelter (the closest indigenous villages were kilometres away). He looked in his rear-view mirror. Behind him: the deserted road. And, now looking back at her over his shoulder (the car moving at less than ten kilometres an hour), he thought about stopping, but he did not.