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Acre

Lucrecia Zappi

Extract (chapters 1,2 and 6) translated by Lisa Shaw

1

I only thought about the new varnished floor when I came home. I wasn't in a bad mood, but how could it be that before going out it hadn't dawned on either me or Marcela, none of the inhabitants of this flat, that the sun would be very strong today – stronger than it was yesterday, but not as strong as tomorrow – and would make the varnish sizzle, even in the dark?

I crouched down to touch the damage, and thought about the guy who had spent the weekend kneeling on the floor of our living room, chatting on his mobile phone, us buying him something to eat, him getting on our nerves, all of that just for me to end up stuck here, yet again regretting not having paid attention, while the sun had already gone down and risen again five hundred times. For a moment, I took in the light of the night sky that spread across the room and I closed the curtain.

When I turned my back to the window I noticed a silhouette in the half-light: it was Marcela sitting on a worktop in the open-plan kitchen, as she liked to call that door-less space.

I thought about beginning by asking her why she had not closed the curtain. Or saying that it was odd that she was sitting like that in the dark, with her legs dangling, like a little girl who couldn't reach the floor.

What are you doing there, Marcela?

Nothing.

I cannot guess.

There's nothing to guess.

The guy's just laid the wood floor. The sun's toasted it, look at this, Marcela. Did you leave the curtain open?

No.

Marcela. Ok. Put the light on. What's the matter? Why are you sitting there like that in the dark?

She stretched to reach the light switch and covered her eyes to shield them from the sudden glare. My wife really looked like a child on that worktop, her feet a long way off the ground.

Can you see me now? With her hand raised slightly in front of her face, Marcela went from being a kid to one of those cemetery angels, that hide their face from darkness. You'll never guess who came up in the lift with me.

Who?

Nelson. The one from Santos.

I thought he died.

Well, he might have disappeared but he hasn't died. I recognised him straight away because of his colourless hands and arms. He had vitiligo, remember? Remember, Oscar?

Yes, I do.

It's spread.

I didn't want to know anything about vitiligo, or what that guy had come to our building for. I pictured the two of them in the past. They were sitting on the sand, Marcela was leaning against his chest, letting those white hands caress her teenage stomach.

And where did he go?

What do you mean?

Which floor did he get off at?

Marcela ran her thumb along her eyebrow, a gesture that alluded to her headache brought on by the unexpected and the tiredness she felt at the end of the day. She slid off the worktop and turned the tap on. She didn't even seem to notice that the water was coming out in small bursts of yellow. I was going to tell her that they had turned off the water supply during the day to clean the tank when she started washing her hands. It was only as she turned the tap off that she noticed that the spurts were explosive and sporadic.

Oh. Is there water rationing again in the building? There was no lack of it at the restaurant today.

No, they've cleaned the tank.

Since Adriano had taken over as the building manager, this type of maintenance work was being carried out quite frequently, which in my view reflected the fact that he was a surgeon. This clinical care seemed to me to be a natural trait of someone who spent a large amount of his time in the operating room at the Santa Casa de Misericórdia Hospital, perfecting incisions into uteruses with his scalpel, protected by his cap, mask, scrubs, gloves and medical clogs.

Marcela took a cup from the sink, examined the hardened grains of coffee in the bottom and looked at me impatiently. She wanted to know if I was going to stay there, concerning myself with other people's lives. She dirtied the tip of her finger in the dried granules and raised it to her mouth, then shrugged her shoulders. Marcela did that a lot, tried things and shrugged her shoulders. She would end up poisoning herself one of these days. She turned around to wash the cup, despite the lack of water.

*

What's the matter, Oscar? she asked, without turning around. She was busy.

Nothing. But I get home to find you quiet, in the dark, and then you tell me about what happened in the lift. It looks to me like it upset you.

That's a good one. Me. You're the one who's upset, she answered without altering her tone of voice.

My wife went and sat back on the worktop, next to the built-in cupboard, another of her creations. She ran her fingers over the granite.

C'mon, Oscar, Marcela said, forget it. Her voice sounded weak, but then stronger as she turned her fake smile on me. I just bumped into Nelson in the lift. One of life's coincidences.

I was just about to say that it was undoubtedly not a coincidence, but I changed my mind. I didn't want her to get angry, nor did I want to come across as insecure. I wasn't going to give in to my own accusations. Even if it was hard to believe that, out of the blue, Nelson had got into the lift in our building thirty years later.

Marcela rested her hands on the polished stone surface again. She traced with her fingers the hidden path that led to the opening for the drawer. She scratched her armpit and

was still tilting her head, her gaze fixed at mid-height. A stone angel. I thought about the bitter taste of coffee in her mouth.

*

What floor did he get out at?

He got out with me, love. He was going to see Vera Panchetti.

Next door? To do what?

He said he was her son. Can you believe it? The old lady spends her life talking about her little boy who lives far away and it turns out to be him.

This is just getting better. Did he have a suitcase?

No. Maybe he'd already been in the flat. I cannot imagine he would come without bringing anything.

Come from where?

Marcela didn't reply. She was thoughtful for a moment.

Hey, Oscar, wasn't it today?

What?

She ran her hand along the wall and pointed to the calendar. When was it the guy said he was coming to fix this crack?

The photograph that Marcela then looked at was of a construction site. In the picture for the month of March there wasn't a cloud in the sky, it was just a potentially abrasive landscape, a patch of mud with machinery on it, making way for a road, but which was nothing more than a muddy wasteland featuring a row of stationary excavators.

Think about Vera, seeing her son come home after so long.

God, you get so emotional, Oscar. It must be because she occasionally calls you ‘son’.
I’m sensing a touch of jealousy.

Is he still weird?

What do you mean? Oscar, don’t make trouble. I just bumped into him. Nothing else.

I listened to the sound of the lift cables engaging. Especially in the early evening, when there was more coming and going in the building, you could hear it most intensely. We had lived there for eleven years, on the ninth floor, right underneath the machine room. Before that we had spent eighteen years in a studio flat on Praça Roosevelt square, when we left Santos, married by that time.

Marcela and me, who would have thought it? Despite no longer being a teenager, to this day I still feel a little embarrassed when I remember taking my clothes off in front of her for the first time.

Marcela rubbed her hands vigorously so that the cream soaked in. She put the bottle in her bag, distracted by her own gesture. She gave the impression that she was just passing through, as if our living room was a waiting area in a bus station. Or an airport. Her shoulders were always tense, as if she concentrated all her strength there or felt constantly besieged by people like me, who kept an eye on her all the time. If I asked her, she would say that she didn’t know what I was talking about, that she’d always been like that.

She would eat corn flakes in front of the television with her feet crossed on the coffee table. One of life’s winners. You could sense this from her fixed gaze, as she held the remote control. When she wanted something she just had to look in my direction, because I was always here, reading her mind, even if I only picked up on her most straightforward desires, those within my reach.

I considered myself a romantic for that reason, not because I was always at her disposal, but because I paid attention to the banal details of our surroundings, like cushions and little things that I would take pleasure in bringing from the kitchen, even when she would tense up her body rejecting the token of my devotion. Over the years our nights became a delicate balance of invisible gestures and observations. If by chance she felt suffocated, when it wasn't the television, the velvety sound of the lift rescued her.

*

The cross that she wore tight against her chest had an old patina. It was a small letter T in etched gold that had kept her company for ages. One time, she said that that piece of jewellery gave her a sense of direction.

Not because of Christ, she stressed. Do you see? It's not superstition. It's like the four points of a compass.

I remember the metal sticking to the sweat on her adolescent breasts, the chain against her goose-bumped skin, her shoulders whitened by salt water. Her, alone with her poor mother, who'd taught her no manners, at the edge of the beach. And Nelson always hanging around.

Perhaps Marcela didn't like showing off her looks. It had been years since I had seen her in a bikini and she had stopped heavily outlining her eyes in black, as she used to do. Nowadays she could even pass for a typical woman from São Paulo, always in a hurry, the type that is guided by her most recent memory.

Do you see, Marcela?

She frowned and looked at me.

Marcela.

Her eyes were wandering aimlessly around the flat. It was sanded throughout, ready for the first coat of paint.

You think he has come back to stay?

I don't know, Oscar. Why?

Nothing. I was just asking. She tilted her head towards her armpit, aware of her own smell. I'm going to have a shower. It was hot today and now it's chilly.

I looked at Marcela. I tried to imagine Vera's face when she met up with her son again. She must have wondered if he was still alive. Talking about him occupied a good deal of her endless years of loneliness, of her painful anxiety. She would calmly broach subjects that upset her, which were practically all of them, as cautious as someone blowing Merthiolate into a wound. If she knew about her son's return, she kept it a secret.

Marcela came out of the bathroom wearing tracksuit bottoms and a woollen jumper. She had a towel wrapped around her head, like a meringue. I studied her face, which stood out because of the talcum powder under her armpits, which went up as far as her neck. Her reddened eyes gave her a tragic quality. As if she were showing off the details of a non-existent kimono, my wife opened her arms wide when she sat down. Her mouth down-turned, yet hard like an apple, and her chin slightly raised, inquisitive, had a libidinous quality about it.

You've got talc up to your ears.

I know.

Are you hungry?

There's nothing to eat. Will you fix me a juice?

I got up without saying anything, squeezed three oranges and put the glass in her hand. Anything else?

*

In the neighbour's flat the television was on, in line with the regular schedule. Now and again the sound of the soap opera mixed with the dragging of the chains that came and went from the machine room. Nothing out of the ordinary, I thought to myself, until I heard a noise in the corridor. It was as if the space between the past and the present had become shorter. On an impulse I went up to the door, but didn't open it.

Marcela laughed. You've got to be kidding me, Oscar. Do you think it's him? Sitting up straight on the sofa, she tapped the cushion twice next to her. Come here, sit down.

I did actually imagine Nelson right there, first in the corridor and then pushing at our door, which he would open, talking in a loud voice. He would then come into our flat, going straight over to the window. He would open the curtains, noticing that from there he could see a lot of sky, like in his mother's flat. A truly magnificent view. That made us equals.

*

It was an old customer from the shop who came up with the idea of buying Vera's flat. He himself had done deals on a few properties like that. He was the type who no longer bought even a lightbulb. He just used to drop in to occupy my time, leaning on the counter. To reinforce the logic of buying the property, he also reminded me that, as it was the neighbouring flat, it would be a great investment. In the future, I could choose to live in a space that was twice as big. When the current owner had passed on to a better life.

The thing is that Vera was very relieved when we started to pay off the debts on her two credit cards, in addition to the service charge that she hadn't paid for years, all in exchange for the flat. We drew up a written agreement establishing that she would carry on living there.

So everything stays the same, she concluded.

Yes, of course. But why two credit cards, Vera? I've only got one.

*

If it weren't for our neighbour's bills we'd be a little bit better off, Marcela pointed out. Remember that we've still got the loan on our flat, as well as the work that's going to be done on the restaurant.

Marcela drew her thumb along her eyebrow again. She looked straight ahead, determined not to cooperate. Even so, she agreed that the next-door flat was a one-off opportunity. For that reason, the crack in the wall, a reminder of the arch that once linked the two properties together, didn't bother her all that much. She even liked to look at it, to imagine that one day the arch would open up again, in all its finery, revealing a large open-plan living space.

One time she got carried away, which was rare for her, since she didn't like day-dreaming, Marcela suggested painting it lilac. Lilac would be a dramatic change, she sighed.

She was right. I looked at Marcela and I remembered that following the carnival bank holiday the wood floor guy should have started work on the plastering.

I pointed at the wall. Look at that. That was what you used to say to me, wasn't it? That he should have started with the walls, not with the floor.

Marcela didn't reply.

Of late we had not been able to make decisions, she and I. The builder started working and we ended up camping out in the restaurant, sleeping on a duvet.

*

I stood up to put the empty glass on the worktop in the kitchen and the intercom rang. It's the neighbour from 4D, I told her.

Marcela, dragged away from her thoughts, looked at the door. Adriano?

Yeah. You used to call Adriano that, remember? By his letter and number?

He's still 4D. It's just that now he drops in on 9A whenever he wants. She slowly adjusted the towel above her ears. Life in this building sucks.

Tell him to come up, Décio, I replied to the doorman, and I opened the door so that Adriano didn't ring the bell and Marcela wouldn't still have that look on her face.

As I turned the key I took the opportunity to check through the spy hole in the door. I couldn't make out anything strange next door, just the sound of the television. And the movement of the lift that stopped on our floor. Adriano pushed the door open.

Hey, são-paulino. Did you see the match the other night? What kind of a welcome is this, waiting for me at the lift door? Next you'll be calling for me at home.

Adriano was your typical nice guy, bursting with positive energy. He would come home from the hospital wearing his lab coat and at weekends lived in his shorts. He talked about all kinds of things with the same degree of importance, and with pedantic detail, from the cleaning of the water tank to the waiting time at A & E. When he came into our flat he used to admire the view of the square with his customary enthusiasm, reminding us that his flat only looked out onto the back of the building, a dark yard full of washing lines.

How's it going?

We're the same as ever, Marcela said, looking at me. Sit down.

It was obvious that there was no reciprocity between my wife and the building manager. At least Adriano was making an effort.

Great view, isn't it?

Do you want a joint, Adriano? Go on, love, roll us one, vai amor. I was getting embarrassed by Marcela's curtness.

Marcela smiled. Of course, she said. She looked refreshed after her shower but it didn't fool me. Pass me the box, love?

Did you hear that Vera's son has turned up? I didn't think he really existed. Honestly.

Marcela sat up straight on the sofa. Can you believe that we've known him since we were teenagers?

No way. Seriously?

Yeah, sure. I met Marcela in Santos around the same time. Nelson, who's also from São Paulo, went to live there. That was in '87, '88. I spent two years in Santos and I came back married to Marcela.

Wow, Oscar, you don't miss a trick, do you? But is the Nelson you met in Santos Vera's son Nelson? Did it never occur to you that it was the same person?

No. It seems that his mother sent him away in a hurry, but he only stayed there a short time, three or four months. I think before that he had spent some time in a youth correction centre, so his mother got scared and sent him to stay with family in Santos.

A correction centre? Shit, Adriano exclaimed, without understanding the importance of what I was telling him, apart from the danger of having an unstable individual in the building. So the guy's a delinquent?

Yeah, Adriano, Marcela said, looking at him from a distance, without seeing him, even if he sat at her side. A delinquent. In her view, Adriano was not only abrupt. He was clingy, difficult to shake off.

I was just going to ask what the two of you thought of him. You know, your honest opinion. But if he's a friend, fine. Cool. Or is he not a friend?

Why?

Nothing. I bumped into him in the entrance hall and found him a bit odd. Did you notice that he's got vitiligo on his hands? It's the kind of thing that gives me the creeps.

Really, that's rich coming from a doctor. I hope I never have to be treated by you, Adriano.

I know, but anyone like that who turns up at the hospital, I even get the urge to ask if they've plunged their hand into a bucket of bleach. Adriano chuckled to himself.

But to be serious for a minute, Nelson is really odd, a bit weird, and he's got a real attitude.

That's just your impression, Marcela said, crumbling the weed onto the rolled-up cigarette paper between her fingers. She moistened the paper delicately with the tip of her tongue, first softening her smile for her neighbour.

It must be just my impression. At least Vera must be happy, the poor woman.

Marcela stared at me. Yes, the poor thing, right, Oscar?

Her son has just arrived from Acre. Vera's always said that she had a son who was an engineer, remember?

Adriano looked at us talking, and seemed distracted. He stretched out his legs. He played with a keyring without letting go of his mobile phone, waiting his turn for a drag on the joint.

Lately our sofa had served as a transition point for Adriano between work and home.

He came straight from the Santa Casa hospital. His lab coat was embroidered with the words gynaecologist and obstetrician, sister professions that validated his taste for women and blood, as he had once said. Marcela's antagonism towards him was triggered just by looking at that.

It's just hard to believe that he's a high-level civil engineer, who has built roads in Acre. You two, her next-door neighbours, must have heard Vera telling that story, she even tells it as she's going down the corridors.

Yes, yeah, I reacted, watching the scrunched up joint die in his hand.

So, what are you doing today? If you want, I've got food downstairs. Ana made a lasagne, she's just told me it's in the oven. Ok, it's not Kidelicia food, Marcela, but it will taste all right.

Of course it will, Adriano.

Can I just say, as a friend, Marcela? You're looking really thin. Adriano cracked his stiff neck. At least come and line your stomach, you need to look a bit healthier. Especially now you've got a new neighbour. Right, Oscar? You've got to take care of pretty things.

2

I didn't ever officially move to Santos. I thought I would just be going there for a weekend, but two days turned into two years. In 1987 I was sixteen and my mother was dying.

I went to stay with Tuca, a childhood friend of hers, and although I was used to fending for myself, I felt that I'd become tied to the home of a woman that I barely knew. She lived on the road alongside the beach, Avenida Bartolomeu de Gusmão, next to the empty lot on the corner. It was an unexpected, stunning landscape for a teenager from the centre of São Paulo. The sound of the waves served as a distraction, as well as that of the seagulls that flew in through the windows in search of leftovers on our plates.

Tuca lived with my grandparents for a while, so she owed my family a favour, but I don't know much about that, or about my mother's childhood in Santos. It was agreed that I would stay with her friend until things took their course. It was what my parents decided,

while going back and forth to the hospital and desperately working out how they were going to pay for the treatment, not to mention the bounced cheques sent back by the bank.

There's no other option, son. That's why I'd prefer you to stay in Santos for a while. With Tuca, you remember her.

My mother was in the habit of propping the door open with her foot when she wanted to talk to me. It was her way of remaining on the edge of things, ready to make a move but still present. She came to tell me again that the battle against cancer was complicated, and we therefore had to try everything we could. Ultimately, she chose a more optimistic version for herself, that everything would turn out fine, although we knew that this optimism was wearing a bit thin given the state of her health. She disguised her frail body with shoulder pads and make-up, and put on a brave face.

We'll keep trying, my mother said staring at me, propping my bedroom door open with her foot. The doctor wants me to try another kind of treatment.

D-day approached with the precision of a drip-feed. I opened my eyes and there was the Santos landscape, awaiting me.

*

We got there late, but I don't really remember the journey. I napped as we passed from tunnel to tunnel, and tried hard not to feel sick as the car had to break abruptly to wind its way down the Serra do Mar mountain range. My dad was driving with his hand on the handbrake, distracted by Alcione singing at full volume on the cassette player. The closed windows made our white Beetle seem like an airless bubble. From the backseat, the Atlantic rain forest smelled like petrol and our endless descent of the sharp bends on the edge of the precipice, shrouded in mist in some sections, made me think that, if we plunged over the side, there

would be no Santos, no nothing. I kept my eyes tightly closed in the stale air, blocking out the headlights of the cars, until the trees of the Atlantic rain forest gradually got smaller and the greenery turned into a large mangrove.

It had been over six months since we'd seen Tuca, but when she opened the door, I recognised the Peruvian poncho that she was wearing the last time we visited her, made of such coarse wool that it looked like a rug with a hole in the middle. She struggled to open the padlock on the gate. Her slow hands were fumbling around.

Oscar, say hi to my friend.

Hi.

Oscar, Tuca said, your mother was my best friend when we were little.

It was obvious that the two of them were exaggerating, beginning with the poncho that dragged on the floor when Tuca bent over. I only replied because my mother was keeping her eye on me.

I know, I said.

While my father was unloading the trunk of the car, I sat on the water meter – a block of cement next to the wall –, removed from the scene, aware that the two women needed me to interact to lessen the awkwardness of their forgotten friendship.

Your mother and I used to play together in the street, she went on. What happened to all those people? It seems we're the only ones left.

My mother laughed at Tuca's comment, she really didn't know the whereabouts of the others.

It's true. But Oscar remembers me. He's tired of hearing about how we used to play in the street. When was the last time you were here, Oscar? Is it three months since you've been here? Let's go in.

I noticed her varicose veins squashed under her elastic stockings.

No, it's longer than that. Six months, about that long, she added. Let's go in. Oscar?

C'mon, get down off there, Oscar! Stop behaving like a kid.

When my mother came up to me, I jumped down and went in before everyone else. I really didn't want to stay there, alongside those grimy walls with a popcorn texture, and a piece of chipboard covered in bits of tiles forming a red, yellow and black mosaic floor, not to mention the snake plants stuck in plant pots. I didn't know which was older, the plants or the pots. The patio was uneven and stained by small puddles of water. Up to that point, everything about Santos seemed to be grimy to me, beginning with the front yard of Tuca's house.

The living room was divided into two, and had a set of arched windows. Blue and white. The neo-colonial simplicity was actually quite pretty. So that Tuca didn't think I was childish, I wanted to comment that it was an interesting building, but I was afraid of saying something stupid. I just managed to say that I liked architecture.

Yes, this is a really nice house. He'll stay for a few days, my mother said, reading my mind. Until I finish having all my tests done.

Oscar, I've emptied a wardrobe for you, in the bedroom you always stay in, at the back. And I've made you something to eat.

I didn't like the fact that she was so prepared for my visit because I wasn't ready to stay there, which seemed like a fair thing for me to say, but I knew it would upset my parents. You could hear the crashing of the waves on the other side of the avenue and I already noticed the strong smell of seaweed, of the small holes in the rocks where swarms of sea roaches disappeared, those harmless crustaceans that made me run away shrieking when I was a child. At that moment, I couldn't stop thinking that I was about to be left alone with that woman. Tuca uncrossed her arms outside her poncho and held them out in my direction.

Come here, Oscar.

*

At the dining table my mother didn't stop eating, her newly animated face revealing how much she liked chilli peppers. Before passing the jar to my father, she recited all the different kinds out loud, slowly, calmly studying the packaging in her hand – biquinho, dedo-de-moça, cheiro, bode, cumari, and cambuci peppers.

It's no use, what I really love are the malagueta ones.

The cancer must have already reached her tongue, as her voice sounded slurred. She picked the peppers out of the jar with a small fork.

We drizzle it like this, look, she said to my father.

I felt like crying. I wanted to shout out in front of everyone that, as I'd already unpacked my case in the bedroom, I had the right to close the jar and keep it in the fridge whenever I wanted. If this was now my home.

I moved the peppers out of her reach and screwed the lid on tight. That's enough, mum.

Oh, son, what are you doing? I've not finished yet, she said, trying to show me that you didn't do that in someone else's house.

You haven't? I couldn't say anything else.

Do you already want me to leave?

They laughed at that and at much more. Tuca was spinning yarns about distant days, as my mother carried on fishing out malaguetas. It was becoming more and more embarrassing to see her insisting on shaking the jar, to get to the pointed red peppers at the bottom. My father, who was watching the goings on in silence, passed her a glass of water.

I think you two are going to get on well, he said finally, but without looking at me.

I agreed, my mind a blank, afraid of being abandoned in that house that smelled of sea and margarine, with its open cupboards and cushions against the wall. And that woman, the owner of all those things, her veins squashed beneath her elastic stockings, who seemed much older than my mother, and rubbed her legs as she tried to fit me into her world, telling me yet again that she had a stationery shop, and also gave English lessons in the shed.

Not classes. Revision sessions, she corrected herself.

*

I arrived one weekend in September and on Monday I was already at school. I ended up at the Objetivo school, next to the Embaré church, opposite the beach. There were no introductions, like this is the new boy, which made it easier for me to get to the desk at the back of the classroom.

I immediately took to a guy everyone called Bakitéria, because of his acne-filled face. He was a bit odd, and, like me, was trying not to attract attention, and lived in the same area at the end of the beach. Now and again we walked home together and on the way, he showed me the city.

Santos has got top football players, like Pelé, so it's got his girlfriend too, Xuxa, the hottest TV star ever! It's also got the best surfers. You'll discover that Santos is an avant-garde place, really up your street, he used to say.

I'd never heard that term, but I agreed, only because he liked some weird-sounding music, like Os Mulheres Negras, a band made up of two musicians that was starting to make it big in São Paulo and defined itself as the third smallest big band in the world.

In the early days, I felt like calling my parents, but it was an expensive inter-city call, so I'd find myself a place to while away the time until I'd stopped missing them.

Sometimes I would sit on the cement block until late. I wasn't very comfortable in the house, which at night turned into a set of long corridors lined with carpets and locked doors. Beyond a certain hour it looked like it was uninhabited. A few windows were left open, banging in the wind, and the gate of the car-less garage was padlocked - only Tuca had the key, although it was easy to jump over it.

I gradually grasped the weekly routine, such as when the gas delivery truck went past playing its jingle. There was market day, garbage collection day, and from my make-shift cement stool, where I could just about squeeze myself with my knees bent, I could also watch the people coming and going on the beach, on the other side of the avenue.

They used to walk along the damp sand, and since Canal 7 was the last drainage channel on the beach, it was also the arrival and exit point. Most of them were barefoot, not concerned about the infinite number of invisible beings that lived in the sand, such as the hermit crabs hidden under shells or the tangle of the seaweed that gave off a strong smell of low tide.

*

Tuca, after washing up after dinner, normally went to bed. She insisted on kissing me good night, examining me with gentle eyes. Everything would turn out fine. In the morning, the breakfast table would already be laid, with a flask of coffee, bread, margarine and a packet of coconut cookies.

One day, as she was drying the dishes, she asked me if I liked surfing.

My history with the waves is complicated, was all I said in reply, trying to preserve my dignity at not having anything to say.

Complicated, in what way?

I've seen a few films, about shipwrecks.

Her totally understanding look was the one she used in her English revision classes. She liked to play the psychologist.

No. Well. It's more or less that. There was this film that I happened to see when I put the TV on once.

Were you scared, Oscar?

I think Tuca realised that I hadn't seen anything at all, that I'd never even thought about whether I liked surfing.

No, I wasn't scared. But I did see a film. I mean, another one. The actor had sun-bleached hair and spent his time waxing his surfboard. It was the story of this guy who liked this girl, but she liked an older guy. In the end the girl ended up marrying the blond guy, the one that waxed his board. I thought about telling Tuca the story, but I thought it was too complicated so gave up.

*

When she returned from the stationery shop, Tuca would spend hours in front of her sewing machine. She made curtains and sheets to order. When the time came, she would go into the kitchen. There Tuca would make some lukewarm, bland food. She peeled the boiled potatoes with a small knife, being careful to take the skin off without taking the rest with it. During this slow process of cooking the potatoes, her reading glasses steamed up, and when this happened she used a tea towel to wipe the lenses.

Sitting in front of her, I watched her reorganise the freezer, so that the little packets of beans and mince would fit in, after having carefully written the date on each of them. Then,

as the weeks passed, she would stick a knife into the frozen mini-packages, sculpting holes into the whitened edible bricks, until she finally split them open enough to fit into the pan.

Tuca also made her own cardboard boxes for the cats and filled them with special sand, as if there were not enough sand on the other side of the avenue. At night, she used to leave a trail of lamps that lit up the corridor, and made the insects concentrate in small groups under the orange light, a reflection of the carpet, until they were annihilated by the heat. They roasted themselves and fell to the floor. I don't know what the cats' cardboard had to do with the flies, but the two things seemed complementary to me in that house, like I was. I felt that when she looked at me but didn't ask me anything.

On the cement block covering the water meter, where I used to sit and watch the night go by, and think about these trivial things, as I watched the play of mirrors of the boats on the sea, as they were engulfed by the waves and then glimmered again in the darkness. The cargo ships moved around in the blackness, and the trace of oil on the surface of the water was carried to the shore with the smell of the damp night, along with the odd seagull searching for fish, as stray dogs rummaged through the popsicle wrappers in the sand.

In the garage, I found another sewing machine. I thought it was broken, but Tuca explained that it was a spare one. Another Singer. Next to it were spools of thread and a polystyrene board. The smell of damp, the cats' box and the lights in the corridor were the setting of my teenage years in Santos, as well as the pencil in Tuca's hand writing on the paper sewing patterns. I jumped over the gate and took the board with me. I didn't want anyone to see me. That was how I came to trying my hand at surfing for the first time.

Initially I used to lie on the board, floating far away from the breaking waves. I would watch the others, and long to be part of the group. I had to learn to surf if I didn't want to look like a jerk. I tried hard to paddle along on the polystyrene board, but it was only after my father sent me money to buy a longboard that I was besieged by the guys from the gated

community near Tuca's house. They'd noticed that I'd been living on the avenue for a short while and approached me without saying much.

One of them had a waterproof digital watch. He used to press the green light on the display, as he talked in a forced way, a bit idiotically, imitating my São Paulo accent for the rest of the group, who whistled their approval. One of them said that, if I wanted to surf with them, I wouldn't have to prove anything to anyone. Just loyalty to the group.

You've just gotta hang out with us, the green-light guy suddenly said. C'mon.

He took a shot at some scientific comments about the calm sea, with no waves, but the others didn't seem to be listening, distracted by their own guttural sounds, which were turning into orchestral spitting as they tried to expel the water that had gone up their noses, the salt burning their throats. One of them was singing, it must have been for my benefit.

Oh, scoundrel surfer.

What do you want, bro? Hey, bro. Wanna surf with us?

Yeah.

So you gotta hang out with us, bro.

He then mentioned another guy who had also come from São Paulo. His name was Nelson and he was living with his cousin, Washington, who was from Santos. Do you know him?

Nobody really knew him, but from the time he'd shown up on the beach they thought Nelson was a bit of a layabout, a daddy's boy pretending to be a drug dealer. He and his cousin went to the Santa Cecília high school, between Canals 3 and 4. Green-light guy pressed his watch again, as if he had given the entire lowdown on Nelson.

Oh, one more thing. He's got a weird disease on his hands. They're all white.

I remembered that Bakitéria, my classmate, had asked me if I knew the guy from São Paulo with the white hands. What about him?

Digital light guy leaned over his board, talking with his chin resting on the wax. You've gotta give him a fright. We'll let you know when he shows up.

Great, I said. I hugged my board, wishing it was a cushion.

He don't surf at all, I said in response, trying to be funny by quoting from a song by the band Os Replicantes, but I messed it up, and it fell on deaf ears.

Hey. The knife is just to scare people, the light guy explained. It's normal to carry one.

It was typical for gangs to carry them, like what happened with Adidas. He then told me about the girl with the long nails who attacked Adidas to defend not only her brother, but the entire Canal 7 crew. She dug her nails into the guy's face, and he ended up with three scars, lines across his cheek, and that's how he came to be nicknamed Adidas. The moral of the story was that they didn't want any outsiders in the Canal 7 gang, and it was important that I first proved my loyalty. Even though they looked the part, it occurred to me that they were more likely to prefer Leo Jaime's ballads to punk rock.

Even so, the sickening feeling I had about the challenge to hurl myself into the sea with a knife to attack someone I didn't know reminded me of the sensation I felt when I sniffed chloroform with a school mate, locked in my bedroom in São Paulo.

That was at the start of the year, and I'd just turned sixteen. A geography project was the excuse to shut myself away that afternoon with my friend, who offered me the sleeve of his damp shirt so I could also sniff the liquid stolen from the lab. The substance went deep within me, boring a hole in my stomach, an overwhelming visceral repugnance that kept me pinned to the floor.

Suddenly I heard my mother on the other side of the door, shouting that if we didn't let her in she would call the ambulance, and then the police. Or was it the police first and then the ambulance? I managed to reach the door handle, looking vaguely normal. I said I had a

stomach ache, which was not exactly untrue. My friend said hi and kept staring at my mother, a bit spaced out.

*

My first tumbles off the surfboard were in the dark. Initially I went into the sea at night because I didn't want anyone to see me looking so clumsy on top of the board. I would leave the house secretly, reckoning that Tuca would be the last person to let me go into the sea on my own and especially in total darkness. I took my time entering the water, looking for an angle, and even when I was turned completely upside down, my face plunged into the sand, I felt encouraged by the idea of a primitive irrationality. I thought about the nails gouging Adidas's face.

One day – it was a Sunday morning – I decided to approach the Canal 7 guys. The sea was very rough, the waves were rolling in. They said it would be just like that, that it would take time to learn the basics, as they admired my brand-new surfboard. I also looked at it admiringly.

My father's present made me feel quite vain, even knowing that he had given it to me because of his heavy conscience at having kicked me out of the house all of a sudden. He spent hours working in both his shop in the Consolação neighbourhood and the one on Rua Aurora, checking the price of the light fittings due to inflation, irritated by the odd mosquito, but incapable of keeping his family close by him. My mother in her hospital bed, and me in Santos.

When you were in the sea you realised how closed in the bay was. There was a good reason why surfers went all the way to Guarujá. As I chatted to the guys I imagined Tuca spying on me through a gap in the curtains. After all, it was a big house, with more than ten

windows overlooking the sea. I was overwhelmed by shyness and I could only stand up on the board when she stopped looking through the window.

I sensed that someone had called out to me. But it was Nelson's name they had shouted, and he was paddling towards us. He looked like he fancied himself as a lifeguard for a TV commercial, with a see-through lime green sun visor pulled low on this forehead and a whistle hanging against his chest.

When Nelson was a few meters away, digital watch guy passed me the knife. Nelson noticed this, but didn't do anything.

*

There was no way out for me when they closed in on us both. I dived down and grabbed Nelson's foot to stick the knife in his surf leash. It wasn't really deliberate, that wasn't my intention.

I looked to the others for support as I came up for air, having the distinct impression that I had not passed the test. My mates had already moved away, not having even waited for me to return to the surface. The only one left was the guy who imitated my São Paulo accent, who until then had seemed to be my mentor. Digital-watch-green-light guy. Before paddling away, he told me not to worry, that I was in good hands, and took the opportunity to say hi to Nelson before leaving.

See you around, he said.

Nelson didn't even reply, he just looked at me, as if I could confirm something. That was when I realised what was going to happen. As soon as I stepped on the send, Nelson would beat me up and none of my Canal 7 companions would defend me.

*

On the beach my instinct was to protect my surfboard, but the kick I received in the face made me bang my head on the corner of the board. My voice sounded weak, and it felt like the sound coming from inside my head was shattering my skull. Electric shocks that made me scratch at the sand. I could hear the echo of people around me, and the sky trembling at the same time, a strident shade of blue that made me feel sick. My mouth filled with blood, that's why anything I tried to say sounded incomprehensible. I spat and blew my bloody nose. More people gathered around, more and more fans wanting to see the fight.

That was when I saw Marcela. She was standing still in the ring, her arms around a sun-burned blond guy. Like in the film about the surfer sanding his board. I don't know why I ended up staring at her, that brunette with dark eyes. I thought she was pretty. It was the last thing I remember before I passed out.

*

The next time Nelson and I saw each other, it was as if nothing had happened, and that was that. There were no second introductions and there was no fighting. I remember that we even ended up smoking cannabis together while he explained that there were no decent gangs there, like there were in São Paulo. That there were no punk rockers there. In Santos, the gangs were all surfers. Group A against Group B. The usual stuff.

I said thanks when he passed me the joint, as the locals looked on curiously. To me they were locals, and no doubt they didn't trust me. Any of them would have trusted Nelson more, even though he wasn't trustworthy. These were the kind of thoughts in my head.

You're welcome, he said, offering the weed to whoever wanted it, inviting them to partake with open arms. You just need a crew to invade a rival territory for boards to get smashed or a fight to break out. People from the coast are like that. They form a circle in the water and sort things out with their fists.

And knives, I said, just for the sake of saying something and not look a fool.

But wise up, Oscar. We scare each other. Not intending to hurt anyone or cut their leashes. That's not the done thing, but it's exactly what you tried to do to me.

It's been what? Two weeks since you were laid up in Ana Costa Hospital?

Yes, two, I said, resisting the urge to touch my bandaged head.

Also, when there aren't any waves in Santos, the crew from Canal 1 have to come through here on their way to Guarujá. But the rivalries are more about girls, he said, looking at Marcela. Girls like surfers. The likes of us, not ones from São Paulo. We're very white. Not white, green.

Marcela looked at me with those almond-shaped eyes, holding a strand of her hair level with her mouth without showing any emotion. She licked the end of the strand, fixing it behind her ear.

That night, at the beach party, Washington, her boyfriend, was hugging her around the waist. There was a guy they called Namor, the Prince of the Depths of the Seas, who was dancing like a mystic, going around and round the bonfire. He was praying to the flames, praying for the night to end soon and for good waves tomorrow morning.

I felt a bit dazed, increasingly nauseous from the smell of boat diesel. I looked at Marcela again. She rested her head on her boyfriend's shoulder as if it was the nicest thing to do in that silence, with the gentle waves of the glittering sea lapping at the shore. I wondered if what the two of them had going would last forever, but months later, and that's a whole

other story, Washington ended up getting shot in the back. He died and they buried him the following day. Drug dealing, they said.

*

The rumour was that he died because he owed money. That was why they buried him quickly, for fear of revenge against the rest of his family. The case was never solved, but Nelson and Marcela left Santos. The police didn't investigate, and in the end, nobody could fully explain why the crime had occurred.

I don't know why I thought it all had something to do with the cans of cannabis that were famously found washed up on beaches. I heard about it on the news, when I was watching it with Tuca. I think it was because they alternated between images of Marcela and of Nelson, the missing couple, and those of the cans of cannabis. I waited for Tuca to fall asleep so I could think it all through.

Washington, when he wasn't in Vasquinho's bar smoking cigarettes with Chulapa and other football mates, was out surfing. One of the dealers, who sold drugs in Maresias, was called Douglas, and he'd threatened to kill Washington.

People even commented that his mother tried to plug the gaps, pay off his debts to the dealers. Somehow she always managed to buy cocaine for her son to inject. I found all this strange and I never got used to the idea of a needle piercing your skin, burning like a blowtorch. It was a game I didn't understand.

During those early days in Santos, I also saw a guy die. He crossed the avenue in just his swimming trunks, you could see his feet were getting burned by the midday asphalt. It all happened so quickly that he was already smashed up when he rolled into the gutter, coming

to a halt in front of our gate. On the beach side of the avenue children were playing sand wars.

*

When Marcela rested her head on Washington's shoulder, I still didn't know all that, nor had I noticed the marks on her arm, those healed up wounds. He had a tattoo on his chest, a kind of anchor and octopus. I remember thinking it was a bit of a stupid design, but even so Washington had the most beautiful, cold and indifferent girlfriend. Marcela looked like she had some indigenous ancestry, a *caiçara*, with those almond eyes that never ceased to entrance me. They were like the bonfire in front of us, weakened by the breeze.

A few people were laughing, and there was a canoe in the distance, in the calmness of the night. Namor, the Mystic, carried on dancing. In the sky, the image of the crab etched in the stars, with its back to the sea.

Watching the canoe, I thought about how primitive man used to open up tree trunks with an axe. I saw fish floating on the surface, the shoal dazed by the timbó plants along the coastline. Timbó, the plants whose active principles ended up killing the fish, were indigenous man's solution for providing food. I learned about it in school, I remember, from a book with a picture of the coastal tribal village that Friar Vicente do Salvador painted in the 16th century.

I remembered the guy's feet crossing the hot tarmac to get to the other side, him getting knocked down, and then Nelson in the ring of squinting surfers. Then back to the fight, two jelly fish thrashing around on the hot sand. I never had any cause to pick a fight with him, from the start I knew that there was no reason to confront him in the water, but I was certain that Nelson would get his own back on me, sooner or later. He was known for

that. I don't know at what point in the night I started thinking about that, and then I couldn't stop. I had already taken a beating from Nelson, but I knew that a solitary thrashing would not be enough for him. I sensed that he would never leave me in peace.

6

I woke up in the middle of the night to the sound of knocking. I tried to make sense of it, but in the dark all I saw was a grainy mist descending slowly on the bedroom, making the noise seem faint and far away. Marcela's deep breathing grew louder and I tried to focus my attention outside the room, but the knocking had stopped. Now I wasn't sure if I had heard something or if I had dreamed it.

It was 3am. I got out of bed carefully so as not to wake my wife up. Without switching the light on, I went into the living room to check that I had turned the key twice in the lock. Through the spyhole, nothing.

When I went back into the bedroom I lay down, and that was when I heard something again. In the early hours of the morning the shifting lift cables, with their deep-sea sounds, became more noticeable. It was just a few hours before daybreak, another day at the store. My reluctance to be behind the counter made me think about my own father, spending his entire life behind there.

I tried to go back to sleep. For a split second my attention was drawn by the living-room curtains. As they swayed they created a series of lines, narrowing again afterwards, only to then form random lines again, merging with Marcela's breathing as she slept, as exposed and transparent as a jelly fish, with trailing tentacles. If there had been a light on, I would have seen the soft smile on her face, as she lay wrapped up in her own secret, facing the wall.

I pulled my wife's blanket off her. She was sweating. Marcela used to wrap herself up in the sheets, which I saw as a way of trying to rid herself of nocturnal visions. She clenched her fist tightly over her ear, as if her cupped hand brought her childhood back. She would sleep like that, curled up with the sound of the sea. Mar-cela. Mar e céu. Where the sea joins the sky. When she woke up in São Paulo, what was left was the practical question of whether to take an umbrella in her bag or not. But when she slept, the elusive breeze carried her far away.

I got up and went back to bed, but she didn't wake up. I fiddled with her sprawling hair so that she wouldn't lie on it. I thought about Marcela as a child, about how things change shape in the dark, and perhaps for that reason in the past she used to prefer to sleep with a lamp on. I was careful not to wake her as I got up, groping around on the floor for my pants and my sweater on the chair.

Where are you going? Marcela murmured.

Sleep, my love, sleep.

She wiped away the kiss I gave her on the face with her closed fist and turned her head towards my side of the mattress, a heap of blankets and pillows. I preferred not to move a thing, not even to touch her wrist to loosen her watch strap.

*

I got in the lift. A sickly perfume mixed with the smell of cigarettes brought me to my senses. A legacy of the party, I concluded, no doubt from the last guest to leave, on his way down to the ground floor. I distractedly peered out onto the landings on each floor, but there were no lights on anywhere.

I came face to face with Adriano at the lobby, standing still next to the doorman, who was dozing with his head on the transistor radio that was playing a Roberto Carlos song.

What's up, dude. Did Marcela kick you out of bed?

I cannot sleep. What about the party?

It's over. This guy here was the last to leave. Adriano laid the flat of his hand on the stirring doorman's shoulder and then turned up the volume on the radio. Décio! Wake the fuck up!

I felt sorry for Décio. I was no longer taken aback by the way Adriano spoke to him, but he had worked in the building for ages. That must have been why it bothered me. The doorman never had a minute's peace, he was always at the mercy of the building manager's moods, subjected to the most absurd abuses. To make matters worse, he expressed himself badly, got all tongue-tied when he had to explain something to Adriano, out of fear, I reckon. I wondered if in Acre there were building managers like him. Why did that cross my mind? I wished I could stop thinking about Acre.

As the years passed, Décio revealed that he was homosexual and that he hated tramps. He said they were vermin. He was quite friendly with the transvestites who hung around on the street corner, and talked to all of them, which might have been a way of protecting himself. Recently the good-neighbourliness between Décio and the transvestites in the early hours of the morning ended in a slanging match, and his increasingly hot-headed behaviour was causing him problems in the residents' meetings. The fact was that nobody wanted an impulsive doorman. Or a queer one, as Vera and Adriano agreed once.

Why do I have to put up with these people who dirty the streets and cause trouble all night long? Décio shouted, grimacing.

The doorman who worked the morning shift had taken his place during the party, but from the way I found Décio sleeping, it didn't look like he'd left his post at all. He was exhausted, and not even Adriano's offensive remarks affected him.

I thought about Marcela, wondering if she was still entwined in the sheets. Neither car horns or shouting in the street could wake her up. The image of the man in Acre came back to me. He was travelling, in the early morning, creating a landscape of half-built roads. A few entire stretches disappeared during the rainy season.

Fuck, Décio. Imagine if some madman or delinquent turned up at the door and you didn't even notice.

I'm always on the lookout, Décio said, turning the radio off. Don't worry, sir. I won't do it again, too much.

Nobody in this building wants to pay a layabout to sit on his ass all day, Adriano said, without moving from the doorman's desk.

It wasn't the first time that the building manager had lost his temper with Décio, only to then try to smooth things over by giving him a friendly slap on the back.

It's just that everyone in the building is complaining.

The doorman, confused and exhausted, tried to explain himself with more truncated phrases and waving his trembling hands around in the air, but he couldn't. I nodded off, sir, he finally said.

Décio's rather lost gesture made me think of Washington. By the time he died, he'd already become a problem in Santos. He had a drained, half-starved look about him, and wandered around aimlessly trying to score drugs to give him back his soul. Nobody seemed bothered by his death. They buried him, end of story.

Leave him alone, Adriano.

We'll be back in a minute, Adriano announced.

Décio sucked his little finger, which he had stapled by accident the other day. He tried hard to look competent, busy, but his poor posture gave the impression that one of his shoulders weighed more than the other.

It's late. I'm not going anywhere, Adriano.

The doorman looked at me. He probably thought that Adriano was going to get angry with me because I wanted to go back up to my apartment.

Oh, you'll chicken out, he said.

Should I lock the door, seu Adriano?

Óbvio, Décio.

Yes, sir.

Head bowed, Décio took a paper clip from the drawer. He balanced it between his fingers. Looking chastised, his solitary act reflected the boredom of the hours he spent alongside his transistor radio. You could tell this from the way he meticulously braided the small piece of metal. Hours of training. I remembered the noises I'd heard earlier, the knocks at the door, the man from Acre walking along the road, and someone in front of me.

Are you listening to me, Décio, or have you fallen asleep again? Adriano was constantly picking on him, it was too much. He turned towards me and smiled. It's the end, he said. I get why you cannot stand the guy.

Which guy? I looked at the doorman, who had stuck the clip in his injured finger without meaning to.

So, Décio. Adriano was talking in a loud voice again, irritated by everything. Sucking your finger, man? You need to improve your posture. I've told you already that you should sit up straight. It's disrespectful.

Yes, sir. Sorry, seu Adriano.

That guy Nelson is actually really weird, isn't he?

Seems to me that you decided to pick a fight with him, right? In fact, with everyone.

An oddball who reckons he's just got back from Acre. He's really just got back from a puta que o pariu fuck knows where. Adriano agreed with himself. But watch out. I've noticed that he's got his eye on your wife.

What?

I'm telling you he's a weirdo. The way he's a bit anonymous, and comes up to you with nothing to say, staring at you. There's something odd about that.

Adriano was convinced that he was a kind of sheriff, not just of the building, but that he represented all the inhabitants of Vila Buarque. That was what he was doing at that moment, by trying to teach the doorman some manners, as he sought to involve me in a discussion about Nelson, the outsider in the building. Next his attention would be turned to the streets.

He had a one-dimensional, paternalistic view of the militant incursions necessary to clean up our neighbourhood. He defended vigilantes and law and order. In the building, he

took it upon himself to resolve small everyday issues, like changing a cracked flower bed alongside the outside wall, and in the residents' meetings he always had the last word.

He's a great building manager. Nobody can deny that, Vera used to say.

What he did have was the gift of the gab, warming the hearts of others with his own brand of civic duty.

Adriano interrupted what he was saying to test the wall behind Décio's chair with his finger nail, trying to find the damp patch, where the paint was beginning to flake off.

Hey, speaking of outsiders, did you notice a guy who went into my flat and then left? I didn't see him, but it was Ana who told me. I'd never seen the guy before in my life.

What was he like?

I don't know, it seems he had very black, straight hair and a dark-skinned face. Covered in spots. He was ugly, a Bolivian type. Adriano turned towards me. Ana said that Nelson took a good look at him, as if he knew him.

He laughed again, shaking his head, but a wave of seriousness swept over his face.

So, Nelson must have invited him. It's the only explanation. It's odd, though. Décio, did you see anyone different?

Nope. Only the party guests. Some down here, others upstairs. Décio's half-smile, as he concentrated on what Adriano asked him, made him seem like the building manager's accomplice, even without really knowing who he was talking about. He would wait for the moment to open or lock the entrance door, in the same way he would wait to open or close his mouth.

Feel like going out for a bit? Get some fresh air?

At this time of night? It's 3am, Adriano.

It's my birthday, you won't deny me this pleasure, are you? You know how much I love this city and it's my birthday. Have I ever asked you to do anything before, Oscar? On the most important day of my life?

You... Well, Adriano.

Me what?

No, nothing. I'm going back upstairs, before Marcela wakes up.

Hell, Décio, there's Suzi. Your friend is dirtying the glass door again with her nose. You don't give her food, do you?

*

Suzi went past, looking inside the building, intrigued by what was going on at that time of the night. She was one of the transvestites known to them, who turned tricks on the corner of Vila Nova street. She had a cute way of touching her hair, tucking a strand behind her ear, neatly. She went past again, taking her time so she could see who was in the lobby. Seemingly she didn't want anything, not even to say hi to Décio, her fellow early-morning worker.

Adriano looked towards the door. He smiled. Maybe he was trying to communicate with her silently. It was obvious they knew each other.

Where do you think she's going, Décio? Adriano stood up straight. Not Cracolândia, I hope.

Is Suzi into that, seu Adriano?

Vai saber. You'll soon see.

Suzi's air of mystery bothered Adriano. I noticed that he watched her. Her straight hair on her powerful shoulders made her look a bit like an android.

She'll end up dying like a stray dog and nobody will know why. Let's go for a wander, Oscar.

Ok, then. Just a quick one, Adriano.

As soon as we went out, Décio would take off his glasses and put them on the table, and then go and lock the entrance door and stand there for a while, watching the transvestites on the other side of the glass.

*

From the square you could see the effect of time on the buildings. With the exception of the garage in our building, whose façade was a tall, glass rectangle, nothing stood out on that block. It was a collection of low-rise buildings, which had been chipped away at and patched up, dotted with air-conditioning units and the odd brightly coloured curtain. At street level the entrances to residential buildings rubbed shoulders with shop fronts. They were totally diverse solutions that led to an opaque homogeneity of ornamentation.

Do you think Marcela's asleep?

Yeah.

Marcela and Nelson. How do they know each other, Oscar? Did they really meet in Santos?

What are you getting at, Adriano? Marcela and Nelson are old friends. They even dated once.

I heard they ran off together when they were teenagers. You never told me that.

Who told you?

Adriano sniggered like someone who'd just scored a goal, just a little one, and then speeded up his attack. You see? No, forget it, Oscar. Relax. I'm just telling you what I know. That's all. Adriano pointed upwards and smiled at me. You're losing sleep over Vera's son, hey? It's freaking you out. I say that because I know you.

There was a guardrail on the first floor that was a bit loose. The building was one of the oldest in the area. The late-1940s terracotta and the simple neo-classical finishing touches, like the small balconies and shutters, became even more expressive due to the dirt that blackened the building.

Did you see them both, Adriano?

What kind of question is that, Oscar?

No, nothing, it's just a question. I thought Marcela was different when we were in your flat, that maybe you knew something.

I don't know, Oscar, I don't know what you're talking about. She's your wife, after all. Adriano smiled. Or am I wrong?

Adriano, look at that small building on its own. With the bar downstairs.

I wanted him to pay more attention to the building, to change the subject. I wasn't in the mood for arguing with my neighbour.

Imagine the cool marble interior and the wood-panelled lifts with reliefs and mirrors from the golden age, Adriano. After doing it up on the cheap they must have put plywood on the walls and taken down all the ornaments and mirrors. Like in our building.

That's the way it is. No one's gonna spend money when they don't need to. It's a pity, Oscar, but it's true.

In some ways, I thought, that was a reflection of the square itself, nothing more than a promised renovation, like most squares in São Paulo, which ended up being lined with cement, inviting people to stroll among imaginary trees. I wanted to explore this vision further, but I could only try to keep pace with Adriano, who had shot off in front, heading towards Suzi and her companions.

*

A drink in any bar is fine by me, Adriano suddenly said.

Around here? Don't you think it's a bit rough?

We were on the corner of the square when Adriano folded his arms, getting ready to speak. Fuckin' hell, Oscar. This is my city. And if the crackheads think they're going to take over around here, they're mistaken. C'mon, let's inspect the streets. Scare a few of them.

Adriano, listen. I'm not going on patrol.

Suzi came up to us. She leaned on the railings in the square, holding on with her arms raised. She spat out her chewing gum. The street light accentuated the sparkle of the blue sequins on her braless chest.

Come here, Adriano, she said.

She knows your name and everything, huh?

Don't tell me you've never been curious, Oscar. She's an authentic transvestite, you know. Not one who's been operated on. Transvestites come because they've not been mutilated. They get turned on.

That's quite a theory, I said, and I laughed at my neighbour's good humour. Not even if I had all your enthusiasm, Adriano.

I'm gonna introduce you. Hey, Suzi, Adriano called out.

Suzi walked over really slowly. She took a few confident steps and stopped right in front of me.

Hi, honey, she said, lifting up her top to rub her firm breasts. Fancy a suck?

No thanks.

I do a good price for the doctor's friend.

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After Doutor Vila Nova street, we went down Marquês de Itu as far as Amaral Gurgel street. We quickened our pace, spurred on by the cold. The more Adriano analysed Nelson for me, looking at me out of the corner of his eye, the more he seemed to calm my thoughts. I felt understood, it was as if he putting into clear words all that had tormented me for the last few days, but which I had not been able to grasp.

We walked underneath the Minhocão flyover, seeming to be part of that crowd of homeless people sleeping rough under the street lights. We went to Arouche square, where there were several shacks made of cardboard, newspapers and blankets. Some cat or other was meowing in the hope that we had some scraps of food with us. The scent of the lilies from the flower stall was intense.

They look like cocoons, the birthday-boy said, in a rare poetic moment, stopping to admire the make-shift houses of those sleeping rough.

He came to a halt by a bronze statue by Brecheret to comment that he had always liked that sculpture. He stopped to read the plaque at the foot of the statue.

After bathing. C'mon, Oscar, say something about this woman – you know everything about this neighbourhood.

I haven't a clue.

Adriano ran his hands over the statue's legs. C'mon, Oscar. Where was it he said he came from, what part of Acre?

He just said Acre.

You mean he just appeared out of nowhere, all of a sudden. He told his mother he was in Acre. Vera wouldn't make up something like that. What was he doing in that no man's land, on Brazil's borders?

God knows what they do up there. Building roads? Smuggling timber?

Roads and timber. Those thirty years were etched in his face. I wouldn't be surprised if he was a qualified forest engineer, Adriano said. He must be the friend of a friend, as vague as it sounds, just imagine the shady dealings he must be involved in.

What do you think?

Of him turning up here?

Yes.

How should I know?! I don't like him. I'd kick him out of the building.

I'm buying his mother's flat.

Another reason for him to clear off.

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A car raced past from the other side of Arouche Square. The driver's door opened before the car had braked, and that was when I saw that a man was crossing the street right in front of the vehicle. About to be knocked down, he cried out. The driver quickly got out of the car,

and with a kind of pipe in his hand set upon the pedestrian, who took a step back and then fell to the ground, as a result of the blow. Then he was beaten again, now by another youth who got out of the passenger side, and was also armed.

The pedestrian tried to escape, but was struck a few more times, and I saw his hands raised in the air, begging them to stop – please, please, he was saying – as the two of them kicked him, beat him incessantly, in a compulsive release of brutality. The driver shouted something and, when I got closer, I realised that the man on the ground was speaking Spanish. The other guy who had got out of the passenger side demanded to see his ID. He said that Brazil was for Brazilians, or some nationalistic shit like that, and got back in the car before his victim could react. The driver hit the man one last time with the pipe, ran to the car and shot off towards Avenida São João.

We ran over to help the man, Adriano telling me to calm down, reminding me he was a doctor. We knelt down beside the injured man. His face was covered with so much blood that it was difficult to see where the cuts were. His blood-soaked hair stuck to his forehead and the saliva that was dribbling from his exploded mouth made me feel sick, ashamed and on the verge of tears.

Adriano leaned in and whispered in the victim's ear. Hey. Bolivian. Do you get it now? This was to teach you a lesson, to stop you being a jerk, walking around on your own. There's racism in São Paulo, you know. Adriano looked at me and smiled. Look at this, he's not even reacting. The worse thing is that he really does look like a Bolivian.

Do you think they did this out of prejudice?

He doesn't look like a queer. Adriano spoke softly into the man's ear again. Speak to me, Bolivian, habla. Were you the one who scared my wife? Did you gate-crash my party?

The man raised his hands in surrender.

He's saying no, Adriano. Leave the poor guy alone, we've got to call an ambulance, Adriano.

Tell me the truth, shithead. Adriano looked in the eyes of the man lying on the ground. Say something. Was it you? Do you know Nelson? Nelson from Acre?

A pool of blood was forming behind his head.

Adriano, let's get out of here, I said.

I'm against gratuitous violence, but São Paulo cannot carry on like this, it needs cleaning up. Get it, Bolivian? Spit it out, you bastard!

The man groaned and muttered something in Spanish. Then he stopped moving. Adriano stood up and kicked him.

Watching this terrified, scrawny man getting beaten up was repulsive. Seeing close up Adriano's all-consuming obsession with overpowering his prey to the bitter end, until he had exhausted his own torment, was a dreadful experience. My neighbour used to say that he patrolled the streets, but clearly that had nothing to do with the cleaning up of the city centre that he advocated. He hitched a ride on other people's sadism, and now he wanted to justify his desire to kill. And what if he were the man who had turned up in his flat? How was he connected to Adriano's wife? Ana had been mugged - that was Adriano's excuse to go looking for someone to blame.

I began heading towards home, but when I realised that Adriano had stayed behind, I stopped to shout to him to come with me. He had a gun in his hand.

Adriano. For fuck's sake!

Mind your own business, Oscar. This bastard thinks he can come into other people's countries, so why not other people's homes?!

Adriano fired.

No one even reacts, they're so fucked up. Just look around, Oscar. It's the truth.

Really fucked up.

I'm calling the police.

Don't talk shit, Oscar. Come here. Shoot him.

No.

Man up. Watch this.

He fired the gun. The guy shook as he lay on the ground.

Oscar, no one reports this kind of thing any money, you know that. Go to any police station and you'll see. There's so much crack out there that this is called self-defence.

Adriano. Adriano.

What.

Adriano, you saw him be thrown on the ground, beaten up, and this is what you do?
I'm off home. Now.

Calm down. Hang on minute. Adriano took off one of his sneakers, pulled off his sock and put it on his hand. He took the wallet from the unconscious man's pocket. Look at this, Oscar. Didn't I tell you? This clown's Bolivian but his ID is from Acre.

Is it?

Adriano laughed. How should I know. Do you need an explanation? Look, Oscar, I'm sorry but you're a sucker. Look at your wife.

What about her?

Her and Nelson. A teenage fling could turn into something more. Or maybe it already has.

What the fuck has one thing got to do with the other, Adriano? I fiddled with my glasses.

I actually quite liked Nelson. A guy who'd come a long way to save his mother. Did he know that Marcela lived in the same building?

If they didn't get it together back then, they won't now, I said.

But they did get it together, and what's more, your wife likes him. But don't worry. I'll help you to put him straight.

I don't want any help, Adriano. Or any guns around me. That doesn't intimidate anyone. And it's bullshit you going around with a gun so you can shoot anyone who's not like you.

It's your choice. But if I were you, I'd at least get a lawyer. My cousin, maybe. He doesn't charge so much, and he's used to litigious cases.

Now mine's a litigious case.

You never know. C'mon. I've got three bullets.

You're crazy. I'm calling the police.

The police?! They buy me beers for shooting bums. I think he's dead.

Jesus, Adriano. Let's get out of here.

Adriano walked behind me across the deserted square. I tried to work out how long we'd been there, next to the man on the ground, I think about five minutes. My teeth were chattering with the cold, but then I realised it was shock. Adriano crossed the square and I followed him, like a younger brother who can only follow. There was no one about. He tucked his gun into his pants after wiping it clean. From a distance, he didn't look remotely suspicious. He took steady strides, like a policeman.

Let's keep this to ourselves, alright?

Have you ever killed anyone, Adriano?

A good question. Our secret.

What do you mean?

Adriano laughed. I don't like showing off.

Well then?

One or two.

How many, Adriano?

But only unnecessary people. Niggers, crackheads, now and again a really ugly whore. And faggots. Faggots are a fucking waste of space. They have to go. Shooting is an adrenaline rush. It's your turn next time.

We passed a few tramps lying on the sidewalk on Amaral Gurgel street, and Adriano stood still for a minute. He retraced his steps, but it was to attach a loose poster stuck to one of the pillars under the Minhocão, taking care not to rip it. But because there was nothing to hold the paper in place, he pulled the corner off.

Damn. I've ripped it, he said. I tried my best.

Adriano looked at me, his eyebrows arched, seeking recognition. We crossed Amaral Gurgel at a right-angle and went onto Marquês de Itu street. A passer-by stopped in his tracks on the pavement above to light a cigarette and two cars went up the street on that empty early morning.

The above extract was translated by Lisa Shaw

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