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As if we were in a palimpsest of whores by Elvira Vigna is one of the novels featured in the autumn 2018 Portuguese reading group run by And Other Stories.

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Como se estivéssemos em palimpsesto de putas (As if we were in a palimpsest of whores)

Elvira Vigna

Excerpt (pages 21-38) translated by Eric M. B. Becker

Brasilia can't possibly be this lame.

João hangs up the phone and walks out of the hotel.

He's beginning to develop this habit, calling Lola after he's checked in.

“Everything all right?”

Everything's always all right.

“Good night, then.”

And then he leaves.

In Brasilia it takes longer for him to call. He already arrived some time ago. But just look at the sky in this city! A sky that refuses to set the sun free, traps the sun in these fucking streaks of pink, yellow. *The sky's got a point*, João thinks to himself. Brasilia nights must be boring as hell.

So he sits for a while on the bed, gazing at the window and the parking lot, which is what you can see from the window—there's a lamppost that looks like it's falling.

It's not falling, that's just the clouds rolling past. But if you look at the clouds as though they were standing in place, it's the post that's moving. Backward, falling.

Until it disappears. The clouds, too.

More lights. From the cars, other lampposts, buildings in the distance.

Then, giving in, he picks up the phone.

“Everything all right?”

Everything was all right.

And then he leaves.

The Saint Paul.

It's got this lobby built for the damn pharaohs. The pharaoh, his aides, slaves, wives, ministers, the luggage. A frickin' palace.

João turns to walk across the lobby he already crossed when he checked in. This time, heading toward the door, the dark, the outside, the nobodiness of the city. He isn't sure where to go. There's no one he can ask. He still barely knows anybody, from his company, that is. And even if he did. He actually prefers it this way, no questions, no small talk. He just leaves when he wants.

There's no sidewalk. He tests out a dirt path, full of weeds that line the avenue. Not exactly an avenue. A minefield where the mines are cars.

There aren't so many.

They're frickin' enormous, these avenues. Like the lobbies. But there's a stoplight in the distance, whether for traffic or a spaceship landing, that's anyone's guess, turning green then yellow then red in the dark, and that's where João decides to go.

The guy at reception said that somewhere over there is the commercial district and, lacking greater specificity, commercial sounds just about right.

He takes a step. Then another. He waits. Waits some more. Then he crosses.

He no longer uses a toupé.

He tried a mustache for a while. He looked just like Lola's father. Later, he tried a goatee. but they kindly informed him that the company didn't look kindly upon facial hair. So he shaved it off.

But he likes a little hair. Another kind.

We'll get to the hair later.

But first, a roast beef sandwich and a mini-skirt, as they call the stubby little beer bottles.

Later, it'll be like a trip to the market. Get your papaya! Fresh fish! The best bananas around! Or a military camp, boots just outside the tent door.

There are a bunch of tent poles with a blue tarp, a thick one, tossed on top, some rope holding it to the corners, forming what João thinks are four identical cubicles. In one big room.

But all this happens later, inside the shopping strip.

First, there's the roast beef sandwich and the mini-skirt. More than one.

That's how you write it, at the time.

These days, you'd write miniskirt, but now it's *long-neck* instead.

The whole thing merits a socio-linguistic study. A fake feminist victory: making sure a short and stubby beer bottle is no longer a miniskirt. Long-neck being more elegant in form, modiglianesque, though a tad bit nosey, like someone craning her neck beyond the space previously fixed for the feminine. Because that space is just as fixed as it ever was.

But for the time being it's still mini-skirt.

João crosses the avenue, the commercial district, the smell of the supermarket meeting him before the supermarket. Before he can see the supermarket. Cheap, trashy, smelly just like a cheap, trashy supermarket. And then there's the noise. Busted shopping carts, wheels jamming, rusty and dirty, rammed into one another, so that they're piled one right behind the other, in a line, mimicking order.

It's almost closing time.

There's a mad rush of women and men, exhausted after an entire day spent working,

leaving with the items they need, headed for the dark, taking the final heroic steps to the finish line, always in last place. An Olympic race that repeats itself every day, the finish line a TV tray in front of the television set.

“Hi.”

“Hi.”

And that's the last they'll look at each other.

Nobody has any clue.

But later these people are replaced with new ones, who use the same trays that were already there, but are different people. And nobody suspects a thing.

No one looks up all of a sudden and asks whoever is sitting in front of the tray next to them:

“Who are you?”

All the more because what difference does it make anyway, this response to a question no one bothers to ask?

A man appears but doesn't bother asking.

He just comes close, stands there, and João says:

“A roast beef sandwich and a mini-skirt.”

With the demanding look of a regular. And to make sure he's gotten his point across:

“Well done.”

“Huh?”

“The cheese—well done.”

Next door, the supermarket's about to close, closing time marked by the noise of

shopping carts being dumped upside down and trash-bombs launched onto the sidewalk.

The bar's located next to the supermarket. Between the two, a little passageway. It's the entrance to a shopping strip, the supermarket on one side, the bar on the other, and inside, more stores about to close. A lottery booth's still open. As it should be. If it calls it a day—luck, that is—if luck calls it a day, it's serious. So it hangs on. It's the sort of thing that always hangs on.

A.roast beef sandwich and a mini-skirt and then another mini-skirt, to gain some extra time, to think.

Him, there. What is it exactly that's there? João looks around him.

Inside the shopping strip, there's a guy sitting on a stool in front of a half-open door. There's a light coming from beyond the half-open door. The guy mutters a few muffled phrases to the stragglers who pass by on their way out, leaving behind the stores that are closing. João grabs his third mini-skirt. He gets up to leave.

He, too, passes by the guy seated on the stool. He passes by slowly, curious.

Would João care to have a look at the girls.

João would.

And from that point on, it's as if João had walked into the waiting room of any union office, DMV, realty firm, the electric company. Passport photo agency. The dentist.

Inside the door, there's a sofa, a coffee table, an armchair, and a fluorescent lamp with some defect that causes it to flicker.

And another door, marked Reserved.

The door marked Reserved is half-open just like the one in front, but behind it, there's not so much as a trace of light.

Complete darkness. And that's where the girl emerges from.

“Hi.”

A chubby girl, nails painted bright red and nice cleavage, but not so different from the cleavage of any other secretary who's trendier and more sure of herself.

Doctor Siqueira will see you now, through here, please.

“You come here often?”

João nearly jumps out of his skin.

“Where?”

A disconcerted look comes over the girl.

“Brasilia.”

OK, then. Problem solved. Brasilia is the black hole on the other side of a door marked Reserved.

The requisite negotiations take place on the waiting room sofa and then the two cross over into the area marked Reserved.

Inside, João can see, or manages to make out, some shapes.

They look like your average market stalls. Papaya, get your papaya! Fresh fish! The best bananas in town!

Or a military camp, boots just outside the tent door.

Your average market stall: a bunch of tent poles with a blue tarp, a thick one, tossed on top, some rope holding it to the corners, forming what João thinks are four identical cubicles. In one big room.

Two cubicles there, two cubicles here.

“Two to the left, two to the right, I think.”

I think of the Elis Regina song of the same name and laugh.

“Your hand on your neck, the soft skin of your back, 'round and 'round my head all those lonely, lonely nights.”

João laughs, too, and begins to sing along with me, and we sing the song until the end, belting it out at the top of our lungs, Sarita be damned, she's just a secretary. And then we laugh some more, tears streaming down our cheeks. We pretend they're tears of laughter.

And now I think, as I get drunk on whiskey and guaraná, I can hear your voice whispering: two to the left, two to the right.

One of the two over there.

João walks into one of the cubicles, pulling back one of the corners of the blue tarp that isn't fastened to anything and is hanging there loosely from the metal frame. An opening in the guise of a door. The cubicles have no doors. They have no ceilings and they have no walls, either. Where there would be divisions between them, the same blue tarp half-hangs there, half-tied to the metal frame—dangles until it touches the floor, but just barely. It's not advised that anyone lean up against anything because they could, without wanting to, end up leaning against someone doing the exact same thing in the cubicle next door.

The girl tells João to leave his shoes outside.

At first, João thinks that leaving shoes outside is a sanitary precaution. Later he realizes that it's a way—perhaps the only way, other than by sound—to signal that the cubicle in question is occupied.

Inside, a mattress on the floor.

The mattress has a sheet stretched over it and there's a little bump in the stretched sheet, revealing a plastic cover below, protection for the mattress, company property that ought to be preserved. Sheets with elastic don't exist yet, so this one's held in place, consequently, by the weight of the mattress itself, and any especially energetic movements will pull it loose.

There aren't any energetic movements.

Not from João, anyway. Not this time. Not the others.

Beside the mattress, a stool whose purpose, at first, isn't apparent to João. The girl shows him without saying a word, she just strips and sets her clothes, folded neatly, on top of the stool.

Behind the stool, a trash can. Behind the trash can, a roll of toilet paper.

The girl lies down on the mattress, knees bent, waiting on João. In the dark surroundings, the focal point, the beacon, is her even darker hairs.

João makes a few clumsy moves. He removes his clothes as fast as he can. He has trouble with a sock. He ends up tossing it to the side somewhere.

It all happens fast, the thing, this time, too.

And this time, too, for good reason. João thinks there's no one else in the giant room.

But sure—no, he's not sure.

João tells me what he wants to tell me, today and every other day. He talks more about what's going on around the tricks with the girls who turn tricks than the turning tricks itself.

In this episode, there are two things that most interest him.

First, it's the mini-skirt, which merits greater description than his visit to the beacon darker than the darkness itself.

Because João walks by the guy sitting on the stool holding his third mini-skirt, which he later leaves on the coffee table in the room where he waits for the girl. Only that when he leaves the cubicle, tricks over, there's a mini-skirt close to the door marked Reserved.

Inside the door marked Reserved.

As though someone had walked in the giant room with its four cubicles, sat on the floor next to the door marked Reserved, and finished the rest of João's mini-skirt.

João's certain that, on his way in, there wasn't a single mini-skirt inside the door marked Reserved. Worse, on his way out, as he walked through the waiting room again, heading back toward the shopping strip, toward the street, and into the immense darkness of Brasilia, João's mini-skirt is no longer on the coffee table. There are several theories.

The quality control theory.

There are two miniskirts. An employee of the establishment is responsible for cleaning up the mini-skirts left in the waiting room. Another client sits down, just inside the door marked Reserved, and leaves his miniskirt there, which still hasn't been removed by the time João leaves the cubicle. Carelessness that will never again be repeated in accordance with the standard of quality of this establishment.

The mustache theory.

It is in fact the same mini-skirt that João left on the waiting room table. And it's the guy on the stool, the one who closes the door of the establishment as soon as João enters, who finishes off the beer. The place is not, in fact, a brothel. It's private property belonging to a millionaire former politician whose only pleasure in life is to sit and watch through an infrared camera as other people have sex in conditions that can hardly be described as comfortable. No one recognizes this politician when he sits on his stool, disguised as a doorman, calling to the unsuspecting who walk through the shopping strip. But his face was once very famous and his mustache already graced the cover of many a newspaper in his time.

The graduate student theory.

João is an involuntary participant in a field study.

The research site is a some government office. An institute of social sciences

affiliated with the University of Brasilia. As soon as someone enters, a graduate student enters right behind him, doing his best not to make any noise, holding a little notepad. The iPad doesn't exist yet.

The graduate student sits on the floor and begins filling out a spreadsheet. Excel doesn't exist yet. The student notes such things as the duration of the necessary preliminary stages for activities to reach their end and the existence or not of any unnecessary but plausible intermediate stages.

And the color of the client's socks.

Because, trick turned, João goes away without one sock. He loses one sock because he doesn't want to waste his time with a stupid sock, first when the girl's already naked and waiting on him to hurry up, and later when she's already dressed and waiting yet again. Both times looking like she's fed up.

The second time, there's one other factor that sends João scurrying out the door. He's scared. He thinks he's been scammed, that someone's filming everything from the non-ceiling of the cubicle and that this person is going to shake him down soon as he leaves, before he even gets a chance to leave the shopping strip.

“A thousand bucks to keep this videotape of your ass from being mailed to everyone you know.”

YouTube doesn't exist yet.

But that's not what's going on.

Socks that are left behind are collected with gloves and tweezers and placed in plastic envelopes for further analysis in the Field Research Lab. Files with photos of socks can easily be consulted via Exhibit III, entitled, conveniently, Socks.

The grad student takes a swig of your mini-skirt between notations.

The theft theory.

Or it could be that someone in the cubicle next door stuck his hand beneath the tarp and grabbed João's sock.

It's like this all the time. During the day, it's a pop-up store that sells tchotchkes. They use the socks to make handmade artisanal mattresses. Real beauties.

The theories above are all mine.

Because João tells me a little about the mini-skirt, almost nothing about the chubby girl, and later starts in on one of his favorite subjects—whether today or any other day—which is how frickin' great he is.

João is great, to hear him tell it, because he's always going after interesting and transgressive experiences, like this one in Brasilia.

He starts talking, I look for an escape. I divert.

I come back to the theories I've invented. I'm pretty great myself.

The possibility of that place actually being a government building is the part that piques my interest.

Each day until six in the afternoon, the room behind the door marked Reserved is full of desks, chairs that screech across the floor, telephones. And employees who speak into the telephones, sit in the chairs, place documents on the desktops. The documents are stamped and passed around from desk to desk, in a loop, all day long. Like musical chairs.

The music stops. You're out!

There's a thermos near the bathroom, and huge noisy fans.

At six, everyone lines up all the desks against the back wall, invisible to anyone who visits. Two or three of the better-looking female employees stick around, plus one guy to serve as doorman. The rest go home.

When dawn arrives, the two female employees and the guy who acts as doorman divide the profits from turning tricks and then begin moving everything back to its proper place. They set aside a bit for the general pool. That way, the next day, those

who worked the night shift are able to show up to work a bit later because their colleagues cover for them, swiping in for them too when they arrive at work in the morning.

They've been doing this for ages.

When new people are assigned to the team, they find a way to get rid of them. When someone's about to be promoted, they do something to throw a wrench in it. They're fine where they are. Everything's all right. Sometimes they fall behind in their work, but everyone falls behind everywhere, so it doesn't really matter.

João refers to this place in Brasilia as your typical second-rate sauna.

I can't resist.

“You know only gay guys go to saunas, right? There's no such thing as a straight sauna. Actually, not even lesbian ones.”

“Ah.”

“You sure the chubby girl lying on the mattress was facing you?”

“Ha-ha,” João laughs.

It's not a sauna, it's not second-rate, and it's not typical.

Whether it is or it isn't typical, João isn't really in a position to say, because it's his first.

Second-rate, perhaps. But what's second-rate inside a shopping strip with a trashy supermarket in front, in the middle of what's hardly a wealthy neighborhood of Brasilia, on a weekday, next to a bar selling roast beef sandwiches.

The sauna, then, wasn't real.

“No, it was.”

In the back of the large room, behind the tent poles with the blue tarp, João is sure he saw a door with the word Sauna written on it.

“Yes, I definitely saw it.”

And right next to the door marked Sauna, another note.

Out of order. Open from such and such hour until such and such hour (and it was after hours). Under renovation. Employees only.

Or some such thing. He thinks.

The name Sauna, which João stored somewhere in his subconscious, and which still goes by the name Sauna so many years later, is a joke among the employees of the government office, because the glorious air conditioning from the giant room doesn't reach the bathroom.

“So they christened the bathroom Sauna. That's it.”

“But I thought the fans were huge and noisy?”

“Air conditioning. Air conditioning.”

“Something's not quite right there.”

Lola.

João had just married, just joined the company. Brasilia is one of his first business trips. Later, he'll return many times. Some of them with Lola, on vacation. Tacking on a long weekend after a stay there on business. And even regular vacations, with her. So she can get to know the city, so she can spend a few days in Caldas Novas. In the thermal pools in Caldas Novas. An affectionate nod to the times she spent in Olympic-size pools as a synchronized swimmer.

They stay at the Saint Paul.

I have a feeling that Lola will try to remember walking through the lobby of the Saint

Paul, along that avenue. Perhaps strolling, arm in arm with João, in front of the same shopping strip, a bit different today, but not that different. João directing his gaze inside the shopping strip the same way anyone passing in front of a shopping strip might turn his head to see what's inside and then going his merry way, continuing his stroll, Lola saying any old thing, telling any old story while João smiles, feigning interest. Without her noticing a thing.

And perhaps she really did ask, “Should we stop here and grab something to eat?”

And he might very well have said no, they'd hunt up some place better. Or he may have said yes, while she sat there with a mouth full of roast beef, talking, talking some more, looking around, while he sat there, expressionless, smiling blankly back at her, expressionless, not there, not on that day, there, with Lola, but there some other day, the day with your typical second-rate sauna, Lola a thing that talks then talks some more and which he remembers to smile at now and then.

Lola will try to remember.

But she doesn't know how it went down, what she did or what she was wearing, as she crossed the lobby of the pharaohs, what João was like at her side, if they held hands as they sometimes did. And she truly doesn't remember if she ate a roast beef sandwich in some old bar at the entrance to some old shopping strip, João at her side, looking all around, everywhere but at her, the way he always did.

Lola's ashamed. About the stupid things she said, the way she laughed, the roast beef sandwich. Ashamed for having sat there without knowing where she was, like an idiot.

Later, she'll also try to remember what she was like, what she was doing, at the very moment that João walked into the cubicle in what he calls your typical second-rate sauna.

At that point, they'd barely been married.

In the tidy, empty apartment, Lola thinks things are all right after all. The realtor's course an idea that still hasn't occurred to her. But even so.

Lola usually takes a shower for when João calls. She doesn't know why. But she likes

to talking with him, him on his trips, her on the bed, fresh from the shower. And after the phone call, she likes to stay there, in the dark, eyes open, repeating to herself again that things really are all right.

That must have been how it all happened.

It's what I think it must have been like, for Lola, when João tells her what he already told me in this teaser of sorts, this dry run. I can't be certain that this conversation with Lola actually took place. I think it must have. I think it's likely it wasn't a conversation exactly, in the same way it wasn't with me. João's the one who does the talking, Lola sitting there, like I did before, each of us there in our roles as ears and, he hopes, nodding our heads in agreement.

It's Lola I think about.

And what she gets, or doesn't get, out of this life that João considers to be his birthright (and is), and which he considers better than many others (and is) because he doesn't hold back, doesn't follow rules, because he's a fucking badass.

No he's not.

He's not, and neither are his colleagues from his old job who travel with him.

Or better yet, he is.

But the group of badasses has more members than he imagines. Lola, for example. But in order to realize this, he'd have to have looked around himself at some point and he never bothered.

There's another problem. He should have made a choice. He shouldn't have lied to himself. Or to Lola. But made a choice. Was that the life he wanted? Then he should have chosen that life.

And there's one more problem. Like everything in life, what goes around comes around.

And one more problem.

Everything in this life changes.

João walks out of the hotels, with or without his colleagues, and goes to check out the tricks being turned by the girls who turn tricks.

Little by little, the tricks, because they're always the same, change.

And when he tells me about this, his own telling, little by little, also changes.

In the end, this is what counts in all he's telling me. This change.

The outings to strip clubs and whorehouses, even the girls turning tricks, become, little by little, no longer a trip to a better world, a portal leading to an alternate reality, so much more exciting than this one. Only inside his own head is it possible to maintain, and even this with difficulty, the idea that it's possible to go further and further and further. And never come back.

That doesn't stop him from trying.

He goes through the motions of leaving his clothes on a hanger in some shitty hotel, as he becomes someone else, a persona of himself, when he's naked. Convincing himself, as he leaves the hotel, that the world isn't there, waiting for him, same as it ever was. That the girl, naked, is the port of entry to another world, and that, should he so decide, he can bring about these other worlds.

He's never seen a Courbet.

They've never seen one, any of them. They've never even heard of him. They've never seen—he or his colleagues—a replica of *The Origin of the World*. Ever. They sense that there's a world out there. Another world. That something better must begin there. Or that it's possible to start all over again, give origin to a new world over there. There in the pussy. They can't be criticized. Courbet thought so, too.

And, like them, he also thought that given a pussy, thinking about legs, arms, a head, or, in other words, a complete woman, would constitute an unnecessary effort.

João wants this something else. Another life. Another office where, nevertheless, we meet, day after day, and where we talk to one another, always the same routine. And where, when we're leaving, we say:

“See you tomorrow.”

“See you tomorrow.”

He wants something else. Another world.

And it's funny, because it never occurred to him to create, by himself, for himself, a fictitious life on top of the one he led.

“Hi, my name is Joe Grassland (Prado), nice to meet you.”

Grassland, said with the same natural air as when he doesn't question the names thrown at him by each Tabatha, Shirley, Veronica. Agatha.

To each their own fictions.

Perhaps he didn't do it because it didn't make sense. What he likes is to be himself, João, being someone else. Himself, just different, this different him who's the true him. The true João. Exactly.

During our conversations he's also not expecting me to come up with my own stories. During our conversations or what I call, for lack of a better word, conversations, I'm a pair of ears. In reality, I don't exist.

I could tell him that I'm called something other than my real name and he'd believe me.

Or would I be the one believing?

We'd nod our heads in mutual agreement, looking at each other, there with our two names, the other ones.

And we'd dispense with the pleased to meet you.

The above extract was translated by Eric M.B. Becker

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