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## ***Apátridas (Rootless)***

**Alejandro Chacoff**

**Excerpt translated by Julia Sanches**

### Chapter One

American money was simple. Its color and texture evoked the same tedium as Drexel Hill, our Philadelphia neighborhood—the scattered green of pine trees; the row of identical red-brick houses. The soft, beige carpet and the metallic clinking of radiators. In winter, snow fell, and everything around turned white and lost contour. Color withdrew and then resurfaced a few months later. And this infinite, superficial renewal—things changing in small ways and then returning to how they had been before—is something I still associate with American dollars. The notes always crisp, as if just printed; smooth and pleasing to the touch. It's strange, but there's also a certain innocence to them. It must be purposeful, like almost everything Americans do.

On the flight to São Paulo, and then to Mato Grosso, my mother spoke at length about my father. She told us he'd admitted to liking Pinochet (a statement I didn't fully grasp at the time); that he didn't help his own mother out in Chile (she lived in a slum in the outskirts of Santiago); that he didn't even know how to cook. She said these things as if we didn't know him, as if we hadn't lived with him all those years, too. My mother also

explained that he'd forced her to sell a piece of land they both had received as a wedding gift from her own father, my grandfather. It was an excellent plot in Mato Grosso, near the Boa Esperança neighborhood, and my father had forced her to sell it so that he could use the money to buy a car. He was already married to someone else when she met him, in fact; he had never gotten divorced nor annulled his previous marriage. "Your father is a bigamist," my mother said, with monarchical scorn, as if those words settled the matter. I was puzzled by that word: "bigamist". It seemed to conjure a great feat, as if he had spoken several languages or been knowledgeable in some neuroscientific niche.

The two or three flights to Mato Grosso were restful. I enjoyed hearing those stories about my father. I had never really understood him; to me he'd always seemed ethereal, a figure with no clear personality. It was good to know that he had experienced a life full of turmoil, that he could hold his own as a character in a novel, that he had a past I knew nothing about; all this lent him substance. In Philadelphia, he often sat in the living room, reading the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and *The New York Times* with an absent-minded air. He spoke to us in an exceedingly gentle tone that, as we grew up, became obsolete, overly infantile.

It was only when he bought things that I caught a glimpse of a being more authentic and spirited. He had a lovely, curlicue signature for cheques, and at dinners out, when we traveled to some academic conference my mother had to attend in Manhattan or New Haven, he would tear out sheets from his cheque book with handsome severity. "American Express," he'd say, drawing his green card and brandishing it for a few seconds until it had been spotted by a waiter, toying with the limits of offensiveness. He would tip 40%, which shocked the servers, always fearful of close-fisted foreigners. Even after her PhD in Linguistics, my mother still felt uncomfortable around the American ritual of commerce—servers rapidly reciting the various coffees and sweets in uninflected voices as if in prayer. My father had been born for it. "Give me a minute, please," he would say with hostile elegance whenever somebody tried to rush him. I spent a great deal of time back then trying to decipher the mysterious logo of his Alfa Romeo, with the vague suspicion that that emblem—green snake, cross, and sword—might reveal something about his essence. We

weren't in any shape to buy that piece of shit car, my mother had said; we should have kept the land.

"Tell us more, tell us more about him," my sister asked, yawning, at once sleepy and thrilled by these stories; and as the plane sliced the vast darkness, we kept on listening to her. The trolley cart rolled by, we ate dinner, one by one the plane lights faded, and my mother's tone, softened by the food, grew tender, my father's despicable exploits taking on the drowsy melody of a fairy tale. As she listed the assets that had belonged to her and which he had sold, one by one, I nodded off.

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Romualdo, my grandfather's driver, picked us up at the airport. Panting and piling suitcases into the back of the Ford F-1000—the same vehicle my uncle used to transport crates of mahi-mahi, spotted sorubim, and pacu over ice—he explained to my mother: "Betinho's gone fishing and had to take the four-door pickup, and the Communist needed the Belina to go to the doctor. I tried to grab the Santana, but they're using it to ferry stuff to and from the São Benedito party. Betinho's Logus is at the shop." My mother seemed not to be paying attention. In the distance, jackhammers and sledgehammers sounded in the airport parking lot, dulled now and then by the thundering racket of a landing plane. "For fuck's sake, Romualdo," she said minutes later, whispering absent-mindedly in a voice that was at once calm and resigned. "There's no point in making plans with you all." She sat my sister in the front seat of the pickup and asked him to tell me how to hold on tight to the cargo bed so I wouldn't fall out.

The sharp scent of forest fire hung in the air, and the gusts of hot wind that hit my face felt strangely refreshing. For long stretches, I saw nothing but scattered houses, each of them with thatched roofs, punctuated time and again by a melancholic billboard for a drug store or an exam prep course. I hoped the sun wouldn't make my skin peel and that my uncles and cousins wouldn't rag on me about it later. The rangy trees and rocky planes recalled a road trip we had once taken across the American Midwest. "My family and I are

from a place a bit like Iowa,” my mother had said to Myriam Thornton, her advisor at the University of Pennsylvania, a woman she never referred to by her first name. Dry and gentle, Thornton had believed in my mother and egged her on with several research grants; but, that night, as we sat around the dinner table—my dad slicing spinach and garlic into strips, knife hitting wood—she let out a shrill laugh. And my father, attuned to such minor opportunities, set to sarcastically describing the place of my mother’s birth—the heat, the dearth of direct flights, *sertanejo* music playing in squares at earsplitting volumes. “It’s awful, just awful, Myriam. You have no idea,” he said in his part-British accented English, which, these days, I suspect he made up himself. My mother’s face twisted in mute fury; the only chance she ever had of missing her hometown was when he criticized it. Later, to the low hum of a Mario Lanza Christmas album, she broke a few plates against the kitchen wall.

Presently her high-pitched laughter reached me drowned in wind flurries. Through the cargo bed window, I watched Romualdo opening and closing his right hand, as if he were mocking somebody loquacious. He tossed a bag of popcorn out of the window, followed by a can of Coca-Cola that rolled and bounced over the asphalt until a truck behind us destroyed it. My eyes were on my mother, checking for her reaction (in Philadelphia, she had instructed us obsessively never to litter), but she remained calm—laughing and chatting—my sister asleep in her lap.

When we reached Rua Otiles Moreira, my grandfather’s street, a group of shirtless boys in flip-flops interrupted their ball game to let the pickup pass. They stared at me as the iron gate opened. I recognized a few faces, but feigned interest in the suitcases in the cargo bed. The gate took a long time to open. When the pickup finally crawled forward, somebody farther down the road yelled “Hey, how do you say pussy in English?” and a few benign chuckles echoed out.

I laughed, too, but my laughter was nervous. Our return home (this time, not on vacation) and my grandfather’s imposing house filled me with a mix of pride and shame. Pride and shame, pride and shame, emotions that were relentless and inseparable back then. The long iron gate and rusted parabolic antenna gave the house an aura of authority

that was anti-aesthetic, as if its ugliness were somehow intentional, like a detention center in some minor Eastern European country. On the front red-brick wall, small, white caterpillars crawled to the top, fell, then struggled up again, Sisyphuses of the savanna. I never forgot the time my cousin fearlessly grabbed one with his hand and squashed it until a pasty liquid oozed out. “There,” he said. “Shitshow’s over.”

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It was months before my father called. “How are you liking school?” he asked me in his obsolete voice. Nobody knew where he’d been living since the separation. He wanted to speak to me in English—it’s unclear why—and I felt rather stupid doing that in the hallway, relatives and my grandfather’s servants streaming past me. We didn’t have much to say to each other. We broached then returned to the subject of my new school.

I told him it looked like a prison (my concept of prisons had been informed by the American TV series I had watched back in Philadelphia) with narrow corridors and tighter staircases, grates on every window, and a grayish, concrete patio. I told him about the most momentous thing I’d learned there, that Brazil was far bigger than the United States. “Not if you count Alaska and Hawaii,” he corrected. For some reason that correction irritated me, and I went on telling him how big the country was: the teacher had explained that Mato Grosso was bigger than Texas, the largest state in America; and she had said that the distance between the capital of Mato Grosso and the capital of Goiás was about one thousand kilometers, the same distance separating Marseilles, in the south of France, from Normandie, in the north. In fact you could fit several Hollands, Belgiams, and Luxemburges in Mato Grosso. “And what do people do with all that space?” my father asked, and I noticed his tone had changed.

After that phone call—full of static and voices crisscrossing the line (happy and verbose, these voices made our silences even more uncomfortable)—my father started calling every week. He never said where he was. But we spoke less and less; after a quick hello to me and my sister, he would want to speak with my grandfather. My mother never

spoke to him again; she had cut off all contact, and asked her father to do the same. It would annoy her no end to hear, from the living room table, her father clearing his throat, spitting out phlegm in laughter, delighting in one of his former son-in-law's anecdotes.

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My grandfather kept his money in the third closet drawer. Stacks and stacks of bills fastened with rubber bands, each of them fattening some white envelope. Every envelope was labeled in block letters (it surprised me that someone older than I was could have handwriting so similar to mine). Some of the labels were concise ("Gas Station" or "Notary"), others more cryptic ("Ditinho to Mary & 3 Sto. Antônio," "*Cristo-Rei* piece"), and others more gregarious, romantic ("Dom Bosco's Gang;" "São Benedito Party"). There were many envelopes. He would shuffle his threadbare sandals across the room and stiffly squat down to grab the notes, and I enjoyed watching him sort and organize the money. Once, he asked me if I wanted to help him count the money. But as soon as he glimpsed my fascination, the way I studied and scrutinized each note, his face grew somber. "They aren't worth a thing," he said evasively, taking back the notes. "Dollars are worth much more."

The money in Brazil was constantly changing. Every time we went back there on vacation, a new currency was in circulation (Cruzados Novos, Cruzados Velhos, Cruzeiros—though my grandfather, perhaps out of some pragmatic instinct, referred to them all as "Réis"). All these new notes looked quite old. Their color was faded and their texture flimsy; I was scared to hold them too firmly lest they crumble in my hands. The people featured on the notes were also hard to make out. The contour and features of their faces were lost over time, and they all resembled ghosts (which they in fact were). Occasionally, on the notes, you would find poems by Carlos Drummond de Andrade or Pablo Neruda, as well as amateur pieces scrawled in pen (the verses' sentimentality and anxiety growing as the money's value decreased). Once, a bit older, I came across a drawing of a swastika. Sat between two other drawings—a penis gushing sperm and a winged heart—the symbol seemed to lose some of its ominousness. That's how ideology reached Mato Grosso: twisted and busted up in transit.

One day, my grandfather handed me a few envelopes and asked me to put them away in my backpack. Romualdo collected us in his pickup and we headed toward Santo Antônio do Livramento. There, we stopped at a great aunt's house, and I distributed the envelopes among nebulous relatives sitting on her porch, learning and then immediately forgetting each of their names as I handed over stacks of money. "God bless you," they would say, "now speak in English so your cousin can hear you a bit."

Before this, on the way to Santo Antônio, the pickup had left the main road a couple of times and taken a detour down narrower, dirt roads pocked with muddy puddles over which clouds of mosquitoes hovered. The residents of these houses—some, unpainted cement blocks; others, wood shacks with thatched roofs—would lift their eyes and stare at us, their expressions unflinching as they sucked on mangos or laconically hammered nails into random pieces of wood, only returning to what they'd been doing once the pickup had passed. Romualdo pulled up at one of the low, squat houses. While my grandfather sat in the truck listening to some state championship game on the radio—very quietly, as if such a low volume helped him focus—Romualdo climbed out. He opened the cargo bed and pulled out bags of rice and farofa, large sacks of vegetables and bocaiúva, and cilantro seedlings. He opened the heavier, ice-filled boxes and pulled out spotted sorubim and pacu—the fish always frozen in some asymmetrical position, their tails curved, as if glaciated mid-swim—and goat and lamb legs whose sinuous, grayish muscles filled me with a diffuse sadness. An earthy smell, tart and slightly rancid, overwhelmed everything. Some children rushed up to the truck, and Romualdo, annoyed by the physical effort of hefting things in and out of the cargo bed, laughed aggressively. "You just gonna stand there staring like a bunch of bozos? This is all for you, you tykes. . ." Then he dragged out the heaviest box and set off knocking into people, as if wanting to tip them over. "Git, git, if you're not gonna help, let me through goddamnit." Dripping with sweat, he pulled off his shirt, revealing two caramel-colored spots against his black skin, between ribs and waist. The marks lent him a tentative distinctiveness, somewhat like those large, dark birthmarks with two or three hairs bristling out of them. Later, I learned the scars were from bullets.

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We set up (we were set up) in a room with three single beds; at the time I didn't grasp the metaphorical weight of that arrangement. To my mother —separated and unemployed in her early forties—the symbolism was probably obvious, if not glaring. A queen-sized bed, however, with its intimations of pity and the familial pressure to get remarried, would have been worse.

The Communist, my grandfather's eldest brother, lived in the room next door and had to move his books out, tomes of philosophy and old issues of the *Estadão*. Years later, once I began writing, I went looking for his books and discovered that he owned many minor novels by great authors (*Women in Love* by D.H. Lawrence, *Island* by Aldous Huxley, *The Crocodile* by Fyodor Dostoyevsky). As if some critic had flagged for him every expendable title in a major author's oeuvre and he, out of mulishness, had had one of his "neurasthenic episodes" (as my grandmother called them), seeking out exactly those titles for his collection. The Communist would fetch his books from our room early in the morning, when we were still asleep, and the noise he made shifting things on the shelves—a rustling that reminded me of Joelma running the squeegee—was hypnotic and compelled me to sleep in longer. "We're still here," my mother would sometimes say, yawning, so that he would leave the room. When this happened, my uncle would look over at the bed and, with trembling lips, saucer his eyes in dubious fright. It was never clear from his expression whether he was apologizing for his early-morning intrusion or if we, who were occupying a space that had once been his, were the real intruders.

"We're here," my mother would say again, after he had left the room—quieter this time, as if trying to persuade herself.

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In those first few months, my mother and uncles changed our home number several times. They summoned the family's lawyers and mobilized state prosecutors. None of it

worked. My father kept on calling my grandfather to chat and ask him for money - sometimes, with eerie panache, the calls were collect. Everyone said he cried over the phone and claimed to miss my sister and me a great deal. But he never once mentioned where he was. My uncles bought a caller ID to record the numbers he dialed us from, and soon discovered that several of the calls were being made from Asunción, Paraguay. There wasn't much they could do with that information: it only served to exacerbate the family's anxiety. They suspected my father might cross the border to weep at my grandfather's feet—then we'll really be fucked, my uncle said, because the good-for-nothing son of a bitch will ask him for a much higher figure. But that didn't happen either. Once or twice, some family acquaintance would claim to have seen him at breakfast at El Dorado, the nicest hotel in town. But such accounts were not to be trusted. I was well-acquainted with my father's chameleonic appearance; his furtive impersonations and ethereal character, the way he adopted and abandoned mannerisms and accents, allowed him to change even his own physical traits. He could fashion himself into whatever he liked, and, precisely for this reason, he was nothing. In any event, I fantasized about him arriving at my grandfather's house, getting in fistfights with my uncles, Romualdo, the staff, then heading to the third closet drawer, grabbing an envelope, and staining it with blood. Of course this never happened, and that was even harder on my family, for the relentless imminence of an unpleasant visit is always worse than the unpleasant visit itself.

“What your father's doing is called extortion,” my mother would say, full of anxiety, the word once again evoking something very sophisticated, and not exactly malignant. But I had never seen any envelopes addressed to my father in the third closet drawer. Where were they? I asked my mother, and she laughed bitterly. “It's only very high bank transfers for him,” she said. “You can't fit everything he asks for in some stupid envelope.”

It was out of a trite curiosity to witness my father in the throes of emotion that I began to discreetly—or rather, with a child's caricaturesque and pointedly indiscreet discretion—unhook the living room phone whenever he called for my grandfather. There was so much talk of my father crying over the phone, I wanted to hear it for myself. The only time I had ever seen him cry was stopped at a red light on Avenida Santo Amaro, back

when we still lived in the United States and were on vacation in São Paulo. A boy had come up to the car window to sell him flowers, then pulled a .38 from his jacket and pointed the gun at his head. Everything had happened very fast (and very slow), and it was only later, at the very end of the avenue, as a fine, acid rain fell and the thick flow of traffic kept him from speeding off like he would have liked, that my father began to cry. The deep sound he emitted—strange and cadenced, laced with phlegmy hiccups — mixed with the honking outside, and it was as if he had only then discovered the existence of that more primitive emotion. “Piece of shit country. Fucking piece of shit country,” he said to my mother in his strange, part-British accent, punching the windshield and grunting. “Let’s leave this piece of shit country. What a fucking shithole you were born in, huh?” After we had parked and gotten out of the car, my mother grabbed my arm and said loudly, so that he could hear her: “How many times did I ask him to leave his fucking Rolex in the hotel?” My dad quickened his pace, leaving us farther and farther behind him on the sidewalk, and once he had finally entered the hotel lobby, my mother raised her voice even more. “What did I say!” she screamed. “What did I say!”

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I spent my childhood in the most capitalist country in the world. But American prosperity was sterile; it emitted only the urgent, vaporous pleas of immediate consumption. G.I Joes with bellicose expressions and military fatigues were abandoned in a corner of my room just weeks after being bought, and my sister’s plush macaw—a recorder stuffed in its gut—parroted phrases in our accented Portuguese, its tone reliably sinister. When it came to the drama of money, the pastoral seclusion of Drexel Hill kept us inside an innocent bubble— perhaps that, too, was American purposefulness playing its hand – and I never quite gave it much thought. But I began to feel increasingly naïve and ignorant whenever my cousins (some of whom were younger than me) brought up the subject of money at my grandparents’ house. Sex, which I wasn’t well-versed in either, didn’t bother me: the inexperience of those around me was blatant. But my cousins demonstrated a strange authority around wealth, as if having penetrated some fundamental facet of existence still unknown to me.

They would talk about my grandfather's land, about his properties, about the notary, the gas station, about their buddies at school—the grandchildren of former governors or Congress members who had become rich by illegal means (“Felipe’s granddad has three bathrooms, all of them with those artificial waterfalls,” Marco, my oldest cousin, told me one afternoon). They spoke of buildings, of employment record books and severance pay; they said things like “appellate judge” and “contractor” and “proxies at the Court of Audit,” imbuing such insipid words with vitality and drama. Money played a narrative function that I couldn’t quite wrap my head around; it was like memory, or history. To this day, when I spot some traveler at the airport, displaying that mute and focused affection toward their belongings—carefully opening their glasses case or costively clicking the various buttons on their leather briefcase, with more pleasure than haste to find their documents in one of its compartments—I feel sort of lost, as though I were witnessing a ritual beyond my interpretative capacities, an experience similar to reading a Kawabata dialogue, one of those ceremonious teas he often depicts - where one appreciates the scene’s aesthetic beauty while also having the vague sensation of missing layers and layers of subterranean meaning. My cousins enjoyed more than anything discussing the construction of my grandparents’ pool, and how much it had all cost: the contracts, the cement required, the transportation of cargo. The pool in question, which everyone loved, was shaped like a teardrop, its water green and murky with litterfall floating on the surface. Bocaiúvas would fall from the tree and sink to the bottom, growing dark and waterlogged, their texture now rougher and furrier, pellets of fruit resembling little turds that we had to swim around.

Sometimes, cousins and distant relatives would arrive from Sorriso or Poconé to talk to my grandfather. They came well-dressed, their children on their shoulders. The children, in knee-length socks, tiny shoes, and ties, had the churlish look of La Belle Époque. Having been forced to wear a similar, pseudo-European outfit for a group photo at my new school, I was familiar with the gentle humiliation on their faces. But they also showed another humiliation that was more potent and difficult to articulate at that age: having to witness their parents beg for money. My father was doing the exact same thing; but for some reason I couldn't put myself in their tiny, slick shoes.

On these visits, the relative in question would usually elaborate on some business plan—to export pequi liquor or open an ostrich farm, say—and assure my grandfather that they would invest the money wisely. My grandfather would patiently hear them out, but he didn't really care. He didn't believe in business ideas, thought they were naïve and slightly delusional; they were like great car chases and acrobatic jumps, things that only worked in movies. The novels of Nelson Rodrigues had endowed him with a cheerful cynicism. "In Brazil, you only win with the State." When he grew tired of his cousins' stories, he'd stiffly get up from his desk and, in threadbare sandals, shuffle to the phone table, where he sat, panting, having given up on going to his room. "Nêga!" he would yell at my grandmother, who was murmuring prayers in the back room, rosary beads in hand. "Your cousin's waiting. Grab the envelope by the saint!"

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My grandfather had bright, tan skin and a fine tuft of hair in the middle of his chest. A slender scar the shape of an ellipse ran down his large, hard belly, and I am often reminded of it when I see one of Miró's drawings. The scar was connected in some way to a past ulcer that my mother and uncles always brought up in graphic detail ("He would come back from the post office and vomit blood in the toilet!"), which has always struck me as a way of showing us everything our grandfather had endured to make his fortune.

But he was even-tempered about his money and never experienced any pangs of guilt or passion. The explanation he gave for the capital he had accumulated was simple: "I won the bid for town notary, and cash started pouring into my account like water."

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We were standing in front of school one afternoon, in the thick of that universal and discomfiting ritual of waiting for our parents to come collect us, when Cauê asked me what cars were like in the United States. "Much better," I said with deliberate vagueness. Even

though I'd enjoyed trying to decipher the logo of my father's car, I had never paid much attention to others. The children at school would eye the vehicles with focused expressions and snobbish demeanor, whispering praise or laughing maliciously to one another. A beat-up car did not necessarily result in condemnation. The black car with missing hubcaps that collected Mendiguiho, a boy from our class, caused quite the stir. It was impossible not to be judged on your parents' car. For a handful of seconds, as the child in question climbed into the front or back seat of the car, all previous values scales and hierarchies would dissipate, eroded by the symbolic weight of the vehicle. Cauê, an arrogant and manipulative boy who trafficked in adult words, was always humbled by his mother's scratched up silver Kadett, a sad tussock of foam bristling from the front seat. As Cauê clambered into the back, he became that tussock of foam. And he shut the door with a faraway, resigned look in his eyes. Likewise Mendiguiho, who was more insecure and reserved, took on the brusque and hearty bearing of the big, black Opala he climbed into, reveling in a passing confidence. "Later!" he'd yell as he slammed the door far too hard, his high-pitched voice subsumed by the deep roar of the engine.

Romualdo sometimes showed up in my grandfather's silver F-1000. Before it even rolled to a stop I was already tossing my backpack into the cargo bed and climbing in; and then Romualdo, who understood the importance of putting on a show at such moments, would rev the engine a couple of times. Sometimes he drove shirtless, his large belly slotted into the wheel and his bullet scars in plain sight, the F-1000's long and slender gear stick rumbling relentlessly beside him from the force of the engine.

A few months after we moved back to Brazil, my mother bought a small, green Volkswagen Gol 1000. The first time Cauê saw it, he asked, with speculative cruelty, what had happened to the F-1000. "It's in the shop," I lied. "But why doesn't your mom ask your granddad for a better car?" he retorted, and I remember having been taken aback—not by the implication that my mother's car was bad (which I already knew) but by the inherent presumptions in his question (how did he know who my grandfather was? And why should my mother ask my grandfather for anything?).

“Better an enlightened bourgeois than a nouveau riche who fancies himself an aristocratic,” I said after a second of thought. I had heard my mother use that phrase one day at lunch when my grandfather, in his direct and purportedly inoffensive manner, had compared her lowly salary as a university professor with that of his cousin in Rio de Janeiro, who had become rich off the resale of tires and buffers. I wasn’t sure what the phrase meant, but my mother’s tone, biting and triumphantly sarcastic, had led me to pocket it for possible future use.

Cauê didn’t get it. He relished in bootlegging grown-up concepts and crass sayings, but I could see from his vacant gaze that the phrase was too mysterious and oblique, even to him. Seeing it had not had the desired effect, and feeling vaguely humiliated by what Cauê had said earlier, I resorted to something more direct:

“My father owns an Alfa Romeo.”

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In those months, I developed a fondness for that Volkswagen Gol. Its green paint glimmered in the bright sun like a volatile hologram and its factory smell, dusty and pungent, seemed permanent. My sister and I used to ask our mother to shut all the windows so we could turn on the air-conditioner to its maximum potency. Bringing our faces close to the air vents, we savored those blasts of wind. But the car had no air-conditioner, it was only a fan. As my mother watched us repeat this ritual every morning—puffs of hot air hitting her face—she would let out a nervous laugh, the humor of it mingling with a certain horror. Occasionally losing patience as pearls of sweat dotted her upper lip and forehead (from the sun and the hot air, but also from the effort of steering a non-hydraulic wheel), she’d say: “Turn that fucking thing off.”

She had bought the Gol in several installments. Its 1.0 engine was so weak they didn’t even sell it in the U.S. anymore; only Brazil, my mother would say, full of disdain for the country’s economy. But she couldn’t conceal her delight in the fact that the car was hers

alone and that she no longer had to rely on Romualdo or on the staff at the notary for her transportation. She had been offered a job as a professor at the local federal university and spent her first few payments on the Gol. In her mid-forties, she was reliving the tremulous joy of early financial independence. Soon she would be ready to leave her parents' house. My sister and I participated in her excitement. We would turn the fan up to 4 and ask her to drive us along the road to Chapada dos Guimarães in the evening, as the first city lights emerged on the horizon, pale and timid in the violent dusk. As we listened to the classical music station on the radio, the sun set in a diffuse miasma of pinks, purples, and yellows. And when Mahler came on, my mother changed the station, not wanting to be reminded of my father's affectations, nor of his last lie: that he was being transferred to Frankfurt for a new made-up job at a new made-up bank. Changing the station, we'd find ourselves fenced in by *sertanejos*, *axés*, and shrill supermarket ads. And so we learned to turn the radio off and appreciate the silence.

On these long drives, without looking in the rearview mirror, my mother would say she didn't want to talk about our father anymore. Yes, he had ruined our lives and decimated everything we had ("it would have been yours, too, you hear?"), but it didn't make sense to keep listing off everything we had lost. There were people whose lives were far worse. "Who are we to complain?" she'd say. That was around the time she started referring to him as crazy. It soothed her to assign him a pathology. "He's insane," she would say resignedly, in the same sticky, pious tone my relatives used to describe the trying lives of the servants, or of Dona Madalena, our poor neighbor. No, it wasn't worth listing every single thing he had thrown away, she said, it wouldn't do us any good to dwell on it. And then she would start the inventory: part of the Leblon apartment, the piece of land in Boa Esperança, shares in the gas station, the masters in economy at Temple University ("Which your grandfather paid for!"), the house you grew up in, etc., etc.

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My family was receptive to the verdict of my father's insanity, though my uncles preferred the term "sociopath." The word wasn't a cliché back then, and its mysterious,

clinical ring helped keep my father at arm's length, turning him more sterile than he actually was, barring him from the broader category of lunatics that encompassed relatives and acquaintances whom my family held in a certain affection.

Madness was so ubiquitous in our family discussions we had our own term for it. A person could not only be round the bend, but they could be rounding the bend, or have rounded the bend at a particular time—as if insanity were a strong bout of flu that one dipped into and out of on a seasonal basis. There was Mumuco, an acquaintance from Tangará da Serra who had abandoned his career as a state representative to hole himself up in a chicken coop, where he spent all day eating bocaiúva and reading and rereading *In Search of Lost Time* (“he just sits there reading Prouuuust under his breath,” said Betinho, my youngest uncle). There was Bravo França, a distant cousin who would invite my grandfather over to drink guaraná and, on seeing him, open his safe. “José, dear cousin,” Bravo França would say to my grandfather as he fanned out notes and notes of money over the glass living room table. “Everybody knows you like to give your money away; but me, José, what I really like is to stash it.” Bravo França would then take the stack of notes in his hand and bring it up to his nostrils, taking deep and rapid whiffs, like a dog. One time, unable to resist, he shoved a stack in his mouth and slowly munched on the notes with a parsimonious look on his face while explaining to my grandfather that they tasted a bit metallic, somewhat like blood.

At lunch, people facetiously accused one another of having rounded the bend at some point in their lives. The most common target was the Communist. Now and then, he would lock himself in his room for days with the curtains drawn. When this happened, Joelma would leave a plate of rice, beans, meat, and okra at his door (the only combination of food he tolerated during his bouts of depression). Once he snapped out of his stupor, the Communist would regale everyone with the story of Grigory Potemkin, wise and brilliant advisor to Catherine the Great, Empress of Russia. In his periods of deep melancholy, Potemkin used to shut himself up in his corner of the palace for months on end, leaving the entire court directionless and confused—a confusion exacerbated by the fact that Catherine refused to acknowledge her chancellor's depressive episodes. “Potemkin has returned,

Potemkin has returned.” No one completely grasped the Communist’s analogy (were we the court, the idiots lost without him?), but the mere act of telling it at the dinner table seemed to fill him with life.

My grandfather, though, didn’t quite believe in madness. “Give the son of a bitch a thousand Réis,” he’d say as he lifted his spoon to his mouth. “Give him that and see if he burns it.” Reading Proust in the chicken coop, spending days and nights locked up in a room: pure theatrics. Burning money was the real test for anyone who claimed to be mad. The day he saw someone burn a thousand “réis” for no reason was the day he’d believe in madness. Whenever my grandfather expounded on that theory at the dinner table, we would all burst into laughter. And, maybe due to overuse of the word “burn,” my eyes would often fix on a painting hanging above him, right at the head of the table: it was Jesus, his heart stuffed in a crown of thorns, a bonfire raging around his beating organ. As far as Bravo França is concerned, my grandfather reminded us, as far as that cousin of mine is concerned, well, you all know the story.

On the last afternoon at his cousin’s mansion, not long before the man died, they had chatted in the library in the back of the house, where the safe was located. They had then said goodbye, and my grandfather walked all the way back, down the parquet corridor and to the pebbled area under the shade of almond and mango trees that led to the road (a construction that should never have been approved by town hall). On the side of the house was a window that looked into the service area, full of steaming pots and pans and of staff rushing in and out of the house; and that was where, before he continued on his way, my grandfather caught sight of his old cousin, weedy and catatonic, with his eyes down. He wasn’t quite sure why, but in that moment a strange curiosity seized him, and he decided to get a closer look. As he drew near the window, he noticed França’s expression was not inert at all: instead, he was intensely focused, gently bowed over an iron. “Shk, shk, shk,” my grandfather said, making an ironing gesture with his wobbly hand. “The notes he had put in his mouth were all there, every single one of them—you had to see it, every single one, all crisp and new, all the blots gone.”

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My father wasn't insane. At times he seemed the opposite: a man without dramatic inner monologues or profound internal conflicts. His gift for grasping the codes, mannerisms, and accents of other countries often seemed to me only the side effect of a deeper void, of the absence of an inner life. He could recall some scattered passages from books of authors he'd studied during his abandoned master's degree in Philadelphia (Paul Kennedy, Samuel Huntington) and he could deftly glide over the icy surface of several subjects without ever diving in. People say he was handsome, but it's impossible to pass judgment on the beauty of one's own parents. He was the opposite of my grandfather, who was interested in only a handful of things. On their phone calls my grandfather would discuss his plans to resurrect Dom Bosco, what would have to be done for the soccer club to become a force in Mato Grosso again, spoke of a new pesticide to help him curb the termites that were dilapidating the training grounds.

The guilt I felt for eavesdropping ate away at me, but my father and grandfather's conversations were tedious. I started to suspect that the theatrics my uncles attributed to my father was of their own making. I was about to give up on the calls when one afternoon I finally heard him cry. He was asking for money to "start over once and for all." This time, his weeping was not a deep groan but a fine gale so atonal it almost sounded like laughter (hee, hee, hee, hee). I never found out which one was the fake cry.

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Back then, I was still under the narcotic effect of the American TV shows I used to watch, with their tidy denouements and narrative arcs. I wanted the phone calls to end. Selfishly, I felt like my father's obsession with my grandfather's money depreciated my own currency, as well as my mother's and sister's. The staff, our cousins, and our aunts and uncles behaved toward us with pitiful and condescending affection, and that affection—I'm not sure if it was affection, in fact —frightened me very much, as though we were nearing some enormous failure (what kind, I wasn't sure). My grandfather often remarked on my

mother's paltry salary, on how she made a pittance as an intellectual. And this was the only time his cheerful cynicism hurt, brewing in me a strange, enduring fantasy: that of becoming a rich intellectual.

I approached him as he was dressing for São Benedito mass. It was around five in the morning, a rare moment when he could be caught on his own, seeing as the Communist, my great aunt Heleninha, my mother, Betinho, the maids, and even my grandmother (who'd wake up in fifteen or twenty minutes) were sleeping. The house was blanketed in a blueish penumbra, and my grandfather's placid whistling mixed with the roosters' crowing and the dogs' disperse barking in the yard, forming a mosaic of sound at once lovely and melancholy, a bit like a flute in a children's fable.

I found him still preparing for mass, his exceedingly white hair damp and brushed back (it was always shocking to note, from old photographs, that his hair had been like that, utterly white, since his time in the army). He was standing, tending to his mustache (also milk-white) in the bathroom mirror. His shirt was half-open, Miró's elliptical traces visible on his large and hard belly, and he wore only his underwear and a pair of socks, his varicose veins—a topography of rivers and greenish-blue deltas — also visible. The bedroom light was on, and my grandmother still snored brutally in bed, the low sound of the television in the background.

Seeing him like this, seemingly vulnerable, helped me muster some courage, and I asked him, rather abruptly, to stop giving my father money. I said (without quite believing in it) that my father was mad, an “incorrigible” man. And I warned him that if he continued to give that money, things “would not end well;” my father knew no limits, and people who get used to getting things like that on a silver platter never go off of it.

These were all phrases I had culled from my surroundings, disconnected sentences from my mother or my uncles—a recap of what was spoken of in whispers at home. As I pled with my grandfather, I felt the keen embarrassment that comes from using borrowed phrases: the self-awareness of using the words and expressions of others. I contemplated

making a quick confession—that I had eavesdropped on a couple of his conversations over the phone—but the moment this occurred to me, I decided I would instead attend mass on Sundays to pray and atone for my dishonesty in a more discreet fashion. I knew that he knew that I listened in on his conversations, and he knew that I knew that he knew.

For a moment, as I watched him grooming his mustache in the bathroom mirror with a pensive look on his face, I thought he might be mentally processing my request and that he would resort to some long and elliptical anecdote, or to the proverbs of Machiavelli or Marcus Aurelius – which he distorted and remixed to his own purposes, in the parlance of Mato Grosso - I thought that he would either accept or deny my request, the same way he sometimes did with bankrupt cousins who visited from Poconé or Sorriso. Instead, he walked up to me and took my hand. Lacing his fingers through mine, he squeezed hard enough for me to find it funny but not hard enough to hurt—an affectionate game that never failed to make me laugh. “The money’s mine, the money’s mine, the money’s mine”, he chanted in a whisper, as if he were intoning a game show jingle, squeezing my fingers and making me cackle. “When you have your own money you can do whatever you like with it.” Then he opened the third closet drawer, took out a note and handed it to me. “Buy some Eski-Bons for your grandmother after mass, and some Chica-Bons for yourself.”

On the bill was a drawing of a small rosary and the opening stanzas of The Lord’s Prayer. The amount seemed too high for a few popsicles, but it wasn’t the first time I had been confused by inflation. In the depths of his room, my grandmother snored loudly and a television ad listed off the prices of beef cuts: knuckle, rump, topside, silverside. Supermercado Boizão has lost its mind, the TV announcer said, in a reputedly demented voice. Everybody’s gone nuts here, completely nuts, get here fast, while prices are hot.

*The above extract was translated by Julia Sanches*

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