

Open Markets

Ronaldo José da Silva has no front teeth and wants to know if I am gay. He asks this while grabbing his crotch.

“Why? You looking for something?” I ask him in Portuguese, looking up at him from where I am seated on the sidewalk by the beach. The first thing I notice is the fact that the only teeth that he has in his upper jaw are his molars. Everything else is stripped clean to the gums. He has a cellophane bag of soda cans in his hands and places it in the tan sand of Copacabana. There are only five cans inside, crushed flat. He lowers his brow at my response. I show him my wedding ring.

He doubles back as if shoved, covers his mouth, and offers me a handshake before sitting down a few feet beside me. “*Puxa, meu!* Pardon me! I’m sorry. I thought you were gay. You look gay.”

“Sorry to disappoint you.”

He stands up again, pounding his chest with his fist. He has on a dirty tank top, baggy Bermuda cargo shorts with stuffed pockets and flip-flops. He is as brown as topsoil and it is impossible to tell his age, though he later tells me that he is 30.

“I’m not a fag, man,” Ronaldo says. “I’ve got three girlfriends!” He displays this number with his fingers. “You’ve got any children?” he asks. He seemed to be looking for another way to prove his initial observations were accurate.

“One daughter.”

“*Puxa, meu!*” he exclaims in surprise, slapping his head and reaching for my hand again. “Pardon me. If I were you, I’d punch me in the face, *cara*. Please forgive me.”

“*Tá bom, rapaz*. I’m not worried about it,” I say. He grabs my hand for a handshake.

“Where are you from?” he asks. He must have detected an accent.

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“Sao Paulo.” I didn’t tell him that I was American and lived most of the year in the United States.

It was 7:10 pm and getting dark. The moon was like a ripe orange hanging over Pão de Açúcar mountain in Rio. Children played soccer on the beach in the dusk. A coach would blow his whistle whenever the ball went out of bounds or one child tripped up another and fell face first into the sand. The beach was becoming vacant, but the foot traffic along Avenida Atlantica’s sidewalk had increased; a mix of people heading home from work, tourists in fanny packs wearing sneakers with colored socks, and a huddle of poor people here and there, most of them under 20 years old, some of them innocent, some of them stoned and angry. The most dangerous time in Rio is when the sun goes down.

“I’m sorry I insulted you.” He shakes my hand again as I get up to leave.

“*Tá bom, meu.* I’ve gotta go. I’m meeting a friend for dinner.”

“Sit here, man. Let’s talk. *Senta.*”

With one hand locked around mine and another searching in the pockets of his shorts, Ronaldo anchored his weight to the ground, making it impossible for me to leave without making a scene. When I sat down, he pulled his hand out of his pocket, throwing a red soda cap into the sand.

The black and white square tiles of the sidewalk created the shape of waves going all the way down the beach. On hot days, those waves seem to evaporate and distort passers-by as if they are walking through thin smoke, or passing a funny-mirror in an arcade. Ronaldo says he has children, but that he isn’t a father. Fathers stay with their children, so he reasons that he isn’t really a father because, although he has children, he doesn’t take care of them. Slapping his chest with his fist, he adds, “I only care about myself and God.” He points to the orange and blue sky. “Without God, I wouldn’t exist.”

“Hmmm,” is all I can think to say. All these toothless guys like Ronaldo had was God. And God couldn’t even give this guy a dozen crappy cans of soda cans to recycle. Instead, he has half a dozen. I don’t know where I stand with God, so the only thing I can think to say instead of a

mumble is an unsure quote from Jesus: 'the flesh is weak.' Even *Jesus* had it bad. This really *is* a rough world. "You make your living collecting cans?"

"Yeah. It's honest work. Today was too cold." It's about 85 degrees out. "Tomorrow's a holiday. The beach's gonna be *lotado*," he says, squinting as if the sun were in his eyes. He demonstrates with his hands just how crowded Copacabana will be in the morning by stretching his arms out wide. With the beach a hundred yards away, his opened arms appeared to hold the entire ocean in suspended animation. The tide is coming in.

"Do you have a house?" I wonder how he pays for it, or if he built it brick by brick over the years and no one but his neighbors even know he is really there.

"I've got a house," he replies, eyes fixed on faraway waves.

"You're not one of these *cariocas* that waste all their money on drugs, are you, friend?" I say out of the blue, picking up the soda cap he tossed in the sand and putting it in my pocket.

"Naw, man!" he counters angrily. "I don't spend...I do honest work!" He pounds his right upper arm with his left fist. They are probably about fourteen and a half inches thick and he probably weighs about 165 pounds. "Sometimes I'll smoke some marijuana. But, I don't have the money for that. My street is full of it. Drugs everywhere."

"It's bad?"

"It's *bad*? Do you see how the drug dealers shut this city down last week? They said to these store owners here that if you open your doors Monday, you're *dead*," he says, pointing a fake gun to my head. He pulls the trigger. I look at his cargo pant pockets to see if I can make out the shape of a knife or a gun. A part of me wonders if he has the power or the will to hurt me. I tell myself he's harmless. I think I'm right. "I know. It's bad. *Filho da puta...*"

"*Puxa, meu.* You've got children and parents on drugs in my street, *meu.*"

A young boy, about ten years old, approaches Ronaldo from behind. He stands as tall as Ronaldo sitting down and has a piece of tree bark in his thick hair. He is bare chested. His teeth are white as stars.

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“I don’t have any money for you,” Ronaldo tells him, and then points to me. “Ask him. *He’s* got money!”

The barefooted boy holds out his hand. I had some loose change and a 10 Brazilian *reais* note in my pocket, which was the equivalent of \$2.85. “All I’ve got is change,” I tell him. He keeps his palms up, half smiling. It’s getting darker out. “Here...”

The young boy slowly moves the coins around in his hand.

“*Puxa!* Look at him, counting his money in front of you! No shame! *Sem vergonha, pô,*” Ronaldo says and the boy seems to like it, because he chuckles without making a sound. His eyes light up.

“What’ve you got?” I ask him.

“Ninety cents total,” he replies, and then walks off without saying another word.

I turn to Ronaldo, somewhat reserved. “Do you know him?” I ask.

“I see him around all the time.”

“Is he homeless?”

“Yeah.”

“He has no family?”

“He might,” Ronaldo suggests. “But they don’t take care of him.”

“You have children.”

“No,” he says, and I don’t know if he lied before and is telling the truth now. Then he twists his torso towards me and explodes, “*Puxa, meu!* Are you sure you’re not gay?”

“Enough of this already.”

“All right. I’m sorry.”

“I gotta go now. I’m waiting for a friend.”

“Why did you come here?” he asks, reaching for my hand again.

“To work. And to meet a friend,” I say, gripping his right wrist with left hand to get out of the handshake. I think the worst out loud in the dark.

“You trying to rob me or something?”

“Tcch, no way. Never. I’m a man of God,” he reminds me.

“Good, I gotta go. I’m meeting a friend for dinner. I’m getting hungry.” I stand up and wipe away sand that had stuck to my white pants. He stands up, too.

“Hey, man,” he says, calmly, as if what he was about to say was all he ever wanted to ask. “Can you give me some money?”

“Ô, *Ronaldo*, I thought you said you weren’t going to ask me for money?”

“Wrong. I said I wasn’t going to *rob* you.”

“I just have 10 *reais* in my pocket and I need it to eat tonight with my friend,” I say, though there is much more in other pant pockets and drawers and banks.

“*Puxa, meu*. God gave you a life of dreams and he just gave me life with nothing. Come on...please.”

“I need to eat, too.”

“*Uê*, you said you were working here. Aren’t you making money tomorrow?”

“Okay. Come on, we’ll split the money and I will buy you a *pastel de carne*.”

He gets mad. “But I just ate. I’m not hungry. What am I going to eat tomorrow?”

“I can’t give you all my money because then I won’t be able to eat,” I tell him. “Come on, I’ll buy you a *pastel*.”

“I don’t want a *pastel*. I just ate. What am I going to eat tomorrow?” He lunges for my wrist, grabbing it as I did his, his body weight anchored down so I can’t move.

“Let go of me, and I will help you.” I speak calmly, thinking it’s important to look fearless. Ronaldo surrenders. “Nice meeting you,” I say somewhat solemnly, securing with my thumb against my palm a pink ten note with a parrot on it. We shake hands like a maitre d and a casino guest looking for the best seat in the house, then separate. “Look in your hand. You’ll eat tonight and I won’t. *Tá bom? Tchou-tchau.*”

His once energized face deflates like air released from a balloon. It seems as if he wants to reply. Instead, he looks in his hand, then looks at

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me, then we are apart for good and we do not exchange a single word and nothing except the crescent moon bears witness.

It was as if it didn't happen. But somehow, I cannot forget it.

That night, I ate *feijoada*, *carne seca*, white rice with *farinha de mandioca*, fried bananas, spring greens, two *bolinhas de bacalhau*, a salad, gulped down two dark beers and capped it all off with two drinks made with sugar cane rum called *caipirinhas*. It tasted like sweet, spiked lemonade. My friend Mario paid for all of it.

The disco instrumental, "Love's Theme," by the Love Unlimited Orchestra, was playing on the speakers tied to a wooden beam above us. There was a woman with long, straight, jet-black hair and a dark tan seated a table away. She was laughing and talking at a table for six. She wore a red top, tied tight around the breasts, and her belly was showing. She wore tight jeans with patches on them and a wide leather belt with suede fringe hanging down. Her toenails were painted red. She looked like someone that was digitally created by a man who spent every waking moment of his life clipping pictures of female movie stars in search of the perfect female features—the perfect nose, a curve in her smile, long legs. She was flawless, completely stunning. Ronaldo José da Silva would never stand a chance with her. But I would. *Ah-ha...* I at least had a chance. I think.

"Come back to Earth, man," Mario says, sipping a glass of water.

"I'm back," I say, reclining in my seat and stretching my arms outward. "I'm all here."

"You've got that look on your face."

"What look?" I know what look.

"The look that says, 'What am I doing with myself?'" He changes his voice as if to imitate me sarcastically. "You switched careers last time you got this way. What's next? A new religion?" he asks. Mario's a journalist who's twenty years older than me. He spent time in prison back in the 1960s after being targeted and arrested by the government for being a communist guerilla. They were only half right; he was a guerilla. They tortured him, then exiled him to Chile. We used to work together. Now I

am a consultant for a political advisory firm. The money isn't much better, and the people are the same. They either want to chronicle power, influence it, or be it.

"Religion...come on." I say flatly. I want to tell him about how I made a man sad today because he believed that he would eat, and I would not. Instead, my friend interrupts my thoughts.

"How is that meeting going? What's it like inside? Can you tell me anything?"

"The market. They are *really* worried about the global markets."

That was what they talked about at the Sofitel Rio Palace Hotel: the market. How was the market going? What do you think the market will do next year? What is this country's debt-to-GDP ratio? What does the president want to do about this? Who will pressure him, and in which direction? Who do we blame?

At the Sofitel meeting, I ate and drank for free with some colleagues. We sat on a deck overlooking Copacabana beach. The view of protruding rocks covered in a small tropical forest was stunning. The women there were knock-outs and young, in their mid-30s. I describe them to Mario. He would know the type. "Smart. Articulate. Happy-go-lucky. Wear all the new fashions." The women were part of the event planners at the meeting. They were from Europe. They hung around together and smoked cigarettes, blowing smoke high into the air. One was an Iranian with impeccable English. Another was Chinese. They worked in Switzerland.

At night, they went up to the top floor of the Sofitel Rio Palace to have a party with the diplomats and the businessmen who were worried about the markets. "I wasn't invited," I say, sipping alcohol. *Caipirinhas* are a good drink. "I heard the view of Copacabana and Ipanema from up there was just completely stunning," I tell Mario. He's from Rio. He knew those soft pillow clouds and the deep blue sky with that orange citrus sun shining down at sunset, over the sea below. He called it heaven on Earth, and described it as a gaseous nebula of colors stuck inanimate in the universe. Something only a telescope can spot, but he was lucky enough in Rio to see it daily with his own eyes.

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“Mario,” I say to him, as if to blow my words into his heart, “I feel like there is nothing we can do.”

He knew what I meant, leaned back in his chair, stretched out his arms and rested his forearms on the top of his graying, blue-black, Japanese hair.

The sun goes down, but it is still muggy as we stroll along Avenida Atlantica where my friend’s car is parked about five blocks away from the Sofitel. The white moon looks like a smile over Rio’s darkened sky. A few feet away from me there is a Korean immigrant holding a box full of cell phone cases, flashlights, and electronic calendars and she tries selling them to people eating at La Maison Pizzeria. I hear her Portuguese and it is bad. Another guy appears with some type of instrument he made. A mother buys it for her daughter. Her son fights with his sister over it. Apparently, he doesn’t think she knows how to play it right. A man on crutches bounces a soccer ball off his head, off his chest and off his leg, which is severed at the knee. A man yells out, “Purses, just two *reais!*” A samba is playing on someone’s car stereo, a red Volkswagen Gol. The city is too loud to hear the waves breaking all around it or to hear my friend say goodbye, “I’ll see you at the Sofitel tomorrow.” I wave him off into the night.

“Give me your hand,” says a stranger. This one is a woman. A gypsy with dirty fingernails. She looks about thirty.

“I don’t have any money,” I say. A 24-hour pharmacy is playing “Aquarela do Brasil,” a classic bossa nova, on its stereo system.

“You are a happy person with a lot of luck, but you harbor a lot of jealousy and wants. Put some money in your hand,” she says, her warm hand holding mine. “Close it, and make a wish. What do you wish for this world?” she asks, breathlessly.

“I don’t have any money to give you,” I say.

“Come on, *moço*. Just put a little bit of money in your hand and make a wish.” Her face is close to mine, as if she wants to tell me a secret. “End the day right. Make a wish for this world.” She isn’t smiling.

“I have to go. I’ve had a long day.”

“I’ve had a long day, too. My children must be still awake waiting for me.”

“You should go home then. Good night,” I say, and she reaches for me, but does not touch me.

“Please...,” she says, massaging her fingers and cocking her head to the side. “Please...buy diapers for my child.”

I think it must be cold between the stars, where nothing exists but empty space, a desert without meaning or reason. I wonder if she’s lying about the child. But it doesn’t matter. I do what I can, while at the end of this day, a shiny and sarcastic moon smiles happily in its universe high above the world, as if to tell me in a motherly sing-song voice, “Good night, little man. It’s time to go to bed now. All of this will be here again in the morning.”