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Carlinhos stands in front of the rusty refrigerator in red briefs and prays to the Mother of God. He slowly opens its squeaky door. The dimly lit fridge contains one orange soda bottle. He sighs heavily, standing there with both hands on his hips. He stares at the bottle. There have been times where there hasn't been anything at all. He pauses, thanks the virgin, scratches his arm and then pushes the door shut, confining the only source of cool air his family proudly owns.

He turns to the mattress in the corner of the room. His mother, little sister, and baby brother are still huddled and asleep in the midst of their faded yellow-orange-and-green flowered sheet. He walks back toward them. Morning sunlight shyly seeps in through the cracked window, highlighting Maria's bleached hair against her deeply tanned skin, which is barely covered by the sheet or the brassiere she religiously wears to bed. Others often compliment her through their incredulity that she has three children and the eldest is already fourteen, while Maria welcomes the flattery without divulging that she is not yet thirty.

Carlinhos crouches besides the mattress. He has always enjoyed watching his mother sleep because she appears to be at peace instead of being sad, worried, or mad. He looks at her relaxed brow and regrets having to be the one to wake her. But he must. The day is already warming up and it's time for him to go. Gently, he places his hand on her shoulder and nudges her lightly. Her eyes flutter trying to focus in on the form besides her. Carlinhos smiles at her.

"Good morning, mamãe."

Maria tentatively smiles back without success. She turns from her son's gaze, toward her younger children still asleep, and notices someone's missing.

"Papai went out earlier to see some guy for work. He said to tell you he'd be home later and that he..."

Her husband didn't come home last night. His familiar habits would suggest he's either passed out on a random street or asleep in another woman's bed. The one thing she's certain about is that she won't be discussing this awkward matter with

her son. At the same time, she can't lay back and permit him to cover-up for his sordid father. She lifts her hand and shakes her head.

"Shut up, boy. You know better than to lie to your mother."

Carlinhos lowers his head.

Anyway, Maria's deceptive husband wouldn't ask someone to fabricate an alibi for him; that's too time-consuming, unworthy of his effort. And João wouldn't bother coming up with a new justification upon being confronted, either. He is reliably content to shuffle-and-dish-out poor excuses that both his spouse and son have come to be familiar with. Maria recognizes that her son lies to shield her from potential disappointment and distress, but is distraught by the dishonesty in it.

"Do you want to become a rotten good-for-nothing like the degenerate that fathered you?"

Carlinhos adamantly shakes his head.

Maria must attempt to steer Carlinhos toward honesty in all things. With some effort, she must help him work toward making a better example for his sister, his brother, and his own children one day. Maria goes over the same resolution on the various occasions she has found herself in this uneasy position. Her outrage sparks righteous adamancy that warms her up inside only to cool down and leave her feeling tired, a feeling she is accustomed to, and one she is fed up with.

It's been fifteen years... João was a good-for-nothing then and he hasn't changed for the better. Her father dragged the sixteen-year-old boy down the aisle of their small church kicking and screaming in front of their friends and neighbors. Maria was too young to be as embarrassed as she could have been. She was glad they were doing the honorable thing. Fifteen years later she still lives in Roçinha, João is still self-centered and irresponsible, and she finds herself thinking that perhaps she should have accepted the advances of her patrão. Then Dona Estella would have had a legitimate cause to be jealous and a valid reason to fire Maria. She leans back into her pillow.

"Paolino needs milk, Carlinhos."

He gets back up, reaches over and grabs his crumpled green shorts from the top of the pile of clothes on the rattan chair by the mattress, and promptly slips into them. He then picks up a tee shirt, notices it's inside out, reverses it, and puts it on. The navy blue Ocean Pacific tee shirt is a bit short: it has shrunk and he has sprouted in the last couple of years. It's also slightly washed out and worn around the neck area, but it's his favorite shirt. He moves a little to the right and looks into the mirror lying upright against the wall by the chair. He tugs at the bottom of his tee shirt with both hands then nods approvingly.

When Carlinhos was a little boy, Maria had imagined and anticipated the pride she would feel at seeing her child get dressed without her help. She watches the ritual lovingly, but the sight of her little man going through the motions, overwhelms her with nausea, now.

Carlinhos turns from the reflection without seeming to notice that his shorts hang five-finger widths bellow the navel. He slips his rugged feet into his rubber flip-

flops. The sun outside is already quite high in the sky. He turns to his mother.

“Mae, I’ve got to go.”

“Don’t forget the milk... and cigarettes too.”

“I know. I’ll see you later.”

Maria sits up, wipes her forehead with the back of her hand, and blows him a kiss. He grabs it in the air and puts it in the back pocket of his shorts. He heads out the door as Paolino begins to cry.

Carlinhos walks down the dirt road, away from his home, his eyes focused ahead. A voluptuous brunette struts by him in a form fitting, mid-thigh jean skirt and a partly see-through white halter-top. He breathes in a fusion of lemon and lavender that she leaves trailing behind.

His heart beats faster. Suddenly he hears the voice of his mother’s friend, Dona Josefina, from a window above.

“Ô Carlinhos! Tell your mother you can all come over and watch TV later on tonight.”

He excitedly waves up at her then walks on. They haven’t watched television in a while. His little sister and his mother will be excited. He can’t wait to tell them the good news, but that won’t be until later.

A cab drives by. As usual, he tries to look into it as it passes by him, to see if he can recognize the passenger. It’s odd to see a taxi in Roçinha. People in this neighborhood are more likely to drive a cab than ride in one.

A loud grumble approaches speedily from behind. A bus is on its way back toward São Conrado. Carlinhos doesn’t consider this mode of transportation to be a viable option for him. He would squabble over the fare with the driver just to wind up being kicked off. The worst is when schoolchildren are among those watching him unsuccessfully negotiate a free ride. They sit quietly in their pressed uniforms with their hair neatly combed and judge him. He can see it on their faces. It’s the same look they have, along with the city’s other citizens, when they avoid him in the street. They can’t recognize that he once was one of them. His mother, like their parents, also took advantage of the free education the State provides for its children. Carlinhos and his younger sister both had their own midnight blue uniform, books to learn from, and warm food served at the school cafeteria.

But his father was unable to give up old habits, drinking himself out of the few paying opportunities that came his way. So Carlinhos’ mother convinced Dona Estella to extend her hours serving as a maid during the week and to allow her to work on the weekends as well. Although that arrangement initially improved things, the longer hours exposed Maria to her patrão’s presence and inevitably to his unwelcome attention. Maria did her best to avoid him. Nevertheless, Dona Estella wasn’t oblivious to her husband’s attraction to their maid and Maria lost her job. Faced with the unemployment of both his parents, Carlinhos quit studying and began to work.

These children, on their way to school, cast judgment on him because they can afford to. They never consider that he can’t afford free education and that he works

because he chooses to provide a better quality of life for his family.

Carlinhos instinctively squeezes in as close to the wall as possible, allowing the bus to shakily race past him. A man jumps out from a pink home further down the road and signals the driver. The bus slows without stopping. The man runs up besides it, grabs on to the outer handrail and jumps on to the bus still in steady motion down Roçinha's winding road.

Slightly distracted by the stranger's successful hitch-run-and-jump, Carlinhos' foot knocks a half burned white candle off balance, sending it plunging into a large ceramic bowl besides it. He stops. Looks around to ascertain no one is looking. He crouches and carefully removes the bloody candle from beside the decapitated chicken nestled inside the bowl. He places the candle back in an upright position and pushes it slightly into the ground. He feels discouraged. There isn't a mistake-proof way to know for which Saint this offering was intended and whom he should apologize to. And if he went asking around, from one house to another, the person who left this here would be capable of placing a curse on his entire family. Carlinhos assesses the situation. It is safer to take a guess than to sneak away. Cowardice and shiftiness won't go unnoticed nor unpunished by those who oversee everything.

He places both hands against the cool ceramic bowl and calls out to Xangó. Considering that Xangó's the most vindictive Saint, notorious for his violent temper, (bringing liars and thieves to justice, mercilessly striking them down with a ray of light) this calling of his name should take care of the worst-case scenario. Carlinhos is sorry to have desecrated this offering and promises to light a candle. He reaches for the only coin in his back pocket and places it with the carcass. As the coin disappears under blood, he is filled with overwhelming relief. He assumes that this sense of alleviation comes from the forgiveness he has been bestowed. He smiles and suspects this is a sign. Things will be just fine... God willing. Carlinhos gets back up and continues down the road.

The small convenience store at the bottom of the hill is already open. People are going in and customers are coming out with bags filled with purchases. Soon he will be one of them. First he needs money.

A major road runs along the bottom of the mountain Roçinha is built on. He watches traffic stream chaotically past him. Cars, trucks and buses, speed aggressively in both directions. They seem to accelerate as they pass him by. He waits on the sideline for a break in the continuous flow of colorful automobiles, and then courageously darts across the road dribbling by a car here and another there. A miracle carries him safely to the opposite side of the road that separates the slum from its prosperous neighbor. São Conrado is one of the fastest growing affluent neighborhoods in the city and a conveniently located hunting ground for young street thieves, like Carlinhos.

The recently erected complex of luxury condominiums to his left isn't his first choice. The wealthy community is always alert. This minority has more to lose than the average person who has nothing to lose and it has everything to gain. Rich folk take precautions. Bodyguards, escort them around in chauffeured, air-conditioned cars. They conglomerate in exclusive country clubs where they eat from lavish buffets and leave indecent amounts of leftovers. Carlinhos' stomach grumbles with hunger.

His lips tighten. Drivers and doormen will see him coming a mile away and shoo him before he even decides to make a move. It's a pity because when things do

work out in that area, one can go home a hero. Although he feels quite positive today will be a good day, he decides to play it safe.

São Conrado Mall is to the right. It's like Disneyworld, sheltering many restaurants, luxurious stores, and even a movie theater inside the complex. He's been in the mall a few times, never getting further than the fast food joint 'Big Bob's'. Inevitably one of the numerous security guards hastily ushers him back into the street. They are all quite pushy with the exception of Manuel who just gives a serious nod toward the exit. Carlinhos always obliges. Manuel lives up the street from his family. He'll occasionally knock on their door on his way home and bring Carlinhos' little sister a piece of candy or chocolate from one of the fancy stores in the mall, never neglecting to shake Carlinhos' hand. Carlinhos likes Manuel and knows his mother does as well. Manuel speaks to her politely and calls her Dona Maria, which always makes her blush. He is a good man. Unlike other guards, Manuel doesn't ask him to leave the mall because he dislikes him, but because it's his job. Carlinhos wouldn't jeopardize that.

Further back from the mall lies the São Conrado Beach. At times, Carlinhos will go up to the roof of their shack in the late afternoon, as the sun sets into the ocean, gradually changing the color of the perfect stretch of fine white sand. His mother was the one who first showed it to him. It's one of God's gifts to His children. Carlinhos finds that view relaxing, and helpful with girls. With such a spectacular view, all he has to do is lean in for a kiss. The beach is a fantastic resource. Swimmers often leave their belongings unattended. One can get a tan and enjoying the breeze, all the while unperturbedly picking up the loot while strolling along. However, mixing work with pleasure doesn't make much sense to him. Fabulously underdressed women are feast for the eyes though a distraction from his work. Unwilling to gamble with the quality of a day's worth of effort, he is reluctant to work the beach.

On the other hand, his friends favor this territory. While playing soccer behind the church yesterday afternoon, they mentioned that they were going to surf-the-beach. He doesn't think that they should all work the same area. With too many of them, they attract unnecessary attention. And then people overreact and call it a 'crime wave', reminiscent of the last true 'wave' from two years ago when there was an organized sweep onto the São Conrado Beach. A couple hundred Roçinha boys came down the hill around lunchtime, when people take their break from work and relax in the sun. Together, they walked the beach and picked up every towel, hat, umbrella, pair of sunglasses, wallet, watch, and bikini top from one end of the stretch to the other. That day is legendary in both Roçinha and throughout the rest of the city. Carlinhos was only twelve then, therefore Maria wouldn't allow him to join the 'wave', but he did join in on the celebration. Everybody did. Roçinha residents laughed and danced all night. They laughed and danced for the next few days as well. The laughter stopped when they noticed that people weren't coming to the São Conrado Beach anymore. People didn't return for months. They drove further down to Barra da Tijuca or simply stayed at the overcrowded Ipanema and Copacabana Beaches. A day of fun for some turned out to be bad business for most of Roçinha residents: a lesson Carlinhos hasn't forgotten.

A black and white police car drives by slowly. The policeman suspiciously looks at him and nearly brings his car to a halt. Then he drives on. Carlinhos is frustrated. He hasn't even done anything yet. He is often treated as a criminal, but it's the policemen that are the real criminals. They roam the city at night and murder young street thieves. He knows that most of them don't kill for the sport of it, but because they are joined in an unofficial effort to clean the city. Newspapers talk about it and mothers mourn their children. Yet no

one has been arrested for it. Witnesses won't talk to anyone that matters, and politicians publicly announce that they will fix the problem. The children continue to be killed at night. Kids like him: petty thieves. And somehow the children are the ones that are supposed to be the criminals. Carlinhos doesn't understand that justice but he does understand that this policeman can look at him however he wants, here, on neutral ground. He wouldn't dare to look at him the way he just did if he were in Carlinhos' neighborhood.

A drop of sweat trickles down his cheek. It's getting hotter. Carlinhos takes his Ocean Pacific tee shirt off and stuffs the tip of it into his shorts. He makes sure to secure it. He couldn't bear to lose it.

It's late and it's time to get the job done. His eyes turn towards the towering Intercontinental Hotel on the beachfront. It's a five star resort where rich foreigners stay. Sometimes he watches them lay out at the swimming pool through the security bars around the property. There are fountains and even a bar inside the gigantic pool. Carlinhos has never been in a pool. Dona Estella was once planning to go abroad for a couple of weeks and Maria was going to take him and his little sister to her patrão's house to play in the pool. The trip was canceled at the last minute and Dona Estella threw a lavish party instead. Carlinhos overheard his mother say that one of the guests drank too much and threw up in the pool. He got upset that he had not had a chance to go in it before it was ruined. He hopes to have another opportunity to go in a swimming pool. Realistically, he knows that opportunities like that one don't come around twice in a lifetime, for someone like him.

He begins to walk towards the hotel. He wipes the sweat from his forehead. It must be at least 40 degrees Celsius. He looks up at the electronic billboard as he passes the mall. It displays 38 degrees Celsius. Close enough. It's really hot.

Two translucent white people walk out from the entrance of the hotel. They're both wearing hats and white tennis shoes: gringos. He moves close to a nearby bush. They turn and are coming toward him, probably on their way to the shopping center. The woman has a large purse in her hand: easy enough to grab in a run by. The man is wearing an oversized loud flowered shirt and a camera around his neck. Carlinhos can't believe it. He thought this species had long been extinct. No one carries a real camera out into public without concealing it in a bag or something. Even gringos know better. This is going to be a great one. These people are probably wearing expensive watches and carrying a lot of cash. His heartbeat picks up its pace. They're approaching.

As they're about to walk past each other, the woman looks at Carlinhos and smiles at him. It's a beautiful smile. Her teeth are particularly straight and extraordinarily white. He swiftly sweeps behind her and shoves his index and middle finger into her back as he wraps his other arm around her chest to hold her closer to him. The man stops, his face covered in disbelief. The woman breathes heavily.

"Stay calm!" the man sternly suggests to both the boy and the woman.

Carlinhos doesn't understand him. He presses his fingers deeper into her back instead. She whimpers. The man carefully takes his camera off from around his neck and slowly hands it over.

Carlinhos releases the woman's chest but pushes his fingers strongly into her back to make sure that she doesn't move away. He slides the camera onto his arm with his free hand and motions towards the purse. The man takes it from her tight grip

and slides it onto the boy's arm along with the camera. Carlinhos looks at their wrists and is disappointed to see that they aren't wearing watches. The hotel staff probably warned them. He points at the tennis shoes. The man momentarily seems perplexed then figures that the thief must want to see if he's hiding money in his shoes. He awkwardly takes them off while standing and proceeds to vigorously shake them upside down to show that they're empty. The boy keeps pointing to the shoes the man is holding, and then makes the international hand motion for hand-it-over. Carlinhos grabs the shoes. He's so excited to have found these fancy imported tennis shoes. He can hardly wait to try them on and see if they fit. The woman begins to cry.

"Please stay calm," the man insists.

He pulls his wallet out from his pocket and volunteers it to the boy. Carlinhos grabs it with the hand that he had been poking the woman with and runs down the street, turns left around the corner, runs some more, turns right when he reaches the next corner and keeps on running. He turns his head all the while trying not to trip in one of the various potholes pockmarking the sidewalk. No one is behind him. He slows down a little bringing his stride down to a jog. He reaches the next corner and turns left again. He stops to catch his breath and to get a better grip of the goods. He steps into a little alley, gets down and places everything on the ground, spreading the items out in order to better assess his loot. He glances around. The street is clear.

The camera isn't made of plastic. It's one of the heavy ones. A little window displays number twenty-three. Carlinhos doesn't know whether that's a good thing or not. It either means he can take many pictures, or that the film is nearly finished. He will figure it out when he gets home. Regardless, it's a handsome machine. It will certainly take brilliant shots of his mother. He can clearly picture her beam captured by the lens, carrying her smile to him. The tennis shoes are seemingly brand new. Its supple white leather's unmarked and the tiny creases are hardly noticeable. They're real Reebok shoes made in the USA. He excitedly slips one on and is delighted to find it roomy enough to allow for longevity. Sobbing comes around the corner. Carlinhos puts on the other shoe and carefully ties them both tighter than it's comfortable, to hold them in place. Then he stuffs his flip-flops snugly into his shorts.

He picks the purse up and opens it. A pretty red wallet catches his attention. He takes it out and opens it. There are dollars in it. There are also some cruzados, but lots of dollars. He takes the money out and places it inside the man's brown leather wallet that is also filled with all kinds of paper money. The dollar is doing great on both markets right now. He puts the empty red wallet back into the purse and takes another look into it: lipstick, passport, receipts, hand written notes, a candy bar, and a few pictures. He wonders what is on the pictures but knows that he's not supposed to look at them. They are someone else's personal things and he has no use for them. He closes the purse and gets up. He chucks the purse into a bush and gets going.

Carlinhos can't wait to show his mother what he has brought her. She will be proud of him.

Swiftly he continues down the street, then darts across the main road, and once again he survives the rush of cars. His guardian angel is certainly still on duty.

The small convenience store at the bottom of the hill awaits him ahead. People are

going in and customers are coming out with bags filled with purchases.

He walks into the store, his arms filled with his treasure, and moves past a few strangers and familiar faces, confidently walking up to the counter. Proudly he places his loot beside the register, as envious and admiring eyes look his way. He pretends to ignore them. The woman behind the counter recognizes him. It's been a while since she last saw the boy and she's aware that he only shows up when he's had a good day. He hasn't had a lucky streak lately.

He carefully lists the products he needs and she promptly gathers the items. Although he doesn't come into the store as often as her regular customers, she can count on the smile he wears on his face from the moment he walks into the store to the moment he steps out the door. Somehow he inspires her put things into perspective. The woman hands his grocery bags and asks for twenty-three cruzados. He gives her a fifty, then puts his change in the wallet and places it back into his pocket. The woman winks at him as he heads out. She hopes that he will find a way to come back soon. God willing...

Carlinhos feels good when he can walk out of a store with bags full of purchases like a regular customer. Today isn't any different. Of course, tomorrow might be a different story. Yet he must keep in mind that he's had a good day. Tomorrow he'll simply take the same steps his took today, like he did yesterday, and the day before, and hope that he'll be back at the convenience store at the end of the day. He knows that God is watching over him, and just in case, he'll light that candle for Xangó before going to watch television at Dona Josefina's with his family tonight.

Carlinhos heads back up Roçinha's dirt road with his favorite shirt still attached to his shorts, a plump wallet nestled in his back pocket, an expensive camera precariously on display around his neck, and bright white Reebok sneakers on his feet. He's happy today. He carries grocery bags filled with milk, cigarettes, rice, beans, coke, white candles, and good news for his entire family.

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