

Glue

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Second Place Winner, Fiction

When we saw the other children we crossed the street, we held our purses tighter, we fingered the knives we would never use. The other children had black slits in place of their eyes; it made them look like something was missing, cut out. With broken pieces of glass they could make a woman cry and convulse, a young man submit. With Bruno, it was different.

I met him in Jaqueira Park looking at the monkeys. Even from a ways behind him I could smell the brown, snot-looking substance coming from the plastic bottle he had tucked in the front of a shirt that belonged on a giant, not a four-foot kid. He was a cheira-cola, a glue addict. He seemed too small to be out on the streets, motherless and shoeless. Among the sparse items I had in my purse was a Snickers bar, my means of communication.

“You hungry?” I asked. He turned and looked at me, saying nothing. His face held the look of one whose brain never fully formed; slightly bulging eyes, a cock to his neck signaling that his head was a bit too heavy. His red-rimmed eyes turned up first to my yellow hair, then to my purse, then to my American clothing. Eying me suspiciously for a bit longer, he finally nodded, never taking his lips from the green bottle. He fumbled around with the chocolate bar and I busied myself reading the signs posted on the cage: Danger—Animals bite and may carry disease. Keep out. Bruno took one bite of the Snickers and then climbed over the railing. He took a little piece of chocolate and jammed his arm through one of the rungs, taunting the monkeys. I chewed on my fingernail and looked around, wondering just what I was going to do if he got his hand bitten off by rabid monkeys.

“You need to be careful,” I finally said. “I don’t want the monkeys to hurt you.” He didn’t look at me.

That was our first meeting.

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Through weeks and months I walk the same streets as him. Buses and taxis bump into each other as they selfishly vie for a spot on the road. The sidewalks are littered with hard, mud-colored men with glistening backs pulling carts filled with paper, young women in bright colors hiding smiles behind their fingertips, rolling, shirtless men at stands selling fried yucca root and tapioca.

People gather in the bits of shade provided by the bus stops, but the sweat still runs down their backs and stains their armpits. They fan themselves with bits of paper, holding still when a breeze moves through. During the hottest part of the day, the street kids and cheira-colas sleep in abandoned houses and on park benches, or jump off the bridges into canals of black

waste-water to cool themselves. People who have never been here call it the Venice of Brasil. If only they knew.

At night the street kids gather in their gangs, harassing passersby for their money, their food, the clothes off their back, sometimes just robbing them. I go to the grocery store to buy bread, cheese, a liter and a half of cheap purple soda, and go sit with them for dinner. Habib and Roberto are the unstated leaders of this group, and this night they are both dressed in their favorite attire—**women’s clothing**. **Habib has on a bright green mini-skirt** that is uncomfortably revealing, gold hoop earrings, and a green bandana wrapped around his frizzy afro. Roberto is more conservative with a floral print dress and a curly bob.

They are, for the most part, very religious transvestites, and before we eat they force everyone to stand and begin to pray together, ‘**Ave Maria**, full of grace, the Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women. Holy Maria, mother of God and our mother, be with us sinners, now and in the hour of our death. Amém.’”

At ten, Bruno is the youngest of these cheira-colas. I invite him to sit with me against the crumbling stone wall, covered in graffiti and piss. He comes and pulls the band out of my ponytail and begins to rub my hair all over his face, moaning and sighing. I don’t say anything about the glue and snot and dirt he’s transferring to me, and I try to be nonchalant about the fact that it sounds like he’s becoming aroused as he plays with my hair.

“Tia,” he says after a while, “do you not have the sun in the land of the English?”

“Of course we have the sun,” I laugh.

He looks at me with deep concern before asking his next question. “Well, then why are you so white?” I smile and wrap him up in my arms, hurting for better things.

We sit for awhile like this. I watch the reactions of people as they walk past. The women walk quickly and carefully, like nurses in an AIDS clinic, their heels clicking away on the pavement. They move their children to the other side of the sidewalk and hold tighter to their hands. The men puff out their chests and shoulders, guiding their women by the arm. A police officer comes up, hand on his baton and asks if I’m being bothered. The smirk in his eye tells me that they’ve met before. “No, I’m fine,” I say, and he moves on.

Bruno begins to slump over, and I lay his head in my lap and let him sleep.

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“Bruno, where is your family?” I ask one evening.

“In Coque.”

I teach English in Coque. Police booths guard every exit from the slum as if they’re trying to contain a disease. When the wind blows here it brings waves of empty popcorn bags and condom wrappers and the scent of booze from the mouths of yellowed men. The children of Coque are breastfed drugs, sex, and bloodshed. I can imagine why he left.

“Do you have family there?” I ask.

“Sim Tia, I have a mom and six or seven brothers and sisters. Maybe eight.”

“What about your dad?”

He shrugs.

“Did you ever go to school?” The other cheira-colas overhear and begin to clamor over each other to be the first to tell.

“Tia! Tia!”

“Shut your mouth, Moreno!”

“Filho da puta! I was talking first!”

“Tia, I learned the alphabet. Do you want to hear it?”

Another fight about who gets to say it first, complete with a few slaps, and the next ten minutes are spent listening to each of them recite the alphabet. All but Bruno seem to be able to say at least most of the alphabet; however I find that none of them knows how to write it. Roberto hands me a piece of chalk, and I write out the alphabet on the broken sidewalk.

For five minutes I have their attention, and then an argument breaks out. It's useless to try and get them to concentrate again, so I drop the subject.

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Some nights later I come across the corner where they usually sleep, and I see their blankets and clothes strewn across the sidewalk and into the street. I keep walking and find a few of them down the block, huddled against a wall with their hands grasped tightly between their legs and tears streaming down their cheeks.

“What happened?” I ask, bewildered. Nobody answers. I go to Bruno and cup his small face in my hands. “Bruno, what happened?” I get down on my knees and begin to smooth the hair back from his face. It is matted down and stinking like glue.

“The policia came. We were sitting on the corner not doing anything, Tia!” He angrily wipes tears away with his knuckles. “They called us mother fuckers and started hitting us.”

At this point the others joined in. “Tia, they took our glue and put it in our hair. They pulled down our pants and poured it... poured it...” With shame they look down and tears boil out. “They saw everything, Tia, the people walking by. We were so embarrassed!”

I take Bruno's hand and notice pubic hairs stuck to his fingertips from trying to pull the glue out. Down the street at the police station I see three of them standing outside, pointing and laughing. I am disgusted by these keepers of the law and even more so by the people who can walk past and feel as if justice is being done.

In that moment I understand that the closing of eyes and the turning away of heads are responsible for more deaths than the hands that kill. In that moment I understand genocides and child soldiers. In my frustration I can't remember how to speak the language; all I can do is to lead the crying boys to a church building where the secretary lets them use scissors and hot water.

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The life of a cheira-cola is a life of circles that lead further towards insanity. When given an opportunity, they tend to run with it only until the first obstacle. They've been trained to succumb by every angry word thrown down, every corrupt fist, every eye that looks away.

I ran into Bruno less and less until one day I made a trip to the market downtown. As my bus was crossing a bridge I saw the other children. They crept up from the mud banks, a pack of red-eyed rats. I watched as the scent of alarm went up amongst the pedestrians and they quickly scattered. **And that's when I saw Bruno.**

With nauseous recognition I watched as he and another boy ran quietly up behind a woman walking alone. The woman had her cell phone stuck to her ear, completely oblivious as to what was about to happen.

Bruno ripped the woman's purse off of her arm, the other boy grabbed her phone, and the pack took off running in separate directions to meet up in a corner elsewhere and divide the spoils. In shock, the woman stood with her empty hand up to her ear.

"What a pain!" said the passenger sitting next to me. **"The police should just shoot them."** He made a look of disgust, wrinkling his nose, and then went back to the book he was reading.

I turned back to the window as we passed the park where I first saw Bruno. Through the branches and off in the distance, I could see what I thought was the cage of monkeys and the posted danger signs.