

Chapter 1 from *Quanto custa  
um elefante?* (2020)  
by Marcelo Mirisola

*Translated by Paulo Candido*



## Translator's Preface

Marcelo Mirisola (b. 1966) is a contemporary Brazilian writer born in the 1960s and, as such, his work pays tribute to 20th-century Brazilian and Latin American literature. The chapter presented here opens his novel *Quanto custa um elefante?* (2020), which translates to “How much does an elephant cost?” Mirisola and I felt that such a direct translation of the title did not convey the original version’s rhythm. So the English version lost the interrogation and became an affirmative statement, “The price of an elephant,” without losing its somewhat strange flavor.

Mirisola writes the novel as a first-person account of the author’s experience, beginning with a note to his lost lover—herself a character in the book—and descending quickly into a tale that incorporates Afro-Brazilian religious rites, the biblical Devil, and a whole host of local references, both to the Brazilian context as a whole and to Rio de Janeiro, where the novel takes place, in particular. It is quite hard to convey the text’s whole context to a foreign reader. Yet we try.

Latin American magical realism (known in Portuguese and Spanish as “fantastic realism,” or *realismo fantástico*) was an overwhelmingly predominant literary trend throughout the region during the 1960s, when the Cold War and our colonial heritage joined forces to turn Latin America into a military-led bloodbath sponsored by the West. It would be naive to attribute the rise of magical realism solely to the political and social conditions during which it happened, but it is curious that several of our most celebrated novelists—names like Nobel Prize–winner Gabriel García Márquez from Colombia, Jorge Luis Borges and Julio Cortázar from Argentina, and Isabel Allende from Chile—were all either practitioners of, or seriously influenced by, magical realism. Many important Brazilian authors have also drunk from the waters of magical realism, including writers such as Jorge Amado, Érico Veríssimo, and Dias Gomes, among others. Although, two decades into the 21st century, magical realism has already turned into a mainstream genre globally, one may still read *Quanto custa um elefante?* as a latter-day magical realist novel, as the genre’s influence and defining traits prove prominent in it. Marcelo does not make the reader wait; just after the small note to

the narrator's lost lover, Ruin, the first paragraphs of the first chapter dive right into the Devil's invocation by an Umbanda priestess, and from there, we are not in the proverbial Kansas anymore.

Dom Juanito, described as "the sorcerer of the rich and famous," has nicknamed the narrator's lover Ruin in a previous book by Mirisola. Just like a One Ring or Scotland's throne, Ruin is the source of a relentless obsession, a bringer of chaos and destruction. The mention of Juanito also serves to inform the reader that our hero has already been involved in supernatural affairs.

Juanito's lines also present the first translation decision: to keep the words spoken in Spanish and repeat them in English, an addition to the original text we thought was justified by the importance of the phrases to the story development and the severe loss of context the suppression of the Spanish text would represent had it been translated into English. It is important to observe here that I was lucky to work directly with the author, so all translation decisions were discussed and agreed upon by both me and Mirisola.

The next interference in the text was editorial: We decided to explain references to some local aspects in footnotes; since the text was written in Portuguese for Brazilian readers, we felt that the mentions to places in Rio de Janeiro and to the Brazilian currency, while obvious to the local reader, deserved short explanations. Finally, all terms related to Afro-Brazilian religions were either explained directly in the text or left as a breadcrumb for the more curious readers.

Mirisola's vast arsenal of Brazilian popular and religious themes, as well as his dialogue with the Western literary and philosophical traditions, turns the translation of this small chapter into an amusing challenge. Hopefully the English-language reader will be able to enjoy a taste of the original text's style and spirit.

## Chapter 1 from *Quanto custa um elefante?*

by Marcelo Mirisola

My love,

I deny, with all my powers, the existence, the contents and, especially, the flash drive's "materialization" in our hotel room. I can't accept it! And I also do not recognize myself or you during that damned weekend. I wish you could understand, this is not our story, I am not losing my mind, much less trying to avoid any responsibility. The past has already happened. We can't go back in time: only that supernatural cesspool, the *Macumba*, or the arbitrariness of the Universe would explain, my love, the sequence of horrors poured upon us, as if we were, just the two of us, the sole recipients of the 10 plagues of Egypt. That damnable weekend!

We were trapped!

Besides, the sole outcome of such a violence speaks against my style. Or do you really believe I would be so foolish as to—once again!—write another book about our bad luck and our misfortunes? You know my style is directly linked to my ego, and I don't bargain over it, not even with the devil.

Not this time! I swear to you, and to myself, this time our story will not be turned into a novel.

That's because we are talking about something unfit even for the outskirts of reality. . . much less for fiction! I wouldn't be so crude, neither to you nor to my already stained "reputation."

You know me, you know my writings, take a breath and think: Nothing happened of any relevance, any elan, I would never devise such a stupid plot. . . much less after the books I've dedicated to you in order to praise myself. By the way, I loved it when you said that I'm "my own ego tourist guide". . . Bingo! That's exactly the case, right on target!

I am an egomaniac, an obsessed man, but above all, you know that. . . I am a fucking artist! According to the poor plot written without our consent, I am dead to you and I've wasted any chance of reconciliation. . . but my love, that may not have anything to do with me (the records show I am your monster, so do you really believe it?), my

love for you is above any excuses and any broken spells, my love (that you have left here) is one that gives the finger to the supernatural and defies all special effects, all traps, all pitfalls. . . and stays the same. Exactly the same. Use it as you will, it is yours. The same applies to Belchior's<sup>1</sup> compact discs and to the small hippie sandals you have also left behind, and now everything is being dispatched by priority mail.

Yours,  
Marcelo

## 1

– If he were that good, why was his house stoned? – Mother Valéria was quick to downplay Dom Juanito, El brujo. El brujo de los ricos y famosos. *The sorcerer of the rich and famous.*

For those of you who don't know it, it was after a session with El brujo that I kicked off *As If I Was Smoked*, my previous novel. If I recall correctly, in the second or third paragraph Dom Juanito delivers his message, which is more than a message, it is the novel's motto and mantra:

– Es su ruina, olvida a esa mujer. *She's your ruin, forget that woman.*

He also made another threat, one I haven't mentioned in that book; I thought it was an unnecessary piece of information, I didn't expect I would need to write almost 150 pages to close a seemingly minor demand:

– Suerte que vino aquí – he warned me. – Se fuera en cualquier otro lugar te iban a desplumar. *You're lucky to have come here. If you went anywhere else, you'd be ripped off. "Deplumed," as he colorfully put it.* – Despertarte, hombre! Ponete las pilas! *Wake up, man! Turn yourself on!*

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And I was counting on being "deplumado," or ripped off—and it was not even a very unconscious or hidden wish—so I went to see Mother Valéria. I would never be able to forget Ruin, even

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<sup>1</sup> Belchior is a beloved Brazilian singer and songwriter who rose to popularity in the 1970s.

feeling continuously threatened by her shadow. My diabolical heart demanded otherwise.

And speaking of the devil, it was Mother Valéria who curtsied and brought me to the presence of such an illustrious, distinct, and renowned creature. She was the one who guided me to my heart's main square and introduced me to the devil.

I was completely adrift, but my bank account was full of money. Lots of money. A supernatural quantity of money, something I had never imagined I would have. Suddenly I was a *CitiGold Private Client*, me, this person here, against all odds, turned into a shiny, golden, and very private client.

Money falling from the sky: urban properties, stores, warehouses and gas stations, coffee farms in full production, cattle, trucks and tractors, and a fortune in government titles, paid just after my parents died. An inheritance, falling at once from the sky into my now-VIP checking account.

And if it fell from the sky, it was—obviously—the devil's share. It was his. At least the money in the bank, that was his. And it was the first thing the son of a bitch sniffed: As I was desperate after losing Ruin in a quite gruesome weekend, my millionaire sucker face was probably flashing, in large shiny letters, for something like this: SUCKER AND MILLIONAIRE ASKING TO BE RIPPED OFF, ripped off, ripped off, ripped off. And the devil, never a fool, obliged. He wanted his share. He wanted it all.

It is incorrect to think that everyone seeking the devil wants to sell his or her soul. Of course, most go looking for a bargain and end up offering themselves for a trifle. But all rules—I hate being forced to repeat such commonplaces—all rules have their exceptions.

People seek out the fiend to solve their earthly demands, to order an accident or a small cancer to an enemy, to make a 12-year-old stepdaughter fall in love with her nice and wholesome stepdad, a lottery prize here, some petty requests over there. No one seeks out the devil to ask for the preservation of the Amazon rainforest or to help a neighbor who lost their oven, fridge, and two-place sofa to a flood. For the latter causes there are Leo DiCaprio, the Catholic Church saints, and a myriad of NGOs and charities—not all of them managed by God.

I never felt like selling my soul, less so after Valéria made it clear my soul was of no interest to the devil. I wanted an explanation for the awkward weekend with Ruin and, if at all possible, and God willing (I dragged God into the story because I am a chicken-hearted bastard, a coward, and because, oh well, I believe in Him. Deal with it), God willing and if my fate was really tied to Ruin's fate, I (besides being a coward, plus a superstitious and corny hypocrite) wanted her back.

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The devil—with good reason—ripped me off. In his place I would have done the same, damn the do-gooders. From now on, I would have much more than an explanation and a relief for my despair. In a moment I will talk at length about how I was fooled and about the weirdest fucking weekend of all time.

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Mother Valéria/“the man” (because they really had, in fact, a pact between themselves), in a half possession, half warning mood, in order to prevent any illusion of a middle ground and/or any suspicions I might develop, and obviously trying to impress me—and impress me she did—slashed herself, opening a large cut in her index finger. A gushing stream of dark, thick blood poured onto the image dedicated to Lucifer and, as the sticky liquid fell generously over the icon, the altar, the Congá darkness lit up in frightening flashes: It was one of the most beautiful, threatening, and impressive scenes I ever witnessed. It was as if my dizziness and my loss had mingled with Valéria's blood and faith, and together, and only then, they all turned into light: Lucifer.

Awed and frightened by what I saw, and presented to a state of things—or a state of the world—to which I didn't have any chance of even beginning to devise some kind of response or explanation, besides being psychologically broken and completely disoriented after I'd been cheated, I did what anyone in my place would have done, I caved in. To put it briefly, I may say “the man”/Valéria made



me a proposition not only worth his or her or its name, but on par with the image it represented:

– We sacrifice a child. We can find one in Rocinha<sup>2</sup> right now.

Such a suggestion assured me I was standing before the devil himself, in flesh and blood, in horns and all other common features and images we usually associate with the said creature, including a strong stench of sulfur that pervaded the room, mixed with special effects and all the evils of the world. It was the man. It could only be him. His voice showed no hesitation: “We sacrifice a child. We can find one in Rocinha right now.” *In natura*. And it was perfectly down-to-earth, inside that hellish context he was supposed to operate: Do you want to solve this matter? It is very easy, kill a child.

– No! No, mind you, Mr. Devil, we need not go that far.

He got mad at me.

Before resuming the account, it is important to make a remark and remind the reader of something: It was not like I sought out the devil. I could have gone to an Argentinian psychoanalyst, but I went instead to a *mãe de santo*, an Umbanda priestess, because I was completely perplexed; when choosing my supernatural flavor, I’ve just traded Freud for *Macumba*.

The idea of calling him, the evil one, was hers. And I, a polite man who was going through hell, did—I insist—what anyone in my situation would have done, I opened my arms to the devil. I was caught with my pants down—I even wonder if I’d not been ambushed. And I, a man who, in principle, had just been fooled again by Ruin, I was now in the presence of the Prince of Darkness. And one would think he must have gone through considerable troubles to travel from the comforts of his deep kingdom to Mother Valéria’s Congá, just to meet me, another Pierrot crying for the love of another Columbine, another fool in a large crowd of betrayed men, every single one of us deluded and hopelessly in love.

So, I reckoned that for Satan himself to be there, in person—rather unsettled, let me tell you, and impatient, too, before a paltry

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<sup>2</sup> Rocinha is the largest favela (the local name for “slum”) in Rio de Janeiro. As a matter of fact, it may be the largest favela in Brazil.

insect like me — something more than the proverbial kick I had been served in the ass must have been happening. Why such a high honor?

I felt both deeply flattered and like I would soon pee myself, but I also had nowhere to run. It was all or nothing, so we had to reach an agreement.

– Instead of a child you may offer money. He accepts money – said Valéria, cheerfully.

I pretended I didn't understand. Then I decided to throw out some bait and risked a counteroffer:

– What if I wrote a book exalting Your Excellency?

The devil's impatience immediately changed or lowered its frequency. He inhaled deeply, and he may have missed for a moment his quiet life in the depths of Hell. He nodded, briefly caressed his horns and then he, the very one who had certainly chatted with Thomas Mann and Goethe, he, the good, old and tired Dorian Gray, he opened a puzzled smile of incredulity and amazement, and answered:

– Fuck your fucking exaltation; I want six elephants.

I looked to Mother Valéria and asked:

– How much does an elephant cost?

– Thirty thousand – the woman answered promptly – an elephant costs 30 thousand reais.<sup>3</sup>

Besides ignoring my past and future writings, the devil asked for six elephants, 30 grand apiece!

Look, I could be in the presence of Satan himself, but the one thing larger than Heaven and Hell put together is my ego. And thanks to it — my large and unrepentant ego — I manage to regroup my forces, there in that fucking place where the devil had sent me. And I said:

– No, you can't have six elephants.

The Good Old Fellow's rage boiled. Nothing could escape him, he said, he would catch me in the whirlwind, I would fucking regret it dearly if I didn't stop being a cheap coward, he hadn't emerged from the depths to waste his time with me, he wasn't kidding around.

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<sup>3</sup> The real (R\$) is the Brazilian currency. At the time of writing, one US dollar would be traded for something between five and six Brazilian reais.

I was about to respond with something like “it’s too much information. . . I need to check my balance, I can provide an answer in. . .”

Valéria quickly pulled me out of this train of thought and cut to the chase:

– A hundred twenty thousand in cash. For the first installment.

First?

– Yes, there will be two burnings. One hundred fifty thousand total. In the second session we will burn 30 thousand. Now we need 120 thousand, ’cause he’s hungry.

I was going to ask for some time to think because I really needed it; it was too much information at once, the devil was hungry and he fed on *mo-ney*, and I started doing some calculations in my head: “What if we find an innocent child for a cheaper price, say, in Cordovil, Brás de Pina, in Morro do Pica-Pau?”<sup>4</sup>

Then Mother Valéria, who was also in a hurry, said:

– Forget the elephants, my son, let’s talk about cash. Cash.

The creature was hungry, and his meal would cost me no more and no less than 150 thousand reais.

They, she and the devil, were talking about burning money. A fortune, 120 thousand now, followed by another 30 thousand. But how could they know I had that kind of money in the bank?

And on the top of it, I said to myself, holy fuck, my soul goes down the drain.

Should I waste all this money for the sake of a woman? A woman I love, my home, my life, yes, a woman that for seven years now had been driving me crazy, a woman that made me write three fantastic books, a woman that was my sunshine, my only sunshine, etc., etc. — but such an amount of money just because I was in pain for having been cheated?

I am in fact quite a coward, more than that, I am more a wacko than a coward. I had no objection to wasting a fortune that had fallen on my head without any effort on my part (other than living in tiny apartments for 50 years). I had no attachment to it. But besides wasting the money, would I lose my soul just because she left me?

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<sup>4</sup> Cordovil, Brás de Pina, and Morro do Pica-Pau are poor neighborhoods in Rio de Janeiro.

Mother Valéria, after we went all-in, was quite helpful and explained the obvious: It was not a “sale,” because the “will to receive” came from the man. I should feel thankful and lucky for making an “offering,” a gift to the devil. She told me not to worry, me and my little soul would emerge uninjured from that minor venture. It was not a sale, much less a bargain, an exchange or a trade. If I could not offer a child in sacrifice, if elephants were impossible to find in the market, the circus and the zoos, I could pay in cash. The devil was hungry:

– He does not want your soul. Let us burn the money, it is equivalent to sacrificing an innocent’s life. You have this choice, and we won’t wait your answer for much longer, you either accept it or you’re pretty much fucked.

– Hell – I thought.

The devil immediately interrupted my thoughts:

– Are you going to haggle with me?

Fuck! A thousand flying fucks! Where the hell is my guardian angel when I need him?

Mother Valéria, noticing the situation was getting out of hand, begged the devil’s leave and whispered in my ear:

– Take it or leave it. You won’t find another opportunity like this elsewhere. Do you have any idea of what is happening here and now?

– No, I’m pretty clueless.

– We’re here – said the woman – to celebrate life. And a life that is treacherous, after all we live on Earth. Did you know, my son, that Earth is just a Hell’s patch of land?

At this point the devil burst out in laughter. Valéria seized the moment to bring the point home and said the magic words, “he who loves does not haggle”:

– My son, you know this better than anybody. Why would you try to bargain?

Using all their charm and wit, the Beast and the *macumbeira* managed to corner me. In the end it was a kind of godsent relief, let me tell you. Besides, I have also enjoyed the unquestionable conclusion that our little blue planet is just a patch of Hell.

– The point – continued Mother Valéria – is to socialize with this guy here, who rules the world and our illusions. It is a rare opportunity, if you don’t take it now you may well forget it until another lifetime.

And she added:

– The only real sin, my son, is to cower from life.

The time was running out.

– What are you waiting for? Only he – she concluded, pointing her chin toward the entity – only he has the power to give back what the bowels of the world has taken from us.

In five minutes, the *mãe de santo*—inspired, naturally, by the demon who shamelessly plagiarized me—said things the Brazilian literature was unable to express for the last 25 years (and there would be much more. . .):

– The devil rules the world and our illusions, the Earth is but a Hell’s patch of land, only the devil can return what the bowels of the Earth have taken from us. He who loves does not haggle.

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Before the witch could go on, we were interrupted by her son, an albino gorilla-sized jiu-jitsu fighter, who entered the Congá carrying a goatling. Mother Valéria explained: “The man there asked for it, to start the rite.” I thought to myself: “How is that? We haven’t even closed the deal, and he wants to start the rite already?”

I almost forgot to tell you something. So many weird things happened that night and in those days that the facts and the details, which in the end are what make the account plausible, end up slipping from the mind.

Let me explain: Satan possessed a foreign sorcerer, who had arrived directly from Mozambique to Mother Valéria’s Congá. This surprised me when I entered the sacred chamber, actually an enormous room in the apartment—“The devil gave it to me”—the woman kept in Ipanema.<sup>5</sup> Room or Congá: The Candomblé word “Congá” means magic temple, place of ways, offerings, rites,

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<sup>5</sup> Ipanema is an upper-middle-class neighborhood in Rio.

conjurations, etc. The Black man dressed in a green tunic was almost two meters tall. He snorted through his nostrils and spoke with a very heavy accent, giving the impression that he had really come from another world, from Hell itself; he was the one who growled impatiently and threatened me, at the same time offering me his toxic and far from orthodox services; so, as I was saying, a gorilla-sized albino man, Valéria's son, entered the room carrying a teenage goat, almost an adult goat. My eyes moved from the black man to the small animal, and it looked back at me, creating a bond of complicity, tenderness, calm, and affection: How are you, little guy, is everything OK?

The devil could not believe what he had just heard, "How are you, little guy, is everything OK?" What could I do? We had a moment, the little goat and me, I think the devil got jealous and would certainly unleash all hellhounds on me. But before he could admonish me once again, Mother Valéria interfered:

– Besides lighting the Earth – she said, pointing to the sorcerer, who in turn shot me a disapproving grimace – he is also our caretaker, and the caretaker of corruption, and it was him, in that exact and unique moment in which you were distracted and in love with that woman, when you were lost in the world, dazzled and unprotected, it was him who collected, guarded, and cared for you and your treasure. He guarded your treasure, I'm talking about your life, my son.

– Life – she added – that is ours only in those moments we lose control, when we are not participating. That is the devil's workshop. Come on, my son, take your life back, if that is God's will.

I found it curious that she ended her speech with "if that is God's will." The literary metaphors and images Mother Valéria used, like "the Earth is but a patch of Hell" and others, also made an impression on me. Also, I had never imagined that the devil was watching over me: Could it be possible that he was my guardian angel?

Finally, when she said "if that is God's will," and the devil nodded, "yes! If that is God's will," well, seeing and hearing all this—maybe just an act to trick me, as they've tried to trick Jesus in the desert, but I am not Jesus—I ended up letting myself go with the flow, and then, not exactly comfortable but happy and dazzled by the poetry coming directly from the depths of Hell, I started to be ripped off.

Although I was somewhat satisfied, I was also in a state of submission, I was subjugated. So I could not counter them. Nevertheless, I both had and didn't have all that money. I forgot to mention it, before I could reach the devil for the first time, Mother Valéria had "locked" my body through the celebration of 12 dark masses in my honor. According to her, besides the high-quality coffins where I was, I mean, my bodily fluids were symbolically buried, besides that she had to require the help of almost a hundred "filhos e filhas de santo."<sup>6</sup> Also, seven dozen black oxen and uncountable goats and chickens had to be sacrificed to rid me from all curses I collected in 20 years of literature. "Envy, my son, lots of envy: even a Japanese fellow ordered a *macumba* against you."

A fuckload of envy: If even a Japanese guy ordered a *macumba*, things were really very bad for me. That I knew.

She had not just freed me from two decades of envy and its weight, she had also cured me from prostate cancer, thrombosis, and dying of respiratory failure in the waiting room of a public hospital. It cost me 120 thousand reais. Money not burned, mind you, but transferred in the most common way to Valéria's son's (the gorilla-sized albino jiu-jitsu fighter) bank account.

I made a quick mental calculation and concluded that besides scrapping my bank account, I would also have to sell my one-room apartment in the neighborhood of Bixiga in São Paulo, the sole property in my name. Everything else, thank God, was frozen until the end of the inheritance proceedings.

Valéria told me to calm down, there was nothing to worry about. Him, "the man," would let me pay in "installments."

And she would vouch for me and act as my bondsman; she would pay the debt herself if I failed to raise the money. She said I should close the deal already, because "the man" was about to lose his patience. I insisted I didn't have all that money, so we agreed to burn 30 thousand reais, the equivalent of one elephant. Then, when I managed to raise the rest of the money, we would make a nice bonfire with the remaining 120 thousand. Immediately thereafter the devil chastised me again, saying he had never made a deal

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<sup>6</sup> The Brazilian Candomblé/Umbanda lower-rank priests and priestesses.

like that before, that he was making an exception for me, and that it was shameful on my part to use a *mãe de santo*, one of his own daughters, as the guarantor of a sacrifice. So we closed a deal—an act that had other repercussions I will explain as we go along—for now, all I will just say is that 30 thousand would be set on fire immediately.

There were also many ceremonies performed by Valéria after that (“just to be sure”), I don’t know how many chickens, ducks, and roosters, maybe a whole poultry farm, plus pigeons, oxen, and goats, all of which ended up cleaning out my bank account. I also renovated Mother Valéria’s living room furniture in her gorgeous Ipanema flat and paid a six-month gym membership for her gorilla-sized albino son. I took a 50 thousand real hit on my credit card. The devil was hungry, very hungry.

– Yeah, sucker: try being nice, go ask the devil for love and peace and see what happens.

But the fact is, all this madness has a reason, one that left me completely satisfied and fulfilled, something that went and will go far beyond a fortune burned to satisfy the devil’s hunger. I have nothing to complain about. A madman, as Chesterton noticed, is someone who has lost everything but his reason.

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A thought before going on:

I am talking about burning money, a lot of money. Money in cash. Fire, money. Bill upon bill, a hundred reais, 50 reais, one over another. I even threw some dollars and euros in the bonfire for good luck and to cheer up the devil, who was still mad at me.

You should try for yourself, dear reader, to burn a small bill. Under normal circumstances, it is very hard. Under extraordinary circumstances, it is also very hard. Unthinkable. Now, think about killing a child. Also unthinkable.

On the other hand, think about killing a son of a bitch, think about the amount of useless people in this world wasting oxygen and carbon gas. Think about a certain former president of the Brazilian Senate, who has been embezzling public funds for decades, who makes deals to benefit his friends, lovers, and relatives. Think about



this guy who paid for a hair implant with public funds, remember he dyes the implanted hair shades of mahogany.

How much is such a son of a bitch's life worth?

Remember you've spent your life saving what little money you managed to earn. Think about the way money moves the world. Realize that money is life, ask any Jewish man and he will confirm, money is the sap that feeds the tree of life, money is the acquired knowledge and the wisdom, the happiness and unhappiness of a man. Understand then, my dear, burning money is far more serious than killing someone. Sometimes, a life is not worth even five cents. Most people are worth nothing, and life does not have the value men and their judgment have put on it. Even the Bible, a story of holocausts, confirms this impression. Newton, yes, Sir Isaac Newton, was a son of a bitch. Some people are not worth two reals, add it up, burning 150 thousand reals is equivalent to many genocides. Stalin and Hitler have not killed that many people. Nero has burned just one city. Think about it, only a monster would commit such an insane, barbarian, and crazy act, a grievous act of unpredictable consequences. Think that an act like this has the potential to move the present and change the future. Think about a black hole.

It is not just bullshit, not just a disdain for the myriad starving souls out there. Although people do not starve for a lack of money, they starve because the money owners prefer to amass their money instead of burning it. But I am neither Robin Hood nor a liberal banker, I have no intention of saving the world, far from it, my goal was just to put 150 thousand reals to fire. Just that.

For me, beyond the holocaust, beyond the unjustifiable and maybe unforgivable madness, before everything and anything, strange as it may seem, I did what I did for love. Yes, it was an act of love. An act whose purpose was not just to unclog the devil's arteries and feed his heart. It was, or better said, it is—because it is a major and continuous act of love, certainly an act previously unheard of, perhaps the first and the last unconditional act of love I managed to perform in my miserable life. To keep it short, it is an unconditional act of love, a love whose reason of existence was self-sufficient. By the way, it has gone far beyond any expectation, I was suddenly launched into a future I thought was long lost: I burned

150 thousand reais because the devil promised not just to bring back the woman I loved, he also promised me a son. The devil promised me a son from Ruin.

Before passing judgment and declaring me a vain and selfish man, let me do it for you. The money was mine, I would waste it anyway, so fuck you, you who will now throw away this book, you who does not have even two reais in your pocket to insert into your own asshole: Good for you, bye, have a nice life.

A son, a life that probably wouldn't make any difference among the many lives inhabiting the planet's five continents, another Pierrot to fall victim to an asshole of a Harlequin, another sufferer among billions of hopelessly romantic Pierrots, cheated and useless clowns crying in the crowd. Maybe he would be a peaceful and successful violinist, or a numb waiter serving jerks at a tasteless burger joint in Vila Madalena,<sup>7</sup> or even the owner of a burger joint. Perhaps a saint or a murderer, who wouldn't do anything special or anything different from what any other saint or murderer who ever walked on Earth ever did—anything but a writer, because that would be too much of a disgrace.

A fuckingsonofmine. The revelation cut deep, it really touched me. Inexplicably, the promise of a son made sense out of my life's incurable senselessness, out of a 51-year trance. Fifty-one years stumbling and held down, hungover and drifting. It was as if something clicked and the tune abruptly changed.

The devil's sudden revelation had healed me from myself. It made sense. It was not God or the fucking literature that made it dawn on me, but the devil. He was the one who gave me a compass, solid ground, a direction, a reason to keep going on. It is like the path drawn by a man who puts a gun in his own mouth. To him, it makes perfect sense to pull the trigger. So, if it makes sense, it is alright. Life is alright. It was as if I had earned a do-over. As if I had gotten my future back. I, who had arrived completely lost at Mother Valéria's home; the new fact, therefore, was not my lack of direction, I've always been disoriented. I can't recall a moment when I had somewhere to go, a

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<sup>7</sup> Vila Madalena is a famously bohemian neighborhood in São Paulo, the largest city in Brazil.

goal. And I've never complained about being a drifter, I was used to it and felt comfortable that way. I've never considered ways or directions to anything or anywhere, more so for having acquired—by my own means, let it be clear—a non-place of my own.

What else could I want?

When I was young, I had the future to exact revenge on the world of my elders, a world that had nothing to do with me. Yes, I had a brand-new future to waste, and I dedicated my life to that task. Until I reached that future, and failed to recognize myself (or had not recognized myself) in it—the same way I couldn't recognize myself, when I was young, in the old world of the elders. But now I'm the elder and it would be—theoretically—impossible to “exact a revenge” from the future, since all I had ahead of me was more past. And then, trivial as it may seem, the new fact was the son—the impossible revenge. And it was much more than mere vanity. Alright, I recognize it could be my old male bachelor vanity. But beyond that, and more important than that, a son was something that made sense.

A dangerous and improbable coherence? A contradiction? Yes and yes.

It does not have any logic. It suits me: It does not have logic, but it makes sense. If we were talking about some later-day surrealism, the question would be already closed.

Still, the devil promised me a son from Ruin.

Let us get back on track. How does a guy (yes, I am talking about me) who had cracked the code for self-deception, and who had not only knowledge but also practical experience with a goddamned system that had already failed—and that had no chance of working—how does such a mess of a man, old and tired, a guy who despised the infamous “free will, hope, and destiny” triad, how does such a guy suddenly, out of nowhere, just because Satan himself said so, how does such a guy suddenly start believing there is a meaning, any meaning, in this fucking life? How does an improbable revelation, 51 minutes into the second half of the soccer match, a son from Ruin, how could it make any sense?

Analyzing it all coolly, what did we have? Ruin. Always her, the cheater, the staggerer, the one who has never loved me back, the

most improbable woman, the card Dom Juanito, *el brujo de los ricos y famosos*, advised me to discard from my deck, the woman who has always fled from me and left me speaking to myself, the woman who has never been mine, the asshole who cheated on me with a street poet and then left me for a hipster, the woman who satisfied her hungers eating street garbage. Never a reliable woman, and yes, I had three reliable women, and dumped them one by one, for Ruin. It was her, the *macumba* in woman form, the black mass, a devil recommended by the Devil himself. She was the one who would bring me the future and fulfill the devil's promise through her own womb, she would give me a son. Well, for me it made sense, it has always made sense.