

“The Things We Do to  
Come” from *As coisas* (2018)  
by Tobias Carvalho

*Translated by Jon Russell Herring*



## Translator's Preface

When Júlia put out the call for this issue on contemporary Brazilian writing, I immediately knew I wanted to submit a translation of something by Tobias Carvalho. This story comes from his collection *As coisas* (Things, or Stuff, 2018), which is glorious. It's a wry, touching, and funny snapshot of what young guys get up to in and around Porto Alegre, the capital of Brazil's southernmost state, Rio Grande do Sul.

Carvalho is a playful, self-referential writer: In one of the later stories in *As coisas*, his protagonist responds to a question about what he's been up to by saying, "I've been writing about gay characters." Although we read it as autofiction at our peril, Carvalho does predominantly write gay characters—and he writes them really well. His prose is unadorned and articulate, sacrificing nothing to the style or to the pleasure of storytelling. He isn't particularly interested in coming-out stories, preferring to write, instead, about what happens after that. And he doesn't seem to feel the need to "represent," so as a result, his characters are morally complex and never outrageous, toned down, or one dimensional.

In a recent interview for *Artefact* (the online magazine by journalism majors at the London College of Communication), the students asked Carvalho how he feels about being referred to as the voice of a generation. His response was, "Oh, wow, that's a bold statement. Could it be 'a' voice of a generation? I don't want to talk over anyone; I'm one amongst many."<sup>1</sup> Just before that in the interview, he'd spoken about how it's not easy for Brazilian writers to find an Anglophone audience, and while I believe I'm among the first—if not the first—to have a piece of his published in translation, I know I won't be the last.

In bringing the story over to English, my main aim was to find the laconic, matter-of-fact voice of the narrator, who knows he's

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<sup>1</sup> Fellipe Pigatto de Andrades, "I'm Proud of It,' Says Young Brazilian Author on Being Associated with Gay Themes," *Artefact*, January 8, 2024, <https://www.artefactmagazine.com/2024/01/08/im-proud-of-it-says-young-brazilian-author-on-being-associated-with-gay-themes/>.

telling a great, funny story but is still unassuming and self-deprecating. The sentences are often quite short, and their rhythms hint at a mixture of boredom and occasional disbelief. But when the narrator is in moments of high stress, the phrases stretch out, revealing the anxiety beneath.

In terms of cultural specificity, there isn't a lot of Brazilian context that I felt an English-speaking reader would need extra context for, apart from the reference to a character voting PSDB (the Brazilian Social Democratic Party) as shorthand to show his difference from the narrator, and potential antagonism towards him. In the main, one of the thrills of the themes and language in Carvalho's work, for us readers, is that the *porto-alegrense* and the universal coexist so seamlessly in what he communicates. In that sense, it was exhilarating to translate in general, and I did not feel the occasional resistance of Lusophone phrasing and syntactic structure that I might encounter in translating other Latin American writers into English.

One aspect that did give me pause—in this otherwise galvanizing sense of flow as I worked—was that as a British writer I kept believing I'd found the *mot juste* for a certain piece of dialogue, description, or narratorial observation, only to realize that it was a big fat Britishism and needed to be recast into US English. I toyed with the idea of translating into UK English, because why not? But while this might be acceptable for UK readers—helping them understand that a story like this from Rio Grande do Sul could equally happen in Nottingham or Brighton or Norwich—I knew that I didn't want US readers of the translation to be pulled out of the text into a Britain where people moan about having to “drive to the arse end of nowhere,” or where kids who borrow their parents' car to meet boys for sex in a country lane would “get a right bollocking” if they got caught. After all, Carvalho writes in the Portuguese of the Americas, and I felt that the right thing to do was to try and recreate his world in an English of the Americas also.

There is one other key linguistic feature in this story: the terminology and shorthands that gay men use on hookup apps. As translator, I was aware that there may well be specific, in-community terms that straight readers would be less familiar with. As a gay translator, the categories, labels, and behaviors described in the app-facilitated

hunt were still occasionally new territory in Portuguese. However, some use borrowings from English, others have almost cognate terms in both languages, and for the rest, Google was my friend and can be the readers' too.

I am extremely grateful to my American editors on *Absinthe* for their comments and edits on this and more besides. (I hope we caught all those Briticisms.) I'd also like to thank Nick Campbell for reading and commenting on drafts, Daniel Hahn for his generous guidance over the last few months as my mentor, and Tobias Carvalho and Agência Riff for granting us the rights to publish the English version of his story in this issue.



## The Things We Do to Come

by Tobias Carvalho

I open Grindr and message the first guy I see: top, hairy, 42, no photo, 88 kg, 180 cm.

The first thing I say is *How's it going?* and the second is *Horny?* and he says yes. I ask for pics and he sends me one of his cock, hard, straining up against his hairy belly, something that always seems to do the trick for guys my age for some reason, us Lolita boys in the arms of semi-pedo HxH types who're into smooth twinkles with our killer blend of boredom, projection, and unresolved feelings of paternal abandonment, *aka* daddy issues.

I started at two in the afternoon. I put on "1999" by Prince and went looking for a quick fuck like I'd done on many previous afternoons. I'd hang around online, find someone, say *How's it going?*, *Horny?*, ask for pics and hope we could meet at his. (The nearer the better.) I'd drive over, say hi without asking his name, go into his apartment, kiss, suck, do it, chat a bit (maybe), and leave.

There wasn't much else to do in Porto Alegre.

If he wasn't up for it, if he was masc4masc, if he was vers/bottom, if he was into fisting, dildos, bears, bis, couples, or tops, I'd move straight onto the next as long as he was close by and interested in someone with a profile like mine: 20, toned, 177 cm, 66 kg, white, student, Aquarius, insecure, unresolved feelings of paternal abandonment, *aka* daddy issues, atheist, socialist, depressive.

But OK, the hairy top, 42, etc. can't accommodate, doesn't seem that enthusiastic, isn't into horoscope nonsense, isn't very good looking, even though his cock is arguably OK.

The next one's 27 and lives over by Cavanhas, he's got an undercut (which would've been cool three or four years ago) and he's a Cancer. Body type toned, height 176 cm, and he's ticked *native american* for ethnicity even though he's clearly white, which might indicate an identity that's not externally apparent, or just that he isn't very clued up on what *native american* means.

But the next one's my type. He's 19, he's hot (bordering on chubby, not chubby, but definitely not toned, a bit of a beer belly, but more like a drinking-Skols-on-a-Sunday-with-your-homies belly,

the cheapest bottles in the bodega, the beers you drink on mini-benders when you don't let on you *are* a bender), and his photos are great. There are a few different ones, full length, in the mirror, in bed, some with the front camera, others taken by someone watching him fuck another guy. In his profile it says he lives in Viamão.

Viamão. Yep, Viamão, i.e., down Protásio Alves then off to bumfuck nowhere along Antônio de Carvalho, with no idea where it twists and turns. But he's hot. After all these hours looking, he might be worth it. He's worth it.

I check again: He's a top, he's got a place, he's alone, he's up for right now, he doesn't mind waiting for me, he says he's into me, he likes long slow sessions, and he's not in the closet after all, which proves my instincts are still a bit unreliable after all these years of opening apps the moment I wake, only closing them when I'm about to fall asleep. I tell him I'll get there within the hour.

I get dressed, I put on some boxers from Lupo, shorts and a surfer-ish T-shirt. I get in the car and set off. It's hot: It's summer.

I open Waze and follow the route it takes me, passing through Campus do Vale and reaching Viamão, where I drive down a few cobblestone streets that seem quite calm, but still have a bit of a grubby look to them. I get to the address I put in and see the guy waiting out front, wearing Lycra shorts and a sleeveless top. I flash my lights and he gets into my car.

Hey. I'm Jonatan.

Hey.

Bro, I need to tell you something. My folks are home. We need a plan B.

Fuck. You could have said.

I thought they'd be out.

So what do we do?

I know a place.

He gives me directions to a hillside nearby. He says it's not dangerous, it's an area with upmarket housing and not much through traffic. The plan is to do it in the car.

We head off in that direction and follow a few roads till we reach one that's surrounded by more fields than buildings, something you only get outside Porto Alegre.



My car is all a gay could want for. The back seats push right down, level with the floor of the trunk. It's practically a motel. It's nine at night when we park up.

Now that I can finally focus on Jonatan, I can see that his dick is nearly poking out of his pants. He smiles at me, then kisses me, greedily tasting every inch of my lips, he switches the AC on, he throws me into the back of the car.

And he fucks me like an animal.

I enjoy sex, but I don't usually find it easy to talk when I'm naked with someone new. Jonatan doesn't suffer from this problem.

Sit here.

Suck it. Harder.

My nuts.

Sit right on it. Now pull away. Sit back.

Get on all fours.

Get on all fours and moan.

Moan like you mean it.

Moan louder, little bitch.

You like a big cock, don't you.

You love it.

We both come at the same time, me having moved through quite a few positions, some of them new to me.

I notice a burning sensation in my lower back and realize it's from rubbing against the rough floor in the car. He laughs at the grazes.

You had a good time there, huh?

Yes.

Me too.

Great.

When a guy feels like getting laid, it's great. And you came all the way out to Viamão.

I did.

So slutty. I love doing it with a guy who's not ashamed to act real slutty.

Right.

Lying in the back of my car, we chat for what feels like only a few minutes. We talk about college, star signs, politics. He's studying

film, he's a Leo, he votes left. The car windows start misting up and then I hear the AC cut out.

Jonatan.

What?

The battery. It's dead.

In denial and still only in my boxers, I try turning the key in the ignition. It's unthinkable that I'd be such an idiot to leave the AC on while the engine isn't running.

Don't worry.

Yeah, Jonatan. It's easy for you to say don't worry. I'm on a hillside in Viamão, a town that's notoriously unsafe, at 10 o'clock at night with a dead battery, in my underwear, in the heat. My parents went to the beach today. I mean, if they knew that I came to Viamão and let a boy fuck me in their car while it was parked out on the street, I don't want to think about what they might have to say.

We'll ask for help at one of the houses, he says. It's the only thing for it.

My foot hovers over the brake pedal while he pushes. It's downhill for a few meters and then the road ahead starts to rise. I worry that he won't be able to keep the car moving, but he's a strong guy. We stop outside a house and he rings the doorbell while I wait in the car.

A window opens and we see a muscular bald guy in his 30s, also wearing Lycra shorts and a sleeveless top, but he's definitely straight and unlikely to be favorably disposed. He has a tribal tattoo on his thick arm and he's giving off the vibe of someone who doesn't like being disturbed.

Good evening, sir, says Jonatan. Our car battery died. Have you got a cable so we can try and do a jump start?

What d'you mean, died? What do you want?

The battery went flat. We just wanna get it working.

But what were you doing in the car?

We were listening to music and we left the AC on by mistake.

You were listening to music in the street with the engine off?

Yeah.

Wait. I'm coming down.

I notice he's taller than I expected and there's a big bulge in his pants as he approaches. But he's not bringing anything to help with a jump start—he's got a gun.

Take it easy, buddy, I say, feeling anxious.

I'm easy, he says. If you guys try anything, I'll put a bullet in you.

We just wanna get home, I say, and get out of the car. I unlock the trunk and see if I can spot any jumper leads stashed away in there.

Does this car belong to you?

Yes, it's mine. But the moment I close the trunk, the car horn starts blaring and won't stop.

Jonatan, I think you'd better go to that house over there and see if they've got a cable.

Yeah, good idea.

While Jonatan walks across to the house, the man keeps staring at me. I don't know if he's genuinely wary of us or just wants to intimidate us. It's summer, it's 40 degrees, I'm standing by my unlocked car in a dark street in a satellite town of Porto Alegre with a man who probably votes PSDB and has a gun.

What's up, Jonatan?

They said they don't have a cable.

OK, so what shall we do?

We'll work something out. We can ask at the other houses.

There's no point, the man says. No one's gonna have a jumper cable, there's no gas station round here, and if you knock on someone's door at 10 at night, they're gonna think you're trying to break in.

So what do you suggest, buddy? I say.

Ah, I don't know.

Irked by his lack of concern, I suddenly notice it's only me who's tense. I don't know if it's because I'm the one whose car it is, or because I don't live in Viamão and don't know the lay of the land here, but I realize that Jonatan isn't bothered by the gun or the man's unhelpful attitude and random remarks. His face is carefree.

I'm calling my dad, he says.

Your dad?

Yeah, he's got tools and bits and pieces for the car. He'll come and jump-start us.

There's no alternative. He calls his dad, who says he'll be here in 20 minutes. The bald guy still thinks we might be dangerous and decides to wait with us until everything's sorted out.

Jonatan's dad pulls up in a pickup. The other guy tells him what's been going on and goes back inside. Jonatan's dad shows no sign of disapproval, grabs his gear and without once looking me in the eye, sets about bringing my car back to life without any help. Everything's sorted in a matter of minutes.

Jonatan tells his dad to go home. He says he'll see him there.

On the way back, Jonatan puts his hand on my thigh.

Wow, that was nuts, yeah?

Nuts, Jonatan?

Nuts.

I thought we were gonna die.

Hey, it wasn't that bad.

Your dad had to come.

My dad, yeah.

Do you reckon he knew we were there because we'd been fucking in the car?

Of course, he wasn't born yesterday. But it's no problem. He knows I like getting laid. When a guy needs to get laid, you just gotta let him.

Think about what just happened. There was kinda no need.

But at the end of the day we got off, I mean you enjoyed it, right?

Yeah.

And I actually prefer it when something a bit edgy happens.

Why?

I dunno. Like, you always remember each other afterwards.