

The Butcher's Shop

“A sea of red on Canada day and they’re spoiling everything, savages because of their nature, no manners, bouncing up and down,” she affirmed, nosing them down. “Teenagers,” the other woman, younger, said. She also had more make up, thick lines under her eyelids. “We have a story of persistence, of hard work, while they’re deteriorating our heritage,” the older one emphasized.

The boy was part of the group whose gaze the women rested upon. He wanted to explain why he was there, because he didn’t know any other way to assert himself; he didn’t want to be called a sugarplum anymore and being among older teenagers stronger than him gave him a sense of prosperity, though not for much longer. They thought he was a bit thin for hanging out with them. They thought he looked like a cucumber.

He overheard the two women talking, criticizing the fact that in a national holiday young people could drink nonstop without considering the history of the land. It was refreshing. He didn’t know where they came from. Bored among his peers, he decided to follow them and leave the group behind. The two women were probably fifty years old, dressed in orange, somewhat annoyed by the excess of red. They walked along crowded avenues until they landed a few blocks later in a coffee shop with yellow umbrellas.

The tables were outside. He positioned himself in a strategic position to be able to hear their conversation. Somehow, outside of the group, he was ordinary. He ordered a slurp of watermelon, which looked more like a giant glob.

No ordinary juice would please him, his stepmother had said once. These women reminded him of her, she, whose face he began to find similar to his, even though they weren’t naturally related. The realization made him alert, knowing that his real mother, the one he hadn’t seen in years, was in the city for a few days now. “In 1900, France was a country more populated than Brazil, even though 80% of the coffee consumed came from there,” one of the women said.

He assumed they were Brazilian, because one said “obrigada” after buying coffee. His father had remarried a Brazilian, but Paul was born here, in Canada. He spoke Portuguese at home,

but the stories about his past didn't involve this country but another, so he grew accustomed of not having a sense of home. Recently his real mother had contacted him from Ontario. They were strangers, but as she arrived in town, he decided to celebrate the national holiday as a way to reconnect with her.

His stepmom, Marieta, was his real mom, he told himself, as if he were explaining his life story to the couple of women sitting across from him in the coffee shop. She talked to him about the things he liked, for example, the Monument of Bandeiras, in São Paulo, a big sculpture, soldiers walking towards the unknown and one of them riding a horse. It was concrete. He asked Marieta if she had known his mother. She said no, a bit embarrassed to hear him ask her that.

It was a long time ago, she replied. He confessed that his mother had contacted him a few weeks ago but he didn't know what to do. He said that he didn't have any feelings for her because she was an unknown face, just like the women who looked at him in the crowd. Had they been abandoned too? Probably not.

He introduced himself to the ladies. "Are you from Brazil?" He asked, trying to make conversation and take his thoughts away. The image of his mother travelling across the country disrupted him. He was accustomed to living between places too. He was born in Canada but his father took him to Brazil to register him as a citizen after his wife abandoned him. Now she was back. "Yes," they replied. "Are you?"

They asked back, to which he answered, "I'm from both places." He showed them the name Brazil tattooed on one leg and Canada on the other. "My name is Paul, Paulo," he added, hoping they would see him differently now. "I saw one of you say obrigada after you ordered your coffee. I do that sometimes," he said, shaking his head, disoriented for a moment. But the women didn't give him much attention.

He wanted to tell them that his dream was to speak Portuguese and practice like Caetano Veloso, who sang as if he was kissing the vowels through his thin lips, a sweet melody that often brought a smile to his face. Sometimes he fantasized kissing Caetano Veloso too. The Monumento das Bandeiras, a sea of red flags, Ontario and Brazilian music, all of these things made him desire to be someone else.

How could he explain this to others? There was nothing else to talk about so he asked them if they liked Vancouver. They said yes. He recalled a movie he watched with Marieta called *Idade da Terra*, by Glauber Rocha, the first nouvelle vague he watched from Brazil. “The movie is apocalyptic,” she had stressed. He imagined what Glauber Rocha would have done if he had landed in Vancouver on Canada day, if he would have thought about colonization and sexual appropriation of women.

Naturally those women weren’t interested in this subject so they ignored him and began talking among themselves. He slurped all the watermelon from his cup with ice in his fingers taking him back to the tradition of calling his stepmother at night whenever he felt alone and cold, never imagining one day his real mother would reappear to see him. Now she had returned but how could he forget that she had left him when he was two? She had fallen out of love, his father told him. He was too young to understand how people fell out of love with babies. “I don’t know what to say,” his father said.

Marieta, when hearing about the fact that his mother was in town, said he should go and not tell his father, after all it was his mom, but he wouldn’t listen and get upset. So after leaving the restaurant with cold fingers, watching the two Brazilian women talking nonstop, he called her. She answered as if no time had passed. She told him she was in Vancouver because she was working in a butcher’s shop and they needed someone to check the merchandise in the franchise. She wanted to see him.

Hearing her story, he realized that maybe she hadn’t come to see him after all, and that made him disappointed. He was angry that she had left him all those years ago. It was sudden, and he didn’t want to remember the past. Regretful, he told her he could meet her in the swimming pool briefly, where he had practice, because he didn’t want to change his routine or show her that he had been thinking about the meeting ever since he got the letter. Seeing her arrive in the big lounge of the aquatic center made him cringe, and for a moment she stood there, not recognizing him.

He waved his hand because he knew who she was from the blue jay jersey she said she would be wearing. They hugged sideways, as if their bodies didn’t match, as if time had separated them for too long. She held his face. Her fingers had big rings. It was difficult to breathe. He said hi. He tried to say something to avoid looking for traces of him in her eyes. Maybe the cheeks were similar. But then nothing, there was nothing to talk about at first. Until she began

to explain her work, how she had been in the city to select the right meat. It was a strange subject. He imagined how she would ask him about school, or girlfriends, boyfriends in his case. There were no big explanations or apologies, just an acknowledgment, oh, you're well, so big, Paul, she said.

All those years away, Paul felt his whole-body empty, as he if was missing a part. Now that she was there, he felt awkward, still incomplete, even if the thought of his stepmom, Marieta, filled his mind, a protection. I don't think this is love, he thought, even though at some moments she appeared to be truly happy to see him. He nodded yes and imagined if her words had any promise and would last in his memory. He was anxious to get out of there, to continue to grow older but away from her.

The truth is that he didn't know who she was. Take a picture of me so you can remember, she said. I have a phone, you can call me, he said. Show me your hands, she asked. She said she knew how to read the lines in his hand and then explained that he had a great future. Are you in it? He thought, but didn't ask. Let me comb your hair, she said. He had long hair, because he wanted to look more feminine, a soft feel to the touch. It is nice, she said. It was unusual to have his hair combed, because he never did. He thought that maybe from now on he would comb his hair too, as if by doing it he would feel her love from time to time. Tenderloin, flank, steak and ground beef, she said, as she moved her hand up and down. Those were the most popular parts, she explained, as she began to talk about her work in the butcher's shop.

He asked her if that's what she's been up to. "I was in the hospital for over a week," she said, unexpectedly. He was late to react. "What do you mean?" He finally asked. "It was an anxiety attack," she explained, calmly. "I had another son, and he died in a car accident a few months ago," she affirmed. Paul didn't know if the news should make him feel jealous or sorry. His father had never mentioned his mother's new marriage. It was as if it never existed. "I didn't know," he said. "It's ok. I should have contacted you earlier," she said, "he is not coming back, but you never left."

With big hands, she embraced him, and he imagined her holding the knife with its silver surface, cutting the meat. "I'm sorry I wasn't around," she said. Up until that moment, the memory of her body was a fantasy. "My mother used to buy chicken and kill it in the yard when I was a child," she said. "It traumatized me. Now I see dead meat all the time. But I don't

fear death.” He nodded and told her she would be fine, crying wouldn’t bring him back but it could help.

As she left, Paul watched her go not knowing when he would see her again. At home, his father asked where he was and he told him he had gone to the butcher shop to look for a job. “I didn’t know you wanted this kind of work,” he said. “Neither did I,” he lied. Marieta didn’t say anything because Paul kept quiet about it all. The next day, as his mother didn’t call, Paul kept thinking if it would have been better to have never heard about her and her dead son, the sight of her face as a piece of meat in his hands. For a few days he cried, and then he forgot, unsure on what to do with all that.