

Iracema's Footprint

By
Bernard F. Blanche



Eloquent Books

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Dedications

Iracema's Footprint is dedicated in fondest memory to my father and lovingly to my wife and children whose cooperation and help have made this labor possible.

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CHAPTER ONE

Dust on the Land

Fleeing from the reality of the bus and fighting the dry and dust-saturated air, Marcus locked his eyes on the water as the bus passed over a concrete bridge. Enormous glasses of icy water materialized in front of his mind. His ears strained to pick up the sounds of the flowing river. The water was ten meters below and stretched its long, fluid body for nearly one kilometer alongside the ribbon of road. Women knelt in the shallow water along the edge and rubbed their wash with long bars of green and yellow soap. Some beat the cloth on smooth stones that lay immersed in the running water.

Up ahead the water was still, a pool of quiet, deep water. Its lack of movement made it useless for cleaning clothes. Marcus's eyes blinked rapidly toiling to maintain a liquid coating on the surface of the pupil and iris. The water stirred in soft ripples that circled away from a hidden disturbance in the pool. The bus slowed to negotiate a washout that had long been in disrepair. As the vehicle crept to a walking speed, Marcus saw the glistening brown skin of a young woman. She was slowly treading water along the bank. Black, straight hair mingled with the curves of her shoulders as she swam out into the pool and away from the road. The buoyant nude figure remained suspended in the deep water. Marcus watched as her body registered the approach of the bus. As her head turned, her legs dropped slowly down into the darker water below her. The half turn gave her a full view of the bus. She made

no apparent attempt to cover her breasts; the slightly turbid water offered little cover. Marcus felt her gaze settle upon him. Wearing a business suit on a bus traveling into the interior made him easily visible. Two soft kicks from her submerged legs brought her up onto her back. A vision of an Indian goddess played through Marcus's mind. Gliding away, her friendly and refreshing smile presented perfect white teeth. Her dark, walnut-brown skin was now accented by her parted lips. She had floated to the far bank of the river but was plainly visible from the clay road. The bus now accelerated slowly, drifting away from the water and the woman. Casually she stood, and Marcus strained to keep her in sight. With an easy and carefree wave of her hand, she invited Marcus to return the gesture. Leaning against the side of the bus, Marcus managed a hurried wave. He saw the figure dive gracefully back into the pool. Through the waves and spray of the water, she knifed across the river to the bank by the road.

Someone coughed; it was Marcus. He rolled his head and remembered the last rest stop that the bus had made. A weathered sign with the town's name painted on it oscillated in slow motion from an invisible gust of wind. Merchants with their wares in baskets upon their heads weaved among each other in an attempt to get to customers aboard the bus. They could not get onto the bus; so, many of them milled about beneath the windows waiting for a sale. Bananas were selling for ten *cruzeiros* apiece, but most travelers were bargaining for closer to seven. Some purchased them for eight; some for nine. Oranges in palm baskets also sold for a variety of prices. Marcus haggled with one woman over her price and felt he succeeded quite well. He managed to get the price down to eleven *cruzeiros*. Later, out of fatigue, Marcus bought two more oranges from another woman without dicker-ing. They were more reasonable at nine *cruzeiros*.

Stretching his legs, the bus driver, who was smoking a Continental cigarette, leaned against the back of the vehicle. He had watched Marcus and now laughed aloud at the young man from the South.

Nodding into a light sleep, his memory flowed into dream. Nightmarish rows of gray-frosted women pushed their shriveled hands at him. They wore tattered, dirty clothes. Some of the older women smoked pipes as they sat motionless in the shade of a yellow building. Beggars filed by canting, “*Por amor de Deus!*”¹

These struggled with only brief moments of opportunity during the week. Three times a week they could sell or beg at the train station as the train passed through. They begged at the bus terminal only twice, once on its journey into the interior and once on its return trip. Marcus was not aware that this nightmare of hands at the window would become so familiar to him. Shortly, he awoke.

As the *Paulista*² became more alert, he began to sense an awareness of himself amid his drained fellow travelers. His one hundred and seventy centimeters rose well above most of the people he had so far encountered. His searching, dark brown eyes constantly fluttered with a youthful, excited energy. He felt foreign in his own country. The harsh sun had hardened and darkened the complexions about him, and he sensed the lightness and suppleness of his skin as feminine. Marcus winced at the sharp pang and prick of sun burned skin on his thin, moderate nose and mildly jutting cheekbones.

The straight and fine, dark hairline of his eyebrows contrasted the smooth undulation of his wavy, very dark, brown hair. The drop of hair conditioner applied in the morning drew the color even closer to the black of his eyebrows.

His features were healthy, but the trip fought them, decanting his lithe and athletic build. His firm jaw drooped as he approached a boredom-drenched sleep. The reflection added lines of tension to the child features of his face. Marcus thought himself a typical young adult, but women found him innocently handsome. This

1 For the love of God!

2 a Brazilian from Sao Paulo.

slight difference of perspective gave him a flirtatious bearing. Like salt, this spiced his sexual appeal with women.

The soccer-primed limbs rattled constantly in relentless, mechanical vibrations and oscillations from the coach. The rhythm copied untiringly the rough roadway over which the bus hurtled in its flight from the modern capital.

The heat was oppressive; yet no one seemed to notice. During eight hours in the desert, the waves of rising warmth had numbed and deadened the faces of the travelers. Some were rhythmically moving their legs, fingers, and heads. The ruts and stones on the baked clay road jostled the bus continually. A few passengers were lulled to sleep, ignorant of any danger. The driver aimed the bus westward across the countryside of Ceara, Brazil, at reckless speeds; and the people welcomed the breeze at eighty kilometers an hour.

At each of the three rest stops, the people had purchased refreshment. Even now some were hypnotically peeling oranges and tossing the rind from the window. One child attempted to strike each tossed peel through the open window with his head, scoring imagined goal after goal. The edible part of the orange dried quickly, sticking slightly to the watering lips of the travelers. The July air had quickly sucked all the exterior moisture from the juicy fruit.

Most of the experienced passengers carried towels with them. The cloth was always dry, but it still provided shade and served as a duster. The unceasing grit crept into every crevice of the bus. It lay almost undetected on the uniform of the driver and blended insidiously with the tan fabric. His shirt took on the faint reddish blush of the powdered clay. The faces of those sleeping became mummified as an even coating of dust drifted across their heads. The towel-bearers drew streaks along their clothing and about their cheeks with each brush stroke. The dust never came off: it merely moved or was pushed about the surface. One weighty man at the rear of the bus sat back as his face eroded. The small beads of sweat, which began on his oily brow, ran

slowly by his eyes and nose. Gently and unnoticed, the droplets gathered the dust and took it to lower regions of his round face. The muddy drops never reached his neck or joined the other streams of perspiration that began at the top of his huge neck. The forehead sweat evaporated along his jaw and cheekbones. Traces of red deposits spotted his complexion.

The one voyager who seemed more unprepared for such a long trip through the *Sertao*³ was Marcus Batista Da Paz. He sat toward the rear of the bus just in front of the heavily sweating man. He had read about this ancient land. He knew of *Lampiao*, the bandit Robin Hood of the Northeast. The papers in the South also told of the frequent and devastating droughts that hit this area. The drought of 1965 ended when the rains returned six months ago. It was a short rainy season, and some people were still returning from the South. This was a typical day for July 9. Marcus realized that the monsoon rains would not come for another eight months at least. That is if they came at all, and already the sun parched the land. These people were nomads with a home. Marcus wondered why they would return to such an inhumane, difficult land.

Not all his information was obtained through history books or the newspapers. When he had gone into Mato Grosso to see Brasilia, he had seen these impoverished nomads of the *Sertao*. From his hotel room, he watched them arrive atop the gasoline and oil trucks. The trip took four days with only rest stops and covered approximately eighteen hundred kilometers. The same relentless red powder covered their drawn faces and humbled bodies. They were all men who had brought well-worn clothes with them. They left their families for the promise of employment in the construction of Brasilia. Marcus now had a partial sense of the pattern of their lives.

The federal government was also aware of some of these hardships, but had previously done too little to alleviate the

3 A desert region in northeastern Brazil.

poverty of these people. The American Peace Corps was operating in this area. Marcus was part of a new diversified attack against the ignorance and harsh conditions of the area. The National Foundation for the Improvement of the Northeast (FIN) had assigned Marcus three objectives. He was to develop a sanitation program, draw an updated map, and initiate adult health and first-aid classes for working people. The poverty, however, would be beyond his control.

Marcus tried to imagine what might reverse these economic trends. A cough, like a mischievous imp, leaped from his lungs. The taste of the moist clay was in his mouth. The reality of his discomfort made him anxious to reach Iracema. He squirmed in his seat and looked out the window. For the first time, he realized that the sun was beginning to set. Ahead, the low brush, cacti, and occasional palm were casting long fingers of cool shade toward the speeding bus. The coach scurried like a frightened wild animal, for it had no idea that its captors meant it no harm. A few more coughs forced themselves from Marcus, but, finally, he was again able to relax. His memory of the bather he had seen in Sobral pulled him into a deeper sleep.

Suddenly, Marcus's body was still as the bus rested motionless. It rattled his rest, and his mind consciously struggled to awaken him. His eyes popped open, but he did not sense his surroundings immediately. The bus was dark and the world was dark. He felt the soot and grit on his seat and upon his gray suit. Vague and unfamiliar shadows moved about him. Each ghost bumped and plodded its way among the seats of the bus gathering belongings and companions. Marcus did not like being alone, and he began to realize that he was not supposed to be.

The Foundation had sent a telegram of introduction to Iracema. The group that had requested a "Specialist" would certainly be on hand to greet him. In the dim light of the street, Marcus saw the bus driver unlock the underneath luggage compartment. The huge man who had sat behind him was already disappearing into the street beyond the light. Faceless people searched

other faceless forms and somehow managed to locate friends and family members. Several large groups of curious citizens stood in dark silhouettes at the fringe of the umbrella of light that descended from a street lamp. The arrival of the train or the bus was a social occasion. Perhaps, Marcus thought, one of the groups was waiting for their "Specialist".

His legs ached as he pulled himself up from the seat. His height forced him to hunch his shoulders and bow his head. He felt tired and humbled as he inched his way along the aisle of the bus. As he reached the steps, Marcus remembered the one orange still on his seat which he had not eaten. He paused briefly before forfeiting the fruit to the empty bus. Deciding to begin this job with a fresh start, Marcus took a deep breath and bounded like a young lion down the three steps onto the sandy ground. He was at the end of the line, Iracema.

Most of the crowd had already dispersed as he reached the driver at the compartment. "I hope you enjoyed the trip, *Senhor* Marcus," said the driver with a knowing smile.

In response, the young man shook his head from left to right. He reached for his two bags in the compartment.

"No, *Senhor*, I'll get them for you."

"Thank you, I'd appreciate that," responded Marcus. He used this brief moment to arch his back. He enjoyed the dull pain that rose up his spine. The muscles stretched, and he found some momentary relief from the arduous nine hour trip.

As Marcus moved to accept the luggage, a lengthy shadow stepped in front of him and gripped the two bulky cases. "I've got them for *Senhor*," said the porter. The man wore a curious flat, thick-leathered hat. Years of wear were apparent on its tough hide.

"Okay, but I haven't any idea where you should take them," said Marcus with a slow bewildered voice.

"That's no problem. Those gentlemen have asked me to place your bags in their jeep." He had turned full-faced when he addressed Marcus. The simple nod that he gave produced a

conditioned reflex as Marcus turned in reaction. Two men stood apart from a larger group of onlookers. Marcus lost view of them briefly as the porter passed between the men and him. The two gray bags were on top of the man's head and swayed precariously as he walked beneath their weight. As he reached the jeep, another man assisted him to load the luggage into the back. This man was apparently the driver of the Willis. Marcus swung his head away from the jeep in order to obtain a better view of his new contacts. They walked toward him and broad smiles formed upon their visages. The shorter and stockier of the two appeared to be the older. He extended his hand through the darkness. It was a long and firm handshake.

"I am Dr. Augusto Mendonca, and this is Dr. Santiago Mendonca, my brother." Marcus grasped the younger man's right hand. A small lip scar bent his smile slightly, but his friendliness managed to shine through. His hair was close-cropped and glistened with the soft light of the street lamp. He was freshly showered. "You must be Sr. Marcus Batista da Paz. We have expected you since the weekend. I am so very pleased to meet you."

"Thank you for meeting me. I wondered how and where I might find lodging in Iracema." Marcus disliked that his comment portrayed his inexperience. Being twenty-four, he wanted to correct that impression. "The Foundation advised me that I should make these arrangements when traveling, but I never do." Now he sensed that he had overdone it. He reprimanded himself. Then he vowed to relax and not worry about his image. Fatigue was visible in all of Marcus's features. He suspected that his business suit was probably ruined since there would be no dry-cleaning done out here. He longed for a cleansing shower and peered enviously toward Dr. Santiago. It would be one hour before he could realize his wish.

"We would love to show you some of the city," continued Augusto, "before we take you to your hotel."

"Yes, Iracema is quite a showcase. Our waterfall is known throughout the Northeast." Dr. Santiago slipped into the con-

versation. Marcus imagined that the waterfall could not possibly be seen in the darkness of the night. The Doctor caught himself; “You can see that tomorrow morning after we show you your office.”

Marcus figured they had plotted every detail of his life, and they assumed that he was accustomed to such a desert crossing. Dr. Augusto led Marcus to the 1961 Willis Jeep. The doctors’ wives and families were presented to the young man. They seemed sympathetic to his exhaustion but quietly refrained from offering any counter proposal to the doctors. Only the driver and the three men took seats in the jeep. It was clear that the others had fulfilled their obligation and were to walk to whatever destination they had.

Marcus was too weary to bother remembering anything that the eager doctors painstakingly pointed out to him. Sore and confused images of the trip bounced into his thoughts as he tried to concentrate on his companions. He sat in the front with the driver who was also very occupied with making sure that Marcus saw all that Iracema had to offer a night visitor. He drove more carefully than the bus chauffeur, but Marcus’s uncertainty about his ability shot spasms of fear through his limp body. With the streets and alleys of the village put to memory, the driver sparingly watching the road. He leaned, bent, and rotated his body like a circus acrobat. Strength rose and subsided in his arms as he wheeled the vehicle about the curves in the route.

His excitement bubbled into his speech, and Marcus had difficulty understanding some of the heavy *Cearense* dialect that caked his Portuguese. His pronunciation was garbled by a fleshy delivery caused by missing teeth.

The doctors sat in the rear on parallel metal seats that ran along the sides of the vehicle. Dr. Augusto found it difficult to prevent his sliding toward the back where the luggage was placed. He wedged his right foot against the bags and succeeded in minimizing his slipping motion. The younger doctor was oblivious to the constant sliding. He made unconscious shuffling

motions to stay to the front of his bench. Augusto presented a stoic face, which did not appear stern but rather strong and consistent. The thumb of his right hand swept his brow of any moisture that began to form. His excess weight was well distributed over his frame and added to the sense of power that radiated from the man. His speech was always accurate and rapid. He wasted no time struggling for the correct word or phrase. What he said on his first attempt ostensibly stood. His face was clear and his cheeks were closely shaven. The drudgery of using the razor twice a day was a necessity to him. It was part of the image that he presented. He was a man you could calculate; a man of careful habits. The pencil-thin mustache curved carefully along his upper lip. It was almost too thin, for in the darkness it sometimes blended into the numerous shadows of the night.

Dust swirled about the moving jeep as the powder leaped away from the crushing tires. The reddish tint was gone. The cool evening had drawn the heated color from the dust. Its gray eddies circled and fell on the nearby sidewalks or angrily chased the fleeting Willis.

“Don’t you think that it’s interesting that a folk character like Iracema could have lived and walked this land?” A pause forced Marcus to turn backward. Augusto had pulled Marcus from his daydreams and lack of attention.

“Uh? Oh, I’m sorry. What was that?” murmured Marcus. The doctor repeated the question with a slight bit of impatience. “Yes,” forged Marcus, “I guess the people feel quite proud that such a well-known legend comes from this region.” Augusto was satisfied.

Driving west from the bus depot, the men were now showing Marcus the town *Praca*⁴. People walked the rectangle in a clockwise direction. They were cleanly dressed, and each displayed some purposeful activity. Some voyeurs touched young women with their eyes. Concentration was written across their brows

4 town square

and mouths. Girls and boys in separate groups gossiped about members of the opposite sex. Then Marcus saw it.

“My God!” It was the first conversation that Marcus had initiated, and he caught his audience and himself by surprise.

“Ah, yes! The Statue of Iracema. It is an exact replica of the marble one in Fortaleza,” said Santiago admiringly. Augusto was silent, evaluating what Marcus actually meant.

“Why it’ssuperb and so well placed in the *Praca!*” Marcus was not sure if he liked or detested it. It confused him. The Amazon stood at least four meters high and was constructed of concrete. A huge bow in her right hand was balanced by a long fishing arrow in her outstretched left hand. She held the bow aloft elongated while the arrow was set like a shepherd’s staff. Long trunk-like legs reached up to support her enormous calves and hips. From her navel, her body triangulated upward peaking at her feminine shoulders. Their delicate size tempered the enormity of the lower portion. Twin conical, concrete breasts seemed pinned upon her child-like chest. Marcus examined the calm, indigenous beauty of the face and the straight hair which lay mockingly in thick concrete upon her neck and shoulders. The jeep wheezed to an idling halt.

“The legs give her the strength. You know it is said that she ran to the ocean for a swim and returned the same day.” Marcus remembered his nine hour, one-way ticket. The *Paulista* could not identify who had spoken. He sat transfixed by the statue. His weariness prevented him from making any evaluation. He wondered if any of the clay dust had settled upon Iracema during her trip to the coast. As they again accelerated further west, she remained rooted and indifferent to their departure.

“I think I will grow to admire that unusual woman.” All the men nodded with flat smiles which approved of Marcus’s words. Dr. Santiago stretched forward and patted his shoulder. The young visitor appreciated the touch of camaraderie and openness that was part of Santiago.

The jeep darted past rows of attached homes until suddenly the town ended. A stand of trees barred their way and the jeep was brought to a halt. The driver cut the engine and a heavy silence was immediately evident. Marcus shuffled around in his seat to face Dr. Santiago quizzically. The doctor inclined his head forward and pointed toward the front of the jeep and upwards. Marcus strained his eyes attempting to discern something in the line of trees and in the blackness beyond. As he leaned closer to the glass of the windshield, he focused on the stars and a ragged and ominous barricade of black wall in the distance. It cut into the whole westward section of the heavens from the southern to the northern horizon. Hell had opened up and part of the sky was gone. Then the silence was broken.

“This is your first view of our mountains,” instructed Dr. Santiago, “Don’t let it slip from your memory. In the winter during the heavy rains you will sit at home and listen to the boulders smash themselves at the bottom of our waterfall. Then you will know the power of our land and understand Iracema.” The young gentleman heard Santiago’s words, but they were drowned by the darkness he saw.

The city was backed up against a foreboding granite wall. The huge monolith fell vertically for some five hundred meters. The leg of the *Ibiapaba* range slithered for hundreds of kilometers between Piauí and state of Ceará. The snake-like cut that it carved along the western land served notice to travelers that Ceará had once dropped from the main land mass. The rest of the state sloped gently toward the sea. This was the mountain range that marked the frontier of Ceará. The state of Piauí rolled north and west to the Amazon jungle from the other side of the range.

“The Indians constructed a cobblestone pass up the face of the cliff. The people from Bica, on the mountain, still carry their produce down the trail during market day.” The driver did not see the impression that the mountain had made on Marcus.

Dr. Augusto added, "Of course, we now have a government road that is more adequate for travel. You will get many opportunities to ascend our *Serra de Ibiapaba*."

"You have seen enough for now," said Dr. Santiago. "We'll take you to your hotel and a good night's rest." Marcus was relieved. "Tomorrow we shall pick you up at eight o'clock and show you the Health Post."

"Isn't tomorrow Sunday?" questioned Marcus.

"Yes," interrupted Dr. Augusto, "but that is better for we will not have any patients to occupy our time."

"Then eight o'clock will be fine with me," agreed Marcus. The arrangements were made and the jeep whined to a start. The driver reversed, turned, and headed east. The bland row houses blended closer together in a blur of speed. The *Praca* was again in sight, but no attempt was made to slow the vehicle this time. The jeep pulled up abruptly just one short block from the bus depot. They had arrived at the Hotel Jose de Lima.

"You will be very comfortable here. We have made arrangements for you to remain here until you find suitable housing." Dr. Augusto remained in control of the details. A broadly smiling man with glistening, flushed skin and a missing front tooth appeared on the steps of his hotel. A woman accompanied him. Her wide eyes beamed and her mouth slanted downward to the left. It was a smile, though, and Marcus knew they were glad to have his business. The doctors introduced the proprietors to Marcus. The couple told how great and kind the two doctors were. And Marcus again learned that he would certainly enjoy his stay at their hotel. They assured him that any complaints that he might have would quickly be corrected. His luggage was taken to room number three on the left side of the main hallway. The hotel was a one story structure with seven separate quarters. An expansive and open-aired dining room and kitchen sat just left of the door to his room. Beyond the kitchen were the shower and two toilet rooms.

The doctors had remained toward the front of the establishment and were engaged in whispered conversation with the proprietor.

The wife was making certain that the room was in readiness. Marcus waited outside his room until the woman left. He turned and exchanged courteous waves with the five people now assembled at the door. Three powerless strides moved him forward; he was alone in the room. He wasted no time surveying the place, but rapidly prepared himself for a shower. His body thirsted for the coolness of water, and his pores ached to be rid of the reddish clay.

The shower room was large and dark with the shower nozzles suspended from the ceiling. It was a simple, gravity shower with the water stored in a concrete tank above the room. Marcus needed some light so he fumbled in the darkness for a light switch. There were no electrical gadgets at all in the room. He could only make out the three glistening metal shower heads that hung beneath the storage tank. The sound of the proprietress' humming brought Marcus to the door. Checking his cotton robe to prevent any accidental immodesty, he opened the door.

"*Senhora?* Could I please secure some type of lamp or candle from you?" asked Marcus.

"Certainly, *Senhor* Marcus." She was on the other side of a low wall that separated the hallway from the kitchen. She was igniting a small wood fire but now started toward Marcus. As she neared, she swept a small kerosene lamp, fabricated from a vegetable oil can, from a nearby table. It was already aglow with a dull pulsing flame, and the woman never broke her stride toward him. "I should have realized that you were anxious for the *banho*⁵. We are to get electricity in our homes very shortly. Now, only some businesses and our main street are lit by the town generator. When electricity from the Sao Francisco arrives, you will not need a lamp in the shower." She spoke with ease and familiarity with him. The floor length cotton dress that she wore dusted the tiles in an irregular circle about her sandaled feet. Grease spatters and stains appeared and reappeared on the bodice of the dress as she stood in the flickering lamp light.

5 bath or shower.

“I’m sure everyone will welcome the electricity. May I have the lamp, please?” The woman hesitated, apparently expecting a lengthier conversation.

“When you have finished, I will have some food for you. Just come into the dining room, and I will serve you. Would you like a beer? My husband would be glad to purchase one for you.”

“The food and beer sound like an excellent idea. Thank you, I’d like that.” His voice was hollow as it struggled to exit the shower room. The German beer of Brazil was excellent and would satisfy his thirst. Marcus thought about the woman’s kindness. Perhaps the doctors had left the suggestion with her. He placed the lamp on a small wooden table that grew out of the darkness in the room. Small toads with suction-cupped fingers clung to the walls. They were pale and anemic of sunlight. The flesh rippled up his spine. The sensation succeeded in bringing attention to his body.

He was in good physical condition but was astounded at how much the trip had taken out of him. The tone of the muscles was gone; the icy shower would change that. Even with his robe removed, he still felt dressed. The same red dust that covered his hands had worked its way under his suit and up his arms and legs. He remembered the showers that he had taken after soccer games at school. Then the dirt had turned the water muddy as it descended the body. What would this horrible grit do to the water? Marcus pulled the chain that led to the middle nozzle. He chose to remain as far from the walls as possible. Sound and touch were the only senses alive. Splashing water massaged his numb back and neck muscles. Like a child in spring, Marcus sprang free and danced in the shower of water from the metal head.

The proprietress heard the laughter mingled with the splash of flowing water. It was a long time before the renewed and radiant bather emerged from the room. The woman understood his actions without attempting to weigh them. All the travelers that she encountered had accustomed her to this boy-like ritual. To the *Cearense*, the need for water never made its enjoyment

automatic or a simple reflex. Marcus and the travelers before him adopted this tradition as part of their being. If he were to leave tomorrow, he would never forget his excessive need and adulation of that shower. He entered his room and dressed. Hunger reached through his body, and he began to anticipate the enjoyment of a quiet meal and cold *cerveja*.

His meal would only be adequate, but the Brahma Chope, perfect. The flavor of the beer remained with him; the subtle bitterness of the hops relieved his tongue of the dust that he had tasted all during the long day. The bland macaroni, beans, and rice did not overwhelm the beer. Marcus spiced the food on his plate with several bountiful splashes of hot pepper sauce from a thin-necked bottle on the table.

In his sleeping quarters, he looked about the room twice, hoping that the bed would materialize from some unseen panel or door. There was a chest of drawers and a taller upright chest for coats and suits. The lone table stood sentinel over the cabinets which Marcus stuffed with his wardrobe. The table he covered with books and personal toilet articles. Where was the bed? A photograph of Saint Sebastian was framed and nailed to the wall. Its dull, faded color afforded no contrast to the few earth tones of the room itself. A ball of rolled cloth was suspended from a menacing iron hook about one and a half meters from the floor. By carefully inspecting the object and unravelling it, Marcus discovered the hammock. Now the vague knowledge that the *Nordestinos*⁶ frequently slept in hammocks shot into his conscious mind. Of course, this was his bed. He tugged at the loose loop on the unhooked end. It easily traversed the corner of the room and hung on a second hook imbedded in the adjoining wall. He opened it to its full width. It flopped closed before he could sit upon it. Next, Marcus stood sideways as if to mount a horse. He parted the fabric with his left hand and sat, by balancing himself with his right hand firmly

6 People from the northeast

on the other edge of the material. Slowly, he sat and rocked, feeling a brief twinge of loneliness. As he lay back with a slow oscillation, he remembered how his parents and he had used a miniature hammock to lull his infant sister to sleep. He shook the memory from his mind. The effort left him more awake than he cared to be.

Something scurried in the rafters above him. Dust and dirt trickled down into the room. Marcus looked up but saw nothing. Some more rustling motion in the roof drew the young man's eyes to two fiery red beads. A Norwegian roof rat and Marcus exchanged unwelcome glances. The rat left, leaving Marcus staring at a dark void just below the baked clay roof tiles. They lay one upon the other and stretched neatly in rows down the lattice work toward the front wall of the hotel.

A crisp crackling sound on one of the walls was followed shortly by a soft thump somewhere on the floor below the hammock. An insect had become entrapped by the four walls of the apartment. Since there was no ceiling, the beetle needed only to gain sufficient altitude to scale the two meter high interior walls of the cell. Once free of Marcus's room the creature could obtain passage to the outside through the dining room or the kitchen. If it sought escape at the roof, it could easily be snared by the hundreds of spider webs that netted the under-surface of the roof. The tandem of noises was repeated again and again, but there was no way of knowing if the same insect made the sounds.

Others slept in the hotel, for Marcus heard muttering nonsense and braying air from deep within their lungs. Marcus wondered if the fat man from the bus was still sweating red powder. He could identify at least three persons in the adjacent rooms. One coughed frequently breaking the smooth rhythm of his heavy breathing. A snorer distinguished himself with only occasional silence. The third sent high pitched whistles through the darkness of the still air. The delicate force of the latter sounds brought Marcus to speculate that this one might be a woman.

From the street, shouts and braying donkeys shattered the privacy of the hotel's symphony. A drunk strolled by chanting his favorite melody. Thoughts of robbers and thieves brought a ripple of fear into Marcus's body. On the verge of sleep, he recalled the pool and the swimming girl. Dimly he recognized his need for her; he was asleep.

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