

LATE FOR SCHOOL

MARCELO DIVERSI

Visiting Assistant Professor

Department of Human Development and Family Studies

University of Missouri at Columbia, U.S.A.

"Judge Elder wants to see you."

"Why?" I say, shaking the juvenile officer's hand.

"I don't know. All he said was that he wanted to see you, and soon. Maybe he's gonna tell you himself to stop hanging out with the kids in the downtown area," he says, winking at me.

"Maybe I should take a tape recorder with me then." I smile back.

The officer moves the toothpick from one corner of the mouth to the other. "I know he's got nothing against street educators, but when you gather 'em for activities, teaching, or whatever it is that you do with 'em, the kids become too visible to the public. And that doesn't look good for my boss, does it? You know, the image of a clean and prosperous city, with model social programs, doesn't hold too well when there're so many street kids hanging around downtown, especially in an election year. Get my drift?"

"I think so," I say, mad at myself for not knowing a thing about my country's constitution. There's got to be something in it that says all citizens have the right to circulate freely in public spaces.

As I walk into the busy Juvenile Court lobby, I see Dan and Carlos sitting near the officers' desks, handcuffed to each other. I'd met them during my first fieldtrip in early '94, nearly 2 years ago, each hanging out with a different crowd and in different areas of downtown. They were both around 14 then.

Dan was the leader of a group of 10 to 15 boys living in an abandoned building next to a busy intersection of large avenues on the outskirts of downtown. A light-skinned mulatto, he was bigger and stronger than the other boys, and often more daring in their daily adventures. I hung out a lot with that group in '94, and Dan was the last one to warm up to me. And even then I didn't think he liked me much. He seemed suspicious of everybody--the kids in the group, the passersby trying to approach or acting too friendly, the six or seven street educators who visited them daily. But on my last day with them, before I returned to the U.S. to continue my studies and write up my first experiences in the field, Dan surprised me with what I think was a demonstration of affection.

"That's not right, Marcelo! You come and play and talk with us, and now that we're beginning to like you you leave us," he let out as I was saying the last goodbye to the boys.

I looked at Dan, feeling a knot in my stomach. The scene was messy in that piece of sidewalk, with "little T," the group's youngest boy, about 8 years old, trying to climb up my back, Lico asking if I was going to write them, Fabio wanting to borrow the camera I'd brought. He wanted to take pictures of me with all of the kids. In no time, each one of the kids wanted to take turns as

photographers. I know there were a bunch of other things happening around me at that time, things I didn't register. I kept looking at Dan.

"It really doesn't seem right, does it?" I finally said, imagining how I could explain to him that I was studying street kids in Brazil, but that I was really going to school in the U.S., even though I'm Brazilian... But Dan was already fighting with Fabio over the camera I'd mindlessly taken out of my backpack, and my words got lost in the swirl of flashes and shouts and laughter. Had I used them?

I'm reminded of that knot in the stomach now that I see Dan again.

When I first met Carlos, one of the few white boys living on the downtown streets, he was hanging out with two older teens, cleaning the windshields of cars stopped at red lights. Sometimes they would get a few coins for the job. A few times, they got yelled at by the drivers. Most of the time they were simply ignored.

Carlos was always kind and friendly to me, and often talked eagerly about getting out of the streets. In spite of being homeless, he had gone back to school and said he wanted to get at least a high school diploma. One cold night I saw him cleaning windshields alone and stopped to talk to him. We sat on the footsteps of a closed newsstand and talked about school for a while. He didn't like the crumbling building, but liked his Portuguese teacher. That day his teacher had asked him to read his short essay in front of the class, saying that it was the best essay of the week.

"She said it had a couple of minor grammar mistakes, but that it was very good. She makes me wanna go to class."

"Excellent!" I wanted to be encouraging.

"You know, sometimes it's hard to get to class on time. And when my clothes are all dirty and I smell bad, I don't go at all," he said showing a missing front tooth in his smile.

"How do you get up early in the morning?" I asked, thinking of my absolute dependence on alarm clocks.

"I try to lie down in a place where the first beams of sunlight will reach my face and wake me up. I usually miss class on cloudy days," Carlos said, cracking himself up. "Wanna see my essay?"

"Would love to!"

Carlos got up and walked to the darker corner of the newsstand. I watched him. He then bent down and stuck his hand in a hole under the newsstand, pulling out a greenish, velvety looking backpack. He took a notebook out and carefully fanned the pages until he found a loose sheet folded in half. He smoothed it out on his knees and handed it to me.

"Thanks, man!" I was excited to see what he wrote.

Carlos grabbed the bucket of water, the mop, and the small wooden wiper and went for more windshields. "Let me know what you think," he said without turning to look at me.

TO BE A BRAZILIAN...

...Is to live in a country where most families don't have houses to live in, don't have jobs, and are starving.

Where politics is just a game of power and influence. This is the opinion of most of the Brazilian people. The politicians use all the races (Black, White, Indian) to continue savoring luxuries, trips in the vacation seasons; all that paid for by us, you and me, who are underpaid workers.

It's necessary to dream, love, and fight for a Brazil more honest and just.

by C___ V___

I finished reading Carlo's essay for the second time and began to watch him at work, dipping the mop in a bucket half full of blackened water, walking up to a stopped car with a smile, pointing to the windshield with the dripping mop, and seeing the driver's index finger move sideways on the other side of the windshield, declining.

The next driver quickly closed the window and locked the door when Carlos headed toward his car. Carlos then smiled, shaking his head, and walked to another car. In the half hour I watched him work that night, I saw more scared and disgusted faces than I remembered seeing in all my life.

I stopped to talk to him more often after that night. We talked about many things, like school, girls, America, soccer. A few times we talked about his family. That day was Mother's Day. I found him in his usual street corner, sitting on the curb peeling an orange.

"I miss her," he said.

"Did you go visit her today?"

"I can't go to her house. Last time I was home I broke a chair on her boyfriend's head. He was beating her up, the drunk bastard. He always did. He came home loaded everyday. I heard her crying and tried to stop him. We started to fight, but he was drunk and kept falling down. I hit 'im really hard on the head with that chair, oh yes I did. Then my mom started to yell at me, saying that I'd killed him, that I was a no-good. I couldn't believe she was defending him, you know, I got so mad that I left home right then."

"Did you ever try to go back?"

"Yeah, I went back the next day, when I knew the son of a bitch wouldn't be there, but my mom said that what I'd done was wrong, that the man I call son of a bitch is the man of the house and I need to respect him. Fuck that! I got mad at her and left, for good."

"Maybe she's changed her mind by now," I hoped.

Carlos took a pocket knife out of his left sock. "She knows where I am. People from her neighborhood see me here everyday."

He cut the orange and gave me a half. We sucked on them in silence for a while and then started to talk about something else.

I hadn't seen Carlos since that mother's day, but we recognize each other right away in the yellowish waiting area of the Juvenile Court. At first, I'm a bit surprised to see him with Dan. They used to hang out with different crowds and, I thought, they seemed to be too different to become action buddies. But that was in '94, almost two years ago. And I still remember how many life cycles I went through in the period of two years when I was an adolescent.

I walk up to him and he stretches his handcuffed hand toward me, dragging Dan's hand and attention with him. Carlos and I shake hands and smile at each other.

"Hey, Marcelo!" says Dan, looking surprised to see me, "Whatthefuck are *you* doin' here?!"

"It doesn't look like you guys are doing too well," I say shaking hands with Dan too.

"It ain't that bad. Always the same thing, ya know, they bring us here, tell us how bad we is, how we're gonna grow up to be scumbags. Then they let us walk out. They don't even bother to try and take us to our families nomore." Dan's voice is much deeper now, his hands look huge laying on his knees.

"Why did they bring you here this time?" I ask.

"They caught us with a Walkman we'd took from a rich boy near the cathedral," Dan says casually.

We talk some more and then they tell me about their latest escapade. Two weeks before, they'd been taken by the juvenile officers to the Mission for Boys, a shelter run by the Baptist church which serves some 25 economically underprivileged kids younger than 18 years old. Both said they were happy with the idea at the time, tired of sleeping on concrete, eating what passersby and local workers chose to buy for them, and the endless hassle from life on the streets--running away from the police, avoiding drug dealers, asking church ladies for clean clothes or just finding a place to shower.

But trouble started early on their first day. Some of the boys already living in the Mission spread toothpaste on the few clean clothes Carlos had brought with him while he was having his first breakfast. Then, when they were playing soccer in the backyard, one of the boys started a fight with Carlos. Dan butted in and slapped the boy around, telling the other boys they would get the same treatment if they messed with him or Carlos.

"I went to school in the afternoon and even started to like the idea, ya know, there was some babes in my class," Dan says smiling. "But when I went back to the house after school, Tom started to yell at me. I figured he'd heard about the fight in the mornin' and I tried to explain that the boys'd started it and that I had to defend myself. I told him that Carlos had nothin' to do with the fight." Dan stops and looks at Carlos. "Of course he did!" Dan says, bumping Carlos on the shoulder. "But I knew he really wanted to stay there, so I lied." The friendly smile leaves Dan's face.

"Tom said he didn't care who'd started the fight. He said I was new there and had to learn to respect the ones who'd been there longer. He was yellin' at me like I was a soldier! He even tried to slap me in the head but I was too quick for the old man." Dan smiles as he shows how he ducked Tom's slap.

There is a brief pause. "I told him to fuck off. I wouldn't put up with that, ya know. That's why I left home in the first place. I set some mattresses on fire and left the damned Mission. I get angry just to think about how Tom yelled at me! If I cross paths with him in a dark street, man, I won't even tell ya what I'd do!"

I can see Dan's jaw muscles tightening up. A thick and curvy vein pops up under the skin of his forehead as he talks about Tom.

I try to keep my mouth shut but can't, "I...I don't like the way Tom treats the kids in the Mission."

Tom is the head of the Mission, a religious organization with social and educational programs funded by the Baptist church and international grants. I've known him since I started doing fieldwork with street kids in Campinas. I've also

heard many stories about how he was a member in one of the toughest gangs in Rio de Janeiro, a real mean ass, until he found Jesus and became a born-again Christian dedicated to help kids considered to be at risk.

We used to treat each other cordially until a recent clash. Lara, a 17 year-old girl, bright and tough, got into an argument about TV rules with the supervisor of her unit, a small house in a low-income residential neighborhood where five other girls lived, and left for the streets of downtown in the dark of night. Lara went back to the house the next day, apologizing for being short-tempered and asking for permission to return. But Tom, following some kind of tough love philosophy, had already instructed the supervisor not to let Lara back in right away.

"Tom said I'll have to spend a week on the streets to learn to value the Mission more. But I do value the Mission already!" Lara told me with teary eyes on her second night in the streets.

I stormed into Tom's office the following morning. We talked, and then argued. He didn't change his mind, Lara ended up staying on the streets for two months, and I'm not allowed in his Mission houses anymore.

I look at Dan and think I understand his anger at Tom and his Mission.

Carlos tells me he left a week after Dan did, unhappy with the strict rules and schedules in the Mission. They are both sleeping on the streets again but say they are not smoking crack.

Dan looks at Carlos, then at me, at Carlos again, trying to keep a straight face.

"Only a drag here and there so the boys don't get on my case," Dan says and we all crack up.

An officer comes and takes Dan with him. I sit down next to Carlos.

"Why did ya really leave the Baptist Mission, bro?"

Carlos turns his head to look at me, smiles, and then looks down. "I don't really know, man. I actually liked the place. The food was decent and we had clean beds and clothes. I even liked some of the guys living there." He pauses, distractedly playing with the handcuff still on his right wrist.

"But the best thing was going back to school! Remember how I always wanted to study? Remember that essay I showed you?!" his voice suddenly coming out stronger, his eyes widening and his face radiant.

"Of course I do! Remember I copied it out that very day you showed it to me? I stuck it to the wall in front of my desk and I get inspiration from your words every time I read them."

"That *was* a good essay, wasn't it?"

"It sure was. Have you written anything else since then?"

"Nope," he says, fiddling with the handcuff again. "Or maybe I did. I can't remember. I stopped going to school sometime after I last saw you. I wanted to keep on going, you know that. All I wanted was to go to a good school, learn Portuguese, mathematics, and a bunch of other things. But I got lazy."

"What do you mean? Lazy?!"

"Well, to begin with, I stopped doing homework."

"Why?"

"Cuz I worked till late at night and then was too tired. Sometimes I had to work more to make enough money. You know, it's hard to find people who pay for that lousy windshield job," Carlos says, cracking a big smile.

"But that's *not* laziness, brother! You shouldn't have to work at all at your age! I didn't work when I was in school and still had trouble getting my homework done!" I say smiling at him.

"I shoulda went to class anyway, even without my homework done. But I couldn't stand the yelling I had to swallow when I didn't have my homework with me!"

"That's very different from being lazy."

"No, I got lazy. Even the teachers said I was getting lazy. They were mad that I got late to class almost everyday. Then one teacher said that if I came late again she would put me on detention."

He brushes his thick black hair with his free hand. "The very next day I get up late! Imagine that!"

He shakes his head slowly a few times, smiling, "I didn't go to school that day, or the day after, or the day after that."

"But you were sleeping on the street, right? Didn't you tell them what was going on with you?"

Carlos shakes his head.

"Why not?"

"I don't know...nobody asked. And I was afraid they'd look down on me if I told them I was a street kid. You know, they always think you're a pickpocket right away."

"You aren't lazy, Carlos! Not at all! You're the only goddamn person I know who went to school while living on the streets! That's something to be proud of, buddy."

"But it don't matter now. I don't care about school nomore. I realized that at the Mission. I liked the school all right. But it wasn't the same thing nomore. I think I'm too old for school now."

"Too old! You're only 16, bro," I say, smiling at Carlos.

"I'll be seventeen soon."

"There are special schools for adults in town where you study with people your age and..."

Carlos interrupts me, "I need to take care of business, man. School won't get me nowhere. I know I got no chance to become a doctor, or a lawyer, even if I work my ass off in school. I learned a lot about life in the last two years, bro. I know that poor people's schools don't take you to universities. Have you ever seen someone missing a front tooth in your university classes, Marcelo?" Carlos says, pointing to his mouth.

I look at the space between two yellowish teeth.

"You don't need to answer, man, you're okay, you know that. But I need to get wise on the streets, knowhattamsayin'? I don't want no janitor job breaking my back 40 hours per week to make less than a buck an hour for the rest of my life so that I can rent a shack in some fucked up neighborhood, send my kids to the streets to bring extra money, and then drink myself unconscious every night to forget my pain and shame. I seen this story before. Nobody respects people like

that. They walk with their heads down. I want to walk with my head up, be respected, know whattamsayin?"

I nod my head slowly without looking him in the eye.

"And I want to have money, you know. I want to buy myself nice clothes, a big house with a pool, and a black Honda Civic to impress the chicks, just like the big dealers from the Paradise 'hood do. And there ain't no school that can give me a shot at that."

"How much have you learned about the dangers of being a drug dealer?" I ask already knowing that he knows more than what I can tell him.

"I saw a dealer get shot in the head by one of his own men last month. I've seen a woman dealer get shot by the police in front of her two kids. I've seen a lot of shit out there."

"And that doesn't worry you?" I try him.

"Everybody knows that street kids don't live very long anyway. Being respected is the only chance I got. And I won't be making the same mistakes."

Carlos turns to look at the officer walking toward us.

"Your turn, ol' crook," the officer says uncuffing Carlos.

The officer's eyes seem to avoid--or perhaps ignore--mine.

Carlos and I shake hands and he gets up, the officer hanging onto his arm. They start to walk away but Carlos stops and looks back at me.

"What have I got to lose anyway?" Carlos says with a sly smile as the officer drags him along.

"Life," I shout as they go down the corridor.

The officer lets Carlos turn around again. This time he's staring at me, he doesn't stop, doesn't say a word. He just keeps on walking backwards, the sly smile gone from his face.

"What life?" he finally says before giving his back to me for the last time.

I watch their shadows blend with the darkness at the end of the corridor.