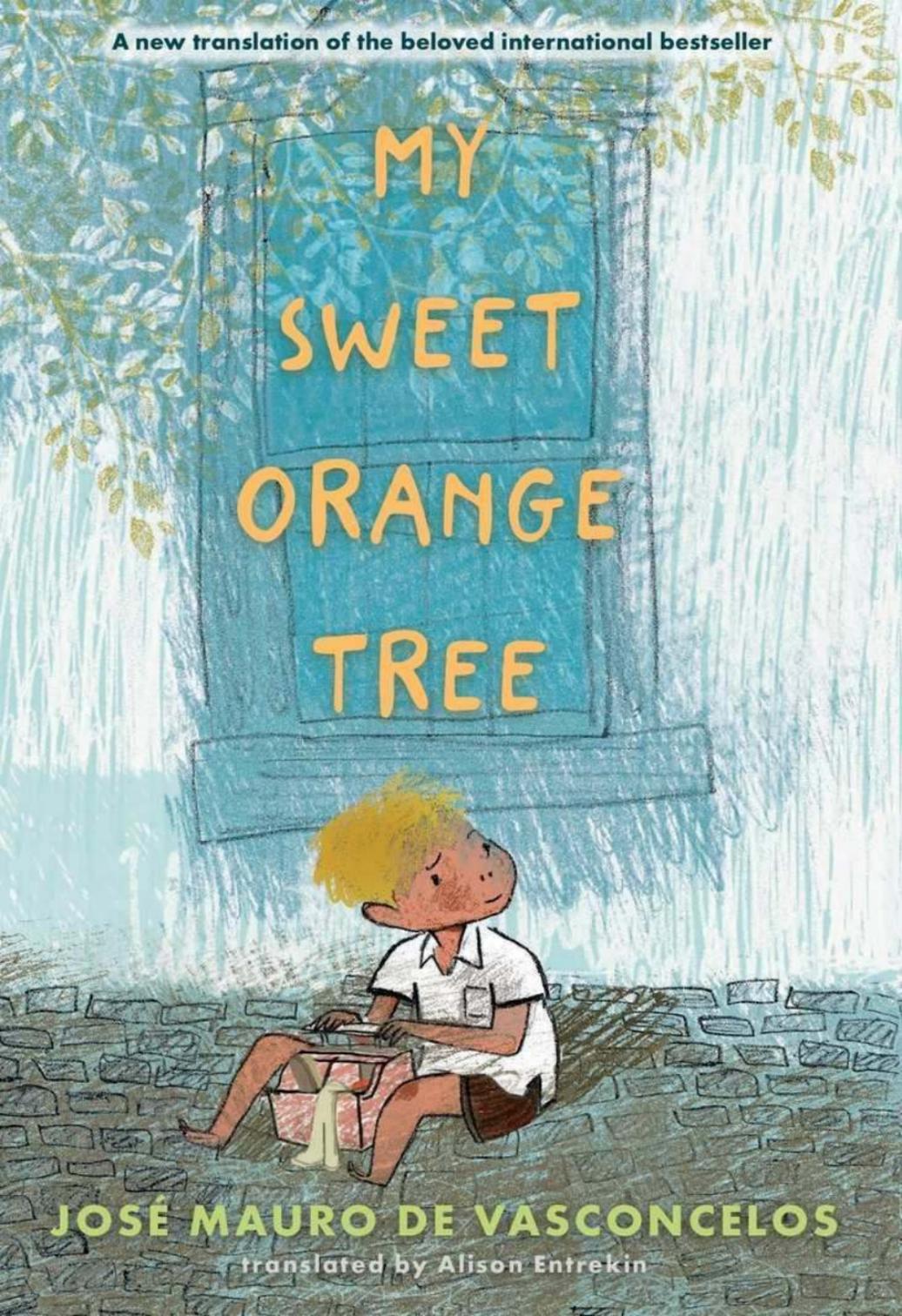


A new translation of the beloved international bestseller

The illustration is a watercolor-style drawing. A young boy with curly blonde hair, wearing a white short-sleeved shirt and brown shorts, sits on a grey stone path. He is looking up and to the right with a slight smile. In front of him is a small, pink and white striped box. Behind him is a large, blue window with a white frame, set into a light blue wall. The window has four panes. The title 'MY SWEET ORANGE TREE' is written in large, bold, orange letters across the window panes. The background is filled with soft, light blue and green washes, suggesting foliage and a bright, airy atmosphere.

MY
SWEET
ORANGE
TREE

JOSÉ MAURO DE VASCONCELOS

translated by Alison Entrekin

My Sweet Orange Tree

The story of a little boy
who discovered pain

José Mauro de Vasconcelos

translated by Alison Entrekin



CANDLEWICK PRESS

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents
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For

Mercedes Cruaães Rinaldi
Erich Gemeinder
Francisco Marins
as well as
Helene Rudge Miller (Birdie!)
Nor can I forget
my “son”
Fernando Seplinsky

* * *

For those who have never died

Ciccillo Matarazzo
Arnaldo Magalhães de Giacomo

* * *

In loving memory of my brother Luís (King Luís)
and my sister Glória. Luís gave up on life at the age of
twenty, and Glória, at twenty-four, didn't
think life was worth living either.

Equally as precious is my memory of Manuel Valadares,
who taught me the meaning of tenderness at the age of six.

May they all rest in peace!
and now
Dorival Lourenço da Silva
(Dodô, neither sadness nor nostalgia kill!)

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PART ONE



At Christmas, Sometimes the
Devil Child Is Born

 CHAPTER ONE*The Discoverer of Things*

We were strolling down the street hand in hand, in no hurry at all. Totoca was teaching me about life. And that made me really happy, my big brother holding my hand and teaching me things. But teaching me things out in the world. Because at home I learned by discovering things on my own and doing things on my own; I'd make mistakes, and because I made mistakes, I always ended up getting beaten. Until not long before that, no one

had ever hit me. But then they heard things and started saying I was the devil, a demon, a sandy-haired sprite. I didn't want to know about it. If I wasn't outside, I'd have started to sing. Singing was pretty. Totoca knew how to do something besides sing: he could whistle. But no matter how hard I tried to copy him, nothing came out. He cheered me up by saying it was normal, that I didn't have a whistler's mouth yet. But because I couldn't sing on the outside, I sang on the inside. It was weird at first, but then it felt really nice. And I was remembering a song Mama used to sing when I was really little. She'd be standing at the washtub, with a cloth tied about her head to keep the sun off it. With an apron around her waist, she'd spend hours and hours plunging her hands into the water, turning soap into lots of suds. Then she'd wring out the clothes and take them to the clothesline, where she'd peg them all out and hoist it up high. She did the same thing with all the clothes. She washed clothes from Dr. Faulhaber's house to help with the household expenses. Mama was tall and thin, but very beautiful. She was brown from the sun, and her hair was straight and black.

When she didn't tie it up, it hung down to her waist.
But the most beautiful thing was when she sang, and
I'd hang around, learning.

*"Sailor, sailor
Sailor of sorrow
Because of you
I'll die tomorrow . . .*

*The waves crashed
Dashed on sand
Off he went
My sailor man . . .*

*A sailor's love
Lasts not a day
His ship weighs anchor
And sails away . . .*

The waves crashed . . ."

That song had always filled me with a sadness I
couldn't understand.

Totoca gave me a tug. I came to my senses.

“What’s up, Zezé?”

“Nothing. I was singing.”

“Singing?”

“Yeah.”

“Then I must be going deaf.”

Didn’t he know you could sing on the inside? I kept quiet. If he didn’t know, I wasn’t going to teach him.

We had come to the edge of the Rio–São Paulo Highway. On it, there was everything. Trucks, cars, carts, and bicycles.

“Look, Zezé, this is important. First we take a good look one way, and then the other. Now go.”

We ran across the highway.

“Were you scared?”

I was, but I shook my head.

“Let’s do it again together. Then I want to see if you’ve learned.”

We ran back.

“Now you go. No balking, ’cause you’re a big kid now.”

My heart beat faster.

“Now. Go.”

I raced across, almost without breathing. I waited a bit, and he gave me the signal to return.

“You did really well for the first time. But you forgot something. You have to look both ways to see if any cars are coming. I won’t always be here to give you the signal. We’ll practice some more on the way home. But let’s go now, ’cause I want to show you something.”

He took my hand, and off we went again, slowly. I couldn’t stop thinking about a conversation I’d had.

“Totoca.”

“What?”

“Can you feel the age of reason?”

“What’s this nonsense?”

“Uncle Edmundo said it. He said I was ‘precocious’ and that soon I’d reach the age of reason. But I don’t feel any different.”

“Uncle Edmundo is a fool. He’s always putting things in that head of yours.”

“He isn’t a fool. He’s wise. And when I grow up, I want to be wise and a poet and wear a bow tie. One day I’m going to have my picture taken in a bow tie.”

“Why a bow tie?”

“Because you can’t be a poet without a bow tie. When Uncle Edmundo shows me pictures of poets in the magazine, they’re all wearing bow ties.”

“Zezé, you have to stop believing everything he tells you. Uncle Edmundo’s a bit cuckoo. He lies a bit.”

“Is he a son of a bitch?”

“You’ve already been slapped across the mouth for using so many swear words! Uncle Edmundo isn’t that. I said ‘cuckoo.’ A bit crazy.”

“You said he was a liar.”

“They’re two completely different things.”

“No, they’re not. The other day, Papa was talking about Labonne with Severino, the one who plays cards with him, and he said, ‘That old son of a bitch is a goddamn liar.’ And no one slapped him across the mouth.”

“It’s OK for grown-ups to say things like that.”

Neither of us spoke for a moment.

“Uncle Edmundo isn’t . . . What does ‘cuckoo’ mean again, Totoca?”

He pointed his finger at his head and twisted it around.

“No, he isn’t. He’s really nice. He teaches me things, and he only smacked me once and it wasn’t hard.”

Totoca started.

“He smacked you? When?”

“When I was really naughty and Glória sent me to Gran’s house. He wanted to read the newspaper, but he couldn’t find his glasses. He searched high and low, and he was really mad. He asked Gran where they were, but she had no idea. The two of them turned the house upside down. Then I said I knew where they were and if he gave me some money to buy marbles, I’d tell him. He went to his waistcoat and took out some money.

“Go get them and I’ll give it to you.”

“I went to the clothes hamper and got them. And he said, ‘It was you, you little rascal!’ He gave me a smack on the backside and put the money away.”

Totoca laughed.

“You go there to avoid getting smacked at home

and you get smacked there. Let's go a bit faster or we'll never get there."

I was still thinking about Uncle Edmundo.

"Totoca, are children retired?"

"What?"

"Uncle Edmundo doesn't do anything, and he gets money. He doesn't work, and City Hall pays him every month."

"So what?"

"Well, children don't do anything. They eat, sleep, and get money from their parents."

"Retired is different, Zezé. A retired person has already worked for a long time, their hair's turned white, and they walk slowly like Uncle Edmundo. But let's stop thinking about difficult things. If you want to learn things from him, fine. But not with me. Act like the other boys. You can even swear, but stop filling your head with difficult things. Otherwise I won't go out with you again."

I sulked a bit and didn't want to talk anymore. I didn't feel like singing either. The little bird that sang inside me had flown away.

We stopped and Totoca pointed at the house.

“There it is. Like it?”

It was an ordinary house. White with blue windows. All closed up and quiet.

“Yeah. But why do we have to move here?”

“It’s good to stay on the move.”

We stood gazing through the fence at a mango tree on one side and a tamarind tree on the other.

“You’re such a busybody, but you have no idea what’s going on at home. Papa’s out of a job, isn’t he? It’s been six months since he had the fight with Mr. Scottfield and they kicked him out. Did you know Lalá’s working at the factory now? And Mama’s going to work in the city, at the English Mill? Well, there you go, silly. It’s all to save up to pay the rent on this new house. Papa’s a good eight months behind on the other one. You’re too young to have to worry about such sad things. But I’m going to have to help out at mass, to pitch in at home.”

He stood there awhile in silence.

“Totoca, are they going to bring the black panther and the two lionesses here?”

“Of course. And old slave-boy here is going to have to take apart the chicken coop.”

He gave me a kind of sweet, pitiful look.

“I’m the one who’s going to take down the zoo and reassemble it here.”

I was relieved. Because otherwise I’d have to come up with something new to play with my littlest brother, Luís.

“So, you see how I’m your friend, Zezé? Now, it wouldn’t hurt for you to tell me how you did ‘it’ . . .”

“I swear, Totoca, I don’t know. I really don’t.”

“You’re lying. You studied with someone.”

“I didn’t study anything. No one taught me. Unless it was the devil who taught me in my sleep. Jandira says he’s my godfather.”

Totoca was puzzled. He even rapped me across the head a few times to try to get me to tell him. But I didn’t know how I’d done it.

“No one learns that kind of thing on their own.”

But he was at a loss for words because no one had actually seen anyone teach me anything. It was a mystery.

I remembered what had happened a week earlier. It had left the family in a flap. It had started at Gran’s

house, when I sat next to Uncle Edmundo, who was reading the newspaper.

“Uncle.”

“What is it, son?”

He moved his glasses to the tip of his nose, as all grown-ups do when they get old.

“When did you learn to read?”

“At around six or seven years of age.”

“Can five-year-olds learn to read?”

“I suppose so. But no one likes to teach them because it’s really too young.”

“How did you learn to read?”

“Like everyone else, with first readers. Going ‘B plus A makes BA.’”

“Does everyone have to learn like that?”

“As far as I know, they do.”

“Absolutely everyone?”

He looked at me, intrigued.

“Look, Zezé, that’s how everyone learns. Now, let me finish reading. Go look for guavas in the backyard.”

He pushed his glasses back up his nose and tried to concentrate on reading. But I didn’t leave.

“What a shame!”

It was such a heartfelt exclamation that he moved his glasses back down his nose.

“I’ll be darned. You’re persistent, aren’t you?”

“It’s just that I walked all the way over here just to tell you something, sir.”

“OK, then, tell me.”

“No. Not like that. First I need to know when your next pension day is.”

“Day after tomorrow,” he said with a little smile, studying me.

“And what day is after tomorrow?”

“Friday.”

“Well, on Friday could you bring me a Silver King from the city?”

“Slow down, Zezé. What’s a Silver King?”

“It’s the little white horse I saw at the cinema. Its owner is Fred Thomson. It’s a trained horse.”

“You want me to bring you a little horse on wheels?”

“No, sir. I want the sort with a wooden head and reins. That you stick a tail on and run around. I need to practice because later I’m going to work in films.”

He laughed.

“I see. And if I do, what’s in it for me?”

“I’ll do something for you, sir.”

“You’ll give me a kiss?”

“I’m not big on kisses.”

“A hug?”

I looked at Uncle Edmundo and felt really sorry for him. The little bird inside me said something. And I remembered what I’d heard people say so many times, that Uncle Edmundo was separated from his wife and had five children. But he lived all on his own and walked so slowly. . . . Maybe he walked slowly because he missed his children. And his children never came to visit him.

I walked around the table and hugged him tight. I felt his white hair brush my forehead. It was really soft.

“This isn’t for the horse. What I’m going to do is something else. I’m going to read.”

“Come again, Zezé? You can read? Who taught you?”

“No one.”

“You’re lying.”

I backed away, and from the doorway I said, “Bring me my horse on Friday and you’ll see if I can read or not!”

Later, when it was nighttime and Jandira lit the lantern since the power company had cut off the electricity because the bill hadn’t been paid, I stood on my tiptoes to see the “star.” It was a picture of a star on a piece of paper with a prayer underneath it to protect the house.

“Jandira, can you pick me up? I’m going to read that.”

“Enough with the tall tales, Zezé. I’m busy.”

“Pick me up and I’ll show you.”

“Look, Zezé, if you’re up to something, you’ll be in trouble.”

She picked me up and took me behind the door.

“Go on, then, read. This I want to see.”

Then I read, for real. I read the prayer that asked the heavens to bless and protect the house and to ward off evil spirits.

Jandira put me down. Her mouth was open.

“Zezé, you memorized that. You’re tricking me.”

“I swear, Jandira. I can read everything.”

“No one reads without having learned to. Was it Uncle Edmundo? Gran?”

“No one.”

She went to fetch a page from the newspaper, and I read it without any mistakes. She gave a little shriek and called Glória. Glória became nervous and went to get Alaíde. In ten minutes, a crowd of neighbors had gathered to see the phenomenon.

That was what Totoca wanted me to tell him.

“He taught you and promised you the horse if you learned.”

“It’s not true.”

“I’m going to ask him.”

“Go ahead. I don’t know how to explain it, Totoca. If I did, I’d tell you.”

“Then let’s go. You’ll see. When you need something . . .”

He grabbed my hand angrily and began to drag me home. Then he thought of something to get revenge.

“Serves you right! You learned too soon, silly. Now you’ll have to start school in February.”

It had been Jandira's idea. That way the house would be peaceful all morning long and I'd learn some manners.

"Let's practice crossing the highway again. Don't think that when you go to school, I'll be your nanny, taking you across all the time. If you're so clever, you can learn this too."

"Here's the horse. Now, let's see this."

He opened the newspaper and showed me a sentence in an ad for a medicine.

"In all good pharmacies and drugstores," I read.

Uncle Edmundo went to get Gran from the backyard.

"Mama, he even read 'pharmacies' correctly."

They both started giving me things to read, and I read everything.

Gran started muttering that all was lost.

Uncle Edmundo gave me the horse, and I hugged him again. Then he held my chin and, in a wavering voice, said, "You're going to go far, you little monkey. It's no accident your name's José. You'll be the sun, and the stars will shine around you."

I didn't get it and wondered if he really was a bit cuckoo.

“That's something you don't understand. It's the story of Joseph. I'll tell you when you're a bit bigger.”

I was crazy about stories. The harder they were, the more I liked them.

I patted my little horse for a long time, and then I looked up at Uncle Edmundo and said, “Do you think I'll be a bit bigger by next week, Uncle?”

 CHAPTER TWO

A Certain Sweet Orange Tree

In our family, each older sibling brought up a younger one. Jandira had taken care of Glória and another sister, who'd been given away to have a proper upbringing in the north. Totoca was Jandira's little darling. Then Lalá had taken care of me until not long ago. For as long as she liked me. Then I think she got sick of me or fell madly in love with her boyfriend, who was a dandy with baggy trousers and a short jacket just like the one in the song. When

they used to take me for a “promenade” (that’s what her boyfriend called a stroll) on Sundays, he’d buy me some really yummy sweets so I wouldn’t tell anyone. I couldn’t even ask Uncle Edmundo what “promenade” meant or the whole family would find out.

My other two siblings had died young, and I had only heard about them. They say they were two little Apinajé Indians, very dark, with straight black hair. That’s why they were given Indian names. The girl was called Aracy and the boy Jurandyr.

Then came my little brother Luís. Glória was the one who looked after him the most, then me. He didn’t even need looking after, because there wasn’t a cuter, quieter, better-behaved boy in the world.

That’s why when he spoke in that little voice of his without a single mistake, as I was heading out into the street, I changed my mind.

“Zezé, are you going to take me to the zoo? It doesn’t look like it’s going to rain today, does it?”

How adorable. He spoke so well. That boy was going to be someone; he was going to go far.

I looked at the beautiful day with the sky all blue and didn’t have the courage to lie. Because sometimes,

if I wasn't in the mood, I'd say, "You're out of your mind, Luís. Just look at the storm coming!"

This time I took his little hand, and we went out for our adventure in the backyard.

The backyard was divided into three games. One was the zoo. Another was Europe, which was over by Julio's neat little fence. Why Europe? Not even my little bird knew. We played Sugarloaf Mountain cable cars there. We'd take the box of buttons and put them all on a string. (Uncle Edmundo called it twine. I thought twine were pigs, but he explained that pigs were swine.) Then we'd tie one end to the fence and the other to Luís's fingertips. We'd push all the buttons up to the top and let them go slowly, one by one. Each cable car was full of people we knew. There was a really black one, which was Biriquinho's. It wasn't unusual to hear a voice coming from over the fence, "Are you damaging my fence, Zezé?"

"No, Dona Dimerinda. See for yourself, ma'am."

"Now, that's what I like to see. Playing nicely with your brother. Isn't it better like that?"

It might have been nice, but when my "godfather" the devil gave me a nudge, there was nothing

better than getting up to mischief. . . .

“Are you going to give me a calendar for Christmas, like last year?”

“What did you do with the one I gave you?”

“You can go inside and see, Dona Dimerinda. It’s above the bag of bread.”

She laughed and promised she would. Her husband worked at Chico Franco’s general store.

The other game was Luciano. At first Luís was really scared of him and would tug on my trousers, asking to leave. But Luciano was my friend. Whenever he saw me, he’d screech loudly. Glória wasn’t happy about it either and said that bats were vampires that sucked children’s blood.

“It’s not true, Gló. Luciano isn’t like that. He’s my friend. He knows me.”

“You and your critter mania, talking to things . . .”

It was hard work convincing Luís that Luciano wasn’t a critter. To us, Luciano was a plane flying at the Campo dos Afonsos air base.

“Look, Luís.”

And Luciano would fly happily around us as if he understood what we were saying. And he did.

“He’s an airplane. He’s doing . . .”

I’d stop. I had to get Uncle Edmundo to tell me that word again. I didn’t know if it was “acorbatics,” “acrobatics,” or “arcobatics.” One of those. But I couldn’t teach my little brother the wrong word.

But now he wanted the zoo.

We got quite close to the old chicken coop. Inside it, the two fair-feathered hens were pecking at the ground, and the old black one was so tame that we could even scratch her head.

“First let’s buy our tickets. Hold my hand, ’cause it’s easy for children to get lost in this crowd. See how busy it gets on Sundays?”

Luís would look around, see people everywhere, and hold my hand tightly.

At the ticket office, I stuck my belly out and cleared my throat to sound important. I put my hand in my pocket and asked the woman, “Until what age is entry free?”

“Five.”

“So just one adult then, please.”

I took two orange-tree leaves as tickets and we went in.

“First, son, you’re going to see how beautiful the birds are. Look, parrots, parakeets, and macaws of every color. Those ones over there with the colorful feathers are scarlet macaws.”

His eyes bulged with delight.

We strolled about, looking at everything. We saw so many things that I even noticed Glória and Lalá behind everything else, sitting on the bench, peeling oranges. Lalá was eyeing me. . . . Could they have found out? If they had, that zoo visit was going to end with a big paddling on someone’s rear. And that someone could only be me.

“What’s next, Zezé? What are we going to see now?”

I cleared my throat again and resumed my posture.

“Let’s go and see the monkeys. Uncle Edmundo calls them simians.”

We bought a few bananas and threw them to the monkeys. We knew it wasn’t allowed, but the guards

had their hands too full with such a big crowd.

“Don’t get too close or they’ll throw banana peels at you, pip-squeak.”

“I really want to see the lions.”

“We can go in a minute.”

I shot another look over to where the two other “simians” were eating oranges. I’d be able to hear what they were talking about from the lions’ cage.

“Here we are.”

I pointed at the two yellow African lionesses. Luís said he wanted to pat the black panther’s head.

“Are you out of your mind, pip-squeak? The black panther is the most terrible animal in the zoo. She was brought here because she’d bitten off and eaten eighteen tamers’ arms.”

Luís looked scared and pulled back his arm in fright.

“Did she come from a circus?”

“Yes.”

“Which circus, Zezé? You never told me that before.”

I thought and thought. Who did I know who had a name for a circus?

“Ah! She came from the Rozemberg Circus.”

“Isn’t that a bakery?”

It was getting harder and harder to trick him. He was growing smart.

“That too. We should sit down and have our lunch. We’ve walked a lot.”

We sat down and pretended to be eating. But my ears were pricked, listening to what my sisters were saying.

“We should learn from him, Lalá. Look how patient he is with Luís.”

“Yes, but Luís doesn’t do what he does. It’s evil, not mischief.”

“So he’s got the devil in his blood, but he’s so funny. No one on the street can stay angry at him, no matter what he gets up to. . . .”

“He’s not passing me without getting a paddling. One day he’ll learn.”

I shot an arrow of pity into Glória’s eyes. She always came to my rescue, and I always promised her I wouldn’t do it again.

“Later. Not now. They’re playing so quietly.”

She already knew everything. She knew that

I'd gone through the ditch into Dona Celina's backyard. I'd been fascinated by the clothesline swinging a bunch of arms and legs in the wind. Then the devil told me that I could make all those arms and legs come tumbling down at the same time. I agreed that it would be really funny. I found a piece of sharp glass in the ditch, climbed up the orange tree, and patiently cut the line.

I almost fell down with it. There was a cry and people came running.

"Help, the line snapped."

But a voice coming from I don't know where yelled even louder.

"It was Seu Paulo's kid, the little pest. I saw him climbing the orange tree with a piece of glass."

"Zezé?"

"What, Luís?"

"How do you know so much about zoos?"

"I've been to a lot of them."

It was a lie. Everything I knew, Uncle Edmundo had told me. He'd even promised to take me to the

zoo one day. But he walked so slowly that by the time we arrived, it wouldn't even be there anymore. Totoca had been once with Papa.

“My favorite is the one on Rua Barão de Drummond, in Vila Isabel. Do you know who the Baron of Drummond was? Of course you don't. You're too young to know these things. The Baron must have been really chummy with God. Because he was the one who helped God invent the lottery game that they sell tickets for in the Misery and Hunger bar and the zoo. When you're older . . .”

My sisters were still there.

“When I'm older what?”

“Boy, do you ask a lot of questions. When you're old enough, I'll teach you the lottery animals and their numbers. Up to twenty. From twenty to twenty-five, I know there's a cow, a bull, a bear, a deer, and a tiger. I don't know what order they're in, but I'm going to learn so I don't teach you the wrong thing.”

He was growing tired of the game.

“Zezé, sing ‘The Little House’ for me.”

“Here at the zoo? There's too many people.”

“No. We’ve left already.”

“It’s really long. I’ll just sing the bit you like.”

I knew it was the part about the cicadas. I filled my lungs.

*“I live in a house
atop a hill
down which
an orchard spills.*

*A little house
where one can see
far far off
the sea.”*

I skipped a few verses.

*“Among strange palms
cicadas sing psalms.*

*The sun sets
with golden sails.*

*In the garden,
a nightingale.”*

I stopped. My sisters were still sitting there, waiting for me. I had an idea: I'd sing until nightfall. I'd outlast them.

No such luck. I sang the whole song, repeated it, then I sang "For Your Fleeting Love" and even "Ramona." The two different versions of "Ramona" that I knew . . . but they didn't budge. Then I got desperate. Better to get it over and done with. I went over to Lalá.

"Go ahead, give it to me."

I turned around and offered her my bum, clenching my teeth because Lalá was heavy-handed with the slipper.

It was Mama's idea.

"Today we're all going to see the house."

Totoca took me to one side and told me in a whisper, "If you tell anyone we've already been there, you've got it coming."

But it hadn't even occurred to me.

A whole crowd of us set off down the street. Glória held my hand and had orders not to let me

out of her sight for one minute. And I held Luís's hand.

"When do we have to move, Mama?" asked Glória.

"Two days after Christmas, we have to start packing our stuff," said Mama, somewhat sadly.

She sounded so tired. I felt really sorry for her. Mama had worked all her life. She'd been working since the age of six, when the factory was built. They would sit her on a table, and she'd have to clean and dry tools. She was so tiny that she'd wet herself on the table because she couldn't get down by herself. That's why she never went to school or learned to read and write. When she told me, I was so sad I promised that when I was a poet and wise, I'd read her my poems.

Signs of Christmas were appearing in the shops and stores. Father Christmas had been drawn on every pane of glass. People were already buying cards to avoid the rush closer to the time. I had a vague hope that this time the Baby Jesus would be born in my heart. At any rate, maybe I'd improve a bit when I reached the age of reason.

“This is it.”

Everyone loved it. The house was a little smaller. With Totoca’s help, Mama untwisted a piece of wire that was holding the gate shut, and there was a stampede. Glória let go of my hand and forgot that she was becoming a young lady. She raced over to the mango tree and flung her arms around it.

“The mango tree’s mine. I got here first.”

Totoca did the same with the tamarind tree.

Nothing was left for me. I looked at Glória, almost crying.

“What about me, Gló?”

“Run around the back. There must be more trees, silly.”

I ran, but I found only long grass and a bunch of thorny old orange trees. Next to the ditch was a small sweet orange tree.

I was disappointed. They were all going through the house claiming bedrooms.

I tugged on Glória’s skirt.

“There was nothing else.”

“You don’t know how to look properly. Just wait a minute. I’ll find you a tree.”

And soon she came with me. She examined the orange trees.

“Don’t you like that one? It’s a fine tree.”

I didn’t like this one, or that one, or any of them. They all had too many thorns.

“I prefer the sweet orange tree to those ugly things.”

“Where?”

I took her to see it.

“But what a lovely little orange tree! It doesn’t have a single thorn. It has so much personality that you can tell it’s a sweet orange tree from far off. If I were your size, I wouldn’t want anything else.”

“But I want a big tree.”

“Think about it, Zezé. This one’s still young. It’s going to grow big—you’ll grow together. You’ll understand each other like brothers. Have you seen that branch? It’s the only one, it’s true, but it looks a bit like a horse made just for you.”

I was feeling really hard done by. It reminded me of the Scotch bottle with angels on it that we’d seen once. Lalá had said, “That one’s me.” Glória picked one for herself, and Totoca took one for himself.

But what about me? I ended up being the little head behind all the others, almost wingless. The fourth Scottish angel that wasn't even a whole angel . . . I was always last. When I grew up, I'd show them. I'd buy an Amazon rain forest, and all the trees that touched the sky would be mine. I'd buy a store with bottles covered in angels, and no one would even get a piece of wing.

Sulking, I sat on the ground and leaned my anger against the little orange tree. Glória walked away, smiling.

“That anger of yours won't last, Zezé. You'll see that I was right.”

I scratched at the ground with a stick and was beginning to stop sniffing when I heard a voice coming from I don't know where, near my heart.

“I think your sister's right.”

“Everyone's always right. I'm the one who never is.”

“That's not true. If you'd just take a proper look at me, you'd see.”

With a start, I scrambled up and stared at the little tree. It was strange because I always talked to

everything, but I thought it was the little bird inside me that made everything talk back.

“But can you really talk?”

“Can’t you hear me?”

And it gave a little chuckle. I almost screamed and ran away. But curiosity kept me there.

“How do you talk?”

“Trees talk with everything. With their leaves, their branches, their roots. Want to see? Place your ear here on my trunk, and you’ll hear my heartbeat.”

I hesitated a moment, but seeing its size, my fear dissipated. I pressed my ear to its trunk and heard a faraway *tick . . . tick . . .*

“See?”

“Tell me something. Does everyone know you can talk?”

“No. Just you.”

“Really?”

“I swear. A fairy once told me that when a little boy just like you befriended me, I would talk and be very happy.”

“And will you wait?”

“What?”

“Until I move. It’ll take more than a week. You won’t forget how to talk, will you?”

“Never. That is, only for you. Do you want to see what a smooth ride I am?”

“How can . . . ?”

“Sit on my branch.”

I obeyed.

“Now, rock back and forth and close your eyes.”

I did as I was told.

“What do you think? Have you ever had a better horse?”

“Never. It’s lovely. I’m going to give my horse Silver King to my little brother. You’ll really like him.”

I climbed down, loving my little orange tree.

“Look, I’m going to do something. Whenever I can, even before we move, I’m going to come and chat with you. Now I have to go. They’re already out the front, about to head off.”

“But friends don’t say good-bye like that.”

“Psst! Here comes my sister.”

Glória arrived just as I was hugging the tree.

“Good-bye, my friend. You’re the most beautiful thing in the world!”

“Didn’t I tell you?”

“You did. Now if you offered me the mango or the tamarind tree in exchange for mine, I wouldn’t want it.”

She stroked my hair tenderly.

“Zezé, Zezé . . .”

We left holding hands.

“Gló, your mango tree’s a bit dumb, don’t you think?”

“It’s too early to tell, but it does seem that way.”

“What about Totoca’s tamarind tree?”

“It’s a bit awkward, why?”

“I don’t know if I should tell you. But one day I’m going to tell you about a miracle, Gló.”

 CHAPTER THREE

The Lean Fingers of Poverty

When I put the problem to Uncle Edmundo, he gave it some serious thought.

“So that’s what you’re worried about?”

“Yes, sir. I’m afraid that when we move, Luciano won’t come with us.”

“Do you think this bat really likes you?”

“Of course.”

“From the bottom of his heart?”

“I’m sure of it.”

“Then you can be certain he’ll go. He might take a while to show up at the new place, but one day he’ll find the way.”

“I’ve already told him the street name and number.”

“Well, that makes it even easier. If he can’t go because he’s got other commitments, he’ll send a sibling, a cousin, a relative of some sort, and you’ll never notice.”

But I still wasn’t convinced. What good was the street name and number if Luciano didn’t know how to read? Maybe he’d go along asking the birds, the praying mantis, the butterflies.

“Don’t worry, Zezé. Bats are very good at finding their bearings.”

“At finding what, Uncle?”

He explained what bearings meant, and I was even more impressed by how much he knew.

With my problem solved, I went out to tell everyone what was in store for us: the move. Most grown-ups said cheerfully, “You’re moving, Zezé? How lovely! How wonderful! What a relief!”

The only one who didn't bat an eyelid was Biriquinho.

"Good thing it's only a few streets over. You'll be nearby. What about that thing I told you about?"

"When is it?"

"Tomorrow at eight, at the door to the casino. Folks are saying the owner of the factory ordered a truckload of toys. You going?"

"Yep. I'm taking Luís. Do you think I'll get something too?"

"Course. He's a runt like you. Why? You think you're too big?"

He came closer, and I felt that I was still really small. Smaller than I'd thought.

"Because if I'm going to get a present . . . But now I've got things to do. See you there."

I went home and hovered around Glória.

"What's up, Zezé?"

"It'd be so nice if you could take us to the casino tomorrow. There's a truck from the city stuffed full of toys."

"Oh, Zezé. I have a pile of things to do. I have

to iron, I have to help Jandira get things ready for the move, I have to keep an eye on the pots on the stove. . . .”

“A bunch of cadets from Realengo are going.”

Besides collecting pictures of Rudolph Valentino, who she called Rudy, and pasting them into a notebook, she had a thing for cadets.

“You’ve got to be kidding me: cadets at eight o’clock in the morning? Pull the other leg! Run along and play, Zezé.”

But I didn’t go.

“You know, Gló, it’s not for me. I promised Luís I’d take him. He’s so little. All children his age can think about is Christmas.”

“Zezé, I already told you I’m not going. And that’s a fib: you’re the one who wants to go. You’ve got your whole life to get Christmas presents.”

“But what if I die? What if I die without getting a present this Christmas?”

“You’re not going to die so soon, my little old man. You’ll live twice as long as Uncle Edmundo or Seu Benedito. Now, enough of this. Go play.”

But I still didn’t go. I made sure she bumped

into me everywhere she turned. She'd go to the chest of drawers to get something, and she'd find me sitting on the rocking chair, begging her with my eyes. Begging with your eyes really got to her. She'd go to fetch water from the washtub, and I'd be sitting in the doorway, looking at her. She'd go to the bedroom to get the clothes to be washed, and I'd be sitting on the bed, chin in hands, looking. . . .

She couldn't take it.

"Enough, Zezé. I've already told you that no means no. For heaven's sake, don't try my patience. Go play."

But again I didn't go. That is, I thought I wasn't going. But she picked me up, carried me out the door, and dumped me in the backyard. Then she went back inside and closed the doors to the kitchen and the living room. I didn't give up. I sat outside every window she was going to pass, because now she was starting to dust and make the beds. She'd see me peeking at her and would shut the window. She ended up shutting up the whole house so she wouldn't see me.

"Meanie! Evil witch! I hope you never marry a

cadet! I hope you marry a private, the sort who can't even afford to have his boots polished."

When I saw that I was wasting my time, I headed for the street, fuming.

I ran into Nardinho playing. He was squatting, staring at something, oblivious to everything else. I went over. He had made a little wagon out of a match-box and tied it to the biggest beetle I'd ever seen.

"Wow!"

"Big, isn't it?"

"Wanna swap?"

"Why?"

"If you want some trading cards . . ."

"How many?"

"Two."

"You're kidding. A beetle this big and you'll only give me two?"

"There're heaps of beetles like that in the ditch behind Uncle Edmundo's house."

"I'll do it for three."

"Three, but you don't get to pick."

"Nothing doing. I get to pick at least two."

"Fine."

I gave him one of Laura La Plante that I had several of. And he picked one of Hoot Gibson and another of Patsy Ruth Miller. I put the beetle in my pocket and went on my way.

“Quick, Luís. Glória’s gone to buy bread, and Jandira’s reading in the rocking chair.”

We crept down the hallway to the bathroom. I went to help him pee.

“Make it a big one, ’cause we’re not allowed to go in the street during the day.”

Afterward, I splashed water from the washtub on his face. I did the same to mine, and we went back to the bedroom.

I dressed him without making any noise. I put his shoes on him. Goddamn socks! They just get in the way is all they do. I buttoned up his little blue suit and looked for a comb. But his hair wouldn’t stay down. Something had to be done about it. I couldn’t find anything anywhere. No brilliantine, no oil. I went into the kitchen and came back with a little lard on my fingertips. I rubbed it on my palm and took a whiff first.

“It doesn’t smell at all.”

Then I slapped it on Luís’s hair and started combing. His head full of ringlets was beautiful. He looked like Saint John with a lamb on his back.

“Now, you stand over there, so you don’t get all wrinkled. I’m going to get dressed.”

As I pulled on my trousers and white shirt, I looked at my brother.

What a beautiful child he was! There was no one more beautiful in Bangu.

I pulled on my tennis shoes, which had to last until I went to school the next year. I kept looking at Luís.

All lovely and neat like that, he could have been mistaken for a slightly older Baby Jesus. I was sure he was going to get lots of presents. When they set eyes on him . . .

I shuddered. Glória had just come back and was putting the bread on the table. I could hear the paper bag rustling.

We went hand in hand and stood in front of her.

“Doesn’t he look lovely, Gló? I dressed him myself.”

Instead of getting angry, she leaned on the door and looked up. When she lowered her head, her eyes were full of tears.

“You look lovely too. Oh! Zezé!”

She knelt down and held my head against her chest.

“Good God! Why does life have to be so hard for some?”

She pulled herself together and started fixing our clothes.

“I told you I couldn’t take you. I really can’t, Zezé. I have too much to do. First let’s have breakfast, while I think of something. Even if I wanted to, there isn’t enough time for me to get ready. . . .”

She poured us our coffee and sliced the bread. She continued staring at us with a look of despair.

“So much effort for a couple of lousy toys. But I guess there are too many poor people for them to give away really good things.”

She paused and then went on. “It might be your only chance. I’m not going to stop you from going. But, my God, you’re too small. . . .”

“I’ll get him there safely. I’ll hold his hand the

whole time, Gló. We don't even need to cross the highway."

"Even so, it's dangerous."

"No, it isn't, and I'm good at finding my bearings."

She laughed through her sadness.

"Now, who taught you that?"

"Uncle Edmundo. He said Luciano's good at it, and if Luciano's smaller than me, then I'll be better . . ."

"I'll talk to Jandira."

"Why bother? She'll say yes. All Jandira does is read novels and think about her boyfriends. She doesn't care."

"Let's do this: finish your breakfast and we'll go to the gate. If we see someone we know who's heading that way, I'll ask them to go with you."

I didn't even want to eat any bread, so as not to waste time. We went to the gate.

Nothing passed except time. But that ended up passing too. Along came Seu Paixão, the mailman. He waved to Glória, took off his cap, and offered to accompany us.