INVISIBLES

ED SIEGLE

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This is just a little samba,
Built upon a single note,
Other notes are bound to follow,
But the root is still that note,
Now this new one is the consequence
Of the one we've just been through,
As I'm bound to be the unavoidable consequence of you.

'Samba de Uma Nota Só'
(Antônio Carlos Jobim and Newton Mendonça)

One

The man on the late news laughed, showing a gap in his teeth, and for a moment he looked like Joel's dead father. His body was thin, his dark face creased. He wore a soiled red and black Flamengo football shirt. He was one of a crowd watching the *polícia* flounder round a hijacked bus, and Joel didn't need to be told the pictures came from Rio de Janeiro.

The footage switched to the windscreen of the bus, on the inside of which a hostage was writing in red lipstick: 'At six o'clock, he's going to kill everyone'. Night fell in an instant as the report skipped towards its climax. Cameras flashed and sirens wailed. An anchorwoman seemed an eye of stillness in a cyclone of pandemonium. The shot panned to the crowd and there Gilberto was again, if it was him. Joel caught another glimpse of a gap-toothed smile and begged the lens to zoom in and remove all doubt, but instead it showed the hijacker being dragged into a police van. As the report came to an end, a crowd tore at the vehicle's windows, howling vengeance for the woman lying lifeless in a fireman's arms.

Joel rummaged for an old tape and recorded the footage the next time they looped the news. He played it again and again, crouching near the screen, moving from side to side, trying to find the perfect angle. He sped through the fatherless parts and watched the relevant sections in slow motion. Frozen, the frames were blurred. Natural speed gave a sharper image, but each snatch ended too soon to be sure.

Joel smiled when the man smiled, and ran his tongue from canine tooth to canine tooth, pausing to feel the central gap. His father felt alive in him again, in flesh and tooth and the spaces in between.

Some time after midnight, Joel turned off the television, went into the kitchen and poured himself a tumbler of gold cachaça, then sat on a step outside in the yard as the liquid warmed his guts and he looked up at the stars. He wondered just how incensed Debbie would be if he rang her this late to tell a tale she wouldn't believe. His dad was alive! Joel couldn't sleep at the best of times and these were surely the very best. He looked at his bike, sitting black and inert in its shed across the yard. Then he fetched trainers and a black jacket, manoeuvred ticking wheels down steps and launched himself along the street, pushing elation into the pedals. The air rushed cool against his face as his dark shape flew through the multicoloured streets, squeezing through parked cars, past a startled fox, then turning up the hill with barely a breath, until he was hurtling into Queen's Park Road where he turned towards the sea, speeding downhill now, rounding a chicane by the old park gate, taking the racing line across the wrong side of the road, guessing from silence that nothing came the other way. Through the lights of Edward Street and down Rock Gardens, until the road ran into the promenade of Brighton seafront, where he slithered his bike around a bend and down two ramps, then along the beachfront itself, pedalling hard again, past the chained-up Palace Pier, until he reached a groyne with a donut scuplture, which he rode along until he reached the end.

Joel stood looking across the sea, breathing the air through wide nostrils.

'I'm coming to get you, you old bugger!' he yelled.

But Joel wanted to be closer to his father *immediately* – not in weeks or days when he could catch a plane – so he swung his bike on to his back, jogged down the groyne, and strode across the pebbles. He stripped and stood before the

sea, with the light of the moon on his skin and the sound of waves in his ears, and spread his arms wide. The sea lapped at his calves then up his thighs until he dived beneath the surface, emerging with a shriek. Out from the shore he swam, bobbing under waves, spinning on to his back. Joel looked towards the beach, which was dotted with clubbers and smokers and drinkers and snoggers – and every now and again he could hear a cheer or a bass beat on the wind. He wondered if Debbie was out tonight, and if she was with anybody yet – it was only a matter of time.

Jesus, it's freezing, what am I doing? Joel thought, then dived under the water a final time, letting his body sink, with his eyes open and stinging beneath the waves and the water like iced silk on his skin. He swam then hobbled on to the shore and spun a few times in the breeze to dry himself, which only made him colder. He pulled his clothes back on, feeling a little damp at the skin, and sat on the pebbles longing for a cigarette. The cold was definitely winning, so he jumped up and down a few times, then wheeled his bicycle up the beach, mounted and pedalled home.

He parked his bike in the yard, watched the video again then went upstairs and sat on his bed. He listened to his breathing until it slowed, calling 'Undiú' into his head – the song his father liked to sit on the end of his bed and sing when Joel was a kid.

Orange light slipped past the curtains. Birds hadn't started singing yet, and he was glad. He tried to sleep, but his mind would only spin Brazilian memories. Joel reached under the bed, retrieved a shoebox, opened the lid and took out a silver compass, feeling its weight in his palm. He looked at pale, round-cornered photographs of himself and a dark brown man with black hair and a gap-toothed smile. There was one of them kicking a half-deflated football in a square lined with palm trees, another of them holding green coconuts on Ipanema beach. He thought about the news footage and

wondered how his dad's Flamengo shirt had become so soiled. Joel sang under his breath, '*Uma vez Flamengo, Flamengo até morrer*' – 'Once Flamengo, Flamengo till I die' – a chant Gilberto and Joel had once loved to sing along with the red and black thousands, high in a stand of the Maracanã.

But Gilberto wasn't dead. He was alive, and smiling. Twenty-five years without a word and up he pops with a smile.

Bar do Paulo sat on a corner in Lapa, a few blocks from the white viaduct over which trams rattled to Santa Teresa. Seven stools lined a zinc counter which sliced across the front. The regulars were ignoring Fat Paulo's grumbles about the stupidity of the *polícia*, and chattering at a television that hung in the top left corner, looking as if it was going to tumble. The walls were adorned with Flamengo team photographs and pennants, and to the right stood a six-foot cardboard cut-out of the Pope, dressed in the red and black shirt of that Holy team. The Pope's fingers were raised to bless the enlightened patrons, to remind them to keep the faith – no matter how woeful the missed chance or crushing the loss at the feet of the Devil's team: Vasco da Gama. Part of the counter housed a window on to savoury pastries: *pasteis* and *coxinhas* and *empadas*. The glass was always visited by an ant or two and the regulars would stage races, betting on the ants' attempts to scurry to pastry heaven.

Nelson arrived at five o'clock to find a stranger on his stool. He caught Fat Paulo's eye and shrugged an appeal, but Paulo merely stared back because Nelson was way overdue with his tab. Nelson felt in the pocket of his shorts in vain. His stomach ached at him and he tried to keep his eyes off the beautiful pastries. Maybe he could win some money on the ants, he thought, though Zemané was the only man who might just lend him a stake, and Zemané wasn't on his stool – though *his* stool was being reserved. So Nelson stood back, squinted at the television and told his mouth to stop nagging him about a glistening beer.

The television wasn't showing football. Cameras were trained on a bus, around which policemen and reporters crouched and scrambled. The shaking picture showed a man gripping a weeping girl by the neck, holding a gun in her mouth. Someone had scrawled on a window in red lipstick: 'They cut off his mother's head'. A reporter said the hijacker, Sérgio, was threatening to kill the hostages at six o'clock. Sérgio looked drug-crazed, or perhaps he was mad from living on the street. He was talking, talking, talking – right there on centre stage, telling the cops what to do, moving the hostages around and scaring the life out of them all. Nelson was surprised they hadn't already shot Sérgio – it must be some kind of record for a black man in a siege – but there were crowds barely yards from the bus, men and women and kids, and maybe they didn't want to solve this crime the usual way in front of the locals and thirty million Brazilians watching on TV.

Nelson knew most people wouldn't feel sympathy for Sérgio, but he couldn't help cheering for him, lined up as Sérgio was against the guns and cameras of the world, and he found himself clenching his fists in empty pockets and willing Sérgio to win – to escape from the bus and get the money or whatever he wanted, whatever the police didn't want him to have. And Nelson thought, for a moment at least, that maybe *he* should hold up a bus or a car or an American and grab some money to pay off his vast debt. Perhaps he could buy himself a chance, a fresh start in a flat with a view of the sea and a place on the roof to grow hibiscus plants, somewhere he could play his guitar and refine his compositions. Secure a foundation, work hard and the rest would follow – that was what Zemané always said.

Beers were poured and pastry numbers dwindled as the regulars slouched, transfixed. Lights flashed around the bus as the moment of death drew near. Nelson watched as best he could, but his legs were aching. He was just thinking he might go home and practise guitar when Zemané arrived, cuffed him

around the head, kicked the usurper off Nelson's stool and bought him a beer. Fat Paulo glared at Nelson, who raised his glass and winked. On television, pandemonium broke out as Sérgio was wrestled into a van and a limp woman was carried away in a fireman's embrace.

The regulars sat and stood and waved their arms as they argued about Sérgio. Some thought he was a hero; most shouted that he was a devil. Everyone agreed the police were to blame, and celebrated the fact with swigs of beer and a slapping of hands. Zemané dissected Sérgio's kidnapping technique and pointed out improvements to police tactics, creating a mock scene on the counter with his straw hat for the bus and a cigar for a bazooka. Nelson sided with Zemané and was rewarded with two more beers, but no one bought him anything to eat and he didn't want to say he was hungry. To be unable to afford a beer was one level of poverty; to be unable to eat was penury of a different order, and not something you showed to bar-friends. Nelson told his stomach it would have to wait until he was paid for the gig that night at the Bar das Terezas.

At nine o'clock, Nelson left his stool, assuring Fat Paulo he'd pay his tab the very next day and treat everyone to a beer – two if he won on the ants. He walked through dark, thin streets which sloped into the beginnings of the hills, where the mansions of Santa Teresa stood silent, their shutters clammed, hoping not to be spotted by the million-eyed beast of the *favelas*. Beyond the mansions and *favelas* slept the forest. And above the forest stood the giant statue of Cristo Redentor, arms spread on the highest point, staring down on all of Rio.

Nelson climbed some steps and pushed open a door into a tall house. He took off his flip-flops and hurried up three flights, trying not to make a sound. He paused at the top of the stairs. He could hear cars, somewhere, and a television on the floor below. No sound came from his room, but a blade of light sliced from the door. He peeped through the crack

and saw an enormous black man in a Vasco da Gama singlet sitting in the armchair with his eyes closed. Apart from a mattress, the chair was the only piece of furniture Nelson hadn't sold. He'd kept the armchair because he couldn't squeeze it through the door, which annoyed him because someone had obviously managed in the first place. Nelson doubted the Vasco man bore glad tidings, but he needed his guitar. He tried to push the door silently, but it creaked and Vasco opened huge white eyes.

'You don't live here any more, Flamengo,' Vasco said.

Nelson grinned and scratched his wormy hair. He might be smooth broke but he still had all his hair, even at thirty-nine years old.

'*Beleza!*' he said. 'If I can just pick up my things, I'll be on my way.'

'Make yourself at home,' Vasco replied, and grinned – now he saw Nelson wasn't going to fight.

On the mattress in the corner was a tidy pile. Nelson had read in a magazine he'd found that there was a new craze in America: ridding yourself of possessions you didn't need, to let your life breathe. My life has gigantic lungs, he thought. There were two T-shirts with faded logos, a pair of black shorts the same as those he was wearing, a plastic razor with bristles between the blades, a bar of soap, a book of songs, and a photograph of himself aged sixteen with a spherical afro and his arm round his little sister Mariana. He put the items in a plastic bag.

'I was wondering,' Nelson said. 'My guitar?'

'Adolfo sold it,' Vasco replied, and closed his eyes.

Back in the street, Nelson sat on the kerb and wondered what to do. He couldn't play the gig without his guitar, and he couldn't say someone had sold it because he owed them an ocean of money. The manageress of the Bar das Terezas had only given Nelson the gig because he'd convinced her of his respectability. It wasn't any old Brazilian place she ran – though it looked like one, because that was how foreigners

liked it. You had to be of a certain calibre to work there, she often said, because Americans didn't want to come to a bar where some *marginal* might rob them because he was down on his luck. Nelson had lied that he worked in the smart – but fictitious – Hotel José Manoel, giving her the number for the Bar do Paulo. When she'd rung for a reference, Zemané had pretended to be the owner.

It was sad to have blown the gig, but almost the end of the world to have lost the guitar. It wasn't the fanciest one in the world, but he didn't have much left from his late aunt Zila and he liked to think he could feel her presence when he played. He could hardly bear to think of another man coaxing its strings into a melody, so he resolved to walk and walk until he found a place to pine and sleep. He looked up then down the street, and decided up was better than down. Besides, one of Zila's Eleven Commandments was: *When presented with several paths, always take the first*. Nelson had spent much of his life interpreting this by doing the first thing that came into his head – a policy which had won him friends and lost them again in equal measure; which had led him to learn the guitar and a thousand songs, but which had lost him every *real* he'd ever earned and a fair number of those earned by others.

He walked through alleys, round corners and along cobbled streets. He came across tram tracks and followed them through the heart of Santa Teresa, where people spilled from a bar or two and the smell of black beans and fishy *moqueca* slithered through the air. I'll eat tomorrow, he told himself. On he walked, past shuttered houses and high-walled mansions, until most of the buildings fell away, revealing a landscape of a million shimmering lights: *favelas* sparkled, office blocks were patched with yellow squares, and chimneys far away spat flames into the night. Turning the other way, he saw the statue of Cristo through the trees.

Nelson noticed a house standing slightly apart on the edge of the vista across the city. He didn't think Cristo's eyes had seen him, since they were looking over the bay to

somewhere far beyond – America, he wouldn't be surprised. If Cristo hadn't spotted him, Nelson could hardly argue the appearance of the house was a Sign. He stood in the middle of the road and wondered how his life had come to this: hungry in an empty street at night, perhaps being shown a place to sleep by an indifferent Jesus. Life could be worse, as his aunt Zila was fond of saying – at times when it was hard to see quite how. He tried not to remember her pastries. Anyway, if Jesus wasn't helping, that was his problem. Yemanjá was the deity that really mattered, and Nelson was sure she'd be up here helping in person, if it weren't so late and he weren't so far from the sea.

Nelson took off his flip-flops and padded over to the wall round the house. The sensation of warm cobbles on the soles of his feet made him think of playing as a child. The wall was eight feet high and topped with broken glass. He wondered if there was a dog: most dogs liked him, but you could never be sure. If only he had something to feed one. He chuckled through a rumble from his stomach. If he had something to feed a dog, he wouldn't be feeding it to a dog. He eyed the wall and thought about an attempt, but noticed a wide door set at least a metre deep. Its dark recess beckoned. His blinking felt slow and his thoughts far apart. He sat against the door and, pleased to hear no sign of the potential dog, made a pillow on the step of his bag of possessions, lay down with his legs curled tightly, and fell asleep.