

Let's do the tapir

A story of the Amazon, football and hammocks

Leonardo Poggi

Miki Fossati

Laura Molina

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for all the uncontacted

zero

This story doesn't end well, I know it. So much for nature, so much for the harmony of man and the cosmos, so much for recovering the primordial rhythms, I'm going to die in this shitty forest, I'm dying here and nobody will ever know where I ended up, so much for nature, I'm dying here of hunger and thirst, how long does it take to die, thirst gets you first, everyone knows that, but I've still got two fingers of water, but the spiders, I never thought about the spiders when I was thinking about nature, if only it had been a jaguar—God, are there jaguars here—better a jaguar but not the spiders, I don't want to die eaten by spiders, better a snake then, like the ones my grandmother used to tell me about, where you don't even have time to say the whole name of jesuschrist before you're dead, better that than the spiders.

He looked around him, into the thick grass, to see whether the snake might already be lying in wait. His thoughts were coming apart, the hunger, the tiredness, the thirst. He took his head in his hands, elbows on his knees; perhaps it was better to let himself die there, what else could he do.

Chapter 1

1.0

It all depends.

“It’s a question of... before you judge you have to allow for the error of...” said Antônio.

“Perspective,” offered Eduardo, the assistant manager.

“Yes, that. And from our perspective our wall looks really badly set. But what counts is the goalkeeper’s perspective.”

“You reckon? I think the wall really is badly set.”

But Antônio was no longer listening to him. The centre-forward’s low drive had passed alongside the wall without so much as a glance at it and looked destined for the bottom corner to the goalkeeper’s left. But the goalkeeper, whose strong point was not the setting of the wall, was on the other hand a nimble diver and had gone down with the right timing. In that instant, which Antônio had frozen, photographing it with his mind, it looked from his own perspective as though he would manage to turn the ball away with his fingertips. From the perspective of the centre-forward, who was hopping about impatiently, holding in the urge to celebrate, it probably looked as though the ball was going in. And from the perspective of the stands it might perhaps have looked as though the shot would end up straight against the post, or wide.

It all depends.

Then at a certain point the ball goes wide, or hits the post, or the goalkeeper’s fingers, or the back of the net, and it no longer depends.

1.1 Radio

“Hey there, Antônio!” João, the caretaker at the station, greeted him. “How did the match go?”

“It depends,” replied Antônio Carlos Rocha de Almeida, known to everybody simply as Antônio, without even noticing how that entirely predictable answer brought an immediate smile to João’s face.

“If you’re asking me about the score, you work at a radio station, so you’ll know the score better than I do. Which means you’re not asking me about the score, and so I’ll tell you the match went well: the patterns bore fruit, you should have seen the boys’ faces when they saw the aggressive octopus working time after time. On the other hand the defensive patterns still need a lot of work. It depends which side you look at it from, in short.”

As always, the first thing Antônio did on walking into the station, the usual twenty-five minutes ahead of the start of the programme, was to switch on the computer. As always, the computer was off. And it was slow. Between pressing the power button and being able to start using it an eternity went by. As always, Antônio spent that eternity thinking: a computer that is switched off is the perfect metaphor for your curiosity about the world. It was a short thought, one Antônio had already put into words hundreds of times. And yet in the enormous stretch of time between switching on and the computer being usable he thought of nothing else. Not obsessively, the way *all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy* is obsessive in *The Shining*. Nor with a different turn of phrase each time. No, he pressed the button, stared at the screen and thought it through once, very slowly: a computer that is switched off is the perfect metaphor for your curiosity about the world.

The only thing that changed was the music that filled the wait, music Antônio took in absent-mindedly, out of the corner of his ear, and which was different every time because Isabel, who presented the programme before him, had made a bet with herself never to play the same track twice. Ever.

“And if you like it? Why don’t you play it again?” Antônio had asked her once.

“I fetch it back with my memory and listen to it with the ears of my mind,” she had answered.

Then the computer came on and Antônio could start up the internet connection. There was waiting to be done there too, but the croaking of the modem made the wait more agreeable: it was the screeching of the world coming out to meet him, with all its information. Antônio would begin his usual tour of the world: La Nación, Público, CNN, BBC, El Mundo, Repubblica, Le Monde. He had a gift for languages: he had studied English and Spanish at school, and if you spoke English, Spanish and Portuguese then reading French and Italian was doable too; but he was sorry never to have studied some more exotic language, Arabic or Chinese, because he understood that his view of the world, however wide, was limited all the same. The computer loaded the pages slowly, but Antônio didn’t mind: as the news appeared on the screen he began to read and to take notes in his notebook.

That day too, as always, after twenty minutes Isabel laid a hand on his shoulder, said “You’re on,” and left him alone in front of the microphone, while yet another song played that Isabel had put on for the first and last time in her life.

Watching her go, Antônio thought that this business of playing a different song every time must be a symptom of great intellectual curiosity (where she gets her ideas from, though, is anybody’s guess:

the computer is always off). And in a way, always changing was itself a fixed pattern, and Antônio liked patterns.

He sat down in the olive-green chair, adjusted the microphone, took a last look at his notes, waited for the closing bars of 'Smooth', by Santana and Rob Thomas, to fade away, and then launched into his globa-local news round-up.

"Good afternoon, everybody. We begin today's press round-up, the third of November 1999, with a story that will be of interest to our friends at the Rainha da Inglaterra on Avenida General Gurjão: a few days from now the Australians go to the polls in a referendum to choose whether or not to remain under the reign of Elizabeth II. Off the top of my head it strikes me as madness, what do you say? Obviously they'll kick her out, what has the Queen of England got to do with Australia? But then I think that the world needs rules and certainties, and that sometimes even the most absurd of rules gives you more comfort than the absence of certainty, and then I think that maybe, who knows, the Australians will choose to keep the Queen. What do you think?"

His voice was warm and persuasive, and had been that way ever since he was a boy; after the first adolescent embarrassments he had always been very proud of it. In these three years of working in radio he had refined his timbre and his delivery, and by now those vibrations in the lower register gave every listener an immediate sensation of pleasure.

"The residents of Rua Noruega, on the other hand, will be glad to hear that this week in Oslo, the capital of Norway, the Israeli and Palestinian leaders met, with the President of the United States, Clinton, acting as master of ceremonies. Clinton then also met the new Russian prime minister, one Vladimir Putin. What do you say, is this the time it works? Peace and love for everybody? I don't know. I look at the photograph of Barak and Arafat shaking hands and the only thing I can manage to think is that two of those three gentlemen had that same photograph taken a few years ago and nothing changed. But the people of Rua Noruega are people who think positively, I know that, and so let's carry on hoping."

He paused and smiled. He was never entirely sure of his sense of humour, but that had seemed to him a good line, well done Antônio. A click of the mouse, a page that always loaded very slowly, and...

"And now, sadly, a story that touches the residents of the airport district closely, and all the rest of us with them: the search for survivors of EgyptAir flight 990, which came down yesterday in a disastrous accident off Nantucket, Massachusetts, has been called off. Tragedies in the air always strike hard at our imagination and at the idea we have formed of ourselves as the masters of nature by way of science. And they strike harder still at a city like ours, almost entirely cut off by land, which has such need of aeroplanes to connect it with the rest of the country. Our thoughts go out to the families of the victims."

The silence that followed was, for once, the natural conclusion of what he had just finished saying and not the peculiar interval that generally signalled that Antônio was carrying on some soliloquy or other inside his own head.

"Anyway," Antônio resumed. The timbre of his voice had dropped an octave, making it more attractive still. "Life is made of ups and downs. Sometimes the downs are very far down, and sometimes what helps us back up is good music. And when the music is good you can listen to it twice in a row, dear Isabel, so that perhaps it fixes itself better in the memory. Dedicated to you, and to everybody over in the neighbouring town of Santana: 'Smooth'."

The notes of 'Smooth' faded away and Antônio opened the phone lines. Or rather: the phone line. Because in his life some patterns were less deliberate than others: some seemed to have a universal sense to them, while others made you ask "But why?". And the first call of the programme was always Teresa's.

"Antônio, what beautiful words. So sad but so moving. And what a perfect choice of music, if you don't mind my saying."

"Actually that track was chosen by Isab—"

"It was absolutely spot on, honestly, I was about to burst into tears. Anyway I didn't ring about the sadness, I rang about the joy. Look, you know I don't know anything and it's you who teaches us the things of the world with that lovely voice of yours, but all the same I wanted to say that Norway and Palestine finally making peace is a beautiful piece of news, it gives us so much comfort and hope, thank you for telling us about it. The business with the Queen of Australia, on the other hand, I didn't really follow, I didn't understand how a people can say to a king 'we don't want you any more', but it seems a lovely thing all the same. Bye, Antônio, have a lovely evening."

Not a chance, thought Antônio.

"Thank you, Teresa, have a good evening yourself."

1.2 School

In Macapá there is a bar for everything. There is a bar for when you're thirsty, there is a bar for when you're feeling lonely, there is a bar for when you want to throw a punch. There are bars that make an effort to be elegant and bars with bad reputations. And then there was the bar below Antônio's flat, with a television in the corner that was always showing some sporting event or other, live or recorded.

Antônio went there not because he liked drinking, nor because he was particularly fond of Louis the barman, a great sweating hulk of a man with the tiresome habit of abandoning his half-smoked menthol cigarettes on the chipped edge of the counter and letting them burn away in spirals of pale blue smoke. Nor was he enthusiastic about the *caipirinhas* Louis made, heavy on ice and sugar to save on *cachaça* and lime. He went often simply because he liked watching matches in company, taking the opportunity to set out his theories to the regulars.

That evening a local television station was showing a volleyball match again. And what a match. The World League final between Italy and Cuba from a few months earlier. Antônio sat down at the counter and ordered a beer, which at least was not watered down.

"There. Did you see the movement that player just made, crossing with that other one?" said Antônio to the stranger on his right, though mostly to himself. "Do you think it's random? Nothing is random in volleyball. You'll ask me: but how can they have decided everything in a millisecond? And I'll answer that they haven't decided anything at all, the way a man doesn't decide to throw himself on the ground when he hears gunshots. Bang! On the ground. It's instinct."

Volleyball had always been a great love of Antônio's, and the Italian national side in particular. Taller than average and physically gifted, he had spent his youth alternating between the net across the middle of a court and the nets behind the goals. But volleyball is a cruel sport: you have to be really tall, much taller than Antônio, and to play you need a lot of friends, and good weather, and a free court. With a football it's easier; somebody like Antônio had the advantage, and one friend was enough to get a match going, even in the rain.

"But sheltering from gunfire is one thing, playing a millimetre-perfect second-tempo attack in zone three is another, how can that be instinct, you'll ask me," Antônio went on to the man on his right, without noticing that the previous one had quietly got up and left and that the stranger to whom he was explaining volleyball was a different stranger.

"And I answer that it becomes instinct. You try, you try, you try again, every possible pattern and the impossible ones too, until they become instinct, until your body knows them the way it knows that the pattern is to breathe in and then breathe out, and then breathe in and out again, keeping the rhythm, but if all of a sudden, out of nowhere, a foreign body arrives: atchoo! That is volleyball: an instinctive sneeze at the right moment."

The stranger (the same one as before? Yet another one? Who could say, to know that you would have had to look at them with a minimum of attention) gave him a puzzled look, shook his head and went on sipping his *cachaça*.

"And I tell you this," Antônio was saying at school the following day to his pupils, while they played, trying to apply his patterns, the flow of thought from the previous evening had still not been interrupted, "even if it will surprise you, Brazil is a nation on the rise. And nothing will show our rise more clearly than our dominance in volleyball—Alvaro! I've told you a thousand times that

zone one is defended with your right foot forward!—Everybody out there thinking that all we're good for is dancing the samba and playing football, praising us for our exciting football and our flair. Whereas now that we've finally understood how the world works, what the patterns are that govern its essence, we shall triumph in the most pattern-driven sport of all—Keep your arms still on the block, Enrique!—Enough of all these fourth places. Invention carried us to the semi-finals for years, but there comes a point where invention is no longer enough, you need patterns. And I can see that we've understood that. That you have understood it. I see it when I watch a match on television. When I go to the arena to watch Macapá. When I watch you—Well done, George, that's it, perfect—The only ones who haven't understood it yet are the people at the federation, who alas let Bebeto slip through their fingers, what a disaster. But when they do understand it, when they choose a coach who breathes patterns, somebody like Bernardinho for instance, well, at that point it will be a hard fight for second place for every other nation on earth."

"And football? you will ask me," said Antônio, changing the subject on the spot, walking onto the pitch with the football while his pupils were still playing volleyball. By now nobody was surprised by him any more, not even the first-years on their first day of school, already duly informed of the existence of a mad PE teacher who would start explaining water polo patterns while his students played football, or impose volleyball matches with a rugby ball, and so on.

"Football is the same thing, but it's more than that. It is the most precise..."

"Metaphor, sir?" George, his best pupil, interrupted him.

"Yes, exactly, the most precise metaphor of how life ought to be: fighting together for a result, each one contributing what his abilities allow, sacrificing yourself for the others but knowing how to be an individualist, knowing how to suffer beyond the limits your body seems to impose on you, rejoicing together in the victories and learning, always together, not to despair at the defeats. But mark my words, I said: ought. In life, I know, I don't like it but I know it, there is a great deal of room for selfishness. But in football, luckily, not any more. And if we don't understand that, or rather if you don't understand it, you can forget the World Cup until 2100."

"So what are we playing then, sir? Volleyball or football?" George asked boldly.

But Antônio was staring outside, lost in his thoughts, and did not even hear the question. He could see volleyball patterns slotting into football pitches; he could hear the words of Julio Velasco, the great coach of Italy's first triumphs, echoing round his head: *alibis, our players are extremely good at making alibis for themselves*, he imagined a side in which the suffering of rugby, or of water polo, was the engine driving every player, in which the cutting precision of patterns could be mixed with the invention of his own people, in which...

"Sir?" George was waving a hand in front of Antônio's eyes with a vaguely worried expression, bringing him abruptly back down to earth.

"Yes?" answered Antônio, slightly embarrassed.

"Are we playing volleyball or football?"

"It depends."

1.3 Stadium

After leaving school, and after lunching as he did every Thursday at his mother's, who never failed to send him off with a packet of cakes "for later", Antônio cycled along the avenue that separates the two car parks of the Zerão stadium, on his way to the afternoon training session.

Painted on the ground, a yellow line and a green one mark the middle of the carriageway and, above all, as everybody in Macapá knows, they mark the presence of that powerful and imaginary line, the equator. An equator that stops for nothing: it flies fearlessly over the Amazon, races on towards the continent, runs straight through the hideous monument raised in its name in front of the entrance to the stadium, hops nimbly over the old perimeter wall whose original pale blue has long since been stripped away by the rain, the heat and the dozens of hands that have left every kind of graffiti on it, divides in two the stands built in 1990 and poorly attended ever since and, most important of all, offers thanks to whoever designed the stadium for arranging things so that the halfway line runs exactly between the two hemispheres, making the Zerão a place unique in all the world.

Antônio had always preferred the southern hemisphere; he had always felt more of the south, perhaps because of the "South" in "South America". The southern half of the stadium had always been the one he favoured, despite its being the sunniest: the home bench had been put on the south side, and every time they played that way round he felt that his side was not merely defending an area or a goal, that it was the whole southern hemisphere in play each time, threatened by the opposition's long balls and endangered by free kicks from the north. And even as he pedalled along calmly, lost in his thoughts, he instinctively rode the road, ruined by a thousand potholes, against the traffic in the left-hand lane, on the south side, naturally.

The road that led to the Zerão stadium was the decompression chamber of his life. He would turn into it dodging lizards and knots of weeds, passing between the faded yellow and orange walls of the poor district that surrounds the stadium; he rode along it still immersed in his problems at school, in his bills that were always too expensive, in the elusive women who always grew tired too soon of him and of his long speeches, in a world where money counted for too much and human relationships counted for nothing at all. But then the sight of the pale blue wall of the stadium calmed him, and in those few hundred metres between him and the iron entrance gate his daily round was purged of every negative thought and the ideal values of football found their way into him. The moment when he climbed off the bicycle, sweating, keys already in hand, was the moment when his existence seemed to him most complete: here was Antônio, none other than the manager of Macapá Futebol Clube, in his head the most important football club on the planet.

Even the sinister noise of the old rusted hinges was a cause of happiness: it was the stadium welcoming him with its hoarse voice and saying hello. Beyond the wall the world changed; the colours changed and so did the smells. The smell so typical of changing rooms and of male hormones let off the leash mixed with the smell of the leather of dozens of footballs and with that of the grass, so rare in the district, which stood out sharp above everything else. Antônio loved arriving early for training; he loved doing a tour of the changing rooms, where he often gathered up the belongings forgotten by the boys of the other teams; he loved carrying the footballs slowly out onto the pitch—on the south side, of course—and contemplating the stands from the entrance gate, a single trapezoidal block built to the west of the pitch.

"Empty stands have an energy of their own" was perhaps the sentence Eduardo, his assistant manager, had heard him say most often. Before every training session a scene repeated itself always identical to itself: Eduardo would come into the changing room, find Antônio busy with some task or other, and ask, "You're here already?"

“I like arriving early,” Antônio would answer without fail. “Empty stands have an energy of their own.”

“And what energy would that be?” Eduardo would reply when he was in a combative mood, drawing on his physics degree abandoned years before. “Potential? Kinetic?”

It was a question to which Antônio often responded with a shrug of the shoulders and sometimes with yet another “sermon”, which was what Eduardo called Antônio’s long monologues. “You mustn’t anchor yourself to a concept of energy as narrow as the one they teach you at a school desk. When you fall in love with a beautiful girl, what do you feel inside? Isn’t that energy? And when everything is going the right way and our side plays well, I know it doesn’t happen very often, but sometimes it does, what is it that drives them? Have you seen their eyes? Are you going to tell me that isn’t energy? Everything is energy! Everything! And I promise you that the stands of this stadium lost at the top of the most absurd nation in the world, these stands have an energy of their own even when they’re empty. And if you stopped taking that scientific attitude to every subject under the sun I’m sure you’d be able to feel it too.”

At this point a shrug of the shoulders from Eduardo was practically compulsory, followed almost always by a smile, a pat on the shoulder and a “How can I help, Antônio?”

1.4 Macapá

Afternoons in Macapá come in two kinds: lazy, or very lazy.

There is no silence: there are always birds calling, and children playing and shrieking undisturbed even at two in the afternoon. And there is always, near or far, the voice of a radio or a little transistor playing music, always. On the bus, in the tavern, at the airport, in the market, out in the street through open windows, music is everywhere. The richest and luckiest, who unfortunately are often also the biggest scoundrels, shut themselves inside their big-engined cars, turn the music and the air conditioning up to maximum and begin to circle slowly through the city, keeping an eye on their territory or simply escaping from themselves.

Macapá lies in the region of Amapá, and Amapá, in the language of the Tupi, the ancient and now extinct indigenous people who lived along the coast, means “place of the rain”. If you happen to arrive between August and December, during what the inhabitants call the dust season, you may well wonder why. It is hot, very hot, and the afternoons are lazy. It doesn’t rain much, and when a spatter of rain does come everybody is glad, because for a few moments the heat loosens its grip. But stay in Macapá until the end of the year and you will understand where the name comes from: in the mud season it rains a great deal, an enormous amount. When it rains the afternoons become very lazy. They are long afternoons, broken up by coffee or guaraná, accompanied by the beating of the rain on the tin roofs of the houses and by the smell of the river, unmistakable. The cars with the air conditioning are obliged to stay parked, because the roads often become impassable and the desert of blinding sun is replaced by a desert of mud. An imperfect desert, though, because even in the rain, unless it is an outright storm, the children can play football.

The children of the Bairro Central play in the rain, and they even play in shoes, and even, sometimes, on grass. The children of the Bairro do Laguinho play in the rain too, where not so very long ago the notorious Pretinho, the son of slaves, used to go about armed from midday until six, and if he found you in the street he would throw you down a well. They all play in the rain in the Bairro do Trem, home of the Ypiranga Clube, and young and old alike play, despite the water and the mud, on the walkways between the stilt houses of the *baixadas*, the poorest part of the city, where apart from football and samba there is little else that can give any joy (though football, luckily, gives a great deal of it). Nobody, on the other hand, plays in the street in the Beiril district: they are all far too serious there, the roads are in good order and do not flood, and there is no room for football.

The only man who goes about between midday and six, in any weather and has done for sixty years, is Mendonça, whom everybody in the Pacoba district knows and in some fashion respects. Pacoba means “banana”, and it is precisely in exchange for a banana that Mendonça will tell you the story of the first aeroplane to arrive in Macapá. He says he remembers it personally, which of course is not true; it is simply a postmodern oral tradition handed down to him by some relative or other, his father perhaps.

“It was the eighteenth of March 1922, the eve of the Assumption of Saint Joseph,” Mendonça recounts in his stentorian voice, “and a seaplane bound for Buenos Aires made an emergency landing. Come, follow me...”, and he turns into the Avenida Pará, which despite its name is little more than a muddy lane, and climbs to the top. He points a finger eastwards; the river can just be made out on the horizon. “There. Right there.”

His eyes look into the distance, a studied gesture; he pretends to be searching for a story he remembers perfectly well and must have told a hundred thousand times.

“It was seven in the morning and the fishermen were coming back to their moorings as usual. Suddenly the silence of the morning breaks, and it breaks from above. My eyes lift to the sky and I hear one of the fishermen shouting ‘Aeroplane!’. I had heard of them,” how well Mendonça lies, “but I had never seen one.”

The old man goes on: “An old mixed-race woman starts screaming ‘The end of the world! It’s the end of the world!’, and everybody kneels down and begins asking forgiveness for their sins.”

He smiles; perhaps the thought of the whole city on its knees before the great metal bird still amuses him.

“Old Marcelo, whom everybody believed to be paralysed, starts running round in circles shouting Hail Marys; the commander of the Guarda Nacional bursts into tears and confesses to his wife that he has been unfaithful; his wife forgives him publicly, to the delight of the onlookers; the bells of São José toll for the dead. Leading the party of brave men out in the canoes is Cirilo José Simões, who will reach the aeroplane first and find the two German pilots worried about all those people arriving, the aircraft would never have taken the weight.”

Always, at this point in the story, Mendonça takes a pause, peels the banana and eats it slowly, thanking you over and over for the gift. Pacoba bananas are the sweetest, but not everybody knows how to tell them apart.

“The aeroplane is towed over near the fortress, and on the afternoon of the following day a full-blown procession is organised to go and visit it. All the most prominent families are there, and the authorities, and every social class. The nuns of the Colégio Santa Maria bring their pupils to see that miracle of steel and the children do nothing but ask questions. Alexandre Vaz Tavares, the mayor at the time, declares two days of holiday, and that is why we still remember it.”

And if by any chance somebody should ask him what became of the aeroplane, he would cut them off, annoyed: “Ten days. Ten days it was here, then the fuel arrived and it left again in the middle of a storm.”

You will get nothing more out of Mendonça.

1.5 Isabel

It was raining. In November, in the dust season, it almost never rains, and yet it was raining.

On days like that the bar could quite happily have stayed shut until midday at least, because nobody felt like a drink when it rained that way. Ana Maria, the owner, was not of that opinion; for her, having a bar was a sort of divine mission. “What did Jesus Christ say? Give drink to the thirsty! He didn’t say sit at home waiting for the sun, did he? Give drink to the thirsty!”

The rain that morning was warm, grey and drumming; it carried the smell of the river with it and it muffled the noises of the street, of the occasional car, the occasional passer-by hurrying away and holding in his curses against the weather: “It shouldn’t rain this much in November.”

Maria Isabel Barbosa, Antônio’s colleague at the radio station, was standing behind the door of the bar, watching the street, talking to herself, her breath condensing in a perfect circle on the glass. Her eyes, a blue so pale as to look almost white, watched with curiosity as the dust of the city turned into mud, as the mud became a torrent and ran away towards the river, the Amazon, which everybody in the city called more simply “the river”.

Still, Isabel, keep still.

Despite the very light turquoise vest that served her as a dress, Isabel felt extremely hot. Beads of sweat formed at the base of her neck and rolled lazily down her olive back, to be trapped in the long raven tail of her hair.

Stay still, don’t breathe.

She was barefoot; she had left her flip-flops behind the till. She parted her bare feet a little in search of slightly cooler tiles, breathed in deeply and closed her eyes.

Still.

The drumming of the drops soon turned in her head into a samba rhythm that grew steadily more precise, until her body began to move on its own, without her being aware of it. When the rhythm gets inside you there is a heat that radiates from the base of the spine and nothing can stop you moving; the legs become the rhythm, the hips become the rhythm, and then the upper half of the body can no longer be held back either and starts to move. The spine becomes an engine, a power station, and the more vigorously the heat pumps and spreads through the body the more the dance simply *happens*, and is no longer a conscious act.

How long until carnival? Four months yet! Too long! Too long!

Isabel danced, following the rhythm of the rain, and as she danced she forgot the mud and the smell of dead fruit, the poverty and sadness of so many districts; she forgot Macapá with its houses too often too crowded, and the whole of Brazil, she forgot everything. She danced around the four little half-rusted iron tables, brushing past the ice-cream freezer that had been broken for three weeks now and that nobody had yet come to mend. Despite a figure that was not exactly willowy she wheeled with surprising lightness along the steel counter propped up by dozens of dents large and small, and swept out in a long arc to come back in front of the door. Dancing was a way of travelling, because travelling had always been her dream, and the sacrifices she had made to study, to get

through university, had always been made with a single word in her head: travel. And yet she had never so much as left Macapá. Not yet, she thought.

Her eyes still closed, her laboured breathing was misting an ever wider section of the glass. Sweat was running all over her body; she could feel the vest stuck to her skin and she could feel waves of pleasure running through her. The fire in her belly had not yet gone out and the temptation to start dancing again was very strong. She did not care in the least about the heat, as nobody in Macapá does, and perhaps nobody in the whole of Brazil; what she cared about was feeling alive.

We said still, Isabel, we said still.

Her hips had already set off again when the rhythm of the rain was overwhelmed by a more regular beating sound, as though somebody were throwing rubber balls against the door, no, as though somebody were knocking.

Isabel opened her eyes. On the other side of the door an elderly man was looking in, using his hands as blinkers.

“Senhor Oliveira, come in!” exclaimed Isabel, opening the door so abruptly that she caught Senhor Oliveira by surprise and he very nearly went full length on the white tiles.

“Sorry, Isabel, from outside I could see there was movement, I thought you were washing the floor.”

“Washing the floor?” Isabel smiled. “Not exactly.”

“It’s just that I’m wet and I wouldn’t want to make a mess...”

“Don’t you worry, Senhor Oliveira. What can I get you?”

“Get me? No, look, I’ve got money today, not a lot, but something...”

Senhor Oliveira broke off abruptly, looking at the girl’s body, which the sweat-soaked vest could no longer hide, as she came round the counter to fetch the coconut liqueur, his favourite. Fine generous hips, fine swaying backside, fine big girl, uncle Oliveira’s girl.

“Don’t you think about that,” said Isabel in an amused voice, pretending not to have noticed. “You know what Dona Ana Maria always says, don’t you? Give drink to the thirsty! Are you thirsty?”

“Well... yes,” answered Oliveira, a little embarrassed at not having been able to keep his eyes to himself.

“Then it’s on me!” concluded Isabel with a smile. And as Senhor Oliveira dragged himself towards the little table nearest the window he could not stop his eyes going back to the girl, who was already filling a glass to the brim with the white liquid and carrying it swiftly over to the table, still with a fine smile stamped on her face.

Nothing, thought Senhor Oliveira, left open-mouthed, that vest hides nothing at all.

1.6 Minimatches

Antônio was a football manager *sui generis*.

When he was twenty-one his grandfather had gone to visit a friend in Rio de Janeiro and had decided to take his grandson along. It was the first time Antônio had left Macapá, and the occasion was one of the important ones: the world volleyball championship was on, Brazil were playing at home and were overwhelming favourites, and the grandfather's friend had somehow found three tickets for the semi-final against the Italy of Julio Velasco, a coach Antônio had only ever heard about but who from that day on would become his idol.

It was the twenty-seventh of October 1990, and Antônio would never forget it. The official capacity of the Maracanãzinho was seventeen thousand, but nobody doubted that there were at least twenty-two thousand people inside. The match was due to start at four in the afternoon, but by one o'clock the scorching stands were packed and the *torcida* had begun warming the place up with its music and its dancing.

Brazil were magnificent: there was that genius Maurício Lima, there were Tande, Marcelo Negrão and Giovane Gávio; they could not lose.

Instead those six almost meek-looking boys dressed in blue, led by that little Argentine, had shown the world how far you can get by applying the patterns to the letter, without losing faith in their effectiveness even when you lose the first set badly, even when there are twenty-two thousand people willing you to fail.

What had stayed with Antônio out of that whole experience was the silence that fell over the arena after Lucchetta's last spike; above all the silence inside his head, as though his brain had been reset by that shocking defeat and needed a few minutes of inactivity before it could accept the impossible.

Velasco. The man responsible for the impossible had been Velasco.

As a teenager Antônio had come close to a professional career in football: he was an attacking midfielder with good feet and long legs. Going to play for a first-division side, though, would have meant leaving his family, leaving Macapá, and perhaps throwing himself into a life he did not really want. He had let it go, while carrying on playing until he was twenty-five, when he was forced to stop because of a bad knock (not so bad, in truth, perhaps) taken during the semi-final of the Amapaense championship, a championship his side, Macapá Futebol Clube, then ended up losing in the final, precisely because of his absence, some people insinuated.

The following year he was already coaching. For some time he had been a regular at the Glicério Marques, the city's other stadium, often taking a seat in the front row and sparing nobody his comments, some of them extremely theatrical, on everything and everybody for the whole of the match. He had soon been noticed by a director of Real Amapá, one of Macapá FC's rival clubs, who had taken him on to coach the youth side.

Antônio had taken up the post with a great sense of responsibility. Having spent his playing career permanently at odds with the methods and the arguments of every coach he had come across, including the national team coaches whose television interviews often gave him heartburn, he had felt that this was his great chance to revolutionise the world's training methods, to give football the place it deserves in the intellectual pantheon.

He had studied hard, Antônio, and had read up not only on football but on a wide range of sports: volleyball, water polo, basketball, handball. He had realised that training dynamics could be very different from one another, and that innovation did not always correspond to achieving results. The idea had begun to form in him that a coach's task was to make his own players aware of the fact that the coach was useless. They had to be trained to face on their own every situation the game could produce, many of which called for pure invention because they could not be reproduced in training.

His model had become, naturally, Julio Velasco.

From the following year, 1996, all this reflection had led him to create a method he considered completely new: what he himself christened the "minimatch" method.

The squad was divided into groups, and each group had to play a mini match against another group in a restricted part of the pitch. The possibilities were endless: two against four in a long narrow rectangle running from goal to goal; six against six in a small square pitch five metres a side; two against two on an L-shaped pitch taking in the touchline and one goal area; eight against seven inside the box alone; and dozens upon dozens of other combinations. The results of each match went towards building a league table of players, to be used when picking the side for championship fixtures.

The start of the season for the boys of Real Amapá had been disastrous. Trained that way, they had soon lost the habit of playing on a full pitch, and what little vision of the game they had once had seemed suddenly to have vanished: the criticism began to rain down on Antônio from every direction.

Even so, this method had shown at least one positive side straight away: the boys came to training gladly, because in practice they played the whole time, and were spared all those tedious technical drills that nobody ever enjoys.

Then Antônio, always reasoning in terms of arbitrarily shaped sections of the pitch, had begun to give names to a great many game situations. "That's a dense L," he would say to the parents of his players, who took it in turns to help him out as masseur, team doctor, kit man and whatever else was needed. "The flat triangle", "the big diagonal", "the reversed piston", "the false circle", "the torn trapezium" and a great many other definitions that the boys' parents, baffled, often pretended not to hear.

But Antônio did not lose heart, and this jargon soon began to find its way into his communications with the players as well. "André, we start with an upturned cup and see whether we can develop the big diagonal. Watch out, because they often do the short jacket and don't let us play the thinned-out pinball, especially on the left."

These were not subjects likely to win the sympathy of the board.

After some difficult months, though, a different wind had begun to blow through the Real Amapá youth side, thanks in part to the fact that with the minimatch method the boys had quickly become used to playing matches: they had played a great deal and learned a great deal, far more than their opposite numbers at the other clubs.

Real Amapá did not win the youth championship that year, the start had been too disastrous, but Antônio had been noticed by the other clubs too: his football was perhaps not the most spectacular or the most creative, but it was certainly the most effective.

The boys, helped by the freshness of their fifteen years, had grown used to recognising the various game situations for themselves, and had become extremely good at leading their opponents into situations they had rehearsed over and over and in which they felt at home. And the wider the range of minimatches Antônio built up, the more often these traps sprang shut during a match, and the more emphatic the victory became.

“You’re strange, but you win” was the finest compliment Antônio could be paid.

1.7 Teresa

Teresa was too disorganised to be a creature of habit. There was, for instance, a little shop where she liked to do her shopping, but then on the way home she would realise she hadn't bought the eggs, or the manioc flour, or the coffee, and so she would go and finish her shopping in the first shop she happened to come across. She often changed her route to work, not because it was a habit of hers but because there was always something that caught her attention or somebody to say hello to that made her turn off, sometimes a very long way off.

For some time, though, her daily routine had found a fixed point: Antônio's radio programme. She didn't know why she liked it so much, nor, in truth, had she ever asked herself: she liked it, and that was that. Whatever she was doing, at six o'clock she switched the radio on and picked up the telephone, ready to call. And yes, because if every person God has sent onto this earth has a gift, Teresa's gift was that she always got through. Some of her more spiteful friends insinuated that it was because nobody ever rang that station except her, but Teresa knew that wasn't so: hers was a genuine talent, one she had known about and made use of for years. Once, when that viper Luiza had made her angrier than usual, she had gone home and, to put herself to the test, had actually telephoned *Hola, Christina!*, the hugely popular afternoon programme. Her satisfaction had been such that instead of saying hello to Christina, Teresa had come out with a raspberry. And then try explaining that the raspberry was not for Christina but for her friend Luiza. Friend, indeed. Bah, better to lose friends like that than to find them. In any case Christina and her staff had not seemed particularly interested in the historic rivalry between Teresa and Luiza, and the great big raspberry had caused a fair amount of uproar, but even so Teresa considered it a shining point in her career as a caller.

At home, beside the bed, there was a little red plastic chair, badly scratched but brightened up with a cushion of fake green and brown brocade. On the chair, sleeping next to her, were a notebook with a photograph of a comical little pig in boots on the cover, and Gioni the toy, a little pig as well, which had belonged to her mother and perhaps, who knows, to her grandmother before that. The fact that there was a little pig on the cover had nothing to do with Gioni: Teresa always kept a notebook beside the hammock to write down the phone numbers of the programmes she meant to call and a few notes to remind herself of what she wanted to say. The one with the little pig on the cover had been left behind by somebody at the beauty salon where she had been washing hair for twenty years, and nobody had ever come to claim it. Until a few months earlier her room had been a mechanic's workshop: a roller shutter, a window with iron bars and a great deal of oil on the floor. By now the oil had almost entirely been cleaned away, and friends had painted the shutter with a great rising sun on the inside and a beach with a seagull, so fat that it looked more like a penguin, on the outside. The bars had stayed, though; you never know. Apart from the old wobbly table under the window and the equally old gas cooker, the room did not contain much else, if you leave out the two most precious things: an old television whose aerial she had had to fix laboriously to the outside of the shutter, and a large radio with a built-in programmable cassette deck on which Teresa recorded every radio programme she took part in as a caller. She piled the cassettes up in a big cardboard box in the corner; every so often she listened to them again, but in fact just looking at them was enough to lose herself in her memories. This was the cassette of the time she had rung Antônio to talk about Venezuela, and this one was her contribution about the Oscars.

She looked at the clock, noticed that Antônio's programme was about to start, smiled, and went to switch on the radio. Goodness knows what they would be talking about today. It was dusk, an hour of the day that gave her a little fright, and that was one of the reasons she liked Antônio's warm voice, which came along and drove away the sadness and that sort of fear so natural at that moment of the day.

Fear that suddenly took shape when she heard the sound of running footsteps in the street just outside the shutter. Her finger froze a few millimetres from the light switch, a solitary bulb hanging from the ceiling by its electrical cable alone, and her instinct pushed her, against her will, to turn the radio off. Soon shouts coming from both ends of the street began to converge on her house, and the man who had stopped just outside the shutter found himself trapped. Teresa moved silently towards the far corner of the room and made herself very small, crouching on the floor. Brawls were not rare in her part of town, but in most cases everything ended with a lot of insults and a few punches or shoves. Knives were not rare either, but this was not a rich area, nor one where foreigners turned up, so blades usually remained more of a social status than an actual weapon.

The struggle did not last long. A great deal of shouting and swearing, two or three very heavy blows against the shutter, and then footsteps fading away into the evening that was rapidly becoming night. And a smothered voice: “Help!”, “Somebody help me!”, which would not stop, “Help me for the sake of the Lord Jesus Christ!”, and which was growing weaker and weaker: “Help me, help me...”

Teresa was not a particularly brave woman, but she was kind and also extremely curious. Not to be able to see, not to be able to know what was happening a few metres away from her behind that closed shutter, was simply unacceptable. She waited what felt to her like an infinite length of time, until she thought she could hear only a faint breathing. She seemed to hear her mother’s voice, poor woman: stay out of trouble, Teresa, stay away from fights. She was right, of course, but this time it was different, this time it was happening right outside her own house. She buttoned her cardigan up properly and raised the shutter a little, expecting the worst of everything possible. A very large man was lying on the paving, bleeding heavily and rattling with every breath.

Teresa had picked up a towel—she had no bandages or medicines in the house and that towel had been the only thing that seemed to her vaguely useful—and with it she began cautiously to staunch the man’s wound.

“Telephone...” whispered the man on the ground.

Teresa turned towards the inside of the house and stared at the telephone, near but not near enough to reach without stopping staunching the wound.

“Excuse me, senhor... sir. I was thinking that perhaps I could telephone the hospital, but if I let go, what do you say...” she began to explain awkwardly to the wounded man, who interrupted her, his voice little more than a breath: “In my pocket! In my pocket! MY phone!”

A mobile telephone. Teresa thought that in Macapá you could count them on the fingers of one hand; the only one she had ever seen at close quarters belonged to the owner of the salon where she worked—a woman she suspected of having other activities besides beautician, to be able to afford such expensive whims—and it had been at the centre of an extremely long and extremely painful negotiation with TIM Brasil, who had taken almost a year to deliver it.

“The number... look for Inácio.”

“I don’t know how to use it, I don’t know how to use it...” stammered Teresa, rummaging in the man’s pockets and smearing her hands and her skirt with his blood. As it turned out, it was very simple. Pressing a few keys at random, even with a hand as shaky as hers, brought up a message telling you how to unlock the keypad; pressing the green button with a handset painted on it took you to a list; pressing the down arrow scrolled through the list; the third name was indeed ‘INÁ-

CIO', written in capitals. She tried pressing the green handset button again and sure enough the telephone came to life.

"Gustavo, what is it? You know I don't want you ringing me at this hour..." answered a deep, hoarse voice at the other end.

"Hello? Hello?" Teresa did not quite know what to say. "Well, Senhor Gustavo has been beaten up, they may have stabbed him..."

"And who are you?"

"It..." Teresa hesitated a moment. "It happened outside my house, on Avenida Piauí, he's on the ground, he isn't well, come quickly!"

The black pick-up with no number plate arrived after the longest five minutes of Teresa's life. In the back, four figures with their faces covered held rifles between their knees; from the narrowness of their shoulders you could tell they were little more than children. A big bald man at the wheel got out at a run, slamming the door. He cast an expert eye over Gustavo's body, lifted it with no apparent effort and hurled it into the back without a great deal of ceremony. Then he turned to look straight into the eyes of Teresa, who had stood petrified the whole time.

"You. What's your name?"

"Teresa..." she answered, in a voice that barely came out of her mouth.

The big man climbed back into the pick-up at a run and drove off with his tyres screeching. It was in that instant that Teresa, the bloodied towel still in her hand and shaking like a leaf, thought: what a thing! With a telephone like that nobody could ever stop me again.

1.8 *Inácio*

Inácio Alfonso Império de Oliveira, known to everybody as Senhor Inácio, had, like a great many of his fellow citizens, almost never left Macapá. Like everybody, he put this down to the city's near-total isolation by road: boats stink, and I don't trust aeroplanes. But the reality was that the isolation suited him, because he cared very little about the outside world. Yes, I can drive as far as Calçoene, but how many times do you want to look at those two rocks lined up in a row? Yes, with a jeep I could go to Guyana, but what do I care about Guyana?

Senhor Inácio did not believe in bad luck; he believed that his life was closely watched over and supervised by somebody up above and, as often happens in Brazil, he saw his god constantly mixed in with the myriad rites and signs that made up his daily round. When things were going well, when his shady business turned out more profitable than usual, when his rivals' henchmen kept well clear of his men, it was certainly thanks to the Madonna whose image he never stopped venerating, or to Jesus, or more often to some saint or other. When something went wrong, like the year that new half-Indian policeman turned up and started poking his nose into his affairs, it was always his own fault: he had not been to church enough, the image of the Madonna had been replaced too often by images of a far more voluptuous kind, or more simply he had ignored the messages the Lord was constantly sending him. That time with the policeman it had rained without a break for more than a month, without stopping for a single minute: it was a signal, he should have understood it, he would have had to go and do penance. But he had not done it, and in the end he had had to have that policeman killed.

This business with Gustavo was a sign, he was certain of it. God spoke to him continually through signs of this kind; he let him know when he was on the right road and he let him know when he was going wrong. God was not particularly clear, though, when he was going wrong, about what exactly was wrong with what he was doing. He controlled half the city with (violence) a stern but fair authority, he had a respected family with four sons as (fat) solidly built as himself, he settled his tax affairs through a local football club into which his money flowed (very dirty) from various sources and was magically cleaned up. God could sometimes have been a little clearer with him: where am I going wrong?

Gustavo, unlike his boss, was interested in the outside world; he would have liked to travel. It was partly for this oddity that his young right-hand man fascinated Inácio. At times he even suspected he might be his son: that boy who years before had so boldly asked to work for him had something in his eyes that reminded him of himself at that age. He did not pay much attention to what became of his mistresses once he had left their beds, so it was by no means out of the question. Whatever the truth of it, Gustavo had proved his worth and his loyalty more than once, so much so that he was the only man into whose hands Senhor Inácio would have trusted his own life. Whoever had harmed him was a dead man, and nobody was to have any doubt about that. And whoever had saved him was to be rewarded.

What Gustavo had been doing so far out of his own part of town was not yet precisely known, at the hospital they were keeping him sedated, but Senhor Inácio had no doubt that he was off after a woman. Indeed his attackers, who were going to come to a bad end, could very well have been the girl's relatives, her father and her brothers. He certainly wasn't going to visit this one here, thought Inácio, chuckling to himself as he sized up the backcombed hair and the not exactly graceful shape of the woman sitting opposite him.

"Are you Teresa Alves Miguenhes?"

“Yes, sir.”

Inácio was reading from a crumpled, handwritten sheet of paper. Teresa had remained standing, waiting for a sign that she might sit on the chair in front of the desk, a sign that did not come.

“You live on Avenida Piauí and you work in Madame Samuela’s salon?”

“Yes, sir. Excuse me, but are you some sort of policeman?”

Policeman or outlaw were much the same thing in Teresa’s head, except that this place did not look like a police station. Perhaps he was a private investigator? Like in the films?

“Policeman? No, no. I am an honest citizen who wishes to reward a kind lady for a courageous act. You saved Gustavo’s life, did you know that? Without you he would be dead. I owe you a favour, senhora; you may ask me for whatever you want.”

“What do you mean, whatever I want?”

Outlaw, she had decided: a man who behaves like that can only be an outlaw.

“Gustavo is like a son to me and I am a very generous man. Ask me for whatever you want.”

Teresa was struck dumb. Her thoughts ran to the conversation she had had that morning with Luiza, who had called her a reckless madwoman for running such an enormous risk and getting nothing out of it in return. Then she thought back with a shiver to the previous evening’s incident, to that wounded, bleeding man and to how she had helped him.

“A telephone,” she said, almost to herself.

“You want to make a telephone call?” asked Inácio, mistaking her meaning.

“No, no. You said you could give me what I want. I would like a telephone, like Senhor Gustavo’s.”

“A telephone like Senhor Gustavo’s. I see.” Inácio opened a drawer and motioned to her to come closer. “Choose whichever one you like. Is there anything else I can do for you?”

Teresa peered into the drawer and saw that it contained at least ten mobile telephones, of every shape and colour. Her face lit up when she saw a black one, shaped like a banana, so like the one used in that fine science-fiction film she had seen a few months earlier. She asked with her eyes for confirmation that she might take it, and then answered: “No, I’m fine as I am. You have to know how to be content.”

1.9 Oral test

Antônio's lessons were never ordinary PE lessons.

"Today we're doing an oral test."

Antônio pulled on his gloves and planted himself in the middle of the goal. The first to present himself on the spot was João.

"Where is Murrayfield?"

"Erm... in Scotland?"

"Correct."

João took his customary limp penalty, which Antônio saved without difficulty. That was perhaps one reason why, without realising it, he always asked him easy questions.

"Lucas: name me a sport that is played without a referee."

"Frisbee!"

"Almost. The sport is called Ultimate, though. Sorry, no penalty."

George put his hand up. "Sir!"

"Yes?"

"Actually there are some federations that call it Ultimate Frisbee and a couple that call it Frisbee. Since you didn't specify the country, in my opinion Lucas's answer was right."

Antônio had to agree, and so Lucas got to take his penalty, sending him the wrong way and earning his "plus" in the register.

"Name me a sport in which you can't touch the ball with your hands, Raul."

Raul, a very tall dark-skinned boy, thin as a reed, was another with a saveable shot. "Football."

Behind Raul's back most of his classmates began to snigger. George put his head in his hands. Alexandre muttered "Idiot" loudly enough for everybody to hear.

"Football, Raul? Really? Isn't the goalkeeper part of football?"

"Sorry, sir, I hadn't thought of that..." answered Raul, mortified. No penalty for him.

Alexandre was the boy with the hardest shot in the whole class. From one oral test to the next he had struck the ball harder and harder to find out where the teacher's limit lay. When he had worked out that there were no limits and anything went, as in the first division, he had started hitting shells that made your wrists shake. For that reason Antônio often asked him abstruse questions about the rules of curling, or the names of stadiums in Australia, or something of the sort. But that day An-

tônio was feeling in good form; the idea of saving a proper penalty rather appealed to him, and in any case it was worth trying to teach Alexandre a lesson.

“You tell me, Alexandre: a sport in which, during play, you can’t touch the ball with your hands.”

“Tennis!” exclaimed Alexandre confidently, already starting his run-up.

“And how do they throw the ball up in the air to serve? With their feet? With their mouths?”

Everybody was sniggering.

“But sir, you said the words *during play*, I thought...”

“The serve is part of play, Alexandre. Sorry, no penalty for you today.”

George muttered: “Idiot.”

Raul let out a louder laugh. Alexandre turned and shot him a look of fire that made him bow his head at once, but Raul didn’t care: sir and George had put Alexandre back in his place.

George was Antônio’s best-prepared pupil. His shot was usually nothing to fear, not because he lacked the strength to hit a proper rocket but because in him the clowning always won out. The panenka, the rabona, the backheel: once he had lain down on the ground and taken the penalty with his head. Be that as it may, George deserved stimulating questions. But now Antônio had noticed his little smile and could not resist the curiosity of knowing.

“So then, George, will you tell us a sport in which nobody can ever touch the ball with their hands?”

“Hockey.”

And without waiting for Antônio’s approval he hit a low missile to his left, which Antônio saw only once the ball was already in the net.

When everybody had had their turn Antônio gathered the students in a semicircle in front of him, for the “moral of the story”.

“Today George has taught us a fine lesson about the importance of thinking outside the patterns.”

“But sir,” Alvaro interrupted him, “you’re always telling us that the patterns are enormously important.”

“Of course. But the patterns are the foundations of your game, and everything else rests on them. And then, precisely, there is everything else. Do you think Picasso always drew like that? Picasso first learned classical technique to perfection, and only then allowed himself to turn it upside down. That is what you have to do: breathe patterns until you have complete mastery of them, and then at the right moment—snap!—turn them upside down and leave your opponents dumbfounded, expecting the Mona Lisa and finding themselves in the middle of *Guernica*.”

George would have liked to ask why on earth the opponents should be expecting the Mona Lisa, given that it wasn’t painted by Picasso, but for once he decided this was not the moment to be a know-all, and held his tongue.

“And above all,” Antônio concluded, “what I expect from you is that you should know how to tell when it is right to follow a pattern and when instead it is time to think outside the patterns. When you’re playing, when somebody is testing you, when one day you become famous sportsmen. Remember *Guernica*. Remember that it is you who choose whether to play the same song twice or never to repeat it at all.”

Right, what songs have got to do with it I really don’t understand, thought George.

1.10 Millennium bug

Once a week Antônio used his hour of radio time to give internet lessons to his listeners. He had never studied computing, he had no computer at home (though he was thinking of buying one soon) and before he started working in radio he had never used one in his life. But he had curiosity on his side, and that half-hour of use before the programme, repeated over time, was more than enough to make him “the station’s computer expert” (where expert meant the only person who switched it on) and the biggest tinkerer among his acquaintances, with the obvious exception of Vitor. Vitor was a real geek: he helped out when there was a problem and, above all, he passed on the tips about the most interesting sites and programs, the ones that would become popular in the months that followed, thereby allowing Antônio to pass not only for a populariser but for a man who could see a long way ahead (within the narrow circle of those who listened to his programme, mind you).

“Today’s a big one, I warn you. Have your notebooks ready, because I promise you won’t want to forget what I’m about to explain. Let’s start with an astonishing new thing: a program that lets you download any song you want, whenever you want, for free. It’s called Napster and it works like this: you install it on your computer and you tell it which folder you keep your music in. All the other users do the same, and Napster lets you search inside their folders, inside the folders of computers all over the world! When you find the song you’re interested in, one click and within twenty minutes or so there it is on your computer. I realise it sounds incredible, but to prove to you that it’s true we’re going to run a test. The first listener to ring in will choose a track of their liking, I’ll look for it, and we’ll see whether by the end of the programme we can listen to it together.”

“Hello?”

“Antônio?”

“Hello, Teresa.”

“Antônio, I’ve got a beautiful new telephone, you should see it. I’m calling you on it, can you hear? Can you hear the difference?”

Teresa had never used a computer; she had barely seen one from a distance, as she had candidly told him, and she showed no sign of intending to start. But, as she had already explained several times live on air to Antônio’s embarrassment, Antônio had such a lovely voice that even hearing about these excruciatingly boring subjects was pleasant all the same.

“So, what track would you like me to look for?”

“Ooooh, I wouldn’t know. I like Caetano Veloso very much, but maybe in the rest of the world they don’t know him. Can you really search computers all over the world?”

“Yes, Teresa, apparently so.”

“In Jamaica too?”

“Yes.”

“Goodness, how exciting. Then... I’d say a nice cheerful song. Would ‘Could You Be Loved’ do? I don’t understand how you’re going to connect to Senhor Bob Marley’s computer, given that he’s

been dead a good while. Perhaps his family? Anyway, say hello to them from me, and hello to you, Antônio dear.”

“Right. Let’s put ‘Could You Be Loved’ on to download and in the meantime move on to our second story, which unfortunately is not so cheerful, in fact it’s very worrying. I’ve talked to you once or twice already about the millennium bug: a problem in computer programs which, it would seem, when the new year starts, will confuse the year 2000 with the year 1900. And who cares, you’ll ask? When my neighbour, Senhor Bastos, comes home drunk and confuses Friday with Saturday it makes no difference to me. But I’ve read a number of articles in which the experts all agreed that a lot of structures that rely on computing could throw up error messages and even seize up altogether. And if my computer seizes up, never mind. But what if a bank’s computer seizes up and transfers the money from your account into mine? Or the one on board an aeroplane, what happens then? In an article I read today an expert says he is very worried about what might happen in countries like India and Pakistan, which possess a nuclear arsenal, and says that he will be celebrating the Pakistani New Year rather more than the one in Rio de Janeiro, because whether we’re still alive to celebrate the second depends on the first. I say: what sort of world have we built if we have to be afraid that an error in a computer could cause a nuclear bombardment? In any case, the experts are searching for a solution, so they say.”

Antônio broke off to launch the musical interlude. To stay on theme he put on ‘Two Suns in the Sunset’ by Pink Floyd and ‘Russians’ by Sting.

“Speaking of searching, let’s get back to lovely things and to how inventive humanity can be when it puts its mind to it. You know when you stop me in the street and ask me where I find all this information?” It had happened to him only twice since he began working in radio, but “twice” justified the plural. “Well, obviously I use what’s called a search engine. Until a few days ago I used Altavista or Yahoo, like everybody. But now I’ve discovered a new one. It’s got a very strange name: Gugol, spelled G O O G L E, and I can guarantee you it’s a bomb. You type in a word and out of the ten results it gives you, you can be sure that at least seven or eight have got something to do with what you were looking for. And it’s fast, too. Then of course the evolution of the internet is so rapid that next year there will probably be an even better one, but until it comes along, write this name down and start using it, you won’t regret it.”

He checked the computer and saw with a smile that his experiment had worked.

“And that’s all for today. Until the next episode. But before I go: there was an experiment under way, let’s see what fruit it has borne.”

Antônio switched off the microphone, launched ‘Could You Be Loved’, said goodbye to Paco, the sound engineer, said goodbye to João and went off satisfied.

1.11 Macapá Futebol Clube

The two successful years with the Real Amapá youth side that had followed that terrible start had opened for Antônio the door back to Macapá Futebol Clube, this time as manager of the first team. But with the first team things had quickly become difficult. The authority Antônio had laboriously managed to build up with fifteen-year-olds evaporated in an instant with grown men, particularly when those men were his own former team-mates. The minimatch method was viewed extremely badly at every level; Antônio's jargon caught on with nobody, not even with Eduardo. Eduardo was a pragmatic man and a lover of numbers who read trends in the statistics that Antônio could not and would not understand.

The first season had ended without disgrace and without glory. The players ran themselves during matches without listening to Antônio's advice and submitted to the minimatches unwillingly but without ever coming to outright rebellion. When it came down to it they played for fun, there was no money going round, and if they won the odd match despite that manager it meant the players had some ability about them.

"The method works," a discouraged Antônio would say to Eduardo. "You lot refuse to see what to me is obvious: it works. What do the statistics tell you? They tell you we're improving, don't they?"

"The statistics tell me the boys are playing better in spite of the training method."

"How can you say that? I have to train the players to do without me, I've always said that's my aim, haven't I? And they're learning it well, that's all there is to it."

The relationship of trust between the two coaches never took off, that between the players and Antônio was non-existent, and Eduardo felt the whole weight of the team on his own shoulders: at the end of the season the side finished fifth, half a disaster.

But that was what happened in the first year. Despite the friction and the bad blood the board had decided to keep Antônio for another year, and things had slowly settled down. Nobody ever admitted publicly that Antônio's method had brought any benefit, but the following year the side did in fact do better than usual, finishing first in the first qualifying group and second in the second, until, going on to win every knockout tie, it reached the semi-final. Slowly Eduardo had come to appreciate certain sides of Antônio's character, and in part his preparation too, above all his constant urge to take an interest, to read up, to study.

For Antônio, telling Eduardo what he had prepared for training was never easy. He would draw up a list of situations in which, in his judgement, the side could cause the opposition problems, or in which the opposition would try to cause Macapá problems, and then put it to Eduardo for a preliminary check.

"Today we have to do the split rail, definitely a bit of octopus, a few rowing boats down the right, and we absolutely have to try the *fortaleza* in case we happen to go ahead early, maybe with a bit of crazed archer as well."

"The split rail?" Eduardo was not entirely comfortable with Antônio's jargon, partly because new names were born every week and partly because he had never really made the effort to learn all the definitions.

“Yes, the split rail, the goalkeeper’s long clearance with all the midfielders and forwards breaking forward.”

Antônio, perhaps concentrating on how to organise the divisions between the various mini pitches, did not notice the puzzled expression on Eduardo’s face.

“The long clearance? You’re joking, aren’t you?” Eduardo’s tone had become very serious, but Antônio did not seem to register it.

“Yes, I mean, no. And now I come to think of it, a bit of *piranha* too.”

“Hold on, Antônio. Sunday is the semi-final, correct? I don’t know what your problem is with semi-finals, but Macapá haven’t reached a semi-final in six years. And you want to waste our time hitting long clearances?”

“Eduardo, you don’t understand because you don’t want to understand. And it isn’t only your problem, it’s everybody’s problem, the politicians’ too. You all refuse to have courage, to try going beyond what you’re used to; you’re all dug into your positions, you don’t really want to achieve results. Survive, that’s what you want to do, just survive. And in doing that you deny the very nature of the human being, its natural drive towards evolution: we were programmed to evolve, to look for new things always, to improve. You people don’t live in this age, you live in the past.”

“You people who, sorry? Who lives in the past?”

“I was only saying. Ypiranga have conceded three goals this year from long clearances, why shouldn’t we practise them? Why shouldn’t we try to exploit what is an obvious weakness in the opposition? What would have happened if, I don’t know, during the Second World War the Americans had refused to exploit the enemy’s weaknesses? Would you like there to be a worldwide Nazi government?”

“What weaknesses? The Nazis? What are you talking about?”

“And in any case the problem is that you people are not capable of recognising merit and giving it its due, you always feel entitled to criticise on the basis of questionable arguments or on the basis of an objectively inferior grounding...”

At the word “objectively” Eduardo stopped listening to Antônio, glanced at his notes, looked at his watch, tried to keep himself busy tidying things here and there, and finally, when he could no longer hear Antônio’s voice booming among the reinforced concrete beams, said: “You tell them today. You talk to the boys.”

“It’s the twelfth of November. Can you believe it? Already the twelfth of November. The start of the 1999 season? It feels like yesterday. Doesn’t it feel that way to you too? We’ve had moments of great energy, we’ve had so-so moments, we’ve played well and we’ve played less well, but here we are.”

Dante and Diego were watching him, each with a shoulder propped against one jamb of the changing-room door. They were smoking, as they always did before a training session or a match, and exchanging quick knowing glances to communicate to one another the tedium of having to listen to yet another of Antônio’s speeches, which they knew well, having been his team-mates for years. Dani and Ricardo were slowly lacing up their boots, nodding silently. Maurício, with his unmistakable blond mane, pretended to look for something in his bag, picked up his can of deodorant and put

it back in one of the pockets, checked that the cap of his new shower gel was firmly closed and carefully tested every zip.

“We’ve reached the semi-final. On Sunday our season is on the line, just as it was on the line last Sunday and the Sunday before that. Only the day after tomorrow we’re playing Ypiranga.”

“Those bastards at Ypiranga!” put in Danilo José, the team captain, provoking a burst of laughter that Antônio received with irritation.

“Respect, boys, respect. We can’t go out onto the pitch against a side as strong as Ypiranga without showing them respect. Sport is first and foremost a school of life; we can’t always go about thinking we’re the best at everything we do.”

“But coach,” it was Danilo José’s voice again, “we are the best!”

“We’ll see, Danilo, we’ll see.”

While he talked Antônio was drawing with coloured chalk on the great slate blackboard on which four football pitches had been pre-printed, with the lines marking out the pitches for the minimatches.

When it came to the turn of the “split rail”, a murmur ran through the players. Once again it was Danilo José who made himself his team’s spokesman. “Coach! We don’t know that one, what’s it called? The boiled book? The interrupted toilet paper?”

More laughter filled the changing room.

“It doesn’t matter. At this point the name doesn’t matter. What matters is that you practise this game situation. Ypiranga have conceded three goals this year in this situation and I want you to practise it. You have to feel respect for your opponents and to know their weaknesses; these two things are not in contradiction. Only by learning to reason about other people’s weaknesses can we recognise and improve our own.”

“Which situation, coach?”

“Long clearance from the goalkeeper and pressing high up the pitch.”

The boys looked at one another, half resigned and half amused, some of them not even too sure they had understood correctly. The silence in the changing room thickened until almost nobody dared to breathe any more. The tension was broken by Danilo José, who got up sharply and walked out of the changing room muttering, “I’m going to talk to Eduardo,” followed immediately by his lieutenants Henrique and Lucas and then, one by one, by all the others.

Only Thiago, one of the youngest, stayed sitting where he was, waiting for instructions. He wore a brace on his teeth and a headband that made him look like a tennis player from the eighties, and he was displaying a smile that made Antônio suspect he had not entirely grasped the situation. A few moments later Amauri burst into the changing room in his mechanic’s overalls. “Sorry, sorry, my scooter broke down, sorry...”

The sentence was left hanging halfway when he realised the changing room was empty and it dawned on him that he had already seen the boys out on the pitch.

“What’s happened?” he asked timidly.

“Nothing,” answered Antônio. “Nothing. Get changed quickly, we’ve got work to do,” he concluded, walking out of the door.

1.12 *Semi-final*

On the morning of the fourteenth of November 1999 the doors of the church of São José witnessed an unusual coming and going. Not that the church was normally deserted on a Sunday, quite the opposite, but that day a great many people who had never set foot in that parish turned up at the door out of curiosity.

The entire football team of Macapá Futebol Clube was drawn up in front of the altar, on its knees, with the priest going along blessing them all under the attentive eyes of Senhor Inácio Império, the chairman, and of Eduardo, the assistant manager.

“Where is he?” asked Inácio, extremely irritated.

“I don’t know,” answered Eduardo. “I telephoned him and he told me he’d come, but honestly he didn’t sound very convinced, you know what Antônio’s like, senhor.”

“No, I don’t.”

“Well, he’s a hard man to persuade.”

“Be that as it may, he had better turn up. We certainly don’t want a calamity falling on us, do we?”

“No, no, of course not...” murmured Eduardo, without a great deal of conviction himself.

The calamity Senhor Inácio feared had announced itself shortly after dawn in the form of an alarming waterspout that had risen a few hundred metres from the little harbour of Macapá and stayed there, threatening, for almost an hour, while a wave of panic spread through the city like oil on water. “It’s a bad omen!” was the most widespread comment, but also “We’re all going to die,” or, with a certain amount of exaggeration, “It’s the end of the world.”

Waterspouts are not so rare in Macapá; in unlucky years you can see two or three of them. What made this one unusual was its persistence: normally after a few minutes the spout dissolves and moves off towards the ocean. But the spout of that November day did not want to go: it stayed there turning, throwing up frightening whirls, now coming in towards the coast, now drawing slightly back as though it wanted to make fun of the frightened citizens.

“What a calamity if it comes down on our houses!”

“It’s a calamity as it is, even if it doesn’t hit the houses: that’s misfortune looking at us with the eyes of God!”

And so on.

Antônio had had a difficult night. After a long evening spent thinking and rethinking his patterns of play he had collapsed with sleep, still dressed, on the uncomfortable sofa in his living room. Dawn had caught him curled up in an unnatural position, his notes still clutched in his hand, and waking had been accompanied by back pain and a nagging discomfort in his head that neither a coffee nor a shower had managed to drive away. He had learned about the waterspout from the radio, which he had switched on for a bit of company while he put the previous evening’s papers back in order but, perhaps because he was by now absorbed in the thought of the semi-final, the news had left no trace on him at all, at least until Eduardo’s phone call.

“Hello, Antônio?”

“Eduardo! What’s going on?”

“Haven’t you heard the news?” Eduardo’s voice was strangely agitated.

“News? What news?”

“The waterspout, there’s a waterspout just outside the harbour, it’s been there for almost an hour and it won’t go away!”

“But is there anything to worry about? What do the authorities say? Isn’t it like it always is, that after a while it moves off to the north-east?”

“It’s been there for almost an hour, do you understand? It isn’t a normal waterspout!”

“So what is it then?”

“Everybody here is saying it’s the end of the world, a sign of disaster.”

“And you believe it? Eduardo, the man of science, suddenly discovers he’s superstitious?”

“I’m not the one who’s superstitious, it’s the waterspout that won’t go away! Anyway, Senhor Inácio has summoned us all to the club.”

“To the club? But it takes me half an hour to get there. What has he summoned us for?”

“For the disaster. That is, to fight off the disaster.”

“And how does he intend to fight it, may I ask?”

“Listen, Antônio, Senhor Inácio told me to tell you to come. You can ask him the questions afterwards, all right?”

Reconstructing the business afterwards, nobody would have been able to remember precisely who it was who said the words “let’s go and get ourselves blessed”; what is certain is that Inácio’s eyes lit up and there was no need to say it twice. In his heart of hearts Eduardo knew perfectly well that it had been him, and knew perfectly well that he had done it to untangle a situation that was growing steadily more tense: the chairman in despair at the ill omen, the players unsure whether to take him seriously or not, time passing without the tension easing, and Antônio nowhere to be seen.

From the Macapá club offices on Avenida FAB to the church of São José was a few hundred metres, but that strange party could hardly go unnoticed. A strange Sunday, that fourteenth of November, for the residents of the Santa Rita district: an ominous waterspout followed by a procession of grown men in green shorts and green and orange shirts, faces dark or actually in tears, on their way to a small church in the centre of town.

Antônio was undecided what to do. He did not want to miss his chairman’s summons, but he was certain the reason for it was trivial; and besides, by bicycle the Macapá offices were half an hour from his house and going all the way over there would definitely make him miss the entire preparation for the match. And then there was an alarm bell ringing in the recesses of his mind, made up of the letters of fire of the word “SEMI-FINAL”.

Antônio was a league manager, good at studying opponents and at using the whole long stretch of a season to make adjustments and improvements. But knockout football, that was another matter. During knockout ties all his insecurities took shape and became real, and the closer the final came the more his legs shook.

Round of sixteen: first doubts; quarter-final: critical introspection; semi-final: paralysis. Every time his brain went through that moment of blankness he had experienced during the semi-final of the world volleyball championship, the one Brazil could not lose, and instead.

In his last year as a footballer, too, his last match had been a semi-final: he would have done anything to escape from himself, even pretend, as in fact he had, that the slight discomfort in his ankle was something a great deal more serious.

Antônio decidedly had some sort of problem with semi-finals.

And if the quarter-final of the 1999 season had been too easy a test to put his convictions under strain, the semi-final on the fourteenth of November would be against Ypiranga, a strong and motivated side.

It was never established whether the blame lay with the communion wafers, which the priest had dug out in a great hurry from a cupboard in the sacristy and which were not exactly fresh, or with the wine, which had long since turned to vinegar. The fact is that the Macapá boys came out of the blessing literally transformed: one holding his stomach, one suffering dizzy spells, one finding his vision blurred. Some people might have smelled a conspiracy in this rather than the force of a divine punishment.

And then there was Senhor Inácio's sullen fury, which infected everybody; even the rational Eduardo had begun to wonder whether Antônio's absence was not one more sign of a destiny that had not stopped getting in their way for a very long time.

"Why," howled Inácio, "does the Lord have to take it out on us? Because the Ypiranga lot come from a favela where they're all starving? And that's enough to make them his favourites? It isn't as if the boys of Santa Rita were rolling in gold, eh! Aren't there fairer ways of arranging this contest? Sometimes I really do not understand the Lord our God!"

What destiny decides, man can hardly change. The first Macapá players arrived at the stadium when the whole of Ypiranga were already halfway through their warm-up; in their eyes and in their guts a sudden malaise, impossible to fight off. Danilo José, the captain, the man with the "horrendously accurate" shot as his team-mates often jokingly described him, was flat out. It was said afterwards that he had only just had time to get home and into the bathroom, where he would remain bent double with pain for the whole of the match.

Inácio was on the point of sacking Antônio, who had just arrived, there and then; only Eduardo's intervention postponed what seemed even a mild reparation for an unforgivable slight. Antônio himself, whose nerves had grown more and more fragile as the kick-off approached, would manage to think of only one word for the whole match: semi-final, semi-final, semi-final.

The match? The semi-final of the 1999 Amapaense championship, played on the scorching afternoon of the fourteenth of November, saw the extremely strong and extremely motivated Ypiranga side overwhelm what looked like the ghosts of Macapá FC. A flat four-nil that left no room for any reply.

“It is *bailado* football that finally triumphs over those who see the essence of the most beautiful sport in the world in patterns rather than in the soul,” the Gazeta Esportiva (subtitle: ‘The newspaper of truth’) would write the following morning.

“It’s a curse,” others would comment.

1.13 End of transmission

As soon as he had climbed the stairs Antônio realised something was wrong: the door was open and from the landing you could already see the chaos, papers scattered about, cables twisted together, Isabel's pencil pot upended on the floor. Sitting on the mixing-desk chair, dragged into the middle of the room, Paco was holding his head in his hands; he did not seem even to have heard him come in.

"Paco, what... what the devil has happened?"

"Thieves," he answered without looking at him. "They must have got in through the little bathroom window, maybe they put a ladder up on the roof of the garage below, who knows. And who cares how they got in, anyway. They've taken everything."

Paco raised his eyes, wet with rage and dismay. "Everything, everything that's worth anything: the mixer, the computer, the microphones, the headphones, the amplifiers, everything. Even that box of old CDs that had been in the store cupboard for years."

Antônio was petrified. He turned his gaze around the rooms, which had been literally stripped bare; there remained chairs and desks and cupboards thrown wide open, the posters on the wall and the couple of cables the thieves had left on the floor.

João came in from the other room with his eyes down, holding a multi-socket adaptor in one hand and a bag of sweets, empty, in the other. "What a disaster, Antônio, what a disaster. Goodness knows when we'll manage to get back on our feet."

"If. If we manage it, and that's by no means certain. In fact let's just say it isn't going to happen, the station is finished, that's it, let's not kid ourselves, for fuck's sake."

"Come on, Paco, don't talk like that... we'll find a way, we'll look for a sponsor..."

Paco did not even answer him; he made a brief gesture of annoyance before shaking his head and taking it back into his hands. The mixing desk, that old great box he lovingly held together with insulating tape and salvaged cable, was to him like a son, a girlfriend, a dog. He was a talented sound engineer and every so often he talked about going off to make a career in the USA or in Europe, but in the end he always stayed where he was, cradling his radio station like a rag doll.

Antônio was trying, without much hope, to find something to say to comfort him when Isabel came in, the one who went on air after him on Wednesdays. Or rather, she did not come in at all: she stopped dead on the threshold, her eyes wide.

"Th... thieves...?" she murmured, letting her bag fall to the floor.

João, who was wandering about with the plug in his hand, plainly not knowing what to do with himself, answered her by spreading his arms, disconsolate.

"But you could have warned me, called the police, I don't know, done something!"

"I got here an hour ago and found this, Isabel: I hadn't even had time to work out what had happened when Paco arrived..." He lowered his voice and nodded his head towards the sound engineer. "You've no idea, Isabelita, you should have seen the way he went off his head when he real-

ised. I've never seen anything like it. I was afraid he'd throw himself out of the window, never mind phone calls."

At that very moment the telephone, its ring echoing round the emptied room, made them all jump.

"Hello?"

"Teresa?"

"Antônio! What's going on? I've had the radio on for twenty minutes but your station won't come in. I got frightened straight away because I thought my radio had broken, but then I checked on another station, holy Jesus, the programmes the others put out, there's no comparison at all, you know? You're the best station in Macapá, I always say so to Luiza, who keeps on with that other programme by that fellow who pretends to be an American actor, I don't know how she can listen to it."

"Teresa, sorry, but I don't..."

"Oh, I've lost my thread. I was saying: what's going on? How come you're not on air?"

"Teresa, I'm afraid you're going to have to get used to listening to Luiza's programme."

"What do you mean? What are you saying?"

"I mean the radio station is gone. They've stolen everything."

Isabel had declared that she needed a cigarette, and Antônio—who smoked perhaps once or twice a year—was so shocked that he decided to keep her company. They sat down on the pavement and Isabel did nothing but shake her head; she had tears in her eyes and did not know herself whether she was more angry or more heartbroken. "What a shame, what a shame... we were doing so well... we were doing really rather nicely, weren't we, Antônio? We were starting to build a proper audience and now, now this."

"Don't be like that, you sound like Paco. Come on, you're not that pessimistic. We'll do something, we'll find a sponsor, you'll see."

"Of course, a sponsor. As if they were mosquitoes, and there were so many of them you had to swat them away. But even supposing we're that lucky, between looking for one, finding one and getting everything going again, months will go by. And in five or six months' time who out there is going to remember us?"

"Well, but..."

"But nothing. If there was one good thing in this shitty city, one thing I really liked, one, it was this stupid little radio station of ours. Maybe in its small way it kept somebody company, maybe for a few moments it lifted somebody out of their troubles, maybe it had a little soul of its own that mattered to this city. Now, I don't know, there's nothing left."

Antônio did not know what to say; Isabel was not wrong, but it hurt him to see her so bitter. Suddenly, without in the least realising it, he heard himself say: "Well, sitting here complaining isn't much use. Let's go and have a drink, get dinner somewhere: at least if we've got to feel sorry for ourselves we can do it over a beer."

Still astonished at having spoken those words—he was not usually so direct with girls, quite the reverse—he was even more astonished when, entirely unexpectedly, Isabel got up, brushing the dust off her shorts, and said: “Yes, why not. Somebody invited me somewhere and I said no because I was sure I’d be on air. It’s too late for that now, but I don’t fancy spending the evening on my own brooding. Let’s go. Did you have a place in mind?”

Antônio had a moment of total darkness: he ate out almost every evening and yet he could not think of a single restaurant. While Isabel looked at him questioningly, rummaging frantically through his memory he finally managed to dredge up Armandinha’s: anything but a smart place, but at least you ate well there, and in any case it was the only one he could think of.

And so they set off, while a torpid papaya-coloured sun came down on the dust of the pavement, on Isabel’s curly hair, on poor Paco, left alone in the empty rooms sobbing hopelessly and stroking the one cable that remained, and on the idea of that invitation to dinner, which Antônio was already beginning to doubt had been such a good one.

They walked a long way—I remembered it being nearer, that restaurant—while Antônio took the opportunity to set out for Isabel in detail a theory of his, worked out at that very moment, on how radio programmes might have parallels with certain sporting activities, football in particular, and how the pattern of the little rowing boat, to name but one, could be applied, transposed of course, to the management of the six o’clock news.

Isabel walked along absorbed. Antônio was very pleased that she was listening to him with such concentrated interest, an intelligent girl, not like that old capybara Eduardo, who put on that air of condescension purely because he did not understand.

An accidental brush of hips gave rise to a fleeting thought about a possible after dinner. *Fancy coming in for a moment? Oh, all right, maybe we could have one more little drink together, just for a minute though. Sorry about the mess, the bed’s still unmade...* Don’t be ridiculous, you’ll walk her home and you’ll say goodnight talking about the radio station like good friends and that will be that, no use thinking about it. Rather, perhaps he had forgotten to explain properly the difference between having a pattern and being bound by one; better to clear that up for her—with the hockey example, perhaps—otherwise the argument might not seem complete to her.

As silent as she had been along the way, Isabel became just as talkative when, having finally arrived, they sat down at a table. She did not seem to notice the cramped spaces of the restaurant at all, nor the yellowing walls decorated with images of *orixás*, splashes of sauce and photographs of actors cut out of the papers, all of which Antônio—after all the times he had been there—noticed for the first time instead, and was left vaguely embarrassed by. What a place to bring a girl for dinner, you idiot, he thought, as he passed the paper napkin discreetly over the Formica of the table to remove a ring of some unidentified grease, as he hoped she would not notice the doubtful clarity of the glasses, as he prayed she would not hear the coarse blaspheming of the diners at the next table, three men and three bottles of *cachaça*.

The food was excellent as always, though it seemed Isabel was not paying attention to that either; she talked in bursts as though she were on air: politics, the radio station, her friends, the diary she kept every evening—there, perhaps, he had drifted off a little—travel, above all travel.

“Because you see, Antônio, I’ve never travelled but it’s always been, always, my dream. Learning languages to see the world, to be able to meet different people. And then to have in front of your own eyes certain wonders of nature, of architecture, things you’ve only seen in books, there, for that I don’t know what I’d give.”

She drank another sip of *caipirinha* and before Antônio could get a word in she started again, excited: “You know, maybe what’s happened has a reason of its own, after all. I’ve thought about it the whole way, while we were coming here, the whole time I thought about nothing else: maybe the thing with the radio is a sign that something—oh, don’t go thinking about mystical things, you know I’m not the type—but I mean, something that makes me feel it’s time to change, to do different things, I don’t know.”

“Well, what you say is very fine... it makes me think of what a friend of mine with a sailing boat used to say: ‘When the wind changes you have to change course too, otherwise you end up on the rocks.’ There, it’s always stayed with me because...”

“Exactly! That’s just it, a phrase that expresses perfectly what I mean. You see, I haven’t got two coins to rub together and I haven’t even got the radio station any more, but perhaps for that very reason, look, something has blossomed inside me, an enthusiasm, a confidence in the future, I don’t know. I’m convinced the moment has come for a turning point, for a new life, do you see?”

Antônio, struck by that explosion of feeling, by that liveliness, by her cheeks flushed with the spiced food, was seized by the idea that perhaps a very small thought about after dinner might be allowed at this point. There had been more than one beer and they were already on their second *caipirinha*; she was all ardour and heat, looking at him with eyes of flame. “Do you see, Antônio?”

“Of course, Isabelita, I understand perfectly, and you know, I was thinking, I live just round the corner from here: we could go there, make ourselves comfortable, have another little beer... There are new patterns we could talk about and...”

Isabel stopped him by laying a hand on his. “Antônio. Listen, Antônio: better not.”

“I mean, I only wanted...”

Isabel let go of his hand; she was smiling but her eyes were clear and firm. “Better not, I’ve told you. We’ve known each other a long time, I like you and I’m fond of you too, but there it is, you’re no part at all of my plans. You’re a good lad, I think of you as a good friend, but that’s where it ends. Let’s not complicate things.”

Antônio felt as though a bucket of river water had been poured over him; he distinctly felt the cold trickles running down his back. He had always had a weakness for that girl and, without ever thinking about it in an entirely conscious way, he had believed she felt an interest in him too. Somehow he had always vaguely thought that one day, in the future, there would certainly be something, some little something, between them. Perhaps he had simply got the moment wrong; floundering a little, he tried to leave himself a way open. “No, sorry, of course, it isn’t the right evening, the radio station and everything, it’s been a bit of a day. Maybe we could go out together in a few days, go to the cinema, talk calmly about everything, about us...”

This time Isabel really did start to laugh. “Ha ha ha, Antoninho, come on, what are you thinking... no other ‘us’ than friendship has ever crossed my mind. Look, I’m really sorry if somehow, I don’t know, I made you believe—though I don’t think I did, I swear—if I made you think of anything else. I’m sincerely sorry, I wish you all the luck in the world, but I really am no good for you. I want to get away from here, I’ve got other plans... Forgive me, I’m just not the right person.”

There was nothing else to say, and Antônio said nothing when she got up to leave, brushing his shoulder with a caress.

Of the rest of the evening he always had a confused memory: a warm, humid night, a little pale blue Formica table, him and his three fellow diners and their bottles of *pinga*, which had by then become four.

1.14 Endgame

In the dust season not even the most inattentive observer can miss another pastime (besides football) that is very popular among the city's children. You only have to walk along the riverfront to see dozens upon dozens of brilliantly coloured kites rising from the little beaches below, most of them home-made out of drinking straws and coloured plastic bags. The Rua Beira Rio, the riverfront, stunned for some months of the year by the lashing rains and submerged, sometimes literally, by the brown of the river, can turn for a few hours into one of the most cheerful and colourful places on the planet.

The prevailing wind is the easterly, a hot gusting wind, friend of the fishermen but enemy of kites: walking along the riverfront you cannot help noticing how crammed the power lines are with old torn kites, caught up there goodness knows how long ago. In some places they look like art installations; you can hardly make out the pylon or the lamp post any more, so many wrecks have crumpled themselves onto it, so hard does the colour fight against the brown that is everywhere.

One of the places where the power lines have claimed most victims is a short stretch of riverfront near the northern boundary of the Perpétuo Socorro, where the women once went to wash their clothes in the river and to bathe under the palms along the front, far from eyes which, had they turned indiscreet, would have found themselves looking down the barrel of a hunting rifle shouldered in turn by one of them to safeguard the virtue of the group. There the narrow beach that runs alongside the road suddenly widens, and it is there that the girls of the district arrange to meet to fly, some would say "snag", their kites.

Behind this beach, a little back from the road and incongruously drowned in the thick of the *jacarandas*, stood a low building of dusty brick with large and not especially clean windows facing the river, the second and topmost floor of which housed Senhor Inácio's office.

The appointment was for eleven in the morning on the seventeenth of November, but Antônio left the house very early; it was a fine day and he would ride up the riverfront northwards on his bicycle, hoping the sun would melt away his dismal thoughts. The kites of each district are systematically in the colours of the district itself: yellow and green for Santa Inés, where Antônio lived; blue and black for the Trem, the colours of Ypiranga and of Inter, the favourite club of Padre Vitório Galiani, its founder; red, yellow and green, the colours of the official flag of Macapá, for the Bairro Central; red and yellow for the Perpétuo Socorro. When the first red and green kites of the Cidade Nova were already in sight, Antônio stopped the bicycle and got off, looking for a reasonably safe place to leave it.

He realised he knew nothing about Senhor Inácio, neither what his real work was nor what his life outside football consisted of. To him, and to everybody, he had always and only been Senhor Inácio, the chairman. Being summoned to his personal office rather than to the club's own offices did nothing to reassure him either. Never before had a meeting with the board been held outside the walls of the club, and Antônio himself had never had the least idea that out there along the river Senhor Inácio kept another office.

An hour early, and there were a great many kites in the air. Antônio watched them, fascinated: his childhood spent kicking a football about had not allowed him to take enough delight in this marvel. There were boys and girls of every age, some of them genuinely expert at handling them in flight. Adults, on the other hand, were very few; looking properly, perhaps only him. Sitting on a low wall in the warm smell of the river, he watched a big green lizard chasing flies, looking for any foothold that would keep him from thinking about the semi-final lost so dishonourably the day before. In the

distance the shape of a young man came closer with a loose-limbed walk. He had a beard and long hair and his way of walking was very rhythmic, as though he were dancing. Antônio recognised him: it was Douglas; he had not seen him in months.

“Douglas? Is that you?”

“Antônio? Hello! Yes, it’s me! How good to see you!”

They embraced, looked at each other for a long moment, laughed.

“What’s happened to you? You’re thin, you’re brown, you’re...” Antônio hesitated a moment, weighing up whether or not it might come out as an insult. “...you’re handsome!”

“You mean compared with the fat, pasty lad you used to know?”

“Well, yes, maybe not exactly fat, but look at you! You’re really not the same man!”

“Nothing much, Antônio, what can I tell you: I’ve been up the river, in the forest, for a few weeks, a trip with two friends...” Antônio could not remember ever having seen Douglas so happy. “We’ve got it right here on our doorstep and we don’t even realise what riches we’ve got. How many times have you thought about going up it? And still we don’t realise what it really means.”

“Countless times. I’ve thought countless times about going up the river and exploring it properly, and then for some reason I never did.”

The hour he had in hand went by quickly amid Douglas’s stories. The word he said most often was “beautiful”; his eyes were bright and lost in the memory of encounters with people he described as “more real” and of a landscape so compelling that it suddenly became too large and too complex to be fully understood. An hour, an hour and five, an hour and ten...

“Forgive me, Douglas, I really have to go. Shall we meet one evening so you can go on telling me? I want to know everything down to the smallest detail, what route you took, who went with you: I want to know it all.”

Senhor Inácio was waiting for him behind a large wooden desk, an unlit cigar in his mouth, his pink linen shirt stuck to his body with sweat despite the wind coming in through the great window open onto the river. On the desk lay the sports pages of the local papers, across which stood great circles in red marker pen around the articles about the previous day’s match. The light from an enormous computer monitor—Antônio had not even thought monitors that big existed—was reflected on the chairman’s greasy, whitish skin as he began to speak without preamble, with a slight stammer Antônio had never noticed before.

Antônio would never manage to look him in the face, out of a sort of sudden revulsion; all his eyes looked at were the brilliantly coloured kites wheeling nearby, just outside the window.

“Antônio, I’ve called you in because it’s been decided not to renew your contract.”

The news certainly did not catch Antônio by surprise: he watched the kites and did not move a muscle.

“I don’t deny that in part you’ve done a good job, but it wasn’t enough. The boys aren’t happy and Eduardo isn’t happy either. I haven’t spoken to him yet but I know he isn’t.”

Eduardo? Antônio knew Eduardo was not enthusiastic, perhaps, but between them there was a frank relationship and if there had been problems he would have talked to him about them. In any case it was clear there was no room to argue, and he said nothing.

“I wouldn’t want you to think it’s a question of money, absolutely not; in fact I wanted to assure you that your November salary will be paid to you as normal.”

It was not a question of money, not least because the “salary”, as Senhor Inácio called it, was so paltry that it would not even have covered a new bicycle pump.

“But there it is, it isn’t working, Antônio. Your training method isn’t orthodox, it hasn’t borne the fruit we hoped for, we aren’t happy.”

One of the kites was following particularly attractive trajectories; it always seemed on the point of falling but always recovered, running very rapidly through a figure of eight and then climbing again. That kite had an internal tension to it, an energy. The thought made Antônio smile, a gesture the chairman interpreted entirely wrongly.

“I see you’re amused, good. We’ll announce it this afternoon before training; if you want to say goodbye to your boys you may come. Eduardo will take the session and will remain first-team manager until we find a replacement. Ah, and I’d like you to hand back all the equipment: the bag, the shirts and the tracksuit, thank you.”

That figure of eight again, that recovery at the last possible moment again.

“Well, Antônio? Have you nothing to say?”

“Oh, Senhor Inácio, I would have plenty of things to say. I could talk about my boys and how disastrous they have been this year, a group of extremely poor players saved only by the way I organised their football. I could talk about a short-sighted board whose boldest stroke was taking the players to church to be poisoned before a semi-final. I could talk about the sadness I felt seeing our own stands always empty and those very same stands always full when Ypiranga played. But I am not made that way. You want to send me away? I understand that; we lost the semi-final and I take all the responsibility for it myself. But there is perhaps one thing I want to say to you. You will not win. You will never win again. As long as the Futebol Clube has you as its chairman, Senhor Inácio, you could bring in, I don’t know, the manager of Palmeiras and a player like Catu or Rolando and you would still never win again.”

“Antônio, Antônio, so much bitterness. If you want to become a successful manager you have to learn to put personal matters aside, you know that? And there’s another thing I want to tell you, and I want to tell it only to you: next year there won’t be a championship. The money has run out, the Zerão is closing and goodbye everybody. You see how short-sighted you are? You see that you think only about Macapá when in fact we’re in the middle of a crisis a great deal bigger than you and me?”

“But Senhor Inácio, are you sure of what you are saying? What do you mean, the Zerão is closing?”

“It means that although they were built less than ten years ago the stands are falling down and there’s no money to put them right; it means that five Macapá clubs will no longer have a stadium to train in; it means that we may perhaps manage to play in some cup competition in the north of Brazil, but nothing more.”

“They will put it right. The Zerão is too important to this city, they will find a way.”

“You still enjoy living in the world of dreams, eh?”

Antônio got up sharply, took off the Macapá Futebol Clube badge he kept pinned to his shirt and let it fall noisily onto the desk; with a measured step he walked out of the office and with an emphatic slowness went down the steps one by one until he reached the street. The glare of the midday sun almost blinded him.

Up in the sky the kite he had been following with his eyes until a few minutes earlier suddenly lost height and went to snag itself on the power lines directly beneath Senhor Inácio’s window, joining other kites of the same colour that had met the same fate in the past.

1.15 *The River*

Antônio was standing on the buttress of the Fortaleza thinking about suicide. Every so often he happened to turn it over in his mind, as a theoretical possibility entirely disconnected from reality. Of this sort: if a doctor came along with the serum of immortality and wanted to inject you with it, what would you do? I'd pick up an iron bar and beat him half to death, that's what I'd do. And if I couldn't manage it, then I'd kill myself without a second's thought. Immortality, whatever next.

At other times he had thought about suicide as a potential solution to his problems. Am I behind with the electricity bills? Well, if I killed myself it wouldn't be a problem any more. Do I have to make that phone call I really don't want to make? Same again. But every single time it was clear to him—from the start, from the “if”—that he was not really entertaining the idea. And every time the next thought was: what could be a reason that would make me really think it over? Then a vague sense of shame would come over him for having associated the idea of suicide with such trivial thoughts, and generally his mind would start to wander, would start to consider creative methods of killing oneself, and five minutes later he was already thinking about something else entirely.

That time too he was not really thinking of killing himself. But he was thinking about his loneliness and perhaps about Isabel, he was thinking about the radio station, he was thinking about buggy computers and perhaps about the end of the world, he was thinking about the semi-final and about that other semi-final, he was thinking about the pale blue wall of his beloved stadium. And then his thoughts fell on the pilot of the EgyptAir flight. On how bad you have to feel to want to kill yourself, how appallingly bad you have to feel to actually do it, and how unimaginably bad you have to feel to do it and take a hundred people with you. But how do you do it? How the fuck do you end up like that? And imagine if the pilot had already thought about killing himself in the past, alone in his room, and somebody close to him had managed to talk him out of it. Had saved him. Imagine the cursed irony of it. Perhaps it's better to kill yourself straight away, the first time it comes into your head.

Then, little by little, that time too he began to wander. He came back to the practical aspects of suicide and thought, as he always did, that if he had to do it he would choose the river. And it was the river that distracted him, with that fantastic colour of its, the only possible colour for a river worthy of the name: brown.

His memory took him back to being a child, the first time at school they had been put in front of a map. “Miss! What are these pale blue lines?”

“Those are the rivers. This one drawn here is the Amazon.”

“The rivers? You can tell whoever drew them has never seen one!”

The wild laughter. And the teacher, patiently, explaining that the colour of the river is a particular colour, due to the characteristics that make it almost unique in the world, but that in general other rivers really are pale blue or blue, more or less like the sea. “There's even a song about a beautiful European river: ‘The Blue Danube’. One day I'll play it for you.”

And then a leap forward, Antônio a young adult, in front of a computer connected to the internet for the first time. His friends all searching for Pamela Anderson, and him for “Danube photos”. And the disbelief first and then the laughter, seeing that the blue Danube was brown as well. Thames photos, click: brown. Nile: brown. Mississippi: brown. Hahaha, damned cartographers, and I who believed you all this time, you and the teacher. But then more clicks brought up photographs of blue rivers,

and in some of them even the Danube itself, and the Nile and the others, looked blue. Perhaps it depended on the shot, on which stretch of the river? And so the wide eyes, the intuition, the quick search and the confirmation: there were photographs (and how many!) of the Amazon that showed it blue, a very deep blue. Thinking about it, it was obvious, but having had it in front of his eyes all his life he had never stopped to consider it, not once in more than twenty-five years: the river was far more various than he had thought, and had a great many surprises in store.

That distant time he had switched off the computer reluctantly and had promised himself that he would soon go and look for them, those surprises; but the months had passed and then the years, and school, and the heat, and the radio, and the rain, and football... and the river had gone on flowing towards him without ever once being answered.

1.16 Departures

Isabel came from a relatively comfortable family whose parents would gladly have paid for her university studies, but out of personal pride she had chosen to pay for them herself, working in Ana Maria's bar. The radio station, on the other hand, she gave her time to out of pure passion. But now her studies were finished and there was not even the excuse of the radio any more, perhaps dead for good: she had to decide what to do "when she grew up". And perhaps part of growing up was learning to set one's pride aside.

"Papa, I've thought it over: I've decided to accept your generous offer to pay for my studies at the international school for interpreters in New York."

"I'm glad, Isabelita dear. And when were you thinking of leaving?"

"The day after tomorrow, if that suits you. I'd like to start with the next semester."

"I see you've worked on the pride. I'm glad. Maybe after that we can work a little on the impulsiveness as well, eh? But I'm very happy for you."

Isabel arrived in front of the door of 1630 Sixtieth Street, Brooklyn, when the sun had long since gone down. Seven steps led up to a little house of pale brick steeped in the yellow of the street lamps; her enormous wheeled suitcase would never get inside without somebody's help. The bell was jammed and she was too tired even to knock on the frosted glass. She had travelled for twenty-four hours straight: to reach New York from Macapá you had to strike deep into the south of Brazil, first to Brasília and then to São Paulo, and only then had a great US Airways aeroplane finally carried her to her destination.

Of those twenty-four hours she retained a confused memory: the absurdly long waits in queues first of all, the word "Aliens" at the New York airport, the horrible things eaten on the plane, the "\$8,000" printed on the ticket, the English she heard and could not understand (*I've got a degree in languages, damn it!*), the people, a quantity of people all together that seemed to take her breath away, the fear of the first take-off immediately overcome by curiosity and by the new pleasure of flying, of rising up and cutting through the clouds, the smiles of the people in the seats beside her on arrival in New York, the breathtaking view of the city first from the aeroplane window and then from the taxi, and in particular of the enormous twin towers that could genuinely be seen from every corner of the city.

It was her first real journey. During the ten and a half hours of the flight between São Paulo and the Big Apple she had finally had the chance to write a proper travel diary, and out of her pen had come a river in flood: an entire notebook bought for the occasion at Brasília airport had been filled with dense writing and uncertain drawings. She had decided so quickly, and Papa had agreed so quickly (*did he want to get rid of me?* she thought, laughing), that there had been no room to feel any emotion at all: just time enough to let Ana Maria, the owner of the bar, know, to make one telephone call to the radio station so that somebody there would hear about it, and to pack. The school would accept enrolments provided she started when "Mid Term" ended on the nineteenth of November. She remembered with embarrassment the almost comic telephone call to the office during which she could neither understand nor make herself understood, so much for interpreters and translators.

The cold, she had nothing on but a duster far too light for the weather, gave her the courage, or the strength, to knock at the door. The house belonged to a third cousin of her father's who had moved over with her family decades earlier, had had an unspecified number of children, had lost her hus-

band, and now enjoyed her not particularly meagre pension by renting out the upper floor of that little house lost in the south of the metropolis, where Koreans, Chinese, Italians, Brazilians, Poles and Orthodox Jews shared out, peaceably enough, every square centimetre that could be built on and lived in.

The woman dressed in black who opened the door had an enormous hooked nose that adorned her face and made her look like an eagle, or better, a crow. She began speaking to her in what from her own point of view was Portuguese, a language she had not been near for at least thirty years, and which Isabel had the tact to pretend to understand. The old lady led the way up the steep stairs to the flat above, from which came music and a good smell of something Isabel could not identify.

God gives nuts to those who have no teeth, thought Teresa, holding her new mobile telephone in her hand. She had spent half of the preceding days diligently studying its manual and the other half showing it off to Luiza. At the hour when she usually rang Antônio, though, a sense of melancholy came over her. *Am I really going to have to get used to ringing that mangy parrot's programme?*

She weighed the telephone in her hand again, flicked the cover open and shut, feeling like the co-star of that film, took a deep breath and dialled the number.

"Hello?"

"Er, Senhor Inácio? It's Teresa. Do you remember me? I'm that lady with the telephone."

"Which lady with the tele..."

"The one who helped Gustavo. How is he, by the way?"

"He's better, thank you. He's recovering well, he's already started rehabilita..."

"I'm glad," Teresa interrupted him, because she could not go too long without speaking or all the determination she had miraculously scraped together would vanish in a breath. "I'm sorry to trouble you, but I was thinking again about what you said to me when we met. Do you remember?"

"Mmm, yes..."

"Well, you gave me this beautiful telephone and I'll be grateful for ever, but you'd said it was little enough and that I could ask for whatever I wanted. Well, another thing has come into my head that I'd like."

"Let's hear it, let's hear it," Inácio encouraged her, amused and almost full of admiration at such cheek.

"Well, you know Radio Nova Amizade? A few days ago there was a burglary, they stole everything and now the station is closed. Well, you know, I'd like it to open again."

"Ha ha, you aim high, don't you, senhora Teresa," laughed Inácio, to whom the meeting had meanwhile come back. "I remember you telling me that in life you have to know how to be content."

"I still think so, Senhor Inácio," said Teresa, calling on the last drops of her reserve of courage and shamelessness, "but sometimes you also have to know how to dare. Nothing ventured, nothing gained."

Almost on the other side of the city Antônio was lying on his bed staring at the ceiling, with a solid conviction that had formed inside him. *Leave. I have to leave.* Douglas's stories of his wanderings through the Amazon forest echoed round his head, and the bitterness he felt about the way the football season had ended and about the burglary at the radio station did nothing but amplify them and bring them closer, almost within reach. But there was something else. The day before he had gone to the station to take stock and decide how to carry on, and Isabel had not been there.

"She's gone," a very downcast João had said.

"Gone? Where? How?" Antônio had not expected it at all.

"She's gone to New York. I don't know much more than that, she left yesterday."

"To New York? João, don't tease me, it isn't possible..."

"Antônio, I'm not teasing you: I'm telling you she's gone. She said the moment had come to change, that she'd made a quick decision but the right one, to go and study. I don't know anything else."

He had ridden home slowly, the smell of the river very strong in the humid air, almost a sweet putrefaction of fruit. The fronts of the houses looked soaked in the light of the setting sun, grey and yellowish and pink like a cheap watercolour. Antônio still had in his ears that silence which meant a complete reset of the brain, one more of them. Isabel had gone. In recent times she had been a constant presence and had ended up being part of his inner landscape; her absence weighed more than he was willing to admit even to himself. *I need a holiday: tomorrow I'll ring the school and take a couple of weeks off, the school year is over now anyway, I've never taken any leave, they're hardly going to say no.*

His ceiling filled with colours, with faces, with tastes, with sounds. He picked up the telephone and dialled the number Douglas had left him.

"Hello, Douglas?"

"Antônio?"

"Hello, yes, it's me. I've decided I'm going off to travel round the Amazon and I wanted to ask you for some advice, get you to explain properly what route you took and how you got there."

"When shall we meet?"

"Right now if you like."

Chapter 2

2.1 Water

Monte Dourado, Pará. The town, if we may call it that, was a simple huddle of small houses gathered round a bare little square dominated by a modest colonial building, behind which the forest already loomed, that housed a microscopic post office with its wooden shutter half down and a sleepy *pousada* with its blinds pulled to.

Five or six children and dogs were playing around the post of the *pelourinho*, but otherwise, once the wheezing bus that had brought Antônio there had set off again and the couple of people who had got off with him had disappeared into the side streets, the town seemed deserted. That peace was a relief after a journey that had seemed interminable, crushed between women, luggage, shrieking children and old ladies gossiping without pause, with the driver's radio at full volume shrilling one little song after another.

It was a relief above all after the preceding days, when his wish to get away for a while from his usual life had been frustrated by the crowds, by the noise, by the sheer quantity of people and tourists thronging the towns along the river.

The organised trips to look at anteaters or to taste *jacaré*, on boats stuffed with Americans and Europeans photographing every parrot as though it were the last one on earth, surrounded by children trying to sell them ice lollies and sticky fruit, were not what he had expected of the Amazon. The shops, the little tables with the old men drinking *cachaça* in the afternoon heat, the cars, the transistor radios, the bored vultures on the remains of the vegetables at the market, the boys with dark eyes sizing up the tourists' watches, the round backsides of the girls shuffling along in flip-flops and laughing together, were all the same as in his own city.

He had dutifully visited Santarém and Manaus, but he felt as though he had changed districts, nothing more. That was not the Amazon he had imagined so many times; it was certainly not there that he would be able to knot together again the threads of his thoughts and of his life, immersed in nature; it was not from a journey like that one that he would be able to come home enthusiastic, renewed, enriched.

Already on the way to a disappointing return, he had stopped at Almeirim, undecided whether to give the whole thing up and go back to his two rooms on the first floor or to believe one more brochure promising fantastic excursions to discover the beauties of the river: the extremely rare pink dolphins! The extremely dangerous anaconda! The confluence of the two rivers, the waters that do not mix for kilometres!

While he wandered doubtfully through the scorching streets of the little town a furious downpour had made him run for shelter inside a bus station. Waiting for the rain to stop, he had loitered over his *cafezinho*, casting a distracted eye over the walls covered with overlapping posters and flyers advertising ice creams, shows, special offers on detergents, samba schools and beauticians of many promises, until his eye fell on the timetable board. It appeared that entirely minor routes left from there, connecting, without any great frequency, places in the interior whose names meant nothing to him. An idea had begun to make its way into his head, and he had gone over to the ticket window, where a small man in shorts and flip-flops was reading a sports paper and picking his nose.

"Listen a moment, I see there's a bus that goes to Monte Dourado and it says in brackets 'Rio Jari': does that mean the town is on the river?"

"If that's what it says, that's how it must be, no?"

“Heh heh heh, yes, of course, of course. But look, in your opinion, once you get there, is there any chance of finding a boat, of hiring one I mean, to go a little way up the Jari?”

The little man had taken his finger out of his nose, examined it thoroughly, then, satisfied, had shrugged and said with a broad smile, “Well, the river’s there, there’ll be some boat or other, otherwise what would they have built the landing stage for?”

“Quite so, you’re not wrong. All right then, give me a ticket. The coach leaves tomorrow at nine, doesn’t it?”

“That’s what it says, Wednesdays and Fridays at nine, so given that tomorrow’s Wednesday that’s how it’ll be, no? Then nine, half past nine, sometimes if there’s a lot to load it gets to ten, eleven, who knows. But if you come at nine you’ll be fine, you’ll even get the seat at the front where there’s more air. That’ll be thirty reais.”

It had been a decision taken on impulse: Antônio had suddenly felt thoroughly excited, and happier than at any time since he had set off. *No more following organised itineraries, the ones laid on for tourists, no more fake adventures in a tamed forest; now I’m going off on my own, I’ll take a nice little room in Monte Dourado and find a lad to take me up the river towards the interior. No more brochures. The moment has come to break the patterns: it’s my journey and from now on I’m organising it myself.*

Behind the four houses that made up sleepy Monte Dourado he had no trouble finding the landing stage, just a jetty of planks jutting barely three metres out over the greenish river. Hauled up on the bank there were six or seven little wooden boats the size of bathtubs, fishermen’s things, and moored at the landing stage only two motorboats, not a great deal larger but fitted with a rough sort of cockpit and a plastic sheet stretched over to shade the deck. One of the two was extremely old and listed visibly to one side; on the other a man with a great bush of iron-coloured hair was fiddling about with the engine.

“Hey! Listen, I’m talking to you! This boat here, do you hire it out?”

The man wiped his hands on his shorts, scratched the hairs on his bare chest, weighed up Antônio’s shirt and his Adidas shoes and lit a cigarette. “Of course, of course. Hire with pilot, good price, very beautiful excursion. I am the pilot. Where was it the senhor wanted to go?”

“Well, I wanted to take a trip on the river, go up it a bit to have a look at the forest... maybe stay away a couple of days, I don’t know, if there’s somewhere to sleep...”

“Of course, sleeping on the boat, all equipped, most comfortable, the senhor lives like a lord. Away two or three days, plenty of forest, very beautiful excursion. Excellent price, food included, cook included, I am the cook.”

“Ah, good, very good. Could we leave tomorrow, or do you need to finish getting the boat ready?”

“The boat is most in order, look at her, a jewel.”

He slammed the hatch that closed off the engine and threw the cigarette end into the water. “We leave tomorrow morning; meanwhile the senhor can sleep over there at the *pousada*, nice place, clean, excellent dinner. Excellent price. The *pousada* belongs to my sister Gesita.”

The dinner really was excellent, a river-prawn *moqueca* to make you lick your whiskers and a beer that was very nearly cold; on the other hand the bill struck him as a little steep for something called an excellent price, even taking into account that the bed was narrow and humped and the high ceiling of the room was entirely covered in geckos. One gecko or two did not bother him, but there must have been five thousand of them at the very least, and even though Dona Gesita had answered his misgivings with a broad, contented smile because that way “he wouldn’t have a single mosquito in the room”, Antônio slept a somewhat restless sleep.

Nor did the price strike him as excellent that Gambone—*Paulo by name, but Gambone will do, everyone calls me Gambone, come on, on board, mind that plank, no, the dog’s very good, he’s called Torment: he doesn’t bite, he only farts, ahahahah! Look what a day, look at this boat, a very beautiful excursion*—extorted from him before he had even let him climb aboard that tub; but he was there now, that appeared to be the only boat available, and by this stage he was dying to make that trip up the river.

The journey began in a genuinely gratifying way: after a few hours’ sailing they came in sight of an enormous waterfall, which broke off the drowsiness of the current all at once with boiling foam, flights of birds and rainbows of spray.

Gambone did the honours, thoroughly proud, as pleased with himself as though he had built it that morning. “This is the Cachoeira do Santo Antônio, very beautiful. Big waterfall, the biggest in Amapá, very beautiful, no? Very beautiful. Very lucky you to see it. Worth the excursion, only for the waterfall, worth it, very beautiful excursion.”

Antônio, though much struck by the sheer scale of that fall of water deep in the forest, was rather put out. “So we’re going back now? Is the river trip over already?”

“Eh, that’s what you thought, eh?” Gambone had turned to look at him slyly, one eye half shut against the smoke of the cigarette hanging from his mouth. “The excursion is still long, more beautiful still. Very lucky you, because I know the river so well. Old cheat, the Jari, old spiteful thing; whoever doesn’t know him ends badly, dangerous old yellow cheat.”

He came about to head back, glorying in himself as he turned into a side channel further downstream, a secondary one almost hidden among the branches. “I know all the tricks of this wretched river, you are very lucky to come with me, he has more arms than a woman in heat, this old yellow thing, a thousand arms that change their turnings between today and tomorrow. Only I know his cheats, I know how he twists and turns and I take you where you want, up the river. City people who came got lost, on this river, plenty of people. Came and got lost, big professors, people who write the books, lost among his arms with no idea any more whether they were going down or up. Very lucky you to come with me, very beautiful boat, mine.”

And Antônio really would have got lost, in that continual forking among the green of waters that seemed indistinguishable one from another. He had to admit that his boatman’s boasting was, on the whole, well founded when after a couple of hours they came out again onto the main course of the river, broad and yellow and flown over by flocks of parrots, with no trace left of the waterfall, a good way behind them now.

The rest of the journey turned out to be a much more tedious business than expected: the boat grumbled and rocked, spitting exhaust fumes over an opaque yellowish water, and the forest was a green wall on both sides, tangled and unceasing, its monotonous, looming mass enlivened only by the multitude of birds that rose and fell, shrieking an endless range of cries, and every so often by the very rapid wheeling of restless little monkeys.

Gambone steered with one hand and lit unbroken cigarettes with the other; a couple of times a day he moored the boat and devoted himself to soporific fishing sessions, in which Antônio did not feel greatly inspired to take part, and which enriched the monotonous cooking on board—which otherwise began and ended with *empanadas* fried at length in thick palm oil—with oblong fish of a muddy flavour about which Torment seemed enthusiastic.

After taking four whole rolls of film of that great wall of branches, leaves, lianas and orchids, Antônio gave up hope of accidentally framing a jaguar on the hunt, or at the very least a fight between tapirs, a mating of capybaras, some species of parrot that would afterwards turn out to be unknown and would be given his name. You could tell that that chaos of foliage was swarming with life, but it was a very elusive life and, apart from the omnipresent birds and monkeys, apparently invisible. He took notes lazily, curled up under the sheet next to Torment to avoid the afternoon downpour, listened to Gambone recounting for the umpteenth time the formidable performance with the *mulata* twins Diamira and Alfonsinha that had given rise to that so evocative nickname of his. The forest seemed so close at hand and yet he felt he could not really see it, hear it, touch it.

Despite this vague disappointment he felt well. Rested, certainly: those days of quiet sailing whose only excitement was the ceaseless battle with the mosquitoes had let the stress of the last few months settle, and Antônio was beginning to daydream about buying himself a boat and a banana-yellow dog and setting up in a little house in Monte Dourado, perhaps with a girl (Isabel, perhaps?), about starting a small radio station that broadcast nothing but jazz and Indian music, about writing a novel that was about football, when the river journey suddenly came to an end.

Until a moment before they had been sailing in absolute peace, enjoying the breeze and the smell of diesel, when all at once Gambone slowed down and pulled in to the bank, where a small clearing of beaten earth looked out over the river. He laid down the plank, went ashore, tied the boat to a sapling, then calmly picked up Antônio's rucksack and unloaded it onto the ground.

"All ashore!" he announced merrily.

Antônio was mildly puzzled; he had not understood there was going to be a stop, and besides, there did not seem to be anything there to justify one. But he followed Torment, who had disembarked wagging his tail happily. Gambone brought Antônio a can of beer and invited him to make himself comfortable on a fallen trunk, waited for the little creature to do a couple of small businesses at the foot of a yucca, climbed back on board, took in the plank and whistled the dog back; the dog leapt aboard elegantly while the engine was already spluttering away from the bank.

"Very beautiful excursion, very beautiful. The river trip is over, you wait and my cousin comes and gets you with the jeep. Very beautiful jeep, a very comfortable journey back. Excellent price."

Antônio was dumbfounded. "What? What do you mean? Are you mad, you can't leave me here! I paid for there and back! Come back at once! You can't leave me here!!!"

"Calm down, my cousin comes soon. One-way price with the boat, excellent price, very beautiful excursion, very beautiful boat. In a very little while my cousin comes, calm down. Calm down, a good lad, very beautiful jeep."

Gambone's voice was already receding; the barely sketched track that came out into the clearing was deserted as far as the eye could see; the forest made its noise. Torment was barking, and seemed to be saying goodbye to him.

2.2 Din

The jeep jolted and creaked, rising and falling over the humps of the ground like a ship among waves. Or perhaps it was those three days in a row spent on the boat that made Antônio feel as though he were still on the water. The smell that soaked the air was the same, thick and heavy: he had believed it was the smell of the river, that river so turbid and slow that knotted itself like a yellowish snake between walls of leaves, but he realised that it was in fact the smell of the forest, just as the din that had wrapped itself round him unceasingly ever since he had left Monte Dourado belonged to the forest.

He had always thought Macapá a noisy city, so much so that he regarded the brief moment between putting on his headphones at the station and the start of the programme as a very small gift he allowed himself each time: two, three seconds of perfect silence. The only one there was, from the moment he opened his eyes in the morning and the neighbour's radio was already shrilling away downstairs, while Maribel sweeping the courtyard warbled the repertoire of the opera singer she would never become, and from the windows next to his old Benito's television, on at every hour of the day, hummed a continuous, unintelligible background of words, groans and gunshots.

And yet by comparison Macapá was silence, a silence which, inside this unbroken uproar of sound, he was almost beginning to feel nostalgic for. *You see, one never thinks about these things; for years one imagines the forest, looks at the photographs, cannot quite see what it is really like—that is entirely impossible—but does get reasonably close to all this green, this shade, those lianas and those prehistoric flowers sodden with damp; and yet one never thinks about the sounds. You cannot see the noise in the photographs, nor can you smell this smell, like some immense sweating animal covered in moss.*

The little routine at the start to cadge a bit more money out of him had not surprised him, heaven knows: he had been used to that sort of thing since the day he was born, even if it still irritated him slightly. What had almost astonished him, on the contrary, was that the jeep had arrived little more than an hour after Gambone disappeared: for a person to be two hours late, more often three, was the norm, and a delay of only an hour and a quarter an unexpected exception.

At first he had been amused by the fact that Pepè—that was how he had introduced himself—had a bottle of *pinga* beside his seat and took generous swigs from it, just as he had found something likeable in this swaggering way he had of behaving, his battered hat, his bold moustache. “Off we go, boss, away into the forest!”

He had taken the indefinable age of the dented jeep for granted, roughly repainted an improbable red, as he had the fact that the driver drove with his knotted feet half stuffed into flip-flops: practically everybody drove that way, even if Antônio had never liked it.

He had been fascinated by that track Pepè had swaggered onto, in reality no more than a hint of one, a gap cleared in a rough-and-ready way of the largest trees, where the jeep still had to labour through the undergrowth, forcing its way among torn-up grasses, shrubs and bushes. He had thought, excitedly, that he was in the forest at last, that at last he was really living it, here they were going into the thick of it, even if only for a short stretch, *at last I'm in here inside the forest, alone (with Pepè, but he doesn't count), no tourists, at last I can look at these trees and enjoy them close up, all this nature, the smells, the birds, the sounds.*

The frequent obstacles had not caught him unprepared, nor having to get out and clear a way with the machete to get round a fallen trunk or a tangle of shrubs blocking the passage. Nor had he been

surprised—he was no tourist, he had been born just behind here—when they came to that marsh which certainly had not been there before: everybody knows that when it rains the rivers widen, break out, create branches and bogs which then, once the rain stops, disappear, or sometimes stay there for whole years instead.

When Pepè had turned off to skirt the marsh with a very wide curve to the left, he had remained calm: these things are normal in the forest.

But he had begun to worry a little when, hours later, they were still following the uncertain edge of that muddy water. When they set off it had been morning, and the sun lit them from in front, rising little by little out of the mists above the screeching of parrots and toucans. Then they had turned off to skirt that *pantanal*, and found the sun on their right, a sun that had slowly reached its zenith and begun its descent; if they had followed their original direction they should have had it behind them by now, and instead they had had it on their left for a very long time. Antônio had thought about it for quite a while; he was not good at these things and his sense of direction had always been somewhere between dreadful and appalling. But between two almost indistinguishable walls of green, with nothing to do but bounce about on those dreadful lumpy seats, which had left his backside aching worse than if it had been beaten with sticks, and all the time in the world to look about him, after a while you notice. So he had plucked up the courage to suggest to Pepè: “Erm... this detour is very long, it’s because of the marsh, isn’t it?”

“Yes, very long. It’s very big, this marsh, very long yes, very.”

But he had not looked at him while he spoke: Pepè was growing more taciturn by the minute and the frequency of the swigs of *pinga* was increasing alarmingly. To drink it like water is normal for a great many people, but it is not in fact water, and even if you are used to it, it certainly does nothing for your concentration and your reflexes.

Another hour had gone by, amid the creaking and the jolting, and still the sun was on the left and still it went on sinking. There had been short, abrupt detours (trials? attempts?), immediately aborted in front of the impenetrable rampart of foliage, then off again, staggering more and more along the margin of that opaque silt. Pepè was hunched over the wheel, his eyes red and the bottle by now almost empty, and Antônio was beginning to be seriously worried. “This detour really is quite long... of course, the rains, the branches of the river... but all in all we do get there, don’t we, to the road, what’s it called, the 210, we’re just going a bit of a long way round, and afterwards we get there, that’s right, we get to the road?”

“Of course, a very long way round. Lots of marsh. We get there, yes... of course, calm down. Pepè knows the road, I’ve done it hundreds of times, I’ve done it. Don’t you worry, boss, about the marsh: I know the road perfectly, calm down, look, you see, I know it.”

Pepè’s hands more and more uncertain, the empty bottle rolling and clinking back and forth across the floor, the sun lower and lower, no trace of a track, only the edge of the marsh and all that resounding of cries, of shrieks, *God, what have I got myself into? He’s blind drunk and by now I’m certain he’s lost the road, and I’ve been really stupid because nobody knows where I am. Now this idiot is going to fall asleep with his head on the wheel; he only wanted my money but he doesn’t know the road, he’s lost, and the lower the sun gets the more the noise grows, I didn’t know that either: the forest never rests.*

Agitated as he was, Antônio had not dared speak to Pepè again; Pepè now seemed utterly concentrated on his hands and the gearstick and the steering, utterly concentrated but by this stage absent, and the sun was further and further to the left, more and more wrong. *Perhaps it would be better to*

stop; I'll suggest it to him now, let's see, he's drunk and he's certainly got a knife, never mind, I'll suggest it anyway, this marsh makes no sense at all. And suddenly the crack, the blow, perhaps an unseen trunk or a hole, a spin, the terrible thud, the crash. And then everything still, a dripping, and the din of the forest.

2.3 Forest

However hard he tried, Antônio could not remember precisely the moment when he had walked away from the overturned jeep: he was certainly in shock, and had perhaps hit his head as well. He remembered getting to his feet, bruised, shaken, after being catapulted out and landing in an ungainly heap in the middle of the bushes. He remembered the jeep, the wheels still turning slowly; he remembered the strangely muffled awareness that Pepè could only be dead, crushed underneath it. But he did not remember how he had decided to set off on foot for the 210, nor did he remember on what basis he had chosen the direction to set off in.

His rucksack must have been thrown clear with him, and he must have found it and picked it up, because there it was on his shoulders when, perhaps an hour later (half an hour, two hours?), his thoughts became somehow coherent again and he found himself walking under a torrential downpour of rain, in the thickest thicket he had ever imagined, with the single thought of reaching that damned road.

He vaguely remembered circling the vehicle, incongruously trying to find his hat again, but only after he had already walked a few metres did he think of the machete. He had gone back, but had understood at once that there was no way of reaching it, buried under the carcass of the jeep along with Pepè and his *pinga*. Thinking about it more lucidly a few hours later, he realised he ought at least to have tried: forcing a way through that forest was a nightmare, and now that night was falling, the thought that his only defence was his camping penknife made him feel decidedly insecure.

For goodness knows what reason, on leaving the jeep he had convinced himself that in an hour or so, two at the most, he would come out onto the road; but now he was beginning to understand that it might take a great deal, a great deal longer.

He thanked heaven he had kept two of the greasy *empanadas* that untrustworthy Gambone had palmed off on him for lunch and dinner throughout all three days of their sailing. Those, half a bottle of water and his favourite cherry sweets were his entire provisions, and while he was thinking vaguely that he would perhaps have to stop for the night—*the rain will stop, of course, but I certainly won't be able to sleep, goodness knows how many animals there are, listen to those monkeys screaming, do jaguars hunt in the dark?*—into his mind came *feijoada* the way Armandinha made it, and that black steaming sauce, the pieces of well-cooked meat, the slices of orange to garnish it, and even the two chipped Formica tables, the glasses of doubtful cleanliness, the smell of sweat and onion of the enormously fat Armandinha, even her moustache, seemed to him a vision of paradise. *The moment I get back, the moment I find the 210 and a lift and then get home, the moment I get back I'm going to go and stuff myself with feijoada and get drunk on pinga** worse than poor Pepè, that thieving drunkard who didn't even know the road, God rest his soul, I wonder if he had a family, poor man; I've got to reach the road quickly and send somebody to bury him.*

2.4 Encounter

He had walked all day, with nothing inside him but one by now shrivelled *empanada*, two packets of cherry-flavoured gummy sweets and two coconuts, the only fruit among all the ones he had seen that had not made him suspect it was poisonous. He was hungry, thirsty and very tired, but above all he was beginning to be genuinely frightened. He had gone over the reckoning a great many times, but it was time to admit that if he had gone in the right direction from the scene of the accident he should have come across some sign of civilisation long before now. He did not want at any cost to tell himself that he was lost—*lost in the Amazon forest, god of all the saints, in the Amazon forest; has anybody ever been saved who got lost here, shining jesus, why me, why me of all people*—but he could not hold out much hope on that score.

What he had been following for hours might be a track, a path, a trail, or it might be nothing of the kind. It might perfectly well be an entirely random succession of stretches of thinner vegetation, animal runs, patches of grass that for goodness knows what reason grew lower.

In any case he had no alternative; even if he had decided to turn back he would never have managed to retrace the road he had covered in that day and a half. The turbid, slimy warmth of the humid air had glued his shirt to him, but taking it off and exposing more centimetres of bare skin to the insects was unthinkable: he would never have believed there could be so many mosquitoes in the world.

He realised that before long evening would fall, and he could not bear the thought of another night like the one he had spent, sitting on his rucksack with his back against a trunk, sunk in a darkness so complete and absolute that he had never suspected it existed, his eyes wide at every noise and rustle—and there were an infinity of noises and rustles and cries and cheepings: the forest seemed more alive in the dark than during the day.

And flashing the torch about all the time (*how long can the batteries last? better save them*) was no use at all: the little blade of light showed only ever trunks and a tangle of foliage.

I ought to build myself a shelter, he thought, out of branches: it wouldn't protect me from anything, of course, but perhaps I'd feel calmer, perhaps I might even sleep. I could make myself a roof of boughs and then drink a mouthful of water and eat the last gummy sweet. I've still got two fingers of water in the bottom of the bottle; I can't drink more than a mouthful at a time (not until I find some more that looks drinkable, not until I get somewhere, not until it rains), but when the sun goes down I'll have a swig, not before, better not, even though my mouth feels like asphalt and the rucksack gets heavier every second.

He felt something between his neck and his shoulder, reached up absently to remove a leaf or a twig, and his fingers met something enormous, cold and alive. With a squeak of horror he hurled away a spider the size of his hand and, half dead with revulsion, broke into a panicked run. He got only a few metres; the rucksack bounced heavily on his back and his heart was hammering wildly. He stopped, let the rucksack fall and sat down on it, shaking with exhaustion, with fear, with disgust.

This story doesn't end well, I know it. So much for nature, so much for the harmony of man and the cosmos, so much for recovering the primordial rhythms, I'm going to die in this shitty forest, I'm dying here and nobody will ever know where I ended up, so much for nature, I'm dying here of hunger and thirst, how long does it take to die, thirst gets you first, everyone knows that, but I've still got two fingers of water, but the spiders, I never thought about the spiders when I was thinking about nature, if only it had been a jaguar—God, are there jaguars here—better a jaguar but not the

spiders, I don't want to die eaten by spiders, better a snake then, like the ones my grandmother used to tell me about, where you don't even have time to say the whole name of Jesus Christ before you're dead, better that than the spiders. He looked around him, into the thick grass, to see whether the snake might already be lying in wait. His thoughts were coming apart, the heat, the hunger, the tiredness, the thirst. He took his head in his hands, elbows on his knees; perhaps it was better to let himself die there, what else could he do.

A line of big ants was flowing like a stream a little beyond his feet; he stared at them blankly without really seeing them. They came and went, carrying seeds and leaves, and Antônio watched them flow and run and thought, as the palpitations died down and his breathing slowly came back to normal, thought vaguely that perhaps they could be eaten, he had seen it in a documentary—*god, I'm so hungry, so thirsty*—perhaps if you caught them by skewering them on a stick you could then roast them with the lighter. *I'll go and look for a stick now, a longish thin one; come on, Antônio, anything's better than sitting here dying; let me go and find a stick.* He raised his head and half a metre away from him he saw the witch.

He stayed still, dumbfounded: he had not heard her arrive at all, had not heard a movement, a sound. For an instant he thought she was a hallucination, but no, she was true and real, an immensely wrinkled and withered old woman, naked but for two leaves hanging at her hips, a tangle of white and grey hair plaited through with twigs and berries and small bones. With a sort of basket full of herbs and barks hanging from one arm she looked at him, motionless, entirely calm, with barely a flash of amused curiosity in the small black eyes that shone like oil. His first instinct, to run, was too stupid, and easy to recognise as such. He stayed where he was, watching the witch while other thoughts (*it isn't a forest spirit; it isn't, because they don't exist; it's a human being*) forced their way with difficulty into his consciousness, and given that she was in fact a woman—*water, food, shelter from the spiders*—he realised that she was his one and only last chance.

The witch looked at him placidly, examining every detail of his matted hair, of his crooked sunglasses, of the sweat that soaked him, of the smell of desperation and bewilderment he gave off.

Time passed, and then the old woman moved: she turned and set off briskly towards some destination or other. Antônio was still undecided, a residue of his intention to let himself die holding him back; but after a few paces the woman turned and looked him straight in the eyes, with those shining eyes of hers that were laughing at him a little. Then she began walking again, and he picked up his rucksack and followed her.

They walked perhaps an hour, perhaps more; he had entirely lost any sense of time and confined himself to putting one foot in front of the other, following those withered little buttocks that moved with unexpected agility. She did not turn round again; she had no need to. He was so much noisier than she was that the witch knew he was following her without needing to see him.

The forest seemed indistinct and endless, and then entirely suddenly it opened: a clearing risen out of nowhere, huts and smoke and a swarm of children running everywhere and shrilling like small birds. Just time enough to take in the whole of it, and something struck him full in the chest, a blow that sent him flying, rucksack and all, backside on the ground.

The children laughed, delighted by that clumsy man knocked down by a ball of woven lianas; but as the laughter died away, curiosity took its place: what was that creature, white and pale and ridiculous and strange, and where on earth had the medicine woman found it?

They gathered round him, interested and wary; a very small girl with her mouth dirty with mud and fruit came and touched the skin of his arm, timid and bold at once.

The witch squeaked two curt orders and the children made way for him; she signalled to him, and Antônio, picking himself up off the beaten earth, followed her towards the shade of a hut at the other end of that round open space.

2.5 Contact

The hut of branches and mud was very dark, and only after a few moments, once his eyes had grown used to the gloom, did he see that it was far larger than it had seemed and that at least twenty or thirty people were sitting inside, variously adorned with white and dark designs and with parrot feathers. Among them—the only one wearing a long necklace of what looked to him like teeth—was a very old woman, so shrunken and wrinkled that she made the old woman who had found him look like a girl in full bloom. This last was meanwhile making what seemed to be a short speech of introduction, all croaks and trills, and Antônio thought that perhaps it was appropriate for him to say something; it might well be that somebody had passed this way before, missionaries perhaps, it might be possible that these people understood his language. “Ahem, I am very happy to have arrived in your beautiful village and I am grateful for your kind welcome; furthermore I thank this kind lady who has accompanied me here and... and I am sure we shall get along perfectly, and that a fine friendship will be born.”

Better to be prudent. They did not seem hostile, but he had noticed a good many spears and arrows propped up at the back, and all the men carried these great knives of stone and bone hanging at their hips: he thought he had had a very good idea in laying it on about the friendship.

He noticed at once, however, that his words had passed entirely unnoticed: not one of those present had batted an eyelid or given the slightest sign of comprehension; they confined themselves to watching him with great attention.

Then the ancient one croaked something and a man got up and tugged at his rucksack, once, twice. He understood that they wanted him to take it off, and when he had slipped it from his shoulders the man took it and laid it on the ground in front of the one he imagined to be some sort of queen. She put out a small hooked hand and began fiddling with the buckles with those little bird fingers of hers. Antônio came forward attentively—*look obliging and deferential; she is the first queen you have happened to meet, but everybody knows it is good practice not to cross them. I wonder whether I should attempt a bow, I wonder whether it is the custom*—and undid buckles, small buckles and zips. The man from before then seized the rucksack and simply turned it upside down, then picked up one object at a time to hand to the old woman, who examined it attentively before passing it to the person beside her.

Every single article, shoe, pants, razor, sock was passed from hand to hand, touched, shaken, turned inside out, carefully sniffed. Antônio was very anxious about his camera, which however left them all fairly indifferent and was quickly set aside. What those present found very funny, on the other hand, were his rolls of film: when they opened the little lids and pulled out the small cylinders in bright colours branded Kodachrome and Fujifilm they commented on them at length, laughing a great deal.

Now that the entire contents of the rucksack had passed through everyone’s hands and been duly checked, Antônio was beginning to feel rather stupid standing there watching, but he had by now got it into his head that he was in the presence of a sovereign and feared it might be in poor taste to sit down without permission. At that very moment she gave out a rapid, imperious trill and he felt somebody tug at the hem of his shirt with a certain roughness. The man, fairly young and muscular (a chamberlain, a dignitary, the captain of the guard or—even—the crown prince?), tugged and tugged, and finally Antônio realised he was meant to take it off. *But of course, here you are. What, the trousers too? All right, don’t pull, I’m taking them off, wait while I get my shoes and socks off, just a moment, there we are... no, but the pants... look, what are you doing, you’ll tear them like*

that... all right, all right, forgive me, Your Ladyship, don't be angry, they're already off, satisfied now?

In fact, now that he was as naked as his mother made him, the atmosphere became noticeably more relaxed. After all they were naked too, apart from those few leaves and pieces of bark: probably a clothed man must have seemed to them something rather perverse. *With all this searching they also wanted to make sure I didn't have some kind of weapon*, he thought; *all in all they're not wrong either*. In fact, now that they had established he was broadly harmless they seemed to have forgotten him completely; they passed one another little pots, rolls of film and shirts, and nobody looked his way any more.

But standing there like that, stark naked, he felt rather too inoffensive, defenceless, let us say. Cautiously, and checking out of the corner of his eye that the empress did not find it unseemly, he sat down in a corner, hugging his knees.

While the elders chatted amiably, plaiting his shoelaces and his ballpoint pens into their hair, evening was falling, and from outside he seemed to catch a smell of roasting meat. He felt his stomach rumble and his mouth fill with saliva. *They'll give me a little something to eat, won't they? We're friends by now, we've emptied the rucksack together, we've laughed at the rolls of film, here we all are naked; we're practically almost a family, they'll give me something to eat, you'll see. Though I don't quite know what, what will these people eat, tapirs, snakes, armadillos? Even an anteater with all its fur on I'd eat without making a fuss, I can't stand the hunger any longer. And I even had a moment of terror, how stupid, when they wanted me to undress: the comic-book picture came into my head of the big pot with the white man boiling in it, imagine being that daft, the things I go and think, cannibals only exist in comics nowadays, or perhaps, but perhaps, at the very most in some remote, unknown tribe deep in the Amazon For... Anyway, better go back to thinking about the tapir: I wonder if it's tender, I wonder how they cook it.*

He noticed that the woman beside him was absently holding a pair of his trousers in her lap while chirping animatedly with a little old woman at her side, who had stuck one of his disposable razors into her mass of white hair and every so often adjusted it coquettishly. They seemed thoroughly engrossed and entirely unmindful of him, so he ventured to reach out a hand and take back his trousers. He had not even managed to touch them when, quick as a snake, a sturdy old man shot out to block his hand, waving thirty centimetres of polished, sharpened stone blade under his nose. Antônio drew back, raising his hands and explaining in a rush, "Of course! Of course they're yours! Of course I gave them to you! With great pleasure, I swear, all the clothes, the shoes, the soap, the pens, they're all yours, it is an honour and a joy to me to make you a gift of them to seal this fine, fine friendship!"

He withdrew into his little corner and went back to hugging his knees, surrendered. *I'll give you the lot, look, so long as you at least give me a rat's leg to gnaw on.*

2.6 Village

They were not rats' legs, though he would never manage to establish what animal the meat came from, black and greasy, brought into the hut a few minutes later by three or four boys and girls on trays of woven leaves and twigs.

Antônio, almost drowning in his own saliva, waited for everybody to help themselves, then waited again, and again: he had no wish to see that great knife at close quarters a second time. At last Lady Razor noticed him and gestured towards the meat; he cast a glance around and saw that a couple of the others present were signalling to him to help himself, the sovereign included.

He fell on the tray gratefully: the meat was sweetish, and as tough and fibrous as string, but it seemed to him he had never eaten any more delicious. Meanwhile the young ones had brought in a good many half coconuts, some full of water—*better not to think from what turbid, muddy, greenish watercourse swarming with alligators and toads and snakes they had taken it; but who cares, I'm so thirsty I shan't think about it at all*—others brimming with a syrupy mixture that his fellow diners seemed to enjoy enormously. When they passed it to him he tasted it with a certain mistrust but, strangely, he liked it: fragrant and very sweet. He did not stop to wonder which vegetable it was the fermentation of; sweet things he could never resist, and he took several long draughts of it.

He woke befuddled when the sun must already have been high and was blazing outside the hut, which was deserted. Whatever that concoction was, it needed to be approached with caution, he decided, trying unsteadily to get up; he had absolutely no memory of anything after drinking a great deal of it.

He looked around: his things, rucksack included, had all disappeared, except for his notebook, which had evidently awakened nobody's interest and had been left on the floor of beaten earth. He picked it up and, his head still hammering and confused, went to the doorway: women and girls were coming and going from the huts and a quantity of children of every age were tearing about here and there in a very energetic game. A small group of old people, among them the Queen Mother and Lady Razor, sitting at the far end of the open space, were busy with branches and bark, probably making something. He did not see a single man: probably they were off hunting or fishing or seeing to other business of forest men.

As soon as they saw him the children broke off their game and crowded round him, curious; a very dark, skinny boy had two of his odd socks knotted round his neck and a small girl had his pale blue pants on her head. Nobody paid the slightest attention to his nakedness, obviously, but Antônio felt genuinely uncomfortable so exposed, and so he politely removed the pants from the little one's head, at which she let out an extremely shrill screech and began howling at the top of her lungs.

The screaming brought a couple of threatening-looking mothers to the doors of the huts, and Antônio, thoroughly frightened but determined not to loosen his grip, quickly tore a page out of the little notebook and in a few seconds put together a paper boat, which he held out to the child. The little girl looked at it rather doubtfully, but fortunately the screeching had stopped dead and the reassured ladies had gone back to their occupations.

The moment he had his pants on Antônio felt better, decidedly more at ease, but he noticed that the child was turning the boat over in her hands, studying it intently: apparently she liked it very much but had no idea what it was. Beside the hut there was a large puddle, and he—imagining that if he tried to take the gift out of her hands the little poppet would start the siren up again—tore out another page and made another boat, which he set down on the surface of the water.

A few seconds were enough for the small crowd of children watching him with the utmost attention to understand what it was: they laughed and trilled, visibly delighted with those little white canoes. TwoSocks came forward at once, holding out an extremely dirty little hand. Half an hour later half the pages of his notebook had gone, every child had its own boat, and Antônio had received in token of gratitude a peeled stick, a handful of berries, a turquoise frog and two beetles.

And he had won the unconditional approval of the entire child population of the tribe.

2.7 Exploration

Leaving the children to invent regattas in the puddles, Antônio thought that, since he had recovered his pants, it might be as well to try to work out where the rest of his luggage had ended up. So he began to walk about the clearing, peering here and there into the shade of the big huts that surrounded almost the whole of the beaten-earth space. He moved with a certain caution; he was not entirely sure whether his status was that of guest or of prisoner, and he did not want to risk finding out the hard way.

The first thing he located was his rucksack, so stuffed with firewood that it almost hid the little woman carrying it on her back. Next came his favourite shirt, which, knotted at both ends, had been hung up like a small hammock and swung there, yellow, cradling a baby. Of the rest of his clothing there was no trace; goodness knows what they had done with it, cushions, turbans, dusters, bags for grain, who could say. He did find his bar of soap, though, thrown aside in a corner: it bore the deep print of a bite, but the flavour of eau de cologne had evidently not been appreciated.

At the far end of the clearing he finally saw his watch again as well: it glittered, dangling from the brown wrist of a girl nursing a baby a few hours old. He thought that the elders had probably made her a gift of that exotic jewel to celebrate the newborn, how was he supposed to take it away from her?

No, never mind, I'm not taking anything away from anybody; it's certainly not stuff of any great value, let them keep the lot, so long as they don't get angry. When they come looking for me in a few days and I go home we'll see; maybe I'd at least like to get the camera back, we'll see.

That first survey of the village having been exhausted without much result—it consisted in fact of very little besides those six communal huts and the clearing they surrounded—Antônio did not quite know what to do. He decided to head into the forest along a path that looked broad and well trodden, one that children and young people had been coming and going along all day: if the children went there it could not be too dangerous, could it? There was certainly one difference between Antônio and the children: moving along the path he made a deafening noise, while the little ones had already been taught to move silently. *If there's a wild animal about it'll be covering its ears with its paws at all the noise I'm making... But how do they do it? These are dry twigs, how am I supposed to not tread on them? And how do they manage not to hurt their bare feet? I've half a mind to turn back before I tread on a thorn (a snake hidden among the leaves, a centipede).*

Antônio suddenly heard trills and yells that could very well be adult male voices. *Who knows, perhaps I've come into their hunting ground; let's hope I haven't caused any trouble.* For a few minutes he stood undecided what to do, fearing that meeting the men might turn into some sort of clash between alpha males; but since he could hardly spend the rest of his life standing still in the middle of the forest, he took courage and stepped out into the open.

He found himself in a wide artificial clearing, roughly rectangular, bounded on two sides by a kind of fence like the ones round the village huts, along the edge of which a few women and a great many children were watching intently in one single direction. Antônio followed their gaze and found himself catapulted into a bubble of pure terror. He saw a man let out alarmed shouts and, at the far end of the clearing, a dozen men running away in all directions. It seemed to Antônio that a shot of adrenaline went straight into his brain, which within the space of three seconds worked through every possible cause—and some of the impossible ones—that might have provoked the general stampede. An invasion of jaguars, an attack by an enemy tribe, an enormous brawl (yes, why not a brawl? *They're Indians, but there'll be idiots looking for a fight among Indians too, won't*

there?)), the army believing he had been kidnapped and coming to free him, that's it, perhaps it's the army, holygod they're wiping them out because of me; look at the way that Indian strikes the ball, if only we'd had somebody who could cross like that.

Eh? he asked himself.

As his pulse abruptly slowed and the paralysis in his body began to leave him, Antônio noticed several things. That it was only the adult males running away, while the children watched them attentively and the women twittered among themselves excitedly but not in the least terrified. That the shouting man had struck a sort of ball in a way that closely resembled a long cross. That the ball was being chased by a couple of men, one of whom appeared to have won it. That this last one shouted in his turn and all the others ran off round the clearing again. That the new shouter struck the ball (less well than the first, it seemed to Antônio) and once again there was a struggle to win it.

Emergency my foot. They're playing. *Jesusgod, they're playing with the ball.*

2.8 Language

Wandering about the village, Antônio had peered timidly into one of the big huts: in a hammock of woven lianas an elderly gentleman was taking a nap, in another two babies of a few months old slept tangled together, several others hung empty, and a great many were rolled up on the ground. He had noticed that the hut was really very big; he judged that perhaps eighty people could sleep comfortably in it, so they were certainly not divided by family. He wondered whether there was some criterion for going to sleep in one hut rather than another, or whether when evening came you simply chose one, hung your hammock from any beam that came to hand and went to sleep there. *If that's how it is, it's not for me; until I understand something about all this I'm always sleeping in the same place*, Antônio decided. *And I haven't even got a hammock, come to that; I'll have to sleep on the ground again. I don't know whether I should try to get one lent to me, I don't even know whether I could explain it, in gestures like this.*

But the problem solved itself when, some hours later, as evening fell, two women came up to him and put a bundled-up hammock into his hands, then took him by the arms and tried to push him towards a hut. Not understanding why he could not stay out there a moment longer—it was a fine evening and millions of insects were chirring under the moon—he resisted, trying to explain *thank you for the hammock, very kind, but I was thinking of turning in a little later*; but the two showed no sign of loosening their grip and pushed him with ever greater insistence. Thoroughly embarrassed, and the fact that he was in his pants did not help, he attempted a protest, but the two answered with a shrill screech, “Maaaaiaaaa!”, accompanied by a gesture of the hand, the fingers opening rapidly out of a closed fist as though forming the number five: “Maaaaiaaaa!”

Whatever that sound and that gesture meant, Antônio soon gave in, partly because his reluctance was attracting the attention of more and more of the villagers, who joined in the chorus of “Maaaai-aaaa!” with their fingers snapping open, and partly because their manner was shifting from mildly amused to serious and on to worried: “Maaaaiaaaa!”

Inside the hut he noticed that the dormitory was organised in concentric circles: on the outside slept the oldest and at the centre the children, each in a small hammock of its own from which arms and legs soon protruded to form an inextricable tangle of sleeping little bodies wedged one into another. Between these two rings slept the adults, apparently by no rule at all and in the most complete promiscuity. *I shan't close my eyes for a single instant* was Antônio's last thought before he dropped off like a stone.

“Mama, is that strange man bad?”

“No, he isn't bad, he's only strange. And besides he has no weapons and he's all soft and white, how could he be dangerous? The old ones say another of these yellow men came once, a long time ago: my grandfather told me about him, and I think the medicine woman saw him, when she was a child. He wasn't bad, but then he got ill straight away and in no time he was dead.”

“He gave us presents.”

“What presents?”

“Little tiny canoes, he made them himself out of a white leaf. Look.”

“Pretty. You see, he was kind, he isn't bad.”

“Can we keep him here with us?”

“The elders will decide, but yes, I think we’ll keep him with us. But don’t get too fond of him: I’ve told you, they’re delicate, they die at once. Then you’ll be upset.”

After a few days the situation had settled itself in some fashion, if a slightly paradoxical one. The elders, and the adults generally, were always busy about one thing or another, and although they had no intention at all of ignoring him, on the contrary, they watched him with amused interest, the fact that they could not communicate with him at all, and that from their point of view Antônio was capable of absolutely nothing, frequently frustrated their initiative.

He thought he had a gift for languages, but all he could understand was the laughter, always assuming they were laughing.

He had noticed it from the first mornings, at the moment of waking: when the men and women around him got up one after another he stayed lying down a long while with his eyes closed, opening his ears to the world around him. And although the village population was numerous, what his ears heard was not the sound of a crowd; it hardly sounded human at all. They spoke to one another by whistling, screeching, clicking their tongues and goodness knows what else, and the result was frighteningly naturalistic. From inside the hut, all his brain could reconstruct was birdsong, frogs, monkeys perhaps, a small waterfall, a burst of drier noises that might recall a woodpecker, leaves lifted by the wind and dozens of other sounds which, however incredible it seemed to his ears, made up the language of these people. At first he had thought these were the sounds of the forest, and, left alone in the hut, a deep sense of solitude had gripped him: *they’ve all gone, they’ve left me here*. Then he had steeled himself and gone out in his turn, discovering that he was not alone at all: the women already busy weaving lianas, grinding and carving, the children coming back from the stream completely soaked and squeaking like robins, a few men standing talking together in deep clicks and croaks before leaving the village bound for goodness knows where.

With little to do and no way of communicating, Antônio found himself for most of the time wandering about the village, watched carefully by its inhabitants, who had soon adopted a very paternalistic attitude towards him. Even pushing into the undergrowth and going a few metres from the village was virtually impossible for him, and in the first days they had to look after him in every way: feed him, water him and often defend him from insects and venomous snakes, until the elders came to an agreement about what to do. Antônio was like a child, and with the children he should stay.

And the first thing that began to be familiar to him was precisely the laughter of the children he now found himself surrounded by at all times: they were as numerous and noisy as sparrows, and quick to laugh. When he came near the group of children chasing one of those balls made of leafy twigs they would stop, intrigued, until one of them came forward, touched him with the tip of a finger and then turned round and said something to everybody in his shrill little voice, provoking irrepressible laughter. From that moment on Antônio would be surrounded by the racket of their incomprehensible cheeping.

He took to following the children everywhere: it was thanks to a child that he discovered the quiet side branch of the river where everybody went to fetch drinking water, and thanks to the same child, a small one with a very fast run and quick eyes, he soon learned the use of a certain kind of leaf for drinking slightly cleaner water; thanks to two girls he learned to recognise at least ten edible fruits and berries, and they showed him—with unmistakable grimaces of fright and disgust—which ones must absolutely not be touched. Together with the children he went to strip from the plants the leaves the balls were made of, and thanks to a couple of older boys who took aim at him with a

well-judged throw of stones while he was following them, he discovered where and how it was considered correct to relieve oneself.

Evening in the forest came down all at once. The sun sank towards a horizon you never saw, and where a minute earlier an archipelago of bright patches had lit the undergrowth, a minute later, as soon as the angle of the sun shifted by a few degrees, it was almost entirely dark. Antônio had been caught out by these sudden shadows on the way back from the river, where he had gone to cool off and had lingered to watch two gigantic butterflies chasing each other over the surface of the water. What not long before had seemed to him a broad and perfectly accessible path had turned within a few seconds into the entrance of a dark cave. *My eyes will get used to it, it won't take long*, he told himself, stopping for a moment, just time enough to hear a piercing shriek and to see a muscular girl appear out of nowhere and strike a violent blow with a long stick against the trunk he was absent-mindedly about to lean his hand on. The noise the stick made, however, was not that of wood against wood but something more like an egg breaking and spattering in all directions. With his sight sharpened by the adrenaline that had suddenly entered his bloodstream, Antônio saw beneath the stick the shape of a multicoloured spider a little larger than his hand, flattened against the bark. Exactly on the spot where he had been about to lean. Three or four more spiders, one of them truly enormous, were coming rapidly down the trunk. Antônio, paralysed, turned towards the girl, who looked at him with eyes of fire, took his hand and yanked him away.

In no time at all they were back in the village clearing, where a great deal of light was still coming through the opening in the dense roof of trees. The witch was waiting for them in evident apprehension, and her face cleared when she saw them come out of the path.

Antônio would have liked to ask something, but he had no way of framing any question. The girl, Fire Eyes, let go of his hand slowly—she had gripped it so hard that it was tingling—and went on looking at him for a long moment with an indescribable expression.

“Maaaaiaaaaa!” she said at last, with the usual gesture of the hand opening all at once. “Maaaaiaaaaa!”

“Maaaaiaaaaa!” he tried to repeat, imitating her gesture. “Maaaaiaaaaa! It's those spiders, I understand, I understand: in the evening we go into the huts to protect ourselves from them, now I understand... Maaaaiaaaaa!” he repeated once more, more faintly, his legs shaking.

Fire Eyes went on looking at him a moment longer, then turned towards the witch, who said something to her; she seemed satisfied, and disappeared from view.

2.9 Attempts

Antônio had spent the first days as a simple observer: he had set himself as his chief objective not being eaten by a jaguar, not being crushed by an anaconda, not dying of poison and a thousand other “nots”, while he waited for the rescue expedition that somebody (his parents? The school? Senhor Inácio?) had certainly organised. While he waited to be collected he had wandered curiously about the village, taking advantage of this unique opportunity that had befallen him to get a close look at the ways and customs of these people so different from himself.

But he had also set himself an ethical dilemma: given that he would soon be leaving, he wanted to have as little impact as possible on their lives. He had wondered, for example, what would happen the moment the rescuers arrived. From the way they had received him, Antônio had not been able to work out whether he was the first white man they had ever seen or not, but they had certainly not seen many, and not recently: nothing in their way of life suggested that they had come into contact with the technology of the modern world.

As the days passed, though, he had begun to think that perhaps, all things considered, coming to his rescue might not be so straightforward. Perhaps it would take weeks or even months before they found him. So he had started to think about what he could teach his hosts, as a token of gratitude for having been taken in (not, it seemed to him he could say, with any particular enthusiasm, but at least not with hostility).

But, precisely, it was not at all easy. One of the first things that came into his head was the importance of washing your hands. But try explaining to somebody who does not speak a single word of your language, and who in some respects lives in prehistory, why it is useful to do it. Try explaining the existence of germs. The water supply did not seem to be a problem, but all the same Antônio thought that in their eyes washing your hands might look like an unreasonable waste, and decided to let it go.

A great many other things, almost all the objects that studded his life in Macapá, were out of the question: not so much because they would not have understood their use as because he would not have known how to build them. *I can't do anything*, Antônio thought over and over in that period, sometimes laughing about it, more often with a touch of bitterness.

He could have suggested some innovation in the way food was prepared, but who knows, perhaps they did not have the right enzymes. *What name did the Indians give you? “He Who Gives the Whole Village Diarrhoea”. And besides, what do I know about how you prepare an iguana?* He could have built a small dam in the river nearby, but what if it then became a watering place for jaguars? Fishing among his adolescent memories he might perhaps introduce a few notions about knots, but the huts already seemed to be solid enough on their own, and in any case he had not even had time to frame the thought before his potential new Indian name came into his head: *“He Who Made Everything Collapse”*.

A sundial. A sundial shouldn't do any harm. But what use is a sundial to these people? Perhaps they could use it to mark the time in those matches of theirs, the game with the ball? There, yes. I could bring in some innovation in their sport. I see no contraindications.

And so one day, while he was thinking what sort of innovation to introduce, the ball of leaves and lianas and mud (he hoped it was mud), struck by one of the children, rolled between his feet, and he understood what he would like to give these people who had been so hospitable.

He did have some notion of how balls were made in antiquity, thanks to a lesson on the subject he had prepared for his students a few months earlier. Between saying and doing, though, stood a capybara, a tapir or some other animal of the right size whose innards he would have to use. Then there was the question of catching it, killing it, gutting it, cleaning it out. Being generous with himself, these were all operations that seemed to him feasible. But the last, essential operation, that one no: not with all the optimism in the world could he imagine finding the courage to blow into the innards of a tapir.

Antônio shook himself out of his inconclusive daydreams and noticed that Chubbycheeks, the child who had kicked the ball, was a few paces from him waiting for it to be given back so that he could carry on playing. Antônio held it out to him with a sad smile and realised that he had tears in his eyes.

Turning his head slightly he saw a little girl holding out a fruit to him. *Would this be the fruit of consolation? If it isn't, it ought to be*, thought Antônio as he savoured the taste of the first bite, already feeling better but at the same time unable entirely to drive away that sense of helplessness and uselessness.

At the second bite, holding the mouthful longer than usual to study its flavour, he noticed the seeds and had an idea. He took a handful of them, cleaned the pulp carefully off them and showed the girl his open hand. *Look carefully, child. Look and remember*. When the girl's expression moved from "I've seen" to "and now?" (or so it seemed to him), Antônio made a small hole in the ground and buried the seeds in it. Again he sought her eyes with his and waited for the "all right" look. Then he pointed at the sun, high above, filtering through the leafy vault of trees, and made a series of gestures that he hoped might be interpreted as "many days will pass". He gave a last glance at the little mound under which the seeds lay and made the gesture for "a plant will grow" (which a film enthusiast with a taste for horror could easily have interpreted as "a zombie's hand will come out of the ground with its fingers moving").

Into his mind came an Italian film he had seen some time before, in which two men who had gone back in time could not manage to explain anything even to Leonardo da Vinci. *Who knows, dear child, perhaps I explained it better than they did and you're quicker than Leonardo, and if you remember, if you managed to understand what I showed you, perhaps you'll become the first farmer among your people*.

The girl smiled at him, and so, it seemed to him, did the witch, who was watching him from a few metres away, talking to a man.

"You see? He's kind."

"Perhaps he is, but he's foolish too. He's teaching Araci to sow. As though we didn't know how."

"But perhaps he doesn't know that. Perhaps the Strange Ones like him learned it only recently. Perhaps he's only trying to work out how to make himself useful."

2.10 Ant-Jaguar

Yamandé was weighing up the situation. Or rather no, Yamandé was ostentatiously weighing up the situation. Or rather not even that: Yamandé was ostentatiously making a show of studying the situation, when in reality there was nothing to weigh up. The situation was the same one they always ended up in every time they played Ant-Jaguar without the older boys: he and Piata were the fastest at climbing the ranks of the animal kingdom, and when they reached Monkey and the others were still at Butterfly, Tortoise or, at best, Armadillo, it was clear that for the umpteenth time victory would be a two-man affair between him and Piata.

To tell the truth there had been two changes lately: one was that Moacir had begun to make his mark too, thanks above all to his courage and his strange dives. He was not at their level yet, but Yamandé was working out ways of using him strategically, to confuse Piata and make life difficult for him. The second change was that they played with a spectator: the Strange One, who among his many strange traits had precisely this one of often coming to watch them play. Some of the other children were intimidated; they were not used to playing under an adult's eyes, but the Strange One only seemed like an adult physically (apart from that absurd colour of his). In every other respect he was a small child, smaller even than Cauê, who insisted on playing with them but stayed Ant because he did not yet have enough strength in his legs to hit the tree of transformation. The Strange One seemed like a small child because he could not speak and could not do anything useful for the life of the village. It was a mystery how he had managed to survive long enough to become so tall; perhaps it was something to do with his colour.

Another thing he had in common with the children was curiosity: it seemed his only occupation was watching. Every time you came across him he was watching something: somebody weaving, somebody else preparing food; every so often he followed you when you went to fish or to fetch water at the river. But more than anything else he spent his time watching them play. Yamandé wondered whether, as well as not knowing how to do anything, the Strange One might not know how to play anything either.

I wonder if he understands the rules of our game. Perhaps he does, they're very simple. Everybody starts as Ant. Then you have to kick the ball and try to hit the tree of transformation. Whoever hits it turns into the animal above: if you were Caterpillar you become Butterfly, then Tortoise, Armadillo, Tapir, Capybara, Monkey, Caiman and finally Jaguar. Then you have to run and fetch your own ball and get back home. At that moment the guardian can hit you with his ball, and if he does you go back to being the animal below and you become the new guardian. Whoever becomes Jaguar first has won.

Yamandé realised he was mentally explaining the game to the Strange One; he shook himself and went back to concentrating on the match in hand, but not before thinking *what a shame he doesn't understand the Language; if I explained how to play, maybe he could play too, and then he'd enjoy himself a bit.*

Piata, who was the guardian for that round, watched Yamandé and chuckled to himself. *Look at him, pretending to think it over, as if I didn't know what he'll do.*

Moacir had already hit the tree and had therefore turned into Monkey, drawing level with the two of them. But now it was Yamandé's turn to shoot, last in this round. Barring some incredible mishap, Yamandé would hit the tree and become Caiman. The only thing he had to decide was which side to drop the ball on, since he would then have to go and retrieve it. The wisest thing was to let it end up near the other boys' balls. Piata had the hardest shot in the whole group, and this always caused a

general stampede: in that confusion it was not easy to aim at one particular player, still less if he was as quick as Yamandé. But Cauê's ball was over there nearby too, and Piata knew perfectly well that Yamandé did not want to risk his shot missing him and ending up hitting the little one.

Think about it as long as you like, my dear friend; we both know perfectly well where you're going to shoot.

Yamandé knew perfectly well that if he dropped the ball near Cauê's, Piata would aim at somebody else rather than risk hitting the little one. But it was a tactic that seemed to him unfair and, as always, he did not want to make use of it. He took aim and kicked his ball with a crisp, accurate shot that sent it slamming against the right-hand side of the tree of transformation and, in consequence, landing some way from the other children's balls. As he ran to retrieve it, preparing to dodge Piata's throw, he shot a glance out of the corner of his eye towards the Strange One and thought he saw him smile.

2.11 Time

He had lived on the equator all his life and yet he had never really noticed it: the days are always the same length, the dark always comes at the same hour, there is no way of registering the passing of the seasons.

In the city it had been different; there were clocks and deadlines, calendars and diaries, working rhythms, league seasons, holidays and anniversaries that broke time up into well-defined segments. But there in the forest the days ran on undifferentiated one after another, week after week, month after month. Of course there were differences between one day and the next, small daily events—that night of torrential rain, the birth of the baby of the girl from the third hut, the man bitten by a snake and carried back to the village by the other hunters already stone dead, that jaguar caught after a very long hunt—but in memory you could arrange them in any order you liked; they had no precise place in time.

And this made it impossible, Antônio realised with resigned dismay, really to register the passing of the days, of which in fact he stopped keeping count by cutting notches in a beam of the hut after not even six months. More or less around the time when he thought he would go mad.

At that point, after a long stretch in which he had suppressed the thought, he had had to accept the fact that nobody was going to come and look for him. By now they had certainly given him up for dead, and if for days, for weeks, he had scanned the sky expecting the roar of a helicopter, straining his ears for a voice, a loudspeaker, a siren, anything a rescue party might use to make itself heard, he had by now had to surrender to the fact that nobody was coming. Perhaps in all that coming and going of boats and jeeps they had lost his trail and did not even know where to begin looking for him; perhaps they had not even tried, because finding a man lost in the Amazon forest is like looking for a needle in the king of all haystacks; perhaps they had thought he could only have died within a few days of hunger and thirst, or been killed by a snake, by a jaguar (by a spider).

Not that he had not thought of setting off to look for the jeep: from there, if, if, he took the right direction (but how was he to know which?) and if, if, he managed not to get lost again, not to go round in circles, not to meet a jaguar or a snake, in a couple of days' walking he might perhaps hope to reach the 210, where he might be able to find help.

But even reaching the jeep was an undertaking, he had realised, that was all but impossible. Looking around him in the clearing where the village stood, he had noticed from the very beginning that he had not the slightest idea which direction to take: the stretch he had covered following the witch he did not remember at all, and even though he more or less recalled the spot where they had come out into the clearing, nothing could give him any certainty that the old woman had proceeded in a straight line, indeed he was practically certain she had not. And that was only the last stretch: retracing two days of forest backwards and managing—without the slightest indication—to find the jeep again, he knew perfectly well, was essentially unthinkable.

In any case, life there was not bad. The Indians were affectionate and kind, they had taken him in benevolently, and for some time now the men had been letting him go hunting with them (though they still would not let him touch spears or arrows); the women got him to help gather firewood and berries; the children adored him. After the boats had come the paper aeroplanes, whose principle it was obviously impossible to explain but which they had learned perfectly well how to fly, and then the paper in the notebook had run out (and so, for that matter, had the things he knew how to make out of paper).

There were even two or three girls, a little on the short side but not bad at all, not bad at all: nice tits, and backsides always on show; it was a pleasure to look at them.

But what was driving him mad was not being able to talk to anybody, not being able to exchange a thought, an idea, an opinion, at least a joke, holyjesus. That bird language of theirs, all trills and squeaks and croaks, was completely impenetrable to him even after all those months. He had more or less learned a few names, although he rarely had occasion to use them: how often do you say a person's name if you have nothing to say to them? He had understood—he thought he had understood—that a certain slightly burred chirp meant “meat”, but to tell the truth it might just as well have meant “dinner” or “grub” or “Fernanda certainly does cook a marvellous armadillo”. And that squeak with a falling note in the middle was “water”, but as far as he could tell it covered rain water, river water, the water you drank out of coconuts and perhaps tears and urine as well, who could say.

On the other side, their learning of his language was not working out much better either: they had learned his name, which they pronounced roughly “N't'niiiiiii-ho”, and the children could say something almost intelligible for “little boat”, but that was where it ended. They did not seem to have any interest in learning it, nor for that matter any need to, being able to chat among themselves as much and in whatever way they liked.

Antônio thought he would die of a lack of words, *how do you do it, how do you do it, not being able to talk to anybody, it's worse than being mute, worse than being deaf, worse than being lost alone in the forest (all right, maybe not that); I lived on words and I can't even say hello how are you. I can't do it, I'll go mad, I'll throw myself in the river and let the pink dolphins eat me.*

There was nothing wrong with life in the village, once you were used to going to the lavatory between an araucaria and a palm tree, to being naked and drinking river water, to being bitten every minute by millions of insects and to chewing monkey meat thoroughly; but Antônio found it fairly tedious. The hunting might even have been fun, perhaps, but quite apart from the fact that his horror of spiders never entirely left him easy when he was moving about the forest, those expeditions on the trail of animals he knew far too little about, the ambushes, the blood, gave him more anxiety than anything else. Or perhaps it was the fact that they would not let him handle weapons that made him feel in the way, and in more danger than he perhaps really was. Fishing bored him to death, and it could hardly be said that gathering firewood, weaving baskets, looking for berries, fruit and bark with the womenfolk or sharpening arrows were especially thrilling activities.

And the days were long, with nothing to read, no music to listen to, nobody to have a couple of words with. So Antônio found himself more and more often watching the children play, observing those strange games of theirs with the ball, some very simple, others full of exceedingly complex rules. From sheer watching he felt he had understood all of them, or nearly all. The only thing that still made no sense to him was what determined the end of a match. Systems for measuring short intervals of time they did not have; the number of points did not seem to matter; there was not even a single event, such as hitting one particular tree, that could be given the meaning of “end of match”. And yet every time, out of the blue, the match was evidently over, and the children, happy, slapping each other amiably on the shoulder, ran off to have papayas for their tea.

He had noticed, though, that these boys, even the smallest, were endowed with extraordinary speed and dexterity, and that a couple of them—TwoSocks and a sturdy boy with a serious face—had a genuinely accurate and powerful shot.

So one fine afternoon Antônio, sick of merely watching those incomprehensible manoeuvres and undecided whether to go and throw himself in the river, instead set to with a will and lashed three

straight branches together, then planted that rough reversed C in the ground at the edge of the clearing.

Then he went over to the children and asked them by gestures to lend him the ball. He set it down and, with a kick neither too hard nor too short, put it into the goal. He turned towards the boys, who were watching him attentively, and said, “Goal.”

There was no reaction. He went and fetched the ball, put it back in position in front of his feet and shot at the goal. And again he looked at the children, repeating, “Goal.”

“Goh-eeeeee-al?”

“No. Goal.”

They all seemed very perplexed. The serious one shrugged, took his ball back and they all started their abstruse match again, shrieking.

Antônio sat down on a trunk, thoroughly disappointed, reconsidering the idea of the river or perhaps that of offering himself up to a jaguar. But then, in the middle of the game, TwoSocks broke away from the others and—as though on a sudden idea—instead of shooting at the trees aimed at the goal and found the middle of it with a perfect cannonball. Then he turned towards Antônio and in a low, questioning tone offered him: “Go’uh-llll?”

Antônio’s heart leapt; he sprang to his feet and shouted, “Goal! GOAL! Yes, well done, well done, goal, goal, GOOOOOAAAAL!”, and he clapped his hands and waved his arms, and the children, thoroughly delighted, imitated him and waved their arms and jumped and shrieked, “GOL! GOL! GOL!”

Antônio was happy. *Maybe there’s hope after all; maybe they’ll be able to learn a few words of Portuguese; maybe at least we can get a bit of a game of football going.*

2.12 Omens

“He’s white!”

Ayíndé, the medicine woman, was watching Kirimà with her usual air, half serious and half mocking.

“And do you know what’s white? The dead! Only the dead are white!”

Kirimà was shorter and slightly stockier than the average of the village, and had a characteristic dark skin that made him unique in the whole tribe. His voice was unique too: more ringing, and capable of reaching a volume the others could only dream of.

“In fact, do you remember the first days? Do you remember? Everybody touching him, the children too, everybody touching him with a finger to see whether he was really alive or whether he was a forest spirit!”

With one sharp slap Kirimà crushed a wasp that had settled on his shoulder, a gesture so frequent that by now it characterised him. Unlike all the other inhabitants of the village he was not completely immune to the venom of one particular species of wasp, whose members had always seemed to know it and to take pleasure in tormenting him. Where for the others a sting of that kind was nothing but a painless itch in the affected area, for Kirimà it became the cause of a long discomfort that could last for several days. None of the herbs that in cases like this brought relief worked on him. Since he was small he had grown used to living that way, killing as many wasps as possible and bearing the pain of the stings as nobody else did. He could not remember a single day on which he had not killed at least one wasp, and in some seasons not a day went by without his being stung two or three times.

But he had not resigned himself. Over time he had experimented with dozens of different solutions for keeping wasps away or easing the pain of the stings, and many of Kirimà’s inventions had entered the tribe’s store of knowledge, so much so that he had become one of the most respected adults for his considerable knowledge of the forest’s secrets.

He had also hung his hammock next to that of a good many women, and by some of them he had had some of the healthiest and handsomest children in the whole village.

“And now? Do you like the way he’s always going about with the little ones? A man who doesn’t know the forest is dangerous to himself and to others, and we let him go about with the little ones?”

“He’s learning. He isn’t dangerous any more now.”

Ayíndé had taken a liking to Antônio, not only because it was she who had brought him to the village but because she had always thought he really was a kind of spirit, a good spirit, though, one you had to spend time with, and that time spent would come back to them in the form of some great advantage which she could not yet foresee but which she was certain would come. And because she always spoke very calmly, she made her authority weigh all the heavier.

“He’s learning? He can’t tell a tapir from an anteater! How long ago was it? Three days? Four? We found him urinating in the river again without protecting himself!”

“Kirimà, Kirimà, you must be patient. How many people do you know who have been attacked by the *candiru*? You know perfectly well there aren’t many of them and they aren’t dangerous to us. The old ones tell of these tiny fish that can swim up your urine and get inside your body, but I’ll tell you the truth: I’ve never seen one that small. The ones we find in dead fish are as big as my fingers, and those aren’t dangerous.”

“But you have to protect yourself! Our old ones taught us that, as the old ones of the old ones taught them!”

“Yes, you have to protect yourself, that’s true. But the old ones of our old ones weren’t on this river. Perhaps it was the old ones of the old ones of the old ones, I lose track now. On the other river perhaps there were more *candiru* and it was more dangerous. Our old ones also taught us to extract the juice of the *xagua*, but how many times has that been any use?”

Kirimà knew it perfectly well; another talent he had always had was for remembering the stories. He remembered the stories of the first old ones he had known, the ones who had died when he was young, and he remembered the stories of the present old ones as well. His memory was so formidable that for a long time everybody in the village had asked him to tell the stories of the old ones; it was the commonest way of passing the evenings, and Kirimà always threw himself into these tellings with his whole spirit, hearing the voices of his ancestors finding room inside him, feeling the spirits stop to listen to him.

The other moment when it seemed to him that the forest spirits stopped was when he watched his son Yamandé playing with the ball. Kirimà had never been among the best with the ball; he remembered the initiation ceremony as one of the saddest moments of his entire existence. But Yamandé was different; he had always been a curious child, and as soon as he had grown big enough to start playing with the ball his gifts had been immediately clear. Good Kirimà would have done anything for Yamandé, but with every day that passed there seemed to be less and less need: he was growing up well, he was strong, loved and respected by his friends, he had quick and accurate feet and a smile always ready.

The young ones were coming back from the playing clearing, chattering and laughing loudly. A little way behind them came Antônio, still with his uncertain gait after all this time, still producing the noise of thunder at every step and still finding enormous difficulty in communicating even the simplest things. Good spirit indeed: in Kirimà’s eyes Antônio seemed nothing but an enormous unsolved problem, and the fact that he spent all that time with the children did not leave him easy. He had a presentiment that something was going to go wrong.

Smack! He crushed another wasp and went off in a bad mood.

2.13 Signs

The rising and setting of the sun, the cycles of the moon, which you glimpsed thin as a smile between the branches or which shone round as a manioc ball, lighting up even the lowest ferns: there was nothing else to divide time into moments.

Antônio had had to give up the temptation, the need that in the early days had been almost compulsive, to try to break the days into hours and minutes, to bundle them into meaningless little bunches called weeks or months.

It was not easy, even after a certain time, to make himself a routine, and he was beginning to think it was entirely pointless to do so.

Eating was not a fixed appointment: nobody at a precise and recurring moment laid a table with a cloth of palm leaves, half coconuts for glasses and bone implements for cutlery. Nobody went to the river at a set hour to fill the water jugs; nobody rang a bell made from a hollowed stone at midday to call everyone to lunch. In fact there was no moment that could be called “lunch”, and “dinner” was simply the moment, before the sun went down, when more or less everybody gathered to eat, but also to tell stories, to drink half a coconut of the heady mixture, to sing songs of distant legends, to listen to the recommendations of the spirits through the mouth of the shaman, to gossip about their hammock neighbours.

The rhythms were dictated solely by necessity, by the availability of resources, by the decisions that, even before the people took them, the forest itself took. The hunting could stop for several days if the previous one had been plentiful; it could be disorganised or perfectly orchestrated; it could be a private affair or the whole village’s. The same went for gathering: sometimes a small party of a few people disappeared for hours and came back with their baskets full of supplies. Sometimes the expeditions were far larger and noisier and seemed almost like long picnics.

Not even the ball game, about which the villagers had a genuine obsession, followed any precise routine. It could happen that on the way back from a hunt the hunters would throw blowpipes, bows and arrows with their poisoned tips and everything else into a corner and let themselves loose in an improvised match of their strange game. Indeed it had seemed obvious to Antônio from the start that the hunting expeditions were sometimes too short, as though the hunters did not really want to commit themselves because their heads were already in the next match. Even when he began to follow them on the hunts, although he did not properly understand the language it seemed clear to him that sometimes their commitment was almost a formality, as though they meant: “Let’s do half an hour walking in the forest, is there any animal about? No, is there? Quick! Back to the village to play.”

The funny thing was that they all seemed permanently busy, and at the same time there seemed to be infinite, dilated moments of pure idleness.

Now, for instance, the downpour that had arrived halfway through the day had gone off leaving a thick humidity that the returning sun had heated into an exhausting closeness. The forest was still dripping from millions of petals and leaves, and Antônio, half lying with his shoulders against a trunk, was on the point of dozing off, lulled by the songs of the birds shaking the rain off their wings and by the chatter of the children having their tea around him with the freshly gathered fruit, damp and warm.

He managed to catch a few words whose meaning he recognised: “eat”, “good”, “sweet”, “want”, “rain-finished”. And “opiii”, there, *opiii* must be the name of those red juicy fruits the children were smearing all over their faces. *I must remember that*, he thought. *Opiiì*. And, sleepy and distracted, he traced the letters with his finger in the soft earth beside his hand: O P I I Ì

A couple of seconds later he noticed that silence had fallen: the children had gone abruptly quiet. He raised his eyes and saw them, all the little faces in a circle, staring at those marks on the ground. Then rising to look at him, a question in every pair of eyes.

He sat bolt upright. *Myjesus, writing. Never mind wanting to teach them technological abstrusities like some pseudo Leonardo da Vinci, never mind teaching them to plant seeds in the ground, which I’ve discovered they already know how to do perfectly well and goodness knows for how long. Writing, holymadonna, these people don’t know it, they haven’t even the concept of it.*

Exalted by that dizzying intuition and by the infinite possibilities it threw open, it was with an almost trembling hand that he picked up a fruit between his fingers and said, “*Opiiì*.”

The children looked at him.

He set it on the ground, next to the writing, pointed at it, said again, “*Opiiì*.”

In all those dark eyes watching him he read nothing but curiosity.

Then in front of him he traced in the earth A N T Ô N I O, said in a good clear voice, “Antônio,” then pointed at himself and pronounced it again: “Antônio.”

The children knew his name, so even though they did not understand this game at all they sniggered, and one or two repeated, “Antônio?”

“Yes, Antônio.”

And again, pointing at the letters one by one: “A N T Ô N I O”

Then he got up, went over to Chubbycheeks and traced on the ground C A U Ê, pointing first at the child and then at the marks, then at the child again. And he did the same with P I R A Í and with M O A C I R and with all the others, until he closed the circle with the little girl sitting on his left: A M I A J Ê.

She watched him intently and he repeated, “A - A - Antônio,” and then “A - A - Amiajê,” underlining the writing with his finger, underlining the two identical As: “A-ntônio, A-miajê. A, A, A.”

The little girl repeated: “A.”

He smiled at her. She smiled at him. Everybody was smiling. *What a strange game.*

The next day it was she who, after they had played all morning with the ball and gathered, tired, in the shade of a big ebony tree, came up to him and with her little finger in the dust hesitantly traced a crooked

Λ

“A?”

“Very good, nearly! Look, here, like this: A”

“A. Amiajê.”

“Yes, yes! A, Amiajê. A, Antônio” and looking around and seeing that they were all waiting, he wrote out each of their names in front of them again: “U, U, Ubiratan”; “P, P, P, Piata”. The children laughed and repeated the sounds of their names, scrawling marks on the ground more or less at random but steadily more precise, steadily more like As, Us, Ps and Ms.

2.14 Ipê

The game of signs had been a very welcome novelty. Every one of the children could now trace his own initial perfectly, and it was not unusual to see a child carefully drawing an A or an É in mud and annatto on a friend's cheeks, singing out its sound: AAAA A-A A... AAA A-A-A-A!

Antônio promised himself he would start on numbers, one day or another, but for the moment there was no hurry: they had a whole world of words to enjoy themselves with.

Moving from initials to whole words was less easy; the smallest ones soon got bored and went back to playing with lizards and pebbles, but the bigger ones took the game very seriously: as with everything, all children want to get to the bottom of every new discovery until they have taken it apart and put it back together again, until they feel they have mastered it.

Antônio, however hard he tried, could not remember how long it had taken him, many years earlier, to learn to read and write his own name. He had a confused memory of a classroom that had seemed to him enormous, of a smell of dust and chalk and sweaty children, of fingers sticky with coconut sweets smearing the paper. And yet he remembered that by his mother's birthday he was already perfectly able to do it, well enough to spell it out on a card with drawings of enormous butterflies and impossible flowers: it had not taken long, back then.

And in fact it did not take long in that very green classroom, among the hopping of toads and the hum of insects, with blackboards of muddy earth to be rubbed out with your feet, before each of them could trace, if with some uncertainty, his own name and, when particularly inspired, those of his companions as well.

So Antônio attempted a further step. He heard the children talking about going to the river: the word for river, "ipê", he had known for some time, so he called their attention and drew on the ground I P Ê, sounding the word out carefully and repeating it over and over. But the children did not seem to understand; one or two laughed, one or two shrugged, and they all ran off to bathe in the river. *Yes, too difficult. It's one thing to grasp that this mark is you and that one is your friend, and quite another to grasp that there can be a mark for every thing, that you can draw any word on the ground, anything at all, that you can make "river" appear in the dust while it's still hidden behind the trees. Too difficult, it's true. A pity.*

Antônio got up and with a sigh made for the river; yes, it really was time for a bathe.

A few mornings later Antônio was shaping a couple of new balls, a slow and rather dull process he had learned from the children themselves, and the children were nowhere to be seen. This was normal: they did not turn up every morning. Every so often they set off in a group on very long hunts for lizards or frogs; sometimes they spent the whole day up trees looking for fruit and birds' nests; every so often they went to the clearing to watch the grown-ups play. A little tired of leaves and mud, he decided to go and look for them.

They were not playing ball anywhere about and they were not in the welcoming shade of the *shabono* either; they were not in the clearing, where the only thing that reigned was the ceaseless sound of the thousand voices of the forest, so like those of their language. Perhaps they had gone into one of the infinite places Antônio still did not dare push into: routes that looked to him like impassable walls of foliage and undergrowth, paths invisible to his eyes, trees that seemed impossible to climb.

A little disappointed, he made his way back to the open space, resigned to spending the morning alone, when all at once he saw something on the ground, near one of the many paths that led into the thick of the forest. He came closer without daring to believe what he was seeing, looking, his heart beating hard, at the marks cut into the beaten earth:

ANTONIO IPÊ ☺

Could it be true? As he rushed, heart pounding, along the path to the river he thought: *no, it can't be true, it can't really be what it looks like.*

The first one he saw, among the branches near the water, was Amiajè, who watched him with eyes bright with excitement, quivering on her thin little legs. She came forward plainly hiding something behind her back, followed soon by the other children, whose manner was somewhere between shy and mocking, every one of them with something hidden in their hands. One of the bigger boys plucked up his courage and, giggling with excitement, took Antônio by the hand and led him towards a bend upstream where the water was very calm, almost stagnant. Antônio tried to peer behind the children's backs but could make out nothing but leaves.

When they reached the river all the children lined up along the bank, and what Antônio saw took his breath away. Each of them was hiding behind his back one or two little boats made from the broad leaves of some unknown plant. *Antônio, river, little boats: it really was a message, it was a message written for me.* With their eyes full of pride the children set their boats down on the surface of the water and created a slow green procession. The boats were taken by the lazy current and headed downstream, some floating lightly, others capsizing or catching against one another.

But Antônio could not see those small shipwrecks: his eyes were full of tears.

2.15 Women

“Do you think he’ll ever hang a hammock next to anybody’s?”

“He’s never... really?”

“No, in all this time he’s never done it, not once.”

“Perhaps he isn’t interested. Perhaps he’s one of those who only likes playing ball.”

“Perhaps he can’t. There are a great many things he can’t do. Have you never heard tell of the time he tried to hunt the tapir? There: perhaps he’s as good at that as he is at hunting tapirs.”

“Ahahahah!”

“Eheheheeh!”

“But perhaps not so much time has gone by.”

“Oh yes it has. He arrived in the moon when the anteaters give birth, and that moon has already come round and gone again.”

“You remember it very well. You’ve been paying attention, perhaps you’re interested? Perhaps you’d like to hang your hammock with him?”

“Hihihihhi!”

“Ahahaha no, what are you saying! All the spirits would burst out laughing! Though it’s been so long since I hung my hammock with anybody that I’m almost tempted...”

“Eheheheheh! And do you think he’d want you, a dried-up monkey like you?”

“Better a monkey than that mangy old toucan you are.”

“Ahaha! Old toucan, am I? When you’re the grandmother of every anaconda there is!”

Antônio had rapidly become the darling not only of Ayîndé, the medicine woman he had taken for a witch, but of all the old women of the village: his clumsiness and his being different had brought a pleasant gust of novelty, and even though months had passed since his arrival he went on stringing together comic performances that fed giggles and gossip. He still found the language extremely hard, and although he had learned a few words it was not enough to make even a rudimentary speech; but he understood well enough that he was a source of great entertainment to them. All in all it did not trouble him much: better to provoke laughter than resentment or other negative feelings, and in any case the ladies treated him well and helped him whenever he got some improbable task into his head.

No, the trouble did not come from there. What Antônio feared was the young women. In these months of his stay Antônio had observed the ways and customs of the village with more care than an anthropologist would have: at worst an anthropologist’s mistake would have translated into a flawed piece of research, whereas Antônio feared that a mistake of his in approaching some delicate

subject could cause him serious grief. And what subject is more delicate than relations with the opposite sex?

Not that he would not have liked to find himself a girl, but he simply did not know how to behave. Even in Macapá, in the setting where he had been born and had lived, he had never been a ladies' man; on the contrary he had always been rather awkward in his approaches, as the business with Isabel demonstrated, which after all this time still stung a little. Here he had no idea where to begin. The only thing he had understood was that there did not seem to be any marriage ceremony or anything of the kind. New couples came into being in a way whose simplicity fascinated him: at a certain point a man hung his hammock next to a woman's (or the other way round: he had already seen a good many cases in which the woman took the initiative) and from that moment on they were a couple. That was all.

But how these couples came about was still entirely obscure to him. Putting up a hammock here or there as though it were nothing seemed to him too crude; he was certain there was some form of courtship preceding that moment, but he could not identify the mechanics of it. Was a play of glances enough, and then straight on to the hammock? Or did you have to make yourself agreeable for a while? And how, and what do you offer a girl here, a coconut, a dead snake, a lizard for her tea? And how were you to know whether some man more prominent than you (that is, every other man in the village) was already interested in that particular hammock?

And besides, they were too young, far too young. Antônio thought of the girls at the school where he taught: no, it was out of the question. Antônio understood that there, in the village, that was a taboo of his own making, but it made no difference: taboo it was and taboo it stayed. This led him to try to avoid the girls of "marriageable" age, sometimes with embarrassing consequences, like the evening when he had seen a young woman coming purposefully towards him with a hammock in her arms. Antônio had leapt up out of his own, tripping and nearly going flat on his face; then, seized by panic and not knowing what else to do, he had snapped the wooden hook that served as its support: "No hammocks hung here." The girl had gone on advancing towards him all the same, smiling, and had then walked straight past his position without so much as looking at him, to go and hang her hammock next to a tall young man with elegant ochre designs on his face, leaving poor Antônio dumbfounded and provoking great hilarity in a couple of old women who had witnessed the scene.

There was one girl, to tell the truth, who was certainly some years older than the others and yet had no children, nor had he ever seen her hang her hammock with anybody. She tended to keep herself a little apart; there was something that set her off from the others: her features had something different about them, the designs she made on her skin had a style all their own, just as she had a particular way of arranging the flowers she used as ornaments, and even the baskets she wove had knots that... *well, Antônio, you seem to have observed her very carefully, for a man who has decided not to have anything to do with women, very carefully for a man who doesn't want any grief, a little too carefully, given that you could describe her centimetre by centimetre. Yes, let's admit it, I'd like to know her better. Perhaps I could try giving her a few of those yellow berries everybody seems to like so much, wrapped in a nice shiny leaf perhaps; perhaps I could even add a flower, or maybe a blue frog. Damned language, if only I could get two words out, I'd like just to know what her story is.*

2.16 *Janaína*

There are stories that are not told, or that are told only to oneself, when you are alone, when you can think about how far away a place can seem, about what an enormously long time twice ten moons can be.

That the place the solitary girl came from, the one who painted herself differently, was far enough away to be out of reach was more than anything a hope of hers. Her name was Janaína and it was almost two years since she had left her village.

“Sooner or later I’ll kill him,” Janaína had said to Guiomar.

“Shhhh! What are you saying, are you mad?”

“I can’t bear him any more, I don’t know what to do.”

“It isn’t for you to know. The spirits know. And the spirits have decided that you are Yarimi’s woman; there’s nothing else to know.”

“In truth it was Yarimi who said the spirits had said so. The spirits haven’t said anything to me.”

“Shhhhh! Then you really are mad! What are you saying? You know it’s Yarimi who speaks with the gods, why should they have spoken to you?”

“To explain to me why I have to be with that animal and always do whatever he says.”

“The spirits will know, and they certainly don’t have to tell you, they have to tell the chief of the village. And besides, I think the spirits are angry with you because many moons have passed since he took you and you still haven’t had children.”

“And a good thing none have come. It’s easy for you to talk like that. The gods destined you for that good man Tooru, not for that howler monkey. If he tries to touch me one more time I really will kill him.”

But that time Guiomar had not said “Shhhh”. That time she had merely stared, terrified, at a point behind her shoulder.

Janaína had turned and had seen Yarimi, who had come out from behind a palm with the silence of a stilled wind and was watching her with wicked eyes.

The plan was simple. She would stupefy him with the drink of change and when he collapsed asleep she would act. In the bottom of her heart she was a little sorry not to have the courage to kill him for real, but the evil spirit was him, not her. And a village that lets itself be led by an evil man is a bad village: running away was an easy decision, without regrets; she could not understand how it had not occurred to her before. She would go to the river, take a canoe and paddle for as long as her strength lasted, to the furthest of the villages. Many moons earlier she had been to two of these villages for ceremonies of peace and the exchange of gifts, and it had seemed to her that they were peopled by kind folk. Hers was the worst village in the whole forest, Janaína had decided, and if the spirits had been wicked enough to send her there and pair her with that monkey, well... Janaína did not dare complete the thought, but in her heart it was clear that these spirits did not deserve respect, and it was certainly no longer a time to put up with that misfortune.

Yarimi loved the drink of change. That evening Janaína, keeping her eyes lowered, had poured him one bowl after another, offering him her own share too as a sign of apology for the ugly words she had spoken that afternoon.

The critical moment was after the fourth bowl: usually at that point Yarimi got worked up, and the least thing was enough to turn him violent. But that evening he had stayed calmer than usual. He had drunk a fifth bowl as well, and halfway through the sixth he had fallen asleep, drunk.

Fate is on my side, Janaína had thought, looking at the almost full moon whose light filtered through the branches enough to let her see where she was walking, without making a sound and without waking anybody. She tried not to think about how they would receive her in the new village, concentrating on every single step, pleased with her own silence. She smiled at the thought that this skill and the skill of paddling, the two skills that would be essential to her escape, had been taught her by the monkey. At least he had been good for something. She was concentrating so hard on listening to her own silence that at first she had not understood what that very loud sound was that she heard the moment she set foot outside the boundary of the village. What kind of animal could it be?

Yarimi had many faults, some of which he was on occasion willing to admit himself. But he was not stupid. The spirits would never have put a stupid man at the head of the village. He had wondered for a long time why the spirits had saddled him with that disrespectful, disobedient woman who could not even give him a son, but now it was all clear: it was a trial to temper his spirit. That day he would have the chance to be rid of her, and the very next day he would be able to take another woman; he only had to decide which.

That evening he had not drunk a single drop of his beloved drink. Every time the woman had brought him a bowl he had merely put his lips to it, taking a small sip which, as soon as she moved away, he had spat back into the bowl, then emptied it onto the ground. After the sixth bowl he had decided the performance was complete and had pretended to fall asleep, taking care to keep his knife well within reach.

When he had heard Janaína get up he had tightened his hand on the handle and waited for the attack. To his great surprise the woman had not tried to kill him but had set off out of the hut. Yarimi had then followed her to find out what she intended, and when he had seen that she was leaving the village he had understood: that woman cursed by the spirits had decided to abandon them. An affront worse than any other: nobody abandoned the village of which Yarimi was chief. He had breathed in deeply and then let out the alarm cry at the top of his lungs.

If she had had time to think, Janaína would have wondered where she had gone wrong, how her plan had failed so quickly and so miserably. Perhaps she would have questioned the role the spirits had reserved for her, or perhaps she would even have thought she had got everything wrong, that she should have accepted the spirits' message and lived the life that had been set in front of her.

But Janaína had had no time to think. Only to act and to run. Woken by Yarimi's cry, which after a couple of seconds she had recognised in terror, some of the ablest warriors of the village were already awake and beginning to run this way and that, trying to work out what was happening and what to do. In the confusion she had seen that some of them were heading straight for the river, cutting off the escape route she had set herself. She had rapidly changed course, moving away from the river and pushing into the thick of the forest. Somebody had seen her running and, calling for help, had launched himself in pursuit. Consciously she did not know where she was running to; she simply ran. But instinct was guiding her towards the point that would represent perhaps her salvation, perhaps her end. Certainly the decisive point of her adventure.

She had gone on running at full tilt, and when she had emerged from the thick of the trees still a little ahead of her pursuers, everything had become clear, literally as well.

The moon lit the rocks, the shining water of the river and the astonishing, very high and narrow drop of the waterfall. It was higher than the tallest tree in the whole forest: the water plunged down between two narrow slabs of rock to throw itself into a small lake far below. The village legends told of some ancient one who had been valiant enough to dive, and many bold young men often talked of going to try it, but no living person had ever had the courage.

Janaína had not dived at once. She had stopped on the lip of the waterfall to stare at the point where her pursuers would come out, hoping that Yarimi would be among them so that she could show him which of the two of them was the braver. And so it happened. The light of the moon was not strong enough to let her see his eyes, but there had been no need. You could make out perfectly the change in his expression: from the conviction that he had caught her, to doubt, to disbelief when she turned and jumped.

She had been wandering the forest for days now, following the course of the river, without meeting anybody. She had no trouble finding food and water, and the almost miraculous success of her escape had given her enormous strength of spirit. She was not in difficulty. But that long solitude was beginning to unsettle her a little: she had not expected there to be no villages for such a long stretch after the waterfall. *All the better*, she found herself thinking, *the further I go the better*.

It was dusk on the fifth day, almost time to look for a place to spend the night, and at that moment, above the cries of the parrots, she had heard children's voices beyond the trees.

2.17 Words

“This thing the Strange One does with the children, those signs, is it magic?”

“No, Kirimà, it isn’t magic,” said Itáakûara, yawning, as he swung lazily in his hammock. He did not seem very interested. “The Strange One is called Antônio, you know that, and he isn’t capable of doing any magic at all, I can tell you. In the whole village there’s nobody the spirits would less want anything to do with. It’s only a game, don’t think about it.”

“But what a stupid game. Signs are painted on your body, they aren’t drawn in the dust with a stick. It’s a foolish game, nobody has ever seen the like, I don’t like it.”

“It’ll be a game their Strange children play. Don’t worry about a game. It isn’t dangerous, is it?”

“No... no, it doesn’t look as though they can hurt themselves. But I don’t like it.”

“There are a great many things you don’t like, Kirimà,” the shaman chuckled, settling himself more comfortably inside the hammock. “Leave them alone, they’re only children, they’re only playing.”

That game turned out to be extremely useful to Antônio who, without having foreseen it at all, found that having to write words down made him learn a great many new ones, and he began making progress in the Language much faster than before.

But the children had very soon discovered, as they grew familiar with the signs—and despite their language being very poorly suited to being written—that this game gave them an extraordinary means of secret communication, of which the adults and the elders knew nothing, a formidable instrument for slipping out from under their control.

You could trace IPÊ outside the *shabono* and the children who woke later than the others would know that their companions had gone to play down at the river. If you saw OPIÎ near the path you knew your friends had gone to stock up on fruit; if you found PUTÚ cut into the soft mud on the bank you could run to the clearing to play ball with the others.

It was handy to see AYÎNDÉ SWEET next to the fire, because you understood that the medicine woman had made her delicious mash of manioc and honey and with a little dexterity you might manage to filch at least a handful of it; and it was useful to read YBOTYRA ANGRY beside the entrance to the hut, because you knew that old Ybotyra was having one of her bad-tempered days and the children had better keep well clear of her if they did not want stones thrown at them.

A little less useful—but Antônio, otherwise extremely proud of the children’s progress, knew it was inevitable—was the use of that new weapon in their quarrels with one another: an offensive CAUÊ TAPIR traced in the middle of the open space was followed by a bloody MOACIR POO written larger still, just before Antônio obliged the two of them, both thoroughly offended, to make peace.

So he was not unduly surprised when one afternoon he heard them sniggering and, going over to the group that was laughing helplessly to the point of tears, saw that right underneath Itáakûara’s hammock somebody had traced, with great care, ITÁ BIG BELLY. He ought to have told them off, naturally, but looking at the abdomen—objectively imposing—of the shaman who, while he lay blissfully sunk in sleep, swung slowly, overflowing from his hammock like an enormous over-ripe mango, he could do nothing but smother a laugh, while all around him the boys rolled about on the ground in hilarity.

He laughed a great deal less, however—indeed he went scarlet with embarrassment, and thanked heaven he had taught that extremely dangerous game only to the children—when a few days later, coming out of the shade of the *shabono* early in the morning, he caught a glimpse of a swarm of children running off, scattering in all directions to hide giggling among the branches, and found in front of his feet, right on the threshold, decorated with three round stones, the writing ANTÔNIO LOVES JANAÍNA.

2.18 *Far Away*

“I’m telling you it’s that one, I’m absolutely certain,” Yamandé insisted. “Haven’t I told you about it lots of times already? Leeenā said to me: look at it carefully. Look at it carefully, because this caterpillar isn’t like all the others. This is the best thing you’ll eat in your whole life. She made a hole in the manioc, put it inside, and she was right. I’ve never eaten anything so good since and I’ve never forgotten what it looked like. You’ve no idea how long I’ve been hoping to find it again. I’m telling you it’s that one.”

“I know you’ve told me over and over,” Piata retorted, “and I’m telling you again that isn’t the problem. The problem is that he’ll never eat it.”

“But it’s delicious, I’m telling you. Why wouldn’t he eat it?”

“Because caterpillars disgust him.”

“Caterpillars disgust him?”

This time it was not only Yamandé who was astonished but almost all the other children as well. “And how do you know that?”

“Because I’ve watched him and I’ve noticed he never eats them.”

“But you must have got it wrong. All right, he’s Strange, but not even he can be that strange, everybody likes caterpillars. I say we take it to him and you’ll see how pleased he’ll be. Tell the truth, you don’t want to take it to him because you want to eat it yourself.”

Piata thought about what to do and then decided the situation was serious enough to deserve the revealing of his great secret.

“No. I’m telling you he doesn’t like caterpillars. And do you know why that doesn’t seem strange to me? Because I don’t like them either.”

“You don’t like caterpillars?”

“No. And not only do I not like them, they absolutely disgust me.”

“Caterpillars disgust you.”

“Yes.”

“Then why do you eat them?”

“Because I have to.”

The revelation was all the more shocking given that Piata was the biggest of the lot of them, the one who ate the most and ate everything, or so they had always believed.

A long silence fell among the children.

It was Moacir who broke it. “I don’t like them either. Only I never eat them.”

“How do you manage that?” Piata asked him, his eyes lit with hope.

“I pretend to eat them, then when nobody’s looking I hide them among the picked-clean bones or wherever I can.”

“Clever!”

“So do you really think there’s a danger he won’t like it?” asked a disappointed Yamandé.

“Yes.”

“What a shame. I really wanted to give him a present in exchange for the strange ball he made for us.”

“Me too. You’ll see, we’ll find something else. And don’t be sad: you’re about to taste that flavour you say you like so much all over again.”

Ah yes, the special caterpillar. They looked around, but it seemed to have vanished. Then they noticed that Cauê had moved away from the group, and they saw him on the other side of the clearing, going up to Antônio and holding something out to him. From that distance they could not see what, but they were all certain it was a stuffed manioc root. They set off at a run, shouting their friend’s name.

Antônio watched Cauê holding out to him a root with an enormous revolting caterpillar inside it. He was almost sure it was a gesture of goodwill from the child, perhaps a thank-you for the rubber ball he had made the day before. But eat the caterpillar? Up to now he had always managed to avoid them, fishing meat, fish and vegetables out of the trays and leaving the caterpillars aside, which must certainly have pleased the Indians, since they seemed to be very fond of them. But now there was no escape. Perhaps he could lift it out, give it to the child and eat the manioc? While he was thinking about it Cauê took a good bite of this unusual stuffed roll, chewed, said “Ang-uààà”, which Antônio had by now learned meant “delicious” (as the child’s face confirmed), and with a great smile put the rest of the delicacy into Antônio’s hands.

Antônio had long since lost all sense of time. He had a vague idea of how long had passed since his arrival in the village, but if somebody had told him that it was at that moment nine o’clock, Rio de Janeiro time, on the eleventh of September 2001, Antônio, contemplating the caterpillar squashed into the manioc, would certainly have answered (in a Portuguese growing steadily shakier from disuse), “And what has that got to do with me? I’ve got a great deal more pressing problems to solve.”

Five thousand kilometres further north, in a place so distant in every possible sense that it might as well have been on the other side of the universe, Isabel was staring at the television, dumbfounded. It was a long time since she had thought about Antônio. The year before she had gone back to Macapá to settle some business and had learned that he was still listed as missing in the forest and that by now there was no hope of finding him.

Now, out of the blue, she remembered how hard he had been struck by the tragedy of that aeroplane whose pilot had decided to kill himself by crashing into the sea with all his passengers, and she thought: *thank goodness you’re dead, dear Antônio. That way you haven’t had to see this horror.*

At the umpteenth replay of the second aeroplane crashing into the WTC, Isabel shook herself, took a small rucksack and put her mobile and two bottles of water into it. *The media all over the world*

will have gone mad. Let's go and see whether they need an interpreter. With a hysterical laugh she finished the thought: "*Whether?*" *Ha ha.* And she ran out of the house.

2.19 World Cup

Ladies and gentlemen, good evening. Live from Tokyo we bring you Holland v Argentina, in the quarter-finals of the 2002 World Cup. The sides are already coming out onto the pitch, Holland in their traditional ochre-spotted shirts and Argentina in their handsome brown-striped strip. The crowd is one for the great occasions: at least thirty children, a great many parrots and an unspecified number of insects and dangerous animals. But quiet now, it is time for the national anthems.

Antônio broke off the commentary he was delivering to himself, gave the order “A’iybò”, and the children lined up, which was exactly what he had hoped they would do. A surge of pride went through him, tempered by the strong suspicion that they had done it not because his pronunciation was impeccable but because they had already worked out what to do. It was the third quarter-final. In the first, Japan had surprisingly beaten Italy, to the sorrow of Antônio, who did not want to steer the matches but was secretly hoping for more realistic results. In the second, Germany had seen off Denmark 8–5. Brazil v Croatia would complete the bracket. Antônio said “Holland!”, pointed at the ochre spots and began to sing the anthem, accompanied with great enthusiasm by the Dutch players: “Poropò, poropò, poropoppoppoppopopò. Poropò, poropò, poropoppoppoppopopò.”

For some time now the children had seemed to have thoroughly absorbed the main rules of football, and Antônio had even organised a few village tournaments, although they were tournaments that took place more in his head than in reality, since he had soon given up trying to explain the concepts of groups, tables and points, and what he had learned of their language was certainly not up to the job.

Perhaps there were no words up to the job in the whole of their language, which they called “Acaaaaa!”, simply “Language”. In any case the children played, he kept the tables himself, and everybody was happy that way. Something could be done to improve things further; there is always something that can be improved; but Antônio could not think what.

Until one evening, one of those relatively few evenings when he thought back to the world he had left behind, the idea of what to do came to him. His mind had flown to the World Cup in Korea and Japan. Antônio had calculated, taking account of the pregnancies he had seen carried to term, that he had probably been in the forest two and a half or three years: so the 2002 World Cup must have taken place recently, or perhaps was even going on at that very moment. Antônio thought that introducing ritual elements such as team colours and national anthems might be both entertaining and comprehensible to the children.

The next morning, as soon as he woke, he carefully levelled a well-sheltered patch of ground where he drew with a sharpened stick the bracket of the matches of the first Amazonian fantasy World Cup. So as not to complicate things too much, he had decided to skip the group stage and go straight to the quarter-finals. He had chosen all the great sides except France, whose victory over Brazil at the ’98 World Cup was an affront still too fresh and too painful to be forgiven. In Antônio’s fantasy, therefore, the France of that damned Zidane had been sensationally knocked out by the host nation.

Moreover, to make the association between the bracket and the matches comprehensible, he had decided not to use national flags but team colours. Colours which he would then paint directly onto the still unripe bodies of his players.

Here the first problem arose: having created the first two sides, he had decided to paint the “Japan” players with a fine red circle on the chest, something Yamandé and company seemed thoroughly de-

lighted by. The red circle was so handsome that the “Italian” players wanted one painted on them too, and it took no small amount of patience to persuade them to be painted with wavy black stripes.

The second problem came out at the moment of the national anthems: Antônio had realised that he knew practically nothing about the Japan side, starting precisely with the anthem, and had decided to use the Marseillaise in its place. But first he had launched into *Fratelli d'Italia*, which was the only anthem apart from the Brazilian one whose music, and even a few words, he remembered well. And the opening “Poropò, poropò” had provoked such enthusiasm among the children that there was no way of persuading them to accept any other music. The Marseillaise was met at once with shouts of protest: the “Japan” boys felt unjustly discriminated against and made it clear that they wanted the opening “Poropò, poropò” as well. And that was how Antônio turned *Fratelli d'Italia* from a national anthem into the opening song of the matches. The World Cup theme tune, in practice.

In introducing his young friends to football, Antônio was absolutely determined to prevent them from being so much as brushed by the concept of refereeing injustices, and had promised himself to be as impartial as possible. After Italy’s defeat by Japan—as if that would ever happen—he realised, however, that if he wanted to enjoy himself a bit more too, he would have to intervene at the point of picking the sides.

Another fixed principle of his conduct, in fact, was to avoid like the plague the formation of fixed teams: he did not want to run the slightest risk of creating gangs and factions in a village of five hundred people. Given that the composition of the sides had to change from match to match, then, he might as well steer it a little, not to create favouritism but to increase the realism (in his own eyes) of the role-play.

The players at his disposal were some thirty boys and six girls, between the age of six and the age of initiation. In the next quarter-final he had made the sides up so that Germany came out a little stronger and more “muscular”, while he had allocated the more agile children to Denmark. Holland v Argentina, on the other hand, had to be a more evenly balanced tie, so Yamandé and Moacir had ended up in the first side and Piata and Ubiratan in the second, and the weaker or smaller players had been divided more or less equally too.

Yamandé and Piata, besides being the two strongest players, were also very close, and had pulled a slight face of disappointment at the thought of playing apart. *Never fear: you’ll see, for the next match, in the green and gold shirt, you’ll be back together*, thought Antônio, smirking.

2.20 Ash

Antônio was about ten metres up. All along the bark of the tree he had nimbly climbed he had cut vertical incisions with the sturdy claws of a large anteater, suitably worked to make them sharp. From the incisions a precious pale yellow resin had begun to well up and, suitably channelled by the shape of the incisions themselves, to run down into a large bowl at the foot of the tree. Two enormous yellow caterpillars with big red and white spots, which struck Antônio as being of modest size, were walking lazily along a branch a short distance away. *Ooh, these are good ones*, thought Antônio, *I'll give them to somebody*.

Look at you, Antônio, you're one of us, the people of the village had no word to refer to themselves by, *you're climbing down a tree whose Portuguese name you don't know with two enormous gelatinous caterpillars in your hand that you intend to eat with your friends*. His thoughts now flowed in the local language, leaving room for Portuguese only for those words that did not exist or were in some way untranslatable.

The commotion began just as he had started his descent, an operation complicated by the fact that he was holding the caterpillars in his right hand. An inhuman cry had gone up from behind one of the largest huts, and already a great many people were running towards it, abandoning what they were doing.

Antônio understood at once that somebody had died; he felt it inside; a cry like that could not mean anything else.

They did not have a good relationship with death; they considered it an intruder. In their stories there was a time when death did not exist and the people of the village could live for ever. In that period they had met a powerful enemy tribe which they had managed to defeat, and death was the punishment for having dared so much. This was the fundamental story, repeated over and over: death is the punishment for having fought against other beings like ourselves; we must fight no more, and one day perhaps death will leave us and go away.

But not that day. When he reached the ground Antônio was certain by now that the dead person was somebody important and loved. In general the reaction to a death was the more brutal and furious the more important the dead person was within the community, and the behaviour of those who had come running left no room for doubt: they seemed to have gone mad, blinded by fury.

The cries would soon reach everybody, including those hunting and playing far off, and within an hour at most the whole village would be gathered in the phase of violent reaction to the death. Nobody tried to channel or stop this rage; on the contrary, often the oldest were also the angriest, and their behaviour spurred on the younger ones and even the children. They would go on like that, screaming and kicking at the air, thrashing and shaking themselves, beating their chests and legs with violent blows of the hand until they fell exhausted to the ground, which for some of the strongest meant several hours of passion.

The forest reacted to the din first by amplifying it: birds and monkeys of every species added their cry to that of the men and women, creating a truly impressive roar. Then, as the grief went on unchecked, the animals abandoned the field and left a ring of silence around the outbursts of rage, creating one more extraordinary effect, a kind of distant low echo generated by the trees themselves.

No!

The first thing Antônio saw was the feet. For some reason Antônio, without even fully realising it, was able to tell almost everybody apart from their feet alone, feet with a solid but incredibly flexible sole, callused but exceptionally sensitive.

No!

He had no doubt, but he wanted to convince himself that it was not true, that it could not be, that he might perfectly well be wrong.

“No!” The cry in Portuguese was lost among the shouts of those around him. “No! No! No!”

Stretched on the ground with her eyes closed lay Ayîndé, her expression curiously relaxed, her hair scattered around her head to form a kind of halo.

The witch.

How many things Ayîndé had taught him, the medicine woman, the witch? Everything. Antônio felt rising inside him the same rage the others were already expressing. It had never happened to him before; usually he confined himself to watching this first expression of grief from one side, but this time it was different. He began to scream and thrash about like the others, and before long he lost all sense of time and space.

When he opened his eyes again he was lying on the damp earth. The warm afternoon air enfolded the village while a good many of the hardest, men and women, were still vibrating in what had turned into a kind of funeral dance. The elders were already laying out the body and building the pyre: between four large stones a great quantity of wood was heaped up, and on top of it was laid a slab of the same stone on which to rest the body. All the dead woman's belongings would be burned on the pyre, and the things that would not catch fire would be gathered up and thrown into the river. Once the flesh had burned, the bones would be collected and burned separately until they were reduced to ash.

Antônio watched the whole procedure with a strange detachment: the fire that started from the resin and flooded the wood, that rose high and enfolded the medicine woman, merging with the red of the sunset; the body slowly blackening and disappearing from this world; the bones. The ashes were taken by four young people, two men and two women, and carried to the top of the roof of trees that partly covered the village, at least twenty metres from the ground, and then slowly let fall like snow onto the huts, onto the people, onto everything. Beneath this terrible snowfall the first hunters who had set off on the special hunt were already coming back. They would all feast and drink until their strength gave out. The length of the feast depended on how prominent the dead person had been, and in this case it would not last less than three days and three nights.

The first songs were already rising; the women and the youngest of the boys went to the elders intoning very ancient songs, of which Antônio caught no more than the odd word, with the explicit purpose of easing their spirits. The adults who were not occupied in some task listened passively to these melodies and rarely allowed themselves a half-smile, their eyes full of tears. Soon the meat would be cooked and the alcoholic drink, the water of the forest, would begin to flow. The dead woman's closest relatives mixed a handful of the ashes into their portion of the water of the forest, and Antônio was invited to drink a mouthful; it had never happened before.

What Antônio felt was a sensation of completeness; the witch's soul had entered inside him. He ate and drank without fear for three days and three nights, and when he woke at dawn on the fourth day he understood that something inside him had changed for ever.

2.21 Happiness

Dear notebook... Antônio often spent a little time with himself, talking aloud. No, there's a better word. Journal? Dear journal... no, not that either. Diary! Dear diary! Right then: dear diary, here I am lying in a hammock surrounded by boys running and laughing, and for the first time I have to confess to you that I'm happy. I can't believe I feel this well. I play football every day, or their ball game, which at first I looked down on and which now seems to me beautiful; I've become a sort of official educator to the children of the village and, well, I'm happy. My greatest worry these days is that I can't find a way to explain the concept of cold to them. I've got as far as telling them about ice by saying that every so often water turns to stone, to general laughter, but cold I still haven't worked out how to describe.

"Ba-all?"

Yamandé, whom Antônio had for so long called TwoSocks inside his own head, asked it with his usual smile, using the Portuguese word.

"I wanted to rest a moment," Antônio answered in the language of the village.

"Ba-all!" Yamandé insisted, holding up the ball.

Goodness, these boys never get tired... like all boys everywhere, for that matter, but these ones seem as lively and active as any I've ever seen.

"All right, all right, ball, ball," he said in Portuguese, as he did every so often. It was a kind of gesture of affection; sometimes it came to him spontaneously and sometimes he felt a real need to launch into long monologues in his old language, knowing perfectly well that they could not understand him.

"But no sprints, all right? I've had you doing sprints and stretches all morning; the last thing I want is for you to hurt yourselves. I know, you're young, and when you're young you always think you're invulnerable, but you have to learn early when it's the moment to push and when it's the moment to rest."

Yamandé looked at him with an amused air, as he always did when he listened to this unknown tongue. "Quick, the big ones are hunting, the little ones are waiting at the pitch!" he said in the Language.

"At the pitch, eh? So a match, so we'll rest tomorrow..."

Antônio was not really worried; these boys would have played all day with him or without him, and had probably been doing so for generations. If anything he felt responsible because he was trying to direct their physical and technical preparation and would not have wanted to upset some balance, still less some muscle fibre.

When they reached the pitch, though, the first adults were already coming back from the hunt. The rule was that in the presence of adults the young ones had no access to the clearing; they could only stand aside. Antônio had taught them to do a bit of cheering, because traditionally ball matches were watched in silence, chatting perhaps but certainly not shouting. The arrival of the grown-ups had left a veil of disappointment over the boys: they would have to go back to the village and leave the field clear for those entitled to it. That time, though, it was different: one of the hunters came over

to Antônio and, speaking slowly, said, “The others are still hunting. Shall we play with the little ones?”

It had never happened. It might happen that one of the better boys took part in a match, perhaps to replace somebody who had been hurt or was busy elsewhere, but big against little had never been seen, except sporadically, two against two or three against three perhaps.

“Play gently, please,” Antônio answered him, fearing that some slightly too violent physical contact might hurt one of “his” boys.

“Not gently, hard, very hard, that way they become men sooner,” the adult answered, in a tone that did not sound in the least ironic, “but at your game, at football, not at the ball game.”

Yes, thought Antônio, *I know. The ball game is sacred.*

The boys understood at once and became the very image of happiness; they shouted, they ran about the pitch, they hugged one another, they were joy personified, and all this before the kick-off.

“Let’s do it your way, Antônio, let’s do the poisoned arrows and the bow drawn too tight, all right?”

Antônio nodded with a great smile stamped on his face; it was enough for him that they played and enjoyed themselves. He was not even sure they were all clear about the names of the patterns he had introduced very recently and more as a game than as a serious matter. And besides they were no longer children but they were still boys, still far too small; the concepts were too difficult.

The little ones began shyly and awkwardly, and they had to be understood: facing them were the great hunters of the village, the strongest and most respected men. They misplaced their passes, they lost the ball, Antônio’s patterns produced nothing but a great deal of confusion. With every goal they conceded they grew more crestfallen, and a couple of them were very close to tears.

Then all at once something clicked in the boys’ heads and the bow drawn too tight began to work. The wide players helped the centre-backs in the defensive phase and the adults constantly found two or three little ones under their feet, and holding on to the ball became harder and harder. *And to think I made them run today and they ought to be tired*, thought Antônio. They went on misplacing passes and losing the ball, but the defence was holding now, and at four or five nil the great hunters could no longer score, nor even get very close to the goal.

Antônio saw Yamandé still conferring with a couple of team-mates. *He’s reminding them about the poisoned arrows*, he realised. He was also waiting for the right moment. A hunter lost the ball in midfield, besieged by three possessed little opponents; the ball arrived at Yamandé’s feet and twice he produced a burst of pace and a change of direction that left his marker several metres behind. Coming in sight of the goal he feinted the shot and instead floated a pinpoint pass towards one of his three team-mates who with perfect timing had slipped in between the opposing defenders: the poisoned arrows.

Antônio contemplated the long arc of the pass, feeling something entirely new: it was a moment of beauty, of silence, of growth. The eyes of the opponents were lost in surprise; the eyes of his boys were like a jaguar’s. *It isn’t true that it all depends: when everything is this precise, when there is all this appetite and all this joy, it doesn’t depend any more.* The half-overhead kick of Jaci, one of the older boys, came off his foot at an incredible speed born of perfect timing. The goalkeeper stood still and perhaps did not even have time to see the ball go into the net. Yamandé was already celebrating the way Antônio had taught him, arms in the air, running towards a team-mate to embrace

him. Somehow, inside himself, he had known well in advance that the ball was going in; inside himself he had known already that it did not depend any more.

This is the best football team I have ever had, thought Antônio, happier than he had ever been.

2.22 Stories

“Antônio, are you able to build everything?”

Janaína’s thin voice interrupted a long monologue about football made up of imprecise memories and patterns traced with a stick on the ground. Antônio turned in surprise and looked at her questioningly while the boys around him got up and ran off.

“You’re always telling us about your village and the things there are in your village. Do you know how to build those things? For instance, are you able to build the great shining bird?”

“The aeroplane?” Antônio asked in Portuguese. “No, I’m not able to. I’m not even able to build your huts,” he concluded, switching to the local language.

“But you’ve seen all those things, haven’t you? Why don’t you know how to build them?” insisted Janaína, who had the peculiarity of gesturing far more than her companions while she spoke, because for her too the village language was not her mother tongue. This gave an emphatic tone to everything she said and underlined her physical presence and her body, on which Antônio could not help letting his eyes rest.

“Because they’re difficult things,” said Antônio, who was sometimes astonished at how much he managed to say with a vocabulary that was still relatively limited. “They need many men and much thought.”

A little way off two older women were busy lighting a fire; one of them put in, laughing, “Antônio isn’t even able to light a fire!”

“Yes I am!” he answered. “It takes me a long time but I can do it!”

A collective laugh gave Antônio the suspicion that he had said something the wrong way.

“Tell us something beautiful about your village,” Janaína asked again, sitting down beside Antônio, very close, their knees almost touching.

“Something beautiful?”

Almost all his stories revolved around football, around world cups, great players, some experience of his own. He did not do it on purpose; he felt limited by the language, and football was a subject fairly simple to translate and one that interested everybody. Where words failed him he could manage by demonstrating, by gestures, by drawing. Football had been his doorway into learning the language. Now, though, he wanted to tell Janaína something he considered beautiful about his world, something he missed.

“In my village, and not only there, all over the world, there are threads...” How was he to tell this in a language that had developed inside the Amazon forest, suited to and developed for a people of hunters? “And other people’s thoughts pass along these threads. We call it ‘Internet’. If you attach yourself to one of these threads you can see what other people are thinking.”

“See?” asked one of the women who had been teasing Antônio before, fascinated.

“Yes, see, because inside these threads pass thoughts which then end up on a thing we call a ‘screen’, and if we look at the screen we see the thoughts. Ah, it’s like when we draw on the ground: the earth is the screen and it shows you what I’m thinking, isn’t that right?”

“I’d never thought of that...” put in Janaína.

“Yes, when you draw you’re letting out something you have inside you,” *how hard it is to say in this language*, “and through the threads that are in the world you can be very far away and your thought arrives on the screen all the same.”

“But how far away? As far as the river? As far as the *bacaba* trees?”

Antônio knew that the concept of distance was rather vague for the villagers; more than once already he had had enormous difficulty talking to them about the world as a whole.

“Far away, as far away as you like. Think of the furthest thing you know.”

“The moon.”

“There: as far away as the moon.”

“Can you hear the moon’s thoughts?”

“No, the moon’s thoughts no; I don’t know whether the moon has thoughts. But once some men went to the moon and we could hear their words through special invisible threads.”

“Invisible threads?”

“Yes.”

“That go from the earth to the moon?”

“Yes.”

Antônio realised how incredible those words must sound, considering that there were people who used those threads and yet did not believe man had been to the moon. He was expecting some show of scepticism, and instead watched in astonishment as Janaína looked around her with a dreaming air and asked, “Are there invisible threads here too?”

Antônio took a few seconds to recover from his surprise before answering, “Yes.”

“But we can’t see them because we’re not able to build the screen, is that right?”

“That’s right.”

“A pity,” Janaína concluded. “I’d like to see it. And there’s no hope you’ll learn how to build it, is there?”

“No, I’m sorry.”

2.23 Revelations

Word spread that Antônio knew the strangest stories ever heard in the village, and a curiosity its inhabitants had not known they possessed took hold of them.

It seemed impossible to satisfy them, helped along by the Language, which forced Antônio into very long paraphrases in his attempts to describe what was extremely difficult if not impossible to describe. The result was always somewhere between the comic and the magical; with every story the audience grew, and before long Antônio found himself surrounded during his tellings by the entire village, listening.

When it comes down to it, it isn't very different from when I was on the radio. In fact I end up with more listeners here. Speaking of which...

"There aren't only threads you can see, there are invisible threads too..."

"Like the one that goes as far as the moon!" put in Janaína with her wide gestures and a note of pride in her voice.

"That's why the moon stays up in the sky! It's attached to a thread!" another voice confirmed.

Antônio went on: "Along these invisible threads pass people's voices..."

"But wasn't it thoughts that passed along them?" asked an old woman.

"No, sister," Janaína put in again, "thoughts pass along the real threads, the ones you can see! Along the invisible threads only the voice passes!"

And the pictures too, my dear, but perhaps I'll explain that another time...

"Every day I used to speak into a trap for the voice that took my words and handed them out to the invisible threads. We call it 'radio' and you use it to talk to people, as I'm doing with you. Only the person listening didn't have to be in front of me; he could be in his own hut, he could be outside, he could even be far away."

"How far away? As far as the *bacaba* trees?" a girl asked him at exactly the moment when Antônio was regretting having touched on the subject of "distance" again.

"As far as the moon! As far as the moon!" answered Janaína, with more emphasis than ever.

"My voice didn't reach as far as the moon, though. Let's say it reached about as far as the *bacaba* trees, perhaps a little further," Antônio concluded, while disappointment took hold of Janaína, who had been hoping in her heart that Antônio was able to talk to the moon.

"It's our way of telling stories. Everybody carries on doing what they're doing and listens to my voice at the same time."

"But listening all together is lovely!" put in an adult, one of the hunters.

"The young learn better!" said an old man.

"If you're listening to a voice you can't hear the sounds, how are you supposed to hunt?" argued the first hunter, closing the matter.

Antônio looked around him; he felt everybody's eyes on him, in particular Janaína's, who, having recovered from the shock of learning that Antônio did not speak to the moon, was working up one of her outlandish ideas.

"What a strange village yours is," she said at last with a broad smile. "There are threads that carry thought and invisible threads that carry the voice. Couldn't you have put the thought straight into the invisible threads?"

"Do you know, that's a good idea? In fact I'm sure that sooner or later that's exactly how it will be: thoughts will travel along the invisible threads."

"Antônio," it was a sturdy, motherly grandmother of many children speaking, "don't you miss your village, your tribe?"

Antônio had not expected such a direct question, a question he had never in all this time even put to himself so simply, and it moved him more than he had expected.

"No, not much. I'm happy here; you're my tribe now. Well, my parents and my sisters, of course, I miss them a little... and perhaps a girl I used to know..." said Antônio, suddenly realising how distant his previous life had become.

"Did she put her hammock next to yours?"

"No, no, erm..." answered Antônio with an embarrassed smile, glancing at Janaína. "She didn't want to..."

"Is that why you left?"

"I got lost, that's the truth. In my village they weren't going to let the boys I was with play ball any more, and so I decided to leave it for a while, but I got lost."

This statement caused a start among all the members of the village, who began discussing it animatedly among themselves. Two elderly members got up, frowning deeply, and placed themselves in the middle of the circle. "Not let them play ball! How can you forbid playing ball?"

"Perhaps the pitch had burned? But even then you only have to wait a few days!"

The uproar among the listeners did not let up, and Antônio took advantage of it to recover from the wave of emotion that had swept over him.

"After all, you stopped me playing your ball game for a long time too; in my village it wasn't very different. An old man wouldn't allow my boys to play any more."

"If he had stopped *you* playing," said the first of the two old men, "the old man would have been wise: you aren't any good with the ball! But he stopped your boys playing, and that isn't wise."

"I really am glad I met you all," Antônio concluded, shaking his head.

2.24 Saudade

A long time ago Antônio had read an article about words unique to the various languages of the world, the ones that are hard to translate because their meaning is hard to render. The only Portuguese word that appeared among the top ten was *saudade*, and Antônio remembered finding it funny, because in fact it had always seemed a barely comprehensible word to him too.

The meaning was perfectly clear to him, obviously, but he struggled to make it his own and to understand how anybody could feel *saudade* for just about anything, as many of his acquaintances seemed to. He had supposed that this was due at least in part to never having left Macapá; but his sisters too always did the same things and even lived in the same family house they had been born in, and yet they talked continually about *saudade*, for a friend they had not seen in a long time, for the schoolteacher, for a dish they had eaten as little girls, for a toy.

And now that he had been living in the forest for goodness knows how long he had had final confirmation that *saudade* does not depend on where you live. There were some things he was sorry about: he was sorry to think that his parents and his sisters believed him dead, but strangely he felt no *saudade* for them (though he was a little ashamed of that). In the early days he had been sorry not to be teaching any more, not to be explaining football, not to be talking on the radio; but once the terrible period of not being able to communicate had passed, now that he could talk to his new friends he had not the slightest regret for the old days. There were only two things he felt *saudade* for.

One was the future. Antônio was by now extremely happy in his new world and was certainly not bored, there were always things to do or stories to tell, but the way of life of the people he lived among was almost entirely without progress. In ten years' time they would be doing the same things in more or less the same way as they were doing them now.

This was for the most part a reassuring thought, but every so often Antônio could not help thinking with a touch of melancholy about the whirling rate of progress in the world he had abandoned. Goodness knows what innovations there had been in computing, for instance. Almost certainly internet pages loaded twice or even three times as fast now; and with that thing, Napper or whatever it was called, perhaps you could listen to whole albums now, or maybe even watch films. But there had certainly been new wars too, and given that man always found a way to use technology to do harm as well, perhaps somebody had already managed to find and exploit the dark side of the new technologies. This thought put its head round the door every time and helped him keep his regret for the world outside the forest below the surface.

The purest form of *saudade*, though, he felt for his grandfather. Ricardo Paulo Almeida Carvalho had been born in Macapá in 1918. The city's state of semi-isolation, which for so many of his fellow citizens had been an excellent excuse to stay planted where they were, had instead stirred in Ricardo the urge to travel, to know Brazil and the world. When the war came, in 1943 he had enlisted at once. Since dying in battle would have been an obstacle to his plan of getting to know the world, he had chosen a speciality that would keep him reasonably far from the front line. And so he had found himself in Italy as a trumpeter in the band of the Força Expedicionária Brasileira, fighting in the Emilian Apennines and playing the Brazilian anthem and the Italian one at Montese and then, one after another, in all the other liberated towns.

Antônio remembered very little of his stories from that period, because most of the time they were not about battles, which he would gladly have listened to, but about the charms of the girls of Bologna and Modena, and hearing them told in front of his grandmother embarrassed him no end.

Now he would gladly have listened to those stories too, but his grandfather was no longer there to tell them, and this was perhaps the chief cause of his *saudade*. Be that as it may, Ricardo had gone back to Brazil at the end of the war, stationed in Rio de Janeiro, where he had met a woman whose charms surpassed those of the Emilian girls by a considerable margin (by how considerable a margin depended on whether his grandmother was present during the telling or not) and where, above all, he had risen through the ranks of the military band in view of the first post-war World Cup, which was to be held in Brazil itself in 1950.

The story of that World Cup and its tragic ending is known to every Brazilian. Antônio remembered perfectly, as though he had heard it a minute earlier, the time he had heard his grandfather tell it: it was 1978, and Brazil had just been cheated out of the final by Argentina after the scandalous match with Peru. Ricardo had called the thoroughly disappointed eleven-year-old Antônio, at his first World Cup lived through as a conscious viewer, and had settled him on his knees. He had called his son Italo, Antônio's father, over beside him as well, and had begun to tell it.

"You think this is a disappointment? Now I'll tell you the story of a real disappointment. In fact the story that ought to appear in the dictionary under 'disappointment'. I've never told it to you before, Italo my dear, because it's too painful a story and I decided I'd tell it only once in my life: today seems to me the right moment."

Ricardo was a great teller and Antônio very much liked listening to his stories about sport, but even more he liked living new ones with him year after year and hearing him tell them, in a manner so impassioned and so gripping that he almost doubted he had watched the same match. Unfortunately the recent stories all ended badly: the robbery of '78, the surprise defeat by Italy in '82, the shoot-out defeat by France in '86, damned Argentina again in '90. Then at last in '94 a new victory had come. Ricardo loved matches against Italy, because they reminded him of the days of the war, of his youth and of the delightful Emilian girls. And also because they usually ended well. When Baggio blazed the final penalty over the crossbar, Ricardo had smiled with the smile of a man who has seen at the cinema the ending he wanted, and had said to the family gathered round the television, "Now that I've finally seen a happy ending together with Antônio, I can die happy."

It had not been a figure of speech: Ricardo went a few weeks later, with that smile on his lips that had never left him again.

Four years later Brazil had come to grief in the final, once again against damned France. Antônio had felt a sensation of pure, sweet, exceedingly bitter *saudade*: in some ways he was glad his grandfather had been spared this new disappointment, but in reality his most entertaining stories had been the ones about defeats, and Antônio would have liked to hear what inventive insults he would have reserved for that damned Zidane.

"Antônio's got his story eyes again," said Yamandé to Piata. "Let's go and get a story out of him."

"Antônio, your eyes are lost up in the sky, but it's a lovely afternoon. Will you tell us one of your stories?"

"Eh? Ah, yes. All right."

"Yeeees!" shouted the smallest ones, delighted.

"One with a villain in it, mind!" asked Moacir.

"But a likeable one..." begged Cauê, who as time went on had not lost his round chubby cheeks.

“You want a story with a likeable villain? All right then. Make yourselves comfortable, and I’ll tell you the story of Paolorossi.”

2.25 Adults

“What do you want to do when you’re a Man?”

“What do you mean?”

“What I asked you. What do you want to do from tomorrow on, when we’ve become Men?”

They were gathered in their favourite place in the whole forest, an enormous ebony tree halfway between the village and the river: sitting on the great branches that served as comfortable seats, curled up under the enormous leaves that sheltered them from the rain, which that day was beating down with unusual insistence in that area where the vegetation was relatively thinner. Rain that had settled the parrots like brightly coloured flowers on the branches, from where they watched them, croaking quietly to one another. The petals of the heliconias were glossy and red as never before. It was a perfect moment.

Piata answered as though Yamandé had asked him what the sun would do after it had set. The sun would rise and then set again, the rain would stop beating down and then start again, and meanwhile the plants would go on growing, the animals go on eating the plants or eating one another. “I’ll do what you do when you become a man: I’ll go on being part of the village, with a man’s responsibilities. Why, what else do you want to do? I don’t even understand why you’re asking me.”

“It’s easy for you to talk like that. To take life as it comes. You’re the biggest and sturdiest of us and you’re not too stupid either,” Yamandé broke off briefly to dodge the kick Piata had aimed at him, “you’re even bigger than a lot of the ones born before us and everybody respects you. It’s natural that when the time comes you’ll be the Elder of the village.”

“What are you talking about? Who cares. Do you know how much water will come down from the sky before that can happen? I don’t want to become an Elder and above all I don’t want to think about it now. You know that becoming an Elder means your death isn’t far off. Why should I think about it now? What sort of thoughts are these, are you so afraid of tomorrow?”

“I’m not afraid of tomorrow, you know that. It’s what happens the day after tomorrow that doesn’t let me rest when I sleep. We’ll be Men. And then? What do we do when we’re men? Why does becoming men have to be different?”

“I know what I want to do after I’ve become a Man,” said Moacir, sitting a couple of branches lower down, breaking off from the laborious carving of his name that he was working into the trunk. He waited for them all to turn towards him and then added, “I want to go and see the world.”

Somebody’s eyes widened; somebody laughed.

“What world?” Yamandé understood at once that Moacir was serious, and understood too where that idea had come from. Not least because, though he did not want to admit it, he had thought about it himself. “You want to go and see Antônio’s village, see Macapá?” he went on.

“Yes. And not only that. I want to walk about the world outside the forest, I want to go to the Maracanã, I want to use all the instruments Antônio has told us about, I want to see the people who play all those strange games. I want to get on the great shining bird.”

As he spoke the others had stopped sniggering, but the boldness of this last statement had struck them completely dumb, had left them without words and without breath. Nothing could be heard but the usual carpet of sound of the forest, which above the ebony leaves seemed even amplified.

“Have you gone mad? Have you drunk the drink of dreams before you’ve even become a Man?”

It was Piata who started speaking again (and Yamandé thought at once: *and there is his first speech as an Elder*). “Getting to Macapá is impossible. And even if it were possible, why should anybody want to? Antônio came here from Macapá and stayed here. That means it’s better here.”

“Perhaps. But he’s seen both villages and then he chose. I want to see for myself before I choose.”

“And poor Araci? You know she can’t wait to hang her hammock next to yours. Are you going to abandon her, just like that?” Piata knew that Moacir was embarrassed about talking about girls, and it was the trick he always resorted to when he wanted to shut him up. But not that evening.

“If she wants to, she’ll come with me,” Moacir shot back confidently, determined that evening to astonish them to the very end.

But it had stopped raining, the parrots had risen into the air again, and Yamandé took the opportunity to break the awkwardness that had settled on the group. “Enough talking, the rain’s over. Let’s go and get Antônio to give us his last bits of advice for tomorrow.”

2.26 Initiation

The boys' initiation rite was a group affair and consisted of a match at the Ball Game between the adults' side (for which the strongest were selected, like a real village national team) and a side made up of the ten oldest boys among those who had not yet been initiated. Near the entrance to the *shabono* stood the palm of initiation: as each boy grew tall enough, he picked a coconut and joined the group of the next initiates. When the tenth boy picked his fruit the side was complete and preparations began for the rite, which took place three days later.

Piata and Yamandé were the two oldest boys among those who had not been included in the previous batch, and in their year there had been a slight dip in births, so a good deal of time had passed since the previous ceremony. But when, days earlier, Ubiratan had been the ninth to pick his fruit, they had felt a shiver: they knew it would not be long now.

Everybody thought the tenth coconut would be picked by Ubirajara, or perhaps by Taini, but one morning a radiant Cauê presented himself to Itátakûara, the shaman of ceremonies, with a coconut in his hand.

"Thank you, Cauê, but I'm not hungry just now," Itátakûara answered him, misunderstanding what was happening.

"No," said Cauê, shaking his head. "It isn't for eating. It's the ceremony coconut."

"Cauê!" Itátakûara had reproved him, furrowing his red-painted brow. "You know these are not things to joke about."

"I'm happy, but I'm not joking."

"And you know too that it's forbidden to be helped or to climb the tree."

"Nobody helped me, I did it all myself."

Cauê knew that his small stature, even more than his youth, justified Itátakûara's disbelief, so he felt obliged to add, "I made a little mountain of stones, climbed onto it and jumped."

It was an unprecedented event. Not even in the oldest stories handed down from generation to generation was any such thing recounted, so much so that the rules had not even taken it into consideration. The boys merely walked under the palm, reached up a hand, some of them jumped, but usually without any particular conviction: there was no hurry to become an adult. Cauê, though, did not want to be parted from his long-standing playmates, and necessity had developed what was already, quite plainly, a brilliant intellect.

After a brief consultation among the elders, it was decreed that Cauê had correctly earned the right of access to the rite, although everybody felt sorry for him, knowing what would happen three days later.

The other nine were pleased to learn that the tenth was him. He was small, yes, but he had a lethal turn of pace and an unmatched sense of position. Antônio too was convinced it was a good thing for the boys' side.

A side he was distinctly worried about: years had passed by now, but the memory of when the rite had been his turn was still sharp, like a scar on an arm.

It had been one of the most intense moments since he had found himself in the village. Being an adult, he had not had to pick any coconut; at a certain point the elders had simply established that he was no longer as helpless as a child and could be admitted among the men. At first the prevailing emotion had been happiness, because it was the consecration of his being accepted as a full member of the tribe. Then worry had taken over. At the time he was already able to communicate, if still crudely, but even though he believed he had understood the rules from watching the matches, he had spent the three previous days going over them.

They played ten against ten in the main clearing, which for the occasion was prepared and cleaned. The player with the ball could not move. The nearest opponent could place himself in front of him, but the holder of the ball had the right to push him away with a shove. When he judged he had a clear view, the holder of the ball kicked it in the direction of a team-mate. The first to touch the ball with his hands or his feet became the new holder, and so on. The object of the game was to strike the two sacred trees at the end of the pitch. Every time both were struck, the side scored a point.

To the worry, finally, the last feeling had succeeded: the expectation of humiliation. For the initiates that was their first match at the Game, which up to then they had only been allowed to watch. This, together with the fact that the Men's side was the best possible while the initiates were ten ordinary boys, meant an enormous disparity in the forces on the pitch, which translated into devastating defeats.

Indeed, strictly speaking you could not even call them defeats: the gap was such that the points were not counted. Only the points scored by the initiates' side were kept, and the ceremony ended when they had managed to reach ten, which usually happened after hours and hours of play, during which the Men spared them nothing and scored points in clusters. The message was clear: now you are Men, but it is only the very first step; you have a long way to go yet to become like us. The rite Antônio had taken part in had lasted almost a whole day, and you did not have to be very old to remember longer rites still, like the one Kirimà had taken part in, which had lasted more than two days.

Now the feeling that prevailed in Antônio was worry again. Thanks in part to the "World Cups" he regularly organised every two moons, this was perhaps the strongest group of initiates that had been seen in many years; they certainly had a robust team spirit. But never having played the Game (Moacir had asked him once or twice to train them in secret, but Antônio had categorically refused) was a great handicap, and besides, Antônio feared that having accustomed them to football would end up confusing them.

It was therefore with great surprise that he watched the first moments of the rite. The boys and the men, painted in the colours of initiation and of maturity, were focused and tense; the rhythmic sound of stones and sticks amplified the beating of their hearts while the women and the elders sang the high, deep notes of the Chant of Becoming Men.

Itáakûara, adorned with the ceremonial headdress of feathers, sang the last verse loudly and started the ceremony with an enormously long kick, which was immediately intercepted by Moacir with a kind of feline save. The ball was instantly passed to Piata, and from there came a long delivery in the direction of Yamandé, who struck it on the volley and sent it bouncing between the two sacred trees. Point to the initiates.

Just time to recover from the surprise and the initiates were on the attack again, emerging from it with a second point, scored by Cauê, who came out of a scramble with the speed of lightning.

The adults were incredulous. The initiates, while respecting the rules, were overturning a style of play that had been rooted in the village for goodness knows how long, perhaps centuries. When the ball was theirs they struck it on the volley wherever possible, so as not to give their opponents time to plant themselves in the way. When it was in the adults' hands they placed themselves in front of them, yes, but at a distance that put them beyond being shoved away. They ran here and there about the pitch like men possessed, preventing their opponents from fixing on any settled points of reference. And some of them, Yamandé and Cauê in particular, had so accurate a kick that they could make a point at the first attempt even from a distance, whereas in general the procedure for making a point involved a slow approach to the target and several attempts.

The adults tried to look pleased at the boys' great performance, but many of them were in fact furious, and they soon tried to bring the contest onto the one plane on which they were still superior: physical contact.

The boys tried to avoid it as far as possible, but when it happened the shoves they took were tremendous. On one occasion Cauê was catapulted backwards almost two metres and banged his head, luckily without serious damage. And Jaci, Itaúna and even Piata took some considerable knocks too.

The only one who seemed to dance unharmed above all this confusion was Yamandé. And it fell to him to have the ball for the tenth point. Piraí had served him an excellent ball, and between him and the trees there was only Jaguariuna, one of the sturdiest and most experienced of the adults, who threw himself at him almost violently but slightly late. Yamandé avoided his muscular body with a jump and found himself alone with the ball at his feet in front of the point trees, but with his back to them.

A short time earlier Antônio had told him about a Brazilian footballer, one Sócrates, who loved striking the ball with his heel to wrong-foot his opponents. Yamandé had been thrilled by this novelty and had immediately set about trying it over and over. Now Antônio prayed that Yamandé would not want to use that stroke to close the ceremony, *please no; all right, not being humiliated, but humiliating the adults, no, please*. Yamandé hesitated a moment, then turned right round on himself, losing a little time and giving Jaguariuna the chance to come back at him. With a light touch of his foot he passed the ball to Piraí, who had meanwhile come towards them following the play, and who had an easy job striking the two trees and bringing the contest to an end.

The celebrations could begin.

For the first time in the history of the village the adults' side had not overwhelmed the initiates. Janaína said to Antônio that it was a pity the Men's points were not marked. "Goodness knows how many points they made. Just imagine if they'd made fewer than the boys, that would be wonderful."

"Goodness knows," Antônio answered. And while he watched the adults' expressions without quite managing to read them, he thought that he would never reveal to anybody, not even to her, not even to the boys, that the contest had finished 10–8 to them.

2.27 Omens

“Can’t we carry on tomorrow morning?”

Yamandé looked at his father once more with a pleading air. Antônio had begun talking with the sun still high in the sky, but by now it was getting dark and the fires had been lit. Kirimà had obliged the young man to help him skin a couple of large caimans that had been caught a few hours earlier, even though they both knew perfectly well that in reality it was an excuse to keep Yamandé away from Antônio. Skinning caimans was a long and fairly wearing job, one that the young were glad to get out of, especially in the case of specimens that size. But Yamandé was an adult now and had not been able to say no to Kirimà.

Antônio had begun by talking about football with a small group of boys, but then somebody had asked him about his mother tongue and the business had gone on a long time.

He had started with the ancient Romans, a great empire beyond a great sea, and how they had tried to conquer the whole known world. Every single thing was to them a source of surprise and of a shower of questions, the great sea (how do you explain the sea?), the world, the empire: the very concept of the immensity of the world and of all the peoples and nations that inhabited it was something alien to them. The more questions came, the richer the telling grew, even when in order to explain something he had to make long verbal circumnavigations to arrive at describing objects or events not expressible in their language. Time passed, and by the moment when the Portuguese set out for the conquest of the new world the whole tribe was gathered round Antônio, listening. They were beautiful to see: black eyes wide open and mouths half open in astonishment; big and small gathered close to one another and silent, so caught up in those fantastic stories that they almost forgot to breathe.

The whole tribe except Kirimà and poor Yamandé, forced to cut lengthwise into the belly of one of the two reptiles, free out its stinking thick innards, begin the long and laborious operation of separating from the flesh the skin that in some places seemed stuck on with resin, and would not come away even for teeth, even for the sharpest of anteater claws. And then to cut the whitish, fibrous flesh into strips, hang it on the twigs specially prepared to dry it, and start again with another part of the caiman’s body, a big caiman, an enormous one, never seen a caiman that big; or rather yes, there was another one bigger still there beside it, waiting for nothing but to be skinned.

“The first one’s nearly finished, we only have to clean the great rock. We’ll carry on tomorrow morning, won’t we?”

Many feelings were fighting it out in Kirimà’s head. There was envy of that vast audience, certainly, but he was not capable of confessing it to anybody, not even to himself. There was anger at Antônio’s stories, which he judged useless, that one, yes. The useful stories were the ones about hunting, about fishing, about dangerous animals, even about the ball game (though about that one he was not too convinced); but Antônio’s stories, absolutely not. Great shining birds, enormous canoes that crossed an inconceivable thing called an “ocean”, thoughts that travelled inside threads that looked like lianas, and then that new game, “football”, all those names, those incomprehensible events. All of it absolutely useless to the village and, Kirimà felt inside himself without managing to put it well, certainly harmful too.

They were a little way from the village, in front of a great smooth stone that lay in the direction of the river, used for generations as a working surface for that kind of cleaning of the catch. After what had seemed to Yamandé an enormously long time, the first caiman had been completely skinned

and cleaned out and they were removing the remains from the stone in order to lay the other beast on it and begin again from the start. It had got late, though, and soon the darkness would not let them see anything at all. Every so often Kirimà had cocked an ear to try to catch fragments of Antônio's telling, and every time had ended up regretting it with a grimace of disgust.

"It's almost dark. Soon we won't even see our own hands, we'll never manage to clean the whole of it!"

Kirimà knew Yamandé was right. He had wanted to skin the first one very carefully, perhaps too carefully; it had taken them an infinite amount of time and it had indeed got late.

"Listen to your father, Yamandé," it was not unusual for him to begin sentences addressed to his son this way, "just open its belly and clean it out; you know it's dangerous to leave it closed, it could burst. Meanwhile I'll dig a hole so that when you've finished we can bury it and carry on tomorrow morning."

Yamandé nodded and set about opening the big reptile's belly, unwillingly but with a will. The evening shadows were enfolding everything very quickly and within a few minutes it would be impossible to go on. Putting his hand inside the carcass to pull out the innards, Yamandé felt something resist, something heavy that had not been in the other animal. Yamandé drew his father's attention to it; at first he did not quite understand what his son was referring to, partly because of the poor light and partly because of the sheer bulk of those slimy, twisted innards. In the end he managed to work out that it was the caiman's stomach; he took the sharpened claw and opened it. Along with a nauseating stench, out of the stomach came a small monkey, almost intact, which the caiman had evidently eaten shortly before being caught in its turn by the fishermen. Kirimà almost jumped backwards, horrified, shouting, "No!"

Yamandé looked at him without understanding.

"Caimans don't eat these monkeys! Never! They don't eat them!"

He turned towards the rest of the tribe and understood. "It's a sign from the spirits of the forest! They aren't pleased! Antônio has to stop these stories of his! Look!"

Yamandé had great respect for his father and for his knowledge of the forest—even if he sometimes found him tedious—and he had no reason to doubt that what he was saying was true. Indeed he had several times seen groups of monkeys screaming and throwing stones at caimans from up in their trees.

"It must have fallen from a branch," said Yamandé. "The branch must have broken."

"Listen to your father, Yamandé. These monkeys eat the same things we eat, they go up the same trees we go up, but they are far, far better at it than we are. Do you understand the misfortune? If a branch broke under that small weight, what could happen under our bodies?"

"You're right, I understand, but it isn't Antônio's fault, is it?"

"I don't know."

2.28 Birth

Poranga Pagé is the good spirit of the forest. Those who have seen him can barely describe him: he is certainly white, perhaps round, perfectly silent, heavy (though this has never been a problem). He is a joyful but elusive spirit, primordial but shy, who pursues his noble ends without a plan, at random, and yet with a systematic thoroughness no other spirit of the forest possesses.

He does not fear the light because he is almost invisible, but he prefers the dark and the shade, of which the forest has no shortage. He is extremely good at hiding and disguising himself; he escapes rival spirits with lightness and tenacity; he seems clumsy but he is very fast, uncatchable.

He slips through the infinitesimal spaces left free by the leaves and winds himself over the lianas; he jumps, he dives and swims like the fastest of fish. He travels the length and breadth of the forest, continually changing shape and name, and only those who are not looking at him and whose minds are clear of sad thoughts, very rarely, manage to see him.

Every touch of Poranga Pagé leaves a trace, a veil lighter than dust and of the same consistency as the air, in which the spirit wholly exists. Yes. Poranga Pagé can be enormous but he can also be as small as a grain of sand, and much smaller still. But it does not matter whether he is a veil or a grain or a giant: every print of him and every memory of him contains him completely.

He was wandering the forest, Poranga Pagé, following a small secondary watercourse. Sparingly he brushed the low branches of the trees, the eggs of predatory fish or of dangerous spiders. And everything he touched, as it has always been and always will be, bloomed, changed, came alive.

The whole forest resounded in him: the predators, the prey, the inanimate plants. But more than all of them, what resounded inside him were the souls of the women and men who live in the forest, all the souls: those past, those present and those to come. Because to their children the inhabitants of the forest had given the flesh but not their soul; that, as it has always been and always will be, came from Poranga Pagé.

The small bend of the river almost hid from view the banana leaves spread on the ground and the small woman crouched on them, breathing hard. She would have liked to be left alone but had not been listened to. Several children circled round her, fascinated as only children can be by somebody else's suffering. Many heads poked out, curious, from behind the first row of plants, and two or three adults came and went, busy or, more simply, impatient.

Poranga Pagé heard the melody of all their souls, which had once been inside him, and did the equivalent of a smile. A small child, barely able to stand up, saw him and pointed at him with a finger, letting out a few inarticulate sounds. Nobody noticed in the general confusion and the child himself soon lost interest. One of the souls was unknown to him: it was like a tuned instrument whose timbre he did not recognise; it had never belonged to him. He tried coming closer to hear it better, circled round it dancing the dance of the forest spirits, and decided that he liked it, it was different, but beautiful.

If to make a flower bloom or an egg hatch a veil was enough, for this task Poranga Pagé had to apply himself more: he had to search inside himself for the right soul, draw it out slowly, come close to the crouching woman and take advantage of her deep, laboured breathing to make her breathe it in. When the soul ran quickly through the woman's ganglia, distributed itself through her body in search of its objective and finally entered the child, Poranga Pagé understood, with another smile, who had joined himself to the woman: it was the stranger.

When he felt the first beats of true life come out of that new being, Poranga Pagé smiled for the last time and moved away, brushing now a root, now a piece of bark, now the tail of a bird. The forest, permeated with his spirit, was calling him back and he could wait no longer.

“The head! The head!”

Antônio was overwhelmed by emotion and all the fears that had gripped him up to that moment vanished.

“Perhaps we ought to boil some water,” he had asked. “Why?” he had been answered. “Perhaps we ought to wash that claw thoroughly,” he had insisted. “Why?” he had been answered again. “At least clean the banana leaves,” he had whined. “Clean them of what?” he had been asked.

Now the head was out and he would have liked to take it in his hands and pull, but no, absolutely not pull; he would have liked it to come out by itself, but Janaína was not pushing any more, it seemed to him, or perhaps she was pushing and it did not show. How long could it stay like that? Isn’t it dangerous? Isn’t it mortally dangerous? And then that colour? Is it normal for babies to be blue? Purple?

Janaína had seemed calm the whole time, in pain but calm. She had not let out a moan beyond a few hoarse breaths, but at that moment she seemed sorely tried; her fists were clenched and she looked exhausted, and her breathing too had grown duller. Antônio was paralysed by his own doubts. He looked around for confirmation of his fears, but the women who were present were serene; they were quietly singing the Song of Being Born and watching the scene with a confident detachment.

“But what is Antônio doing here?” one of the women had asked at the start, astonished at his presence.

“Antônio has been with us a long time now, but remember that at the beginning we called him the Strange One. It’ll be something that goes back to his old customs,” a second woman had answered her, smiling.

The only thing Antônio managed to say, feeling immediately very stupid, was an uncertain “Breathe...” in Portuguese.

Janaína raised her face, streaked with sweat, and looked him straight in the eyes with a look of resolve that struck him deeply. Then she smiled, or grimaced, Antônio was not sure which, and began pushing again with far more energy than before. Within a short time, short compared with everything that seemed to Antônio to have gone by, the child came out completely, the first cry had been given and Janaína was already relaxing.

“It’s a boy, Antônio, did you see?”

“I saw, I saw.”

The newborn was holding his eyes and his fists tightly shut and was not crying; his colour had finally come back to normal and many members of the village were gathering round them with smiles of satisfaction.

“Let’s hope Poranga Pagé has brought a beautiful soul.”

“Let’s hope so, yes,” answered Antônio, without understanding.

2.29 *Cries*

The cries and the laughter that ring out from one side of the clearing to the other. The thousand noises of the jungle seem to have vanished, covered by the noise of youth and light-heartedness. And in his head he already knows that the most radiant and exalted cries of all will be the ones that come out of his own throat in a few minutes' time.

He is not yet high enough to rise above the canopy of the rainforest, but he is close. Only the strongest and bravest get high enough to range with their eyes over the endless green of the forest and to understand that you have arrived at the top, that higher than this you cannot go. He has never yet felt this sensation, but he has heard it told so many times. And today he is the strongest and bravest young man in the village. Today it will be him who breaks through the green ceiling that surrounds them, and from tomorrow it will be him telling the children what it feels like to climb onto the roof of the world.

The sound of the laughter and of the shouts of encouragement covers everything: the sound of his breath as he climbs purposefully from branch to branch. The sound of the animals carrying on with their lives, indifferent to the epic feat being accomplished beside them. And the sound of a branch bending under the powerful thrust of this young man, and then snapping.

Then there is a moment of silence, and then the sounds are ugly, they become noises. Noises that should not be there: noises of branches snapping, noises of fear, the noise of a terrible impact. And then the cries of pain and despair.

2.30 Farewell

Antônio reached the spot when a desperate knot of people had already formed around Yamandé and, as on that other cursed occasion with the medicine woman, he recognised him by his feet.

He felt himself fainting, but then he saw one of them move and he thought he could hear the boy's voice too. *Can you recognise a person's voice while he is screaming, distorted by pain, sunk in a chorus of other terrified screams?* he wondered. Apparently yes. *If he's screaming he can't be dead, ohjesus, thank goodness, thank goodness he isn't dead, I couldn't have borne it.*

When the others moved aside to let him through, the relief vanished and he felt himself fainting again. The cuts more or less all over his body were not a great problem; you could see they were superficial and they almost added to his beauty, that bicep spattered with blood made you think of a valiant warrior just come victorious out of a battle.

But the left leg was in a bad way. A very bad way. No left leg should ever have been in a way like that. *It isn't possible, it's certainly a nightmare, I shouldn't have tasted that strange grub last night; now I'll close my eyes for a moment and when I open them again I'll wake up and Yamandé's left leg will be as it was before, with only one knee, what is another knee doing halfway up his thigh, it isn't possible...*

When Antônio came round, he saw above him the faces of Piata and Moacir.

"Yamandé! How is he? Is he...?"

"He's in the *shabono*, he's sleeping. Itátakûara gave him the herb of fainting," Piata informed him.

"And the leg?"

"You saw the state of the leg as well as I did."

"But will he recover? What does Itátakûara say?"

"Itátakûara says to wait and hope. To hope very much."

"No!" Moacir broke in angrily. "There's nothing to hope for. And even less to wait for. The only thing to wait for is his death."

"Moacir, calm down."

"No I won't calm down, and don't put your arm round me! You know it perfectly well too. Everybody knows it. Nobody has ever recovered from a wound like that. Nobody."

His words met no answer, until it was Piata who took upon himself the weight of what had to be said. "Itátakûara has said to hope, and we hope. If Itátakûara says to go and fetch some herb even at the end of the river, we'll go. But if there's nothing else to be done, we'll do nothing else. We'll say goodbye to Yamandé, we'll weep, and we'll carry on the life of the village."

Moacir looked at him with a look that might have been mistaken for hatred, and perhaps was. Then he turned his eyes on Antônio, and there, there was no longer any doubt: it was hatred in its pure

state. Perhaps no young man, ever, in the history of the village had looked at an elder with such open and barefaced hatred.

“And you? Aren’t you saying anything? Have you run out of words?”

Almost as though confirming Moacir’s accusation, Antônio went on saying nothing. Without lowering his eyes, but without opening his mouth either.

The young man went on: “How many words have you poured out, in all this time, telling us about Macapá and the world outside the forest? Eh? How many? And the great shining bird, and the cart that moves by itself, the invisible threads, the screen of thoughts. I remember them all, one by one, you know? And now? Now, precisely when your words might be good for something, you keep quiet? You don’t say anything any more?”

“But I don’t...” Antônio thought Moacir was hoping to awaken in him some forgotten piece of medical knowledge, and tried to find the calmest voice he could. “I’m not a medicine man, Moacir. You know that. In Macapá I knew all these things I’ve told you about and knew how to use them, but I don’t know how to build them. There’s nothing I can do better than Itátakûara to help Yamandé.”

“I know you’re not a medicine man. I know you can’t do anything.”

Moacir took a breath to drive the blow home better. “You’ve never known how to do anything except your stupid game with the ball. And you’re so certain you’re useless that it doesn’t even occur to you that now you’re the only one who really can do something to help Yamandé.”

Antônio went on staring at him almost stupefied, without uttering a word. And Moacir added nothing more. When it seemed that neither of them would speak again until the end of time, it was Cauê who broke in and explained what Moacir meant, and what had been perfectly clear to him from the first minute.

“Moacir means that you have to help us take Yamandé to Macapá, Antônio.”

“It’s out of the question,” Piata tried to put in, but Moacir was not intimidated.

He was far less muscular than his friend but slightly taller, and he loaded his anger onto that height, staring down at Piata as though he had been twice as tall. “You keep out of it. If you don’t want to come with us it doesn’t matter. You’re right not to; the village needs you, it’s right that you should stay.”

Then, as though Piata no longer existed, he turned and looked again at Antônio. “Well?”

Antônio had decided some time ago that he would end his life in the village. He was so at peace with himself that he had willingly accepted even the shortened life expectancy that this choice very probably entailed. But if he was calm about sacrificing on the altar of serenity a good many years of his own life, he could not do the same with Yamandé’s life. And if he were to spend the rest of his own life with the suspicion of not having done everything possible to save his beloved TwoSocks, so much for serenity.

He looked around him; he looked at his hammock, at the walls of the *shabono*, at the vault of trees that served him as a roof. He looked at his home. Then he heaved an enormous sigh, brought his eyes back to Moacir and Cauê and said, “All right. You’re right. But the problem is that even if I

wanted to help him, and I swear I'm not looking for excuses, I really don't know how to get back to Macapá."

"We do," Cauê answered proudly.

"We've found the Great River," Moacir and Cauê had said. "The Great River, the one in the stories and the songs, we've found it."

And they had said it with confidence, without hinting at the slightest doubt. They had explained clearly how it was different from the rivers round about, the only ones the village knew, treacherous, tortuous tentacles of an inextricable tangle of waters that changed course and shape with every rain. They had used the biggest word for big there was in the Language; they had said they had seen it with their own eyes, that it was as wide as that group of palms down there.

They had said that its water ran, ran straight, that the water of the great river knew where it was running to. Not like one of their rivers of slow waters, entangled with lianas and branches, not one of the ones where, if you are not careful and let yourself be carried too far while fishing, you can no longer find the way home because they go round, they go round in circles, and the current does not know where to go. It was the Great River, the one that knows the way.

They had said it with fervour, almost with tears in their eyes in their anxiety to be believed. And Antônio had believed them.

All at once he realised that, without ever really thinking about it, he had always taken for granted that despite detours and uncertainties both the long stretch with Pepè and his own subsequent walk had followed the original direction, the one that—more or less perpendicular to the river—led away from it. He had always pictured to himself a route which, for all its twists, had broadly left the Jari further and further behind. But, mygod, it had been a really stupid thought. Deep down he had always known that Pepè had got lost, and he himself all the more, with his wandering without any point of reference: it might perfectly well be that that random route had instead stayed more or less parallel to the river all along; it might be that, twisting and turning, it had actually brought him back close to it. It might be that the Jari really was not far, that it was less than a day's march away. Indeed, now that the forest spoke to him and he understood its language and many of its secrets, he was certain of it: the Great River could not be too far off.

And if that was so, then perhaps, with a little luck, perhaps Yamandé really could be saved. If that was so, Antônio knew what he had to do.

He realised that he was terrified at the idea of going back to his world, to the world of before: somehow, in all those years, he had convinced himself that it would never happen again; it was as though he had been landed on another planet, from where the memory of his native land, of the things and the people he had loved, was sometimes tinged with nostalgia, yes, but the nostalgia of an exile with no return.

It was as though that world had ceased to exist, vaporised into material for telling stories that by now seemed almost invented even to him, and now the idea of seeing it again, of being immersed in it again, made his hands sweat.

But those boys had faith in him; he could not disappoint them, he could not betray them. He could not betray Yamandé, leave him to die or, at best, to be left horribly crippled: his Yamandé, lively as a monkey, the one who ran faster than all the rest. Cripples do not have long or beautiful lives in the

forest; he could not do that to Yamandé. If there was even one chance, then there was only one choice. He had to try.

2.31 Goodbye

A raft. The only way is to build a raft. There are eight of us, me plus the six boys who want to come at all costs, and Yamandé, who has to be carried. The hollowed-out trunks we use for fishing are unthinkable for travelling eight at a time on the great river for days—how many, and who can imagine it, perhaps two, perhaps three?—and we'll have to bring water too, something to eat... We need a raft and it has to be big enough. Antônio, his head still fogged by the smoke, the sounds and the drinks of the ceremony that had lasted almost the whole night, was coming back from the river where he had rinsed his face and watched the dawn rise through the leaves of the tree ferns. He had watched the forest wake and had listened to that moment of suspended silence, a few instants only, between the falling quiet of the crowd of night animals and the taking possession of the air, of the trees, of the day by the daytime ones, in a crescendo of sounds and cries and beating wings that grew steadily louder.

I'm going away, he thought, in a few days, if all goes well I'll be elsewhere, I'll see another dawn in a place completely—mygod, how completely—different. But I'm not really going away—he was certain of it as he made his way towards the hut to say goodbye to Janaína and the baby—I'm only going to try to save Yamandé, and then I'll come back.

“And then you'll come home, when Yamandé is better, then you'll come back, Antônio?”

“Of course I'll come home. I'll find it hard to be away, I'll miss your hammock next to mine so much,” said Antônio, without, however, finding the strength to look her in the eyes: *too many risks, too many things that could go wrong for me to be able to swear it to you. I know it and you know it.*

He smiled at the crouching woman nursing the baby, stroked her round cheek and her hair, and the caress went down to her breast and to the little head of Ybyráatã, who was suckling blissfully with his eyes closed.

“And besides, I want to see this little anteater grow up, you know that. You know that's part of why I'm going too, I know you know it. If one day he got hurt, I'd want there to be somebody who does everything he can to save his life, to save those strong legs of his and make him run the way he did before.”

“I know. I want you to go and save Yamandé. But I want you to come back; I don't want to be without a husband, I don't want your son to grow up without knowing you.”

“I'll come back, of course I'll come back. Don't worry, little blue frog.”

“And be careful. I'm very afraid of the great river and of all the spirits of your village that nobody knows.”

“The shaman has spoken with them, he has listened to the voices of all the gods, he has said that they have all given their permission. They'll go with us on the journey; you mustn't be afraid.”

“Yes. But be careful. Goodness knows how many jaguars there are in your village.”

Cauê, Itaúna, Moacir, Ubiratan, Jaci and Piraí came up silently. They did not want to interrupt, but there was no time: Yamandé had begun to moan and they had taken alarm. They had to go.

Goodbye, trees whose crowns rise to an impossible height, each one different from the next and yet all so well known, no harder to remember than the members of your own tribe; river whose sound is heard like the voice of a friend; huts half hidden in the clearings like shy nocturnal animals: goodbye!

How sad can be the step of one who, having grown up among you, goes away! Every hope of those who for so generous a reason depart of their own will seems to fade, and at once confidence abandons them; they are astonished that they were able to decide, and they would turn back, did they not think that the one in danger is their greatest friend. The further they go on into the wood, the more their eyes drop, already wearied by that new sameness; the air seems already heavy and dead; they push on through unknown forests; trees are added to trees, paths run out into paths; it seems that they take the breath away, and before new leaves whose names they do not know they think of their village, of their hammock and of the laughter that will ring out when they come back victorious to their own trees.

Goodbye, hut that has always sheltered them, and from which, lying in the hammock, they learned to tell apart from the sound of ordinary steps the sound of a step awaited with a mysterious dread. Goodbye, huts still unknown, so many times looked at with sidelong eyes, in passing, and not without shame, in which the mind already imagined it might find a companion. Goodbye, elders of the village, thanks to whom they had so many times found their calm again in the words of the spirits, and to the ball game through which they had become adults: goodbye!

Chapter 3

3.1 Departure

They set off just after dawn, painted with the signs of courage, of adventure and of help-a-companion, adorned with the feathers and the amulets Itáakûara had prescribed on the advice of the spirits of the forest, the spirits of the river and the goddesses of the Great River.

Yamandé, although he seemed to be dozing, was moaning quietly, without a break, already lying ready in his hammock with compresses of leaves and mud and medicine-herbs bound tightly round that butchery of a leg.

The women had sung the chant of the great deeds and the boys were quivering with excitement, resolute and thoroughly frightened. *Like astronauts setting off for Mars*, thought Antônio: *you leave on an uncertain and dangerous journey towards an alien place, where nothing whatever resembles what you have seen all your life.*

“Off we go. Cauê, Itaúna, you two take the hammock first.”

The first stretch, through the forest, was the relatively easy one; Antônio knew that perfectly well. Moacir and Cauê had shown themselves confident of being able to find the great river again, and they did indeed proceed without too much hesitation; the labour of pushing a way forward through the forest was no different at all from that of any hunting expedition. Yamandé was not too heavy a load to carry, and the exhilaration of departure made the boys spend their best and most vibrant energies.

“It isn’t far,” the two explorers said with conviction. “It isn’t far, soon we’ll see the Great River.”

And they did reach it, in fact, as evening was already coming on: they saw the trees open and among them the very broad yellow course of the Rio Jari, which runs wider than all the rivers of the forest, the river that knows where to go.

They camped there on the bank, and when they used the embers to light the fire, taking them from the bowl of stone and clay that the village had prepared for them, they already felt almost as though they had arrived: they had found the biggest river they had ever seen, everything was as the gods had guaranteed.

You haven’t even seen the Amazon yet, now that really is big, thought Antônio. *It’s only the very first step, only the kick-off, boys: the city is still a long way off, Yamandé is in a bad way and we have to hurry, and I know nothing about the course of the river, I don’t even know whether it’s the right one. You think I can take you there but I don’t know, I know nothing about this road of water that joins two worlds, I’ve never built a raft and tomorrow morning I’ll have to make one. Let’s hope the gods of the water really are favourable to us, let’s hope I haven’t led you off to get lost, to die stranded, to be smashed in the waterfall. The waterfall. I’ve no idea where it is, but let’s hope, let’s hope, and let’s sleep now, because tomorrow we have to set off and be quick.*

The morning woke them with the rustling sound of the river, with birds and monkeys that already seemed different, and, Yamandé’s compress changed—he’s *livid in the face*, he’s *burning with fever*, we have to go fast—they set about building the raft, attending to instructions.

Antônio did not know much about rafts. He remembered the ones he used to build as a child out of twigs and lolly sticks for races with his friends in muddy streams; he vaguely remembered some documentary about the Kon-Tiki—goodness knows how romanticised—he had a few photographs,

a few pictures in mind. But the boys were waiting for directions and he supplied them: we need trunks, straight branches, we need lianas to lash them like this.

He was assailed by a great many doubts. *We'll need a thing, what's it called, a perpendicular blade, a centreboard, that's it, to make it go straight, or do rafts not have one at all? When in doubt let's put one on, what harm can it do. Boys, we need a piece of wood shaped like this. And then how do we steer it? We don't want to run aground on the first bend, and how do we get back to the bank if the current of the river takes us? We need branches, long sturdy poles, we have to be able to guide it at least a little.*

The raft was beautiful, said the boys enthusiastically: only in the building of the largest huts had they seen so much engineering, and although they were visibly frightened of the river they just as visibly wanted to try out running on the water aboard that technical marvel. Antônio was not so convinced. *Mygod, what a labour it is to make one of the most primitive craft in the world. Goodness knows whether it will hold. Come on, let's go, we're off.*

3.2 The raft

Being fascinated by the building of the raft was one thing; getting onto it and throwing yourself into the arms of the river was quite another. It was complicated even to get everybody aboard, after loading the few provisions and poor half-conscious Yamandé, without that precarious assembly of trunks tipping too far and pitching them into the water. And it was only after a thousand instructions to sit down and keep as still as possible—*the gods protect us, but not if we behave like idiots*—that Antônio felt sure enough of his crew to plant the poles against the bank, cut the lianas they had tied the raft up with during the boarding, and dare to push off.

For a good while the excitement of sliding fast along the great river silenced them all: the boys, gripping the trunks tightly, watched the banks go by, exchanging only the occasional gesture to point out something interesting, the trunk of a very tall ebony, an enormous toucan flying over them, a furtive shape among the leaves, an anteater perhaps, a shadow under the water gone too quickly to be sure it was a *jacaré*.

Antônio watched the banks, the anteater, the toucan, but mostly he was thinking about the waterfall. He had not mentioned it to the boys (in any case he had only remembered its existence once they were already under way), but that did not stop him thinking about it.

He had tried to gather all his memories, the few vague ones that remained after all that time, to try to establish more or less where it must be. But what he retrieved were faded fragments: it was Gambone's chatter while he dozed, it was Torment barking at every parrot, it was the millions of insects he was not used to, it was kilometres and kilometres of banks that all looked the same: not enough. Too hard to reconstruct precisely how long they had travelled going up the river after the detour to avoid the waterfall, let alone to calculate how fast the motorboat had gone and how fast, by contrast, the current carrying them now was. To say nothing of the whole journey made in the jeep with Pepê, of whose bearing and direction he had no precise idea at all: the raft had been put into the water—it had to be faced—at some random point on the river, without its being possible to establish any relation between that point and the Cachoeira and its roaring danger.

Antônio racked his brains and the hours went by. With the impact of the novelty of sailing softened, the boys had relaxed—all except Itaúna, who did not yet seem at ease and had never let go of the trunks with his hands—and had settled down to chatting and joking calmly, without neglecting to pour the odd drop of water between Yamandé's lips every so often.

When the sun began to sink towards an opalescent sunset, the group conferred over whether to pull in and spend the night on the bank or sleep aboard, and it was unanimously decided to stay on the river: the more distance they covered the better, and given Yamandé's condition the priority was speed.

Besides, the river had the undeniable advantage that they did not have to think about defending themselves from the night animals: unless a maddened *jacaré* jumped onto the raft like a frog, it was far safer to sleep there than on the ground in the forest.

But the idea that they might find themselves near the waterfall in the middle of the night was not one that left Antônio easy, and so with a sigh he had to make up his mind and talk to the boys about the Cachoeira.

He tried to explain how big it was—without much success—but the fact that he had described it as the dwelling of a goddess of the Great River, a particularly capricious and perhaps hungry one, im-

pressed them enough for them to accept promptly his proposal of sleeping in turns, so that there would always be somebody awake with his ears well pricked. "A noise like thunder, even far off, even if you can barely hear it, and whoever is on watch wakes everybody at once. Mind now, boys: the goddesses don't sleep."

Although he had not expected to, Antônio slept well, and when he woke with the sun in his eyes he found the crew awake and lively, breakfasting on the roast meat brought from the village. "No thunder, Antônio, only the birds and the monkeys and the great river, which whispers at night too."

So far so good. Who knows, perhaps we've been lucky enough to take a side channel like the one Gambone took; perhaps we won't even see that blessed waterfall I can't get out of my head.

And for many hours the voyage seemed to bear him out, going so smoothly that the only concern was to keep Yamandé's head in the shade as far as possible. The boy seemed to be dozing almost all the time and Antônio was not sure this was a good sign: when he had renewed the compress on the leg he had found it in a condition he preferred not to think about again.

It was Itaúna who heard it first: the one most intimidated by the river and therefore the most alert. He raised his head and murmured, "Thunder."

Then he repeated it, shouting: "Thunder, listen, listen!", and all at once they all heard it, still far off but perfectly distinguishable, a rumble and a roar, a vibration in the air.

"To the bank, to the bank! Quickly, we have to pull in, use the poles, find the bottom!"

But the poles, long as they were, seemed unable to get the least purchase; the river must be deeper than they had thought, and who could say whether it was only their agitation or whether the current really was faster and stronger already.

The noise of the waterfall could now be made out even without paying attention, and it seemed to come closer with every instant. *We're too far out in the middle of the river, too far from the bank, the poles don't touch the bottom, we'll never manage to pull in like this.* Antônio understood that they had to decide quickly. "Moacir" (the most athletic, the most fearless) "Moacir, we have to get into the water and push the raft towards the bank; we have to do it straight away, now!"

"Yes, Antônio, but I'm not very good at being like the fish in the water..."

"You only have to move your feet and hold on tight to the raft, don't let go of it whatever you do, and kick your feet as hard as you can. Come on, let's go, there's no time, let's go."

Antônio lowered himself into the water first, trying not to think about how many creatures peopled the river: swimming was not a sport they practised in the forest, and for a good many reasons. But there was no choice; the waterfall meant certain death for them all, and so, clinging to the trunks (*don't think about the fish, don't think about the snakes, about the caimans*), he swam with all the strength he had. Moacir was already beside him and immediately after him Ubiratan, taciturn Ubiratan with the sturdy legs, went into the water without a word, whirling his great feet with the energy of a *pirarucu*. The river was cool and even pleasant—if you left aside the continual sensation of something alive brushing your legs, your skin—but the current really was strong. *We're not going to make it. No, don't think about it, move your legs, move your legs.* They were almost at the end of their strength, teeth clenched, knuckles white with effort, when at last the oblique course they had managed to give the craft brought it close enough to the bank for the poles to get a grip. "We're touching, Antônio, we're touching!"

With one last convulsive heave they managed to grasp the plants, to hold the raft against the bank: amid rainbows of spray and a roar that was deafening now, the river disappeared into nothing barely a hundred metres further on.

A long pause was needed, lying panting on the muddy bank, to let the excitement of the danger settle, to eat something and to pull off an entire legion of leeches. Above all it was necessary to decide how to proceed: Antônio's vague hope of happening on a side channel that would get round the waterfall had all too visibly evaporated, and at that point, one way or another, the Cachoeira had to be faced.

The first idea was simply to carry the raft on their shoulders and put it back into the water below the drop, but a quick reconnaissance was enough to establish that the forest at that point, soaked by centuries of spray and vapour, was more luxuriant still than usual: managing to force a way through that damp, steep tangle carrying not only the injured boy but that hugely cumbersome contraption would have been a miracle.

On the other hand Antônio had a fairly precise memory of the distance between Monte Dourado and the waterfall: at the time he had only just set out and was still paying attention to what was around him, and he remembered clearly that they had not travelled more than half a day. With a fair approximation it could therefore be reckoned at twenty-five, perhaps thirty kilometres: not too far to do on foot, one day of forced marching might be enough. But first of all they had to get down there, to the foot of that wretched drop, and just descending through that thick growth would take hours: which meant having to stop another night in the forest, but above all it meant reaching the town a day later. Nobody dared say it openly, but they all realised that Yamandé's condition was getting worse before their eyes: perhaps one more day would be too much for him.

"We can go down on foot and let the river carry the raft down. Then we pick it up past the waterfall."

"It'll be smashed to pieces, Piraí."

"Perhaps not."

"I'm telling you it'll go into a thousand pieces, that waterfall is high, it could never..."

And at that moment Antônio remembered—where and when had he seen it, in a paper, on television?—those people who had thrown themselves over Niagara Falls inside a wooden barrel and had incredibly made it. Imposing as the Cachoeira was, it was certainly not as high: perhaps there was a chance the raft would not be shattered. And if they did not want to lose a day it seemed to be the only possibility.

"Perhaps you're right, perhaps it won't be smashed. We have to try. And if it does end up in little pieces, it'll mean we do it on foot."

"But how do we get it back afterwards? How do we get it back from the middle of the river?"

"I don't know, Moacir, I don't know. The currents caused by the waterfall create a movement that carries the bulkiest objects towards the edges and... at least I think so, more or less. Anyway, we'll think about it when we're down there."

They decided that two of them would stay with the raft, to entrust it to the current only after the others had reached the bottom: they could not let it fall without somebody watching and at least trying to see where it ended up.

So they all set off except Moacir and Cauê, who had to wait almost three hours, looking for berries and hunting lizards, before they sighted the thread of smoke and the glow of the fire lit by the others. They had already pushed the raft as far from the bank as possible with the poles, holding it tied by only two long lianas. Only when they sighted the signal and freed it by cutting the moorings did they realise that they would miss the spectacle of seeing it fly: they watched it run over the water faster and faster and—all at once—disappear into nothing.

3.3 *The drop*

I don't know which spirit I have to thank, thought Antônio when he saw that the raft, after that flight which had seemed enormously long, almost in slow motion, had come through practically intact. Or perhaps he did not think it, because Ubiratan began invoking so many spirits, divinities, names of trees or birds or of something never heard of before, each one duly thanked, that Antônio began to suspect he had thought aloud, and became certain that the boy was making a good many of those names up on the spot.

The raft had held. The centreboard had been smashed on a spur of rock and the rudder had been lost, but the structure, if a little out of true, had stood the impact with the water and was now bobbing towards them, pushed by the turbulence of the waterfall's landing zone which, as Antônio had supposed, was driving it towards the bank. Moacir and Cauê rejoined the group when a new rudder had already been rigged up, little more than a long, slightly crooked pole. They agreed together that there was no time to rebuild the centreboard, the whole raft would have had to be taken apart and put back together to fit a new one, so they embarked at once, letting the river carry them again, each of them proud in his heart of the trial come through thanks to their courage and their intrepid craft.

The next hours of sailing were so easy that Antônio, exhausted, fell asleep more than once, almost hypnotised by the lapping of the water against the trunks and by the background noise of the forest, always so different and yet always so much the same. The raft, in any case, seemed animated by a life of its own and carried them purposefully through the long bends of the river, whose bed was by now perceptibly widening.

Yamandé began to moan in his hammock, drawing everybody's attention. Perhaps the moment had come to give him another dose of the herb of fainting.

3.4 Glances

It was then that, after one more bend in the river, Antônio saw in the distance the glint of a tin roof, the outline of buildings among the trees, and not long afterwards could clearly make out the landing stage, as rickety as he had left it, and deserted. There were no boats moored, only the usual faded little boats hauled up on the mud and a rusty outboard with no propeller, from which a perched *urubu* watched them sleepily as they moored and came ashore.

The boys had gone very quiet; they entered the town cautiously, their hands going uselessly in search of the blades Antônio had forbidden them to bring. Crowded round the hammock, they let him go ahead of them as a vanguard while they looked about with wide eyes, curious but on the alert. As far as Antônio could see, though, there was no danger at all: the streets, with a few more cars parked beside the houses than he remembered, were, apart from dogs and lizards, dusty and empty. People must be at supper; from the open windows came a clattering of plates, voices and the theme tunes of news programmes. The two or three children who saw them arrive—six naked boys carrying a bundle of hammock and a taller naked bearded man walking ahead of them—had opened their eyes wide, struck dumb, and had run for shelter indoors.

The little square had stayed almost exactly as he remembered it. A somewhat threadbare flower bed had been added round the *pelourinho*, and a building with a look of never having been opened had been renovated with roller blinds and plastic render and bore the plate “Tumucumaque National Park - Administration”. The shop had put out a display stand outside hung with coloured flip-flops and little nylon dresses; three lamp posts of altogether too daring aluminium design offered the dogs new and futuristic opportunities for a piddle; the *pousada* had been painted cyclamen and equipped with a neon sign, switched off now, which with no great originality read “At the pelourinho - Pousada - Café - Cerveja Brahma”.

In the half-lit room the landlady was washing glasses with her back to the entrance and to the only customer, an old man caressing a small beer and watching intently, on an enormous television hung on the wall, a heated argument at full volume between two heavily made-up ladies which a portly presenter in a navy blue jacket was simultaneously trying to calm and to inflame.

Seeing them come in naked and painted, in perfect silence, the little man’s eyes widened and he croaked, “Gesita...”

“Yes, Armando, what is it? Have you finished your *cervejinha* already?”

“Gesita, erm... there’s... people.”

Gesita turned and stood a moment nonplussed, the glass in one hand and the cloth in the other, but she recovered quickly. “And who are you? What are you doing here? Out, come on, out, this is no place for you.”

Antônio came forward, adjusting the two parrot feathers in his matted hair. “Dona Gesita, good evening. Don’t worry, we’re doing no harm: we need help, there’s an injured boy, we need help.”

“But you, tell me now, you aren’t one of them. I don’t understand: what are you doing with these Indians?”

"It would be a very long story, senhora... my name is Antônio Carlos Rocha de Almeida. You see, you certainly won't remember me, but I've been here before, some time ago. I know your brother, Gambone..."

"Oh, Gambone! It must be two years since I saw him. Paulo took the boat and went off up the river; he wanted to do business, sell, buy, God knows what. Monte Dourado offered no prospects, he said. In two years he'll have telephoned me three times, that capybara soul."

"I also knew your cousin, poor Pepè, who unfortunately..."

"Pepè? And who would that be? I've never had any cousins: well, Paulo and I have seven cousins, all girls, and to think how much uncle Armando would have wanted a boy; but perhaps it was better this way, he'd have turned out an idle womaniser like him... But you, I still haven't understood who you are and what you want. An injured boy, you say? Where is he? Let me have a look."

"You're right, this boy is in a bad way, a doctor needs to see him quickly."

"Perhaps with a boat..."

"There aren't any proper motorboats any more; Gambone took his and the other one was in such a state that the river rotted it away years ago. Everybody uses the car now: we'll have to find somebody to take the boy."

"But there are too many of us, we'd need two cars, perhaps even three..."

"What nonsense. The boy goes to hospital and the others go back into the forest. You surely don't mean to take the whole lot of them into the city."

"Actually... I think I do, Dona Gesita, that's what we'll have to do: they won't be separated, and I don't want to leave them here either, I want them to come with me into the city. And besides I'd like to go to Macapá, not to Almeirim. It's a long story, as I told you."

"It seems madness to me, but well, if it makes you happy. We'll see about finding the cars, though it won't be easy to find anybody who'll give a whole tribe a lift... Ah! But here we are: early tomorrow morning the coach to Macapá goes through Laranjal. You'll all fit on it and you'll travel in comfort. Laranjal is on the other side of the river but that's no problem, we always cross with the little boats. All in all it's the quickest way of getting you to the city; it'll take you less time and you'll travel more comfortably than doing the whole thing by car."

"Oh, thank you, that's an excellent idea! Of course we'll have to stop here for the night, but we won't be any trouble to you: we'll settle outside the town, under the trees..."

"No, no, trees indeed. You aren't in the forest here. You'll sleep here, in this room; I'll bring down hammocks for everybody. And we'll put that boy in a proper bed: he's been thrown about far too much, he needs to lie quiet."

"Thank you, you really are very kind. I have no money with me, but when I get to the city I can go to the bank and..."

Gesita shrugged. "We'll think about that later. I've enough to live on, and as for leeches in the family, my brother Gambone is quite enough. Don't you worry about it. Now then, you'll be wanting to eat, won't you?"

“As a matter of fact, well, yes. You know, they’re boys, they’ve always got an appetite: we brought provisions but they’ve run out now... yes, thank you very much. In fact the first thing is to put Yamandé down to rest and then eat something.”

“No,” said Gesita, looking him up and down. “The first thing is to put something on you.”

For the first time in many years Antônio was conscious of being without clothes: Dona Gesita’s amused look made him feel, how strange, decidedly... what was that word? It would not come back to him; there was no corresponding word in the language of the tribe. There: naked. The word was naked.

In the room the old man, his beer forgotten, was staring at the boys. The boys, huddled close together in a compact brown group, were staring at the television, mesmerised, with their eyes wide open.

3.5 Gesita

Dona Gesita must have had a great maternal instinct that had found no way of expressing itself, because after her brief initial mistrust she took charge of them like a mother hen. *She's anything but a plain woman*, thought Antônio, *a bit of a chatterbox perhaps but she seems very affectionate; goodness knows why she never managed to start a family*. Probably in that hole there had not been many available suitors, or perhaps she had judged none of them worthy of her standing as the owner of a *pousada* with a neon sign, no less.

The fact remains that she took them under her protective wing, as though they were all—Antônio included—children to be looked after. Which, all things considered, was not far from the truth: fierce hunters and perfectly adapted in the forest, in this entirely new environment they were as helpless as babies.

First of all Gesita installed Yamandé in a real bed upstairs, not before stuffing him thoroughly with assorted tablets taken from a medicine cabinet the size of a dispensary. And although mattress and pillows were an entirely new experience for the injured boy, after an initial sense of discomfort and astonishment at that softness, that smooth, sweet-smelling white, the smile of bliss that spread over his face despite the fever made it clear beyond the slightest doubt that he found it anything but disagreeable.

To get the group's attention it was necessary to switch off the television—from whose enchantment not even the Great Anaconda could otherwise have torn them away—to the considerable annoyance of Senhor Armando, who was sent on his way by Dona Gesita kindly but without excessive ceremony: "We're closed for tonight, Armandinho. I've got people."

The old man went off shaking his head, unconvinced. *If a man can't even drink his small beer without a whole tribe of naked Indians arriving and planting themselves in front of the television, what a world. What have we come to.*

The field cleared, the woman took over the organisation. The boys seemed to accept her attentions willingly—Moacir above all, who kept giving her radiant smiles—and, to Antônio's considerable astonishment, showed themselves more intrigued than intimidated by that flood of novelty. After leaving the young ones a good while to spray one another with the hosepipe, and offering Antônio the use of a bathroom with a bath, Gesita put at the group's disposal a vast chest of drawers overflowing with garments of every kind.

"You've no idea how many things people forget in the rooms," she had muttered; but true as that might be, it seemed to Antônio that those clothes really were rather too many, above all the men's ones, compared with the quantity of absent-minded guests an inn like that could ever have had. Perhaps after all there had been a husband, but apparently Gesita did not care to talk about him.

The boys, after a moment of mistrustful alarm—the best reflection of themselves they had ever seen was in a muddy puddle—fell in love with the great full-length mirror which, with its coquettish ro-coco frame, dominated Dona Gesita's room: they spent a whole hour preening in socks and shirts, shoving one another aside to get a look at themselves, laughing, vain and helpless with hilarity.

While she made supper—pushing this way and that Piraí, who was constantly under her feet, fascinated by the kitchen, by the burners, by the crockery, by the ingredients he kept sticking his fingers into to taste them greedily—Gesita was thinking about organising the departure. "After supper I'll go and ask João and Vicente to take you across the river by boat early tomorrow morning. Besides,

I'll have to say something about you; they'll have seen you arrive. And even if they haven't, Senhor Armando gossips worse than my cousin Gilberta."

The simplest solution turned out to be serving the group their supper in the inner courtyard: they had greatly appreciated the chairs in the room and had tried all of them one after another, chuckling with satisfaction, but they had found tables, apparently, an invention that was mostly just awkward. So they ate in the courtyard among the pots of geranium, coriander and oregano, sitting on the ground as one should, smartly dressed in the shirts they had chosen for themselves.

Tomorrow when we set off we'll have to manage to get a pair of shorts on them as well; shoes, damn it, are simply not worth thinking about, we'll see later, perhaps they'll like flip-flops, but the shorts are absolutely essential. And we'll have to persuade Cauê at all costs to take off that lilac lace petticoat he seems to like so enormously.

The stew the landlady set down in the middle of them in a great pot, well stocked with beans and reinforced with slices of fried plantain, was appreciated with enthusiasm: they had never tasted chicken, but they found it excellent, a little less tasty than snake, but certainly better than *jacaré*.

There was no way, on the other hand, of getting them to drink water out of the glasses: the glass, so transparent, disturbed them; it looked like solid water; it was incomprehensible and decidedly unsettling. They only made up their minds to drink when Gesita brought some earthenware bowls retrieved from the kitchen, but they found it very interesting and rather funny that this water had no taste at all. They were in the middle of a heated debate about how very strange it was that the water tasted neither of mud nor of leaves nor of earth nor of rotted reeds when Antônio was struck by a memory he had entirely suppressed: beer. *Myjesus, beer exists!*

Gesita was glad to open a bottle for him, and when the first cold mouthful went down his throat Antônio thought that this, there, this was worth not three days but three months up and down waterfalls aboard a soaking, lopsided raft. At the second mouthful he closed his eyes, lost in the delight. But he opened them again abruptly at the third, struck by a sudden thought. "Senhora, what year are we in?"

3.6 *Fourteen years*

1. *Mygod, the tenth of March 2014.* Antônio turned that shattering discovery over in his mind, immersed in the bath Dona Gesita had kindly offered him the use of. A bath. A flush. Tiles. Rose-scented soap: how many can the things be whose existence you come to forget in fourteen years? Fourteen years was a long time, far longer than he had thought. True, he had watched the children turn into young men, he had watched the little girls who were mothers now; but for some strange reason—perhaps because of that seasonless flow of the days—he had never formed any precise thought about the years. If he had been asked point-blank, without thinking, he would have said five or six, seven at most.

He looked at himself in the mirror over the basin and found himself so changed that he was not sure he would have recognised himself if he had met himself.

Thin and tanned, as dark by now as they were, and a great damp ball of beard and hair. He picked up a razor, sniffed the scent of the shaving foam, ran a little flake of it between his fingers. Then he decided it was better not to shave completely, partly because with half his face tanned he would have looked ridiculous, partly because by now he had grown used to feeling bearded; so he began trimming his beard and hair with the scissors—anything was better than tidying them up now and then at random with a bone blade—and at that moment, unexpected and violent, the awareness that he would soon see his family again struck him like a punch.

Without even noticing it he had hidden away, at the bottom of his stomach, his heart, his mind, the sorrow of never seeing them again, and only now that he knew he would see them did he realise how deeply he had buried it.

And there, smelling of roses in front of the basin, with the scissors in his hand and underpants two sizes too big, he allowed himself after all this time the joy of thinking about them.

I wonder whether Janita has put on more weight, and whether she did become a nun the way she used to say she would; I wonder about Amanda, whether she married that dandy of a fiancé of hers—I never took to that boy, with that workshy look about him—I wonder, perhaps she's already got two or three children, or perhaps she's already divorced; and Gabriela, Gabrielita who could barely walk and is a young lady by now, what will she have turned into, I wonder whether she's doing well at school. A stab of fear froze him for an instant: and Papa, and Mama? What if they were dead? But no, what are you thinking, they were barely middle-aged when you left, Papa was in good shape and Mama was bursting with health and vigour: she'll still be bickering all day long with uncle Ernesto and aunt Norminha; I wonder whether they've still got that horrible dog that looks like a hairless tapir. And the friends too, I wonder whether Paco has reopened the radio station, whether Jaquinho has found himself a woman; I wonder about my pupils, that know-all George and all the other adolescents who are men now. I wonder about that girl, the one at the radio station, what was her name, Isabella, Isadora, I wonder what became of her.

They won't recognise me, he thought, smiling at the mirror. They won't recognise me, but I'll recognise them. I'll recognise them all.

3.7 Alarm clock

Everything is relative. It all depends, thought Antônio in the half-lit room, listening with half-closed eyes to the boys chatting among themselves, shortly before falling asleep in the hammocks Gesita had provided. Then it came to him with astonishment that the expression “it all depends” had been an old habit of his, but that in the time spent in the forest he had stopped using it. And now that he thought about it, it seemed to him that there was not even a word to express that idea in the Language. *Who knows, perhaps it’s a sign that everything in the forest is simpler and sharper*, he wondered, and then went back to concentrating on the boys’ words, smiling at their innocence.

“Did you imagine these huts would be this big?” It was Jaci who had spoken.

“I did,” somebody answered.

“I didn’t. And I hadn’t even understood that a village could be this big. I mean, Antônio kept saying it, big, big, but I didn’t think this big.”

“If I’ve understood right, this village isn’t even the biggest they’ve got. The one Antônio comes from is bigger still.”

“Impossible.”

“I’m telling you it is.”

“Let’s ask Antônio.”

“I think he’s asleep. He’s old, he gets tired before we do.”

“Hahaha.”

“What surprises me is that there are so few people,” it was Ubiratan who had spoken. “Look around you: this hut is enormous, but when we arrived there was only that man drinking the yellow drink...”

“He was drinking piss!” Cauê interrupted him, setting off great hilarity.

“...and the woman Gesita. And that was all. These villages must be extremely boring places.”

“I’d understood there were many more people.”

“Perhaps something bad happened and they all died!” suggested Cauê, joking, but provoking one or two shivers too many in his friends and in himself as well.

“Antônio!” called Jaci. “Are you asleep?”

“No, but I should be. And so should you.”

“Why are there so few people in the village? Has something bad happened?”

“No, Jaci, don’t worry. This village is like that. And besides, when we arrived it was almost evening, they were nearly all in their huts already. Tomorrow we take the boat with wheels and we go to

my old village; you'll see, there'll be a great many more people. Now go to sleep, because tomorrow we have to wake up early."

"What does it mean, wake up early? We wake up when we wake up."

"No, because the coach, that is, the boat with wheels, doesn't wait for us. We have to wake up before it goes."

"And how do we do that?"

Antônio showed them the alarm clock Gesita had given him shortly before. "This object counts the time as it passes, precisely, and when the moment comes it makes a sound and wakes us up."

"You have an object to wake you up while you're asleep?" asked Jaci incredulously.

"Yes."

"You're mad."

"Perhaps you're right."

3.8 *New words*

At dawn they were all awake already, before the alarm clock had even gone off, thoroughly excited about the coach they would be getting into. The evening before they had peered reverently at the few cars parked in the town, so shiny and coloured and different from anything they had ever seen. Antônio had explained to them that the coach was like one of those, only much bigger, that they would get inside it and it would carry them like a boat but on the road. They had probably not entirely understood, but they could not wait to try out that marvel of movement and metal.

Metal like the things Dona Gesita uses to cook with, like the pot, only we'll go inside it and it moves and it takes us to Antônio's village, are you afraid? Afraid of a pot that moves? I'm not afraid of anything, when I'm as old as Antônio I'll have a coach too, all made of metal and coloured like a parrot.

They all tasted the coffee—which Antônio sipped almost ecstatically—finding that it tasted of burnt wood and that sugar was much, much better eaten on its own rather than wasted by dissolving it in that slop; then, once they had passed Gesita's inspection, which checked that everybody had shorts and a shirt on, they set off for the landing stage, Yamandé in pain but a little less feverish now, laid in his hammock in a loose striped pair of pyjamas.

João and Vicente were already there: when Gesita had explained the situation to them the evening before they had raised no objections, an injured boy, good heavens, of course, it goes without saying. In towns as isolated as that people are used to standing by one another; it is rare for help to be refused to anybody.

But in towns as isolated as that people are also very curious, and so that morning the whole of Monte Dourado had gathered round the landing stage to watch them leave: the children a little disappointed because they had heard about naked Indians—the ones out there, in the forest—and could see only boys in shirts; the adults very struck by Antônio, who had stayed fourteen years outside the world, but how did he do it, I'd have died, of course you'd have died, the first jaguar that came past would have eaten you, you'd have died just from not being able to watch the afternoon telenovela, what do you know about the forest, oh and you do, you've lived three metres from it your whole life and you've never set foot in it, look at these boys, they grew up hunting jaguars and there you are, fatter and lazier than a capybara.

The little boats pulled away from the landing stage, the town waved them off, and Gesita—in that dead-and-alive place the unexpected was as rare as a day without rain—already missed them.

"What a beautiful woman. Very beautiful."

"Eh? Who? Very beautiful who?"

"That woman, Gesita, the one who gave us food in her house."

"She's much too old for you, Moacir."

"Yes, she's very old. But beautiful, with all that yellow hair, beautiful yellow hair," he sighed.

"Yes, well, it was dyed, Moacir, dyed."

"What is dyed."

“Dyed is coloured, daubed, painted, it isn’t their real colour.”

“It doesn’t matter, don’t talk like that, you’re jealous because your hair isn’t that beautiful. She’s a very beautiful woman, she smells of flowers, she has paintings on her eyes, she has a beautiful dress full of colours, she has hair as yellow as the sun. I think she’s like the goddess of the river, the Great Yellow Anaconda. She’s very beautiful, you don’t understand anything.”

Moacir sighed again, his eyes far off, watching the bank recede.

Cauê gripped in his fist the lilac petticoat they had let him bring along on condition that he did not wear it; he was thinking about the coach and he was very frightened, but he would have died before admitting it.

3.9 Tears

The driver was called Fernando, and when he pulled away, tyres crunching on the gravel of Laranjal, he was rather mistrustful: those were Indians, he could spot them a mile off, they did not even know the language apart from the bearded one, and goodness knows where he had sprung from, and then that injured boy... He did not want any trouble; driving this rolling sideboard on roads that were more mud than tarmac was quite enough of a labour, and for what they paid perhaps his wife was right, perhaps he would be better off in the factory canning fish in Belém. But then he changed his mind: on the whole they made no trouble, they were quiet and calm—they looked out of the windows, fascinated by the sight of the road running, running.

When they came into the city Antônio barely noticed what was around him; he was bewildered but above all he was worried—*how am I going to get all of them to the hospital, on a bus, in a taxi, with what money*—when the driver, having dropped the last housewife in a hurry at her stop, said, “But where is it you’re going? You have to take that injured boy to the Senhora dos Anjos, don’t you?”

“Yes, but I don’t know, perhaps there’ll be a bus...”

“In my opinion that’s not very convenient. You’d have to change on Rua Paraná and probably wait, with that one who can’t even stand up... Ah well, I’ve finished my round anyway; while we’re at it I’ll take you, off we go.”

“But are you sure? We’ve only got the money for the ticket as far as the city” (*somehow I have to pay Gesita back, absolutely*) “and it’s out of your way to go to the hospital.”

“Ah, but the hospital is practically on the way to the depot... They’re good boys, these, well brought up, and that poor lad there, I’ve got a son of twenty myself, nasty business, that leg. I’ll take you as far as there, and then you’ll see.”

There was a certain commotion in the emergency reception when six Indians came in carrying a hammock, intimidated by all that white and green, by that unfamiliar and suspicious smell, led by a bearded fellow loudly asking for a doctor, a, what do you call it, the one who mends legs, bones, there’s an injured boy, we need an, an... an orthopaedic surgeon. Quickly.

“So you’re telling me you spent fourteen years in the forest. That’s a very... bizarre thing, a really unusual thing, you know.”

“Yes, doctor, I know. It’s rather a long story, but what I care about is that the boy, the leg, is all right.”

“Yes, yes, all right. He’s fine, but you were right to bring him here: it really was a bad fracture and he was in a very bad way; he’d have died if he hadn’t been seen to in time. The leg will come right, he won’t even notice he was hurt, but it’ll be a long business, it’ll take a good period of rehabilitation. But tell me about yourself: how did it come about that, well, those fourteen years...”

“Listen, yes, I’ll tell you, but now be kind, could I make a telephone call?”

Janita had answered the telephone—she had not become a nun after all—and it was lucky, because the way she was thrown into shock suggested that if their mother had answered they would have found themselves facing a heart attack: she gasped, she panted, she stammered, she asked, to be sure—you never know, there are a lot of strange people about—for the name of their paternal great-

grandmother, and then dissolved into tears, sobbing, “Antoninho, oh, Antoninho! We’re coming, we’re coming right now, half an hour and we’ll be there.”

They had just moved Yamandé into a room, operated on and sedated, and Antônio was trying to work out what to do with those boys who had been standing for a good while now in the emergency reception, although they still seemed calm, glued to the big windows and looking down into the street with inexhaustible curiosity at the cars, the vans, the signs, the shops, the bicycles and the motorbikes, the traffic lights and the beggars, the women in heels, the tarmac, the rubbish and the drain covers, the trousers and the skirts and the glasses, the dogs on leads, the roller blinds, the cigarettes, the umbrellas.

It was then that they arrived, all together: his mother pushing her way through to embrace him first, holding him tight enough to take his breath away, weeping like a fountain and brandishing the packet with the forty *beijinhos* that, overwhelmed by agitation, she had made before leaving; and then Janita and Amanda, stroking him both at once and weeping too; and Amanda’s husband, who thank goodness was not the dandy and who had never seen him before but gave him a manly squeeze, urging on the two small children he was holding by the hand, “Come on, come on, give your uncle a kiss!”; and Gabrielita in a miniskirt, who did not remember him at all and stood a little apart but who, infected, was crying too. And aunt Norminha, flooding him with tears and squeezing his cheeks between her hands, and uncle Ernesto, who kept slapping him on the shoulders and sniffing, and Antônio, who did not know whether to laugh or to cry a little himself.

“How handsome you’ve become, Antoninho, your mother’s boy, my baby, with this *garimpeiro* beard... Goodness knows when your father will see you, he doesn’t like a crowd, you know what a bear he is, but he’s waiting for you at home: I haven’t seen him so moved since he saw you born... My beautiful boy! You look taller, but you’re skinny, let me look at you, goodness knows what you were eating, what horrible creatures and weeds... And how I cried thinking you were dead, I had I don’t know how many masses said, you see, Nossa Senhora dos Meninos listened to me, you must tell me everything, everything... But these, are these your friends? What handsome boys!”

And, crazed with gratitude and joy, she embraced the boys, who were somewhat disconcerted by that soft bulk wet with weeping and smelling of iris; she stroked their hair, filled their hands with freshly made *beijinhos*, then went back to tearing Antônio out of his sisters’ arms to embrace him again, embraced her daughters, embraced Norminha and Ernesto as though she had not seen them for years, and, weeping and laughing, embraced a nurse with a moustache who happened to be passing.

Uncle Ernesto opened two bottles of Italian sparkling wine after sending a nurse off to find some glasses, “Come on now, be kind, be quick, we’ve got a toast to drink!”, the boys stuffed themselves with sweets, the women soaked one handkerchief after another, the children struck up for their uncle a little song learned at nursery, aunt Norminha clapped her hands: the emergency reception of the Senhora dos Anjos had not seen so much commotion and tears and joy since thirteen years earlier, when Senhora Anita Madeira de Andrade had given birth there, without time to reach the delivery room, to her four twins, two fair and two dark.

3.10 Home

The hours that followed were such a chaos of sensations and faces, boiling with voices he did not remember and sticky with coconut sweets, that Antônio was never able to reconstruct them precisely.

They had taken him and the boys aside before they left the hospital to vaccinate them against practically everything. “It’s the standard protocol; natives of tribes that have never come into contact with us are extremely at risk. Flu can kill you, to say nothing of measles and chickenpox.”

“But I had chickenpox as a child, and I’ve caught flu at least a thousand times...”

“Come along now, don’t make such a fuss, we’ll do the lot for you too, to be on the safe side.”

The business annoyed him a good deal more than it annoyed the boys, who were mostly intrigued by the coats, the couches, the syringes, and who were delighted at the idea that that small prick—*Less than a wasp, less than one of those big ants!*—would protect them for ever against every illness in the world.

“It isn’t quite like that, boys, you’re protected against some illnesses but...”

“You said this thing was a medicine that would protect us from illnesses. You said it stopped us ever getting ill again.”

“All right, Cauê, all right. That isn’t exactly what I said, but never mind. Now let’s see if we can manage to get out of here.”

They first had to look in and say goodbye to Yamandé, who, just woken from the anaesthetic and still dazed, seemed not entirely to understand where he was or why, and certainly did not understand at all who all those people were, in particular the plump elderly lady plumping his pillows and those two small children who gave him a little kiss on the cheek. “Say hello to uncle’s friend, he’s poorly!”

But for the first time in days his face was relaxed and not clenched with pain, and in the hard white bed he seemed at ease; so, once he had been reassured that they would be back very soon, all that was needed was to retrieve Cauê, who had gone off to explore the corridors of the third floor, and they were ready to leave the hospital.

It took three journeys in Ernesto’s car to carry everybody to the house of Marcela, Antônio’s mother, where a festive crowd of relatives and neighbours was waiting to embrace the resurrected man, to see the tribe from the forest that had come with him, and to take the opportunity to eat, drink, put on a bit of music, dance, gossip, argue about politics, about football, about prices that go up and up and about that television series that had just ended, what a shame.

“Shame you didn’t come back on a Saturday, Antoninho, then even more people could have come to celebrate you!”

Saturday, imagine that. Remembering that Saturday and Sunday were different days from the others, that every day had a name and a peculiarity—*on Thursdays there’s the market on Rua Mendes, on Tuesdays there’s the TV quiz, on Mondays the weeklies come out, or is it Wednesdays?*—amused

Antônio a great deal; it was something he had entirely forgotten and that now struck him as rather ridiculous.

In the middle of that throng of strangers the boys managed extremely well: they smiled at everybody, warbled politely in their unknown language and let themselves be stuffed with sweets, crisps and scalding *empanadas*, drinking one bowl of Coca-Cola after another. The drink had made them fall in love at the first instant, while about the glass of the tumblers they maintained all their reservations.

Ubiratan had not moved from the veranda, from where, sitting on the creaking swing seat that Senhora Marcela renewed every year with new cushions—at that moment acrylic sugared-almond-pink hydrangeas—he gazed tirelessly at the panorama of the city, the roofs, the streets, the inextricable tangle of electric wires and aerials, a nearby building site bristling with very tall cranes.

Gabrielita, sitting on a corner of the sofa, was showing Itaúna, who did not understand a word but nodded in admiration as each new function was unfolded, a little fuchsia gadget that looked like a television in miniature—*she's talking about telephone, internet, games and music and films; but what is she saying, she's pulling his leg, there can't be telephones like that yet, it'll be a toy, one of those children's things they advertise in the comics; in a minute she'll tell him it lets you see through people's clothes*—while Piraí laughed in the kitchen with a group of matrons who had got it into their heads, seeing him interested in sauces and pans, to teach him to cook crab *moqueca*.

Janita stayed at the house only as long as she had to, in order to pack a bag for Yamandé and take it back to the hospital. “Poor boy, he hasn't even got pyjamas with him, a pair of slippers, a dressing gown... I'll take him a packet of biscuits too and some sweets; they certainly don't cook at the hospital the way we do here at home, he'll be glad of something sweet in his mouth. Perhaps I'll get a couple of magazines as well, a big lad like that in bed all day, goodness knows how bored he must be.”

Antônio was about to tell her that reading papers in Portuguese was not the right pastime for Yamandé, but then he thought that the pictures in the magazines would in fact please him enormously; when it came down to it, it was an excellent idea. So good that he did not even stop to argue with his sister about the advisability of slippers and a dressing gown.

It had been settled that the boys would sleep on the veranda—sheltered from the incessant rain but not shut in a room, which they preferred—and, efficiently, Janita, Amanda and Marcela had each thought, without telling the others, that it would be as well to borrow a few hammocks from friends, with the result that at least thirty of them were piled up on the armchairs in the sitting room.

Antônio was beginning to be extremely tired; the emotion, the confusion and not least the two or three beers he was no longer used to held him suspended in a smiling befuddlement, except that he started every time a door banged, a motorbike roared in the street, an ambulance went past: noises he once would not even have noticed and that now took him a few instants merely to identify.

But he recognised at once the sound that came from the television somebody had switched on: the commentary on a match, evidently, was impossible to forget. When he came into the sitting room, escaping the sticky embrace of a distant cousin who had arrived late and whose name he could not remember, Moacir had just run off to call everybody and the boys were thoroughly excited. “Antônio, look, look at that object with the people inside, look! They play with the ball like us, they're playing football!”

3.11 TV

“It’s a screen, isn’t it?” asked Cauê, remembering the Portuguese word Antônio had said so many times in his stories. “The people playing aren’t really inside it, they’re in a place far away, very far away. Ah, yes, they’re on the moon!”

Antônio smiled and nodded, letting his eyes rest on those boys whom in some ways he felt he was seeing for the first time.

They had no notion at all of the function of furniture; to them an armchair was just a cumbersome mass and was in no way associated with the idea of “sitting down”. Moacir, seeing the sofa, lay down on it, thinking that an object vaguely similar to a hospital bed might also vaguely have the same function. Piraí had the same idea, but with the table, raising murmurs of protest and giggles from the assembled relatives. The others were perched in various ways on the furniture, one on a chest, another on the back of the armchair. Only Jaci stayed standing in a corner, fascinated by the glass drops of the chandelier, which Antônio had more than once told him not to try to pick, because he was afraid he might think they were fruit.

The images of the match went past too quickly to catch the boys’ attention, distracted as they constantly were by the too-many novelties around them; Antônio himself had entirely lost the habit of focusing his attention on an object of that kind. Besides, he was fascinated by the technology: that television was enormous compared with the ones he remembered, the screen was extremely flat and extremely thin, and the quality of the picture was breathtaking.

Piraí, driven off the table, was the first to start imitating the movements of the players he saw on the screen, soon followed by all the others. A feint, a pass, a burst of pace on the spot. Each of them chose a player in shot and copied his movements. Antônio was entranced. Seen from outside they seemed to be dancing a dance without a rhythm; in fact Antônio understood that they were demonstrating a vision of the game he had not expected. They were not imitating the man with the ball but the other players, the ones taking part in the defensive or attacking phase; it was their way of perceiving and commenting on the strategies of play.

At a certain point the number 10 of the side in yellow, it had taken Antônio a good quarter of an hour to work out that this was in fact a Brazil match, took the ball just outside the opposition box and slipped fearlessly into the hornets’ nest of the defence, moving with a frightening agility and power despite his tiny build. In no time he had beaten three or four opponents but had drifted too far to the right to be able to hit a powerful shot. As he fell, twisting round on himself to avoid one more defender, out of his left foot came a magical trajectory, a slow ball with a high looping arc that beat the goalkeeper and went in at the top corner to his right.

“GOL!” shouted the boys in chorus. “GOL!”

For the first time in their lives they saw applied the gestures Antônio had taught them: the arms in the air, the embraces, the fists clenched in victory. The director lingered on a close-up of the face of that small genius in the yellow shirt who had just performed that miracle of technique. The boys stopped embracing one another, fell silent and turned abruptly towards Antônio. The first to speak was Cauê. “The one who scored...” He did not quite know how to say it (there was no need, because they had all already noticed). “Did you see, Antônio? Did you see how like Yamandé he is?”

Antônio could not believe it: Yamandé and the brilliant number 10 of Brazil, on whose shirt the name “Foguete” stood out in green, really did look like brothers.

3.12 Zerão

“Where are we going, Antônio?”

Alarm clock or no alarm clock, Antônio was on his feet as soon as the sun came up, and so, for that matter, were all the boys. He had thought long and hard about how to organise the days; what mattered most to him was that Yamandé should not be left too much on his own. But the hospital rules were very strict: they were not let in before midday, and visiting hours were limited in any case. There was a good deal of free time.

He had spent whole hours explaining to the boys the use and the meaning of the objects in the house, but that world, he had realised, was too bizarrely different from theirs, and it would take him a great deal more than a few mornings to get them used to it.

Moacir was one of the most curious. He had spent a good ten minutes opening and shutting the fridge, touching in fascination all the cold things it held and working out, successfully, how the light inside it went on and off; Antônio had decided he would let them get on with it, at least until they got themselves into something potentially dangerous. While the others were listening to him talk about locks, rugs, switches, books and all the other things that came before their eyes, Moacir had moved on to examining the tap. He turned the hot and the cold on and off, he touched the water, he brought the flow down to a trickle, he tasted it; a couple of times he very nearly scalded himself.

That morning, cool and unexpectedly flooded with sunshine after the night's rain, Antônio realised that he could no longer keep six sturdy, lively young men shut up in the house talking about light fittings and lavatory cisterns, and he made a virtue of necessity.

There was one place he absolutely wanted to visit, one that had been working its way into his mind like a woodworm until it had settled at the centre of every thought: he wanted to go to the Zerão, he wanted to see what had become of it after all those years. Inside himself he knew it could not have been abandoned.

It would not be easy, he knew that perfectly well, not even for himself. Too many strange things, too many differences. Covering the few kilometres that separated them from the stadium could take hours (*or it could take days, or we could get lost and never find the way again; there are a thousand dangers here*).

“You taught me all the secrets of the forest. This is my forest, and it's full of secrets you don't know. You must be very careful, because in my forest there are things far more dangerous than the jaguar and the caiman.”

The boys' mocking smiles went out at the first bus that went through a puddle a few centimetres from them, splattering them without breaking off its charge, and they soon turned into expressions of panic: mopeds, cars, even bicycles and handcarts became mortal threats. “It doesn't stop!” was the commonest remark, “the man on that great metal animal looks us in the eye and doesn't stop!”

“Perhaps the great metal animal can't stop.”

“It can,” Antônio explained, “it can stop, but the driver doesn't make it stop.”

“Why? And why doesn't it attack, then?”

“These animals don’t usually attack. You have to think of it this way: the mind of these animals is the mind of the driver. When they attack, it’s because the driver has made a mistake.”

Antônio’s answers did not satisfy them, and it took him quite a while to persuade them to follow him. In the end he cut it short: “If you do as I do, nothing will happen to you.”

The avalanche of conflicting sensations he had felt so often since coming back left Antônio shaken all over again. He felt as though he had ended up in one of those science-fiction series with earthlings in brightly coloured shirts, he couldn’t remember the title, who went exploring the strangest planets. The models of the cars and the mopeds were mostly unknown to him; the shops, the people, even the smell in the air was no longer the same, and the stink of the exhaust fumes seemed to him suffocating. He felt as though he had smashed through an invisible wall and ended up in another universe, similar to the one he had grown up in and yet profoundly different. In spite of this sense of estrangement, though, there were also old habits, evidently never forgotten, that came back up of their own accord and left him profoundly astonished.

Coming out onto the Rodovia Juscelino Kubitschek and looking to the left to see whether Alfonso was there smoking, leaning against the veranda of his fishmonger’s shop that had always been painted yellow (*the fishmonger’s is still there! With the sign and everything! Maybe Alfonso is still there too!*); turning into the Rua da Bacia even though it’s the longer way, just because there are trees along the canal (*the trees are still there! And how small and scrawny they look!*); recognising the low single-storey houses and the everlasting shacks balanced on the edges of the muddy roads, the very long rows of whitish and grey buildings dotted here and there with bursts of colour, with the palms for exclamation marks; remembering a water tap round the corner of a house, but also being taken aback by some new building or by a junction that had been altered.

And at last, here was the Zerão, unrecognisable. The car park in front reduced to an enormous unmade patch of ground; his beloved pale blue wall completely repainted, no, rebuilt, in a gaudy white broken up by green pillars. And the stands, he noticed, entirely new, rebuilt: two tiers, with a sloping roof, wider than the old ones, freshly painted, beautiful. So they had done the refurbishment after all, thought Antônio. He could not pass his enthusiasm on to the boys; he already had trouble explaining to them that this was the pitch he had so often told them about. He didn’t know what they had been expecting, but certainly not that wall, those roads and what they were looking at.

In spite of the works, the north end of the stadium was still fenced off with wire netting broken by a rickety little gate standing half open.

While he was letting the boys in he saw that there was a team training on the pitch, and seeing a few black-and-white shirts he had no doubt at all: it was Macapá Futebol Clube.

There, some of these lads could have been players of mine, but too much time has gone by; I can’t recognise them and they certainly won’t recognise me.

An assistant came over at a run with a smile on his face, while Antônio could not find the words to apologise: “I didn’t think I’d find anybody at this hour of the morning...”

“We’re professionals,” the young man replied, very affably. “We have to be here, it’s in the contract, isn’t it?”

Professionals, thought Antônio, Macapá are a professional club now!

The boys were left literally open-mouthed. Cauê said, “It’s big,” and Piraí almost at the same moment, “What strange white trees you use...” and he was already going over to touch them. “They aren’t trees! It’s metal!”

The assistant looked at Antônio with an astonished expression and asked, “Are they talking? Is that a language?”

Antônio smiled at him and said to Piraí, “Of course they aren’t trees; I’m sure I’ve told you about them.”

“I didn’t remember,” the boy replied.

Then Antônio turned to the assistant: “Yes, it’s a language. We don’t want to be a nuisance to you, though. I’d come to show these lads the pitch; we thought there wouldn’t be anybody here and we’d have a few shots, but look, we’ll go straight away.”

“Why, do they play football?”

The assistant had noticed that there was something odd about that group of young men. It wasn’t the fact that they were Indians; groups of Indians going about Macapá were not unusual at all. Nor was it the way they were dressed: short shorts and bare feet were the norm. But there was something, apart from the language, that didn’t add up. Perhaps it was the way they stood close to one another, shoulder against shoulder; perhaps it was the way they gestured as they whispered among themselves. The assistant watched them again and again, and convinced himself that yes, there was something different about them.

“Yes, they don’t speak Portuguese, but they play, and quite well too.”

“If you like,” said the assistant, without losing his friendly air, “we were just about to organise a small-sided game. If you want to join in we’d be delighted. Do you think they’re up to playing with us?”

“Look, I don’t know. Let’s try it and see, all right?”

Of all the things that had fascinated the boys in those few days, nothing had seemed to their eyes as extraordinary as the footballs seemed to them now. Soft, smooth, perfectly spherical: they felt them all over, they sniffed them, they licked them to find out what they tasted like, they balanced them on their noses or on their feet, raising more than one laugh from the Macapá group.

“What’s going on?” the assistant whispered to Antônio, amused. “It’s as if they’d never seen a football in their lives.”

“Can I tell you a secret?” Antônio whispered back. “Yes, it’s the first time they’ve ever seen a football.”

The assistant gave Antônio a light dig with his elbow, convinced it was a joke, and Antônio did nothing to persuade him otherwise. Instead he went over to his boys and began to explain a few things to them. Meanwhile the Macapá athletes had picked the sides, and a little group of five players was shyly making its way over to Antônio and that band of strangers.

The moment Antônio told the boys that those five players would be playing with them, a full-throated protest broke out. “We are us!” burst out Moacir. “We can’t play with them, they don’t understand us!” Ubiratan piled in, and so on.

Antônio found himself obliged to go back to the assistant, who by that point was talking to the man who seemed to be the manager. “I’m sorry, really, I didn’t mean to cause you all this trouble. I’m a manager... well, I was, and I know very well how tiresome these situations are. Anyway, my boys would like to play on their own, if you don’t mind.”

“How many of you are there? Six? Seven with you? If you like we’ll play seven a side.”

“Yes, thank you, thank you very much. Let’s say ten minutes and then we’ll go, all right? That way they’ll see what it’s like to play.”

“What do you mean, haven’t they ever played?” asked the manager.

“Yes, they’ve played. Look, forget the last thing I said, all right?”

“One other thing,” said the manager, a greying man in his forties. “Haven’t they got any boots?”

“No, they play barefoot.”

“Then so will we!” said the assistant with a laugh, and in no time at all every player was lined up on the pitch barefoot, including the amused Macapá players.

The kick-off was left to the visitors, and Antônio made a point of reminding everybody exactly what the rule about the first pass was: “Forwards, mind.”

Ubiratan barely touched the ball to Cauê, who produced a sprint straight for the goal, head down, with a look of animal conviction in his eyes that nobody at the Zerão had ever seen before. When he got to about thirty metres from the opposition goal he let fly a shot of unheard-of power that finished high, very high. The ball looked as though it would never stop: it flew over the crossbar, over the athletics track whose works would never be completed, over the perimeter netting and over the first houses of the *bairro* as well.

The Macapá players all burst out laughing, even though one or two of them could not conceal, at least from themselves, their dismay at all the power generated in that kick. Antônio rushed over to Cauê, trying to explain to him the difference between these footballs and the balls of leaves they used in the forest. Cauê’s eyes were shooting fire as he answered him through clenched teeth: “I understand, I understand.”

Play resumed with a different ball, and it wasn’t the only time: the Indians had lightning feet and always got to the ball first, but the last touch was always a rocket that finished a long way off, often outside the stadium.

“Lower,” was all Antônio said, holding himself back from saying *softer*, trying to take the edge off it with smiles and pats on the back. After a few minutes the laughter of the Macapá players had died away. Even though none of the shots had troubled the keeper, the physical and technical supremacy of those boys, in spite of their slight build, was obvious, and the awkwardness they felt with these footballs was diminishing minute by minute.

After eight minutes the manager let out his first furious shriek at one of his men who had lost the ball in midfield for the umpteenth time. Macapá had in practice not yet managed to get past the halfway line, except with a couple of long balls that had gone out for a goal kick.

The Indians' passes did not follow parabolic paths. Their balls travelled straight as bullets, they were struck with a violence never seen before, and their game was completely without frills: pure aggression in defence and quick finishing in attack.

In the ninth minute a throw-in was being taken in Macapá's defensive third. Cauê was at least ten metres from the player who was receiving the ball, but his speed was astonishing and those ten metres were covered in a flash. Having intercepted the ball they began to pass it quickly among themselves until Jaci saw Ubiratan's run out of the corner of his eye and picked him out with millimetric precision with a waist-high pass that cut across the pitch at tremendous speed. Ubiratan did not think twice and struck the ball on the volley, this time managing to control the strike perfectly. The ball buried itself unstoppably in the top right-hand corner, the keeper, who had set off late, catching himself swearing the moment he realised how useless his dive was.

The poisoned arrow, Antônio smiled to himself, naming the pattern they had carried out. He was used to that aggression and those speeds, but the comparison with these trained players was truly striking. The difference was so vast that the Macapá lads seemed to be standing still.

"GOL!" the boys shouted together, "GOL!" and they embraced and raised their arms to the sky, clumsily imitating the celebrations of the footballers they had seen on television the day before.

The assistant decided to blow for the end of the ten minutes with the boys still performing those pantomimes. Antônio came over with a smile from one ear to the other and told them that the match was over and that they had won, setting off the celebration all over again, this time in their own way, with the chants and the dances of victory, while the Macapá athletes made their way quietly over to the manager, who was already telling them off: "Shame on you! The 2013 champions! Shame on you!"

Antônio, by now visibly embarrassed although enormously pleased, went to put a stop to his players' celebrations, sparing no compliments to any of them. The manager's assistant came up to him amazed but still genial, and congratulated Antônio.

"Never seen anything like it," he said, "never."

"Thank you. What's your name?"

"Carlos. And yours?"

"Antônio. Thank you for the compliments, Carlos, but you know we had a lot of luck too."

"Luck my foot, these lads are formidable! Antônio, did you say? I used to know an Antônio, but that was many years ago... Anyway, would you give me your number? I'd like to stay in touch."

"Number?" asked Antônio, not immediately understanding that this was about the telephone. "I haven't got a number."

Carlos looked at him with a questioning expression and then looked at the boys. "You're a strange lot, aren't you? Tell me the truth, Antônio, they're Indians, aren't they? I mean proper Indians, they come from the forest, don't they?"

Antônio looked around before answering: the grass, the stands, the scoreboard with a big clock that said one o'clock. Yamandé!

“Yes, Carlos, we’re Indians, but now we have to go.”

And then, in their language: “Boys, quickly, we have to get to Yamandé, quickly, quickly!”

We? thought Carlos, watching them run off.

3.13 Vision of the game

The consultant's shouting could be heard from the far end of the corridor. His office was hidden behind a door with a barely legible nameplate, a door Antônio had always seen shut.

They had found Yamandé sitting up in bed eating an apple, and it had been a joy to see his smile at last. A brisk nurse had said that the doctor had examined him a short while before and had established that they would soon be able to start physiotherapy, so Antônio, delighted, had hurried out into the corridor to try to speak to the doctor.

Meanwhile the boys had already started telling their friend about the football pitch, the balls and the goals, in that unusual way of theirs of talking and gesturing that entertained all the other patients and their visitors: they didn't understand a word, but it was a show all the same.

The consultant's shouting showed no sign of dying down. Antônio had already made two attempts at knocking on the door without getting an answer, and had come back impatiently to stand outside the door of Yamandé's room, waiting for the doctor to calm down so that he could speak to him.

The boys were recounting the match against Macapá with exuberant attention to detail. In those ten minutes of play each of them had gathered an astonishing quantity of information, and now they were pouring it out over Yamandé in an avalanche. They had noticed how their opponents and the coaching staff were dressed, they had noticed the differences between one ball and another, the places in the stands where the seats were missing, even where the abandoned heaps of earth were that should have served to refurbish the athletics track. But most of all they remembered, moment by moment, the position of every opponent.

"While I was passing the ball to Jaci," Cauê was saying, "the opponent with the very short hair and the yellow shirt was three paces from the middle line, the tall dark one was ten paces in front of me, the one who was always laughing was running slowly towards Piraí but there was a lot of space between them..."

"And the keeper was a bit over to the right, you could have shot then and there!" Itaúna put in.

"Yes, I could have shot then and there, but the space to get the ball through was less than half a pace, and with those balls being so light I could have got it wrong, so I passed to Jaci."

"Being fearful is not good," Moacir concluded, silencing Cauê, who lowered his eyes, not knowing what to answer.

But Ubiratan had already begun recounting another passage of play, and he too had recorded the positions and the directions of movement of team-mates and opponents with a precision verging on the incredible.

Antônio nodded, knowing this quality of the boys' well. Until that day he had never wondered why they had this gift; it had seemed to him perfectly ordinary. But now that he was plunged back into the reality of Macapá he realised how special it was. *Perhaps because they're hunters? It must have been the forest that made them like this*, he concluded.

Yamandé's leg was caged in a mesh of metal rods that came out of the flesh and made a strong impression, but he said he was not in much pain, and apart from the odd grimace his good spirits seemed to confirm it. He followed the stories, asking all sorts of questions and joining in as best he

could in the gesturing of his friends. *He's recording it all as well*, Antônio understood, *he's reconstructing the whole match in his head*.

Almost as if to confirm what Antônio was thinking, Yamandé asked: "Ubiratan! Why didn't you pass to Cauê?" obliging Ubiratan to give a long, incredible explanation made of angles and running directions of the opponents, at the end of which they all agreed that the shot, the solution Ubiratan had chosen, had been the best option.

Antônio decided to make another attempt with the consultant and went up to the door again, behind which the tirade had still not finished. In spite of himself he found himself listening to what the doctor was saying; it was impossible to do otherwise, given the volume of his voice.

"The World Cup! The World Cup my arse! Here, if one of our patients picks up an infection he's as good as dead, never mind the World Cup! Look! Look how much money they've spent on those stadiums! Do you want to know how many hospitals we could have had out of those dollars? You don't want to know, well, I'll tell you! Never mind the World Cup!"

Antônio's eyes widened, fixed on some distant, undefined point somewhere beyond the anodised aluminium door. 1998 France, then 2002, 2006, 2010...

"Two thousand and fourteen!" he found himself shouting. "Two thousand and fourteen!"

He ran the length of the corridor; he had to tell somebody, and the only people to hand were the boys.

"Two thousand and fourteen!"

When he came into the room everybody turned towards him, and Antônio made an effort with himself to get a grip. In the bed next to Yamandé's a young man with what must have been his wife and his two daughters watched him the whole time while, in that language brimming with sounds and gestures, he explained to the boys that the World Cup was going to be held that very year, that it would take place a few months from then. The young man, who had one arm in plaster and one side of his face covered in grazes, recognised the "Poropò, poropò!" that Moacir struck up, laughing, and looked at Antônio for an explanation.

"Two thousand and fourteen," Antônio told him, still riding the crest of his enthusiasm, "it's the World Cup!"

The young man smiled and said, in the most good-natured tone he could manage, "You must be about the only people in the world who didn't know the World Cup is in Brazil this summer!"

It took Antônio a while to absorb the news: not only was the World Cup about to happen, it was going to take place in Brazil. His heart began to beat faster and the hairs on his neck stood up as they had the first time he had seen a jaguar.

Everybody around him realised that something had happened to him: the young man with the broken arm let out a guttural sound and so did Yamandé, though perhaps because of a stab of pain in his leg. Cauê came over and asked, "Antônio?"

"Boys," he tried to gather his thoughts, "the World Cup..." He realised that for them nothing would change. "It'll be in Brazil!"

For them nothing changed. For them “Brazil” was an abstract concept like so many others they had had to accept without question in recent times. Only Yamandé thought about it for a while and then asked, “We’re from Brazil, aren’t we?”

“Yes, Yamandé, we’re Brazilians.”

“And does that mean...” the boy thought briefly, “that we’ll be able to play in the World Cup?”

“No, Yamandé, the best ones will play.”

Antônio smiled, while Cauê said, “He means the ones like Foguete.”

“That’s right,” Antônio confirmed, “the ones like Foguete.”

3.14 News

Janita was in tears. Antônio's first thought was: *Yamandé. Something's happened to Yamandé.*

Then he noticed that Janita was looking at the television and relaxed at once. She was probably crying over a soap or something of the kind.

"Why are you crying, Janitinha?"

"Because Nelson Mandela is dead."

Antônio remembered a day very many years earlier, when he had found Janita in tears over the death of Tchaikovsky, whose tragic circumstances she had just been reading about.

He thought this was one of the many historic moments he had missed in those fourteen years, and that as soon as he had a little free time he wanted to set about catching up on them.

"When did he die?" he asked her.

"Three months ago," Janita replied, to Antônio's astonishment, sniffing. "There's a documentary about his funeral on now."

Antônio sat down in the armchair without speaking. For the first time since he had come back he was understanding, really understanding, what an extraordinary business he had lived through in those years, and how far the world had gone on in the meantime without him, without waiting for him. He thought of the innovations there must certainly have been on the internet; he realised he had not yet had the time to take a proper look at those futuristic-looking telephones everybody seemed to have in their hands and which apparently served for things far more important than telephoning. And he was well aware that he had no idea how local politics or world geopolitics had evolved.

While he was making these reflections, the television was showing the procession of the various heads of state who had gone to pay their last respects to Madiba. "Here is the President of Brazil, Silvina Mello..." said the voice-over.

The President? "Janita, have we got a woman president?"

"Yes."

Well I never. And what else, now? Antônio wondered.

The television, as though it had read his mind, was quick to answer him: "...and the case of this man caused an outcry: he passed himself off as a sign-language interpreter..."

"Hahahah, magnificent!" laughed Antônio.

"Here he is pretending to translate into sign language the words of the President of the United States, Barack Obama."

"Janita, have I got this right? That's the President of the United States? A black man?"

“Yes, Toninho, that’s him.”

Extraordinary. How long have I been away, fourteen years or a hundred and forty?

Antônio’s father had always been a reserved sort, and now that age was coming on he had become even more taciturn. For most of the day he sat in the armchair in the living room or on the chair on the veranda, stroking the dog or watching it play in the yard. Since Antônio had come back they had exchanged few words, and they had still not had the chance for a conversation face to face.

They had always talked about sport rarely: Italo had been born a year after the tragedy of the Maracanaço, while Antônio had been born a year before the triumph at the Azteca, and however silly it seemed, this thing appeared to have marked their relationship.

Antônio had promised himself he would use history and politics as an ice-breaking subject, but he had realised that by now he knew far too little about them to make idle conversation out of them, and, sitting down on the veranda beside his father, he decided to throw himself into sport.

“So, Papa. Seeing as I’ve just found out that the World Cup is going to be here in Brazil, tell me what I’ve missed in these years. Any sporting triumphs for Brazil? The usual disappointment?”

“It depends, Toninho, it depends.” Italo stayed thinking for a few moments, then suggested, “Shall we talk about artistic gymnastics?”

“Haha, you want to start right at the bottom, do you, Papa?”

“No, I want to talk about sporting triumphs for Brazil.”

“Get away!”

“Yes, Toninho. Two years ago there were the Olympics in London, and for the first time we won the gold medal in gymnastics, on the rings.”

“Incredible!”

“Oh yes. And we won another one in judo, and a third in... volleyball!”

“Volleyball?! Really? Fantastic! I always said that sooner or later we’d win it.”

“Women’s volleyball, mind.”

“Ah. Good. And the men’s volleyball?”

“Silver.”

“Aaaah, what a shame! Oh well, at least we’ve beaten the semi-final curse. Who knows, sooner or later...”

“We beat the semi-final curse a while back.”

“What do you mean? Come on, Papa, don’t make me drag the news out of you with pincers.”

“We took silver at Beijing too, in 2008. But at Athens in 2004 we won gold.”

“Gold?”

“Yes. But above all...”

“Above all?”

“We’ve won the last three World Championships in a row. Volleyball is our territory now, Toninho. And do you know who the coach is who’s led us to these triumphs? Bernardinho, exactly as you always hoped,” his father smiled, as pleased as if he had given him a present.

As the icing on the cake they went on to talk about football. Italo told him about the Brazilian triumph of 2002 and about the Italian victory of 2006, dwelling with great abundance of detail on the inglorious exit of the French captain. And then he told him about the rise of tiki-taka and the triumph of the Spaniards in 2010.

Then, after a few minutes of silence, while Antônio was still working through all this information, Italo let out a deep sigh and said to his son: “I never believed you were dead, you know?”

He was crying, but his voice was as firm as ever.

“...”

“And do you know why? Do you remember what your grandfather said shortly before he died? ‘I’ve seen a happy ending together with Antônio, I can die happy.’ I want to see a happy ending together with a little grandson of mine as well; you couldn’t have gone before that.”

Antônio’s eyes opened wide. In the confusion of those days, with a thousand things to think about, a thousand to tell and a thousand others to rediscover, it had completely slipped his mind to tell his family the most important news of all. *Mygod, how shameful, how did I not think of it?*

3.15 Surprises

They were all at table, Antônio sitting with his parents and Janita, the boys scattered here and there with their plates of stew and their bowls of Coca-Cola. The warm wind, swollen with rain, was making the flowered nylon curtains dance; the radio was chirping away in the background while his mother and Janita argued about whether to take Yamandé *cajuzinhos* the next day or coconut sweets again, when he cleared his throat and said: “Ahem, well, I wanted to tell you that... there hasn’t been the right moment until now, but... anyway, I’ve got a son.”

“Mother of god! Antoninho! You got married!” Marcela had dropped her cutlery and almost knocked over her glass, bringing her hands up to her cheeks, red with emotion.

“Not... well, not exactly, but anyway...”

“Ohgod, oh jesus, what joy! A little grandson! I must call Amanda at once, tell her she’s become an aunt, that the children have got a little cousin!”

She got up in agitation, sending her napkin flying and rushing towards the hall and the telephone, but halfway there she about-turned and came back to let herself drop onto her chair, fanning her flushed face. “Mammamia, I feel almost faint, you were dead and instead you’re alive and you’ve got married as well!!!”

“Mama, it isn’t exactly...”

“Did you all hear? A child of Antônio’s! We must celebrate! Janita, you’re an aunt again! Italo, go and fetch a bottle, or two even, I must call Amanda straight away, and aunt Norminha... And what’s he called? And how old is he?”

“No, not years, he’s tiny, he’s only four moo... four months, more or less. He’s called Ybyráatã.”

“What a lovely name, it sounds like a hummingbird’s. And what’s your wife called? What a beautiful girl she must be!”

Janita had got up to embrace him, laughing, holding him tight. “How lovely, Antônio, how happy I am! I’m the only one left now, I’ll have to get a shift on!”

His father merely looked at him, sitting up straight on his chair with his knife and fork still in his hands, a smile from one ear to the other, sniffing, his eyes brimming. The boys had understood nothing except that something was being celebrated, so they were laughing too, and clapping, and embracing everybody, while Ubiratan and Piraí beat out in unison on the table the very fast rhythm of the Festival Song.

The neighbour appeared in the doorway, still with her napkin in her hand. “Is everything all right? Has something happened?”

“Genovefa, we’re grandparents again! My Antônio has given us a little grandson! Come in, come in and have something to drink, we must celebrate; call Ronaldo and the boys too, and tell Senhor Meñares from the yard next door as well, he’ll be so pleased!”

Antônio went from one toast to the next—the neighbours from the other yard had arrived as well—and to everybody he had to repeat that no, he had no photographs, not even a video, no, nothing: maybe next time, next time, promise, promise.

“And you left her there all on her own, your wife? You should have brought her to meet us, good heavens, what a head you’ve got. Oh, but I must send her a present, Janita, we must go and get it: something for the baby, and earrings for her, or a bed jacket perhaps. Italo, tomorrow you must open a post office savings account for the little one, oh, here’s Amandinha, well done Janita for calling her! Children, you’ve got an aunt and a little cousin; come and give your uncle a kiss! Antônio, his mother’s darling, who’s become a papa! And what did you say your wife was called?”

“It isn’t exactly... Janaína, she’s called Janaína.”

“A lovely name too, and tell me, how did you meet, how long have you been married? Myjesus, I can’t wait to see the baby, his granny’s little hummingbird.”

Aunt Norminha, who had arrived with a large tray of pastries and a pair of hand-knitted blue bootees—*I made them when I was expecting Gabriela, I put them away, you don’t mind, do you? A little present from auntie*—embraced him together with Gabrielita, who was asking whether she would be the godmother, and who was very disappointed that there wasn’t even a photograph to put on Facebook.

Amanda was blowing her nose, thoroughly pleased. “Well done, Antônio, and another boy at that! Papa, have you seen, are you pleased? But Antônio, you absolutely must telephone Teresa.”

“Teresa? Teresa who?”

“What do you mean, don’t you remember? Your listener, the one who was always ringing in: listen, listen, she’s on air now!”

“On air? Where? How?”

Amanda turned up the volume. “Of course she is, she got the radio station back on its feet; it’s a long story and I don’t really know it, but anyway it’s all thanks to her. She does a lovely programme of recipes and news from around the world, we always listen to it; listen how good she is, you can never understand a thing, she’s marvellous, listen! In fact call her, call her right now!”

With the telephone already pushed into his hand, Antônio laughed: it was almost vertiginous to find himself on the other end of the line like this.

“Hello?”

“Teresa?”

“Yes, good evening, my dear, where are you calli... But this voice, this voice I’d know among a thousand, among a thousand million... Antônio?!”

“Yes, Teresa, it’s me, Antônio.”

“Godinheaven, Antônio, what a thrill! As I live and breathe! I knew you couldn’t be dead, Antônio, you couldn’t be, not with a voice like that. Mammamia, dear listeners, you can’t imagine, there, I’ll

put on a nice song to recover from the emotion: my dear ladies and gentlemen, here for you is Barbara Gaynor with 'I will survive'."

3.16 Gazeta

Marcela arrived out of breath, drying her hands on the tea towel, while Antônio was trying to work out how the mobile phone his sister Amanda had lent him worked, he had barely managed to switch it on. “Antônio, Antônio, come to the telephone! There’s a journalist! A journalist for you!”

“What journalist, Mama? What does he want?”

“I don’t know, the Gazeta of something. Come on, hurry up, don’t keep him waiting!”

Antônio did not share his mother’s agitation at all, and to tell the truth he had no great desire to talk to a journalist. What for, anyway? *Oh well, let’s hear what he wants, otherwise Mama will torment me.*

“Yes, hello?”

“My dear Antônio! What a pleasure to hear you!”

“Sorry, who’s speaking?”

“I am José Geremia Opispo de Mervelhos, but you may most certainly call me José! I’m a journalist with the Gazeta Esportiva de Amapá, you’ll know it, of course.”

“Actually no. But then I have been rather out of the loop lately...”

“HAHAHAHA! Rather out of the loop! Fourteen years out of the loop, eh, Antônio! What a character!”

“Listen, I’ve got things to do, so if...”

“But of course! But of course, Antônio, you must be terribly busy! I’ll steal only five minutes of your time, a quick little interview, but when you see it published you’ll be dumbfounded! In five minutes I’ll get you the interview of the year, you’ll see, Antônio, you’ll see!”

“Well, I don’t know, I don’t understand... an interview to talk about what? No, in fact, first of all: who gave you my name?”

“Ah, my dear Antônio, a journalist never reveals his sources, everybody knows that! In this case it was Doctor Traverso, the one at the Senhora dos Anjos, who, what a coincidence, happens to be my cousin! You can’t really count your own cousin as a source, can you? And anyway I’ve told you now, hahahah!”

“And what the devil did the doctor tell you?”

“Ah, everything, my dear Antônio, everything! That you’d turned up after fourteen years lost in the forest, accompanied by a tribe of Indians, one of them injured, he told me the lot!”

“A fine busybody, this Traverso.”

“Ah, he always keeps me up to date, he’s one of my most interesting sources, and then, well, he’s my cousin, I did tell you he’s my cousin, didn’t I? If you knew how many things happen in a casualty department! A first-rate source, I tell you!”

“Right, well, if he’s already told you everything, I’d say we can say goodbye and...”

“Not at all, Antônio, not at all! He told me the bare facts, but those are only the bones: the flesh, Antônio, the flesh of journalism is the impressions of the protagonists, their voice! Now then, the first question.”

“But I’m not sure I want to be interviewed. I don’t know, I’d like to think about it for a moment, because...”

“Hahahahah! He doesn’t want to be interviewed! You really are a delight, my dear Antônio: who in the world wouldn’t want to be interviewed? So, as we were saying, the first question: what did you feel on returning to civilisation after fourteen years?”

“What sort of a question is that? I don’t know, I couldn’t say, it isn’t something you can put like that in a couple of words...”

“Fantastic. ‘I don’t know. I can’t express in words what I feel; it’s something that has traumatised me deeply. Perhaps one day I’ll manage to express the violent feelings I have.’ Fantastic. Second question.”

“But I didn’t say that! I said it was a stupid question, how can you ask what somebody felt when he...”

“Second question. What did you feel on seeing again the family who thought you were dead?”

“Listen, I don’t think we should go on. My affection for my family is a private matter, so...”

“Splendid, splendid. ‘The emotion of that moment completely overwhelmed me. The infinite affection I have for my family gushed out of my heart like a river in flood; I was sobbing like a child.’ Perfect.”

“Goodbye to you. I’m sorry, this interview is senseless.”

“We’ve finished, Antônio, we’ve finished! It wasn’t difficult, you see? To conclude, tell me: I hear those boys of yours play football, and it’s you who coaches them, isn’t it? They’re good, they tell me, fine little legs!”

“And who told you that? I don’t think it can have been the doctor.”

“Hahahaha, no, no, Antônio! That was the groundsman at the ground, another of my sources whom I shouldn’t reveal, but there we are, reveal one, reveal them all! He always lets me know when there’s something interesting, a quarrel between the players, an injury, a piece of gossip... In exchange I get him a front-row place at the rehearsals of the Piratas da Batucada samba school—he has this little passion for the dancers, the rascal—it costs me nothing, it’s my cousin who runs the school, you know, Doctor Traverso’s wife; you remember the doctor, my cousin, don’t you?”

“Listen, I don’t know what you’re talking about. Goodbye.”

“And the groundsman told me the little Indians gave Macapá a fine little thrashing, hahahahah! Marvellous! They’re sharp, eh! So, Antônio, what did you feel when...”

Click.

Antônio was exhausted and dazed. *Mygod, who is this imbecile? I should have hung up sooner, what an idiot. Heaven knows what he’s got in mind to write. Luckily this wretched Gazeta, who on earth is going to read it?*

The boys had been enormously struck, not so much by the victory as by the match itself: by the fact of playing with people different from themselves, of playing for the first time in their lives with strangers.

And they were wild about the pitch, the goals, the lines on the ground, the stands. They begged him to go back there; they were dying to try playing again under those terraces, those lights, on that grass as soft as a little monkey’s fur.

Antônio for his part was no less keen, so one morning he called on the groundsman and asked whether they could come and have a few shots at a time when there was nobody about; they didn’t want to be a nuisance, perhaps in the dead hours. Joaquim, the groundsman, made no difficulties: he threw open his arms and a broad toothless smile and proclaimed, “But of course! What do you mean, a nuisance! From three to five there’s never anybody here, come whenever you like.”

It was four o’clock exactly, and for half an hour already the boys and Antônio had been careering about, heedless of the rain, soaked through, sweating and happy on the pitch, knocking the ball about and running and lying down time and again on that beautiful grass. *Antônio, I’ve never seen grass as beautiful as this; I want to put it all round the shabono** when I go home, all soft green grass like this.*

At that moment Antônio caught sight of a movement in the stands out of the corner of his eye and turned to see, coming down in leaps and bounds, waving his arms in greeting, a curly-headed little fellow in yellow shorts. “My dear Antônio! It’s José, do you remember, José Opispo of the Gazeta!”

“Remember you I do, but what are you doing here?”

“Why, the groundsman, my dear Antônio! He let me know at once—I’d told him to let me know: investigative journalism, Antônio, investigative journalism!—and he’s earned himself a place at the special rehearsal, all the dancers in costume, spine-tingling stuff, Antônio. But as we were saying: these boys really are good, what legs!”

“I don’t understand, we’ve already done the interview. What do you want from me?”

“The photographs, Antônio, the photographs! We are the civilisation of the image; an article is worth nothing without photographs! I’ve taken some fantastic shots, it’ll make a spectacular piece, there, a close-up too, like that.”

“What are you doing? Who gave you permission to photograph me? Go away!”

“There, the boys too, yes, yes, like that; look how photogenic these little Indians are, good, like that, you too, fantastic, fantastic.”

“Boys, what are you doing? Don’t take any notice of him! And you, get out, away, out of here!”

“Done, we’ve done it, all sorted, a fantastic article, my dear Antônio, you’ll see!”

And in a trice he had turned his back on him and was already going back up the terraces at a hop, the camera in his hand, waving it in a bye-bye.

3.17 Lessons

He ought to have thought of it and given it to them earlier, the little lesson he was instead forced to deliver to the boys at the market, in front of the fruit and vegetable stall from which Jaci had taken a melon, offering the indignant stallholder two Coca-Cola bottle tops in exchange. They were not even in the wrong: they had gone out to buy shorts and shirts and had seen Antônio hand the moustachioed Arab at the stall a couple of banknotes in exchange, and then the fishmonger a handful of coins to get a bagful of mixed fish for mamma Marcela's soup. It was logical that they should have understood that in exchange for those things you had to offer something else, and that a couple of shiny tops should have seemed to them a fair swap.

"You can't give just anything in exchange, you have to give these, do you see? They're called money. You give them in exchange when you want something."

"But why do they want these? Those little round ones are nice, shiny, but these are ugly, all dirty, with a picture of an unpleasant man on them."

"Because that's how it works here, Jaci. If you want a melon you have to give that man one of these, not just anything, otherwise he gets angry."

"All right. If he likes them, all right. And where do you get these?"

"You don't get them, you earn them. In Portuguese we say you make them. For example, you've got a lot of bananas, so you come here, and whoever wants them gives you some of these in exchange. It's called selling, and then this money they've given you becomes yours and you can use it to get other things from another person; that's called buying."

"But I don't understand. If I want a banana I have to give one of those to that man?"

"Yes."

"But to have one of those I have to give a banana to another man?"

"Yes, well, more or less."

"Then why don't I keep the banana instead of giving it away so as to get another one?"

Ohjesus, whoever would have thought it was so hard to explain trade, economics. Antônio could not remember at all what it had been like when he had learnt it as a child. Even though he knew it wasn't possible that it had been so, it seemed to him that he had always known it. He tried another approach.

"Right, let's say you have to dig a very big hole, or build a big hut, and you can't manage it on your own. So you get people to help you, don't you?" The boys nodded in unison. "Good. So to the people who have helped you, you give some of this money to thank them, in exchange for their work. Understood?"

"And they go to that man to get bananas?"

"Yes, if they want bananas, yes."

“And they give him in exchange these ones that I gave them?”

“There, yes, well done!!!” *Come on, we’ve done it, they’ve understood.*

“And why don’t I just give them the bananas, if that’s what they want in exchange? And why don’t they get the bananas themselves?”

Antônio took his head in his hands. *Holygod.*

Frustrating though it sometimes was, he knew very well that he could not be surprised at the difficulties the boys ran into at times, because for him too, even though he had been born into it, really understanding that world was anything but easy. Many things he had always considered himself well up on now escaped him, and he was the one in need of a guide.

To introduce him to the new technological marvels of the modern world, the family’s new blood had of course been appointed. Gabrielita sat down with him beside the house computer, a fine computer with a thin screen much bigger than the ones he remembered.

“What do you want to look at, uncle?”

“Well, let’s have a look at the internet. There’s still an internet, isn’t there?” said Antônio, joking, but with a hint of apprehension in his voice that he did not manage to conceal entirely.

“Haha, uncle. Of course there is.” Gabrielita clicked on an icon Antônio did not recognise, but then a familiar logo appeared that disappointed him very much.

“Google?! You still use Google?”

“Obviously. Everybody uses Google. Why do you ask?”

“Well, it’s just that I used it too, fourteen years ago; I expected there’d have been some sort of change in the meantime. Never mind. Listen, is that programme for downloading songs free from all over the world still there?”

“BitTorrent? Yes, yes, we use it all the time.”

“No, I meant a different one, but I can’t remember what it’s called any more. Napper, I think, or something like that.”

“Never heard of it.”

“Oh. But this Bittoren, does it work by looking for a song and downloading it?”

“Um, yes and no. Songs are hard to find; generally we download whole discographies.”

“You mean you want to hear one track by... um... by Santana, and to hear it you download his entire discography?”

“No, to hear just one track I generally use YouTube.”

“You use what?”

The study session was not going very well. Apart from Google, everything seemed to have changed. That was, when it came down to it, what Antônio had expected and hoped for, but expecting it was one thing and finding himself faced with it was quite another. Antônio felt almost more disoriented than the boys: for them, at least, everything was to be learnt from scratch, whereas he had the additional burden of having to unlearn everything he remembered.

Gabrielita tried to explain something that might appeal to an adult, such as Facebook and Twitter. Antônio nodded, but it was plain that he wasn't really understanding. While they were talking it came out in conversation that he had never heard of Wikipedia.

"You don't even know Wikipedia?"

"No. I ought to, oughtn't I?"

"Holiest Jesus, uncle, where have you be..." Gabrielita broke off, laughing, before completing the gaffe, but Antônio didn't make her suffer for it and moved the conversation onto easier ground.

"Let me have another look at that site for music, go on. And let me hear something that's popular today."

Gabrielita played him *Na Linha do Tempo* and *Livre*.

"Are you playing me music you like, or music you think I might like?"

"Erm... both," Gabrielita replied diplomatically.

"And who are today's world stars? Be honest."

Antônio did not dare ask more precise questions; above all he did not want to ask what had become of his favourite bands, fearing it would turn into a long list of "never heard of them" interspersed with a list of the dead, and he had no wish at all to listen to that.

"Hmm... I don't know, I really like Katy Perry and Lady Gaga."

"Go on, let me hear something."

Antônio could not, in all honesty, say that he shared his niece's tastes, but in compensation he quickly learnt the use of the related-videos column and plunged into an exploration of the most watched videos on the net. Some he appreciated, some made him laugh a great deal, others he did not understand. Then the spectacular image of an explosion drew him in. As he clicked he thought he felt Gabrielita stiffen at his side.

For a few dozen seconds he watched the clip without saying anything.

"What is this stuff? Did it really happen?" he asked her, his voice breaking.

"Yes," she whispered, pulling a face.

Antônio thought about it for a few seconds and then said: "Listen to me: the boys must never know anything about this. Do you understand, Gabrielita? On no account."

But Gabrielita was looking at him with a sorry expression. Antônio turned round, and a few metres behind him he saw Itaúna looking at the screen. They stared at each other for a few seconds, then the boy turned without a word and went back out into the yard.

3.18 Newsroom

The little newsroom at Rete Norte was crowded with people, with sheets of paper, with tablets and mobile phones, with screwed-up sweet wrappers, with approaching deadlines, with boredom and irritation.

“Come on, people. Come on. This episode is as limp as an old woman’s backside. Come on. We need new ideas, a bit of life, a bit of colour. Something lively, something fresh. Alfonso, suggestions?”

“We could think of something on the World Cup, perhaps some slightly sideways angle...”

“The World Cup. Holymother. I talk about something fresh and he comes out with the World Cup. We’ve been talking about the World Cup for a whole year and we’ll be talking about it for at least another one. Have you noticed, I’m asking you, have you noticed, that there are already two features on the World Cup in the schedule? One on the teams’ kit—holymother—and one on what our athletes will be eating—double holymother—between one match and the next. But even if we did have a brilliant idea, and looking at your faces I doubt it, we can’t talk ALWAYS AND ONLY ABOUT THE WORLD CUP: HAVE I MADE MYSELF CLEAR?”

“Yes, yes, of course.”

“Perfectly clear, boss.”

“Yes, very clear.”

“Excellent. You, Amélia, ideas?”

“Well, there’s that cheating story that...”

“I’m going to have the lot of you sacked today. The lot of you. You’re more embalmed and more useless than an Egyptian mummy. Or perhaps it’s me who doesn’t speak Portuguese. Don’t I speak PORTUGUESE? I asked for something NEW, byourlady: cuckold stories were already old in Homer’s day. The lot of you, I’ll have you sacked.”

“Erm... there is... in the press round-up...”

“Come on, Esmeralda, out with it, don’t be shy. There is what?”

Esmeralda cleared her voice, which moved from the very faintest to the merely faint: “Erm, well, in the press round-up there’s this little local paper that... well, there’s the story of this chap who’s come back after fourteen years in the forest, together with a team of Indians who play football. And they’d given him up for dead. And they’re good, they say that in a friendly they beat Macapá and... well.”

“Mm. I like it. New, different. The chap, the Robinson Crusoe of the forest, the blowpipes and the footballs, the Indians all naked and painted: nice, colourful, I like it. Well done, Esmeraldinha, I should make you editor and send Alfonso to be editorial assistant in your place. Or better still to scrub the stairs. Say thank you to Esmeralda that you’re not all sacked for today, every one of you. And let’s go and interview the chap straight away, the resurrected man, what’s he called?”

“Antônio Carlos Rocha de Almeida, boss,” said Esmeralda.

George, until that moment almost entirely distracted—he had been embellishing with extremely complicated decorations a little drawing that bore a very vague resemblance to a Corinthian capital—suddenly dropped his pen.

“Antônio Rocha de Almeida?” he exclaimed, dumbfounded. “Ohgod, but I know him!”

“Do you now? And how’s that?”

“He was my PE teacher, boss... Jesus, I was sure he was dead!”

He did not say that when he had heard he was missing and by then given up for lost he had cried over it a little. It was true he had been a great baby of fifteen, but he had not realised how fond he had grown of a teacher, mad though the man was. “Can I interview him, boss? Can I?”

“But of course. At least you’ll make yourself useful for once. If you know him, so much the better: more passion, more colour. Call him at once. And take Manuel and the video camera with you, so we can put together a feature and a short round-up clip that we can put on the site in the meantime. Something nice, short, a few minutes, but fresh, sparkling, mind. And mind: colour, plenty of colour.”

3.19 Streets

Too many colours, Antônio was thinking, squashed on the bus between a plump adolescent girl dressed in pink and a little man who was talking to himself, addressing a certain Ernesta who seemed to have disappointed him.

The orchids, the heliconias, the berries, the fruit, the birds were dazzling many-coloured brush-strokes, but the background, the true and basic colour of the forest was green, it was the millions of shades of green that seemed to dye the air, the light. There it was like being on the emerald bottom of a pond or a swimming pool, whereas here the jumble of all those reds and yellows, the deep blues of the peeling walls and the acrylic fuchsias of the shirts, the reds and blues of the cars, the oranges, the purples, the electric pale blues of the signs bewildered him; it was all too colourful and seemed piled up at random, colours that were like noises.

He still had to make a certain effort to go about on his own in that city that had been his; it still seemed to him that he could not get his bearings, that everything was too complicated and confused, an almost illegible cacophony.

Three girls were chattering, sitting a little way ahead; their laughter was pleasant, but Antônio had already realised that he was no longer able to establish whether a girl was pretty or not. He struggled to decipher their clothes, which always seemed to him either too brazen or too elegant, and often both at once. And besides, they were always too, too dressed. *How are you supposed to tell whether a woman is beautiful when she's all harnessed up in cloth like that, I ask myself, who knows.*

He wriggled on the seat; the trousers, the shirt, the shoes made him uncomfortable. He felt tied up, tight, constricted, and it seemed to him that he was always a little dirty and sweaty. Just as the city seemed to him dirtier and hotter all the time, with a dirtiness he did not remember, made of filthy water and old paint, of neglected rubbish, of roughness, of tired dignities turning into squalor, of the ever-present smell of exhaust fumes and food and people.

He could hardly stay shut up in the house all day, naked and at peace; not even the boys did that any more. They went out every morning, in a group, on cautious but ever longer rounds of the district, observing everything with the concentrated interest of the explorer on an alien planet. The hairdresser's window contained a whole world of scents and wonders, of backcombed highlights and ringlets, of lacquered nails. And immediately afterwards came the car wash, and how could you not stop for a whole hour to enjoy the blue brushes that go up and down and turn, the water, the foam, the gleam of the cars that came out of it as radiant as jewels, the hoarse laugh of the man with the big belly who worked that merry-go-round of spray. Then the greengrocer, with mountains of never-seen fruit and vegetables that somebody or other had picked from goodness knows what plant and which were slowly wilting in the sun; the music that came out of the bar where the shade, with its strange and slightly rancid smell, glittered with glass and bottles; then a woman in red heels, two dogs chasing each other, a scowling policeman jerking a young lad about and an ambulance that went past in a flash, wailing. And the umbrellas, an astonishing novelty for people who have lived through millennia of rain: Cauê and Ubiratan had wanted one each and would not be parted from them even when it was not raining at all.

Moacir, on the other hand, had forgotten every umbrella in the world in an instant when he had seen a boy go flashing past on a bicycle. He had almost wept with enthusiasm when it turned out that Antônio's old bicycle was still in the entrance hall and he had been given permission to learn to use it, entrusted to Janita for the first experiments with the pedals in the dusty sunlit yard.

Thinking of him out and about on a bicycle in Macapá left Antônio anything but easy in his mind, and he nursed the hope that Yamandé would get better and that they would all go back to the peace of the forest before the cycling passion became a problem. Then again, the boys were on the whole very careful, and for the moment they made a point of crossing the road as little as possible: even to Antônio the cars seemed too many and always too fast. Handling an anaconda or a jaguar was one thing, but venturing off the pavement to throw yourself in among those noisy, unpredictable projectiles was quite another story. That was all they needed, the bicycle.

He looked out of the window rather tensely; he always had the doubt that he wouldn't manage to recognise the stops, that he'd take the wrong road and get lost between a supermarket, an alleyway and an amusement arcade. And while he listened to the muttering concerning Ernesta's many sins he tried to picture what George would look like after all that time. He was pleased that he had called him, that he wanted to see him, that he had declared himself so happy to have learnt he was alive and well and back in town. *I can't have been such a bad teacher after all, if after all this time one of my pupils still remembers me, and with so much affection. The business of wanting an interview, of wanting to film the boys playing, of having a magnificent proposal, I don't know, it seems a bit odd, who knows what he's got in mind, we'll see. But deciding to meet at the radio station was a good idea; I'm dying of curiosity to see what Teresa has got up to. Whoever would have thought it would be her, of all people, who'd put it back on its feet, her, the queen of the confused phone call.*

3.20 Radio

He had expected to see again the old, slightly dilapidated wall, but the district had evidently gone up in the world and the little building that housed the radio station was painted a fine turquoise that set off, at the first-floor windows, modern four-colour window stickers with an indistinguishable logo and the words Radio Nova Amizade in yellow and black.

At the entrance, beyond the yellow-painted door, a small reception area had been set up with little wicker armchairs and chintz cushions. A curly-headed young girl sitting in front of a computer and the rather pompous title of “editorial assistant” welcomed Antônio with enthusiasm: “Oh, of course, Teresa told me you’d be coming! Teresa! Teresa!” she shrieked towards a glass door. “That gentleman has arrived!”

Teresa came at once, still with her headphones round her neck: strawberry-pink plastic earrings, cherry lipstick and a banana-coloured bob, she looked like a basket of fruit. Working in radio must have done her good, as she herself confirmed by enveloping Antônio in a violet-scented embrace. “Antônio, how happy I am! I prayed for you so much, I lit a great many candles to Nossa Senhora da Conceição and I even gave a hen as an offering to my neighbour who does *candomblé*, because you never know, the more gods you’ve got in play the better, and you see it worked! You were saved! And how lovely to meet you at last, and here at the station too. If you knew how this radio business has changed me, how it’s woken me up, you know you have to get yourself an education too, keep up to date. And all thanks to you, to your voice. But look at you, what a handsome fellow, I knew it, with that voice. I imagined you a bit more of a hunk, mind, but you’re really not at all bad; if I were ten years younger, well.”

“Thank you for the compliments, but...”

“Aha, don’t worry, I’m not trying to court you, I know you’re married as well, imagine.”

“And how the devil do you know that?”

“Well, your mamma told me, didn’t she? Yesterday when I rang to confirm the time we had a bit of a chat, what a nice woman. She told me you’ve married a beautiful girl, that you’ve got a lovely baby and that soon it’ll be time to get the second one under way. Congratulations, your mother was so pleased!”

“Yes, well, it isn’t exactly... anyway, let’s leave it. Tell me about you, about the station. How did you manage to put it back on its feet?”

“Oh, it’s a long story, look. That Senhor Inácio was generous, there’s no denying it. And then he didn’t even have time to see the success we’ve had; he had some trouble with the police, they say, I don’t really know: he’s gone to live in Bogotá, where he’s got a branch of his company that needed his presence. Gustavo, on the other hand, well, you know how it is, ill-gotten gains seldom prosper: he’s in prison, poor boy, a good lad but badly brought up, bad company, you know how these things are. And so that’s how we put the station back together, you see?”

Antônio had not understood a blessed thing, but he judged it useless to try to interrupt Teresa, who in the meantime had settled him on the chintz cushions and was talking without a break, waving apricot-coloured nails about. “And we’ve had a fine success, you know? My programme gets a lot of listeners, recipes and politics, it works beautifully, if you only knew. Of course I still work at Madame Samuela’s—better the devil you know than the devil you don’t, as they say—but I don’t wash

hair any more, now I do the colours and the sets, but all day long I do nothing but think about my programme; I've got a passion for it, look. And the figures are doing very nicely, Luiza is even a bit jealous."

"Luiza?"

"Yes, of course, my friend Luiza, you remember her, don't you? She does the gossip column, that's what it's called now, not *mexerico* any more, you know? There, she knows everything about the singers and the celebrities and how they dress and get engaged and split up; she does a lovely little programme, she's really got a gift for it. Of course she hasn't got my figures; the only one who comes close is João."

"But which João, the caretaker?" Antônio was more and more bewildered.

"Yes, yes, him, him! He still does the caretaking, obviously, but at nine he does the astrology programme and at ten the agony column. If you knew how good he is, he gives advice that brings tears to your eyes; I'd almost like to have love troubles so I could get his advice. You absolutely must have your horoscope done, look, who knows what astral influences this Amazon business of yours has."

"Of course, I can't wait. Anyway, congratulations, you've done really well. But I didn't quite understand the business of the recipes and the politics. Do you know about politics now? At the time it didn't seem to me that..."

"Me, politics? Not at all, imagine! It's that I'm good at cooking and I've always had a passion for it—and cookery programmes always do well, look—but I thought we needed to broaden the positioning a bit, not just grannies and housewives, so I put politics in as well. But it's easy, you know? I look at a couple of news sites, internet sites, you know the sort of thing, well, of course you know, you're the one who taught me the internet, with your programme; god, it seems such a long time ago! There, I read the headlines and then I go on Goggle and put in the keywords, don't I? I put in the keywords together with the word 'recipes', for instance, I don't know: 'Iraq, recipes' or 'Ukraine, Putin, recipes'. Or if I've already got a dish in mind I put that and then the keywords: 'Prawn *moqueca*, Obama, chemtrails'. Something interesting always comes out, if you only knew. Paco taught me how to use Goggle, do you remember Paco, the sound engineer? He married a German woman and went to live in Europe, in Berlin or Amsterdam or another city in Germany, I can't remember now. Sydney, perhaps."

Antônio made an effort to drink another mouthful of the over-sweet fruit juice Teresa had put into his hand. "Well, I'm pleased: he always wanted Europe."

"Yes, yes, look, I'm happy too, even though at first we didn't know how to replace him; then luckily we found Saverio, he teaches the piano at the school for the blind, he's marvellous, I'll introduce you to him afterwards. He's the one who gave me the idea for the new logo, do you like it? I drew it myself."

"Mm. Very pretty, yes. A... a parrot. With a... a rake in its beak?"

"Aha, no it isn't, what parrot: it's a swan, a swan with its wings spread over a globe, with the olive branch of peace between peoples in its beak. I took my inspiration from that lovely song I like so much, you know, 'Imagine all the people', the one by Paul Lennon, you know it?"

"Of course, of course. And the logo really is charming."

“Isn’t it? I’ve always had a gift for drawing. Saverio said so too, he can’t see, of course, but I described it to him properly and he told me it was really pretty. Oh, but look, your friend has arrived! I’ll leave you in peace, who knows how much you’ll have to say to each other. Perhaps you’d like a *cafezinho*?”

3.21 Individuality

Antônio went on calling them “the boys”. The boys have done this, the boys need that, as though they were a single undifferentiated body. And in the early days they very nearly had been: intimidated by the quantity of new things, they had pressed close to one another so as not to be overwhelmed by them, giving each other strength. This had also made Antônio’s task of keeping an eye on them and protecting them from the many dangers of life outside the forest simpler.

But as the weeks went by and they adapted to the new world, and holyjesus, how fast they did it, their various individualities came back to the surface, and keeping them all together every moment was no longer possible: the awkwardness, the mistrust, the fears were dissolving day by day into an ever greater ease and desire to try out that new world. Antônio had had to accept the fact that he could no longer control them, or at any rate that he needed his family’s help to do it.

Moacir and Cauê had gone off to the airport again to watch the planes land and take off from close up, a pastime they had taken to cultivating over the past few days. Antônio had no wish to go there for the fourth time running, but Gabrielita had offered to go with them: the boys had said in any case that they knew the way, and it was not far after all, so after a great many warnings he had resigned himself to letting them go. It was always a pleasure for him, in any case, to see that the passion with which, back in the forest, they had listened to his stories about the modern world had stood up to the test of a comparison with reality.

Jaci and Itaúna, escorted by Janita, had gone instead to the cinema to see that cartoon set in a frozen kingdom. Goodness knows what they would make of it, considering that, quite apart from the language, there was the further detail that their only experiences of the concept of cold were the fridge in Antônio’s house and the ice lollies—a good many of them, to tell the truth—that they had eaten.

Antônio remembered how frightened he had been the day Itaúna had caught him watching the footage of the eleventh of September. He had not thought Itaúna would be able to understand what had happened, but to be on the safe side he had given the boys a lesson on the concept of “film”, explaining that people liked to act out and record on a screen stories and strange events of all kinds, sometimes sad ones too, which absolutely were not true, no no, nothing true about them at all, there, you see, in this film this actor dies but in the next film he’s alive and kicking again. Not all of them had shown themselves very interested, partly because of the language barrier, but Jaci and Itaúna had turned out to be passionate filmgoers and had begun to devour one cartoon after another. Antônio had nothing against it, quite the contrary: *after all they’re good stories, instructive, easy to follow and not bloody*, and never mind that he felt he was treating them like five-year-olds.

On the other hand he knew perfectly well that they were not children at all, cinematic tastes aside: they were young men of twenty or thereabouts, and besides, in the forest they had been considered men in every respect since the initiation. Here things were a little different; in this other world you are considered a boy until you are forty, as was demonstrated by the fact that he himself was called one at that age by mamma Marcela (when not, indeed, “baby”, which was rather out of place, but mothers are made that way). And speaking of Marcela: goodness knows what she was getting up to at that moment with Piraí, who had gone with her to the market to learn the secrets of the shopping.

Antônio found himself thinking: *my boys are growing up*. And a touch of melancholy came over him, which made him laugh at himself and at the strange thoughts he was having. At that moment he looked up and saw Ubiratan come out onto the veranda with two beers in his hands and sit down beside him. For a while they stayed silent, sipping the beers and watching the road beyond the railings. It was Ubiratan who broke the silence first.

“You know, when we left the village I wasn’t sure Yamandé would be saved. It’s strange. I don’t know how to say it, I believed your words but even so it seemed strange to me. Too strange. And instead you did it. I haven’t thanked you yet.”

“You mustn’t thank me. I didn’t save him on my own. We saved him all together. And what a mad undertaking it was. Do you remember when we managed to avoid the waterfall by a hair’s breadth?”

“Yes.” Ubiratan laughed for two seconds, but the obvious melancholy came back at once to darken him. “It’s beautiful here and everybody is very kind. They’re helping us so much. And they weren’t obliged to.”

“You weren’t obliged to save me and help me either, when you found me. The whole village took me in as though I’d always been part of it. To my family it seems the least they can do to do the same with you.”

“Your family, yes. You know, Antônio, when we were in the village I’d never thought about it; you arrived when we were children, I can hardly remember the time when you weren’t there. To me you’ve always been one of the tribe. But now that I see your family, I wonder how you managed to bear staying in the village all that time, knowing that your family was here.”

“Ah. It wasn’t easy. Especially at the beginning, when I couldn’t even speak your language. But it was you children who helped me, and I’ll never thank you enough. And besides, you know: a son’s destiny is to go away. I was homesick, but thanks to you I went on living well. More than for myself, I was sorry for my mother and my father; they’re the ones who stay behind and suffer most.”

Antônio realised he had touched a sore point. *The* sore point. He hurried to make amends: “But don’t worry, Ubiratan. My situation then and ours today are very different. Those who stay behind suffer more when they don’t know. They don’t know what has happened to the one they love, they don’t know whether he’ll come back. Our wives know what has happened to us, they know why we went away and they know we’ll come back. And your son is still too small to understand what’s going on; I’m sure he’s there keeping Ybyráatã company.”

As so often happens, the cure was worse than the disease.

“You’ve said all the reasons why I’m sad, you know? I miss Kinératan very much, but perhaps he’s already forgotten me. And Amiajè only knows why I went away; she doesn’t know what has happened to me. She doesn’t know whether we found the right road, she doesn’t know whether we’re still alive, she doesn’t even know there was a waterfall to survive, but I’m sure she has imagined worse dangers still. And she doesn’t know whether we managed to save Yamandé, and she doesn’t know when we’ll come back or whether we’ll come back. Nobody knows. When are we going back, Antônio?”

“Yamandé is healing well but he still needs a bit of time, the doctors have said, at least one moon; then we’ll go home. It isn’t long now. And it will be even more beautiful for those who have waited for us to see us all come back safe and sound, with so much to tell,” Antônio smiled.

They went back to watching the coming and going in the road. The talk had done them both good, and the second beer accompanied a more cheerful conversation, centred on the many comical aspects of their stay there, the subtext of which was: yes, I miss the forest, but underneath it all this is a wonderful adventure that I’ll remember for ever.

The first back were Marcela and Piraí. Dark in the face, they were not speaking to each other. It was an odd expression to use of two people who speak two different languages without understanding one another, and yet in their cookery sessions neither of them usually stopped talking for a moment and they seemed like mother and son, whereas now they were practically ignoring each other. Antônio thought he heard his mother muttering something about caterpillars and filth, but looking at their faces both Antônio and Ubiratan decided to avoid asking for detailed information about the reason for their obvious quarrel.

Shortly afterwards Jaci and Itaúna arrived too, followed by a Janita who did not stop talking for a second. The two of them, plainly shaken, hurried into the house without speaking. *They're upset as well*, thought Antônio, noticing that they certainly did not have the faces of two people who had just watched a cartoon. It was true that the concepts of ice and snow were foreign to them, but it was not possible that it had had that effect on them. "Janita! What's happened? Didn't you go and see *Frozen*?"

"Yes, and they enjoyed it enormously. You should have seen how they laughed every time that terribly funny snowman came on the screen. It was really good fun."

"...They don't look to me like two boys who've spent an entertaining afternoon. What happened afterwards?"

"Ah, that, yes. Well, I wanted to take them for an ice cream, but as soon as we came out they saw the posters for that other film, the one with those handsome barrel-chested Greek warriors, the 300 Spartans. They were very curious, they made me understand they wanted to see it."

"Janita, but I told you..."

"I thought, oh well, it's a war film, it won't be hard to follow even if they don't understand the language. Enough of all these cartoons, they aren't children."

"Janita..."

"Only the film was a bit too violent. I kept saying 'film, film' to them, but they got a bit upset and after half an hour they wanted to leave. I'm sorry, Antônio."

A bit upset, my foot, thought Antônio, *I've never seen them like that, not even when we took on the waterfall*. But he understood that Janita was already sorry enough on her own account and that there was no call to twist the knife in the wound. "No, no, it's all right. Never mind, you'll see, they'll get over it. It was kind of you to take them; I'll go and see if I can calm them down a bit."

Antônio got up, motioned to Ubiratan to follow him, and at that moment saw, beyond the railings, Moacir, Cauê and Gabrielita arriving from a completely different direction from their usual one coming back from the airport.

Cauê had a ferocious expression on his face, that too a novelty. Moacir was visibly in the grip of similar feelings but was better at keeping them out of sight. Gabrielita followed them with her head down, every so often raising her eyes for a quick glance, now at one, now at the other. A glance in which Antônio thought he saw gratitude mixed with regret. When they were closer Antônio noticed that Cauê's shirt was torn and that both boys were rather muddy. And was that a bruise on Cauê's cheek, perhaps? And had Moacir's knuckles always been so grazed?

Antônio was obliged once again to exercise his less than outstanding powers of deduction, because apparently this little group had no great desire to talk either. Was it possible that Cauê and Moacir had come to blows? Cauê and Gabrielita went straight into the house without even saying hello. Moacir stopped for a moment, put a hand on Antônio's shoulder and said: "She's all right, don't worry. And so are we. Those others are a bit less all right," and went on after his friends.

Antônio and Ubiratan were left looking at each other, at a loss, and Antônio thought: *yes, when is it we're leaving?*

3.22 Offer

“Come on, boys, go and get the balls and get busy, because a friend of mine is coming soon to film you for the television.”

“What’s filming?”

“Which television, the one that’s in the screen?”

“Right, filming is... well, like photographs, you remember when they took your photographs, don’t you? There, filming is that sort of thing, but they’re photographs that move, and they’re for putting into the screen, yes, so that everybody sees them.”

“So then everybody sees our photographs in the screen like when we watch the television?”

“Yes, exactly.”

“I shall very much like seeing myself small in the screen.”

“Nobody will be looking at you in the screen anyway, they’ll be looking at me because I’m better looking.”

“But I’m better.”

“But I run faster.”

“Boys, off you go and play. We’ll think about the screen later.”

Yes, *we’ll think about the screen later*. But the screen was something that had to be thought about at once. George had been really affectionate and nice, and the interview had been pleasant and intelligent—not like the one with that idiot with the curls—but apparently the public had found the business very interesting, and George had called him back to propose a special centred on the boys, with a lot of footage of them playing, which was precisely what they were to film that day as soon as George arrived with the cameraman. And that was perfectly all right, of course.

What he had said afterwards, though, was something Antônio needed to think about carefully. *And think about it now, my lad, because it’s more than likely that George will want an answer today, and I still don’t know, I can’t decide*. Antônio let the ball roll absently from one foot to the other, reflecting, while the boys shrieked up and down the pitch fighting over no fewer than six or seven footballs.

It was the offer that had left him uncertain. Apparently the network George worked for was very interested in them: their ratings were slightly down and they needed something new—*fresh*, he had said—so they had offered to organise a round of matches for them in the region, six or seven towns, teams at regional level, all the travel and expenses paid and a fee for the engagement, in exchange for the television rights. And on top of that, kit for all the boys—with the network’s logo on it, needless to say—boots included. There, the boots alone looked like being a sticky business: the boys had always played barefoot and Antônio was certain they wouldn’t take at all kindly to changing the system. But then it was hardly conceivable to have them playing barefoot against opponents in boots, and he had no idea how to solve it. And it was not by any means the only thing that worried him: all those coaches, all those away trips, different towns, hotels, a great many strangers,

the fact of playing not for the fun of it but because at that point it would be a sort of obligation, these were all things he had no idea how the boys would take.

On the other hand he realised that for them it could be a unique chance to have new and certainly interesting experiences, to see other places and other people, to measure themselves against players they didn't know who played differently from them, and almost certainly to enjoy themselves enormously. And he could not deny that he wanted it a great deal himself: going about a bit with the expenses paid, seeing other towns, playing alongside his little team and enjoying a few proper matches appealed to him considerably.

Besides, there was what they had learnt from the doctors to take into account: Yamandé would need at least another month for the rehabilitation, and spending all that further time in Macapá risked becoming a problem. The boys were used to an active life, and staying put for another month with nothing to fill the days but loafing about and playing for a couple of hours a day on the training pitch—for the moment good-naturedly allowed them, but goodness knows for how long—was certainly not ideal.

There had already been the business of Cauê, who had said he wanted to hang his hammock next to Gabrielita's. *What hammock, she isn't even fifteen, holygod.*

"It's out of the question, she's too young."

"My sister is as young as she is and she's just had a baby."

"Your sister has nothing to do with it. Here things are different."

"Why?"

"Because they are. Because I say so. Listen, Cauê, I understand you want a girl: you could—let's leave the hammock out of it for a moment—you could make friends with the neighbours' daughter. Fernanda is nice and very pretty."

"But she's old!"

"Old, what do you mean, she's eighteen!"

"I don't know what years is. But she's old. And ugly too, she's as skinny as a grasshopper's leg. I don't want her."

"Well, that's your loss."

"And Gabrielita is always looking at me; I think she wants very much to put her hammock next to mine."

"And that's enough about hammocks! You leave my niece alone, end of discussion."

But Antônio knew that it was not the end of anything: they were young, it was obvious that girls should be a primary concern for them—especially considering that they had practically nothing to do—and he feared it was only a matter of time before some mess or other blew up.

Not to mention Moacir and his bicycle. He had got as far as "no hands" by now and would soon be tired of going round and round the yard. *The moment he goes out into the road he'll get himself into*

some sort of trouble, I know it, I've no doubt about it. Then Ubiratan, who has learnt to work the remote control perfectly and spends all day nailed in front of the television dulling his wits with adverts and soap operas, he's turning into an idiot on me (and thankgod he hasn't discovered the porn yet). And Piraí, who is always in the kitchen and, what with experimenting with dishes and sweets with Mama and aunt Norma, is putting on weight: another month of sauces and biscuits and he'll get a backside like a tapir's, never mind playing football. No, no, they need distracting, they need shifting from here, they need keeping busy: that above all, keeping busy. And running.

From the far end of the pitch he saw George arriving, accompanied by the cameraman. Antônio smiled and waved to him. He had decided.

3.23 Finance

There was in fact another aspect that had convinced him, Antônio was thinking as he drank his coffee in the drizzling morning light, watching the boys have their breakfast of corn cake, watermelon and papaya and congratulate Pirai because his *beijinhos* were almost as good as mamma Marcela's. Money, to which for nearly fifteen years he had not given a single thought, turned out, well, what do you know, to be something that had to be taken into account. Six young men with healthy appetites to feed, plus himself, were no small outlay, and somehow or other they had to be clothed as well, whether they liked it or not.

When he had been given up for dead—and his bank account closed—the few savings he had had gone to his parents' account, and they of course had then put them back at his disposal: *they're yours, Antoninho, don't be silly*. He had used them until now to contribute to the expenses; his parents were already more than generous enough in taking into their house a band of bizarre strangers who had arrived as a free gift along with their resurrected son.

But the savings were thinning out, the stay in Macapá was dragging on, and Yamandé's rehabilitation and physiotherapy would involve costs that were far from negligible. The tour with its attendant fee, offered by Rete Norte and proposed to him by George—a generous proposal, taking them on tour, considering that they were nobody—could help to solve the problem.

It created another one, though. Even allowing for the medical expenses for Yamandé and the cost of the minimum outfit it would be necessary to get for the boys—and for himself—to go on tour for a month, and bearing in mind that for the next few weeks they would have all their expenses paid, the result would be a little nest egg which, though not yet quantified and certainly derisory in many people's eyes, worried Antônio.

The fact was that that money would to all intents and purposes belong to the boys: they were the ones playing, the fee was theirs.

After the initial confusion they had not taken long to get a decent grasp of how money worked, thanks partly to the fact that, to make them understand, every time they went out Antônio would entrust a few coins to each of them in turn to buy an ice cream or sweets, whose Portuguese names they had learnt with surprising readiness.

Antônio was worried because he knew that, even if it were not an enormous amount, this was not a sum to be spent on sweets and liquorice laces. And yet he could not think what to do with it.

There was no doubt that once they were back in the forest that money would be of no use whatever, but it was equally true that it was their property and that it would have to be put somewhere.

It was Teresa who gave him the idea.

She had insisted at all costs that he should come back to the radio station with the boys, and had welcomed them with warm enthusiasm. She had been most affectionate, she had offered coffee, lemonade and mints, she had introduced them to Luiza, to João and to Saverio, and she had even wanted them to open the programme, although Antônio was not convinced.

"They don't speak Portuguese, Teresa."

“Oh, it doesn’t matter. Even when I talk you can’t understand much, and I do know Portuguese. It’ll just mean their friends understand them, their mothers there in the forest.”

“I really don’t think they can hear them in the forest, they...”

But nobody was listening to him any more; the boys were already snatching the microphone from one another, delighted to hear their voices of trills and whistles bouncing back off the loudspeakers.

“How lovely! They sound like birds singing! I’ve half a mind to keep it as a signature tune, what do you say?”

When he went back some days later to see her, with a begonia in a pot to thank her for her kindness and hospitality, he found her in the company of a short, round woman, black and glossy as an *açaí* berry, who introduced herself with a very wide white smile: “Good morning, what a pleasure to meet you. I’m Mariana.”

“She works with the whales,” Teresa specified.

“I work for Greenpeace, actually. We don’t only deal with whales, as you’ll know.”

“Well, as Teresa will have told you I’m not very up to date any more, but of course, I know perfectly well what Greenpeace is.”

Mariana smiled. “I very much wanted to meet you, you know. We have several projects under way concerning the Indians and the question of the deforestation of the Amazon. From what I understand your friends come from an uncontacted tribe, don’t they? So fortunately the deforestation problem hasn’t reached them yet. It’s a real tragedy, unfortunately.”

“Yes, I remember people were already beginning to talk about it before I left. I imagine things have got worse...”

“They have. Something has been done, but it’s always far too little, a drop in the ocean. There’s a great deal still to do.”

“Yes, poor things, Antônio, just think: they cut down all the trees around them, they tear everything up and they don’t know where to go any more. They ought to buy the whole forest, and then I’d like to see who goes and tears the trees out of their own back garden.”

“Teresa gets very passionate about our causes, she’s a great supporter of ours, especially when there are whales involved. But I’d like to see you again, Antônio, at greater leisure. Perhaps talk to your friends, the voice of the native peoples concerned is very important to us.”

“Of course, Mariana, with great pleasure: the boys don’t speak Portuguese but I can interpret, that’s no problem. We’re about to leave on a tour for a few weeks, but we’ll certainly arrange to meet on our return.”

“You see, Mariana, how kind and nice he is? And he’s so fond of plants too, he doesn’t want them cut down, isn’t that right, Antônio? He’s got green fingers, just like me. Look what a lovely begonia he brought me, isn’t it a marvel? Do you know what, in honour of the plants I’ll open the programme with that song ‘Where are all the flowers gone’, in the version sung by... Baez, are you pleased, Mariana?”

“Joan. Joan Baez.”

“That’s right, yes, Johnny Baez, I couldn’t remember the name, I can’t think why.”

It was only when he was out in the street, still dazed by Teresa’s smell of violets, that he understood what the right way to use that money was. *As soon as we get back from the tour I’ll talk to Mariana about it, she’ll know how to go about it. Teresa is right: we’ll buy the forest, the whole forest all around the village.*

3.24 Contract

Antônio crossed the road and smiled to himself, thinking back over the meeting he had just had with the director general of Rete Norte, whom he had gone to see in order to settle the arrangements for the tour, and in particular the financial side.

The director had detained him with extremely long speeches, explaining that the idea was to broadcast seven matches, each of them preceded by a quarter-of-an-hour mini-special on each of the boys. At the end they would get a documentary out of the whole thing as well, filling it out with some further footage shot during the tour.

“We’ve already made contact with a few local sides in Belém and Altamira. Unfortunately it’s difficult to be taken seriously, because nobody knows you. For the moment they’re only offering us minor teams or youth sides. But I’ve already spoken to the Macapá manager, who wants revenge for that little game last month. We’ll start with that: if you acquit yourselves well, perhaps even snatch a draw, it’ll be easier to get interesting fixtures for the matches after that.”

“If they play the way I saw them play the other time, it’ll be Macapá trying to snatch a draw,” Antônio had said, surprised at his own cheek. The director had taken no notice and had gone on: “It’ll be a football story, but not only that. We’re also interested in the human side of the various members of the team. What the impact of our advanced society has been on you... on you people.”

Advanced? Antônio had thought, pulling a face, but without interrupting him.

“What you do, how you eat, where you sleep. Let’s say it’ll be a story of the Amazon, football and hammocks.”

Well, I don’t know, Antônio had thought doubtfully, taking good care not to voice his misgivings. The man ran the network, after all.

“You’ll have to get used to having a camera around for most of the day, but you’ll see it won’t bother you; in fact your boys may even enjoy it. And, as I was saying, interviews will be needed for the specials. Naturally a small extra is provided for in respect of your additional role as interpreter.”

Naturally. Antônio, confining himself to looking at him, had waited for the man to go on.

The director had pressed the intercom and called his secretary, asking her to bring him the contract, which he had passed straight to Antônio, showing him where to sign.

“Excuse me,” Antônio had said at last, irritated by the director’s brisk manner, “I wouldn’t want to seem mercenary, but we haven’t yet dealt with the financial side. You’ve just mentioned an extra, but I don’t know how much this extra amounts to. And I don’t even know what it’s extra to. What’s the basic fee? I imagine it’s all here in the contract?”

The director had pulled a face that said “well, obviously”.

“Do you mind if I read it quickly?”

“Of course not,” the director had replied, with body language that meant: of course I do.

It's mad how everything is relative, how it all depends which side you take it from, thought Antônio as he went down the steps on his way out of the Rete Norte building, pleased with himself, almost proud. In fact without the almost: proud of the way he had faced the director head on and imposed his own conditions. The fact that, when it came down to it, he had nothing to lose had certainly been important.

The contract that had been put in front of him provided a fee for Antônio of 2,000 reais, roughly four times his old teacher's salary. Of course fourteen years had gone by in the meantime and 2,000 reais were worth less than they had been, but considering that board, lodging and transport would be at Rete Norte's expense it meant pocketing the lot almost intact. Not bad at all. He had almost signed when a doubt came to him and he began to read it all again from the beginning. The director had snorted, not hiding a certain irritation, but Antônio had paid no attention to him. He had reread the passage in question, opened his eyes wide, then run rapidly through the contract in search of something he had not found.

"Excuse me, but this only talks about my fee. I don't see the boys'."

"You don't see it because there isn't one. Naturally we've given it some thought, you know, don't get the wrong idea. It's just that as far as I'm aware the civil status of these boys of yours is not in the least clear. Who are we supposed to make this money out to? We don't even know what they're called or where they reside. Are we to make the payment out to Mr Indian, No. 2 Amazon Forest?"

The director had given a little cough that was perhaps a chuckle, but Antônio had detected no humour in it.

"Naturally I've consulted our accounts department and our legal department, and both say the business would be far too complicated; the tax office would come down on us."

"And so, seeing as the business is complicated, you've decided not to pay them. They're Indians anyway; in a month or so they'll be going back to the forest, what do they want with money?"

"Precisely," the director had nodded, realising with a fatal moment's delay that Antônio's remark was sarcasm aimed squarely at him and that the one thing he should not have done was agree.

Antônio had laid the unsigned contract on the desk, stood up and held out his hand to the director. "Look, I want to help your legal department, and your accounts department, and all the others. Since the thing is a bit too complicated for your resources, let's say nothing comes of it. We'll each go our own way, and goodbye to you."

The director may perhaps have had his faults, but years of commercial negotiation had taught him to recognise a bluff when he saw one, and Antônio's was not one. He had tried to come back with an offer of 4,000 reais, two thousand for Antônio and two thousand for the boys, but another thing he was good at was recognising the moment when it was unwise to push his luck. Antônio had stayed calm, firm in his intention to obtain what he simply considered fair. The director, a third gift, could also do his sums on the wing; he realised that even with a fee of two thousand reais apiece plus expenses the network would still have a good margin, and he had called an assistant in to amend the terms of the contract on the spot.

Two thousand reais to Senhor Antônio Carlos Rocha de Almeida, and a further twelve thousand, again to Senhor Rocha de Almeida in his capacity as trustee of the team... "Ah, we haven't decided the name of the team yet. We were thinking here of Amazonia Futebol Clube, what do you say?"

“It’s a fine name for a team from Manaus,” Antônio had retorted, feeling himself filled with a confidence he had never known before. “But we come from the forest and we have a language of our own. We’re called Asu Ka’a Futebol.”

“Ah. Good. Nice. What does it mean, if I may ask?”

“It means Great Forest. And in any case the additional reais are fourteen thousand.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Fourteen thousand. Yamandé is to all intents and purposes part of the team as well, even though he doesn’t play. Go and interview him too; you’ll see you won’t regret it. The extra for my fee as interpreter I’ll make you a present of, seeing how kind you’ve been.”

3.25 Mannequin

Emboldened by the confidence that came of how well the negotiations with Rete Norte had gone, Antônio decided on impulse to go to the Amazon Forest Protection Authority and start putting into practice his idea of protecting the forest around the village.

Cauê went with him as the boys' spokesman, having had it briefly explained to him that there were bad people who wanted to cut down the trees of the forest. Or at any rate Antônio's intention had been to give a brief explanation, but of course the "whys" had started. Why do they want to cut down the trees? Because they want to use the wood. Well, the forest is enormous, they can cut down a few trees, nothing happens. But the trees they cut down are many, very many, too many; one day they could be all of them. Why all of them? Because they're bad. Then why are they allowed to do it? Because they think the forest is theirs. This piece of information had closed the discussion, because the absurd, inconceivable idea that anybody could consider the forest "his" had provoked such hilarity in the boys that Antônio had left the room with them still splitting their sides over that piece of foolishness.

Having crossed the imitation marble threshold of the building, Antônio and Cauê found themselves before a stocky bald gentleman in a porter's cap who, seated at a desk that was too small for him, was engaged in the systematic elimination of flies by means of a rolled-up magazine. To Antônio's enquiry as to which office he should approach in order to put his question, the man shook his head without interrupting his blows and decreed: "You're not in the right place, I don't think."

"But isn't this the Amazon Forest Protection Authority?"

"Of course it is." SMACK!

"Well then there must be an office responsible for it, mustn't there, that deals with protection applications..."

"Hm. Not as far as I know. But if you're really set on it you can try the Public Relations Office. Second floor." SMACK! SMACK!

The Public Relations Office did not seem to Antônio the most suitable, but since nothing further seemed to be extractable from the porter he set off towards the lift, followed by a rather perplexed Cauê. The office in question turned out to be inhabited by a nervy young man in a tie who was presiding over a squad of young men and women sitting in front of computers that seemed antiquated even to Antônio. The young man practically pushed them out of the room, saying that they had no time and, besides, what an idea, coming there. They should go, if they really insisted, to the first floor, to the Maps and Land Registry Office.

From there they were directed, by a bald and suave little man who smelt of lavender and dust, to the third floor and the Reporting Office, and then back down to the second and the Private Clients Office. They then passed by way of the ground floor, where a pleasant employee of the Maintenance Service offered them a *cafezinho*, and the fourth floor, where a florid official tried to persuade them to buy, instead of the forest, which really is very damp, a nicely ventilated plot out towards Santa Mariana, an area with great prospects of development, a safe investment. The official put into their hands the business card of his brother-in-law's estate agency, repeating that it is always better to be advised by an expert when it comes to buying land.

Antônio was tired and exasperated, and was beginning to find it wearing to have to keep answering Cauê, who was eyeing every interlocutor grimly and asking, spoiling for a fight, whether this was the man who wanted to cut down the forest, when they found themselves, for no particular reason, in front of the Allocations Office, which by its name at least gave hope of being the right destination.

The door was open, and inside a man in a short-sleeved shirt could be seen sitting at the desk, identified by a nameplate as Doctor Thomas S. Mello Aluguer. Apart from him and a mannequin in an explorer's uniform propped on a chair in a corner, there was nobody there. Antônio knocked and the man motioned to him to take a seat in the waiting room, that is to say on the chairs immediately outside the door, where Antônio whiled away the wait leafing through some decrepit ornithological magazines with Cauê and watching, through the door, the man who sat motionless staring at some sheets of paper on his desk without giving the impression either of reading them or of doing anything else.

After a wait of half an hour Senhor Aluguer seemed to wake from his torpor and motioned to them to come in and sit down. There was only one free chair in the office, on which Cauê promptly installed himself, and Antônio therefore had to decide whether to remain standing or move the mannequin from its place. A further gesture from Senhor Aluguer pushed him towards the second option. As soon as they were seated in front of him, Aluguer motioned to them to move back a little, miming the gesture for heat. Quite apart from the fact that it did not seem to Antônio particularly hot in the office, the most worrying thing from his point of view was the evidence that he was dealing with a mute man. *How is he going to explain to me what needs doing?* Still, they were there now and they might as well try. Antônio cleared his throat and began to speak, articulating his words carefully.

"So, we would be interested in acquiring a plot of land in the Amazon Forest and..."

Senhor Aluguer sprang up and went quickly to fetch a file from the cupboard, out of which he took a couple of brochures and a map that he unrolled in front of Antônio and Cauê, pointing to a spot in the forest on the border with Peru.

"Excellent!" said Senhor Aluguer in a fine deep voice, making Antônio jump with surprise. "I'm very pleased to hear of this intention of yours. We recently launched a programme of exactly that kind, the PPFACP, but if you're here it's obviously because you know about it. For 50 reais you can protect—not acquire, ahahah, of course we're not talking about acquisition—50 square metres of forest at the headwaters of the Rio Uapés, where several tribes of uncontacted or formerly uncontacted people live. Your friend comes from there, I imagine? How much forest do you want to protect, fifty square metres? A hundred?"

"Erm, no, we come from much nearer; our village is out towards the Rio Jari, inside the Tumucumaque National Park, I think."

"Yours? You, Senhor...?"

"Antônio Rocha de Almeida, how do you do. And this is Cauê."

"How do you do. Excuse me, Senhor Almeida, I wouldn't want to offend you, but you don't look like an indigenous person."

"No, yes, well, it's complicated. I represent an indigenous people."

“Which people precisely? What are they called?”

Antônio was caught unprepared. Among the many words a people living isolated in the forest had no need of, one was certainly the word to describe themselves. Cauê, who was quivering to know what was going on, took advantage of the pause to ask Antônio for enlightenment, and Antônio translated the request.

“He wants to know what we’re called? All the inhabitants of the village one by one?”

“No, he wants to know what the tribe is called.”

“What sort of stupid question is that? We are us, we’re the people.”

Antônio was not sure the official would be happy with the name of a people who called themselves “the people”, but the attentive Doctor Aluguer had already caught the word and had set off on his own account. “Manguari? Never heard of them. In any case there are various forest protection programmes running, but at present the only one that provides for the taking into protection by third parties concerns the area I’ve mentioned.”

“But what if we wanted actually to buy the forest surrounding the village instead?”

“Ahaha. Buying is quite out of the question. The forest is public land, it belongs to the State, it’s everybody’s property. In fact, as Brazilians it’s already yours, my dear sir. Speaking of protection, on the other hand, we were saying that this most interesting area on the Peruvian border...”

“But we’re not interested in that area, we’re interested in a completely different one! If there isn’t a protection programme yet, perhaps one could be started, couldn’t it? What would be needed to start one?”

“Ah. These are complicated things. Complex things. You have no idea. But if you’re set on it you can submit a proposal to the Ministry, accompanied by all the cartographic and hydrogeological documentation and of course by the flora and fauna surveys. The business plan to be attached, duly authenticated by a qualified Public Officer, will have to set out in properly tabulated form all the measurements and survey data, including the ethnographic census records of all populations possibly present therein, and a plan, inclusive of reporting projections at one, three and five years, certifying, preferably with the validation of the Institute of...”

Antônio laid both hands on the desk, cleared his throat, cutting off the official, who as he spoke had been extracting sheaves of forms from drawers and files, drew breath and said in a forcedly calm voice: “All right, forget I spoke, I’ve understood. Goodness knows what got into me.”

He stood up and left the office, closing the door with rather more force than necessary.

Cauê and Senhor Aluguer were left staring at each other for a few seconds, while the official began to feel uneasy at the puma’s stare the young man had fixed on him. Then the door opened again, Antônio came in, put the chair back in the corner, propped the mannequin on it and said, icily, to the boy: “Come on, Cauê, let’s go. Let’s go back to playing football, which is what we know how to do.”

The boy followed him, but not before hissing a few words at Doctor Aluguer, who watched them leave nonplussed, his arms laden with forms.

“What did you say to him? What does *ambûá eçaí ité* mean? It’s a word I don’t remember.”

“It means slimy-thousand-legs-with-poisonous-frog-eyes.”

Yes, very appropriate.

3.26 Friends

Yamandé would recover the full use of his leg; the accident would leave no consequences even for his sporting abilities. Of course a little more time would be needed, at least a month, partly because the physiotherapist looking after him had taken the matter to heart and had set as her objective not only the complete recovery of muscle tone but also the return to athletic activity. But it was excellent news; the doctors had said they were very surprised by the speed at which he was recovering and by the qualities of the boy's physique. And Yamandé had not even reacted too badly to the news that in a few days' time his friends and Antônio would be leaving on a tour during which they would play real football matches against real teams, seven a side. At first he had darkened, then he had reflected for a few seconds and had finally pronounced: "But who's the seventh? Are you playing, Antônio? Ahahah, quite right, otherwise we'd be too strong! But how lovely! If I get better quickly perhaps I'll manage to play a match or two myself!"

From the beginning the party had split up each day to go to the hospital in turn in little groups of two or three, and that day it had fallen to Antônio and Jaci to hear the consultant's words: the way back had been one long succession of laughter and enthusiastic anticipations of that journey to play football that would be starting shortly.

When they had got to within a few hundred metres of the house Antônio distinctly heard a "Jaci!" coming from the bare patch of ground surrounded by weeds on the other side of the road.

A group of youngsters was playing football, and the smallest of them, barefoot like all the rest, in a canary-yellow vest much too long for him that served him as shorts as well and perhaps as pyjamas too, with the rain streaking his muddy little face in which the absence of three or four teeth stood out, was waving a hand in greeting.

Antônio turned towards Jaci, who, with what seemed to him an expression of embarrassment, headed for the patch of ground and the child, crossing the road without paying the slightest attention to the possible arrival of cars and very nearly giving Antônio a heart attack. He did not even have time to open his mouth.

The reproach died in his throat when he saw the child and Jaci greet each other with the gestures of the tribe, a little ceremony that was repeated with three or four other, slightly bigger boys. *Do they know each other?*

Jaci detached himself from the little group to join Antônio on the other side of the road, again without looking about him in the slightest, and was in fact brushed by a moped carrying two men who produced a volley of abuse that even Antônio could not manage to catch properly.

"I'm going to stay a bit and play football with Marcos and the others."

(*Marcos? The others?*) It was not a question, and Antônio felt a strange sensation: he had elected himself their protector, but these young men had an autonomy of their own and every right to live as they thought best.

"Of course, Jaci... But please, be careful when you cross the road."

"The road? Oh yes, of course, the road, the road."

Jaci crossed it again with the same nonchalance and within moments was surrounded by youngsters counting his keepie-uppies out loud: head, head, knee, heel, left foot (several touches), right foot, shoulder, heel again and so on. Antônio watched him, beginning to smile, as Jaci sat down on the ground without breaking off the keepie-uppies—drawing a spontaneous round of applause from the boys—and then stood up again.

The most surprising thing for Antônio was not his technique but the fact that his lips were unmistakably counting, and by now he had done at least five hundred. In the language of the tribe there existed only the numbers up to twenty, and then a few words to describe various ill-defined orders of magnitude: “many” like the days lived by the elders, “many” like the fish in the river, “many” like all the trees in the forest. Jaci, on the other hand, was counting, and, this thought struck Antônio deeply, he could only be doing it in Portuguese.

At around the thousandth touch the boys lost interest and Jaci himself grew tired of it. *He could go on for ever*, thought Antônio as a game got under way in which Jaci and the little one would play against all the rest. The two of them were communicating: a few gestures, a lot of smiles, football certainly as a common language and... a few words? Antônio noticed that Jaci had taught the rudiments of some of their patterns to that child, who seemed to appreciate the double arrow particularly, a sort of quick one-two that they tried over and over again, and when it came off, at a tenth of the speed at which Jaci normally executed it with his companions, they celebrated together by jumping and repeatedly making the gesture of drawing and releasing a bowstring.

It's a piece of luck, really, thought Antônio, *that these young men can live a second childhood at twenty, not very differently from what happened to me in the forest.*

He had been standing there in the same position, transfixed, watching the scene for about a quarter of an hour, and the awareness of this was slowly dawning on him when one of the boys waved a hand in greeting again.

“Moacir! Moacir! Moacir’s come to save the penalties!”

Oh no, this is too much.

Moacir arrived on the wrong side of the road at a mad speed on Antônio’s old creaking bicycle and produced a clumsy skidding stop on the slippery ground of the patch that sent him head over heels amid the boys’ laughter. *If he gets hurt as well we’re finished.* Fortunately he got up with no ill effects, and indeed with an expression of pure joy painted on his face. Although he was only slightly taller than his companions, in the middle of these youngsters his smile and his sly eyes towered over everybody. Within less than a minute he was in goal saving penalties.

The goal was an old peeling wall on which two posts and a crossbar had been badly scratched into the plaster. The whole wall was covered with small holes, the biggest of them the size of a fist, and with writing done in coloured chalk, faded by the dust and the rain. Moacir took up his position in front of the goal. He greeted each taker with a small roar and with the claw gesture made with his hands, often followed by a laugh that took the edge off it. None of the boys was capable of troubling the extremely agile keeper, who indeed, to save some of the penalties, waited for the shot crouching or even sitting on the ground.

Roused by Moacir’s arrival, Antônio crossed the road in his turn and went to stand beside Jaci, who was watching the penalties slightly apart from the others.

“Watch the little one,” Jaci said to him with a smile.

Facing Marcos, Moacir got ready standing up, as though he had a real opponent in front of him. Two steps of a run-up and a toe-poke. Perhaps it was the light ball, perhaps it was the child's real ability; the ball was directed with great precision into the top corner to Moacir's right, and Moacir produced an extremely balletic leap that allowed him to turn it away with the very tips of his fingers. If the shot had been the slightest bit faster he would not have got to it.

"He's very good," Antônio replied. "He's a bit like you when you were small..."

But everybody was already calling him in Portuguese: "Jaci, Jaci, come and take a penalty!"

A sentence that Jaci showed he understood perfectly, to Antônio's renewed astonishment.

Jaci did not need asking twice. He took the ball, counted the eleven paces Antônio had taught him so long before (*I wonder if he's counting in Portuguese*, Antônio asked himself) and laid the ball carefully on the ground like a seasoned professional (*but where can he have seen that? I really am losing control*). Moacir in front of him was roaring and clawing the air with more conviction, and his eyes had become a jaguar's eyes. Jaci did not hold back and unleashed an immensely powerful shot that knocked off a large piece of plaster some thirty centimetres across, right at the angle of the top corner where the little one had tried to slot his penalty. On one side joy and jubilation, on the other Moacir's gesture of defeat, he had managed to get his fingertips to this ball too.

At once one of the bigger boys ran under that great hole, by far the biggest in the whole wall, and wrote 'JACI' in red chalk in an uncertain hand.

Only then did Antônio understand that the writing was signatures: they were shots the boys had struck that had brought down pieces of wall (all of them, or almost all, inside the goal); they were holes that recorded the small feats of those youngsters. And now Jaci too had left his mark.

When Antônio decided it was time to go home, Jaci was still gazing proudly at his name written under the biggest hole.

3.27 Forest

“They’re all at Antônio’s village now, aren’t they?”

Janaína was trying not to be anxious—worry goes into the milk and is bad for the baby, the old women always said so—but she could not stop thinking constantly about where her man was, what he was doing, what dangers he was running.

“Of course they’re there. They’re all in the great *shabono* where Antônio lives now, round the fire as we are, and they’re eating tender caiman meat that the warriors of the village have caught in the enormous river that is down there. They’re caimans much, much bigger than ours, but they aren’t dangerous, they haven’t got a single tooth, they only eat papayas and orchids.”

The confidence Kirimà was displaying was a long way from the confidence he actually felt. They had left two moons ago and nothing was known of them; he had no idea whether they were safe and well, or where. But he did not want Janaína to worry, or anybody in the village to worry. Above all he did not want, at any cost, to worry himself. He had already spent whole sleepless nights with the vision of his son’s leg, so devastated that he had had to make an almost unbearable effort to convince himself that a wound like that did not necessarily have to lead to death.

He had found himself having to trust a man he had always thought he hated, the man he still confusedly held somehow responsible for the disfavour of the spirits that had caused Yamandé’s accident. But incredibly he had realised that he did trust him. Perhaps because he had no choice, certainly, but perhaps also because, when it came down to it, however immense the effort it had cost him to admit it to himself, he had always believed his stories.

Kirimà was a storyteller; certain things he knew. He could tell when somebody was telling a true story and when an invented one. When you tell a story you are inventing, your eyes wander upwards, to the sky, to the tops of the trees, to watch the images of your tale fly, to see them form out of nothing in the air like flakes of smoke. But when you tell a true story you already have all the images inside you, you don’t have to look for them. When you tell a true story you look into the faces of those who are listening to you; you want to see what they think, to be sure they understand properly. When you invent a story you don’t mind if the one listening sees it a little differently, it’s an invented story anyway, and it’s all the more beautiful for that. But if a thing really exists you want the others to understand it rightly. And Antônio always looked the village in the eye when he spoke, so Kirimà, in spite of himself, had always known that he was not inventing.

He looked at the clouds above the treetops: he, on the other hand, had to invent a little now, because Antônio had told them many things but of a great many others he had not spoken, and if he wanted to say where their young men were, what he did not know he would have to create out of his imagination. He was sure the whole tribe knew this perfectly well, but nobody minded: they were happy all the same, and a well-invented story soothed the anxieties as much as a true one.

“On the great fire in the middle of them they are also cooking other animals from outside the forest, animals that run with countless frogs’ legs, animals that fly backwards and have to be hit with an arrow right between their three eyes, otherwise they are immortal. But their flesh is delicious, with the taste of caterpillar and of ripe berries.”

The whole group of listeners gathered round the hearth swallowed, mouths watering; their own supper of anteater meat could not begin to compare with such exotic delight.

“When they have finished eating they will listen to the chants carried by the invisible threads and they will all dance, all night long, drinking juices as sweet as honey, and Yamandé will dance in the middle of them, his leg straighter and stronger than before.” Kirimà’s voice cracked for an instant.

Janaína came to his rescue. “Antônio will dance with them too, won’t he?”

“Oh, he’s the one who beats the rhythm on the drum with hummingbird feathers plaited into his hair; there are the most beautiful women all around them, women from outside the forest with very long yellow and green hair...”

Kirimà, recovered from his moment of emotion, had not been able to resist the desire to tease Janaína a little, and went on, smiling to himself as he saw her eyes widen, already blazing with jealousy: “...but Antônio will not look at the yellow women and their hammocks of plaited flowers, because he will look into the flames and see his Janaína and his Ybyráatã waving their hands to greet him.”

There, Janaína was smiling again already, rocking the little one.

“He never talked to us about these beautiful women, Antônio,” Piata observed, very interested.

“Oh well, he must have forgotten. He preferred to tell stories about ball games, you know that.”

“And goodness knows how many new stories he’ll tell us, they’ll tell us, when they come back.”

“A great many stories, yes. Tales of ball games, they do nothing but play all day, there in the great village. But they’ll also tell of when they flew very high on the backs of the great shining birds, with all the invisible threads brushing their hair like fingers, and...”

The shining birds were interesting, but Piata had grown distracted, thinking that he could not wait to ask Moacir and Yamandé for more details about those women with the flowing, many-coloured hair.

3.28 Word of mouth

Isabel felt like a prisoner in an ivory tower. After spending five years of her life in Geneva (*I struggle to find its soul*, she kept saying to her mother during their infrequent telephone conversations) she had looked forward with enthusiasm to her return to New York, but once she had touched down at JFK and hummed, as always, the inevitable U2 song, she had soon found herself a prey to dejection. Was that really her life? Was she really going to be an interpreter for ever?

Professionally she had nothing but reasons to be happy. Working for the United Nations at all, with their extremely tough selection system, was proof of her qualities; having won straight away the competition for a second five-year cycle, and in the New York office at that, ought to have left her extremely satisfied. And after all, interpreting was a marvellous job, an indispensable bridge between different cultures: now and then, when she was in a good mood, she would introduce herself by saying she was a colleague of the Rosetta Stone.

But now she felt the weight of having talked, for years, about the most varied problems, from the smallest to the most momentous, and of never having laid a hand on a single one of them in the flesh. She was in contact with all the problems of the world and yet she felt as distant from them as if she were on another planet.

And then there was the *saudade*, that so uniquely Brazilian feeling. When she was living in Geneva she had mistaken it—*how could I have made a mistake like that!*—for homesickness for the last place she had called home, her flat on 36th Avenue. But now that her gaze rested on the familiar silhouette of the Roosevelt Bridge, her mind had cleared: to think that *saudade* can be felt for a country other than Brazil is like believing you could pine for Africa and mean Asia. However fascinating Ulan Bator or Kathmandu may be, it is simply impossible.

She thought she had learnt to keep it at bay, with a barrage of travel and a busy, frantic life, but the distance from home always came back to make itself felt, like that friend-enemy we cannot tear ourselves away from, she thought. The instruments provided by technological progress did nothing but fan the flames: since she had gone back to work at the glass palace her tablet had been connected more and more often to the Brazilian press agencies, to the media of the Macapá region.

The smallness of the events at home warmed her heart and often drew a smile from her, and sometimes—it seemed to her she had become more sentimental lately—a tear. She had never heard of Senhor Jaco Sainz, but reading that a *pororoca* wave, the out-of-season tidal bore, had scattered the livestock of his farm had saddened her. Poor Jaco. And poor cows. The Maracatu da Favela samba school, freshly crowned runners-up for 2014, was already beginning its preparations for the following year's carnival. She wondered whether Silvinha was still on the organising committee, such a lovely person, so sunny. A new special secretary for women's policy had just been appointed by the governor of the state of Amapá: a young woman with a likeable face, there was a piece of good news.

Every time Ana, a Serbian interpreter who spoke beautiful Portuguese and with whom she had struck up a friendship at once, saw Isabel handling her tablet, she would come over out of curiosity.

Apart from the local news, the press was talking about women and about the World Cup, associating the two subjects in every possible way.

In little more than a week the Macapá area had produced a “Miss Cup”, a “Muse of the Cup”, a “Kitten of the Cup”, a “Godmother of the Cup” and a dozen other titles, all accompanied by photographs of young women in varying states of undress and of varying prettiness.

Ana found it hilarious. “You Brazilians are incredible!”

Isabel was not so enthusiastic; the more time went by the more she found this sort of article jarring.

“Yes, we are. But I prefer it when our uniqueness shows itself in other ways. Look at this,” Isabel retorted. “A man has come back to Macapá after fourteen years spent in the Amazon Forest,” she read aloud.

“And listen: ‘Taken in by an uncontacted tribe, he has resurfaced together with a group of Indians in order to bring help to a member of the tribe.’ Look at the photograph!”

The photographs were fantastic; they showed the group of Indians playing football barefoot, together with that taller, bearded man.

Looking at him again more carefully, Isabel had the suspicion that she knew him. She hid the beard with a finger so as to look properly at the eyes alone: he reminded her of somebody but she could not place him. It was on reading the article that it came back to her with perfect clarity.

Antônio Carlos Rocha de Almeida.

“Antônio!” Isabel exclaimed.

“Why, do you know him?” Ana asked.

“Yes, I know him, I know him,” Isabel replied, astounded.

“Well I never, that’s incredible! Will you email me the link?” Ana asked. “It’s too good a story not to share it on Facebook.”

The next day Ana was attending a meeting of the Third Committee and, as she always did, arrived well in advance to organise her things and, if possible, have a bit of a chat. Her Facebook post had already had a hundred or so likes, and she ran down the list to see who had shared it. Beside her one of the big fish, an ambassador who was a member of the Permanent Council and of the President’s private office, was ostentatiously peering at the images scrolling past on the screen. Ana knew that she and Isabel knew each other well; Isabel had been a valued assistant to the ambassador before sitting the UN competition.

“He’s a friend of Isabel’s,” she said, pointing at an image on the screen. “There, this one. It seems they even knew each other rather well.”

“But what’s happened? Are they Indians?”

“Yes, apparently he went missing fourteen years ago in the Amazon Forest and in the last few months he’s reappeared in his home town, bringing with him some members of the tribe he’s been living with. And the funny part of it is that they’re brilliant at football!”

“At football?”

“Yes, apparently they play superbly.”

“Is it a World Cup advertisement?”

“No, no, it really happened. I’m telling you, this one, he’s called Antônio, is a friend of Isabel’s.”

“Would you send me the link to the article?”

“To your personal email?”

“Yes, please. It’s a beautiful story.”

The ambassador ran into Isabel a few days later, at a reception at the Brazilian embassy, but they barely had time to exchange a greeting and a few words before the crowd separated them.

Isabel, toying with her glass of *batida*, was thinking with some amusement that it was exactly as hot in that room as it was in Macapá, when she heard herself addressed.

“Aren’t you bored?”

She saw that she was being spoken to by a stranger of about forty-five, the only man without a tie in the room where the reception was being held, with a very self-assured air.

“I’m always bored at these things,” he added, in fluent but rather rough Portuguese.

“No, I’m not bored,” Isabel replied in an accentless English. “I’m just feeling a little tired, it’s been a demanding week. Do we know each other?”

“We’ve certainly never been introduced, I’d remember. Robert, how do you do.”

“Maria Isabel Barbosa,” Isabel replied, waiting a few moments before adding the obligatory “how do you do.”

Robert could not fail to notice Isabel’s raised eyebrow, and recalibrated his approach, switching to English himself.

“The surname, quite. Hubert, Robert Hubert. Do you work for the embassy? I caught sight of you talking to the ambassador.”

“No, I am an interpreter and I work for the United Nations, but the ambassador and I have known each other for many years and we always enjoy meeting. Wait a moment, Hubert?”

“Yes, Robert Hubert,” the man replied, smiling.

“*That* Robert Hubert?”

“Yes, I’m *that* Robert Hubert, the one with the stadiums that cost hundreds of millions of dollars. And at the last International Workshop I chaired the working group on Sustainability: if you see something ironic in all that, I can confirm that there’s a great deal of irony in it, though perhaps not where you think.”

The conversation was interrupted by the ambassador, who had come over smiling, holding her usual glass of sparkling water.

“Are you telling him about your friend? Everyone here is talking about that story.”

“Which friend?” Hubert asked, curious.

“Are you ready for a little irony where you don’t think there can be any?” Isabel asked, and went on: “A friend of mine who had been given up for lost in the forest has come back after fourteen years, bringing with him the members of the tribe he’s been living with all this time.”

“And where’s the irony in that?” said Hubert, a shade too bluntly.

“The irony is that the members of this incredible tribe know how to play football, I haven’t worked out whether Antônio, my acquaintance, taught them or what, and now they’re in the middle of a tour around the north of Brazil.”

“Oh, I see. Do you know whether by any chance they’re going to Manaus?” Hubert asked in return; he still saw no irony whatever in the story, but he refrained from pressing the point.

“I think so, but I’m not sure,” Isabel replied. “It’ll only take me a moment to check, though.”

Two minutes later the attention of all three was focused on Isabel’s tablet, on which increasingly bizarre images and videos were appearing. Apparently the Indians had so far won every match, some of them by a very wide margin (it was so incredible as to suggest a publicity stunt) and yes, the last match of the tour was indeed to be played in Manaus.

“That’s the opening match of the stadium!” Robert exclaimed, seeing the date. “I didn’t know the ones who were going to play were Indians, but, well, it seems more than fitting. Naturally I shall have to attend the ceremony as the designer, why don’t you both come as well? As my guests, of course. Mrs Barbosa could give me a hand with my limping Portuguese; I’d be grateful.”

“I’m sorry, I can’t be there,” the ambassador replied. “Next week I leave for Geneva and then I have a series of meetings in the Middle East; I shan’t be back in America before the end of June.”

“And you?” Hubert asked, turning to Isabel.

Isabel felt again the tightening of the heart that homesickness had been causing her lately, and at the same time another jolt that might also have been due to the man’s gaze, which was in all fairness very enveloping, so that when she answered the words came out of their own accord: “Your Portuguese did not seem so bad to me; I do not think you need an interpreter. But I do have a lot of leave owing to me and I miss Brazil very much. I am tempted, I will think about it. But I warn you: if I do come it will be an opportunity to let you know what I think about all those millions of dollars that have been spent on football stadiums.”

“Agreed. But promise me that before you tell me, you will let me take you on a tour of the stadium.”

3.29 Tour

Antônio had opened the window before sitting down on the bed with the laptop in his lap. He liked the drumming noise of the rain, and he liked the warm smell of the river beyond which the humidity veiled the outlines of the houses heaped up on the bank. It really did look like a fine city, Manaus, and he was a little sorry to have had only half a day to look round, but the schedule of the tour had been fixed in advance by Rete Norte and of course one had to fall in with it.

He was pleased too to have a room to himself. The boys managed more than well by now with things like sleeping on their own, and he—who had to admit he had found the tour more tiring than he had expected, since however well life in the forest had kept him in condition, playing football with twenty-year-olds was no small undertaking, and then all that travelling, those broken and flooded roads, those pitches plastered with mud—was enjoying a few moments of peace. By now he had understood that he only managed to feel calm when he knew the boys were under control and safe. *Just think what a paternal instinct I had without knowing it.*

But the hotel they were in that evening was pleasant and quiet, free of the dangerous enticements of dubious nightclubs and smoky amusement arcades among which he had had to steer a course at some of the earlier stops, looking for a difficult balance between the young men's legitimate curiosity and desire to enjoy themselves and the risks that could be involved in situations and places for which they were not remotely prepared. *An old aunt rather than a manager*, he thought: *that liquor is too strong, be careful; those machines eat money, don't be taken in by the little lights; no, those girls aren't for you, they're there, they're there working, there, leave them alone; and you, put a shirt on, you can't go and eat bare-chested here.* An old aunt, a chaperone, a mother superior.

Now, though, everything was in order; probably, in spite of being divided between three rooms, they were all piled into one, fighting over the television remote control and the smartphone on which they never tired of looking at their own photographs, the ones Gabrielita, with admirable persistence, took from the Rete Norte footage to put on the Instagram account she had opened in their name, and to which Moacir contributed by uploading the odd photograph he had taken himself.

Antônio arranged the pillows more comfortably behind his head. *Well, that's that one done*, he thought. *And it went very well, extremely well in fact.* Winning every match had become the norm by now, and Antônio occasionally wondered whether the teams they had played against were not weaker than they had been made out to be. *Anyway, tomorrow the last match and then back to Macapá. Yamandé, if everything has gone as expected, will be discharged straight after we arrive: a few more days to get ourselves organised and pack up, and then at last we go home, into the forest.*

He smiled as he went to look for the forest on the computer. That Google Maps his niece had taught him to use still seemed magic to him; he never tired of running back along the Jari, of following the course of the famous road 210 he had never found, of going over the stages of the tour, Belém, Tucuruí, Altamira, Santarém, of widening the map and looking down from above at the whole of Brazil, at all of South America. And then narrowing the field again, closer and closer, closer and closer, onto the dense green of the forest, as if by looking hard he might manage to see Janaína going down to the river with Ybyráatã hanging round her neck, Piata coming back from the hunt, Itákûara dozing in his hammock.

He laughed to himself, thinking that all this looking at the world from above would have made even Poranga Pagé jealous.

I wonder whether we'll find a way to protect at least this little piece of our world; I wonder, he asked himself, looking at that boundless green, *how many other tribes like ours there are.* He launched a search, clicked on a link, then on another and another, more and more uneasy and perplexed: there were dozens and dozens of pages talking about an "Indian question" whose scale he had never suspected.

During his life before the one in the forest he had heard it mentioned, naturally, but he had not given it much thought, as happens with a great many things one hears about but which do not touch one at all. He had not remotely realised that there were such complex and disputed issues behind it.

The fact that he had practically become an Indian himself made him read those pages with a certain dismay: on the one hand he read about the question as the educated city Brazilian he had been for most of his life, trying to pick his way among the information and the opinions with detachment and coolness; on the other he felt personally involved, himself, his family, his friends, and he struggled not to let himself be carried away by anger and agitation. He switched off the computer and stretched out on the bed to listen to the pouring rain. *When we get back to Macapá I must see that Greenpeace woman, that Mariana: she has worked a lot on this thing and perhaps she'll be able to help me understand it a bit better, without letting myself be carried away too much by my feelings.*

And speaking of feelings, he thought as he was slipping into sleep, *I was pleased but much less moved than I'd have believed at hearing Isabel again after all this time.* He had been glad that she had tracked him down and called him, and gladder still that she was there, in Manaus, and had suggested having dinner together after the next day's match. But when he thought how badly he had taken her refusal all those years before, and how stupid and clumsy he had been that evening, it all seemed so far away; it seemed to him that he was watching another, quite different Antônio act in his memory. And he suddenly realised that until that moment he had been thinking that the next day he would see again the girl in green of that evening. *What an idiot, obviously the years pass for her too: she must be over forty by now, she'll be a married and settled lady.* He fell asleep thinking that he could not for the life of him remember her surname.

3.30 Manaus

Isabel had never slept on an aeroplane in her life. She felt no fear, on the contrary, she liked flying very much, and had always thought there was something exciting about soaring so high above the world, free of all the constraints of weight and gravity. She would sit calmly in her seat and even on the longest journeys stay awake to contemplate the view or, at night, the other passengers. She rarely watched the films on offer and read even more rarely. For Isabel an aeroplane was a place of observation and introspection.

Hubert, on the other hand, had gone to sleep during take-off, and apart from two short breaks to eat the “horrible” food served by “noisy” stewardesses had done nothing but turn and turn again in his reclined seat, snoring loudly. For more than an hour they had been flying over nothing but forest, and Isabel was at once horrified and fascinated. *The green sea really is a sea, look, an ocean rather; it stretches as far as the eye can see in every direction, so regular that every irregularity completely polarises the attention. Antônio was a castaway, she realised, goodness knows what he must have felt down there for fourteen years, lost inside it.* Isabel had spent her youth on the edges of that green world, she had brushed against it more than once, and now it gave her the shivers. *What is happening to me, she wondered, what are all these sudden fragilities?*

Hubert turned over abruptly, exhaling yet another grunt, and rested his cheek on Isabel’s generous arm. She smiled and did not move a millimetre; she even suppressed the temptation to tidy his ruffled fringe a little before refocusing her attention on the treetops.

The heat and suffocating humidity of Manaus welcomed her like two old acquaintances, together with the sluggish smell of river and fruit. Robert was not of the same opinion, and began to puff and sweat copiously as soon as he was out of the airport and out of the protection of the air conditioning. Isabel felt at home; she smiled to herself, thinking how sweet it was that all the warmth of her own land should flow up through her feet and vibrate in her body. Her euphoria grew from moment to moment and reached its peak in the taxi, which went through streets that seemed familiar to her although she had never been to Manaus: the colours, the sounds, the faces, everything contributed to the sensation of being at home and to her happiness.

And, she had to admit, Robert’s discomfort contributed to it in a slightly perverse way as well, giving her a sense of superiority and of control.

But the next morning Hubert was transformed. He had stopped sweating and a radiant smile lit up his face.

“It always happens to me like this, ever since I came to work in Brazil. The first few hours are exhausting, then somehow my body adapts and I feel wonderful.”

“But did you sleep last night?”

It seemed impossible to Isabel that he could have got to sleep after sleeping for almost all of the ten hours of the flight the day before; she herself had stayed awake until very late.

“Yes, yes. I’m a great sleeper, it’s not unusual for me to sleep for twenty hours at a stretch. And now I feel really well, I feel almost Brazilian.”

“Your accent has improved too, actually!” Isabel joked.

The conversation continued pleasantly through the morning, when they had breakfast together and then made their way at their leisure towards the area of the city stadium. But while a lazy, serene mood hung over the whole city, in the stadium area something was happening. The first small knots of people were forming with their protest placards along the avenues that led to the ground, watched over by too many policemen in riot gear.

“Shame”, “Goal for the World Cup - Brazil eliminated”, “Respect!”, “Who is the Cup for?” were only some of the banners that Isabel and Hubert, the latter rather worried about being recognised, looked at together.

“Now tell me they’re wrong,” Isabel said at a certain point.

“They’re wrong if they think these two placards, which will get visibility in the local press at best, can really change anything.”

“I meant on the substance, in the sense that all those hundreds of millions spent on stadiums could have been spent in another way. There are children dying here of poverty and neglect, you know.”

“Well, they’re wrong about that too. The money was for stadiums, there were no other projects. And this is what they’ve got: stadiums, fine modern ones. Do Brazilians like football? Yes. That’s the only argument on the table. I’m not telling you I’m happy to see the poverty spread through this country and all the contradictions you know better than I do. I’m telling you that this time round a great system of power touched Brazil and neither I nor perhaps anybody could do anything about it. What I have done, what I’ve had in mind to do ever since I moved to Brazil to take on these commissions, is to give Brazil the best: the maximum sustainability possible with current technology, the reuse of materials, the lowest possible environmental impact. That’s what Brazil will have: the most beautiful stadiums in the world.”

“That nobody will use.”

“I know, these things can happen, but in this case there was nothing in my power that I could do to prevent it.”

The opening ceremony proper took place very simply. The governor of the State of Amazonas unveiled a plaque commemorating the day, Rete Norte covered the event with a special, but Hubert stayed in the background, appearing only from behind in a few of the official photographs. The protest did not have the desired effect, and in the end the little over a thousand demonstrators were clearly outnumbered by the fans who turned up, about twenty thousand of them.

Since the match was to be seven a side, the pitch had been laid out turned through 90° in the southern half of the stadium, with the goals on what would later become the touchlines. The northern half of the field was still partly unusable, awaiting the completion of the works.

Before the kick-off a second small ceremony took place, which was scheduled to be crowned by a speech from the captain of the Indians’ team.

When the footballers came out onto the field of play, Isabel realised what a property Rete Norte had on its hands. Well exploited, it could have become a media phenomenon on a world scale. The Indians arrived bare-chested with their bodies and faces painted in different colours: they were all very young, proud, with a walk so fluid that it looked like a dance. Antônio—there he was! How he had changed!—was holding a microphone, and invited one of the boys, evidently the captain, to say something.

The moment the boy spoke, Antônio turned sharply to look at him.

The language of the Indians resembled no language she had ever heard. It was a set of very high-pitched sounds, interspersed with clicks of the tongue and long vocalisations. All of it accompanied by broad, highly theatrical gestures. *I wonder whether centuries ago, before losing contact with nature, our own ancestors were as theatrical as this when they spoke*, thought Isabel. And when Antônio began to speak in Portuguese to translate what the boy had said, she could not help smiling. *You an interpreter too, Antônio. You see? Destiny.*

“They have explained to us what money is, what selling and buying mean. And we have understood it, even though it seems a strange thing to us.”

It seemed to Isabel that Antônio’s voice was uncertain; she could not tell whether from emotion or from some other feeling she could not identify.

“Then they told us that the forest is not ours. That men can come and cut down the trees as though the forest belonged to them. But that it does not belong to us, to us who have lived in it since the moon was small and young.”

Isabel felt a shiver. *What did he say?* Every time the boy spoke, Antônio took longer and longer pauses, as though he were thinking over the words he was about to translate. The boy said one more thing; Antônio was silent for a few seconds, and it was only after a decisive gesture of invitation from the boy that he made up his mind to open his mouth.

“We cannot buy the forest. But nobody can buy the forest. How can you buy or sell the sky, the warmth of the land? The idea is strange to us. If we do not own the freshness of the air, the sparkle of the water in the sun, how can anyone consider them his?”

After the boy’s next sentence, Antônio moved the microphone away from his mouth and said something to him, to which the young man replied firmly. The two of them went on gesturing and talking to each other for some time until Antônio finished with two gestures much more brusque and much less elegant than the others: the captain seemed to waver but in the end decided to go on, pulling a face of disappointment.

Isabel found herself playing with her professional deformation: although she knew nothing of that language, she found herself trying to guess what Antônio and the boy were saying from the tone, from their gestures and from what they had said before. If she had been asked at that moment to hazard a translation on the spot, she would have attributed to Antônio the words “That’s enough now, this is neither the place nor the moment for this sort of talk”, but of course in reality it could have been anything else at all: for all the years she had spent at the UN she had never heard anything like that language.

Antônio began translating again, visibly reassured: “But today we are here to be the first to play in this new house of football, the biggest house of football in the whole forest, and we are very happy. For the occasion we have put on the colours of the great festivals, and we are very moved, because a great many people will be watching us play; we hope it will be as much fun for all of them as it will be for us.”

“For them it certainly will be,” Hubert said into Isabel’s ear, a gesture a little too intimate for the relationship they had had up to that moment, but one that did not displease her at all.

“What do you mean?” she asked.

Robert showed her a magazine he had been leafing through, bought shortly before, on the cover of which the Asu Ka'a boys were spread out ("Inside: the Moacir poster!"). "In the match that went worst for them, the first one at that, they won four-nil. Of course they'll enjoy themselves; they aren't playing against people at their level. Look at this: four-nil, five-nil, eight-one, six-one..."

"But why did they organise this tour against such weak teams?"

"Weak? Not that weak. Apparently they're all the best teams in the championships of northern Brazil, the Amazonense championship, the Paraense, the Amapaense. Bearing in mind that only teams from the centre and south play in the Brazilian Série A, I'd say it's the best they could find."

In the meantime the Indians' team had already got its first goal, with a passage of play so quick that Isabel, distracted by the conversation with Robert, had not had time to see it. The sensation that those boys were always dancing grew stronger as she watched them play; they seemed extremely light and extremely fragile, and yet out of their feet came shots and passes of uncommon power; they had an instinct, or perhaps a quickness, that always got them to the ball first, and with those colours painted on their bodies they were hypnotic, she could not take her eyes off the pitch.

And they celebrated in a really strange way, making the gesture of an archer drawing his bow, and look, some of the crowd were already imitating them.

3.31 Agreements

“Forgive me, but I still haven’t entirely got used to eating the way you do.”

It was not easy to work out what there was of the Indian about Antônio: he did not have their features, his hair was a light brown very rare in the forest, his skin was less dark than the Indians’ and an untrimmed beard peeped brazenly out over his chin. And yet he had unquestionably become an Indian, perhaps it was his movements, or the tone of his voice, or goodness knows what else; Isabel could not stop asking herself.

“I mean... the way you do, that is, the way we did before you became you...”

Isabel smiled. She and Antônio were in a fairly refined restaurant in Manaus, and seeing each other again after so many years to spend an evening together was all the more pleasant after the resounding victory of Antônio’s boys in that afternoon’s match.

When Isabel had told Robert (*when did Hubert and I start using first names? Odd, I can’t even remember*) her plans for the evening, he had commented: “It seems a rather too elegant place to me; perhaps he’ll feel uncomfortable.”

It was sweet of Robert to worry about Antônio’s feelings, but Isabel had noted, flattered, the hint of jealousy in the remark.

She was in fact extremely curious, too curious in Robert’s opinion, to know every aspect of the incredible adventure Antônio was living through.

“What did you eat in the forest?” Isabel asked, biting into an excellent *costela* cooked over charcoal. “I imagine everything, insects too!”

“But not all insects,” Antônio replied. “Only the good ones.”

Isabel laughed heartily, thinking Antônio had made a joke. “No, come on, seriously.”

“I am being serious. We eat everything: insects, grubs, fish, birds, reptiles, amphibians, mammals, a quantity of plants I couldn’t even list... And it may be homesickness, I don’t know, but I miss those flavours, and these things you eat all seem to me to have rather the same taste. And they’re all a bit too salty.”

Isabel looked Antônio straight in the eye for the first time, perhaps for the first time in her life.

“It’s incredible how much you’ve changed. Oh god, it’s entirely credible, considering your shipwreck in that green ocean, but it’s astonishing all the same to see it with one’s own eyes.”

“You’ve changed a good deal too. You’re... you talk in a curious way, that’s it.”

She always seems to be writing a newspaper article, thought Antônio, I didn’t remember these rhetorical flights of hers. And I didn’t remember she had such a matronly build, perhaps that’s the effect of the time that’s passed, like those little lines at the corners of her eyes.

There were a few moments of silence, then Antônio started again: “Anyway, the caterpillars...” but he was interrupted with a smile by Isabel: “That’s enough about disgusting things, all right?”

“They aren’t in the least disgust...”

“Tell me something curious about those incredible boys of yours instead. Did they have a hard time adapting to our world?”

“Much less than I’d have thought. Perhaps the fact that I’d been talking to them about it for years helped. Of course, there are things they still don’t understand, rubbish, for instance: in the forest the waste is a handful of stripped bones and fruit stones, and they can’t make sense of the papers, the bottles, the cigarette ends, the litter in the street. But other things that ought to disconcert them don’t trouble them at all. One telling episode is the business of the football boots. I was extremely worried; I’d prepared a whole long speech to explain that playing barefoot was wonderful, obviously, but also very dangerous if the opposition were playing in boots with studs. Just think, there’s even a legend about the India national team supposedly not taking part in the 1950 World Cup because they weren’t allowed to play barefoot... sorry, I’ve digressed. As I was saying: I spent days thinking what the best way might be to convince them, and instead, when we got to the sports department of the shopping centre, they threw themselves at them to try them on and the only thing they asked me was: ‘But are you sure Rete Norte is buying them for us? Don’t we have to pay any money?’”

“Hahah, and why do you think that was?”

“Well, they wanted to look as much as possible like the great footballers they’ve seen on TV; since they’ve been here they haven’t missed a match.”

“How sweet. But listen, speaking of ‘buying’ and ‘money’: did they really say that to you? And the boy’s speech, about buying the forest?”

“That was an episode that... took me by surprise, that’s it. I was concentrating on the translation, and from the language of the tribe it isn’t easy, it’s a language perfectly suited to life in the forest but not in the least suited to this life, you understand me, don’t you?”

“I understand you very well; it often happens to me too, even though Portuguese, English, Spanish and French are far more like one another.”

“When I realised what he was saying I asked him to stop.”

Isabel’s pupils, slightly dilated by the *caipirinha*, stared at him intently (a little too intently, Robert would have said).

“Yes, but if I’ve understood correctly they come, you come, from an uncontacted tribe. Earning, buying the forest seem to me ‘Western’ concepts, so to speak. Have you been giving them courses in finance these fourteen years?”

Antônio had developed a sort of alarm system: when Indians or the forest or the differences between Western and indigenous civilisation were being discussed, the sense of superiority that regularly showed through in the people he was talking to would easily send him into a fury. He took a moment to observe the curved lines of Isabel’s face and her barely sketched smile.

The alarm did not go off.

“That’s a thing I’d thought of myself when Rete Norte offered us the contract, something so naïve that I’m almost ashamed of it. In the end we’ll be left with a few thousand reais in our hands, not even enough to pay the first official you go to for information.”

Isabel's mobile rang, making Antônio jump; he still could not get used to the fact that people always and at every moment had a mobile phone about them.

Isabel, blushing slightly, answered the phone, speaking in English. It was a language Antônio had never known very well and had not practised for fourteen years, but there was no need to know the language to notice that the tone of her voice had become light and effervescent.

It's a man, he guessed, and soon Isabel will hang her hammock next to his.

And in any case a few words of English had stayed in his head: *buying the rainforest*, didn't that mean buying the forest? Perhaps she was telling him that Antônio wanted to buy it? He couldn't quite follow. Were they laughing at him, perhaps?

The alarm did not go off this time either.

At the end of the call she asked for enlightenment: "Are you buying a piece of forest as well? What for?"

Isabel composed herself and turned serious again, although the light in her eyes did not go away. "Antônio. It may be the magical atmosphere of Manaus, or perhaps simply the *caipirinha*, but I'm going to make you a risky proposal."

Antônio did not understand, and for fear of saying something stupid stayed silent, confining himself to a nod inviting her to go on.

"I think I know how to help you with this business of buying a piece of the forest. Some time ago I worked on a UN project on finding project financing models for the safeguarding of the Amazon Forest. I was the interpreter and not one of the experts, but I learnt something and I think I know how to set up a foundation for the purpose."

She ignored Antônio's astonished expression and went on: "I don't know exactly how much money you have, but to start the project off at least, very little is needed."

It seemed to Isabel that she could see the millions of thoughts fighting in Antônio's head to get to his mouth first: "But are you sure? I tried to find out about it and I got the impression that with a few thousand reais you really can't do anything at all, except attach yourself to projects already running somewhere else entirely, which interest us relatively little. Not to mention the bureaucratic madness."

"Bureaucratic obstacles can be got round, and that's precisely where I can help you. And obviously the more money there is the better, I'm not saying otherwise, if you won a billion reais on the lottery it would all be simpler. But to start with, I really do think your money will be enough. Then we'll have to find a sponsor or some route to funding, and there too I already have a few ideas; Rete Norte might even be interested. In any case I'm quite certain that the lovely fairy tale of the group of Indians who appear out of nowhere and play football better than anybody else will touch a great many people's hearts. Mine, for example, has been touched."

"You're telling me that with your help we could buy our own forest. That's what you're telling me."

"Yes. I won't blame you if you don't trust me, but I'll tell you anyway: trust me. Your money won't end up in my pockets or in anybody else's. It will always stay directly under your control or, if you need help with the administration, under the control of somebody you trust."

“Why are you doing it? I mean, your life is in New York, isn’t that what you always wanted?”

“I don’t know, you see. To get to live this life I studied and worked so hard, and I gave up a lot of people and things as well. Now I feel the weight of that effort. And I miss Brazil. I miss the poetry, the energy of these people. And I feel I’m in a position where I can do something to improve the things that are wrong. So your sudden appearance seemed to me like a signal, just as Robert’s arrival in my life seemed like a signal...”

“The one on the telephone?”

“Yes,” said Isabel, smiling. “Was it that obvious?”

“It was obvious that you’ve hung your hammock next to his.”

“Ah ah, I like that expression!”

“Yes.”

“No.”

“No what, sorry?”

“I haven’t hung my hammock next to his.”

“But you’d like to.”

“Who knows.”

The conversation went on easily for the rest of the evening, and Isabel enjoyed herself enormously listening to the story both of Antônio’s adventures in the forest and of their arrival in the city, laughing till she cried when Antônio told her about Teresa and the radio station. They parted with a promise to speak again as soon as possible to settle all the details: Antônio had expressed the wish to get back into the forest to his family as soon as he could. And the fact that that family existed, and that he spoke of it with such affection, pricked Isabel with a very small pang of disappointment, which she tried to forget as quickly as possible.

3.32 Returns

“Put in a few more beans, Janita. Ever since they got back from that football trip it seems to me the boys are hungrier all the time; it must be all the exercise they’ve had.”

Marcela wiped the sweat from her upper lip; it had always been very hot in that kitchen. “And another pepper or two, perhaps; vegetables are good for you.”

She stirred the sauce carefully, while trying to remember whether she had told Italo to call at the shop for a couple of crates of beer. “Janita, has anybody hung out the washing? We must get another load on at once, the laundry basket is about to burst.”

“Yes, Ubiratan hung out the washing. He’s always careful about those things.”

“Good, good boy. Piraí, those onions have to be thinner. Look, like this. There, perfect.”

He’s getting really rather good in the kitchen, this boy, thought Marcela, brushing his shoulder with a caress, he could even make a trade of it; I’m sure he’d like that. Antônio had never wanted anything to do with it, Amanda was a great botcher, Janita on the other hand was very precise and reliable but with no imagination at all. *Yes, he really is the one most suited to cooking of all—*Marcela broke

the thought off halfway, astonished and a little disturbed: she had been about to say to herself, *of all my children.*

She shook her head, smiling and plunging the ladle into the pan; it really was hot in the kitchen. And there was still the *farofa* to make, a kilo at least to make it go round. The washing machine, she really must remember to get it going, otherwise where were you going to find seven clean pairs of shorts afterwards. She pushed back a lock of sweaty hair with a sigh: *well, you’re not a girl any more, Marcela; it isn’t so strange if you’re tired in the evening after running around after a family of ten.* No, eleven, eleven, now there was Yamandé too, out of hospital, and thank heaven he was well, a fine boy like that, it would really have been a shame.

Yamandé had had a smile from one side of his face to the other ever since he had been discharged. At last, after all that time spent only able to listen to accounts of a thousand marvels and strange things and *if you knew about this* and *if you saw that*, at last he could see with his own eyes and try out everything the others were already even slightly tired of, and he went about springing on his restored leg with the happy eyes of a child at a funfair. They had said that now he was better they would be going back into the forest, but he had no wish for that at all, not before he had seen and tried everything his friends had done.

He had almost quarrelled with Ubiratan and Itaúna the evening before, because they would not stop talking about how soon they would be going back to the village, very soon, and how they could not wait to see again the woman, the baby, the mother, the brother, the elder and the newest born, and perhaps even that nuisance Itáakûara, and why not the anteater or the spider, what boring friends.

He had Moacir and Cauê on his side; they did not seem in any great hurry to go back into the forest. They had liked playing football the way they had over the last while, and they were toying with the hint Antônio had let drop—they had no idea how much he had bitten his tongue over it afterwards—that, having seen them play during the tour, a couple of clubs had got in touch with him to ask whether the boys might be interested in a contract.

And if they ever seemed to be wavering, Yamandé had already worked out that it was enough to mention the bicycle to make Moacir pull a face at the thought of the tangle of the forest, and to talk about Gabrielita to see the hope of that famous hammock light up again in Cauê's face.

And in fact, speaking of hammocks, Yamandé himself had half an idea of going back to see Joana, the physiotherapist, who was so tall and big and had those broad, light hands, and who perhaps, perhaps, would like to go on teaching him Portuguese.

Antônio offered Isabel another beer before going home for supper: he would have felt a little uncomfortable leaving his parents to have supper alone with the boys, trying to untangle their bad tempers and small quarrels without even understanding their language. They already did a great deal, an enormous amount, for all of them, and even Janita, who had found herself acting as elder sister to a whole band of big lads who got up to one thing and thought up a hundred more, patient and affectionate though she was, was beginning to show signs of impatience.

Isabel accepted willingly; she had other plans for supper herself and wanted to be in time to get back to the hotel where she had decided to stay with Robert and change. Antônio plainly took no notice whatever of what the people he was talking to were wearing—*perhaps in his head he sees everybody naked and free with nothing but the breeze on their skin*, she thought with a dreamy little laugh—but Robert appreciated a well-dressed woman, and she appreciated his appreciating it.

The conversation went on easily. Antônio had decided by now that Isabel's offer to take care of the legal and practical side of putting their small part of the forest under protection was not only the one road that was actually passable but also the best he could find. He had already put her in touch with Mariana and, since thank heaven the two of them had got on very well together, their combined skills would be effective, or so Antônio hoped.

Of course, seeing the whole business through would take a little time and it would be necessary to put off the return to the village, but Antônio necessarily had to be reachable, at least to sign the papers and approve what Isabel and Mariana did: if he disappeared into the forest again the project could not even get started.

Having to wait rather saddened him. He had already got it into his head that now that Yamandé was entirely back on his feet they would be able to plan the departure within a very short time, and the urgency of seeing Janaína and Ybyráatã again, of seeing again the scented, sounding green of the village, of returning victorious to the tribe with their mission accomplished, had grown strong; in some ways he really could not wait to leave.

But to console him, and it was a consolation so valid that his eyes lit up at the mere thought of it, there was the fact that staying on a little longer in Macapá meant being able to watch the World Cup, and, well, that could not exactly be called nothing. Even so, the mere thought of it made him laugh: his mother, his sister and his father sitting with him in the living room together with seven Indians politely arranged in a circle in front of the television, windows open and flags at the ready, in their underwear, peanuts and beer for everybody, cheering.

3.33 Cries

The cries and the laughter ringing from one end of the bus to the other. The thousand noises of the road seem to have vanished, covered by the noise of youth and light-heartedness. And in their heads, they already know that the most radiant and exalted cries will be the ones that come out of their throats a month from now. They are not yet so high up as to tower over the world, but they are close. Only the strongest and bravest get so high that they can let their eyes range over the infinite immensity of the stands and understand that you have arrived at the top, that higher than this you cannot go. They have never yet felt this sensation, but they have heard it described many times. And today they are the strong and brave men who will have to perform the feat. Soon it will be they who burst the white nets that surround them, and they who tell children what it feels like to climb to the roof of the world.

The sound of the laughter and of the shouts of self-encouragement covers everything: the sound of the music coming out of the earphones of those who only wanted to relax, the sound of those who are chatting to their neighbour, heedless of the task that awaits them. And the sound of something metallic bending under the mighty thrust of the vehicle and then snapping.

Then there is a moment of silence, and then the sounds are ugly, they become noises. Noises that should not be there: noises of other metal parts snapping, noises of fear, noises of a terrible crash. And then the cries of pain and despair.

Chapter 4

4.1 *That said*

The bus had turned over on itself and lay wheels in the air on the edge of the carriageway, with one side ripped open as though somebody had gone along scoring it with a chainsaw instead of a key.

The first motorists who arrived on the spot and got out of their cars to help noticed the colours of Brazil painted on the side. Then somebody noticed that the bus looked brand new and that the design was different from that of the many buses advertising the imminent World Cup, and somebody else read the words “Get ready! The sixth is coming”, which had been chosen as the national side’s official slogan, arousing a great deal of controversy among all those who remembered the disaster of 1950.

“Perhaps they’ve written it on all the buses?”

“I don’t know, I don’t know. I said it would bring bad luck.”

As the doubt grew, the first-aid operations became more frantic.

Three sturdy men set to work with a will to lever the door off its hinges so as to force a way inside, and when the first of them managed to get in and let his eyes rest on that face he had seen so many times on television, and then on another and another, the confirmation came, and the desperate cries of the rescuers were louder in intensity than those of the injured calling for help.

Nobody died. That said, it was an absolute tragedy: on board the bus was travelling the entire Brazilian national team, who were to have made their World Cup debut two weeks later, and almost all the players seemed to have cut or broken something. From the very first television reports and the first articles in the online papers, from the very first discussions in the street, in the bars, in workplaces, everybody seemed to think the same way: having discharged at the start of the conversation the duty of feeling relieved at the absence of still more tragic outcomes, one moved on to examining the grave consequences such a hard blow might have on the Brazilian national team. So much so that the expression rapidly became a catchphrase: “Nobody died. That said...”

4.2 *Like*

Like all her compatriots, Yaia too had been swept up in the whirl of incredulity and despair that followed the News (it had immediately become the News; there was no need to specify which). A little message from Dani on WhatsApp, full of weeping faces and exclamation marks, had made her switch on the TV, and for two hours she had watched all the news bulletins, all the reports from the motorway, from the hospital, the reactions from abroad, the President's message of encouragement, the whole thing punctuated by the incessant beep announcing the arrival of new messages from her friends via WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter and every other app she had installed on her phone. It was being talked about in the Ruzzle chat as well, and an old discussion on Orkut had even come back to life. Then, all at once, she had switched off the TV, the computer and the mobile, in search of peace. She wanted to sleep, but the peace did not come, disturbed by the commotion from the kitchen where her parents and her brother were arguing about some road safety law she had not caught and which at that moment did not interest her.

With her head resting on her beloved spelt-filled pillow she had let her gaze wander in the half-light over the pictures hanging on the wall, which recorded the evolution under way in her sixteen-year-old's little bedroom. The only poster of the old guard still holding out, more for reasons of historical affection than anything else, was the Justin Bieber one Fábio had given her three years before. The others had been replaced by photographs and cuttings that showed a Yaia who was more mature and more aware of the problems of the world around her. A Greenpeace poster, the framed ticket from a Titãs concert, photographs of Camila Vallejo and of Kennedy. The sporting side was covered with magazine cuttings of the three fittest players in the national side who, ball in hand and very little on, drew attention to their extra-footballing qualities, and, beside them, a photograph of Moacir, that young Indian who was not at all bad-looking himself (not at all, not in the least bad-looking) and who, from what she had seen on TV, did pretty well on the pitch too.

Her gaze went back briefly to JFK, who invited her to ask herself what she could do for her country. And then again to the three hunks of the Seleção and to Moacir, Seleção and Moacir, with that sensation of an idea forming not in the head but in the chest and then, at last, rising and showing itself in all its clarity.

She switched the Mac back on, tapping on the desk with a green-varnished nail in quivering anticipation, and as soon as it was possible she connected to Facebook. A short search revealed several mourning groups for the accident, among which "Let us pray for the Seleção and for all Brazil" already had over twenty thousand members. And countless pages had already been created in support of the call-up of this or that footballer, filled with discussions in which reasonable people set out their point of view with the customary composure: "Oreste is brilliant, it was an injustice that they didn't call him up before, it's destiny that has kept him back for this occasion." "If they call him up I hope the bus has another crash." "One can tell you've never seen a football match in your life ;-)" "One can tell you're blind :-D" and so on and so forth.

Yaia pushed back her tangerine-coloured fringe and noted with satisfaction that nobody had had her idea yet. She clicked on Create Page, wrote "Send the Asu Ka'a to the World Cup", chose as the cover a fine photograph of one of the boys in the middle of a spectacular overhead kick, pressed Enter and looked with satisfaction at her work. While she was thinking over the next step she saw that the first two "Likes" had already appeared on the page: Fábio's (well, obviously! The fact that it had taken him all of twenty seconds was almost suspicious: could his crush on her be starting to fade?) and her cousin Patricia's.

Then the other Likes had followed from the usual friends she interacted with most, including her grandmother's, which Yaia returned with a little heart, wondering what she was still doing awake at that hour (*but perhaps Granny is wondering the same about me, LOL*). Thirty-nine Likes in half an hour, at one in the morning: it was decidedly her greatest success since she had been on Facebook. She hesitated a while over the "suggest this page to all your friends" button, which she was generally very much against, but this time it was for a good cause. She clicked on Send and within a quarter of an hour she had reached sixty-seven Likes. The first two from unknown friends of friends, one Fernanda Greenpeace and one Victor Menezes, gave her a great deal of satisfaction, and with the satisfaction calm finally arrived as well. She switched the computer off again and as soon as she laid her head on the pillow she felt she was already about to fall asleep, but she had time for one last thought: *imagine how cool it would be if tomorrow morning I wake up and there are a hundred Likes*.

When she woke up the Likes were nearly a thousand and some discussions had already appeared about which of the six Indians were the most suitable to go and strengthen the Seleção, and in what position. Yaia was electrified and decided to skip breakfast so as to look after the page better. She found a photograph of each of the six (Antônio she discarded without even a thought. Had she thought about it, though, the thought would have been "too old, and anyway he isn't a real Indian") and created six dedicated posts, enriching them with the little information she managed to find in those twenty minutes. Then she left the house and ran to school.

At the Colégio Sagrado Coração de Maria in Brasília there was a strict ban on using mobile phones in class. In two years Yaia had never broken it, but that morning resisting the temptation was much harder than usual. At the first break she ran to the lavatories with her trusted friends and switched on her phone, but she was met by a disappointing result: one thousand and twelve Likes. Dani let out an incredulous shriek and so did Leticia, who however noticed Yaia's disappointed expression. "A thousand Likes? But that's amazing, it's insane! What's that face for?"

"No, it's that we were at a thousand already this morning when I left the house; I was hoping it would catch on faster. Maybe it's run out of steam. Oh well, never mind."

"Are you mad? Do you know anybody with a thousand Likes on a page that isn't I Love Justin Bieber or LeoDiCaprio Marry Me? You should be showing off about this from now till next week, never mind!" Leticia tried again to encourage her, and was instantly withered by the look from the other two: how dared Leticia forget the affront suffered at the hands of their arch-enemy Maria Eduarda, who held the school record with over three thousand Likes on a shamelessly ingratiating page describing the school.

"Ah, of course. I always forget. Oh well, but everybody knows Eduarda's page had Likes her father bought."

"Be that as it may," Dani cut in, more pragmatic, "you mustn't give up. Have you put the link on Twitter yet? WhatsApp? No, eh? Come on, let's get this page going round, because I want to see a different expression on Eduarda's face."

From: fernanda.silva@greenpeace.br—Time: 10.39 To: [greenpeace girls + Amigos da Terra] Subject: Nice idea

Hi girls,

last night I was wandering about half in despair on Facebook when I came across this page: “Send the Asu Ka’a to the World Cup”. It’s a nice idea, isn’t it? What do you say, shall we try spreading it and see where we get to?

Kisses F

Towards midday, awake for no more than twenty minutes, Victor Menezes was having breakfast in front of the computer, looking for an angle for a piece to send to the “Jornal de Taguatinga”, the local news site he contributed to. Obviously he wanted to talk about the News, but he was trying to give it an angle different from the thousands of other pieces that talked of nothing else, when that Facebook page he had marked with a Like the night before came into his mind. He found it again, took a look at the profile of the girl who had created it, thought: *that’ll do*, and within ten minutes had sent off his piece.

At five past one, as soon as the bell rang, Dani switched on her phone and immediately looked for the page Yaia had created. At first glance she pulled a face of disappointment, but then she realised she had misread and that the number of members had one figure more than in the morning. Without even showing the screen to her friends, she ran all the way to the next classroom, just in time to run into Maria Eduarda and slap the hard truth in her face: “Yaia’s page has eleven thousand members and not one of them paid for by Daddy!”

At half past three Jaci, from his little bedroom in the centre of Manaus, came across Yaia’s page, which had sixteen thousand members. Jaci was thirteen. Until two months earlier his name, which his parents had told him was an ancient indigenous name, had never much appealed to him. But since the story had come out about those Indians who played football brilliantly and one of them was even called the same as him, he had become extremely proud of it and had also invented a series of abstruse stories about blood ties with ancient warriors of the forest. He had recorded all their matches broadcast on TV, and now he prepared a montage with their most spectacular passages of play. He uploaded it onto Yaia’s page, with the comment: “With champions like these, the cup is ours.”

At seven in the evening Yaia could not take her eyes off the computer. The page she had created less than twenty-four hours earlier had more than thirty thousand members, thanks partly to the beautiful video uploaded by Jaci00, a bright young lad she had finished chatting to a few minutes before.

The next day Dani and Leticia came to fetch her in the afternoon, then they called in nearby to pick up her cousin Patricia and went off to celebrate. Yaia felt euphoric, but also a little ridiculous, because she could not suppress the sensation of being a famous person incognito. *Ah, if you knew who I am...*

While the girls were dancing, in newsrooms all over the world thousands of sports journalists were trying to repeat Victor Menezes’s morning feat: to manage to find an original angle for talking about the sensational news of the crash of the Brazilian national team’s bus. Elmar Stod, a young sub-editor at CNN who was engaged to an anthropology student at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, thought back to some conversations he had had in the preceding weeks with Jill about that Amazonian tribe that had recently come to prominence. He looked for some information online and came across first Jaci00’s video and then Yaia’s page. *There’s a nice little article in this*, he thought with satisfaction.

Yaia got home at two in the morning and out of superstition decided not to check her phone or switch the computer back on, and went straight to sleep. *Let’s see tomorrow*, was her last thought.

When she woke up she dragged it out even longer. A teacher was away, so school started two hours later: she had a long shower and then a substantial breakfast with milk, kamut bread and lime marmalade. She was making up her mind to go and switch on the computer when she heard a hail of blows on the door. She opened it, only to be swept aside by Patricia, who in her hurry had not even straightened her hair. “Aren’t you going to say anything? Do you realise?”

“Say anything about what? The page?”

“Yes! Haven’t you checked yet this morning?”

“No...” Yaia replied, already quivering with excitement.

They ran to her room and waited for the Mac to start up, with Yaia giggling as she watched her cousin’s agitation. She opened Facebook and abruptly stopped laughing.

Two million four hundred thousand seven hundred and eighteen Likes. The page had been mentioned in a story on CNN.com, and from there picked up in a cascade by all the leading newspapers in the world, as the line of dawn moved across the earth waking its inhabitants.

Yaia’s immediate instinct was to check how many Likes the President’s page had: 450,000. Ha! *And to think that until yesterday I was competing with Maria Eduarda.* Then she checked the previous President’s: 765,000. Hers had even more Likes than the page of the Seleção itself.

When she had finished her round of comparisons she felt hollowed out, not knowing what else to do. She could spend the time being hypnotised by the Likes counter, which was rising at a rate of a hundred a second, but then she turned to Patricia, who in the meantime had started snivelling, and hugged her. “And now what?”

A few minutes later her mother came into the room out of breath, holding out the telephone: “It’s a producer from Rete Globo. They want to talk to you.”

4.3 Call-up

From the mobile lying on the little table beside the bed came the national anthem, which the coach, with a sarcasm that anyone who did not know him well might have mistaken for servility, had assigned to one number in particular.

“Ohjesusredeemer. And what does she want this time? What on earth can I tell her that’s any different from last night?”

“Perhaps she only wants to hear how you are,” suggested the nurse who had just finished settling him back in the bed.

“Welcome to planet earth, young extraterrestrial,” the coach addressed her. “Do disinterested politicians exist in your galaxy?”

He pulled himself up with difficulty, levering himself on his unbroken arm and trying to reawaken the pain in his ribs as little as possible, turned down the volume of the TV, which was showing him in the act of informing the nation of what he had said the evening before and would repeat now, and answered: “Madam President! What a pleasure to hear from you again today!”

After a long and useless exchange of civilities, the coach brought her up to date on the state of the situation, which was in fact the same as the day before and the day before that. In view of the exceptional nature of the event, FIFA, with the unanimous agreement of all the other participating countries, had decided to grant Brazil the maximum flexibility in settling the list of the players called up, which now had to be fixed by the eleventh of June, the day before the start of the World Cup.

Of the twenty-three players involved in the crash, three had come out almost unhurt, apart from a few knocks or minor cuts. Another five, including Foguete, had more serious injuries which would prevent them taking part in the first matches, but which perhaps—perhaps—might mend in time for the final stage of the tournament. The other fifteen were out of action: between broken legs, arms, heads and ribs, they all had prognoses ranging from two to six months.

“It’s a tragedy, but that said, it still seems to me a miracle that you’re all alive,” the President said, almost whispering.

The coach nodded with a shiver and went on with his report: “In agreement with my staff I have already drawn up the list of players to be called up, and we are getting in touch with them as we speak. Obviously they are all sorry about the fate that has befallen their team-mates...” *yes, of course, terribly sorry*, thought the coach, *I don’t think*, “but at the same time they are honoured to have been called on to fly our flag high in this moment of great difficulty. They are all players of such quality that I have no doubt that with the help of god and of the Brazilian *torcida* the trophy will be ours all the same.”

The coach put his brain on pause, ready to let the useless rigmarole of good wishes and closing encouragements fade out, the country is counting on you and blah and blah and blah, and was instead surprised by a little cough from the President, who cleared her throat and said: “Ahem. Well, on that subject...”

“Are they all idiots? Are they ALL COMPLETELY IDIOTIC? You there, what, what’s your name!” the coach addressed the nurse who, in a corner, was moving her stunned gaze from the dent in the wall to the remains of the mobile scattered over half the room.

“Natália, sir.”

“Natália, tell me something: after our crash, while I was unconscious, did the whole nation by any chance bang its head on the table, so that now we’re surrounded by two hundred million imbeciles?”

“I... I don’t think so, sir.”

“No, because I can’t explain it to myself any other way, holiestmotherofgod.”

He made as if to take the mobile from the little table and remembered with annoyance that he had just hurled it against the wall.

“Rosita, would you lend me your phone a moment?”

“I don’t have it with me while I’m working, sir,” lied Natália, her eyes fixed on the remains of the iPhone (*I wonder whether Chico can put it back together and make it work again*, she thought).

“It doesn’t matter, I don’t know a single number by heart any more anyway, damned technology! Listen, do me a favour: go to one of the players who are in here and tell him the coach says to telephone Thiago and get him here as soon as possible.”

“Very good, sir.”

“And tell him to bring me a new phone as well!” the coach shouted after her, and then went back to talking to himself as Natália hurried out of the room.

“Facebook. Twitter. The internet. But blo... But what the hell is she talking about? Aaahhmm, I’ll smash the place up, I’ll smash it. God, let me get my hands on the cretin who came up with this brainwave!”

4.4 Thiago

Thiago helped the coach into the smart suit that had just been delivered to him.

“Can you believe it? There are only a few days left before the tournament starts, we have to begin again practically from scratch, and these lunatics are making me waste time on this... this... a petition for Indians at the World Cup! Can you believe it, holiestgod? Ow, do be careful!”

The coach was in full flood; Thiago confined himself to helping him dress and nodding at whatever he said.

“They start a petition on Facebook and I have to sit and listen to them, as though it were a serious matter. But the world has gone completely mad, I tell you! Ouch!”

Thiago nodded and knotted his tie as best he could, considering that the coach did not stay still for a second.

“And what a petition! A group of lads who don’t even speak Portuguese and have never played a real match in their lives. Why not start a petition to give FIFA to the Italians or the Germans while we’re at it, I ask you. Ow. Look, I’d have taken more seriously a petition asking us to call up Ronaldo, Zico and Pelé. But perhaps I’d better keep quiet, better not give them any more ideas.”

The “keep quiet” possibility would not have displeased Thiago, but he did not have many illusions about it. And rightly so.

“All right, Thiago, thank you. Listen, I’ll go to the TV studios by taxi, there’s no need for you to come with me; I need you on another front. Get on the phone, on the internet, on anything, and find me a legal hook that stops me calling them up, you never know, these incompetents might be serious.”

The coach signed the early discharge papers with his poor arm, said a warm goodbye to the medical staff who had looked after him, and asked for a taxi to be called for him.

Thiago was on the phone and already talking to somebody. *Good boy*, thought the coach, and finally allowed himself a smile.

4.5 Live

A thousand kilometres away, Yaia's mother threw open the door of her room. "The car from Rete Globo is here. Are you ready?"

"Coming right now." Yaia gave herself a last check in the mirror, one very last touch with the lipstick, then turned towards Patricia, Dani and Leticia and received their approval and three encouraging kisses. She glanced once more at her mobile, fixed on her Facebook page. Fourteen million Likes. The official 2014 World Cup page comfortably overtaken. As the very last thing she glanced at the Justin Bieber poster: *feeling my breath on your neck, are you, my lad?* She winked at him and went out.

The traffic along the W3-Norte was even more tangled than usual and Yaia arrived at the Rete Globo studios behind schedule. She was hurried into the little make-up room, where a make-up artist as friendly as she was professional sat her down in a small armchair and, in the time it took to say "Oh, my girl, what marvellous make-up, you can tell it's your first time on TV and you'd taken trouble over it, eh? You're perfect as you are, just a little touch-up, and after the programme we'll have a chat and you can tell me exactly what you used," had already taken it all off, redone it and restyled her hair in a completely different way.

As soon as it was finished, Yaia was pushed into the studio by the production assistant, fitted with a microphone and settled in one of the two small armchairs. She greeted absent-mindedly the lady in a suit already sitting in the other armchair and started looking about her with the curiosity of a child: the cameras, the various operators crowding around them, the three giant screens, one connected to the central studio and the other two to smaller studios similar to the one she was in.

Pity the audience is only in the central studio, she thought; but perhaps it's better this way, at least I won't get nervous. Which is odd, really, because why be afraid of getting nervous in front of a hundred people in a studio, when you know there are millions of people watching you through the TV? And only at that moment did it come into her head that the millions of attentive people in front of the TV really were there and were a great deal more daunting than the millions of people who had put an absent-minded like on her Facebook page. Oh god! Millions of people! Let's hope I don't make a terrible fool of myself; I'm sure Maria Eduarda is out there waiting for nothing else.

"Are you nervous, dear?" the lady asked her kindly. "Don't be. You're young, and you young people are all good-looking, you always come over beautifully on television. And you seem to me a clever young woman as well as a pretty one. It'll all be fine."

"Uh? Ah, thank you," Yaia replied with a smile. To return the kindness she decided to go along with this attempt at conversation and was about to ask the lady whether she, on the other hand, had been on television before, when she finally recognised her. "Ohjesus! Forgive me, I hadn't recognised you at all. In the flesh you look much younger," she added, immediately wondering why she had said such a thing.

"Then I shall have to have somebody sacked," retorted the President, winking at her.

"Your Facebook page is nice," Yaia said then, still wondering: *but what am I saying? Oh god, I've lost control of my brain.*

"Coming from a super-expert like you, that's an enormous compliment."

Before Yaia could carry on with her delirium, the floor manager made a series of signals, everybody moved with consummate dexterity, the lights changed intensity and the programme began.

“Ladies and gentlemen, good evening and welcome to this special edition of ‘Bom Dia Copa do Mundo’,” declaimed the presenter from the central studio in Rio de Janeiro, already savouring in advance the ratings record the programme was going to set. “In the studio with us we have Gerson Louis Ribeiro Cardoso, president of the Brazilian Football Federation, and Professor Everaldo Conrado de Mello Dias, anthropologist at the Universidade do Rio de Janeiro.”

[Applause]

“Joining us from São Paulo we have the coach, Alexandre Sergio Gonçalves, manager of the Seleção, to whom we would like to give a big round of applause straight away for being with us in spite of his serious injury three days ago.”

[Thunderous applause]

“Joining us from Macapá we have Senhor Antônio Carlos Rocha de Almeida and his boys from the Asu Ka’a Futebol team. We are also trying to establish contact with the president of FIFA, Hans Mallor, who is however travelling to Rio de Janeiro at this very moment: we shall see whether we manage to reach him. Joining us from Brasília, finally, we have the young and enterprising Yaia Anita Guermães Pereira and, to finish with a bang, none other than the President of Brazil, Silvina Mello. Welcome to you all and thank you for being with us.”

[Applause]

“Before we get to the heart of the matter, a warm greeting to the unfortunate heroes of the Seleção: we look forward to seeing you fitter and stronger than before!”

The applause was deafening and heartfelt. After a further series of interminable preambles, the presenter finally got down to business.

“But let’s start straight away with the reason we’re here. Yaia, would you like to tell us about your idea and the success it has had? We remind our kind viewers that at this moment the Facebook page ‘Send the Asu Ka’a to the World Cup’ has over 19 million members, and is growing steadily and extremely fast.”

Once Yaia had finished her account, without stumbling even once (and it found room for a brief cameo by Maria Eduarda as well), the floor was passed to the coach for a comment.

“The tragedy that has struck us is, precisely, a tragedy. And as the man responsible for the team and on behalf of all the players I should like first of all to thank the whole of Brazil for the affection and support you have given us in these days,” said Gonçalves, looking straight into the camera. “We need everybody’s help, and initiatives like this one are an example of how ready you all are to put yourselves out. But if the crash is a human tragedy, I want to reassure my fellow countrymen: it is not a sporting tragedy.”

[Buzz]

“Certainly, we shall not be able to field many of our leading men, and I am sorry for them, for us and for the whole world, which will not be able to enjoy their feats. But we are not a country that in 2014 happened by chance to have a few world-class players in the side. We are Brazil. We, all of us,

are the world-class players of world football. Even our third team would be favourites for the final victory, so imagine how much faith I have that the newly called-up players will let us lift the cup for the sixth time.”

“And why weren’t they called up before, somebody might ask?” asked the presenter, acting on that somebody’s behalf.

“Because, as many people know, you can call up twenty-three players at most. Brazil in football is like Austria in the downhill or China in table tennis: there isn’t enough room for everybody, we’re too strong,” the coach concluded with a little smile.

[Lukewarm applause]

“But why not give one or two of these boys a chance as well?” the presenter pressed, while the cameras framed the little group of Indians, with Antônio sitting behind them acting as simultaneous interpreter. Most of the boys looked thoroughly bored, but the close-up of Yamandé and Moacir aroused something quite other than boredom in Yaia and in hundreds of thousands of hearts all over Brazil. The director lingered on them as long as he could, but when he saw that Yamandé was about to yawn he superimposed a montage of some passages of play from their earlier matches, which the presenter underlined, turning to Gonçalves: “It seems to me they do pretty well, all things considered, don’t they?”

“But of course they do well. They’re Brazilians too, aren’t they? It must be something in our air.”

[Laughter]

“Joking apart, if they keep applying themselves it isn’t impossible to imagine a rosy future for them.”

The coach had opted to leave the stick aside and use as far as possible nothing but the carrot. “But it is, precisely, a possible future, certainly not the present. Not only do these boys have no international experience, but as we can see from these pictures they have never even played eleven-a-side football in their lives.”

This sentence, as soon as Antônio had translated it, provoked murmurs of indignation in the Macapá studio.

“We can’t even know whether they know all the rules and...” Yamandé sprang to his feet when Antônio translated, but Antônio was quick to pull him back down into his seat before the cameraman could frame him.

It was in any case the presenter who once again interrupted the coach: “This afternoon we also heard one or two other opinions: let’s hear what these gentlemen think, some of you may recognise them.”

A film began in which a number of former world-class footballers, interviewed for the occasion, sang the praises of the young Indian players. From one old Brazilian great they had used the clip in which he said that Cauê’s overhead kick reminded him of his own, while a former Argentinian champion had himself filmed clicking Like on Yaia’s page. The coach withered the presenter with a look.

When the film had finished, the presenter tried to give the floor to Antônio, but Gonçalves imposed himself in order to finish the thought he had begun and, while he was about it, to give an opinion on the film.

“Football is flair and imagination, yes, but it has evolved a great deal since these champions were playing, a great many years have gone by.” (*Take that!*) “Today imagination isn’t enough and above all, though it may seem strange to say so, it can’t be improvised. A great many other things are needed, among them preparation and the habit of playing together. It would be a problem even to bring into the side certain great champions from Italy, Germany or Argentina. Let alone bringing into the side six boys who know almost nothing about football, don’t know the other players and don’t even speak their language.”

[Murmurs]

The presenter announced that he wanted to hand over to Macapá, but that first there would be a short commercial break. This gave Antônio and the boys time to exchange a few ideas about what needed to be said.

When he finally had the chance to speak, Antônio reported what had been agreed, taking care to leave aside the insults that Cauê and Moacir in particular had directed at Gonçalves: “First of all I should like to say that I agree with my colleague.”

Good! thought the coach, surprised. But also: *colleague? Where? Who does he think he is?*

“Football can’t be improvised,” Antônio went on, repeating the coach’s words, “patterns and preparation are fundamental. But it is not in the least true that these boys don’t know football. These boys know football very well indeed. Of course they have never played at the Maracanã in front of two hundred thousand spectators, but they have played since they were children just like every other Brazilian footballer, and they know all our football stories and they hate Paolo Rossi and Zidane like every self-respecting Brazilian.”

[Laughter]

“And of course they can play eleven-a-side. In these months they have been forced to play seven-a-side, and what’s more to put up with an old man like me, because the group that courageously left the village to go to Yamandé’s aid...”

[Dramatic pause. Thunderous applause. Extreme close-up of Yamandé. Thousands of broken hearts all over Brazil]

“...had to be a small one. But on the pitch in the village they have always played eleven against eleven. And I can assure you that their performance eleven-a-side is equal to, if not better than, what you have been able to see on TV in these months in the seven-a-side game. Some of them, individually, are among the strongest footballers around today...”

[Buzz from the audience]

“...and as a team, well, it’s hard to think of a more united one. As for the insinuations about the language, on the pitch you speak mostly with your feet, and that language they understand perfectly.”

The presenter was about to add something, but Antônio raised his voice slightly and went on: “And we should like one thing to be clear: we haven’t asked anybody for anything. Until two days ago we

were living our lives, quiet and content. If anybody wants to ask for their help these boys will be proud to give it, because even though they weren't born in Rio de Janeiro or São Paulo they are as Brazilian as anybody else in this studio, and proud of it. If it is decided that their help isn't needed, there's no problem at all: we'll watch the World Cup in my living room in Macapá, we'll cheer for Brazil and then we'll go back to our village."

"I think we should keep calm."

It was the president of the Football Federation who took the floor. "There are no insinuations and no ingratitude, but it has to be understood that it is also a question of what is appropriate. The footballers the coach, Gonçalves, has called up are all professionals who have worked their way up the hard way, and..."

Antônio interrupted him: "But what do you imagine, do you imagine that in the Amazon life runs along easily and without problems? You put the stress on the word professionals, but you can't even conceive of the effort and dedication needed to play football in the heart of the forest. There's no working your way up that can compare with twenty-two boys who, in order to play football, have to tend the pitch with their own hands and make their ball themselves!"

"Yes, yes, of course, I certainly didn't mean to give offence," the president of the Federation conceded, "but it is also a question of regulations, which we can hardly disregard simply because it seems a nice idea."

[Scornful laughter from viewers at home]

"I don't even know whether these boys possess a document properly so called, but they are certainly not registered with our Federation, and I doubt FIFA would accept their participation."

The presenter took the floor again: "Thank you, Mr President. I'll interrupt you for a moment to greet, as it happens, the President of FIFA, Mr Mallor, who has just landed and has been kind enough to call us directly from the airport."

[Timid applause]

"President Mallor: first of all let us thank FIFA for granting an extension on the timing of the call-ups."

"It really was the least we could do."

The presenter gave a rapid summary of the positions expressed up to that point, on which Mallor commented, in good Portuguese with slight Spanish and English inflections: "FIFA's work revolves around the universal spread and the preservation of this wonderful game. For that reason, on the one hand we are always reluctant to modify the rules, because football is already magnificent as it is. On the other, we welcome with open arms anybody who wishes to enter our great family. It is FIFA policy to interfere as little as possible with the decisions of individual Federations, and we certainly do not wish to stick our oar into the decision about which players to call up. But I want to reassure everybody present and all the viewers on one matter: the rules for whose preservation we fight strenuously are the rules of the game. Bureaucratic questions are there to support the game and must not be an obstacle to those who play with fair play. For that reason I want to reassure the president of the Federation: we have been flexible over the dates and we shall be, if necessary, over other regulatory questions too. Let Brazil call up the players it thinks fit to call up. Provided they are Brazilian," Mallor concluded with a joke.

The coach received these words with incredulity and sought out in one of the monitors the eye of the president of the Federation, who wore the expression of a child whose prepared excuse for not doing his homework has just been taken apart. The programme was drawing to a close and President Silvina had still not spoken. By virtue of her institutional role she had been left the last word.

“Brazil is a great country of which I am proud, every day that god sends on earth, to be the President. The Amazon is one of our chief riches and we are glad to have the opportunity to show how conscious of that we are. There is no doubt whatever that these courageous boys are our fellow countrymen and are as Brazilian as I am and as this enterprising girl sitting beside me. Nor is there any doubt that everybody must do his own job, and that the job of putting the team back together after this incredible misfortune falls to Cardoso, the president of the Federation, to the coach, Gonçalves, and to their staff. But nor is there any doubt that this is an emergency situation, in which the whole Nation has felt it must give its support. And it is as the representative of the Nation that I have asked them to take into consideration young Yaia’s idea, an idea the Nation has supported so warmly.”

The President smiled and fell silent, giving it to be understood that her contribution was over, although nobody showed any sign of having grasped its sense. Did she mean that the Indians should be called up? That the coach was free in his choices?

To break the deadlock, the presenter opened the lines to calls from home.

“Speaking of the pulse of the nation: let’s feel it a bit more. First, an update on the site: we are at twenty-six million likes, three million more arrived in the course of this programme. But let’s also hear the voice of one of those twenty-six million. Hello?”

“Hello?”

Antônio’s eyes widened for an instant and then he burst out laughing.

“Yes, good evening. Your name?”

“Good evening to you all. Most holy mother, what a thrill. My name is Teresa, and I’m calling from Macapá.”

“Oh, a fellow citizen of Senhor Almeida’s!”

“Yes. And not only a fellow citizen, but also a great fan of his and, I would venture to say, a friend. I used to listen to him always, always, on the radio fifteen years ago now, have you heard what a beautiful voice? I must confirm that on TV he’s even better-looking than in the flesh.”

[Laughter in the studio. Embarrassment on Antônio’s part; he did not translate the sentence for the boys]

“Tell us, Teresa.”

“There, yes. I wanted to say that I don’t quite understand all these discussions. How do you establish who wins the World Cup? By playing, isn’t it? There, why don’t you have a nice match, Antônio’s boys against the team chosen by that other gentleman, and whoever wins goes to the World Cup to represent Brazil. Nothing ventured, nothing gained.”

Teresa's brilliant naivety left everybody dumbfounded. The first to recover were Mallor and President Silvina, who opened their mouths simultaneously to say that it was a beautiful idea. The coach immediately declared himself in agreement, rubbing his hands at the thought of disposing of that enormous pain in the arse without looking like a racist, and of offering his newly called-up players a decent training session into the bargain.

In the little Macapá studio there was an excited conference, at the end of which Antônio took the floor and said: "That's absolutely fine by us. But if we're to establish which team should be sent to the World Cup, we think it's better if we play eleven-a-side."

"But there are only seven of you," the presenter objected.

"That's no problem. We'll go back to the village and fetch the others."

4.6 Bureaucracy

Among the millions of viewers intent on following the “Bom Dia Copa do Mundo” special, Thiago was missing, busy hopping by moped from one bar to another in the evening breeze in search of his target, one César Azevedo, identified by his network of contacts as the man they needed. Since it was Friday evening he was not to be found at his workplace as a senior official of the central registry office of São Paulo, and he was not answering his mobile either, so Thiago had been landed with this old-style search operation, which on the whole he was rather enjoying—partly because in more than one bar the request for information had been paired with a *cervejinha*—and when he finally found him he was almost sorry.

“Senhor César Azevedo?”

“Yes?” César replied, without taking his eyes off the television on which he was watching, along with the other customers of the little bar, the World Cup special.

Thiago sat down at his table and introduced himself as an assistant with the Brazilian Football Federation. César gave him the briefest of sideways glances before returning his gaze to the screen. “Yes, I know who you are. What do you need?”

And before Thiago could begin to speak he added at once: “Obviously you need something that apparently can’t wait, but I’d like to watch the programme, so be quick and get to the point.”

Thiago was not enthusiastic about discussing it like this, in public, but the attention of the whole bar seemed to be captured by the TV, so he leaned closer and said in a low voice: “Erm, well, we’re afraid that being obliged to put that group of indigenous people in the team might damage the team itself.”

“Mm...”

“And so we were wondering whether... well... whether it’s legal to call them up, or whether by any chance there’s some law, some regulation that might stop us doing it.”

César said nothing for a few seconds; the only sign that he had listened to Thiago was, perhaps, a slight rocking of his head.

“Did it take you long to find me?” he asked then.

“A bit, yes. Why?”

“It took you a long time because from Friday afternoon until Monday morning I don’t like talking about work, I don’t carry my mobile and I don’t tell anybody where I go to rest. You’ve no idea how many people need favours, all the time.”

Thiago chose to play the do-you-know-who-I-am card. “With all due respect, Senhor Azevedo, we aren’t ‘people’. The people in charge of the Seleção, ten days before the World Cup, are not asking a favour for themselves. They’re asking for help for the whole Nation.”

“So in practice it’s as if all the people who ask me for favours all the time had turned up here together, with all their relatives. Just my ideal evening off.”

“...”

“Listen, lad: win the World Cup, and if your boss wants a document certifying his status as emperor of Brazil I’ll draw it up for him in a minute. But this isn’t 1950. We don’t sign blank cheques any more. And just look over there,” said César, pointing at the coach on the television screen, “does that look to you like the face of the emperor of Brazil? To me it looks like the face of a man who can’t even tell the cleaning lady to put a bit more elbow into it.”

Thiago looked up and thought the fellow was not entirely wrong.

“To me it looks like the face,” César went on, “of a man who is about to do exactly what a sixteen-year-old girl has told him to do. Fat chance of him coming to me to tell me what I should do.”

“But I... but we don’t...”

“And now excuse me, lad, but I’d like to finish watching the programme.”

Thiago got up, defeated, and left the bar, taking the *cervejinha* with him. He sat down on the moped and began to sip it, looking absently towards the television inside the bar and thinking about what to do next. When he had finished the beer he noticed that the programme seemed to have finished too. He took the mobile out of his pocket with a sigh, correctly predicting that it would ring in a very short while.

“Coach!”

“Thiago! Did you find the fellow?”

“Yes. Well...”

“Stop everything! There’s no problem any more. These cretins turned out not to be damaging after all, quite the opposite. We’ll carry on with the call-ups as planned.”

There was nothing to stop, but the coach did not necessarily need to know that, thought Thiago. Better to leave him with the impression of having carried out his first assignment beautifully and of now having to resolve a fresh complication. He got back on the moped and set off, relieved, for a ride round the biggest city in the Americas.

4.7 Photographer

Not even two minutes had passed since the end of the programme when Moacir's mobile rang.

In theory it was the team's mobile, but Moacir had in effect appropriated it. He had become an enthusiastic photographer and, to Antônio's astonishment, he was rather good as well: his following on Instagram grew from day to day, and apparently they were not all football enthusiasts or people interested in indigenous matters.

When it came to telephoning he would hand the device to Antônio with reluctance, and Antônio for his part would take it just as reluctantly, not yet being entirely used to this sort of telephonic ubiquity.

"Hello?"

At the other end was the director of Rete Norte.

"My dear Antônio. I've just watched the programme, warmest congratulations. And warmest congratulations to myself as well, for the nose I showed, ha ha. Naturally I shall have to congratulate George too; I may even have to give him a rise, damn it. It would have been better if we'd never met you, ha ha!"

Antônio did not know how to respond, and the man went on.

"I'm joking, of course; as you well know, we at Rete Norte like to treat our collaborators and our partners properly."

Of course, thought Antônio.

"And on that subject, I've been thinking that our recent collaboration has been satisfactory for both parties, don't you think?"

"Yes, yes, certainly," Antônio had to admit.

"There. If I've understood correctly you have just been handed a formidable opportunity, but you have the practical problem of putting it into effect. The time available to go back into the forest to fetch the rest of the team and fly to São Paulo is very tight. Have you any idea yet how to manage it?"

"Erm, no, but it all happened a few minutes ago; I'm sure we'll think of something, I imagine the Federation will help us..."

"I wouldn't count on that too much, if I were you. Watching the faces of the Federation people on TV, they didn't look too friendly to me. No, Antônio, I suggest you collaborate with those who have already shown themselves worthy of your trust: your dear friends at Rete Norte. May I make you a proposal?"

"Go ahead."

"We hire a helicopter. With that we do a bit of back and forth and bring the whole team from the village to Macapá. And then we also pay for your flight to—"

“That’s out of the question,” Antônio interrupted him.

“Don’t be hasty, I wanted to set out the practical side first; I assure you I would have got to the financial aspect, I’ve learnt my lesson.”

“No, it isn’t that. It’s that I don’t want the exact location of the village revealed, certainly not before I’ve discussed it with the people who live there.”

“I see.” The director rapidly thought of an alternative. “Then listen to this: you’re going to want to reach the village somehow, aren’t you? So we help you organise the return, according to your requirements, and then we take care of the trip to São Paulo. In exchange you give us the exclusive on accompanying you along the journey for the stretches where you allow us to...”

“Hmm... put like that, actually...”

Antônio’s murmur was about to turn into a yes, and the director took advantage of it to fire off his last request.

“...and you give us, exclusively, photographic and video material of your return to the village.”

“Excuse me, but I thought I’d been perfectly clear about not wanting to reveal the position of the village. We won’t be taking any journalist to the village, not even George.”

“No, no, I didn’t mean that. You’ll produce the photographic and video material yourselves, so you’ll have the guarantee that it respects your requirements.”

“Ah.” Antônio considered the director’s skill with admiration.

He seemed to have thought of everything. Or of almost everything. “Mm, it seems to me a reasonable proposal, although I shall have to discuss it with the people of the village all the same. Unfortunately, though, I have to be honest: I’m not much of a photographer and still less of a cameraman.”

“Oh, but I don’t want you to do the filming. I was thinking of that Moacir. I’ve been following his Instagram for a while now, he’s really good.”

4.8 Gambone

When Dona Gesita put down the receiver her hand was all sweaty. The World Cup, no less. Just look at those few scrawny creatures who turned up naked as worms with feathers in their noses, just look at what they had managed to set up. This was an opportunity not to be missed; if all went well, next year she would repaint the front in old rose and put in a veranda with a proper awning. She wiped her hand on her dress and picked up the receiver again.

“Hello, Paulo? Always me telephoning you, isn’t it, I’d have to die before you’d call to find out whether I’m still alive. No, I’m not calling to ask how you are; bad weeds like you are always well. No, it’s that I’ve got something interesting in hand. Tell me, have you still got that old tub of yours? Yes? Very good, now listen to me: this is something big. I’ll only tell you that Rete Norte and the Seleção are involved. Yes, the national football team, that one, and if I say football it’s because it’s the football one. Let’s be quite clear that I’m running the whole thing, because you’re about as trustworthy as a jaguar, but if you listen to your little sister and do things properly you’ll be buying yourself a motorboat next month.”

Gesita knew her brother better than anybody in the world; she had held him in her arms when he was born, and she knew perfectly well that there were only three things in the world that made him move, and move fast. The first was money, the second women. The third, the most powerful weapon of all, the invincible one to be drawn in emergencies, was the affecting memory of their poor mother, who on her deathbed had stroked his fringe and said: “Promise me, Paulinho, that you’ll always, always obey your sister. Otherwise your mama in heaven will cry.”

Women were not involved in the present circumstances, but money was, and in quantities more than sufficient to make recourse to mama’s deathbed unnecessary.

So when the coach from Macapá deposited the Asu Ka’a party in front of the landing stage at Laranjal, they found Gambone moored and standing to attention. The boat had been given a coat of yellow paint, and Torment—another dog, obviously, but why go to the trouble of looking for a new name every time—proudly wore a sequined collar, formerly the garter of the last stripper with whom Gambone had been on friendly terms.

As for Gambone, he was sporting a Royal Navy captain’s cap: a slightly redundant touch, but when his sister had told him the figures he had immediately felt entirely willing to deploy whatever redundancy might prove necessary. He had in fact asked Gesita for a substantial advance. “But what do you want all that money for? You’ve already got the boat, and the diesel costs a tenth of that.”

“I have expenses to meet. Entertainment expenses. I have a hat to buy.”

Antônio had guaranteed to everybody involved, from the director of Rete Norte to the big cheeses of the Football Federation, that there was no problem: once the question of the boat and of a guide who knew the river perfectly had been solved, everything was absolutely under control, you can all find your way home, can’t you? But in reality he was anything but convinced of it. Gambone had played him a nasty trick fourteen years earlier, but as far as knowledge of the river went Antônio was certain he was unbeatable. The skill with which, near the turn-off to avoid the waterfall, he had shaken off a couple of boats that had tried to follow them, presumably journalists’, had further strengthened this conviction. But where to land? Antônio remembered perfectly that shortly after putting the raft in the water they had passed a bizarre confluence of three watercourses which he was fairly sure he would recognise. But from there to finding again the precise point at which they had emerged from the forest—in three months the vegetation must by now have erased the traces of

their passage—and managing to retrace the path back to the village, well, that was still in the realm of absolute uncertainty.

We'll think about it when we're there, he told himself, wondering, not without a touch of anxiety, whether Janaína had meanwhile given him up for lost and hung her hammock next to somebody else's. He was interrupted in his thoughts by Gambone, who was informing him that the aperitif was served: if you do things, you do them properly, that's it. This is not a poor man's boat, a very beautiful boat, the best choice for anyone wishing to visit the Cachoeira do Santo Antônio and go up the course of the Rio Jari. Because to go up the Jari you need not only a very beautiful boat but also a man who knows how to pilot it, Gambone concluded, looking straight into the telephone Moacir was holding. It's on, is it? Are you filming? Antônio, ask him if he's filming. And it isn't for the money, heaven forbid, that's fine of course, but what counts is giving your very beautiful contribution to the Team, giving your contribution to the Country. Even Torment can tell, look how elegantly he's sitting, all he needs to do now is serve the *caipirinha* for the aperitif himself.

From various points of view it would have been more logical for a couple of people to go back into the forest to fetch the team's missing players, Antônio, say, and one or two of the boys. But nobody had wanted to lose the chance to see their own families again, to give them first-hand news, to tell in person all the things they had seen, tried and discovered, to describe the marvels of the world beyond the forest (perhaps passing rather more quietly over the disturbing, incomprehensible, frightening things). Nobody except Piraí, that is. He had muttered something about wanting to stay a few more days to get back into the kitchen with Dona Marcela and finally learn to make *beijinhos* properly. Time was so short and there was so much to do that Antônio had not felt like starting an argument: he had confined himself to asking whether he was really sure he wanted to stay and, on receiving an affirmative answer, had asked his family to do him this one last favour of keeping an eye on the boy and taking him to the airport when it was time to leave for São Paulo.

The other young men were so excited and impatient that they would have carried the boat on their shoulders if it would have got them there sooner. They opened and closed the bags of presents for relatives and friends, endlessly spreading out, admiring and putting away again shirts and caps, necklaces and pendants, plastic bags and bowls, folding umbrellas and forks, mirrors, knives and cans of Coca-Cola.

Yamandé was also carrying a bag with a special kit specially prepared by Janita: disinfectants of every kind, bandages and plasters, antibacterial eye drops and ointments (she had been undecided until the last moment about slipping in a box of condoms, you never know, but the embarrassment at the thought of explaining their use to Yamandé had made her give up the idea).

Moacir had had to give up the bicycle with regret (first clear enough forest to be able to turn the handlebars, and then we'll see, we'll see next time we come back), while Cauê was champing at the bit to tell his friends about the collection of girls he had met during the tour and with whom, very practically, being unable to hold a conversation, he had proceeded straight to the facts, discovering that even oldish girls, over seventeen, could be highly satisfactory.

In spite of the doubts about the route and the impatience of the boys, as restless as wasps, Antônio was enjoying the journey, the smell of the forest found again, the flight of the parrots, the impeccable courtesy of the captain, which almost made up for his cooking, which had remained abysmal. But one nagging thing remained, an unreasonable shadow of guilt that would not leave him in peace. "But listen, Gambone, that cousin of yours, the one with the jeep..."

"I haven't got any cousins, only seven girl cousins each more boring than the last. No boy cousins, though my poor uncle would have liked one. Would the senhores care for another little glass?"

“No, but I mean the one with the red jeep, that Pepè, poor man...”

“Ah, Pepè! He isn’t my cousin at all. I met him down in Santarém, at the Anaconda Vortex Night Club, a nice little place, do you know it?”

“No, I haven’t had the pleasure. But I meant to say, well, if he was a friend of yours, I meant to say I’m truly sorry he died like that...”

“Died? What do you mean, died? I ran into him last month: he’s a corsetry rep in Belém.”

4.9 Piraí

Stretched out on Antônio's bed, Piraí was savouring the sweet taste of freedom. It was a taste whose existence he had only recently begun to suspect, but now that he was tasting it he wondered how he had managed without it for all those years. There had always been something he did not like about life in the village, but only now was he finally beginning to understand properly what it was. Sometimes, as a boy, listening to Antônio's stories, he had supposed it was connected with what he heard in them. But unlike Moacir and Cauê it was not the incredible inventions that struck him, nor was it the football stories that so fascinated Yamandé, Piata and all the rest. It was something more indefinable. And besides, Piraí remembered having felt uneasy even when he was small, before Antônio arrived, so how could it have been his stories that spoke of the thing he had always felt the lack of?

Over the time spent in Macapá and travelling about with the others he had finally begun to clarify his ideas, to understand what attracted him about this new world and what oppressed him about the world he was born in: space, and the lack of it.

Life in the village was peaceful and had its good points, Piraí did not deny it. But, he understood it now, it had always been too crowded. It was odd, extremely odd, considering that in Macapá there were many, many, very many more people than in the village, but in the village you were always together, too much together, too close, whereas in Macapá, paradoxically, there was more space. And there was not that feeling, which he had always found vaguely unnerving, of the way everybody always knew where you were, what you were doing, next to whom you hung your hammock, even where and when you did your business. *It's strange*, he thought, *it was as if there were more air in the city, as if breathing were easier*. And you could even be alone for a while, without anybody finding it odd.

Not that there had been many moments of solitude, far from it. Antônio was a great man, the feat of Yamandé's rescue would be handed down for generations, but he was also rather overbearing. Piraí had never known his mother and a jaguar had taken his father away very early too, he barely remembered him, so he knew he was not the best qualified to make this comparison, but Antônio in that period had seemed to be acting as mother and father to all of them at once. Or rather, perhaps that was exactly the right comparison: Antônio was not their real father, and for some reason this pushed him to increase his attentions, something Piraí had already experienced in his own skin, living through a whole tribe acting as father and mother to him.

However hard Antônio tried, though, he could not be everywhere, and he had been obliged to allow him a few flashes of freedom. And what an incredible sensation that first time had been, he still felt breathless if he thought about it: during one of the first walks around Macapá, when they had gone for the first time to the bank of the river. The immensity of the river, the far bank a long way off, almost invisible, on the other side.

There had been some sort of trouble with Jaci and a fruit seller; Antônio had had to intervene and the others had gone after him, all except him and Ubiratan, who had stayed there, a few paces apart, admiring all that space. *How strange, there was so much air to breathe and he felt a strange thing in his chest, he almost felt he could not get his breath*. But it was a good sensation, he had understood on thinking it over.

Antônio had soon arrived to break into his confused thoughts, had gathered the group together and taken them home to give them a lesson on money. Interesting, like many of the things he explained, but Piraí would have liked to stay and look at the river a little longer.

Then all Antônio's relatives were always affectionate and kind, but they treated them as though they were small children. And, going by Antônio's words, they all seemed rather too concerned with giving each of them a well-defined role: Yamandé is the one with the broken leg, Itaúna the one who's afraid of everything, Cauê the one who's afraid of nothing. *And I'm the one who cooks.*

That was why he had seized the opportunity that had presented itself. The two days after the television appearance had been extremely confused ones and Antônio was even busier than before. It had been enough to say to him "I'm staying here" and mumble something about wanting to learn to make *beijinhos* properly for the man to have almost no time to reply: "Are you sure? Then we'll see you at Macapá airport when we get back." "Yes, all right" and he had been free at last.

Free, oh god. There's still that other little problem to solve, he thought with a shiver. *I'm a hunter, in the name of the Great Anaconda. I killed a caiman on my own before any of the others. And now I'm afraid of an old woman, afraid of hurting her feelings. But how am I going to explain to her what I want, if I don't know her language?* He looked out of the window. It was still raining, but you could tell it would stop shortly. He got up from the bed and headed for the kitchen.

Marcela was busy fiddling with a pan. Hearing him come in, she greeted him with her usual warmth: "Piraí! Have you had a bit of a rest? Good. I'm starting to make the *vatapá*; come here and I'll explain something to you about dendê oil."

Piraí laid a hand gently on her shoulder, waited for her to turn right round and for her to be giving him her full attention. He went over to the tray of *beijinhos*, which by now had been established as by far his favourite food. He ate one and made a "delicious" face. He ate another, again with the same face, then signalled to her to wait. Marcela was watching him attentively.

At that point Piraí pretended to eat another, then another and another and another. After repeating the same gesture a great many times, he made as if to eat one more, but stopped, putting a hand on his stomach and turning the corners of his mouth downwards. Then he looked at Marcela to check whether she had understood.

Marcela made as if to speak, but Piraí thought better of it and stopped her. He went over to the tray of *maracujá* cake, another of his passions, and made the gesture of eating a slice, this time with a happy look again. Then he pointed at the *pudim de leite*, good; the *arroz doce*, really not bad at all; and the *churros*, oooh, what a longing. Finally he went back to the tray of *beijinhos*. He really did eat one, again with a happy look.

He looked at Marcela to check that she was following him and made one last gesture: with his hands he tried to indicate the whole kitchen and Marcela herself, and then pointed at the *beijinhos*. Then he stopped and looked at Marcela again, questioningly.

Marcela smiled at him. "I've understood what you want to tell me, you know? You like cooking, but it isn't your only, your one and only passion. You're right. My Antônio was always like that too: the radio, school, sport. Sports. Well done, Piraí, I'm glad."

Piraí of course understood no more than a word or two, but the tone of Marcela's voice and her expression left no doubt: she had understood. He hugged her, then let out a sigh of relief and got ready to go out: ever since they had left on the tour he had been wanting to take a walk as far as the Fortaleza on the river. But Marcela had one more thing to ask him: she pointed at the tray of *churros* and gave him a questioning look.

Pirai had a moment's doubt, but understood immediately afterwards that she was asking him what his other interests were. He opened the window, at which the sun was already beginning to appear, and took a great breath.

4.10 Shivers

Who would have thought that the tale of Hop-o'-My-Thumb, told goodness knows when, years before, would come in useful. And above all that Itaúna—who certainly had a good memory, but Antônio had not imagined it went that far—would remember it at the right moment.

Finding the point where they had put the raft in the water had been, contrary to his worries, rather easy, since it turned out that, besides the recognisable confluence of the three arms of the river Antônio had in mind, each of them had a memory of his own, a landmark: “Near a very tall ebony tree”, “There was a narrow bend with an old trunk in the water”, “Just as we set off there was a group of jacarandas, it must be just behind there”. But goodness knows whether, once they had landed, they would have managed to take the right path into the forest straight away if Itaúna had not cut deep notches in the trees on the way out: “I thought of that story about Little Thumb, I thought that way we’d know how to get back.”

He had been clever to think of it. The marks on the trunks guided them for a good stretch in the right direction, just enough for Moacir and Cauê—who had already covered that route both out and back when they had found the Great River—to pick up their own landmarks with confidence.

As they walked, briskly now, towards the village, Antônio reflected on how many things had changed in those three months, on how different everything was from when they had passed under those same trees carrying a half-dead Yamandé, heading through a thousand risks towards the unknown.

He was glad he had done it, you only had to look at the boy skipping about, lively, in the middle of the little group, to have not the slightest regret about having saved him, but he now realised that nothing would be as it had been. In a few days they would be back in the city; other boys who had never left the forest would experience so-called civilisation and would themselves be fascinated and disturbed by it; then they would all try together to play out this absurd chance of taking part in the World Cup—he still could not believe such a thing was happening—and then, then they would go home, into the forest. Or would they? Would they really be able to go back to living the life they had lived before?

And it would not be the life they had lived before in any case; it never could be again, now that they had taken clothes and knives to the village, now that they had seen cars and aeroplanes and televisions. He realised that, however things might go, that thousand-year-old way of life had been changed, contaminated for ever. *I wonder whether it will have been a good thing, I wonder. Better not to think about it, it's too big a responsibility; thinking about it gives me shivers.*

But he also got a shiver thinking back over what Gambone had told him: “Died, my foot. Those people have thick hides, people who come from the slums. Not like us. You don’t kill them off that easily. The luck of it was that he had that jeep of that very beautiful red. One of the park helicopters was doing a sweep. They saw the red and came down for a look. They hauled the jeep up with the winch, and that son of an armadillo Pepê was squashed like a nut but alive. He’s got one leg a bit on the short side now, and a battered face, but he was never much to look at anyway. Not like us. And besides, corsetry is a growth sector, he says the ladies are mad for lace, always among the underwear, a fine trade.”

Antônio was glad the old brigand was not dead; he had always been left with a slight nagging feeling of perhaps not having done enough, of not having managed to find help. Knowing he was among the lace in Belém, lame though he was, took a weight off his heart. But the shiver, the dis-

quiet, was at the thought that if he had not gone off, if he had stayed near the jeep, he would have got back to Macapá after a day instead of after fourteen years. And everything, everything would have been different. *Goodness knows where I'd be now, doing what, with whom. What's certain, absolutely certain, is that I wouldn't have a play-off in a week's time to take part in the World Cup.*

4.11 Surprise!

He had imagined the scene a hundred times in a hundred different versions, and as they got closer to home they crowded into his head one on top of the other. His favourite showed the seven of them walking side by side with him in the middle, in slow motion, as in Hollywood films. But in the forest it is hard work walking side by side even in twos, let alone in sevens, and this realist scruple spoils the fantasy for him. Then there were other scenes involving silent, very long looks: himself and Janaína, Yamandé and Kirimà, Moacir and Piata. Or else a noisy, uncontrolled jubilation. He had imagined it in a hundred different ways and none of them turned out to be the right one: he came closer to it with memory than with imagination.

The village could not be far off by now—I think I've recognised a tree. Is that possible? How many trees must there be in the Amazon, a billion? A hundred billion? And I think I've just recognised one!—and Antônio found himself thinking back to his first moments in the village and to the football that had greeted him. *I wonder who kicked it. Perhaps it was Yamandé, TwoSocks. Or Cauê. No, it couldn't have been Chubbycheeks, he was too small then to have a kick like that.* When he had learnt to speak the Language properly he had asked who had struck it at him, but nobody remembered any more. *Perhaps it was Piata, he had a good hard boot on him even as a boy. Imagine if we walk into the village and the first thing that happens to me is that I get a football in the stomach.*

There was no football in the stomach, but the return of the band was marked, as many of Antônio's experiences in the village had been, by the ball.

"Shhh!" It was Moacir, silencing them, who settled the manner in which they would present themselves. "I can hear voices. There's somebody in the clearing, they're playing football."

Yamandé made to dart forward, but Moacir held him back by an arm: "Wait, let's get closer without letting them hear us. I want to make the film without their noticing."

Moacir had taken on the role of the expedition's documentary maker with great seriousness and enthusiasm. Rete Norte had equipped him with five modern mobiles and as many spare batteries, charged. Since he did not have to telephone or connect to the internet, with a minimum of care they ought to be enough to complete his photographic and video report. He had already run one mobile flat during the boat journey, interviewing all his friends and taking countless photographs of Torment. At Antônio's request he had avoided documenting the last parts of the boat journey and the first parts of the walk ("Why don't you want people to know where the village is?" "It's too complicated to explain. I'm asking you as a favour, Moacir: don't make the film for this bit, Rete Norte has already agreed"), and even when Antônio had given him the go-ahead to start again he had not photographed much, partly so as not to slow the group down and partly because he had soon realised that the animals were hard to capture and that the trees, by the thirtieth photograph, were not all that gripping.

But now at last he had the chance to shoot something phenomenal. A group of villagers playing football, unaware of being filmed by an outside eye. Moacir thought that perhaps only at that moment, for the first time in his life, was he close to understanding how Antônio had felt when he arrived at the village. Then he drove the thought away, took the last few steps in absolute silence and concentrated on the scene before his eyes.

Piata was about to take a free kick.

“The wall is terribly badly set,” Yamandé commented under his breath, while he rummaged in his rucksack to get out the present he had bought for his friends in the village.

“Shhh!” Moacir silenced them again. But then he could not stop himself adding: “The wall is more of a nuisance to me than anything else, it blocks the view of the ball.”

“It’s badly set all the same.”

“It’s a question of...” Antônio put in: “before you judge you have to take into account the error of... it depends which side you look at it from.”

“Meaning what? If it’s badly set it’s badly set,” Itaúna added.

“Shhhhhh!”

Piata liked to take his time before striking a free kick. He liked to give himself all the time he needed to study which side to put the ball through, though with the wall as badly set as that there was not much to study: all you had to do was hit a rock at the goal and it was a certain goal. That time, though, he took longer than usual: he looked around him, there was something odd, first he thought he had heard noises and now, on the contrary, from one side of the clearing there was a strange silence, as though all the animals on that side had decided to fall quiet together. Then he shrugged and started his run-up, sighing inwardly already, because a few seconds later he would have to go and look for the ball in the thick of the forest.

The ball had vanished among the trees, as always. They had all seen it. When Piata took a free kick everybody fixed their eyes on the forest behind the goal, to speed up the search operations. For this reason, the appearance at the halfway line of that strange object which looked like a ball but bounced a great deal more was greeted with an extra load of surprise and perplexity. Slowly all the young men went over to it, while it finished bouncing. The bigger of the children who had been watching the match came over too, while the smaller ones were held back by their mothers, who were nervous.

“What is it?” asked Jerujeru.

“A fruit?” suggested Icaribá.

“I’ve never seen a fruit like that before,” said Piata, who was still looking around him, “and I haven’t worked out where it fell from. Did anybody see where it fell from?”

“Perhaps it fell from the great shining bird this afternoon?” suggested Taini, not knowing how close he had come.

“If we’re still playing it means it hasn’t gone past yet, doesn’t it?” Icaribá retorted.

“It seems to me it came from over there!” piped the little voice of one of the girls in the crowd.

Piata was the first to turn his eyes in the direction the little girl had indicated, and therefore the first to feel he was almost fainting when the leaves moved, the branches parted and out of the forest emerged the ghost of Yamandé.

4.12 Nails

As the other members of the little group emerged into the clearing, some of them wearing a strange thing on their bodies that stopped you seeing their chests, the mute astonishment of those present was replaced by cries of joy. Some of the children ran to the *shabono* shouting: “Yamandé! Yamandé is back! Antônio, Moacir, they’ve all come back!” and within a few minutes there was such a commotion in the clearing that beside it the carnival was a pastime for lovers of silence. Antônio saw Janaína’s face and the profile of Ybyráatã in her arms, and felt a sensation of warm wellbeing, immediately replaced by a more unpleasant one. Janaína was coming forward at a calm pace, looking around her unhurriedly. She was smiling, laughing in fact, and beside her, smiling, laughing, with her, was Kirimà. *Is it possible? Jealousy. That unpleasant sensation was without doubt jealousy. Is it possible?* Antônio asked himself a second time, but then Janaína’s eyes met his and the most beautiful smile in the forest cleared away every cloud. Janaína kissed him and passed Ybyráatã into his arms. *Of course it isn’t possible; what on earth was I thinking.*

They were to be, as was clear at once, two days of great celebration and intense emotion, washed down with generous rations of the drink of change.

After a brief interval of happiness, though, the jealousy in Antônio had been replaced by a new unpleasant sensation: guilt. Explaining that they were there for only two days and would have to leave again at once was not in the least easy.

He had brought Janaína as presents two shining pans that had left her open-mouthed, dozens of necklaces and bracelets, the most colourful he had managed to find, with which she immediately replaced the ones of seeds and feathers she was wearing, and a beautiful hammock of sturdy red and blue striped canvas, which she had liked enormously. But the presents had not been at all enough to make a melancholy pout that darkened her face disappear entirely.

“But we’ll be away for a month at the most and then we’ll come back for ever, I promise you.”

“What is month? You’ve been away three moons and already you’ve started talking like the Antônio of long ago.”

“I’m sorry. Month is like saying moon.”

“Then why didn’t you say moon?”

“I do beg your pardon. I’m tired, overwrought and confused, dammit, have a bit of understanding!”

Janaína looked at him to see whether he was doing it on purpose. Only then did Antônio realise he had spoken in Portuguese. And he tried to turn it into a joke and a plea for patience.

“I’m joking, my little frog. I love you, I love Ybyráatã and I want to come back to you as soon as I can. First I just have to do this thing.”

He stroked her cheek and, taking one of the seed necklaces she had abandoned on the hammock, he slid off twenty-two big brown seeds and eight red ones and threaded them carefully onto a long stalk. “There, look. These red ones are the days of the matches and these brown ones are the days between one and the next. Now we’ll hang it on the door of the *shabono* and every day you’ll slide off a seed. That way you’ll know when we’re playing, and you’ll know, the whole village will know, that after each match, if we haven’t come back within three days it will mean we’ve won and

that we're playing the next one as well. And you'll know how long there is before we come back: you see, even if we won every time we wouldn't be away for more than one moon. Then I'll come back to you and we'll sleep together for ever on this beautiful new hammock. Are you happier now?"

Once peace had been restored with Janaína, Antônio took her by the hand and led her towards the river, in search of a quiet corner. When he had made sure they were alone, Antônio said: "Do you remember my stories about the screen and the things you can see inside it?"

"Of course I remember."

"There. In the time I've been here, they've invented screens you can carry about, and in which the images these same screens have seen in the past can be remembered."

"I don't know whether I've understood."

"Look, I'll show you now."

Antônio took an iPad out of his rucksack. He put it into the woman's hands, and she took it with a certain trepidation; then he launched the application for watching videos. And that was how, astounded and fascinated, Janaína met Marcela, papa Italo and all the rest of Antônio's many-coloured family, who sent her lots and lots of greetings and look how beautiful our little grandson is, what do you mean, they're the ones who'll see us, we aren't seeing them now, it doesn't matter, I'm sure he's beautiful, isn't he, Norminha?

Talking to Itátakûara and explaining that not only would they be leaving again very soon but that they needed to take a great many more players with them was not entirely simple either. Again Antônio resorted to his iPad, showing some pictures of the tour that had just ended. The village elder, although the contraption left him very perplexed, was most understanding: "Antônio, you have lived with us a long time, you are part of us. You know that, don't you?"

"Yes, I know. I am."

"Then you should know that I am only the elder of the village; I am not the master of anybody's destiny but my own. I am glad you have told me of your plan, but you don't have to ask anybody's permission. If you feel you must accomplish this undertaking I can only wish you this: may the spirits be with you."

The hardest part of the conversation was keeping up sobriety and humility while outside the *shabono* all hell was breaking loose.

Moacir had understood Rete Norte's requirements perfectly. That was why he had also asked his companions in adventure to wait a while before handing over the presents: he wanted first to photograph and film the villagers busy with their everyday activities. But once he had taken one of his mobiles out of his rucksack, snapped a few photographs and shown the result on the screen, village life had changed for ever. Moacir now had to face the assault of dozens of people competing to have their photograph taken in the most improbable poses. Since the damage was done by now, he might as well calm them down a little: Moacir signalled to his friends that they had the go-ahead, they could do as they liked.

Once the first wave of astonishment and wonder at all the presents had passed, "Beautiful, this is mine", "And what's this?", "So everything Antônio has told us all these years is true!", it was time

for the stories. Kirimà told of the anteater that had given birth right under the tree of the red flowers; Piata brought them up to date on the initiation rite that had taken place a moon before, in which many of the young men had again acquitted themselves excellently, "Although not at our level."

Great interest was also aroused by the rapid selection trials, overseen by Piata, Antônio, Yamandé and Ubirajara, to decide who the other sixteen would be who would make up the group to challenge Brazil. The happy faces of the protagonists of the first journey were great publicity for the new adventure they were proposing: "Piraí enjoyed himself so much that he stayed there waiting for us."

Very few of those chosen showed any hesitation, and in the end even they accepted, infected by the general enthusiasm.

But holding the floor, naturally, were the adventures of the group of boys: a chorus of praise for Antônio's family, for Macapá and for Brazil in general. And as in every chorus, inevitably, there was also the voice outside it, Itaúna's. To everybody who had the patience to listen to him, Itaúna told a version of life in Macapá very different from the idyllic portrait the others were painting.

"The emptiness. It's very strange: there's emptiness and confusion at the same time. There are a great many people, many more than in the village, and at every moment of the day and night there's a very loud noise, but even so it's as if it were empty, as if the people were far away from one another. There are a great many gigantic huts and inside them only a few people live, sometimes two or three or even only one. There are very few trees. And the few trees there are are all small, limp like a man with a fever. And there are few animals as well. And in this emptiness there is the strangest thing of all: a thing they call wind. It's air that moves, but not like here. It moves hard, it bends the trees, if you put a feather on your head it carries it away with an invisible hand, it even has a voice of its own.

"And then people have a passion for making films, but not like the ones in Antônio's screen. Sometimes in the films they pretend to kill each other and people go into a sort of *shabono* to watch people pretending to kill each other and they're happy.

"And they play ball, yes, but they're much worse than us. Our children's team would win against their grown men.

"But above all: the people are different. Many are pale. You know it's said that Antônio too was white when he arrived here. But these are even lighter, paler than a dead fish. Others, on the other hand, are dark like wood after the fire. They're black as night, even in the daytime. You look at them and you can't even work out whether they have a face or not. And they all looked at us as if we were the strange ones."

It was natural, then, for Itaúna, at the moment of departure, to communicate his decision to Antônio: "I'm not coming."

"What do you mean, you're not coming? What about the match with Brazil? And the World Cup?"

"You'll win the match without me too. As for the World Cup, I prefer the one you taught us to play here, when we were children. May the spirits be with you. Take my greetings to Piraí."

Damned hurry, thought Antônio. *I spent fourteen years in the most absolute calm and now I have to do everything at a run.* Just as in Macapá there had been no time to talk to Piraí and persuade him to come back into the forest, now there was no time to talk to Itaúna and persuade him to come with them to São Paulo.

“All right, Itaúna. As you prefer. I’m very sorry. I can’t now, but we’ll see each other again soon and we’ll talk a lot.”

“Yes.”

When they set off again at dawn, two and a half days after arriving, Itaúna was in the front row to see them off, his hand held up high and his gaze proud, with such a fierceness that anybody who saw the splendid photograph taken by Moacir would have thought he was the head of the village. As soon as the group of twenty-three had vanished from sight, though, that same hand ended up inside Itaúna’s mouth, and he spent the next two hours biting his nails as he had not done since he was a child.

They were two hours of growing agitation, which Itaúna spent going over and over in his mind everything that had disturbed him in the preceding three months. But over the images of the gigantic empty huts, of the people with strange faces, of the three hundred Spartans slaughtering each other, kept coming images of his friends, of the football matches, of the growing number of spectators at their games. Over the memory of the noise of the cars came the roar of the crowd at every goal.

Itaúna looked at the sky, much brighter than when his friends had left. *They set off a long time ago*, he thought. But he also thought that a group of twenty-three people advances through the forest much more slowly than one man alone. *Especially if that man is the one who had the great idea of marking the route like Little Thumb. And besides, they’ll lose a lot of time building the... Gambone! There’s no raft to build!* He took the little rucksack he had brought back from Macapá, hurriedly stuffed some food into it, ran to Iracema and finally found the courage to kiss her, then went to Itátakûara: “I’m going to catch them up. Perhaps they’ll need me.”

“Undoubtedly,” said Itátakûara, while the young man, running, was already plunging into the thick of the forest.

4.13 Monte Dourado

A breathless but satisfied Itaúna managed to catch the group up shortly before it reached the river. Antônio was relieved to see him, but that was nothing compared with the relief he felt on seeing that Gambone, you never know, really had waited for them.

The moment they set foot on the big boat, their first contact with the outside world, the group at once divided into two. On one side the novices, those who were setting foot outside the forest for the first time; on the other the experts. Now that Antônio came to think of it, the boys had been truly courageous, right from the very first moments. Courageous in leaving their world and fearless in embracing a new one without any particular awe. But they had never seemed as sure of themselves as they did now in comparison with the others. It was funny to see how those few boat journeys along the river and the Jari were enough to make them feel the world's leading experts in river navigation. To say nothing of the rest of their stay in Macapá and of the tour, which had turned them into latter-day Magellans. The chorus of voices was incessant, the main subject a variation on the classic theme of "Ah, the Jari isn't what it used to be", which amused Antônio enormously, and Gambone too, to whom Antônio occasionally translated snatches of the conversation.

"Ah, this time we've got the boat ready made, but last time we had to build it ourselves. Do you remember, Jaci?" said Ubiratan.

"Of course, only a madman could forget it. And what a boat. Sailing on that was very different. More dangerous, but more fun too."

"And when the hammock with Yamandé in it nearly slid into the water and we caught it by a hair's breadth?" offered Cauê.

That Antônio did not remember, but perhaps it had happened while he was asleep.

"And then we spent the whole night keeping watch to drive off the *jacaré*," Moacir added.

That I'm sure didn't happen, thought Antônio, who did not however interfere, because he was curious to listen.

When they got to the account of the waterfall it was almost impossible to make anything out, because everybody—including an improbable Yamandé—wanted to tell his own version of the story, interrupting each other and drowning out their companions' voices. In this new version of the tale each of them had dived into the water to save the raft or had done something equally decisive for the success of the expedition. And the fact was that, small details aside, that was really how it had gone. They had all been heroic and decisive, and Antônio had to fight against the lump that was forming in his throat.

The waterfall was also, however, the cause of the first disillusionment for the group of newcomers. Gambone had carefully avoided it, and although he had suggested making a detour once they had already passed it so as to go and admire it, Antônio had objected, because he meant to get to Monte Dourado as soon as possible: the marching times were already extremely forced and he wanted to try to tire the boys as little as possible. The decision was accepted by everybody, but among the novices the suspicion began to creep in that "the experts" had taken advantage of it to exaggerate a little.

It was Piata who gave voice to these doubts as soon as the first roofs of Monte Dourado came into view.

“Is that all? From your stories it sounded like goodness knows what, and instead it’s only a bit bigger than our village. Are you sure you didn’t dream the whole thing?” he said, partly joking and partly serious.

The other novices, solid as one man behind their spokesman, nodded in agreement. But Yamandé and the others merely sniggered: “You’ll see. You’ll all see.”

The arrival at Monte Dourado could not have been more different from the previous time. Then they had arrived in silence, almost furtively. Now there was a fairly substantial knot of onlookers waiting for them on the jetty—which rapidly grew in numbers as soon as word spread of their imminent landing—and a good number of television cameras as well. Fortunately Antônio had thought of this eventuality in advance and had decided to take the situation head on. If the first little group of seven had had to adapt fairly quickly to Brazilian life, these would have to do it even faster: perhaps the only solution was not even to give them time to understand what was happening. That was why on the boat he had handed out shorts and shirts for everybody, so as to avoid at least the problem of mass nudity, and had also begun getting the new arrivals to try on football boots.

Even before they had moored, a chant went up from the jetty: “Jaci! Piraí! Cauê and Moacir! Stronger than Spain and Argentine!” At first Antônio did not understand, then he smiled and began waving, while many of the boys crowded nervously towards the stern of the boat, as though to avoid contact with that shouting crowd for as long as possible.

As soon as they had landed Antônio looked for George among the people. He spotted him almost at once, standing a little apart, busy issuing instructions to one of his colleagues. They greeted each other, but with a nod they agreed that for the first interviews they would wait until they were somewhere quieter. Among the crowd Antônio thought he also saw the wild-eyed look of that mad journalist who had interviewed him, or rather who had invented the interview as soon as they got back to Macapá, Pippo, Pispo, what was he called. When it came down to it, everything that was happening was in some way partly thanks to him, Antônio found himself thinking, even though feeling gratitude for a character of that sort was beyond his powers.

Surrounded by the tail of supporters, they headed with George and his crew towards the *pousada*, on whose sign a banner had been hung for the occasion: “At the pelourinho - Official *pousada* of Brazil’s Indian National Team”. Waiting for them on the threshold, like two guardians, were on one side the doctor who was to see to the vaccinations and on the other Senhor Armando, to whom Gesita, in memory of the previous time, had granted the honour of being the only guest at the *pousada* not part of the expedition.

“Welcome!” said Armando, raising his *cerveja*. “Wait while I go and call Gesita.”

But there was no need at all. A few seconds later, summoned by the noise of the crowd, the proprietress of the *pousada* appeared on the threshold with a great big smile that sought and immediately found the Rete Norte cameras. She made expansive gestures inviting the whole band in and greeted them all one by one as they entered, some shy, some bold.

The last to go in, when even the television crew was already inside, was Moacir, who took out of his little rucksack a beautiful flower he had picked in the village and, in a Portuguese that betrayed having been rehearsed dozens of times, said to her: “It’s for you, Dona Gesita”, greeted by a roar from inside the *pousada*.

“It’s for you, Dona Gesita” had rapidly become the group’s catchphrase. Already on the boat, while they were watching Moacir’s rehearsals, some of them had asked more than once for a description of this Gesita and had helped him learn the Portuguese sentence, repeating it together with different intonations. Others had confined themselves to watching what was going on with curiosity; others again, especially the members of the first expedition, had taken a more jocular attitude, and every time they got to the description of Gesita numerous details were added, especially about the clothing, which they knew would not be fully understood by the new explorers. “Yes, beautiful, a pity about those big palm leaves sticking out of her ears...” or “Beautiful? Are you sure? As long as she stays hidden in the trunk with only hands and feet sticking out I couldn’t say...” and so on.

But when they were all inside, Eçaí went up to Moacir and said to him, under his breath: “You were right, she’s beautiful. Very strange but beautiful.”

“The rest of the world is like that too, you’ll see.”

4.14 Calm

“Thiago!”

“Yes, coach.”

“Take a good look at me.”

Thiago looked at him, not understanding what there was to see but already sensing the arrival of some more or less absurd assignment.

“Do I seem different to you?”

“In what way?”

“I don’t know, do I seem the same as before? As a month ago?”

“I’m sorry, coach, I’m not following.”

“No, Thiago, it’s me who isn’t following. I look at myself in the mirror and I seem to be the same as ever, apart from this damned broken arm. But inside I’m not me any more; I’m afraid the aliens have abducted me and replaced me with a calmer, steadier, quieter version.”

“Ah, I see. No, I guarantee you’re the same as ever.”

“Meaning I’m still furious?”

“No, no, I didn’t mea...”

“Well, I’m not, Thiago. I’m not. I’m not in the least furious. But I ought to be. The World Cup starts in three days and I still don’t know what team I’ll be playing with. That is, I know, but they still haven’t given me formal authorisation to call them up. And the mere fact that I have to ask somebody’s authorisation to choose who to take to the World Cup, look, that alone would be enough for me to ask you to go and buy me a bat so I could smash the place up. But it doesn’t stop there, oh no. These lunatics expect me, forty-eight hours before our first match, to have them play a match as well against a team of... of... of... people who have never seen a football pitch in their lives. Can you believe it?”

Thiago said nothing; he knew that his role in such cases was simply to be there so as to spare the coach the impression of talking to himself.

“I thought it was all nonsense to ingratiate themselves with the nation. And I thought that at least the other one, that football Tarzan, would have had the minimum of common sense to go back where he came from and stay there. But no. Hello, we’re arriving this evening, see you at the pitch tomorrow at two, like children. And I, instead of smashing the place up, am sitting here as calm as a millpond.”

Up to a point, thought Thiago, without opening his mouth.

“I look at these imbeciles trying to ruin everything, and I look at them with detachment, as though the leg this dog is pissing on weren’t mine.”

Which dog, Thiago was about to ask, and stopped himself just in time.

“Oh well, at least I’ve managed to talk them into playing only one half, so that whoever wins (whoever, indeed) won’t be too tired when they play Croatia. But if one of those natives hurts one of my men, I swear I’ll get the napalm and burn that damned forest down, the whole of it.”

4.15 *The great shining bird*

Antônio's instructions could not have been clearer: "Still and quiet. Still as when you sight prey and quiet as when you sight prey. Simple, isn't it?"

No, not simple. On the contrary, very difficult.

The incredible excitement of the first flight, watching Monte Dourado grow smaller and smaller beneath their eyes, the sight of the immense forest from above, had brought them all back to the same level: there were no longer experts and novices, none of them had ever been up on the great shining bird before, and Antônio himself had only taken one twice, a great many years earlier. But the first flight had been short and the noise of the little aeroplane, creaking almost as much as Gambone's boat, had been so loud and so unpleasant as to muffle every other emotion. They had stopped over at Macapá, where they had picked up a thoroughly overwrought Piraí, and another short flight, spent almost entirely with their hands over their ears, had brought them to Belém.

In the modern airport at Belém the distance between veterans and novices had opened up wide and visible again. Antônio's plan for surviving the four hours of the stopover, an eternity, was to entrust two or three of the new arrivals to the custody of each veteran, so as to keep them under control.

The great window looked out onto the runway, on which a few aeroplanes moved lazily. So big, so shiny, so powerful; you could have watched them for hours. But raising your eyes you could witness the new and terrible spectacle of the horizon: a dark line bounded the visible, the edge of the forest, and away to the left a slender column of grey smoke interrupted the gaze, lending depth to the view.

The first hour passed like that, in getting used to the presence of such a large piece of glass and to the fact, as was often repeated, that there were not trees everywhere, that all that space without plants was almost inconceivable. *We can do this*, Antônio kept telling himself, still looking at his watch and feeling more than one pang of homesickness for life in the forest.

The second hour began with a mewling that none of those present noticed, except of course that group of highly skilled hunters, the boys just out of the forest. They moved warily around the seats of the terminal, unable to make out where the sound was coming from because of the wide space, which generated an echo that confused them. In the end it was Jerujeru, already famous for his fine hearing and his big hands, who located it, well hidden in the wicker basket its owner had left for a moment on a seat. Antônio, seeing his boys moving in that way, had immediately gone on the alert, but a quick glance at Cauê and Yamandé reassured him: in their judgement too it was nothing serious. Then he suddenly heard the mewling, saw the wicker basket and the ever larger group crowding round it, and understood.

"It's a jaguar cub!"

"A black one?"

"There are black jaguars, I've heard of them."

"But it's small!"

"It must have just been born."

“But it looks big, I can’t explain it, it looks like a grown-up cub.”

“It makes a very strange sound too.”

“Why is it shut in there?”

“I’ll let it out now...”

Antônio arrived too late, and so did the unwitting owner, who had come out of the lavatories, perhaps because of the commotion, and found herself in the middle of a dozen young men engaged in a wildly acrobatic pursuit of her cat, which had meanwhile seen fit to climb one of the building’s supporting beams and hide behind a metal panel a good five metres up.

“I’ll go!” Yamandé’s unmistakable voice rang out through the great hall.

“No, Yamandé...” Antônio began to say, in a deeply worried voice.

“Don’t worry, nothing will happen to me.”

“Yamandé, I say this with all the love I feel for you. If you try to climb that beam I’ll ki...”

Antônio did not finish the sentence. Yamandé had already reached the cat, which had immediately shown him all its contempt by way of claw marks along his forearms.

It took a good half-hour of apologies to get everything back to normal. Antônio thought of a thousand arguments for telling Yamandé off over the business, but decided to keep them all to himself. *Why didn’t it seem this difficult last time?*

But it was the lavatories that were at the centre of the hour that followed, when the first reports began reaching Antônio about the boys’ various needs. Although the young men of the first wave acted as supervisors, and although Antônio repeated like a mantra “Still and quiet. Still as when you sight prey and quiet as when you sight prey”, the enthusiasm in the face of the taps that spouted water by themselves—and the ones at the *pousada* had already left them dumbfounded; they would never have thought there was an even stranger way of seeing water gush out—in the face of the enormous mirrors, of the shape of the white bowls (but if we use them they’ll get all dirty and we’ll be told off!), of the nozzles of hot air for drying your hands, seemed uncontrollable, so much so that one or two of them only remembered their needs once they were on board the aeroplane.

The cry used in the village to raise the alarm rang out suddenly through the terminal: an enormous shining aeroplane was landing, blazing with reflected sun. The boys ran in disarray towards the window; one of them ran straight into the glass; some were entranced, some frightened, one asked where his bow was. Fortunately Moacir and Cauê took charge of the situation and began a mini-lecture, demonstrating to Antônio that they had understood very well several aeronautical matters that he himself would have found very hard to explain in the Language.

The moment was charged with magic: two Indians were explaining, in a language dense with gestures, trills and squeaks, everything they knew about aeroplanes to an audience made up of a group of uncontacted people who had just left their village for the first time. The other travellers, the guards and the staff had focused their attention on this thoroughly anomalous group hours before, and were now witnessing a scene that would have been great theatre had it not been for the fact that nobody was acting.

Antônio, standing apart, had recovered his confidence; in fact he was thoroughly enjoying himself, buoyed up above all by being the only one who understood all the explanations and could place them correctly.

“They’re explaining how aeroplanes work, aren’t they?” asked George, who was travelling with them and had come over in the meantime.

“They’re doing their best,” Antônio replied with a smile.

“You can more or less follow the gestures; it’s the sounds that are really strange.”

“Yes? You think you can follow them? I found them very hard to learn; they’re part of the Language, you know. The same sound accompanied by a different gesture can mean something completely different.”

“Yes, I can believe it. But when they point at the aeroplane, when they open their arms to indicate flying, you can follow that.”

The cat’s owner came over in her turn, curious, and found the courage to ask the question that had been shut up inside her for several hours: “Who are you? *What* are you?”

Antônio thought about it for a few seconds and then replied: “A football team, madam.”

“Oh, you’re that team? The one they talked about on television?”

“I think so; I haven’t been watching television lately, you know, but I think so, if they’ve been talking about a team I imagine it could be us.”

“But have I got this wrong, or are you going to play in the World Cup?”

“We’ll try, madam, we’ll try.”

“And the boys are...” she made a gesture with her hand to indicate the whole group, “that lot there?”

“Yes, that lot there.”

The lady seemed satisfied with the answer, brooded for only a moment and moved away. Then she thought better of it and came back to Antônio, took one of his hands and said, “Good luck. I like you all. I’m sure you’ll do well. Good luck, really” and only then went back to the seat beside her cat, content.

When their aeroplane finally arrived and they lined up to board in the scorching breeze, Antônio relaxed. *We’ve almost done it, one last effort.*

“Are we going near the sun again now?” Jaguariuna asked Moacir, who was caught slightly off guard by the question and thought about it for a while.

“Do you know, I think the sun is magic? Earlier, from inside the aeroplane, I looked at it and it wasn’t any bigger or any hotter. We get closer and it stays the same, that means it’s magic, doesn’t it?”

Jaguaruna made the gesture that means “I don’t know”, while Antônio moved on to counting them for the second time.

“Is something wrong, Antônio?” George asked.

“I’m one short,” said Antônio, perplexed. “I’m counting again because I’m not sure.”

“I’ll help you if you like.”

“Yes, thank you.”

And so, after all those hours of waiting, they had to count and recount three times before arriving together at the conclusion that yes, one really was missing.

They found Icaribá shut in one of the lavatories, sitting with his back against one of the partitions, his eyes streaked with tears—a rare event among the adults of the village.

“We have to go, Icaribá, we have to go and play football.”

Icaribá looked at Antônio with a blank gaze and took a while to take in his words.

“Antônio...” There was something he wanted to say but could not manage to express; he made broad gestures with his hands as if to indicate something. “Antônio...” Then at last he managed to bring into focus what he wanted to know: “Where we’re going, are there trees?”

Antônio helped him up, put an arm around his shoulders and walked him slowly towards the door.

“There aren’t many, but there are lots of other things that can protect us. Do you think you can manage?”

Icaribá walked slowly, his head down, thinking hard.

“They protect us? They manage to protect us?”

“Yes, you have my word.”

“Then yes, I think I can manage.”

4.16 History

Can a match have no story to it and at the same time make history? The spectators present at the Morumbi stadium in São Paulo would have agreed that yes, it is possible.

The final deadline for deciding the call-ups had, as everybody knew, been set at 11 June, the day before the start of the World Cup. But while everyone waited to find out whether and when Antônio's group would be back from the forest, the organisational machine had stayed on standby (technical jargon for saying that nobody had done anything): no date had been fixed for the match that was to decide who would go to the World Cup, and still less had any tickets been put on sale.

By now even a war had trouble staying the lead story for ten days, let alone a many-coloured group of Indians who had gone back into the forest two days after leaping to national prominence. The public's short-term attention had been captured by the countdown to the World Cup, now in its last hours, and by the intensifying anti-World Cup protests in the big cities. As soon as the Asu Ka'a had—contrary to many people's predictions—re-emerged from the forest, an available stadium had been sought in frantic haste, radio and TV had gone back to hammering the story and the box offices had opted for a subsidised price, but the result was that at the kick-off the Morumbi was half empty and the number of viewers in front of the TV was typical of a friendly.

After ten minutes, though, the telephone lines of Brazil began carrying and repeating, millions of times over, the same message: are you watching the match? Unbelievable, turn the television on right now. And a great many of the inhabitants of the district hurried towards the stadium, hoping to arrive in time to witness at least one minute of an event that was passing into football history.

In the first five minutes of play the Indians' team had already handed two goals to Brazil, to the professional players who in two days' time were to wear the green and gold shirt at the World Cup. Of course, all the stars were missing; these were the reserves' reserves, but they were international-class players all the same, and the fact that a team of unknowns was disposing of them with such ease was astounding. The Indians had staked a great deal on the element of surprise: they had thrown themselves forward from the first seconds of play and had scored at once with a phenomenal long-range shot from Jaci. Time enough to kick off and work out what had just happened, and Brazil had conceded a second goal, scored by Cauê out of a collective passage of play worked according to a pattern that none of the Brazilians on the pitch had ever seen before.

Then the Asu Ka'a had drawn breath a little and Brazil had tried to attack, but many of those Indians who up to five minutes earlier had been behaving like forwards were now defending as though they had been born in their own penalty box, and this had generated further confusion among the already bewildered Brazilians. A comfortable save by Moacir followed by a lightning counter-attack had eased the score to three-nil to the Indians by the fifteenth minute.

Before the match the two managers had agreed to the coach Gonçalves's proposal to play the play-off over forty-five minutes. What had seemed a shrewd tactical choice by the experienced coach, to avoid wearing out his team before their World Cup debut, was now the nail in the coffin of any chance of taking part in the World Cup at all. Thirty minutes did not look like enough to overturn the result, and to tell the truth the impression was that even if they had played for another three hours the only possible outcome would have been an even more spectacular victory for the Indians. And so it proved: at the final whistle the score had risen to four-nil to the Asu Ka'a, without Brazil having managed to trouble their opponents again.

And while all twenty-two on the pitch and all the substitutes looked around them stunned, though for two opposite reasons, the first disorganised chants in praise of the Asu Ka'a boys were already going up in the stands.

At the side of the pitch the special correspondent of "Bom Dia Copa do Mundo" was interviewing the coach, Gonçalves; beside them the President of the Federation and Antônio were waiting their turn to speak.

"No, I don't agree," Gonçalves was explaining. "This is not a defeat for Brazil; if anything it's the umpteenth demonstration that our only problem in football is being spoilt for choice."

Antônio listened to the coach's words—and it had to be granted him that he had taken it with great philosophy—but absent-mindedly, busy as he was keeping in check the emotions whirling round his brain. And busy above all trying to prepare, in a few seconds, a speech that would not sound too self-important, but not too self-effacing either: after all, for the last few minutes he had been—*incredible, I have to say it again because I can't believe it*—the manager who would lead Brazil at the World Cup. *Something about the Indians, something about Brazil, something about the worth of the defeated; I'm not asking for a speech that goes down in history, but not something embarrassing either. Think, Antônio, think.*

Meanwhile the microphone passed to the President of the Federation.

"...and the coach Gonçalves's fair words must guide us over the next four weeks. Today there is no defeated Brazil and no victorious Brazil; today one group of players has shown itself more deserving than another to represent our great country at the World Cup, and so it shall be."

Well said, fine words, thought Antônio.

"Naturally the language is an obstacle, but in agreement with the coach Gonçalves we were thinking of proposing to Senhor Almeida that he join the squad in the role of interpreter and, more generally, expert on indigenous affairs. We are confident that in this way we shall manage to make the most of each individual's skills and enable these fantastic boys to represent us at their best."

Eh?

All the words Antônio had prepared vanished instantly; he seemed to see them evaporate before his eyes. He realised he had spoken only when he heard the correspondent thank him and hand back to the studio, but he had not the faintest idea what he had said.

Chapter 5

5.1 Rules

It's as if they told you you'd won the lottery but then, to collect your winnings, you had to let somebody hit you in the face with a stick. No, rather as if you could live in the most beautiful house in the world but the entrance hall stank and there was no way of getting rid of the stench. No, not that either.

Antônio's mind, in a fog for nearly an hour, came back into the light by clinging to a long-standing theory of his: comparisons only hold up to a point, past which they rapidly become bollocks. And anyway, what is the use of making them? Comparisons ought to serve to explain something that is hard to understand. His situation was appalling, but it was not hard to understand.

Oh god, there was no shortage of questioning looks in the dressing room. The boys of the second wave were struggling to understand what was happening: for them the World Cup was still that thing Antônio had often talked about and which they had turned into a good game when they were children, and Brazil was that place where every so often you had to say "It's for you, Dona Gesita", the catchphrase Moacir had started.

The old guard, on the other hand, were understanding perfectly well, and their reactions oscillated between astonishment, indignation and anger.

"But what exactly does it mean that from now on our boss is that one over there and we'll have to do what he says?"

"It means what it means, Moacir. Or perhaps I don't know our language any more?" Antônio knew that the boys were not to blame in the slightest and that being caustic served no purpose, but he was struggling to hold himself back.

"I imagine the coach Gonçalves will be here shortly with his assistants," Antônio went on, "and will explain to us what has to be done now. What hotel to go to, how to train, what to eat, what tactics to play the next matches with, everything."

"What to eat?" said Itaúna, with an astonishment aimed mainly at provoking a reaction from Piraí, who instead looked at him with an air that was part resigned and part "what do you want from me".

Yamandé's attention, on the other hand, was entirely on the football side: "And what tactics do you want to play with? We go out and we win, the way we always have so far."

"This is the World Cup, Yamandé, it's very different. The opponents are much, much stronger."

"But we beat Brazil four-nil in a single half!"

Antônio did not have time to make him see that that had certainly not been a Brazil of legend but a pale, lifeless copy of one, because Brejauva and Eçaí had already shifted the discussion elsewhere.

"Why do we have to change where we live? Where we slept yesterday was beautiful!"

"That's right! We're Brazil now! Brazil has to sleep in the most beautiful place."

Antônio smiled at the thought that the little hotel they had stayed in (Rete Norte's budget did not allow excessive luxury) should seem to them, with Gesita's *pousada* as their only yardstick, the

height of luxury. He explained nothing, they would understand for themselves within a few hours, but he reflected bitterly on how little it took, for some people, to become spoilt champions.

Then, as expected, there was a knock and into the dressing room came the President of the Federation, the coach Gonçalves and a swarm of other strangers, greeted by two or three “It’s for you, Dona Gesita”, perhaps thanks to the misunderstanding of having taken the formula for a general greeting, or perhaps to the general confusion caused by all those sudden conversations in Portuguese. The fact remains that while Gonçalves was speaking, the conviction that he was dealing with a group of idiots settled definitively in his mind.

The boys listened in total silence to the words of the president and the coach and to Antônio’s translation. But as soon as the door closed again and they were alone once more, pandemonium broke out in the dressing room.

“Tonight we have to go to bed early? But I wanted to celebrate!”

“I wanted to go and see the village. When we were flying inside the aeroplane I saw some very tall huts; I want to see them close up.”

“And this madness about not being allowed to paint ourselves?”

“Is that really true? I thought it was a joke.”

“Look at Antônio’s face, he doesn’t seem to me to be joking.”

“But I still haven’t understood who says we have to do what that one over there says and can’t do as we like.”

“That’s how this world is made,” Cauê cut in. “I’ve worked out that they call them rules. They all seem stupid to me.”

The team’s mobile rang. Moacir passed it to Antônio, who took it even more unwillingly than usual. Before he could answer, the dressing-room door opened again and Gonçalves’s face reappeared, with that damned little smile of his, together with that other young man who was always with him and about whom you could not tell whether he looked more resigned or more obsequious.

“Almeida, or rather: Antônio. May I call you Antônio? We are on the same team now. Could you tell my players that they cannot leave the stadium yet? I would like to get them to the hotel as soon as possible but unfortunately there is a whole series of bureaucratic formalities to be got through. We have summoned the director of the central registry office of São Paulo in great haste; he will be here as soon as possible. Thank you.”

Antônio stared at the door that had just closed behind Gonçalves.

MY players?

Then the phone rang again. Antônio looked at it almost without seeing it, weighed it in his hand and then hurled it at the wall with all the strength he had.

On the other side of the door, Gonçalves’s little smile broadened.

“Did you hear that noise, Thiago? It seems Almeida and I have at least one thing in common.”

5.2 Trust

“Before, he wasn’t answering; now it says he’s disconnected,” said Isabel, putting the phone down.

“He’ll have his hands full at the moment. Try again later,” said Robert, sitting on the sofa watching the reports on TV, crowded with commentators still incredulous at what had just happened.

“Yes, I’ll try again later. What an injustice, though. What a terrible injustice, taking the manager’s job away from him. Poor Antônio, when they interviewed him he seemed to be in a trance. I don’t think they’d told him anything and he found out then and there.”

“On the other hand you’ve just solved the Foundation’s funding problem.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, absurd as it sounds, Asu Ka’a Futebol has just earned the right to go to the World Cup. I don’t know exactly how much money they’ll be entitled to, but we’re certainly talking about large sums. I’m almost sorry not to be squeezing a bit of money out of my bosses; I had more than half a mind to suggest a sponsorship to them...”

Isabel opened the browser on her phone and did a quick search. “You’re right. Offhand I haven’t found Brazil, but it says here that qualifying teams get about six million dollars. Good heavens! That really is a lot of money. I don’t know whether it goes to the Federation or straight to the players, but they’ll certainly get a good slice of it.

“Or at least I hope so,” she added immediately afterwards.

“Why do you say that?”

“Well, Antônio told me that at the start there were problems with Rete Norte over paying the boys; the director actually tried not to pay them at all.”

“What a bastard!”

“Quite. And then there are bound to be bureaucratic problems, you know, with the fact that these boys still don’t formally have a document, a birth certificate, a bank account...”

“They don’t even have a name, in practice!”

“In what sense?” This was something Isabel had never thought about.

“I mean, of course they have one, but you know, the tradition of choosing the name to put on your shirt. It’s something I’ve always admired about you Brazilians: it says a lot about the attitude you bring to sport, as though it were still the game it was when you were children.”

Isabel was flattered by the compliment. She liked it when Robert, an upright German architect, pointed out some merit of her Brazil; it made her feel the presence of the shared roots of that humanity whose sense too often slipped out of her grasp.

“Well, but you know, they’re only Brazilian in the sense that they were born inside our borders; I doubt they know this particular tradition of ours.”

“Considering the way they play football I’d be astonished if they didn’t. I’m sure Almeida has told them about it. But rather, you said earlier that they don’t even have a bank account. In that case how was Rete Norte’s money paid to them?”

“It was all paid into Antônio’s account.”

“Ah,” said Robert. An “ah” with a very clear meaning.

“No, hahaha, don’t get the wrong idea! It was all transferred, down to the last real, into an account we opened for the Foundation.”

“Mm, all right.”

“Why are you pulling that face? What is it you don’t like?”

Robert thought about it for a few seconds. He had understood almost at once (almost) that there was nothing between Antônio and Isabel for him to worry about. The passion Isabel put into any discussion concerning him was due to a nature so sentimental as to verge on the rhetorical (and not infrequently to fall right into it), as well as of course to the interest that had lately been rekindled in her towards her native land. For Isabel, Antônio was merely the bellows for fanning this renewed interest. Robert understood that, and for that reason he had until now kept every misgiving about him to himself. But now it was a question of something concerning the Foundation rather than Antônio, so he decided to speak.

“Forgive the question, but do the boys know the Foundation exists?”

“Of course they know!” Isabel replied indignantly, almost without letting him finish the question. But Robert was not intimidated.

“I put it badly, I’m sorry. What I mean is that young Indians who have lived their whole lives in the Amazon Forest and only came out of it three months ago... well, it seems strange to me that they should have all this awareness of their situation. It isn’t as though in the forest there’s an Amazonian Gazette informing them about the deforestation problem or the condition of Indians in present-day Brazil.”

“And so?” asked Isabel, in a tone at once defensive and aggressive.

“And so it strikes me that they should decide to invest their first money in solving a problem they probably didn’t know they had until three months ago.”

Before Isabel could say anything, Robert went on: “In fact, now that I think about it, it strikes me even more that they should have a clear idea of the concept of money. In particular that they should have a clear idea of the concept of *quantity* of money. That, assuming they can count, they should concretely understand, and I stress concretely, the difference between three thousand reais and three hundred thousand.”

Isabel’s face did not promise anything good. Robert raised his hands and felt obliged to clarify his thinking further.

“Listen, I don’t want to insinuate anything. I swear. I don’t quite know myself what I was trying to say. I’m certain that this initiative of yours, of yours in particular, is the best thing for them. That it’s... but we’ve just read it, haven’t we? We’ve just read that they’re going to get a lot of money

now. Then if they go further in the World Cup—and they’ve just shown they have what it takes—even more will come. And I’m a hundred per cent certain that in the world’s leading advertising agencies they’re rubbing their hands together right now. If they happen to beat Croatia the day after tomorrow, do you suppose agents from half the world won’t turn up trying to get them under contract? And I’m only talking about the honest ones. Do you know how many sharks out there are filing their teeth at the thought of twenty-three boys who don’t even have the concept of money and who have suddenly become rich?”

Isabel stood up, pushed back her hair and went over to the window of Robert’s office. *He’s worried mainly about me*, she understood. The lines from Hamlet came into her mind: “Neither a borrower nor a lender be, for loan oft loses both itself and friend, and borrowing dulls the edge of husbandry.”

But what Robert did not have, or had and ignored, was her instinct. She knew, she felt as though a voice were speaking to her heart as a woman and as a Brazilian, that this was the right thing to do. She felt that protecting the village, defending that uncontaminated little piece of forest, was the best way of protecting those boys and their world, their environment, their families, precisely from the sharks Robert was talking about. But she could not talk to him about it; instinct was not an argument for Robert.

“Trust me,” she confined herself to saying, after a long silence. “I know what I’m doing.”

Robert took those words as the signal that it would be time to move the conversation onto another subject. But he had not previously managed to express a thought fully, and clarifying his thinking was a higher need.

“There, this was precisely what left me perplexed: protecting their forest is the right thing to do. But protecting somebody from a danger of which they are not fully aware is what parents do with their children. These are men. Men who come from a particular situation, but men. Are we, are you sure they don’t want to squander everything they have on women and fast cars like their colleagues from other countries? Much as it would certainly be a pity, it would be entirely their right to do so if that were what they wanted. That’s what I wanted to invite you, to invite you all, to do: make sure of what they want. What they want, not what you want, however well intentioned.”

“You’re right. I’m sure Antônio will ask them, or will have asked them already, and to be on the safe side I’ll ask them too. But you’re also right that they’re men and not children. I’m quite certain they’ve already worked out for themselves that from now on there’ll be little to laugh about.”

5.3 Paolorossi

“What do you mean, Paolorossi? Is this idiot taking the piss out of me as well?”

The completion of the bureaucratic formalities, thanks to the help of the director of the São Paulo registry office, César Azevedo, had gone smoothly. Surprisingly smoothly. Apparently there was already a standard procedure for providing Indians who came out of the forest with an identity document and Brazilian citizenship. Antônio had noted to himself that he had never gone to so little trouble over a piece of bureaucracy in his life, and nothing would take out of his head the idea that all this was due exclusively to their new status as players for the Seleção. For a moment it had also seemed to him that Azevedo and Gonçalves’s assistant knew each other, but whatever the reason for that trouble-free procedure, you don’t look a gift horse in the mouth.

Then, though, came the moment for footballing bureaucracy: assigning shirt numbers and specifying the name each of them would wear on his back for the next month. There Antônio discovered that the interpreter’s job could be exhausting. Yes, he had been translating from Portuguese into the Language and back for more than three months, but this was very different. Quite apart from the fact that having just signed a contract changed the whole dynamic, and that the people he was translating for had been seven and were now twenty-three, the thing that put him in most difficulty was translating while toning down or entirely censoring the insults Gonçalves and the boys exchanged without either side knowing.

“He says he wants to know whether you’re serious or whether you’re making fun of him.”

“Of course I’m serious. I’m not a clown like him.”

“He says he’s serious.”

After a series of exchanges back and forth it had become clear that Yamandé would be immovable. Thanks to Antônio he knew the Brazilian tradition of using nicknames instead of names very well, and thanks again to Antônio he also knew the story of Paolo Rossi, who had come back after a long absence a few days before the start of the 1982 World Cup and had then dragged Italy to victory: Yamandé hoped that taking his name would be a good omen.

“This big-headed little sod can see himself world champion already, can he? He wants to follow Paolo Rossi’s career, does he? Then let’s follow all of it: in the first three matches Paolo Rossi played appallingly, so since we’re clever and we already know everything in advance, the day after tomorrow you, my fine young man, are on the bench.”

The moment Antônio had finished translating Gonçalves’s decision, the dressing room went cold. Numerous challenging looks were thrown at him, but Gonçalves held everybody’s gaze, and when he asked whether anybody else had any bright ideas for the name to put on his shirt, for a few seconds nobody answered and many eyes dropped towards the dressing-room floor.

Then Jaci stood up and said: “On my shirt I’d like to write Marcos. I’m sure he’ll be pleased.”

Antônio searched his mental archive of great sporting champions for who this Marcos might be, then remembered the youngsters of the *baixadas* Jaci had played football with, and that small boy who took a good penalty. He explained the matter to Gonçalves, who had no objection, and this restored a little calm to the dressing room.

“Anybody else?”

“Anybody else?”

Cauê noticed that harmony had been restored, and raised his arm to stir the waters again: “I’d like to write Yaia. It’s thanks to her that we’re here. And besides, she’s very pretty.”

Antônio turned mournfully to Gonçalves: “He wants to be called Yaia.”

“And why?”

“I didn’t understand.”

“...Is he joking?”

“Let’s hope so.”

“My god. Help us.”

“Cauê, are you serious?”

Cauê replied, with an eloquent look: “Do you really think I want to put a woman’s name on my shirt?”

5.4 Walls

Moacir
Marcos
Piata

Ubirajara
Itaúna
Taini

Ubiratan
Jaguaruna
Icaribá

Cauê
Piraí

“I hadn’t understood that we’d have to play against the elders.”

“They aren’t elders, they’re all much younger than Antônio.”

“They’re elders. Some of them even have those hairs on their chins, like Antônio. And anyway what has that got to do with it, they’re younger than Antônio but Antônio is very old: if you think about it, it’s as if he had lived two lives and in the first one he was already old.”

“Anyway Antônio said to respect them because these...”

“Elders?”

“...players are all very strong and they all play in the Europe, which is a very old and far away place.”

Antônio was keeping his eyes shut in the afternoon sun. The chatter coming from the boys sitting on the bench a few metres from him, as talkative as a row of gossips, was distracting him pleasantly from a certain anxiety: he did not feel at all easy because of the arguments that had gone on until five seconds before they left the dressing room.

“I wonder what this Europe is like, eh? And I wonder what this place is like, Croatia...”

“So many people, will they all come from the same village?”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“You say city.”

“Perhaps the white and red ones all come from the same city. There are very few of them.”

“There aren’t very few of them, there are many more than us, I mean than us in the village.”

“Perhaps Croatia is a very big village.”

“You say city.”

“Quiet, quiet, some music is starting!”

“What music is it?”

“It’s the festival chant of Croatia, I don’t remember how you say it in Portuguese...”

“Something national, like ‘national sound’, ‘national chant’...”

“Anthem,” whispered Yamandé, “national anthem.”

“Ah, that’s right.”

“That’s right.”

“There.”

“Now it’s Brazil’s turn, do you remember it?”

“Antônio used to sing it sometimes.”

“I don’t remember it.”

“Quiet, it’s starting.”

“Quiet!”

Standing, Antônio sang the national anthem a little uncertainly. Uncertainly because he did not remember all the words properly, because he was overwhelmed by the emotion of the event, of a stadium full of people singing the opening anthem of the World Cup with him, and also because he realised that his boys were the only ones who did not know the words of the anthem, except for Pir-aí and Cauê who somehow remembered a few, and this scene on television would not be good publicity for them.

“Everybody was singing, it was beautiful.”

“My legs are trembling with emotion; I think it’s because we haven’t painted our bodies.”

“I feel empty too without my body painted. Weak.”

“Yes.”

“Me too.”

“Moacir has painted himself.”

“He’s painted himself? Really?”

“Yes, not on his face but on his body and his arms. With one of those pens of Antônio’s. He has to wear the outfit that covers him all over; he said nobody will notice.”

He must have taken advantage of the row in the dressing room, thought Antônio, I hadn’t noticed he’d done it.

The boys had been lined up by the coach Gonçalves in a classic 4-4-2 but, despite Antônio’s efforts to translate his instructions as well as possible, more than one grumble and complaint had come from the players.

“That isn’t how you play,” they had protested, “that isn’t the ball game!”

Antônio had not felt able to report this sort of argument faithfully to the manager of the most decorated national side in history, and had confined himself to telling his own boys that with this arrangement on the pitch too they would have to give the best of themselves.

“Don’t these shoes with teeth bother you?”

“Studs,” Yamandé corrected.

“Very much.”

“Not much for me, but I’m sorry I fell over when they stopped us before we came onto the pitch.”

“It was slippery.”

“Very.”

“I nearly fell too.”

“Somebody from Croatia started laughing.”

“I didn’t see!”

“It’s because we haven’t painted ourselves.”

“You’re right.”

“It’s true.”

They were funny to look at, well wrapped up in their hoodies with the hoods pulled down over their eyes: for the first time they were experiencing a temperature below twenty-five degrees and had had to accept Antônio’s explanation that no, they were not ill, that thing was called “cool” or, if they preferred, “cold”. And for the first time they had understood what a sensible function of clothing might be. But while the boys on the bench commented, those on the pitch seemed more focused on complying with instructions and counting to four than on playing against the Croatians, who began with an out-and-out assault. Jaci in particular, used to ranging very widely, seemed seriously uncomfortable at having to play as an out-and-out full-back, at having to follow the same man all the time, at having to confine himself to an area of the pitch that seemed to him so restricted. And perhaps it was also Antônio’s fault for telling him he had to make sure the defenders were always four and that they always formed a line: he spent more time calling and counting and lining up and re-counting than playing.

By the fifth minute of the first half Gonçalves was already on his feet, purple in the face, bawling insults that Antônio, from the bench—he was not allowed to stand up (and technically not to speak to the players either, except as required for translation)—tried as best he could to convey. From that moment on the refrain “IDIOTSIDIOTSIDIOTS!” would form the background to the first half every few minutes.

“These ones are hitting ours.”

“And the referee never whistles.”

“There, look, another kick at Taini.”

“That one was hard.”

“When Taini makes that face it means he’s in a lot of pain.”

“And yet look how he runs!”

“Well done, Taini!”

“Come on!”

“An elbow!”

“Ubiratan!”

“He’s bleeding!”

“The referee is making signs for him to go off.”

“Yes,” Antônio put in, “the bleeding has to be stopped, otherwise he can’t play.”

“Really?”

“And why?”

“Yes, why?”

“Antônio...” Ubiratan asked in confusion while they treated his nose, “what do we do? They’re hitting us and the referee doesn’t whistle!”

“You aren’t concentrating; during the tour some of them came in hard too and you never complained.”

“Today is different.”

“Yes, I can see that.”

In the tenth minute of the first half a Croatian attack developed along the left touchline. Piata slipped near the halfway line (he still had not entirely adapted to having to wear boots) and let a pass through towards Kovadric who, almost on the byline, sent over a very hard cross. Jaci was converging towards the middle, trying to cover two forwards who had promptly broken free. The ball,

which had worked its way into a forest of legs and had been touched and deflected by team-mates and opponents alike, popped out in front of his feet and he, with no way of stopping his run, struck it and put it into the back of his own net.

“No!”

“How did he do that!”

“He didn’t see it coming!”

“One-nil!”

“To them!”

“No!”

An alien silence descended on the São Paulo stadium and on the entire nation. The few thousand Croatians present in the stands exploded with an unhoped-for and uncontrollable joy. Gonçalves collapsed onto the bench with a savage look; Jaci gesticulated and shouted goodness knows what in his own language. Antônio looked at his bewildered players, on the pitch and on the bench: what was happening was not right, his boys could play much better than this. The situation he was in gave him almost no room for manoeuvre, but he had to do something.

Play resumed with a more cautious Croatia and this allowed Brazil to breathe and Gonçalves to calm down.

“A herd of idiots,” he whispered to Antônio with a suppressed growl, “we’ve come to play in the World Cup with a herd of idiots.”

“What is the coach saying?”

“He keeps repeating the same word.”

“What does it mean?”

It was at that moment that Antônio understood what to do. *It’s a mad idea but it might work*, he thought. *I just have to wait for the right moment.*

“You see they’re elders? I told you so!”

“They aren’t playing any more, they’re waiting for us in midfield so as to hit us.”

“They don’t run like they did before.”

“They’re tired.”

“Yes, because they’re elders.”

In fact, in spite of the confused start, they had got as far as the twenty-fifth minute without any further big scares: Jaci seemed to have decided to ignore the instructions he had been given and start playing further forward, and the more time passed the more courage he took, managing by now to get to the byline for a cross regularly and still be there to cover.

The first to follow his example was Cauê who, tired of staying isolated up front, began coming back to win the ball. And two of Antônio's players on the left flank were more than enough to set up a "poisoned arrow".

In the twenty-ninth minute the umpteenth break by Jaci induced the Croatian manager, worried by his obvious physical freshness, to shift the team's centre of gravity towards him. This gave Cauê more space than he needed: a precise pass, a sudden burst, and the arrow flew straight and unstoppable towards the bottom left-hand corner past the very tall but slow Croatian keeper.

The celebration broke out. The Brazilian crowd, which after the goal conceded had seemed to be in shock, got its breath back all at once and a liberating roar shook the very foundations of the stadium. The bench sprang to its feet and the boys began celebrating in their own way while Antônio, entirely focused, did not let the opportunity slip. He took Ubiratan and Piraí aside and within a minute, pretending to translate Gonçalves's instructions, gave them all the orders he could. When play resumed the boys were no longer following the 4-4-2, although Gonçalves did not seem to notice.

"That's better."

"Yes."

"We can do the silent jaguar."

"And another poisoned arrow."

"And down there there's room for a bow drawn too tight as well."

"Well done, Ubiratan! He's noticed too!"

"Yes!"

In the fortieth minute the Croatian midfielder Modolic took the ball in midfield and with a surprise burst got as far as the final third, where he was challenged by Jaguariuna and went down.

"He dived."

"It isn't a foul."

"Did the referee whistle?"

"But it wasn't a foul!"

"They're elders, they fall over more easily."

"But he didn't fall, he dived!"

The Brazilian players looked at one another in disbelief, not quite knowing what to do. To complicate matters, Moacir was shouting at them not to make a wall and to leave the view of the ball clear. The Croatian players themselves could not believe their eyes.

"What is that idiot in goal saying?" asked Gonçalves, already knowing the answer.

Antônio pointedly ignored him, but from the bench his boys were already shouting uselessly: “Wall! Wall! Moacir! Put up a wall! Look, these ones strike it almost as hard as we do!”

The free kick, with nobody in front of it, flew fast and accurate towards the top corner. Moacir, with all his almost superhuman reflexes, managed to stretch out and get his fingertips to the ball just enough to send it spectacularly onto the crossbar. It had been a matter of a centimetre.

Gonçalves by now seemed a shadow of himself. He sat on the bench turned on one side, muttering to himself and only occasionally glancing at the field of play.

During the interval Antônio perfected his idea. Instead of dutifully translating Gonçalves’s words of fire, he invented a change of heart on the coach’s part and gave the boys instructions on how to arrange themselves on the pitch in a way much more like the one they were used to, taking advantage as well of the substitution of Taini, still in pain from the knock he had taken at the start of the game, with Brejauva.

The second half began with a raid by Piraí on the right: having beaten two men he slipped into the box, where Lovruka managed to whip the ball off him with a desperate sliding tackle a hundredth of a second before he shot. A perfectly fair challenge, even though Piraí, carried on by his momentum, went down spectacularly. The referee, though, had no doubts: he gave a penalty to Brazil.

Antônio’s boys had played the whole of the first half with a very deferential attitude both towards their opponents and towards the referee’s decisions, which they had sometimes accepted without understanding their meaning. But in the second half something had changed. They rushed at the referee en masse, protesting vigorously, and despite the lack of a common language it was soon clear to the spectators present and to those watching worldwide what the protests were about: they were arguing that it was not a penalty, that the referee was wrong because Piraí had fallen on his own; they shouted “No penalty! No, no!”

Cauê also shouted: “Unfair! Unfair!”

The celebrating crowd did not understand what was happening, and nor did Gonçalves, who had shot to his feet at the referee’s whistle.

The referee, caught completely off guard by a situation that had probably never occurred on a football pitch before, reacted on instinct by booking Piata and sending off Icaribá, whose protests were particularly heated, before consulting the linesman and the fourth official: the penalty had to be taken in any case.

It was Cauê who took charge of the kick, while a stadium and an entire planet wondered what he intended. Gonçalves on his feet was by now shouting nothing but vowels without any further articulation, while Cauê, with blazing eyes, did not even take a run-up and gently passed the ball to the keeper, who saved it by stopping it with one foot and immediately putting it out for a throw.

The crowd held its breath for a long moment; Cauê did not move. The Croatians, the Brazilians, nobody dared to breathe; Gonçalves himself was petrified. Until, from a section of the stands in the top tier, a boy began to clap, breaking the spell and provoking a chain reaction that produced the longest applause anybody could remember at the São Paulo stadium. Gonçalves himself was surprised to find that he was clapping, and a minute later the news agencies of the world would make this event the single most popular in the entire history of football.

The victory, finally won 3-1 by Antônio's boys, the happiness of Yamandé, who played the last ten minutes and also hit both posts with a single shot (Gonçalves would have sworn he had done it on purpose), and the celebrations that followed passed almost into the background.

The symbol of the match, and perhaps of the whole World Cup, had already become Cauê's blazing eyes.

5.5 *Opispo*

Opispo was not a man to harbour a grudge. Harbours grudges wastes time and clouds the mind; he was more for quickness of leg and of thought. Had he looked back, but he was not a man to look back, the fact that the media discovery of Almeida's boys was being credited to Rete Norte and not to his *Gazeta* might have annoyed him. But Opispo was a man convinced that success smiles on those who look ahead. Only by looking ahead could a paper with limited means like his get there first, especially now that the Indians were becoming really famous and the big guns of the information business were coming into play. Looking ahead, he had seen what they would become, from a media point of view, if they managed to qualify for the World Cup: and as on many other occasions he had seen it rightly, he repeated to himself complacently.

But sometimes, in order to look ahead, you have to look much further back: that was why he had gone to Monte Dourado, in search of information about the origin of the Asu Ka'a Futebol team. Tribes of uncontacted Indians were interesting material in general; these ones were surrounded as well by that halo of mystery that always does a good story good, and being the first to reveal the exact place they came from would be a masterstroke.

The initial idea had been to follow them secretly to the village—investigative journalism, it had always been his strong suit—but he had soon thought better of it: too dangerous, there could be jaguars, poisonous beasts, tribes of cannibals and goodness knows what else. So he had decided to exercise his investigative powers on more comfortable ground and had stayed roaming between Monte Dourado and Laranjal in search of some lead. But there was already too much competition there; to find a really original story you had to look further ahead, further back, deeper, further to the right, further to the side. You had to buy beers, talk and get people talking and listen, above all listen: the commandment of every true crusading journalist.

Perhaps that was what really distinguished him from the others, he thought: not quickness of leg, considerable though that was, but on the contrary patience. The others arrived with the story pre-packaged and looked only for news that would support it. Not him; he had the patience to wait for the right contact, and above all the right idea, to present itself. And by dint of talking and talking again, it had now presented itself. Perhaps he would become the most hated man in the nation: just now, when Brazil seemed to have found a dream *Seleção*, shattering the dream of an entire country could be risky. But a true journalist does not give up a good idea.

That was why he was now in Santarém, in the hope of speaking to the man who would help him look back at the right point. In the meantime, why not look ahead and enjoy the charms of this young lady in an approximate anaconda costume writhing so skilfully just a few steps away? Having finished admiring her, he beckoned her over and asked: "My dear, you are marvellous! Have you ever thought of going into films? I have a great many contacts, I can put in a word. But while we are here, my treasure, do you by any chance know a certain *Pepè*? He is a corsetry rep, I am told..."

What is genius? It is intuition, tenacity, a pinch of luck. It is having a winning idea and having the ability to get where nobody has got before. Where is that Almeida's Indian village? In the forest, fine, but has anybody wondered where it really is? Because, let's face it, borders in the forest are hardly precise. One moment you're in Brazil and the next, without noticing, there you are in Suriname. There are no border guards in the depths of the forest.

“Corsetry? My stepfather deals with that sort of thing, you know; he’s the one who buys me the stuff I put on, he’s got good taste, don’t you think? If you want to wait until the club closes he’ll come and fetch me, and you can ask him. That way you can talk to him about the film thing too.”

Tenacity and luck. And what if that Almeida’s village were in Suriname? Who but a real reporter, one of the sort they don’t make any more, could uncover so scorching a truth?

In the two hours he spent sweating and drinking bad beer, Opispo had put down on paper a great quantity of notes, the draft of what would be the greatest article of his life. He did not need confirmation, although he was certain he would get it, oh yes. This Pepè would confirm everything, he was sure of it; a journalist’s nose does not deceive.

“Pepè? Pepè? That old drunk, of course I know him. But he’s stuck to the bottle from morning to night rather more than he’s stuck to corsetry lace, take it from me.”

The girl’s stepfather was a shortish, plump type, covered in tattoos and scars, not a type you would be glad to meet after dark.

“His adventure in the forest? That madman tells such whoppers! Of course he’s told me about his adventure in the forest, which one do you want to hear? The one about the caiman killed with his bare hands? The one about the tribe of nothing but women that kidnapped him for a week? The one about the two-metre statue of solid gold that he never found again?”

“No, not really, another time perhaps.” Opispo reflected for a moment. “I would like to hear the one about the tourist from Macapá he lost sight of on the border with Suriname.”

The man produced a dry laugh indistinguishable from the cry of an *urubu*: “That one I haven’t heard, but I’m sure that with the right quantity of reais you could have a signed confession from him, if you need one.”

“Ahahah, I thought as much, my dear fellow, I know the type!”

He gave the man a sociable dig with his elbow; he liked to set up a friendly atmosphere. “But where can I find him?”

“Who knows, maybe he’s selling knickers up the river or driving some mug along some godforsaken track in Pará. For every ten trips he makes up, he really does one. But don’t you worry, sooner or later he’ll be back here.”

The man—not so friendly after all—got back into his car and started the engine, closing the window on the protests of the girl, who maintained that they had to talk about films. Opispo watched them drive away between two wings of dust into a very black night.

He went over his piece again in his mind. It was as if he could already see it written, an explosive piece, a career-turning one, yes. But unfortunately readers, however willing they were to swallow anything, needed something to help it down: a piece of film, an image, something that in their eyes could be used to say “That’s definitely how it is, I’ve seen the photo!” God, what a bunch of mugs. You go to the cinema and see a winged dragon turn into a T-Rex flying a spaceship, then you come out and see a photo in the paper and treat it like the tablets of the law, and it doesn’t even cross your mind that they might be having you on. But that’s the public, and the public must be given what it wants, lads: a nice photo of Pepè on board his jeep would be perfect.

Of course, the problem was knowing where the devil this Pepè was now and when he would be back. But then again, thinking about it, if the scoop came out towards the end of the tournament it would have an even bigger impact: “The Brazilian champions are actually all from Suriname!” Enough to start a war.

The important thing was to launch it before Brazil were knocked out, but against Croatia they had managed splendidly: getting through the group did not look in doubt. Opispo thought back to the girls who had taken turns on the stage over the course of the evening: all extremely promising, not one of them without a future in films. *I can wait*, he decided.

5.6 Shoreline

This is what they call the sea, Jerujeru, the great ocean.

Jerujeru was a great and courageous hunter, perhaps the greatest the village had ever known, and he had always thought he did not know fear. But he had been wrong.

With his feet in the warm water, the little waves stroking his ankles, what he felt was a deep fear that almost paralysed him. All that water, all that water.

Two girls passed hand in hand along the beach; they were young, smiling, the colour of ripe fruit. They looked at him with a knowing look: he was wearing the Brazilian national team's off-duty shirt, but who was not wearing something of the national team's in those days? If they had recognised him they did not let on, but it was unlikely: those of them who had come out of the forest recently were not yet that famous. Jaci, Cauê, Yamandé, so like the injured champion, were on the front of every paper by now, but not him, Jerujeru, not him: you could see his bewildered gaze in the official team photograph, and little else.

Antônio will help you overcome this fear too, you'll see, but now the others are moving away, you have to go, the day off is nearly over, soon you will all go back to the *shabono* where you train together.

The sun was setting on the beach at Fortaleza; boys from all over the city were converging, ball under arm, to begin the usual evening of football. A privileged few would play on the pitches inside the netting; the great majority of the rest would improvise goals with two rucksacks or, the better organised, with small goals bought at the bazaar. They would play all evening; new friendships would be formed, new loves would be born.

Jerujeru's group of companions had stopped in front of a food stall from which a smell of roasting meat was coming. A knot of people was following the Cameroon–Croatia match on a small television, a match the coach was certainly recording. He would offer it to them a dozen times afterwards, as he had, uselessly, with Mexico–Cameroon.

Recording is like memory, Jerujeru, only it happens on the screen. It is more precise than memory—already the sensations of the forest, left only a few days ago, are fading—but more incomplete: the smells are missing, the heat, the spirit.

A group of boys and girls was organising a game: it was not like the village, on the beach the girls who played football (and played well!) were in the hundreds, perhaps thousands, and the temptation to join them was too strong, strong enough to draw him away from his companions and from the shoreline towards which he felt a magical attraction.

“Do you want to play?” they asked him, but Jerujeru did not understand. He picked up a ball and began knocking it up with his head and his knees, and that was more than enough.

The evening before, against Mexico, he had come on to play only at the end, for a very short time, when Ubiratan had taken a very hard knock and had begun to limp. He had looked into the eyes of that demon of a Mexican goalkeeper and had been afraid of him, as all his companions had. He had not thought he suffered from fear; he had never known it before coming out of the forest.

Playing on sand was strange; it was hard to run, to jump, to strike the ball properly. But playing barefoot again was good, without those terrible boots that had made him fall over (again!) as he came onto the field of play. The Mexicans had not laughed; there was something familiar in their eyes and in the colour of their skin, he had liked them, except of course for that demon of a goal-keeper.

Finishing a match nil-nil had been a disgusting sensation, though; it had never happened to any of them before. Many of his companions had wanted to go on playing; they did not believe it could end like that. The coach had behaved like a sick man again, though less so than during the first match. Jerujeru knew that with the coach you had to watch his eyes and ignore what the rest of his body was doing; the coach was the boss, he had to be wise even if he made his body behave like a sick man's.

The sea breeze was cooling the very hot day; the game on the beach was between a "with shirts" team and a "without shirts" team. Fortunately Jerujeru found himself with the without-shirts; taking it off was a real relief. One of the girls playing with them could easily have come from the forest; her features betrayed her Indian origin. Jerujeru had looked at her for a long time and would have liked to ask her why she did not stay bare-chested as they did, but he did not know the words to say it.

The evening before, when Antônio had called him to come onto the pitch, he had felt a very long shiver down his back. Yamandé—he had heard him—had already repeated several times, "I'm weak, I'm weak," when the opposing keeper had turned away numerous shots of his that against anybody else would have gone in; "it isn't the keeper who's strong, it's me who's still weak."

The player who had suffered most from the presence of the Mexican demon in goal, though, was Moacir. Agile Moacir, quick Moacir, seemed suddenly to have turned back into a child. The demon's extraordinary speed and reflexes had drained his strength, and on more than one occasion only a benevolent spirit had prevented a goal for Mexico.

Playing with the girls was fun. They thought differently, they were slower but craftier, sometimes not much slower. They contrived passes that were hard to predict, they defended with an uncommon vision of the field of play; they reminded Jerujeru a little of Yamandé. He was often distracted watching them, as he was distracted watching the boats, the metal birds and many other things. When he had the ball at his feet, though, he went back to being the hunter of the forest, ruthless and brave. The little goal was hard to hit but he managed it from every part of the pitch. The girl with features like theirs hugged him when Jerujeru managed to score with a beautifully angled lob that took everybody by surprise, the players and the spectators who had grown steadily in number to watch the spectacle of that foreigner who did not even speak Portuguese and who played football so well. Everybody was clapping; they were having a wonderful time.

The evening before, he had been hugged too. At the end of the match the Mexican players had been overjoyed, hugging one another; one or two were even in tears. When his companions had gone over to them for this strange custom of exchanging shirts, three or four opponents had hugged him with convinced, real hugs, the way you hug a brother back from the hunt, a girl next to whom you have just hung your hammock.

They're like us, Jerujeru had thought. *Of course they're all like us, the people inside the stadium, the people who live in the cities. But these ones are more like us than the others.* He had returned the hugs, hoping to absorb a little of those men's strength, and it had seemed to him that this was exactly what happened: he had felt stronger straight away, more certain. The most hugged of all, though, was the demon goalkeeper. He had saved the result several times, he had been a real hero;

even the Brazilian crowd was applauding him without a pause. Jerujeru had decided to go and hug him too; he wanted to absorb a little of the demon's strength, he wanted to become unbeatable like him. When he had reached him and held him in his arms, though, he had understood that the demon had gone; the keeper had turned back into a weak and trembling man. Jerujeru had looked around him to try to see where the demon had flown off to, but all his eyes had seen was the blinding light of the floodlights. He wanted to ask Yamandé, he always saw everything, but he was standing apart talking to Antônio about goodness knows what, perhaps still repeating "I'm weak, I'm weak."

At the goal that made it ten-nil the hug came from all his companions, male and female. It was good playing on the beach; why didn't they hold the World Cup on the beach? The world is a strange place.

"Antônio, tell that idiot that if he sprains an ankle playing on the sand I'll come and finish him off myself while he's still on the ground!" was the sentence that interrupted the game, as Gonçalves, accompanied by Antônio, the staff and the boys, came towards them between two wings of a crowd that had suddenly become reverent and silent. As if by magic everybody recognised Jerujeru; the girl with the Indian face herself stood open-mouthed looking at him, one arm frozen in mid-air in a gesture of greeting.

It was Jerujeru, the unknown who had saved Brazil. The evening before, two minutes from the end, the fearsome Peraldez had let fly a beautifully angled shot from the edge of the box. The usual Moacir would have got to it easily, but that evening Moacir was bewitched, everybody had understood that, opponents included. Jerujeru had been coming back towards the defence at full speed and many would have sworn that at the moment of the shot he was still outside the box, too far away. Instead his legs had turned to lightning and his foot, like the strongest of roots, had managed to turn away, right on the goal line, a shot certainly destined to go in. From that moment on neither side would come near to scoring again, and a few minutes later the match would end nil-nil.

Jerujeru joined his group and at that moment remembered the strange custom of exchanging shirts. They had explained to him that the shirt had to be exchanged with an opponent, but he wanted to exchange it with the girl with that lovely face. And while she, perplexed, gave him in exchange for it a yellow vest bought a few days earlier at the market, Jerujeru understood what had happened. It had been the demon. As he was making his entrance onto the pitch he had stared at the opposing keeper: the demon had abandoned the man from Mexico and had left the stadium by passing through him. It had dragged him to the goal-line clearance; there was no other explanation.

He had to talk about it with Yamandé; they had to be more careful. In those last two minutes the opposing keeper had gone back to being an ordinary man and they could have taken advantage of it and won, but they had not: it must never happen again.

5.7 Interpreter

“Yamandé—or should we call you Paolorossi—a tremendous performance, congratulations. Would you tell us about the goal?”

Being the only man in the world able to talk to some of the most popular people on earth put him in a unique position, and Antônio was beginning to enjoy it.

The evening before, as he lay with his mind whirling, making it hard to fall asleep, he had realised with astonishment that the object of his musings was not the next day’s match against Cameroon, decisive for getting through the first round, but rather the range of possibilities opened up by his role as interpreter. *A pity I haven’t had more time to think about it. I could have created twenty-three completely invented characters, made them say anything that came into my head, and nobody could have said a word to me.*

That you don’t shoot the messenger is well known; what he had never reflected on until that moment was that the messenger could also say whatever he liked, and it was difficult (or, in his case, impossible) to check whether it was accurate or not.

Of course, if the boys’ fame grew further, and there was every possibility of it, sooner or later some anthropologist would take an interest in them, would study their language and his game would be discovered. But by that time he would be back in the forest. And in any case he did not really want to take advantage of it to do anything very much: he had only two objectives, the easier—and more irresistible—of which was settling a few small scores.

“He congratulates you and asks you to tell him about the goal.”

Yamandé looked at Antônio in astonishment: “I saw a free corner and I hit it there thinking the keeper wouldn’t get to it. What is there to tell?”

“He says he’s sorry you didn’t see the goal, perhaps you were working? But he knows there’s a custom of recording them; he says not to worry, you’ll be able to see it this evening.”

The journalist went on without taking the hit.

“On the whole, what do you think of the World Cup so far? Is it as you expected it to be? Is there anything that has struck you particularly?”

This was a sensible question, and Antônio chose to translate Yamandé’s answer correctly, since this time he had put the irony in himself.

“He says he’s enjoying himself very much. One thing that strikes him is that you only have to brush against one of these big fellows to make him fall to the ground in agony. Not even when he broke his femur did he feel as much pain as these ones seem to feel. But he’s also impressed by their powers of recovery: in a very short time they’re back on their feet, whereas it took him three moons to heal.”

While they were talking the journalist kept looking around him; perhaps he was not even listening to the answers, so Antônio made a small experiment. At the next question, something about prospects for the rest of the tournament following this excellent 4-1 handed out to Cameroon, having

translated the question for Yamandé he pretended to make a mistake and reported his incomprehensible answer in the Language.

The journalist did not bat an eyelid: “Thank you very much. Back to the studio!”

The other objective, much more complicated to achieve, was to exploit the situation in order to guide the team despite Gonçalves’s interference.

Translating “Enough of this nonsense about not having positions” as “Play freely, the way you know how and the way you always have” was simple. But Gonçalves was not an idiot, and although he had said nothing to him openly he had clearly grasped what was going on. But, again because he was not an idiot, the excellent performance seen in the second half of the Croatia match had already convinced him to put a good face on it, and Gonçalves’s subsequent press conference had been one long eulogy of the total football played by the boys, punctuated by falsely modest accounts of how he and his staff had confined themselves to helping them adapt to World Cup football (which was partly true, Antônio had to admit).

If intercepting and altering tactical instructions in the course of translation was relatively easy, however, intervening in the team selection was a far more complicated undertaking.

Antônio had considered the possibility of creating tension between Gonçalves and the players he thought it better to leave on the bench, by inventing rude replies for them, but had then discarded it as too underhand an idea. If anything he actually had to do the opposite: to soften the words of Yamandé, and above all of Cauê, who had taken a dislike to the coach and kept insulting him (Cauê on the other hand was also beginning to develop, in parallel, a certain admiration for the fact that Gonçalves kept picking him despite the insults).

After the drawn match with Mexico, Gonçalves had intended to change one or two players; Yamandé in particular had not convinced him at all. Antônio, though, knew that for the boy it was only a matter of time, he needed to keep playing in order to go back to being, as soon as possible, the potential star of the World Cup. Thinking and thinking again, in order to keep him on the pitch he had ended up inventing a series of slight muscular strains for all the other possible forwards: Quicé, Pir-aí and Sanhaçu, to their great astonishment, were put through medical examinations and extra sessions of massage and physiotherapy, and Yamandé took the field against Cameroon. And the pitch had then proved him right.

Cauê’s first goal had been followed by a fortuitous equaliser from Cameroon. But a few minutes later Cauê had put Brazil back in front with a leaning palm, one of the many patterns worked out over the years with Antônio, which surprised the crowd as much as the opposition.

The third goal had come from a free kick by Jaci that had gone in right in the corner. While everybody was celebrating, Jaci had walked calmly towards the goal and with his finger had made the gesture of writing in the air M A R C O S at the point where the ball had gone in. It was meant as a tribute to his playing companions in the *bairro* in Macapá, but the Cameroon players had interpreted it as a gesture of mockery, and only noticing that Gonçalves had taken it just as badly and seemed even angrier and louder than they were had prevented a brawl from breaking out.

The goal that made it four-one at the end was scored by Yamandé himself, finishing off a bow drawn too tight: the crowd at the Mané Garrincha in Brasília seemed to have been waiting for nothing else, and seventy thousand spectators celebrated by loosing an imaginary arrow in unison into the last glimmers of dusk. A scene Antônio could not think back on for years afterwards without being covered in a layer of gooseflesh a metre thick.

5.8 Sweat

Sitting on the brown sofa in Leticia's living room, too soft to be really comfortable, Yaia was reflecting that ever since that business with the Facebook page, inviting anybody to her house had become an undertaking: her friends preferred to take her out or invite her to theirs, so as to exhibit her as a trophy to relatives and friends. Not that Yaia minded, certainly better this way than having raspberries blown at you like Eduarda. And besides, this way you met a lot of people, some of them even interesting, though of course nobody as interesting as... oh god! Yaia moved her hand beside her to retrieve her phone, but did not find it where it should have been and immediately stumbled into the thigh of Fábio, sitting next to her. She jumped up to go and check in her bag: *and yet I'm sure I took it out... and in fact it isn't in the bag.* With a rapid glance she scanned the living room: who could have taken it from her? *My friends really ought to have grasped by now that I'm prepared to kill if anybody touches my phone.*

"Yaia, is something wrong?" Fábio asked her solicitously, getting up from the sofa and in doing so shifting the cushion slightly. *There it is!* Phew, it had only slipped down between the cushions.

"Nothing, nothing, all fine, thanks."

She gave him a lovely smile, taking no notice of how much that smile stirred him, entered the security code on her phone and, positioning herself so that nobody could peer at it, opened the photo app.

"There, there!" said Dani. "The programme's starting."

The presenter of "Bom Dia Copa do Mundo" greeted the audience at home and in the studio, introduced the guests and then ran the first feature, an interview by George with Yaia and Cauê, recorded the evening before with the usual translation by Antônio.

The privileged relationship between George and Antônio had turned out to be very advantageous for Rete Norte: from a semi-unknown station in the north of Brazil it had become one of the leading reference points of national television. In particular, an agreement struck by its director with Rete Globo had meant that George was often invited as a pundit on the evening sports programme and was commissioned to make tailor-made pieces, like the one going out at that moment. The director, naturally, took the view that so much additional popularity was a perfect substitute for a pay rise, and on the whole George agreed with him.

"Nice-looking, this George, eh?" said Leticia, turning towards Yaia and winking at her.

"What are you on about? He must be thirty at least!" Patricia objected.

"Well, every now and then you do find a nice-looking thirty-year-old," her friend went on.

"Cauê isn't bad either," Dani commented.

"He's a bit young if you ask me," Leticia pronounced. "A pity they interviewed him and not those absolute stunners Yamandé and Moacir."

"But yesterday he scored two goals," Matheus put in, a friend of Fábio's invited for the occasion, "and the second one, using the post to bounce it in, was a fairy-tale goal. And in general, up to now he's been the main figure in getting us through to the last sixteen. It was right to interview him."

Matheus had been silent up to that point and had been looking for a way to say something and make his presence felt since the start of the evening. The look on the girls' faces made him understand that he would have done better to go on keeping quiet.

"I was hoping that after inviting you to watch the match in the VIP box they'd invite you to an evening reception after the match as well, and that we could all sneak in too, dressed up to the nines!" sighed Leticia.

"Oh, come on!" Yaia surfaced for a moment from her phone. "They aren't actors at a gala evening, they're footballers in a training camp. We'll see; I'm sure they'll remember me at the end of the World Cup."

"I still say this Cauê looks like somebody who knows how to show you a good time in bed," Dani insisted.

"Shhh! Idiot! Keep your voice down. My father's next door!" Leticia scolded her.

You've no idea how right you are, dear Dani, thought Yaia, gazing once more at the selfie she had taken the evening before, a few hours after the match and the interview. All you could see was her own sweating face, one collarbone and Cauê's face, equally sweaty, pressed against it. And from the flush on her cheeks and the shine in her eyes you could tell they were not sweating because they had just been out for a run together.

5.9 Cigarettes

Teresa finished arranging fruit juices and biscuits on a little table covered with a yellow plastic cloth, which she positioned in front of the three small armchairs set out facing the television. She had never watched a football match in her life before, but this World Cup, with Antônio's boys playing in it—and Antônio himself on the pitch, on the bench, and how the kit suited him—was obviously unmissable.

From the very first match it had been understood that she and Saverio would follow the games together, there at Radio Nova Amizade, but immediately afterwards João had joined them too, finding more satisfaction in commenting on them with somebody who, like him, knew the protagonists personally. For the last sixteen Luiza should have been there as well, but she had toothache, so João had stood in for her on 'O carrossel do gossip', which would be finishing in a few minutes, just in time for the kick-off.

Teresa switched on the fan, went to fetch from the desk drawer the Brazilian flag—the biggest they had managed to find; they had had a whip-round to which Rebeca the secretary had contributed too—and draped it carefully out of the sill of the open window. She blew a little kiss into the scorching midday air in what she took to be the direction of Belo Horizonte: "Come on, Antônio, come on, boys!"

Everything was ready.

Watching the first match had been rather confusing because Teresa had left the sound up so as to hear the commentary, but Saverio kept asking her for details the commentator did not mention: "What are the people like, what expressions have they got, do they look happy? Is the referee a good-looking man? Is he fat or thin? What face did Antônio just make? What colour are their boots?"

Answering him, she missed bits of the action and afterwards could not make head or tail of it.

So from the very next time they had found the much more convenient system of turning the volume down to a murmur—just enough to catch a clarification if one was needed—and letting Teresa explain the match properly to Saverio, the way he liked it.

"There, there, they're coming out! They're dressed in yellow, as always: it suits them very well, I think, and besides it's a cheerful colour, everybody knows that. Antônio has trimmed his beard, he looks really good. But he seems a bit thin to me, it must be stressful for him: all this tension, all these people, I wonder whether he's eating enough. God, what an ugly referee, if you could see him. All nose, and shortish and squashed-looking as if they'd wrung him out. Let's hope he isn't too nasty, he's got little eyes I don't like. Chile, on the other hand, have a lovely red shirt. They've got nice faces, cheerful too; let's hope they're a bit sadder at the end of the match. But wait, I'll turn the volume up so we can hear the anthems, they're so beautiful..."

They all fell silent, João with his chin high, proud as though he were on the pitch, Saverio swaying his head in time, entirely absorbed, and Teresa moving her lips along with the words. The anthem always moved her, all anthems did, and then seeing those handsome boys, so young, so serious and upright, the poor loves, goodness knows how nervous they must be. She quickly wiped away a tear from the corner of her eye. *Enough sentiment now, come on, we're starting.*

“They run an awful lot, Saverio, they really are good. And they have such a beautiful way of moving, if you only knew, they showed the girls in the crowd, they were eating our boys up with their eyes... ah! Careful, Piata! That little one with number seven is all over him like a tick; I think when they aren’t filming him he kicks him or pinches him, he’s got the face of a nasty piece of work. There, now Jaci is off, look how he runs, it’s as if he had six legs, he plays the ball to Cauê who oh! He must have kicked it but you couldn’t even see it, he was so fast, it looks as if the ball bounced! Ubiratan gets it and puts it straight through to Taini who’s already up there, what’s it called, past the lines.”

“Oh god, offside!” Saverio worried.

“Eh?”

“No, no,” João put in, “he’s onside by a hair!”

“That thing you just said I didn’t quite understand, you can explain it to me later, but careful now, because Pirai has already got over there on the right, Yamandé plays the ball to him and he with his head, oh! Oh! Goal! Goal, Saverio, GOAL!”

There would have been no need to say it: through the open windows a rumble had come in, and then a roar, which was now bouncing like an echo from one house to another and shaking the palms at the side of the road: “Goal! Goal! Goooooooooal!”

They sat down again, while Teresa took the chance to hand round pineapple and coconut juice and Saverio and João lit a cigarette. *Come on, we’re doing well.*

They had only just put them out when Teresa announced in agitation: “Oh god, I didn’t quite understand what happened but now one of the Chileans has the ball, a rude lanky lout you want to slap, there he plays it to that other one with number 10 and very short hair, oh heavens our boys’ manager is shouting something, Antônio is shouting something too but I think if they shout at the same time the boys can’t understand, you see, they’ve got sort of confused, number 10 shoots very hard, Moacir throws himself like a jaguar but no, no, no, he doesn’t get there by a hair... no! Goal to them. Moacir is distraught, poor child, he was thrown by all that shouting, but I don’t know, I don’t know, how can you...”

The following hour and a half was an agony of even balance; the fruit juices and biscuits ran out, João smoked a whole packet and Saverio, who was usually more than temperate, asked Teresa whether she had a bottle of rum about the place, a drop of *cachaça*, something strong to bear that exhausting lack of conclusions. Teresa, mortified at not having equipped herself properly, put her purse into João’s hand and sent him out to buy rum, *pinga* and a large tub of papaya ice cream.

“It’s practically over, Saverio, the manager does nothing but wave his arms and shriek and Antônio is sitting with his chin in his hands; they’ll have to play the penalties, and you know, penalties frighten me so much.”

“They’ll frighten them too,” Saverio observed. “From what I understand they aren’t at all used to them.”

“No, that’s right,” João confirmed, “I think too that they’re something almost completely new for them... But what’s that one doing now, ohjesus...!”

“Holymother, Saverio, that number 9 has gone off like a rocket, he’s too close, they haven’t stopped him, there he shoots, oh god no, it’s a goal, it’s over! No! No! It’s the thingy, it’s the beam, he’s hit the beam, it didn’t go in, Saverio, it didn’t go in! The guardian angel looked down, it didn’t go in!!!”

“The bar, the bar!” João was shouting in disbelief. “Incredible, it’s the bar, incredible!”

“There he blows, time’s up, holymother, how close we came to losing at the last minute, myjesus, I’ve had a sort of blow to the heart, I’m all in a sweat, thank goodness you didn’t see, Saverio, look, I swear!”

To prepare for the penalties Teresa went to rummage in her drawers and put on top of the television a little picture of Nossa Senhora do Rosário and a statuette of Ogum, god of fire and of battle. “Better to get help from everybody, better for Moacir to have all the support there is, poor boys, what a responsibility, I’d die, look at me.”

Extremely agitated, she lit a cigarette: she had smoked her last one with her schoolfriends decades before, and she held it between two fingers and, without inhaling, blew feverish little puffs of smoke. *God, the anxiety.*

5.10 Advice

“Almeida! Antônio! Do you think I’m blind? Do you think I’m an idiot?”

“Eh?” Antônio was in the hotel’s television room, busy watching the highlights of Colombia–Uruguay for the umpteenth time.

“I mean, do you see me going about with a white stick? With a dog? With dark glasses?”

“I am sorry, Gonçalves, but I do not...”

Gonçalves stopped him with a gesture of his hand and weighed him up with his eyes. “Stop right there. Deny it, always deny it, even the obvious. Good man. I respect you. And so I’ll spare you the clutching at straws. I know what game you’re playing.”

Antônio tried to assume the most neutral expression possible and confined himself to looking at him. The other went on.

“I say it again: I have a great many faults of character, but I do know something about football. I’m not furious about what you’ve done; in your place I’d probably have done the same. It does annoy me a bit that you should think I wouldn’t have noticed, that’s true. But as long as the results were on your side I decided it was better not to interfere; when it comes down to it you know these boys much better than I do.”

Antônio went on saying nothing.

“But today we came this close to going out, so listen to me carefully: this freedom of play you allow them is fine. It’s incredible that it works, but I bow to the evidence. It works. But you have to give them some fixed points, something to hold on to when things go wrong. Otherwise you go from freedom to anarchy and then to falling apart, and that isn’t good at all.”

Antônio could not decide whether Gonçalves was being sincere or setting a large trap for him. Since, however, the man had just expressed respect for those who always deny, Antônio decided the safest road was to go on playing the innocent. “Gonçalves, I assure you that I do not underst...”

Gonçalves dismissed him with a gesture of his hand and sat down beside him.

“Pass me the remote,” he ordered.

He loaded the video of their afternoon match, won in extremis on penalties, and went back to the point that interested him. He started the video, showing a moment when the Brazilian defence had got away with it only through a lucky mistake by the opposition. Then he ran it on a bit, to a moment that showed a Brazilian attack strangely devoid of ideas. Then he stopped it and started up the Colombia match, Colombia being their next opponents.

“You see? The opposition we get from here on is tougher and tougher. Every match is exponentially harder than the one before. Your tactics were fine in the first games and they can go on working, but you have to give the boys a point of reference for the defence and one for the attack.”

Gonçalves turned towards Antônio to check that he was following him, and went on.

“For the defence it’s Piata without a doubt. I’ve kept an eye on him; he struck me because he has an almost fatherly attitude towards the defence. When he goes forward it almost looks as though he does it unwillingly. He has a good shot, but the others have a good shot too; I’d leave him back there providing security. For the attack I’m less certain: that imbecile Paolorossi, it pains me to say it but he really is good. But perhaps he’s better left free; he gives me the impression of being good everywhere, in goal too. Better his worthy accomplice: he gets on my nerves just as much, that damned kid with the round face who thinks I don’t notice when he climbs over the hotel fence in the evening. But in attack he has an incredible sharpness, I have to give him that.”

“You mean Cauê?”

“Yes. I’m not saying tie him to a fixed point in the attack, obviously. But it’s a good thing that whoever plays it long out of defence should know he’ll find him up front. Not somebody at random, him. It changes the whole dynamic of the attack, and I assure you it changes it for the better.”

Gonçalves stood up and, to underline that the discussion was closed, switched off the television.

Antônio kept his poker face to the last: “I shall pass your instructions on to the boys, coach.”

5.11 Valério

Valério woke in a bath of sweat in his hospital bed, shouting “Colombia! Colombia!”

In the expensive private clinic in São Paulo, the “Physiotherapy and Harmony”, where he was being treated along with his team-mates, Valério Almunhos, the broken lynchpin of the Brazilian defence, had for a week now been going about on crutches, having given up the wheelchair that made him feel disabled and gave him too much anxiety. But evidently the anxiety was not so easy to drive away.

“Valério?”

“Yes...”

“Ah, you’re awake. I thought you were dreaming.”

“I had another of those nightmares. This time that fellow who plays centre-forward was in it too...”

“Who? Paolorossi?”

“Yes, him, him. I had to take him somewhere along with other people I can’t remember, but we always ended up in Colombia.”

“Well, the match is today, that’ll be why.”

“It was a frantic dream, you know the sort where you always feel you’re late? I had to take Paolorossi and then get to the stadium to play, and I was running late. I seemed to know the roads and everything, but every time I’d take a wrong turning and find myself in Colombia.”

“A real nightmare, eh?” said Orbiz with a chuckle.

“It was, yes,” Valério replied with the hint of a laugh, “a very realistic nightmare.”

In the days before a Brazil match his guilt was amplified and turned into very restless dreams or outright nightmares in which, more or less regularly, everybody expected something of him that he was not able to do. In this case he had dreamt that he had been given the task of taking a group of refugees to safety, but every time they crossed the border, by sea, by air or by land, they invariably found themselves in Colombia. He did not know what his destination was, but it certainly was not Colombia.

He felt for his crutches; he would not get back to sleep now, he knew, better to take a couple of steps. Oh god, a couple of steps... Valério could not get over how hard it was to walk on crutches. *I’m a world-class athlete*, he kept repeating to himself, *is it possible that I have to stop every five minutes to get my breath? And why they don’t discharge me I don’t know; they say they have to keep this ankle under observation but it doesn’t seem to me that I’m any worse than others who are already home.*

Devil, on the other hand, had no choice: of all those injured in the terrible crash that had wiped out the Brazilian national squad, he was one of those who would have had the best chance of being in the first eleven. And he was one of the worst hurt: concussion with a fractured jaw and temporary total loss of speech. Until the effects of the concussion had entirely cleared—among them a con-

stant, hammering headache—and until he was able to feed himself normally, he would be obliged to stay in hospital.

“Daredevil the masked superhero had a terrible headache to start with too,” Fabbri, an avid connoisseur of American comics, had told him, managing to make him smile at least with his eyes if not with his damaged mouth.

Half an hour before kick-off they were all already in front of the TV, arguing animatedly. They had begun by following the first match each on his own, partly because everybody’s condition had generally been worse and partly because they had not felt up to sharing an experience that all of them would have bet was going to be disastrous. But in the end twenty of them, counting relatives and friends too, had found themselves in Valério and Orbiz’s room rejoicing and hugging over the national side’s victory. From that moment on they had tacitly decided to follow the matches in a common room. They arrived quietly, criticised everything and everybody furiously: the coach, the Federation, the players, the politicians, but then partisanship took over and they followed the match suffering more than the rest of the population put together.

Before Brazil–Colombia the bone of contention had been Foguete’s idea of making the ostentatious gesture of giving his own shirt to the Indian forward, Paolorossi. The two of them looked very much alike, Paolorossi slightly shorter (you had to guess, since Foguete was in a wheelchair because of an injury to his spine) and decidedly less at ease in front of the cameras: he kept his eyes down, moved in an entirely distinctive way, sketched bows or gestures that seemed to be interrupted as they began. Foguete for his part behaved as though it were he who would be taking the field in a few minutes: tattoos well on show, American cap worn at an angle, the inevitable headphones round his neck, waves of greeting with his hands, the eyes of a man who already knows he has made it.

“I always said Foguete was a bastard!” said Rominho in his typical shrill voice.

“He isn’t a bastard, he just likes being the centre of attention,” Fabbri replied.

“The centre of everything, you mean,” Rominho added.

“Nonsense. In two minutes they’ll have forgotten all about him; there’s a quarter-final to win here,” Carlos Dugal reminded them.

“They do look alike, those two, don’t they?” Valério observed.

“They do, they look like brothers,” said Fabbri.

“Then the other one’s a bastard too,” Rominho put in again. “Anyway, how much of a bastard can somebody called Paolorossi be? And look at him, all awkward, and the other evening after the goal he looked possessed.”

“Well, it was a great goal,” Orbiz pointed out.

“I don’t know whether he’s a bastard; strong he is,” Fabbri admitted. “I don’t know whether he’s stronger than Foguete, but he’s strong.”

“Oh, so now Foguete is strong,” Rominho muttered.

“And I have to say I rather like that drawn-bow gesture,” Valério replied, pretending not to have heard Rominho’s last comment.

Watching the matches with an almost completely mute Devil was a real hoot, if you could forget for a moment the drama he was living through. Every time the ball got even vaguely near Brazil's attacking third he would stand up moaning inarticulate "MWGAAAAAH! GHBAAAAAH!"s and gesturing terribly to make up for the lack of words, so much so that within five minutes a void formed around him after everybody, his girlfriend included, had shifted back a few metres to avoid any involuntary clouts.

Somebody always took care to answer Devil's cries as though they had understood, so that a match like Brazil-Colombia, so rich in Brazilian chances, unfolded audibly as: "GHBAAAAAH!! AAAAAH!"

"You're right, that was a good passage of play."

"MWGAAAAAH! BGEEEEH!"

"Of course."

"That's what I think too."

"MBWWWWH?"

"No."

"Don't be daft, not a chance."

"MWGAAAAAH! GHBAAAAAH!"

And so on.

In the thirty-fifth minute of the first half Yamandé took a corner from the right of the Colombian defence. Set pieces were greeted by Devil with a sort of propitiatory rite: he would stay on his feet with his arms wide, gurgling goodness knows what. As the ball set off he would begin with a particularly stentorian "AAAAABWH! AAAAAANGH!"

But at that moment Yamandé managed to give the ball an incredible curling trajectory that cut out the whole defence. This time nobody had time to comment. The ball landed precisely on Piata's foot and he put it in the net without effort. In the common room of the "Physiotherapy and Harmony" in São Paulo an unprecedented roar exploded. Devil collapsed into his chair in tears while team-mates and families, each within his own physical limits, celebrated by jumping and hugging without a pause.

Gonçalves's boys, as though they really could hear Devil's unintelligible but heartfelt encouragement, seemed unstoppable: only bad luck and a couple of really spectacular saves by the Colombian keeper prevented a second goal in the first forty-five minutes.

The interval brought a fresh discussion with it.

"Did you see Gonçalves? He looked stupefied," said Marcelinho, whose facial bruising, keeping his swollen eyes almost shut, allowed him to see only vague shadows or little more.

"He isn't stupefied, that's what he's like when the team is ticking over," Valério replied.

“But it doesn’t look like a Gonçalves team, it almost looks like the Dutch total football side,” Carlos Dugal noted.

“That’s true, goodness knows what’s going on,” said Fabbri. “It’s as if the boys were in charge on the pitch, but is that possible? How can they have all that experience?”

“To me today they look more organised than in the other matches,” countered Corujão, who always saw everything through tactical spectacles.

“Gonçalves is an idiot,” said Rominho to himself, ignored once again by those present.

Around the middle of the second half the referee gave Brazil a free kick at least thirty metres from goal. After a brief discussion with his team-mates Jaci laid the ball on the ground and waited for the referee to mark the wall’s distance with the vanishing spray. The spray had been received without any particular surprise by the Indian boys; it was only one of the thousands of oddities they were exposed to daily. The one most surprised and amused by this innovation had been Antônio.

Devil was already on his feet with his long arms spread wide, mumbling the usual incomprehensible chant. Jaci and Yamandé were standing not far from each other, staring at the ball in total concentration.

“That bastard Paolorossi is taking it,” said Rominho.

“No,” Marcelinho replied, “the one who put the ball down takes it, Jaci. Remember the free kick against Cameroon.”

Instead it was Yamandé who took the run-up and struck it. The ball was hit with incredible force; under the floodlights it travelled white and flat, without even a hint of spin, towards the stands behind the Colombian keeper. After ten metres or so the trajectory inexplicably broke and the ball began to drop towards the goal. The keeper, by now well behind it, set off to his left. Devil had already begun his “AAAAABWH! AAAAAAEEENGH!!” when the ball had not yet gone in. Yamandé, after the shot, had turned his back and was walking towards his own goal, arms to the sky, without even looking at the outcome of the free kick. Antônio, seeing Yamandé’s behaviour, and knowing that shot very well, began celebrating even before the actual goal. Gonçalves himself instinctively raised his arms to the sky in advance. When the net bulged, the boys in the “Physiotherapy and Harmony” clinic were already shouting themselves hoarse with joy.

“THAT BOY IS A GENIUS!” Rominho kept repeating. “I ALWAYS SAID SO: PAOLOROSI IS A GENIUS!”

Devil had sat down again to sob, clutching his shirt, and so he would stay until the end, suffering over every attack. Colombia had thrown themselves headlong into attack and ten minutes from the end had even managed to pull one back from a penalty: the very young Julio had scored to make it one-two, beating Moacir with a perfect execution from the spot. But what the whole world saw was an enormous grasshopper that had landed on Julio’s right sleeve without his noticing, and two Brazil players, Ubirajara and Itaúna, who caught it in mid-air and ate it right there in front of everybody.

The cries of disgust that came out of the clinic’s common room did not die down until a minute from the end, when a new and stranger shout, “MBGHAAAHUURRAH!”, came out of Devil’s mouth. They all turned to look at him questioningly while he was already pronouncing, hoarsely but comprehensibly, “HUR...RA... HURRAH! Val...ério! I ca...an spea...ak!”

He still could not manage it entirely fluently, but the temporary paralysis seemed to have vanished.

“Of course, what rotten luck,” Rominho concluded. “A man gets his speech back and the first person he addresses is Valério.”

5.12 Press conferences

Opispo looked at the confirmation email almost incredulous at having pulled it off: “Tuesday 8 July at 16.00; Estádio Mineirão, Avenida Antônio Abrahão Caram, 1001, Pampulha, Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais.” After they had got through to the last sixteen he had decided he had waited for Pepè far too long, and with a bit of contriving he had found a way of attaching himself to the media circus surrounding the Brazilian national side. The funds at his disposal were not large (partly because some of them had been used somewhat freely), but holding a press conference in a place swarming with journalists from all over the world was an opportunity he could not miss.

“José, you’re a cretin.”

At the other end of the telephone line Geovani Barreto, his editor, tried to bring him to his senses: “An hour before kick-off in perhaps the most important semi-final in the history of Brazil, there’ll be nobody at your press conference.”

“Geovani, my friend, have faith in me, you know Opispo can be trusted blindly, don’t you? Please do as we agreed. The press conference will start at ten past four, quarter past four perhaps if there are latecomers. At twenty past four you publish those extracts I sent you on the website.”

“José, you’re a cretin. There won’t be any latecomers because there won’t be anybody.”

“Do as I’ve told you, publish the extract at twenty past four, all right?”

Geovani had already ended the call. If there was one thing he missed with these modern telephones it was the act of slamming the receiver down. He almost felt the physical lack of it.

Opispo began savouring in advance the greatest professional victory of his career, arid up to that moment of the satisfactions he was certain he deserved. He had had a brilliant idea, had pursued it with tenacity, had written a piece of reportage worthy of the country’s finest pens, a great scoop, something that would blow the whole nation sky-high, and now at last the moment of his triumph was about to arrive.

Of course, he had also been very good at relegating to a corner of his brain the fact that the scoop was a fake; the little voice he heard now and then saying “Fake! Fake!” had grown weaker by the day until it was buried beneath the dozens of other, far more interesting voices that populated his mind.

What remained was incontrovertible (almost incontrovertible): the area of the forest the Indian tribe who had reached the World Cup semi-final came from was not in Brazil but in Guyana. Almost incontrovertible: Opispo knew perfectly well that it was not true—in fact he had not the faintest idea what the precise point the tribe came from was—but he was counting on the fact that the Amazon Forest is big, gigantic, and nobody ever takes it into his head to make precise calculations about the exact location of tribes; no Brazilian, at any rate. *It’s impossible to determine such things precisely*, he often repeated to himself, *it’s simply impossible*.

Press conferences are not normally called an hour before the start of a match, still less a match as important as this one, but he had insisted so much with the head of the National Team’s Press Office—a good-looking girl, by the way; he had carefully noted down her telephone number—that she, exhausted, had fixed the time for four o’clock.

“Nobody will come at four, Senhor Opispo,” she had told him.

“Do not worry, do not worry, miss... Roxana, you said, was it not? What a lovely name, my dear, almost as lovely as you are. Do not worry, you will see how much this press conference will be talked about, ohohohoh yes, how much it will be talked about.”

Taking part in the great media hodgepodge also meant venturing on extremely long journeys; waiting hours and hours for somebody from the Delegation to appear and say something, a problem made more wearing by the fact that none of the players spoke Portuguese so that they were all virtually un-interviewable except through that Antônio; and sitting through press conferences on the most disparate subjects held by people desperately in search of a crumb of visibility. He had always kept punctiliously clear of these press conferences, but that day he did not mind: tomorrow at four would be his moment; today he could even sit in the back row and watch those pathetic characters file past him.

The first afternoon conference on 7 July was in fact rather crowded, Opispo noted with acrimony (or was it envy?): a certain Isabel Barbosa—anything but a plain woman, she too—was announcing the creation of a Foundation for the protection of a part of the Amazon Forest. The curious detail that had drawn so many journalists to attend was that the funding for the Foundation came directly out of the players’ bonuses. Opispo had to admit that it was a story that could have made a great stir—the Indians buying themselves a good-sized piece of forest, no less—had he not been certain that his own announcement the next day would eclipse the lot.

That morning Isabel had spent long moments looking out of the window of her hotel room, in one of the tall buildings in the centre of Belo Horizonte. The air was heavy and humid and, having come out of the shower without drying her hair, more than half an hour later she could still feel it wet. The sound of the interminable shower Robert was taking was her background music as she watched the cars bottling up in the city traffic. They had worked until late polishing the last details of the presentation, they had talked about football, they had slept together, and now she could not take her eyes off that city.

“This Foundation is really going to your head, isn’t it?” he had asked, coming out of the bathroom in a cloud of steam.

“It’s Brazil that’s going to my head, it’s my people, these cities, these children, that immense forest we go on ignoring, the incredible team that’s taken us to the World Cup semi-final...”

“And me?”

“You what?”

“Don’t I go to your head a bit?”

Isabel had turned round smiling: “No, not you!” she had answered, sticking out her tongue and setting off a series of skirmishes that had ended with them back in bed.

It was only at breakfast that they had started talking again.

“I hope this press conference comes soon, because I feel I can’t help you any longer,” Robert had said, entirely serious.

“What do you mean? Why can’t you help me any longer?”

“Because as the match gets closer we become more and more enemies, me German, you Brazilian, we’re perfect enemies. I can hold out a bit longer but I can already feel my resistance about to give.”

“And what would happen if your resistance gave?”

“Nothing in particular; you become my enemy and I start hating you.”

Isabel had studied Robert for a moment. His German accent did not allow her to catch a possible joking tone immediately: he went on being entirely serious, but after some hesitation she had established that he was joking.

“I didn’t know you were so interested in football; until the other day you hardly talked about it.”

“Of course I’m interested in football, I’m German.”

“Of course I’m interested in football...” she had echoed, trying to mimic his way of speaking.

“You see? We’re already more enemies than before!” he had replied, laughing.

“Let me call Antônio; taking part in the conference won’t be easy for him.”

“Antônio, eh?”

“I know you’re terribly jealous of him and you have every reason to be: Antônio is Brazilian and therefore much better-looking than you Germans, who are our enemies; he has lived in the forest in symbiosis with the wildest nature, and this wild nature shines in his eyes, so much so that from the plain-ish man he was when I knew him in Macapá he has become positively handsome.”

“Handsome, eh?”

“More than that, in fact, beautiful. And he’s at the centre of the most incredible event in the history of football. Shall I go on?”

“You see we’re more and more enemies?”

The Press Room of the Belo Horizonte stadium was packed with journalists. The scarcity of information coming out of the National Team’s camp made them hungry for news, and a press conference attended by Antônio—even on a peripheral subject like the protection of the forest—could be a chance to get some information: of any kind at all, as long as there was material to write something.

Opispo, sitting at the back of the room, was trying to analyse the first image that had appeared on the big screen. It was divided in two: on the left a photograph showing a group of Indians playing football in a wide, vaguely rectangular clearing devoid of vegetation, completely surrounded by trees. The murmur in the press room made him realise that one of the boys depicted, in the act of taking a free kick, was Piata. On the right a map of the north of Brazil showing Macapá, the last stretch of the course of the Amazon, a large pale blue dot which evidently located in broad terms the area of forest where the photograph on the left had been taken, and at the top, very high up, the dotted red line representing the border with French Guiana and Suriname.

It took him a while to understand what all this meant. First there were the photographs of Isabel, Antônio and a third fellow, the director of Rete Norte. Then a small technical problem with the mi-

crophones, promptly solved by a very diligent young man. Finally a brief intervention by Antônio assuring the journalists present that the last five minutes would be devoted to questions about the team. It was only while Isabel was clearing her throat to begin speaking that Opispo, as in a flash, understood.

After this press conference nobody would believe a word of his reportage. Who better than Antônio could be an authoritative voice for locating the village he had lived in? And besides, he told himself, with today's technology it is extremely easy to calculate such things precisely. Extremely easy.

"Geovani?"

"José! Hello, what's happening?"

"Geovani, hello, you know that business of the extract from my piece?"

"Of course I know, we spoke half an hour ago, what's happening?"

"Well, Geovani. You know, certain events have occurred, big stuff, very big, I won't go into it on the telephone... Yes, well, I've been put under pressure by people very high up..."

"Pressure? What pressure?"

"Well, Geovani, you know me, you know that with certain delicate matters I prefer to talk in person. Anyway, yes, well, it would be preferable to wait and not publish that piece straight away."

"What do you mean! It was explosive stuff, the scoop of the millennium!"

"Yes, yes, it's explosive stuff, yes, but you know, there are some very prominent people here..."

"José, are you going to tell me what's happened?"

"Geovani, don't publish it, all right?"

By the time Opispo ended the call he was already at the bottom of the stadium's exit stairs. He went to his hotel to book a return flight and never thought about that article again. He also forgot to cancel the next day's press conference, at which in any case only one person turned up.

At twenty past four, after twenty minutes spent reflecting on the irony of a fate that in a single month had taken him from looking for a way to prevent the Indians being called up to being their guardian angel ("it all depends", he often heard Antônio repeat, and he was right), Thiago established that the press conference had plainly fallen through, given that not even the speaker had turned up, and that it could be written off as a false alarm. As he set off at a brisk pace towards the dressing rooms, he took out his phone: "Roxana? It's Thiago. Thanks for warning me about that strange fellow. I just wanted to tell you that in the end nobody turned up to the conference. No, not even him. Search me. Just as well. Of course. Thanks again."

5.13 Waiting

Gonçalves's advice had been very useful, Antônio had no trouble admitting it: the team had played its best match of all against Colombia, despite the opposition being the toughest they had met up to that point. Far from being pleased, though, Antônio was contemplating the dark clouds gathering on the horizon.

In the frantic closing stages of the match Piata had picked up his second booking of the tournament, for which he would be suspended for the next match. And Cauê was doubtful too, because of the bad knock in the back he had taken in the last minutes of play, which had forced him off on a stretcher. Having to do without the two men they had just identified as the pivots of the defence and the attack would have been a problem in any case, and the match awaiting them the next day was certainly no ordinary fixture: Germany had been the most convincing team of the whole World Cup so far.

But the darkest cloud of all, beside which the others were light, plump little white ones, was the fact that it was a semi-final. The kind of match Antônio feared most, his cursed match. Buoyed up by the team's good form, Antônio was trying to keep his mounting anxiety under the surface and not pass it on to anybody else, but it was not easy. It was not easy at all.

Sitting in the little television room waiting for supper, a small group of the boys was indulging in one of their favourite pastimes: changing channel with the speed of lightning, in search of features that talked about them or about the World Cup in general.

"Go back. I thought I saw something."

Taini went back to the previous channel, which was showing an old black-and-white film.

"How strange, this channel must be broken, it hasn't got any colours."

"The ball is strange too, it isn't the same one we use. Go on, come on."

"Wait. I thought they said Moacir."

"Of course they didn't, Moacir indeed. It'll be one of those words they have that sound like ours but mean something completely different."

They all fell silent. For a few seconds their ears registered only the by now familiar but still incomprehensible sound of Portuguese, but then the word "Moacir" was distinctly heard. A few moments later the image of a good-looking man with a moustache appeared on the screen. Those among the boys who had kept some memory of Antônio's writing lessons read on the screen: "M O A C—it says Moacir! But that isn't Moacir!"

Jerujeru ran to fetch Antônio and Moacir, and slowly, drawn by the commotion, almost all the others arrived too. Antônio glanced at the television and understood at once. It was a feature about the Maracanaço, the final match of the 1950 World Cup that the whole of Brazil had already counted as won, only to find itself facing the greatest defeat in Brazilian sporting history.

"Is it really possible," said Antônio to himself but out loud, "that the day before the semi-final these imbeciles should broadcast a story like that?"

“What story is it?” Moacir asked.

“Oh, nothing,” Antônio hesitated. “Actually it’s a wonderful story, in its tragedy. Perhaps the greatest football story of all time, apart from yours.”

“And why have you never told it to us?” Yamandé pressed him.

“I’ve never told it to you because there were many people involved and there was plenty of blame to go round, but Brazil then chose to load the whole weight onto the shoulders of one man, the goal-keeper. And do you know what he was called? He was called Moacir too. He was the man you saw a moment ago. Once, years ago, in the forest, I was about to tell it to you and then I thought of our Moacir and decided not to.”

Antônio fell silent. The boys were staring at him, hanging on his lips. For a moment his memory went back to the years gone by, to when he had not long begun to speak the Language decently, to the sense of liberation he had felt, to how important it had been for him to manage to tell those first stories. Almost without noticing, he began to speak again: “This story was told to me by my grandfather. That day my grandfather was at the Maracanã as a member of the band charged with playing the anthem...”

Half an hour later Antônio, almost against his will, had finished telling his story. He roused himself and thought *but what am I saying? Why the devil have I told them this story?* A series of worrying signals had appeared on the boys’ faces, and Antônio thought it best to try to patch things up.

“But don’t make those faces, come on. You’re much stronger than the Brazil of that time and than the Germany of today. You’ll win without any trouble.”

Oh god, have I gone mad? Change the subject, Antônio, change the subject.

“You’ve nothing to worry about. The curse of the semi-final is something that concerns only me.”

Nothing for it, perhaps I’d better keep quiet, thought Antônio again, getting up and leaving his boys thunderstruck behind him.

The days after the Colombia quarter-final had passed extremely slowly. Antônio was running out of tricks for distracting himself, for not letting his anxiety mount and not letting it rise in his boys. The phone call to his parents had not helped: too much confusion, agitated warnings and stammered good wishes. The call to Teresa had cheered him up a little: nobody could make him laugh the way she could, even if involuntarily. And the string of charms against bad luck and the list of lucky pieces she had drawn up in their favour had made him smile even more.

The call with Isabel had pleased him too, the news on the Foundation front was very good, but one thing she had said had planted a nagging doubt in him. Could Antônio, in all honesty, say that he had been straight with his boys? Yes, on the whole, yes. He had behaved like a caring father with small children: he had looked after interests they did not know they had, and had protected them from many pitfalls by not letting them know those pitfalls existed.

But he was not really their father, and still less were these world-class athletes small children. *They’re strong, brave men. They deserve to know and to decide for themselves,* thought Antônio, not without a pinch of the fatalism induced by his growing semi-final anxiety.

After supper he asked Gonçalves's permission (Antônio had remained very careful about keeping up appearances) to take them for a walk for an Indian rite he had invented a few days earlier and which he used as an excuse when he wanted to be alone with them.

"Do you remember I told you that football isn't only made up of national teams? There are village teams and tribe teams as well. Footballers from all over the world can play in those, even if they were born in a different village, even on the other side of the world."

A murmur of assent greeted Antônio's words.

"The strongest and richest teams give a lot of money to the strongest players in the world to persuade them to be part of their team."

Antônio was silent for a few seconds because he did not quite know how to turn the conversation, then decided to be direct.

"In the last few days I've learnt that some of the strongest teams in the world would like you to play for them."

There was a brief moment of silence, then Piraí asked: "And which of us?"

"All of you."

"All of us?" Apererá was astonished. "But I haven't played even once, how do they know I'm a good player?"

"There's more demand for those who have played, it's true. But they think that if you're in the same team as Yamandé, Cauê and Jaci then you must be good too."

"And it's true!" Brejauva added, laughing.

"A pity we have to go straight back to the village after the World Cup," said Taini thoughtfully. "I'd like to visit a few other places. And playing all together in a big team would be good, wouldn't it?"

"You wouldn't be playing all together," Antônio explained. "Each of these teams already has very strong players and they're only looking for one, two, three at most, to complete the team, depending on what they need. For example there's a very strong team in Spain looking for a goalkeeper because the previous one has stopped playing, and they're very interested in Moacir."

"But Spain is that terrible team that's already been knocked out, there can't be strong teams in Spain!" Moacir retorted indignantly.

"And yet, strange as it seems, that's how it is; some of the strongest te..."

"And me? Who wants me in their team?" Jaci interrupted him.

"Two teams from England are interested in you..."

"But we've seen the ones called England play too, and they're terrible as well! Antônio, are you making fun of us?"

"Let me finish. Two from England, one from Italy..."

“He’s making fun of us,” Jaci concluded, amid the scornful laughter of the others.

“One from Germany and two from Brazil.”

“Ah. Good,” Jaci concluded, suddenly proud.

A few seconds of silence passed and then Piraí was heard clearing his throat.

“I don’t want to go back to the village. How do I tell a team that wants to give me money to play that I agree?”

Piata was the quickest to answer: “What are you saying? What do you mean you don’t want to go back to the village? The village needs all of us. We’ll go back to the village, after making it proud with our undertaking.”

“You go back to the village. You’re happy there and you’re right to go back; I’m better off here and I’m staying here.”

While Piata, halfway between astonished and furious, was looking for the right words, it was Itaúna who cut in, to everybody’s surprise: “I’d like to stay here for a while too. Maybe without going too far away, but playing at Macapá, or in that beautiful city where we went to play, Manaus, would be good.”

“You? But you’ve spent the whole time saying it’s horrible here, you didn’t even want to come and play in the World Cup.”

“I’ve changed my mind. Changing your mind is clever.”

Within ten minutes many others were expressing their preference in louder and louder voices, tempers grew hotter and hotter, Piata and Itaúna almost came to blows and the team split sharply in two.

It was Moacir and Yamandé, among the few who had stayed out of it, who restored if not calm then at least silence to the group. Antônio, in the middle of a full-blown crisis, had gone away without saying anything, confining himself to thinking, almost with relief: *at least it can’t get any worse than this.*

5.14 Delirium

Ybyráatã, no! Don't climb that tree, no! No! That's the cursed tree, no! Caimans don't eat monkeys, caimans don't eat children, no!

It's tomorrow, it's tomorrow, we have to leave, run, it doesn't matter how dangerous it is, it's tomorrow. Tell Senhor Inácio to wait for me, that this time I'm coming to church too, Inácio, Inácio, wait for me Inácio, I have to cross the forest to come to mass as well but I can do it, I'll leave early in the morning, I'll build a raft, but Ybyráatã promise me that you won't climb that tree, no, you won't climb it, remember, caimans don't eat monkeys.

I must teach you to count, why have I never taught you to count? I must teach you to count at least to a hundred, perhaps to a thousand. If I'd taught you to count to a thousand, do you know what a difference? Do you know how many more things we could have done? A thousand days, a thousand years, a thousand kilometres. Why have I never taught you to count?

Let's do this: tomorrow we all run away, we go back to our forest, we go back to Ybyráatã, never mind the semi-final, never mind. We'll wait for the sun to rise and then take a canoe, a jeep, something, and we'll all go back together to our *shabono*, to our life, never mind the semi-final.

Julio, Julio!

The spirit of Velasco must come down on us, it's the only way. Julio, Julio, come to church, get yourself blessed too, but don't eat the oyster! Don't eat anything, the oyster, the crab, nothing, don't eat because they're poisoned, they've poisoned them on purpose. Julio, help me, Julio. Tomorrow my blood must come out of my veins and in its place must come ice, ice and poison. Julio, help me, all the blood must come out.

Coach, I am leaving you the team, I am going away to my wife, to my son, I am leaving you the team. Don't do the bow drawn too tight, don't do the game of the plaited lianas, they've studied us, they know us, they've been hidden behind the trees all this time and we didn't notice. That's why the jaguar stopped coming, why else? They were sending it away so as to watch us and study us. Now they know us too well, we have to run away, abandon the village, move somewhere else.

But it's too late, the semi-final is tomorrow.

Courage, boys, give me courage, I can't do it. My ankle hurts, my foot hurts, I can't run, I can't play with you, give me courage. Without me you can't do it, the right flank will be completely unguarded, give me courage, because with this foot I can't do it. Who will play on the right? Who will play? It will always be my fault, won't it?

Can you feel the spirit of the Maracanaço hovering over us? We can't do anything, we can't flee, the spirit is powerful and there's nothing that can stop it. Boys, run, it's the only way to save yourselves, run, I'll stop it, I'll put myself in front of the cameras while you go back to the forest, scatter, flee.

Help me.

You shouldn't have kept the great black snake so close, you mustn't let yourselves be deceived by its apparent calm; the moment it's hungry it won't hesitate to attack one of you, you must drive it away, shut it up. Don't look it in the eyes, that yellow of its irises is poisonous already, as its red

jaws are poisonous. I love you all, don't you realise, you must drive it away, don't stand so close, there it moves, there it attacks, THERE IT ATTACKS ME!

BANG! BANG! BANG! "Almeida! Senhor Almeida!"

At first Antônio thought it was his heart beating so hard.

BANG! BANG! BANG! "Almeida, are you in there? The team is leaving the hotel to go to the training centre..." BANG! BANG! BANG!

But there were those words.

BANG! BANG! BANG! "Senhor Almeida, I know you're still in the room, answer me, please."

It was not his heart, though that was beating wildly. It was somebody at the door.

"Yes..." Antônio answered in a thread of a voice. Where was he? What day was it?

"Oh, Almeida, thank heaven! Thank heaven! Are you all right? Can I help you in any way?"

"Yes, I'm all right, I'm all right." His voice was struggling to come out. He was in a hotel. But where? When?

"Oh, what a relief, Almeida, the team is already on the bus, they're leaving for the training centre, you're the only one missing: you know, what with the semi-final and everything, perhaps you ought to join them as soon as possible..."

"The semi-final? THE SEMI-FINAL!"

5.15 *The whistle*

He disentangled himself from an embrace of feathers and sequins: “Come on, be good, Almeiridia, your Pepè wants to watch the match. No, not like that, I’ve got your hair in my eyes, come on, unstick yourself from me, my little butterfly, this is an important match; if you’re a good girl afterwards Pepè will show you those purple lace knickers he promised you, but now let me watch, because I know that man there, I saved that man’s life.”

The girl opened her big kohl-rimmed eyes wide, impressed. “Oh yes, if it hadn’t been for me he’d have been as good as dead. I saved his life in the forest, that time I’d escaped by a hair from the great white jaguar, I told you about that, didn’t I? Then I found this one, who’d got lost, he was dying of hunger and thirst and he was being attacked by a whole pack of ferocious anteaters, if it hadn’t been for me... But I’ll tell you about it later, sugarplum, maybe in your room so we can do that game we did the other time; now be good and quiet, it’s about to start.”

“Be quiet, it’s about to start!” Teresa had put on the pale blue shell-shaped earrings that had always brought her luck, and had arranged on top of the television a whole array of pictures and statuettes of saints and *orixás*. She had even lit a “Defumador chama fortuna” bought for the occasion which, although it gave off a vague smell of feet, had been recommended to her as the best talisman on the market. She had put a whole crate of beer to chill and two new bottles of rum and *pinga* were ready on the little table beside a carton of cigarettes and a tray of biscuits. Luiza, extremely elegant in yellow and green striped rayon, was sitting between João and Saverio, who had ready, hidden in a drawer, a whole assortment of fireworks bought from the Chinese man on the corner.

“I can’t see them but I do like the noise they make; get some of the whistling ones too, mind,” Saverio had said, “but let’s not say anything to Teresa, because she’s got all her superstitions and you never know, she might think they bring bad luck; we’ll surprise her.”

The big flag was already spread out of the window; Teresa had already gnawed away the whole fuchsia nail of her little finger before the kick-off.

“But when are they going to whistle this start? Mygod, I’m all in a sweat with the excitement... perhaps we shouldn’t have come, Italo, perhaps we should have stayed at home and watched this match on TV as well... I don’t know whether I can watch them live, I get too worked up...”

“Come now, Marcela, how could we not come? It’s quite enough that I’ve held out this long: watching the matches on TV was making me ill... and besides, you’ll see how pleased Antônio will be when he knows we’ve come; however it goes he’ll have his parents beside him!”

“Oh, I think he knows we’re here.”

“And how do you suppose he can know that? You haven’t told him, have you? It’s supposed to be a surprise!”

“No, no, of course I haven’t told him! But I think he feels it, he feels his mother’s heart close by... look at him—how does this pair of binoculars work, I never manage to—there, there, look at him, mammamia what shadows he’s got under his eyes, poor child, he must have been awake all night... But when are they going to start, I can’t take an hour and a half of this!”

“Wake up, come on!”

"Hmmm, mh... what, do you want to start again? We aren't teenagers any more, what's all this passion, Isabel the she-panther?"

"Ahaha, no, Robert, take that arm away, come on, the match is about to start, we have to watch it! And she-panther, honestly... I've always seen myself more as a kitten, romantic, tender, cheerful and a bit crazy..."

"Zen it means I am ze panter, big Cherman panter zat eats in vun mouthful ze little chuicy Prazilian and all her little friends..."

"Ahahah, no, stop it, stop it! I want to watch!"

"Zere is nossing to see, you can do nossing against ze big Chermany, you tickle us like zis, and zis, and zis...ahaha, ve vin anyway!"

"We're going to win, aren't we, papa? This Germany is strong, I must say they're a bit frightening."

"Of course, Manuelito, Brazil will win, Antônio will win."

Carlos raised his eyes to heaven. "Papa...! Still going on about how you reckon the real manager of this team is Antônio?"

"It isn't 'going on'. I tell you again that I know him well; many of the patterns they use are the same as the ones we invented when we were coaching Macapá and that everybody laughed at us for."

Carlos and Manuelito exchanged a glance and then began to snigger.

"Papa, come on! The split rail, hahaha, of course they laughed at you, how could anyone keep a straight face!"

Manuelito started laughing so hard that the Coca-Cola came back up his nose and he had to spit some of it onto his trousers.

Eduardo settled his little granddaughter Evita more comfortably; she had fallen asleep in his arms, and he dismissed with a wave of his hand the indulgence with which his sons listened to his stories. *I wonder whether Antônio has children; he didn't seem the type to me. I wonder whether he's found somebody who likes listening to his stories. And I wonder whether he's managed to beat the panic of the semi-finals; the shot is a bit too wide but I know him, I know that face: he still believes in the curse. Come on, Antônio, the whole Bezeiros family is with you.*

"Well? Has this match started? Have they done the anthems yet?" his wife Rosa cut in, planting herself in front of the television and eclipsing it behind her ample hips.

"Mama!" "Rosa!" the three male Bezeiros shouted together. "Shhhh! Move over and let us hear!"

"SHHHHH! Will you stop this racket? It's quite enough that I'm letting you watch the match here in the drawing room... Raimundo, get your feet off the little table, with those great boots. And you, Ivano, if you drink that whole bottle before the start you won't even be able to make out the television..."

"Senhor Inácio, Senhor Almundes is on the telephone, about the..."

“But the match is about to start! What the devil does he want?”

“No, not the match, it’s about that batch of coke that’s due to arrive and...”

“Never mind, never mind! Tell him I’m busy, tell him to call back! These people, they think of nothing but work! No patriotism, no poetry! Listen to the anthem, it moves me even more now that I’m far from my Brazil... and then that lad, the manager, I discovered him.”

“Really, Senhor Inácio?”

“Of course. I brought him up, he’s a creature of mine, I put the ball in his hands myself when he was still a boy. I saw straight away that he had a future; I don’t make mistakes about these things, Inácio with Our Lady’s help never makes a mistake, isn’t that right, lads?”

“My boss was right, Senhor Inácio was right: he doesn’t make mistakes about people,” Gustavo preened himself in the total indifference of those present, the forty-two prisoners who had permission to watch the matches in the TV room, greyish with linoleum and neon lights. “He never makes mistakes. Look at me. Once this stumble is sorted out I’ll go back to the place I deserve, a matter of three years, no more. And look at him, Antônio. The boss always said that lad had a gift, he was like a son to him. Him and me, like sons. Antônio and I are practically milk-brothers. I’m practically a milk-brother of the national football team, so there.”

Beside him Romualdo, a multiple murderer who was taking a botany degree in prison, yawned loudly: “Shut your mouth, it’s starting.”

“Come on, everybody, it’s about to start!” Marcos, Sebastião, Rui and a dozen other youngsters were crowded in front of the window of the electrical shop in the Rua Madeira, where at least five televisions were showing the pitch of the Mineirão in every format.

“Look, that’s Moacir!” “Well, of course it’s him, he’s dressed as a goalkeeper!” “It’s him, it’s him, he’s the tallest too! And that’s Jaci!” “Ow, don’t push!” “I have to be in front! I’m the smallest, I have to be in front! And besides, Jaci put my name on his shirt, not yours.” “Yeah, right, your name! Who knows who that Marcos is, maybe it’s his father.” “But his father’s an Indian! He’ll be called Ykairjurxãnutky or one of those names they have; I tell you he put Marcos on his shirt for me! He’s a friend of mine!” “Get away, you lousy little frog, who do you think you are!”

“Just look at those krauts, what a cocky air they’ve got, who do they think they are?”

“Well, Rominho, they are strong, no denying it. That they get on your nerves is nothing new.”

“It’d be news if anybody didn’t get on my nerves, Valério.”

“Who cares who likes who, the problem is that Cauê is on the bench, look!”

“Oh shit. That’s all we needed!”

“It certainly is. And that Taini instead of Piata, too, I don’t know. God, how I’d like to be there.” Fabbri had his legs in plaster and they were all a-quiver. Valério was drumming on his knees, Devil was doing without noticing the breathing exercises he was used to doing before going out onto the pitch, Carlos could not keep his feet still. In the white room of the clinic there hung a smell of adrenaline so intense that the nurse had almost felt faint.

“I don’t know about you, lads, but it’s as if I were there, I can even smell the grass...”

“That’s Devil’s deodorant. But I feel as if I were about to play too, I’m vibrating all over.”

“Let’s concentrate, maybe our energy will get through to them as well; bandaged and splinted, but it’s still energy. Come on, Brazil.”

Torment was in a state of total concentration. It was the very first time he had been allowed into the *pousada*’s main room and he was trying to be extremely well behaved. Gambone kept a hand on his head, just in case, and fanned himself with his captain’s cap.

“It’s hot, Gesita. I should have bought myself a television for the boat. One of those flat ones, very beautiful, I’ll buy one tomorrow. At least I’d watch it in the cool.”

“Well, maybe next year we’ll put in air conditioning, we’ll see. But I’m sweating with the emotion, that’s what it is. To think that I was the first to meet them, and now the whole world is watching them. I dressed them, I was the one who dressed them.”

She dried her eyes. “Let’s have a *cervejinha*, come on, or I’ll get emotional. Armandinho, do you want one too?”

Armando nodded, without taking his eyes off the screen. He was hot too, but he had no intention whatever of taking off the tie he had put on for the occasion, black and with a small grease spot dating from his wedding five decades earlier.

The referee went to the centre circle. Pepè fell silent, with a purple sequin caught in the rough beard on his chin. Teresa gnawed the nail of her ring finger, Luiza crossed herself, Saverio crossed his fingers. Italo held his breath, while Marcela bit her lip, fanning herself furiously with the imitation Japanese fan. Isabel pulled the sheet up to her chin, staring at the screen over the shoulder of Robert, who was singing “Deutschland über alles”, and Eduardo stayed motionless, with a trickle of the baby’s dribble running down his neck. Inácio wiped away the sweat, relighting the cigar that was already lit; Gustavo belched; the children fell silent while Marcos put a finger up his nose. Silence fell in the crowded white room, Gambone spat on the ground, Torment growled. And the referee blew for the start.

5.16 Drums

It was a bright, clear dusk, and an enormous moon had just appeared above the highest branches of the trees, when Kirimà began to tell his story. He could be wrong about many things, but he knew when the tribe needed to hear a story told. The boys, almost all their young men, so far away, so unreachable, running goodness knows what dangers in places nobody in the village could even imagine: there was not an adult who was not anxious about a son or a nephew, not a girl who was not thinking of a sweetheart or a brother, not one of the few young men left behind who did not wonder at every moment where the friends he had grown up with were and what they were doing. Knowing nothing weighed on everybody's mind even more than missing them did. Yes, the village needed to hear a story told.

Kirimà looked at the sky and the trees, made an effort to imagine that distant place and wondered whether the moon they could see from down there was the same one. Then he began his tale.

"Far, far away, where the river grows wide and wider still, there is a great village in the middle of the palms, and in that village there is a great clearing, really great, do you remember the clearings in Antônio's stories?"

A murmur of assent ran through the tribe: of course they remembered Antônio's stories.

"There, this one is even bigger, as big as ten of our clearings. Our boys are at the edge of that clearing right now: they are painted in the colours of the challenge and they are listening to the drums beating very loudly to urge them to run and to win. Tribes have come from every village to watch them play, from every village in the world, and there are twenty times twenty times twenty people all waiting for the game to begin. They have lit a multitude of fires all around, and the clearing is lit up as if it were day. Everybody is singing and dancing, and beating stones and sticks: it is a great evening, the game that will begin shortly is the most important game of all, and the opponents have paint as red as blood, and there are many of them, and they are very wicked."

The smallest children pressed close to their parents; all those opponents painted red and so wicked frightened them a little. They did not believe Kirimà's description in the least, as if a clearing that big could exist, lit up like daylight into the bargain, as if there could be that many people, how many did he say, twenty times twenty times... there cannot be that many in the world. But it's a good story, they thought, and, like everybody else, they settled down more comfortably to listen better.

Kirimà described each of the boys, the patterns each of them had on his face and body, enumerated their ornaments and spoke of their concentrated faces, the faces of great warriors. Drumming with two sticks on a hollow trunk to give himself the rhythm, he described the feather headdress of Antônio, second in splendour only to that of the great shaman who would begin the contest. He let them hear the calls of the frogs in the river and the monkeys in the trees surrounding the clearing, explaining that they seemed to be singing in time with the drums; pointing his finger at the sky he traced the courses of ten times ten great shining birds, the ones Antônio had spoken of so often, and said that in that great village the shining birds are as numerous as parrots, and that they go and come back from the moon, where they have their gleaming nests.

He looked around him: the faces with the shadows of the fire moving across them were all turned towards him; he looked at the children with their mouths open and the ones sucking a finger; he saw the eyes of all the adults glittering with reflected flames as they held their breath, staring at him. He

had never, never had so much attention. *It will be the finest story of all*, he decided, *I shall tell the finest story I have ever told.*

“Everybody is singing the chant of the challenge; twenty times twenty times twenty voices rise and make the earth tremble, they shake the leaves on the trees while the sparks of all the fires fly into the sky like swarms of mad fireflies. Then the shaman of the yellow men gives the cry of the beginning and throws the ball into the middle of the clearing. It is Yamandé who strikes it first, and his kick is very powerful and describes an arc as perfect as a rainbow: the opponents understand how strong our boys are and they are terrified.”

The children nudged one another, thoroughly pleased.

“But the red men are strong and very cruel; they do not let our boys run, they surround them on every side. They are fast and wicked, and treacherous as spiders, and as soon as they are near them they strike the boys with elbows and kicks.”

A hum of indignation rose from the listeners; a little girl, murmuring “Maaaaiaaaa!”, hid her face between her mother’s knees.

“A great big man, with a crow’s feather stuck behind one ear, strikes Jaci on the leg, and he falls to the ground.”

The tribe rumbled at the outrage, but Kirimà had already started speaking again: “Jaci is very brave and gets straight up, but the opponents take advantage of seeing our people confused; they dart like poisonous snakes, and one of them, after shoving Itaúna from behind until he almost falls, strikes the ball and sends it against the sacred tree, too high for Moacir’s desperate leap.”

“No... Nooo...” One single voice, the dismay of them all.

“Our boys look at one another, they want to react but a very powerful magic is thrown over them by an invisible sorcerer; their legs turn soft, they seem no longer to see where they are putting their feet, they are unsure, stupefied by the spell. And now another red man starts to run, he goes past Ubirajara and Piraí, whose eyes seem lost in emptiness, he kicks the ball and it flies past Moacir on wings of magic and strikes the sacred tree again.”

“NO!!!”

“Jaci is limping, he does not know what to do, the others seem no longer to know where to go, it seems their eyes can no longer see the ball; Yamandé and Moacir try to rouse themselves but they cannot, they are all in the grip of the enchantment.”

The rhythm of Kirimà’s sticks had quickened, every eye was wide, Itatakûara was fidgeting in extreme agitation, sitting on his trunk: *what a fool I have been, I did not teach them a single spell before they left, how could I, how could I send people off on an adventure as dangerous as that without their knowing even one piece of magic, how could I.*

“And two men with necklaces of puma teeth surround Ubiratan, they strike him hard on the knee, and there he falls, he cannot get up. They carry him out of the clearing; he will not be able to play again tonight. Jerujeru comes on in his place but the spell is on him too; he stumbles on legs that do not seem to be his, he lets past a small red man, very ugly and wicked, who in a moment is already in front of the sacred trees; he looks Moacir straight in the eyes and sends him diving the wrong way while he kicks and SCORES ANOTHER POINT!”

“NOOOO! NOOOOOO!!!”

The tribe’s cry roared out so loudly that the toucans in the trees, woken from sleep, flew away with a great beating of wings. The women bit their lips; many children were crying. Ubiratan’s mother clutched at the woman beside her, frightened by the injury but almost relieved that her son was no longer forced to play, to measure himself against those treacherous beasts.

“Our boys are as though stunned, they cannot react, and time is passing: when the star of the anaconda’s eye reaches the moon the game will be over, and it is not long now. And the red men score more points; to count them all you need a whole hand and two fingers of the other. They can already feel victory on their skin, they laugh at us and at our helplessness, they have round, violent eyes.”

The men, extremely tense, were stroking the knives at their sides; Itátakûara was biting his knuckles; nobody dared to breathe. Kirimà, all sweating with the tension, quickened the rhythm of the sticks still further; now it was the beat of a maddened heart.

“It all seems over, the opponents shout as they throw themselves on the ball, they know they will be able to score many more points. When all at once...”

When all at once Yamandé gets to the ball and shouts: “YANIAHÏ TELÈÈÈH HOICÏIIII!!!”

It is a mighty shout; it manages to pierce even the murmur of the 80,000 spectators of the Mineirão, who fall silent to hear it better. And Yamandé again, looking at his team-mates, to be sure he has been understood: “YaniahÏ telèèèh hoicÏiiii!”

In the dressing room, shortly before, there had been silence. The boys were saying nothing. The coach had no wish to speak; he had had enough of the whole pantomime and no longer even cared about keeping up appearances. He had caught himself thinking that he could not wait for it to be over, however it went. But Antônio seemed—was—paralysed by panic. He kept murmuring: *the semi-final, of all the things I could have passed on to them I’ve passed on my fear of semi-finals*, and so the coach spoke, if only to shut him up.

“The situation is hard. But we’re losing three-nil, not seven or ten. Three goals can be got back. I know Antônio has told you a lot of football stories; I don’t know whether he’s told you the ones about coming back from three-nil. Not many, but there have been some. There was even a World Cup semi-final in which Germany itself lost four-three. Scoring four goals spread here and there or scoring them all in a row doesn’t make all that much difference. Right now you’re afraid. But when you score the first goal and then the second... and mark this, not ‘if’: when. When you score the first and second goals, you’ll still be losing but the fear will have crossed over into their eyes, not yours any more. How to do it? That’s for you to know. The further we’ve gone in this World Cup the more you’ve started playing like everybody else. Partly my fault. But you aren’t everybody else. You’re you. Stop aping the others and play the way you know how. And go back to being a team, for god’s sake! Until the other day you were the most united team I’d ever seen; today it looks as though you can’t even look each other in the eye. Pull yourselves together, holiestgod. And stop being a pain in the arse to the bench! Have you understood?”

For a moment there had been absolute silence. Many glances had shifted from one face to another. Then Gonçalves had turned the corners of his mouth down even further, had turned to Antônio shaking his head and had said, partly to him but mostly to himself: “No, of course. Of course they haven’t understood. What a fucking situation.”

As Gonçalves sat down, Thiago had encouraged him: “Fine speech, coach.”

“Oh, piss off!” the other had replied. Antônio had given him a glance, had nodded and had then spoken in his turn.

“What did you tell them?” the coach had asked him.

“I translated what you said to them.”

“No, seriously.”

“Seriously. It was a fine speech.”

The coach had looked at Antônio questioningly, had shaken his head and had looked at Cauê: “Kid! Do you feel up to coming on?”

Then he had gone out of the dressing room and headed for the bench, followed by Antônio.

While Cauê was getting ready, the players had stayed in the dressing room conferring for a few seconds and had then gone back out onto the pitch.

“YANIAH!! TELEÈÈÈH HOIC!!IIII!!!”

“What did he say?” the coach asks, curious.

“Let’s do the tapir.”

“And what’s that?”

“Never heard of it before,” Antônio answers, smiling.

The second half has only just begun and Germany have just committed a foul in attack. Before Yamandé takes it, nine Brazil players move forward in unison and line up along the halfway line. *A new pattern!* the excited spectators murmur. *At last! I knew they couldn’t just give up like that!* Even the most sceptical say it, the ones who a minute earlier had been thinking of leaving, the ones who were starting to miss the traditional Brazil. The Germans were expecting something, but this catches them out. Leaving the defence as exposed as that is madness; perhaps it is some sort of tactic, but it looks more than anything like a desperation move. In their uncertainty the red and black players do not quite know what to do; they confine themselves to marking each opponent tightly while waiting to see how the situation develops.

“Do you know how you hunt a tapir?” Antônio asks the coach.

“Are you taking the piss?”

Yamandé kicks. It is a long, hard ball towards Jaci. As Jaci jumps as though to head it, he misses the ball deliberately and it arrives at Cauê’s foot, right on the halfway line.

“There’s a liana that has inside it, instead of water, a slimy, stinking substance; the smell is a bit like coconut, but more rancid.”

Cauê strikes the ball on the volley, getting there an instant before Alherman, from whom he takes a hard blow. He stays down, but the ball is directed accurately towards Ubiratan, who first time turns it for Jerujeru, who is already sprinting towards the goal.

“You have to take this substance and smear it well over your backside and in front over your pelvis, and you mustn’t neglect any hole or crevice.”

But the pass is a shade too short; Kuntz has read it all and intercepts. The ball belongs to Germany and Brazil are as exposed as it is possible to be.

“Because the trouble with the tapir is that it isn’t hard to hunt but it’s covered in ticks, which are even called tapir ticks.”

The chance for a counter-attack is a golden one, and who would not take it? The ball flies from one foot to another among the players in red shirts as they advance rapidly towards the Brazil goal. There are four of them against Yamandé: the whole of Brazil is racing back at top speed to help him, the Germans’ advantage is small but it may be enough.

“And these ticks, which are terrible, have adapted to climbing up the legs and working their way into the pelvis, and this is because the tapir scratches itself against the bark of trees but obviously doesn’t scratch itself in that particular spot.”

Yamandé holds his position well, playing for just enough time to make Itaúna’s recovery run a threat and put pressure on the opposition: Bauer decides to get his shot in early and unleashes a powerful left foot a few paces outside the box. It is an instant, and then Moacir dives. The direction is the right one and the agility is the agility everybody has learnt to admire over these weeks. Perhaps he gets there.

It’s a question of perspective, thinks Antônio, photographing that instant. It all depends. Then at a certain point the ball ends up out, or against the post, or in the net, or on the goalkeeper’s fingers, and it doesn’t depend any more.

Moacir harpoons the ball with his right hand. He falls. Time to get up and, without even looking, he throws the ball out, placing it straight at Yamandé’s feet.

“That’s the point about the tapir: you look at it, it seems a defenceless animal, beaten before it starts. You’d think beating it was child’s play, but if you don’t watch out for even the smallest details it will be the one to beat you.”

Yamandé plays it long. There is only Cauê at that point, who a second earlier was still on the ground but now gets up with the agility of a jaguar and takes the ball down with a perfect touch. Was it a dummy? Has he risen again, spurred on by the golden chance? Nobody knows, and at that moment nobody cares. Cauê runs like lightning towards the German goal, he is completely alone, in front of him only the keeper. The Mineirão seethes with renewed hope as though there were five hundred thousand spectators; they are already shouting so loudly that you wonder what will happen if he scores.

That is discovered a few seconds later: Krugenstein comes out desperately, but Cauê with a feint sits him down and slots it into the empty goal.

Antônio is happy: the match is alive again, the curse of the semi-final is broken, but above all his destiny as a manager has been fulfilled: the tapir's move has worked and he has become useless, exactly as he had always preached.

Kirimà wipes his forehead. The point is scored and others will follow: the whole village is now laughing, crying and singing. A good story ends well, he knows that.

Antônio knows it too, as he laughs at the final whistle in the roar of the exulting stadium.

Contacts

If you want to know more about some of the facts and customs mentioned here and there in the story, visit <http://lamossadeltapiro.wordpress.com/>

You can also find us on:

Facebook : www.facebook.com/lamossadeltapiro

Twitter : twitter.com/MossaDelTapiro

To write to the authors: lamossadeltapiro@gmail.com

By the same authors

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