

LONELYHEARTS

by Rubem Fonseca

I was working for a popular newspaper as a police reporter. It had been a long time since the city had seen an interesting crime involving a rich, young and beautiful society woman, deaths, disappearances, corruption, lies, sex, ambition, money, violence, scandal.

"You don't get crimes like that even in Rome, Paris, New York," the editor said. "We're in a slump. But things'll change soon. It's all cyclical. When you least expect it, one of those scandals breaks out that provides material for a year. Everything's rotten, just right, all we have to do is wait."

Before it broke out they fired me.

"All you have is small businessmen killing their partners, petty thieves killing small businessmen, police killing petty thieves. Small potatoes," I told Oswaldo Peçanha, editor-in-chief and owner of the newspaper *Woman*.

"There's also meningitis, schistosomiasis, Chagas disease," Peçanha said.

"Out of my area," I said.

"Have you read *Woman*?" Peçanha asked.

I admitted I hadn't. I prefer reading books.

Peçanha took a box of cigars from his desk and offered me one. We lighted the cigars, and soon the atmosphere was unbreathable. The cigars were cheap, it was summer, the windows were closed, and the air conditioning wasn't working well.

"*Woman* isn't one of those colorful publications for bourgeois women on a diet. It's made for the Class C woman, who eats rice and beans and if she gets fat, tough luck. Take a look."

Peçanha tossed me a copy of the newspaper. Tabloid format, headlines in blue, some out-of-focus photographs. Illustrated love story, horoscope, interviews with TV actors, dressmaking.

"Think you could do the 'Woman to Woman' section, our advice column? The guy who was doing it left."

"Woman to Woman" carried the byline of one Elisa Gabriela. Dear Elisa Gabriela, my husband comes home drunk every night and . . .

"I think I can," I said.

"Great. You start today. What name do you want to use?"

I thought a bit.

"Nathanael Lessa."

"Nathanael Lessa?" Peçanha said, surprised and offended, as if I'd said a dirty word or insulted his mother.

"What's wrong with it? It's a name like any other. And I'm paying homage to two people."

Peçanha puffed his cigar, irritated.

"First, it's not a name like any other. Second, it's not a Class C name. Here we only use names pleasing to Class C, pretty names. Third, the paper only pays homage to who I want it to, and I don't know any Nathanael Lessa. And

finally” — Peçanha’s irritation had gradually increased, as if he were taking a certain enjoyment in it — “here no one, not even me, uses a masculine pseudonym. My name is Maria de Lourdes! ”

I took another look at the newspaper, including the staff. Nothing but women’s names.

“Don’t you think a masculine name gives the answers more respectability? Father, husband, priest, boss — they have nothing but men telling them what to do. Nathanael Lessa will catch on better than Elisa Gabriela.”

“That’s exactly what I don’t want. Here they feel like their own bosses, they trust us, as if we were all friends. I’ve been in this business twenty-five years. Don’t come to me with untested theories. *Woman* is revolutionizing the Brazilian press, it’s a different kind of newspaper that doesn’t run yesterday’s warmed-over television news.”

He was so irritated that I didn’t ask just what *Woman* was out to accomplish. He’d tell me sooner or later. I just wanted the job.

“My cousin, Machado Figueiredo, who also has twenty-five years’ experience, at the Bank of Brazil, likes to say that he’s always open to untested theories.” I knew that *Woman* owed money to the bank. And a letter of recommendation from my cousin was on Peçanha’s desk.

When he heard my cousin’s name, Peçanha paled. He bit his cigar to control himself, then closed his mouth, as if he were about to whistle, and his fat lips trembled as if he had a grain of pepper on his tongue. He opened his mouth wide and tapped his nicotine-stained teeth with his thumbnail while he looked at me in a way that he must have thought fraught with significance.

“I could add ‘Dr.’ to my name. Dr. Nathanael Lessa.”

“Damn! All right, all right,” Peçanha snarled between his teeth, “you start today.”

That was how I came to be part of the team at *Woman*.

My desk was near Sandra Marina’s, who wrote the horoscope. Sandra was also known as Marlene Katia, for inter-

views. A pale fellow with a long, sparse mustache, he was also known as João Albergaria Duval. He wasn't long out of communications school and constantly complained, "Why didn't I study dentistry, why?"

I asked him if someone brought the readers' letters to my desk. He told me to talk to Jacqueline in the office. Jacqueline was a large black man with very white teeth.

"It won't set well being the only one here who doesn't have a woman's name, they're going to think I'm a fairy. Letters? There aren't any. You think Class C women write letters? Elisa made them all up."

"Dear Dr. Nathanael Lessa. I got a scholarship for my ten-year-old daughter in a fancy school in a good neighborhood. All her classmates go to the hairdresser at least once a week. We don't have the money for that, my husband drives a bus on the Jacaré-Caju line, but he says he's going to work overtime to send Tania Sandra, our little girl, to the hairdresser. Don't you think that our children deserve every sacrifice? Dedicated Mother. Villa Kennedy."

Answer: Wash your little girl's head with coconut soap and wrap it in curling paper. It's the same as the hairdresser. In any case, your daughter wasn't born to be a doll-baby. Nor anyone else's daughter, for that matter. Take the overtime pay and buy something more useful. Food, for example.

"Dear Dr. Nathanael Lessa. I am short, plump and shy. Whenever I go to the outdoor market, the store, the vegetable market, they trick me. They cheat me on the weight, the change, the beans have bugs in them, the cornmeal is stale, that kind of thing. It used to bother me a lot but now I'm resigned to it. God is watching them and at the day of judgment they will pay. Resigned Domestic. Penha."

Answer: God doesn't have his eye on anybody. You have to look out for yourself. I suggest you scream, holler, raise a scandal. Don't you have a relative who works for the police? A crook will do also. Get moving, chubby.

"Dear Dr. Nathanael Lessa. I am twenty-five, a typist and a virgin. I met this boy who says he really loves me. He

works in the Ministry of Transportation and says he wants to marry me, but first he wants to try it out. What do you think? Frenzied Virgin. Parada de Lucas.”

Answer: Look, Frenzied Virgin, ask the guy what he plans to do if he doesn’t like the experience. If he says he’ll dump you, give him what he wants, because he’s a sincere man. You’re not some wine or stew to be tasted. But there aren’t many sincere men around, so it’s worth a try. Keep the faith and full speed ahead.

I went to lunch.

When I got back Peçanha called me in. He had my copy in his hand.

“There’s something or other here I don’t like,” he said.

“What? ” I asked.

“Ah, good God, the idea people have of Class C,” Peçanha exclaimed, shaking his head pensively while he looked at the ceiling and puckered his lips. “It’s Class A women who like being treated with curses and kicks. Remember that English lord who said his success with women came from treating ladies like whores and whores like ladies.”

“All right. So how should I handle our readers? ”

“Don’t come to me with dialectics. I don’t want you to treat them like whores. Forget the English lord. Put some happiness, some hope, tranquillity and reassurance in the letters, that’s what I want.”

“Dear Dr. Nathanael Lessa. My husband died and left me a very small pension, but what worries me is to be alone and fifty years old. Poor, plain, old, and living a long way out, I’m afraid of what’s in store for me. Lonely in Santa Cruz.”

Answer: Engrave this in your heart, Lonely in Santa Cruz: neither money, nor beauty, nor youth, nor a good address brings happiness. How many rich and beautiful people kill themselves or lose themselves in the horrors of vice? Happiness is inside us, in our hearts. If we are just and good we will find happiness. Be good, be just, love your neighbor as yourself, smile at the cashier when you go to pick up your pension.

The next day Peçanha called me in and asked if I could also write the illustrated love story. "We turn out our own stories, not some translated Italian fumetti. Pick a name."

I chose Clarice Simone, two more homages, though I didn't tell Peçanha that.

The photographer of the love stories came to talk to me.

"My name is Monica Tutsi," he said, "but you can call me Aginaldo. You got the pap ready?"

Pap was the love story. I explained that I had just gotten the assignment from Peçanha and would need at least two days to write it.

"Days, ha ha," he guffawed, making the sound of a large, hoarse domesticated dog barking for its master.

"What's so funny?" I asked.

"Norma Virginia used to write the story in fifteen minutes. He had a formula."

"I have a formula too. Take a walk and come back in fifteen minutes; your story'll be ready."

What did that idiot of a photographer think I was? Just because I'd been a police reporter didn't mean I was stupid. If Norma Virginia, or whatever his name was, wrote a story in fifteen minutes, so could I. After all, I read the Greek tragedies, the Ibsens, the O'Neals, the Becketts, the Chekhovs, the Shakespeares, the Four Hundred Best Television Plays. All I had to do was appropriate an idea here, another one there, and that's it.

A rich young lad is stolen by gypsies and given up for dead. The boy grows up thinking he's a real gypsy. One day he meets a very rich young girl and they fall in love. She lives in a fine mansion and has many automobiles. The gypsy boy lives in a wagon. The two families don't want them to marry. Conflicts arise. The millionaires order the police to arrest the gypsies. One of the gypsies is killed by the police. A rich cousin of the girl is assassinated by the gypsies. But the love of the two young people is greater than all these vicissitudes. They decide to run away, to break with their families. On their flight they encounter a pious and wise monk

who seals their union in an ancient, picturesque and romantic convent amidst a flowering wood. The two young people retire to the nuptial chamber. They are beautiful, slim, blond with blue eyes. They remove their clothes. "Oh," says the girl, "what is that gold chain with a diamond-studded medalion you wear on your neck?" She has one just like it! They are brother and sister! "You are my brother who disappeared!" the girl cries. The two embrace. (Attention Monica Tutsi: how about an ambiguous ending? Making a non-fraternal ecstasy appear on their faces, eh? I can also change the ending and make it more Sophoclean: they discover they're brother and sister after the consummated fact; the desperate girl leaps from the convent window and creams herself down below.)

"I liked your story," Monica Tutsi said.

"A pinch of Romeo and Juliet, a teaspoon of Oedipus Rex," I said modestly.

"But I can't photograph it, man. I have to do everything in two hours. Where do I find the mansion? The cars? The picturesque convent? The flowered wood?"

"That's your problem."

"Where do I find," Monica Tutsi continued as if he hadn't heard me, "the two slim, blond young people with blue eyes? All our models tend toward the mulatto. Where do I get the wagon? Try again, man. I'll be back in fifteen minutes. And what does Sophoclean mean?"

Roberto and Betty are engaged to be married. Roberto, who is very hard working, has saved his money to buy an apartment and furnish it, with a color television set, stereo, refrigerator, washing machine, floor waxer, dishwasher, toaster, electric iron and hair dryer. Betty works too. Both are chaste. The date is set. A friend of Roberto's, Tiago, asks him, "Are you going to get married still a virgin? You need to be initiated into the mysteries of sex." Tiago then takes Roberto to the house of the Superwhore Betatron. (Attention Monica Tutsi: the name is a pinch of science fiction.) When Roberto arrives he finds out that the Superwhore is Betty, his dear

fiancee. Oh heavens! what a horrible surprise! Someone, perhaps a doorman, will say, "To grow up is to suffer." End of story.

"One word is worth a thousand photographs," Monica Tutsi said. "I always get the short end of things. I'll be back soon."

"Dr. Nathanael. I like to cook. I also like to embroider and crochet. And most of all I like to wear a long evening gown and put on crimson lipstick, with lots of rouge and eye shadow. Ah, what a sensation! What a pity that I must stay locked in my room. No one knows that I like to do these things. Am I wrong? Pedro Redgrave. Tijuca."

Answer: Why should it be wrong? Are you doing anyone harm? I had another reader who, like you, enjoyed dressing as a woman. He carried on a normal, useful and socially productive life, to the point that he was selected a model worker. Put on your long gowns, paint your lips scarlet, put some color in your life.

"All the letters should be from women," Peçanha reminded.

"But this one is real," I said.

"I don't believe it."

I handed the letter to Peçanha. He looked at it with the expression of a cop examining a badly counterfeited bill.

"You think it's a joke? Peçanha asked.

"It might be," I said. "And it might not be."

Peçanha put on his reflective look. Then:

"Add some phrase of encouragement to your letter, like for example, write again."

I sat down at the typewriter:

Write again, Pedro, I know that's not your real name but it doesn't matter, write again, count on me. Nathanael Lessa.

"Shit," said Monica Tutsi, "I went to do your great piece of drama and they told me it was stolen from some Italian film."

"Wretches, band of idiots — just because I was a police reporter they're calling me a plagiarist."

"Take it easy, Virginia."

"Virginia? My name is Clarice Simone," I said. "What idiocy is this of thinking only Italian fiancées are whores? Look here, I once knew an engaged woman, a really serious one, who was even a sister of charity, and they found out she was a whore too."

"It's okay, man, I'm going to shoot the story. Can Betatron be mulatto? What's a Betatron? "

"She has to be a redhead, with freckles. Betatron is an apparatus for the production of electrons, possessing great energy potential and high velocity, impelled by the action of a rapidly changing magnetic field," I said.

"Shit! That's really a name for a whore," said Monica Tutsi admiringly, on his way out.

"Understanding Nathanael Lessa. I have worn my long gowns gloriously. And my mouth has been as red as tiger's blood and the break of dawn. I am thinking of putting on a satin gown and going to the Municipal Theatre. What do you think? And now I'm going to tell you a great and marvelous confidence, but you must keep my confession the greatest secret. Do you swear? Ah, I don't know if I should say it or not. All my life I've suffered the greatest disillusionment from believing in others. I am basically a person who never lost his innocence. Betrayal, coarseness, shamelessness, and baseness leave me quite shocked. Oh how I would like to live isolated in a utopian world of love and kindness. My sensitive Nathanael, let me think. Give me time. In the next letter I shall tell more, perhaps everything. Pedro Redgrave."

Answer: Pedro. I await your letter, with your secrets, which I promise to store in the inviolable reaches of my recondite consciousness. Continue this way, confronting aloofly the envy and insidious perfidy of the poor in spirit. Adorn your body which thirsts for sensuality, by exercising the challenges of your courageous mind.

Peçanha asked: "Are these letters real too? "

"Pedro Redgrave's are."

"Strange, very strange," Peçanha said, tapping his nails on his teeth. "What do you make of it? "

"I don't make anything of it," I said.

He seemed preoccupied with something. He asked about the illustrated love story but took no interest in the answers.

"What about the blind girl's letter? " I asked.

Peçanha got the blind girl's letter and my reply and read aloud: "Dear Nathanael. I can not read what you write. My beloved granny reads it to me. But do not think I am illiterate. I am blind. My dear granny is writing this letter for me, but the words are my own. I want to send a word of comfort to your readers so that they, who suffer so much from small misfortunes, may look at themselves in the mirror. I am blind but I am happy. I am at peace, with God and my fellow man. Happiness to all. Long live Brazil and its people. Blind but Happy. Unicorn Road. Nova Iguaçu. P.S. I forgot to say that I am also paralyzed." Peçanha lighted a cigar. "Moving, but Unicorn Road doesn't ring true. You'd better make it Windmill Road or something like that. Now let's see your answer. 'Blind but Happy, congratulations on your strength, your unwavering faith in happiness, in goodness, in the people, and in Brazil. The souls of those who despair in their adversity should take nourishment from your edifying example, a flambeau of light in the darkness of torment.' "

Peçanha gave me the papers. "You have a future in literature. This is a great school we have here. Learn, learn, dedicate yourself, don't lose heart, work hard."

I sat at the typewriter:

Tesio, a bank employee, resident of Boca do Mato, in Lins de Vasconcelos, married to Frederica in his second marriage, has a son, Hipolito, from his first marriage. Frederica fall in love with Hipolito. Tesio discovers their sinful love. Frederica hangs herself from the mango tree in the back yard. Hipolito asks his father for forgiveness, leaves home and wanders desperately through the streets of the cruel city until he is run over and killed on the Avenida Brasil.

"What's the seasoning here? " Monica Tutsi asked.

“Euripedes, sin and death. Let me tell you something: I know the human soul and don’t need any ancient Greek to inspire me. For a man of my intelligence and sensitivity it’s enough to look around me. Look closely at my eyes. Have you ever seen anyone more alert, more wide awake? ”

Monica Tutsi looked closely at my eyes and said, “I think you’re crazy.”

I continued:

“I cite the classics only to demonstrate my knowledge. Since I was a police reporter, if I don’t do that the cretins don’t respect me. I’ve read thousands of books. How many books do you think Peçanha has read? ”

“None. Can Frederica be black? ”

“Good idea. But Tesio and Hipolito have to be white.”

“Nathanael. I love, a forbidden love, an interdicted love, a secret love, a hidden love. I love another man. And he also loves me. But we can not walk in the street holding hands, like the others, exchange kisses in the gardens and movie theaters, like the others, lie in each other’s arms on the sandy beaches, like the others, dance in night clubs, like the others. We cannot get married, like the others, and together face old age, disease and death, like the others. I do not have the strength to resist and struggle. It is better to die. Goodbye. This is my last letter. Have a mass said for me. Pedro Redgrave.”

Answer: What are you saying, Pedro? Are you going to give up now that you’ve found your love? Oscar Wilde suffered like the devil, he was ridiculed, tried, sentenced, but he stood up to it. If you can’t get married, shack up. Make a will in each other’s favor. Defend yourselves. Use the law and the system to your benefit. Be selfish, like the others, be sly, implacable, intolerant and hypocritical. Exploit. Plunder. It’s self-defense. But, please, don’t carry out any deranged gesture.

I sent the letter and reply to Peçanha. Letters were published only with his approval.

Monica Tutsi came by with a girl.

"This is Monica," Monica Tutsi said.

"Quite a coincidence," I said.

"What's a coincidence?" asked the girl Monica.

"The two of you having the same name," I said.

"His name is Monica?" Monica asked, pointing to the photographer.

"Monica Tutsi. Are you Tutsi too?"

"No. Monica Amelia."

Monica Amelia stood chewing a fingernail and looking at Monica Tutsi.

"You told me your name was Agnaldo," she said.

"On the outside I'm Agnaldo. Here inside I'm Monica Tutsi."

"My name is Clarice Simone," I said.

Monica Amelia observed us attentively, without understanding a thing. She saw two circumspect people, too tired for jokes, uninterested in their own names.

"When I get married my son, or daughter, is going to be named Hei Yoo," I said.

"Is that a Chinese name?" Monica asked.

"Or else Wheet Wheeo," I whistled.

"You're becoming a nihilist," Monica Tutsi said, withdrawing with the other Monica.

"Nathanael. Do you know what it is for two people to like one another? That was the two of us, Maria and I. Do you know what it is for two people to be perfectly attuned? That was us, Maria and I. My favorite dish is rice, beans, finely shredded kale, manioc meal and fried sausage. Guess what Maria's was? Rice, beans, finely shredded kale, manioc meal and fried sausage. My favorite precious stone is the ruby. Maria's, you guessed it, was also the ruby. Lucky number 7, color Blue, day Monday, film Westerns, book The Little Prince, drink Beer on Tap, mattress Anatom, soccer team Vasco da Gama, music Samba, pastime Love, everything the same between her and me, wonderful. What we would do in bed, man — I don't mean to brag, but if it were in the circus and we charged admission we'd be rich. In bed no couple was ever so

taken by such resplendent madness, was capable of such a dexterous, imaginative, original, pertinacious, splendiferous, and fulfilling performance as ours. And we would repeat it several times a day. But it was not just that which linked us. If you were missing a leg I would continue to love you, she would say. If you were a hunchback I would not stop loving you, I would reply. If you were a deaf-mute I would continue to love you, she would say. If you were cross-eyed I would not stop loving you, I would respond. If you had a paunch and were ugly I would continue to love you, she would say. If you were all scarred with smallpox I would not stop loving you, I would respond. If you were old and impotent I would continue to love you, she would say. And we were exchanging these vows when a desire to be truthful struck me, as deep as a knife-thrust, and I asked her, what if I had no teeth, would you love me? and she replied, if you had no teeth I would continue to love you. Then I took out my dentures and threw them on the bed with a grave, religious, and metaphysical gesture. We both lay there looking at the dentures on top of the sheet, until Maria got up, put on a dress and said, I'm going out for cigarettes. To this day she hasn't come back. Nathanael, explain to me what happened. Does love end suddenly? Do a few teeth, miserable pieces of ivory, mean that much? Odontos Silva.

As I was about to reply, Jacqueline came by and said that Peçanha was calling me.

In Peçanha's office was a man wearing glasses and a goatee.

"This is Dr. Pontecorvo, who's a — just what are you?" asked Peçanha.

"A motivational researcher," Pontecorvo said. "As I was saying, first we do a survey of the characteristics of the universe we're researching, for example: who is the reader of *Woman*? Let's suppose it's the Class C female. In our previous research we've surveyed everything about the Class C female — where she buys her food, how many pairs of panties she owns, what time she makes love, what time she watches tele-

vision, which television programs she watches, in short, a complete profile."

"How many pairs of panties does she own?" Peçanha asked.

"Three," Pontecorvo replied without hesitation.

"What time does she make love?"

"At 9:30 p.m.," Pontecorvo replied promptly.

"And how did you find all this out? Do you knock at Dona Aurora's door in the housing project, she opens the door and you say, good morning, Dona Aurora, what time do you get it on? Look here, my friend, I've been in this business for twenty-five years and I don't need anybody to tell me what the Class C woman's profile is. I know from personal experience. They buy my newspaper, understand? Three pairs of panties . . . Ha! "

"We use scientific research methods. We have sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists, statisticians, and mathematicians on our staff," said Pontecorvo, imperturbable.

"All to get money from the patsies," said Peçanha with undisguised scorn.

"As a matter of fact, before coming here I put together some information about your newspaper which I believe may be of interest to you," Pontecorvo said.

"And what does it cost?" said Peçanha sarcastically.

"This I'll give you for free," Pontecorvo said. The man seemed to be made of ice. "We did a miniresearch on your readers, and despite the small sample size I can assure you, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that the great majority, almost the entirety, of your readers is made up of Class B men."

"What?" screamed Peçanha.

"That's right, Class B men."

First Peçanha turned pale. Then he began to turn red, then purple, as if he were being strangled. His mouth open, his eyes bulging, he rose from his chair and, arms spread, staggered like a crazed gorilla in Pontecorvo's direction. A shocking sight, even for a man of steel like Pontecorvo, even for

an ex-police reporter. Pontecorvo retreated before Peçanha's advance until, his back against the wall, he said, trying to maintain his calm and composure, "Maybe our technicians made a mistake."

Peçanha, who was within a centimeter of Pontecorvo, underwent a violent tremor and, contrary to what I expected, did not pounce upon the other like a rabid dog. He seized his own hair forcefully and began tearing it out, as he screamed, "Comedians, swindlers, thieves, exploiters, liars, scum of the earth." Pontecorvo nimbly made his way toward the door, as Peçanha ran after him throwing the tufts of hair yanked from his own head, "Men! Men! Class B! " Peçanha snarled madly.

Later, after calming down – I think Pontecorvo escaped by the stairs – Peçanha, seated behind his desk again, told me, "That's the kind of people Brazil's fallen into the hands of – manipulators of statistics, falsifiers of information, con men with computers, all of them creating the Big Lie. But they won't pull it off with me. I really put that wretch in his place, didn't I? "

I said something or other in agreement. Peçanha took the box of El Ropos from the drawer and offered me one. We smoked and talked about the Big Lie. Afterwards he gave me Pedro Redgrave's letter and my reply, with his okay, for me to take to the composing room.

On the way I saw that Pedro Redgrave's letter wasn't the one I had sent him. The text was different:

"Dear Nathanael, your letter was a balm for my afflicted heart. It has given me the strength to resist. I will not make any deranged gesture. I promise to . . ."

The letter ended there. It had been interrupted in the middle. Strange. I didn't understand. Something was wrong.

I went to my desk, sat down, and began writing the answer to Odontos Silva:

He who has no teeth also has no toothache. And as the hero of the well known play put it, "There's never been a philosopher who could bear a toothache with patience."

Besides, teeth are also instruments of revenge, as Deuteronomy says: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a hand for a hand, a foot for a foot. Dictators despise teeth. Remember what Hitler told Mussolini about another meeting with Franco? : I prefer having four teeth pulled. You're in the situation of the hero of that play *All's Well If Nobody Gets Shafted* — no teeth, no taste, nothing. Advice: put your teeth back in and bite. If biting doesn't do the trick, try punching and kicking.

I was in the middle of Odontos Silva's letter when I suddenly understood everything. Peçanha was Pedro Redgrave. Instead of returning the letter in which Pedro asked me to have a mass said for him and which I had given him together with my answer about Oscar Wilde, Peçanha had handed me a new letter, unfinished, surely by accident, and which was supposed to come into my hands by mail.

I got Pedro Redgrave's letter and went to Peçanha's office. "May I come in?" I asked.

"What is it? Come in," Peçanha said.

I handed him Pedro Redgrave's letter. Peçanha read the letter and, seeing the mistake he had committed, turned pale, as was his wont. Nervously, he shuffled the papers on his desk.

"It was all a joke," he said, trying to light a cigar. "Are you mad?"

"For real or a joke, it's all the same to me," I said.

"My life would make a novel . . ." Peçanha said. "Let's keep this between the two of us, okay?"

I wasn't sure what he wanted to keep between the two of us, his life making a novel or his being Pedro Redgrave. But I replied:

"Of course, just between the two of us."

"Thanks," said Peçanha. And he breathed a sigh that would have broken the heart of anyone who wasn't an ex-police reporter.

(Translated from the Portuguese by Clifford E. Landers)