

ME AND MY BEETLE

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Translated by
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Ah, me and my beetle! It was their ads that grabbed me! The beetle's a small car, and when I get in it I feel small too. Not in size – in the noodle, if you get my drift. Inside the machine I'm a kid again, just like in the orphanage, except there's nobody bugging me or spying on me. After three lousy lessons I could drive this heap like a pro; getting my license was a piece of cake. I'm something else behind the wheel. I'm not afraid to floor it, and if I ever get mine someday, I hope it's with the VW emblem stamped on my guts. But if that day comes, they'll find my little beauty fully equipped, with every accessory the auto supply has to offer.

“Hey, Januário, I bet the oil doesn't even need changing”.

I'm at the gas station and Januário is the round-faced guy who always takes care of me. He can spot my beetle three blocks off and waves his yellow chamois in the air. He says there's no cleaner or better equipped Volks in the city. And he's right. I take real good care of it, like it was a person. One of these days I'll go off the deep end and start pouring milk down the gas tank.

“Jano, what's with that Gordini? It's really gettin' to be too much. What good is it to win races even on ice if it's always coughing? Check the tires, Moonface. I'm gonna make two hundred today. No, not at Santos. Sand racing is for crabs. Asphalt's my thing. This town's got a racing strip. Ciao, Jano. Tell the Gordini owner not to believe everything he reads in ads”.

I turned on the radio. Dig that system. Even on São João, with all them buildings, I once picked up Rio de Janeiro. Wanna see the fog lights? They weren't cheap, but they're the best around. Now glom how the chrome strips shine! People talk about my wheels like nothing you ever seen. Nobody would guess what it was like when I got it. It came stripped and I had to dress it up like a foundling, like they did with me at the orphanage. Look at old Mug shaking. His mother took thalidomide, but he brings you luck, like they say. Try the doors. They can really take it. Not a rattle, man. She's like that all over, soft ad silent. Sometimes, just for kicks, I hit the streets where the sidewalk peddlers hang out, just to see their mouths water.

"How 'bout selling it?"

"Is it for sale?"

"How much you want for it?"

Watch this, I'm gonna pull up to that little short guy over there.

"You like my wheels, half-pint?"

"I'll give you six for it, cash."

"Shove your six."

"What?"

"Hands off my beetle, shrimp."

I drive up Eduardo Prado, heading for Pacaembu. Don't think I get bugged by all the Jags and Mercedes. My little red beetle outshines them all and has a personality of its own. The chicks check it out with the corner of their eyes. There's a fat chick who lives by the off-ramp who's more hooked than any of 'em. She goes crazy when my beetle drives by. If I was into maids, I could have as many as I wanted, but I didn't deck out my wheels like this just to waste it on nobodies. I'm gonna take that curve by the stadium so you can feel how it handles. It steers with one finger. Just watch that ice cream vendor fill his pants when I brake. He thinks I'm tripping out.

"You got tuna ice cream, man? No? Then gimme strawberry, but I won't pay unless you sing 'Yes, We Have No Bananas'".

At first he used to sing. My hair and the rings scare the sheep. I head for Paulista, eating ice cream. A Porsche passes me, driven by a Turk with a chick at his side. No way: I pull in front of the rich bastard and slow down, holding up traffic and not

giving a damn about the horns. What's the hurry, Ahab the Ayrab? All I'm doing is showing off my chrome and listening to the radio. There's lots of daylight left and I think I'll stop by the boardinghouse and give Dona Itália a kiss on the cheek. The old lady loves me.

Nowadays everything's cool, laid back, but it was a struggle to buy the beetle. You know the song, "I worked and worked just to have a car?" The guy that wrote it must've had me in mind. Since the time I worked in the bar, waiting on drunks and wiping the counter, I saved my bread. "Thanks for the tip"! Maybe some of you gave me tips and helped me buy the beetle. I even started sleeping on the street to save. That's where I got this damn cough that Dona Itália can't cure.

I stop in front of the boardinghouse, a groovy place with a garden out front and freshly painted. I live upstairs, in that room with the open blinds. I used to have a sorta weird roommate who's working on TV now, as a clown. I called him Shazam because he used to come and go suddenly. When Shazam moved, Dona Itália, who I call Dona Península, gave me a discount on the rent and I got the room to myself. I park the beetle under the carport. Like always, I go in through the kitchen to bum a bit of food. I tiptoe up and plant a smacker on the back of Dona I's neck.

"You scared me!"

"What's for tonight, Auntie? Shrimp?"

"I only serve at the table."

"Just a little one, Dona Península. I promise to leave some for the others."

Of course I'm not the only guest. Dona Itália is a widow and needs to bring in some bread without turning the place into a flophouse. A middle-aged couple lives downstairs, they been with Auntie for twenty years. Upstairs there's a confirmed bachelor, three loud students in one room, a hairdresser in the pantry, and me, sitting pretty in the front room. The old unmarried guy would spread his cheeks to get me out, but the landlady dotes on me.

"You seen the new side strips on my beetle?"

"I saw them when you left."

"Is it or isn't the most bitchin' beetle in the whole city?"

"You ask the same thing day after day."

I eat a shrimp ball, then another, mostly to spend a little time with the old lady, who needs company and a few kind words. Poor old woman, all she has is the tenants. If I ever hit the jackpot I'll split it with her.

"Do you have the newspaper?" I asked her.

Dona Itália looks around; she was reading it but can't remember where she left it. She points toward the small solarium. I go there and see the paper in the hands of the old bachelor. He's a mysterious sort, the kind that live in boardinghouses and fifth-rate hotels. I wanted to see the movie page, but the Wolfman won't let go of the paper, folded into fourths and gripped in his hairy hands. Notice my way with nicknames? The Wolfman is the old unmarried guy, see, always wet with dew because at night he turns into a wolf and does his thing. I even had a nightmare once, on a full stomach, where he was chasing me through the woods and I could feel his breath on the back of my neck. It smelled like codfish balls.

Now Cary Grant comes into the solarium in a chocolate colored robe. He's Dona Itália's oldest guest, a nice guy with lots of experience in group living. He's always asking for or offering cigarettes and sneaking a few drinks behind his wife's back — Bette Davis. Him and his wife are real good people.

"What's new with the sniper?"

The Wolfman is reading about precisely that.

"They haven't caught him yet."

"Have they got a description?"

"How could they? Nobody's seen him."

"Who's the latest victim?"

"Some poor devil from the country. He always picks people like that, down and outers without a penny to their names."

While this talk is going on I can't see the movie page. I love a western with lots of shooting. I go up to my room, which is always clean. You can see that Dona Itália's been here. I'm pretty sloppy myself; the only thing I really take care of is my beetle. I flop down on the bed and open the night table where I keep the album with the Volkswagen ads. I know some of them by heart. I've been collecting them since my waiter days. Thank God I have my beetle today, but I'm also grateful I went into real estate. I have that old gift of gab and got lucky in the profession. Just this week I sold a studio apartment to a retired hooker.

I wash my face, straighten my leather jacket, and go downstairs to the solarium. The Wolfman and Cary Grant are still talking about the sniper. Clô, the hairdresser, joins them.

"But hasn't anyone seen his face?" the fag asks.

"Whoever saw him is dead," Cary replied.

"Even the dead ones didn't see him", the bachelor corrected. "He shoots from a distance."

"But why does he kill?" the roomer in C18 asks, his flesh crawling.

"For the fun of it."

Dona Itália appears at the door to tell us that dinner is ready. I don't always have supper at the boardinghouse, especially on Saturdays, but I'm interested in the shrimp balls, even though they make me thirsty afterwards. At the table the guests talk about nothing but crime. The Wolfman has a memory like a steel trap when it comes to mysterious crimes.

"And they say the worst crimes are committed in London! That's a romantic fancy. Jack the Ripper was a nursemaid compared to our kind."

"The English make a lot of their fog", Bette says. "Nothing but a tourist attraction!"

"Let's talk about something else!" Clô protests, horrified.

He hates violence of any kind, the dear thing.

Cary Grant has his own point of view:

"Look, maybe the man believes in euthanasia. He only kills those who are suffering. It mentions the alienated, the pariahs. If so, his intentions are good."

"Are you defending a maniac like that?" his wife says, scandalized.

I pay no attention to the blab and eat my shrimp balls. I grab the pitcher of carrot juice. I like any kind of juice. What I don't go for is alcohol, except dark beer, which is sweet. I miss my beetle, so I decide not to wait for dessert.

"Ciao, Auntie!"

I kiss the old lady good-bye, under the mocking eye of the Wolfman, who doesn't know how to be nice to anybody. But Cary Grant and his wife get all choked up when I treat Península that way. I run my hand over Clô's hair and leave through the parlor, taking the last shrimp ball with me.

There's my crimson stallion under the carport. When I was in the orphanage I watched a serial with Buck Jones, *The Crimson Horseman*. Today I own the horse. I put it in reverse and hit the street. It's night by now; I prefer the night. How do you people drive? I usually dangle my left arm out the window and drive with just my right, sorta hanging there. Casual, like somebody who's not taking it too seriously. None of that ten-till-two crap they teach in driving school. When Buck rode he was real relaxed too, like he was sitting in an easy chair. It's my pose that gets the chicks. I'm that same way, real laid back, when I take customers to look at real estate. The President could be sitting beside me and I'd still drive the same way. The boss gets on my case, though, saying I drive like I was stoned. But there's no denying that customers like me and end up making a deal.

"Newspaper?"

These guys who try to sell papers to drivers really steam me. Once I spit at one of them. Got him right in the eye. I see the headline: POLICE SEARCH FOR SNIPER.

"Gimme one, Ragman!"

I continue toward downtown. The lines at the flicks are so long that I lose interest in the western. Movies are impossible on Saturday. The best thing, I guess, is to go hit on that fat chick by the Pacaembu ramp. She usually hangs out in the garden of the large house in the early evening. Since traffic is slow, I raise the newspaper, lit by the headlights of the car behind me. I can't read a thing, so I give up. I slide the beetle in between a Chevy and a decrepit Dodge. It works like a charm. Both drivers get a good scare, and I laugh till it hurts. What's that damn Merc doing ahead of me? I tailgate to try and wake up the slowpoke. I get off São Luís, take Bela Vista, Ninth of July, then Pacaembu. Take a look at that Cadillac, a fishtail job from the fifties. I wouldn't be caught dead driving a piece of junk like that. My beetle's never had a scratch. . . That's not true. It was in an accident once.

I think it was the only time in my life that I cried. I had gotten out of the Volks for an ice cream and was about to take the first lick when I heard the noise. A damn Interlagos had run into my rear end. I saw the dent and lost my head. The owner of the Inter was twice my size, but that didn't keep me from trying to yank him through the window. That was when the crowd butted

in and grabbed my arms. But I still had the strength to kick him in the stomach. To make a long story short, a cop showed up and the owner of the Inter gave me some money. But don't think that made me happy. That's when I embarrassed myself. I laid down on the sidewalk and started crying like a baby. Lot of people stood around watching me, but I was really out of it. A nicely dressed lady helped me up from the sidewalk. I got into the beetle looking straight ahead and hightailed it to a body shop. Dumb! It was closed. Know what I did? I parked the car and slept in it till the next day when the place opened. Man did I stay on top of those guys in the shop!

I'm near the Pacaembu ramp where the fat chick with the big buns lives. I make the turn at the stadium, come alongside a driver training car and sideswipe it just for kicks, then head up the ramp with my tires squealing. Jeez, I think I must have that intuition you hear so much about. Behind a gate, in the garden, I see the balloon about to go up. Her dress is striped, which is why it reminds me of a balloon. To tell the truth, I'm not all that good at picking up girls, and I don't like to be told no. Not even my beetle has cured me of that, but with this fat chick it's a sure thing. She's been givin' me the come-on for months now.

I stop the beetle and smile at her with my James Dean look. I motion for her to come over to the machine. The little balloon answers with another gesture, telling me to park further ahead. Which I do, naturally. Now the lard ball comes over and my ticker starts thumping like crazy in my chest. Close up she's even fatter, with shiny skin and the face of somebody who puts out.

"What do you want?"

"I got the idea to ask you out for a spin. Wanna go?"

"I was waiting for my boyfriend", she lied.

"You were, but not anymore. Get in."

She gets in the beetle real casual, smelling like a rose, a fat rose, kind of limp, smiling and reddish. I put the machine in motion and start the interrogation.

"So what's your name, doll?"

"Shirley."

"I don't like it, it's too short. It gives the impression you were born thin and got fat later. I'm gonna call you Marianna. The kind of name that gives the mouth something to work on."

She laughed and the laugh squeezed it way past her 150 pounds.

“Where are we heading, Henry?”

“My name’s not Henry, doll.”

“Look, you changed my name, so I’m changing yours.”

“Henry’s okay. I never met anybody by that name, except in schoolbooks. There was always a Henry, remember? But to answer your question, the beetle will decide where we go.”

The fat girl is on the quiet side. She adjusted herself into the seat, completely at ease, her mouth half open. She lifts her fanny because she’s sitting on something – the newspaper.

“Would you like to know who the Sniper is too, Henry?”

She took the paper, folded it, and tried to read it. Just for laughs I took a sharp curve, throwing her off balance. She fell on top of me, laughing, and gave up on reading. I feel her hair against my face, but she goes back to her spot. This is one crazy chick, real laid back, her own boss, and she can probably stay out as long as she likes.

“What are you in that house, Marianna?”

“I’m spending a few months with my aunt and uncle. I’m from the country, you know? But they’re good people and don’t mind if I go out.”

“What’s my name again?”

“Henry.”

I drove for ten minutes or so in silence, taking my eyes off the road only to look at her large thighs beside me. Fat girls are peaceful, and she was one of them that floated. I must have seen her on a billboard advertising health tonic, with roses in her cheeks and holding a tablespoon of syrup. I went all the way down Pacaembu, took Palmeiras, and headed back downtown, weaving in and out of traffic with my God-given skill. She isn’t scared by my swerves and just smiles at my boldness, without looking at me.

“Like to meet Aunt Itália?” I ask. “Let’s go there and have some cherry liqueur. Don’t say no, Marianna.”

I didn’t wait for an answer before taking the route, and now I’m near the boardinghouse without the decision provoking the slightest reaction from the girl. She sits there fanning herself with the newspaper and playing with one of her curls.

When I stopped in front of the boardinghouse, she looked at the two-story building like she lived there with me. I thought it was funny, but without knowing what I was laughing at, she goes inside with me. The Wolfman is still in the solarium and gets a surprise: in less than an hour I leave and show up back here with a chick. The old reject is probably jealous. We head for the kitchen.

“Is this where Dona Itália lives?”

The landlady, who’s drying dishes, turns around, sees me with the girl, and gives us a huge smile. What a smile that woman has!

“Who’s the beauty?”

“This is Marianna. I found her on an exit ramp.”

The two of them hit it off instantly, just the way my beetle tears off. They hugged, and Dona Itália started trotting out the string of good things she always says about me, not forgetting to mention that I’m kinda sloppy. She says I throw wet towels on the floor and go through shirts faster than anybody in the world. In spite of everything (she says) I could make any decent girl happy.

Cary Grant sticks his head in the kitchen. You all know what Cary is like. He’s the one who did such a good job of acting in *To Catch a Thief* and who laughs ‘cause his contract calls for it.

“Your night’s off to a good start.”

“This is the oldest guest here.”

Marianna reaches out her soft, friendly hand.

“Pleased to meet you, sir.”

Cary says he had a girlfriend just like her when he was young. Fooling around, he invites Marianna to run away with him. She laughs so hard that her rolls of flesh shake.

Bette Davis appears at the kitchen door. Her husband, unflappable, introduces her as just a friend, getting a laugh from all of us.

“Young lady, he’s a married man”, the older woman says, picking up on the joke. “And I know his wife as well as I know myself. If you want to do her a favor, run away with him. But you’ll be getting a rotten deal!”

Dona Itália, who’s always serving one thing or another, served the juice. She was moved by my success and liked the

doll. It's better like that, when everybody agrees. Even the Wolfman, wearing his red robe, came in, still harping on the same subject:

"The paper says the guy works from a car. That's why they haven't caught him."

"A motorized sniper?"

"Shoot-and-run."

"What's the make of the car?"

I put my arm around Marianna and show her the house, all except my room so they won't get the wrong idea about the girl. I go in just to get my scrapbook, which I show her in the solarium. I read her some of the ads, like the announcers on TV. She asks me to read some of them a second time. She's sitting next to me with her thick thigh pressing against me and her face a couple of inches from mine.

"You read so well, Henry!"

"I never saw a bad beetle ad. I really like that one where they stuff all those wrestlers into the van."

"Well done, isn't it? I used to have a boyfriend who worked in an ad agency. He was a groovy guy."

Dona Itália appears in the solarium.

"Have you two set the date yet?"

For the first time I feel embarrassed and look toward Marianna, blushing I think.

"Whenever he wants to", the girl answers.

I'm skinny myself, but I love the calmness of fat people. No thin girl would talk like that, right away on the first date.

"And what do you say?" Itália asks me.

"The same. I'll get married right away, if you'll give us a reduction on the rent."

"Of course I will! I'll just double the charge for meals."

"It's a deal."

I was the first to get up, since Marianna seems willing to stay there, everybody's friend but the Wolfman's. I told her he had killed his fiancée and buried her in the back yard and that sooner or later the police would come around and take him away.

The doll kissed Dona Itália four times, kissed Bette Davis, planted a big hug on Cary Grant, who repeats his invitation to run away with him. The boardinghouse is nice, but it's even better in the beetle, driving around the city.

By now Marianna is leaning against me. Her weight on my right side feels good. She's like a large balloon that blew in the window while I was driving through an amusement park. I hear her breathing, which reminds me a little of exercise classes on the radio. Sometimes I look at her, she looks at me, and we don't say anything. It's incredible that in three hours we can keep quiet and still understand each other. I let the Volks take me where it wants to go.

An hour later, Marianna asks:

"Can I have an ice cream?"

"Only if you give me a kiss."

"I hate kissing with my mouth dry."

It was the chick who started, covering me with her heavy, smooth, strong arms. I hadn't imagined she enjoyed kissing the way she enjoyed ice cream. She kisses with the same greediness, with the same exciting rhythm of a mechanical reaper. She overdid the ice cream so much that her mouth was still cold, along with her teeth, her tongue, and her strawberry-flavored breath. But what with insistence and suction, things start heating up. I go from winter to summer, which gives me the enjoyable sensation that I've been kissing her for six months. Or for a thousand-mile trip.

Marianna pushes me away and asks a question:

"Where's the Jardim Paulistanò district?"

"Why?"

"I used to go out with someone who lived there."

The conversation at this point turns to the past, and I think I feel jealous. I want to know if she had a lot of boyfriends, what they were like, and if she was ever engaged. The kind of things guys always ask on the first date.

"I've had lots", she confesses with that naturalness of hers.

"All of them were wet blankets. I don't even remember their names. The smarter ones settled for some petting. The one who lived in Jardim Paulistano at least had something going for him." And she starts to laugh in a mysterious way that interests me.

"What kind of something?"

"Something that a lot of people would think is bad."

"For example."

"You want an example?"

The doll's words come out slow and I can see that she really doesn't want to spill it. I have to press her up against the door of the Volks so she'll tell me what happened.

"If you don't tell me, I'll dump you here and leave."

"But it's so stupid!"

"Did you two do it?"

"Well, you know, almost. . . But that's not what I meant. I'm talking about a quirk of his, one that I had too. Lots of nights we'd go out just for that. He'd come up the ramp, honking his horn, and I'd jump into his Impala. What a wicked boy he was!"

"What did he do?"

Marianna tells how one night they were driving down a street when the Impala ran over a cat. Big deal, but three days later the same thing happened again. She thought it was a funny coincidence, but the guy, with a devilish look on his face, said he did that almost every night. He couldn't get to sleep unless he ran over a cat with his car. Marianna wasn't shocked and confessed that she liked the dry sound the bumper made when he hit the cats. Besides, it took precision and a sharp eye, since cats are light on their feet and if the driver hesitated a fraction of a second the animal would get away. The kid from Jardim Paulistano was an expert at the game. As soon as he saw the cat's gleaming eyes, he steered the car slowly in its direction, and he didn't floor the pedal till he was close enough for the kill. In three months Marianna only saw him miss three or four times. Unfortunately, she said, the guy in the Impala stopped coming by to pick her up. If she hung out in the garden, it was in hopes that some night he'd show up again.

"Are you shocked?" she asked. "Are you angry with me?"

"Cats don't do much for me one way or the other, but I think killing animals is for cowards. The only danger your boyfriend faced was maybe breakin' a parking light. . ."

Marianna had a crazy look to her:

"It was exciting, Henry! I got hooked!"

I lower my head:

"Was that the only reason you liked the guy?"

"I think so, though he kissed great after killing the cats."

"Did you like him better than the others?"

She nodded her head like some kid from the streets:

"I never had any fun with the others. I'm not crazy about movies, and a guy who can't talk about anything but football

doesn't stand a chance with me. There was one, the biggest drag of them all, who played the organ in church. Can you imagine going out with a guy like that?"

I caress Marianna's hair. The doll looks up at me with sad eyes, waiting for me to forgive her. I turn the key, put it in first, and cut out. At least I'd found a great place to kiss girls, if Marianna doesn't want to see me anymore. Now there's less people in the streets. Time really flies when you're with this girl. I offer her a cigarette; she says she doesn't smoke. Better that way, then her mouth will always be fresh for kissing. For her, kissing is a necessity, not a vice like smoking and drinking. I ask her what her aunt and uncle are like.

"An old couple who just want one thing: to see me married. So they can get rid of me."

"You get along with them, like me and Dona Itália?"

"I haven't told you the whole truth, Henry. The old people aren't my aunt and uncle. I lived in the country till last year, with Mom, until she died of cancer. The couple were friends of my father. I was afraid of being by myself, so I wrote them, and they took me in. I'm a kind of companion to the woman I call aunt. But she doesn't need a companion; in fact she's quite active. She wants me to get married so I'll get out of there."

"It's good you didn't get married yet."

"Why?"

"Because you and me can get married."

That made the doll real happy, and she threw her fat arm around my neck.

"Then you're not mad at me?"

"Mad? Why should I be?"

"Because of the cats. . . I don't want to tell you any more lies. . . I didn't just sit there beside him like an idiot. I participated, understand? Sometimes I saw the animal first and nudged his arm. I even wanted to learn to drive so I could take the wheel. I had the idea he'd like me better if I learned to play the game."

"That's enough about that."

"Is it bad?"

"People shouldn't talk about things that give pleasure."

The doll looks at me; I don't strike her as the kind of guy who could kill cats, but the fact that I understand her already,

that's something. I think it's funny; despite her size, she's like a kitten wanting to be petted. I go around a square whose name I can never remember and continue down a dark, tree-lined street.

"Cats!" I say, busting out laughing.

I step on the accelerator, looking sideways at the girl that I plan to marry next month. I start talking about the papers the justice of the peace will ask to see. It's really cheap to hitch up with a woman once and for all. It's more expensive and complicated to get a driver's license, a lot more.

Marianna has an idea:

"What if we took our honeymoon traveling around South America. . . We could get Volkswagen to sponsor it."

"Forget it!"

"But we could collect money to build a hospital!"

"You mean a cat hospital? . . ."

The doll busts out laughing and slaps me on the back so hard I almost cough up my heart.

"That's what I call black humor, Henry."

She goes on laughing, slow and deep, like a laugh in fourth gear on an asphalt road. That's when I came up with another nickname for my collection:

"Marianna Catkiller."

"Don't make fun of me, sweetheart."

"Too late now, Superwoman, you're Marianna Catkiller now."

"You're not going to spread the story around the boardinghouse."

"My nicknames are just for personal use. I never called the Wolfman that to his face."

She hugs me again, all 150 pounds of her pressing against my frame.

"The Wolfman. . . Did he really bury his fiancée?"

"If not, she's embalmed in his room."

Everything is a laughing matter with Marianna Catkiller. Laughing like crazy, we pass by Brigadeiro and Augusta, where I wanted the playboys to catch me in my beetle with the doll resting on my shoulder.

After turns and more turns, we totally lose track of where we are. I really didn't know where we were, when I saw the Little Tramp come out of a corner bar, blotto, and go down a

steep grade that must have been dangerous for somebody in his condition. Except for the missing hat and cane, he looks just like the Little Tramp, that bore you see in old flicks on television. The girl is still leaning on my shoulder, forcing me to drive with my left hand.

"You're putting my arm to sleep, and I'm gonna need it."

"Sorry, fiancé dear."

"I forgive you, Catkiller."

Marianna opened the car window and took a deep breath.

"I almost fell asleep, but the fresh air woke me up."

"That's why I like you; you're air-cooled, like the beetle."

She gives me a big kiss.

"I like people with a sense of humor."

"You remember the Little Tramp?"

"The one with the cane?"

"You think he's funny, Catkiller?"

"To me he's garbage."

We come to a square with trees around it. Luckily, no other cars are parked there. I look for a good place to wait. I stop and light a cigarette, just the least bit nervous. To tell the truth, I don't smoke when I'm calm.

"What are we going to do here?"

"Wait for a cat."

"Want me to find one?" she asks, lifting her tense body. I grab her by the fanny; she jumps and bumps against the headlining.

"Oh!"

"Stay right where you are."

"Don't you want a cat? I can spot them a block away."

"I'm a big boy, Superwoman."

"So you are, you sweet little boy, It's not necessary. If you like, I can even find one to live with us after we're married."

I play with her fine black hair.

"Cats and dogs are for old maids. The Wolfman doesn't have a dog 'cause he's one himself."

She looks at me tenderly:

"Do you want children?"

"Of course, girl. With that body of yours you oughta be able to manufacture carloads of 'em. And when they grow up I'll tell them, 'Children, I regret to inform you that your mother is the famous and most wanted Marianna Catkiller.' "

The doll started laughing, and I saw the Little Tramp reach the bottom of the grade. I take a look around the square and don't see anybody, except for an old Ford that just crossed it. The ex-comedian comes staggering in our direction, dragging his feet. That makes the job harder and better. When he passes in front of the beetle, about twenty feet away, I turn on the headlights. The beam startles and irritates the pitiful pedestrian. Marianna stifles a laugh between her lips. The guy was wearing rags looked like he'd never make it through the winter. Angry, but still looking like the Little Tramp, he tries to act like he's sober, picking up his pace. But he stays in the same spot, like in nightmares.

I throw my arm back and feel for the shotgun, hidden next to the seat. I quickly place it in the correct position, just like the manual says. I take aim without giving any thought to Marianna, who realized the importance of silence at that moment. The first blast must have got him in the liver, since the Little Tramp jumped like he was caught on the horns of a bull. I cocked the toy, take aim and now, more hurriedly than before, get off the second round. Class is class. I wasn't hoping to get the actor in the noggin, which turned as red as a rose caught in a fistfight. His body slumped to the ground, like a puppet with its strings cut, and I pulled away, but in reverse, which threw Marianna off balance. Reverse, low, second, third, and off we go. The first few minutes call for total concentration. Speed but not panic. All you need is self-assurance and expertise, along with a cool head. I'm the best there is at such withdrawals. The proof is that till now only one person said the Sniper uses a car, probably a beetle.

Marianna's first reaction was a sigh of relief as the car merged with others on a street in the Santa Cecilia district. I keep on driving, looking straight ahead, calm as can be because a woman beside you removes any hint of suspicion.

"I'll take you home", I say, afraid she won't to see me anymore.

"You think anyone saw the car?"

"I don't think so, doll."

I go up the Pacaembu ramp, certain that the girl isn't wetting her pants from fear. We stop at the door of the house, which is completely dark. I feel Marianna's head on my shoulder again. The doll is dying from sleepiness. She yawns, exhales,

then breathes in all the air of the street. She kisses me on the face, a kiss that tastes of missing me already. Her eyes are small from sleepiness, like a Japanese. I run my hand over her hair. From now on I won't be a lonely Wolfman like the guy back at the boardinghouse.

"I'll call you tomorrow at the boardinghouse", she tells me.

"Don't make me wait, Catkiller."

The fat girl laughs, awkward.

"You enjoyed being with me, didn't you?"

"You better believe it, Catkiller. My Marianna Catkiller. . ."

The doll opened the door of the beetle and ran to the gate. But she doesn't go in right away. She still hasn't gone in. She waves her fat hand until my car disappears.