

FATHER AND SON

Sônia Coutinho

Translated by
Marguerite I. Harrison

Like any self-respecting Brazilian, says the Father as they are leaving the well-decorated lobby of the hotel where he is staying (he came alone, just for one week, under the pretext of medical exams – I needed to distance myself from that atmosphere at home, Son), like any self-respecting Brazilian, repeats the Father, now raising his voice, to be heard over the dull roar of the cars in the street, I dream of ending my days here in Rio.

With my retirement five years away and nothing else to do there, etc., he continues, walking beside the Son on the sidewalk of Copacabana's most crowded block, being bumped into every second by a constant parade of pedestrians: "a neighborhood as sophisticated as any in the world, where you can walk around dressed as you like because no one pays any attention".

I'll sell the house, I'll buy an apartment here near yours. It's the best location!, says the Father, insisting once again that the Son list the advantages of living in the condo which the Father gave him two years ago, when he had suddenly informed the family that he would go live in the Big City: right near five movie theaters (one of them with a real movie screen, the Father recalls), two drugstores, and countless bars and cafés.

Lights begin to flicker on, traffic steadily intensifies, the people's faces in the street look mysterious and sad at nightfall. As they are stopped now at the corner where the cross street dead-ends at the beach, the Son observes this stranger, his Father (it's been over a year since he was here last, on a holiday with Mother), who begins, again, talking about Arthur.

(The spacious house, with lawn and garden, on the calm, deserted street. They are the President of the Town Council's two sons, someone would comment whenever he or Arthur entered a room. On Saturdays there were dinners on the glassed-in back porch. Mother, so young and pretty and elegant, would go out with Father almost every evening.

Who, the victim of a sudden stroke, was forced to return to his old bureaucratic post. "Some of the areas of his brain may be permanently affected...," Mother whispered vaguely to him one day – just when the house was needing a new coat of paint, and no one's around to see that it gets done! Time went on with relentless determination as harsh, dark-green seedlings, from the city's persistent jungle, began breaking through the roof.

Mother, having aged overnight, surprised him one afternoon, however, with her talk on the telephone: Paulo or Saulo, he'd never known for sure, but what mattered was the tone she had used.

Everything's rotten, everything's falling apart, Arthur started to say one day, referring to the *structure of Our Society*. He was in his first year of Law School, which he soon gave up. He was reading a lot and publishing articles in the university newspaper – ah, no doubt he had always been the smartest, as well as the most handsome of the two.)

Your Mother is making my life hell with her worries, you know how it is. Between us Arthur was always the one she really liked, you and I never had much of a chance, did we Son? And your brother leads the same old life: he travels often now, I'm sure that he's involved in political activities because he sure doesn't have his own income. I got him three jobs, one by one he abandoned them.

He often talks about leaving home, which at least would spare us the humiliation of another nocturnal visit from the police to take him away. I know best what it cost me to bail him out of jail the last time: I had to resort to my old contacts, to go out

begging, something I despise doing. But what kind of a hell-hole would he live in? I know that your Mother would be devastated if he went away, that's why I always end up imploring him to continue living with us.

Arthur doesn't appreciate any of the things I've valued all my life. He always comes out with a hurtful comment to mock the beliefs that guide me: God, Family, Democracy, Charity, Gratitude, none of these mean anything to him. He's an enemy that I allow in my house. What have I done, my Son, to deserve all this?

They are sitting on a bench on the sidewalk that faces the beach, surrounded by the frightening solitude of two million people packed into this narrow stretch of land between mountain and sea. Bitterness seizes the Son's throat.

I ran away, I came to another city, I never went back there – spare me, Dad! The Son who fought so hard to forget is weary, terribly weary, like an old man. I don't know either, my Father, why I deserved this luck.

It had been difficult, so extremely difficult: he had debated long and hard for so long. He was already twenty-six when he came to Rio to fulfill his destiny. His Father had spoken about Arthur a hundred times, a hundred times he had wished to tell him about himself. But he was able to confide only in the psychiatrist he had visited secretly: was it the contrast between what the priests taught at school and what he witnessed at home? He had even mentioned the obscene color photos he had found one day in his Father's desk drawer, which had made him want to throw up.

The long conversations with the doctor had proven useless; so one day he made up his mind: "a neighborhood as sophisticated as any in the world, where you can walk around dressed as you like because no one pays any attention".

But you, you are very dedicated, the Father continues to say, turning to the Son who tries to keep from crying. You work and earn a decent salary, even though you continue acting (better opportunities for a career in the arts, you had told the family that night, justifying your plan to come live in the Big City).

I don't think like your Mother, I couldn't be prejudiced against theater people. I've always had it in my blood as well. You remind me of myself when I was a young man, the Father

continues tenderly. I think a lot about you whenever I leaf through my old scrapbooks and clippings of plays I directed with the college group.

If it hadn't been for your Mother, the birth of you two... I never really liked politics. Women are always getting in the way, always wanting their husbands to achieve a certain status, to make money. That's why I tell your Mother that you're smart not to think about getting married, my Son – the Father keeps talking, with amazing tenderness. I know how it bothered you, that habit of hers of always criticizing you, but you're right, you shouldn't think about women. Your job comfortably supports you as a bachelor and allows you time to do what you like. It's an ideal situation, the Father says to the Son, who now glances at his watch.

It is almost seven o'clock and two friends are waiting for him to go with them to rehearsal, he explains to the Father, to whom he says goodbye after setting a time to meet the following morning.

He is now walking quickly in the direction of a nearby bar, checks himself out in a storefront window: he is extremely elegant in those burgandy velvet pants, the sand-colored sweater of fine wool and, around his neck, the print silk scarf, in burgandy and tan tones.

As if a big weight had been lifted from his shoulders, his step changes rhythm the closer he gets to the bar: it becomes lighter, more sprightly. Ah, his new clothes are bound to impress his friends.

You look cool, Silvio says, throwing him an approving glance.

A gift from Dad, answers the Son, smiling.

How is the old man? Does he still talk about Arthur all the time?, asks Alvaro, gulping down his beer.

Arthur, Arthur, repeats the Son, with a bitter scowl, I mentioned Arthur to you too?

Well, you know very well that not a day goes by without your bringing up your infamous brother, at least twice.

My Father is hopelessly in love with Arthur, and I can certainly see why. He deserves it: he's an ascetic, a martyr (when they arrested him he was even beaten, without their being able to extract anything from him); his life is dedicated to *saving*

humanity. Arthur is sort of like a saint, cut from the same cloth as those who were thrown into the lion's den and didn't renounce their God, says the Son, in a mocking tone, while motioning to the waiter.

Who now looks, slightly annoyed, over to the table. Blonde and handsome, the bar's patrons are constantly propositioning him. He hadn't realized it would be like this when he started working here, but now he's certain that the boss hired him as bait. These three I can tell, he goes on thinking, as he approaches the table sullenly, I'm sure they'll spend all night pestering me.