

THE MARK
Luiz Ruffato

Translated by
Marguerite Itamar Harrison
Smith College

Marquinho died soon before turning ten. He was run over by a bus, at the entrance to the alley, on a cold Monday in August: bad-luck month. He had been all perky, proud of his kite's tail and its straight-edge. He'd spent Sunday afternoon in a crazy-frenzy, amid sticks, tissue paper, crushed glass, paste, knives, and spools of thread. Once finished, nightfallen, he tried to go to sleep immediately so that the day would break quicker. However, the urge to become lord of the skies over Vila Teresa, or perhaps over all of Cataguases even, meant that he wasn't able to sleep a wink before dawn. He watched Bibica and Jorginho go to bed, he heard Dusanjos do Alemão arrive from church service, Mrs. Olga's daughters return from the town square, Zunga's quickened steps coming back from the *Ilha*¹ at an ungodly-hour.

It took days for Bibica to accept that she would never again see Marquinho rushing clumsily into the shack, always startled, as if he'd just gotten up to no good. That she'd never hear him running up and down the alley steps with that swish-

swish, under the threat of someday slipping *oh dear god!*, and breaking an arm or a leg, *my heavens!* Mr. Zé Pinto had warned him so many times! *What an exasperating kid! One of these days he's gonna fall flat on his face!* Marquinho: slim, feeble, trouble-maker that he was. This Marquinho she would never see again, ever. And what made Bibica sick was that, for some unknown reason, she couldn't remember Marquinho's face. She could recognize the odor of his urine on the straw mattress; she'd never mistake his high-pitched voice amid the clamor of the alley kids. She felt his presence in the small objects he'd left behind – a crank, a small can of glue, a tiny empty box of snuff, a ball made of socks, a small sack of marbles – and even the warmth of his body was preserved in his few tattered clothes. But what were his facial features, the shape and color of his eyes, the line of his mouth, the design of his nose, the contour of his chin, the cut of his ears? All that had faded away.

("Bibica, Mr. Zé Pinto said that I came with the flood. Don't I have a father, Bibica?")

"Of course you do, son. Mr. Zé Pinto was just joking with you."

"So, where is he?"

Where is he?

"He went to war. Died. God rest his soul."

"War? He died at war? Aha!"

Marquinho would dash off in a rush.

"Bibica, which war?"

Which war?!

"The boys made fun of me, they say there's never been a war in Brazil...")

Bibica was leaning over the washtub washing clothes when she heard the sound of sudden brakes. Her body stiffened, she wiped her hands on the apron. For a few instances she stood frozen, as if in a trance. That night she had had a bad dream, teeth, rotten teeth, she couldn't quite remember, it was like a sign. Half disoriented, she climbed in the direction of the street. When she reached the sidewalk, Mrs. Zulmira embraced her tightly, in tears. "What a tragedy, Bibica, what a tragedy!"

She disentangled herself, went on walking, zombie-like. She saw a lumber truck pulled over in front of the grocery store owned by Mr. Antônio, the Portuguese. She saw a bus stopped, in the opposite direction. Dragging legs of lead she made an opening in the crowd and saw a fallen body, its head crushed under the wheel of the bus, a pool of blood. Her eyesight darkened, the ground fell out from under her.

Right there in front of Mr. Antônio's Portuguese market, the scoundrel! Right in front, how prophetic! Marking the beginning and the end. She was a disillusioned woman, who'd left the life of the *Ilha* and now washed clothes for hire. Money was scarce, always scraping by to raise two kids. At great cost she'd managed that shack in Zé Pinto's alley, with no electricity, everybody squeezed into the same room, such a zoo! She suffered from her reputation as a fallen woman, wanting to erase that part of her life, but it seemed to be a disease – like leprosy – a mark that wouldn't come off no matter how much you scrubbed your body with all the soap in the world. Mr. Antônio, the Portuguese, that old bastard, took advantage of her flaw.

Everyone in the alley bought on credit from his shop, he'd write it down in a notebook. Except for her. One morning she found herself pondering: how was she going to sterilize that mountain of clothes if she didn't even have enough money for the kerosene? She lit her pipe, and while puffing on it, decided: she would speak to Mr. Antônio. It wasn't right that he didn't sell to her on credit. If he distrusted her, he could ask Mr. Zé Pinto if she didn't indeed pay the rent and the water bill right on time, at the end of each month, down to the penny. And if every two weeks she didn't pay Homero for chopping wood for her. He could ask everybody in the alley if she owed money to anyone, if they had any complaints against her, an honest woman, yessiree.

When she arrived in the shop, Mr. Antônio was alone, displaying his wares in the shop window. "Good morning, Mr. Antônio." "Oh, Miss Bibica, g'day. How are you, ma'am?" "As the dear Lord wills." Then, she started stalling, unable to broach the subject. "May I be of help with anything, Miss Bibica?"

"Well, Mr. Antônio, it's that... do you think you could, well, sell me a liter of kerosene on credit, could you? I'd pay you back on Friday... Lord willing." "On credit, Miss Bibica? On credit..." He scratched his head, took the pencil from his shirt pocket, scribbled something on the paper used for wrapping bread. She stood there wringing her hands. With her eyes on her dingy slippers she asked: "Is it because I came from the *Ilha*, Mr. Antônio? You are distrustful... If that's the case..." He cleared his throat, uneasily. And placed her name at the top of a page in his notebook.

Bibica never quite understood what happened after that. When she'd enter the shop and there was someone playing pool or table-soccer, or leaning his belly against the counter drinking a shot of liquor or a soda pop, Mr. Antônio would treat her coolly. When alone, however, he was pure affection. He would grab her hand, bow to her, tease her, ask if she needed anything. She pretended not to notice, deep down sensing that Mr. Antônio, who knows why, was coming on to her. In the beginning she'd been annoyed—just because she'd been a lady of the night, just for that reason! But she ended up being flattered by it. She'd been feeling worthless, a hag, incapable of arousing anyone's interest. And all of a sudden...

"Mr. Antônio..." " Oh, Miss Bibica, how nice to see you! I was looking for someone to help me with something there in the back. Could you, please, ma'am?" He opened the little gate to the counter, she entered, and followed him to the pantry. He stared at her, "Miss Bibica," he whispered, enveloping her in his arms, their bodies compressed between beer crates, the flavor of cheap wine forcefully mixing with that of ordinary tobacco. Frightened, she wanted to scream. He relaxed his embrace, tried to restore his composure. "My god, what was I thinking?" And he returned to the counter, crestfallen. Not knowing what to do, Bibica teased him, straightening her dress: "Mr. Antônio, I didn't know you liked fooling around." "Show some respect," he said soberly. "If you'd known what I've been through... Fílhinha, poor thing, is getting up in years, doesn't want to have anything to do with such things... but I'm still a man with desires..." Bibica felt pity.

She spent days avoiding the path to his shop. She was afraid of his reaction. But then she started to run out of everything at home: kerosene, soap, matches, ground coffee, cornmeal, macaroni, bluing tablets. When she stepped inside his store again, Mr. Antônio got all excited. Anxious, he uttered his little speech: "My, Miss Bibica, I don't know what happened to me that day... if you're angry, which you have every right to be... I shouldn't have done that, I know... it's just that when I see you... I lose all control... Jesus, what's to become of me?" And listed his laments: that Filhinha was a source of misery in his life, that she didn't allow him to do anything, not even keep up with his local soccer team, something he truly enjoyed. That now that the kids were well on their way, he thought he'd have a little peace, but she'd become emotionally ill, which made her even more petulant. "Oh, Miss Bibica, I'm a wretched person."

He promised her the world. That he would buy her a house, that as soon as Filhinha got a little better – "now see here, miss, the doctors are thinking of having the poor thing hospitalized in Juiz de Fora" – he'd abandon everything, "everything, Miss Bibica," in order to stay with her. And he started showering Bibica with gifts: face powder, perfume, rosewater, lipstick, a mirror, nail polish, a thin gold-filled chain. "Whatever am I to do with all these things, Mr. Antônio?" She resisted his insistence, because, experienced as she was, she knew that it was all a lie, madness, craziness. But how long would her strength hold? *(Dear Lord, protect me during these difficult times deliver me from temptations could it be that he truly loves me silly woman he just wants to take advantage of loose woman men are all alike they suck the orange and throw out the pulp I already know good lord how many men have lain down in my bed filled my head with nonsense if I were to believe them I would be lost lost and poorly paid they'd get up out of bed put on their clothes and go out the door with the same ungraceful face if I were to believe in men's promises if Mr. Antônio is indeed liking me truly no no it's not possible married settled a reputable man isn't going to leave his family because of a good-for-nothing whatta wretched bunch of mosquitoes this is some night one of those nights is there citronella in the closet no no it's gone I need to buy some light it at night to drive them away hail Mary full of grace the Lord be with you I'm going to the seven o'clock mass it's*

been a while already the priest speaks such beautiful things orapronobis orapronobis front row veiled head daughter-of-Mary sash so far back with outstretched neck poor middle-income rich closer to the altar poor way in the back there are people so without decency it's best to remain alone to believe that Mr. Antônio likes me why not all of a sudden a miracle these things happen didn't Cátia marry that man owner of that little shop in Leopoldina no no I wasn't born lucky god helps who knows no no I'm never going back there I'm experienced small talk what an annoying mosquito my god it's so hot the orapronobis mass I believe in God the Father Almighty Maker of heaven and earth full chapel I'm gonna get up early the bucket to wash my face so hot Mr. Antônio speaks the mass speaks of the communion of saints in the forgiveness of sins in life everlasting).

Bibica got up early in order to go to the seven o'clock mass at the Hospital chapel. When she passed in front of the shop her legs stopped short. The door was closed, she heard the radio on, Mr. Antônio was there, she knew, she wanted to flee but her body didn't obey, *my god, what madness!* She knocked one, two, three times, he appeared, "Oh, Miss Bibica, do come in," his voice penetrated her ears and kept ringing, making her dizzy, dazed. She saw Mr. Antônio's beautiful dentures behind his immense black moustache, as black as his eyes, and his hair plastered with Brill-cream. Bibica became enraptured by the morning's sky-blue glow, with the sun that filtered through the drink bottles on the shelves, with the birds singing in the almond tree, and yes, even with Mr. Antônio's accent. *It can only be the mark of the devil.* And the door closed behind her.

She sprayed the rest of the perfume on her neck, got all dolled up and went to the shop to convey the good news. When she entered, Mr. Zé Bundinha was drinking a beer, gnawing on a chicken leg. Awkwardly, she asked if Mr. Antônio had ... something or other. Mr. Zé Bundinha commented, in somewhat of a loud voice: "My, Bibica, where are you headed so dressed up?" "Nowhere, really, Mr. Zé." And she left. She lay in wait, outside. When she saw Mr. Antônio was alone, she returned.

"Where did you go, Miss Bibica?"

"Nowhere, really, Mr. Antônio."

"And why are you so attractively dressed?"

"Because I was coming over to talk to you, sir."

"What about?"

"Do you remember, Mr. Antônio, when you spoke of taking me as your mistress, buying me a house?"

"Take you as a mistress, buy you a house?"

"Yeah. Well, now, now would be the right time, you know..."

"What are you trying to tell me, Miss Bibica? Spit it out, woman!"

"I think I'm with child."

"What?"

He grabbed Bibica by the arm and dragged her into the bathroom, which reeked of disinfectant.

"Have you gone mad? Do you want to ruin my marriage, dishonor my name in this town? Do you want to disgrace me in front of my children? Have you lost your mind, Miss Bibica?"

He went to the sidewalk, looked in one direction and then the other, as if possessed.

"So, you waltz into my business establishment to tell me such a thing! I can't believe it! I've had nothing to do with this! Nothing! You came looking for me, in here shaking your hips, and throwing yourself in my direction. My Filhinha is there in Juiz de Fora, emotionally disturbed and confined, a major burden to me, and you come up with a ridiculous thing like that! I'm a reputable man, Miss Bibica, and where do you come from? From the gutter! A... a prostitute! What proof is there that the kid is mine? Listen here, do me a favor: Get yourself away from here! Right this minute!" Pale from fright, Bibica could only stammer: "I'm sorry, Mr. Antônio, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to cause you harm. I'm sorry, I didn't think that you were gonna get so angry, I'm sorry." And she scurried off, in tears.

In the beginning Bibica was overcome with bitterness, but then she secured two extra laundry jobs – "to help distract me, so I won't have nonsense on the brain." Toiling from dawn to dusk: washing, scrubbing, beating, rinsing, bleaching, hanging out, drying, gathering, ironing, delivering. At night, she

slept like a rock. Her belly grew daily, mild tremors in her gut. When she wasn't preoccupied, bent over the washtub, she had fears *my God, will the boy* (she was certain he'd be a boy) *take his revenge? I wonder if he's all perfect like? Is he gonna be trouble? Will he be someone in life?* She even made a promise: if everything turned out well, she'd take him some October 12th to be blessed in Aparecida do Norte.

To fulfill a lifelong dream, Mr. Antônio traveled to Portugal with his wife. He revisited the village in Trás-os-Montes from which he'd departed at age fifteen, and he took the opportunity to settle old business: inheritance issues, some old properties that were worth little. He returned after two months: demolished the shop – the Nossa Senhora de Fátima Bar – and built the modern and expanded Brazil Market.

Marquinho was born premature, grew up frail, was always feeble, an ailment here, another there. And he was scrappy. Bibica would yell at him, send him to his room, but to no avail. "What this boy needs is a lashing, a whipping. If you don't set him straight, Miss Bibica, somebody else will," Zé Pinto would counsel, tired of catching him stealing fruit in the yard behind the alley. But Bibica didn't have the courage to spank him. *He has so many troubles already, poor thing.* And she'd go on excusing his mischief.

"Marquinho was caught stealing breadfruit at the orchard, Bibica. Amâncio gave him a few raps on the head."

"Marquinho lifted up Toninha's skirt, you know, Mrs. Olga's Toninha. She's coming over to talk to you."

"Marquinho went into the school, tore up the bags of powdered milk, scattered them throughout the classroom, and even defecated all over the principal's desk, Bibica. The only reason the police aren't arresting him is because he's a minor."

"Marquinho went to the red-light district, Bibica. Murudo almost yanked his ear off. He stood there, crying."

"Marquinho lost an argument and punched out Mrs. Marta's son, Bibica. He drew blood. But it was well deserved, you know. Wow, what a tough kid!"

"Marquinho almost drowned in the Pomba River, Bibica. It's a good thing Baiano was there to pull'im out."

"Bibica, Marquinho took the slingshot and hit the windshield of a car parked in front of the market. There was shattered glass everywhere! But no one knows he did it."

"Bibica, come quick. Marquinho took a beating. He's flat out there in the field. There's a serious amount of blood! I think he's gonna die."

Marquinho was hospitalized at once, with a punctured bladder. He stayed a week in the hospital, teetering between life and death. Bibica spent seven days at the hospital entrance. She would cry, while tearing her hair out and blaming herself. She should've already fulfilled her promise to go to Aparecida do Norte, but, my god, with what means? She didn't have any money, the journey was long, and because she worked so hard she was always so exhausted! God surely could understand. One morning the nurse pulled her aside and told her that Marquinho had gotten better, that he was doing quite well in fact, and that perhaps he'd be discharged the following day. He did come home, then, but was no longer able to control his bladder.

And there he was, before her, the source of all her suffering: the little purple coffin donated by the city leaving Marquinho's thin body on view, his bandaged head, *what a stupid accident, my God, how stupid! How is such a thing allowed to happen? What a streak of disasters! As if all my other troubles weren't enough, and everything ending up like this, in such a way, such a*. She'd spent the entire afternoon heavily sedated with tranquilizers. Now, almost midnight, she was lying down, her head heavy, light flickering from the oil lamp, shadows dancing about the room. Jorginho is sleeping at a neighbor's house, and Zunga, well, he must be on the *Ilha*. Mrs. Zulmira, *poor thing, such a dear*, sitting on the shack's only chair, falling asleep. They no longer speak to each other, they no longer have anything to say, *silence, tomorrow everybody will leave early for work, five-thirty, the factory's whistle will sound at six, is no one going to the funeral?* Mrs. Zulmira gets up, "Bibica, I'm gonna go check on the boys, I'll be back soon, very soon. I'm gonna brew some coffee for us, see if you can rest for a little bit." Bibica, her body

dead tired, tries to get up, feels dizzy, the roof spins around, the beam, the soot hanging on the rafters, *I need to use the big broom, to remove the cobwebs, poor Marquinho, poor little thing, my god*, she hears footsteps outside, Mrs. Zulmira? She keeps staring at the door, and is astonished to see, *no, it can't be*. Mr. Antônio stops, he's wearing a navy-blue suit and tie, he leans against the doorway as if he were carrying a sack of rice on his shoulders, he's drunk, he takes a deep breath, he breathes in with difficulty, pretends not to see her, or doesn't see her, looks at the coffin, collapses on the chair, brings his hands to his face and tries to hold back the pain that rises, overwhelming everything. Choked by the smell of the lit candles, he gets up, "my God, what misery, what misery!" He leaves the shack in haste, and darkness engulfs him. Hurriedly, Bibica drags her swollen legs to the door, not even a glimpse of him, nothing, a vision. The deathly-sweet scent of the flowers intoxicates her. Mrs. Zulmira brings steaming coffee in a speckled blue-and-white enamel mug. "Mrs. Zulmira, did you see?" "See what, Bibica?" "You didn't see anything?" "No, Bibica, nothing." "You didn't see anyone there in the alley just now?" "No, Bibica, I didn't. You're tired. Come lie down, try to rest a little bit." *Oh, Marquinho, it's true, he would never come here, ever.*

The two Brazil Market clerks tried, over the course of several days, to clean up the blood that had stained the cobblestones. They even used caustic soda, but the mark remained there. Then, when no one remembered Marquinho anymore, it disappeared.

NOTE

¹ The word *Ilha*, meaning island, refers to the red-light district. The Portuguese term appears in Italics throughout the text. (N.T.)

RUFFATO, Luiz. A mancha. In: __. *Histórias de remorsos e rancores*. São Paulo: Boitempo Editorial, 1998. p. 37-50.