



Gerusa Lealⁱ

Tradução de George Gouldⁱⁱ

Burdens

A man and a boy are walking along a dirt road. The boy trips over a rock and swears. The man doesn't approve of swearing. He tells the boy to carry the rock as punishment. The boy places the rock on his head and they continue on their way.

The longer the road stretches ahead, the larger and heavier the rock grows.

"Dad, I can't carry it any more."

The father pays no attention. The rock grows so large and heavy that the boy stumbles and falls to his knees. The father looks on. He thinks of leaving the boy there, but what use would that be?

Once, he told the boy to climb a guava tree to pick a ripe guava hanging from the tip of the highest and thinnest branch. The boy climbed up and brought down the fruit. The father promptly threw the guava down the slope. He told the boy to climb down and look for it. He ran away and went home. By nightfall, the boy still hadn't turned up. He went to sleep. The next day, when he woke up, the moment he opened the door, there he was, sitting on the front steps.

Another time, he took the boy with him into the forest. It hadn't rained in a long time. He told him to hack a path through the bushes with the machete and when he saw he had reached the point right in the centre of the dry scrub he set fire to it. To clear the land for ploughing. He saw the flames spread and the smoke rise.

He looked to one side: there was the boy, running towards him he knew not from where.

Still another time, he called him and told him to fetch the shotgun. He wanted to go hunting. The boy went. He told him to climb into a grotto and follow a hare, and waited outside. From the opening, he took a shot at whatever was moving inside in the dark. No scream, no thud. He sat on a log and waited. The boy didn't return, so he left. He didn't even bother to check whether he had hit the hare or not.

He forgot all about the boy.

He cleared the land, hunted, slept and woke. Every now and then, some game hanging in the yard to cure would go missing. He'd hang it higher up each time, and would lie in ambush to catch whatever animal it was that was stealing his meat.

He didn't catch it.

After a few days, when he was back near the grotto once more, he saw the boy emerge from the opening. He picked up a stick and set about the child.

"Don't hit me, Dad."

He lowered his arm. They went back home, the father walking ahead.

No more cured meat went missing from the yard.

He planted cotton. That night, they were going into town. To do business with the buyer.

He hurls the rock far; lifts the boy from the ground by the arm. They went on walking. He in front, the boy behind, making an effort to hold back his tears. They arrived in town just as morning was breaking.

There was a woman standing by the store door. He passed by her and neither of them spoke. She looked mockingly at him.

At the counter, he negotiated the price with the storekeeper, who paid him in advance, cash, and they arranged for the cotton to be collected three days later.

The boy, outside, was looking at the pretty woman, who stood with her back to him. The father didn't want him to speak to her. He held down his tears again and began drawing on the ground with the tip of his finger.

The father left and headed back to the store. The boy got up and followed him. The father bought enough supplies to last a month, arranged the packets so they could be carried on his back, and, at the baker's, ordered some bread and butter and a glass of milk each for himself and the boy. The meal finished, they set off on the return journey.

They arrived at nightfall, very tired, and the boy lay down on the straw mat and was soon fast asleep. The father watched him. He picked up the shotgun and took aim at the boy's head. He was a long time taking aim.

Then he slid the barrel into his own mouth.

The boy awoke with a start at the sound of the shot, leaping up from the straw mat. He felt his feet wet. He looked at the corner of the room and saw the cracked pot of water, and the water on the floor.

The father fetched a hammock, the boy another, and they tied them across two *macaiba* trees and slept outside in the yard.

The boy slept. The father couldn't sleep. He saw in the boy's moonlit face the face of his mother.

What good would it do to kill him? She would still be alive. Mocking him. And he didn't have the courage to kill her. He could kill the storeowner, but he knew for certain that even then she would never come back to him. She couldn't stand being poor. What's more, the storekeeper was the only buyer for miles. He couldn't buy his cotton if he was dead, could he?

The right thing to do would be to put a bullet in each one of them. And the last bullet in his own breast.

But it was late now and he was tired. Better get some sleep. The plantation was a very mean boss.

The dogs

With the child hugged tight in her arms, the woman makes her way across the desolate neighbourhood, her nose buried beneath the shawl that covers the head of the boy resting against her shoulder, obscuring his face from view.

She knows it was madness. She wants to quicken her pace, but she walks on almost without breathing, glancing furtively at the pack invading the deserted streets.

She shouldn't have, it was foolish. No, she couldn't keep the child.

The boy had looked at her. And smiled. And reached out his little arms towards her. No one had paid the least attention when she had picked him up in her arms and walked away.

Slowly. Slowly, so as not to provoke the dogs. She thinks of throwing a stone at them but there are no stones in the street, and anyway, even if she managed to hit one on the head and killed it she would be lost – whosoever kills a dog forfeits their soul to Saint Lazarus and will be punished.

She felt she was going to be punished, one way or another. She didn't even know the little one's name. The boy started to cry, pushed against her breast with his small hands. Perhaps it was just that he was cold. She pulled the shawl around him, he struggled, and she wrapped it round him tighter, felt the warm liquid soaking her body. She had to get home, wash the child, change his soiled clothes, give him something to eat, improvise a makeshift bed.

She can't walk any faster, the dogs. The dirty dogs, black dogs with yellow eyes – where did they come from? – their number increased and they spread out all around.

Her arms are hurting from carrying the boy, she places him on the ground, they walk holding hands – would he be taken for her son? – Night falls.

She's tired, but she can't stop – the dogs. Servile and cowardly creatures, now in packs, threatening, they snarl in mock-bravery, one stops and begins to howl, probably seeing a soul from beyond the grave amid the evening shadows – an ill-omen for your cries, you wicked beast.

Nobody in the streets, just her and the child.

And the dogs. Licking the wounds of the woman and the boy petrified in the middle of the asphalt over the crossing.

She shouldn't have taken the child. She shouldn't have. She knew she was going to be punished for it.

Holding hands with the child, she walks on across the desolate neighbourhood. Slowly. So as not to provoke the dogs.

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