

My Sweet Orange Tree

The story of a little boy
who discovered pain



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Chapter One

THE DISCOVERER OF THINGS

We were strolling down the street hand in hand, in no hurry at all. Totoca was teaching me about life. And that made me really happy, my big brother holding my hand and teaching me things. But teaching me things out in the world. Because at home I learned by discovering things on my own and doing things on my own; I'd make mistakes and because I made mistakes I always ended up getting beaten. Until not long before that, no one had ever hit me. But then they heard things and started saying I was the devil, a demon, a sandy-haired sprite. I didn't want to know about it. If I wasn't outside, I'd have started to sing. Singing was pretty. Totoca knew how to do something besides sing: he could whistle. But no matter how hard I tried to copy him, nothing came out. He cheered me up by saying it was normal, that I didn't have a whistler's mouth yet. But because I couldn't sing on the outside, I sang on the inside. It was weird at first, but then it felt really nice. And I was remembering a song

Mother used to sing when I was really little. She'd be standing at the washtub, with a cloth tied about her head to keep the sun off it. With an apron around her waist, she'd spend hours and hours plunging her hands into the water, turning soap into lots of suds. Then she'd wring out the clothes and take them to the clothes line, where she'd peg them all out and hoist it up high. She did the same thing with all the clothes. She washed clothes from Dr Faulhaber's house to help with the household expenses. Mother was tall and thin, but very beautiful. She was brown from the sun and her hair was straight and black. When she didn't tie it up, it hung down to her waist. But the most beautiful thing was when she sang, and I'd hang around, learning.

*Sailor, sailor
Sailor of sorrow
Because of you
I'll die tomorrow ...*

*The waves crashed
Dashed on sand
Off he went
My sailor man ...*

*A sailor's love
Lasts not a day
His ship weighs anchor
And sails away ...*

The waves crashed ...

That song had always filled me with a sadness I couldn't understand.

Totoca gave me a tug. I came to my senses.

'What's up, Zezé?'

'Nothing. I was singing.'

'Singing?'

'Yeah.'

'Then I must be going deaf.'

Didn't he know you could sing on the inside? I kept quiet. If he didn't know, I wasn't going to teach him.

We had come to the edge of the Rio-São Paulo Highway.

On it, there was everything. Trucks, cars, carts and bicycles.

'Look, Zezé, this is important. First we take a good look one way, and then the other. Now go.'

We ran across the highway.

'Were you scared?'

I was, but I shook my head.

'Let's do it again together. Then I want to see if you've learned.'

We ran back.

'Now you go. No baulking, 'cause you're a big kid now.'

My heart beat faster.

'Now. Go.'

I raced across, almost without breathing. I waited a bit and he gave me the signal to return.

'You did really well for the first time. But you forgot something. You have to look both ways to see if any cars are coming. I won't always be here to give you the signal. We'll practise some more on the way home. But let's go now, 'cause I want to show you something.'

He took my hand and off we went again, slowly. I couldn't stop thinking about a conversation I'd had.

'Totoca.'

'What?'

'Can you feel the age of reason?'

'What's this nonsense?'

'Uncle Edmundo said it. He said I was "precocious" and that soon I'd reach the age of reason. But I don't feel any different.'

'Uncle Edmundo is a fool. He's always putting things in that head of yours.'

'He isn't a fool. He's wise. And when I grow up I want to be wise and a poet and wear a bow tie. One day I'm going to have my picture taken in a bow tie.'

'Why a bow tie?'

'Because you can't be a poet without a bow tie. When Uncle Edmundo shows me pictures of poets in the magazine, they're all wearing bow ties.'

'Zezé, you have to stop believing everything he tells you. Uncle Edmundo's a bit cuckoo. He lies a bit.'

'Is he a son of a bitch?'

'You've already been slapped across the mouth for using so many swear words! Uncle Edmundo isn't that. I said "cuckoo". A bit crazy.'

'You said he was a liar.'

'They're two completely different things.'

'No, they're not. The other day, Father was talking about Labonne with Severino, the one who plays cards with him, and he said, "That old son of a bitch is a bloody liar." And no one slapped him across the mouth.'

'It's OK for grown-ups to say things like that.'

Neither of us spoke for a moment.

'Uncle Edmundo isn't ... What does cuckoo mean again, Totoca?'

He pointed his finger at his head and twisted it around.

'No, he isn't. He's really nice. He teaches me things, and he only smacked me once and it wasn't hard.'

Totoca started.

'He smacked you? When?'

'When I was really naughty and Glória sent me to Gran's house. He wanted to read the newspaper but he couldn't find his glasses. He searched high and low, and he was really mad. He asked Gran where they were but she had no idea. The two of them turned the house upside down. Then I said I knew where they were and if he gave me some money to buy marbles, I'd tell him. He went to his waistcoat and took out some money.

"Go get them and I'll give it to you."

'I went to the clothes hamper and got them. And he said, "It was you, you little rascal!" He gave me a smack on the backside and put the money away.'

Totoca laughed.

'You go there to avoid getting smacked at home and you get smacked there. Let's go a bit faster or we'll never get there.'

I was still thinking about Uncle Edmundo.

'Totoca, are children retired?'

'What?'

'Uncle Edmundo doesn't do anything, and he gets money. He doesn't work, and City Hall pays him every month.'

'So what?'

'Well, children don't do anything. They eat, sleep and get money from their parents.'