

## Flowers of Gasoline

**A**t the end of every day, my father's uniform reeked of smoke, metal, and fuel from the bus he had driven through the city of São Paulo since dawn. As he walked down our cobblestone street, the aroma rose so full-bodied, you'd think he was carrying flowers of gasoline.

He slipped through our half-open front door, patted my shoulder, waved to my brothers, and kissed Mother's cheek in a sheepish way that made my grandmother grin.

At the dinner table, cluttered with plates of rice, beans and, at the best of times, beef, he told us his daily anecdotes from work. A smile creased his rough skin, drawing three lines on each cheek and spreading a web of finer lines from the corner of his eyes.

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“Can you imagine João de Santos on fire? Mauro Silveira poured chili sauce over João’s--” He interrupted the phrase with thundering laughter that called for my boyish giggles. Mother smiled but complained that he couldn’t finish even one goddamned story. We laughed all the same; he loved that laughter.

Some days, when he took the route downtown through Santo Amaro, our neighborhood, my father gave me a ride to school. To catch his bus, I got up earlier than usual and ran the five blocks leading to the bus stop. As he pulled over, at exactly seven o’clock, I silently stepped in and joined the other passengers. I took the first seat in the row across from him and watched him drive. Upon arriving at the next stop, he set the parking brake with the transmission still in drive and opened the two doors. Every once in a while he peeked at me. His head, birdy over his square narrow shoulders, emerged from a white shirt buttoned all the way up and collared by a black tie. I hoped that all the passengers could see him from their seats or from their standing places.

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The bus would gradually become so crowded, we would call it “a beehive.”

In the evening, I would walk him from home to the neighborhood bar and ask about bus maintenance and driving. He always changed his step to a clownish walk, stamping his feet sideways and replied at length. Everything served as an inspiration for a technical explanation. When the trees were turning yellow, he said, “On rainy days, the factory defroster helps with keeping the windows cleared.”

Later, during cold days, I would watch the bus windows smear anyway. Seeking a new solution, he wiped liquid soap over the glass. When the vapor reappeared, he stared through the windshield as if he wanted to be out there.

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One day he drove away and did not return that evening, nor the next day, or the following week.

My sleep slipped out of me like a mercury ball spilled from a broken thermometer. The lamppost's gloomy light that streamed through the aluminum blinds blurred my mind and tired my eyes. I rolled my younger brother to the far end of the mattress and wondered about the space that my father managed to leave in a family of seven children, our mother and our two grandparents.

I was eleven years old then, the third son, his favorite.

Back from the Palmeira bus company's main offices, Mother grabbed the ingredients for dinner, spilling rice over the linoleum floor. "He," she said in a high-pitched voice, pouring oil into a pan, "he has been transferred to Espirito Santo, up north, without telling us." She sliced the onions, tearful. "He can go to hell," she ended.

Nonetheless, she wrote him a letter, scribbling three lines and carving her signature into the paper. I snatched the envelope, licked the bitter stamp, and ignoring the yellow mailbox on our street, headed to the post office.

Several days later, Palmeira's administrative assistant told Mother that Lorenzo Antonio Siqueira, my father, had moved again, and while it wasn't anyone else's business it sure was my mother's, so she'd tell her, confidentially, that he was now driving a bus for a company located in Minas Gerais in Central Brazil.

Hissing like an angry cat, Mother gave up on him. She shrugged me off when I threatened to go on a no-school strike unless she wrote him again. If she knew his address, she hid it from us.

That week, Mother went hunting for a monthly pension at Palmeira's office, believing that deserted wives deserved one. We knew quite a few of those. Back at home, she hushed me at the dinner table, and no one winked at me over her shoulder.

I closed my door on the noise and speed of São Paulo, its heavy traffic and busy people. I stayed behind it with my mother's mother and my father's father.

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I turned my scolding gaze from the uneven white ceiling above my bed and trained it on my grandparents. Their fragile bodies, dangling jowls, and puffed gray hair, added to my impression that they were ancient versions of their respective son and daughter.

The two had always lived with us, not in peace but rather in a state of cease-fire. A month after my father had left, they put the weapons down, rested their sharp tongues, and became a couple. They remolded their lives so easily that I wanted to puke. Mother said they would face the future better that way, and she did not mean their death but their living. We were all concerned about life, then.

I couldn't stop the changes. My strike strategy failed like all the tactics I had ever employed when trying to beat Mother's resolution. She believed that my dropout case wouldn't hit the juvenile court before I got whatever bothered me out of my system and returned to school, and that seemed satisfactory to her. Soon, she got too busy to bother with such minor issues. She rolled up her sleeves, literally, and started working as a cleaner in a building up the street from our small rented house. At night, she baked sweet corn cakes and made coconut sweets for sale.

I stayed on guard, in case he came back and dared not enter home for fear of Mother's hot temper. She was angrier than she had ever been, hurting like the other abandoned women we knew or even more. However, while quick to slap us, she was also fast to smile, and my father had always taken very well the turns of her moods.

With our new household arrangement, my mother worked all day, my grandparents took care of each other, my elder brothers sold mother's cakes and sweets to the nearby grocery stores, my other brothers studied and played, and I waited for everything to go back to the way it used to be. To my dismay, all things new soon seemed old and familiar.

Drowsing off and waking up, I had "daydreams" during nighttime and daytime. (Why hadn't anyone invented a special word for the nightly daydreaming?) I took a snaking black road that unwound in front of me though I wasn't asleep or out of bed. Between those rides,

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the questions I wanted to ask my father burned behind my eyes. I wondered if I'd understand his leaving by the time I reached the age he had been when he left us.

Upon the loud arrival of every morning, I found my grandparents glancing at me sideways and humming to each other. Their insistence and uselessness exhausted my tolerance. At eighty, they couldn't do anything besides combining their clothes in one dresser and getting each other's medications. I felt like kicking their asses, but I considered before proceeding, as a juvenile court's judge might say. My father used to say on such occasions: "See the sign? Drive carefully." Mother wouldn't listen because she never listened to him. But I took his advice and fled. I jumped on a bus going to the Palmeira bus company's place of business.

I loved the place as much as I loved buses and driving.

**T**hat Monday morning, I entered the Palmeira bus station without him for the first time. The familiar odor of oil, metal and gasoline hung over the place and noisy bursts of smoky air punctuated the low sound of motors. A wave of heat rose from the asphalt.

Drivers in uniforms and mechanics in blue overalls hung out in their regular spot, outside the office. They waved at me with the ease of uncles greeting their nephews. I stopped, surprised. It had been a matter of months since I had last been there.

"Come here, Pedro!" João de Santos, my father's pal, cried.

They offered me coconut sweets, slightly better than my mother's, and sweet coffee that I drank; though at home the children weren't allowed to drink coffee.

When they joked about my long black curls, João de Santos said that no girl would throw me out of her bed.

"A heartbreaker," one of them joked.

"Like father like son," said Mauro Silveira, the stout mechanic. I dwelled on his warm words.

At lunch, all of us had hotdogs and Coke and later, I took a bus ride with João de Santos. He said he hadn't heard from my father, so I changed the subject of our conversation to driving.

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The next month slipped away so fast I had no time to go to school. Once, during dinner, I commented that I had been pronounced the Palmeira bus company's mascot. Mother raised her wine-painted lips in a curious smile. She had always had a weakness for bus drivers, but she didn't wish for me to become one. She had lost her patience for men who kept moving.

My grandparents argued in intertwined voices that being a mascot was no honor compared to my younger brothers' achievements at school. They moved to the sofa, squeezing mother between them and leaving me no place to sit.

"He wasn't going to school anyway," Mother told them. "He's better off at Palmeira's than at home or on the street." She had quit school after finishing the fourth grade and never regretted it.

"See?" I grinned at them.

She turned her large dark eyes, set deep over her full cheeks, on me. "But Pedro, if you don't go to school, I'll lose you to the state."

Grandmother's plumed face relaxed, and grandfather winked at Mother as if I weren't there in front of him.

I flushed, hating the old crows for assuming that Mother was tricking me back to school.

"Okay, Pedrinho?" she asked.

I nodded my head. When she was right, she was totally right.

Perhaps Mother did trick me after all. I started frequenting school often enough to be considered a student but infrequently enough to allow time at the bus station. In a general sort of way, her education worked out pretty well.

My reputation had solidified at Palmeira during the accident-free three months. I was the only one who knew I had no luck to spare, despite my acclaimed status as a mascot. My supposed luck did not save me from the flu, for instance. High fever kept me home for a whole week. However, I recovered my optimism, upon getting well, in time for Palmeira's annual picnic.

Following Palmeira's tradition, the famous event was held at a large farm, away from São Paulo. I huddled in a shadowed corner at the back of the barbecue pits together with the men who hadn't married yet

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or had already separated. The workers' kids ran about the grass field, childish and uninteresting. They screamed, played, flew kites and did not notice me. I only followed them to the seats placed in front of the stage to watch the show "Estrela Teca." The workers strolled behind me.

Teca, the blonde star of a TV morning program, sang a song glorifying peace on earth and blessing the rainforests. With a sweet smile, she then introduced "the man who loves kids, the president of Palmeira, Senhor Alberto Fagundes."

The public cheered when the president's lips picked at Teca's pinkish-golden cheeks before he started his speech. The wind grew stronger, blowing his gray hair back in a romantic singer's hairstyle. She remained standing beside him. Her light mini-dress clung to her flat belly and round breasts. The dress's brilliant colors changed shapes over her body. The pink and green triangles stretched, twisted, and erupted. She kept straightening the dress with one hand and arranging her windblown hair with the other. The drivers and the mechanics stood behind the circle of kids, with their eyes bulging. You could hear them catch their breath when a burst of wind raised Teca's dress, revealing the full length of her golden legs.

"God loves us," breathed a mechanic.

I wanted to laugh. She was so beautiful.

The president ended the speech and raised his hands in praise of the employees. I applauded with the drivers and mechanics, clapping, whistling and howling. The president thanked us, a little surprised.

While keeping an indifferent presence at school, I took much interest in João de Santos and Mauro Silveira's teaching. Those were serious matters. Under their care even the oldest buses worked well. I learned that in case of negligence, the rust, dirt, lack of oil, and mechanical problems built up to the point where they hurt the bus.

Mauro Silveira spilled the bus's guts in front of my eyes and put them back so often, I got to know the parts of a bus better than I knew my bodily organs. João de Santos explained the rules of driving, as if he were preparing me for a bus Formula One Race. When problems occurred, we looked for new solutions.

Unfortunately, though I was tall for eleven going on twelve, even

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the shortest driver was two heads taller than I was. When pulling the driver's seat all the way forward, I could barely touch the pedals with the tips of my tennis shoes. It made little difference. I luxuriated in sitting inside the parked buses anyway. It's not like I thought about my father each time I took the driver's seat. Only one time or another, I imagined myself driving with him sitting on the front seat across from me.

**B**y the age of twelve, I had already become one of the guys. Mother would have slapped the dirty jokes out of me, had I repeated them. So I did not.

In secret, I studied the pictures of semi-naked women hung on the garage walls, but I soon learned that looking sideways, the way my grandparents glanced at people, was never as discreet as one expected.

On the small celebration of my twelfth birthday, the drivers and the mechanics gave me a football wrapped in green and white, the colors of my team. Inside the wrappings, I found a picture of Teca, the blonde TV star, dancing in a red bra and a white puffy skirt. I blushed and shoved the photograph into my pocket all the way down. My fingers hovered over it and wrinkled the edges.

At night, I remembered her sweet blue eyes and tanned belly. The sensation of pleasure in my body felt new and yet familiar. I fell asleep.

**T**he comfort one feels among the like-minded had lasted through the week that followed my birthday. I spent more time with the men and less on the buses. If they wondered, they asked no questions.

I was listening to their chatter outside the office, when Mauro Silveira leaned a heavy hand over my shoulder and said to João, "The kid needs a man-to-man talk."

"He needs a father," a new driver commented.

"I don't," I barked.

Someone coughed, and they all shut up.

"Who do you think you are?" I yelled on my way out. "I have a father."

The next day, I promptly returned to school after a three-week absence. It took me two days to catch up with the class. What had the other



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students done for so long? On the fifth day, I got bored.

I went back to the Palmeira bus station, though I had planned not to do so.

The sun was burning over the city, too hot for Palmeira's crew to hang out. I paced straight into the garage where Mauro Silveira stood wiping grease off his hands with a dirty rag smelling of toner.

"Where's my father?" I asked.

He shrugged his large shoulders, his face clouding.

"Where've you been, boy?" Another mechanic asked me, smiling.

I looked at Mauro. "Come on, tell me," I said.

The other mechanic cocked his head. "What's happening?"

"He's in Diadema," Mauro said, his lips twitching like he was chewing a lemon.

"Okay," I said. My skin burned over my face and down my neck.

"He's sick, too," he said.

"Okay."

Mauro held my chin between two fat fingers and raised my face to his. "Don't cry," he implored.

**M**y grandparents hadn't aged much that year, as if my father's absence didn't hurt them all that much. On the other hand, the ceiling had suffered from humidity in the winter and the paint had cracked like fish scales.

I was sick again. Between my dreams and my daydreams, my grandparents' vague whispers took form. They said my father was drinking his head off. He was driving a bus, but the company was going to let him go. He wasn't coming home. Mother said he'd have to die before she would take him back even if he begged her.

I coughed. They glanced at me sideways and stopped talking. I wished myself dead. Their words stank. I lay back and passed my hand over the blonde star inside my pocket. She was my angel.

In the morning, in spite of Teca's blessed closeness, my head felt heavy like a bowling ball and my body was soaked with sweat. I reached out and caught my grandmother's hand as she passed by.

She was so used to my silence, to my ignoring her, that she froze in surprise. In a minute, however, she made a lot of unnecessary noise

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and took my temperature. Messing around with me further, she made me swallow some medication, like she did with my grandfather. I took it and fell asleep.

When I woke up, she was wiping my forehead with a moist kitchen towel. My grandfather sat beside us and offered to read the journal aloud. He had no idea I wasn't interested in the news. I said okay. My grandparents weren't all that bad, after all.

On Thursday afternoon, my mother entered home crying. "He's gone," she said. "He's coming home."

"He's coming?" I confirmed.

She kept sobbing so much, I finally understood. "Stop lying!" I screamed. I stepped toward her.

She gulped, and raised her hands to hold me, but I grabbed my shirt and ran out to catch a bus to the Palmeira bus station. Upon arriving, I entered the bus João had just parked. I found the gear and steering wheel polished and the floor cleaned. The windows were a little dusty, but I could see the circle of drivers through them.

I embraced the steering wheel and leaned my forehead on the slick black plastic. Looking into my eyes in the mirror, I bent over and pulled the seat all the way to the front. I had grown enough to be able to press the pedals with my feet.

The drivers were heatedly arguing, a common occurrence. For once, I didn't care to listen. I honked the horn against the noise of their shouts. When they didn't stop shouting, I banged my head on the horn, once, twice, three times. The honks nearly deafened me. An angry cry came from the drivers. I did not have to take it. They didn't care about me. I took off. It was easy.

As I drove away, I saw them running after the bus. I laughed and waved as I left the bus station. I knew I'd have to take two turns before reaching the highway and following it to Diadema.

"Father would be so surprised," I thought.

I drove well, experienced and clear-minded. I had driven with João long enough to be in control. But the people on the street didn't know it. Whatever they saw made them scream. Perhaps I was so short they assumed the bus was driving itself. I laughed again. Imagine a bus

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breaking free!

I took the right turn to Pinheiro Street, parallel to the highway. A sign announcing radar surveillance reminded me that the police keep an open eye on the highway. I'd have to find another way. Calmly, I turned left, changing my route. The gray five-story buildings seemed to sway as the bus passed by them. I was growing happy. My body felt the bus's strength, its humming, its movement. Smoothly, I passed two cars. I was slipping from one pleasant moment to another as the bus moved along the street. I loved the way the gear obeyed my hand, the way Teca rested in my pocket, soft and lovable.

Right then, a police siren cut the air. The police car screamed behind me. They shouted through a megaphone: "Pull over!"

Yeah, right.

I sped up, screeching through a turn and stupidly scratching the body of the bus as it rubbed against a post. "It's over," I thought. But when I looked back, they weren't behind me. Apparently, they stopped someone else. My hands still trembled over the steering wheel anyway. The way to Diadema wasn't safe. I slowed down and, making a quick decision, I entered a narrow cobblestone street and headed home. The bus shuddered above the bumpy way. I drove down the five blocks where buses had never ridden before.

When my eyes found my light-blue house, I set the parking brake, with the transmission still in drive, opened the bus door, leaped off the stairs, and landed on the pavement. A crowd swirled around the bus, over the pavement and all the way to my house's entrance. I felt my heart pulsing faster, banging under my ribs. Something was going on. I ran forward, flung the door open and burst into the house, closing the door in someone's face.

The family, all sitting around the unset table, stood up as one. I stopped dead.

Behind me, two neighbors came in without knocking. One of them started to speak—but soon fell silent.

In slow motion, I turned my head in the direction everybody was looking. My father was lying on the sofa in our small living room.

"I'm sorry, son," my mother said through tears, rising her head from him.

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"He's back home!" I said.

"We're family," my mother said and shrugged.

I drew closer in hesitant steps and knelt beside him. I gave one look at him and screamed like someone had stabbed me.

I raised my arm to touch him, but Mother caught my fingers in the air and put them to her soft cheek. "He's gone," she said softly. I believed her now.

How do you know someone you love is a corpse? Well, you just know.

I heard the people outside and the far traffic. I glanced at him sideways. When you don't focus your eyes, you capture a lot more than a plain picture. He was well-dressed, shaven and clean. His face looked very much like mine. My friends at the Palmeira bus station had been right. It caught my breath. Three lines creased each cheek, and a web of finer lines was gradually spreading from the corners of his eyes.

"Mother, he's laughing," I said.

"So typical of him," she replied in a sob.

Faint but persistent, a scent of gasoline hung over us and I didn't know if it rose from his skin or mine.

"I'll be back," I said, as I got on my feet again. The bus was waiting for me.

***Avital Gad-Cykman** was born and raised in Israel, and now resides in Brazil. Her work has been published in Glimmer Train, The Literary Review, McSweeney's, Prism International, Descant, Other Voices, Michigan Quarterly Review, Stand and other magazines and anthologies.*