

The Fifth Acolyte Reader



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Leonardo

by Dom von Adilaw

The regulars at the Ball Game Cafe have never discovered where Leonardo lives in this lush, sprawling, tropical city, though when we ask him he waves vaguely and chirps in his little boy's treble, "Over thayer..." It has to be near the Ball Game because he ranges nightly among the cafe's outside chairs, tables and lustful clientele. Leonardo tells those who ask him that he is 13 years old, but he once confided in me, under threat of being tickled, that he had just turned 12. On occasion he mentions brothers and sisters, never his parents – if he has any. None of us has ever seen any of his relatives.

A sturdy tot with fair, unblemished skin, oddly reddish-brown hair trimmed in the semi-Buster Brown bob currently in vogue here, he has an athlete's body and grace, the exuberance of youth, and the typically brown, slanted eyes and flat-nosed features of the Chinese-Malay racial mix from which his people emanate. Leonardo dresses simply in T-shirts, very short trousers and sandals, and like a small animal in a forest, he forages for his living, not without hazard. The local police frequently swoop down upon such waifs, whom they claim are vagrants, carting them off to institutions said to be more rife with sex, crime and brutality than anything these youngsters encounter in the streets. Thus Leonardo carries around a crude shoe-shine box, sometimes actually polishing, zestfully and with myriad flourishes, a Ball Game customer's oxfords. But far more often he uses his kit as a stage prop, for Leonardo is a sterling actor. After all, success in his chosen role of poor-little-lad-who-needs-a-friend means food, drink and always a soft bed in some gentleman's air-conditioned apartment. But failure is a sentence to the probably crowded, grubby precincts of the home he never explains, or to curling up on the hard, dust-eddied, cement doorway of some nearby shop. Leonardo and failure are light years apart.

We can never decide whether he plays his games out of sheer intuition or adopts the Piteous Urchin role because he's learned its dollars-and-cents value. He certainly learns rapidly and accurately. Leonardo is a master of the sympathy-evoking grimace, the subtle nuance, the appropriate words and gestures. He has long ago realized that the mere sight of his precocious muscularity and Oriental beauty immediately win him an inordinate number of admirers in his permissive

society. Moreover, he buttresses his appearance with a wide-mouth smile which gives way to a positively magnificent lightning-flash grin of victory when he has gained his end. Or, as we've irreverently observed among ourselves, when somebody has gained Leonardo's.

That one so young can be so very knowing must surely be the combined result of inheriting the easy-going, good-natured, tolerant and totally uninhibited personality common among his countrymen, and of spending most of his time among the worldly denizens of the sleazy bars and raucous night clubs of Sin Strip. For nobody along that bubbly street considers Leonardo's activities unusual or deviant. In this immensely practical milieu, nobody asks *how* you play the game, but whether or not you won. Were Leonardo inveigled into expressing his philosophy, we believe he'd voice that old platitude, "the customer is always right." Do his experiences harm him? Judging by the nimbus of euphoria in which Leonardo floats, just before and just after a conquest, one arrives at the conclusion – not at all.

We delight in his performances. Leonardo appears on stage early in the evening carrying his shoe-shine kit and looking oh so small, winsome – and hungry. If no likely prospect decorates the scene, he makes for one of us, knowing that he'll not only glean enough to eat, and might also pick up some useful information or histrionic device until such time as he spots a promising admirer. He trusts us – to a point.

"Lend me a dollar, and I'll give you back two tomorrow," I suggest, mainly to get his reaction.

"No!" says Leonardo sharply. *"NO!"*

I submit that I'm an old friend and that he can be confident of my honesty. Leonardo regards me with a quick glance consisting of two-thirds suspicion, one-sixth contempt that I would consider him to be that foolish, and one-sixth unwilling conjecture that maybe – just maybe – I mean it.

"No!" The decision is final; good, solid money is never to be dispensed, except to Leonardo. Yet he'll offer us pieces of cheap, sticky candy at such times as his operations net him funds beyond those necessary for gorging on mounds of chicken and rice.

Leonardo has no shame. One of his clients, undecided whether to be angry, disconsolate or both, reports that he intercepted the boy at the very moment when he was backing out of the apartment carrying the client's watch. Leonardo admits to this attempted pilferage over a cup of coffee at the Ball Game, playing the Expressionless shoe-shiner – and almost surely cursing himself for not having handled the affair with far

greater skill and profit.

If the evening wears on bereft of likely strangers or previously enchanted patrons, Leonardo thinks nothing of tempting one of us old-timers. Boldly but quietly edging onto one's chair, he nestles into one's chest like any ordinary little boy when he's tired and sleepy. The difference is that Leonardo is neither, but a shrewdly wide-awake activist applying teasing pressure at such junctures as he deems vulnerable. If this gambit fails, he silent guides one toward the evidence of his own interest in the usually correct belief that no red-blooded man is going to resist such avid invitations. One evening when he appeared in smart navy blue short trousers, Leonardo backed up to two of us, reached around to pull down the belt line so as to reveal the manufacturer's tag within. "Made in Switzerland," he boasted. Then, turning on his devastating grin, he patted his buttocks and added, "Made right here."

This being the sort of city it is, and the Ball Game being one of its notorious rendezvous, Leonardo finds countless opportunities to exploit. Surveying the rows of tables and chairs and their occupants, he perceives a likely target on whom he advances with a falsetto "Shine, Mister?" Shine or no, the victim, typically delighted to be selected, is more rapidly than not enmeshed in Leonardo's schemes. He is likely to laugh loudly and remark to his neighbors that "the little fellow his spirit." There will follow a series of low-toned, head-to-head exchanges after which the victim, trying to appear casual, will survey the rest of us in a manner meant to convey how superior he is in attracting this diminutive charmer where we dolts have failed – and walk away with Leonardo in pursuit of glory.

The program then concludes with one of three variations. In the first, Leonardo, alone, returns in an hour or so, heading for the stall near the Ball Game that sells pork cubes on a skewer. With one of these, plus a similar skewer of fried bananas, Leonardo passes from sight gnawing on these fruits of his machinations. The second variation finds him gone until morning, and if he hasn't already been breakfasted by his latest conquest, he will solemnly sit down at a Ball Game table and demand eggs, bacon and rice, which he will demolish with gusto. Representing the apogee of success, the third variation finds Leonardo, all giggling 12-year-old now, leading some burly admirer to the boys' department at the poshest shopping center, there to be nicely outfitted in the latest sports wear. The buyer looks self-conscious; Leonardo looks as though he owns the whole edifice.

We Ball Game habitués often discuss him admiringly:

"He's America's sweetheart!" – a dig at the number of those nationals who, after the Germans, English, French, Swiss and Australians, have succumbed to Leonardo's wiles.

"Ah, Leonardo..." – A delighted sigh – "That boy can achieve anything!"

To which we all can agree.

Meanwhile the handsome object of our comment is maneuvering himself into yet another coup. Allowing the flustered gentleman whom he has just enticed to precede him around the corner, Leonardo, following, turns at the last moment. He flashes us that brilliant gamin grin, all gleaming teeth and floating triumph.

Leonardo wins again!