

Sweet Sorrow

by Kevin Esser

I'VE RETURNED TO LISBON after six weeks of prowling through Spain and Morocco. It's colder here now. The September rains have started – a cold, persistent Atlantic drizzle that the people here seem to ignore... or at least tolerate, stoically.

Got a room at the Residencial Mansarde – fifth floor with no elevator. (I have rather macabre fantasies of cardiac arrest in mid-flight, as it were.) Shower and toilet down the hall... but it's all clean and airy and, most important of course, allows me the luxury of coming and going privately. Unusual for a Portuguese pensão, and something that has made rendezvous with boys very difficult indeed.

After Morocco, the culture/attitude/ambiance here seems very staid. I know for a certainty that I'm once again back in the West. There, in Morocco, the common language was money, basic and uncomplicated and universally understood. With it, I could buy a glass of mint tea or a boy, neither transaction more weighty or complex than the other. My only problem became, eventually, learning how to exercise restraint. I could, in theory, have had a dozen or more boys a day – but the outrageous ease of availability was its own strange curse, breeding a subtle sense of paranoia based on the realization that, after all, an open market of such proportions could exist only with police-complicity, which inevitably fosters a brutal system of extortion. (The Serpent forever lurking in Paradise.) And, God knows, I paid my share of blackmail. It eventually became part of the budget, figured in between the hotel bill and the couscous.

But here, in Lisbon, the Game is different. No hustling scene per se. We're back to the Old Rules now, where the street-prowler like myself has to rely on the haphazard and unreliable currency of humor, kindness, charm, persistence. What could be more frightening than that? ...having to use your own personality as barter? Still, the boys here are poor, and money can always provide an extra bit of leverage. I suppose, then, that the first sentence of this paragraph is faulty: The rules are different, sure, but the Game is the same. The Game is always the same.

I keep thinking about the shoeshine boy I met here six weeks ago. I suppose I've never gotten him out of my head. It's likely, in fact, that I've come back to Lisbon solely to find him, to discover his name... to get

him, if possible, into my bed – though I don't like admitting to such obsessions.

I can't even recall him very vividly... so, memory exercise:

First night in Lisbon, eating grilled swordfish at the Sol Dourado off the Rua Santo Antão – a salad of lettuce, green tomatoes, and raw, sweet onions – sitting outside against the wall beneath a splash of golden streetlight as the boy approaches down the middle of the street (closed to traffic) – lugging his shoeshine box in front of him with both hands – moving in a slow, patient shamble, head bobbing slightly, the trace of a Mona Lisa grin as he surveys the customers at the café. Of course I've seen many shoeshine boys before... but never one as bizarrely audacious and persistent as this one. His strategy was basic, masterful: he simply would not take “no” for an answer, a cliché that assumed new meaning with this boy. I watched him with a growing wonderment as he roamed from table to table, apparently blind and deaf to all rebuffs (no matter how strident) and shining every shoe in his path... remarkably heedless of the hands pushing at his shoulder or the curses shouted at him from above... deterred by nothing, and almost always collecting his fee. (Extortion, really: saying, in effect, “Pay me, and I'll go away.”)

Then it was my turn, and I shrugged and pointed to my Nikes as he wandered to my table and sat down beside me on his box, already nodding, still with that odd half-grin. I thought he must certainly have misunderstood – sure as hell couldn't polish my tennis shoes – so I pointed again, shook my head, said, “No, menino, you can't, it won't work...” But he held up his finger like a little school-master correcting an errant pupil and squatted beside the box, fished inside and pulled out a roll-on stick of white polish, then crawled still grinning beneath the table with the red-and-white checked tablecloth dangling like a monk's cowl over his head and shoulders. I'm not sure why, but I tried to stop him, nudging him in the ribs, muttering, no, no, it's all right, you don't have to do that, amigo. He sat up after a minute or so... and I thought he had finished. (His hair was a mess, filthy, completely covering his ears in scraggly brown strands – a round cherub's face with startlingly large eyes – brown T-shirt and brown pants, both the color of pale milk chocolate. I remember him being very dark; but it may just have been the shadows covering him – I don't know.) But, in fact, he was *not* finished – had merely paused like a diver surfacing for air – and before I could tell him again that I didn't *want* my shoes glowing like a pair of Pat Boone's white bucks, he had climbed back dutifully beneath the tablecloth, nodding slightly as if he knew what was best for me despite my protests.

(Silly old Americano who needed a patient, but firm, hand.) Of course I relented at this point... my hand still on his back, ostensibly as a gesture of vague resistance, but more truthfully now because I wanted to touch him – as simple as that – and I was enjoying the feel of the hard muscle flexing beneath the brown shirt, a bit damp with sweat – patting his ribs, his shoulders, his head as he raised up now and sat back onto the box, feeling blindly for the seat with his butt.

“And now I’m supposed to pay you, hah?” (Still speaking Portuguese.) He nodded and held out his hand palm-up, still crouched in the shadows behind my table, slumped forward, his head at my knee-level. I asked him how much. He said twenty escudos, pronouncing it “veent-escoosh” in the soft, husky voice that I *knew* he would have, I swear. He couldn’t have sounded any other way. But I was still unfamiliar with the currency at that time and thought he was trying to rip me off, so gave him only ten – which embarrasses the hell out of me now, knowing as I do that twenty escudos is less than half the price of a lousy pack of cigarettes. My needless stinginess has nagged at me ever since. Maybe *that’s* why I’ve come back, hah? To repay a debt, to square my karma with this kid before moving on.

Nothing else happened that night. He stood up muttering and prowled away, stocky shoulders hunched as he walked back up the street. He sat for a few minutes counting his money on one of the low stone window-ledges across the way (a bank, I think), then hoisted his box and wandered off. I still don’t know his name, though I’ve wondered about it nearly every day since. Nor do I know his age: probably twelve or thirteen. I’d love to find him again, and I suppose I’ve put it off long enough. It’s time to rearm myself with cash and passport and return to Sol Dourado. What are the odds of encountering him?... one shoeshine boy in all of Lisbon?

A couple of shots of vodka, then I’ll give it a try.

I COUNTED THE STEPS on the way back up to my room: 125. I’m panting like a tubercular: like, in fact, Gide’s alter-ego in *The Immoralist* – finding in the boys of Tunisia the healthful beauty and vigor so lacking in himself. No denying the mighty attraction of that life-force, so integral to the overall magic of the young male animal: The way they walk, eat, laugh, smile; the way they smell – the incredible scent of health in their spit and sweat and semen. Even sleeping, how the body is poised in repose, knees and elbows bent, fingers curled, penis stirring at intervals as if restlessly impatient – cheeks flushed pink with blood,

moist with dream-sweat like dew on a rose. What outrageously gorgeous beasts! Every boy who passes by untouched, who remains beyond my embrace and caress, wounds and withers a part of me. I am (truly) dangerously obsessed. I think of nothing but boys; dream of nothing but boys; spend my life searching for nothing but boys. Christ, how I *adore* their lean adolescent chests, hips, legs; smooth, perfect asses; pretty little cocks and curly puffs of soft pubic hair. The satin feel of them; the ripe, sweaty tang of them on the tongue. Well...

I shouldn't have started in on that tiresome old refrain... especially not this evening, when I do in fact feel somehow exhilarated, though my victory has been a small one. I walked around after leaving here at 3:00 pm, found the long-distance phones in the Praça do Pedro IV for later use, surveyed some restaurants, ended up at the Bar Bristol, two doors down from Sol Dourado. I had an appetite for a change, so I ordered a caneca (large beer) and a bifana (steak sandwich). About halfway through, I saw a shoeshine boy wander up to a nearby table. I had to do a double-take. My first impression was that he merely resembled the other youngster: same big, saucer-eyed stare; same round, dirt-smudged face – but his dark brown hair was chopped off close to his skull and it took me several seconds of staring and wondering before I recognized him definitely as “my” boy. A bit chunky with babyfat in the behind – as bold and bizarre as ever, giving everyone the same hassle he gave me six weeks ago. I smiled, watching him, tickled by my private joke: a special audience of one for this odd, intriguing tomcat-boy.

Shambling, grinning, nodding... he finally found a receptive patron at the table next to my own: a thin, blond German sipping coffee with his friend. I'm guessing he was gay: something about the way he watched the boy, arms crossed, chuckling continuously with occasional amused glances at his friend, who was engrossed in studying a map and seemed not at all interested. Between swipes of his cloth (which he flourished and popped with truly comical panache), the boy pulled a cigarette from his pocket and bummed a light from a passing waiter. He held it awkwardly, almost gingerly, between thumb and forefinger, trying so damned hard to look tough... then gagged on the first puff, tried again, choked more violently. I didn't know whether to laugh or look away in embarrassment... and, of course, the German *loved* it, chortling (a preposterous word, but the only one that applies) as he pawed his blond stubble and cast glance after amused glance at his friend across the table.

I waited for the kid to finish – my beer already gulped – watching him gesture toward his throat and mumble in Portuguese about having a

cold, this damned smoke... then he took another puff, lips pursed – coughing again as soon as the smoke hit his throat. Finally he gave up the ruse and tossed the cigarette away onto the cobblestones, accepted his money from the Max von Sydow look-alike (“veent-escooch!”), and started away with his box banging against his knees as he walked. Never even looked in my direction. (Maybe he really *didn't* feel well.) Strange, though, the panic that shivered through me when I saw him leaving. I slapped some money onto the table and took off after him. (Did the German see me rush off in pursuit? Probably... and to hell with him.)

The boy was in his “resting place” across from the Sol Dourado, perched on the stone ledge counting his money, wearing a blue soccer jersey with two vertical white stripes on each short sleeve, black jeans (zipper pulled down, trace of green beneath), sneakers, no socks. All very dirty. I almost passed by, then circled back slowly, said that I remembered him – but he obviously didn't remember *me* (did I really think he would”) – then went on about his hair being cut. He didn't seem to follow at first, then did his own haircut gesture with scissoring fingers, imitating the sound of clippers with his tongue. “You want a shine?” already reaching for his box, questioning with his eyes. “No, amigo, not today,” and I pulled twenty escudos from my pocket. “Here, for you.” I handed it to him, gave his head a good pat. He smiled, but didn't look surprised or even say thank-you. Somehow, though, I was satisfied, and waved goodbye. His smile was enough for today; patting his head a pleasant bonus. How odd: two weeks ago, in Morocco, this sort of elaborate “courtship” would have been unthinkable. Fifteen dirhams (maybe twenty on a bad day) would have bought this boy and put him beside me here, in bed, hours ago. But not in Lisbon. (I saw two Indian boys earlier today on the Avenida da Liberdade, holding hands as they strolled along. Here, it looked odd, reminding me how little fundamental difference there is between Portugal and the States. Morocco, and points East, is the Other World – but now, sadly, I'm back Home.)

Tomorrow, the ritual continues.

MORE CLOUDS, more drizzle – it never goes away now. My window looks out over a jumble of gray stone and orange tile strewn against the hillside beneath a charcoal sky, all brooding in cold shadow like El Greco's anguished vision of Toledo.

There's something oppressive here. I seem, in fact, to be the only guest. No sound hour after hour but the rain and the wind. I'll meditate later before going out – do some breathing and some simple yoga. And,

damn! I have to cut down on the booze. I notice myself shaking more and more, trembling almost uncontrollably at times, my knees so shaky I can barely walk down the sidewalk. Christ, what a litany of woe! Pathetic.

Last night, by the way, I realized that I'd forgotten to ask the boy's name! Amazing. Am I *really* going crazy? I find myself constantly addled, distracted, befuddled – pursuing nameless youngsters like Aschenbach mooning after Tadzio. It can't go on. Death in Lisbon. Terrific.

FELT BETTER AFTER MEDITATING – a bit stronger, more solid and centered.

It's 5:00 pm now. Still cloudy, but the rain has stopped. I'm at the Bar Bristol (at “my little round table near the door”) – still mulling over my conversation with Jorge. That's his name... my boy's name. Different than the Spanish version the Portuguese pronounce it “Zhorzha”: a soft name, a pretty name.

He showed up at his usual time, ambling along with his shoeshine box – still wearing the same blue shirt, his black jeans rolled up to the knees. I waved him over to my table as he started hassling a nearby group of unsuspecting Danes. I think he'd already noticed me, but (for some reason) had been doing his best until then to appear casually oblivious.

I handed him another 20 escudos, asked his name, his age.

“Doze,” he said.

Twelve.

Twelve years old.

He started to wander to the next table, counting his money (he seems forever to be doing that)... then came back as I tapped his hip – sat beside me on his box...

The time has come, the walrus said...

(It occurs to me suddenly that he resembles Pixote – dirt, prison haircut and all – but a bit older, stockier... and more attractive – not pretty, God knows, but awfully damn cute in a ragamuffin way.)

I told him I was a writer, would like to do a story about him. (*Now I had his attention!*) Would he like that?

Sure, yes... nodding vigorously.

Well, we'll have to talk in my room...

The boy was amazed, properly incredulous.

“You write?” – “About me?” – “A story about me?” – “In the

hotel?”

(Is this fair? Sure, I want to write about him, but I want to suck his dick, too, and I suppose he has the right to know *that*, doesn't he? And of course I'll tell him: I have no intention of locking him into my room and springing upon him – but I'm never sure how fast to proceed, each boy demanding a different tack, some ready at a wink to drop their pants, others just as apt to back away panicked and run squalling for the cops.)

...but he *did* agree finally. (I'm always surprised by success, always astonished that a lovely young boy could actually enjoy my company, or my conversation.)

Almost immediately, another boy – older, taller, thinner, with shaggy blond hair and a pale, gaunt face – steps up to the table, his hands in the pockets of his tan corduroy trousers. Jorge introduces this lad as his cousin, Paolo. I shake hands with him, smile, say “Ola!” He's fourteen, I discover – then watch and listen as Jorge goes through an animated summary of our earlier conversation, showing his cousin twenty escudos and explaining – breathlessly, with rounded eyes and a sort of stiff-shouldered pride – about my plans to use him in a story. I corroborate with smiles and nods, waiting till he's finished before giving him a good long pat and massage on the head and neck, letting my hand linger. (His short hair was still wet from an earlier rain-shower, reminding me of a pup's damp fur – even had that same woolly musk-odor – but am I indulging in a bit of olfactory fantasy?... how could I have smelled his hair from two or three feet away?) I'm not sure, but I think there was a trace of suspicion in Paolo's eyes as I stroked his cousin. After all, he's fourteen... pale and blond as a Botticelli angel... how many times-has he been accosted in the last five or six years? He knows me, I'm sure; knows what I am; knows what I'm after. (And, oddly, why is it *Jorge* that I want, and not *him*? What is it about this husky little dark boy that attracts me, challenges me, intrigues me?)

All details of our later rendezvous settled (We're to meet here at six o'clock – I'll pay him 500 escudos for our “interview” – how uncomfortably sinister these pretenses seem!). Jorge and Paolo amble away together – but Jorge is back in about five minutes with a bifana, sits down next to me (on his box, of course), and starts eating – holding the sandwich in both filthy hands – chewing open-mouthed – rocking back and forth and side to side with that enchanting perpetual-motion energy peculiar to young boys. I realize suddenly that I haven't even introduced myself, tell him my name is Miguel (it always feels odd using my middle name, but it works out well). That brings a pleasantly startled smile as

he swallows a huge mouthful of bifana (head ducking briefly in an exaggerated vaudeville gulp). “My cousin's name is Miguel!” (He said this very rapidly, but I heard the word “primo” clearly enough.)

I ask him where he lives; he points across the street to a row of windows above another cafe. (He's probably up there now.) That certainly explains why he's always prowling this territory (his home turf). My finding him so quickly and so easily after six weeks was no stroke of Divine Providence, no Karmic Attraction drawing together two mystically linked souls. The kid lives here, for Christ's sake! He has a brother, fourteen, named Jerome (*Zhair-urn*) who also shines shoes. (I wonder where *he works*.)

“Do you like shining shoes, Jorge?”

He says “no” and makes a face... a sour-lemon face, shaking his head as he chomps off another hunk of his sandwich. We continue chatting (as well as my rudimentary Portuguese will allow), and he tells me that he likes his hair better short – it's cooler, he says, and gives his own scalp a quick rub with his hand to illustrate. I ask him about cigarettes – do you want one? – he makes another sour face and holds his belly. I *try* to say that I saw him smoking one yesterday, but our conversation gets scrambled somehow and he actually calls the waiter over to our table (a dark, Arabic-looking fellow who has been eyeing me warily ever since). I can't understand them completely, but Jorge keeps repeating “ontem... ontem” (yesterday) as the waiter glances back and forth (gravely) between us. Sudden fear, embarrassment, confusion – I shrug, smile innocently (what *is* the kid telling him!?) then let out a sigh as he stalks away without a word. In Morocco I probably would have gotten a wink and a leer. I thought nothing of parading around Tangier with Achmet holding my hand or playing with my beard – in fact, I felt awfully damn *proud* of it! I remember sitting at the Zagora with him one afternoon, pleased and a bit titillated by the occasional glances of other men, mostly the Arabs themselves – so happy that I almost started crying (idiot!), causing the youngster to ask whether I was ill: “You sick a little, Kevin?” “No, my sweet boy,” and I stroked the back of his hand.

Jorge... back to Jorge: Alone again after the waiter leaves, he sits grinning and chewing as I watch him. We see an old lottery-seller shuffling up the street, braying like a donkey through his megaphone. I say, “Como um burro,” and we both laugh. The boy's head ducks as he giggles, his eyes squinted nearly shut. I realize that we have, for the first time, shared something – suddenly, we're friends – an amazing rush of something like joy fills my chest and I reach out and pet the back of his

head, briefly. We find ourselves staring at each other. I say, “Que?” and Jorge just lowers his head and gives a little shrugging laugh, eyes once again narrowed to crinkly slits. So damned cute!

And now I wait. It's already ten minutes past six, and I'm beginning to wonder why the boy hasn't returned. Was it really all for nothing? A man with an accordion (wife collecting money in an old cup) just strolled by playing *Cielito Lindo*. One of those unexpected, startling moments that bring a sudden surge of tears – sorrow and joy mingled like vitriol and honey – alchemy of despair.

Paolo is approaching from across the street... enough for now.

MY WATCH TELLS ME that it is now 9:00 pm. An astonishing jumble of events since my last entry. I don't even feel like writing at the moment. The emotions are too close, too fresh, too vivid – it will take a while before I can find the proper perspective on all this, before I can make sense of the troubling hodgepodge of joy, anxiety, doubt, fatigue, elation.

Where do I begin?

Paolo stepped up to my table at the Bar Bristol – very thin boy, square-jawed with a sort of dreamy, thin-lipped smile. We shook hands. I asked, “Where is...?” and he said, “Jorge?” before I could finish. I nodded, watched him set down his box (did I mention that he also shines shoes?) and hurry off around the corner. (Where *was* Jorge at that point? I still don't know. Shining, I suppose.)

I ordered another caneca – waited for about five minutes before the two boys returned... Jorge still lugging *his* box (thump, thump, thump against his knees); I greeted him with a smile. A crackle of sullen tension – strangely mute grins and nods exchanged between us (What *had* Paolo been telling him?) I told him to wait; he sat for a few edgy seconds, then indicated the other tables with a slow swipe of his hand and stood up to make his rounds. And, happily, he managed to find a customer (a thick-set Portuguese man/bull – face shiny with beer-sweat – lacking only a tail swatting lazily at flies)... which gave me time to finish my beer before he ambled back to my side (with Paolo again) and stood waiting for me to pay my bill.

Then the shock: *both* boys setting their boxes side-by-side against the wall of the Bar Bristol and joining me as I started back to the pensão.

“You leave your boxes here?”

Sure, they leave them there (Paolo talking, suddenly taking charge). They'll be OK.

“So why are you both coming?” We were already to the corner – a shrug, but no answer. We stopped for cigarettes, once, twice, Paolo handling that now as well, conducting me (and Jorge) like a young tour-guide, walking in front of us with quick, long-legged strides – no cigarettes at either shop, and my heart pounding, filling my chest... as I asked again and again, “Why both?” – then said (almost there now), “One or the other, but not both.” (And I noticed as we walked the ten or so blocks back to the pensão that Jorge didn't even come up to my shoulder, and realized that I had never stood next to him before – such a very young, small boy – sticking close to his cousin as we hurried along the sidewalk – obviously anxious, uneasy.) At one of the little parks along the Avenida, we paused for about a minute as Paolo rushed away to talk to Jorge's brother, Jerome. (“Meu irmão,” Jorge told me, pointing, “está ali... Jerome,” but I couldn't see him – there were so many people, so many double-parked cars and scooters, that I simply nodded and waited, sure by then that the fuckin' jig was up, man! – the scam had been blown – we were being chaperoned by Paolo and I might as well wave bye-bye right now and start searching for new gems through the endless maze of Samsara days and nights in this cold gray rock pile on the Sea.)

Paolo, finally, loped back, and we rushed the remaining half-block to the Mansarde (all of us walking rapidly now as if impatient to complete the tragedy.)

Again, “Why both?” as we all paused just inside the door (dark, empty, mold-pungent vestibule with part of one wall knocked out, chunks of wood and plaster heaped as if vomited behind the boys). Paolo nudged Jorge with his elbow: “He's afraid,” admitting finally what I'd known all along.

“But why?... why afraid?”

Shrugs, grins – eyes downcast... both youngsters shuffling, poised for fight or flight with feline-tensed shoulders.

“Why?” I asked again, then made a jack-off gesture (hell, might as well!): “You don't want to?” Jorge laughed – a startled giggle – looking at his cousin with an I-knew-that's-what-he-wanted nod... then ran out the door. Paolo followed, but came back a few seconds later (I really don't know why – Did he want one last look at the Norte *A-maricón-o?*) – hands in his pockets, shaking his head when I asked, “You?... no?” Definitely “no” as he hesitated another (puzzling) moment before rushing off in pursuit of Jorge.

I remember saying, “Ciao!” (It seemed a fitting epitaph for this

rank farce.)

So... that was that. A shame, too, because we could've been friends, Jorge and I. That's what I was thinking as I started my marathon hike up the 125 steps to the goddamn fifth floor. (And it's true, dammit! Would my relationship with Jorge have been – or be, now – a failure without sex? Must that *always* play such an enormous role in this deadly day-to-day round of hunt-and-seek? Sure, I'll take sex any time – revel in it – but do I have to search for it so frantically with such a tocsin-clangor of panic in my skull? Can't I be happy with a boy's friendship unless I can get him into my bed? Absurd! If sex comes, fine – marvelous – but, Christ, demanding it *all* the time is a fiendish self-torture that has left me fish-eyed and gutted, narcotized by despair. Being celibate or rutting like a billy goat: there has to be a happy middle road, but I'll be damned if I can shake this satyr mentality I've staggered into. My head is ruled by my heart-on. And so it goes and goes... a dogged wag's tale of woe.)

... and – pausing at the second landing, struggling to get my breath, really afraid for a moment that I *was* going to end up sprawled on the steps like some victim of Divine Wrath. It was then, resting against the bannister, that I heard footsteps on the stairs below me – peered down into the stairwell but couldn't see a damned thing – climbed down slowly, sliding my hand along the smooth- shiny wood of the railing. I was almost to the bottom before I saw Jorge standing with one foot raised onto the fourth step, hand resting against his upthrust knee. I paused in a splendid B-movie pantomime of dismay... and fear, too, because I half-expected to see Paolo and Jerome and a sinister gang of Lisbon thugs thronged muttering behind him.

“Jorge?”

A nod... and that familiar expression of his: wide-eyed bemusement, gentle but watchful – innocence belied by a certain street-wary tension. He said something quickly, but I had to shrug, perplexed. “You want something? You want to talk?” Another nod, and I waved him up the steps. “Where is Paolo?” Again I missed the details of his reply (I think my Portuguese/Spanish/French must decline whenever my testosterone begins to flow, as if all my other faculties shut down in observance of this sacred event.) I'm not sure where Paolo had gone, but Jorge dismissed the question with a vague gesture of his hand toward the door, so I let it pass.

“You want to come up to my room?”

His black pants (a type of denim, I think) were still rolled up to his knees – though, at the time, I still didn't know why – and, as I watched

him, he came trudging up the steps, nodding, gazing at his feet. (He's quiet, this boy – still such a child – an enchanting little amoreto with dimpled satin-brown cheeks – his hand on the railing still immature, fingers almost pudgy.)

We didn't say anything as I unlocked the outer door and let him in; in fact, I shushed him with a finger against my lips – anxious, as always, about that final (I almost wrote “fatal”) dash down the hallway to my own room – though here, as I'd expected, I had no problems – no other guests or staff anywhere (as if I've booked myself into a dummy pensão, very convincing in every detail, yet... spookily derelict, trapped humming in dream-warp).

We entered the room (my hand actually shook as I wriggled the key into the lock – very embarrassing). I feel always, at this point, like a fiend peeping through my own keyhole. Would Jorge mind my writing about him in such leering detail? I don't think so. In fact, of course, he *knows* that I'm a writer and that I want to use him in a story: seated on my bed, he picked up a *Newsweek* I'd bought yesterday and asked if I wrote stories like *that*, pointing at one of the pages. No, I write “histórias”... I wasn't sure how to explain, so I said, “como sonhos” (like dreams), and he smiled with a sudden uptilt of his chin and a soft sniff, somehow amused and delighted by this comparison.

I had to ask him, “Why did you come back, Jorge? I thought you were afraid.” He stared down shrugging at the magazine. And of course he *was* afraid, terrified shitless, but must have liked me enough to want what I offered so crudely downstairs. I hope, at least, that liking me had had a *little* to do with his change of heart... or was I just an obviously harmless bungler who had happened along at the right time, an idler plucking this fruit from midair as it plopped ripened from the branch? I don't know; I never do.

He put down the magazine and looked at me standing near the sink across the room – sat there perched on the edge of my bed with knees bouncing lightly and bottom lip sucked beneath gently gnawing front teeth. That's when I noticed the scratch on his left shin, almost two inches long and only partially scabbed... which is why, I realized then, his jeans were rolled up: the friction of pant-leg against sore must have been awfully damn painful. I knelt down next to him and touched the scratch. “Does it hurt?” He winced, nodding. I stroked the black denim over his left knee. “OK? Can I?” Each time is like starting over: a mingling of ecstasy and trepidation, some vestige of schoolboy awkwardness forever surfacing in this moment of fateful confrontation.

How marvelous to be suave, cool, nonchalantly in command... but I've never been, never will be: boys fluster me – make my palms sweat, my heart flutter – they're precious, confounding, mystical, diabolical creatures who quicken my breath and leave me thick-tongued, slack-jawed, tearful with joy and longing.

Jorge pulled off his own shirt after I flicked it with my finger. His torso was pale – nipples a dark rose, navel puckered with a childish swell of flesh. I pulled off his sneakers, and I'm afraid I probably grimaced when I saw the filth on his feet (sweat turning the grime slippery). We both reached for his pants at the same time... laughed. He stood up, let me unfasten the little button and pull the jeans down (his zipper – as always – was already open). I tried to be gentle, but couldn't avoid irritating the scratch, so Jorge took over, carefully sliding the pants over his feet and stepping free. He was wearing ill-fitting lime-green briefs that smelled sharply of sweat and urine. We'll have to wash you, I said in English – then in Portuguese.

“Aqui?” – his finger stabbed down at the floor as he glanced around the room. I smiled (had I offended him?) – but then he smiled too. I fetched a towel (still damp from my own shower this morning) and tossed it to him – peeked out the door: nobody there, of course (welcome to the Twilight Zone...) We rushed like a couple of thieves down the hallway (dark green carpet flecked with black, as if crawling with ants). As always, the bathroom smelled like spoiled cabbage – rancid stink of sewer-gas. I turned on the water. (They have a shower-hose here, and – blessedly – plenty of hot water. My God, if only I had a dollar for every ice-cold, bone-numbing shower I've taken in the last two months! Monkish disciplines breeding libertine appetites.) The boy already had his underpants off when I turned around (they were draped like a limp green pennant over the doorknob): ivory-pink penis, uncircumcised of course, about the shape and size of my index finger from tip to middle knuckle. I almost averted my gaze (still – as every male is, I suppose – ruled by that gym-class ethic which warrants against the eyes roaming beneath waist-level), but then quickly smiled and made *sure* he saw me eyeing him. That *was* the point, after all. And now, freed from his clothes, the youngster seemed somehow liberated, not at all shy about being ogled and admired... as if he was sure now that I was safe and, indeed, that *had* been his only concern. His fears and inhibitions seemed to have been shed with his clothing... something that I've noticed about all boys: the sort of pagan euphoria that comes with stripping, the primal juice-flow release of nakedness. And Jorge – all sturdy, healthy, perfect

boy – was no different: He looked down at himself, grinning, and gave his behind a quick little shimmy, performing that cunningly comic phallus-dance that seems actually instinctive to all boys: knees bent, arms outspread, penis wagging against pale thighs (no hair on top, just a shadow of dark fuzz in the groin-crease on either side, like two little downy wings).

I gave him a round of applause, really laughing for the first time in several days. It was easy after that: We'd passed that crucial moment in every encounter when the tension suddenly thaws, when man and boy become friend and friend. We both were comfortable now with our roles: I, this boy's Guide in the evening's ritual; he, the eager Initiate.

Fast forward: shower completed – Jorge washed himself as I watched, my knees resting against the edge of the tub – mercifully, he *did* allow me to soap his bottom (a fleshy, unmuscled child's ass), then giggled as I lathered him between the legs, sliding my hand round and round that slippery jiggle of penis and balls. Christ, sometimes I actually believe that I could live on such moments like a yogi dieting on rarefied Tibetan air (but the rapture is fleeting, and I inevitably return panting to the hunt). Back in the room, he sat on the bed lazily toweling his hair as I applied a bit of first-aid cream to his scratch (good ol' Johnson & Johnson), then three band-aids side-by-side to cover it up. He seemed fascinated by the process, not at all fretful as most coddled American youngsters would have been; he was a young city-beast, accustomed to pain, merely intrigued by my efforts to alleviate it.

I started fingering him while he was still drying his arms and shoulders. Husky giggles – flexing of thigh and stomach muscles – but no erection, which didn't surprise me, boys seldom responding to that type of cursory manipulation (though *I* enjoyed it well enough, kneeling between his legs, massaging the fleshy foreskin between thumb and forefinger: this sacrament of Holy Masturbation). But I knew what to do: took his hand (towel discarded now) and placed it on his own crotch, rubbed it around beneath my own. A quickening of breath... and sure enough his penis was soon swelling, stretching out stiff (as long as my entire finger now, and a bit thicker), straining back towards his belly and pinkened with blood. (Odd, but that gentle “dual manipulation” never fails to quickly arouse even the most timid or nervous boy.) Then resting against his elbows, he allowed me to lick him: I slid my tongue beneath the prepuce (the taste of boy-penis: somehow like sweat even when not sweaty, a vague tart saltiness to the flesh itself – especially beneath the foreskin, around the glans, a citrus-rich morsel of velvet)... sucking the

shiny pink head half-exposed above its sheath of skin, I pulled the fleshy sleeve down with thumb and two opposing fingers and licked round and round the bared knob flushed nearly scarlet with blood and glistening with my spit.

Then (I started to ask him, had to stop to gulp a mouthful of saliva): “Can you make milk, Jorge?” Everywhere I’ve traveled, boys use the word “milk” for semen, so I figured I’d give it a try here... and Jorge certainly *did* understand well enough, though his only response was a cryptic shrug. “Sometimes?” I asked. He nodded, said, “But it takes a long time – Paolo can do it better.” (I *think* that’s what he said.) OK. No problem. I had all the time in the world. Did this lovely boy really think I’d mind having to spend the next fifteen or twenty minutes (or the rest of my life) with him in my mouth!?! I urged him back onto the bed against the headboard, threw the damned *Newsweek* onto the floor (where it remains now, crumpled testimony to an earlier debauch) – lowered my own pants (just far enough to permit for a bit of auto-stimulation) – explored his thighs, balls, circled my tongue around the base of his cock (slicking down the two little tufts of boy-fuzz on either side). I glanced up now and then, usually to find Jorge watching me, smiling, his elbows resting on the mattress with both hands upraised and curled into loose fists; or, sometimes, with eyes half-shut and fluttering gently as if in opium-stupor – one knee raised, the other flat beneath me as I rested against his left leg – still licking, sucking, lapping, kissing – tonguing the tiny slit of the urethra, nearly exhausting myself in this sweaty sacrificial delirium (an offering of most sweet savor to the Lord)... until the boy mumbled something (still uncannily as if ganja-dazed) and took over with his own hand. He knows his own rhythms (I nodded, reassuring him that I understood) and could best finish the job himself, drawing up the sap with just the proper quickening of friction; still, I had plenty of time to resume my tender lapping of smooth ball-sac before Jorge tapped me on the shoulder (as if, sweetly, to tell me a secret). I watched him pumping in a frenzy (afraid for a moment that he might hurt himself), the foreskin drawn back in a scarlet collar beneath the knob... finally, miraculously, he stopped, held his hard-on squeezed in his fist and milked out one lovely tear of boy-semen. I took it, gratefully, on my tongue (a sweet-salt bead of dew.)

I kissed him on the lips as we rested afterwards, grinning (I had already pulled up my own pants, desirous of nothing more now than a few moments of lingering with this boy – naked – beside me). He allowed me that one kiss (as a token, I suppose, of mutual gratitude), but

averted his face – gently, patiently – as I tried for another (no hustler, this lad!). But no matter. We'd given each other some moments of joy (and how wonderful for me, now, knowing that what we shared had been something new for the boy – his first time – an awakening of the senses that I can only imagine, vaguely, like a mystic dreaming of the womb).

I asked him if he could stay, but he said “no” and shook his head... sitting up now on the edge of the bed (still a bit bleary, the drug analogy holding true even now). He wanted to take a piss (and said the word in English, pronouncing it “pes”). I told him to use the bidet (a rather repugnant habit I've slumped into lately) – watched him cross the room (padding with an endearing bare-footed shuffle), each softly rounded buttock dimpled at the top near the base of the spine (there was a thin blue vein traced diagonally across the white, shell-smooth hollow behind his left knee). I followed. He glanced at me over his shoulder, lips parted, his pee dribbling out weakly at first, then in a steady yellow stream (his urine is very dark – really should take in more fluids). Forgive me, Father... but I couldn't resist giving the boy a gentle little goose as he stood relieving himself, the result being a startled thrust of his hips and a spurt of piss all over the wall. Even now it makes me laugh... and (after an initial gasp of embarrassment) Jorge had a good giggle about it, too.

Before he left (and after, by the way, I wiped his crotch clean with the damp towel), I asked him again why he had decided to come back. With that same little grinning shrug, he said that Paolo had told him to be careful (I caught only bits and pieces – and I ask you now, oh Lord, if there exists a Paradise where boys are free and easy and where English is spoken? Morocco, to some extent – but, Christ, it now and then occurs to me that through some radiant concurrence of cosmic forces I might actually have been born in a land with, as Burgess puts it, a “decent tradition of pederasty”. Instead, I made a crash-landing in the very womb of bloody Protestant moral dry rot and, like a horse stampeding back into its own burning stable, I return there always: an escaped convict stumbling back blindly to his cell... a condemned man sharpening the very ax). Paolo had told him to be careful, because “he (me) probably wants to fuck you” – and Jorge had been afraid, but not so afraid that he wasn't willing to try it out for 500 escudos (I *did* pay him, sure – does that cheapen what came before? – bullshit). And did you like it, Jorge? Sure, nodding eagerly, he liked it a lot. And can I see you tomorrow? He stuck out his bottom lip and rocked his head from side to side in a sort of burlesque Yiddisha pantomime of indecision.

“Maybe?” I asked. He nodded: OK, maybe. I escorted him down the hallway to the outer door, kissed his cheek (he smiled)... and then he was gone.

It's a little after midnight.

THIS IS MY LAST DAY (that is, I leave tomorrow, on Sept. 27).

I went out looking for Jorge before lunch. (It's raining harder today: chilling, raw.) The Bar Bristol and Sol Dourado weren't open yet, of course. Everything deserted, like an abandoned Hollywood set. And no boy.

I'll try again later, maybe. (I actually bought two cans of Coke from a little cafe/bar down the Avenida. They're in the sink now, submerged in cool water, as if *that* will keep them cold. I thought perhaps Jorge might like something to drink. Now it seems a rather pathetic gesture, really.)

IT'S NOW QUARTER past six pm.

Jorge was on the steps when I returned after lunch! (It's so damned dark downstairs that I nearly stumbled over him before realizing he was there.)

Maybe he really *does* like me a little. (No doubt at all that he digs the sex.) I told him how happy I was to see him, and he let me give him a kiss on the mouth before coming upstairs with me. His sneakers were replaced today by a pair of blue plastic sandals, but he had on the same blue shirt and black pants, which were, however, rolled down this time – and I discovered later that he still had on the band-aids. (I gave him another dozen for later use, after I leave.)

The boy was much more at ease today. He enjoyed the cola, told me though that his favorite is orange (the red-and-white Coke can is sitting on the little table next to the bed – I just picked it up and shook it – still has some cola in the bottom, and a dribble of amber pooled around the metal lip on top – odd, like fondling a dead child's toy). His clothes were off quickly this time (penis already slightly stiffened, I noticed with delight) – and, yes, I gave him another 500 escudos before he left – why not?

No shower today.

I lubed him with luxuriant care (his balls tightening beneath my tongue as I lapped their satin sac) – then down farther to the fleshy crease between the legs, causing his knees to spread as I flicked my tongue against the warm pucker of his asshole.

We shared his penis this time, I keeping it slick with my spittle as he

maintained a steady stroke/stroke rhythm, occasionally changing hands to rest his overworked wrist. (There was as much joy in simply watching him as in the partaking. I found everything about him so painfully precious: his rapt, open-mouthed expression, pleasure and anticipation mingled in a facsimile of pain – the sharp etch of his ribs beneath the pale skin – the slow squirm of his legs as he jacked himself off – a small mole like a drop of chocolate on his right thigh.) We said nothing for the entire twenty or thirty minutes (except for the soft words of rather dazed admiration that I occasionally muttered – Jorge usually lifting his eyes to see whether or not I was speaking to him, then just as quickly refocusing his attention on the business in hand). And again, like yesterday, he finally, patiently, wondrously managed – with a sudden shimmer of tears in his eyes and one leg lifting off the mattress in a slow spasm of pleasure – to squeeze out what little juice he had: a first drop flicking viscous onto his thumb, a second and final one seeping out timidly from the reddened slit and poising there like a cloudy bead of sweat until I licked it away (also catching the other drop as it oozed down toward his wrist). He lay there on the bed for another minute or so with one hand behind his head, the other massaging and squeezing at his softening penis the way a child idly fondles a small pet – then looked at me with his squinty-eyed grin and said, “Optimo!” (Great!), his first spontaneous comment of pleasure or satisfaction. As before, I put off my own needs until later (something – typically – that the boy never even seemed to notice). I knew our time together would be brief, and I wanted to devote every moment of it to him: watching and touching and reveling in *him*.

Then, after taking one more swig of Coke, he swung himself off the bed and got dressed. I told him I'd be going home tomorrow. He looked genuinely saddened, a bit surprised, as if it hadn't occurred to him that I'd eventually be leaving. At the outer door, I stroked the side of his head, told him what a sweet boy he was (“muito simpático, muito bonito”), and gave him a goodbye kiss and a quick hug. Still no passionate little catamite, he nevertheless *did* return my kiss, and my embrace, and no less warmly than you'd expect from a little brother or a close, fond friend... which left me very pleased, and keeps me happy now as I recall it. But there was no real grief for him in our parting, which is fine. I hope there is only happiness in his memories of me: no sorrow, no regret.

So much I've forgotten to put down: licking beneath his upraised-arm as he lay masturbating with one hand (the right) resting behind his head – the armpit smooth and tasting strongly of young, sharp sweat; two

freckles like specks of pepper on the bridge of his nose; a gray-blue bit of lint that I picked from his belly-button as he giggled.

Oh, Christ... so that's over now as well. Jorge's gone. I'm not sure what was gained, if anything, except a few hours of pleasure stolen from the demon time-miser; but I have the memory of him, already somehow vague as dream-image; and I *was* happy with him here. That's something.

It's almost seven o'clock. I should go out for some dinner, but it's raining fiercely and I'm not at all hungry. Maybe later.

– *Lisbon: Sept. 26, 1982.*