

5. Black Money
by Carla Zaccagnini



The dealership was on Avenida Pompeia, in front of a gas station and next to the most elegant car mechanic I have ever seen. It was in a bend, at the end of the downhill slope (or at the beginning of an uphill slope, when moving towards the river). It was one of those slopes that, at a certain speed, makes the car wheels get off the asphalt, causing a sensation in the belly that in Brazil is known as “sigh of a virgin.”

It was a stretch that was prone to accidents. On the one hand, summer rainstorms would make the valley flood at times. On the other, the sensation of the downhill drive combined with the turn often caused collisions, sometimes against the gates of the dealership and the cars parked near the perimeter.

But not that day. It was a quiet day, when my father read the newspaper or played solitaire on the screen while he waited for the next potential client. Someone looking for a new car, selling an old car, or looking for a change. A foreign man came in and he inquired about the price of several vehicles. “This one? And that one? And the one over there, the silver one? And that black one?” He took down the price of each. The man’s accent and his diverse interests called my father’s attention. He didn’t seem to know what he was looking for. My father asked the typical questions: “Do you want it for work?” “Do you have a family?” The answers were vague, sometimes evasive. Just a curious guy, my father thought. Or someone who is studying the market, maybe a future competitor.

Three or four weeks after, he returned with his brother (or cousin), who was particularly friendly. The new relative carried a book in French under his arm, as if he was in the middle of reading it—a novel, probably. My father doesn't remember the title or the author, but it was the language of the book that helped him in placing their accent and that initiated a conversation ending with "we are from Ivory Coast."

The relative with the book was equally eclectic in his interests, but a bit more precise in his research. He discretely directed what appeared to be a random walkthrough. They both walked between the cars to ask for prices and to check their teeth. My father followed them with his eyes, coming as close as allowed by his foot in a cast, without being able to get through the narrow passages between the cars that had been carefully parked, as if they had been put in place from high up above by giant but delicate hands. They chose five cars of different makes, models, years, colors, and engine capacities.

Apparently, the combination of makes, models, years, colors, and engine capacities that could be resold in Ivory Coast. They had come on a business trip, they said. The family member with the book spoke most: "We have been importing used cars from Germany," (some details which my father doesn't remember would fill in the coming lines) "we were studying options, running numbers, and it seems that it is more convenient bringing them from here, by boat. We are waiting for the money to arrive and soon we will be able to close the deal. How about we meet at your home tomorrow and we explain in further detail how we can arrange the payment?"

He was a bit nervous with this visit. It was a bit strange that they wanted to meet in his home, and that the form of payment needed that much explanation. He asked a friend to come over, so that there would be two players on each side, and he asked his girlfriend to be upstairs, as if keeping a card up his sleeve.

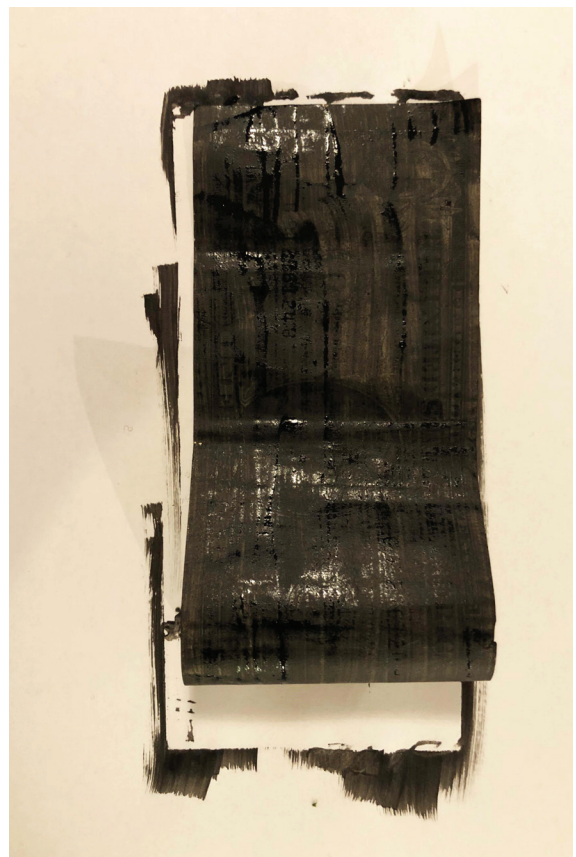
His friend didn't arrive at the agreed time, though he could still arrive at any moment. The two brothers (or cousins) arrived with a briefcase that my father calls 007. The one talking was still the one with the book, even though this time he didn't bring it: "What happened is the following, mister Guillermo: the money is already here, it is in the boat. And it is all like this." He showed a bill died in black.

He showed four or five bills, all of which were totally black. And the relative who had never carried a book under his arm asked for some water. My father made a gesture to get up. His leg in a cast made moving much more difficult, so he pointed to the kitchen and said: "If you don't mind, could you go get a bowl with water?" He didn't mind. My father sat back down in the seat. The relative with the book (who hadn't brought the book) looked at him with a smile.

His cousin/brother came back from the kitchen with a bowl filled with water. He took out a little flask from his pocket, poured some drops of a transparent liquid in the water that didn't change color, and said: "This liquid is the only thing able to clean the dye." "It doesn't come off with water alone?" "No, no, no, no, no." Green hues started to appear, the ornaments, the portraits, the numbers: two or three bills of 20 or 10, and one of 100. Clean. Like magic.

The captain of the boat didn't want to hand over the money until they paid his part of the deal. My father didn't understand, or pretended not to understand, the problem. They just needed to clean the necessary bills to pay the captain in his cabin (like they had just shown in this living room). But no, they couldn't clean the money in the port, no, no, no, no, no. And the captain was steadfast: as long as he didn't receive his part of the clean dollars, the black dollars wouldn't come off the boat. They also needed money to buy the liquid, which was extremely expensive. My father doesn't remember how much they said it would cost, he never had a good memory for numbers.

The plan was that my father would advance the captain's amount, plus the cost of the secret liquid. He doesn't recall the numbers, but these also wouldn't reveal much, after so many years. It was a percentage of the profit from the sale of five used cars in a transatlantic trade. Once the captain would be appeased, they would recuperate the full sum with which they would pay for the five reserved cars. They would leave my father the black dollars and the necessary amount of the chemical to clean them. And they would return to Ivory Coast, by boat, with the five cars and the stubborn captain, now satisfied.



To show him they were trustworthy, they left him the bill of 100, so that he could check its authenticity. "You can have it checked," said the one of the book. My father had already checked it: he knew dollars, he had even fabricated a little machine that lit up when detecting the magnetic strip used in dollars printed by the Mint. There was no reason for it to be false. It would be like a magician who, wanting to prove that there was no trick, showed a marked-up card.

They told him to think about it and they agreed to return in the afternoon. They rang the bell and he opened again. They came without the briefcase. My father noticed it and thought that it was in order to be free of incriminating evidence in case he had contacted the police. They sat down again at the same table. "Interesting," my father said, "but I think you will have to find someone a bit more naive, it is not going to work with me."

They kept up their niceness, and left with a smile, without knowing very well what to say. At the door, they said goodbye in a friendly manner and my father kept the 100 dollars. A while later he read in the newspaper that a group of swindlers had been arrested in São Paulo. The article described in detailed the trick of the black dollar bills and came with a picture of the squad. My father thinks he recognized the first one who visited him, the one who went into his kitchen and filled the bowl with water. The relative with the book was not in the photo.