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from DON BUENO*

by Zulfikar Ghose

Night had fallen but it was still too early for his mother to return from work. The small apartment on the second floor picked up every sound from the narrow street and reproduced it as a continuous roaring noise. César stood at the window, his bare arms hanging over the sill. At eight years, he was slightly taller than the urchins who played in the street and whose company his mother forbade him in order to save him from becoming like them. There was not much flesh on his cheeks; that, together with the absence of any peculiarity in the shape of his nose, made his dark brown eyes appear large and, perhaps therefore, melancholy. He looked down on the congestion of dilapidated old buses, with black clouds of smoke from their exhausts; rickety trucks that rattled when they moved and whose engines made a loud, clattering noise when they idled; little yellow taxis honking their horns; and innumerable hand-drawn carts, both on the road and on the sidewalks. The wares of the shops flowed out to the sidewalks, and clusters of people stood in front of them, gesticulating and talking loudly. Barefooted boys ran in and out of the traffic and the crowds of people, the tails of their dirty shirts flying behind them out of their shorts, chasing one another in some wild game of chance or trickery.

César hated the hour when it became dark and it was still too early for his mother to return. Until this night, however, it was only her absence that he dreaded, and the fear that she might not return; but now he noticed two men standing in front of a shop across the street, looking up at him while they talked. The gestures of their hands and the way they jerked their heads in his direction made him think they were talking of him. Their grins appeared to him to be malicious and full of evil intent. He wanted to move away from the window but found himself frozen there, and was terrified. He had begun to feel a new kind of fear that had nothing to do with the absence of his mother. The men suddenly shook hands and walked away in opposite directions. César breathed a little more easily, but the idea of fear had become lodged within him, and he wished his mother would come at once so that he could pretend that nothing had changed.

The dinner hour approached and the congestion in the street gave way to a steady flow of traffic with the buses grinding past in second gear. César felt hungry, but knew he must wait. He had looked into the kitchen. There were a couple of pots and a pan, all scrubbed clean; of the jars on a shelf, one had half a kilo rice in it, another some flour, and three others were empty. He put a pinch of rice grains into his mouth and chewed them, but found the taste revolting.

* Zulfikar Ghose, *Don Bueno* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1983), 66–73. © 2009 Zulfikar Ghose. All rights reserved.

Seeing that the street was less crowded, he had an idea. He slipped out of the apartment, closing the door behind him, and raced down the dark staircase where a naked bulb, long dead, had remained unreplaced. He walked rapidly down the sidewalk, dodging past the cluster of people outside some shops. He was glad that the urchins had gone home by now. But he was mistaken and his sense of having the freedom of the street was short-lived.

'Hey, Mr Good Guy!' a voice shrieked behind him.

'Hey, mama's little backscratcher!' shouted another.

'Hey, motherfucker!' yelled a third.

César saw over his shoulder the three kids running after him. Earlier in the year, one of them, seeing César for the first time, had invited him to some game in the street, but César, too naïve at the time to know better, had truthfully answered, 'My mother does not want me to play with you.' Screaming 'Fuck you, snotnose!' the boy had aimed first at him, but César had escaped unharmed. Since then, it was agony for him to venture alone into the street. He knew from their taunts that if they ever caught him they would not leave him until they had scratched his eyes out. He had even found himself hoping one day that one of the boys would get run over and be killed so that the parents of the others would then forbid them to play in the street.

And now, there they were, running after him, a dozen paces behind. He bolted like a rabbit, making a wild dash for the street corner where the traffic light was changing. If he could get across just before the traffic light began to move, his pursuers would be blocked by it. He could hear some of the drivers already revving up and others honking their horns. He flew over the sidewalk and onto the cross street where there was a roar of engines to his right. He was in the middle of the street when the light turned green and the entire block of traffic seemed to take off like a great steaming monster let loose from hell. He saw nothing but heard the loud screeching of brakes and felt the hot mouth of a radiator grill close to his right arm and leg, but it did not swallow him up, and he reached the opposite sidewalk, hearing, in the same confused moment, a thud and then a crash behind him, but he went on running without looking back.

He did not stop for breath until he had reached the square where he made straight for the corner where two policemen stood outside a supermarket. He felt safe by the door near which they stood, watching the customers come and go. His heart still beating fast, he stepped inside the open door, and stood beside the row of empty carts with their green handles branded in white with the supermarket's name. There was quite a crowd in that corner, with people coming in constantly, pulling out a cart and wheeling it away, and others who had just checked out, walking away with their full sacks. He had to look hard to find her through all those people who obscured his sight. But there she was! At a checkout counter, pushing aside the items she had already punched on the cash register. He thought she looked important as she counted out great sums of money and then deftly rang up the next customer's shopping. He stood there, watching for several minutes.

Suddenly, she dashed out of her counter, and he saw her run down an aisle. He slipped through the crowd to see where she had gone. She was already coming back, holding a boy of eight or ten by the collar. The boy wore a buttoned-up shirt over blue shorts and from the bulge at his stomach, César could see that he had hidden something there. He watched his mother by amazement as she dragged the boy to a glass booth where a man sat with piles of paper in front of him. He could hear her voice without hearing the

words, and from the tone and the gestures of her hands he could tell that the boy was in trouble. Soon she was back at the counter, and the man in the glass booth disappeared with the boy to the rear of the supermarket. Afraid that he would meet a similar fate, Cesar quietly walked out of the supermarket and went and stood on the sidewalk. He decided not to stand too near the policemen, but not too far from them either in case the urchins discovered him there. The twenty minutes before the supermarkets closed and another ten before his mother came out seemed to him a long wait. He practiced arithmetic by adding up the numbers on the license plates of cars that went by: 315 was 9; 244 was 10. He diverted himself by giving himself an imaginary prize each time the numbers added up to 10. It happened thrice and each time he stood to attention and, imagining that his hand belonged to someone else, some principal of a school, he pinned an unseen medal of distinction on his own breast.

But there she was at last! Walking out with a sack in her arms. She looked serious. He restrained the impulse to run up to her. She might scold him. He was supposed to be at home. So, he walked behind her, trying to step with his little feet exactly on the same spots on the sidewalk where her feet had trod before him.

They came to the crossroads where he had had to run for his life. There was a huge congestion there. A bus had run into the back of a car. A police car stood behind the bus. A red light beamed from its roof. The traffic there was squeezed into a single line. Many people stood near the bus, talking loudly. There were several policemen in the crowd. His mother did not stop but crossed the road as soon as she could. He trotted behind her while looking anxiously around him to see if any of the urchins were about.

At another time, Leticia said, 'You're full of fears, Cesar. In all your memories someone is out to get you.' She was standing at the kitchen sink, cleaning mushrooms, too preoccupied to enter into a discussion. He enjoyed sitting at the kitchen table with a beer when she worked on the dinner. She moved busily about between the sink and the range, now washing the peeled potatoes and slicing them on a chopping board; turning to stir something already being cooked; mixing some ingredients in the blender; taking spices out of a cupboard and banging it shut—she made a continuous din while cooking and scattered a lot of pans, plates and knives on the working surface next to the sink. Later, after they had eaten, she would sit with the remains of her glass of wine while he quietly did the washing-up. When she was not talking, she liked to hear him speak, and when he was not there she switched on a small transistor radio.

When he returned from the school one afternoon—he was twelve at the same time—he was surprised to see that his mother was at home. She called to him from her bedroom when she heard him enter the apartment, and he found her sitting up in bed with her glasses on, mending one of his shirts. He looked at her but avoided her eyes, knowing they looked funny behind the thick lenses: larger and slightly cross-eyed.

'I've sent for my mother to help us out,' she said.

He stared at her stupidly, not knowing what had happened. She said something about not being well, but could not explain to him that the grinding misery of her existence was slowly crushing her. The money Cesar's father had left her nearly ten years ago had seemed an enormous sum at the time, and indeed would have served an enormous sum her handsomely had someone advised her that she ought to invest a good portion of it to

secure a future income. But the shock induced by the abandonment had made her sink into a profound lethargy, almost a total inertia, during the years that she still lived on in the house by the ocean, where what little she did, like taking Cesar to the beach, seemed to be prompted by habit and not by an immediate will. Only the persistent headaches informed her of a present that had to be endured, and she lay, dosing herself with pills, hoping for that very present to turn into oblivion.

What had rescued her from that state of inertia had been another shock—a bank statement that showed her that she had practically nothing left. She could not believe it, especially as she had not engaged in any form of extravagance. She recovered her will, and her drive to live, and wrote to her bank demanding an explanation of the loss of her fortune. The manager replied: did she not know that there had been an inflation of over 100 per cent during the last several years?

Now thirty-eight, her face seemed to be drawn back by wrinkles, the skin sagging at the corners of her mouth; during the last three years her eyesight had deteriorated, and the spectacles, which made her eyes appear so frightening to Cesar, seemed to enlarge the wrinkles around her eyes and make her nose look conspicuously pointed.

The grandmother arrived, and entered into Cesar's memories as in unceasing monologue. Into the background cacophony of street noises was introduced the shrill voice of the bent little woman with her stooping shoulders and gray hair pulled back and stuck into a rubber band. She talked even when she was alone in the kitchen and Cesar, doing his homework by the window to the street, found that even when the street was a crush of traffic, with every vehicle filling the air with the clatter of its engine and the honking of its horn, and people in front of the shops shouted and the kids yelled as they flew about the sidewalk, he still heard the grandmother's voice, sometimes as a drone and sometimes as sharp little phrases that pierced his ears.

'Going away with the first man who comes along in a fancy car, if you please! No religion, no fear of God; who was born for such a life? I always told you, keep your skirt on, wear blouses with high collars, buttoned up. You can't trust any man who's not decent enough to stand with you at the altar. It's God's judgment. A little romance, if you please! Running away from home to live among pimps and whores.'

'Mother!'

'What's the difference? A life of idleness and sin. Who was born for such a life? We had a nice patch of land, strong god-fearing young men in the town to whom the land was a good dowry. But we have a modern daughter who wants a modern life, if you please! Now look at you, a fine home you've made for yourself and your boy! And where are all those friends with cars and houses by the sea? Who wants to know you now? Who wants the burnt scrapings from the bottom of the pan? Oh, it's modern living this and modern living that. And money falls from the sky, if you please! A life of pimps and whores. Who was born for such a life?'

'Mother, please! You don't want César to hear.'

But the grandmother never stopped, and César believed that she must talk even when he was at school and his mother at the supermarket.

One day he was sitting at the window, struggling with algebra, when the grandmother came shuffling up to him. Some of her hair had fallen out of the rubber band and stuck out over her ears. Her hollow, wrinkled face, with the front teeth missing, and her beady eyes

that caught some light from the street, the entire face coming close to his with a scowling look, frightened him. She stood less than a meter away from him and, jabbing the air with a pointed finger that seemed intent on poking his right eye, she said, 'And you, nice airs you take on! She is going to make a good man out of you, a gentleman, if you please! As if a boy can become a man without having a father, as if you can ever hope to spend a day without looking for him!'

His mother had earlier withdrawn to her room, but she called from there, 'Mother, please!'

But the grandmother took a step closer to him. Her small figure appeared to him to become monstrously large. 'Go, go and find him, if you please! Run from the woman, and go and find your father, hug him, embrace him, but stick a knife into his chest and let him fall at your feet. Is this why he gave you life? Ha!'

She waved her arms around and swung her head, and César saw the dingy apartment, heard the ferocious noise of the street, and behind the shrieking fury in front of him he caught a glimpse of his mother's shadow in the doorway. In the light, the grandmother's mouth opened like a black hole, her beady eyes were again close to him, the finger once more threatened to poke his eye. 'Who was born for such a life, ha! How can you call yourself a man until you have killed the monster that created you? The fruit of a sinner, you must sin too. Go, go and find him, go hug the man who did the foul deed. You will never be free until he falls at your feet and with his dying breath claims you as his son!'

Sweat had begun to fall from César's brow; he was trembling. He saw that his mother had fallen in the doorway. But his grandmother was spread above him like an enormous spider, the wrinkles of her face stretching out, it seemed, to create a vast canopy above him. He threw himself up, as in a dark entangled forest there is nothing to do but make a dash for it, tearing through the web, and crying, 'Mother, mother!' ran to the heap that lay in the doorway and fell beside her, holding her, attaching himself tightly to her, crying.