

## **The Haiti**

Bill Albert

He opened his eyes. It was morning and he felt a chill on his back. The night warmth of his sister's body was gone. She was in the corner of the room heating water over a small Primus stove. He pushed the sacking aside and stretched.

'Pablito, go clean your teeth.'

Always she began the day like this. Just like their mother had done. He didn't mind.

'Why should I clean my teeth, when so little has passed between them.'

Always he gave the same answer.

She picked up a stick, turned and hissed at him. Laughing he grabbed his toothbrush and ran out of the room.

Theirs was one of about a dozen open doorways which gave on to a narrow roofless communal passage. At the end nearest the opening that led through a wall to the main road there was a single water faucet. Señora Ramirez was using it, filling a yellow plastic bucket, water splashing in the dust at her feet. Pablito had to wait.

He drew his bare toes along the dirt floor, first in a straight line and then pivoting on one leg he swept his foot quickly around in a wide arc, drawing a half circle on the ground. The spinning made him slightly dizzy.

'Oye, little dancer.'

The voice startled him and he almost lost his balance.

'Little dancer, you may use the water now.'

'Thank you, señora.'

He cupped cold water in his hands and drank. He splashed some on his face, rubbing his eyes clean. After wetting the brush he attacked his teeth vigorously.

Rosa had found some bread the previous day and this with a cup of *te de manzanilla* was their breakfast. Today they would find something else, maybe fruit or if he made enough money cleaning shoes they would buy a bar of chocolate.

'We will go to the Haiti again today, yes? Try once more?'

'Perhaps', she answered.

She put their tin cups up on a wooden shelf, half covering the picture of the Virgin. She had torn it out of a magazine. Sometimes when there was enough money she bought a small candle.

'But it is the best place', he pleaded.

'Yes, of course, it is the best place. But, what of the others? They too think it is the best place.'

He hadn't forgotten. The last time they had tried to work the Haiti some older boys had driven them away. They threatened to cut him if he came again. His sister had yelled at them. Called them cowards, bullies. They had pushed her and laughed as she fell down. Pablito did not know why but this had frightened him much more than the boys' knife. He tried not to think about it.

It was safer to stay in the park. Although there were fewer people there, if it wasn't too wet, many sat on the benches and then it was possible to find shoes to clean.

Early morning in the city was cold and damp. It was the long season of the *garua*, when much of the Lima day was trapped in a

bone chilling mist. Juan's mouth was covered by a thin scarf to keep the moist air from his lungs. He walked quickly. He knew he musn't be late again. If he was he would surely lose his job, and he couldn't afford to, especially now that his younger brother had come from Huancavalica to stay with them.

A *collectivo* stopped. It was already sagging with too many passengers, but Juan pushed himself on, finding a place to stand on the back stairs, one arm hooked through a window frame.

No one on the bus spoke. They listened to the music from the driver's radio, swaying to the beat and the movement of the bus. After they had crossed the Rimac, he saw that the traffic was not heavy. He relaxed. The trip to Miraflores would not take long. He would be on time today.

The benches were damp. Large drops of moisture lay like transparent beetles on the green wooden slats. It would be difficult to find shoes here today. From the park they could see the cafe across the street. The waiters were putting out the tables and chairs, sweeping the pavement. There were no customers and the older boys had not yet arrived.

'We should go there now', he said, 'before the others come.'

She knew he was right. It was the best place to be, even if there were risks. They could spend hours in the park and not make a single *sole*. In the cafe there was always money to be had one way or another.

She looked at her brother, the wooden box containing the polish, brushes and rags held to his chest.

'Yes, of course. Let's go.'

They walked slowly to the curb and waited for a break in the traffic before crossing.

It would be a good day. He knew that. He had come early and the boss had been pleased.

'How are you, Juan?'

'Very well, thank you, señor.'

'Tomás is not here today, you will have to do his tables. Yes?'

'Of course, señor.'

Maybe later, if the boss was still in a good mood, he would ask if there was a job in the kitchen for his brother. Obviously, he could not be a waiter like Juan. Not an *indio* fresh from the *sierra*. It took time to learn to wait on tables, to understand the Spanish spoken by the *limeños*, to act properly, to be a proper *costeño*.

The dust from the street had been captured by the dew and it coated the tables with a wet grey film. He rubbed hard with the cloth. It was important to wipe the surfaces perfectly clean.

As he finished the first customer sat down. He opened his copy of *El Comercio* and began to read. Juan stood in front of him.

'Good morning, señor.'

'Black coffee', he said, without looking up.

'Yes, señor. Anything else?'

'No, nothing.'

They squatted near the base of a small palm tree and watched the man unfold his newspaper. They were only a few metres away, but he did not see them.

'Can you see his shoes, Rosa? Are they clean?'

'No, I cannot see them from here, but it doesn't matter, just ask him. Go on', she whispered.

Pablito hesitated. 'Maybe, I should wait until there are more people?'

'No, go now, now!'

He picked up his box and moved across to the table.

'Clean, señor?', he asked, pointing to the man's shoes.

The man did not look up from his reading, did not answer.

'Señor?'

The reply was an impatient flick of the fingers.

The boy returned to where his sister waited underneath the tree.

'Well, were his shoes clean?'

Pablito laughed. 'I forgot. I did not look.'

Rosa cuffed him hard on the ear. He cried out in pain.

'But you said it didn't matter, you said it didn't.'

Juan watched as the small boy was waved away by the man with the newspaper and the cup of black coffee. He did not think he had seen this one before, but it was not important. He was like all the others. If the boy did not find shoes to clean the girl with him would start to beg at the tables and he would have to chase them away. The boss did not like begging in his cafe. Soon there were many people at the tables, and he forgot about the two children. When some time later he looked for them, they had gone.

A man sitting at a table near the street beckoned to Juan, making a writing motion in the air. He gave the man his bill. After he had paid and left the cafe Juan took his cloth and wiped the table clean, ready for the next customer.