

The Massacre

by marci stillerman

Lost Children story

Before daybreak on July 23, 1993, Juan left the steps of one of Rio de Janeiro's Catholic churches. The other homeless children who slept and played there every day, nearly a hundred of them---Juan at eleven was one of the oldest--- still slept. When the sun arose, it would be a warm day. Juan loved the warmth of the sun. He'd shivered all night on the cold stone.

Juan walked along the street's muddy ruts that would dry to rock-hard clumps under the sun. The flies were already at the garbage in the gutters. Juan rounded the corner and climbed a flight of crumbling steps to a large stone building fronted by an iron fence. He sank down against the fence in a pool of sunlight, hugging his bare legs to his chest. His stomach rumbled and churned, gassy with emptiness.

An old lady carrying a cloth bag, pushed open the gate and nearly tripped over him.

"Dios!" she screamed. "You almost killed me."

"Perdón," Juan scrambled to his feet.

"I have no money," she said. He nodded, staring at the bag.

"Nothing in there," she said. "I'm going to the market. Go to the beach. People there have money."

The woman turned into the street. The boy leaned against the fence. He'd wait. When she returned he could carry her bag to her door.

She might give him bread. He thought about what she said about the beach, but the policia were fierce, especially where the rich people and the tourists were. A beggar could be beaten, even shot.

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He knew a boy whose head had been broken.

The July sun rose higher. Juan dozed. The people passing on the street paid no attention to the ragged child. Even the flies, sensing that there'd be no bread crumbs or grains of sugar on his person, avoided him.

"You still here?" The woman had returned. Her cloth bag bulged with her purchases and a newspaper-wrapped loaf of bread.

Juan jumped to his feet, grabbed the bag, nearly knocking the woman off her feet..

"Thief," she screamed. "I'll call the police."

"No, please," the boy pleaded. "I am no thief. I will carry your bag."

Sighing, she put her key into the lock. He followed to her door. She unlocked it and reached for her groceries. Juan held onto the bag and pushed past her to the kitchen. He put the groceries on a rickety table.

The place was stuffy and smelled of sickness.

"I told you I have no money," she said. "There's nothing here for you."

Juan was silent, his eyes on the bread in the sack.

"This is all the food I have," she said, nodding toward the bag. "But you can have this." She broke off a third of the loaf of bread and brought out of her bag an apple, a limp carrot and a stalk of celery.

"Sit on the bench and eat." She filled a jar with water and set it beside him. "When you finish, go. I must tend my sick husband."

She put into the pot of water on the stove a few scraps of gray meat, celery, carrots, and turnips from her bags.

"You have a healthy appetite," she said. "Do you have AIDS? I'm told many of the street children do."

On a bed lay a man, his eyes closed. The woman held a spoon to his lips.

"Take it, Fons," she said. "It's medicine from the clinic." The man

abruptly coughed up phlegm, knocking the spoon from the woman's hand. Juan picked up the spoon and handed it to her.

"I told you to go," she said. "Why are you still here?"

To the man she said, "I'll get soup. You should eat something. Then I'll wash you."

As she fed the soup, Juan replaced the cloth on the man's head.

"Have you a place to go?" the woman asked the child. He shook his head.

"Well, perhaps you will stay with him for an hour. I have to return to the clinic for more medicine. Try and get him to take some soup." She handed Juan the bowl.

The boy nodded and moved to the head of the bed

When she returned, the sun was low, a red ball, inflaming the sky. The boy, his arm supporting the sick man's head, offered water from a spoon. Fons' body was wrapped in fresh towels and under him were layers of clean newspaper. The soiled sheets lay soaking in a tub of water.

"Thank you," the woman said. "You can leave now. Take what's left of the bread. I wish I had more."

"De nada," the boy said. He left the bread. The woman might need it.

He walked to the church steps where he and many of Rio's homeless children would spend another night.

The night of July twenty third was moonless. But before the dark night was over, before the terrible day could start, eight children lay dead on the church steps. Six others bled, seriously wounded.

The three men who had opened fire on the children were declared not guilty and freed by a court of law.

Fons also died that night. After he was buried, his wife went to find the boy who had tried to help him. She was told by the children who still played and slept on the steps of the church that Juan was among those who had been massacred.

