Exposure

Mal Peet

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Extract

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The boy with all the dreadlocks had two lines of business: cars and the patio trade. He had been working his turf – the pavement along the front of La Nación's building – for a few months now. Longer than most of his predecessors. The car thing was the usual, but he did it with politeness, even delicacy, and these were not qualities his victims would expect from one of his kind. So he surprised them, and it paid off. He had a plastic bucket without a handle, a squeegee and, tucked into the waistband of his cut-offs, three large rags: a dirty one, a less dirty one and a clean one.

The routine goes something like this.

A car pulls into a space. The boy does not go to it immediately, because he knows that if drivers see him before getting out, they will have crucial seconds to harden their hearts. He waits until the driver has locked the doors, then

appears magically. And smiles.

"Good day, Señor. You like me to wash your screen?"

Sometimes - quite often, actually – the driver will hesitate, maybe shrug, dig a small coin out of his pocket. The victims who do this are the ones who look at him.

"Thank you, Señor. I'll watch your car for you too. All part of the service."

More often, the response to the boy's offer is either non-existent or obscenely dismissive. But his smile does not waver.

"Okay, Señor. No problem. But maybe you like me to keep an eye on the car for you?"

The driver looks at him, hard. Jabs a thumb up towards the heavily built uniformed man patrolling the patio. "That guy up there's watching my car. And he's watching you too."

The smile achieves an even greater brilliance. "You mean the doorman? My friend Ruben? Yeah, Ruben's cool. He's sound. Just not so quick on his feet as he used to be, you know?"

The boy's technique gets him about four results out of ten and he calculates that this works out at an average of twenty-two centavos a hit. He is surprisingly good at arithmetic, considering the fact that the only way he could ever have been in school was through a window after dark.

Some days he gets his arse kicked, and this was one of those days. The car was a black Porsche 911. (The boy knew the makes and models of cars, even though he couldn't read

them.) The driver was a white guy with his hair shaved close to his skull so it looked like the shadow of a bat or something. The boy had known straight away that it was a no-hope hit, but went for it anyway because it was his solid rule that you do not choose: you go for everything. The man had ignored him, getting a briefcase out of the car. Checking his mobile, then putting it away in the inside pocket of his suit jacket.

"Okay, Señor. No problem. But maybe you like me to keep an eye on the car for you?"

The man with shadow hair sighed, drumming his fingers on the Porsche's gleaming roof. Then he turned with surprising swiftness and kicked the boy. Who had somehow been expecting it, and had flinched. The kick caught him high on the right buttock just below the hip. He found himself sitting on the pavement, his leg numb and useless. The man loomed over him, his eyes hot with anger that seemed inappropriate to the situation.

"Listen," he said. "I'm sick and tired of wherever I go there's some street rat hustling me, and I don't need it, okay? Now, lemme make this plain to you, kid. I come back to this car and anything -- *anything* – has happened to it, I'll find you and pulp your stupid hairy head. Is there any part of that you don't understand?"

"No, Señor."

"Good. Now get the hell away from my Porsche."

The boy levered himself backwards across the pavement, soaking the seat of his shorts in the water that had slopped

from his bucket. When he was sure the man had gone, he lifted his face and gazed up at the concrete and glass perspective of the office block narrowing into the late afternoon sky. He felt dizzy, maybe because he was hungry.

Seven floors above the street, Paul Faustino was checking the text of an article that would appear on the front page of the next day's edition of *La Nación*.

EXCLUSIVE: OTELLO WILL SIGN FOR RIALTO

by Paul Faustino

The gossip mills and rumour factories can shut down. Otello, the man who led this country to victory in this year's Copa América, will be a Rialto player within the week, I can now reveal. The terms of the transfer were agreed between Rialto and Espirito Santo yesterday after Spain's Real Madrid withdrew from the contest for the striker. The deal is unlikely to be on a cash-only basis – Espirito have stolidly refused to lower their evaluation of Otello from fifty million – but details will not be disclosed prior to a formal announcement at a press conference scheduled for Thursday. My information is, however, that Rialto's popular young forward Luis Montano will move to Espirito to offset the fee, thus adding to the controversy that will inevitably attend this affair. We can expect a bitter reaction, not only from Espirito fans, but from many in the North who will see Otello's move south to the capital as an act of betrayal...

Faustino leaned back in his chair and massaged his lower lip with his thumb and forefinger. This was a big, big story. It would warm the cockles of his editor's heart – if she possessed such an organ. It would earn him a nice juicy bonus too. He could not quite believe his luck, actually, so there was an uneasy edge to his glee.

Talk of Otello leaving Espirito had begun well before the Copa América. And in recent days the hum of rumour and speculation had swollen into the voice of a vast beehive. The tabloids and TV sports channels had been obsessed with it. Lacking any real information, they'd put out opinionated babble. Chaff. Faustino had been a journalist long enough to know that there very often is, in fact, smoke without fire. But he too had been pretty sure that Otello would make a move. He had to: Espirito was not a good enough club for him. They'd had another lousy season, ending up fourth from bottom of the league, despite Otello's twenty-three goals. Which meant that once again they'd not be playing in the Copa Libertadores. Which in turn meant that Otello, the national captain, would go yet another season without playing an international club game. Ridiculous, obviously.

Faustino was not a gambling man, but he'd have put money on Otello joining one of the big European clubs: Manchester United, say, or Barcelona. But a move south, to Rialto? No way. Of all clubs, not Rialto.

And then, this morning, the call from Otello's agent, Diego Mendosa, a man Faustino hardly knew.

Still scrawling notes, Faustino had said, "Why me, Señor

Mendosa?"

"Pardon?"

"I was wondering why you chose to break the news to me, exclusively."

"Because you are widely respected, Paul. All these rumours have caused my client a great deal of stress, as you can imagine. Only someone with your reputation can lay them to rest."

"Yeah?"

"Yes. Also, perhaps I would like to give the finger to certain other newspapers that have pissed me off."

Faustino had laughed at that. "Yeah. Well, that's honest."

Afterwards he'd wondered about that. In Faustino's vocabulary, "honest" and "agent" were not two words that normally went around holding hands.

He went back to his article.

> Born in the North, and famously proud of his African heritage, Otello has done much to silence (in stadiums, at least) the racist jeers directed at black Northerners. His charity work – the food programmes, the football academies in the slums – has given him a status, a respect, way beyond the usual scope of football stars. All of this, along with his much proclaimed loyalty to the North – he has played for only two clubs in his career, both of them north of the Rio de Oro – means that his transfer will have a seismic effect...

Faustino wondered if the word "seismic" was a bit over the

top and decided that it wasn't. He'd been at countless Rialto games and seen their supporters jeeringly wave fifty-dollar notes at the visiting fans, especially when the game was against a side from the North. Heard the call and response jokes.

"*What do you call a northerner with a roof over his head?*"

"*A burglar!*"

Then there was the fact that the owners and directors of Rialto were hate figures in the North. Members of the New Conservative government, like Vice-President Lazar and that evil little sod Hernan Gallego. Multimillionaires like what's-his-name, the supermarket guy, Goldmann. And Nestor Brabanta, of course. And this was the club that the North's great hero had decided to join. My God, he was in for a rough time.

"Seismic," then. Nice word, anyway.

Faustino skimmed the rest of his piece. He'd soft-pedalled on the political/social/racial issues. Mendosa had asked him to, and you don't bite the hand that feeds you. First rule of journalism.

> I for one am glad that he has faced reality and joined a club that will put him centre stage where he belongs. Let us welcome him to our city and pray that the inevitable storms in the North soon abate.

"You can be a sanctimonious prat sometimes," Faustino

told himself, and deleted the last sentence. He was dying for a smoke.

La Nación

To: Vittorio Maragall, Editorial
From: Paul Faustino

Hola, Vito

Attached is copy for tomorrow's Otello piece. It's up to you, but I suggest we go with a crop of the photo we used on the front page July 25, Otello holding up the cup with all that red and yellow glitter stuff in background.

I'll be at La Poma until about 9. If you get away in time, I'll maybe grant you the honour of buying me a drink.

P