

German Shepherd

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| Brazil |

translated by Stephanie Reist

“What’s bothering you, my child? What’s got you so afraid of the world?”

“I’m not sure; I’d also like to know,” the young Nélío responded, holding back his tears.

“Come here, son. Let’s talk,” Angela Maria, the spiritual healer, midwife, and guide known throughout Seropédica and its surroundings called over to him.

With her hands caressing his, Nélío felt safe to open up to Angela:

“For two months, I haven’t slept right; I haven’t eaten well; I’ve been having strange dreams, waking up out of breath, sweating, and tired.”

“I know, my son. I understand. Go on.”

“I have this constant feeling like someone is following me, that everyone is watching me, that something awful is about to happen soon.”

“I understand. Why don’t you tell me one of your dreams.”

“Sure. So I went out to get bread and the street was totally deserted, like a movie set. The wind whistled that low wail of a hot, cloudy morning. A traffic light was blinking yellow non-stop. Somehow I felt watched from the windows. Suddenly, a steady beating sound arose — as if from all sides —until I spotted a cavalry of horses stampeding towards me, and at the very end came a stumbling horse, alone, bleeding from its nostrils, with its tongue dangling out of its mouth. There was a sign hanging on him. When I looked at the sign, I saw my name carved into it with a knife: Nélio Gomes.”

“Alright, my son. There are two things you’ll need to understand: first, you have to strengthen your spiritual protection. Second, that soon your innocence will be put into question, so take care and protect yourself and be confident in what you say and how you act.”

“Thank you, Angela. Only your words could calm me down.”

More at ease, Nélio then took in the porch and garden of the house he had come to for guidance and blessings: well-lit, simple and elegant at the same time, spacious and welcoming. The sense of welcome he received from Angela’s eyes and mouth were in harmony with the setting, including the plants placed along the enormous lawn.

At the end of the session, Angela urged the young man to find some Okúta Mimo, sacred stones of the Orixás, to get specifically for protection. One would be placed behind the front door, preventing bad energies from entering; one on the window sill, filtering what comes in and what goes out; one under the bed to ease his sleep and protect him from tempestuous dreams; and the last one in the bathroom, the place where one cleanses oneself and rids the body of heavy burdens. The young boy left like this: optimistic with the list of holy stones to buy.

The next week was peaceful, lacking the troubling feelings from before; he slept better and felt happier. But even so, Nélio remembered Angela’s final piece of advice: “Don’t take too long getting the stones, even if you feel better you need to follow through with the process.” And Nélio would not drop the ball.

It was a hellishly hot Carioca-summer Saturday morning. Nélío got on a bus in Séropédica heading to the center of Rio de Janeiro in search of a large store that sold Candomblé and Umbanda religious items.

As he had planned, he did not take long with the purchases, despite being fascinated by the statues, herbs, clothes, stones, instruments, animals, and other objects in the store. In total, he bought twelve Okúta Mimo: three of Inhasã, three of Òpará, three of Ogum, and three of Ossain. He also bought a pocket knife with the symbol of Ogum, the Orixá of war, to give to his father.

He left the store full of joy, with everything wrapped up inside his backpack. Even though he was itching to look at what he had just bought, he decided to wait until he got back on the bus: he knew someone could always be watching.

He sat at the back of the bus on the way back to Seropédica. Settled all the way in the right corner, he started to unwrap the stones and the knife from the brown paper, calmly starting at their details and reflecting on how life seemed to be going right in that moment. He felt happy, fully of life, good energy pulsating through his body.

But it didn't take long for the proof of Angela's warning to arrive.

While heading up Avenida Brasil, a police blitz ordered the bus to pull over. The passengers judgingly eyed one another. Nélío felt, more than once, that some of the looks were directed at him: it wasn't a sense of being watched or persecuted, but instead his skin color once again experiencing the daily inquisition that Black people go through.

It was precisely that. A police officer got on the bus shouting: "In the force I am known as the German Shepherd; I sniff out drugs anywhere!" He fixed his gaze on each of the passengers, breathing them in just like a dog. When he finally got to Nélío, with a yellow-stained half grin, he said:

“Let’s get off, my young man? The German shepherd has just caught his prey.”

Pensive, Nélio remembered all the times he had heard similar stories from others.

“What did I do?” Nélio asked the police officer who, clearly well-trained, gave the teen a smack on the back of his neck and ordered him to get off the bus.

Outside, sitting on the ground like a prisoner, Nélio looked back at everyone waiting for the next scenes through their windows. Then the search started.

“Lift up your shirt and empty your pockets, boy.”

Done. Nothing illegal.

“Open your backpack, slowly, you little pothead!” he said with his gun drawn, aiming at Nélio’s head. Without hesitating, Nélio started opening his bag when the cop spotted the packages wrapped in brown paper and declared with delight:

“Bingo! I hit the jackpot!” Once again the German Shepherd had saved the day and Rio de Janeiro from thugs.

Level-headed, Nélio recalled Angela’s foresight: “If you are in a bind and things take an unexpected turn, act with the ease of someone who’s been in control since the beginning. Take pride in your innocence.”

This was that moment. He told the officer to remain calm and asked, politely, if he could open the packages and show him their contents. The policeman noticed that something was off, but his ravenous canine ego wouldn’t let him lower his head. He opened the wrapped stones himself and showed the whole audience his big find.

Nélio, calmly, transformed into an international scientist and explained the stones’ chemical

compositions, making them up on the spot: the type of each stone, what they were for, where he had bought them and at what price.

The officer was getting angry, upset by the inglorious show — until he found the knife. He knew then he could either win or lose, so he raised the knife up for everyone to see.

“Can everyone see that I just found a weapon?” pressed the cop loud and clear, trying to gain the crowd’s approval and fervor. Nélío didn’t know what to do, but he tried to seem relaxed and unconcerned with all the theatrics. Searching for a way to end the frisk, Nélío spotted the other officer accompanying the German Shepherd. Up until that point he had only been watching the scene unfold, but then he asked his fellow man in uniform to hand him the pocketknife. The German Shepherd gave it to him with glee, but quickly changed his expression: the second officer had handed the knife back to the Nélío, telling him to get back on the bus:

“Go home, young man.”

Nélío quickly got his things together and got on the bus as if he was making his way along a presidential parade, receiving many perplexed and questioning stares from the driver:

“Kid, I don’t know what happened out there, but you’re the first to ever get back on the bus after a shake down.”

Nélío didn’t respond. He just continued the rest of the journey at peace, thinking about the victory of the stones and the knife.