

TRANSLATED FROM PORTUGUESE BY LYDIA BILLON

Miss Carminda and the Prince

Herophilus ran away from the Domingos Jorge Velho Public School and hid in the storm drain. From the darkness, quiet as a rock, he watched the machine rattle to a stop and identical humans jump out. They ran into the school and rushed back out carrying Mr. Aristides. Then they fed the teacher to the machine.

The principal was out of breath, eyes on the ambulance, hands shoving the students out the door. Put your things away and go home, classes are canceled today. What about the snake, Miss Carminda? Go straight home, I'll take care of the snake.

The principal waited for the last sixth grader to leave and took two tranquilizers. The police might show up any minute asking questions, and Miss Carminda would have to answer them calmly. The police always made her nervous. Any awkward answer, any hesitation in her voice, any shaking, and she might be considered a suspect and possibly have to go to jail for a crime she hadn't committed. Mygod, a coral snake was loose on the school grounds and Miss Carminda just stood there paralyzed, imagining melodramas. Iranildes, look up the number for the Center for Reptiles and Poisonous Animals in the phone book.

Miss Carminda collapsed in the armchair. It's nice to have a body, to let it fall down into a soft place, to feel your fingertips, and the soles of your feet. It's nice to yawn. The tranquilizers were kicking in, another miracle of science. If animals hadn't been sacrificed in laboratories, Mr. Aristides would say, medicine wouldn't be where it is today, and you, Miss Director, wouldn't have your pills. Write down the number, Iranildes, I'll call them myself, and you can go back to your office.

Miss Carminda stared at the phone number for the Center for Reptiles

and Poisonous Animals. It's nice to fix your eyes on a number. Soon she'd ask the men to come capture the snake, real soon. Without slavery, Mr. Aristides, civilization wouldn't be where it is either, but people finally recognized slavery for what it was: a cruel anachronism.

He was smiling through his mustache in the teachers' photo gallery, above the metal filing cabinet. He would have liked to have been Doctor Aristides, biologist or paleontologist, Harvard Ph.D., research professor at Yale, author of scientific books. But the public school needed him more than Harvard, so he never had time to pursue a fellowship to study abroad. None of the three women he had married and divorced had been Miss Carminda. Thankgod, sighed the principal. It's nice to sigh. Mr. Aristides used to say he had never felt quite ready for a serious relationship with her. Thankgod. For a former actress whose portrait hung in the lobby of the Municipal Theater of Santa Cruz do Rio Pedroso, and a director of a respectable institute of learning, it would have been embarrassing to share a bed with a poor, alcoholic teacher, writer of science fiction stories without rhyme or reason which he never finished.

Mr. Aristides had a bad reputation in the city. It was well known that he would arrive at work drunk and refuel during regular working hours from a bottle of *jurubeba*, a hooch he kept in his mail slot. What no one knew, but Miss Carminda suspected, was that he got high on ether and benzene he stole from the school laboratory, laboratory in a manner of speaking. It was actually only the bathroom of a small, empty shed that Miss Carminda dreamt of transforming into a theater when the budget permitted. Mr. Aristides expanded the bathroom by sawing down a wall of rotten wood that separated it from the rest of the shed and making a new wall with formica dividers. An opening between the dividers served as passageway from the laboratory to the rest of the shed. The bathroom, that is, the laboratory, had a door that led out to the courtyard.

Miss Carminda didn't like to see the old bathroom cabinet fill up with drugs, much less to acknowledge that Mr. Aristides had obtained a dissecting kit and planned to build a vivarium in the shed. The teacher intended to keep little animals locked up in there, and later cut them up in the lab, dead or alive, for the kids to see, with the excuse that he was illustrating his biology lessons. The principal could not become an accomplice to that pervert.

In the picture over the filing cabinet, Aristides' mustache was youthful and black. In real life, it had grayed with age, and yellowed from cigarette

smoke. The paper with the number for the Center for Reptiles and Poisonous Animals curled around Miss Carminda's fingers until it punctured. She called to ask them to attend immediately to the capture of the reptile. The Center was simply frightful, to tell you the truth. The residents of the city felt greater pride in that abomination than in the Municipal Theater. People from all over the country and even abroad would wait in line to gaze upon hundreds of sick, confined creatures suffering from behavior dysfunction. Instead of the Center for Reptiles and Poisonous Animals, Miss Carminda should have called the Society for the Protection of Animals and the Fire Department. Then everyone would carry out his or her duty: the firemen would protect the humans from the snake, the Society for the Protection of Animals would protect the snake from the humans, and the two organizations would work things out.

Iranildes entered the room without knocking, I came to see if you needed anything, may I offer you one of your tranquilizers, Miss Carminda? No, thanks I'm fine; and besides, I'm all out. Iranildes squeaked, Oh? so your pills ran out earlier than usual this week? The principal didn't reply. She was nice, the secretary, but a bit nosy. Iranildes, call an urgent meeting of all the teachers. Take this down for the agenda: discuss the cancellation of Mr. Aristides' project in light of the tragedy that has just occurred. You can go back to your office now.

Who could Aristides have been thinking about to smile with such satisfaction when that picture was taken? Certainly not about Miss Carminda. Thankgod. If he died, he wouldn't have anyone to leave behind. The public school needs me more than my genes do he would say when pressed about having children. Miss Carminda would bury him as if she were the widow.

If he died, she'd win the war. She'd bury all her defeats along with him, including the one in the faculty meeting when they had argued about the vivarium. Today the kids will cut up little animals, tomorrow they'll cut up their own children, and later their children's children, the principal had said to the faculty. These days, ladies and gentlemen, the physiology of a living organism can be seen on video, you can now study anatomy using artificial models of the highest quality, made in China and imported from the United States. Mr. Aristides rebutted, But the animals are anesthetized before dissection and don't suffer! Yes, they do suffer! Miss Carminda cried out, swallowing dry the tranquilizer that the secretary had just passed her under the table, Animals suffer when they're caught, suffer when they're

locked up, and suffer from fear! The teacher stood up and glared into the eyes of each participant, to force out their support, Well, ladies and gentlemen, who in this world doesn't suffer? How many stories of pain and despair does each one of us have to tell? Why should we humans have to suffer alone and spare the animals? Could it be, perhaps, that animals don't suffer when they're free in their natural environment? Let's be mature. Let's be realistic. Let's be scientific. Suffering is part of life.

Everyone remembered his or her quota of nearly intolerable pain: a kidney stone, a heart attack, getting hit in the testicles, a difficult delivery, the loss of a child. It's unfair to have to bear such a heavy burden alone. Such great pain has to be shared with the other creatures of the world, beginning with those who can't defend themselves. Everyone approved the vivarium project except Miss Carminda.

But the principal would not allow Mr. Aristides to increase rather than diminish the suffering on Earth. With Iranildes's help, she held up the project for two years, claiming a lack of funds. The teacher grew tired of waiting for the renovation of the shed to begin and decided to install the first occupant of the future vivarium, a toad he'd found in a puddle after it rained. A student brought in a coral snake that had been caught on his father's farm. The teacher set up a habitat for the toad, a rock and a bowl of water. For the snake, Mr. Aristides made a small house out of a used aquarium that he covered with a pane of glass, leaving a crack for air. Some teachers complained about having a poisonous snake nearby, a danger to children and adults alike. But Miss Carminda made sure the reptile would be kept there, Didn't you approve the vivarium with animals for the teacher to dissect? Well then, now you have to face the consequences.

Miss Carminda, the men from the Center for Reptiles have arrived, said Iranildes, opening the door to stick her head in the room. The principal untangled herself from Mr. Aristides' mustache and greeted them. The area needed to be evacuated. By nightfall the snake would be caught and then would have to endure tedious, frightened days in a cage until she died.

Herophilus saw a fast machine carrying Miss Carminda. Coiled up in a cavity of the storm drain, the coral snake rested. Part of her body had been crushed by a machine while crossing the street, but she was still alive. Herophilus and the snake kept an eye on each other.

Herophilus. Aristides is so old-fashioned; anachronistic. He's like one of his own science fiction characters, grumbled Miss Carminda, pressing down on the gas pedal. The teacher had named the toad Herophilus after a

scholar of anatomy and brilliant dissector of cadavers who'd lived in Greece in the third century BC. He could have chosen a modern name, of a contemporary scientist, like. . . Miss Carminda racked her brains, she didn't know any names, she'd have to do some research. Ok fine, the guy on *Cosmos*, Carl Sagan. Or that quadriplegic genius who talks through a computer, Stephen Spielberg, is the name I think. . . Now what name had Aristides given the snake? The principal didn't know, though she'd heard he had named her *Carminda*.

At home the principal looked in the fridge for some lunch. She wasn't hungry, but needed to force down a little something. Afterwards she would take advantage of the free afternoon and visit an old friend, a volunteer at the Municipal Theater. She reheated some leftover gible pie. No one would request an autopsy of Aristides' body; there was no reason to, he wasn't even dead. But if he died, and the police ordered an autopsy, they'd find traces of the tranquilizers that Miss Carminda was in the habit of taking. Iranildes would tell the police that the week of the tragedy the principal's supply of tranquilizers had run out sooner than usual. The detective would snoop around everywhere and discover that Miss Carminda had diluted some tranquilizers in the bottle of liquor that Mr. Aristides kept in his mail slot.

The pie was making Miss Carminda sick, so she put it back in the fridge. Even under torture, she would deny having put the tranquilizers in his liquor. Iranildes was one who had access to her tranquilizers, Carminda would say, only that the secretary could be meddling, but not dishonest. In the principal's opinion, it was Mr. Aristides himself who had stolen the tranquilizers to mix with the drink to intensify the effects of the alcohol. Her version of the accident would clear up the facts and wrap up the case.

She had made sure she attended the dissection class to watch the children, fearing that one of them might want to mess with the coral snake. To avoid drawing crowds into the vivarium during class, she had asked Mr. Aristides to leave the toad in a little box in the laboratory the day before the dissection. The teacher did as he was asked before going home. At the end of that day, the principal ordered a maintenance worker to move the snake in the aquarium to the area where the toad had been kept. Why is it that Miss Carminda had the snake moved from one place to another? You know how students are, officer, rebellious by nature. By removing the snake from its original place, I was hoping to discourage any mischief on the part of the students. Good idea, the officer would say. You can't be too

careful when the safety of students is at stake. The principal even took care to have some bricks put around the aquarium. What's more, on the day of the dissection, she turned out the lights in the vivarium so students wouldn't sneak in there; kids are afraid of the dark, you know.

Now the accident, officer, happened like this: drunk, sedated, and, I believe, high from inhaling ether and benzene fumes, the teacher picked up the toad awkwardly and squeezed its parotid glands, which released a poison directly into his eye. With his eye stinging, the poor guy blundered and let the toad escape. The amphibian went through the passageway that leads to the vivarium and disappeared in the direction of its habitat. The teacher ran after it. Unable to see the bricks that I had the maintenance worker put around the snake's aquarium, he tripped over them. (At this point, Miss Carminda would bury her face in her hands to control her sobbing.) Unfortunately, the teacher fell right on top of the aquarium. I heard the glass break and panicked, thinking of the possibility that the reptile might bite Mr. Aristides and get away. But my immediate concern was the children's safety. I pushed them through the door that leads out to the courtyard and ran up to the school building with them. My protective instinct was so great, that even though I'm a little old and out of shape. . . . Don't say such a thing, Miss Carminda. But I must, officer. Even though I'm kind of over the hill, I managed to outrun them. Congratulations, my lady, and you're not over the hill by any means.

Miss Carminda's phone rang, *pringgg*. There was no reason to worry about police, autopsy, or jail. *Pringgg*. The teacher was receiving good medical care. Only ten percent of those bitten by a coral snake actually die. *Pringgg*. Miss Carminda? This is the Center for Reptiles and Poisonous Animals. We found the snake in a storm drain near the school, or rather, we found part of it. A toad that was nearby must have eaten the rest of it. We've caught the toad. If you'd like, Ma'am, we can open its stomach so you can see whether or not the other part of the snake is really inside. I'm going to raise the animal, said Miss Carminda. Ma'am, you're going to what? I'm going to adopt the toad. He's Herophilus, he has to be Herophilus, the school mascot.

Miss Carminda had a large yard with a little fountain in the middle. She would have it enclosed with a wire screen so that Herophilus wouldn't get lost in the neighborhood. The two would continue to make a good team until the toad eventually died of old age. For dinner that evening, Miss Carminda would welcome Herophilus with gilet pie.