

When she passes

Heloisa sighed and looked away from the window, grime dulling her view of sunlight flickering off distant waves. In front of her, books pilfered from the public library: *Elementary Physics*, *Introduction to Mathematics*, *Concepts in Biology*.

For the whole of her young life, Heloisa had wanted nothing more than to escape the stifling horror of the favela, squalid and stinking, where appalling violence was as regular and unremarked as the rats. By the age of five she had stepped over more than one cooling corpse with barely a shrug.

Her way out was the books in front of her.

"Helo! Where are you?"

Without waiting for a reply, her mother, who knew exactly where she was, burst into the tiny room.

"Helo, stop wasting time on books. Antonio will be waiting!"

"But mama..."

The older woman dragged Heloisa upright by her arm.

"Look at you, too tall, too tan. But Helo, you're still young and lovely, and maybe Antonio is just a poet, but he's a good boy. Now off with you."

Knowing further protest would be wasted, Heloisa left the dingy shack, as she did each day. She walked steadily to the sea, careful not to draw the attention of the loitering *meninos de favela*, but the low whistles and shouts found her anyway.

"Ooooh, bonita! When you walk you're like a samba! Come here, let's swing so cool, mmm, sway so gentle, baby!"

Heloisa kept her gaze straight and maintained her pace. Seventeen years of life in the favela had taught her that beauty was nothing but a curse, a magnet for the drug runners who saw it as a trophy to be grabbed and possessed. Too many of her friends had died in jealous crossfire, discarded like pretty trash.

On the corner she could see Antonio, waiting where he always did. In the tense atmosphere of the favela Heloisa had become finely tuned to the signals of the men around her. She knew that Antonio loved her although he had never told her. She knew he would give his heart gladly, and maybe he was a good boy, maybe he would even marry her. But what use was that? Her life with him could never be more than a brief moment of joy in a lifetime of fear and violence. She would live and die in this rotting favela, pregnant and widowed or beaten or raped, maybe reaching twenty-five if she were lucky.

So she walked by Antonio, looking straight ahead, not at him, hoping he would believe she just didn't see. He smiled, but she continued without breaking her stride.

In her hand, a textbook. University entrance exams were just a month away and on Ipanema beach she could read undisturbed.

The exams would be the hardest thing she had ever attempted.

But if she passes, each one she passes goes far.