





VOICE OF  
THE YOUTH  
C. BOYERS

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For Oliver

I've never seen you more radiant than today.



## PROLOGUE

### Mid-Morning The Streets

My steps crash clumsily on the cobblestone street as I propel myself through thick humidity towards the barbershop. The hot, South American sun beats down and my lips are weighted by small beads of sweat that gather in mass, then slide to the floor as a giant drop.

Neighbourly strangers are scattered across my path, their daily routine delaying me... Some toddle along with overflowing grocery bags, others hover and chat on street corners, adding to the sociable mood of the city – and the congestion.

My blood begins to simmer as I dodge them. Pushing forward, I weave my way along the street, bumping into those too slow to respond.

It's not *their* fault that I'm late, but I need someone to blame.

Pausing momentarily to let a bus pass, I catch my breath and steal a glimpse at my watch.

“Shit”.

Noting the time shoots a pain to my head.

My mind flickers to the last time that I let him down by being late. The discomfort of the memory ignites my steps and quickens my pace.

A drop of sweat rushes down my forehead, trying to catch up with my feet.

Damn this heat.

The traffic light is about to turn green for



the cars, but I take a chance and sprint across the road. Behind me, an elderly woman gasps at the recklessness of the youth, and cars hoot a warning.

Their reaction is fleeting, and the chaos of the city continues behind me.

I continue beating the pavement with my feet.

Rounding the final corner, I skid to a halt and square up outside the barbershop's glass door. A bold sign reading *Cavalheiro* hangs in the window. I feel clammy and far from being a gentleman.

I glance at my watch.

09:05.

I'm five minutes late but I take care to wipe my sweaty hand on the back of my jeans.

With most of the grime now marked on my pants, I press my palm flat against the wooden door frame, pushing it open with a combination of purpose and reservation.

The door edges open with its usual creak. I peek my head inside the shop.

Traffic and chatter fade into silence behind me.

Heaving, I swallow big gulps of the still air, tinged with the taste of varnished wood. Stepping fully inside, I close the door behind me and my body ripples with goosebumps.

There sits Baba Blades, in his usual leather chair, with his tumbler of triple distilled. His dark and broody demeanour dominates the bright room which is silent apart from the sound of my heart beating in my ears and the rickety fan working overtime in the corner.

He cuts through the thick stillness.



“You’re late.”

He does not need to say anything more. Closing my eyes, I take a moment to dwell on my regret. I should have left the gym on time. I should have just said no to Shakes.

## ONE

### Morning The Outdoor Gym

It’s not unusual for our city’s events and happenings to start later in the day compared to other parts of the world – or so the television tells me. In our country, crowds of families gather in the streets while other countries tuck their little ones in for the night. Our routine may seem offbeat, but it works for us. We all know our place, and that place lies within the community, adding a sense of expectation to daily life.

The weight of expectation is one of the reasons that I struggle to say no to people, especially Shakes. I’ve had my fair share of late nights and early mornings for the sake of celebration – and duty.

So, I allow Shakes to twist my rubber arm into joining him for a gym session before my shift at Baba Blades’ barbershop, *Cavalheiro*. I also understand the risk of being *extra* late for my shift. My decision boils down to who I dread disappointing more and adjusting my schedule accordingly.

I don’t have the energy to deal with the taunts and manipulation that come if I refuse a gym session.



Instead, I'm dealing with the repercussions of gyming with no energy – it's far easier.

I try the counting-out-loud technique which supposedly makes it easier to focus. At least that's what Shakes says. Lying on my back, I push the weights above my shoulder line, concentrating on keeping the weights from falling on my head.

“Eighteen.” Sharp exhale.

“Nineteen.” Sharp exhale.

“Twen-ty.” Long exhale.

Sitting up from the cement bench press, I squint my eyes into the sun and drop the make-shift weights to the ground, narrowly missing my scuffed shoes and sending a cloud of dry gravel into the air. Whoever decided to fill empty paint tins with cement didn't consider a weightlifter's aggression when finishing a set.

Gyming outdoors has its pros and cons. It's open, the view is fantastic and there's a lot more fresh air than indoor gyms, but also a hell of a lot more heat.

My previously discarded T-shirt feels unusually heavy as I lift it to wipe my sweaty forehead, a sign that I over-exerted myself. Shake's scratchy voice demands attention, rambling in the background against the sound of crashing waves and music blaring from the cheap speaker.

“We gonna make double – no – triple if we do it ourselves.”

I'm tired and don't feel like listening. If it was anyone else talking, I'd brush them off entirely. However, it's Shakes talking, and when Shakes talks about money, it usually involves dark intentions and underhanded loopholes.

When Shakes talks, you pay attention or you get caught up.

Shakes manoeuvres his small frame closer to my resting spot. He pauses at the speaker which leans precariously against one of the cement blocks.

Bending down, Shakes snatches his phone from his bag and throws his voice out again.

“Chats! What’s the name of the playlist from the party over the weekend?”

I glance sideways at Chats, just in time to catch a goofy grin spread across his chubby face. Clearing his throat, he looks up from his phone with obvious pride in the question being directed at him.

Taking his enthusiasm one step further, Chats jumps up and scurries over to Shakes, gesturing that he’ll find the playlist himself. Not even two steps later he comes short, tripping over Tony’s gym bag that sits at the end of the pull-up bar. She had gone to get water and left her stuff in our care.

I smile. Not because I want to see Chats embarrassed, but because I find it amusing how Tony manages to trip him up even when she’s not there.

Correcting his posture, Chats slows down and arrives at Shakes’ side.

Chats has always been that way, desperate for Shakes’ approval. I remember the very first day that I met him a few years ago. We were at a house party and he changed his T-shirt three times in one day. At first, I assumed his strange behaviour was an effort to appear as fresh as



possible. I had only just met him, but he had that vibe about him, so I was confident in my judgment.

When Chats emerged wearing his third shirt in three hours, Shakes commented on how “peachy” it was. The same giddy smile spread across his Chats’ face, and coincidentally, he stopped dipping into his room to swap out his clothes.

I’m pretty sure that he wore that same faded floral for a full week after that. In hindsight, I suppose Chats deserved the compliment. The Lord knows that he doesn’t get enough of them.

A sharp voice snaps my attention back to the moment.

“Zee!”

It’s Shakes again.

I paste on a surprised smile and lift my eyebrows, hoping to convince him that I’ve been half-listening, at least.

“What’s up?” I ask.

“It’s your turn to spot,” he says, chalking up his hands and brushing the excess powder on his pants. Gym chalk is Shakes’ second favourite powder. I chuckle inwardly at my personal joke. He takes his place on the bench, wiggling his scrawny shoulders into position.

Chats sits next to him, one hand scrolling on his phone, the other hand curling a light weight in a half-arsed fashion.

For some reason, Shakes *really* likes it when I spot him. Part of me thinks it’s because he wants to show off how much he can press, which I’ll admit is a considerably impressive weight in comparison to his body size.

Glancing down at my watch, my heart skips a beat.

“Sorry Shakes, I gotta head. The hustle calls.”

He releases a heavy gurgle which translates as a mocking scoff.

“You’re dodging your turn!”

He flicks his thin wrist in a dismissive action and his heavy gold watch slides down his arm.

“Come on. One more set Zee.”

The expectation crushes me, heavier than any weight in the gym. I don’t need much convincing.

Pausing mid-air, I slide my water bottle back into my backpack and hop over to Shakes’ side.

“Ok. One more. Then I go.”

An awful tinny track blares from the speaker, vibrating and pulsing the promise of an impending headache.

Let’s get this over with.

## TWO

### An Hour Later Cavalheiro

The air in the barbershop is awkward and thick, a mirror of the sweaty summer day outside. The smell of old, varnished wood fills the air, circulating slowly as the fan pushes it around the room. Normally, this smell brings me comfort, filling a place of solace in a turbulent world. Today it makes me feel nauseous.

I’m not sure if the sickening feeling is because my lungs



are on fire after the sprint, or if it's from Baba Blades' unrelenting stare that pierces me from underneath his threadbare homburg hat.

With my foot rooted at the entrance, I try to calm my heart rate. The second that I have a spare breath, I admit defeat.

"I'm sorry," I plead, my exasperation wrinkled into my skin.

"Being sorry doesn't make you on time."

Baba Blades' response is curt and raspy, tinged with discipline. The years of smoking have taken a toll on his voice, adding a hint of aggression when the mood calls for it.

The hair on the back of my neck stands up in defence. It always does when he states the obvious, rubbing in my flaws as though I'm unaware that they exist. I'm already frustrated with myself for giving in to Shakes' persuasion, and Baba Blades knows it. However, his firm stance has been his idea of "tough love" ever since my Papa died. I was a little boy when Papa was killed after being "at the wrong place, at the wrong time" and Baba Blades took on the role of my father figure. Over the years, we've developed a regular father-son relationship, with moments of reprimand scattered between support.

Baba Blades rests his half-empty tumbler back on the dark, wooden coffee table in slow motion. It fits perfectly within the ring stain that I've watched develop over the years of me working at the barbershop.

I use the extension of time to take a sharp breath and bite my tongue to prevent saying something I'll regret.

One part of me is relieved that there is no one else sitting on one of the crimson, cushioned bar stools. Another part of me wishes that the shop was bustling as usual, hosting another conversation to distract from Baba Blades' disappointment.

His voice penetrates the tense atmosphere again.

"Zee."

I already know what he is going to say. All that I can do is hold eye contact and try not to let my clenched jaw reveal itself. It's moments like this that I'm grateful for my slightly fuller cheeks.

The husky stream of reprimand continues.

"If you can't respect time, it shows me that you have no respect for the journey of life."

My teeth bite down harder. Baba Blades uses the armrest to push himself out of his dark leather chair in the corner of the shop. I hear his knees click as he straightens out his legs. He dangles his arm to his side and casually picks up his tumbler once again.

He continues, "The smallest practice of discipline starts with the simplest building block."

He shuffles closer to me, easing his older muscles into motion with an air of grace.

I wonder if he can see my veins bulging to the surface of my temples. I sure as hell can feel them as my blood pumps harder with every passing second.

My eyes begin to water with frustration, forcing me to break eye contact.

I release a breath that I didn't even know I was holding in. My focus shifts to the mirrors, pushing forward

