



Eymard Toledo

Uncle Flores

An almost true story
from Brazil

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*For Lucas, Antonio and Clemens,
For my brother Vicente and my father João*



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Onkel Flores

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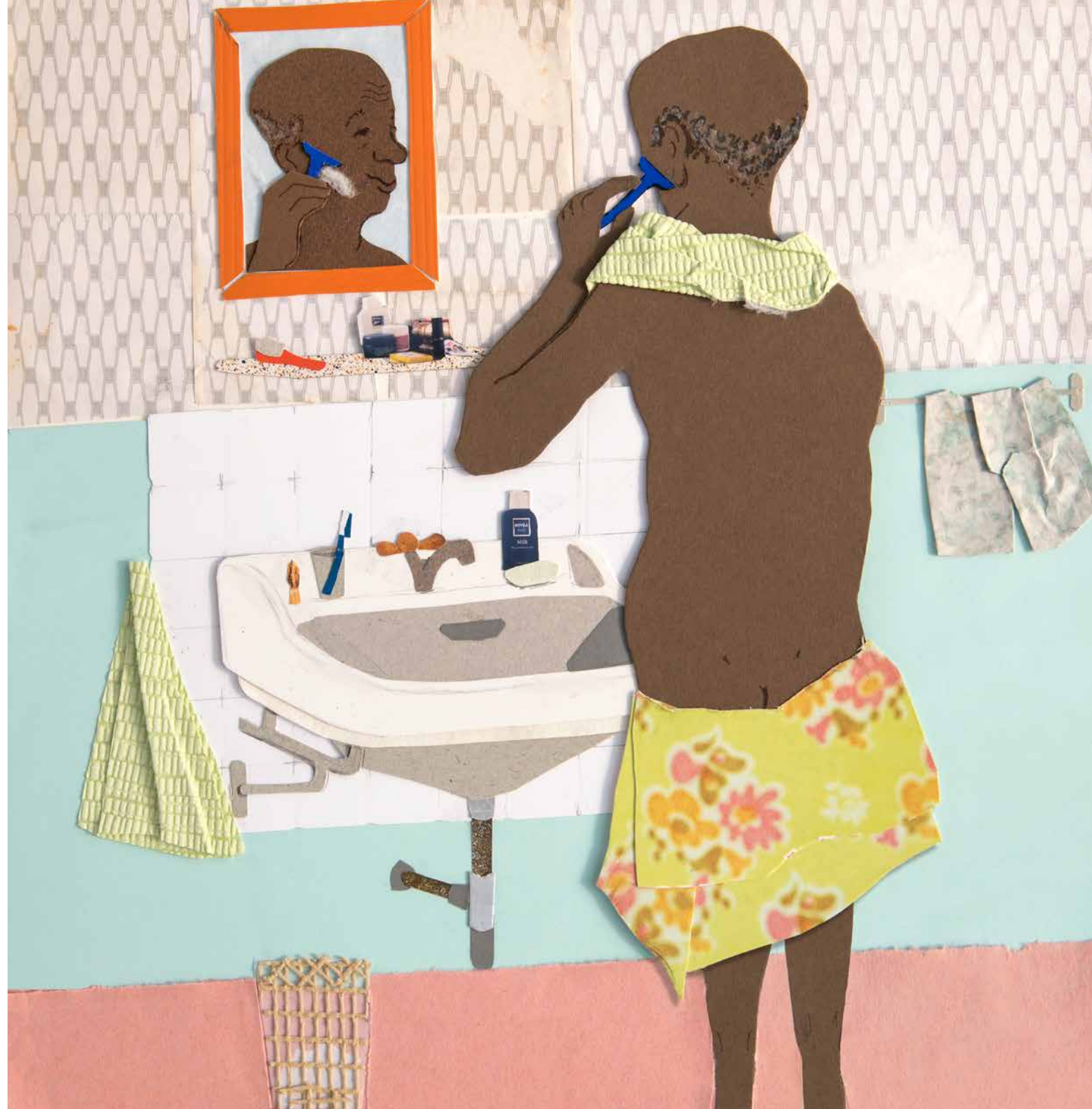


I would get up early in the morning and go over to Uncle Flores' house for breakfast. When I came to his house, it was still dark. I could hear my uncle sing from afar. He liked to sing while he shaved. When he was done, we had coffee and bread together. 'This will help you concentrate at school', Uncle Flores would say.



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After school I went back to Uncle Flores' and spent the afternoon with him. My Mum only came back from work in the evening. When I was done with my homework, we sat in the kitchen and my uncle told me stories. I liked the ones best, that began with *Once upon a time*

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‘Once upon a time the nets of the pescadores* were full with fish. And the lavadeiras** laughed and chatted at the river, loud enough, so that you could hear them across the river. Your Dad knew exactly when your Mum lost her soap in the river. That was back then, when Pinbauê still was a small village, and the water of the Velho Chico was still clean,’ Uncle Flores told me.

*fishermen ** launderers



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‘But then, the factory was built and a lot of people came to the village,’ Uncle Flores continued. Construction workers, truck drivers, tractor drivers, engineers and men in dark suits. Houses had to be built for the people. Big houses and small houses. Pinbauê grew and grew, bit by bit. That’s how our village became a town.’

For as long as I can remember, everyone in Pinbauê worked in the factory, except for Uncle Flores and my Dad. He said: ‘I’m a fisherman, and I will always be a fisherman, until the river doesn’t give me a single fish anymore.’ But my mum said that we would only have one small fish to eat every day, if she wouldn’t work in the factory.

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‘When I grow up, I want to be a tailor. That is a good job,’ I said to my uncle one day.

‘You are right, Edinho. But I wish I could sew colourful clothes again. For a long time now I have only been sewing grey work clothes for the factory.’

That was true, Uncle Flores sewed grey overalls day in, day out. And I also had been cutting and ironing only grey fabric for a long time.



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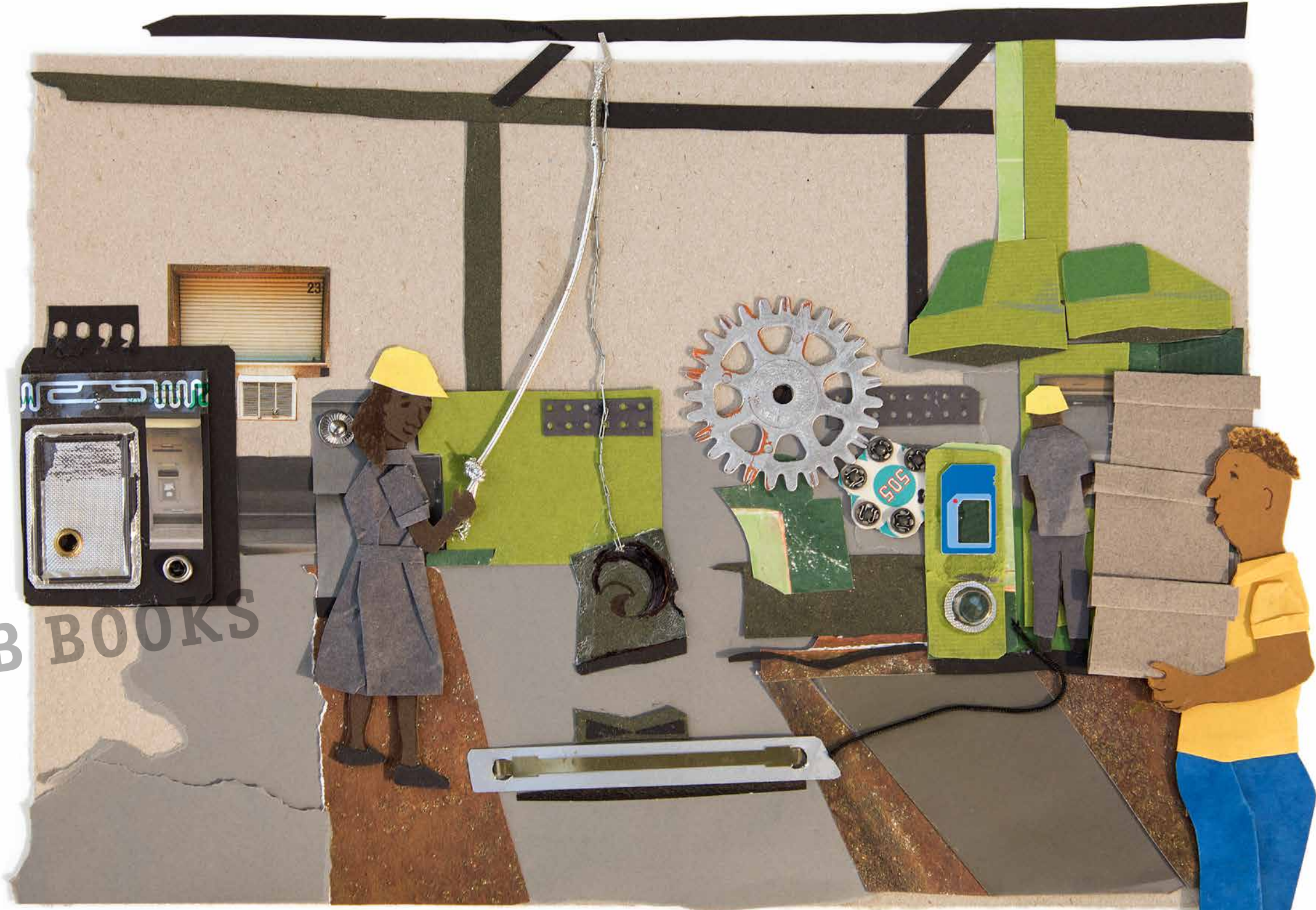


A short time later I noticed that my uncle hadn't sewn any grey work clothes for a while.

'Uncle Flores hasn't had anything to do lately,' I told my Mom at home.

She told me what happened in the factory: 'A couple of weeks ago, a delivery man brought parcels from abroad. They contained work clothes and now, we all wear these new overalls. Some have come apart already. But they don't get repaired, you just get a new one.'

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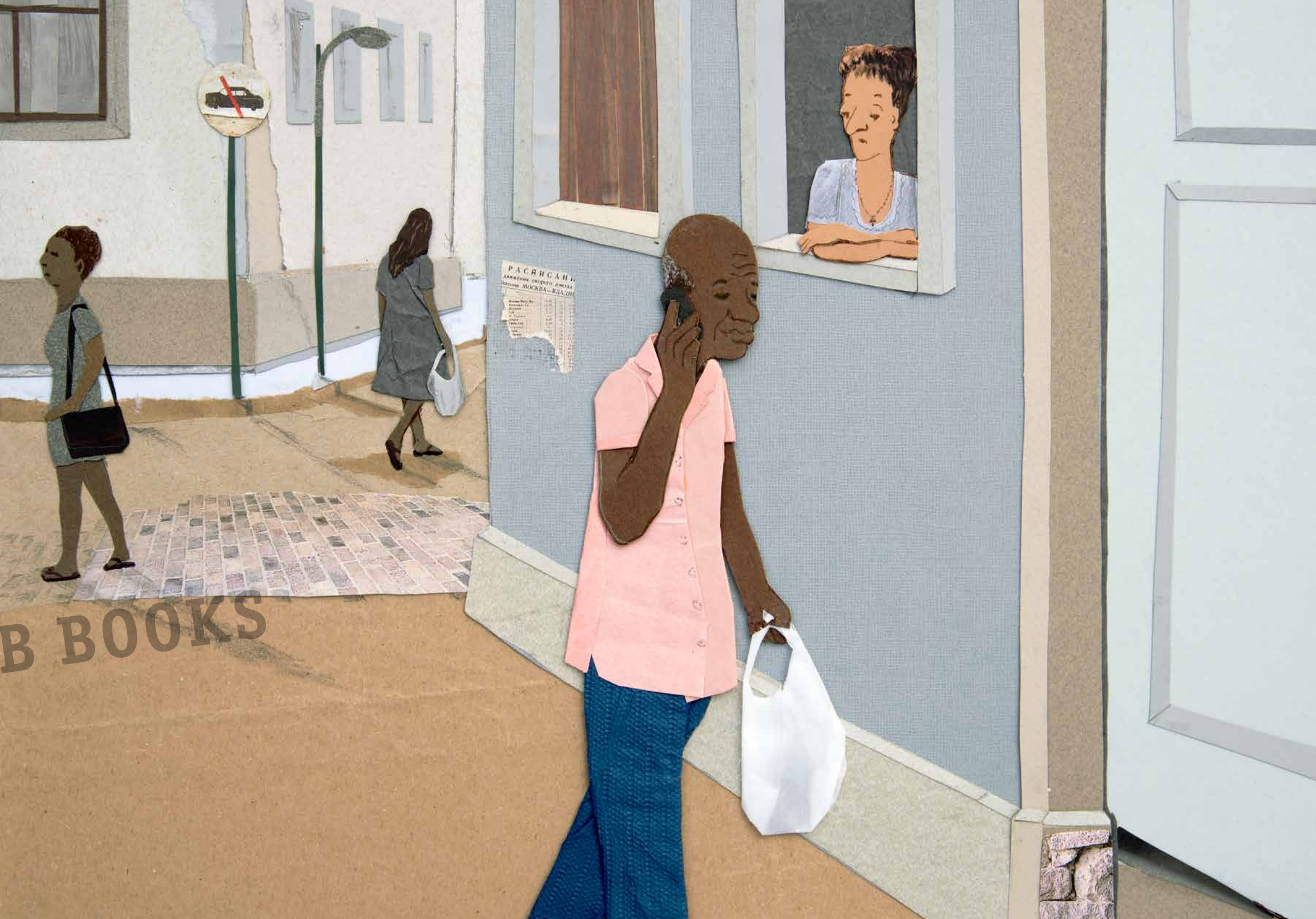


Soon after, Uncle Flores got a call from the factory. They didn't need him anymore, because they could now buy cheaper work clothes abroad.

'How can it be that someone can sew cheaper than me?
Who are these tailors?' Uncle Flores asked and shook his head.



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Even if it hadn't been fun always sewing grey uniforms, now Uncle Flores was worried because he didn't have any work. On the other hand, he had time to go for walks with me.

From the shore of the river we watched Dad throwing his net into the river and reeling it back in. Uncle Flores looked over the river: 'The factory has changed our village completely. Every house in Pinbauê is covered with grey dust these days. There have been only small fish in your Dad's net for a long time, and the women can't wash their clothes in the murky river anymore.'

It was on one of these walks that I mentioned to my uncle that I had found something interesting in the chest of drawers in his house. But my uncle was lost in thought and did not seem to listen.



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Only when we got back home, Uncle Flores asked me what it was I had found in the drawers.

‘There are lots of colourful materials. You told me that you used to sew beautiful dresses for ladies and fancy suits for men.

Even for carnival people ordered your costumes, didn’t they?

You could turn these materials into colourful curtains.’

Uncle Flores looked at me for a while and then he told me:

‘That’s not a bad idea, Edinho.’

It was on that very day he was back at his sewing machine.

Cloc cloc cloc cloc cloc cloc cloc.

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The next weekend already we went to the Praça central* to sell our curtains. Uncle Flores took his small horse and was escorted by one of the many Viralatas**.

I went by foot with my wheelbarrow, which was loaded to the top. I arrived soaked in sweat, but there was no time for a rest.

Uncle Flores stuck his broom between two trees and hung up the curtains.

It didn't take too long and Doña Beija stopped by. She bought a curtain for her popcorn stall. Her customers admired the colourful curtains – and that was how it all started.

*central square ** stray dog



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All around Praça Central, and soon all over Pinbauê, you could see colourful curtains in the windows. It became obvious to everyone: something was changing in Pinbauê. People now looked out of their windows again, some even painted their home in a bright colour. And there was even more change: People started to order shirts and dresses from Uncle Flores again. They ordered colourful clothes for parties, weddings and birthdays ...

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And that's how Uncle Flores' house became the most popular in Pinbauê. On some days you would find a long queue in front of the building.

The customers liked to stay for a cafezinho with broa* and more often than not they ended up in a long conversation with my uncle. One day, after the last customer had left the shop, I asked Uncle Flores: 'The people in Pinbauê used to look so serious. Now, when they leave with their new clothes they seem to be in such a good mood. What is it you actually do?'

'I make clothes, offer a good cafezinho and a nice broa, and I listen to what the people have to tell.'

'Is that all?' I asked

'That's all indeed,' said Uncle Flores

*coffee and corn cake



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That was quite a few years ago. Now I sit at the sewing machine myself and make the suits, shirts and dresses according to the wishes of the people in Pinbauê. Yes, I did become a tailor myself. Uncle Flores is very happy, since his eyesight is now failing. However, he still welcomes the customers and invites them for a cafezinho and a chat ...



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Afterword

Pinbauê may be an invented name, but this story has been inspired by many true incidents. Pinbauê could have been one of many small cities in the state of Minas Gerais in Brazil. Like many cities in my home state, Pinbauê is covered by dust from the chimneys of factories. The soil in Minas Gerais is very rich in iron and other minerals. That has lured lots of factories to the region in the last decade. They offer a lot of work, but they do a big damage to nature. Velho Chico is the nickname for the river São Francisco. It is the longest river in Brazil and its spring is in Minas Gerais. This river has been suffering for years now because of the pollution of the industry and now they are even planning on re-routing the river to the dry northeast of Brazil. Many fear an ecological catastrophe.

Edinho's father and uncle have jobs that are slowly vanishing out of daily life. They love nature and the Velho Chico and try to keep up the traditional lifestyle. Edinho's Mother thinks practically, like many women in Brazil. They work hard and their workdays are long. Because of this many children grow up at relatives or friends. Not all of them are lucky enough to have an Uncle like Mr Flores near them.

Edinho was the one that had the idea that was really important to his uncle. And that too is typical for the life in Brazil: People have to learn to find answers for problems at a young age. They live in a country that is constantly changing and where everything is provisional. You need good ideas to survive.

There is a saying in Brazil which expresses the Brazilian way of life: 'The future is now'. You don't think much about tomorrow. Maybe that explains the Brazilian relaxation, the whole world knows. And maybe that's why Brazil is known as the country of festivals and parties: birthdays, weddings, baptisms, carnival, there is a festival for every saint and even an All Saints Day. Nobody knows what will happen tomorrow. That's why we should celebrate today.

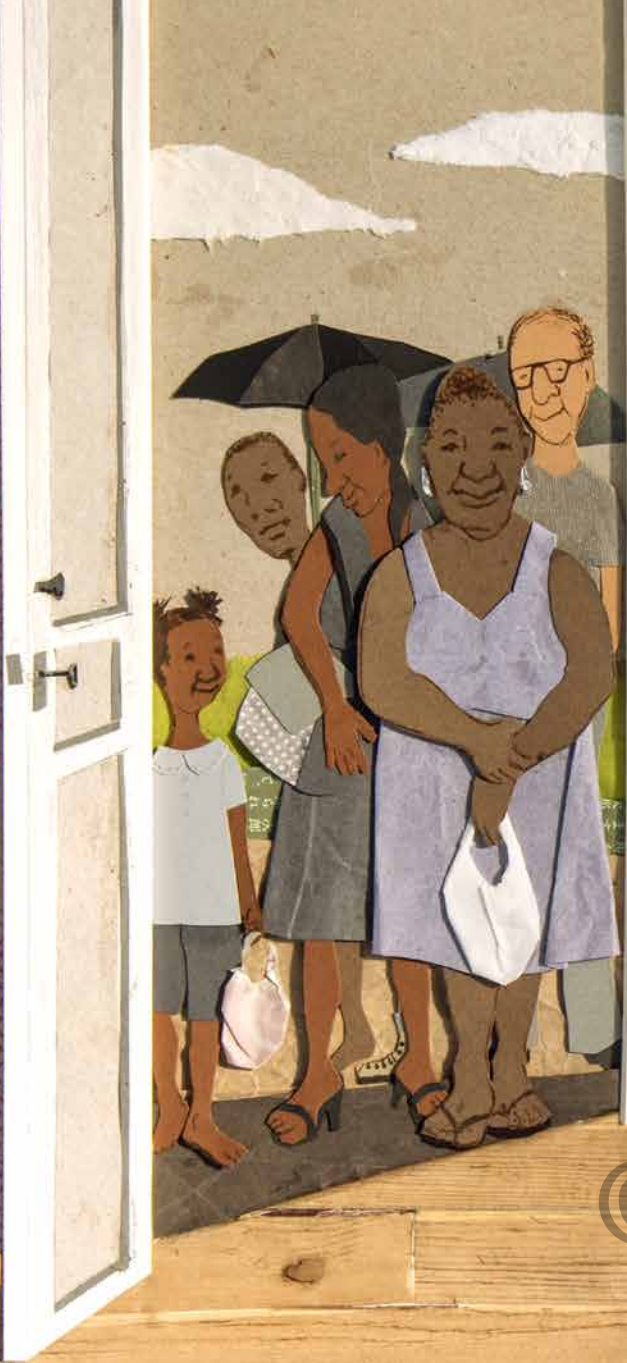
And of course fitting clothes are important for every one of these occasions. It doesn't matter if you are rich or poor, Brazilians always have something fancy to wear.

Uncle Flores is concerned about the factory on the other side of the river. He knows that the men in the black suits have a lot of power. They are the ones that construct the big factories and decided about the future of the people in Pinbauê. Edinho and his uncle are determined to change something. The solution they found may not bring back the fresh air, the clean water or the fish, but it gives the people hope and happiness. And that's quite a beginning, isn't it?

Eymard Toledo, January 2016

‘Excuse me, could you tell me where I find the house of Mr Flores?’

‘Mr Flores, the tailor? Take the first to the left, and then the second to the right. You will see a yellow building at the end of the road. You can’t miss it, it’s where you will see a long queue outside of the house.’



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