

Five Cavaquinhos

When Nair asked them to take all five cavaquinhos out of their cases, Mauro understood that his mother meant to put an end to it that afternoon.

She had spread a white cloth over the long dining-room table. It was not a good tablecloth. It had two old coffee stains and a round scorch mark near one end, made by Anselmo many years before when he had set down a small pot because he could not find the cork trivet.

The cavaquinhos lay in a row on the cloth.

Five.

From a distance, they were the same instrument.

The same pale soundboard, the same narrow shape of the soundhole, the same darkening at the edges. Even the slightly crooked headstock had been reproduced, a tilt Anselmo had never corrected because he said a cavaquinho could listen too.

Davi ran his hand over the third one.

"This one."

"You haven't even started," Mauro said.

"I don't need to start."

Nair, by the window, closed one shutter to cut the sun falling across the table.

"Nobody's choosing by looks."

"I didn't say it was by looks."

"Then play all of them."

Davi shrugged.

At thirty-eight, he still did it the way he had at fourteen: lifting one shoulder more than the other, as though he needed to keep an exit open.

Mauro pulled out a chair and sat far from the table.

Their father's workshop had been closed for eleven days.

He had carried the key in his pocket since before the funeral. Not because anyone had handed it to him. He had already had it for almost twenty years. Anselmo had never asked for it back.

During his illness, he kept asking about the workshop.

Did you open the window?

Did you cover the boards?

Don't let the sun hit that rosewood.

Make sure the dehumidifier hasn't filled up.

One afternoon at the hospital, Nair adjusted the glass of water on the table beside the bed and said,

"The window you remember."

Anselmo looked at her.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Say it."

"I have to remember your medicine for you. Not the wood."

He fell silent.

Nair straightened the sheet over his legs harder than she needed to.

Two days before he died, Anselmo asked about the cavaquinhos.

Mauro pretended not to understand.

"All five?"

His father moved one hand over the sheet.

The tips of his fingers were yellow.

"Did they turn out well?"

"They did."

"Better than the old one?"

Mauro did not answer.

Anselmo laughed without sound.

"Then they turned out well."

Now Davi was tuning the first one.

The four copies had been made three years earlier through a project connected to a university and an instrument manufacturer. For weeks, technicians photographed, weighed, lit, and measured the old cavaquinho. Nair said nothing in that house had ever received so much attention, including the people who lived there.

When the replicas arrived, Anselmo opened the cases in the workshop.

He held the first one close to his ear, tapped the soundboard with his fingernail, turned it over, examined the neck joint.

"You even copied the things I did wrong."

The project coordinator laughed.

"What things?"

"If I tell you, you'll fix them."

He did not tell them.

The instruments arrived labeled. Anselmo removed the labels that same day.

Nair was furious.

"Then nobody will know."

"That's the fun of it."

"It's your fun."

For months he ran tests with his sons, neighbors, and musicians who stopped by the workshop. He put two instruments behind a cloth, played a little, changed their positions, asked which one was the old one.

Davi almost always chose the third.

Mauro got it right every time.

Anselmo noticed.

He never asked how.

Davi played a chord on the first cavaquinho.

Nair looked at the floor.

Mauro already knew that movement. Since his father died, certain sounds made his mother search for something near her own feet.

Davi began a passage from "Carinhoso," stopped, corrected the first string, and started again.

He stopped before the end.

"No."

He picked up the second.

Mauro watched his hands.

He had known which one was the old instrument from the moment Nair opened the cases.

The fifth.

He had not needed to play it.

There was the slightest resistance near the bottom, where the soundboard met the side. Almost nothing. It might not even have counted as a difference if he had not known where to place his thumb.

He knew because he had been there when it happened.

He was seventeen.

Anselmo was building the instrument for himself, which was rare. The cavaquinhos he made almost always had an owner before they had strings. For this one, he had been setting wood aside for years.

Mauro was already working with him.

Or said he was working with him.

In practice, he swept, sharpened tools, held pieces, fetched coffee, and ruined small things under supervision.

That afternoon, Anselmo had gone out to buy sandpaper. Before leaving, he pointed to part of the soundboard clamped to the mold.

"Don't touch that."

Mauro waited for the workshop door to close.

He kept sanding a piece.

Put tools away.

Looked at the mold again.

The clamp seemed loose.

He tightened it.

Stopped.

Tightened it a little more.

He heard a soft crack and stood still, his hand on the screw.

For a few seconds he decided the sound had come from the street.

When he loosened the clamp, he found an internal crack near the join with the side.

He stared at it.

Thought about tightening the clamp again.

Thought his father might not notice.

Thought about leaving before he came back.

Anselmo saw the crack before he had even set the bag of sandpaper on the bench.

"Was that you?"

Mauro looked at the piece.

"I think it was already there."

His father did not answer.

He switched on the articulated lamp and pulled over the stool.

He examined the instrument for several minutes.

Mauro waited for the shouting.

It did not come.

"Get the scrap box."

He brought the large one.

"The small one."

Mauro went back and brought it.

Anselmo selected an old piece of dark wood and began cutting a cleat.

"Is it ruined?"

"Hold this."

Mauro held the lamp.

"Dad."

"More this way."

Mauro moved the light.

"Is it ruined?"

Anselmo tested the cleat, took it out, shaved one end.

"I don't know yet."

They worked together.

The repair had to allow for a difference in mass so the cracked area would not be stressed again. Inside, the small cleat sat crosswise.

Mauro shone the light through the soundhole.

"One day you'll replace it."

"What for?"

"So it'll be right."

Anselmo wiped away the glue that had squeezed out.

"It is right."

"It's not the way it was."

His father looked at his own glue-stained fingers.

"Nothing stays the same."

The next morning, Anselmo argued with a supplier on the phone for twenty minutes and spent the rest of the day without speaking to his son.

That was all.

For twenty-seven years, Mauro carried that afternoon the way a man carries a coin in his pocket.

Sometimes he forgot it was there.

Then some movement made the coin tap against his leg.

Davi finished playing the second.

"Better."

He picked up the third.

Nair finally sat down.

"Your father liked that one."

"He liked confusing us."

"No. That sound."

Davi played.

The third had a cleaner attack. The notes separated without effort. When he played hard, the chord stayed clear.

Nair watched his hands.

"Did he play that birthday song on this one?"

"He played it on any of them, Mom."

"I know."

"Then what?"

"Nothing. Play."

Davi went on.

Mauro remembered the wake.

A man had said Anselmo never delivered an instrument late.

He did.

A woman said he did not know how to ask people for money.

He did. He had called that same woman three times to collect what she owed him.

Davi told someone their father had never raised his voice in the house.

Nair was nearby.

She did not correct him.

Neither did Mauro.

The dead improved quickly.

Davi finished.

"This one."

"There are two left," Mauro said.

"You could play twenty."

"There are five."

"You know what I mean."

Davi set the instrument down carefully.

"It sounds like him."

"It sounds the way you like."

"And since when is that a crime?"

"It isn't."

"Good."

Nair ran one finger over a stain on the cloth.

"I don't want to know which one is better."

Davi turned to her.

"I know."

"No, you don't. You're choosing the one you want to play."

"Of course. What else is a cavaquinho for?"

"Your father could go two months without playing and still wouldn't let anyone put his away anywhere."

"That's not an argument."

"I'm not arguing."

She pointed at the five instruments.

"I want to know which one was the one that stayed here."

Davi opened his mouth and closed it.

Nair went on.

"The one I moved off the chair when I was going to serve dinner. The one that came home smelling of other people's cigarettes and beer in the case. The one he dropped in the hallway once and then swore for three days he hadn't dropped."

Mauro remembered the fall. His father had blamed a fold in the rug.

Nair looked at him.

"I want that one."

Davi scratched his nose.

"Fine. You keep that one. I'll keep one that works."

"I'm not keeping five."

She tapped her fingertips once on the table.

"One with me. One with each of you, if you want them. We'll figure out the others."

Davi pointed at Mauro.

"Then ask the notary."

"Don't start," Nair said.

"He knows."

Mauro looked at the fifth.

Davi noticed.

"Do you know or don't you?"

"We could find out from the project records."

"That's not what I asked."

Mauro rubbed his thumb against the corner of the chair.

"If you want an expert report, it's a lot of trouble. There are photos, measurements, documentation. Maybe they marked something Dad didn't remove."

"I'm not sending these five things to any laboratory," Nair said. "I've had enough laboratory in this house."

Davi laughed.

She did not.

"Do you know which one it is?" she asked.

Mauro took a moment.

"I do."

Nair nodded.

That was all.

Davi spread his hands.

"Then say it."

The third was still vibrating slightly on the cloth.

Mauro knew that instrument. Anselmo had played it many times after the copies arrived. Davi had chosen it in almost every test.

The first time, their father had played it for nearly ten minutes without saying a word.

Then he handed the cavaquinho to Davi.

"You made this one beautifully."

The project coordinator asked,

"More alike?"

Anselmo turned the instrument once in his hands.

"More obedient."

Mauro stood.

He picked up the first.

Turned it over.

Ran his fingers along the side.

Did the same with the second.

With the third, he took a little longer.

Davi followed every movement.

On the fourth, Mauro examined the neck joint.

When he reached the fifth, he did not put his thumb near the bottom.

He turned the instrument first.

Looked through the soundhole.

With the window light coming in from the side, almost nothing could be seen.

He already knew.

He set the fifth down.

Went back to the third.

"It's this one."

Nair let out a breath through her nose.

"Then that's settled."

Davi smiled at the cavaquinho.

"I told you."

"Told me what?" Nair asked.

"From the start."

He picked up the third and played two chords.

"I knew it."

Mauro wanted to take the instrument out of his hands.

Nair stood.

"This one stays here."

"Of course," Davi said.

"And nobody takes it to a bar."

He laughed.

"Mom."

"Your father did. It came back with the case stinking."

"Then it's tradition."

She almost answered. Instead she picked up the cloth she used to dust the china cabinet and wiped the cavaquinho's soundboard while Davi was still holding it.

"Give me that before you get it dirty."

Davi handed it over.

Nair tucked the instrument between her arms and chest to reach a mark near the bottom.

She did it without any special care, the way she had hundreds of times before four copies existed.

Then she carried the third to the china cabinet.

Mauro watched.

Davi chose the second.

"Can I take this one to the bar?"

"You can do whatever you want with yours."

"See how things improve when they're not historical artifacts?"

Nair told him to shut up.

When she asked Mauro which instrument he wanted, he pointed at the fifth.

"That one."

Davi tilted his head.

"Why?"

"It needs an adjustment."

"So do the others."

"This one more."

Davi shrugged.

"You always liked the problem ones."

Mauro looked at him for a second.

Davi had already turned away to get his own case.

The two instruments left over were taken to the workshop until they decided what to do with them.

Nair brought coffee.

Before sitting down, she went through the bedroom and came back with a cardboard box full of Anselmo's things: three shirts, a waist pouch, a small radio, two order notebooks.

"This goes too," she said.

Mauro looked up.

"Not the notebooks."

"Why?"

"There are customer records in them."

"A dead man's customers aren't coming back to demand their repairs."

"There may be workshop stuff in there."

"Then look through them by Sunday. Anything you don't want, I throw out."

Davi took the third cavaquinho from the china cabinet.

"Can I play it now?"

"You can play it here."

He played.

The sound filled the room.

Nair carried the box into the hall and came back for her coffee.

Mauro drank his cold.

That night, he took the fifth home.

His wife was asleep.

He left the case on the living-room table and turned on only the kitchen light.

He opened it.

The cavaquinho was there as it had been at his mother's house, except now Mauro could touch wherever he wanted.

He ran his thumb near the bottom.

Felt the slight resistance.

Closed the case.

Two weeks later, Nair called.

"Your brother wants to do something Sunday."

"What kind of something?"

"Lunch."

"That's a thing?"

"Stop being an idiot."

Mauro smiled.

"Okay."

There was silence.

"Mauro."

"What?"

"I found a box of workshop receipts."

"Keep it."

"You said that about the notebooks."

"Then keep it with them."

"If it's up to you, I'll die buried under your father's things."

"Don't exaggerate."

"You don't live here."

She hung up.

On Sunday there were twelve people in the house.

Davi took the cavaquinho from the china cabinet out to the veranda. Nair saw him.

"Don't put a glass on the case."

"Nobody did."

"I'm warning you before they do."

They brought out chairs. A cousin showed up with a pandeiro. An aunt brought pudding in a pan covered with aluminum foil.

Mauro stayed near the door.

Davi played better than their father. Technically, he always had.

At one point, Nair asked for the birthday song.

Davi began.

Halfway through, he missed a passage.

Stopped.

"Dad used to play it differently."

An uncle on the other side of the veranda said,

"Your father made different mistakes."

Someone laughed.

Davi raised his middle finger without stopping smiling.

Nair laughed too.

"Then play it right."

Davi started over.

When he finished, the uncle asked for another.

Then another.

The cavaquinho held its tuning through changing hands, heat, conversation, a pandeiro running ahead of the beat, and a glass that nearly fell onto the case.

Nair sang quietly during one of the songs.

Mauro had never heard his mother sing an entire song.

He stayed through coffee.

When he got home, he took the fifth out of its case.

Sat in the kitchen.

Tuned it slowly.

The third string slipped a little after a few minutes.

There was roughness near the neck and a short buzz when he struck certain notes hard.

He played the birthday song.

At the passage Davi had missed, he found the old noise.

Stopped.

Took a flashlight from the drawer.

Rested the instrument on his leg and searched for the angle.

It took a while.

When the light found the inside near the side, the dark tip of the cleat appeared.

Still crosswise.

The old glue had yellowed.

Mauro held the flashlight until his shoulder began to ache.

Then he set the instrument on the table.

Picked up his phone.

Opened his mother's contact.

His finger stayed over the screen.

It would be easy.

He could say that, looking more carefully, he had found something else. He could blame the light in the room, the rush, the confusion among the copies. Nair would complain. Davi would make some joke. The three of them would put the instruments back on the cloth, or maybe not even that. Maybe all it would take was switching two cases.

The screen went dark.

Mauro put the phone down beside the flashlight.

He did not call.

On Monday, he took the cavaquinho to a makeshift workbench in the utility area.

He removed the strings.

Cleaned what he could without touching the area of the repair.

When he came close to the old crack, he stopped.

There was no urgency. The wood was not opening up.

Even so, he laid out the tools.

Then put them all away.

The following month, Nair sold one of the two remaining instruments to a musician from another city.

The last went to the school where Anselmo had taught a few apprentices.

The third stayed in the china cabinet.

When anyone asked, Nair said,

"It was my husband's."

Sometimes she added,

"The boys figured out which one it was."

She did not say which boy.

If Davi was there, he said,

"I figured it out first."

Nair answered,

"You picked the one you liked."

"And I was right."

"People win the lottery by accident too."

Davi kept using the second. He took it to jam sessions, left it on chairs, changed strings without asking anyone.

One night he sent Mauro a photo on his phone.

The cavaquinho was on a plastic table between two bottles of beer.

The message said:

"mom can't see this"

Mauro replied:

"idiot"

Davi sent a laughing emoji.

The fifth stayed on the top shelf of Mauro's wardrobe.

His wife asked why he did not put it on a stand with the other instruments.

"Humidity."

"The stand is in the same room."

"It gets afternoon sun."

"Then move the stand."

"Leave it there."

She looked at him, then at the wardrobe.

"It's yours."

Mauro realized he was holding the wardrobe door open with his hand.

He closed it.

Months later, the cavaquinho's third string began slipping again.

He could replace the nut, correct part of the setup, work on the neck.

He did two of those things.

Not the third.

To reach the area properly, he would have to remove parts and expose the old repair. He knew how. He had done harder work many times.

He set the tool on the bench.

The cleat Anselmo had placed there was still inside.

Mauro put the tool away again.

The instrument stayed as it was.

He did not take it to his father's workshop either.

After Anselmo died, Mauro opened the workshop every week for a few months. He raised the door, opened the windows, turned on the dehumidifier, swept.

At first he left everything in place.

Then he began to move things.

Threw out jars of expired glue.

Sorted scraps.

Gave duplicate tools to two of his father's former apprentices.

Nair came by one Wednesday and found three black garbage bags near the door.

"Hallelujah."

"Some things are useless."

"I've been saying that for twenty years."

She went in.

Opened a drawer.

"Is this good for anything?"

"Yes."

"This?"

"No."

She tossed it into a box.

Mauro took it back out.

"You said it wasn't useful."

"Then why did you take it out?"

He examined the small metal piece in his hand.

"It might be."

Nair laughed.

"Exactly the same."

"Same as what?"

"Your father."

Mauro put the piece back in the box.

She did not notice.

Or noticed and said nothing.

A year after Anselmo's death, Nair invited her sons to lunch.

When Mauro entered the living room, the space in the china cabinet where the cavaquinho usually sat was empty.

"Where is it?"

Nair came out of the kitchen carrying a serving dish.

"In the case."

"Why?"

"Because tomorrow I'm taking it to the school."

Davi, sitting on the sofa, lifted his head.

"The original?"

"The cavaquinho."

"Mom."

"There are kids there who can play it."

"But that was Dad's."

Nair set down the dish.

"They were all your father's while they were in his house."

"It's not the same thing."

"Not to you."

Davi looked at Mauro.

"Talk to her."

Nair made a short sound.

"There. Now I need an expert before I can give away my own things."

Mauro took his car key out of his pocket and set it on a piece of furniture.

"If you want to give it away, give it away."

Davi spread his arms.

"You're both crazy."

"You already have one," Nair said.

"That's not why."

"Then why is it?"

Davi took a moment.

"I don't know."

Nair went back to the kitchen.

"Tell me when you do."

No one mentioned the cavaquinho during lunch.

Nair complained that Davi no longer brought his daughter to visit during the week. Davi said the girl had school. Nair said children came out of school too. Mauro asked whether they needed to discuss that on the anniversary of their father's death.

"It's not an anniversary," Nair said. "Anniversaries are something else."

After dessert, she brought out the case.

Set it on the same table where, a year before, the five instruments had lain in a row.

The tablecloth was different.

"Before I take it, play it."

Davi opened the case.

"If I play, will you change your mind?"

"No."

"Then what's the blackmail?"

"There isn't any. Play."

He sat down and tuned the instrument.

He began the birthday song without anyone asking.

This time he did not miss the passage.

When he finished, Nair was clearing plates.

"Done?"

"Done what?"

"You played?"

"I played."

"Then put it away."

Davi did not.

He held the cavaquinho out to Mauro.

"Go on."

"No."

"It's been a year since you played with anyone."

"I play."

"Alone doesn't count."

Mauro looked at his mother.

Nair had her back to them, stacking plates.

"Don't drag me into it," she said.

Davi kept holding out the instrument.

Mauro took it.

It was light.

The tuning was steady.

The neck answered without resistance.

He ran his fingers over the strings.

Nair carried the plates to the kitchen.

Davi waited.

Mauro began.

On the second time through the song, Nair reappeared, drying her hands on a dish towel. She stopped in the doorway.

Mauro kept playing.

The instrument offered nothing beyond what was needed.

No dirty note.

No buzz in the high passage.

When he reached the part where Anselmo used to stumble, Davi came in singing one word wrong on purpose.

Nair corrected him from the kitchen.

Davi sang it wrong again.

She threw the towel at him.

Mauro missed a note.

Davi laughed.

"There. That's his son."

Mauro kept playing.

Nair sat down.

Began tapping two fingers on the table.

After the song, Mauro handed the cavaquinho to his brother.

Davi closed the case.

"Last chance."

Nair raised an eyebrow.

"For what?"

"To change your mind."

"Tomorrow, nine o'clock, it goes to the school."

"You're going to cry."

"I can cry there."

Davi looked at Mauro again.

"You're sure this was really the one?"

The question came with a smile. It was only a tease.

Mauro could hear Nair moving cups around.

"I'm sure."

Davi snapped the latches shut.

The next morning, Nair took the cavaquinho to the school.

Mauro knew because she sent a photograph to the family group: the instrument in the hands of a boy he did not know, maybe thirteen, sitting in a plastic chair.

Davi replied first.

"i want royalties"

Nair replied:

"go to work"

Mauro wrote nothing.

That night, he got home after ten.

His wife had already gone to bed.

He entered the bedroom without turning on the light, opened the wardrobe, and took down the fifth case.

He carried it to the living room.

Sat on the floor.

For a while he kept one hand on the lid.

His phone vibrated in his pocket.

It was Davi.

"mom wants to know if you still have those workshop notebooks"

Mauro read it.

Typed:

"i do"

Davi replied:

"she said bring them sunday"

Mauro set the phone on the floor.

The case remained closed across his legs.

He ran his thumb along the worn edge.

Inside were the crack, the crosswise cleat, the old glue, the third string that would not hold its tuning, and the mark his father had chosen not to erase.

At the school, a boy who had never known Anselmo would play, the next day, the cavaquinho Nair believed she had been lifting off the chair for decades.

Davi would probably keep saying he had picked the right one from the start.

Mauro could call.

His mother was awake; she almost always watched television late.

His brother had just written.

He placed the phone face down.

Then he stood, carried the case back to the bedroom, and returned it to the top shelf of the wardrobe.

There was no one left to ask whether it was right.