

Anthony De Sa

In His Words

*Kicking the Sky* was inspired by growing up in Toronto during the seventies in the Portuguese enclave where my parents had settled after leaving their tiny island of Sao Miguel in the Azores. By age eleven I had claimed my neighborhood and my city. I'd ride my bike through the distended alleys I knew so well, always searching for new adventures, my senses heightened to things around me: the scent of mothballs and bleach that trailed our women, the sounds of fado funneling across our chain-linked fences, the white skin between pant leg and sock when men sitting on their lawn chairs crossed their legs, and the grit of roof shingles beneath our sneakers as we soared from one rooftop to the next.

The city had a reputation for cleanness and moral rectitude—*Toronto the Good*—but in the summer of 1977, things changed when a twelve-year-old Portuguese boy shining shoes, surrounded by the strip clubs, bars, and body rub parlors of Yonge Street, was lured away from his friends to earn a bit of extra money. Four days later the boy's body was discovered. He had been brutally raped and murdered. The boy's name was Emanuel Jaques, but the media had stolen his name from us and dubbed him “the shoeshine boy.” The Portuguese of Toronto mobilized and took their revolt to the streets, demanding change. The crime sparked national outrage and led to a massive cleanup of the sex trade in Canada's biggest city. For almost a year, the highly publicized crime and the case against the three men who perpetrated the crime exposed the dangers of the industrial city—for many immigrants, the first city they had ever lived in. I will never

forget that summer when the murder of that boy prompted my father to secure a deadbolt to our front door. Our city's dark underbelly was exposed, and everything changed: friends, family, and my childhood innocence.

I've often thought of how difficult that time must have been for immigrant parents like mine. They must have felt confusion and anxiety – the result of being further marginalized and alienated. As immigrants in Toronto's fledgling Portuguese community, they struggled with full work schedules, financial strains, and the guilt of leaving their children to fend for themselves. Like so many other immigrants, they felt overwhelmed and overburdened. Growing up, I always awoke to an empty home, and I often returned from school to eat alone with my sister. While my parents worked double shifts, I spent my days, along with a lot of the kids in our neighborhood, on my bike exploring the labyrinth of laneways that linked my Portuguese neighborhood to the rest of the city. The truth was I reveled in being a latchkey kid, free to roam and peer into places thought safe from prying eyes.

The varied tensions of growing up in Toronto with ethnic parents forced me to straddle two separate worlds. Most of the clashes, certainly all of the internal conflict that arose in me, arose from the inability to bridge the great divide between my Portuguese heritage shrouded behind our front door and my Canadian identity, which I felt most comfortable in the minute I closed our front door behind me to meet with my friends in our neighborhood's dark garages. We wanted adventure and freedom. My friends and I refused to accept what we perceived as a social island that held no dreams for us and was too small compared to the greater reality in which we lived. That boy's murder triggered an irrevocable shift in our lives, but we believed that the murder of Emanuel Jaques could

never happen to us. We were stronger and smarter, and we pushed onward with the conviction that if we stuck together, we were invincible.

The church loomed large in my household and in our growing Portuguese community. Its power should never be underestimated, nor should its role in narrowly defining the kind of community we would become, the additional sacrifices that would have to be made in order to reap the rewards of life in this country. Before the brutal murder of Emanuel Jaques, the Portuguese community had no political voice. The one voice that offered them solace and security in a sea of isolation was the church. It was what the older generation knew, and it was the most consistent moral voice in a very changed world.

Perhaps it was my parents' feelings of guilt for being so absent in my life that made them lord their emotional power over me. I was expected to achieve what they could not achieve, become who they never became, and carry the burden of their unfulfilled dreams. But over the course of almost a year, through the unraveling courtroom drama and media stories about the shoeshine boy murder, I became more aware of the dashed hopes of my parents and those in my neighborhood, of the power of faith and the role of church, and of the terrifying confluence of power and desire that these elements fostered in my community. As an eleven-year-old boy, I was exposed to a dark and cruel world, where I learned about bravery and cowardice, life and death, and the heart's capacity for love and desire. But I would never let go of the feeling of soaring over rooftops, and I will never forget the thrilling moment when I leapt higher than ever before to kick at the sky.