

~~PERFECT DAYS~~



RAPHAEL MONTES

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ABOUT THE BOOK

The path to true love rarely runs smoothly ...

Teo, a medical student, meets Clarice at a party. Teo doesn't really like people, they're too messy, but he immediately realises that he and Clarice are meant to be together. And if Clarice doesn't accept that? Well, they just need to spend some time together, and she'll come to realise that too.

And yes, he has bought handcuffs and yes, he has taken her prisoner and yes, he is lying to her mother and to his mother and to the people at the hotel he's keeping her at, but it's all for her own good.

She'll understand. She'll fall in love. She'll settle down and be his loving wife.

Won't she?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Raphael Montes was born in 1990 in Rio de Janeiro. A lawyer and a writer, he has published short stories in various mystery anthologies including the Brazilian *Playboy* magazine. *Suicidas*, his debut novel, was a finalist for the Benvira Literature Prize in 2010, the Machado de Assis Prize awarded by the National Library in 2012, and the São Paulo Literature Prize in 2013.

Alison Entrekin has translated a number of significant works, including Paulo Lins' *City of God*, which was made into an Oscar-nominated film; Cristovão Tezza's *The Eternal Son*, shortlisted for the IMPAC Dublin Literary Award; Clarice Lispector's *Near to the Wild Heart*, shortlisted for the PEN America Translation Prize; and Chico Buaque's *Budapest*, shortlisted for the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize. Originally from Australia, she now lives in Brazil.

For my mother

PERFECT DAYS

RAPHAEL MONTES

TRANSLATED FROM THE PORTUGUESE BY

Alison Entrekin



Harvill Secker
LONDON

There is always some madness in love. But there is also always some reason in madness.

FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE

1

GERTRUDE WAS THE only person Teo liked. The other students weren't quite as at ease around her. The minute they walked into the lab, the girls all held their noses. The guys tried to be cool, but their eyes revealed their discomfort. Teo didn't want anyone to notice how good he felt there. He'd walk over to the metal table with his head down.

There she'd be, serenely waiting for him. Gertrude.

In the pale light, the corpse took on a very peculiar brownish hue, like leather. On a small side tray were instruments for more in-depth investigations: scissors with curved tips, anatomical forceps, rat-tooth forceps and scalpels.

"The great saphenous vein can be seen near the inside of the knee. It then courses medially to lie on the anterior surface of the thigh," said Teo. He pulled back Gertrude's epithelium to expose her dried-out muscles.

The teacher looked down at his clipboard, frowning from his fortress of notes. Teo wasn't intimidated: the anatomy lab was his domain. The stretchers here and there, the dissected bodies, the limbs and organs in jars all gave him a sense of freedom that he couldn't find anywhere else. He liked the smell of formaldehyde, the instruments in his gloved hands, Gertrude there on the table.

In her company, his imagination knew no bounds. The world melted away, until he and Gertrude were all that was left. He'd chosen the name the first time they met, when her flesh was still in place. They had grown closer over the course of the semester. In each class, Teo discovered new things about Gertrude: she loved to surprise him. He would

hold his head close to hers—the most interesting part of her—and wonder. Who did that body belong to? Was her name really Gertrude? Or was it something simpler?

It was Gertrude. Looking at her withered skin, narrow nose, and dry, straw-colored lips, he couldn't conceive of any other name for her. Although decomposition had stripped away her human appearance, Teo saw something in those misshapen eyeballs: the eyes of the ravishing woman she must have been. He conversed with those eyes when no one else was looking.

She had probably died in her sixties or seventies. The few hairs on her head and pubis confirmed his theory. In a detailed examination, Teo had discovered a fracture in her skull.

He respected Gertrude. Only an intellectual could have forgone the adulation of a funeral to contribute to the future, to the training of young doctors. Better to serve as a light for science than be devoured in darkness, she must have thought. She had probably had a bookcase packed with quality literature. And a collection of vinyl LPs from her youth. Those legs had danced a lot. Night after night.

Many of the corpses in the foul-smelling vats had belonged to the homeless, beggars whose purpose in life was to die. They had no money, no education, but they had bones, muscles, organs. And that made them useful.

Gertrude was different. It was hard to imagine that those feet had roamed the streets or that those hands had begged their way through a mediocre life. Teo didn't believe she had been murdered either, killed with a blow to the head while being mugged or bludgeoned to death by a betrayed husband. Gertrude had died of extraordinary causes, something not in the natural order of things. No one would have had the courage to kill her. Unless he was an idiot ...

The world was full of idiots. All he had to do was look around: there was an idiot in a lab coat, an idiot with a

clipboard, an idiot with a high-pitched voice who was now talking about Gertrude as if she knew her as well as he did.

“The articular capsule has been opened and the stratum fibrosum pulled back to reveal the distal and proximal extremities of the femur and tibia.”

The girl made Teo want to laugh. And if Gertrude could have heard that nonsense, she'd have hooted with laughter too. Together they'd have drunk expensive wine, chatted about all manner of things, watched films and discussed the cinematography and the set and costume design afterward like film critics. Gertrude would have taught him how to live.

The other students' disrespect for her got on his nerves. On one occasion, in the teacher's absence, the same girl who was now spouting fancy medical terms in a shrill voice had taken some red nail polish out of her bag and, giggling, painted the corpse's fingernails. The other students had flocked around, finding it all very funny.

Teo wasn't the vindictive sort, but he wanted to avenge Gertrude. He could have made sure the girl received some kind of institutional punishment, but it would have been bureaucratic and ineffectual. He could have arranged for her to take a bath in formaldehyde—just to see the look of desperation in her eyes as she felt her skin drying out. But what he really wanted to do was kill her. And then paint her pale little nails red.

Of course he wasn't going to do anything of the sort. He wasn't a murderer. He wasn't a monster. As a child, he had spent many a sleepless night staring at his shaking hands, trying to decipher his own thoughts. He felt like a monster. He didn't like anyone, have feelings for anyone, or miss anyone: he just lived. People would come along, and he'd be forced to tolerate their presence in his life. Worse: he was supposed to like them, to demonstrate affection. He learned that if his playacting seemed real, it was all a lot easier.

The bell rang, and the students were dismissed. It was the last class of the year. Teo left without saying good-bye to anyone. The gray building was behind him now, and as he looked over his shoulder, he realized he'd never see Gertrude again. His friend would be buried along with the other corpses, tossed into a common grave. They'd never share another special moment.

He was alone again.

2

TEO WOKE UP in a bad mood and went to the kitchen to make his mother coffee. The counter was high, and Patricia couldn't reach the shelves. She had to stretch, and her legs would flop about on her wheelchair. It was degrading.

While he waited for the water to boil, he swept the living room of the flat and washed the dishes. He changed Samson's newspaper and filled his bowl with food. As always, he set the coffee on his mother's bedside table and woke her up with a kiss on the forehead, because that was what loving sons did.

At nine o'clock, Patricia came out of her room. She was wearing a simple dress and cloth sandals. Teo had never seen his mother getting dressed, but he imagined it was an exhausting process. He had once offered to help her with a new pair of jeans, but she had refused emphatically, saying, "It's all I have left." Half an hour later she had a dress on, and the jeans were in the trash.

"Marli and I are going to the fair. I'm taking Samson," she said as she put on an earring.

Teo nodded, his eyes glued to the TV, where Tom was chasing Jerry.

"Do I look nice?"

He realized she was wearing makeup. "Have you found yourself a secret admirer at the fair? Eh, Patricia? Confess!"

"No admirers for the time being. But you never know—I might be crippled, but I'm not dead!"

Teo hated the word *crippled*. In an attempt to make light of her condition, Patricia used it frequently. It was sad, he

understood. Ever since the accident, they'd avoided the subject. The wheelchair had become a part of everyday life, and at the end of the day, he thought they didn't really need to talk about it.

Patricia came back from the kitchen with Samson on his leash. The golden retriever was wagging his furry tail. He had joined the family nine years earlier, when they still lived in the penthouse overlooking Copacabana Beach. Now it was an inconvenience to have the dog in a two-bedroom flat. Teo would have preferred to hand him over to a shelter. Samson had beautiful fur and a pedigree; he'd find a new home quickly. Teo had never said this to his mother, as he knew the dog was like a child to her. Although perfectly reasonable, any suggestion that she get rid of him would have been dismissed out of hand.

The bell rang. Patricia went to answer the door.

"Marli, darling!"

It was the neighbor, Patricia's best friend and lover of all things esoteric. A confirmed spinster, moderately stupid, she stood in as a nurse for Patricia, helping her to shower and to walk Samson. They played cards together on Wednesdays. Teo didn't know who was more dependent on whom in that relationship. It amused him when he saw Marli reading his mother's fortune in the cards—her predictions typically bore no relationship to reality.

He had once allowed Marli to read his fortune too. "You are going to be very wealthy and happy," she had said. "And you are going to marry a very beautiful young woman."

He hadn't believed her. He couldn't see himself being happy. He felt fated to limbo, to monotonous routine, devoid of happy and sad moments. His life was just a void filled with timid emotions. He was fine like that.

"We'll be back in an hour," said Patricia. "The barbecue's later this afternoon. Don't forget."

"What barbecue?"

"Érica's daughter's. Her birthday."

"I don't want to go. I hardly know the girl."

"There'll be people your age there."

"I'm a vegetarian, Mother."

"My friends always ask about you. And I'm sure there'll be garlic bread."

Teo sometimes felt like a trophy that his mother showed off to others. It was her way of making up for her own deficiencies—physical and intellectual.

"I'm not asking you, I'm telling you. You're going with me." Patricia slammed the door.

The only sound left in the flat was the music from the cartoon.

THERE WAS NO garlic bread. Blood and fat dripped from the meat on the grill onto the charcoal underneath. Young people were dancing to the deafening sound of funk music. Patricia was enjoying herself with a group of friends. Teo barely knew those people and regretted not having stayed at home with Tom and Jerry.

Among the bottles of vodka in the cooler, he found one of water. He wouldn't stay long. He'd get a taxi home, and Patricia would get a lift later with a friend. His discomfort aside, he had to admit that the place was beautiful. Set into a rocky hillside, the mansion was divided into large living areas connected by stone stairways winding through the natural vegetation that climbed the slope. Farther down the stairs was a kind of bungalow where the party was taking place, with a swimming pool, barbecue, and wooden tables bolted to the ground. Winding paths led to a colorful, well-tended garden, separated from the forest by a white fence.

"Are you trying to escape the music or the people?" asked a female voice behind him. It was hoarse, a little tipsy.

Teo turned to look at her. It was a young woman, possibly younger than him, and very short—four foot nine at the most. Her brown eyes surveyed the flowers calmly.

"The music," he said.

A long silence put a distance between them.

She was well dressed in a blouse patterned with bright diamond shapes and a black skirt, but she wasn't exactly beautiful. Exotic, perhaps. Her light brown hair was pulled back in a messy bun, with a few strands sticking to her sweaty forehead.

"Were you dancing?" Teo asked.

"I was. But I got tired."

She smiled, and he noticed that her top front teeth were slightly misaligned. He found it charming.

"What's your name?"

"Teo. Teodoro, actually. And you are?"

"Clarice."

"That's a pretty name."

"For God's sake, don't talk to me about Clarice Lispector, because I've never read anything by her! That woman haunts me."

He was amused by the girl's spontaneity but remained serious. He wasn't comfortable around women who were so sure of themselves: he saw them as superior, almost unattainable.

Clarice walked over to him and set the plate of sausages and pieces of meat she was carrying on the guardrail. She took a sip from her glass. He glimpsed part of a colorful tattoo through the sleeve of her blouse but couldn't make out what it was.

"Aren't you eating anything?"

"I'm a vegetarian."

"Don't you drink either? That's water, isn't it?"

"I don't drink much. I don't handle alcohol well."

"Well ..." she said, lips touching the edge of her glass, "at least you drink. They say people who don't drink are dangerous.... It's a sign you aren't dangerous."

Teo thought he should laugh, so he did.

Clarice took another piece of meat from the plate.

"What about you? What are you drinking?" he asked.

"It's gummy. Some crap made with vodka and powdered lemon juice. It tastes like bleach."

"How do you know what bleach tastes like?"

"I don't need to taste things to know what they taste like." She said it with conviction, as if her words made absolute sense.

Teo felt a little uncomfortable. At the same time, he felt compelled to continue the conversation. He glanced down at her white legs and ballerina feet in purple strappy sandals. Her toenails were all painted different colors.

"Why are your toenails like that?"

"My fingernails are too." She held them out for him to see. Her fingers were long and slender, the most fragile hands he had ever seen. Her nails, cut short, were painted in an array of random colors.

"I see. Why?"

She answered without thinking, "To be different," and raised her right index finger to her mouth.

Teo noticed that Clarice chewed her cuticles. He assumed this explained the misalignment of her front teeth, which projected slightly outward. Although he hadn't studied dentistry, he'd researched the subject a lot in order to get to know Gertrude.

"And why be different?"

She raised her eyebrows. "The world's pretty dull. My parents are living proof of it. Take my dad, for example. Engineer, always out of town. São Paulo, Houston, London. My mother's a lawyer. Bureaucracy runs in the blood. That's why it's nice to be different. Not have a set routine. Get drunk and not care. Do stupid things and not remember afterward. Paint each nail a different color. Live life before it's too late, right?"

Clarice opened her little woven bag, took out a packet of Vogue menthol cigarettes, and pulled one out. "Got a light?"

"I don't smoke."

She tsked and rummaged around in her bag. The sun was setting behind the hill. Teo watched the drunken shadows moving down below. Clarice found her lighter and lit her cigarette, protecting the flame from the breeze with her hand. She took a drag and exhaled in his direction.

"You don't eat, don't smoke, and don't drink much.... Teo, do you fuck?"

He stepped back a little, a few inches, also avoiding the mint-flavored smoke. What was he retreating from? Why did that odd-ball make him feel so self-conscious? He didn't feel the need to put on an act for her. He liked the blasé way she held the cigarette and said whatever she thought.

"I'm just joking. Relax," she said, with a little punch to his shoulder.

It was their first physical contact. Teo smiled, his shoulder tingling where she'd touched him. He needed to say something.

"So what do you do?"

"What do I do?" She popped another piece of meat into her mouth and chewed on it. "I drink a lot, eat everything, and I've smoked everything too, but now all I smoke are Vogue menthols, girlie cigarettes. I fuck every now and then. I'm studying art history at the university. But I'm not sure if it's what I want to do. I'm really interested in screenwriting."

"Screenwriting?"

"Yeah, screenplays. I'm working on one at the moment. I'm not sure if it's going to be feature length. The argument is ready. And I've written about thirty pages of the screenplay so far. I've still got a long way to go."

"I'd like to read it," he said, without thinking. He was curious to see the result of so much irreverence. He wanted to know what she wrote about and how. Fiction writers put a lot of themselves in their texts.

"I don't know if you'll like it," she said. "It's a story for women. Three single girlfriends in a car driving around

looking for adventure. It's a road movie of sorts."

"I can only like it if I read it."

"Okay then, I'll show you." She put out the cigarette butt with the bottom of her sandal and ate another two pieces of meat. "What about you? What do you do?"

"Medicine."

"Wow, supersquare. My mother would love that. She says art history doesn't get you anywhere. As if poring through penal codes and lugging around piles of legal documents did."

"It's not as square as you think. There's art in medicine."

"Where?"

"Well, first we'd have to define art. For example, I want to be a pathologist."

"I don't see any art in that."

"It's complicated. We can talk about it later," he said. He was trying to create another invisible link between them.

"Okay. I've got to go."

He didn't like the fact that she wanted to leave so quickly. He felt as if she were avoiding him for some reason.

"I was just going to get a taxi. Want a lift?" he said.

"No, I live nearby."

"Could I borrow your cell for a minute? I left mine at home, and I need to call a taxi. I promise to be quick."

She reached into her bag. "Here."

As Teo made the call, he watched Clarice. She had let her hair out, and it came down below her waist. The contrast between her long hair and tiny body pleased him.

Two floodlights came on automatically.

"No one's answering. I'll get one on the street." He handed her back the cell.

They walked along the stone path together until it forked into two. "That's the way out," he said, pointing.

"I'm going to get a beer and say good-bye to some people. Aren't you going to say good-bye to anyone?"

He should have made up an excuse, but he wanted to tell the truth. "I'd rather not."

She nodded, then leaned over and gave him a peck on his tense lips. Then she turned and headed up the steps two at a time, the glass of green liquid sloshing about in her left hand.

WHEN TEO GOT home, he felt giddy. He ran to get his cell from the bedside table and sent a text message to his mother. Then he checked his missed calls, savoring the numbers of the last one. He lay on the sofa for a long while, staring at the ceiling, reliving the images. Something had exploded inside him. Something he couldn't explain, nor did he even want to. Although he didn't know Clarice's surname, where she lived, or where she studied art history, he had her cell number, and that made them intimate.

3

TEO WANTED TO call her the minute he woke up. He punched in her number, which he already knew by heart, but he didn't have the courage to complete the call. How would he explain that he had her number? It would sound pathetic, childish even, if he told her what he'd done.

He now realized how distant she still was. If he did nothing and just deleted her contact from his phone, they might never see each other again. How often in life do we cross paths with such a special person?

Samson came over, frolicking around his legs. Teo stroked his thick fur and let him lick his hands. Then he pushed him away. He didn't want to be consoled.

He dressed for church.

"We're running late!" shouted his mother from the elevator.

He took a deep breath. He didn't have to go everywhere with her, pushing her wheelchair over the sidewalks of Copacabana like a long-suffering nurse.

He suppressed the thought. "Coming, Mother."

He got his wallet and cell from the bedside table before leaving.

MAY THE LORD accept the sacrifice at your hands, for the praise and glory of his name, for our good and the good of all His Holy Church.

Teo found Sunday mass an interesting ritual. The piety of some members of the congregation made him want to laugh: watery-eyed, lips murmuring in prayer, as if God could hear them.

He is among us.

There was also something surreal about it: those same people lived such debauched lives, wallowing in worldly pleasures, and then at the first sign of a problem raced off to pray for a redemption they didn't deserve.

It is our duty and our salvation.

Sunday mass used to be torture for him. He'd attended catechism class as a child and had been confirmed—Patricia was very religious. For as long as he could remember, he'd resented the fact that you couldn't question the dogmas of faith.

May your Son remain among us!

But he'd quickly realized that it wasn't a Catholic's duty to debate; rather, it was to accept and memorize, as children learn their times tables, and he'd learned to put those sixty minutes to better use.

Send your Holy Spirit!

He knew every line in the prayer book by heart. The congregation didn't even pay attention to what they were saying. They chanted in unison.

Save us, savior of the world, for by your cross and resurrection you have set us free.

He chanted along with them, smiling at his mother from time to time, while his imagination roamed far from the noisy church. Mass and anatomy class were the moments when he felt most relaxed.

Receive, o Lord, our offerings!

That Sunday, however, his thoughts alighted on Clarice and refused to rise to loftier heights. During the homily, he remembered the previous day, the forward way she had approached him, the plate of sausages and meat, her provocative question: *Teo, do you fuck?*

May Your Spirit unite us as one body!

Memories depleted, he was beginning to imagine new conversations, scents, flavors. His time with Clarice would be much more special than that he'd shared with Gertrude.

Let us walk in love and joy!

He had an idea. It would have to be thought out carefully if it were to work. Nevertheless, it was already enough to lift his spirits.

Grant us, o Lord, eternal light!

By the end of mass, he had run through it three times in his mind and had it all worked out. Flawless. He knew how to get to Clarice.

Thanks be to God.

WHEN THEY LEFT the church, Patricia saw a friend she hadn't seen in weeks. Teo excused himself, saying he had to study. He bought a phone card at a newsstand and found a phone booth in a square that wasn't very busy. The inside of the booth was plastered with ads for prostitutes. Black stripes covering their eyes and nothing over their private parts. Velvet mouths and hot vaginas. Those were dirty women. Clarice was different: forward but sweet.

He dialed her number. She answered on the second ring.

Teo hung up. He had to breathe deeply before calling again.

She picked up quickly again.

"Good afternoon. May I speak to Clarice, please?" he said, faking a São Paulo accent.

"Speaking. Who is it?"

"Good afternoon, Clarice. I'm from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics. Your name is in our system. Could you confirm your surname, please?"

"Manhães."

"Great, thank you. How old are you?"

"Twenty-four."

He was surprised that she was two years older than him.

"Please hold while I update our records."

A bus sped down the street, honking at a car pulling out of a parking spot. He covered the mouthpiece.

"Thank you for waiting. We're conducting a survey of university students. You attend a university, don't you?"

"Yes." There was a hint of impatience in her reply.

"Could you tell me what you study and where?"

"Art history, at RJSU."

"Is that Rio de Janeiro State University, ma'am?"

"As far as I know, that's RJSU."

"What time of day do your classes start?"

"Seven a.m."

"And are you satisfied with your program?"

"They'll sue me if I say what I really think of that hellhole."

"What year are you in?"

"Hey, do you want to know my birth date, mother's maiden name, and the color of my panties too?"

Teo began to feel pins and needles in his hands. "Of course not, this is the last question. What year are you in?"

"Third."

"The institute thanks you for taking part in our survey."

She hung up without answering.

Teo put the phone back on the hook and turned over the information in his mind. A smile spread across his face.

Sunday dragged on. Teo didn't like Sundays. He wasn't tired, so he researched Clarice on the Internet for hours. He discovered that she'd placed first in the art history entrance exam, with a high enough score to get into the most competitive courses. He also saw that she'd placed well in other entrance exams, always appearing at the top of the lists. He found a blog on astrology where she'd left some comments. On the social networks, the name Clarice Manhães brought up a hideous-looking woman who obviously wasn't her.

Before going to bed, Teo set his alarm for early the next day. At seven a.m., he'd be at the School of Art History.

THE BLACK VECTRA was a remnant of the Avelar family's former prestige, from the days when they'd lived in the penthouse in Copacabana. Despite all her cuts in spending, Patricia had gone out of her way to keep the car.

Teo arrived at the university at six-thirty. The art history department was deserted. He pulled the hood of his jacket over his head. Although it was spring, there was an icy draft running through the silent corridors.

"Where can I find the third-year students?" he asked a cleaner. The man didn't know.

He sat on a bench in the foyer, watching the students come and go. He'd brought a book by Dürrenmatt but was so nervous he couldn't find any meaning in the words. He read and reread the first page, but it was useless. Pretty girls went past, exotic hair, fair skin, holding laptops, but there was no sign of Clarice.

At nine, Teo went to the office to ask for information. The ill-tempered woman at the desk snapped that it was the end of the semester, they might already be on vacation, and she had no way of knowing.

He returned to the foyer, clinging to the railing of the hazy staircase that connected him to Clarice. He couldn't see the steps in front of him; the climb was treacherous. It occurred to him to give up and go back to his books and bodies. If Clarice had wanted him around, she'd have found a way to make it happen. She was the kind of girl who always got what she wanted.

His defeat was confirmed by a girl with bulging eyes. "The third-years are finished for the semester. I'm a fourth-year, but I have some classes with them. The fourth-years are finished too. I just came to get my results. I have no idea who Clarice is."

Teo thanked her impatiently. The idiot didn't know who Clarice was. How absurd. He headed down the ramp in front of the university thinking that people were unaware of the best things around them.

He was already halfway back to the parking lot when he saw Clarice walk past, talking to a friend. Once the surprise passed, he followed her. He took the coincidence as a sign that he was on the right path, which made him feel strong and powerful. Clarice and her friend went into the office.

Outside, gray clouds were competing with the sun for the sky. Clarice left the office quickly, laughing at something her friend had said. Teo envied the other girl for whatever she had said that was so funny. He didn't know what made Clarice laugh. Maybe he was better off with Gertrude and her silence.

The girls walked down the ramp. Clarice was wearing a mossgreen cardigan over a colorfully striped blouse, and she lit up a menthol cigarette, which she smoked until she got to the metro. She already had a ticket. Teo bought one for himself just in time to find them on the platform. He entered the same carriage, the next door down. A multitude of faces got on and off at each station, but Clarice was indifferent to everyone else, with eyes and smiles only for her friend.

They got off in Botafogo and took a bus toward Jardim Botânico.

Teo hailed a taxi and, enjoying the feeling of being in a film, said, "Follow that bus."

The journey continued as far as Lage Park, where the girls got off, still engaged in lively conversation. Teo paid the taxi driver and didn't wait for the change.

OBLIVIOUS TO THE rain that was threatening to fall, dirty children raced through the park. Uniformed nannies sat on benches gossiping and flirting with the men who jogged past. Elderly couples strolled along hand in hand. A group of young people sitting in a circle were improvising a picnic. Clarice and her friend were graciously included in the scene. They pulled semiprofessional cameras out of