

THE BRAVE GIRL



Illustrated by
Nando Motta

Written by
Flávio Colombini

My parents are activists. They defend various social causes and take part in marches to defend human rights. I usually go along with them.



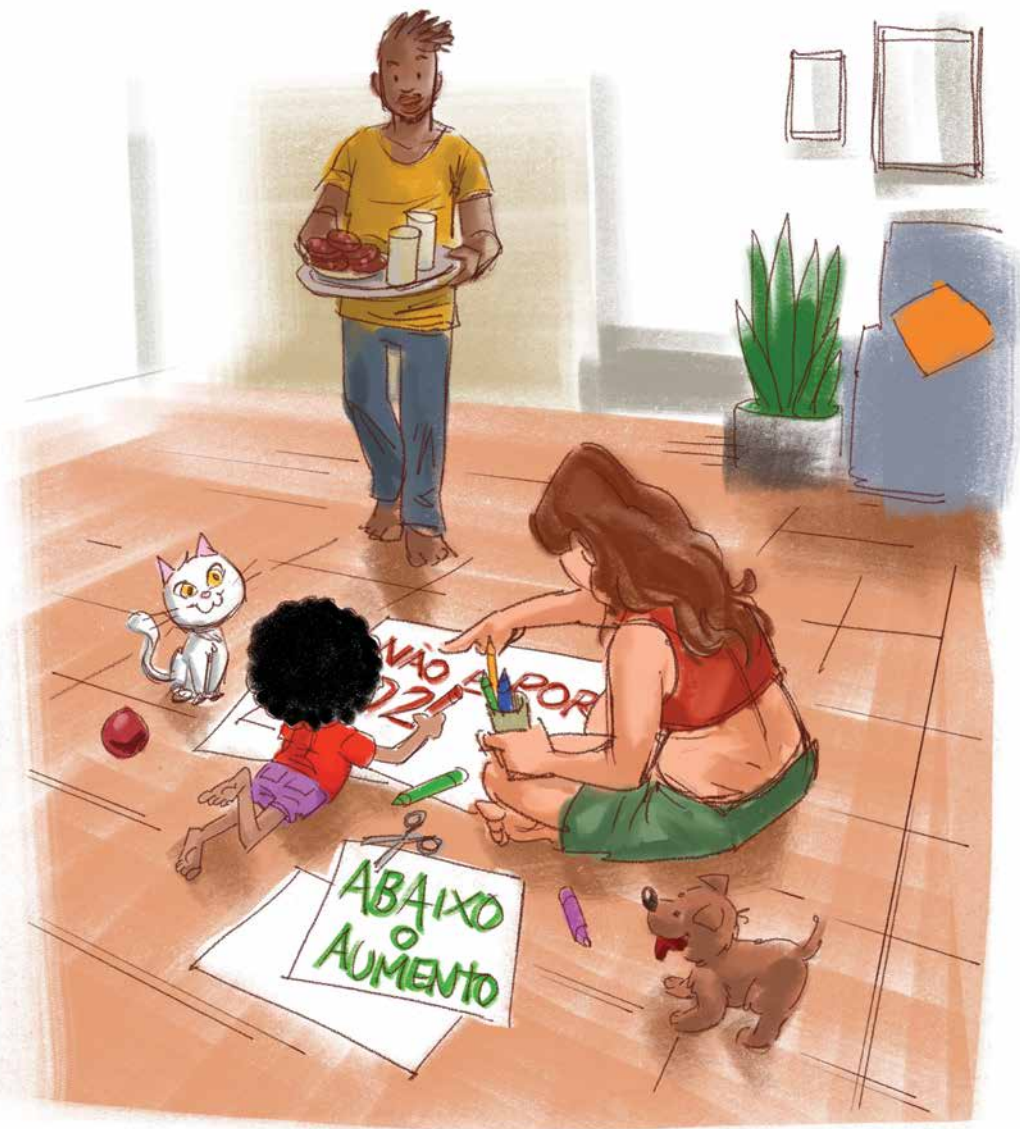
Every March 8, which is International Women's Day, we take part in the traditional Women's March, which demands equal rights for women and men.

I love walking with a crowd of people, singing songs and shouting slogans like these: “Women aren’t just butts and breasts, our fight is for respect!” “Take care, you petty chauvinist, Latin America is going to be all feminist!” “The State is secular, it can’t be chauvinist, the body is ours, not of the moralists...” “Make way for women to pass, our march is towards success!” “Our place is not to be trapped at home, we are free, our place is wherever we want it to be.”

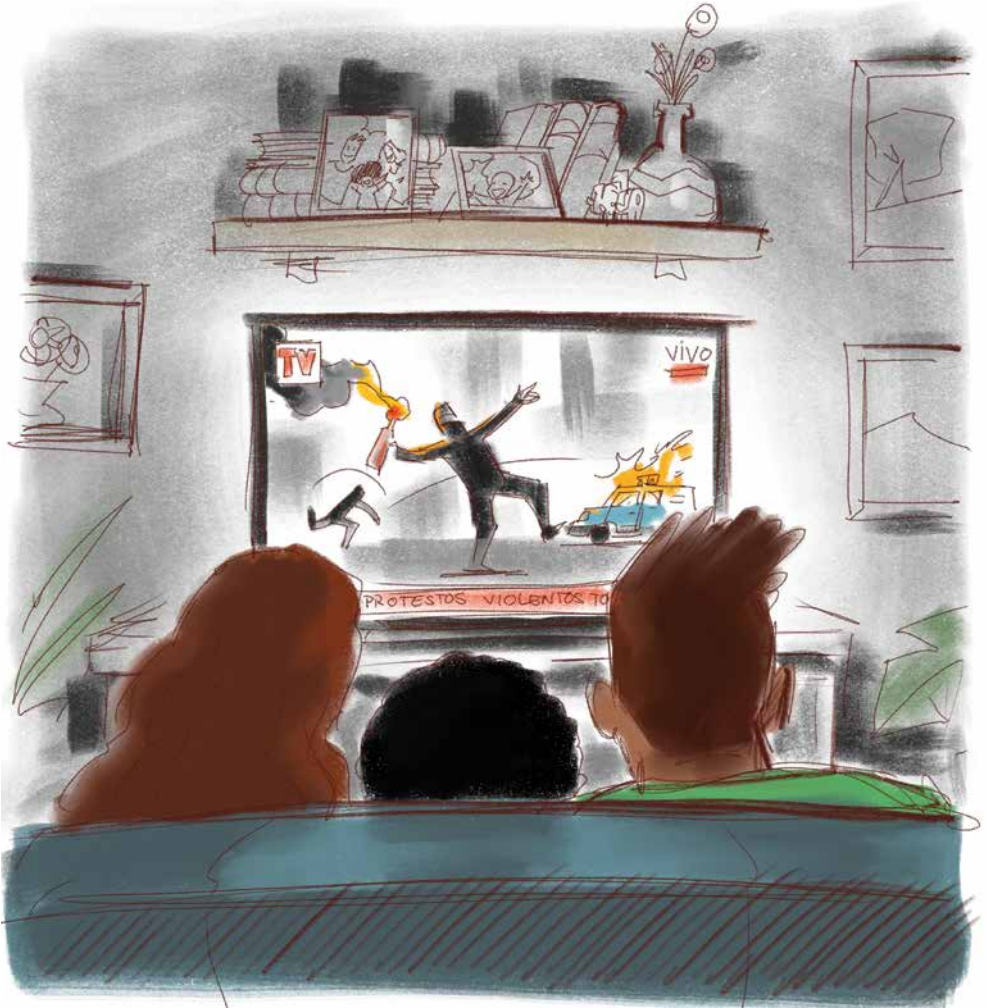


I’m small, but I feel part of something very BIG when I take part in these events.

On June 13, 2013, we decided to take part in a demonstration by FPM, the Free Pass Movement, which was protesting against the increase in public transport fares. The price of taking the bus, train or metro had risen from \$3.00 to \$3.20. It may not seem like much, but the increase would weigh heavily on poor people, who would find it harder to get around the huge city of São Paulo.



The problem was that two days earlier, at another FPM protest, a small group of masked people committed acts of vandalism, such as breaking bank windows, spray-painting on walls and setting fire to garbage cans. Because of these few troublemakers, the police cracked down hard on the protest, with a lot of violence.



The images of the vandalism were featured in the newspapers. As a result, many people thought that everyone who protested was a vandal and that taking part in such events was dangerous.

As we were leaving the apartment, a neighbor criticized us: "Taking a child to a street protest? What a lack of responsibility!"

My mother retorted: "It's those who oppose the demonstrations who are irresponsible. Don't you think the population deserves cheaper and more efficient public transportation? That will only happen if we put pressure on the government."



I also argued: “Do you think that everyone who goes to protests is a hoodlum? That’s not true. Most of the protesters are people like us, who want to improve the world peacefully.”

Although I was only 8 years old, I was already learning to speak like an adult. After that, the neighbor didn’t dare to say anything else.

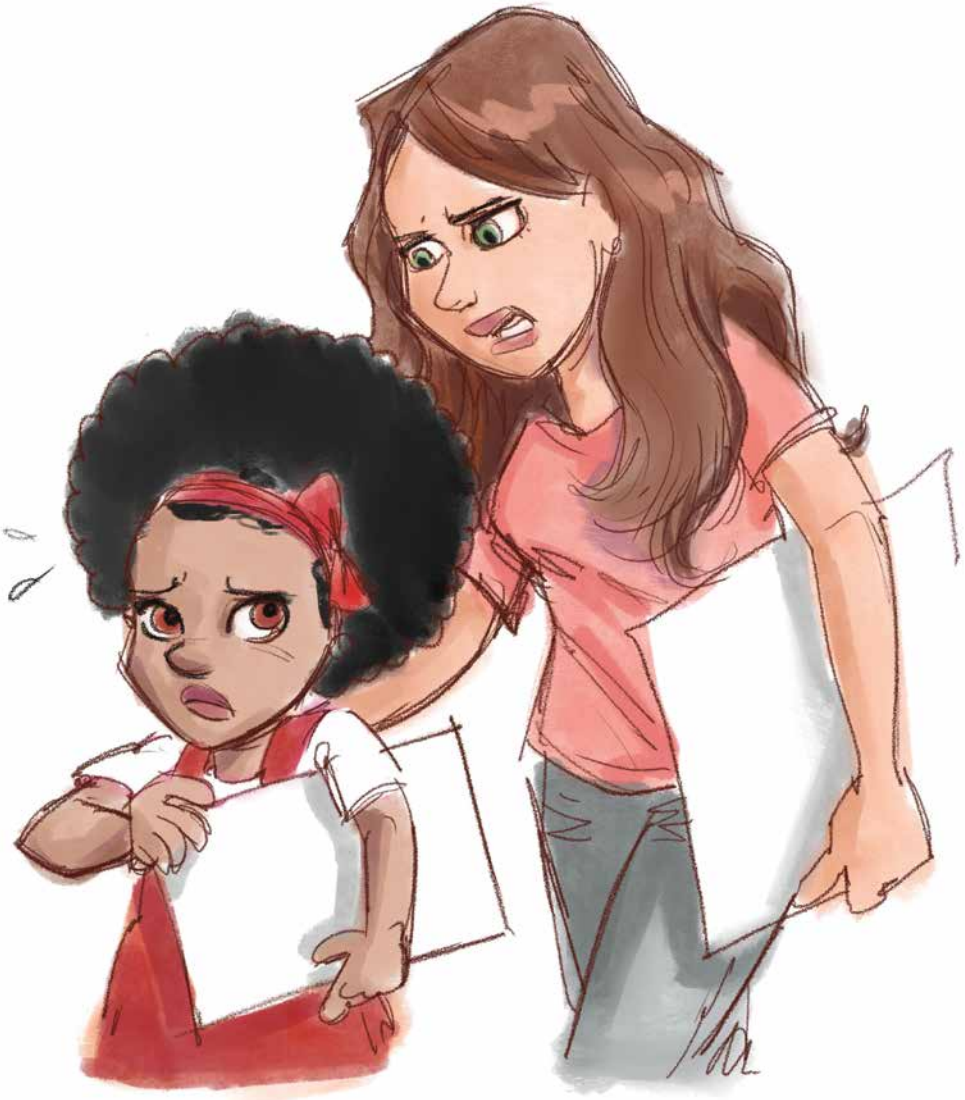


When we arrived at the gathering before the march, we were startled. There were lots and lots of police there. My father got angry and complained: “How absurd! Instead of policing the streets and looking for criminals, they’re here intimidating good people who are demonstrating peacefully.”



Then he warned me: “The policemen are good people, but I don’t think they’re well trained and they’re afraid of crowds. They often don’t know how to react sensibly. If someone throws anything at them, instead of trying to arrest the person who did it, they start throwing tear gas bombs at everyone.”

My mother also cautioned me: “If there are any disturbances, always stay close to us and you’ll be safe!”



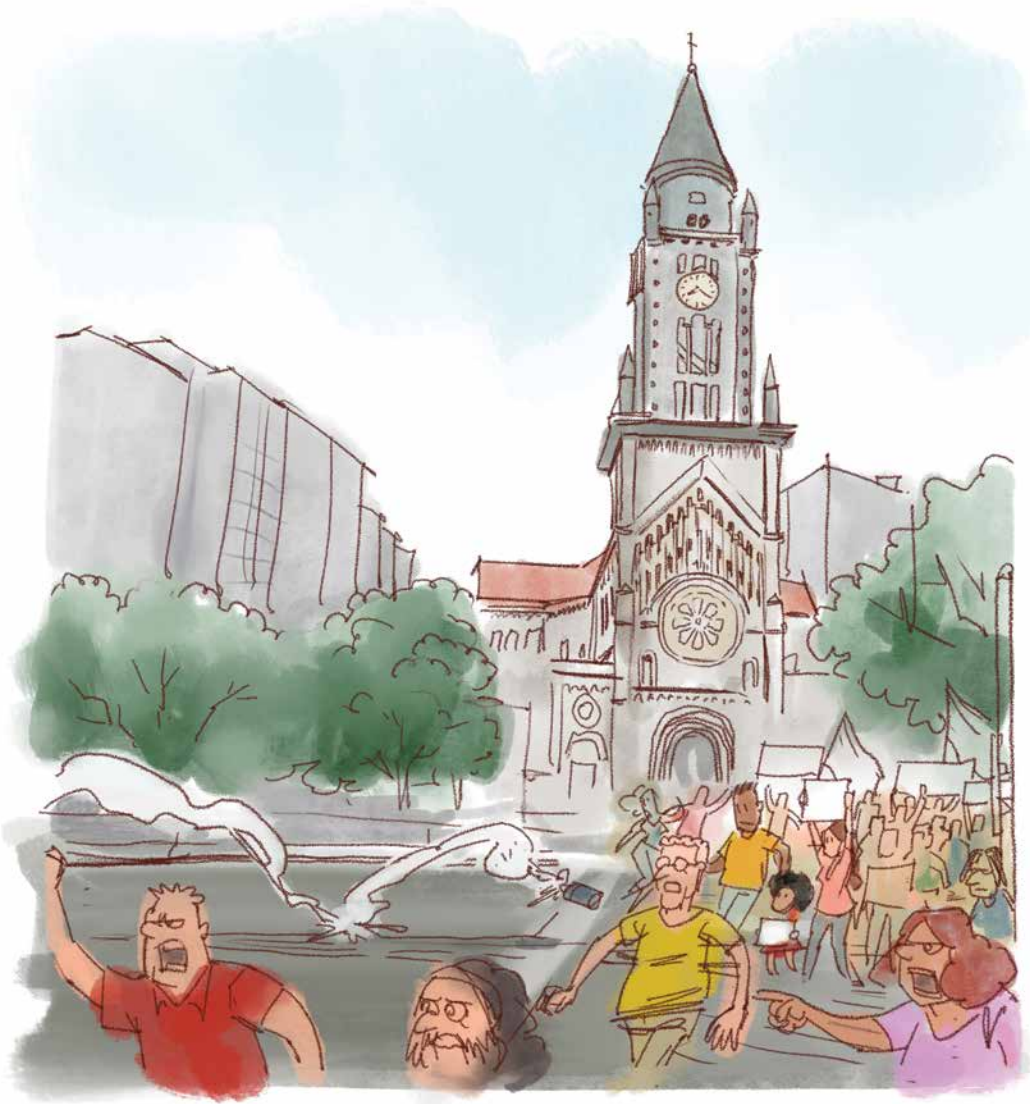
I admit that these warnings made me apprehensive. I thought about asking to leave, but I didn't say anything.

The march started, with thousands of people walking together. It was beautiful to see people carrying placards that read: “For a life without turnstiles”, “Don’t take away our right to get around the city”. The crowd also shouted slogans: “If the fare doesn’t go down, the city will stop!” “Jump, get off the ground, against the bus fare increase”.



I was thrilled to take part in that event, together with so many people who were combating an injustice, fighting for a better city!

Halfway through the march, everything changed radically. To this day, nobody knows how the confusion started. The fact is that the police suddenly started throwing bombs, which exploded near us, making a deafening noise and releasing tear gas, which made our throats and eyes burn.



I got really scared! My eyes started watering, first because of the gas, then because I started crying out of despair. The crowd started running around scared and pushing my parents. I was holding hands with my mother, but our hands fell apart.



I couldn't see anything. I wiped away the tears with my T-shirt. When I could see again, I didn't know where my parents were. I was lost in all the confusion.



I saw a lot of people coughing, crying, running, more bombs exploding and police firing rubber bullets at the demonstrators. My heart was racing, my throat was burning, I could hardly breathe and my eyes were watering non-stop.



Despite this, I managed to run to a corner and tried to spot my parents.



I climbed a set of stairs to get a higher vantage point. From there I could glimpse my parents, who were far away, in the middle of the street, looking for me everywhere.

I tried to run towards them, but it was difficult to dodge the crowd coming from the opposite direction.



Then I finally caught up with my parents!
We hugged each other happily.



The next moment, however, some policemen beat up a protester for no apparent reason. My father filmed the police violence with his cell phone. But then the police wanted to confiscate my father's phone. He wouldn't let them. Then they tried to arrest him.



My father resisted, saying: "Why do you want to arrest me? I'm not doing anything wrong!"

My mother also tried to calm the situation down, but the policemen were angry and didn't want to talk. One of them tried to grab the cell phone, but my father wouldn't let him. Then the policeman raised his baton to hit him...



At that moment, I stood in the middle of them and shouted with all my might: “Don’t touch my father!”



The policeman, who had his baton raised, was startled by my bravery and the fact that I was a child.



He looked indecisively at me, then at my father. Then he lowered his baton and gave up.

Relieved, Dad took me in his arms, pulled Mom by the hand and got us out of there. The police were baffled and let us go.



In my father's arms, I started crying again. He comforted me: "Calm down, darling, everything's fine now! We could have been arrested, but you saved us."



"My mother praised me: "I'm proud of you, girl! You were very brave!"
I was happy to be able to return home with my parents, all safe and sound!

The next day, the press condemned the excessive police violence at the demonstration. And I had a big surprise: someone had taken a photo of me just as I was trying to protect my parents. The photo appeared on the front page of the newspaper. I became known as “The brave girl”.



The people were outraged by the repression the demonstrators suffered. A few days later, they organized another demonstration. I was afraid to go.



My father tried to encourage me: “The government wants us to be afraid to take to the streets to demand changes in the country. But we can’t be afraid. The more they try to intimidate us, the more we need to have the courage to demand our rights!” I finally took heart and decided to go with my parents.

I was surprised, because this time the demonstration was much, much bigger! There were no more police, just the public. Thousands and thousands of people took to the streets. Not just in São Paulo, all over Brazil. And not just to stop the bus fare increase. The people demanded an end to police violence and political corruption. They wanted a complete improvement in the country.



This movement lasted several days and had a good outcome: the increase in public transport fares was revoked, not only in São Paulo, but also in other cities across the country.



This unprecedented mobilization became known as the “June Journeys” and went down in Brazilian history. I was very happy to have been part of it!

Writer



Flávio Colombini

I live very close to where the police repression portrayed in this book took place. From my window, I could hear the bangs and see the flash of the mortar bombs. As soon as it was over, I went to the scene, where I still saw some demonstrators and the police leaving. On the ground, there were countless tear gas capsules and empty rubber bullet shells. It was shocking! In the following days, I went to the demonstrations that mobilized Brazil. I was very happy to see people taking to the streets to demand their right to a better country!

From then on, I usually go to various street demonstrations, because I think it's wonderful to join the part of our population that is politically and socially aware and takes to the streets to demand our rights. We are often few in number, but we make a difference. And I'm happy to see that many fathers and mothers take their children to the marches, showing them how important it is for everyone to take part in the fight for progress in our country.

I invite you to take a look at other books I've written on my website: www.flaviocolombini.com/english

Illustrator



Nando Motta

I'm a political cartoonist, musician and actor. In 2013, like many Brazilians, I also took to the streets to protest. And even now, more than ten years later, I'm very politically active and love to defend the rights of people of my country, voting well, going to marches, and creating daily political cartoons to denounce wrong things and praise good things happening in Brazil and the World.

I invite you to get to know my work on Instagram [@desenhosdonando](https://www.instagram.com/desenhosdonando)