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## Brasil with an S: A memoir

Lee Isaacson Roll

*Eastern Illinois University*

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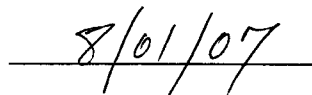
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Brasil with an S

A Memoir

(TITLE)

BY

Lee Isaacson Roll

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF

Master of Arts in English

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY  
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

2007

YEAR

I HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THIS THESIS BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING  
THIS PART OF THE GRADUATE DEGREE CITED ABOVE

31 July 2007

DATE

Michael Jordon

THESIS DIRECTOR

31 July 2007

DATE

Jan Bennett

DEPARTMENT/SCHOOL HEAD

***Brasil*** with an ***S***

*a memoir*

*by*

**Lee Isaacson Roll**

Eastern Illinois University

2007

Submitted for the fulfillment of the Master of Arts in English

Dr. Michael Loudon, director

Dr. Olga Abella, reader

Dr. Daiva Markelis, reader

## ABSTRACT

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This thesis consists of six essays written in the genre of creative nonfiction. The focus of the work is my experience of living in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil and teaching at the American School from 1969-1971 when I was in my early twenties. The essays are sourced in 104 letters I sent to my family; entries in two daybooks; photos; and my roommate's diary. The events suggested by these primary sources have been enriched by information acquired through academic research and by details provided by conversations and correspondence with the people who shared the experiences with me. The essays shift back and forth through time, recalling and reflecting on memories from my childhood to present day. Understandably, these memories have been tempered somewhat by time, experience, and imagination.

The first essay describes the trip to Rio; my roommates and my friends; and my first encounter with *macumba*, Brazilian voodoo. The second tells of two evenings at a five-star restaurant on the top of an unfinished skyscraper. The third records the occurrences of a day spent in a *favela*, a slum, with our maid and her family. The fourth chronicles the observance of New Year's Eve 1969 by practitioners of *macumba*. The fifth details the events of Easter 1971 in the town of Ouro Preto, including meeting Julian Beck and members of the Living Theatre and spending Easter afternoon with American poet Elizabeth Bishop. The sixth essay is an afterword, reflecting on these experiences.

## DEDICATION

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*in memory of...*

Frances Engdahl Isaacson & Gustav Andy Isaacson

*dedicated, with love, to my family...*

Jaime, Jim, Megan, Jack & Andrew; Ann & Klutch; Marcus & Erin; Mark; Lynn;  
Jacky & Bill

*and especially to JR...*

who can make my insurmountable mountains into manageable molehills ...  
who is there for me not only when I am at my best but also at my worst ...  
who is my superhero, Wonderman, always saving the day ...

*May we always, like Megan, fall down, jump up, and say, "I'm okay, I'm okay!"*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Thanks to Dr. Michael Loudon, Dr. Olga Abella, and Dr. Daiva Markelis for reading and reading, and then reading some more; for your advice, encouragement, and support for the project; and for your ability to send me in the right direction when I was lost.

Michael, if it had not been for your suggestion to experiment with a different kind of research, the project would never have been started. It is not finished yet, but I promise that someday it will be. Writing this thesis has been more important to me than any other paper that I have written in the fifty-five years that I have been a student.

Olga, your suggestion to get more of myself into the essays has been invaluable. I have tried, and I'll keep trying as I continue to write the remaining "Brazil stories." Thank you for being "caught in my world."

Daiva, your kind affirmation of my writing has given me the confidence and the energy to make me want to work even harder. Your unerring advice has always been just what I wanted and needed. You cruised on my wavelength.

I couldn't have asked for a better committee. Thank you.

. . .

Karen Moerls Fitch, former roommate and dear friend, without your diary, I never could have put my letters in order and verified my recollections. (From this day forward, I will always date my correspondence!) Thanks for sharing your observations and perceptions from our time together back then and for your reflections and comments now, all these years later. And thanks for taking such good care of me in Brazil and for keeping track of me ever since. You helped me grow up.

Susan Sering Treacy, thanks so much for accompanying me on wonderful Brazilian adventures, for introducing me to fascinating people (yourself included!), and for our renewed present-day friendship.

. . .

Thanks to all of my students from 1993-2007 at Oakland High School who urged and encouraged me to initiate this project.

. . .

I am indebted to everyone mentioned in this memoir. Without you, there would be no stories. I hope I have done you justice. If not, my deepest apologies.



## PREFACE

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To complete my graduate studies in English at Eastern Illinois University, I have written six loosely connected essays in what editors Robert Root, Jr. and Michael Steinberg term as “the fourth genre,” that is, creative or literary nonfiction. The focus of my literary work is the experience of living in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil and teaching at the American School from 1969-1971 when I was in my early twenties: open, naïve, and simultaneously dazzled and baffled by life.

The essays are sourced in letters I sent to my family; entries in two daybooks; photos; and my roommate’s diary, infused and overlaid with memory and imagination. The events suggested by these primary sources have been enriched by information acquired through extensive academic research and by details provided in personal interviews and emails from the people who shared the experiences with me.

Because of the length of time that has elapsed since the actual experience, I have had to create and add details to the ideas and impressions presented in the letters in order to elaborate and to enhance what was stated in the original sources. I acknowledge the current debate about the authenticity of creative nonfiction and admit that, although my stories are based on fact, they are somewhat altered or compressed by time, memory, and poetic license. Nevertheless, it has been my intention throughout the project to stay as close as possible to the truth as I lived it.

As chronological dividers between sections, I have used real dates and actual words from my daybooks, and the majority of the descriptions of people and places are

carefully constructed versions of the original descriptions. Understandably, however, I have had to manufacture a large portion of the dialogue, yet even some of it is authentic, taken directly from the letters themselves; interviews recorded in *Carioca*, the yearbook of Escola Americana do Rio de Janeiro, the American School; and recent conversations and emails with my former colleagues.

When I began the project, I had access to ninety letters that I had written to my family. After the death of my mother in April 2007, I acquired fourteen more. As I read each individual letter for the first time since it was written nearly forty years ago, I realized that I had forgotten many people, events, and details. Yet, I also realized that, even after so many years, the details of certain events, especially those stories that I considered to be indelible parts of my personal history, were indeed real and true. Unlike Elizabeth Bishop who said, “I may be remembering it all wrong” in the documentary about her life, *Voices & Visions*, many of my memories—the stories that I wondered if I had colored with *too* much imagination—were verified by my letters and by my roommate’s diary. In many cases, what I remembered was right.

. . .

For nearly four decades, the most significant and special events of my time in Brazil have surfaced and resurfaced often; they emerge in my dreams and flit through my mind whenever I hear a certain phrase of music or smell a certain scent. Stronger and clearer than memories of any other time in my life, they come seemingly of their own will, taking me back to a place and a time long ago. They make me nostalgic, and they make me feel richly blessed. These, the stories that keep coming back, are some of the stories I have told in my thesis. The first essay describes how I ended up in Rio, my

roommates, and my friends; the second details two magical nights at a restaurant atop an unfinished skyscraper; the third records the occurrences of a day spent in a *favela*, a slum; the fourth chronicles the events of New Year's Eve 1969; the fifth tells of Easter 1971 in Ouro Prêto and of an afternoon spent with poet Elizabeth Bishop; and the sixth, as an afterword, shares some reflections on these experiences.

Because these experiences are such a part of me, for years I have been able to easily access entire scenes with sights, sounds, smells, textures, and tastes. Each of these experiences has touched me in some profound way and has been significant in forming who I am. These details are personally important. As a teacher, I advise my students that the details of their lives, too, are important, and that if these details are not written down, they will be lost. In accordance, I make assignments that require them to write about and reflect on their lives. And now, by writing this thesis, I have finally taken my own advice and written about and reflected on my own life.

Natalie Goldberg, author of *Writing Down the Bones*, says, "We are important and our lives are important, magnificent really, and their details are worthy to be recorded. [...] It is important to say the names of who we are, the names of the places we have lived, and to write the details of our lives. [...] Our task is to say a holy yes to the real things of our life" (43-44). My thesis, I hope, is the first step in beginning the process of recording many other memories of the people and places, the thoughts and ideas, and the changes that have occurred in my life.

I have wanted to write about Brazil for a long time, but I allowed years of raising children, teaching English, and battling cancer to get in my way. The opportunity to record those definitive years in words, sentences, and paragraphs in a thesis has been a

fortuitous and fortunate situation, profoundly meaningful and rewarding. Unlike many graduate students who are just beginning their academic careers, I am winding down, looking around the corner at retirement. They want to plunge in, make a splash in academia or on the literary scene; I just want to sort out my life, get a look at where I've been, and make some proposals about where I should go next.

Author Judith Guest says in the foreword to *Writing Down the Bones*, "writers do not write to *impart* knowledge to others; rather, they write to *inform* themselves" (xii). Yes, I want my writing to guide me. But also, I *do* want to "impart" knowledge. I want to give my children and my grandchildren an inkling of who I was before they knew me. This aspiration to record aspects of my life is not at all because of my own ego, not because of my own sense of self-importance. In fact, that the writing will be public terrifies me; it is not something that I am comfortable with in any way. But the reason I am making myself write is because I wish I had, in writing, more information about my own parents and their parents and their parents before them.

Several years ago, our older daughter begged my mother to write about her life, chronicling as many details as she could remember from her birth in 1916 to the present. After mom died, we found her journal. Reading about her life as a young girl, as a new wife after World War II, as a mother with three kids, as an artist, a teacher, and a traveler has given us precious new perspectives about her as a person and what the world was like in the time she lived.

In the old days, people kept diaries and wrote letters; now very few do. We phone, email, and text-message. And to save time and money, we try to communicate using as few words as possible, sometimes not even using words at all, just letters and symbols.

Once typed or said, the words disappear, along with the ideas, dreams, feelings, knowledge, and wisdom that the words represent. What details are being lost? What nuances cannot be picked up because of the brevity of the message? In the future, we will have sound bites and video clips of this time, but they are modified versions of the whole, stripped to the barest minimum, hardly a fitting rendition of the breadth and depth of a person's life.

Because my mother's stories are so important to me, I hope that my stories will also be important to my family. In addition, I hope that someday I will have writings from my own children and from my grandchildren. Maybe because I have had a life-threatening disease, maybe because I no longer have living parents, maybe because life and death issues invade my thoughts daily (a former student has had two stem-cell transplants to thwart Stage IV lymphoma; her poet/philosopher-turned-military brother, also a former student and adopted in my heart, was shot in Iraq; my good friend has MS; my daughter gave birth to her daughter and twin sons; my father-in-law had a heart attack), I think we—all of us—should, at the very least, try to leave something that will last. I hope my mother's journal and my thesis will create a family tradition of writing the details of our lives.

Furthermore, I feel that I have an obligation to my students. I make them write the details of their lives; in turn, I should do what I ask of them. Often in class, to make points or to offer examples for them, I tell "Brazil stories." The kids ask question after question, begging for more stories. Invariably someone says, "Mrs. Roll, you should write a book." My thesis records and shapes some of those stories.

. . .

The seminal event that compelled me to write the Brazil stories occurred during Summer Session 2004. English 5010 Professor Michael Loudon offered those of us who had already accumulated a stockpile of graduate credits and had written a number of academic papers the opportunity to come up with a meaningful project about twentieth-century poetry. Noticing that Elizabeth Bishop was on the *syllabus*, I knew in a split second what I wanted to do. Some thirty years before, I had spent Easter Sunday with Bishop in her mountain home in Ouro Preto, Brazil. For the class, I wrote about my memories of that occasion and supported my observations with primary and secondary sources. I read Bishop's poetry and prose; I read what her biographers and literary critics, including Brett C. Millier, George Monteiro, Carmen L. Oliveira, Anne Stevenson, Thomas J. Travisano, Gary Fountain and Peter Brazeau had to say about her; and I read her letters in *One Art* published by Robert Giroux.

The project so engaged me that I continued the research through independent study during Fall semester 2004, under the tutelage of Dr. Loudon. Interestingly, the countless strands of biographical information that I followed led me not just to details about Bishop's life, but invariably also to links with my own life. Although I was fascinated by everything I learned, some of the information was downright mind-boggling. It was nothing less than startling to run across names and places in a book about Bishop and then to find those same names and places—many of them long since forgotten—mentioned in my own letters and journals. When I lived in Rio, however, I had little or no awareness of the coincidences that connected me to Bishop or to any of the other people I met in Brazil. It was only during the researching and writing of the

thesis that I began to notice the connections and become cognizant of, perhaps, some sort of “cosmic synchronicity.”

For example, after reading biographies and Bishop’s own letters, I am fairly certain that she and I, unknowingly, crossed paths several years before we actually met in Brazil. During the winter of 1966, Bishop taught at the University of Washington, the university I attended and graduated from as an English major. I am sure that I would have mentioned to her when we met in 1971 that I was from the Seattle area and that my alma mater was the University of Washington, but she said nothing about having lived and taught there.

By cross-referencing dates in *One Art* and *Remembering Elizabeth Bishop* by Fountain and Brazeau with my whereabouts in 1966, I learned that we both may have been in the same lecture hall, attending a reading by guest poet and translator Rolfe Humphries. A freshman, I went alone to the reading and talked to no one; afterwards, I bought one of Humphries’ books, and he autographed it for me. Because most of the faculty—those teaching poetry especially—were expected to attend the reading, it is likely that Bishop was there, too.

I learned from my research that she had known Humphries—or at least *of* him—for years, and her opinion of him was less than favorable. In a letter dated May 1, 1957, she wrote to Isabella Stewart Gardner, an editor at *Poetry* magazine, that Mr. Humphries’ “taste seems to be very strange” (Giroux 338). Apparently, he had rejected poems by both Gardner and Bishop. In contrast to her opinion, I remember that the UW faculty and the students were excited by his visit.

Some time after Humphries' reading, Bishop's behavior toward him, as witnessed and documented by a number of her colleagues, was the cause of considerable embarrassment. Department chair Robert Heilman told Fountain and Brazeau that she and her "crony" Henry Reed exhibited "a shared superiority to the rest of the world, which at times was not altogether pleasant" (217). Reed, the British author of "Naming of Parts," a poem I knew well, was the visiting poet of 1965 who had stayed on at the university through 1966.

Heilman said, "Once Elizabeth and Henry came up and Rolfe Humphries was there. As a young man Rolfe was a very witty, incisive, and even abusive reviewer. By then he was old and tired. He was a guy that you had to like and feel sorry for. Elizabeth and Henry behaved awfully, wandering off in the corners and snickering and that sort of thing. Snide. I don't know whether Elizabeth got drunk; Henry was always a little bit drunk" (Fountain and Brazeau 217). It is strange for me to think that I may have sat in the same audience with poets whose work I have admired and taught again and again. And it is stranger still, alarming actually, to think that people I held in such high esteem could be so mean.

By all accounts, during her stay in Seattle, Bishop spent a good amount of time drunk. She was unhappy. Having never taught before, she had no idea what college students were like; she found them to be undisciplined, undereducated, and whiney. She disliked many of them. In addition, she felt contempt for the Northwest poets, and, for some reason, she seemed to blame Theodore Roethke, who had taught at the university from 1947 until his death in 1963, for the students' inability to write anything but shoddy "mood" poems with no regard for proper English (Bishop and Wehr). Perhaps by the



time I met her in Brazil and mentioned my affiliation with the University of Washington, she had erased Seattle from her memory. Or maybe she was, by then, embarrassed by her unseemly behavior and didn't want to be reminded of it.

From several written sources, I learned that Bishop was a painter. As the daughter of an artist and as someone always interested in art, I wanted to see her work. When I saw reproductions of her watercolors in *Exchanging Hats*, I recognized several as being similar to paintings I had seen in her house. They were small, painted with poor quality paint on poor quality paper. I remembered that, at the time, I thought the work was somewhat primitive and tight—almost as if the artist had a stiff or pinched hand—and I suspected that he or she was someone controlled, withdrawn, and stressed. Of course, now I can conclude that the artist was Bishop herself.

My research seems to support my analysis of her artwork as sound; the more I read about her, the more it became evident that she was trying very hard to keep certain truths about herself locked up inside. In fact, it's not inconceivable to me that she fled the United States as a way of concealing her secrets. After all, according to her poem "Manners: For a Child of 1918," she was someone who was made to believe in "good manners required." Being an alcoholic in twentieth-century North America was not considered "mannerly." And not only was she an alcoholic, but she was a lesbian who, according to her biographers, tried at great length to hide her sexual orientation.

The small size of her paintings was especially curious to me—paintings in the 60s were, for the most part, large. In my research, I came across a gallery note she wrote for a 1967 exhibition of miniature watercolors by Wesley Wehr, one of the few students she

liked and who, over time, became her friend. Her discussion of Wehr's work explained her intrigue with small things.

It is a great relief to see a small work of art these days. The Chinese unrolled their precious scroll-paintings to show their friends, bit by bit; the Persians passed their miniatures about from hand to hand; many of Klee's or Bissier's paintings are hand-size. Why shouldn't we, so generally addicted to the gigantic, at last have some small works of art, some short poems, short pieces of music [...] some intimate, low-voiced, and delicate things in our mostly huge and roaring, glaring world? (Rosenbaum)

Reading her words, all these years later, is elucidating, but what caught my attention even more than her words was what I learned about Wehr himself, as if Bishop in some way, led me to him. A composer turned painter turned paleobotanist, he shared a link not only with Bishop, but, in a way, with me.

In 1981, Wehr discovered the fossilized remains of the oldest cherry leaf known to man. He named the leaf *Prunus andersonii* as a tribute to Northwest artist Guy Anderson whom he described as being "a strikingly handsome man," a "cross between composer George Gershwin and dancer Gene Kelly," who, with his infinite wisdom, his power of observation, and his ability to create a semblance of the mystery of the universe in his paintings was "the closest of all Northwest artists to being a 'Zen master'" ("Wehr").

Anderson was my mom's close friend, one of her mentors. In fact, he told her that she never should have had children; she should have painted instead; she would have

been famous. Luckily for the three of us kids, she wrapped her arms around us and said that she would take us over fame any day.

My favorite thing in Guy's studio—besides his paintings—was a huge pulp-gray bee's nest, suspended from a branch and nailed to the wall. He had fixed the lighting so that the nest on the branch cast intricate tonal shadows across the room. I was fascinated by how he had taken this ordinary object, transformed it with light, and thereby transformed the entire room. For many years, a bee's nest on a branch has hung in my living room; as a little girl, I said I would have a nest like Guy's, and I do.

I have no idea if Bishop ever met Anderson through her alliance with Wehr, but I feel a connection among and with them. All are masters of observation. Critic Philip Booth said of her, she "looks at the world with an eye so individual that to share her vision is—gratefully—to revise one's own" (Monteiro 53). Often called "the famous eye" by her biographers, she urged her students to see, really see, the world around them. "You should use more objects in your poems—those things you use every day, the things around you. [...] One can write very good poetry without vivid images, but I myself prefer observation. I just don't find enough *things* in your poems," she said. (Bishop and Wehr).

Just as Bishop in her poetry observed and transformed a fish or a moose or an armadillo, Anderson observed the things of nature and transformed them into abstracted symbols in his artwork. Accordingly, into every painting, sometimes visible and sometimes hidden, he painted an egg, his symbol for the profundity and perpetuity of life. Wehr, of course, through intense observation, discovered something no one else had ever seen. Like them, I committed myself to the premise that keeping observation keen was

paramount in the continuation of my research to discover information about Bishop and about myself.

Appearing often in both Bishop's biographies and in my daybooks was the name, Lilli Correia de Araújo, the owner of the hotel where we stayed in the town of Ouro Prêto. In fact, Bishop's poem "Under the Window: Ouro Prêto" was written for Lilli. When I found that Bishop's papers and personal effects were archived at Vassar College, her alma mater, I emailed Barbara Page, curator of the Elizabeth Bishop collections to ask about Lilli. She sent me in a number of different directions in my pursuit of information and told me that the notes and letters written to and from Elizabeth and Lilli were now at Vassar. Although it is improbable, it is not entirely impossible that maybe Lilli, or even Elizabeth, mentioned the 1970 and 1971 visits my roommates and I made to Ouro Prêto.

Another name mentioned in the biographies and in my daybook was Julian Beck, director of the Living Theatre. Through research, I have come to realize that Beck and his company were far more important in changing the face of theater, world wide, than I had ever imagined. Author John Tytell writes that the Living Theatre was "the most radical, uncompromising, and experimental group in American theatrical history" (xi). Their seventy-five plays and over five thousand performances "profoundly affected theatre in Europe and America while moving on the edges of society and violating many of the taboos of culture and government. The company was also particularly flamboyant and daring, both onstage and off, attracting attention around the world and unleashing a backlash of attempted suppression and arrest" (xi). During their tenure in Brazil, they performed both *Hair* and *The Balcony*. I was surprised when I read in my letters that I

had attended productions of both, *Hair* in Rio and *The Balcony* in São Paulo, but I have no idea if the Living Theatre was involved in the performances I saw. I have tried to find out, but, so far, the research has gone nowhere.

. . .

As I read about Bishop, I was amazed by the links we shared. Yet, as I researched, wrote, and revised, learning more and more about her, I also realized that I wanted to return to many of the other memories I had of Brazil. At some point in the process, I decided to change my focus from academic research to personal research, and to change my writing from the typical genre of literary analysis in a graduate thesis to self-exploration and reflection inherent in the genre of creative nonfiction.

Within four months, I located several of the people I had taught with at the American School of Rio de Janeiro. Until that time, I had had contact only with my former roommate, Karen Moerls Fitch. Making contact with the others was one of the highlights of the project.

Through the Internet, I located Susan Sering Treacy who was indirectly responsible for my meeting with Elizabeth Bishop and was now living in Evanston, Illinois. Her husband and she still have close ties with Brazil, and we visited on several occasions. They provided me with books, photographs, and their own stories. Also from an Internet search, I found former English teacher Terry Davis. Since leaving Brazil, he has made a successful career as an author of young adult fiction, including a novel about Brazil, *Mysterious Ways*. He and I met in Indianapolis at the annual convention hosted by the National Council of Teachers of English to share stories and memories.

Peter Cooper, former history teacher and current headmaster of the American School, actually made a trip to Ouro Preto in order to confirm some of my observations. He visited the hotel Pouso Chico Rei, owned now by Lilli Correia de Araújo's son, and peeked in the windows of Calabouça, the restaurant that I write about in the fifth essay. He let me know that Lilli was still alive when he visited in October 2004, but she was old and frail and didn't talk. Later that day, he convinced a maid to take him through Elizabeth Bishop's home; the present owner has tried to keep the house just as it was in the early 1970s when Bishop left it. He also reported that he had chatted with a man who had been about ten years old when I visited Ouro Preto; the man remembered Bishop, Julian Beck, and the Living Theatre, and he shared information about them with Peter who sent it on to me.

I located several others as well, and from all the emails, letters, and conversations, I was able to put my undated letters in chronological order and add some of their recollections to my own. Particularly important to the project—invaluable really—was the diary that Karen sent me. From her detailed entries, I was able to sequence two years of events and also to validate the accuracy of many of my memories.

. . .

When I began to write the Brazil stories, I had a lot of information, but I had little sense of my mission and no background in the understanding of the genre of creative nonfiction. In fact, I didn't even know the term: *autobiography* and *memoir*, yes; *creative nonfiction*, no. To better grasp the tenets that defined the form, I took Dr. Martin Scott's English 5010: Creative Nonfiction class, Spring 2005. Because I had always considered poetry, not prose, as my preferred mode of expression, I was gratified to find that many

of the authors—Maya Angelou, Annie Dillard, Gretel Ehrlich, Mary Karr, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Alice Walker, for example—were both poets and prose writers. Poetry definitely found its way into their sentences. I concluded that writing my memories as creative nonfiction was a good way to meld my partiality for poetry and my predilection to tell the Brazil stories as prose.

In Dr. Scott's class, I was immersed in literature so diverse in subject matter, style, intent, and point of view that I reeled with both the fascination and the horror of the infinite possibilities that I could undertake in my own writing. I did not want to write a "tell all," "shake out the family dirty laundry" memoir like Karr's *The Liar's Club* or *Cherry*, although I admire her writing immeasurably. Unlike bell hooks, I didn't have "terrifying" memories; my family and friends were not particularly "interestingly" dysfunctional as were hers; I wasn't rebellious. Yet, I learned from these authors. My copies of their writings look more like open fans than closed books because I have attached hundreds (literally) of post-it notes to identify my favorite passages. I savored their details, their variations in syntax and imagery, and their range of allusions.

The book, however, with the most "favorite-sentence" post-its is Vladimir Nabokov's *Speak, Memory*. When I open this book to any page and point to any paragraph, almost to any sentence, I am stunned by sentence structure, by word choice, by description. I am caught up in the phrasing, the rhythm, and the voice.

I marvel at Nabokov's handling of time: not linear, not chronological, but episodic. Often he visits and revisits the same events, inserting them into new circumstances, thereby contributing to the complexity and richness of the memories,

offering commentary on the connectedness of human experiences. I am wholly amazed by his masterful ability to maneuver through time.

Also, reading Nabokov tweaked my interest and curiosity about “cosmic synchronicity”—although my comprehension is rudimentary at best—as it pertained to the inordinate number of meaningful coincidences I had begun to notice in the process of writing the Brazil stories. Dr. Scott and I talked about synchronicity at length, until it became almost a joke; invariably, his reading assignments correlated directly with whatever I was working on or would be working on soon.

He assigned H. L. Mencken’s “The Hills of Zion,” just as I was beginning to write about Brazilian voodoo. He assigned Joan Didion’s “The White Album,” just as I was trying to remember the circumstances of Janis Joplin’s visit to Rio and my night in Ouro Prêto with Julian Beck and the Living Theatre. In almost eerie foreshadowing, Dr. Scott would leave class, advising me to “keep noticing the happenings of the universe.” I did, and I do. And, in my own reconstructions of occurrences, I have found countless patterns and limitless connections worthy of significance.

After Dr. Scott’s untimely death, at first, it was difficult for me to write, but then I noticed that odd coincidences connected with my memoir were continuing to crop up; cosmic synchronicity was alive and well. I took these unexpected occurrences as signs that I should persist, and I began to write again. When I read Bishop’s words, “But with me things just sort of happen” (Monteiro 112), I said to myself, “To me, too, as if what happens is supposed to happen, as if there really is cosmic synchronicity.” Interestingly, and serendipitously for me, throughout the project, again and again, information has come out of nowhere just when I needed it.



To guide the project, I chose a Nabokov passage as my quotation of affirmation:

I confess I do not believe in time. I like to fold my magic carpet, after use, in such a way as to superimpose one part of the pattern upon another. Let visitors trip. And the highest enjoyment of timelessness—in a landscape selected at random—is when I stand among rare butterflies and their food plants. This is ecstasy, and behind the ecstasy is something else, which is hard to explain. It is like a momentary vacuum into which rushes all I love. A sense of oneness with sun and stone. A thrill of gratitude to whom it may concern—to the contrapuntal genius of human fate or to tender ghosts of a lucky mortal. (139)

. . .

Looking back—superimposing patterns, so to speak—I realize that the “Brazil stories” project was starting long before I was aware that it was starting. My fascination with Nabokov seems to be related directly to conversations I had with Dr. Bruce Guernsey in English 4762: Poetry Writing, Spring 2003, and with Dr. Jyoti Panjwani in English 5061, a special topics class about non-Western literature, Spring 2004.

Dr. Guernsey encouraged me to think about how memory manifests itself: How does memory work? My analytical mind wants chronology, logic, and order, but those are not the ways of actual memory. Nevertheless, as much as memory seems random and free flowing, in the works I read in preparation for the writing of my thesis—particularly Annie Dillard, Joan Didion, and Amy Tan—I found connections and patterns that invited other memories to emerge and merge, thereby creating a sense of the simultaneous. Robert Root, Jr. suggests that creative nonfiction “moves in jumpcuts, flashbacks,

flashforwards, concentric or parallel or tangential strands” (xxvii). Because the poems written in English 4762 were short, and therefore more controllable, I achieved some small success with making memory fluid. But the Brazil stories were a different matter; I was frustrated, often stymied, by the complexity of moving back and forth through time.

To analyze a different method of organization—a method easier for me to grasp because it is chronological—I returned often to Matsuo Bashō’s masterpiece *Oku-no-Hosomichi*, the literary work I focused on in Dr. Panjwani’s class and also in an intensive seminar at Indiana University, Summer 2004. Like Bashō, who felt that his trip to the north of Japan was both a spiritual and poetic journey that embraced external and internal worlds, I feel that my Brazilian experiences edified and defined me in countless ways. And, like Bashō, who, years later, looked at his experiences with “heart/mind, heart/head,” I, too, by reflecting years after the initial experience, have tried to add intellectual substance to what was, at the time, largely an emotional event in which I collected ideas and images but did not reconstruct the events to find meaning.

Bashō has reminded me again and again of the enormity of the universe, the magnitude of history, and the paradox of time. As I wrote about my Brazilian experiences, I found solace in his words: “But with glory so full, so empty are words” (Corman 29); “Who with brush or speech can hope to describe the work of heaven and earth’s divinity?” (77); “I decided to be silent as a poet in such a place” (Miner 174). My challenge throughout the project, however, has been actually to put vocabulary to experiences that, then and now, have provided me with personal depth and infinite blessings and that, in effect, seemed too wonderful for words.

After reading all of my Brazilian documents—letters, postcards, diaries, and journals—I tried to discover the patterns, analogies, and meanings in the stories which I selected to record from the multitude of possibilities. It became evident that certain themes and motifs—war, race, spirituality—were mentioned again and again. These, for me, were and are still, important issues. But I was also interested in the day-to-day goings on of being female; a woman alone and a woman in society; concerns with house and home, family, food, and clothing. By writing about and reflecting on these experiences, I realize what these memories in particular have contributed to my understanding of myself. After arriving at the conclusion of what they mean to me, my challenge has been to extend these experiences beyond their personal value to a wider audience.

In many ways, I tend to be what I call a “reserved observer,” someone who stands back from events, often preferring to watch rather than to participate. Consequently, during the writing of the thesis, I struggled with the questions: How do I get myself into the writing and inscribe my intended emotions and my reconstructed meanings into the reader’s experience of my experiences? How does someone who stands on the sidelines create and dispense both tension and passion? I have tried to get beyond writing just a well-crafted piece; I have tried to the best of my ability to relate my observations and to express the concomitant emotional responses that those observations evoked.

Another challenge was to settle on a style that fit my purpose of sharing experiences that were exotic and mysterious, and sometimes even otherworldly. The first drafts were academic, interwoven with direct quotes and paraphrases from authors I had read, but formal writing did not convey the tone or texture that I wanted to produce. I labored over the decisions about style, writing and rewriting, experimenting with

vocabulary, sentence structure, and punctuation along a continuum that went from language that was formal and academic to language that was casual and conversational. Finally, after many attempts, I determined that primarily I should maintain a style that was rich in poetic phrasing. Also I chose to string together images, almost free flowing, that could be interrupted by random thoughts which ultimately were connected and related. To accomplish these stylistic aspirations, I fiddled with syntax, not always using proper grammar, and utilizing dashes to signify changes in thought process and in memory. I used fragments for emphasis and to move the text along quickly. The result is, I hope, that the essays read as prose, but seem glazed in poetry.

Now that I have clarified for myself what the memories mean to me, my intent is to take the reader into my life in Brazil, just as Bashō did four centuries ago, “pointing out the sights along the way, the places of interest where special attention is required [...making...] ideas, events, or scenes connect to one another and relate to some overarching theme or concept or premise” (Root xxviii).

I hope I have written something worthy of the deep and significant reverence that I feel for the time I lived in Brazil.

I want my reader to exclaim, “Yes!” not to sigh, “So what?”

. . . . .

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**Tuesday, July 8, 1969 ... Sea-Tac Airport ... Seattle, Washington**

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*I'm off!!! If they could only see me now!*

The Pan Am jet was out on the tarmac. I could see it, a gleaming silver shaft in the middle of hunched, head-to-the-wind men in jumpsuits dragging hoses from fuel tanks, and boxy baggage carts whizzing around like bees. I had fiddled so much with the one-way ticket, reading and rereading the flight plan, that the edges were crimped, almost damp from my nervous fingers. First stop, San Francisco—I'd spend a few days in the city, my friend Susan leading me to the usual tourist traps and to places only natives knew about, then we'd relax in her family's lake house somewhere in the mountains. Los Angeles, a layover for a few hours. Guatemala and Panama, customs checks, duty-free shops, artisan vendors. Finally, my destination: Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, South America. That is, Brasil, Brasil with an *s*, América do Sul.

This would be my first trip alone. Ever. I tried to tell myself I was ready. I had a college degree. I had a job. And actually, it was a dream job. A salary of something over \$5000. Twenty-one, legal, on my own, I was supposed to be composed and capable, even a little worldly after spending seven months studying in London and hitchhiking around the continent with my travel buddy Diane. But I'd never traveled all by myself; I kept catching myself biting the inside of my cheek or pushing the cuticle of my middle finger with my thumb.

Leaving my family was not as I expected. Hugs from my mom, my sister, and my brother. Then the unexpected. My dad—never one to be demonstrative, except with our wiener dog and his Springer spaniels—teared up, hugged me hard, and told me he loved

me. He had never said those words to me before, and I wouldn't hear them again until 1991 when I made the 2500-mile road trip in the dead of winter to say goodbye to him before he died. For my whole life, he had been distant, and today, of all days, he made me cry. I sobbed onto the plane. From Sea-Tac to SFO, 678 miles, I cried. My seatmate, someone's grandfather I was sure, offered me his handkerchief, a travel pack of tissues, and, finally, to make me laugh, the barf bag.

Dad. I was like him. I looked like him. And I could get just as angry about injustice as he did, but, unlike him, I rarely opened my mouth. I kept my anger stewing inside me. He had graduated from the University of Washington—the school all three of us kids, a generation later, would attend—and had immediately, but not necessarily by choice, gone off to Italy to save the world from the Nazi terror. He left the Northwest as a happy-go-lucky recent college grad, but with one foot still metaphorically firm on the farm. He came home from the war scarred, the strong, silent type, smoking three packs of cigarettes a day.

When we were little, we would push back his sleeves and touch the wrinkled whorls of skin, the size of quarters and half-dollars. To us, the scars meant *hero*. Pulling down the tin box on the top shelf of his closet, fingering the bars of ribbon and shiny medals, we begged for stories of roaring fighter jets, zinging bullets, and the enemy staggering, flailing and falling backwards into mud. But he just said, "War is hell. That's all I've got to say."

An accountant, Dad showed up at dinner every night at 5:30, read every word—even the classifieds—of two newspapers, one from Anacortes—my hometown, the

gateway to the San Juan Islands in Northwest Washington—and one from big-city Seattle.

He could do things we couldn't. From a thousand yards, he could spot a lady slipper orchid curling out of pine needles or a quail egg nesting in a spongy meadow. He knew history, geography, and politics. Politics, he knew viscerally, in every cell of his body—so much so that after his first heart attack, when he was only 45, the doctor wrote on his chart that he was forbidden to read a paper or watch the news. Mere mention of Richard Nixon sent him into a rage.

Our favorite pastime with him was to spin the globe, point to a place—the more syllables, the better—and challenge him to tell us where it was. Tegucigalpa. Sea of Okhotsk. Bangkok. Rio de Janeiro. He never missed.

Years ago, he had left for parts unknown. Now it was my turn.

. . .

Somehow, circling over San Francisco, I pulled myself together, put on my brave face, sucked in a lungful of recycled air, and reconstructed myself as a confident, world-wise young woman. I was off to see the real world, not the spinning globe of the “Stump Dad” game.

My next challenge was finding my way through the sprawling San Francisco airport. Alone. Where was Susan? She had said she'd meet me as I walked off the plane, but there was no sign of my beautiful college roommate. I looked down the corridors, hoping to see her long, thick hair, the color of honey, swinging over her shoulders—ever since I'd met her three years before, I'd wondered what it would have been like if she'd

been a red-head or a brunette, because her middle name was not the usual Ann or Marie; it was Honey, like her hair.

Since I had no Plan B, I kept whispering, "Keep it together, keep it together, I can do this." But my stomach was knotting and wrenching. Then over the loud speaker, I heard, "Arriving passenger Lee Isaacson, go to the Pan Am desk." Susan was coming, she'd be here soon, her brother had fallen and needed to be seen immediately by a doctor, a delay, but she'd be on her way in just a few minutes, and, depending on traffic, maybe an hour or so, no more. Finally, after I had successfully talked myself out of calling home collect, she arrived, scooping me up into her arms. I was safe.

For several days, at her side, I explored the city, walking the wharves, pitching quarters at mimes and sleepy-eyed sax men, wandering through art galleries in Sausalito, and hanging on cable cars. Feeling smug that not so long ago, Diane and I had seen Europe on a couple of dollars a day, I watched as Susan peeled off twenties and fifties and left ten-dollar tips for muffins and coffee. Hers was a life of privilege. But I always remembered what my mom had said about her, "She's rich, but she's the most generous, kind, caring person you've ever brought home. She made us feel at home in our own house!" Those were comments I hoped someone someday would say about me. I knew the "rich" part would be a stretch, but maybe the rest was possible.

Susan pushed me into shops, their doorways hung with tinkling bells and bamboo chimes, where herbal smells and spices bit my nose and made me sneeze. Exotic to me meant my mom's stewed chicken with curried rice and fresh pineapple. But at restaurants with fresh flowers and napkins starched into swans, Susan ordered dinner in French, learned from a nanny when she was little. She taught me to eat hearts of palm and white

asparagus wrapped and tied with slivered strips of pimento. She took me to a Middle Eastern café where we ate with our fingers in a curtained cubicle. At the top of the fanciest hotels, waiters called her “Miss Susan” and led us to the tables with the best view of Union Square and the Golden Gate Bridge. We were served sunset-colored cocktails, iced over in frost and blooming with ikebana. Each night we tumbled into our beds, and I replayed the day, smiling, but feeling a lot like a foreigner in my own country.

“Quit spending money on me,” I said to her, feeling awkward.

“But I want to. It makes me feel good, and I need to feel good right now. Let me. Please,” she said.

We left town and headed to her family’s lodge in the mountains. We ran the trails with Oliver, her terrier, and one afternoon, she said, “You know, it’s easier to talk to Ollie than it is to people. I’m sorry.” I nodded, but I couldn’t find the right words to say to her. We sunned at the lake. She lent me a bikini, and I was embarrassed by so much white skin.

On the last day, she tucked gifts in my suitcase—a bag, red woven, with roosters on it from Portugal, bought in Lisbon; a coin purse from Spain, bought in Madrid; the brass egg, our symbol of new beginnings, that we had passed back and forth during college. As I was packing, she cried. For a few days, with me, she had been taken out of life as she knew it that summer. Peter, her brother—I saw photo after photo of him—in one, he was suspended horizontally along the jib sheet of a sailboat; in another, he was skiing a double diamond black run down a mountain slope in the Rockies—was dying of a brain tumor. Wherever we went, whatever we did, I knew she was thinking of him,

curling up guilty inside herself because he'd turned angry, and she didn't know him, or herself, anymore.

"Make each day count," she said. "You just never know..."

. . .

I flew out of SFO and made the puddle jump to LA where we were put in quarantine. On the plastic chair next to me sat a man from Costa Rica. His arms brown as pitch, he wore a white lace shirt, unbuttoned from the neck. No undershirt. A mat of black hair scribbled a design on his chest, and a single hair curled out of a buttonhole. It was hard not to stare at it; I wanted to pluck it out with tweezers.

"Sunday, you did not see me? *The Ed Sullivan Show*," he said.

No, I hadn't seen him. In fact, the only time I think I had watched the show was the night the Beatles were on sometime back in the winter of 1964.

"Oh, too bad, I dance for Mr. Ed Sullivan on the TV again maybe sometime. You see me then. Mr. Sullivan make me famous, do you think so?"

Except for a blond stewardess or two and me, the crowd was dark—olive skin, eyes bright black. Again and again, a group of children crept up to me and shouted, "Hello!" then giggled, covered their mouths, and ran off. Finally we got the signal to board.

I shared a seat block with two children and their mother. "This is one Big Fat Mama," I thought. The stewardess had to add a strap over the woman's massive belly to lengthen her seatbelt. Her feet were swelling out over her shoes, and her arms and thighs spread like bread dough into my seat, making me tuck my shoulders and elbows in. How

many hours could I last, I wondered, my body held in? She grinned at me through hot-pink lips and winked with false eyelashes and turquoise eye shadow.

The little boy wore a suit, light blue, complete with tie and vest, and the little girl, Ana Thereza, wore a pink, shocking pink, dirndl with a white pinafore. In Spanish, they jabbered non-stop about their daddy at home, a new litter of puppies, marshmallow rice krispy treats, and me—*la señorita*, so tall and blond, like a movie star. To them, their hair black as night, I was blond, but really, I was plain, dishwater brown and ordinary. I could understand them, at least until they got going a mile a minute, but I pretended not to. Suddenly the little girl turned to me and asked in perfect English, “Are you a poet?”

I laughed and said, “No, no, oh, but I wish I were.”

She cocked her head and said, “Someday maybe you will write a poem about me, Ana Thereza who likes pink and marshmallows.” She ripped four sheets of paper out of a spiral notebook and folded fans for each of us. She peeked over hers then hid her face behind it like a little geisha.

On to Guatemala City and on to Panama City. Airports hotter and stickier than any place I had ever been.

“I need scissors to cut my way through the humidity,” I said to the stewardess.

“You ain’t seen nothin’ yet,” she laughed, affecting a lazy Southern drawl and throwing a hand over her head.

Seven more hours of flight. At 6:30 am, finally, in black rain, we swooped in over Galeão, the international airport of Rio de Janeiro. For some minutes, I relived the nervousness of arriving in San Francisco—again, I had no Plan B. What if... But there, smiling and waving, was my friend Thereza.



**Domingo, 13 Julho, 1969 ... Aeroporto Internacional do Rio de Janeiro/ Galeão**

I really was in Brazil. Brasil with an *s*. I could see Thereza bobbing up and down, waving with both arms. I could see signs, "Welcome to Rio," in a dozen different languages. But, I asked myself, how on earth had I gotten here, thousands of miles from my safe little town on Fidalgo Island just off the coast of Washington? I wasn't sure I even knew. I had plodded along over the past six months making checklists, writing essays, student teaching, getting shots, passing tests, putting one foot in front of the other, finally graduating. But, much of the time, I wasn't fully aware of what I was doing; it was as if I had been in automatic, a robot sleepwalking.

During winter quarter, senior year, at the University of Washington, I was depressed, numb, put into a zombie state, self-induced, to get through each day. Vietnam was terrifying me. Boys I knew from high school were over there, shooting other boys, and getting shot. When they came home to Anacortes, they'd head for the Log Cabin Inn downtown and sit over beer in the middle of the morning. I'd see them there, stooped, expressionless, lighting a cigarette from the butt they'd just smoked.

I was losing friends—drugs snatching them, body and soul. A lot of the vets were using drugs and some of the 4-F's, too. And just regular kids. Steve, the son of my grade school principal, a friend since kindergarten, thought he was Christ. One night, I was stopped at an intersection. Just as I started to accelerate, a body flew into my windshield. His face smashed into the glass, smearing snot and drool. For a second, we were eye to eye. I tore out of the car. It was Steve. He didn't know me. Dressed in a long flowing robe, belted at the waist, and, with hair to his shoulders, he looked almost like Christ. But

he was vacant. I tried to speak, but he turned away slowly, his head tipped slightly, as if he hadn't seen me at all. On the curb stood his disciples, a half dozen kids, no older than junior high. He went to Tibet or Nepal and ended up in jail. A couple of years later, he died from a heroin overdose.

John, who studied with me in London, started smoking dope after his girlfriend drowned. He dropped out of school and who knows what happened to him. Jo Ann—who shocked me speechless when she told me, laughing uncontrollably, that she defecated once in an empty classroom—got hepatitis in Haight Ashbury and died.

I would have my diploma in June, but I had no idea what to do with my life.

. . .

One morning early, I walked onto the quad. Overnight someone had driven wooden crosses into the ground, hundreds and hundreds of them, each representing a life lost in Vietnam. The white crosses against the green grass made me blink back tears. Later, in class, my history T.A.—he was just a year or two older than I, but already he was wearing tweed jackets and bowties—leaned over the sill, looked out over the graveyard, and laughed. “What a bunch of morons. Pointless. We should blast the god-awful commies off the face of this god-forsaken earth.”

Anger surged through me. “Are you serious! How can you look out at those crosses and not question this stupid war!” He just smirked, and I wanted to grind his face in the grass, down to the dirt, into rock.

I had opened my mouth. Like my father, I exploded. I still remember shrieking at him, raging at him for his insensitivity. He made me shake, I was so angry. I don't think I

had ever verbalized my anger before. It scared me, but, at least for a few days, I was no longer in a stupor. I woke up.

A week or so later, a dark, dreary day—a normal day of Seattle fog and rain—I picked up a bookmark in Suzzallo Library. I turned it over and on the back, in microscopic cursive, I scratched out, carefully, a brief essay, really kind of a crazy prose poem, titled “Who I am...” At the bottom, I printed my address. 2405 11<sup>th</sup> St. Anacortes, WA 98221 USA.

For months, Thereza Flarys, the vivacious, always smiling exchange student from Brazil who lived down the hall from me and coached me in English grammar, had been urging me to go to Rio.

“I know the right people. Say the word, and I can get you a job at the American School. Really, I can. You would love Brazil. I know you would.”

What the heck. Why not. I didn’t know what else to do. See *National Geographic* locales for real? Be something of a jetsetter like Susan? Why not.

I found the address of the American School of Rio de Janeiro in the phonebook collection at the library, slipped the bookmark into an envelope, crossed my fingers, and mailed it. I didn’t tell Thereza.

(Not long after arriving in Brazil, I would decide that the move must have been meant to be. That my bookmark even arrived in Rio was something of a miracle. Dozens of my letters would never get back to the States, and dozens of my family’s letters would never reach me. Mail was “lost”—stolen more likely—or our postman would take a week or so off on a drunken binge, flinging letters, magazines, and packages frisbee-style into the Leblon canal.)

My off-beat bookmark attracted attention. A real application arrived in Seattle, I told Thereza, and she set the wheels in motion—"No, she's not a kook; she's responsible; she can do the job. I give my word." And on her word, I was hired to teach English.

. . .

At the Rio airport, I could see Thereza jumping up and down and churning wide arcs with both arms on the other side of the glass partition. Her father, mother, and Headmaster Dr. Brown waved and smiled. The customs officer thumped my overweight red Samsonite onto a table, snapped the latches, and started pulling out neatly folded nighties, shirts, dresses, bras, panties, and socks, shaking them into careless heaps. Thereza had warned me that only hookers used tampons, so mine were zipped into nylon bags, and, when he opened the first three-month supply, he took a glimpse, held the bag at arm's length as if it were a snake, and zipped it back up.

Finally, he lifted out the cardboard box containing the electric can opener I was going to give Thereza as a wedding present. Why on earth my mother and I had settled on a can opener, I'll never know, but finding anything American-made in America had been next to impossible. "Made in Korea" or "Made in Japan," yes. America, no. The can opener was American. I think, in desperation, we just bought the thing and called it a day.

Holding up the box, the officer let loose a torrent of Portuguese, of which, to me, not a single word made sense, but, by the lift of his eyebrow and the sound of his voice, he seemed to be asking questions. Thereza, from behind the glass, started shouting at him, her hands still flying. He motioned her around the partition and directed his questions to her. Doesn't this American girl know she can't bring something electric into the country without paying duty? No, she doesn't.

Thereza—we hadn't even said hello yet—turned to me and said, "He says if you cash a \$25 traveler's check and hand it over to him, the can opener is yours; if you don't, it's his."

"But...I..."

Thereza glared at me to keep my mouth shut. I tore off my first traveler's check, scribbled my name on the line, tucked the can opener under my arm, and tried to scoop my clothes back into the suitcase. So much for the wedding surprise.

. . .

Because of the can opener fiasco followed by the bribe, my first impression of Brazil was disappointing, but, within minutes, I was swept up by the novelty of the tropics, caught in its spell. Except for the air in Guatemala and Panama—and once or twice in a greenhouse—I'd never felt air so dense. It amazed me. It was as if air could be shoveled into wheelbarrows and hauled off in dump trucks. Everything around me was green, a thousand different greens—bluish, pinkish, and purplish green. Blinding yellow green. Washington was the Evergreen State, but, at home, green was fir bough green, moss green, or algae green, colors muted and misted over.

Rio was eye-popping. Swatches of brilliance were made brighter by sun after the early morning rain. Never had I seen such straight-up-to-the-sky mountains, rising up over vertical jungles of curling vines and flapping loose-leaved trees. I had seen steep islands growing out of the water in Puget Sound, yes, but, on land, plains gradually gave way to foothills that gradually gave way to mountains. In Rio, mountains, too sheer to climb, erupted out of flat land, and shot up like giant fingers.

The air was steaming, and I was sweltering hot, but everyone else wore sweaters. And socks.

. . .

Thereza had told me a little about her family, but not enough that I felt I knew much about them. I liked them immediately. They weren't at all like her—animated, laughing, constantly moving—the stereotype I had of Brazilians. Instead, they were quiet and reserved, like people from the Northwest. Her father, a Ph.D. from Stanford, taught engineering at the Catholic University. He also taught a class of math at “EA,” *Escola Americana do Rio de Janeiro*, the American School, my new employer. Comparing his education to mine, I wondered if I was, in any way, qualified to teach at the school; I was just a kid, probably only four or five years older than my students. He kept his head lowered and looked over at me through thick eyelashes. He was shy, and his accented English, to me, sounded like poetry. Mrs. Flarys looked kind; she spoke only a bit of English, but she seemed to understand my words. She said hesitantly, “Welcome to our country.”

Thereza nudged me. “Say *obrigada, senhora*. Thank you. Your first Portuguese conversation. You just wait, we'll make a real *Carioca*—a Rio native—out of you in no time.”

Later that morning, I would meet her sister Sonia, 19, an elementary school teacher, and her brother Hernando, 22, a fifth-year engineering student. They were still home in bed. Then I realized that my welcoming party must have been up since four in the morning. Dr. Brown, tall—6'4” at least—dark, and handsome, said goodbye and told

me to come around school in a few days, after I'd adjusted some, and he'd give me a tour.

In the Mercedes on the drive home, wide-eyed, I white-knuckled my knees. I had heard, of course, about crazy-fool Latin drivers, but nothing had prepared me for such heart-stopping terror. Unnerving. Hair-raising. Dr. Flarys drove sensibly, but no one else did. The boulevards were wide, unstriped, no lanes. It was raining again. Cars sped through town at 60 mph, careening around corners on two tires in the downpour. Pedestrians took their lives in their hands at every crossing. Umbrellas bobbed, blew inside out, and flew. Drivers shook their fists at one another. Others carried on shouting matches through half-closed windows, traveling tandem at 50 mph down thoroughfares. Oblivious to my terror, Thereza told me that the girl who lived next door, only eight years old, had been killed the week before in a hit and run.

As we drove through town, I was amazed by the luxurious buildings. Uniformed doormen stood out front, protected from the rain by awnings, and gardeners in raincoats pinched dying blossoms from overfilled planters. Men swept the black and white mosaic walkways and picked cigarette butts out of sand-filled garbage can-size ash bins. I noticed verandas with covered patio furniture, closed-up umbrellas, and potted leafy palms. Walls of windows looked out to the ocean. I also noticed again the steep mountains rising right out of the ground. But on these mountains, clinging to the sides, were hundreds and hundreds of ramshackle shanties.

"Thereza?"

"Oh, those are the *favelas*, the slums. Where the poor people live. Don't bother with them."

“Seems like if a good wind came along, they’d blow away.”

“Don’t worry, in a few years, we won’t even have to look at them. The government is building great new houses just a few hours out of town.”

“But where do the people work?”

“In the city. They’ll just have to get up earlier.”

. . .

The Flarys apartment was on Pompeu Loureiro, a few blocks from Copacabana Beach, up on the eighth floor. The drapes were closed, the rooms dark. Closed drapes during daylight hours always gave me the heebie-jeebies, so I had to breathe deep to make myself relax. Contemporary furniture, sleek lines. A dining set of dark wood—Brazilian rosewood, I guessed—polished to high sheen. Tidy. Beautiful. But noisy. Like living in the middle of a grade school cafeteria, I thought. With no sound proofing whatsoever, I could hear—and smell—meat frying eight floors below. I could hear children screaming as they slammed soccer balls against the walls in the center courtyard.

We unloaded my bags in Thereza’s bedroom. On two card tables against a wall were stacks of white dinner plates, salad plates, dessert plates, soup bowls, berry bowls, cups and saucers. Many of the dishes were still plain white, but quite a few had been monogrammed and decorated in curlicue patterns of vines and leaves. With a tiny brush and a tiny pot of gold paint, Thereza, for months now, had been painting the edges and rims.

“Brazilian women paint their own china for their trousseaux,” Thereza explained. “Sonia is doing hers, too. She’s engaged, but she can’t get married until I do. Older sister has to marry first. She’s been engaged forever. She didn’t think I’d ever find anyone. Too



picky. Here comes the spinster, instead of here comes the bride. But then I met Felipe, and the rest is history. Wait 'til you meet his friends. Mostly they're pilots. And some are really, really cute."

"You're kidding. Sonia can't marry until you do? What if you..."

"That's just the way it is. It's worked out. Nothing to worry about."

Uncluttered, elegant, Thereza's apartment was so different from my home. My family was a pack of collectors. Books everywhere. Eskimo sculptures—loons, bears, seals, and whales grouped on the mantle and on tables. Hand-thrown pots filled with shells and stones lined the windowsills. Hand-carded wool spilled out of Haida baskets, and large canvasses—my mother's—stretched on frames, were stacked against the wall. Jars of turpentine. Brushes. Squeezed tubes of paint. Everywhere, art. Art by my art teacher mother and art by her friends. Kid art. Refrigerator art. Even art in the bathroom.

In our house, except for a few minutes in the evening when the sunset was blinding, the drapes were never closed. We could look out across the channel to Guemes Island, west to the Straits of Juan de Fuca, and east to the snow-capped Cascade Mountains. We wanted to let the outdoors in.

. . .

The next day, after no sleep—Thereza and I had talked half the night, and, even after she drifted off, I was too excited to do anything but stare at the ceiling—she eased me into a taxi, and we set off for Leblon to visit the school. I was too anxious to see where I'd be working for the next year to wait for a few days "to adjust." "Let's go today?" I had asked her. She told me that Leblon was a classy part of town, home to many Americans.

The school took up a city block, enclosed by a wall, eight feet tall, of painted concrete. Kind of a peachy skin color. In places, shards of jagged glass were embedded in the concrete on the top of the wall, and barbed wire wound in and out of the broken glass. A guard stood at the gate, greeted Thereza, and nodded us in, locking the steel-barred door behind us. Roofed in red tile and two stories high, the school was built around a courtyard. Poles with basketball hoops and loud speakers were spaced along the perimeter. A few weeds, pale and limp, poked up through cracks in the patio. A couple of trees grew at one end. There were no interior hallways. Kids went from class to class on walkways, roofed, but open to the air on the courtyard side. The school looked a little like a prison.

Dr. Brown met us, gave me a stack of forms to fill out, went over my schedule, asked if I had questions. I'm so overwhelmed, I thought, I don't even know what to ask.

I would teach four classes—one each of 7<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>, and 11<sup>th</sup>. I would have three hours of plan time; class size would never exceed fifteen and more likely would never exceed ten. Classes were tracked—gifted, a couple of mid-range levels, remedial.

I might have *forty* kids? All day, only forty? I had forty in one class period when I student taught. Nearly two hundred all day! Three hours of planning? I was used to fifty minutes. Amazing!

“Yes, but you are charged with educating kids from sixty-five nations, and you are expected to prepare them to apply, to be accepted, and to succeed at the best universities in the United States,” he said. “And the world.” I could feel my face flush. Was it possible for me—a kid myself, wet behind the ears—possibly to do that?

I would be called "Miss Lee." Only Dr. Brown and the principal, Mr. Garcia, went by surnames. The dress code? No one wears pantyhose or girdles and nylons? Really? Bare legs. I looked down at my white Washington legs. Sleeveless dresses. Bare arms. Back home, hose and sleeves were mandatory. There's no air conditioning here, just open windows. Be comfortable.

"Right now," he said, "you're hot. Believe me, that'll change by next year. You'll have thin blood just like the rest of us. On a day like today, you'll be wearing your jacket."

Really.

. . .

Later that afternoon, it turned out-of-season warm. "Take me to the beach, Thereza, please," I begged. "I've got to get my toes in the water. The last time I touched the Atlantic, I was twelve, Christmas on Cape Cod."

"No one goes to the beach in July!"

"But I need water. I'm an island girl, remember?"

We headed to the beach. White sand and crashing waves. She was right. Only a few people were there, walking dogs or fishing from a rocky point down shore. Red flags were raised, signaling treacherous surf; I waded in anyway. The water was icy, but the slap of the waves and the undertow pulling at my ankles made me feel at home. Thereza sat in the sand, looked through bride magazines and made lists, a blanket around her shoulders. By dusk, the sky, the rolling waves, and the beach were washed in topaz and amber. The sun melted into the sea, stirring up liquid gold. I had never seen a sunset quite so beautiful.

. . .

The next few days were spent following Thereza from shop to shop. I had no idea that a wedding required hours and hours of looking, pricing, deciding, nodding yes, nodding no, then throwing hands up, and starting over. We looked at silver; we looked at linens; we looked at ribbons and silk, until I was ready to scream. I wanted Rio!

Cobblestone alleys. Out-of-the-way galleries. Outdoor cafes. I wanted to run on the beach and chase after the falcon-shaped kites dipping down and shooting up from white-capped breakers. I wanted to find tall-dark-and-handsome, guitar-strumming, samba-crooning mysterious Latinos. I wanted, in every cell of my body, to see Rio open-air, not from inside a prissy little lace shop. The tension in my back was like claws and teeth, like screws twisting and tightening. I wanted to be released.

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But I couldn't be freed. Thereza, older and wiser, was my keeper. For over a week, she monitored my eating. In the outdoor market, I gawked at papayas the size of footballs, persimmons the size of softballs, and bananas as long as ball bats. But she wagged her finger at me, insisting that everything that went into my mouth must be thoroughly cleaned.

"No, no, no," she said. "Be patient. Your time will come."

She kept an arsenal of purification concoctions—both fluids and pills—in small plastic bags and wide-mouthed jars. Bottled water only. Nothing fresh. I wanted passion fruit; she gave me rice. I wanted skewers of meat from street vendors; she gave me boiled-to-mush beans.

The guardian of my digestive tract, she felt duty bound to keep Montezuma's Revenge at bay. Day by day, I moved bite by bite from canned American-type food to stewed what-have-you to an occasional morsel on my tongue of something fresh. Judith, Thereza's maid, was a marvelous cook, blending tastes I had never imagined could be combined. Avocado, sweet condensed milk, and sugar, she spun together in the Osterizer. Squash, coconut, and spices were boiled into a paste and served with a creamy white cheese. The kitchen smelled of herbs and always, red-orange and golden sauces bubbled on the gas range. Lunch, course after course, was on the table at two, and dinner, again with course after course, was at eight. Each meal was followed by black coffee, thick with sugar, presented in dainty demitasse cups on a silver tray.

. . .

After a week or so of careful cuisine with no ill effects, Thereza gave me the okay to eat my first meal away from home. The entire family—parents, siblings, fiancés, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins—convened at a table as long as Thanksgiving in a neighborhood restaurant. Heaping baskets of bread. Plates of antipasto. Platters of chateaubriand and barbecued pork. Shallow dishes of vegetables submerged in sauces. Everyone rattled on in Portuguese, and I couldn't understand a word. But I communicated with the food, sampling bites of everything. Finally, for dessert, the waiter placed a bowl of gorgeous strawberries on the table—large, luscious, and red-ripe. Everyone else, their bellies full, jabbered on, ignoring the bowl. Everyone, but me.

. . .

I loved strawberries. In a way, I thought of strawberries as a part of who I was, a part of my history. I remembered hunting wild strawberries no bigger than the tip of my

finger, sun warmed, with my mother. Later, as a kid of about ten or so, I, along with nearly every other ten-year-old in our town, boarded a bus at 6 am, crossed the bridge that connected our island to the mainland, and headed to the strawberry fields in the Skagit River Valley, the vast plain of rich soil sandwiched between Puget Sound and the foothills of the Cascade Mountains. All day we picked berries, rain or shine, making a quarter a flat, adding the dollars up in our heads, imagining for the first week of school, new plaid skirts, colored blouses, and brown and tan saddle shoes.

A few rows away from us scurried the straw-hatted Mexican migrant workers, men, women and children. Toddlers, their faces red with berry juice and brown with grime, crawled after their mothers and dug in the dirt with spoons or sticks, but four- and five-year olds picked for money. We started off together at the first plant of the row, but, in minutes, the Mexicans were off and away, picking cleaner and faster than our tiny fingers ever could or would. Somewhere off in the distance was their camp, unpainted windowless wooden boxes lined up like blocks, one after the other, only a few feet from each other. Close by, clotheslines were strung—chambray shirts, overalls, bras, and diapers billowing and flapping. Whenever the bus passed their village, I wondered, but only a little, about how the families, most with a number of children, could possibly fit into the 10' by 10' cubicles. I wondered about the outhouses and the fire pits, the lanterns hanging from nails on trees, and the rusting trucks and cars.

Eventually the berries we picked would end up as sundae sauce or jam. When I was in college, I worked the night shift at one of the local canneries. We stood elbow to elbow along moving conveyor belts, plucking out the rotten strawberries from the millions that passed by. Especially huge berries we kept for ourselves, saving them in a

line on the metal edge next to the belt. Again and again, as bigger, redder berries bumped and rolled down the line, we replaced our stock, finally settling on five or six of particular magnificence to eat during our fifteen-minute 3 am break.

One night a woman went catatonic. Unlike us younger workers who stood, she was perched on a stool. At some point, she froze. Her eyes glazed over, and her fingers locked into a grip, bird-like, as if she had a ball in each palm. A couple of security guards lifted her from the stool, her knees still bent in a sitting position, and carried her off. Another night, a dead mole, its limp weight splayed to the belt, moved past us. Not one of us would lift the gray-brown form from the belt. We all watched, wide eyed, as the tiny body inched to the end of the belt and spilled over into the vat of berries moving toward the squasher.

When I slept during the day, I dreamed of strawberries. When I was awake, strawberries rolled across my eyes. Everything smelled of strawberries, not the fresh smell of new ripe fruit, but a slightly off, beginning-to-rot smell.

My great aunt died—Auntie Aine, the aunt of scones, tea, and lilies of the valley—so mom and I flew to Salt Lake City for the wake. As was typical of her side of the family—you had to have a sense of humor to be raised non-Mormon in Utah—we girls bought fake eyelashes at the five and dime, glued them to our lids, and blinking and fluttering, took turns digging a hole for a rosebush to plant in honor of Aunt Aine. Then, in carloads, three generations of us headed up into the mountains to a restaurant famous, even when my mom was a girl, for strawberry pie. We toasted Aine with berries, goopy with glaze, and dollops of whipped cream.

When it was time for my wedding reception in 1974, there was no white-rose iced traditional layer cake. Instead, there were three unfrosted white cakes, two feet in diameter, vats of whipped cream, and massive bowls heaped with fresh strawberries picked by my mom and my sister.

I always had a taste for strawberries.

. . .

When the waiter placed the bowl of berries on the table in front of Thereza and me, I restrained myself for several minutes. But then I couldn't help myself. I zeroed in on one perfect specimen—red, almost glowing, with a perfect green crown. I needed that berry. “C’mon, Thereza, it’ll be all right, I’ve eaten stuff for a whole week, *não problema. Nada*. Just one berry,” I begged. I knew she wanted to slap my fingers, but finally she said, “Okay. One.”

I plucked up the berry and popped it into my mouth. Sweet, juicy, luscious. Like no berry I had ever eaten before. One berry became two, and two became several. Before I knew it, I’d eaten a half dozen.

A few minutes later, they started—hives as big as quarters. Wheals popped out on my cheeks, blossomed around my lips, and, in no time, covered me from head to foot. I was an itchy mass of urticaria-caused frenzy. Over the next three days, the raised patches speckled and disappeared from one part of my body, only to reappear again somewhere else—on my knees, over my forearms, on my chest. One eye was swollen shut. One cheek sagged like blubber. I was ugly. I wanted to die. People came by the apartment to meet me, and I had to try hard not to cry. I could tell by their expressions that I horrified



them—I was the hunchback of Notre Dame, the Elephant man, the bearded lady at the sideshow.

Finally, I gave up. Convinced that I'd look like a monster for the rest of my life, I put on a large-brimmed hat, borrowed some sunglasses, and went outside for a little fresh air. Just as I rounded a corner, a street beggar hobbled up to me, her old face wizened up like a fig. She stretched her bony hands out to me. Then I looked at her, straight in the face. She had no eye. I decided there was a lesson I was supposed to learn.

Appropriately, this was the week of the moonwalk. I looked like an alien, and I felt like an alien. I was stumbling around in a benadryl-induced stupor, drifting in and out of the foreign reality of my state of mind and of my new home. *Lua*, the Portuguese word for moon, was everywhere. On billboards, in the headlines, on TV. Even new Carnival and bossa nova songs were moon-themed. Styrofoam spheres and tin foil space suits hung in shop windows, and space dioramas decorated counters and shelves. Everywhere, world-wide, people were talking about commander Neil Armstrong, command module pilot Michael Collins, and lunar module pilot Buzz Aldrin.

On the 16<sup>th</sup> of July, Thereza, Sonia, and I sat in front of the TV and watched them lift off, listening as Collins said, "...we are climbing like a dingbat," trying to imagine what it would be like to hurtle through space. Command module Columbia separated from the Saturn third stage, eased around, and connected its nose with the top of lunar module Eagle. Pieces of spacecraft drifted off and away. In awe, the three of us held our breath.

(Although I couldn't possibly imagine it at the time, years later, I would hold my breath again, knowing that components of a new shuttle were designed by my own

brother. When I reminded him recently that I'd watched the moon mission from Thereza's apartment in Brazil, and that I had been covered with gross-looking hives, he said, "Hmmm... Weird. During one of the test flights, our pilot broke out in a billion bumps, too. He looked like some kind of space alien.")

On the 20<sup>th</sup>, ten of us crowded again around the TV. Collins said, "I feel that all of us are aware that the honeymoon is over and we are about to lay our little pink bodies on the line." I looked at the bodies clustered around me—light, dark, freckled, and fair. A universal mix, an assembly of similarities and differences. Our own mini-melting pot.

When the commentary was in English, the nine Brazilians jabbered, but as soon as the commentary switched to Portuguese, they were silent, intent on every word. I strained my ears to hear recognizable words, begged for translations, and flipped through my dictionary. I looked at the bouncing grainy picture on the screen and tried my best to determine what was happening. When the astronauts landed in the Sea of Tranquility, we were anything but tranquil. That men were actually on the moon was both unsettling and mystifying. They said they went in peace for all mankind.

Amen, I thought.

. . .

A few days later, the hives disappeared, finally disappeared for good. "Let's go see your apartment," Thereza said. "Dr. Brown sent over the key. Rua Dias Ferreira, a really, really good street to live on." I was ready. I was ready to be on my own, go where I wanted to go when I wanted to go. Thereza still had lists of wedding to-do's, and I, frustrated, promised myself that I would never have a traditional silver-crystal-china wedding. I wanted other adventures. I think she knew I was feeling captive.

(I kept that promise. We eloped to Reno, and, much to the consternation of everyone, I refused to fill out a gift registry anywhere.)

The third-floor apartment was nothing like the small cramped rooms I'd lived in during my college years. I was awe-struck. A large living room and dining area. A tiny kitchen, but functional. Gas range, refrigerator, double sink. Three spacious bedrooms with hardwood floors and banks of windows. I twirled like a little kid over the gleaming floors in the master bedroom. It was twice as big as the other rooms. Two beds. Two dressers. A wall of closets. A full-length mirror. I had always shared; I'd never had my own room.

"Take it," Thereza said. "You're the first one here. The room's yours."

"I'm not sure I can do it. What if they're mad at me?"

"First come, first serve."

I wanted the room, but I felt nervous. I didn't want my roommates to think I was selfish. I couldn't come up with a credible explanation as to why I deserved the best room.

"Maybe we could draw straws when they come."

"Just take it, start moving your stuff in. You can take turns, four months each, if you feel weird about it."

I did it. I took the room. But I felt like biting my lip.

Connected to the bedroom was my own bathroom. Besides the usual sink and toilet, it had a bidet, just like those in fancy Paris hotels, and a walk-in shower separate from the tub. The floor was a mosaic of tiny black and white squares and diamonds, and the walls were made of sheets of gray speckled marble. I stood in front of the mirror and

stared. I couldn't believe how lucky I was. If only Susan could see me now. Remember, I told myself, try to be like her. When the roommates come, make them feel at home in our home, even if I have the best, the absolute very best, room.

I went back into the bedroom and flopped onto one of the two beds. Through the windows, standing at the top of the 2330-foot mountain Corcovado, the Hunchback, was the statue of Christ the Redeemer, his arms stretched out to the world, his benevolent eyes looking down on all of Rio, rich and poor alike. I'd seen Corcovado on dozens of post cards and on every tourist brochure, but here he was, magnificent, right outside my window.

Like a white rocket, the statue rose skyward, into a heavy golden mist that billowed up, encircled his head, spilled to his feet, poured down the mountainside, and fell over the jungle-forest like water. This was the sight I would wake up to every morning, every day. I went to the window, opened it, and looked down. There I saw a shivering tree of avocados. Besides strawberries, avocados were one of my all-time favorite foods. Behind the tree, a man and woman embraced, unaware that I was watching them.

"Come here," Thereza called from down the hall. "You need to see the maid's quarters."

She led me through the kitchen and out onto a porch area with a clothesline, a broom closet, and a large utility basin. An open-air stairway went up through the middle of the building from a patio area on the ground floor. I could look into the apartment across from us where a maid was wringing out a mop in washtub. The maid's room was

at the end of the porch; it was tiny, the smallest room in the apartment, but it had a toilet, a sink, and a shower.

“Maids’ stairs.” She pointed. “You use the elevator. I’ll tell Judith to find you someone. She’s probably got a cousin...”

“Do we really need a maid?”

“Everyone has a maid. It’s not like you can’t afford it. Two dollars a day split three ways. Chicken feed, right? Judith will be visiting her family in the *favela* next Sunday. I’ll tell her to find someone who can move in the first week of August.”

Back in the kitchen, Thereza and I arranged instant coffee, bottled water, tangerines, cookies, and nuts on a tray. The roommate from Texas, Karen, was due in at 4:30 am, and we wanted to make her feel welcome, make her feel at home. Ellen from Connecticut would arrive on the 31<sup>st</sup>.

“Oh, no! Thereza, look!” I shrieked. Four tiny pinkish chameleons clustered where the walls met the ceiling.

Thereza just laughed. “You’ll get used to them.”

. . .

Over time, I would not only get used to them, but I would appreciate them—they gobbled up insects by the dozens. I would watch the pulsing of their blue-veined bodies as I worked in the kitchen. They would shift their heads and follow me with their eyes. I got so I could catch them and let them curl around my wrist and fingers. My kitchen buddies.

In Washington, there were no bugs. No one used screens on windows. In Brazil, there were bugs bigger than my hand. Waking in the middle of the night, needing a drink,

I would have to make a decision. Should I turn on the light, or should I tiptoe across the floor in the dark? If I turned on the light, I would see hundreds of zigzagging cockroaches skedaddle across the linoleum or skitter over the counter, slip down the cupboards, and scramble under the oven. If I left the light off, I would step on them. Under slippers feet, they crunched.

Every couple of months, the exterminators came. They sprayed colorless, odorless DDT in every nook and cranny. Years later, when I was diagnosed twice with breast cancer, I wondered if Brazilian DDT could have been the cause. After the surgeon chopped off my right breast, I let out a sigh and followed it with a silent war hoop, acknowledging the renewal of my kinship with Brazil, bonded as a sister to those Amazon women who replaced their breasts with bows and arrows.

. . .

Karen was a redhead with milk-white skin. When I first saw her, I thought of the chameleons—just under her porcelain skin, I could see tiny blue veins. She took care of her skin—long sleeves, zinc oxide, large-brimmed hats. Hired to teach physical education, she had been a dance major, but, when she had to, she could throw out a ball. Twenty-six, she was the daughter of a pilot who tested experimental helicopters for the military. She just shrugged when, bug-eyed, I asked her if that was a dangerous profession. “No more than teaching,” she laughed. “Ha ha.”

She wore huge black and white checkerboard sunglasses. Later I would learn that her eyelashes were white, but every few months, her beautician back home in Dallas dyed her brows and lashes dark. She would sit motionless in a chair for forty-five minutes with her eyes pinched shut, knowing that if the dye touched her eyeball, she could go blind.

After a few days with me, she made me her mission. Women from Texas knew how to fix a face, and mine needed some work. Before I knew what hit me, she had plucked and shaped my ragged brows into two swooping bird wings.

On most days, Karen was steady, the voice of reason. Dependable. When I was sick, she mothered me; she held a cold cloth to my forehead, brought me soup. Mono, worms, nausea, diarrhea—it was always something. I'd apologize for being sick so often, but she said, "I'm sorry you're sick, but it's okay, I like to be needed."

On her bad days, I could see a look come over her face. A distant, dark look. She would make a line of half a dozen beers in the refrigerator, drop Patsy Cline into the tape player, and take out a beer, one at a time. I'd say, "You're going Texas on me. Homesick?" and she'd say, "I don't want to talk about it."

. . .

With more energy than a swarm of bees, roommate number two arrived. Karen and I were sitting comfortably on the couch talking when someone pounded on the door. "I'm here, open up, or I'll huff and I'll puff and I'll..." Ellen, the explosion! Six feet tall, sun-streaked brown hair to her waist. Mannish, a bit, with large hands, large feet, and large teeth, she was muscled like a Michelangelo sculpture. She was a look-alike for supermodel Veruschka, the model whose body was painted head to toe with leopard spots. Sometimes Ellen stood in for her at long *Vogue* photo shoots. When passersby in Manhattan, thinking she was Veruschka, asked for her autograph, Ellen just scribbled a signature on a napkin or signed a coaster. It was easier than explaining.

Raised in Panama—her father piloted ships through the canal—she had traveled from continent to continent, picking up famous friends as others collected stamps or

coins. She had left a seven-foot boa constrictor at home in Connecticut in the care of her mother. To celebrate turning 28, she had spent the past week shooting the rapids in Colorado, and she had the bruises, bug bites, and band-aides to prove it.

Next to her, I felt provincial, inept. She could hold me spellbound for hours with stories too dazzling to be true. But I hung on every word.

. . .

After just one day in Rio, Ellen rallied us into decorating the apartment. “We’ve got to do something with this place. Our living space has to be conducive to creativity. We need surroundings that will inspire!”

Karen and I followed her orders in the construction of huge assemblages of found objects. We nailed and glued blocks of wood to sheets of plywood and painted them white, copying the style of abstract expressionist sculptor Louise Nevelson. A few days later, she sketched a fantastic jungle scene, wild colors and patterns, on the white walls of the dining room. One morning she led me up the side of the mountain behind our apartment, breaking through webs three feet in diameter and swatting at spiders as big as prunes, to dig up bushes and trees. We carried them into our living room and created an indoor jungle of green rubber plants, philodendrons, and split-leaved palms.

Whatever we needed she bought. One afternoon she came in with a TV—she wanted to watch the Oscars. One night she brought home a five-man jazz band—she liked their music, so she volunteered her trust fund to finance them. She hosted extravaganzas for people she knew well and for others she had just met that day on the street. Her closets were filled with clothes for every fantastic occasion, and she made us borrow them so we would look fashionably chic. If we needed low-slung belly-button-



showing pants for a Carnaval party, she had them. If we needed a flimsy over-the-shoulder shawl to cover an evening dress, she had it. Jewelry—it was ours. Where the clothes came from, I never knew; they just appeared in her closet, and we were free to wear them.

One evening we were expected at the headmaster's apartment for cocktails and dinner. The engraved invitation said "casual dress." In Dr. Brown's Brazil, "casual dress" for a party scheduled at 8 pm meant coat and tie, little black dresses—or the equivalent—and high heels.

"Now anyone with a sense of humor could interpret 'casual' to mean, well, you know, *casual*. It would be so hysterical to wear..." Ellen said. "Here, put this on."

Karen and I weren't crazy about what she had chosen for us to wear, but Ellen insisted that it would be fun. And funny. We showed up at the apartment respectably late, wet towels around our necks, tennis rackets in hand, wearing short-short white tennis skirts, white bobby socks, and white tennis shoes. Dr. Brown didn't laugh when we arrived; in fact, he didn't say a word. After a few of the guests grinned a little, Ellen assumed the character of a tennis pro superstar and performed an impromptu stand-up routine about the definition of "casual." Then, he laughed.

That night, however, was not Ellen's last bout with the dress code. Several months into the school year, the female faculty and the female students began to push for the okay to wear pants to work. We had heard that the female teachers in some of the Brazilian schools were actually being allowed to wear American jeans—of course, a pair of Levis practically cost the equivalent of a day's rent on Copacabana. We weren't asking to wear something as casual as jeans to work, but we were hoping to get permission to

wear color-matched coordinating pants suits. But Dr. Brown was not wavering; we were to show up for work dressed appropriately in dresses or skirts and blouses.

On the day Ellen decided to defy the rules and wear pants to school, he fired her on the spot. But after a few days, he called her back, and they made some sort of compromise. She didn't wear pants to school again.

. . .

On our second day together, the three of us decided to walk from our apartment to the beach, three blocks away. It was a gray day, early August, mid-winter—by my standards, hot, but by Brazilians', cold. 70°, maybe even 75°. Having come from the summer-chilly Northwest, I considered anything in the 70s hot, and I needed to get to water. I needed to get *in* it, not just look at it. I pulled on my new bikini.

While I was staying with Thereza, I had bought the bikini, even though I remembered feeling self-conscious and overly exposed wearing the one Susan had lent me in California. Rio was on the beach, so I had figured my only problem finding a swimsuit would be narrowing the selection from a hundred to a handful. Wrong. I couldn't find a single swimsuit in the first four shops Thereza pushed me into. July is winter. Brazilians wear wool and fur. I remembered the airport—everyone had worn sweaters and socks.

Finally, in a tiny boutique, the clerk pulled out a cardboard box with two bikinis. I gasped. "Thereza, I can't wear those. Neither one of them! Look at me! They're postage stamp size, and I'm bulk mail! See if she can't find something bigger—ten times bigger." Back home—maybe not in California, but in Washington—we were still wearing one-piece suits with ample coverage.

“Maybe there’s something in the back,” the clerk said to Thereza.

She returned with two tiny strips of red, white, and blue fabric, next to nothing in size, but larger than the other two choices. The clerk told Thereza to tell me that bikinis were out of fashion. I would need a maillot for next season.

“What’s a maillot?”

Thereza started to answer, then said, “Just buy it. It’ll be fine. You won’t use it much anyway. It’s winter! I’ll see what I can do about the price. Since it’s out of fashion, it ought to be cheap.”

She said a few words to the clerk, they nodded, and Thereza took a few bills from my wallet.

. . .

Karen, Ellen, and I set off for the beach. Under my jeans, the bikini was uncomfortable, riding up, pinching me, but I wanted to be prepared in case I felt like swimming. The beach was nearly empty. Occasionally someone jogged by, and we could see a fisherman or two casting lines from an outcropping of rocks to the north.

“C’mon. It’s warm enough. Let’s go in!”

I threw off my jeans, and Karen and Ellen rolled theirs up around their knees. We skipped along the shore, our feet bare, dashing in and out of the waves, squealing. Then a candle, half burnt, washed up against Karen’s foot.

“Hey, look at this,” she yelled.

Then another candle rolled up, and then another. Soon dozens of candles were swirling at our feet. All were white, all partly burnt. We noticed that candles littered the

beach as far as we could see, some ebbing with the waves, others scattered slipshod in the sands up shore.

“This is too strange. Do you think they’re from a wedding? An at-sea wedding, on a ship maybe?” I asked. “Oh, wait a minute, you don’t suppose it’s... Thereza told me there’s this religion...”

“Grab some up,” Ellen said. “They’re perfect for getting a little ambience into the ol’ *residência*.”

I was skeptical, but we had already established roles—Ellen was the leader, I was the follower, and Karen tried to keep a balance between the two of us. We chose the longest and the driest candles, stacking them neatly in our arms. As we were picking them up, we noticed more treasure. Coins, and even paper bills, half buried in the sand. A comb. Bottles of wine. Flowers, wet and wilting.

“I don’t know, I hope this is some kind of blessing,” Karen said.

Our arms filled with candles and our pockets filled with money, we returned to the apartment, excited but a little suspicious. That night our living room flickered in candlelight, and we ate exotic fruits—guavas, pinkish bananas, mangoes, and papayas the size of footballs.

The next day I told Thereza. She turned green. “Oh, my gosh! Quick,” she whispered, adding a litany of Portuguese phrases to her English. “Gather them up. We’ve got to get them back to the beach. Now...before it’s too late. Maybe it’s already too late.

“These candles are *macumba*,” she explained. “Voodoo. Used in a ceremony to make some god happy. The coins, to bribe some god for protection. Or for luck. Thank goodness, they’re white, not black. If they were black, they would have been for a curse.

No one in Brazil—no one at all, it doesn't matter what your beliefs are, no one messes with *macumba*.

“OK, you three, listen up. Here's a little BRASIL 101. I guess I should have said something before. Remember, Lee, when we saw the circle of candles in the crossroads?”

I remembered, but I hadn't fully made the connection between the candles at the crossroads and the candles on the beach. And I had trusted Ellen. If she said we should gather candles, I gathered. No questions asked.

“During the seventeenth century,” Thereza said, “millions of Africans were brought to Brazil to work in the sugarcane fields. Some say 4 or 5 million; others say closer to 13 million. Anyway, lots. They came mostly from the Yoruba nation of West Africa, and they brought their gods with them. The Portuguese Jesuits, of course, forbid the worshipping of these gods, so the slaves got around the ban by renaming them as Catholic saints. Ogum, the god of war, became St. George; Iansa, the goddess of the winds and storms, St. Barbara; Omolu, the god of healing, St. Lazarus.

“On New Year's Eve, you'll learn about Iemanjá, Mary. Pearl white skin, black hair flowing loose to her waist, she wears a blue dress and lives in the ocean. Just imagine, the slaves even felt they had to change the skin color of their gods from black to white. They dressed them in European suits and dresses. Then the natives, the Guarani Indians, added their beliefs to the mix, and, here's what we've got. *Macumba*. Kind of Catholic voodoo with animal spirits and what have you. It's pretty weird, but you wouldn't ever find me—or any other Brazilian—taking a single candle from any kind of *macumba* shrine. Ever.”

We learned to regard *macumba* rituals with respect. We checked our doorknobs for hairs tied in loops, a sure sign of a curse. We bypassed crossroads where white candles encircling elaborate displays of perfume, mirrors, lace, and crystal-clear bottles of *cachaça*—sugar cane rum—had been set out to entice a goddess. We sidestepped shrines of black candles, charred wood, cigars, black bottles of *cachaça* and black feathers on jungle trails just a few minutes walk from our apartment. We even learned to look down, hushed, when we walked by roadside stands cluttered with garish paintings of gods, strands of beads dangling with symbols of good fortune or bad luck, and fetishes for every wish, every ailment, every curse.

Our friend Dick, who had taught at the school for several years and was now the guidance counselor, once dated a girl who had grown up *macumba*. After they broke up, for months, he spent every Friday, Saturday, and Sunday sick in bed. He swore he'd been cursed.

. . .

Dick lived in the building next to us. He was our resident “pharmacist.” We depended on him to give us the right stuff to get us out of bed when we were laid up with the trots or stomach bugs. He had lived in Brazil long enough to know every worm and parasite that might adopt our blood, bones, and organs. By our symptoms, he would prescribe the right concoction—most often, for me, the dark red liquid in the small brown bottle that smelled like metal. Prescriptions signed by doctors weren't necessary. Anyone could go to the pharmacy and order whatever was needed.

Over the next two years, Karen and I would spend many a night sitting at Dick's dining table or cross-legged on his bed drinking wine and pouring over black and white

photographs he'd taken of his friends. Among the photos were beautiful portraits of singer/activist Miriam Makeba. He had lived down the road from her in the Virgin Islands. I was fascinated by the stories he told about how Makeba had starred in an anti-apartheid documentary, so South Africa took away her passport; when she testified at the UN against apartheid, South Africa revoked her citizenship and barred her from returning to her homeland. She was a woman without a country. With the help of Harry Belafonte, she came to the US where she was an immediate success, recording hit after hit. But when she married Black Panther Stokeley Carmichael in 1968, the US closed its doors to her, too. Dick hadn't talked with her since the marriage.

When I was student teaching at Lincoln High School in Seattle in '69, the Black Panthers took over the school. Men and boys dressed in camouflage fatigues with black armbands and black boots stationed themselves up and down the hallways. The principal said he didn't want any trouble; if the Panthers behaved themselves, they could stay. He told the faculty and the students to be accommodating and polite; after a few hours, we were smiling, and they were tipping their berets. Although it was strange for us women to have a man walk us to the restroom—a Black Panther was assigned to each faculty member—education went on as usual. After a few days, they gave up and went somewhere else.

Meanwhile up the street on campus at the University of Washington, Chicano students had learned a few techniques from the Panthers and were protesting the treatment of migrant workers, demanding that the university boycott California grapes until working and living conditions were made more favorable. The students were successful, making the school the first in the nation to refuse to buy and serve grapes.

It was an awakening for me. Back when I was a kid in the strawberry fields in the Skagit Valley, everyone told me that the Mexicans were happy with their situation, that their shacks were a whole lot better than anything they'd have in Mexico; they were lucky to have a roof over their heads, even if it leaked and ten people shared a 10' x 10' cubicle. I was a kid; I believed it. Now I knew better.

Dick also had photos of singer/actor John Davidson. John was taping a new prime-time TV variety show for ABC. They were old friends from theater days, and he was begging Dick to return to the States to help him with the show, but Dick loved Brazil. He was staying in Rio, curse or no curse.

Soon two new male teachers, both named Peter, arrived. Peter Cooper, a Princeton grad who left Wall Street for a breather in Rio, came to teach history. He was a Baseball Hall of Fame Cooperstown, New York Cooper, but he was basketball tall and lanky, not baseball stocky. We immediately made him our big brother and kept him on call for whenever we needed a male escort. Peter's "breather" turned into a lifelong attachment to American schools; he served in Paris, Tokyo, Bogotá, and is now back in Rio as the current EA headmaster.

The other Peter, Peter Lownds, described by the female Brazilian teachers as "murine for the eyes," came down to Rio via Yale Drama School and the Peace Corps. All of us were disappointed to find that he brought a pretty new wife with him, causing a huge housing problem for Dr. Brown. Male teachers lived in one apartment owned by the school; females lived in another. Peter and his wife ended up squished in a cracker box-sized flat, paying their own rent.



Peter's mother was Amy Lownds, who had been married to Bob Dylan. Each time Karen put her Bob Dylan tape in the player, and we sang along to "Lay, Lady, Lay," we fantasized that Dylan might just pop down to Rio to check on his ex-stepson Peter, but he never came. Peter was a Jack Kerouac fan, and Jack Kerouac was a Peter Lownds fan. Once Kerouac told Peter, "You're going to be my successor." And, in a way, he was—not really in the way Kerouac meant—that is, Peter as a famous writer. Instead when *Go Moan for Man*, the documentary about the legendary writer was made, Peter was asked to be the voice of Kerouac.

I learned that when anybody who was anybody visited Rio, they often also visited us at the school. The first big-name visitor came on the morning of September 2, 1969. Former presidential candidate Senator Eugene McCarthy. Faculty and students gathered in the courtyard to hear him speak. I commented to another English teacher that McCarthy, standing with perfect posture at the lectern, looked far more handsome than I'd imagined—I wished my mom could see him. He wore a pin-striped suit and a wide tie, and understandably, he looked much healthier and well-rested than he had during the 1968 presidential campaign.

After a few sentences of his opening remarks, he began to loosen up; once he even feigned an Irish accent that made the kids giggle. He spoke briefly, and I kept wishing that I had paid better attention when my mom and dad had discussed him around the dinner table during the campaign, but I had never in my wildest dreams figured that I'd be sitting near him on a volleyball court in Rio de Janeiro.

After a short speech, he asked for questions. We teachers were amazed by the profundity of the questions the kids asked. McCarthy led them in discussions of Vietnam,

anti-war protests, Students for a Democratic Society, Ted Kennedy's July accident at Chappaquiddick, the progress of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty between the US and the USSR, civil rights and race relations.

"Sometimes they're so noodle-brained in class, but talking with McCarthy they sound like geniuses," I whispered to Ellen. We could not have been prouder of them.

McCarthy recited several of his poems from memory and ended the session by presenting the student body president with a copy of his book *Uma Resposta dos Conservadores*, the Portuguese translation of *A Liberal Answer to the Conservative Challenge*.

I learned later that getting McCarthy on campus had not been an easy feat. I had assumed that Dr. Brown had invited him to come, but actually it was a group of kids who made it happen. Jeannette, Carol, Bob, and Tony, holding handmade "Get Clean for Gene" signs, hung out in his hotel for four days trying to catch up with him. Like the hippies who had cut their hair and shaved their beards to campaign door-to-door for McCarthy back in '68, our kids were models of hygiene and good looks. Finally the junior sleuths tracked him down at a boat dock and kept after him until he agreed to address the student body.

Although I, their teacher, often felt self-conscious, embarrassed, and naïve, my students weren't. They had lived all over the world. They spoke multiple languages. They were used to coming home in the evening and finding some famous politician or entertainer or author sitting in their living room drinking coffee with their parents. Many of them even came from what I would consider famous families—high-profile news correspondents with recognizable by-lines, military and embassy high-ups, well-known

Rio high society. Many were wealthy—it was nothing to them to fly to Paris or New York for a long weekend to Christmas shop. I don't remember what the tuition was then, but now it's \$22,877 for juniors and seniors with an entrance fee of \$6500—small potatoes to them. The kids were confident and assertive—at least, that's how they appeared to me—comfortable with adults, and used to getting their way. They wanted Gene McCarthy, and they got him. He didn't disappoint them, and, when we heard his positive comments about them, we knew that they had impressed him.

Another time their stakeout didn't end so successfully, but it fueled some fantastic fish stories around school. Janis Joplin was in town. The rumor was that she was staying at Dias Ferreira—our address—with us. We were barraged by kids who insisted that Joplin was going to be our guest. Although we told them again and again that we didn't know anything about it, they didn't believe us and camped out on our stoop for a day. When they finally realized that we must be telling the truth, they tracked her down at her hotel. She came to the door stark naked and raving drunk, and the kids scattered like flies.

The visitor who probably impressed the kids the most was Richie Havens. The buzz started during first hour. “Richie Havens is coming. *The Richie Havens!* Opening-act-at-Woodstock Richie Havens! He blew the crowd away at Woodstock with ‘Motherless Child’ and then he sang the word *Freedom* on and on and on. He sang for over three hours!”

Mr. Garcia, the Upper School principal, kept telling them, “I don't know anything about it.”

But when the kids saw that a platform was being moved out of the storage room, they knew something was up. By the beginning of third hour, they were milling around the courtyard, waiting nervously.

Mr. Garcia said, "There's no definite word he's coming, so get back to your classes."

A little red-headed boy from the Lower School pulled on my arm. "Miss Lee, Miss Lee, my cousin, she lives in New Jersey and she went to Woodstock and she said Mr. Richie Havens don't have no teeth."

*"Doesn't have any teeth, young man."*

"Well, Miss, he doesn't have teeth on the top."

Mr. Garcia yelled, "Get to class," but the kids were moving slower than turtles. Then a girl screamed, "He's here! Richie Havens is really here!"

Havens walked in quietly, and the kids went wild. He raised a hand to them and, hushed, they sat down on the court. Bearded, he was wearing a gray coarse wool-looking suit with wide white stripes. No tie, a matching vest, a shirt speckled with brownish flowers open at the neck. His suit coat was buttoned. He sat on a stool and began to play. Thick gold rings, one on his ring finger and one on his pinky finger, flashed as his hand flew over the strings of the guitar; his foot tapping the plywood sounded like a drum. He sang with joy, with despair, and with bitterness. One kid said, "He's singing the woes of an ungentle world."

After the concert, after photographs, after autographs, a senior girl slipped a paper to the yearbook editor. Apparently she had hidden behind a tree outside the school and was the first to see Havens pull in. She wrote, "Gentleness radiates from his soul. Just

look at those deep brown eyes and the way he looks at people. I feel so much love generated by him—just by watching him.”

There were always too many kids around him for me to get close enough to see if he had his upper teeth.

Others came—astronauts passed moon rocks to us; the head of the English department at Philips Exeter Academy sat in on my classes, giving new meaning to *A Separate Peace*; consultants—some annoyingly hoity-toity and others who had their feet on the ground—made cutting-edge pedagogical suggestions, department by department.

The visiting scholar of 1970 was particularly important to me. Dr. Henry H. Callard and his wife took residency in Rio for two weeks. He was the director of teacher preparation at Princeton until 1969, was a trustee of Johns Hopkins, and held honorary degrees from fifteen universities, Princeton and Harvard included. Knowing that he'd be sitting in on my classes made me a nervous wreck. He came on a Wednesday.

In one class, I told the students about an article I'd read, "Joey the Mechanical Boy." Joey was a nine-year-old autistic—none of the kids had heard of autism. Joey believed that he was a machine. In order to eat, he insulated his body in napkins and connected himself with invisible wires to invisible outlets; in order to drink, he built complex structures with straws that pumped fluid into his body. To sleep at night, he created a protective shield of cardboard, masking tape, and wire. During the day, he would suddenly activate his "controls," and begin noisily shifting through the gears until he exploded, smashing his ever-present collections of light bulbs, tubes, and motors. The kids were fascinated, asking question after question. They wrote dynamite poems and paragraphs, recreating Joey's terrifying world of humans as machines.

In the next class, we looked at poppies under a magnifying glass, finding William Blake's, and our own, "heaven in a wildflower." The kids wrote poems inspired by a drawing of a pine tree by one of the students in the third class. In my last class of the day, we discussed William Blake's "The Rose." That day the class was composed of my gifted 7<sup>th</sup> graders and our department chair's gifted 11<sup>th</sup> graders. Their analysis was spectacular, brilliant—they talked like graduate students; I wanted to hug and kiss each one of them.

At the end of the day, I apologized to Dr. Callard because I felt as if my tongue was five inches thick and my teeth kept getting caught in my lips, but the lessons must have gone well because he said, "I have thoroughly enjoyed my day. I've talked to a number of students over the past week, and they have all said that your class is the best class they've ever taken. I can see why." I was in heaven. The next day was Teacher's Day, and the students brought me paper flowers, candy, and notes. Heaven—two days in a row.

Outside of school, I was also being educated. I met countless people of fame of fortune. In fact, the wealth of some of them was staggering. I was pursued by one young man who easily spent \$1000 on a date, but I didn't like him much—he was arrogant and expected me to drop everything when he came over to the apartment unannounced—so I used every excuse to get away from him. One of the Brazilian teachers told me I was crazy not to date him. "You know, he's the second richest guy in Rio," she said. "His dad is the richest." It didn't matter; I didn't like him.

Some of my best friends were the South African crewmen of the *Cariad*, a 95-foot ketch once owned by King George V of England. They—all in their 20s with accents

that could charm birds out of trees—sailed into Guanabara Bay from Africa in the Cape-to-Rio race. They came and went, spending a few weeks docked at the Yacht Club, then setting sail for Argentina or Panama or California, returning a few months later, their bodies bronzed and their curls a few inches longer.

When we first arrived in Rio, Dr. Brown told us about the Yacht Club, saying we'd never see the inside of such a high-class exclusive club. We practiced saying the words in Portuguese—Iate Club—just in case. *Ee- at- chee Cloo-be*. It probably wasn't three days later that we were sipping imported Italian Campari under an umbrella on the patio of the club.

One of the South Africans—Don, an engineer—told me that his goal was to sail back to Durban and build thousands of geodesic domes to house the blacks, not in fenced compounds, but in open, comfortable neighborhoods. I wished him well and told him to get going.

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In no time, I had become a part of a group whose experiences were far beyond what any public school-educated, island girl of middle-class upbringing could possibly comprehend. It was exciting, but unnerving—I spent a lot of time worrying that I'd trip over my tongue or use the wrong fork.

I was star struck, and I relished dropping fancy name after name into my letters home. If only they could see me now.

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**Sábado, 13 Setembro 1969 ... Copacabana**

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*On the Rocks, On the Rocks, On the Rocks*

Karen turned the key—we heard the click and the release of the first deadbolt, then the second. Earlier we had stopped by school to tie up a few loose ends, and on the way home, we had picked up a couple of filets at a nearby meat market—with a salad, we'd have a simple, easy-to-fix dinner. I followed Karen into our apartment.

In the middle of the red couch, facing us straight on was Ellen, smiling. I never sat in the middle of the couch. Neither did Karen. But Ellen did. Karen and I both curled up at one end or the other, leaning into the thick upholstery, cushioned in canvas, our safety zone. But now, there was Ellen, sitting square in the middle, her long limbs extended, arms out—surely, a pose—legs spread wide open. Ellen as a six-foot X. Flexing her bare toes, she was waiting for us.

And she had “the look.” Dang. Sort of a half smile really. The I've-got-something-up-my-sleeve-and-you'll-never-ever-in-a-million-years-guess-what-it-is look. Outwardly she was cool, laid-back and detached, but I could sense that behind the pretense, inside, she was snap-crackle-popping. Her eyes were the giveaway. Lids half shut, dreamy. A kind of controlled crazy.

Shoot. I had already graded a stack of less-than-stellar essays, but I still had a stack to go. I was tired...and crabby. If I had told the ninth graders once that the sentence “Neither Graciella nor Florinda had placed *their* sandals in the closet ’, is wrong, wrong, wrong—*her* not *their*,” I'd told them a million times. Paper after paper, wrong! And



now—just when I wanted to sink up to my chin in bubble bath and sleep—Ellen had “the look.”

I placed my books and papers onto the dining room table and, over the back of the captain’s chair pulled out cock-eyed from the table, I hooked the shoulder strap of my new purse—chocolate brown leather, embossed and hand stitched by some long-haired “Eeepie” camped out at the Hippie Fair in Ipanema. Karen let loose of her gym bag, and it thudded to the floor, like a jumble of half-pound barbells. She carried the meat into the kitchen. I eyed the mural on the wall behind the table. Yup, we had seen the look that day, too, the day the mural went up.

It was back in August, just a few days after we arrived. Karen and I came in from our Portuguese for Beginners class at Catholic University, and Ellen had already spread newspapers and paper towels swiped from the girls’ restroom at school over the hardwood floor. Open cans of paint were lined up like dye pots on Easter. In pencil, she had sketched a design on the dining room wall. Jungle vines curled and twined around tree trunks. A tiger-ish creature with fitful eyes. Fantastical leaves with blossoms like Martian space spiders, shredded into spinning needles of confetti.

We knew better than to protest—Ellen could talk us into anything—so, following her instructions, like paint-by-numbers, we had covered every inch of the 12-foot wall. Then we opened a bottle of wine. Every time I looked at the mural, I wondered how much we would be fined for defacing school property. Sure, Ellen could afford it—she had a trust fund—but Karen and I didn’t. How many coats of white paint would it take to cover the black, greens, and orange. Still, I had to admit, I liked...no, I was proud of the mural. It was daring, something big, something beyond my usual safe zone.

I took to a nestling place on the other couch, also covered in canvas, but blue, bright as cobalt. Karen sat on the soft, black and white checkerboard, overstuffed chair. I could feel my stomach tighten, feel a sliver of terror inch up my throat. "The look" always made me nervous. We waited. With Ellen, everything was a production.

So, what would it be this time? Were we going to sit in a dark underground jazz club until 5 am, sucking in second-hand smoke until our lungs cracked before rolling into school wearing the same dresses and underwear we'd worn the day before? Or were we going to schmooze our way into the Iate Club again and finagle free food? I was certain that Ellen's announcement would have the aura of a Broadway opening night. And I was right.

Slowly she brought her knees together and her arms to her lap, placing her hands palms down, one on each thigh. Straightening her shoulders, she raised her chin, poised to speak.

"Hold it. I think I need a beer," Karen said. "This sounds like trouble. Capital T."

"No, ma'am, Miss red-headed naysayer. You are in for the most fantabulous treat of your life. Little lady, I am your ever-lovin' fairy godmother. Trust me. You need to get dressed."

"Ellen...noooooooo. Too tired," I moaned. "Too much work. Too much..."

"Quit blubbering and bellyaching. You'll kiss my lily-white feet when you see what's up. This is so *a maz ing!* You're going to love it! I promise, crisscross my heart. No questions, just hurry. We've got to get to gettin' before old *sol* plunks down into the ocean. Wear the pink dress. No, wait, the red dress. I'll lend you something glitzy. Give

you a little pizzazz.” She was wiggling her index fingers and moving her shoulders to some unheard dance tune.

But I had my own “glitz.” Understated. Un-flashy. Nothing too obvious. In my opinion, classy but fun. I had bought new earrings a few weeks back in a small shop on Avenida Atlântica. Three gold rings with tiny slivers of gold dangling from the biggest hoop. They’d catch the light just right. And I could wear five gold bangles, like Susan back in San Francisco always did—except hers were real, and mine were fake. Each of hers was engraved with her name and the date she received it—one on each birthday from sixteen to twenty. But my gold charm bracelet, the graduation gift from my grandmother, was real. I would wear it between the bangles.

I had very few clothes. Just enough to get through the week. Knowing that my western Washington clothes wouldn’t work in tropical Brazil, I had planned to buy teacher-ish outfits here, off the rack in some “middle-class-price-range” Copacabana shop. And some snazzy dress-up clothes—although I wasn’t ready for “statement” clothes, I wanted to be noticed, a little. But I hadn’t anticipated that my sometimes-size 8, sometimes-size 10, body wouldn’t fit into tiny size 2 Brazilian dresses. And I hadn’t known that very few ready-made dresses were even available. Most Brazilian women, even the maids, had dressmakers who nipped and tucked every seam and dart until the skinny sheaths, maxis, minis, bell-bottoms, and hip huggers fit perfectly. I was intimidated by choosing patterns and fabrics, thread, and other notions. My mother, who could have fashioned a Cinderella gown from dishrags, had always made those decisions for me. The right decisions.

Except once. One time her decision was wrong, and I still smarted from the memory. Freshman year of college. Mom sewed me a dress. Granny dresses, long and loose, touching skin only at the shoulders and under the breasts, were in style, so that was the pattern she chose. She cut the dress from yards of polished cotton, expensive fabric, a rich brown-gold color with a tiny blue fleur-de-lis pattern. In dark tea and Rit, she dyed lace for the neck, sleeves, and hem. The dress was simple, but, because of the fabric, it was nighttime-event acceptable, or so mom and I thought. I wore it one evening to a banquet. I loved the dress. Later, a group of seniors signaled me over.

“Your dress is inappropriate, far too casual for this kind of affair,” said one.

“Don’t ever wear it to a formal event again,” said another. “An upstairs dress for knocking around in, not a downstairs dress for the formal dining room.”

I felt the sting of their words burn through my cheeks. In my room, shamed, I took off the dress and hung it in the back of the closet.

But here in hot, wet Brazil, mostly we wore shifts—waistless and sleeveless. And like my granny dress, they hardly touched us anywhere. So, I hadn’t realized that after hours and hours of late-night chats with Karen—and a slice of soft white cheese then a slice of golden jellied *goiabada*, a sweet, sticky fruit cooked in sugar, then a glass of wine—my size 10 body was rapidly headed for size 14, making it even more difficult to find clothes ready made.

I pulled the dresses from my closet. The red dress and the pink dress, except for the color, were exactly the same. Except for color, I had a number of outfits the same. If I were ever lucky enough to find something that fit, I would buy two or three in my size. I looked out the window, and gave Cristo up on Corcovado a good long gaze. No sign of

rain. Once, wearing the red dress, I had been caught in a sudden storm, and the deluge caused the dye to run red down my shoulders, down my stomach, down my legs to my feet. In seconds, I had looked like I was bleeding cherry jell-o.

I dropped the red dress over my head, stepped into sandals, ran a comb through my hair, and brushed a little color onto my cheeks. I clipped on the earrings and fastened Karen's necklace for her. Sighing, we shook our heads. Resigned. Still, we knew better than to miss "An Adventure with Ellen."

The three of us scurried to the elevator, Ellen hailed a taxi, and we were off. She read directions to the driver from pencil scribblings on a crumpled scrap of notebook paper, speaking in her own concoction of Portuguese confused with Spanish. We passed through familiar streets of apartment houses with first floor shops and small outdoor cafes, crossed several wide boulevards, went by the Hippie Fair in Ipanema, and after winding around jungle-covered mountains, finally emerged somewhere in Copacabana in a neighborhood of Easter-egg pastel-colored mansions, barely visible behind their swirly iron gates and walled gardens.

I could only imagine what was behind those gates. One recent weekend, a student had invited us to his family's "mountain cabin." Expecting a small rustic bungalow, we packed our tennis shoes, socks, and jeans, and readied ourselves for roughing it. Arriving at their gate, we quickly realized our error. The place was magnificent. Thousands and thousands of square feet. A single-story, sprawling, red-tile roofed, white-walled ranch house, covered in bougainvillea vines, with dozens of rooms and dozens of full-time staff.

One wing enclosed an open air aviary. In tall ornate cages, birds of every color and size twittered and chirred. Everywhere we could hear the splash of fountains, sprinkling like atomizers, into ponds of lilies. Enclosed patios of tiles, hand-painted blue and white, separated one annex from another. Bedrooms were fitted with four-poster princess beds, and the dining table could seat thirty. The entire estate was shaded by the dappled shadows of strategically planted tropical trees. We were in awe—no one back home would, or could, believe us.

. . .

From Copacabana, our driver steered the car toward a dark mountain. At its base was the framework of a skyscraper, a bedlam of steel beams, ties, and girders. He pulled the car into a dirt lot and parked close to stopped-in-their-tracks backhoes, bulldozers, and dump trucks. Like a giant erector set or a Ferris wheel pulled straight, the structure rose heavenward, just shy of reaching the height of the mountain behind it.

By now, the sky was streaking flamingo pink, striped orange and purple, and against the sunset, the mountain looked blackish blue. The latticed towers of two monstrous cranes cast bent shadows, crisscrossing horizontally and vertically, reminding me of the black lines of Escher-esque optical illusions. A few hundred yards from us was the multi-storied framework of a superstructure, unfinished, floor over floor of layered concrete, wall-less and rust-tinged gray. Steel I-beams and girders reached straight up, out, and over from the immense foundation, a massive slab cluttered with saw horses, cinder blocks, and small wind-wisped dunes of powdery cement.

“Ellen? What in the...”

“Shhhhh. Just follow me.”

This was crazy. We were dressed up—just as Ellen had ordered us—but this was no party place; it was a verifiable hellhole. Ahead of us, she barged toward the building, plowing over ground soft from an early afternoon shower, striding over deep ruts, finally stepping onto a plywood catwalk that led to the first floor of the building.

Dumbfounded but trusting, as always, we followed her. She led us through stacks of dusty lumber to the center of the structure, stopping in front of a boxy freight elevator. What on earth were we doing here? This had to be a mistake...but Ellen, as always, seemed to be sure of herself. By now, Karen's forehead had scrunched into a corrugation of wrinkles, and her lips were pursed tight. I was chewing the polish off my thumbnail. What if we were arrested? I'd heard stories of foreigners being locked up for decades, having to eat rats and mice raw, the American consulate just wringing his hands and sighing.

"Get on," Ellen said. "It's safe," she added, reading my mind.

"And you know that...how? This is a freight elevator, not exactly Marshall Fields," I said.

"Been here before...twice," she answered.

She wasn't going to give us even an inkling of what was what. Looking through the top of the wire mesh cage, I could see all the way up to the top of the building. Abandoned, obviously. Story after messy story of massive concrete platforms, piled one over the other. Ellen pushed a button, and the elevator creaked, jolted, and rocked upward. I was scared. Ellen was a risk taker; I was not. That is, everyone thought I was some kind of free-spirited wanderlust—after all, I had flown down to Rio on a one-way ticket—but, when push came to shove, I was a coward. I was the type who'd put a toe

into the water, draw back, and sit, arms locked, chin-to-knees safe on the shore of caution. My how-to-live-life manual was a list of must's, should's, could's, no's, never's, and not's; nowhere was there permission to enter a half-built skyscraper and joyride to the top.

Below me, through a hole in the floorboards, I could see the ground diminishing, as if I were looking down the shaft of a peashooter. Gulping heart throbs, I swallowed hard, sucking damp air down a throat drained dry. Soon the rusting yellow earthmovers were no more than sandbox toys, and the occasional taxi, no bigger than a matchbox car. Gears grinding, slowly up we went. For an instant, lifting my eyes seaward, I caught a split second of blazing light, a narrow line of red orange squeezed between the darkening ocean and evening dusk. Then once again, I was shot through with panic.

“Ellen, what are you doing? What are *we* doing? This has got to be illegal as hell.”

“Never fear. It's okay. Trust me.”

I'd heard those words before.

A single industrial-sized light bulb, attached to a thick cord and looped around a metal bar at the top of the elevator, provided the only light, sickish green and vapid. I could see the mountainside, dimly, cast black in the shadows. Spilled rocks, rubble, and riprap were trapped under an overlay of interlocking chain link, and I noticed that someone had used heavy-duty wire cutters to snip holes in the protective barrier, a diamond pattern.

Finally the elevator jerked to a stop. We had arrived at the top floor, dead center of a giant steel door on a dark wall.



“Close your eyes. Close ’em tight. As soon as you hear the door open, take two steps forward,” Ellen commanded.

The door whirred open, Ellen unlatched the elevator exit gate, and Karen grabbed for my hand. Eyes shut tight, together we stepped out, one step, two steps.

“Okay, open your eyes!”

Before us was not the confusion of trusses, struts, and beams as on the preceding floors. Before us instead was a dazzling expanse of oiled hardwood, dark and light woods fixed into a pattern of herringbone parquet. Immediately to our right, just an arm’s length away, was a distinguished looking man, poised and proper in a black tuxedo. Almost imperceptibly, he cleared his throat then smiled.

“*Boa noite, senhoritas.* Good evening. The evening is much more lovely now that you are here,” he said in Portuguese.

Beyond him, we caught sight of our own faces, awestruck, reflected in a mirror shimmering with the crystalline glints of wineglasses, highballs, tumblers, flutes, and snifters. Like millions of diamonds. We saw pyramids of limes and lemons, cylinders of maraschino cherries, jars of olives amassed on a marble counter, and decanters of liquid amber, auburn, and chartreuse assembled on glass shelving. Above the mirror, tiny stroboscopic lights blinked, “On the Rocks, On the Rocks, On the Rocks.” We were in a bar—not your friendly neighborhood pub—but a gleaming out-of-this-world high-class cocktail lounge on the top of an unfinished building, overlooking the city.

“Ellen, where are we? What is this? It’s absolutely incredible. This place is just a skeleton, an honest to goodness skull and crossbones hazard zone, and then...this amazing paradise!”

“As if I didn’t tell you that you’d love it. You’ve just got to trust me. Welcome to *On the Rocks*, cocktail lounge and *restaurante magnífico e extraordinário* of the Panorama Palace.”

She had done it again, ushered us into a strange and magnificent world beyond anything we could have imagined. Like a tour guide, she pointed this way and that, zeroing in, far below, on the landmarks that we knew, giving us our bearings. We were high above Copacabana in what was obviously a five-star penthouse restaurant on the very top of an abandoned building on a derelict construction site.

We followed Ellen toward the bar. Cantilevered over the counter was a triangle of copper roofing; upright panels of glass walled in the area. But the space adjacent to the cocktail lounge had no walls, only a three-tiered guardrail running the perimeter of the floor. There, under the stars, were round tables for two, four, and eight, spread over by heavy white-on-white linens, set with white china and knives for butter, fish, and meat; forks for salads, oysters, and fruit; spoons for soup, dessert, and coffee. I had heard somewhere that you could tell a lot about a place by the weight of the silverware and the size and thickness of the napkins. This place was first class.

Most of *On the Rocks* was under the stars, open to the night air, but umbrellas and trees formed canopies over certain tables, and planters spilling over with flowers divided the area into quadrants. Only a few people were dining—sunset was still early for dinner by Brazilian standards—their heads drawn close in conversation. On the tables, flickering candles breathed in the night air, flaming up like tiny lungs, and fiery torches licked moonward, sizzling in an updraft.

Beyond the tables was the swimming pool, a slow undulation of shining turquoise, sparked with glints of light. Lit from within and reflecting candlelight on its shifting surface, the pool was as alive as a patch of phosphorescent sea. Only once had I seen phosphorescence. One night, under the moon, in the San Juan Islands—the Canadian side—I had waded deeper and deeper, swishing my arms up past my elbows in the water, each gentle swipe sending dinoflagellates into a swell of luminance. I never forgot the experience, and now, again, I felt shivery and stunned by something so beautiful.

“Oh, Ellen, this is the most amazing, fantastic place! This gorgeous restaurant—talk about an ugly duckling turning into a swan! A true diamond in the rough. How on earth did it...did you...”

We were led to our table, waiters pulled out our chairs, and we were seated just a stone’s throw from the edge. Far below us were city lights and out at sea, the once-in-awhile lights of passing ships. The moon cut a wide path on the water. Above us was the domed ceiling of inky night.

Ellen explained that ten years before, a group of entrepreneurs had planned to build a first-rate destination hotel/restaurant/bar. After completing the framework, they started at the top, intending to work their way down to the ground. Whether they ran out of money or just lost interest she didn’t know, but, after the completion of *On the Rocks*, construction was terminated. It was as if someone had said, “Freeze,” and everything stayed in its place.

“Like the curse of Sleeping Beauty,” she said.

Backhoes, their buckets in mid-lift, stalled; steel beams lay as helter-skelter as pick-up sticks, metal filings settled like dust. But somehow—she never told us how—she found her way over the rutted lot, into the elevator cage, and up to the elegant top floor to dine under the stars.

Karen and I were drop-jawed. Not a single sign disclosed the existence of a working restaurant. In fact, nothing designated the site as a work zone—no warnings tacked to light poles saying hard hats, steel-toed shoes, and safety glasses required. No “Keep Out” signs anywhere.

“Whoa, can you imagine this happening at home? I mean, if the building was being constructed in the United States, there would be codes and licenses, government specs, special provisions. High fences. Just a few peepholes where someone scribbled ‘Watch our progress’. Dobermans and German shepherds. Sheesh. Our lawyers would have fits!” I said.

But this was Brazil, a tropical playground where rules and regulations were mostly ignored, modified, or lost somewhere in a drawer or under a wad of bills. No business—even official business—transpired without under-the-table transactions. When we needed a visa or a stamp on a permit or an ID card, a man hired by the school accompanied us downtown to slip the right number of *cruzeiros* to the right person behind the right desk.

The following July, when I didn’t have the right visa to re-enter Brazil after a trip to Europe, I got off the plane, fixed my eyes on the youngest male customs agent without a wedding ring, tilted my head, and smiled. He looked into my eyes, smiled, stamped my passport, and I was home free. Only in Brazil. Bribes worked, and so did flirting.

We settled into the *On the Rocks* menu, selecting antipasto, butter lettuce salads, filets of beef in lemon butter, asparagus tips, wines, exotic coffees. Ellen's treat. Entranced by the view, time and time again, we blew out the candle, satisfied with the stars. But in an instant, the waiter had it relit. Finally, completely bewildered, he replaced the candle with two new ones. We gave up. Between courses, we were served palate-cleansing fruit ices and hot, moist hand towels, scented with something flowery sweet. An enchanted evening. Who back home would believe it?

"Happy un-birthday! *Salud*," Ellen said.

. . .

*On the Rocks* at the top of the Panorama Palace became a regular stop on the Ellen/Karen/Lee version of the Grayline tour. Our apartment was the Grand Central Station for countless 20-something-year-olds backpacking across South America, and we were always excited to see the expressions on their faces after we pushed them onto the rickety elevator and took them up to the paradise that was *On the Rocks*. Never were we disappointed; every guest, including my mom, stood on the top floor, leaned over a rail, and gaped in disbelief.

Over time, we learned some of the secrets of the structure. Of course, obviously, we could see open staircases, but we learned that there were also staircases hidden behind plywood barricades, corridors constructed behind columns, and hallways concealed behind gangplanks. When we were broke, we'd often set out for the Palace and let ourselves out on a floor where we would lean against a tower of trusses with our own bottle of cheap wine, bread, and fruit.

Once I spent the night prowling the building with my friend Terry. We crept around masonry and dangled our legs over edges. Then, in the upstairs lounge, we drank rum and cokes until 4 am. Except for the nodding, half asleep waiter and the bartender who endlessly wiped the counter—it didn't occur to me that they might want to go home to their families—we were the only people there. Finally, we both put our heads down on the table and slept, not wanting the night to end. When I woke up, I felt, with my tongue, a crack in the crown on my front tooth. After I broke my teeth in a bike accident when I was 16, my mom had said, with tears, "Well, it'll be okay, all the movie stars have caps."

*At On the Rocks*—even me with my cracked crown—we always felt like stars.

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Quarta, 21 Outubro 1970

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*Misses "Got Rocks" at On the Rocks*

Karen, Susan—she was new to the school, our new friend, and eventually would become our third roommate—and I kidnapped Kathy, our student teacher down from New York and stuffed her in a cab. We picked up two teachers from the Lower School and set off for the Panorama Palace to celebrate Kathy's twenty-first birthday. Kathy had moved into Ellen's old room after Ellen left us. It was toward the end of the month, we were tired after teaching all day, and all of us were hurting for cash—we couldn't afford a drink, let alone a meal—but we decided that after cake and presents at our apartment, the view from the fabulous Palace was necessary for Kathy's proper twenty-first birthday.

With Terry, I had discovered a staircase a floor below *On the Rocks* that led to a small empty three-walled room that opened onto a balcony with a spectacular view of the bay. Perfect. No one would even know we were there. We could oooh and aaah over the view and pretend we were wining-and-dining rich. We'd celebrate Kathy's birthday in style, our own kind of style.

We rode up on the elevator then took the stairs. I opened the door, and we walked in. When Terry and I had visited, the area was vacant, but tonight... it had been transformed, turned into an intimate dining room decked out with twin tables topped with tall tapers and color splashes of cut flowers.

"Uh oh, let's get out of here. Either I got the wrong room or..."

We turned and came face to face with a man in a suit blocking the door. He smiled and bowed. The maitre'd, we supposed.

"Ladies, ladies, come in, come in," he said in English. He had an accent, but it wasn't Portuguese. German maybe. A photo op of charm, he walked around us, extended his arms, and beckoned us in. Light taps to our shoulders and elbows. Smiling. So polite. He moved toward the balcony, and behind his back, we shot nervous looks to one another, then followed dumbly as he pulled out chairs and guided us onto the cushioned seats. None of us said a word.

"Sit. A beautiful night to dine with us. The chef will prepare for you the most..."

C'mon, Susan, do something, I kept thinking. Why don't you say something? You can charm any old curmudgeon into doing anything, and this guy is sweet as sugar. He'll be easy. Say something! Get us out of this mess. I was feeling double-duty-extra agitated because this trip had been my bright idea.

A moment later, a waiter in a white waistcoat and black bowtie hurried in and handed each of us a menu the size of a flounder. With a small flourish, the maitre'd tipped his head slightly, bent his arm humbly across his waist, and backed out the door, leaving us in privacy to scan the list of appetizers. The menu—in a leather cover and written on elegant heavy paper—had no prices. "Oh, my gosh. Quick! What do we do now?" I whispered. We speed-read the selections: lobster gobbles and mushroom thingys, citrus roasted this and that, and stuff none of us could even translate. We were terrified. Each item had to cost an arm and a leg.

"Let's get out of here!"

But looming there in the doorway was the shadow of the maitre'd.



“Okay, on the count of three, see how much money you’ve got.”

We eased our purses onto our laps and under the tablecloth, fingered through our wallets, bit our lips, and counted. Like the gossip game, we whispered out of the sides of our mouths until we determined that we could scrape up enough *cruzeiros* for one drink each and a bit of change for a meager tip, not much, but anyway, a tip. Without a signal from us, immediately the maitre’d was silently at our side.

“And, ladies, what will we be enjoying tonight?”

“Five daiquiris and one tomato juice, please,” someone said. The tomato juice was for me. Since mononucleosis and months of bad blood tests, I was off anything and everything with alcohol. Doctor’s orders.

“Oh, but you must try the salmon or the truffle...”

We convinced him that we weren’t the least bit hungry, that we’d eaten a huge feast just an hour before. We were sorry, we’d love to dine at *On the Rocks*, but...a drink was enough. He looked disappointed.

“Think how disappointed he’s going to be when he sees his tip,” Karen muttered.

Our drinks were delivered on a chattering tray. Big frosty glasses floating with ice and fruit. Celery, a foot long, stuck out of my tomato juice. Finally Susan went into action. It was about time.

Flashing her million-dollar smile, she said to the waiter, “Today is Kathy’s twenty-first birthday—she’s twenty-one on the twenty-first! In our country that is something really special. Could you please be our hero and bring her a big, fat cherry?”

No sooner had the request been made than he plunked two cherries into each daiquiri and four into Kathy’s. And because I had tomato juice, he handed me a tiny

three-pronged fork and slipped a silver oval platter piled with cherries in front of me. A few minutes later, he returned with a second waiter—the two of them balanced trays of antipasto, terrines of paté, and plates of tiny sandwiches and cheeses. Again we glanced at each other, scared to nibble even a crumb.

“What do we do now?” someone whispered.

“Sir, we didn’t order this. We...”

He just smiled and looked dumber than a doorknob.

My head hurt, and my stomach went sour. What a mess. I closed my eyes and ran my fingers over my temples. Okay, what would Ellen the Indomitable do? She wouldn’t get bent out of shape for even a second. Of course, she had the trust fund...but even if she didn’t have a trust fund, she’d pull this off without a hitch. And then... there’s that story my mom told me...

. . .

Her dad—he was an architect, much older than grandma—died when mom was young, and she and her mother lived with their friend Elizabeth and her Scottish husband Jimmy in Salt Lake City. Mom told us that Jimmy always said, “One eye is happy to be in America, but the other cries for Scotland.” The three of them ran a beauty school—at first grandma just washed hair and picked up, but then she learned to give permanent waves; she was the first beautician in Utah to give perms. (Elizabeth always said you could count on the prostitutes to leave big tips, but the snooty high-society show-offs were another story entirely, tight as ticks.)

They were doing fine until 1933 when the Depression got them, and the business folded. Mom said that their business actually lasted a lot longer than most others—rich

women still had to have their hair done. On the last night, after they locked the doors behind them, Elizabeth announced, "Tonight we go to Shay's, and we order the biggest steaks on the menu. When the bill comes, we'll just sign for it. It may take a few months, but we'll pay up when we can." That night everything, mom said, tasted better than it ever had before.

. . .

Okay, I can do this, I thought. Ellen's on one shoulder, and Elizabeth's on the other; I feel responsible—I'll make it right. "I've got my checkbook," I said. "Tomorrow I'll get an advance and get the money in the bank before the check even gets deposited."

Someone remembered money in her underwear drawer; another had an uncashed birthday check; someone else remembered money in the sugar bowl.

"Let's do it! We'll put on like we're the six Misses Got Rocks at *On the Rocks*."

But for all my bravado, I suffered through the food. Each bite was like lead. Knowing that I couldn't afford it took away any taste at all. I worried. Unlike Ellen and Elizabeth, I couldn't throw caution to the wind and play out the scene. I just wanted to get out of there.

Finally I laid down my fork; I couldn't eat another bite. I was miserable. Suddenly the door flew open, and in marched four waiters, two of them staggering under the weight of a cake, four layers high and a foot across, the sides slathered with whipped cream and the top decorated with peach slices and chopped nuts in an amber glaze.

Oh, no! I thought. It's enough to feed twenty. And candles, twenty-one flaming candles! It's got to cost thousands of *cruzeiros*. What now?

The other two waiters followed carrying plates, champagne, and glasses.

The cake was placed in front of Kathy, and a waiter commanded her to wish and blow. I knew what I'd wish for—a quick exit. Susan led a snappy round of “Happy Birthday” in English and in Portuguese, and then Kathy sucked in and let go a whirlwind of air. All twenty-one candles poofed out, their blackened wicks like tiny trees after a forest fire. Everyone clapped, and she started to saw away at the cake.

About then, the maitre'd entered, pushing a teacart of covered platters. He cleared his throat and bellowed, “Ta da! My *spec i al i ty!*”

We turned our eyes to him just as he lifted a lid and slipped syrupy black cherries from a silver bowl into a shallow dish placed on a warmer. He splashed something from a flask over the fruit, struck a match, and set fire to the dish. Blue flames whooshed up and, in seconds, collapsed. Our eyes were bugging out, and he smiled from ear to ear. Except for marshmallows, I'd never seen food on fire, on purpose, anyway.

With moves like a magician, he ladled the cherries onto ice cream and passed a plate to each of us.

“This is the only thing I can make,” he said. “Cherries Jubilee. Food for the gods...and for you, my lovely princesses.”

Next, pushed in by still another waiter, came the liqueur cart, jiggling with crystal decanters of *cointreau*, grand marnier, and the crèmes of a dozen things French. *cacao*, *cassis*, *cerise*, *fraise*, *framboise*... This was becoming too much. I knew about the prices of imported things. One night an art dealer from Boston who wore patent leather loafers with tassels had taken Karen and me out for cocktails... he would drink only Chivas Regal...three drinks...three hundred dollars. He didn't even bat an eye.

Before each of us was a huge chunk of cake, a plate of ice cream melting into hot cherries, a flute of champagne, and an assortment of midget-sized glasses and cups for cordials, liqueurs, and espresso. I couldn't even begin to imagine the cost. A month's salary would not be an exaggeration.

A moment later, the maitre'd drew up a chair and squeezed in between Susan and Kathy.

"So, ladies, what is your impression of this place? Are you comfortable here? *Satisfeita?*"

"Uhhh, it's kind of expensive on a teacher's salary, but the view is to die for," Karen said. Surely, as a maitre'd who had to survive on tips, he'd understand that this was a pretty pricey place.

"Ahhh, so it is," he said. "Do you think I should buy it?"

"Wha...buy the view?"

"No, buy the building, silly."

"Ya, right," we teased, thinking, well, if the maitre'd makes enough to buy the building, we'd better turn in our teaching certificates for a towel and a tray.

"I am serious," he said. "Tomorrow, if you young ladies truly believe this to be a wonderful place, I will purchase it."

"You're not the maitre'd, are you?"

He threw back his head, laughing. No, he was not a maitre'd. Not even close.

"I am from Austria, and if you approve of the purchase and promise to spend many nights here as my guests, I will seal the deal," he said.

And, of course, we approved. The Panorama Palace was for us, more often not, our fairytale kingdom where magic was not only possible but probable. We told him about our first trip to the Palace and about our squatter's picnics and about the hidden staircases. We told him about Ellen.

"Wonderful," he said. "Tonight I am honored to be your host. Eat, drink! Everything is on the house. Do not deprive me of the pleasure of watching you enjoy this very special birthday."

Suddenly our appetites were back.

Food never tasted so good.

Smiling, I replayed the rest of my mom's story. Mr. Shay came to their table, kissed Elizabeth on the cheek, hugged my mom and my grandma, shook hands with Jimmy, made a little half bow toward them, tore the bill into shreds, and tossed it up like confetti. My story was ending just like hers.

Stuffed to the gills, we took our leave, hugging our benefactor and telling him that this had been the best night...ever.

It was late. Kathy, twenty-one, floated home, a legal adult. And we were all Cinderellas, falling again into the magic of Brazil, of Brasil with an *s*.

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## Domingo, 12 Outubro 1969 ... Ipanema

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*Fly a kite! In October (spring here) or March (spring there). Why not, can't dance. Resolve...to see the sun come up over Ipanema.*

Maria Elena—our third maid, the skinny, perplexing one—lived in a *favela* high on the crooked spine of a mountain, a mountain the shape of a thumb, bent in the middle like an arthritic knuckle. From her shack, straight down the hillside, beyond the shops, up and over the rooftop gardens of the million-dollar high rises, the shadow-splayed lines of swaying palms, and the bright blur of four lanes of traffic were the white sands and crashing waves of the famous beach, Ipanema. Before 1964, Ipanema was famous to Cariocas; after 1964, and, now in 1969, Ipanema was famous to the world.

When composer Antonio Carlos Jobim and poet Vinicius de Moraes chose to immortalize 15-year-old, tall and tan, Heloísa Eneida Menezes Paes Pinto, known as “Hêlo,” in the song, “The Girl from Ipanema,” they fashioned a fantasy. As she walked “like a samba,” her swaying “more than a poem,” on her way home from school, everyday passing a bar in Ipanema, she made men—and women—sigh. Green-eyed Hêlo got us sighing everywhere, not just in Brazil, but also in America; even my cousins in Sweden and my friends in England knew of her. “When she passes/ each one she passes/ goes ahhh,” says the song.

Even all these years later—especially on a cold Illinois day in winter—my husband will sit at the piano, play the song, and I’m back in Ipanema, my skin warm, the extra flesh of middle age fallen away from my upper arms and legs, my stomach flat and my ankles thin.

Back then, not just Hêlo caught everyone's eye—hundreds of Carioca beauties, their legs bronzed and taut, and their hips swinging, paraded along the beach, drawing out wolf-whistles and whispered suggestions. Carioca men, physically fit, their chests brown and bare, skimmed over the sand chasing soccer balls and volleyballs, leaving us to smile in our own private imaginings.

From her porch—a small 2' x 2' slab of cracked concrete and a wooden pallet with broken slats—Maria Elena's view of Rio was spectacular, tourist-brochure magnificent. But I know that she never forgot where she stood. I know that she would have kept her head down, sucking her lower lip, sizing up her children, appraising the gnawing in their stomachs... and the gnawing in her own heart.

By day, she could have looked down to the wide shoreline boulevard of people promenading up and down the wave-patterned mosaics of polished black and white rock. At night, she could have gazed at millions of lights flickering over the city and in the sky—headlights, tail lights, billboards, and stars. With just a turn of her head—sunrises and sunsets, star-splattered night skies and pale pink dawns. But my guess is she saw nothing beyond the empty shelf or the shoeless child, his nose crusted with snot and dirt. Nothing, not even this scenery—the most beautiful I had ever seen—could make Maria Elena smile. Only once had I known her to smile, really smile the tooth-wide grin of total happiness. It was when we gave her a sack of store-bought cookies, hard ginger cookies with white-squiggle frosting, to take to her three kids.

We had tried to guess her age. Small-boned and wiry, she was thin, pencil thin, a toothpick. Her knees bowed. And the long brown toe of her left foot had pushed a hole in the tip of the white canvas slip-ons she wore everyday; her heels, like flattened potatoes,



were pink and hard. From the creases on her face and the purple veins bulging from those misshapen legs, we decided that she looked forty, maybe fifty. We didn't account for the ages of her children. When she told us she was twenty-two, we gasped. Twenty-two. My age. Three kids—one was already eight. But her bent-over body told me that in ways other than years, she was old, far older than I. She had children; I had never even had a real boyfriend. She had been on her own since she was thirteen; I felt like I was still my parent's child. Even teaching in Rio—my first “grownup” job—was more like an extended vacation than a career. In her presence, I felt sorrow... and I felt a little foolish.

Always quiet around us, she kept her eyes down. They were sad, gauzy eyes, almost yellow, but knowing. A thin straight mouth, like a slit of moon. She kept her head wrapped in a frayed, graying scarf. Wisps of fine black hair grew from her temples to her chin bones, and a scar, like a pale thread, angled from her lip to her earlobe. Once I saw her leaning against the rough stucco wall of our building, running a finger up and down that scar. What story could it tell? I wondered. Her skin was soft brown, more like coffee than cream, and her features were narrow—a long thin nose and a sharp chin, not flat and broad like the faces of our other maids. Somewhere back a generation or two was a Caucasian. She was no Hêlo, but, in her own way, she was just as intriguing.

Her responses to us were usually only a word or two—“Okay, Senhorita Karen,” “*Sim*, Senhorita Ellen,” “*Não*, Senhorita Lee.” But I knew she could speak; I had heard her talking on the back stairs with the maids from the apartments on the second floor. Although she said next to nothing to us, she had a certain look about her, a look of understanding, of depth. A look that bothered me. Sometimes I wanted to take her by the

shoulders and shake her, rattle her head, make her open up and tell me her story, tell me about life beyond the circumference of my tidy, protected, little world.

Her life in the *favela* unfolded in my mind as scenes in the movie *Black Opheus*, set in a Rio slum during Carnival. The myth of Orpheus and Eurydice as *favelados* became my myth of Maria Elena, reverberating with the beckoning beat of samba and bossa nova. I wanted to ask her questions, but usually I just smiled weakly and went to another room. Besides, my Portuguese—proper, school taught at Catholic University three afternoons a week—and hers—common, colored in street slang—were foreign languages. And, even when I tried to get her to talk, pushing past the embarrassment I always felt about my unpretty nasal American accent, I couldn't get her to open up.

Her reticence to speak was strange. For any excuse, our other maids would sit and chat. In a split second, they propped their brooms against a wall or dropped the mop into the scrub bucket to take a chair at our table, talking and joking, even making fun of us, poking one or the other of us in the shoulder and laughing at our latest language *faux pas*.

They were both fat, their chins jiggled, and their flabby arms were dimpled and thick. They told us about the *favelados*. "That pitiful dog Manuel Carlos—what a silly devil—he got so drunk, he stole Dona Maria Oliveira's bicycle and rode it into a shop window where a mannequin was wearing a bikini so little it could fit into his hand, so little that two bottle caps are bigger than the top. He was so drunk, he was kissing on her breast made of plaster. The police found him holding her hand broken off from her arm." And they told us about the children—how Paulinho Arnaldo broke his ankle, making the winning point in a soccer match, and how Rosalina could sing in English the lyrics to a

dozen pop songs—"Lady Madonna" by the Beatles, "Sugar, Sugar," by the Archies. They talked about their families and their neighbors; they told us about life up in the *favela*. But Maria Elena told us next to nothing.

We knew that there was electricity, but no running water in her *favela*. The people who lived there filled five-gallon olive oil cans with water from long metal troughs at the base of the mountain. We saw the *favelados* from the taxi as we rode through Ipanema and Copacabana to sit in air-conditioned theaters or have iced tropical juices and honey-colored *doces*—they were shaped like bird's nests and made of sugar spun into strings—downtown at Colombo's. Colombo's, the elegant colonial restaurant with walls of mirrors, where women still wore flowing, flowery, old-fashioned silk dresses—I wanted to call them "frocks" or "tea gowns," not just "dresses"—and men wore white suits and Panama hats of shaped straw.

Balancing the square gold and green cans on their shoulders, two at a time, the *favelados* carried the sloshing containers straight up steep wooden steps to shacks slapped together into something like a ragged, unkempt rookery, a distance of, maybe, three city blocks. I could imagine Maria Elena, wearing her faded house dress, an apron tied around her waist, carrying a single can, one hand steadying it against her head, the other hand curving protectively over her pregnant belly. I could see her climbing up the steps slowly and cautiously, a child or two grabbing at her hemline.

Somehow, one day in October, halfway up the mountain, her bare feet swollen and aching, her tired eyes closing, she missed her footing; maybe she caught a toe, misjudged a step, maybe she tripped over a child. Head over heels backwards, down a

flight of stairs she fell, rolling and tumbling into a heap. Bloodied and bruised, she held back the tears, thinking—maybe hoping—she might lose the baby. Baby number four.

She was unable to work. And unable to work, she couldn't feed her children. The family lived hand to mouth. No work, no money. No money, no food. Thereza's maid Judith told Thereza that the father of the children—they weren't married—refused to help. "He's a lazy no-good, just sleeps the day away on a mattress, his face to the wall. At night," she said, "he prowls around who knows where, takes his meals with this or that slut, away from his family. Maria Elena should kick him out, be done with the no-good sorry bum."

As soon as we got word of Maria Elena's accident, we asked Thereza to ask Judith to take 15 *contos*, about \$3.75 U.S., to her. Fifteen *contos* equaled pay for one and a half days of work. Hard work. Washing our towels and our jeans in a tub by hand. Hanging them to dry on the line strung between the back door and the maid's room door. Scrubbing tiled floors on her hands and knees. Scratching away at black, sticky slag stuck to the top of the stove and in the oven. Arriving early, leaving late, three days a week. Taking the stairs, three flights up. Maids were not allowed to use the elevator.

Maria Elena was our third maid. The others—the fat ones—had "lived in," worked six days a week. None of us, not Karen or me, or even Ellen, who had been raised with "help" in Panama, could relax into handling servants. Having a maid was part of the culture—everyone we knew, Americans and Brazilians and families from all over the world had a maid, at least one, more often, two or three. When I was growing up, when kids forgot to do their homework or left it on the kitchen table, they used the excuse, "The dog ate it." But the kids at the American School said, "The maid burned it."

But we couldn't adapt. We didn't want to adapt. We didn't know how to have a servant. Always we were apologizing, helping, or fumbling with words when we had to tell a slacker maid to do a better job. We carried our own version of American slave-owner guilt, compounded by the complexity of the civil rights battles back home that we learned about in the letters from our families and friends. We felt like guests in our own home.

Uncomfortable with them in our house day in and day out, we let the two full-time maids go, so we could feel like we had our home back. Maria Elena, three days a week, from 8 am to 5 pm, was a solution we could live with. She kept a change of clothes, a photograph of her kids, and a plastic tub for soaking her feet locked up in the maid's room on the back stoop off the kitchen.

After her accident, we knew she would need help, but no one, not even Judith, would take groceries and money into the *favela*. Likely, someone carrying more food than for one day's meals would be beaten and robbed. The bread, eggs, and milk for Maria Elena's family would end up in someone else's twisting stomach. Survival was lawless; morality, just a word. Ellen, always invincible, convinced that luck and our foreignness could save us, decided that the three of us would take money and supplies to Maria Elena ourselves.

We arranged for Judith to escort us. Like parrots, we practiced her name—*Joo-gitch-chee*, or *Joo-gee*, trying to get the pronunciation right. She had been with the Flarys family since she was a young girl, maybe only five or six, living in a room off the balcony she shared with the Sunday chicken clucking in its wooden crate. She owned a small TV and a radio, and in her closet hung outfits for summer and winter. She returned

to her family in the *favela* a few miles away—I thought Thereza said once a month, but maybe I misunderstood. I hope... I hope she was allowed to return at least once a week. When I arrived in Rio, Thereza had advised me to treat Judith kindly...but not too kindly. Keep her in her place.

Mid-afternoon, before we left for the *favela*, I wrote a note to my mom and dad, “I can’t make any sort of prejudgments—I don’t know what will happen—whether I can even stand to see it. I asked Thereza if she’d ever been to a *favela*. She said, ‘No’; she had never even thought about it.”

Probably most upper- and middle-class Cariocas felt the same way. As long as they could turn their heads from the squalor and hold their breath as they passed, the *favela* didn’t exist. Besides, it was a scary place, with its own law, its own makeshift, self-appointed judges and juries. Gangs. Vigilantes. Warlords. A world apart. A burglary or murder in the *favela* wouldn’t get even a sentence in the back pages of the newspaper.

Understandably Thereza was unhappy with our decision. To set foot in the *favela* was comparable to pinning \$100 bills and a “Mug Me!” sign to our shirts. “*Louca!* Insane! You’re crazy. People die there. They’re tied up and shot in the mouth, so their heads blow up.”

Nevertheless, we packed sacks with food and boarded the bus to Ipanema. Judith was waiting for us, sitting on a bench in front of an outdoor café. Maybe pretty Hêlo had passed this way, I thought. A plumpish tiger-striped kitten arched its back and curled around Judith’s ankles. Another pushed its head against her hand and sniffed at her fingers. Stray cats loitered and slept everywhere in Rio. Downtown, in Centro, there was even a cat park—we called it Alicia-in-Wonderlandia’s park—where people abandoned

their cats to the dark bushes and thick gnarly trees. Hundreds of cats lived there, licking up slimy food left on newspapers by passersby. It was considered good luck to feed them, so they grew as fat and lazy as Alice's cat.

Judith gently removed the kitten to the pavement, and we followed her up a winding, dirt road, past the water troughs where people stopped the filling of their cans to stare at us. On a platform at the base of ramshackle stairs, Judith talked to a man lounging against a light pole having a smoke. Ellen and Karen redistributed the cans in their sacks, and I sat down on a cinder block to scribble a few phrases in my journal. "1000s and 1000s of stairs switching back, straight up, up the hill. Can't describe these mountains—they just shoot out of the ground... I'm scared. (Sort of like when I'm hanging onto the wet guardrail at Deception Pass Bridge in a windstorm at night stepping forward one foot in front of the other trying to be invisible when headlights aim right at me.) But I'm excited, too. *Black Orpheus?* "

Asleep against a pile of filth was a man, a newspaper over his chest, flies on his eyelids, threads of drool on his lips. Drunk? Maybe, maybe not. Snoring, he was bubbling spittle. Sun glinted off broken bottles and tin cans. The smell of rot wrapped around me, and I could feel my throat seize and gag. The air was thick, humidity hanging like hot wet wool. Suddenly the air seemed to move in front of my face, as if Thereza's finger were shaking "no, no, no" at my nose. I had second thoughts, but... I was determined to see the *favela*.

I could catch Judith's words here and there, but those said by the man leaning against the light pole were too mumbled and low. He kept eyeing us, dragging on his cigarette, and jerking his head back as if to say, "Not on my watch." Judith continued to

talk, shifting her weight, pointing up the mountain. Her face was contorting into a look that said, "Mister, wipe that silly grin off your pussy face, and let us through. Now!" I thought she might kick him in the shins. Finally, he looked us over slowly from head to toe, scratched his mustache, and nodded. Judith nudged us, rolled her eyes at him, and we started up the stairs. As we passed him, he flicked the cigarette to the ground and stepped on it with his bare foot.

The mountainside was plastered with shacks, thousands of them, stacked helter-skelter like blocks ready to tumble. I had heard that over 30,000 people lived here, sometimes as many as a dozen people sharing a single room. Concrete was slapped on rock, boards and a couple of bricks stuck in, planks nailed every which way, a hodgepodge, until some semblance of structure evolved. Windows were holes in the walls, places where the boards didn't meet. Roofs, tin sheets—corrugated and rusted through—randomly placed planks of wood, some painted, some not. There were sheets of plywood ripped from billboards, the words still evident. Wood from crates. Railroad ties.

Now something made sense. From our first days in Rio, we had been warned repeatedly, "Always be suspect of wooden bridges over canals. *Favelados* steal the boards from the bridges to make their shacks, but they don't take *all* the boards, just a few. They're clever, they make sure the bridge *looks* intact, but it isn't. When you cross over the canal, the bridge might fall into the stinking water going out to Guanabara Bay, and you're a goner. What a way to go—in a sewer! Drowned like a rat."

To visit the male teachers' apartment, we had to cross a canal. From this day on, I would look much more carefully before I crossed.



Continuing up the stairs, we dodged skinny, nearly naked kids, snot-nosed pigs, and feather-loose chickens. As we sidestepped and veered, Judith, in a low voice, educated us. "Where Maria Elena lives is not really a *favela*," she corrected us, "but a *morro*. Moe-who," she said, coaxing us to pronounce the word properly. It was a step below a *favela* on the social scale, for those even poorer than *favelados*. But the hierarchy for both the *favela* and the *morro* was the same. Location.

As I looked around me, I saw what she meant. The neatest shacks, the most carefully shaped and constructed, were at the top. I realized that the farther down the mountainside I looked, the higher were the piles of garbage. There, at the base, neck high, were heaps of paper, cans, plastic, peels, and bones. Garbage everywhere, rotting and stinking. Water and sewage had seeped down from a narrow spillway at the top, widened into a muddy ditch, slogged down from the uppermost shanties to those mid-mountain, to those at the bottom, separating into shallow trenches and a pigsty of sludge, filling wheel tracks and footprints with oily green scum.

As we climbed higher, people whistled and called out to us. "*Tudo bem?*" "Is all well?" We laughed at the comments we'd heard a thousand times before. "How's the weather up there?" "So tall, where you from, *beleza!*" Men clicked their tongues and propositioned us, winking and beckoning with sensuous fingers. Judith snapped at them, and some slunk away to peek at us from behind walls. Others just laughed, making Judith scowl and hiss something untranslatable. "*Idiota!*" A few, only a few, eyed us suspiciously from dark doorways. Women and children said, "*Olá!*" Most people seemed curious. And welcoming. I wasn't scared anymore. Thereza was wrong.

On a landing, a jabbering throng of kids closed in on us, pulling on our wrists, chattering incessantly, each vying for our attention. One boy, wearing balloon shorts, chirped, "Look, look at my kite!" Another kid pushed him out of the way, yelling, "No, look at mine! I beat everyone! Look! I tied razors to my kite. I win! I win!"

On the steps, we noticed broken glass. Boys were crouched down, rolling rocks over the shards, pulverizing them into a fine powder. Judith grumbled, "These boys, naughty *desordeiros*, steal the light bulbs. These crazy goofball kids will cause an accident. The old men and the old ladies will trip because there is no light at their building." She cuffed a boy under his chin, "Shame on you. Somebody's grandma is going to break her leg, and you're going to cry big, big, sad tears." He just laughed and resumed rolling a rock over a light bulb.

Bare fingered, he spit into his hands and pulled the kite string meticulously through the drool, then rolled the string in the crushed glass. Finally the string was attached to the kite, and he let it go, wagging up over the shanties and the clotheslines of flapping laundry, to soar in the wind.

Against the blue sky, a dozen kites dipped and dove, bright-colored diamonds or bird shapes, like miniature condors, swooping down on other kites, kids guiding the attacks. Far off, the winning kite, an orange double-winged box with a black and purple tail, sliced through the strings of the others, sending them—even the one tied with razors—out to sea, and heavenward. The winner strutted, his thin chest puffed out with his grubby thumbs cocked in his armpits. "Cheater, cheater, cheater," yelled a kid from behind an empty garbage can. Suddenly he turned the can over and kicked it clanging down the stairs; it bounced to a stop against the closed door of a shack.

The kids fascinated me. Like a photographer, I angled their bodies and faces into scenes in my mind. Zooming in, zooming out. Focusing on individuals, feeling lucky to have seen such interesting poses. The boy whose ears stuck out; the boy with one long twisted leg and one short; the blond boy with black skin.

Only later that night, writing about them, did I turn over the coin that was their lives and look at both sides. From my tourist view, they made perfect artistic subjects for drawings or photos—expressions of innocence in their black eyes and expressions of experience in their distended bellies. Colorful in physical detail. Colorful in words and actions. But I was like the reporter who had stumbled onto the prize-winning story—the thrilling scoop... of a wholly tragic event.

What would become of these kids? Most of them didn't go to school. Few would ever learn to read or write. Some lived on the streets, surviving by snatching food from vendors and stealing pocketbooks from old ladies. Many would die—from disease, from gang fights, from the Death Squad, the vigilante cops who took justice into their own hands. Others would make an honest living, but hardly enough to make ends meet.

The *morro* was noisy. Shacks were piled one on the other, sharing walls. People hung out the open windows and packed themselves onto porches. As we passed, heads turned to us and words were said, questions asked. They were polite. Who were we? Why were we here in this place? Oh, so tall! Judith kept explaining, over and over. I noticed a woman with her long black hair pulled back by a tortoise shell comb; she was humming. Another—as if she were starring in an old-fashioned movie—red, red lips and a red plastic rose pinned over her ear. Men with thick mustaches and men with mustaches so thin, they looked penciled on.

Battery-powered radios on high volume blasted music and ads, comedies, weather, and breaking news. Fuse boxes buzzed. Talking and laughing. Yelling at kids. Calling dogs. Teasing. Cajoling. Groups of people harmonized Carnival songs, keeping the beat, drumming their fingertips on matchboxes, pots, and pans. In the *favelas*, on the streets, in rich neighborhoods and poor, always and everywhere in Rio, there was music. Just the Friday before, Ellen, Karen, and I had emptied the kitchen drawers and cupboards of silverware and cooking utensils and, by candlelight, with all of our friends, danced the night away to the samba rhythm of knives and spoons on colanders and kettles.

It wasn't long before we had climbed hundreds of stairs. We were panting in the late afternoon heat—like most days in Rio, dusk this day, too, was golden. The entire city and the waters of Guanabara Bay were washed with gold. We could feel pulling in our calves, feel our backs aching from the sacks of heavy cans. Because I was just coming off a month-long stay in bed with mononucleosis, I was more winded than either Karen or Ellen. My knees were weak, and I felt shaky. I stopped on a landing to rest. How many times a day did the *favelados* go down and up? I was exhausted. When I turned to ask the others to slow down, my breath stopped. The view was startling, magnificent. For the tenthousandth time since arriving in Rio, I was again stunned by this city. *Cidade Maravilhosa*. Wonderful City. Breathtaking, beautiful.

This was Maria Elena's view, every single day. Below me, straight center was Ipanema, mottled with mosaics, black and white. To my left was Copacabana, neon-lit, bright lights bouncing. And to my right was our Leblon. I swept my eyes over modern glass buildings, pink and blue colonial mansions, open air bars with bright rainbows of

umbrellas, street peddlers with plastic blow-up cartoon characters bobbling on sticks, kites and more kites swooping over the waves. Miles and miles of dusk-tinged beaches curving into the fading bluish-gold horizon of Leme and Barra da Tijuca. Far off, I could approximate the location of our avenue, our apartment, the avocado tree outside my bedroom window, even the bakery across the street. Then I looked to my feet. I toed the pile of blackened banana peels, mold-green orange rinds, and greasy cans, uncovering a broken baby bottle, its pink nipple split like a tulip.

Finally, we reached Maria Elena's house. At the summit, it was in the "high-rent" district. To enter the house, we had to make our way through a crowd of kids, then duck under low-hanging electric lines and an off-kilter doorframe. Squinting through two windows and several narrow cracks in the walls were arrows of dust-laden yellow light. It took a second for my eyes to adjust to the dark. A mattress, a stove, a table, three chairs, and a console radio three feet long furnished the room. People—men, women, and children—stood elbow to elbow, body to body. Back against a wall sat Maria Elena, her yellow eyes vacant and dark. On the floor in front of her, we placed our sacks. Rice and black beans, oranges, a pineapple, eggs, vegetables, canned goods, aspirin. She mustered a weak smile and nodded thank you. No one said a word.

Then Ellen broke the silence. "Don't eat it all at once!" Everyone laughed, and introductions were made. First, Maria Elena's three children. Shy for a moment, then they came closer. The little girl looked up at us through spiraling curls fastened by a rainbow of plastic barrettes; the boys, their striped polo shirts buttoned to the neck, poked each other and tottered from foot to foot. I was completely taken over—they were beautiful children. But what was their future? What could I, what could *we*, do for them?

Bring them books, teach them to read? Get them scholarships to private school? There must be something we could do.

We met Maria Elena's sister, her husband and their three kids. Maria Elena's no-account "husband," on the bare mattress, pretending to sleep, only stirred. Ten people. All of them lived in this space no bigger than my bathroom. How did they sleep, I wondered; with only enough room for five or six of them to lie down at the same time, they must have slept in a pile like puppies. Judith's two kids were there, and umpteen neighbor kids peeked in the windows and peered through the doorway. Each child was scrubbed clean, as was the house. Thereza was wrong; this place wasn't scary.

We brought candy and gum, but why hadn't we brought toys. Why? My stomach tightened. I felt bad. Why hadn't we thought to bring things for the kids? Again, that nagging guilt. The shame. I wanted to run down the mountainside to a toy store, scoop up ballerina dolls and bride dolls like those my sister and I had had as children; grab bats and balls, marbles, and slingshots like my brother had; drop them in front of these children. We just hadn't thought. Next time, we would bring toys. Next time...

Ellen, half in Spanish, half in Portuguese, kept the conversation going. I looked around, making mental notes; I wanted, and needed, to imprint this place on my mind. Tacked to the walls, threadbare and sunbleached, were the frayed remains of *futebol*—soccer—banners. A 1968 calendar. Why 1968, I wondered. It was 1969, already October. But I thought better than to ask. On one wall was a mirror, about two-feet tall by three-feet wide, corroding and spotted with blotches, black and ballooning like roses. On the far wall was a wooden picture frame, glassless, a print of something—or someone—religious. Maybe *macumba*, or maybe Catholic, I couldn't tell, it was too faded. Black

and white, scalloped-edge snapshots of the kids—celebrating birthdays, in soccer shirts, at Carnival—were tucked haphazardly between the stained matting and the molding, nearly covering the image on the print. Tacked to the wall above the table was a picture postcard of the snake farm in São Paulo. I had been there. I recognized the snake pit. I remembered that one of the handlers had spiraled six snakes around his arm at once; I remembered the milky fangs of a snake pressed to the rim of a cup.

Ellen was explaining where Connecticut, Texas, and Washington were; she was babbling again. Her explanations were impossible. Snow on lampposts in New England? Long-horned cattle in the shadow of a cactus? Miles of apple trees? Our hosts had been no farther than a couple of miles, never beyond the city limits. They couldn't afford movies. They didn't read. How could they possibly envision Connecticut, Texas, or Washington; they couldn't even envision Brazil beyond Rio.

Maria Elena whispered something to her kids, and they turned and scampered off. In seconds, they returned. Each child held two oddly shaped, soft ball-sized wads of waxed paper. Carefully they unwrapped the packages and produced three teacups and three saucers, celadon green, almost see-through, borrowed from a neighbor. I recognized the dishes; the Supermercado Disco, the only supermarket in Leblon, was selling them—with a minimum purchase—for a few cents, a new bowl or plate each week. Occasionally we shopped at the Disco, not often, only when we were hungry for American food—Chicken-of-the-Sea or Campbell's soup—or jell-o and instant pudding. Like Brazilians, we bought in the neighborhood from specialized shops. Our fresh fruit we bought from one of the carts pushed up and down the street, our vegetables from the stand on the corner a block away, our canned items from the shop on the ground floor of the building

next to ours. We even ordered our meat from the butcher, asking for just the right cut from the fly-crusted carcass hanging on a hook in the open air.

The neighborhood vendors gave us special treatment, maybe not the celebrity status we were given at parties in upper-class Brazilian homes, but a more comfortable attention, as if we were favorite children. They fawned over us and pampered us. As we passed their stands, they called out to us, "I have saved the very best persimmon for you! Come see!" "Look at this lettuce. Not the tiniest blemish. Special for you!" "Dona Maria Santos wanted these plantains and this okra, but I say 'No! These are for the beautiful American girls.'"

On Thursdays, when the outdoor market, the *feira*, was set up in the streets of Leblon, we filled our string bags with gorgeous produce and our arms with flowers. It was from neighborhood shops and stands or the *feira*, not the Disco, that we had filled our sacks for Maria Elena.

Maria Elena stood up, and gestured to us with her hand to sit. I watched her hand, limp but long fingered, fine boned. What if she had been born somewhere else? Would she play the piano? A flute? She offered us her chair and pointed to two others, identical folding chairs, metal with battered seats. We insisted that she take back her seat, but she shook her head "no." She balanced herself against the tiny black and white stove, her arm resting across a cold burner. The man of the house stayed silent on his mattress. Everyone else stood, leaning and bending into one another, arms wrapping around each other, watching us.

Someone presented each of us with a beer. It was cold; one of the kids must have scrambled down to the bar, the *botequim*, below to make the purchase. The cost? A day's



work. I rolled the wet, brown, long-necked bottle in my hands, waiting. For several seconds, we waited. But no more bottles appeared. Apparently only the three of us were expected to drink.

I felt awkward. I was kicking myself for not bringing toys. I didn't want to make anyone feel bad, but I didn't want beer. Mono had kept me in bed for over a month—this was one of my first days out anywhere besides the clinic—and, doctor's orders, I had not touched alcohol, none. In fact, in my mind, I connected alcohol and mono. We had been at a party thrown by a woman from the Belgian embassy. She was short on glasses; I remembered thinking, "Uh oh, she's not washing the glasses, just rinsing them between guests," but I didn't want to offend her, so I drank a glass of wine. A week later, mono.

I could hear Ellen rambling on about the temperature, soccer, and samba schools, but I couldn't pay attention; I was preoccupied by the beer, fearing it, and fearing that I'd make Maria Elena, and everyone else, uncomfortable if I didn't drink. I was obsessing—not just the doctor, but the lady from the bakery across the street had warned me, "Bottled water, okay; but no alcohol, no Coca Cola, no milk." And she wouldn't even allow me a nibble of her cream puffs or chocolate éclairs. "Unless you want to die," she said sternly, eyebrows crunched. "You eat healthy food only."

Whenever Ellen or Karen bought pastry, she warned them, shaking her finger, "Don't share. Rich food is bad for Miss Lee, *muito mal, muito mal.*" Even when I was feeling better, she refused to sell me anything, not the flaky butterfly-shaped palmiers we usually had for breakfast or the cheese blintzes we liked to snack on. When she saw me come out of the apartment, steadied by Karen, on my way to the doctor, she would bustle across Rua Dias Ferreira, one hand stopping traffic, the other balancing a papaya or a

pineapple as big as a bread box. "Eet thees, makee you strongee," she said in broken English.

"Right, Lee?" Ellen asked. I snapped back to reality, but I had no idea what Ellen was talking about. Bewildered, I nodded, and everyone laughed. Karen gave me a hug and said, "No, she's twenty two, not fifteen, and no, she doesn't dye her hair. It really is blond."

By now, it was obvious; only the three of us would be drinking beer. Karen and Ellen tipped back their bottles and drank. Nervous, imagining that my liver was shriveling into a bilious ocher mass of rot and decay, tinged in blood, I sipped, holding cold beer in my mouth, warming it, afraid to swallow. Ellen exclaimed, "Ahhh...*que deliciosa...muito obrigada...*thank you, thank you!" The adults smiled, nodding at one another; they were successful hosts. I swallowed to make them feel good. The children, speaking in high-pitched English, mimicked us, "Tenka oooh," they giggled. After we finished the beer, Maria Elena's sister poured coffee from a thermos into the three green Disco cups.

We slugged down the syrupy sweet coffee in one gulp, and waited. Now what? Again I felt awkward. But Ellen quickly filled the silence with babble. The kids started to chatter, nudging each other. "Come out, come with us," they coaxed. "We show you Carnival." Several ran out, and the adults began to stir. Within seconds, a street band was formed. Guitars, drums, pots and pans. A cassette player and a shoebox full of tapes.

Spontaneously, the floorshow began. No more talk, just music and dancing. Outside, on the front stoop of the small house and on those of the houses next door, a space about 12' by 12', the children stepped into a samba. They crisscrossed feet and

knees in dance moves so complicated, I couldn't sort out their limbs. The adults sang Carnival songs, sucked on harmonicas, beat drums, played guitars, thrummed their knuckles on the walls and doors. Spinning and whirling, the kids challenged each other to fancy footwork, each step more complex than the one before. After each performance, they looked over at us, anxious for approval. Our smiles made them wiggle in delight.

Caught up in the delirium, amazed at the precision, the balance and rhythm, Karen, Ellen, and I were spellbound. We had come for Maria Elena, but the focus was on us. This was a performance in our honor. We were celebrities, queens of the mountain.

A couple of kids pulled us into a line, we swayed into something like a mambo, and then all of us together broke into a high-kicking cancan, laughing until we doubled over. I was clicking mental pictures...remember...remember. Like pixies, the kids swarmed around us, hanging onto our waists, grabbing our hands and making us swing them in circles, their feet flying off the ground.

From somewhere, a soccer ball was thrown in, and the kids dribbled it between their feet, kicking up clouds of red dust. The ball bounced off their heads and under their legs, but they kept right on dancing. One boy yelled, "Goooooaaaaaalllll!" and a bunch of kids fell into a pile laughing, shrieking, untangling themselves and dancing again. Their faces gleamed, and their little legs were dusted red, like knee socks.

Finally, Maria Elena stepped in and touched the children lightly on their heads. "*Chega!*" (Enough!) They backed over to a wall, slid down to a sitting position—a line of six or eight of them, chins and elbows resting on their knees. Karen, Ellen, and I followed her back into the house. She handed me a gray plastic View Master, the kind I'd had as a kid. "*Olha.*" Holding it to the light, I clicked through the cardboard photo rings of

children, the six cousins, Maria Elena's and her sister's kids, big eyed and smiling. The girls, their pigtails tied with white ribbons, wearing identical white dresses with pearl buttons and ruffled collars. Maria Elena's boys, barefooted, in black and red striped soccer shirts, waving black and red flags for their favorite *futebol* team, Flamengo. Her sister's boys in maroon and green, the colors of Fluminense. "Fla" and "Flu." Enemy teams. Where would these kids be in ten years? I wondered. In twenty?

I passed the View Master to Ellen, and she teased, "Hey, how come you guys are wearing soccer shirts from Chile?" Immediately the boys were in her face, shaking their heads, but, a second later, they were back to arguing about scores, swearing that Flamengo's goalie was garbage, and Fluminense's sweeper was a million trillion times better than Flamengo's, and vice versa. Laughing, Ellen winked at Karen and me, and we started to chant, "U S A, U S A!" Hands pawed at our ribs, trying to pull up to our mouths to muffle our words. Ellen threw back her head and yelled, "Pelé, Pelé, Pelé!" and all the kids dropped down, joined in, turning, clapping, and jumping. "Pelé, Pelé!" Their hero. Our hero. The king of soccer. And we were all together again.

It was getting late. The sun had set, and the *morro* flickered with lanterns, lamps, and candles. A man came into the room, the contours of his face reflected in the dim light. There was something menacing about the curve of his eyebrows and the sharpness of his jaw. He was eating chunks of potatoes, still in their skins, from a greasy sack. His teeth were yellow, and he was missing an eyetooth. Suddenly he grabbed a kid by the scruff of his neck, turned him around, snapped his rear end with a thumb and an index finger, and roared, "Get home to your mama! Now!" The little boy scampered to the

door, bent over, wiggled his behind at the man, and ran off into the night. The man laughed, and said, "What a boy! You wait and see, he'll make something of himself!"

Judith introduced us to him. João was his name. He wore a white shirt, unbuttoned from neck to waist, dingy sleeves rolled up over his elbows, khaki shorts, and lace-up boots. Hanging from his belt was a leather-sheathed knife. Then I began to understand. He was our bodyguard for the trip back down the stairs in the dark.

I stood in the doorway and looked again at the room. A single light bulb bobbed on a cord looped over a hook screwed to the ceiling. A blue rubber elephant that squeaked. A blue plastic tommy gun on the wooden floor. And over the stove, on a nail, a pink plastic heart filled with red-tipped kitchen matches. My last vision of Maria Elena's house was of a gun and a heart. Remember, I said to myself.

We hugged Maria Elena—she was even thinner than I had thought—and told her we'd be back. Soon. The children followed us down the stairs until Judith shooed them away. "Don't leave, Miss Ellen, don't leave, stay with us, come back, Miss Karen, stay, Miss Lee," they cried. Maria Elena's sister walked down a few flights with us. Someone's baby, not hers, clung to her side, his feet wrapped tight around her belly. Part way down, she kissed our cheeks and said, "Thank you. Heaven will look down on you." As we descended, João announced us. "Step aside," he said. "Ladies coming through." Someone offered us a lit candle. "Take care." "Have a good night," they said.

We thanked Judith, and she put us on the bus. Through the dusty window, I looked at her and João. They smiled and waved. As João backed toward a streetlight, I saw a silver flash. Under his unbuttoned shirt, tucked in his waistband was a gun. Maybe, after all, Thereza was right.

Maria Elena didn't come back to work, and we didn't make it back to the *morro*. So I never learned from her what I sensed she knew. But I thought often about her and her children, and all of the others. They were happy the day I met them; for a few hours, they were happy. And so were we.

. . .

Some months later, Karen and I sat on a stalled bus in a torrential rainstorm in an intersection in Botafogo. Black clouds curled around us, turning the afternoon dark as night. Suddenly, water rushed down the street like a tsunami, churning circles around us, swirling up to the windows, throwing the bus into a spin. Pelted against the glass were garbage, newspapers, ripped-off car doors, dead birds, the cover to a manhole. Terrified, we pushed up on the windows, trying to secure the rubber seal. Karen mumbled a prayer.

In an instant, the water rushed by, receding to a depth about knee deep. The driver screamed at us to run. With two other passengers, we jumped down, locked elbows and fought our way through the surging brown water toward higher ground. Pushed by the current, we crashed against it, hauling each other forward, up and out of the intersection, over the curb and onto a grassy knoll. Standing safely on a park bench, wet to the bone, our teeth chattering, Karen and I cried and laughed at such a close call. An adrenalin high. I don't remember ever feeling that my life was in jeopardy; instead, I could hardly wait to report the experience to Ellen. She would wish she'd been there.

But the next day, we learned that Maria Elena's *morro* had slipped off the mountain in a mudslide, killing several and injuring many. A baby had been sucked into the sewer and drowned. The *morro* was gone. I was ashamed by my response from the day before, by my casual mental notching of another "unbelievable experience."

Still, within a week or two, after the sun dried the mountainside, the *morro* was rebuilt. I made a mental note to be especially careful crossing the bridge over the canal to Peter's apartment.

The experience of the flood became not "My Brush with Death," but the recognition of both my admiration and my dismay of the indomitable spirit of the *favelados*—at once, their childish naiveté and their heroic persistence to survive.

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### Quarta, 31 Dezembro 1969 ... Leblon

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*Whoopee, New Years Eve! G'bye, '69! Give gladiolas to the goddess, say I. Sometimes old, sometimes new, sometimes borrowed, NEVER blue, says my student, Elissa Jane.*

For weeks, I looked forward to New Year's Eve. Looked forward? Definitely an understatement. I could hardly wait. For believers of *macumba*, this was the night of nights. How would the events on the stretch of beach from Leblon to Ipanema to Copacabana compare to what I knew of religion? In Rio, of course, I was never too far from religion—right out my window, high on the mountain, his feet rising out of the billowing mist, was Corcovado, Christ the Redeemer. And hardly ever did we leave the apartment without seeing something of *macumba*—a circle of candles, a hair twisted on a doorknob, someone with a fingernail an inch long. I had always felt a strong connection—not in the sense of the organized church, ivy-covered red brick, stained glass, and proper, but nonetheless deeply spiritual—to... who knows what. I felt this “something,” whatever it was, bone deep, in my heart, and in the pit of my stomach. But Sunday mornings at the Presbyterian Church on Ninth Street in my hometown back in the States left me empty and cold, wanting something else, something more.

In that church basement—in memory, painted top half beige and bottom half lima bean green—I sat on a folding chair, teetering, scuffing and tapping my patent leather shoes against the linoleum, crossing and uncrossing my scabby ankles. My right shoe stuck to my left shoe, making a sound like smacking, like puckering up for a sloppy kiss. Always something was amiss. My collar was too tight, or the elastic on my underpants was loose. I felt misplaced.



In spring, I'd be eyeing the coat rack. Easter, each year, from 1952 until my Grandma Isaacson was too fat for her light green, full-length Pendleton and it was made over to fit me, my mom bought me a new coat. All the girls I knew, except for Fritzi who got hand-me-downs from her two older sisters, showed up on Easter Sunday with new coats. Mine were "half coats," just below the waist in length, with big plastic four-hole buttons, and they were fuzzy, like combed out cotton balls, white or yellow, soft as duck down. I must have looked like a crib toy, roly-poly, an overstuffed bunny or fine-spun lamb. I worried over my fuzzy coat. Next to someone's tweed or herringbone, what if a stray black thread wormed its way onto my sleeve and into my pocket? Would the white fuzz—I called it my new-fallen-snow coat—turn sooty, turn gray like the ugly tomcat in the empty lot up the alley by Andy's house? What if someone stole it?

The church basement smelled like the "old folks" home, like grilled cheese and cold vegetable soup. The air was steamy, damp but cool, and dribbles of wet wiggled down the windows over our heads at street level, inside and out. Teacher told us about sand and wind, flowing robes and turbans, camels and donkeys, dry heat. Growing up near a rainforest, a stone's throw from Puget Sound, I couldn't imagine deserts, couldn't imagine heat waves undulating skyward, mirages, or oases circled with palms. Teacher's words made no sense to me, so I would squinch shut my eyes and will her to move a step to the right or a step to the left. Then I could see Christ, soft-eyed, hued in golden light, held in by an oak frame. Sometimes, for a millisecond, I could catch a burst of radiance, then I'd refocus, and Jesus was just head, neck, and shoulders, a yellowish face on browning paper, water stained from a ceiling leak, behind glass.

At some point, Teacher moved us to the heavy wooden tables over by the kitchen. When she leaned over to slide the shoeboxes of broken crayons by me, I could smell her. First, a whiff of Toni permanent wave solution on her black hair, very faint, then “Evening in Paris” toilet water on her neck and on her wrists. I could no more imagine Paris than I could Jerusalem, but I knew that smell. I knew exactly where it was in the dime store downtown. I loved that store, the way the light filtered through the front windows and danced the dust into fairies. Through the double doors, past penny candy, two aisles from the old black and gold cash register, past the glamorous rhinestone bracelet and the pink ceramic poodle we would someday buy for our mother, in the middle of the store. On top of an oak display cabinet, they were set—the perfume bottles and the atomizers with spongy squeeze bulbs. Dusty. Upright. Lined up on a framed mirror. Some were crystal clear, others amber or pink. But I loved Evening in Paris best. Not the smell, but the bottle. Cobalt blue and cold. The oval shape, lovely, capped with silver.

Ever since I could remember, I imagined myself inside that bottle, felt myself inside it. Running my hands over the cold blue glass, from top to bottom, from the inside. I looked out to a blue room. To a dressing table. With a three-paneled mirror. I could see squat jars of silky creams for grown-up ladies. And a powder puff in a round box. My mother’s silver charm bracelet, a circle of silver circles on an oval of tatted lace. In 1942, she started collecting. A tiny washing machine because she joked that after World War II, she and dad might have to take in washing to make ends meet. A clock because dad was always late. A fan because Sacramento was hot. Double hearts for love. Wedding rings. I saw the room as blue, but the bracelet was shining silver.

In my pocket, wrapped in my Sunday school handkerchief—or one of my dad’s if mine hadn’t found its way to the wash—was a spit-shined quarter to drop into the Sunday School offering plate, to help the helpless or the hopeless, or some black-skinned kids with flies on their faces and runny noses. Color book pictures were passed to us, and with crayons that smelled like old toenails, we were to give life to curly bearded nomads, babies in rushes, and babies in mangers. Teacher said, “Be careful. Don’t scribble.”

The color book pictures—thick black lines on rough gray-brown oyster shell colored paper, flat shapes without shadows—made me bite my lip. They were wrong. Teacher said, “Make the sky blue and the clouds white.” But I couldn’t. My mother the artist said, “Make the sky purple or green or any color you can feel. Look at a blade of grass. Look, Lee, look closely. See the tiny white stripe? Grass isn’t just green. Look at the yellow, the lavender. Or use your imagination. Dream a color! Put color on top of color. Blend. Just don’t use color straight out of the box. Ever.”

I felt like I was in church, sinning. In our house, color books were banned. In the house of God, I was supposed to follow Teacher’s directions. “Lee,” Teacher would say, “white robes, brown sashes.” “Coats of many, many colors!” my mother would say. My lip would quiver. Did I lose my quarter? I want my Easter coat. I sucked on the skin between the thumb and the index finger of my left hand until it was red-raw and bleeding, and I bit my ring finger.

After headaches and stomachaches created too many skipped Sundays, mom no longer made me go. Dad was fine with it. Whenever he talked about the church, it was with steely eyes and teeth-tight frowns. His face turned blue-black like a storm, and his words boiled in spit, scaring us kids silent. Every few years or so, we would find in the

closet his box of stuff: army bars and army patches—34th Red Bull Division, gold flag-and-eagle buttons, bullet casings, a yellowed copy of the lyrics to “Lilli Marlene,” and a handful of tarnished stinking metal pins, one for each year of perfect attendance at the Lutheran church where he grew up. We knew better than to ask about the church pins. Once had been enough. He had raged, cursing his own mother for making him go to church every Sunday. She would have pushed him through the huge heavy doors when he had a fever, even if he had a bee-stung shut eye or a broken arm.

Over time, away from the church for a decade, I felt no less connected to the great whatever it was. In fact, maybe my spiritual stirrings had grown stronger and deeper. All of my best girlfriends went to church—Galene was a preacher’s daughter, “Milat” was Catholic, “Rooster” and Carol were Lutheran. We spent Saturday nights in the kitchen at Milat’s, under crucifixes and plaster-of-paris praying hands, debating, questioning, trying to quantify religion. But what they said made no sense to me. Their churches worked for them, but not for me.

With Milat at midnight mass on Christmas Eve, the service in Latin, knots of families crowded into pews—all of their last names had ended in “ovich” in the old days, now some did and some didn’t; they came from Yugoslavia—I felt something, but not enough. The Lutheran minister’s wife, my English teacher at school—I adored her because she loved poetry, especially my poetry—was terrified that I’d go to Hell because I had a Ouiji board. Galene’s church, where her dad dropped people into a tank of water six-feet deep, scared me cold. So, eventually, I just seemed to grow into my own religion.

Beaches and woodlands became my church. Only there could I breathe from low down, full and deep, as if air were liquid, silking its way through me. What I knew of

spirituality was wet. Rain dropping off juniper quills. The slapping of waves rolling over stones in the moon's tides. A sea bird dipping its wing in water. On Cypress Island at Eagle Harbor, just off the rocky beach into the dark woods, I built my church. I lashed branches to trunks of trees with hairy twine and lifted armloads of moss onto twigs I had leveled and tied. At first, they were tables and chairs, benches, and shelves. But they grew to be pews and altars, sacred places formed for my kind of worship.

Summer after summer, by boat, I returned with my mother and father, sister and brother, to these mossy sanctuaries. Rains misted down, pelted, shivered down, and the moss grew dense and thick. Salal berries clustered thick and purple-black, and bracken ferns unrolled tender new green. I made brooms of fir boughs and swept smooth my squares and rectangles of forest floor. I cut bouquets of the Indian paintbrush and chocolate lilies that grew on the point where the eagles nested and placed them on my piney altars. Each root, leaf, and bud; each feather, each stone was a prayer. And from my mother and my father, I learned their names.

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On New Year's Eve in Rio, our guests began arriving about eight. Our friend Ina, Jewish, Escola Americana math teacher. Her husband Michael, Irish-American Catholic, in Rio to lecture about physics at the university where I was taking Beginning Portuguese. Michael's younger sister Dorothy, down from California for the holidays. Their parents, also visiting, had declined our invitation and all of us, Michael and Ina included, were glad. Within the first few hours of their visit, two days before Christmas, his mom said, "If I had to live in Brazil, I would just run down to the wharf every week to get *decent* imported American coffee." Stunned, we clamped our dropped jaws shut, took

a few breaths, and counted to ten. Brazil, producer of over one third of the world's coffee! Later, the joke was, "So how *does* New Hampshire's coffee compare with Oregon's? Myself, I prefer, of course, Alaska's. American tourists! Spare us!" A student, Steven, arrived with his friend Peter of Rio and Suffolk, England. Teachers and friends of teachers came.

Ellen brought two Rhodesians, both thin with angular jaws and watery eyes. She had met them that morning at the bus station and ordered them to put Buenos Aires on hold. Seeing *macumba* on New Year's Eve was a must. The boys were in year two of a three-year trip around the world. A couple of passing-through South Africans dropped by—not the *Cariad* crew. These were two we hadn't met before—they had picked up our address from some folks in Peru or Bolivia who had met one of us—probably Ellen—at a party.

It didn't take long for the conversation to shift from "What do you want to drink?" and "Who do you know that I know?" to politics. Someone made a jab at the South Africans about apartheid, and one of them countered, "You Americans can't possibly understand, not in the wildest of imaginings, what the African Negro is like. He isn't culturally or mentally like the American Negro; he couldn't exist without Whites; he needs Whites to tell him what to do and when because he is not capable of knowing for himself."

The other, the taller of the two, said with finality, "You Americans could take a lesson. What we have is a far better situation than the racial turmoil and bloody battles going on in your country."

I could see Karen's lips tightening and her eyes narrowing. I knew she was just hanging on, ready to explode; I knew we were thinking the same thing. It had been just a few days since our friend Eric had told us about some of his experiences marching for civil rights in the deep South. A Brazilian of Swedish descent, he had been brought up in U.S. prep schools and the Ivy League; now he was back in Rio, studying to be neurosurgeon. Late one night, he and his buddies were returning to their rural Mississippi campsite after a day of fund raising and rallies. In a clearing, they saw a fire smoldering, and swinging from a tree was a body, black and dead.

I knew that inside, Karen was ranting. So was I. I thought of Eugenio, my black Brazilian friend, about the copper Christmas decoration he'd made for me and the poems he had written and shoved under my door when I had mono. I wanted to open up and let the South Africans have it. "Yeah, they're different—in South Africa, you keep them in compounds, they learn only what you Whities allow them to learn, they can't even read *Black Beauty*, a book about a horse! It just might give them the idea that black IS beautiful! My god, what chance do they have! It's your fault, your fault that they..." But I buttoned my lip, afraid. About then, Ellen leaped out of a corner, threw a silk scarf over her head, picked up a tray of rum cocktails and limes, and strutted over to us Egyptian style. The subject changed back to who wanted what to drink.

About 11 pm, we crammed into the elevator and broke out onto the street. Even from three blocks away, we could hear the drums pounding on the beach. There were too many of us to stay together, and I wanted to be as far away as possible from the South Africans—they were a different lot from our *Cariad* crew. Or, were they? Was I sure?

I paired up with John, my freckle-faced, tousle-haired friend whom I'd known at the University of Washington. He was in Rio trying to find a job after abruptly leaving the Peace Corps. He had come to Brazil with high hopes, but, after a few months, his tour ended badly—I never knew the whole story. He was always cleaning his Coke-bottle-thick lenses and grinning. Without his glasses, his eyes looked like underwater-sea-creature eyes, blurry and unfocused. Ellen kept saying under her breath that he was a P C reject because he was “a homo.” I had no idea where she got that information; I didn't know, and I didn't ask.

John and I went south. At first, I was wide-eyed fascinated, then dazzled, completely in awe. Above us, stars and the moon pinpricked the black sky. Before us in the sand were thousands and thousands of candles. White candles. Placed in configurations of crosses, circles, or squares. A giant chalice. A crown of thorns. I could squint the flames together into serpentine lines of light, strings of calligraphy angling and looping through the dark.

Like my woodsy places back home, the sand was swept smooth, mounded by hand into sacred shapes. Crowding over the flames were black faces, heads wrapped in white sheeting, eyes lit bright. As far as I could see, from the twin cliffs of Dois Irmãos back to the bend at Ipanema, patterns waggled over the beaches like a blazing marquee, celebrating this night of heaven on earth. Some altars were so near the water's edge that the waves lapped the Atlantic into the candle-filled trenches, reflecting four- and five-fold the millions of flickers quivering in the night. Others bounced light off the glass fronts of buildings, jewelling the night with a zillion sparks of bright confetti.



I had read that over a million people—those who believed in *macumba* and those who came to watch—made their way to the beaches lining the Rio coast. And here we were—John and I, thousands of miles from our own homes—with them, between the sea and the street in a sea of people. We didn't talk; we watched and walked.

The celebrants wore white—white wrappings on their heads, white blouses and skirts, shirts and pants. Feet were bare. Occasionally someone passed by wearing an open-necked shirt or a long flowing skirt of pink or blue. But mostly we saw white. In their arms, they carried flowers—long stems of white or apricot-colored gladioli, pale roses, or sprigs of orange blossoms.

"I can't wait," John whispered. "They'll lay the flowers on the altars, then later, between midnight and dawn, they'll carry them out into the sea. A far cry from Spokane!"

Thick with the smell of flowers and of incense—frangipani, eucalyptus, patchouli—the air was wet. Tropical, warm. At some shrines, drums throbbed; at others, men and women in locked arms wailed or chanted or sang. Many danced in slow rotating circles. Smoke from candles and small fires wound through the crowds, diaphanous garlands connecting us one to the other.

A small boy—like John, a real grinner—snatched my hand and gently pulled me down toward his face. He whispered Portuguese in my ear, "You are pretty, lady." I grinned, but I'd been in Rio long enough to know that anyone with light skin was pretty. Despite what the travel brochures said about Brazil being "colorblind," color mattered.

I sat in the sand next to him as his two sisters bent to kiss each of my cheeks. One smiled shyly and said, "Tonight Iemanjá will touch your face." John squatted beside me,

and they lifted his face with their tiny brown hands and kissed his cheeks. Their altar of sand was sculpted into two interlocking rings, scooped and mounded two yards or more across. In the center of each ring was spread a white lace cloth. In one ring, dug into the sand, were two pictures, gold-framed, one of Mary and one of Jesus. In the second ring, much larger than Mary and Jesus, framed in gold filigree, was the portrait of Iemanjá, the white-skinned, raven-haired goddess of the waters, her ice-blue gown growing out of the sea. Black-skinned mothers, fathers, and children bowed before the white-skinned beauty. Here we go again, I thought, white and black.

On this, Iemanjá's night of nights, over a million people would gather on the beach to pay homage; they would present her with trinkets and delicacies. In exchange, over the next year, she would provide for them voluminous nets, dripping and spilling over with flopping fish. She, the supreme protector, would keep their men safe on the seas—fathers, husbands, and sons.

To please the goddess, this family had fashioned a dressing table, a vanity of feminine luxuries. Carefully they had arranged lipstick, rouge, silver-cased powders, and glass-bottled perfumes on a large hexagonal mirror, its edges beveled in serrated scallops. I thought of home—of the perfume counter at the dime store, blue bottles of Evening in Paris, my woodland shrines. The boy offered a handful of rose petals to John and me and nudged us to scatter them over the sand, and we did.

“We come from Bahia, many, many miles from here,” the boy said. I nodded. I knew Bahia. I hadn't been there, but when my friend Dick spoke of it, he smiled as if he were seeing some beatific vision. “Bahia is Brazil, heart and soul. Real Brazil. There, *macumba* is called *Candomblé*. It's primitive, close to its African roots—so much more

authentic, so true to its origin. You haven't been to Brazil until you've been to Bahia."

Someday I would go there.

"Our father, one year ago, passed on," the boy said. "We come here, his birth home, to bless his spirit and the spirit of his mother."

The boy again took my hand and led me away, taking me through the haze of candle smoke, around collections of humanity. Finally he stopped, looked up at me, and nodded once as if to say, "This is it!"

Fifty people, maybe more, were in a long, loosely formed line, swaying to the drums like a Chinese dragon. At the head of the line, slowly turning, then spinning wildly, was a woman. By her appearance, I knew she was a *Mãe de Santo*, a high priestess.

"She is a special one who can speak in my father's voice. She comes here tonight from Bahia, like us," the boy said. "You must speak with her, too."

We walked closer to her. Moving constantly, she hopped in circles from right to left, then left to right, her bare feet flying over the sand. The flab on her arms jiggled and her heavy breasts flopped, but comic she wasn't. I was confused by my impression of her—she was clownish, even grotesque, but, strangely, regal. Something about her compelled me, drew me to her.

Dressed head to toe in white with strands and strands of beads slapping against her chest, she must have weighed over 350 pounds, but she was light on her feet, almost delicate. She was short, shaped like a box, but her headdress of feathers was at least three feet tall, and, when she stood still for a minute or two, she seemed statuesque, like an African goddess carved from the trunk of an exotic tree.

She sucked on a fat cigar, expelling round puffs of smoke from one side of her mouth then the other. We moved back from her, and John pushed me into the line, next to a family of *favelados*—a father, a mother, and four little ones. Immediately, they broke into a samba, circling around me, clapping and crooning a frenzied Carnaval song. The children whirled around me, and I caught glimpses of knobby knees, scratched elbows and scrapes, and shining faces scrubbed raw. Both father and mother were wiry thin, and I couldn't tell her legs from his, or one child from another. They raced around me, spinning like tops. Suddenly they stopped dead still, quivered like tuning forks, and broke into wild jigging and bobbing, crisscrossing their feet, scissor stepping faster than whirlwinds. Round and round they spun, the children shrieking and squealing. I stood, quiet, in the middle, feeling awkward. I had been born with no rhythm, no voice. I wished that I could sing. And dance.

The boy pulled me down and whispered, "That *Mãe*, she is blessed by many gods. She can make roses out of air. Once my sister saw her make the roses. Yellow roses. Seven roses at one time."

The *favelados* completed their dance, and the long line kept moving. One after the other, *Mãe* blessed the believers, sending some off with smiles and others in tears. Finally in front of her, I was eye to eye with the tickling green, yellow, and red feathers of unrecognizable tropical birds. I stooped, and, with the cigar between her middle finger and her ring finger, she managed somehow to grab my shoulders, ashes spiraling down onto my arm. She pushed her oily black face into my cheeks, kissing me on both sides of my mouth. That close, I could feel a wiry chin hair brush my lip.

“One, two, three,” she counted. “Yes, twenty eight, your lucky number. And seven.” How did she know that, I wondered.

She turned me around, and, still holding the cigar, jerked my shoulders, and ran her fingers up and down my spine as if I were a piano, thumping some vertebrae, caressing others. Turning me around again, she rested her hands on my shoulders, then smoothed her hands down my arms. By now, the cigar was back between her wet lips, smack in the middle of her puckered mouth. She took a deep breath in, raised up my arms, and spewed thick swirls of smoke into my armpits.

“In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, bless you. You are something...something...something...I couldn’t make out the words...and your year will be wondrous and bright,” I thought she said, the words forming in the space around the cigar. Her words continued, guttural and moaning, but I couldn’t translate; I didn’t know when one word ended and another began. I tried to speak, but my words disintegrated in the din of drums and pounding surf.

I stumbled away, only to be caught by a *Pai de Santo*, a male priest, who raised my arms and whirled me around and around and around, blowing smoke rings in my armpits with each rotation.

“Spin and spin and spin,” he chanted. “”Lambs and birds and...” he seemed to be saying.

Crowds of faces smeared into an orbit of blur, like swaths of paint spun off a brush. After half a dozen turns, he stood me square in front of him. Muttering, he scribbled his fingers down my arms and grabbed my little fingers, jerking and pulling. Each finger he tugged and snapped.

Then, looking directly into my eyes, he said, "John, your friend, he is in danger. He is here, in Brazil, because Vietnam is bad, very bad. But he is in big danger in America. He should go far away to Africa." Then his words became garbled, and I couldn't understand; he swung me away by my wrists, saying, "You, yes, you will return to America."

I was confused. How on earth did he know John's name? How did he know John had come to Brazil to escape the draft? How... I tried to tell John what the *Pai* had said, but drums and noise, singing and chanting made communication impossible. I pulled John to me and screamed in his ear. He just grinned and nodded. I was baffled.

By midnight, the tempo of the night had quickened; songs and dances now seemed electric-charged, sizzling. The beat swelled to fever pitch.

"I can't believe this," I said to John. "It's surreal, like I'm at a movie—an incredible, strange, out-of-this world movie, like I'm seeing into them, but I'm invisible." Again, he grinned, nodding.

Around me, people shook, trembled, and retched. They stiffened and threw themselves to the ground, thrashing and rolling in the sand, their eyes bulging out of the sockets. They wailed and yipped like animals, hissing and whinnying, their cries agonizing as death. "Take me, take me, Iemanjá, take me. Bless me. I beseech you, take me."

In trances, some seemed almost to be lifted to the water, as if they were caught in a spell, drawn headlong into the foaming blackened waves. Transfixed, they moved forward, ankles, knees, hips, while others wrestled with them, clawing at them, screamed for them to turn back, terrified that they'd be sucked into the undertow and drowned.

Dragged back, they convulsed and collapsed. Then they slept, fixed to the sand, almost dead, unmoving. Finally, pitching forward and back, they stood clumsily, righting themselves to full height.

On every face was the same look. Innocence. Peace. Tranquility. What had seemed frightening, even ugly, was replaced by a look of deep benevolence, of grace. It was as if hundreds of Mother Marys and Jesus Christs—a Mary or a Jesus I might have imagined as a child, soft and glowing—had touched onto shore, their bodies weightless above the sand, and their faces like child faces, unlined and dreamy.

John was smiling. “To feel that kind of fear and that kind of peace. Amazing! Frightening but magnificent.”

He moved me away from the crowd, saying, “The worshipers are begging the gods to let them be the *cavallos*—the horses—that carry the *orixás*, the spirits. Look at them. Watch. If the gods say yes, the spirits mount them and enter them. That’s why they’re rearing up, writhing, and twisting. In a trance, they try to get to the water to join Iemanjá. The spirits can heal the wounds of the body and the soul, tell the future, and grant good luck. But the spirits can be bad, too. You never know what they might do. They’d just as soon bite off your tongue or sew your eyelids shut. When the spirits finally fly off, the worshiper is exhausted, but completely at peace. Pretty darned amazing. Pretty darned amazing.”

At midnight, the crowds moved closer to the water’s edge. A girl handed me a bundle of gladiolas. “Please have them,” she said. As I touched the flowers, I felt a surge from head to toe. A shiver. Around me, chanting men, women, and children were breaking from the crowd and wading in, their voices rising and falling with the breaking

surf. They carried, cradling them, blue painted boats two or three feet long, the decks glittering with candles. Deeper and deeper they went, in past their knees, past their waists, finally settling the boats gently on rolling waves. Others, hundreds of them, entered the water with armloads of flowers tied with ribbons, laying the bundles among the glowing boats.

Following them, water over my knees, I dropped my flowers into the waves and watched them scatter. I caught my breath; no longer was I invisible, no longer just an observer. I felt connected, a part of something miraculous. Water snaked up my legs, and I let my fingers fall into the surf. Water. Ablution. Yes! A connection.

Then, over Ipanema, the skies exploded with fireworks. The cosmos was spinning; giant pinwheels of fantastic colors burst and swirled over the candle-boats rocking on the tide. With each burst, the crowd held a collective breath, and their breath was my breath. Then, between firings, we whispered and pointed at the boats, and crossed our fingers. We prayed. If Iemanjá was pleased with our gifts, she would accept them graciously and permit the boats to float out to sea; if she found the gifts faulty, unworthy, she would toss them upside down, topsy-turvy, candles doused, back to shore. And the sea would be cursed for one full year. On this night, the last of 1969, just past midnight, the little blue boats floated—floated farther and farther away until they were only bright sparks in the night, until they were gone.

I sat down in the sand, spent, as if I'd been snapped away from the cosmos. John sat beside me, his arm around my shoulder. For a long time, we sat, speechless.

Later, renewed, we walked down the beach, sloughing sand with our bare feet, winding in and out of shrines until we came to a place where fewer people stood. Their



altars were farther apart, five or six yards from one to the next. It was an area of shadowy sand, and the current was strong, close to the bend where Leblon gave way to Ipanema. For some reason—maybe we heard a door close or a baby cry—our attention was drawn away from the beach and back toward street level. John nudged me, nodding to a knot of people coming our way.

Four women and a child, about two years old I'd guess, stepped out of a car parked under a dim streetlight and made their way onto the beach. They didn't seem to notice us at all. They walked a few paces, conferred, walked a few more steps, then conferred again. They were carrying baskets, heavy, I'd say, by the way the women staggered and lugged. Finally, they must have reached an agreement, because they knelt down and got to work.

John touched my elbow and nudged me toward them. We stood nearby for a few minutes, then, with no accent to his Portuguese, John quietly, almost reverentially, asked one of the women if we could watch. She nodded without looking at either of us, and went back to pushing and pulling at the sand. Two of the others moved about scooping and smoothing while the fourth, her head bowed over, sat cross-legged, tracing loops monotonously in the sand with her finger. John and I stepped back and sat, also cross-legged, a few feet from them.

The small child, his head a mass of black curls, climbed on to her back, his legs pinching around her waist. "*Mamãe, mamãe,*" he whined. But she made no response. A few minutes later, when she lifted her face...I knew I'd seen that face before. I could feel tears welling up and felt a shiver. It was at the funeral when I was in high school...tall, beautiful, model-thin Susan, a year younger than I, had stepped out into the empty field

next to her house, poured gasoline over herself, and struck a match...the woman's face on the beach was Susan's mother's face at the funeral...unseeing...blank. Someone had read whole chapters of *The Little Prince* and all of us sat stunned, numb. This face, here, now, was the same tortured face.

The three women dug a rectangular pit, about two feet by four feet, then each of them—two at one end and one at the other—took the edges of a white lace cloth and snapped it taut. On cue, they released it to float like a feather into the pit. Their faces without expression, they lifted food, item after item, from the baskets. Small white cakes. A white pudding. Coconut cookies. White butter mints. One woman, the oldest of the four, placed three white doilies on the large lace cloth, set a coconut cookie the size of a pancake on each doily, and meticulously formed rings of mints around each cookie. Another, maybe a sister to the first woman—both were yellow-brown with clefts like double thumb prints in their chins—sliced an apple and shaped the crescents into a spiraling sunburst. Over them, humming, she dripped, looped, and zigzagged honey, her head slowly bobbing in rhythm.

“I can't imagine what their story is,” John whispered. “It's like she's in a trance. Completely out of touch.”

I nodded. “I feel like I'm watching a movie again, like I'm...an audience...and they're not real. But they are. Do you think we should leave? It seems like this should be something private.”

John motioned me to stop talking, and we eased back into the sand.

Around the pit, the women set a line of candles and poked around each candle, white blossoms snipped from long stems of gladioli. Next they put a square of silk, a

handkerchief, I think, at each inside corner of the pit. The three moved back, and the seated woman with the child rose to her knees. The other women passed to her, first, the glass bowl of white pudding, garnished with white flowers. This she placed on the handkerchief at the upper corner to her right. Next, they passed her two bars of white soap. Even from where we squatted, I could smell them. A sweet floral scent, I thought of Hawaii and Tahiti. Moving clockwise, she placed these in the lower-right corner. John and I, on our knees, moved in closer. She put a tin of talcum powder on the third square and then picked up two tiny bottles of perfume. Alternating from one bottle to the other, she sprinkled scent over the shrine, finally placing both bottles on the fourth square. All this time, the child clung to her back, digging his heels into her waist. Then, keening like a wounded animal, she cried, wailing like a mother who had lost a daughter.

One woman brought out a champagne flute from a basket, then a bottle of champagne. She anchored the corkscrew and popped the cork. No one made a sound. She poured one glass full, set it in the center of the cloth, turning the base round and round until it nested. She splashed champagne over the gladiola blossoms, emptying the bottle. One of the other women repeated the ritual with a bottle of white wine, followed by a bottle of red. The woman with the child continued to cry.

The other three women took her by the elbows and raised her up, the child still fastened to her back—a difficult maneuver because she had crouched on her knees for over an hour, and her legs must have been numb. Still crying, she wobbled under the weight of the child and her own stiffness. Together the three women lit the candles with kitchen matches, and stood, arm in arm, for a long time, silent except for the quiet sobbing of the woman with the child. Then, soft at first, but louder and louder, all four

began to wail, their voices like the moaning of lost souls. Suddenly one screamed, and John and I startled, hearts pounding. The others blew out the candles, threw them into the pit, grabbed the corners of the cloth, and lifted.

They stumbled toward the water, hefting the weighty load. John and I followed, mesmerized. As we passed, people on the beach bowed their heads, moved aside quickly, and allowed us to pass. In the water, the women fell apart; they wailed, flinging the bundle into the breaking waves. The crying woman, the child still hanging on her neck, plunged down into the rush of water, and the other three grabbed at them, lifting the child from her, hoisting him high, and dragging him back to the beach. His mother was now shrieking; she scrambled screaming into the spume, dove down, screamed, popped back up, and was tossed like a barrel. She thrashed, arms and legs digging into the water, hands slapping her head, howling in a voice in no way human. John and I shuddered—her screams cut through me, and I felt like my head would burst. Two of the women ran back into the water and wrestled with her, pulled at her flailing arms, wound their hands in her hair, and dragged her back to shore.

She rolled in the sand, batting at the women who tried to keep her from the surf. She pummeled at their faces and tore at their eyes. She broke away and crawled on hands and knees toward the water. Twice, by her ankles, they pulled her back. Their white dresses were filthy with sand, crusted in grit; their hair hung wet and ropy. Then in an instant, all together, they, and the child, collapsed. They went silent and still. John and I watched, speechless. I started toward them, but John took my hand and pulled me back.

Maybe a quarter of an hour or more later, they stood—as if nothing unusual at all had happened—linked arms and returned to the shrine, smiling, refreshed, at peace, the

toddler waddling behind them. They smiled, nodded at us, picked up their baskets, and returned to their car.

John touched my elbow, sighed deeply, and we were off again, settling in with a family who invited us to celebrate with them as we walked by. Father, mother, and four children threw back their heads and laughed from their bellies.

“Here, lady, this is for you, and this for you, man,” a boy said, presenting both of us with small, footed, pink glasses. The mother poured champagne, and, on her signal, we drank. Then the father motioned for us to bend over their altar; we did, and he poured the rest of the champagne over our heads. It streamed down our hair, ran down our necks, and dribbled off our bare arms. The children giggled, and one hopped up and samba-stepped around us. Next, the father poured wine over a bowl of green grapes and then over a bowl of purple grapes. One by one, each of us ate three grapes, two green, one purple, and spit the seeds into our palms. Why three and two? Why green and purple? I wanted to know the symbolism, but I couldn’t break the mood and ask. We buried the seeds in the sand. One child gave me an orange gladiola, and, we set off again.

A middle-aged couple, probably in their fifties, not black as were the other celebrants, but European-looking, signaled us to sit with them.

“We are not *macumba*,” the man said in English, “but we respect and honor their traditions. Our families came from Portugal generations ago, and sitting on the beach on New Year’s Eve is a ritual we have kept from our childhood. We might not believe in *macumba*, but we don’t really disbelieve, either. We have had many maids who have brought blessings into our household, and some who have brought the curse.”

This, I could understand. I, too, had learned to read the signs. Burnt candles—not ours—in the trash. A pencil drawing of an eye on the underside of a shelf. A black thread tied on a hanger. A tiny broken pearl button in a shoe. Beware.

Sharing with us the foods of the gods—figs, honey, small iced cakes, frosted breads, grapes, and wine, the man continued, “Go to Copacabana. An eye opener for you. The celebrations have changed so much since we were young. We live in Copacabana, but we come here to see the *Mãe*.”

I pestered him to explain himself, but he just laughed. “You’ll see, you’ll see,” he said.

We caught a bus to Copacabana. Parked along Avenida Atlântica were hotel vans and tourist buses. Guides with megaphones explained in English and German and French to groups of Americans and Europeans what was occurring. “Get your souvenirs here! Iemanjá statues! Iemanjá necklaces! Buy coconut cookies here! Brought in today from Bahia, fresh today!”

“Yup, I see,” I murmured to John.

No fat *Mães de Santo* danced over the sand in Copacabana. Only young, thin glamour girls dressed in skimpy white gowns, with movie star lips, and top heavy with hair. No cigars. No chin hair or moles or sweat. No trances, no wailing, no eyes rolling in their sockets or mouths foaming. Instead, sleek, long-legged bronze beauties, nearly naked, their faces painted with Carnaval glitter, flowers in their glorious hair, titillating the crowds. They could shake their sequined nipples and bikinied behinds like jack hammers.

Up and down the beach, dancers in open shirts and skirts of red, purple, and green gyrated to the split-second beat of Carnaval sambas. They were costumed. Choreographed. Like characters in a movie. Scripted. Professional dance troupe perfect. Drummers, too, were dressed alike. They pounded on their drums, flipped their drumsticks in unison and, synchronized, clapped their hands, over their heads. After each set, they shuffled through sheet music to see what song was next. Vendors hawked souvenirs—chains with metal Iemanjá and fish charms, balloons, plastic flowers. We watched the performance as kids begged, pulled on shirt sleeves, and promised that they could lead the *turistas* to the “Best *Macumba* Show” ever. The air was sweet with the smell of peanuts and sugar turning on wooden spades in huge copper pans over fires, the prices twice that of any ordinary day.

A boy walked up to me. In Portuguese, he asked, “You speak French?” I smiled, and shook my head no. “Where you from?” John stepped in, and the guessing game began. Soon at least a half dozen little boys surrounded us, asking questions a mile a minute.

“Lady, you got to be from Sweden or Denmark where the little mermaid is. You’re like the stewardesses from the airplanes from Copenhagen. You’re tall and light. Look at your yellow hair. Where’s the guy from?”

John teased them, telling them he was Japanese, then Mongolian, Icelandic, yes, Icelandic. When he finally admitted to them that we were Americans, the kids couldn’t believe it. “Nah, man, you don’t talk Portuguese like an American, all coming out your nose. You’ve got to be lying.”

I apologized for my less-than-perfect Portuguese, but one boy pulled on my elbow, winked, and said, “Your accent is groo-ooovy.” The English word sent them into fits of laughter, poking and jabbing one another in the ribs.

“*Sua nome, sua nome?*” When I answered that my name was Lee, they pointed to the labels on their cut-off blue jeans. “Lee jeans, you Lee jeans!” I tried to explain that no, I didn’t have anything to do with Lee jeans, but they were hooting and hollering in excitement, refusing to believe anything but that I was *the* Lee of Lee jeans. That gave way to shouting for their favorite samba school, their favorite *futebol* team, their favorite brand of soccer ball. One boy checked his watch, yelled that they needed to get going, and two boys, walking backwards and waving, told us to meet them tomorrow—their families were having a New Year’s Day party, and we were invited. Avenida Nossa Senhora Copacabana. Mid-day. Come, be sure to come!

We rode the bus back to Leblon. For an hour or so, we sat wordless on the beach in the black, star-studded amphitheatre of the universe. The dancing was no longer wild and frenetic, but slow and dreamy; no longer were the drums beating crazy; we listened to guitars and soft singing. People were quiet, waiting. More tiny boats, candles fixed to their decks, were dropped into the water and carried out to the sea. Again, I remembered phosphorescence, how once I had dipped my hands into slow curling waves, lighting the surface to shimmering. Not even that memory could compare with this night. I felt as if I were touched and touching, connected to everyone and to everything by invisible, weightless silken threads. Here, I was a part of the steady pulse of the cosmos. Here, I could breathe. And I felt warm.



Dawn came up deep red, orange, pink, purple, then green and yellow, unlike any sunrise I had ever seen. The waves and sand turned golden, and everyone on the beach wandered off in different directions. Still wordless, John and I walked back to the apartment. The Rhodesians were asleep on the couches, Steven was curled up on the floor with a newspaper over his face, and some people I had never seen before were sitting at the table drinking coffee. There was no sign of the South Africans. Thank god.

Karen was in the kitchen squeezing oranges into juice, pulling coffee cakes from the oven, scrambling eggs, and cutting pineapple into boats. By all appearances, it was a morning like so many others. But nothing, nothing at all, was ordinary about how I felt. Words didn't exist, yet, to describe my feelings, but I knew something deep inside me had been touched, and I felt peace, at ease with the inexpressible mystery of creation.

John hugged me, and left. Wordless.

I walked down the hallway to my bedroom, lay eyes closed, but sleepless, on my bed. I had left the domed dark theatre of the night world, knowing that I had been the audience and the actor, a bit part, but nonetheless, an actor, changed and changing. After replaying the scenes again and again, I felt the flap at the end of the film in my mind, and I slept. Peacefully and deeply.

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*Easter: Mystery and Metaphor*

The three of us—Susan (she moved in with us after Ellen resigned and returned to the States), Karen, and me—left Rio at ten on Wednesday night, headed for Ouro Prêto, an historic mountain town in the state of Minas Gerais, and, next to Rio, our favorite city. We would transfer buses in Belo Horizonte, the industrial city that was only seventy-some years old, but already had a population of over a million. High on a plateau in the mountains, the town was a night's bus ride away. The roads were hazardous—short stretches of pavement and long stretches of dirt and gravel. Even two decades later when Brazil would be crisscrossed by over 990,000 miles of roads, only nine per cent would be paved. And, typically, Brazilian bus drivers were hell bent on defying physics. Ours was no different—he flew off the blacktop into ruts and potholes, bouncing the bus like a beach ball.

Rolling through the night, careening around mountain switchbacks at twice the lawful speed, I tried to keep food down in my belly and out of my throat. Eating slabs of pork ribs at Churrascaria Jardim, our favorite barbecue restaurant, had not been a good idea. Besides the roiling stomach, I had a headache, a searing pain behind my eyes; my body was reacting not just to the ribs, but also to our visit with Thereza. We had stopped in to check on her right after dinner. Seeing her these days required fortitude, more than any of us had. None of us—we were too young and too inexperienced—knew what to do with her. Or *for* her. She was a new mother. And she was a widow.

In February, the country had been deluged with torrential rains. Disastrous flooding. Hundreds of thousands left homeless. Her husband Felipe and three crewmen flew out on a mission to survey the damage; at some point, he was radioed to return to Rio because his father was near death. He swung the helicopter back around toward Rio, and, inexplicably, it exploded in mid-air. For days after the accident, we read newspaper headlines and articles; we watched TV news stories over and over—hundreds upon hundreds came to the funeral—until we were numbed into zombies.

Thereza was no longer someone we knew; she was kept heavily medicated, spending her days rocking the baby, staring at the door, and humming. There were no words of consolation for her, in English or in Portuguese. Every time I visited her, I came away with a headache and tears, anguished by how ineffectual I was.

On the bus to Belo Horizonte, I was relieved—and guilty—to be away from her.

. . .

Suddenly I was jolted from semi-sleep. “What the... Where are we?” The windshield shattered, our bus skidded to a stop, and our faces were prickled with splinters of icy glass.

The driver, covered in blood splatter, jumped off the bus, and I could see him in the headlights, nudging with his toe, a limp mass. I shivered, and a spasm of cold horror shot through me. I was remembering the train trip I’d taken across Canada in February, 1966. An engineer had taken a seat by me during his off-time, we talked a little, and I said it would really be absolutely the best thing ever to drive a train. But I was just making conversation; in reality, I’d never thought about driving a train ever in my life before that moment. But he said, “Come ahead.” At first I thought he was joking—me,

driving a train—it was absurd. But he assured me he meant it. At the next station, disbelieving, both terrified and curious, I followed him out of the passenger car to the engine. There, perched on a stool, my hands under his, I took the control handles, and I was in charge of the train.

Somewhere in Ontario, in the dead of night, between piles of snow shoveled ten-feet tall, we stopped. It was a clearing, just a small circle, the snow yellowish green in a corona of lanterns. The dark forms of towering trees emerged, disappeared, and emerged again in the falling snow and quivering light. Three men, their breath fogging out like vapor, stood by the tracks. Something cigar-shaped, as long as a man, wrapped in black plastic, bound with rope, was heaved into the open door. The engineer lugged it across the floor, settling it at the base of the stool where I was sitting.

“Indian, killed by the wife, drunk as a skunk she was. Cut his neck clean in two with a beer bottle,” one of the men shouted up to us.

“Son of a gun,” the engineer whistled. “Third dead Indian this month. The last couple of fellas just laid on the tracks. Not much we can do, just run ’em over goin’ 60 mile an hour.” He shook his head. “Hate it more than I can tell you. We’ll give this one over to the Mounties.”

. . .

What our bus driver was poking at was the size of a child. I held my breath... and mouthed a prayer. He pulled himself back through the door. “Just a bird,” he said. I exhaled and let the muscles in my shoulders release.

Susan, Karen, and I, curious, moved to the front of the bus. It was a buzzard, its feathers tattered, its neck raw—the severed head, a bleeding open wound. Black feathers, loose, lifted and skipped over the pavement.

A cold wind blew through the broken window, numbing us. Rio had been cool for the past few days, but this mountain blast was through-and-through bone-chilling cold. The driver opened the baggage compartment, pulled our suitcases out onto the shoulder, and we stepped down onto the gravel to dig out clothing—pajamas, robes, Easter dresses, even our towels—layering them on for warmth. The bus started up again, crawling over the steep roads at a snail's pace. At this rate, it would be Sunday before we reached Belo Horizonte.

Sleep was impossible; we were too cold. We were afraid to move—the aisles were peppered with sharp shards of glass. And we were starving. Not for hours, not until early morning just before dawn, did a rescue bus finally come along and take us on as passengers.

Around seven in the morning, tired and cold, we arrived at the Belo Horizonte Excelsior Hotel, our transfer station. Immediately, we took a table at the restaurant and tore warm baguettes into chunks, slathering them with butter and jam. We sipped on *cafezinho*, the “small black coffee” that really is just a few drips of coffee stirred into three or four tablespoons of sugar, and, then, because we were still cold, we placed a second order and cupped our hands around large bowls of steaming milk shot with espresso. So far, the trip didn't seem at all like the glorious spring break we had planned for.

Finally warm, Susan thumbed through *Fodor's 1971 Guide to South America*, suddenly inserting the fading pink cover between two pages toward the end of the book.

"Hey, this is unreal," she said. "We might think we spent a night in hell, but right here, page 546, says Belo Horizonte 'gained international attention a few years ago when a group of atomic scientists called it one of the safest spots in the world in case of an atom bomb war between Russia and the United States... it lies at just the right longitude and latitude... caressed by certain winds that would carry the barest minimum of radiation down upon the people.' Now who could want more than that for spring break..."

"Well, I'd take a fur coat, a muffler, and a couple of shots of whiskey. Oh, and a hot bubble bath—with rose petals," Karen said, blowing on her fingers. "Red." We laughed, vowed to adjust our attitudes, and make the best of the situation. We were on vacation.

Eyeing the clock and dawdling, we waited. An 11:50 bus would carry us to Ouro Prêto, 75 miles away. A newspaper vendor told us to call his city "B H," not Belo Horizonte. "But B H isn't nearly as romantic as 'Beautiful Horizon'..." "B H. Call it B H." Okay, we would. Another local informed us, "Ouro Prêto is, after all, only a suburb of B H."

"Yeah, right," Karen mumbled under her breath, not interested enough even to comment or ask questions. We had been to Ouro Prêto before; this was our second trip. B H was gray, industrial, smoggy, dank, and to us, uninteresting. Ouro Prêto, Black Gold, was paradise. And no way would we call paradise "O P."

We wanted to be left alone in the cold gray station, resting our heads on our bags, but a steady stream of onlookers crept around us. Always we were on display. An exotic exhibit. I was trying hard to ignore the gawkers, but I couldn't help but notice a little boy slumped over on a bench near the men's room. Jaundiced, the lids of his closed eyes were yellow as mustard. He was thin. His shirt and pants were no more than threadbare rags; he had to be cold. He was trembling. But the trembling was from more than the cold. Malaria maybe. Or some other tropical malady. Once in a while, he would open his eyes to look at me, almost as if he were pleading with me. But what could I do. I made myself stop looking at him.

He reminded me of Ellen, of her malaria, that is, picked up during her childhood in Panama. During Christmas break, while Karen and I were making our first visit to Ouro Prêto, Ellen was chugging up the Amazon on a riverboat. A few days into the trip, her malaria relapsed. Lying in a hammock strung between poles on the deck, she was feverish, nearly unconscious. She startled out of sleep to find an old man breathing into her face and lifting her eyelids with his grubby fingers. In his hands, he held a tiny glass vial.

"What are you doing? Get away from me!" she yelled.

"Oh, lady, pardon, please pardon, I collect your tears. The tears of the white goddess. Please, lady, your tears I will sprinkle on the boys of my village. The boys are sick, very sick. It is the correct remedy. Please, lady, I need your tears."

Gently Ellen removed his hands and squeezed her tears into his glass.

. . .

Just as we were the center of attention at the bus station in Belo Horizonte, we were the center of attention wherever we went. Everywhere we created a sensation. Brazilians—both men and women—clicked their tongues, walked in circles around us, even touched our cheeks sometimes, and spoke to us. With no embarrassment at all, they stared at us boldly, making no attempt whatsoever to avert their eyes. We were fair skinned, and we were tall—Karen, the shortest at 5'8", I was 5'10", and Ellen and Susan were both over 6'. On the sidewalk, people would turn all the way around to look at us. They wanted to see Susan's blond hair. And mine. They asked permission to touch Karen's red curls. They ran their fingers through Ellen's waist-length light brown hair. They told us we were beautiful. In contrast, I thought they were the beauties—we seemed pasty and flaccid next to their exotic, chiseled darkness.

In the past, I had been embarrassed by attention, but, in Brazil, I was beginning to learn that I liked it. Black, gray, and brown clothing was being replaced by orange and red. Earrings dangling shoulder length replaced tiny buttons in my earlobes. I bought half a dozen monstrous cocktails rings, and wore three at a time. I was still somewhat self-conscious and tentative, but I was becoming more and more self assured, more comfortable in my own skin. All of us were.

. . .

Several months before, Susan had been waiting patiently for her turn to order ice cream at Bob's, the Brazilian equivalent of an American fast-food restaurant. Tired, in no mood that day to be the main attraction, she was trying to fold into herself, hunching down, hiding under a hat and sunglasses. Sun worshippers in bikinis and teenagers sweating from beach volleyball flocked the stand. Susan kept trying to get close enough



to the counter to order, only to be wiggled out of the way by a hip or a knee. Politely she kept stepping back, moving farther and farther away. Suddenly the proprietor lifted his eyes from the swarm in front of him and spotted her.

“Senhorita? Senhorita *be yoo ti full*, your pleasure?” he called over the crowd.

“Vanilla?”

In an instant, he stuck two fingers in his mouth and sounded a long, shrill whistle. Then, with a dramatic flourish, he held up an over-filled dripping cone. The crowd snapped to attention, parted, and urged Susan forward. The ice cream man, his apron strings flapping, ran around the counter and presented the cone to her with a deep bow. Someone laughed, then a tiny voice piped up, “Look, she is magnificent! The Statue of Liberty!” Everyone cheered, pumping their fists, hip hip hooray, to the air. For us, fading into a crowd was impossible.

. . .

Finally, we left the bus station in Belo Horizonte, bound for Ouro Preto. The trip would have been scenic—winding roads, dense pockets of jungle and open places of undulating grass—but our heads were scraping the ceiling of the bus, and we caught only an occasional glimpse. Standing room only. Pitching from side to side, banging shoulders, we lurched and laughed, shrugging off offers to sit.

“Take my seat,” a man said.

“No, you must take mine!” shouted another.

“Nah, we’re practicing for hitting the waves at Leme! Look out, Arpoador! We’re on our way!” Susan crouched into a surfer stance, faked wobbling onto a wave, snapping into a cutback, and shooting onto shore. Old men, pregnant women, and toddlers could

sit; after having sat for over fourteen hours on a cold bus and in a cold bus station, we would stand, happy to stretch our cramped bodies to full height.

Suddenly we hit a bump, and I was flung toward the driver. I swung around the metal frame of his seat and flew into his shoulder, eye to eye with his hands. The nails on both little fingers were long, an inch or more, so long that he couldn't wrap his hands around the steering wheel. Instead, he extended his little fingers out, as if he were holding a teacup, British-like and proper.

I righted myself and slipped my hand back into the leather security strap chained to the ceiling.

“Well, ladies, we've got a *macumbeiro* for a driver. We better be good as gold. No ticking him off and getting zapped with a curse.”

We were well aware that practitioners of *macumba* grew the nails of their pinky fingers long so they could pick out the eyes of chickens before they slit open the necks, spilled the blood, and burned the carcasses in illegal sacrifices on makeshift jungle altars high above the city.

“We're good, better than good, we're the best,” Susan whispered.

. . .

The driver dropped us at Praça Tiradentes in the center of Ouro Preto. Tiradentes, the Toothpuller. Every Brazilian town has its own Tiradentes something-or-other—a square, a plaza, a street, or a corner. Back in 1792, a group of local citizens—landowners, some lawyers, a priest, and an assortment of other educated individuals—plotted against the Portuguese king to secure independence for Brazil. They called for an end to Portuguese taxation and to bans against printing presses, bookstores, universities, and

foreign newspapers. The rebels wanted factories and steel mills. They wanted industrialization. *Progresso!* They even contacted Thomas Jefferson, asking to trade future Brazilian products for American military assistance.

When the conspiracy was found out, Portuguese officials singled out a handsome, young rebel—army lieutenant, Joaquim José da Silva Xavier—to embody their deadly threat to the insurgents. Because Xavier practiced dentistry in addition to his military duties, he was known to his compatriots more often not by his real name, but by his nickname, Tiradentes, the Toothpuller. The Portuguese decided that the lieutenant would be the example that would force all other rebels to rethink their actions—he was hung, drawn, and quartered, and his descendants were to be officially cursed forever. Instead, in martyrdom, Tiradentes became a national hero, his name revered throughout Brazil.

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Now, three days before Easter, standing in the central plaza in an apex of history, we were finally about to begin our second visit to Ouro Preto, a city hundreds of years old. A favorite place, our micro-version of paradise. We circled our gaze...stucco buildings, white, pink, blue, and yellow with red-orange tile roofs...cobblestone streets...heavy doors intricately carved...frescoes of bulbous garlands of fruit...pop-eyed gargoyles and cherubs. Churches, churches, and more churches. Not even churches actually, but cathedrals aimed skyward with hand-carved spires and elaborate baroque steeples.

Horse-drawn carts bumped along the road interspersed with cars and bicycles, but, still, traffic was sparse. Tied to a post right in the center of town was a mule, hang-headed and sullen. Strapped to its saddle were two white chickens—live chickens,

flapping and squawking. These were Easter dinner chickens, not chickens to be carried in a burlap bag up a jungle trail to a hidden fire pit to have their eyes picked out.

We lifted our suitcases and headed on foot for Rua Brigadeiro Musqueira 6. Pouso do Chico Rei, our hotel. Susan read Fodor as we walked. "...an old restored home that is one of the most charming and 'typical' hotels in the entire town...service becomes a personal thing. Telephone 333 for reservations in advance." Because this was our second trip to Ouro Prêto and our second stay at the hotel, we already knew what we were in for.

. . .

We had visited Ouro Prêto the first time at the insistence of some of Susan's Brazilian friends. Before coming to Rio, she had worked in New York City as a personnel manager at Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center. There she met Senhor Aldo Cavallo, an elderly Brazilian of Italian descent, who was undergoing treatment. Like any proper Carioca, he invited her to Rio. She accepted and arrived for what was supposed to be a short stay, but days became weeks, and, enamored with Rio, she eventually ended up on the doorstep of the American School looking for a job. Dr. Brown hired her on the spot to teach in the Lower School.

Senhor Cavallo introduced her to his niece Vera who, in turn, introduced her to a fascinating group of women. In no time, Susan came to realize that Vera and her friends were not just ordinary folks; they were the Brazilian *literati*, elite women of remarkable talent and reputation. Authors, musicians, songwriters, and performers, some were on the cutting edge of a new, but largely underground, Brazilian feminist awareness, and others,

Vera included, were “take-on-the-world, no-holds-barred” out-of-the-closet lesbians ready to change the world.

None of us had known women like them before. Primarily through Susan, but occasionally on my own, I peeked into their lives of fame and fortune and also into their intimate relationships. One minute they were engaged in cerebral conversation, discussing politics, literature, or religion, and the next, they were squabbling with one another, switching partners in on-again, off-again liaisons, causing us to grit our teeth and shake our heads.

“I had no idea women could be so complicated,” Susan sighed. “They’re absolutely amazing...so challenging but so, so, so frustrating. Thank god I like men—men are a whole lot simpler.”

Karen and I tagged along on cultural outings once in a while, but both of us were intimidated by the women. Next to them—brilliant, experienced, worldly, and older than us—I felt naïve and inept, a bumpkin.

One time, they invited us to a concert. They said Gal Costa was all the rage in Rio, a singer of superstar status, ready to break into the U.S. music scene, but I didn’t know who she was. We sat on the floor of a huge dark room. Spotlit in the center of the crowd on a stool sat Gal. Over and over, she tried to begin a song, but because of the relentless chanting and cheering, she couldn’t make herself heard. Finally the noise subsided, and she eased into a silky bossa nova ballad. Minutes later, she was crooning a love song, drawing us to tears, then she was exploding into wild contortions, her voice blasting through the roof. She had the crowd, the three of us included, in the palm of her hand.

I looked around the room. Hippie girls in flowing psychedelic-printed palazzo pants. Jeweled and rouged transvestites. Butch women in blue jeans and white button-down shirts, hair slicked back in duck tails. Moms and daughters, arm in arm. Grandmothers in sensible shoes. Lesbians and non-lesbians. A few men. I wondered who everyone was. I knew that I would recognize some of the names; I would have seen them on book jackets, playbills, album covers, bylines of newspapers and magazines. Vera and her friends were introducing us to another new world, but it was a world I wasn't sure I was ready for.

. . .

It was Vera who suggested that we visit Ouro Prêto. She said we would stay at Pouso Chico Rei, the small—only five rooms—hotel owned by her good friend Lilli Correia de Araújo.

“You, Lee, with your interest in art and your Scandinavian ancestry, must meet Lilli. She is from Denmark, and her husband was one of Brazil's very finest painters, Pedro Correia de Araújo. He died about fifteen years ago, and his paintings hang throughout the inn. You will love to see these beautiful paintings.”

Out of earshot, Susan whispered, “I've heard that Lilli gave up men after Pedro died. Women only. ‘To preserve his memory’ she says. I guess, to each *her* own!”

. . .

Our first trip to Ouro Prêto had been a few months back, midway through December. Ellen was on the Amazon, and Karen and I wanted to get out of summer-sticky Rio. Spending the days just before Christmas in a mountain town of massive cathedrals seemed appropriate, even magical. Besides, we were missing our own family

traditions, and Karen, Lutheran through and through, needed a spiritual lift to ease her through the holidays so far away from home.

We arrived at Pouso Chico Rei in the early afternoon. Lilli, tall, blond, and definitely Nordic, met us at the door of the inn. She looked athletic, middle aged, no makeup, her hair cut like a bowl. Reserved, with a thin smile, she greeted us and inquired about the comings and goings of the Rio crowd, then she led us up narrow stairs to the second floor and asked if we needed anything. We didn't; the room was comforting—dark antique furniture, clean white bedding, and, just as Vera had said, luminous oil paintings of women hung on the walls. Thick towels. Fresh flowers in cut-glass vases on lace doilies. It was a place for contemplation, and we welcomed its peace and quiet after the hubbub of Rio.

After Lilli closed the door, and we heard her footsteps on the landing at the bottom of the stairs, Karen whispered, "She's kind of dyke-y, and serious, but she seems really, really nice."

Through French doors, our room opened onto a small balcony. Leaning over the railing, looking through a fog of leaden air, gray as gunmetal, we could see churches, winding cobblestone streets, red-tiled roofs, and, beyond the city, grassy hills like elephants sleeping on swollen sides. Soon, not long after we arrived in our room, the clouds opened up, and rain fell in torrents. It gushed down the gutters and spilled into the street. The entire town was a wash of mucky gloom. Thinking the rain might let up, we left the hotel to sightsee, but, in just minutes in the downpour, we were soaked to the bone. We found ourselves sprinting across intersections and diving towards dripping awnings, our eyes stinging and rain snaking down our backs. The rain didn't stop, so we

spent much of afternoon holed up at Calabouça, a dark, cozy bar slightly below street level, chatting with the bartender, listening to the rain through open windows.

Whenever the rain let up, he would say, “Go, go, now’s your chance. Two streets down and across the plaza is a church you must see. Go!”

We made several mad dashes—to a church, to a basket shop, to a copper shop—but, most of the time, we were content with drinking wine and eating savory chicken stewed in beer. The bartender kept our glasses full and our bread basket and butter dish replenished. On one foray back onto the street, we hurried past a clothing shop.

“Stop!” Karen shouted. “Look!”

In the window were two mannequins. Garbed in gaudy three-piece suits right out of London’s Carnaby Street, circa 1965, were Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy, life-sized. Stretched over Hardy’s mammoth girth, pulling at huge buttons, was a double-breasted flared jacket, its broad collar submerged beneath his double chin. Both comedians wore low-rise, bell-bottomed trousers and extra-wide polka-dot and paisley ties. On top of their heads, over Beatle-style wigs, were their signature bowlers; plastic carnations, gray with dust, were pinned to their lapels. In their plaster hands were bright-colored soccer flags.

“Only in Brasil! Brasil with an s!”

Wine-warmed and giddy, we careened through the streets, hooting with laughter at the crazy melding of American, English, and Brazilian mass culture.

. . .

Because rain had sidetracked us from seeing many of the tourist attractions on the first trip to Ouro Preto, we knew we had to return. Easter, from what everyone said, was the perfect time for a repeat visit.



“You cannot leave Brazil without celebrating Easter in Ouro Prêto. And you should visit Dona Elisabetchy. She will be lonely during the holidays, and I’m certain she will appreciate speaking English,” Vera had said.

“Dona Elisabetchy?” I asked.

“An American poet who keeps a house in Ouro Prêto. We call her E lis a bet chee, but, to you, in English, she is Miss Elizabeth. Elizabeth Bishop. Perhaps, you have heard of her? She is very well known in the States.”

“Heard of her?” I was trembling. I could remember sitting on the quad under the cherry trees at the University of Washington, picking apart the metaphors and similes in “The Fish” with my poetry class, senior year. I could remember images, even exact lines, of the poem. Meeting the poet—someone I had studied—was too good to be true.

“I’ll arrange a meeting with her. She has never learned Portuguese very well and welcomes speaking in English. And she has had such sadness recently. A visit with Americans would be good.”

I couldn’t believe it. Elizabeth Bishop. Author of “The Fish.” A published poet with prizes and awards. A famous poet. Some even said she was the Emily Dickinson of the twentieth century. Actually visiting her in her own home. Spending Easter with *the* Elizabeth Bishop. What if... I was in a reverie. What if she and I could have some sort of understanding... a connection... after all, I, an island girl, knew a little about fish...

Karen had never heard of her, but, because I was so excited, she said she would go with me. Susan, however, said, “Thanks, but no thanks. You go ahead, but I’m not going.”

“But, Susan, you’ve got to go...”

“No.” She was emphatic. “I’ve met her before. You go, enjoy yourself.”

During the month or so before the second trip to Ouro Preto, I concocted fantasy after fantasy—I envisioned Elizabeth Bishop as wise and wonderful. She would be gentle and grandmotherly. Graying hair. Soft eyes. I would hang on her every word. She would ask to see my poems...she would be magnanimous, of course, and easily recognize my poetic longings...she would volunteer to help me on my way...she would be my mentor...maybe...

Susan just smiled. She would have no trouble staying busy until we returned, she said. Lilli had mentioned that they might just take off in her old blue rattletrap of a pickup truck and comb the countryside for antiques, do a little bartering for some lamps or chairs and clocks. Susan could supply company and some much-needed muscle.

. . .

Finally the second visit to Ouro Preto was underway, and we finished the steep uphill hike from Praça Tiradentes to the familiar porch outside Lilli’s door. She met us with open arms. We exchanged hugs and the obligatory brush and peck to each cheek, and she explained that we’d be sharing the hotel with some young gentlemen—a traveling drama troupe. Still fantasizing about meeting Elizabeth Bishop, I didn’t catch their name or purpose. She pointed down the hall, and we could see them in the dining room, scrawny and unkempt, sprawled on the delicate caned and upholstered chairs.

Some were reading, some were plucking on guitars, and some were just sitting around, looking sleepy. Untidy and pale, they were different from us. We were tired, but we were clean. And like real Cariocas, our nails, both fingers and toes, were manicured and polished. Our clothing was pressed. In contrast, they looked pale, underfed, and

scruffy. We had assimilated Carioca custom and culture, devoting hours to body sculpting, weekly pedicures, and golden tans. Obviously, they were from somewhere else.

. . .

When I first arrived in Brazil, I was taken aback by what seemed to be the inordinate attention of Brazilians to physical appearance. On the streets of Leblon or Ipanema or Copacabana, it was often hard to tell a high-society jet setter from a domestic. Manicurists traded skills with seamstresses who traded skills with hairdressers. Rio women, even many of those who lived in the squalid shanties of the *favelas*, somehow managed to look as if they had just stepped away from a photo shoot. Not just aging matrons, but thirty-something-year-olds slapped down *cruzeiro* after *cruzeiro* for eye lifts, tummy tucks, and breast augmentations. In Copacabana, it was easier to find a cosmetic surgeon than an internist. Beautiful bodies weren't just found on travel brochures and in fashion magazines, they were everywhere.

Quickly, I learned that although we Americans went to the beach to take in the sun and swim in the surf, Cariocas went to be seen. They didn't throw down a blanket and lie in the sun; instead, they stood, moving with the sun, like a rotisserie, tanning their bodies evenly. Both women and men preened and paraded, creating on the beaches a mega-sized singles club of "the beautiful people."

. . .

Stateside, I'd been schooled to believe in "inner beauty" and that "true beauty is more than skin deep." In fact, spending time on things of the body—cosmetics, primping, bubble baths—made me feel guilty. It was a self-imposed guilt, origin unknown. Years

before, I had wanted to wear makeup to cover a giant junior high pimple, but I was much too embarrassed to ask my mom—I don't know why—probably she would have told me I didn't need it, but, if that's what I wanted, okay. One morning, before school, I smeared thick orange-pink calamine lotion down my nose and over my cheeks; I must have looked like a creature done up with pumpkin rot, but I couldn't bring myself to ask for real makeup, and mom didn't even lift an eyebrow when she saw me.

In Brazil, far away from home, I was allowing myself to experiment, and Karen, with her Southern ways, was teaching me to embrace things luxurious and feminine. I was learning to pamper my body. The very first session with the masseuse—lazing under thrumming fingers rolling over my skin and the warmth of body wraps and exfoliates—hooked me. After twenty-one years of covering myself with heavy clothing and concentrating on the mind and not the body, I was finding that something about skimpy halter-tops and bikinis was liberating.

Carefully but slowly, I was trying to peel away some of the restraints of my old-school Scandinavian heritage. By the early 1960s, my Swedish cousins were already living in sin and going naked on the beaches of the Baltic, but I was still being raised “Old Country.” I was a good girl. With every choice I made, I could feel my Grandma Isaacson, from the southern tip of Sweden, pinching at my shoulders, scolding, whispering “No” in my ears, and stepping back to look at me with steel-gray eyes. “Be a good girl, Lee Ann.” Friends ribbed me for trying to be “too perfect.” “Quit trying to be the social conscience of the county,” they said. “Live a little!” I was still trying to satisfy “the should's,” but, in Brazil, I was beginning to broaden the boundaries.

. . .

So, by their bodies and hygiene, it was easy to tell that few, if any, of the “drama boys” at Lilli’s hotel were Carioca. No stunning physiques in this group. Anemic, disheveled, and tense, they plucked at guitar strings, hummed tunes in several different languages, and muttered to one another. It appeared that they were an assortment of people from an assortment of different nations. After sharing a few English sentences with us, disinterested, they retreated to other rooms. I assumed that we represented an America they disdained—please-and-thank-you, “yes, ma’am, no, sir” conventional prissy missies. We weren’t used to being ignored, but we didn’t mind.

“They’re kind of creepy,” Karen said. Susan and I agreed.

. . .

On Thursday, Friday, and Saturday, we shopped and visited tourist sites, moving from one baroque architectural wonder to the next. One night, we returned to Calabouça for dinner and a chat with the bartender, followed by cracking open a couple of bottles of wine back at Lilli’s, and listening to the drama boys playing guitars and harmonicas until 5 am. Then, on Sunday morning, an hour after a gray-green dawn, we rolled out of bed, ready to see why Vera had said we must spend Easter in Ouro Prêto. Easter. Certainly a loaded word—charged with mystery and metaphor. We were ready to embrace another new experience. I opened the front door and, in an instant, I knew what she meant. Newly whitewashed cobblestones were covered in flower petals, and scrambling this way and that were dozens of tiny angels.

Block after block, we followed the angels, on streets so steep and ancient with loose brick that stepping was precarious. Founded in 1711—Ouro Prêto was called Vila Rica, Rich Village, back then—roads had been built for pedestrians and donkeys, not cars

and trucks. Now the roads were crumbling, and I tried to keep one eye on the angels and the other on the pavement.

“Lee, hurry up!” Susan laughed. “Take off those clodhoppers and go barefoot! Get a move on!”

I was wearing yellow clogs bought a couple of years ago in the Swedish village where one of my cousins lived. Each time the wooden soles clacked against the uneven stones, I was sure that my ankles would snap. Finally, I stepped out of the shoes and ran along between Susan and Karen in sock feet.

“Brasilia was so inhuman,” I whispered, “a little pretty in places, but so cold. Isolated. No personality. Ouro Prêto is a step away from heaven. It even has angels!”

The angels were real. Almost. All the little girls of the town—brown, black, white, and shades of coffee with cream—were dressed in white satin gowns, wings of goose feathers fastened to their tiny backs and tinsel haloes pinned into their hair. All the little boys, shepherd’s staffs in their fists, wore blue or beige, and their heads were bound in turbans wrapped tight over flapping colored fabric. In this shapeless parade, the children ran and skipped, and, then, for a few minutes, reined in by a parent or a tut-tutting nun, they walked sedately, eyes fixed ahead, solemn. But soon, like a scattering of birds, they were off again, whirling and twirling, preening and pecking.

During the night, priests and penitents on hands and knees had slopped water onto the streets and scoured them with scrub brushes and brooms. The cobblestones were painted white, then sawdust and flower petals—roses and carnations, mountain wildflowers—were carefully arranged into crosses and thorny crowns, candelabra, hands praying, symbols for alpha and omega. Some children, cautious, sidestepped the designs,

but others tore pell-mell through the petals, sending up a clutter of color—pink, green, crimson, and gold.

Hundreds of people lined the streets to watch the procession of angels and shepherds. On both sides of the street, porches spilled over with humanity—legs poked through black wrought-iron railings and arms wrapped around spindle rods patterned with filigree. Hanging from second- and third-story balconies—wide enough for only two or three people—townsfolk waved and whistled, sang out to the children, not in the Carioca Portuguese of Rio, but in the accent of the mountain inland. “Terezinha, fix your wings! They’re crooked, silly girl. Smile!” “Tonio, you have feathers in your hair! *Que abacaxi!*” Literally, “What a pineapple!” but slang for “What a prickly mess!”

The three of us joined the joggling throng, and the procession moved through town like a giant amorphous creature, shot through with flame flickers of candlelight and smoke smudges from incense burners swinging from the sleeved hands of white-robed priests. From cathedral to cathedral, we pushed forward, swaying with hymns sung a cappella, moving to what seemed almost a bossa nova beat.

For centuries, Lilli told us, the people of Ouro Preto had observed Easter this way. In fact, with processions of angels and shepherds, and millions of lighted candles, they celebrated a number of saint’s days, thanking God for their multitudes of good fortune. During the early days of the 1700s, men had unearthed gemstones and panned rivers for gold; they had bored the mountains for diamonds, tourmalines, aquamarines, topaz, and emeralds, and had raked them in by the ton. Beyond their wildest dreams, they became rich. Vila Rica. Rich Village. Thankful, they built thirteen cathedrals, magnificent baroque monstrosities, to honor God. Now, on holy days, their descendants, no longer

rich in most cases, kept the rituals, winding from church to church, singing praises, leaving lit candles everywhere, on steps, balustrades, and curbs.

Mid-morning, the procession wound its way to the doors of the thirteenth cathedral. The crowd dispersed, and Susan and Karen wandered off to take pictures. I sat alone on the steps of the church. Three tiny angels, their halos askew and their wings lopsided and drooping, came toward me and sat down, two on one side of me and one on the other.

“Hi, angels, is this your church?” I asked. “Are you friends?”

“Uh huh,” nodded one. “And we’re best friends and cousins.”

One little girl was black, one was white, and one was some exotic shade in between, but most likely they actually *were* cousins, a ménage of color. The black girl, the smallest, was like the beggar kids we had met in Bahia—her eyes, startling, were emerald green, and her curls were burnished with gold. She smiled shyly at me, snatched a feather from her wing and placed it behind my ear. Giggling they ran off to who knows where. They were only four- or five-years-old at most, but no mom or dad was anywhere near.

. . .

In Brazil, kids were often unattended. João, a boy we had befriended back in Rio—or I guess he had befriended us—had no parents. Maybe fourteen or fifteen—he didn’t know for sure—he told us he’d been on his own ever since he could remember. He lived on the streets, sleeping in entryways and stairwells. I kept trying to convince him to go to school, to learn to read and write—I even imagined some Horatio Alger success



story, our photos—my white face and his black one—in a full-color spread in *Manchete* or Brazilian *Time*. But he laughed at me and pulled a wad of money out of his pocket.

“I do okay, I do okay, better than okay,” he said, winking at me.

The kid was sharp as a tack. He had picked up English from American sailors and stood ready on the dock whenever navy ships came into port. I was sure he could cuss like a seaman, but not when he spoke to us. He was a gentleman, a gentle boy.

In the grimy pocket of his khaki shorts, he kept a spiral flip pad of schedules, names, and appointments, recorded in a cryptic scrawl of his own creation. For a fistful of American dollars, he could show swabbies “a real good time,” he told us. He knew lots of “good” girls, and he could mix a better-than-good *batida*, “the crash,” a drink made of fermented sugar cane juice that went down easy and hatched a headache that left homesick sailors blind as bats.

Once I gave him a handful of *cruzeiros* to buy me a stash—no doctors needed, we made our own diagnoses—of parasite pills, the pepto-bismol pink ones. But I never saw him again.

. . .

João was only one of thousands of Brazilian kids fending for themselves. Daily they pulled on our shirt sleeves with scabby hands, begging for coins or cigarettes. Some snatched billfolds and purses from tourists. Others swiped stuff from shops and ate garbage in alleys. I knew that some parents broke the bones of their children on purpose. Some purposely pushed dirt into the sores on their kids' faces, arms, and legs; they picked off the scabs and scraped the lesions with used razors or dirty forks until the wound was bloody and filled with pus. The uglier, the better. A maimed child could beg,

he could survive, he could support his family. Many families made a more-than-adequate living by begging. Certain streets and corners were even prime real estate, perfect for bumming money from strangers; these profit-rich sites were fought for, won and lost, bought and sold.

Life on the streets had its own law and order, and street children knew they wouldn't live much past seventeen or eighteen. They expected to be killed by gangs or by the Death Squad, off-duty cops who supplemented their legitimate income by trafficking drugs or pocketing cash for protection. I heard that sometimes cops killed kids who knew too much, and sometimes they killed kids because kids were the competition.

At school, our kids taunted each other, "Better do as I say, or I'll send the *Esquadrao da Morte* after you!" The seventh graders especially would group around my desk and yammer on and on about the Death Squad.

"Miss Lee, Miss Lee, you won't believe it, but it's true, I know this for sure. My cousin told me that his maid told him that the *Esquadrao da Morte* came to the *favela* last night. They took away the man—the skinny one with the ear that looks like a dog chewed on it—he's the man who shines shoes at Praça General Osorio. They took him to the mountain and tore off his clothes and tied him with ropes and taped his mouth and eyes shut. They cut off his fingers and his lips. They cut off his lips! They tortured him and tortured him until he died. They pinned a note to him—they pinned it right in his stomach—that said 'I sold marijuana'. And at the bottom of the note was a skull and crossbones and it was signed *E.M.* They brought the body back to the *favela* and put it where everybody gets their water. Everybody went to get water this morning, and there

was the shoe shine man without his lips and no fingers. Miss Lee, my cousin said it's really for true."

"And Miss Lee, my gardener told me that the *Esquadrao da Morte* has a PR man, and he's called *Rosa Vermelha*—that means Red Rose—because blood makes a flower like a rose around a bullet hole. Rosa Vermelha tells the newspaper where they can find the bodies of the people the Esquadro kills. A *presunto*—that's a ham—is a white man and a *chouriço*—a smoked sausage—is a black man. The *Esquadro* kills the bad people, but my daddy says the *Esquadro* is bad, too."

The Death Squad meted out punishment as they saw fit. Their targets were petty thieves—pickpockets, druggies, lifelong criminals with rap sheets of minor offenses a mile long. No judge, no trial, no jury. Get the riffraff off the streets and save the taxpayers some money. The public seemed to turn a blind eye.

. . .

The Easter parade disbanded, so Karen, Susan, and I wandered back to the inn.

"Are the drama boys sleeping through Easter?" I asked Lilli. "They missed all the excitement. The procession was amazing, just fantastic. Vera is right. Everyone should spend Easter here at least once in their life."

"They're gone," she said. "Maybe Julian is taking them to São Paulo. They're doing a production sometime, I think, of Jean Genet's *The Balcony*. They'll be gone for a couple of weeks, but they'll be back."

Something stirred in my head. "Who?" I asked.

"Julian Beck. The Living Theatre."

I nearly dropped my cup of coffee.

I felt as if I'd taken a fist to my belly. How had I missed that bit of information? Julian Beck and the Living Theatre. When I was in high school, I had learned—no, I had almost obsessed—about them. When we arrived, Lilli had said who they were—did I misunderstand her accent, was I zoned out, had I just paid no attention? I was nearly sick to my stomach.

. . .

Senior year, my English teacher Anne McCracken had introduced me to the Living Theatre. One day she brought an armload of plays into class—plays from the ancient Greeks, Shakespeare, centuries of plays, even contemporary plays from the theater of the absurd. Also, she dumped a stack of magazines from a grocery sack onto her desk and held up a copy of *The New Yorker*. “Go to the theater review section,” she said. “See what’s playing on Broadway, off-Broadway, and off-off Broadway. Read reviews, read plays, and write what you think. You’re on your own for awhile. Learn something.”

Among the plays I chose to read was *The Connection* by Jack Gelber, a young playwright, only twenty-seven years old. The play horrified me. Set in a New York apartment, a group of heroin addicts were waiting for their fix. The play worked its way into my skin, haunted me. In fact, *The Connection* might have been one of the most important reasons I steered clear of drugs. It left me repulsed, terrified, and nauseated.

The first performance of the play was on July 15, 1959. By the Living Theatre. Under the tutelage of charismatic Julian Beck. To learn that Julian Beck, he himself, and some of the people who slept in the rooms across the hall from me at Lilli’s may have

been the actors in the play made me reel. How could I have been so completely dismissive of them? Immediately, I hounded Lilli with questions.

I knew that Beck was drawn to *The Connection* because Gelber developed his characters with no regard to race. This indifference to color was revolutionary. *The Connection* was probably the first American play ever in which color was incidental. I knew that the Living Theatre, besides being committed to racial equality, was also committed to bringing theatre—and their political agenda—to the people. Not just to the sophisticated, educated upper class, but to everyone. They had come to Brazil, said Lilli, to unshackle the thousands of people dwelling in the slums of Rio, São Paulo, and Minas Gerais. They would make the *favelados* into not just their audience, but into their stars. And into activists who would break down class barriers.

I was devastated that I had made such inaccurate assumptions about the drama boys, devastated that I had missed the opportunity to talk to people I had read, researched, and written about. I was heartsick.

. . .

Shortly before noon, still feeling remorseful, still mad at myself for thinking that the Living Theatre actors were just a bunch of no-name no-accounts, Lilli, Karen, and I set off for our meeting with Elizabeth Bishop. We walked down steep sidewalks, edged by walls of piled stones covered in tangles of vines, to the house of “Dona Elisabetchy,” Rua Quintiliana 546. We stopped at the door, a huge wooden door—easily nine-feet tall—that looked as if it had come from a church or a castle. Painted bright yellow, it was set in a frame painted blue. Nailed high on the wall was an oval sign, white enamel on metal, with blue lettering spelling “Casa Mariana.”

We didn't knock; Lilli just opened the door, and we followed her in. She led us into a room that looked out over the lush green hills and down upon the valleys strewn with red-tiled roofs. Then she said goodbye and left. Karen didn't say a word, but I could tell that she felt as strange as I felt. What were we supposed to do? Where was Elizabeth?

The room was airy and white, very bright, like the rooms I had stayed in when I spent a week in Switzerland with Evalina, an *au pair* Diane and I had met when we lived in London. We stayed in Evalina's Swiss chalet high in the Alps, and I had never forgotten the beds—blond wood hand rubbed to feel smooth as silk. White down comforters like clouds. And an immaculate hand-scrubbed pig that lived under the house and served as the garbage disposal. Even the view from Casa Mariana was, in a way, Swiss-like—mountainous and steep. Boulders broke through green meadows, and an occasional diffusion of mist hung in the trees. The view from the house was magnificent, but, alone in the room, we were uncomfortable.

"So much glass...so many windows...so much light," Karen whispered, "I love the arched doors and windows. And the plank floors. But where is Miss Bishop?"

The minutes ticked by. We waited. Something about the room required us to be quiet. We sat, becoming more and more on edge. A part of me wanted to bolt, to get the heck out of there, but, after the Living Theatre fiasco, I didn't want to miss a thing.

"This is just a little too weird. Should we leave? Do you think Vera forgot to tell her we were coming?"

"Let's give it a little more time. You're still kicking yourself for missing Julian Beck, you said you really want to meet Elizabeth Bishop, and I don't want to hear you complaining for a week that you missed her, too."

We checked and rechecked Karen's watch. We waited for over half an hour. Rooted to our chairs, there was nothing to do but try to be patient.

The furniture was eclectic—small tables with fussy turned-wood legs placed next to rustic tables made from split-open tree trunks. Books were stacked here and there, a few trinkets, some framed drawings and primitive watercolors on the walls. A rocking chair. There was a black wood-burning stove, and, through an open door, we could see a cabinet painted with colors like cinnabar and mustard.

On the ceiling were exposed rafters. And hanging from them were several wooden marionettes—their heads flopped to the side as if their necks were broken. The windows were uncurtained, and the shutters were wide open. A breeze touched the strings of the puppets, and they knocked together, but they never once tangled. Their painted eyes seemed to loll in the sockets, and their wet-like red mouths, carnival creepy, gaped in hysterical smiles. One wore a blue suit and a couple of others wore blue dresses; colored ribbons curled from their wrists and ankles. Like Bishop's poem about the fish, I imagined the marionettes with their ribbons and the fish with its strings swirling "until everything/was rainbow, rainbow, rainbow!"

The ceiling itself was unusual—white and textured. Woven like the uneven weft and warp of a hand-made basket. If counting holes in ceiling tiles helped pass time in a doctor's office, maybe following the wood strips in Elizabeth's ceiling could do the same. In and out, in and out, I followed the narrow strips of wood from the east wall to west, and back again.

Then, just as we were about to give up and leave, she arrived—above us on the landing, a staggering shape of blue velvet dressing gown and electric hair. Her eyes were

haunted, startled from sleep. Karen and I held our breath, speechless. Elizabeth looked frightened. And, to us, *she* was frightening. She shook her head awake, listed toward the wall, and turned back into the room from which she'd come. For a split second, I felt caught in a still life. Blue marionettes. Blue Elizabeth. Out the paned windows, blue sky. Somewhere in the room, a bowl of tangerines against a white wall. A composition in blue with orange. An unsettling tension.

The door closed, and we heard the lock turn. Karen and I didn't know what to do. We sat, afraid to speak, crossing and uncrossing our knees, fidgeting with our hands, afraid to stay, afraid to leave. Some time later—it seemed like forever—Elizabeth reappeared. Her gray hair was tamped down and pushed back, and, when she descended the stairs, she touched the railing only lightly. She looked calmed, but suspicious. Maybe a little embarrassed. The wild-eyed deer-in-the-headlights woman, however, had disappeared, replaced by someone a bit severe, someone contained, with little warmth.

She was short, dressed in gray pants. That the winner of the 1970 National Book Award and the 1956 Pulitzer Prize was wearing pants—on Easter Sunday yet—made an impression on me. The wearing of pants was still a controversial issue at the American School. And in other places as well. It had been only three years since women were allowed to wear pants on campus at the University of Washington without causing a stir.

Elizabeth pulled a chair over and sat facing us, but she was not really looking at us. Without saying a word, she fidgeted with a box of cigarettes and a box of matches, placing the matches on top of the cigarettes, then removing them and holding them. Her hands were shaking. Finally, she pulled a cigarette from the box, put it in her mouth, lit it,



and set both boxes next to a ceramic ashtray on the coffee table, close to the bowl of tangerines.

I didn't know what to do or what to say. I kept hoping Karen would speak, but she said nothing. Should we address her as Elizabeth or as Miss Bishop, I wondered. Finally, somewhat awkwardly, I made reference to Vera and to Lilli and then introduced Karen and myself to her. She nodded, but made no comment, offering no indication that she had any idea why we were in her house. Next, quickly running out of insignificant small talk and fumbling for a topic, I asked about the enamel plaque by the door. Had she named the house, or had it been named Casa Mariana by previous owners?

At last, with hardly any inflection at all, she spoke. "I named the house," she said, "for two reasons. First, I named the house to honor Marianne Moore, my mentor. I owe so much to Marianne. Had it not been for her, I might have become a doctor instead of a poet. Marianne taught me to observe. Observation is the key. She and Gerard Manley Hopkins, the priest poet—you know him, don't you?—are the finest observers ever."

Yes, I nodded, I had read Hopkins; I knew about sprung rhythm. But what I was really thinking about was her bedside manner—she wasn't at all someone I would have termed as "comforting."

"It was Marianne who convinced me that I could write. And second, I named the house for Mariana, the town."

The day before, we had followed Lilli's advice and traveled twelve kilometers to Mariana to see the reenactment of the crucifixion. We had watched a real-life Christ, nearly naked and bleeding, drag his hand-hewn crucifix to the town square, uphill and down. He was followed by a crowd of costumed in-character actors; some taunted and

jeered at him while others moaned and cried. Wherever in Mariana the three of us went, we smelled sage, lavender, and violets, but we saw no herbs, no tiny purple flowers. We had no idea why the town smelled like plants, but the scent was wonderful.

At dawn today, Christ's stand-in would have been tied to the crossbeam and left to hang for hours as the townsfolk carried out the crucifixion. Not in Mariana, but in other towns and villages, we were told, the man chosen to be Christ was actually nailed to the cross.

Because it was becoming more and more apparent that Elizabeth was not going to lead the conversation, I asked her a few more questions. She answered dutifully, smoke curling out of her nostrils and her mouth. All of my fantasies about her were going up in smoke, too. My meeting with her was nothing like what I had imagined. She wasn't interested in me or my poems or much of anything else. Trying so hard to make conversation with her was painful, and I could feel a headache coming on, but I kept trying.

When I asked her about the history of Ouro Prêto, she told us that following Tiradentes' death, his house was leveled, and that Portuguese officials poured salt over the ground, making the land barren, symbolizing the end of the da Silva Xavier name. At one point, she said that she thought Belo Horizonte was the ugliest city in the world, and, when we told her that the men in the bus station had said that Ouro Prêto was just a suburb of B H, she smiled and shook her head. "Oh, Brazilians!" She mentioned that her doorbell had been smashed four times and that cats had made a dump of her garden.

But then I asked her about the unusual ceilings of the house, and she seemed to perk up. "An old man, an ancient old man," she said, "sat on the floor for weeks and

weeks and wove the ceilings out of fine split bamboo. Then we painted them white. My ceilings are exactly like those you would have seen here in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Actually... maybe you'd be interested...yes, there is something else you might like to see."

Karen and I followed her, wondering what she intended to show us. The house was large, five bedrooms, with several stories—I don't know how many—clamped to the mountainside, with balconies overlooking pockets of buildings and deep valleys. As we followed her down a hallway, I peeked into other rooms, noticing paintings and books, and the same eclectic combination of furniture we'd seen in the room where we had started. I saw that she kept her dishes and glasses in an old pharmacy cabinet, and antique lamps were scattered throughout the house. She said that before she took over the house, cats, ducks, and chickens had free run of the place.

"The old man who lived here before me—he was out of his mind—kept burros in the basement. You can imagine the horrible mess."

I laughed, remembering Evalina's pig. "My Swiss friend kept a giant white pig under her house, but it was as clean as a baby. They scooped its poop before hit it the ground," I told her. She laughed a little, then choked on smoke and had a coughing fit.

As we walked, she mentioned some of the renovations that had been made to the house and grumbled about the lack of good help. "You can't believe how difficult it is to find dependable people here. Brazilians are like children. They don't show up when they say they're going to—tomorrow means a month—they steal me blind, they... I think I've had six plumbers, and none of them know what they're doing. What should take an hour takes a week. It's enough to drive a person... I really want to sell this house."

I was uncomfortable hearing her tirade, wishing that she'd stop complaining. Brazilians charmed and delighted me, and, in my fantasy, I wanted her to love them, too. I didn't want her to be one of those Americans—like so many of the Americans I'd met at the embassy—who, disrespectfully, called Brazilians "Brazis" and thought they were ignorant, lesser human beings than Americans.

In what seemed to be a sitting room, she stopped and nodded for us to come closer. She pointed to a wall and smiled; her eyes, for the first time, seemed alive. Screwed to the wall, maybe 10" by 12", was a glass plate. "For centuries, this house has been added onto and added onto," she said. "This is one of the oldest walls of the original house. Look in."

Behind the glass were layers and layers of boards and panels, posts, and paint. I could see thick heavy beams attached to one another by leather thongs. It was a maze of straw, stucco, cording, and wood. Now, standing in front of the wall, Elizabeth seemed to be growing. No longer slumped with her head cast down, she was turning professorial, in charge and capable. In minute detail, like a college lecturer, she pointed out to us every individual bit of building material and explained in depth its composition and function.

"In this wall are well over two hundred years of stories. There must be so many secrets and dreams, the proverbial 'if only these walls could talk.' During renovations, I couldn't possibly cover them up. I find it absolutely fascinating to imagine everything that has gone on in this house. Look at all the methods of getting this house built and rebuilt. Some of the walls are actually more than a yard thick. The strips of rawhide you see way in the back could be from the early 1700s—no one has used that method around here since then. So much mud and wattle. I have to wonder what will be next after my

plastering and my paint. This wall stands for something, and I never tire of looking into it... Did you notice the roof of the house when you came up to the house?" she asked.

We hadn't, but we promised her that we would when we left.

"I call it my 'lobster' roof. Or sometimes it's a dragon roof or an iguana roof. Over the kitchen, it has a curly tail. Such a beautiful red roof. Come out and see it?"

I began to realize that although Elizabeth had terrified me at first, I was beginning to feel a little more comfortable with her—and her with me. It even seemed that I was getting some of what I'd hoped for—she was teaching me something about how to look and how to see, serving up a treatise on the power of detail. To really see, I told myself, I must look up, down, around, and especially *in*. I must go deep beneath the surface to know things, and there is so much to observe and so much to discover.

"I would like you to see something else, if you have time," Elizabeth said. "And I can point out some of the local attractions as we go."

We stepped out onto the street, and I saw that from some vantage point inside or outside of Casa Mariana, at least seven of the thirteen cathedrals of Ouro Prêto were visible. Elizabeth pointed to the churches and named each one. Many of the churches, she told us, housed statuary and stonework created by Aleijadinho, the Little Cripple.

We knew the story from Fodor and other travel books, but I wanted to hear it again, in her words. During the time of Tiradentes and the eighteenth-century conspiracy, she said, Aleijadinho, Antonio Francisco Lisboa, sculpted religious forms from the soapstone found in the area. "Such lovely stone. Green and gray, flecked with darks and lights." Born in 1730 to a respected Portuguese architect and a black slave named Izabel

in Vila Rica, Aleijadinho, by age fourteen, was already something of a master carver of wood and stone.

“There is a saying here that for him ‘wood held no secrets.’”

Sadly, he contracted a disease—most say leprosy—that ate away his toes and his hands. He couldn’t walk, so he was carried on a pallet to the sculpting grounds by his disciples Agostinho, Januario, and Maurício and several slaves.

“He sculpted only at night. He had become so hideous looking that he didn’t want anyone to see him. Some say that even when he went out at night, he wore a sack over his head. He made his sculptures with a chisel and a mallet that were strapped to the stumps at the end of his arms with leather thongs.”

At nearby Congonhas do Campos, without hands and feet, he carved sixty-six life-sized cedar figures to represent the Stations of the Cross and twelve soapstone prophets.

“The sculptures are crude,” she said, “but very powerful, very dramatic against the white church with bright blue doors and against the green hills. As much as the people of Ouro Preto and of all Brazil love him, I can’t possibly put much stock in the stories about him as being true. How could anyone, especially a cripple, complete as many sculptures as the Brazilians swear he has made? To me, it seems highly improbable.”

Elizabeth led us some distance, and I felt as if we were going in circles. We moved back and forth into the shade of pastel-colored shops alongside white-walled residences then out again into the sunlight. It seemed somehow as if we were close to Lilli’s. She spoke of the buildings and of the people who lived in them—one whose rosy-

faced child she adored, another who was her favorite taxi driver, someone who grew remarkable pole beans. Eventually we found ourselves on a steep switchback parallel to, but I think, above Casa Mariana.

“Here it is,” she said. Before us was a boulder, damp and lichen-covered. Split down the middle was a narrow fissure, and up, out of the crack, twined a frail spindle of leaf and blossom.

“Marvelous, isn’t it?” she said. “That a flower can grow right out of rock is certainly a miracle. A metaphor for living.”

We stood for a few minutes without speaking. Another lesson *ala Dona* Elisabetchy, I thought.

Just a few steps away, Elizabeth led us through a gate beneath a massive crossbeam overhung with vines. The area, about thirty feet long, was enclosed by a stonewall nearly a yard wide, and the piled stones were overhung with drooping mosses, rock-climbing orchids, and what looked like liverwort. Ferns sent out thick curling fronds, fruit trees—peach, guava, and apple—grew in no particular pattern, and a couple of the tallest avocado trees I’d ever seen soared over us. A small shallow brook wound through the garden, and the lanky stems of bright flowers tumbled onto heaved-up stepping stones. Masses of unpruned laurel and quince pushed against the stone wall, and in one corner, herbs had gone to seed, tangling with overgrown sprawling weeds.

“The secret garden. Come in.”

April. This was an autumnal garden. Some plants were still full and lush, flowering profusely; others had wilted or were already dead. I didn’t know the names of much of anything, but I saw plants that looked like yarrow and catnip, and some like

phlox, columbine, and coral bells. It was a chaotic paradise of neglect and disorder, yet it was wild and wonderful. It reminded me of home, of my mother's garden. For this secret place, Elizabeth, thank you, I thought to myself.

We spent several minutes in the garden. She told us to make a bouquet. As we picked, she turned over an upside down bucket and uncovered a few lengths of string and some newspapers. We wrapped our flowers, and then it was time to leave.

"If you hear of anyone who wants to buy the house, let me know... I'd really like to sell it," Elizabeth said, shaking our hands. "I wish you a safe journey home."

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I waved good bye, unaware that the journey to understand Brazil's effect on me was just beginning.

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## AFTERWORD

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**Thursday, July 26, 2007 ... home ... Brocton, Illinois**

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*What goes around comes around...*

It has been three months to the day since my mom died. Thankfully, my husband JR, our daughter Jaime, and I were able to get to her in Seattle before she passed away. I can still see us there—the three of us and my brother and my sister—by mom’s side, her hand, cool and thin, in Jaime’s hand, as if no time has gone by.

Together, we watch the video made—just a short month ago—of our son Marcus, the prince of random acts of kindness, marrying beautiful Erin high on a mountaintop over Berkeley, California. We hold photographs close to her, so she can see her great grandchildren—three-year-old Megan and the eight-month-old twins, Jack and Andy. Andy... who was named for my dad, her husband. The babies are tucked smiling in the arms of Jaime and her husband Jim. Meg mugs for the camera with the squinty eyes and fake stretch-lip grin that three-year-olds make when they’re told to smile. All three little ones are blue-eyed—neither of their parents have blue eyes, but my mom does, and I do. Their hair is reddish-gold, and the boys are almost carbon copies of each other, and, of their sister when she was that age.

We tell mom about the most recent movies that have been shot on the street in front of the apartment in Los Angeles where our daughter Ann and her boyfriend Klutch

live, laughing because super-stars Robin Williams and Mandy Moore have been sitting on the street-side window sill of their living room for week, talking on cell phones, waiting for cues, and I say that a coffee table book of the backsides of movie stars could be a best seller. We tell her how much Ann loves her job in the Research Institute at the Getty, and how excited we are about the next gallery showing of Klutch's sculptures and drawings from his satellite series. Mom was an artist, and, even as weak as she is, she smiles.

I wish I could tell her that two days ago, Ann and Klutch were married.

. . .

Mom's passing, coming so close to the deadline for finishing my Brazil stories, left me feeling sorrowful and troubled. Mourning her, I didn't know how, or if, I could complete the memoir on time. But, after giving myself what mom would have called "a good talking to," I made the decision to try. Struggling to edit what I had already written and trying to write the final pages, my insides crawled with anxiety and with thoughts either so blocked that they wouldn't come clear, or, so nagging that they refused to disappear. But, Tuesday night, July 24<sup>th</sup>, I was at Jaime's house, rocking Andy to sleep, when I was hit suddenly with the overwhelming compulsion to find mom's journal and read it, page by page. I handed the baby to his mother and drove home.

Yes, I said I had read her journal before—I even wrote in the preface how important it was to us all. But I hadn't told the whole truth. I had read only parts of it, certain sections that I thought I could read without falling apart; I had put the rest away to read later when I was stronger, more used to her being gone. Tuesday night, I read every

word on every page, crying uncontrollably, thankful that I was alone, that my husband was away, that the phone didn't ring, that the room was dark.

The journal is written in her own hand. Words are crossed out, and, sometimes, she has put down three or four spellings for the same word, with a question mark asking "spelling?" She has written side notes in the margins, and, when I read them, it's as if she's alive on the page, stepping in—sometimes laughing, sometimes serious—to comment on her descriptions and her recollections.

The journal begins, "What goes around comes around. I promised Jaime this Christmas year of 2001 that I would jot down a few unimportant small episodes of my early years of life that loom in my mind. Some events are still painful to recall and they still lodge deep anxiety in the night until reasoning brings the light of day." On the first page, she writes to us, "It's fair to say that being of pure Swedish heritage is an important reason to pray for the sun—with periods of pain, feelings of depression—pure joy comes when the day brings sun."

In March 1970, she came to Rio for the sun—and, also, of course, for me. She gloried in the sun, closing her eyes, putting her face to it. There weren't enough hours in the day or night for me to share everything I loved about Brazil with her, but we bought a watermelon and cracked it open on the street, eating it with our fingers, letting juice run down to our elbows. We went to *On the Rocks*, but, she said she couldn't eat because she had only enough room for the view. We went to the *feira* where she bought armloads of flowers; she couldn't get enough of them. In Washington, flowers were a short summer affair, but, in Rio, there were flowers every day of the year, and, she tried, in a week, to

bring a year's worth into my apartment. We were without vases, so she put them in jars and teacups and coffee pots.

Watching her pull off leaves, measure stems, and shape the bouquets, I missed my home in Anacortes where her gardens were a wild profusion of abundance, masses of color spilling from hanging baskets, huge planters, and the earth itself. I marveled that she was not only an artist with paint, but also an artist with nature.

Mom raised the flowers, and dad grew the vegetables. Green and purple striped beans grew jungle-thick, overgrowing their poles; artichokes, glaucous green and silvery, presented their stickery globes like gifts; and corn grew as tall as the apple tree leaning into the rows. No one was ever prouder of a tomato or a carrot than my dad.

Before she came to Brazil, except for our boat trips every summer to the Canadian San Juans, mom had never left the States. Her week in Rio lifted her to a new realization of what she wanted, where she wanted to be, and what she needed to see. After Rio, she and my dad traveled to Europe time after time—trips to Sweden to visit the relatives, trips to Italy to see where dad had been wounded in the war by a hand grenade, the only survivor of his unit. Finland and Russia. They went to China and Japan and spent winters in Maui or Mexico, so mom could have her sun. They drove to Alaska and Nova Scotia and Cabo San Lucas, taking back roads and “long-cuts,” in the blue Volkswagen bus.

After a trip, she would thank me, saying it was because of my travels to England to study and to Brazil to teach that she gave herself permission to leave her kitchen and her backyard garden to make the world her home. She told me that she named me right; I was named for her uncle Leo who, at age eight, ran away from Sweden to become a cabin

boy on a ship that sailed the globe. That she made the world her home is, I think, the finest legacy she could bestow on all of us who follow her.

When I boarded the plane to Rio in July 1969, Brazil was just a glossy full-color travel poster in my mind. A montage of beaches, bikinis, cable cars to Sugar Loaf, and the statue of Christ the Redeemer looking over the city. In the foreground, a dark-skinned beauty, a hibiscus in her hair, tipping her head to the camera...in the background, a heartthrob of a boy smiling with the most gorgeous white teeth ever.

By the time I boarded the plane in Rio to return to Seattle in July 1971, Brazil was my home, the place where I grew up. The experience that was Brazil was a gift, a surprise package from someone or something unknown, bestowed freely, nothing required in return, no strings attached. In Brazil, each day, hour, minute, and second was among the finest presents I had ever received and ever would receive.

But, it was a gift that had its share of problems and pleasure. I could identify, uncomfortably and compassionately, with mom's early references in her journal to our Swedish proclivity to feel deep, penetrating pain, as well as intense joy. As I turned through the pages, carefully reading, one story caused me stop. I had to shut my eyes, think back, and remember that I had heard it years ago. After a few minutes, I read it through, from start to finish. At the last phrase, "I hope I have forgiven myself," I felt such sympathy, so much tenderness and sorrow, that, in some unexplainable way, I claimed it as my story, too.

When she had told me the story a long time ago, I was little, and she had spoken slowly, cupping my chin in her hands, lifting my face so that we could look at each other eye to eye. It happened when she was in junior high in Salt Lake City; for her, it was a

new school in a new neighborhood. In the journal, she wrote, "The girls in my class were children of politicians and wealth and very much a part of the Mormon hierarchy."

Mom wanted to be like them; she wanted beautiful blond or brunette hair, but she had flyaway red hair and freckles that she hated. An old lady had told her, "If you rise before first light and bathe your face in the morning dew, the freckles will disappear." But they didn't. She had skipped two grades, so she was two years younger than her classmates. Around these girls who were already beginning to look like women, she felt awkward and scared. She longed to fit in, but always, she was on the outside looking in—she wasn't a Mormon.

For Christmas, more than anything, she wanted a Mickey Mouse watch with a leather band. Her mother, widowed, was always struggling to keep the two of them and her own mother housed, fed, and clothed; a house had been lost once because she couldn't make the payments. But, she saved and saved until she could buy the watch.

On the first day back from Christmas break, the girls gathered in the hallway, excited to tell about their gifts—new outfits, new jewelry, new books, and diaries with locks. Every girl, in earnest, tried to outdo the others. Each of them had a new watch, and one by one, they pulled back the sleeves of their blouses and turned their wrists like ballerinas. Their watches were gold, delicate, dainty, some with diamonds, the kind of watch a grown-up lady would wear.

"I felt such shame. No young lady of any prestige would ever wear an ugly Mickey Mouse watch," mom wrote. She unfastened the watch and slipped it into the pocket of her coat. After school, she hid it in her dresser drawer.

When she had told me the story a long time ago, tears welled up in her eyes. Reading it, tears came to mine. "I was ashamed of the watch. But that shame turned into a much, much deeper shame," she had said. In her journal, she wrote, "I had become selfish. I had not accepted a gift that had so much love contained in it. My mother would have forgiven me, and after all these years, I hope that I have forgiven myself."

There were times in Brazil that I felt like my mother must have felt—a little girl embarrassed by an ugly watch. Like her, sometimes I was out of step, not as someone marching to a different drum, but as someone isolated, not tuned into the interlocking, symbiotic connections we share with others. Everyone else seemed older and wiser, more sophisticated. When I was twenty-one, I was sure that Karen and Ellen, who were five- and six-years older than I, had all the answers. I assumed that someone thirty or forty, and surely by fifty, knew what was what.

At twenty-something, I had not yet gained my mother's kind of maturity to fully understand bone-deep the profound and penetrating regret she felt about hiding her watch. By failing to wear it proudly as a symbol of her mother's enduring love for her, she suffered. By failing to wear it fearlessly as a symbol of her own individuality, she felt diminished. By neglecting to tell her mother of her deception, she was overcome with guilt. Now, I understand. But then, young and naïve, uncertain, I was not yet aware of the deep shame that permeates us when we fail to acknowledge the connection that we all share as humans and when we fail to stand up for what is right, and true, and good.

My parents raised me to embrace important issues, but sometimes—because of my selfishness, my immaturity, or my self-centeredness—their lessons were lost, hidden away like an ugly watch.

For years, mom and dad belonged to the local Elks Club. On Saturday nights, they would dress up and go for drinks and dinner. I remember one Halloween night when they, and twenty or so of their friends, went to a party at the club. For weeks, mom and the other wives met in our dining room with their sewing machines, needles, and thread. They sewed identical black-and-white-with-red-bills penguin suits for everyone in their group.

On Halloween, we kids, collected at our house with a babysitter, laughed until we nearly peed our pants, watching the flock of penguins waddle out the door and into their cars to head downtown to the club. When they returned hours later, mom said that it was the weirdest experience ever. No one could figure out who was who—husbands couldn't find wives, and wives couldn't find husbands. Only when they spoke did they find their spouse.

On a Saturday night in the late winter, mom and dad returned home and announced, "We quit the Elks Club." They said the club was going to hold a hoop shoot, but that African-American boys would not be allowed to compete. There were no black people in our town, but there were blacks in Seattle and Spokane, and mom and dad were adamant that those boys should be able to shoot free throws alongside the white boys. Of course, no one in the 50s, not even my own mom and dad, seemed to have noticed that the other girls in our neighborhood and I dribbled and passed and shot baskets for hours on the blacktop behind our garage.

In Rio, one afternoon, a group of us went from school to have a late lunch at the Copacabana Palace Hotel, the most famed of all Rio hotels. A young black man was with us, down from the States for an internship. He was told to enter the hotel from the



servant's entrance; it didn't occur to the doorman that a black man would be in our company. We simply explained the situation, laughed it off, and enjoyed our lunch. It didn't register until afterwards when red-hot shame surged into my body and flooded through me that I realized how wrong I was to have eaten there. I was stung that I could lambaste South African racists, and, then, turn right around and fail to defend the dignity of this good man. But, I never apologized to him.

Although we were developing an awareness of the civil rights of African-Americans in the 50s and 60s, the issue of sexual orientation was another matter entirely. Some of mom's artist friends were gay, but their homosexuality was hush-hush, never discussed openly. If anyone had asked if there were gays in my high school, or even in the community, the answer would have been a resounding, "Of course not, absolutely not!" Consequently, it was not so peculiar that with Vera and her friends, I spent more time worrying about what others might think than attending to what those brilliant women were saying and what valuable life lessons they could impart. Would so-and-so think *I* was a lesbian? Could I get fired from the school because I knew lesbians? A late bloomer when it came to any kind of adult relationship, I knew very little of sex and love, and, the sexual liberation of Vera and her friends terrified me.

When I met Elizabeth Bishop, as silly as it seems, I was still of the mind that somebody as old as she—ironically the same age as I am now—should have her life together. I could only quantify our meeting by how *I* felt—awkward, inept, and plain. That she was unresponsive and distant, I could only interpret as my fault. The world, at that time, revolved around me. That I didn't recognize her as a lesbian was most likely the result of my own refusal to believe it. In my self-centeredness, I didn't allow her to be

who she really was; certainly, all the signs were there. Similarly, I was dismissive of her alcoholism. To envision her as a mean staggering drunk was not in my lexicon of who I wanted and needed her to be.

In addition, there was no way for me to comprehend the mess that was her life—I had no previous experience, beyond movies and books, to draw on, no means of plumbing my soul to fish out empathic recognition of her situation. The enormity of despair that Elizabeth must have felt after her lover, Lota de Macedo Soares, killed herself in Elizabeth's New York apartment was an emotion I couldn't touch. The guilt that Elizabeth must have felt because her friends blamed her for Lota's death—she had carried on affairs outside her relationship with Lota, she kept secrets from Lota, and, for years, despite Lota's constant pleas that she stop, she drank and drank until she was falling-down drunk—was nothing I could register.

Looking back, I see that the only order in Elizabeth's life may have come from her poetry. A master of form, she found perfect words and fit them into the line perfectly. She forged the depths of things intellectual, moral, and emotional, and submerged her themes back into the deep, relying on us, her readers, to raise them up and discover their treasures on our own. There is solace in knowing that I can return to her poems any time that I want, and, that there is much more to her as a person than was apparent when I spent the afternoon with her. Although our meeting, at the time, was troublesome and disappointing, it became an opportunity to look outside myself and my own needs, and, to develop and nurture much more than a scrap and a whit of compassion.

So, the pain and the regrets pile up. I wasn't brave enough at *On the Rocks* to tell the maitre'd the truth, that we had no money. The day in the *favela* with Maria Elena and

her family and friends was one of the best days of my life, but I never went back. I never knew what happened to her. I wrote in my letters that I loved her children, but I never wrote down their names. I dismissed the Living Theatre troupe because they “didn’t look right.”

I could list failing after failing, each with its own sorrow and its own hurt. But, with age comes maturity, and I can forgive myself for being twenty-something. My mom and her watch will always remind me that we must grow into understanding with every day that we live; we—most of us, anyway—aren’t born wise. My life to age twenty-one was nearly hazard-free—safe and protected. My life since, in Brazil particularly, has been a collection plate of experiences that run the gamut of emotional flotsam and jetsam. These life lessons—both the bad and the good—I offer up in exuberant celebration.

I am grateful that the joyous memories of Brazil prodigiously out shadow those that were painful. The joyous memories—*On the Rocks*, Maria Elena, New Year’s Eve, Easter in Ouro Preto—have sustained me, enriched me, and empowered me. And, wonderfully, there are hundreds more memories, remembered, but, as yet, unwritten. The appreciation—the reverence—I feel for the country and its people is without limit.

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So, why did I leave?

In 1971, the school relocated from Leblon to Gavea; the relocation was a major reason that I left Rio. The old school was just that—*old*—nondescript, blending in with its surroundings. We had cockroaches and mice, peeling paint, and creaky stairs. Nothing gave it away as “we’re-better-than-everyone-else-in-the-world” American. No big signs. No red, white, and blue flag. Nothing ostentatious.

In contrast, the new school was a showplace—seven hexagonal silo-like structures—two elementary buildings, a library, an auditorium, a high school, a gymnasium, and a cafeteria. Howard B. Marvin Field, carefully groomed for sports and games. Beautifully manicured grounds, landscaped with new shrubs and nursery trees that, in time, would grow tall and thick.

But the school was built on a mountainside just below Rocinha, a *favela* swarming with 34,000 people. The stream in which the *favelados* washed their clothes was drawn into the blueprint by the American architect firm, and, with a bit of rerouting and some damming, it would be a “delightful water feature.”

I couldn't bear thinking that a young mother with mouths to feed would soap and pound diapers just yards away from limousines delivering our students to their classes. *Favelados* would see our kids wearing expensive labels—pricey watches on their wrists—slinging tennis rackets over their shoulders or dumping lunch trays of food into the trash because they didn't like spinach. At the new school, the “haves” and the “have-nots” would be side by side, in full-living color, five days a week, morning, noon, and night. I couldn't stomach that.

. . .

I came home to America, but I have kept Brazil, my home away from home—  
Brasil with an *s*—cradled in my heart.

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