

DOWN IN THE GHETTO

by

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April, 2013

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“Down In The Ghetto” is an account of my time living in the largest favela/slum in Brazil, written to fulfill the requirements of the M.A. in English with a concentration in creative nonfiction. I spent three months in 2002/2003 living in Rocinha, a favela skirting the edge of Rio de Janeiro. This piece is written as a memoir, brutally honest and rich in both character and scene. My goal with this piece is simply to entertain the reader. I did, however, toss in some statistics and background information on the formation of favelas in Brazil. Ultimately, though, it is a love story. It’s the story of me, faults and all, getting caught up in the drug-fueled life of the gang-ruled slum. I lost myself for a while only to come out on top in the game of love—taking the best souvenir Brazil had to offer (my wife) with me.

DOWN IN THE GHETTO

A Thesis

Presented To the Faculty of the Department of English

East Carolina University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

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Down in the Ghetto

“I just can’t get over how beautiful your hand looks with that gold band on it,” my mom said as people snapped pictures of us, the happy couple, on Mother’s Day, 2013. “You are the LAST person I ever thought would take the plunge.” She’d certainly been right to think that, as one series of one-night stands bled into another. Marriage had never entered my mind. As people drove from my parents’ house in Concord, N.C., down the street to Union St. Bistro for the reception, it still didn’t seem real. Did I really just say “I do?” Dancing at the reception, hearing English translated to Portuguese and vice versa, I felt I was having an out of body experience. I certainly never thought a trip to a Brazilian favela ten years earlier would point me in this direction. A trip to one of the most depraved and dangerous locales in the southern hemisphere got me here. A life lived on the outskirts of society, synonymous with peril – favela life – led me to the altar.

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Favelas, known as slums, ghettos, shantytowns, and squatter communities, formed at the tail end of the 19th century in Brazil. They developed out of necessity by displaced veteran soldiers who’d fought in the Canudos Campaign in the rugged northeastern province of Bahia. The province was split vertically by the mountain range Chapada Diamantina, and flanked on the east by the Atlantic Ocean. During the conflict, the government soldiers lived amongst the trees on Canudo’s Favela Hill. The hill got its name from the skin-irritating favela tree indigenous to Bahia. When the campaign finished, these soldiers made the thousand-mile march to Rio de Janeiro where they had been promised free housing in exchange for fighting. But the government was slow to get the infrastructure together, and thus was unprepared to handle the troop influx. These 20,000 returning veterans were left homeless. With nowhere to go, they took to doing

what they had done before – living on a hill. When they settled in Rio de Janeiro’s Providência hill, they nicknamed it *Favela hill*. A tree that irritated the skin became the name for a place that irritates the government to this day.

Rio de Janeiro was perfect for hillside settlements, as the Serra do Mar (mountainous coastal forests) run along the southeastern side of Brazil, through the heart of Rio. Established prior to the metropolis boom, these favelas grew to such an extent that the government perceived them as a problem for society. Imagine a large region, unmapped, uncontrolled, un-policed, running and functioning largely without government services.

Brazil’s housing crisis of the 1940s forced urban poor to erect hundreds of shantytowns in the suburbs, giving favelas a boost in size. In 1950, a national census defined for the first time what constitutes a favela. So long as there were at least fifty houses of substandard quality, no issued building permits, no inspections, no land ownership, no city services or zoning, then you had yourself a favela. For the first time, favelas could be measured. As of 1950 in Rio de Janeiro, there were fifty-eight favelas with 169,305 residents, or 7% of Rio’s total population.

A mass exodus of tribal groups in central Brazil during the 1960s led to a boom in favela populations. These groups, living in parts of the Amazon jungle and remote hillsides, had discovered that there was life outside of this primitive, by comparison, existence. It was when outsiders who spoke different languages encountered these tribes that a connection was made – there were urban areas and urban opportunities for them. In fact, some tribal groups had never even heard a different language spoken. Working on her doctorate and subsequent book about favela life, Janice Pearlman infiltrated these tribal areas. When she spoke English with them, they thought she was retarded. When she tried to tell them that where she came from, people spoke a different language, they responded by saying, “What do you mean? A dog go whoof

whoof. A cat go meow. And humans speak ... like we are speaking now.” Eventually a light bulb went off and they accepted that quite possibly, life may exist outside of the jungle. There was big city life. They just needed, somehow, to get there. So they sold any and everything they could get their hands on to pay for their trips to the big cities. Once there, with no money or contacts, they did the best they could and settled in areas that weren’t considered desirable. People of means wanted to be near the beach, not up in some hillside settlement without basic city services. These tribal groups built houses out of cardboard, sod and two-by-fours. Discarded building materials and what nature provided became the building blocks of their new lives.

Those who moved to Rio de Janeiro, however, chose an inopportune time. The change of Brazil's capital from Rio to Brasília in 1960 hurt the “marvelous city,” as industry and employment options dried up. Unable to find work, and therefore unable to afford housing within the city limits, these migrants remained in the favelas. Due to the lack of basic services, favelas became synonymous with extreme poverty and a headache for many citizens and politicians within Rio. During Carlos Lacerda's administration as governor from 1960-1965, many people were moved to public housing projects such as Cidade de Deus (City of God), popularized in a 2002 feature film of the same name. Poor public planning and insufficient investment by the government led to the disintegration of these projects into new favelas. And since favelas are built around the edge of the main city, they can grow with borderless abandon. They are, in effect, expanding the city. The government tried to eradicate them and only made the problem worse.

It sounds like our country, the good ole US of A’s war on drugs that really only managed to create a higher demand for them. By the 1980s, however, Brazil’s government worried less about favela eradication and more on the burgeoning drug trade and ensuing violence. There was

a period in the eighties when drug routes changed, making Rio a major transit point for cocaine destined for Europe. Although drugs brought in money, they also came, as a package deal, with small arms trade and gangs competing for dominance. Many of Rio's favelas are still ruled by drug traffickers or militias. A 2010 census report had the number of Rio favelas reaching 763, with nearly 1.4 million residents—22% of Rio's total population.

Since favelas have been created under different terms but with similar end results, the term *favela* has become interchangeable with any impoverished area. What was named for a pesky tree is now a synonym for poverty.

There is a sense that slum life is awful and dangerous and just ... bad. However, there are plenty of hardworking, honest people living in Rio de Janeiro favelas. The slums of Rio are infamous for powerful drug lords and brutal gang warfare, which I can attest is true. But not everyone who calls them home is a law breaker. A lot of folks make an honest living, going to work every day and supporting their families. For example, of Intercontinental Rio's 300-person hotel staff, 75% of them come from the favelas. People may live in favelas because they have roots there, it's cheap and they're poor, or simply because they desire a shorter commute. The one thing they have in common is their "*Bairrismo*," a sense of tremendous pride in their backgrounds and communities. For many people, living in a favela is a badge of honor and pride. Illustrating the vibrant favela spirit is the fact that all of Rio's samba schools, numbering more than one hundred, are located in the slums. Thousands of people flock to them not just to learn to dance, but also to feel a unique sense of belonging.

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Rocinha, Brazil's largest favela, sits in a Analey with mountains behind it and mountains in front. There's a small ocean view, sandwiched between two mountains, visible from most

Rocinha rooftops. The beaches and famed nightlife of Ipanema, Copacabana, and Leblon—Rio’s most affluent neighborhood—may as well be miles away. In this Analey, or bowl of poverty, sit thousands of concrete houses, storefronts, tangled utility lines and narrow alley ways. From above, it looks like some cancerous tumor festering on healthy tissue. A city within a city, Rocinha boasts nearly 200,000 residents. The actual number may be closer to 400,000, as reliable statistics are hard to find. Walled off geographically, its residents make the city of Rio run. Without them, the hotels, restaurants and resorts wouldn’t get cleaned. The city depends on them for cheap labor— cheap to the tune of about \$300 per month. Rocinha residents are the embarrassing lifeblood of the city.

It lays snugly in the mountain’s bosom, with splotches of lush greenery poking up between the apartment buildings. Most of Rocinha’s concrete buildings are the color of pottery. Some are white, stained gray by pollution. Several buildings are yellow, a couple either blue or green. Viewed from atop a nearby hill, it looks like someone took a panoramic picture, and then used the crunch option to shrink it back to normal. How did they pack that many buildings and that many people into such a tight space? To navigate the streets in an attempt to locate someone’s apartment at the top of the hill would seem silly even to try. The whole thing looks like an intertwined mess.

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Rocinha would have remained just some third-world spec in a search engine had I not lived in Vienna, Austria. I’d met a wild-haired Austrian alpha male named Matteo in southwest Florida. Anyone who slaps on flippers and dives headlong into the Gulf of Mexico when beachgoers think they see a shark, while wearing a Speedo, in my humble opinion, is an alpha male. Matteo had been in Florida getting his private pilot’s license. Turns out he trained at the same place the

terrorists used for the 9-11 attacks. I was there from 1998 to early 2001, working as the business editor for a bi-weekly newspaper called the *Venice Gondolier*. Matteo had regaled me with tales of Vienna, which piqued my interest to begin an overseas adventure. After saving some quick cash and quitting my job at the paper, I was off on my first trans-Atlantic adventure.

“Hi, Toddy, slowly southern states hillybilly,” he said as he picked me up at the train station in Vienna. “Is so great see you again.”

Matteo was my point man, setting me up with a place to live in Jordan-Baum, a Catholic student house in the 19th (there are 23) district of Vienna. The view from his Jaguar was spectacular, as he sped through the city. The old town of Vienna was filled with churches, massive structures with dual gray towers, covered in coal-like stains accumulated over centuries. The history and animal museums, both identically constructed with huge stone blocks, sat in a tree-lined courtyard. These buildings were a look back into time, a time of great architecture and artful pride. I was awestruck. There was nothing like this back in Concord, a town where many churches were located in prefabricated buildings and the idea of an “old town” was laughable. Even buildings in the historic district had not yet hit the century mark.

People from all over Europe and Africa lived in Jordan-Baum. It was a great opportunity to not be the Ugly American. My roommate was a Nigerian named Okeke Cosmas, who spoke Igboh (his tribal language), Pigeon English, English and German. I grew up with a father who tossed the words *nigger* and *stupid* around, as in “that stupid nigger.” So for me to meet and see what an amazing young man Cosmas was changed my idea of the black man. An economics student, he smashed the stereotype I’d grown up listening to.

An Ethiopian Muslim named Zania lived in the next room. He bathed himself in the bathroom sink several times a day, cleaning his face, feet, legs, arms, and neck. He sarcastically

referred to me as either Mr. George Bush or El Presidente. An American obviously had to be named George Bush, right?

The community kitchens (there were four, one on each level of the house) were the social gathering places at Jordan-Baum. The kitchens were where the greatest level of bonding took place. A large table, with park bench seating sat crammed against the wall, with small, individual cabinets (one for each student on that floor) built underneath the countertops. A too-small sink sat next to a too-small refrigerator. Metal dividers broke up the refrigerator into sections for each student. No more than a six-pack of beer could be crammed into my refrigerator compartment. This led to serious contemplation when shopping. Thankfully, there was a community refrigerator in the basement dedicated solely to beer. The housemaster stocked the refrigerator with all types of Austrian, German and Czech Republic beers. Some of the beers had been brewed since 1492. Delicious and potent, the beers were sold on the honor system. A student simply would mark a line under his name and settle up at the end of the month. Kasi, a student from Switzerland, always had the most marks. Each night, students met in the kitchen to cook, bitch about their professors, and guzzle world-class beer. Friends were made easily over beer.

My goal was to remain in Vienna for one year. I didn't want to go to Europe for a vacation. I wanted to live there, get mail there. A year sounded substantial enough. Without a job, though, the \$800 I'd brought with me wasn't going to cut it. I needed work.

I found work at the café I frequented to check my email. There usually was email from my mom and my two younger brothers. They were busy with college and work and my mom was day trading stocks in a failed attempt at financial freedom. Café Le Monde, directly on the famed Ring Strasse—the street that circled Vienna's old town—was where I sucked down large draft

beers in between keystrokes. Again, involving beer, I made a friend. This time, with Dominik, the café's owner.

“Hopefully a year,” I told him when he asked how long I'd be staying in Vienna. “I'd like to learn German. That'd be cool. But if I don't find a job soon, I'll be out of here in three weeks.”

Dominik spoke German with his mother for a few seconds before he said, “My mother says you have a nice smile and are always happy. You can work here if you like.”

Now I was making inroads. This was progress. A job! A real job! I had to celebrate. So I drank by myself. Some celebration, huh?

Café LeMonde was small, with black and silver tables adorned with nice linens. Its aim was to look modern. At an outdoor seating area, people could dine as horse-drawn carriages passed by. LeMonde, French for “the world,” was busiest during the lunch rush. That's where I came to the rescue. With my waiting skills there'd be no stopping Le Monde. My only other restaurant experience had been my hometown Pizza Hut and The Stowe Away, a fish house. Pizza Hut fired me for giving away two pizzas to my cousin. A lowly dishwasher at the Stowe Away, I either walked out mid-shift or was fired mid-shift, depending on whom you ask.

My job was to make Wiener mélanges, the little foo-foo coffee drink with the small cup atop the small plate with spotless silver spoon nestled beside mint candy. I also learned how to make all kinds of coffee drinks. The café latte was the most fun to do, because I got to shoot steam into milk and get the concoction burbling to create the perfect amount of froth. I also ran plates and bused tables. Money was never discussed. All that was said was that if some authority figure asked to see my papers I was to tell them that Dominik was my cousin and I was working in exchange for room and board. Upon receiving my first week's cash and doing the conversion

from shillings to dollars, it turned out that I was making \$4 an hour under the table—a pittance, even by 2001 standards.

The best part of the job was getting to work with Dieter L. Wankmüller, head waiter. He was a mountain of a man, farm-boy big: a cigarette-smoking, coffee-drinking, beer-swilling, skirt-chasing shrine to all that is unholy. He was sort of engaged to this Brazilian woman named Angelica, whom he'd impregnated during a previous visit to Rio. I say "sort of engaged" because he didn't allow that simple fact to deter him from getting copious amounts of strange pussy. Also, he didn't seem the marrying kind. Rather, he seemed the kind who would father a child in every country he visited, before disappearing, never to be heard from again. Angelica popped into the café one afternoon as we finished the lunch rush. A kinky-haired, mocha-colored woman with a bottom left molar missing, she didn't fit the Brazilian image I had in my mind. She was, however, a harbinger of what I'd come to find in Rocinha.

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The biggest hurdle with my 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. daily shift was my name. *Todd*, when spoken by Austrians, sounded just like their word for death, *tot*. Hey, Death, we need more coffee on table three. Death! More water on two and bus this table when you get a second. Dominik, who'd spent several years learning English in London, had an easy fix.

"What is your first name?" he asked.

"Christopher."

From then on, at least for a couple of weeks, I was known as Christoph. His mother never bothered to pronounce the ending, so I was Christoph. It was "Christoph, mach der Tisch sauber, bitte!" I had never, in all my 28 years been called Christopher. My mom just liked the sound of Christopher Todd when said together.

Finally, Dominik looked at me and said, “You do not look like a Christopher. You look like an American Johnny. You are Johnny!”

Without missing a beat or even turning his attention from the register, my esteemed colleague Dieter L. Wankmüller said, “He is short-dick Johnny.” So, I became Short-Dick Johnny. And that’s all he’s called me since.

Dieter was extremely disenchanted with Austria and all it had to offer. Whenever I marveled at his German, wishing I could speak that eloquently, he would say, “I wish I could forget it. And you can have it!”

German wasn’t needed where he was going, which was back to Rio de Janeiro, a place where the people worked to live, not lived to work: “They know how live life there, Short-Dick Johnny. Not like here where people work like machine.”

His determination to leave Vienna, which puzzled me, was defiant. “When I get to Rio, I like to send the Austrian minister my passport, with this finger!” He proudly extended his middle finger in the air. A month later, my head waiter and great friend was gone, but not before extending me an invitation to join him in Brazil when I finished Vienna. His invitation, dripping with sexual innuendo, was filed in my memory bank as one I needed to accept.

With Dieter gone, I really had nothing to do but study German. My study routine consisted of a German Level 1 book and watching reruns of Beverly Hills 90210, dubbed in German. I’d sit there every day after work and watch, trying to pick up something, just a morsel of German. Then, my daily was interrupted.

I took the bus home from work like normal, getting off just a couple of blocks short of my street. I walked past the pizza joint, jewelry store, and pastry shop before turning left up the steep hill of Peter-Jordan Strasse to Jordan-Baum. I hurriedly walked up the hill for my German

lesson, admiring the large oak trees and expensive houses as I made my ascent. I opened the house door and headed toward the television room, like always, except this time a bunch of students were huddled around the TV. Instead of 90210, there was an airplane crashing into one of the World Trade Centers. The other was already on fire.

“What the fuck?” I said. What I remember most of that day was this kid from Syria named Amar. He was a tiny kid—possibly the result of generations of incest—who wore leather pants and rarely showered. He ran around the television room, smile on his face, arms raised high above his head and shouted, “Die U.S.A. ist tot! Die U.S.A. ist tot!” He was yelling that America is dead. I couldn’t believe how satisfying watching innocent people leap to their demise could be to someone. His hatred of America may have been warranted. Who knows all of the injustice our government had put Syrians through? But I didn’t take that into account as I chased him around the couch, wildly trying to smash his face.

With Dieter L. Wankmüller out of the picture, I relied more on Matteo and my new friends from the house, Syrians aside, to spend time with. Matteo and I kayaked down the Danube River, with me nearly sinking a kayak in the process. I flipped it over and successfully escaped, but panicked, I climbed on top of the overturned kayak. Blurp, blurp, blurp, it began to sink. A rope was tied to one end of it, which at Matteo’s behest, I grabbed.

“Don’t sink the boat!” he yelled from the shore, before leaping into his own kayak to rescue me. A sunken kayak made it difficult to tread water, but I held on as Matteo dragged me to safety.

My housemates were much less dangerous. We opted for beer, pizza, and watching soccer matches in the basement TV room. I’d take drowning in beer over the Danube River any day. Most of the friends I made at Jordan-Baum continue with me to this day.

Over the winter, it snowed every day for three weeks, and I began moonlighting as a writer for Spark7.com. Mickey, a friend of Dominik's, had known of my journalism background and let me write English articles about the differences between "us and them." For example, how was our Christmas different than one in Austria? And I made more money for one story than I did all week as a waiter. This income spike greatly helped me catch up with Kasi on the honor system beer list.

Somehow I had managed to stick around Vienna until May of 2002. Okay, I was a month shy of staying there for one year, but it was close enough. Dieter L. Wankmüller and I had remained in contact via email and he was very persuasive in his argument that I should follow him down to Rio de Janeiro, a paradise filled with gorgeous women.

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At home in Concord, I went to work for my mom and John (stepdad), mowing yards and doing light maintenance on their rental properties to make some quick, tax-free cash. I'd worked for them during high school and during school breaks at Appalachian State University. At one point they had a hundred rental properties. Never one to fix them up too nice, my stepdad always had work for me. And at \$10 an hour tax free, I racked up a nice savings in no time. My ticket to Brazil cost \$900 for a trip that would last from July to August 2002 – one full month. Dieter already had lined up my first piece of ass down there. What a guy, just a real selfless, tireless worker. He'd arranged for me to sleep with Angelica's cousin – a barely legal, black-as-night young woman. I was talking to him on the phone a week prior to my departure when he told me of her. He said it was all but a done deal, then handed her the phone to speak with me. I hated that. I didn't have anything to say. Plus, we didn't even speak the same language. It was a high-priced, long-distance awkward silence.

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Unbeknownst to me, a visa was required to enter Brazil. An airline employee pointed this out to me as I tried to board my connecting flight from Miami to Rio de Janeiro. After a night of restless sleep in a dingy, Miami motel room, I visited the Brazilian Consulate to acquire my stamp. An hour in and out and I was on my way, albeit a day late.

When my 7 a.m. flight landed at Rio de Janeiro International Airport, a beautiful structure nestled by a harbor, I was anxious not only to meet my Nubian princess, but to see what South America held. I envisioned fruit stands, coconuts and tanned butts. I pictured a beach paradise and a “normal” beach town. I’d been used to beach communities like Surf City in North Carolina and Siesta Key in southwest Florida. What I got was Rocinha.

• • •

After two transfers my bus pulls to the curb on the mountain side of Rocinha, home for the next 30 days. It’s still morning, so I don’t expect to find my esteemed colleague Dieter L. Wankmüller or much of anything else. It’s sunny on the ride over, but Rocinha has this Los Angeles look to its sky, as if one too many a bus has passed by, spewing its black filth into the air. I’d just be happy to find Dieter. He probably thinks my plane crashed due to my mix up in Miami. I have his number in my bag, but no cell phone. I already had tried unsuccessfully to work a payphone at the airport. The prospect of working one in the slum doesn’t seem significantly better. He’d told me to get off the bus before the Curvo do Esse, a Formula 1 type figure eight curve, and find a nearby bar. Hey, I like to drink. So what if it’s just after 9 a.m. These hole-in-the-wall bars, called *botecos*, are plentiful, so I get my luggage off the street and walk to one that would become my version of Cheers, where everybody knows my name – well, at least two people. The owners are a husband and wife team, Ana and Alexandre. Ana handles

the lunch shift. The bar is no bigger than your average mall cell phone shop, the bathroom, large enough to turn around in. I order a beer and a plate of food. Ana enthusiastically leaps to service, firing off phrase after phrase of Portuguese. Then, slower Portuguese. Then, she mimes for me as she speaks, conveying her message through wild hand gestures. She must be in her mid-40s, with close-cropped hair, green tank top, clam diggers and flip flops. Always flip flops. Eyes sparkling, she leans in, mimes eating with her hands, and asks, “Comer? Esta’ com fome?” I hold the paper menu and give it the once over. I knew *feijao e arroz*. I also knew *carne de bife*. And *salada* made sense to me, too. I was having rice and beans, a meat main and side salad. Simple, downhome goodness. Comfort food. “E uma cerveja, por favor,” I add.

“Americano?” she asks.

“Yes, oh, I mean, sim.” She slaps my back and exclaims in more Portuguese what I assume can only be how happy she is to see me. I feel welcomed and optimistic about what lies ahead. Rocinha has itself an American.

As I sip my beer, I watch life pass by in the slum’s haze. It’s July, winter for those in the southern hemisphere, so many people wear jackets or sweatshirts, which I find odd. It feels nice and warm to me. But for locals used to scorching summers, 75 degrees and partly cloudy is cold. A man pushes a wheelbarrow full of crushed block up the sidewalk. Even in the morning, Rocinha hums with the sound of car horns, motorcycles, jackhammers, enthusiastic voices and music. Moto-taxis, small motorcycles piloted by children, whiz by, nimbly dodging whatever obstacle—dog, child chasing after a ball, bag of garbage—that stands in their way. Bourbon Street comes to mind. This place has a New Orleans feel. Each has a predominately black population. Each rarely, if ever, sleeps. And noise abounds. But here, do laws even exist? What municipality worth its weight in salt allows a child to taxi a motorcycle?

After my early lunch and midway through my third draft beer, Dieter spots me. A Marlboro Light dangling from his lips, he smirks and says, “Oi, Short-Dick Johnny! How are you?”

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Camp Dieter sits in front of the Curvo do Esse, mere seconds from Ana’s bar. It’s a U-shape of apartment buildings. Several walkways snake between the buildings, ascending up the lush mountainside to even more apartments. He lives in a two-bedroom, second floor apartment with Angelica and her son from a previous relationship. Angelica looks as if she could burst at any moment, her blouse unable to contain her bulging stomach—soon another child for Dieter to dote on. Dieter believed in spreading his seed. A half-Austrian, half-Chinese child of his was running around somewhere in Europe. He tells me he’s arranged for me to stay in an apartment two buildings down from his place.

“You neglected to tell me you live in the goddamn ghetto,” I say.

“Welcome to Rocinha,” he exclaims, clamping down on my shoulder. “Welcome to the real Brazil.”

He says not to judge the houses on first glance, which is important, because each one would fail immediately. “Some of the apartments look like shit from outside, but inside they look like a palace. Understand?”

The apartment Dieter had secured for me falls short of palace standards. It is abundant in the shit department, though. And it was cheap, to the tune of about \$70 a month cheap. He hands me two keys: one unlocks the stairwell door and the other unlocks my apartment. It’s a standard box-shaped, concrete apartment building with four levels. Ugly on the outside, and if the stairwell is any indication, promises to be ugly on the inside, too.

The narrow stairwell has no light. Even during the day it's impossible to see where I'm putting my foot. You know that feeling you get when you think there's one more step and you do that violent, retard foot slap, awkwardly striking the floor? I certainly do. Due to what can only be assumed a space issue, the stairs had been cut on a forty-five degree angle. I may as well be climbing a ladder. That's how it feels. *Did they build this apartment around people's furniture?*

Suitcase in hand, I stagger, groan, and strain my way to the top of the building (I have the penthouse). At the top of the stairs is a sink with a ribbed washboard. It doesn't dawn on me why the ribs are there. Isn't a washer/dryer combo standard in most apartments? Across from the sink is the door to my apartment. And straight ahead, the rooftop, complete with my very own clothesline. I walk onto my rooftop terrace and take in Rocinha, in all of her sprawling glory. I am lording over the slum, man! I have an ocean view straight in front of me. Granted, the view I have is way out in the ocean, with no beach or sign of life other than an occasional ship. Two large, brown mountains obstruct any chance I have at seeing the beach, but in between their tops is the blue of the Atlantic—so close, yet so barricaded. If I lean over and look straight down, I have a perfect view of the Curvo do Esse, which looks like a winding snake. This is Rocinha's main street, snaking its way down the favela. I see other rooftops with satellite dishes, mops, and more clotheslines. I watch as people return from shopping, plastic bags in hand, people get on and off buses and sweep the sidewalks in front of their botecos.

Feeling a surge of energy, I bust out a poor dance move and let out a "whoooo!" worthy of professional wrestler Nature Boy, Ric Flair, before realizing there are hundreds of other apartments behind me. They just continue, spreading upward against the lush hillside. *Did anyone just see me do that god-awful Michael Jackson impression?* I do a quick check to see if anybody saw me—no one did—before sheepishly heading inside my apartment.

Ah, now I see why it's so cost effective. It has one decent-sized, completely bare room. Thoughts of hosting splendid dinner parties quickly leave my mind. It's just white walls, a tile floor, and ugly light reflecting off both from an exposed light bulb mounted to the ceiling. A sliding window opens to the rooftop. Air conditioning, which at this time of year is not a must, is an afterthought. So, apparently, is a fan. It's like living in a storage room with a place to shit. Hopefully, I wouldn't spend much time here, with a city waiting to be explored. A small sink and countertop is across from the window and next to the bathroom. Two steps lead into the bathroom. I'd heard of a sunken living room, but isn't it usually the kitchen that sits elevated? It's not usually a walk-in toilet with a plastic, accordion-style door, is it? In essence, it's a sunken apartment, literally and figuratively. A rope dangles from a mounted tank on the wall above the toilet. Yank on the rope and the toilet flushes. Now this is living. Only here a few hours and already I see a new form of toilet ingenuity. Those crafty Brazilians.

Already bored staring at my white walls, debating whether to stand or take a seat on my suitcase, I walk out of my apartment, past the ribbed sink, back down the law-suit-ready stairwell, and am surprised at all of the action outside. Compared to the atmosphere earlier that morning, it's bustling. School must be out. The children infuse immediate life, even making the drab apartment buildings look livelier. Now it seems to be a thriving community of people who seem not even to notice that they're living in a slum. It's especially evident among the children, who look like they've been given Ritalin and an espresso and set loose. They run around the U-shaped play area, complete with, oddly enough, a half-pipe skate ramp and mounted pull-up bar. This concrete slab, framed by the outside of the apartment buildings and the main road of the favela, serves as the neighborhood park. All of the neighborhood kids meet here after school to run/skate/leap the excess energy right out of them. Adults use the area, too, as someone must

watch over the kids. There is a sense of togetherness, a sense that it takes a village to raise a child. I'd heard that before while watching a documentary about the Congo. A woman with deep laugh lines around her eyes watches over a group of kids, too many to be her own, even in this part of the world.

Not coincidentally, botecos line the "L" shape of the park. With a counter and enough space for two small tables and chairs, botecos provide the babysitting lubricant needed to watch over these whipper-snappers. These bars are simple, usually just the owner and maybe one other person to help. Where are the lurking waiters, eager to pounce as soon as the last sip of beer leaves your glass? You won't find them in these bars. Botecos are laid back, informal, and wildly popular with the locals. These in the park remind me of mall stores, with a garage door that slides up and down and locks via padlock. *Guarana*, a popular drink made from an Amazonian fruit, mixed with whiskey or *cachaca* (Brazilian rum and elixir of the mighty capirinha) is taken in copious amounts throughout the afternoon into evening. No Budweiser, Miller Lite or even Corona to be seen in these bars, and thank God for it. I don't travel to another country to be fed the same stuff available in America. I travel to get away, to experience what the locals experience. They serve Brahma, Skol and Antartica, all Brazilian beers. And that's the extent of the beer menu in these botecos. I appreciate the simplicity. The beer isn't as good as what I got in Europe, but it's wet and cold, two requirements.

Old men sit around the bar tables, smoking cigarettes and playing dominoes. They appear to take the game seriously, slapping the dominoes forcefully onto the table. Between the kids running around like meth-crazed midgets, teenage boys doing tricks on the half-pipe and a muscular guy doing rep after rep on the pull-up bar, it's a lot to digest. And without Dieter (who is probably in his apartment or out gallivanting), I stick out like a sore thumb in my nice shorts,

button-down shirt and white skin. I walk around the corner and up to the sidewalk to my comfort zone—Ana’s bar, where I am sure to get a warm greeting with my can of Brahma. I pay and take the beer to go, continuing up the hill. There is a pharmacy across the street, next to a knock-off Burger King. A non-sanctioned garbage dump sits a stone’s throw from the burger joint. It was as if the locals just walked down the street with their garbage and ran out of energy: “This seems fine. Let’s drop it here.” And they did. The bags had piled up to eight or nine high, forty feet across, and showed no signs of slowing. The smell and the flies ensure that I walk as far from the trash pile as possible—which was just across the street. Mounds of electrical wires hang from the buildings—a code violation for sure, at least in America. Most of the apartments look like I (who can barely change a car battery) had done the wiring. Every electrical box or pole has this knot of wires hanging from it, twisted together like vermicelli. *Who did this wiring, Stevie Wonder?*

“Oi, Short-Dick Johnny!” says Dieter L. Wankmüller, puffing on a cigarette as he ambles by carrying two plastic bags. He is on his way home from a meat market just up the hill. The rambunctious atmosphere of the park is a perfect place for his side business.

Dieter uses the park to set up a small grill. Unlike the Weber model from Home Depot to which I am accustomed, he has fashioned a piece of sheet metal into a mobile grill station. The items in the plastic bags—chicken wings and chicken hearts—will be grilled and hopefully sold to the parents looking after the playing children. A skewer of hearts or wings brings in one real—the Brazilian currency (pronounced *hee-all*)—about 33 cents. Coupled with his lunchtime gig as a waiter in an Indian restaurant two bus rides away, he seems to be doing alright. He always has money for beer, which really is the most important thing. People get by on surprisingly little money in the favela. Nobody walks around dressed to the nines, but they also don’t seem to go without. Could it be? They are, it seems, happy. Dieter certainly looks content, sitting there,

perfect posture, watching the poultry sizzle. He appreciates the way the *cariocas* (natives of Rio) approach life. They live their lives in the present, and do it, for the most part, with a smile.

As I sit on a cement bench in the park, drinking another can of Brahma, it's hard not to admire Dieter for taking this plunge into a different life. He's not living in some posh district of Ipanema. He's living in what most civilized people would describe as a rat hole. And he appears to be holding it together. An American movie blasts away from a television in a nearby boteco. It's a typical shoot-em-up series of explosions about which Dieter must provide social commentary: "Look this film. Is typical American movie about money, missiles and your short cocks!" *What is it with this guy and the perceived manhood of us mighty Americans?*

Five beers into an afternoon buzz is a tricky situation for me. It can go one of two ways. I can slow down, pace myself, and be a normal person, or I can throw caution to the wind and fall off a bar stool before 9 p.m. The latter, unfortunately, happens more times than I care to admit.

"Don't drink so fast, Short-Dick Johnny," he advises, remembering from our days in Vienna how fine a line it can be. "You have plans this night."

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Ever the gracious host, Dieter holds up his end and introduces me to Angelica's cousin, the lucky girl. He's excited for us to meet. He wants me to see what he sees in Brazil. He wants me to fall in love with its vibrant, festive residents. And above all else, he wants me to have a good time. With Dieter, this nearly always involves pussy.

Angelica leads us up the sidewalk, past Ana's bar where I receive an "Oi, Johnny," past the makeshift trash dump, where we cross the street and walk down steep, obviously homemade, concrete steps. We pass apartments, houses and a beauty salon as we navigate sharp curves that form the maze that is Rocinha. Deftly avoiding rambunctious children who never seem to

understand basic right-a-way etiquette, Angelica leads us on, past large dogs lounging lazily on the steps. The narrow walkway made even narrower by the dogs, I step cautiously, wondering what strain of bacteria their bites would contain. Veterinary care didn't appear high on the list here in Rocinha. The children, wearing t-shirts that look like they were used to clean a bus windshield, dart in between us, speaking excitedly with Angelica. She pats their heads, says something, and keeps leading the way. Several twists and turns later, I stand before a cute, athletically-built, young black girl, with long legs running up to a pair of yellow short shorts. Her ass is sheer splendor, a delight sculpted by years of living in the equivalent of a Stairmaster into perfect, taut globes. I feel my mouth fill with saliva. Echoing in my head are my father's words: *she's built like a brick shithouse. She could make a Bishop bite his hat!* Followed closely by, *don't you bring no nigger gal home.* Sorry, dad, but you know I'm an ass man.

We sit a spell in her family's apartment. She and Angelica babble in Portuguese while Dieter gives me my marching orders. It's a done deal, he says: "Just take her to the beach somewhere and fuck her. I am sure she is a real firecracker."

I am not, nor have I ever been, above sleeping with a girl on the first date. That's actually my preferred method. However, I do at least try to entertain her with funny jokes, interesting tidbits and sarcastic one-liners beforehand. I'm not a complete dick. But this is a "Me Tarzan, you Jane" moment. We exit her apartment, bidding Dieter and Angelica adieu, and walk ten minutes downhill, not speaking (how could we?), to a place seemingly miles away, a place where beeping horns and bus fumes give way to crashing waves and the random gull squawk. The sand, illuminated by a cloudless, star-filled sky, looks like as perfect a place as any for plundering. And that is what this feels like, a plundering. How can any type of rapport be created through various grunts and gestures? Sand pretty. Stars (pointing up) pretty. You ... bonita. The entire

date was awkward silence nestled nicely between sporadic displays of pantomime, followed by the disappointing realization that she hadn't a clue what I was trying to convey. Rapport be damned! We spread a towel on the deserted beach, kiss, and with the ease of a prostitute I had just paid for, have sex right there out in the open. I had landed at 7 a.m. that morning and by 10 p.m. had planted my flag in Brazil. Sadly, it's a flag that would remain at half-staff for most of the month.

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High from our public sex romp, I part ways from my Nubian princess and head back to the park to meet up with Dieter, who has promised to show me around Rocinha's lower level if I am not too worn out. It's been a long first day. Thankfully, I'd slept well on the flight and the thought of seeing Rocinha's nightlife infuses me with a second wind.

"How was the cousin, Short-Dick Johnny?" he asks, exhaling a cloud of Marlboro smoke. "Was she a firecracker?" Dieter divides women into two categories, firecrackers and the rest of them.

"It was pretty good, man," I say. "You're one hell of a tour guide."

Dieter tells Angelica his plan to show me a place where Mardi Gras meets the mafia. He wants to show me how things work, whom to avoid, basically how to have a good time in the ghetto. We walk down and around the Curvo do Esse, descending our way to the base of the mountain. Two side streets shoot off from the main drag. The first one—each is nameless—seems harmless enough. The street is lit up with little shops, botecos and diners. It has a flea market feel, with brightly colored bikini wraps and towels on display. There also are two proper restaurants, owned and operated by locals, where fish, meat, two sides and a salad are popular. At the bottom more vendors, set up in an open-air market, sell CDs, footwear, clothing, towels,

and sunglasses. This market runs the length of the slum's base and provides its border. We cross through to the next street, turn, and begin walking back up the hill. Immediately to my left, as Dieter points out, are three black men, huddled together on the sidewalk, doing business. They're gangsters and they're selling cocaine and marijuana. This is their spot. Barring a police raid, sure as the sun rises in the east, you'll find them here. The cocaine they sell is cut with powdered marble.

"The Comando Vermelho (Red Command) runs the shit here in Rocinha," Dieter says. "Understand? See the children here?"

"Those with the guns?" I ask. "The armed ones? Those are the gangsters, too?" This is like one of those Sierra Leone diamond trafficking documentaries where the children are taken at a young age and turned into gangsters. "Unbelievable."

"They are on the low level," he says, "running drugs, whatever. The main ones, the gangster boss, you will not see."

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The Red Command, which sounded like a Communist S.W.A.T. team under Stalin, was a highly-developed, surprisingly well-run militia. Armed to the hilt, they got shit done. It was impressive, disturbing and downright scary. They sold drugs – pot and coke, notably, right out in the open. They didn't give a fuck. Low-ranking members sat in beach stairs or stood against a building on this one particular street and hawked their wares. They were the authority figures. The cops don't mean shit. The Policia Militar "raided" the slums every now and then for the benefit of news crews, an illusion of protection. But the cops were on the take, paid by the gangsters to leave them alone and let them operate freely. Whenever the Policia Militar came into the Rocinha, fireworks exploded from a rooftop. Comando Vermelho had spotters manning the rooftops to

signal the raid was coming. Decked out in body armor and assault rifles, the police moved through the streets like Starship Troopers. What an acting job.

The slum didn't need the police to ensure things ran smoothly. That was the Commando Vermelho's job, which they performed with ruthless efficiency. Comando Vermelho maintained a very high level of control, strictly prohibiting street crimes. Rules existed and anyone who violated them was dealt with in crushing fashion. You didn't steal in the favela. You didn't harm your neighbor in the favela. You didn't rape in the favela. And if you did, you certainly didn't depend on the cops to save you. The gangsters took care of that, making an example out of you for everyone to see. Like heads atop spikes back in the Dominik days, I saw men sprawled helplessly on the sidewalk, the result of testing the rules set down by the Commando Vermelho. And no one helped them. They lay there like garbage. Anyone who helped would have been viewed as a sympathizer to the guilty. Harsh? Sure. Effective? Absolutely. This was street justice at its very essence.

This brutal form of justice was important to keep Rocinha running smoothly for one simple reason – drug trafficking. If the slums were perceived as safe by outsiders, then those same outsiders would feel safe to enter the favela to purchase drugs. Having a high murder rate was just bad for business. It was econ 101.

Besides the occasional ass whipping or murder, the Commando Vermelho also provided much needed resources such as support for day care, medicine for the sick, and money for the poor. Who knew the generous spirit of the favela could infect even the gangsters? They were like an orange-vested city crew militia, even going so far as to pave roads. What? Did they remove their weapons or just sling them around their shoulders as they mixed concrete? Imagine a New York City gang being so active in their community. Commando Vermelho also threw huge

parties from time to time, with all the favela invited. Sadly, community service wasn't all these Robin Hood do-gooders were up to. Besides the drug trafficking, they also dabbled in arms smuggling (I'd seen some impressive pistols, sawed-off shotguns and assault rifles already), bank robberies, kidnapping, and murder. The kidnapping and murder part bothered me. I was nobody special, but I had to imagine that any white American was a high-Anaue target. Hell, I just hoped my brief eye contact with the armed, prepubescent kids didn't come back to bite me.

Though the Comando Vermelho controlled the ruling interest of Rocinha these days, it was only a matter of time before competing gangs waged war to see who was the baddest of the bad, worthy to control this, the largest Favela. Rocinha has changed hands between competing gangs for years.

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Cocaine had been a curiosity since my first year of college in 1991. I smoked weed, took Xanax, tripped on acid, and drank at App State, but never got into hard drugs. A week into the college experience, after getting blasted on cheap tequila and obnoxiously storming through a female dormitory, I was arrested and charged with drunk and disorderly conduct. I was a ball of uncontrolled energy. Within a couple of weeks, I fell into an extreme depression whereby I couldn't leave my dorm room. I was diagnosed manic-depressive. Somehow, cocaine—though I'd seen it—didn't seem like the best fit for me then.

Here, though, is a different time, different land, with different customs. *When in Rome ...* We slow our walk as we pass by the dealers. It's as if Dieter and I are each contemplating. *Should we?* I feel a rush of anxiety and when Dieter casually asks, "Want to do a little?" I say, with practically zero arm twisting, yes. "I can only do a little, because give me terrible headache. But you don't can say shit to my wife. For her, the cocaine is like a red flag to a bull.

Understand?" I'd never known him to do anything harder than beer in Vienna, but it was clear that this was not Dieter's first time down this side street.

I nod my head and Dieter walks confidently toward them and exchanges pleasantries in Portuguese. I wonder if they're talking about me. *Who is zee gringo?* I try to appear nonchalant as I pace around in view of the dealers. Just across the street is an open air bar, a jukebox toward the front, and a gaggle of jailbait passionately discussing which song to pick. Immediately I find myself smitten with a flat-chested brunette, with skin the color of light coffee. Wearing black bicycle shorts and a sleeveless blouse, she has this regal quality, as if she somehow rises above her surroundings. Her flawless skin stretches over high cheekbones.

"That is gangster bar," Dieter says, breaking my attention. "The man behind the bar with all the gold chains is big gangster." As if sensing my desire, he adds, "Don't fuck any girls from this bar. The girls may be nice to you. The girls may like you. She maybe don't tell you she have boyfriend. Understand? If she have a gangster boyfriend, you maybe go to the red light, Short-Dick Johnny."

The red light, easily visible now, burns all the time. It's way up the mountain and appears to be somewhere in a lush section of trees. Dieter says it's where the gangsters permanently plant anyone who gives them trouble. This place is just full of pitfalls and lovely, little potential liars wearing bicycle shorts. I assure him that the red light is not on my list of tourist attractions.

"Good. Then remember always to think with the right head. Understand?"

To show me that the gangster bar doesn't pose any immediate danger so long as my cock behaves itself, he leads me inside, right up to the dark-haired man tending bar. I think he's wearing real gold. Dieter orders us two bottles of Antartica beer and introduces me to my first gangster. My cherry freshly popped, we take our beers to a table and I bum a cigarette from

Dieter. Life is good. The atmosphere hums with the noisy jukebox and animated conversations from hot-blooded South Americans. This place is alive. We slam our beers, anxious to get back to my apartment. “I take two of the little ones,” Dieter says, showing two \$1.50 bags of what I hope to be primo booger sugar. He says we can snort it in the bar’s bathroom, but I decline, preferring the comfort of my apartment. We grab several beers to go and take off. I am excited. I feel like I did before I took my first hit of LSD in college. I love new things! Back up the hill, the matador is nowhere to be seen. We unlock the stairwell door and blindly begin our ascent.

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“Look, Short-Dick Johnny, is snowing in your apartment!” exclaims Dieter as we get inside. He spreads the coke out on the counter, cuts it up with his I.D. card and offers me a line. Like an overzealous child on Christmas morning, I take a receipt, roll it, stick it up my nose and undershoot my target. “Don’t exhale,” he complains. “You’re blowing it all around. Inhale.”

“I’m trying,” I say. With one eye shut, as if I were aiming a gun, I hit the target.

It’s love at first sniff. What a first day in Brazil. Sleep is put on hold.

“Do both,” he tells me. I switch nostrils and Hoover up another line. I feel my thoughts begin to race. My jaw starts to shift from side to side. I need to concentrate to stop it, but even that doesn’t work. My tongue busies itself by scraping the inside and outside of every damn tooth in my mouth. I have this strange urge to clean, or build something. I wonder if it’s too late to go to law school. Also, I’ve got to shit like there’s no tomorrow. I hop up into my bathroom and proceed to unload, all while rapid-fire questioning Dieter about everything from gang involvement in Rocinha to his thoughts on extraterrestrials. I could not shut up on this stuff. The problem, I soon discover, is that with cocaine, if a little is good, then a lot must be way better. I also discover that it makes me feel superhuman. It’s like every nerve ending in my body is on

high alert. I move faster, with greater sense of a purpose. My confidence level is through the roof. I have a newfound zest for life, for new possibilities. *Should I open up a business down here? Could I? Maybe. I don't know. What would I sell? What would I call it? You could never open a business. Well, I might could ... I wonder if I'm gonna get in trouble with Angelica if I don't see her cousin again. What'd they cut this stuff with, baby laxative?* Oh, and on cocaine, beer goes down like water. If an emaciated POW went up against a burly member of the Hell's Angels in a drinking contest – and the POW was on coke – my money would be on the war prisoner.

“You want the last line? If I do more, I get terrible headache.” Dieter didn't get the involuntary jaw twitches, so he could go home, secure in the knowledge that Angelica would be none-the-wiser. He had the ultimate cocaine poker face.

Two baggies are gone already? It seems like we just got them. And yet we've accomplished so much in this short time. Oh, the things we discussed. On a relatively small amount of cheap cocaine, it does seem as though we've discussed many a world problem. For some, we even come up with a solution. Cocaine, apparently, gives us enhanced mental abilities.

With Dieter gone – and me wired – I grab some reals and head back down to the gangster bar. It's a pattern that I will repeat many nights. I walk confidently, head on a swivel, eyes picking up the slightest movement. I like this new me. He's less timid. I grab a table, order another beer and quickly down it. I give myself a pep talk in between furious drags on a cigarette. *You can do this. You can do this.* Fuck it. Casually, I make my way into the street, but don't go immediately to the gangsters. I inch toward them. *Oh, shit, one just looked at me. Play it cool. You're just here to buy some drugs.* It feels awkward, like a kid at his first coed dance. I

swallow hard, then make my way to them, only lifting my head to make eye contact at the last minute.

“Oi, gringo, você quera pó?” *Pó*, is the slang term for cocaine. It’s a phrase I’ll become accustomed to hearing each day.

“Cinco,” I say, making the open hand gesture. “Obrigado,” I say, as he hands me the baggie. I do an about-face, exhale, proud of my achievement, and march back to the bar. I’d done it! Now where to do more?

The bathroom at the bar is a toilet-seat-missing abomination with a half-inch of what I hope is water on the floor. I step carefully, trying not to splash any of the stagnant liquid on my legs. I pull out my passport and hurriedly dump enough coke for two fat lines. Two becomes four becomes ... four in the morning. I get quite comfortable buying drugs.

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Quite possibly, I was still feeling the after effects of my first night on cocaine. I’d slept poorly with all the teeth gnashing and muscle contractions. Perhaps my decision making ability wasn’t up to snuff, but my second day in Rocinha had begun innocently enough.

I eat a late lunch at Ana’s place. My first beer goes down rough, but the food helps. Refueled and feeling a bit better, I decide to get my camera and walk around the S-curve and down the hill to the gangster bar. The second beer goes down better. The third, even better. Bolstered by the gangster code of honor, I don’t worry about leaving my camera bag on the table as I walk over to buy some bags of coke. I revisit the ghastly bathroom, sliding the folding door shut, and refuel on my other food. My newfound energy has me eager to do some exploring. The open-air market looks lively, so that’s where I go. And that is where I meet him.

Dressed in dirty shorts, with a sweat-soaked, nasty t-shirt several sizes too big, this black boy comes right up to me. He's not wearing shoes and his feet are filthy. He can't be older than nine. Many slum children get recruited by the Red Command. With limited education opportunities, many of these kids get hooked on drugs and gang life. The white crusties, contrasting against the black of his nostrils, are a dead giveaway. He'd obviously seen me buy from the dealers and made me for an easy mark. He follows me through the market. I spot some flip flops and spend the 33 cents it will take to cover his feet. I hand them to him. He seems appreciative as he bums a cigarette from me. He wants something else, too. Whenever he gets my attention, he makes a chopping motion, then gets frustrated when I feign ignorance. Not the least bit discouraged, or shy for that matter, he takes his hand and chops it repeatedly into his palm, his way of saying, "Look, bitch, give me some coke, will ya?" He seemed so confident and grown up for his age. Maybe it was the chain smoking. I really was his bitch.

He follows me out of the slum. We climb a set of concrete steps to an overpass that allows us to walk over one busy highway to a grassy hill and sit down. Traffic races in front of and behind me. A bus stop sits some sixty yards away. My new friend and I sit in the grass together and do blow. I do more, but sort of feel sorry for him and feel like a dick not sharing. "Okay, okay," I say, in response to yet another chopping motion. This kid already was hopelessly addicted and headed toward gangdom. What were a few lines of my shit going to do to him? Not a damn thing, I rationalize.

Picture this: a white man, obviously a foreigner, sitting on a grassy hill with a young black child, doing blow in full view of anyone who happens to drive past. I probably look like a goddamn child molester. What in all that is holy am I thinking? To call it stupid would do a

disservice to the word stupid. Completely delusional, I think I am just being a nice, caring, generous guy.

Two cops eyeball me as they ride by. And I eyeball them right back! Do I leave, immediately? Run like someone is chasing me? Nope. I sit there and continue to snort coke and smoke cigarettes. Unbeknownst to me, they circle around and set up a sting at the bus stop across the street, which I willingly walk right into.

How did they know I would walk to that bus stop? What if I had simply walked back to the safety of the slum instead? Would they have broken an unwritten rule and pursued me into the favela? Or did they have that exit covered as well? Why oh why hadn't I just stayed in the slum?

Sufficiently high, I part ways with the kid, grab my camera bag and bee-bop right into the lion's den. I want to take the bus downtown to shoot some photos of an actual city. Once there, I figured I'd grab a beer, walk around and duck into a bathroom somewhere when I wanted to recharge the old batteries.

I'm not at the bus stop thirty seconds before two men take me by the arm, pull me aside and search my pockets. Hell, they'd seen me tuck the baggies into my pocket. This was too easy for them. You know that feeling in your stomach when you see a state trooper behind you with his lights on? And you've been drinking? That oh, shit, I'm fucked now feeling? I would've welcomed that feeling.

My knees became yogurt. *This can't be happening, can it?* When they pull the coke out of my pocket, the officer makes a symbol to me with his hands. He doesn't speak English, but his hand gesture speaks volumes. He takes his index and middle finger and repeatedly taps them

across the same fingers on his other hand – making what looked like bars. Jail bars. Head spinning, I feel dizzy

I want to kill myself. The military police drive me to another post where the cop is said to speak my language – the language of utter filth. They don't cuff me. In fact, they allow me to chain smoke menthols as we ride up this scenic coastal road with jungle on my left and cliffs and ocean to my right. Still jumpy from the cocaine, all I can think about is opening the door and leaping from the moving jail cell. From there, I could either maneuver through the jungle or just leap off of the cliff into the ocean. What was I going to do, swim to Africa? There were some islands off the coast, but it wouldn't have been hard for the cops to come pick me up, provided I could even reach them. All they'd need was a canoe.

Staying inside the car seemed to be my best option, so that is what I did. Within minutes we are at the other cop booth with the officer who does, in fact, speak English. He comes up to the car, speaks Portuguese with the two in the car and then attempts to address me, but I frantically cut him off.

“If you are going to take me to prison, just go ahead and kill me now. I'm serious. Just shoot me in the head, 'cause I cannot tell my mother about this. I'd rather die now. There is no fucking way I am calling her. No way.”

“Relax,” he told me. “Nobody is going to kill you.”

He turns his attention to his colleagues, discusses something and then focuses back on me.

“They want money to let you go.”

“How much?”

The driver speaks to the passenger, then comes up with the figure. It's \$5,000, a nice, round number.

I erupt in laughter. They seem taken aback. Who is this crazy gringo to laugh in our faces? I burst out in rapid-fire speech, telling the English speaker that I'd only brought \$1,000 with me. I lived in the goddamn slum for a reason. I was on a budget. Laughter in the face of such eminent demise seems to convince them of my honesty.

My Minolta camera—real film—and two lenses inside of a green, faux-leather camera bag sits beside me in the car. This piece of equipment had served me well as a journalist in North Carolina and southwest Florida when the staff photographer was too busy to shoot photos for my stories. I loved that camera and now all I can think is that it will serve as a bribe to keep me out of Brazilian prison. Dieter had told me that Brazilian prison is not Club Med, not that any of them are: “You don't even eat unless someone bring you food. Someone you know ... like your brother, mother, sister. The guards won't caring if you eat.” Hyperbole? Probably. Still, I couldn't go to prison. I'd be somebody's wife!

I tell the cop standing outside the rear passenger window that my camera is worth at least \$500. “It's all I have. Honest.” He confers with his colleagues and they reluctantly agree that it will have to suffice. Thank God for corrupt cops.

To make things worse, if that was even possible, they have to call someone to release me and make sure that I will bring them my camera at a later date. They refuse to take it directly from me. Why? What was their reason for not taking it? I had no rights in their eyes. They could have taken it and still tossed my sorry ass in the slammer. They could have gotten me twice, maybe even three times for the same offense. Could I trust these uniformed gangsters?

The only person I knew to call was Dieter, who wasn't home. He was working at the Indian restaurant. Unfortunately, Angelica, the matador, talks to the cops. She doesn't care to associate with people who do drugs (at this point, neither did I) and now her baby daddy's good friend is one of these people.

She comes to get me at a police stand at the slum's edge. This police station is the size of a juice stand, with just enough room for a desk, chair, and telephone. It's not a place to house prisoners. Angelica lays eyes on me and I feel like pond scum. Because of me, she waddles her eight-month pregnant ass down the hill to collect some deadbeat. Her eyes look so disappointed. She grew up in Rocinha and knows the perils of life here. I'm just another person with no self-control. She handles it better than I figured she would. She scolds me in Portuguese/broken English before negotiating with the cops. Then she scolds me some more on the walk through the slum back to her place.

The deal with the cops was that I bring the camera to the asswipes on Monday. I had to put the camera, lens and nice camera bag inside of a paper bag and do a walk-by. Approach the cop shop/glorified phone booth, drop the paper bag on the ground and keep on walking. Bye-bye camera and the photos I'd already shot with it. Shit! I am pissed off. But even more so, I'm disappointed in myself for being so stupid. At least I don't have to make the call to my mother. All in all, I get a pretty-good deal.

But it was going to be harder for Dieter and me to hang out.

"Oi, Short-Dick Johnny, what you did today?" Dieter asks sarcastically, flashing an I-told-you-so grin. He knew damn well what I'd done. "I tell you not to leave favela with the shit. Any place in slum is sicher ... um, how you say in English?"

"Safe," I said.

“That’s right. The police here are fucking assholes. They want just take your money. Understand? They put shit in your pants pocket to make you guilty. Especially for American. They see just money. The police here make almost nothing. The gangsters pay them to stay away from inside the slum so they still sell the shit. Understand? And they steal from rich Ami-bastard like you!”

Never one to miss an opportunity for a joke, Dieter introduces me a few days later to a group of women at Copacabana beach: “This is Short-Dick Johnny. He is journalist ... without camera.”

• • •

Sadly, this close call does nothing to deter me from my drug use. Even though the sight of the Policia Militar gives me crushing fits of paranoia, I don’t even take a night off. My use remains at the same level, as in every afternoon until sometime the next morning. I score a few bags of what I think will be enough, and head back to my apartment for some quality alone time—just beer, coke and cigarettes, the holy trinity. Once there, I walk to the rooftop. The late afternoon sun, just barely hovering above the mountaintop, gives Rocinha a rustier color. I contemplate. The close call with the police gives me an even greater sense of urgency to soak up what Rocinha and the surrounding areas have to offer. This is a month in a different world, with different food, different language, different ... women.

Women, who if they live up to even half of what I’ve heard, will be as lovely as Aphrodite and sexy as Catwoman (the good version from the Adam West days). Haven’t you ever heard some guy say he was going to Brazil? The reaction, if he’s talking to another man, is usually, “Ooohhh,” followed by a narrowing of the eyes and perhaps even a biting of the lip. You don’t get that reaction when you say you’re going to London. There’s an old joke about life for a

man in Brazil. They say every guy in Brazil has nine girlfriends. My question is where are my other four?

But as you'll see, I wasn't seducing models like Gisele Bündchen—far from it, actually.

• • •

I met Luzia Facifico while riding the bus. I'd hopped on to go sightseeing, thinking that I couldn't spend every waking moment with a rolled up receipt dangling from my nose. So, drug free, I boarded the bus in front of Ana's place, where I'd had the usual of rice and beans, a meat, and side salad.

I take a seat in front of an attractive black girl. A few minutes later, I turn and ask her which one is the downtown stop. Few locals outside of hotel and restaurant help throughout the city speak passable English. Jacqueline is no different. She enthusiastically helps me, pointing to specific sentences in my Portuguese phrase book. She assures me that my stop isn't for a while and, with the help of my book, we have a conversation. Things are going so swimmingly that I abandon my plans and stay on the bus with her. It turns out she's a school teacher who takes a train two hours from somewhere northeast to come teach children in Rio. *What a shitty commute.* I exit with her and together we wait on a bench inside of the train station. Her five o'clock train back home will arrive shortly.

A little too easily, we begin passionately kissing. Train travelers amble by as I cop a few feels of her tits and ass right there on the bench. *Are we gonna do it right here in the station?* We make plans to meet up the next day at the same train station. Naturally, I need to reward myself for this accomplishment. And I do, to the tune of six small bags of cocaine.

Jackie is right on time for our post-lunch rendezvous. We walk around the city, holding hands as she shows me the famed beaches of Copacabana and Ipanema. They are expansive

beaches with golden sand and mountains along the beach, as well as lush mountains jutting up off the coast. We take a short bus ride over to Corcovado (the Jesus statue). The 130-foot, white statue sits atop a granite peak. I'm not the least bit religious, but even I couldn't help but be moved seeing the outstretched arms of Corcovado presiding over the city like some biblical watchman.

An afternoon of sightseeing under our belts, we have a drink before boarding the bus to Rocinha. We take a seat toward the back of the near-empty bus and make out like horny teens on the ride home. I remove her breast from its spandex prison and suck it right there on the bus. *This is going to be easy.* Her skin smells like coco-butter. She has a slight beer gut and nice, big ass—just like I like. But there's a smell I just can't identify.

Once at my building, I put her in front and we climb the steps to my room, my hands on her ass, helping her along. To my surprise and utter delight, she doesn't burst out laughing when she sees my place. There's just a cheap mattress that I'd picked up at one of the shops down the hill, zero sheets, a borrowed pillow from Angelica's kid that kind of smelled like urine, and a wrap that women use to cover their bikini bottoms. If she wanted to sit down, it was the bed or nothing. *Talk about the ultimate seduction! It's the bed or nothing, baby.* Within minutes she's undressed. She grabs my dick and says, "Johnny, e' grande!" That was nice of her to say, but it wasn't grande. I had to correct her. "Okay, medium," she says.

This woman is crazy about me from the get-go. When she gets on top during sex, she looks like a wild animal—dark skin, disheveled hair, mouth agape, bouncing up and down furiously. It was cool and a little weird at the same time, like a movie where the witch doctor priestess rapes me. And then it happens. I get this whiff of something unpleasant and have the feeling that it will only get worse. *Could it be that this sweet school teacher had a rotting piece*

of road kill lodged in her throat? She had chewed gum during our previous encounters. Had she spit it out prior to sex? Maybe she was just having a bad day. I give her the benefit of the doubt. But the more time we spend together, the more painfully obvious it becomes that she is having a bad decade, not a bad day. I can't accurately describe the scent. It just sort of melts my face.

Jackie developed a habit of just showing up unannounced in Rocinha to look for me. Sometimes, I was home. Sometimes I was at Dieter's. And sometimes I was in gangsterland. One of three things would happen if I wasn't there. She would find me, wait at Dieter's place for me, or get frustrated and leave—the frustrated and leave option being my favorite. One time she showed up unannounced and was waiting for me at the entrance to my apartment. A nose full of coke, we go up to the apartment and attempt to fool around. My penis looked like a grub worm wearing a turtle neck sweater. For me, fucking on cocaine is like trying to shove a cooked piece of spaghetti into an electrical outlet.

“Por que, Johnny?” she asks, questioning whether or not I find her attractive. I come clean and admit to using cocaine. I'm a drug addict. She takes it hard, but still sticks by me. She would continue to pop in unannounced, making my decision to use coke even more perilous, as I promise her that I will stop.

The breath thing, however, proved to be more of a problem than the cocaine. I got to the point where I just couldn't cum anymore. She is on her knees, sucking my cock. I am standing—all 6'2” of me—and the overpowering stench still finds its way to my nostrils.

“No in my mouth, Johnny,” she says.

No problem there.

I tell Dieter about the stench, which he too had never noticed.

“Dude, next time you are around her, get close and take a whiff,” I say.

A few days later he comes over to my place to tell me Jackie has been looking for me. I ask if he noticed anything else about her.

“Oh, yes,” he says. “It smells like a toilet at the rail station.”

• • •

As usual, I am at the gangster bar doing cocaine well into the night when I meet a light-skinned, kinky-haired slum girl. I'd never seen this one before. *Don't go home with any girls from this bar.* Damn Dieter and his advice. She says hello as I emerge, high as a kite, from the bathroom. She speaks a little English. We talk at my table in view of the gangsters, my friend's advice just not getting through. I buy some more drugs from the dealers and persuade her to join me in my apartment. I feel like a lurid old man using a Snickers bar to coax some child into a van. She comes back with me and I proceed to treat her like a plastic fuck doll, going down on her and twisting her limbs six ways from Sunday, her kinky hair bouncing with every thrust. And like some deranged lunatic, unable or unwilling to think of safety, I don't even use protection. Common sense is eluding me as I sink deeper into the throes of a full-blown cocaine addiction. I don't mention to Dieter where I happened to find this particular woman.

Different night, same location, I'm doing coke in the bathroom with the piss-soaked floor. I exit to find another girl I had never seen—a dark-skinned gal wearing a leopard print mini-skirt. She's pretty, with an Aborigine look to her—especially the hair. She walks to the bar and leans suggestively over it. I can see cheeks peeking out from her skirt. *That's not fair.* She knows I'm looking. They're stunning, smooth as butter.

Dieter's words again echo in my head but way off in the distance: “Johnny, whatever you do, never go with a woman from that bar. Any other bar is fine, but not that bar. If she belong to

a gangster, you will be killed and buried by the red light. If you get lucky, you just get your arms and legs broken and thrown down the sidewalk. And nobody will help you.”

Dieter’s advice was great and all, but those cheeks were calling my name. As the night approaches morning, we agree to go back to my place to sniff some coke. My version of a candy bar on a piece of string works again.

When we arrive at Chateaux Goodman, she walks in and plops down on my mattress. She is lying face down. At that moment I knew why men throughout history carved the female image from stone. I offer her a few lines and my penis goes into immediate hibernation mode. Before we commence to our night of passionate lovemaking, she takes a shower. *Poor girl. My shower has no hot water.* I watch as she stands under the water, repeatedly jabbing a bar of soap in and out of her pussy. She washes it well. Meanwhile, I am frantically trying to revive Johnny Junior.

When she comes out and sits on the mattress, I begin caressing her legs and butt. Her body is perfect. She takes out a condom, puts it in her mouth and tries to put it on the limp noodle that is my manhood.

While this is happening, I’m frantically trying to give my dick a pep talk. *You can do it. Goddamnit, wake up! Don’t you fucking do this to me.*

Bam! Johnny Jr. is alive and kicking, no small miracle. She smiles enthusiastically as I grow inside of her mouth. She climbs on top and proceeds to do the sexual samba, knees never touching the mattress. Once she brings me to climax, she pulls a Rip Van Winkle and sleeps until 6 p.m. that day.

It was like she’d never slept in a bed before. I keep trying to rouse her for more sex but she doesn’t budge. I pop in throughout the day to check on her, to make sure she’s breathing. When she finally wakes up, I nail her again and she’s on her way. Maybe it is her beauty, but

afterward I'm overcome with a tremendous sense of worry, a red light in the hills kind of worry. Dieter is not amused.

“Johnny, I tell you not to fuck the women in this bar,” he says. “Why you do this? Do you want to go to the red light?”

I'm scared. He puts the fear of God in me. Now, poor Dieter has to take a break from grilling/selling chicken hearts to go down to the bar on my behalf.

“Short-Dick Johnny, I go now to the bar. I speak to the owner to see if this girl was just a bitch or a gang girl. Pack your bags. Then get out of the favela. I come back and throw a piece of paper in your window. If it say, ‘okay,’ then you have no problems. If it say, ‘get out,’ then take your bag and go to the airport now.”

My stomach feels the way it did when those bastard cops pulled that sting on me. *What the hell was my problem? Why couldn't I just enjoy my time without risking my life? Why didn't I just pay for prostitutes like other Americans?*

Dieter tosses the paper in my window, which I find a few hours later. I'd decided to take a circuitous route home, avoiding wherever I think a gangster may lurk. Stone sober but with every nerve ending on high alert (turns out the fear of death produces a feeling similar to cocaine), I snake my way back to the apartment, constantly glancing over my shoulder. Standing outside of my apartment door, I inhale slowly, and turn the key.

“Is okay, Short-Dick Johnny” reads the scrap of paper sitting in my living room. Turns out this girl is beneath even gang standards. She also might be homeless. At least that's what Dieter tells me.

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A week before my month-long vacation ends, I meet the woman who will become my wife. A slum girl, your wife? Who goes shopping the slums for a wife? This was no slum girl. Quite the contrary, actually.

I walk down the hill, past the gangsters, past the open-air market, to behind the slum's border. Under a bridge awaits a small white van that the locals call a wam bus. It's there every day. For one real, the bus takes me from poverty to riches in seven minutes. I'd taken this bus to Ipanema and Copacabana before to swim, walk the beaches and ogle women. Once, I even commandeered a slum child to take me there on his moto-taxi. After that harrowing experience, I opted for four-wheel transportation only.

Vendors walk the beaches hawking rum, fruit, towels, art made from dried coconut shells, and jewelry. My favorite vendors are the guys who sell bottles of fruit-infused cachaca and skewers of giant, grilled shrimp (5 reais, or \$1.50). The sand is filled with world-class beauties, tall, tone and bronze—wearing thongs, which originated in Brazil. Those cheeks had to get evenly tanned somehow. Volleyball nets are set up on the sand along the sidewalks. So athletic, the Brazilians don't even use their hands to play. They use their shoulders, knees, feet, and heads – and keep the ball in the air for a surprising amount of time. I sit on the black-and-white checkered sidewalk, a red can of Brahma in hand, and watch the volleyball game as rocks the size of apartment buildings dot the blue ocean in the background – adding even more beauty to an already lovely scene.

I walk toward the sand and listen to the waves crash onto the shore. They are larger than any I'd seen in either Florida or North Carolina. I timidly remove my shirt, feeling insecure about myself. Three weeks of cocaine use doesn't help beach body confidence. I spread my towel and open my book, *The Jordan Rules*. About twenty feet away, facing me in her chair is a

raven-haired goddess who keeps, I believe, checking me out. In Rio, goddesses are on nearly every corner but this one seems different. She has an innocence and unassuming quality about her. Damn, do I make some character assumptions from a distance.

Her back to the ocean, each time I look up from my book, her eyes seem trained on me, though I can't be sure because, like me, she is wearing sunglasses. She smiles, never looking away. I immediately look down, back to my book to see what antics Michael Jordan could possibly be up to. *You're blowing it.* This woman probably isn't even looking at me. Why would she? With so many bronze gods walking the beach, what would she want with a scrawny white boy like me?

But each time I look up, there she is, looking my way and smiling a Colgate-perfect smile. I peek over my right shoulder to at least make sure some gorgeous hunk isn't the one she's looking at. I would have died of embarrassment had I actually gotten up, walked over, only for her to say, "What the fuck do you want? I was looking at the other guy, you know, the one with muscles?"

Should I talk to her? Is she looking at me? Get up and go to her, you pussy! It is beginning to get awkward. Make a move now or go home and rub one out, you loser. With an inner voice like mine, who needs a motivational book?

Eventually, she gets up and walks down the beach. I, still glued to my chair like some paraplegic, can only watch, helplessly, as my dream girl walks away. Then, it happens. She turns, removes her sunglasses, looks directly into my eyes and smiles. To hear her tell it some ten years later, it was like, "I look this man and he do nothing! I think this man is stupid or the gay."

To my credit, I don't wait around for this brown-eyed angel to get away. It may have taken the equivalent of a two-by-four to the face to jumpstart me into action, but the message

was received. I get up and jog toward her. Seeing me coming, she turns and walks backward, smiling, as I approach her. She has a big ole grin on her face, too.

“Oi, tudo bem?” I say, showing off three weeks of reading a Portuguese/English phrase book.

“Sim, tudo bem. E voce’?”

“Como se chama?” I ask.

“Lilian. E você?”

“Johnny,” I say, nearly inserting the “short dick” part.

We walk and chat—or try—in Portuguese. Her English is total shit, right on par with my Portuguese. We head toward a rocky jetty and sit down to watch the waves slam into the jetty, producing a lovely rainbow-colored mist in the sunlight. I wish I could say that we made love like sea otters right there on the spot, but it doesn’t happen. We don’t even kiss. I just try to be charming and make her smile.

She lives several hours away in São Paulo, but is spending a few weeks at her aunt’s condo in Leblon—a fancy neighborhood next to Ipanema. We make plans to meet up that night for dinner. We take the checkered sidewalk back to where our eyes first met, checking out all of the vendors, laughing at bejeweled halves of coconuts made into faces. We cross the street, walking away from the beach, to the wam stop. We hold hands and plan to meet right here at 8 p.m. sharp for dinner. The wam bus approaching, I hug her and tell her that I have to catch it back to Rocinha.

Like a neutron bomb, my last words of “I have to catch it back to Rocinha” nearly derail our relationship before the first date. Lilly thought that because I lived in Rocinha, I was a gangster—a classic case of guilt by association. Shit, had she even suspected I was using

cocaine, the date DEFINITELY wouldn't have happened. It was only through the prodding of her aunt that she agreed to keep our date. Without her aunt telling her that there were good people in Rocinha, not just gangsters, I wouldn't have seen her again.

Yes, there were good people living in Rocinha, but upon my arriAna back, I, quite naturally, seek out the kind of people Lilly worried about. I had to celebrate my date. And what better way to celebrate than a nose full of powdered marble and cocaine? I shower, put on my best pair of shorts and my nicest button-down short sleeved shirt, and make my way out the door. Even after the cops and the camera, I still exit the favela with several small baggies of coke in my pocket. I bring cocaine on the first formal date with my future wife.

As I stand on the corner, facing the ocean, I look at my watch and realize she's late. *I hope she's coming.* I turn and see this smile, this unmistakable smile, decked out in a black cocktail dress and black high heels, approaching me.

"Hello," she says. "Tudo bem?"

Everything is fine, I assure her. It hits me that I am on a date with a real life Cleopatra; and I'm no Marc Anthony. Her ample bosom fills out her dress, and like a slap in the face, I wonder if I am over my skis with this one. *This ain't no slum gal.* At the beach, she hadn't taken off her shorts to expose her bathing suit bottom. Now, here in the light of the moon, I see her in all her glory. She takes this date seriously, looking prom ready. My idea of taking it seriously was to show up high, with plenty more in my pockets. She looks so ravishing and I'm wearing fucking shorts.

We go to Chaika, a café at Ipanema with delicious ice cream and simple food. She orders something sweet and I order a beer and something small to eat, which I pick at like a bird in between frequent trips to the bathroom.

“Damn, she is fine,” I say, as I pour some coke onto my passport. Then I cut it up with my North Carolina driver’s license, roll up an old receipt and cram the stuff up my nose. Ahhh, what a rush. I check my nostrils for any traces of white, walk out and try for the love of God to finish my meal.

After dinner, we walk along the sidewalk in front of the beach. I sing a rap song in an attempt to entertain her, not realizing that she hates rap. She indulges me. We talk before my bus arrives and it’s there on sidewalk where I get my first kiss. She doesn’t hold back and it is amazing. I want to inhale this woman, just swallow her whole. It was like Penelope Cruz and Salma Hayek had a love child and I got to kiss her. With every fiber in my being, I try to avoid getting back in the bus to Rocinha. I just want to crawl between her bosom and remain there, warm and safe.

Once back in the confines of my slum, I slurp down more beer and a mountain of blow. The next day, Lilly and I meet back out on the beach for some more kissing and ZERO petting. I figured I would have slept with her that first date, because that’s how it had gone in with the girls in Rocinha. This woman wouldn’t even let me touch her thigh. And believe me, I tried.

“No!” she says, quickly removing my hand. “You need three months touch my leg.”

“Three months?!” I ask incredulously. “In three months, I’m gonna marry you!”

• • •

Lilly and I spend as much time together as we can during the last week of my trip. On the beach, we kiss. I try to get her to drink cachaca with me and she refuses. *She won’t fall for any of my tricks.* The most poignant and heartfelt moment of the entire trip is when I tell her that I must leave the following day. “Por favor, fica aqui, Johnny (please stay here),” she says. This really touches me and breaks my heart that I can’t do it.

Years later, I discover that she doesn't even remember telling me that. I guess it was more heartfelt for me. "I never think I will see you again," she says after our marriage. "I just think this is American guy have fun with me in Brazil and then go." The jet stream had barely dissipated before she was dating again. But Lilly, I'd come to find, was a 23-year-old virgin. Her passionate kisses aside, this was a good girl. This was the kind of girl you wait for.

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Back in Concord, I mailed actual letters back and forth with Lilly and traded emails with Dieter. His baby daughter had been born and he had managed to acquire a snack stand up the hill from the makeshift trash dump. Once again, I worked my ass off for my parents, saving money for a return trip to Rocinha. I didn't do any cocaine back home (I wouldn't have known where to look anyway), but my time in Rocinha worried me to the point where I made a snap decision. I felt I needed some discipline in my life. So I joined the U.S. Army on the delayed enlistment program. This meant that I could enlist now and not ship off to boot camp until the spring. It was August, so discipline was still a long way away.

I saved enough money for two months more in Rio. If \$1,000 had sufficed for one month, I figured two grand would be plenty for two. I mowed a lot of yards and did a lot of painting to reach that amount.

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With the army looming, I shave my head to mark my commitment to a brand new me. I fly back to Brazil in January 2003, confident that this will be the ultimate send off to basic training. Nothing has changed since my departure. The buildings in Rocinha still look like a conglomerate of apartment buildings from war-torn Bosnia. Dieter, the proud new papa of a baby girl, is still

grilling chicken hearts, albeit in a new location. The park outside his apartment is still vibrant with the sounds of joyous children and barking dogs.

This time it is Angelica who finds me an apartment. Her choice leads me to believe that she has not forgiven me for my past indiscretion. I doubt she could have chosen an uglier place had she tried. It's around the corner from my last one, merely a few yards to the left from Ana's bar, where I'd eaten 90 percent of my meals. I receive a hearty greeting from Ana as I pass by. She's such a high-spirited woman.

Concrete stairs lead to my new place. They are wet and will remain so nearly each day thereafter. I never discover why. Somebody probably washes something every day and the leftover water slowly makes its way to street level. Shit flows downhill. A fresh pile sits on the sidewalk in front of my stairs. I assume it to be dog shit, though in Rocinha I can't be completely sure. I haven't even seen the apartment and already I'm thinking negatively. Angelica and I ascend the stairs and wait by the lone window, which is covered with bars. The landlady meets us and opens the door to Chateaux Goodman part two. The walls are a hideous shade of snot green. Who picks such a color? The apartment looks sad. It's just a living room, with a set of built-in shelves, and a bathroom. The sink has a PVC pipe which runs toward the floor, but doesn't quite make it. Turn the water on, expect wet feet. With no ventilation and of course no furniture, I smile, though crying on the inside, and agree to the apartment. Angelica smiles, too. Revenge is sweet, indeed.

I pay the landlady \$120 for two months. My old apartment, a distant memory, is a rooftop paradise by comparison. At least that place had a breeze. At least I could go out onto the rooftop terrace. Here, I am sandwiched, walled off by other buildings with only the narrow, wet stairs providing a breeze. It's Brazil's summer now and the mugginess just saps my energy. I unpack

my bags, placing my Rockport suede dress shoes on the top shelf in the living room, which mold so badly I toss them in the trash just weeks later. Determined not to let the apartment kill my mood, I take off down the hill and out of the favela, easily refusing the drug pushers as I leave.

Once I cross the invisible line of demarcation and exit the favela toward Sao Conrado Fashion Mall, my mood brightens. The mall, visible from the slum's edge, is full of high-end shops, a sushi bar and gorgeous women dressed in power business suits and high heels. These women seem like they were sent from a different planet, here to make men eat their dinner out of dog bowls. Could Venus actually have supplied this bountiful crop of Amazonian beauties? Gorgeous women roam the slums, too, but they usually are raggedly dressed in comparison. How could a mall like this be located two blocks from a hillside community famous for its extreme poverty and violence? Did it even matter? The place was booming and the clientele, mostly women strutting confidently in designer wear, seemed straight out of Manhattan. And with a salary more than ten times that of a slum dweller, there isn't a reason for them not to seem from Manhattan. They look alien to me.

From the mall, the ocean is just a two-minute walk away. Sao Conrado Beach isn't very popular. I walk to a yellow-roofed juice hut on the sidewalk by the sand. A large black man wielding a machete takes my order. He grabs a green coconut, tosses it in the air, catches it in his palm, then whacks the top off in three strokes. He sticks a straw inside and hands it to me. I hand him a real and drink my coconut juice ... my 33 cent coconut juice. The beaches of Sao Conrado are the least crowded of the beaches around Rio. I had used these beaches often during my first month after a night of sniffing and drinking. No need to subject large groups of people to my hocking and snot-blowing. A good swim in the salt water did wonders for my impacted sinus cavity. So good, in fact, that afterward, as I re-entered Rocinha, I would never cease to buy

another bag or two of cocaine. Each time I passed by the base of the slum where the dealers were, I'd succumb to "Oi, gringo! Você quera pó?" It was like trying to meander through a car lot without some salesman tracking my every move. They never missed me. Looking back, though, it was obvious that I didn't want to be missed. There were other side streets by which to enter, but I always took the one where I knew they'd be waiting. I wasn't going to approach them ... I was going to walk right past ... unless they spoke to me first. *I'm not gonna do it. I'm not gonna do it. Oh, fuck it, just give me the bag.*

Could I trust myself this time around? I was hopeful, that's about as far as my confidence went. Lilian, the woman I'd threatened to marry, was just a four-hour bus ride away in São Paulo. I needed to make concrete plans to visit her. We had emailed back and forth, but while away, our communication had tapered off somewhat. I needed to stoke the fires of love. Also, my younger brother, Paul, had purchased a ticket and was coming for a visit.

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I succumb to temptation on my very first day back. On my way back from Sao Conrado, I pass the gangsters at their special place on the sidewalk, listen to their call and continue to walk ahead, eyes forward. I pick up a cheap, flimsy mattress and beach towel to furnish my new shithole. Restless and unhappy to sit in this repugnant apartment, I go back down the hill ... to the gangster bar ... just to have a beer. It begins so innocently.

I sidle up to the bar, order a can of Brahma and a cigarette, and go to the jukebox containing exactly three songs in English. "As Long as You Love Me" by the Backstreet Boys; Sting's "Desert Rose"; and "Lady Marmalade" by a bunch of women, are my choices. I play the shit out of all of them, too, and then stand in the piss-soaked bathroom with my tools—passport,

license, rolled-up receipt, and cocaine. These become more important than anything to me. I begin to stop eating on a regular basis. Ana's place becomes almost solely a watering hole.

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The night before Paul is scheduled to land – damn these 7 a.m. flights – I have the bright idea to spend the night getting loaded at the gangster bar. I grab a beer, insert a real into the jukebox and disappear for a moment into the bathroom. By this point, I even wear flip flops into the bathroom.

Coming out of the bathroom, wiping my nose and perspiring, I meet a dude with thick, wavy hair who speaks, surprisingly, great English. It's so nice to have someone other than Dieter with whom to speak. And, big surprise, he enjoys drinking and snorting. I have plenty of money to do both. As the night turns into morning, which they all did on coke, I tell him that I somehow need to get to the airport to pick up my brother. It's approaching 6 a.m. and I'm just now getting around to making a plan. To my astonishment, he offers to drive me there in his car– after our all night bender. But, alcohol cannot overpower cocaine, unless you run out of cocaine, which we didn't plan to do.

Funny thing about doing cocaine is that it's so much more fun and cooler at night. In the light of the day, it just looks ugly and desperate, especially when you think that eventually, you need to go to sleep.

I buy some more coke for the ride, and then we walk out of the slum to a side street near the mall to grab his white hatchback. He drives like a New York City cabbie, weaving in and out, stopping abruptly, and honking his horn. At a stop light near the airport in Rio, he gets out, removes his cock and pisses right there in the intersection. Then he gets back inside like nothing happened.

“Holy fuck, man, that was nuts,” I say, as he guns the gas toward where I hope is the airport. “You sure you know where you’re going?”

We’re nearly two hours late picking him up, and Paul tells me he was just about to fly back home to California, where he was stationed in the Coast Guard. “Where the fuck have you been? Damn, you’re skinny,” he tells me. This hurts coming from him, the skinny brother. *Do I really look that bad?*

We exit the airport, with me apologizing for our tardiness, then explaining exactly who “we” are. When he sees my driver, who is sweating profusely, he asks, “Who is this fucking John Travolta reject?”

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Being an upstanding member of our armed forces, Paul doesn’t do any drugs during his 10-day visit. Poor guy thought we would stay in a hotel in either Copacabana or Ipanema. I may have neglected to tell him exactly where he’d be staying – the despicable green-walled monster.

We arrive safely in Rocinha, the John Travolta reject’s hatchback still in one piece. I never see him again. Paul is an immediate hit with the ladies, who apparently don’t get many natural blondes in this part of the world. Angelica spends an inordinate amount of time just rubbing his head as he sits in the park, talking with Dieter. Despite the female interest in him, Paul keeps it in his pants (for the most part), opting to remain faithful to a girl he’d only recently begun dating.

A trip to a local diner in Rocinha makes the greatest impression on him. I had been there several times, some with Dieter, sometimes alone. They serve a shitpile of food for damn near nothing – macaroni salad, potatoes, bread, meats, rice and beans, the works. However, to get there you have to hang a left past the gangster bar and walk down this narrow alley that looks

like something out of a Stephen King movie. Steam actually rises from the grates in the road. It's a fairly good hike, too, and the path is littered with young kids holding sawed-off shotguns, pistols and assault rifles. One kid even carries a machete. They're just standing on the sidewalk like nothing is going on, possibly awaiting orders from higher ups. And due to the narrowness of the alley, they are dangerously close to us. As we make our way deeper and deeper, Paul gets more and more nervous.

"Just chill, man," I tell him. "Keep walking and don't make eye contact."

A horrible feeling comes over both of us when we arrive to see the diner is closed. *What the fuck?!* The worst part is that we have to turn around and go back. If you keep going in the same direction you eventually arrive at the slum's inner sanctum, the dead center of the gang's home base. Dead being the operative word. That's one piece of Dieter advice that I do follow.

On the way back, which seems to take forever, Paul bumps up the nervous meter to a level that freaks me out.

"Oh my god, Todd, they will fucking kill us, man," he says. "They don't give a shit about us. We're fucking Americans, man. They will kill ..."

"Will you shut the fuck up?" I hiss through gritted teeth, like some rookie ventriloquist. "Shut up and keep walking and chill the fuck out." *I hope these kids don't understand English.*

"Todd, I'm just saying ... Holy shit, did you see that kid with the shotgun? I think he's following us."

"Shut the fuck up, man! You're going to get us fuckin' killed."

I hear music from the jukebox. The gangster bar is right ... here. A wave of relief washes over me. He had me doubting if we'd make it out alive. I need a beer and a line of coke. Paul, with tears in his eyes, just stares at me.

“You wanna cry, don’t you?” I ask sincerely. “Go ahead and cry, man. Just cry.” This is a chief in the United States Coast Guard. I guess running down the occasional drug boat in the Caribbean doesn’t provide the same rush.

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Early into Paul’s visit, I fall seriously ill with pneumonia. The powdered marble had coated my lungs and fucked me up something fierce. Sweaty and semi bed-ridden, I still try to play host and tour guide to my younger brother of five years. I eat even less than before, which wasn’t much, due to the crushing appetite killer that is cocaine. I’d become that little black kid, with whom I’d sat on the grassy hill, openly doing blow. I was pathetic, wasting away to nothing. Like the kid, I was wearing clothes that were a couple sizes too big, once a perfect fit. But now I look like somebody wearing hand-me-downs.

Jacqueline gets wind, through Angelica (I didn’t even know they’d exchanged numbers), that I am back in town and does a pop-in visit. She sees my condition and drags my sorry carcass to a doctor in Rocinha. Sweaty and weak, I sit in the lobby as she sweetly fills out the questionnaire. She accompanies me inside the doctor’s office, where she translates the Portuguese and prods me to be honest. “Yes, I have been using cocaine,” I admit to the doctor. “Uh, you know, every now and then. Not too much.” *You pathetic fucking liar! Can you be honest once? Just once.*

The antibiotics I am prescribed work wonders for me. I stop using drugs until I feel my strength come back, then it’s business as usual. Paul and Jackie are sitting on his mattress in the green monster. He is helping her pronounce his name, which is surprisingly difficult for Brazilians. I had told him of the odor, which had gone undetected by him since meeting her.

“Hyan,” she says. “High-an.”

“There it is,” he says. “It’s back. Smells like collard greens and pigs feet.”

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With Paul gone, and Jackie back up northeast, I am free to pursue my life in the slum. Yet another night turns into morning. Again and again I stumble back to the dog shit, walk up to my apartment and sleep until three in the afternoon. Once awake, I force myself to eat one small hamburger. The hamburgers come with lettuce, tomato, mayonnaise and a fried egg on top. The yolk is nice and runny. It’s all I can do to finish one. Then it’s on to more beer, coke and cigarettes.

Free to travel to São Paulo to finish what I had started with Lilian, I’m confident, no idea why, that we will fall madly in love upon my arriAna. The only thing “falling madly” is my ability to think coherently. I email her from Rocinha’s lone internet café. She is excited to see me again. Oh, let the choir sing. She wants me!

We make arrangements to meet up at the bus terminal in São Paulo, a city of 18 million people, where we will kiss passionately and never let go of one another. To say that Lilly is repulsed by what she sees at the bus stop would be an accurate statement. Clueless, I think everything is fine. Her greeting is, however, strangely lukewarm for two people who have swapped spit. *A kiss on the cheek?* I just chalk it up to nerves on her part. It never dawns on me that I am the problem. Let’s see, since our last visit, I had shaved my head to a stubble and become emaciated. Why wasn’t she leaping into my arms?

We hold hands (out of pity on her part, I’m sure) as we walk down the street. Not wanting to be alone with me, she invites her older brother, Camargo, to have dinner with us at the restaurant. The three of us sit down to a lovely dinner, them one side, me on the other. I am a twitching, fidgety mess. I get up to go to the bathroom.

“Does he have AIDS?” she asks her brother in Portuguese.

“No,” he tells her. “He’s using cocaine.”

Thanks for playing, but I’m sorry, your game is now over.

I return to the table to an uncomfortable silence. Then, it’s time for them to go. Lilly, apparently, must rise early that morning and needs her sleep. *Okay. Well, that didn’t work out like I’d imagined. What’s her fucking problem?*

With that, I bid them a good night and head back, alone, to my motel. Still puzzled, I never once think her behavior has anything to do with me. Denial is not just a river in Egypt. The highlight of my lone trip to São Paulo is seeing two dead bodies on my way home from the disappointing dinner. Lying in the middle of the street in front of a motel, I see him. His body contorted and his head a smashed pumpkin, I can see brain matter. From the looks of it, he gets hit while trying to cross a busy intersection on his bicycle. Nobody gets out or even seems to give a shit. One lane keeps moving along nicely, the people in the other lane just seem annoyed that this dead guy is messing up their commute.

Walking toward my motel, I notice a second body lying on the sidewalk next to a green shrub. His shirt is pulled up a little. He looks so relaxed, like he is napping on a summer night. As I get closer, I notice his leg bent back awkwardly, like Jim Carey when he falls out of the airport tunnel in the movie *Dumb and Dumber*. Directly underneath his sternum, in the rib area, is a small bullet hole, nothing else. *Am I the first person to find him?* Car horns honk and traffic hums as I look at him for another minute, without touching him, and get the hell out of there before I either become a suspect or catch a bullet my-damn-self.

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Back in Rocinha, fresh from a lackluster trip to see the woman I thought liked me, I sink deeper into the grip of cocaine. I have conversations, aloud mind you, with people who aren't there. My mind races so fast, I have to have an outlet. I talk with my dead father. I'm not completely insane, so he doesn't answer me. It's a one-sided conversation in which I apologize for certain things I had done—like cringing and letting go of his hand after the stroke that would soon end his life. It was a conscience cleaner. I also speak to a woman who had broken my heart back in Florida. I tell her off really well. I feel proud, like I've accomplished something by letting her have it.

Oddly enough, the skinnier I become, the more badass of a walk I develop. In an attempt to overcompensate, I try to walk like the actor Steven Seagal, shoulders back, arms swinging—attempting to project a “don't fuck with this guy” image. All the while passing large men wearing jiu-jitsu t-shirts. I probably should be killed on the spot, for that ridiculous walk, if nothing else.

One such opportunity for a good killing of yours truly comes at 1:30 a.m. in front of Dieter's place. We are sitting together, washing our cocaine drip (the shit that runs from the sinus cavity to the throat) down with beers when a group of shirtless black men armed to the teeth with assault rifles march right toward us. *Oh, shit! One of the girls I fucked from that bar told on me. I'm fucked!* Dieter gives me a look that says, “Adios, Short-Dick Johnny. Sorry, buddy.”

We watch as they get closer. Closer. Then, they hang a slight left and continue marching past. *Whew.* Minutes later, they come out—two gangsters in front, two in back, with the poor bastard sandwiched between. The gangsters bringing up the rear point the barrels of their weapons at the young black man's head. Neither of us knows why he appears to be on his way to

an execution. I sit there, slack-jawed, heart pounding away inside the cavity that once was my chest. We watch as the group disappears down the street.

The only other time during these two months where I feel on edge and somewhat threatened is at my favorite gangster bar. Not thinking too much of it at first, it's Dieter who tells me there is more to this encounter than meets the eye.

He and I are sitting at a corner table when this scuzzy, young light-skinned guy comes up to our table, says something in Portuguese, and then sits down. *Well make yourself at home. We don't mind if you do.* Wearing a cap, with shoulder-length hair and thin beard, he addresses Dieter. I have no idea what about, as my Portuguese continues to function on the lowest of levels. What I do know is that this guy is not some low-level flunky. Dieter's rapt attention tells me that much. Ever street-wise, Dieter tosses in a curveball as protection.

"Johnny, lass uns jetzt Deutsch sprechen," Dieter says. He wants us to speak German in front of the gangster interrogator. Dieter thinks that he can understand English better than he lets on.

"Er glaubt, dass vielleicht du ein Spion bist," he says. *He thinks I'm some sort of a spy or a narc. Me? A spy? Laughable!*

"Wie, bitte?" I asked. "Spinnt er voll." What? Is he crazy?

This man wants, demands to know what I am doing in the favela. Was I a narc? Here to collect information? *Huh? For what purpose?* Was I just coming here to make fun of the people here, using up everything before leaving back to my ritzy place in Leblon? That is the part that scares me. Now, a narc is one thing. A spy is one thing. But if it becomes a judgment call on my drug-induced treatment of the locals, which I think has been excellent, then things could take a

sharp turn. I sit with very good posture and sincerely give this man the attention and respect that he fucking deserves.

“He wants to see you sniff a line of coke to prove yourself,” Dieter tells me. *Gee, uh, no problem. I’d been doing it damn-near daily ever since I got here! How ‘bout an entire bag? Here, watch this!* I do as requested, certainly not wanting to find out what he’d do if I refused. I’d seen too much of the Commando Vermelho’s judicial system already.

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Brazil, I find, is like Paris in this way. The Parisians don’t cater to us by learning to speak English. They expect us to learn French. Granted, they do it in a mean-spirited, disparaging way, but I can appreciate preserving one’s history – language obviously being a part of that. In Rio, I didn’t at all get the feeling that they refused English out of spite. I think the cariocas are too busy seducing and being seduced, loving and being loved, dancing and frolicking on the beach to bother with learning another language.

In Rocinha, the “Robin Hood” gangsters are rich, at times helpful and always ruthless. Don’t be blinded by the parties and the handouts. At the end of the day, ruling a slum is a cold-blooded business. In fact, Commando Vermelho lost its hold on Rocinha back in 2004 when its top leaders were either arrested or killed during a dangerous shootout with riAna gangs vying for top seed of Brazil’s largest slum. Since that time it has been a gang called Amigos dos Amigos who calls the shots. Regardless, I can’t imagine much has changed in the day-to-day life.

Some people who are born there end up making money and stay there, because they feel the vibrancy of the favela and don’t want to lose it, even though they now can afford to leave. The biggest challenge residents of Rocinha face is their quality of education and the opportunities that come with it. There’s a public school, but it’s not a quality school, not a

quality education. And without a quality education, it makes it difficult for favela residents to make a connection with residents of more affluent areas. Many of the favela dwellers remain illiterate. This, sadly, fuels discrimination between them and their rich neighbors down the hill, across the mountains. Those two mountains, with a blue-water view in the middle, wall off Rocinha from Ipanema and Leblon. It's such a short distance from paradise to the poor house. A hike over the mountains or a short moto-taxi ride will get you there, but it can't close the gap in status.

Rocinha got really dangerous when the gangs fought for control. People were killed in crossfire, when gang violence raged out of control. The gangs, which have networks in other major cities, fought like savages for control of multiple slums. At one point, Lilian's brother, who was living in São Paulo, called his parents to tell them goodbye, forever. Gangs were running through the streets, shooting up his apartment. And he didn't live in the slums. Gang violence had invaded normal neighborhoods. Thankfully, he was unharmed.

I saw a news report about Rio that showed a video shot from a helicopter. A dozen raggedly-dressed black kids (favela kids) were robbing European tourists blind on the beach. It looked like a pack of wolves tearing into an antelope. When the ladies shooed six away, six more were grabbing and stealing from the other side. When they turned to fend them off, the others came in from the other side. Dirt poor, these children stuck out like sore thumbs to the normal residents through their dress, their speech and their education level. Stereotypes prevail.

"When you told me Roncinha, all this knowledge come in my mind," Lilly says later. "You are gangster. You are violent. You will do bad things. If you are there in Rocinha, I think you are gangster and will take me like prisoner. Because in Brazil, you associate poor with violence. They don't have opportunity to get an education so they go to violence. They don't

have money for education like rich people ... like normal people, so how you can have conversation with them?"

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Lilly and I were married May 13, 2012, on my mother's front porch in Concord. Lilly loves to tell anyone who will listen the story of how we met. When it gets to the three months to touch my leg part and how in three months I was going to marry her, she says ... "And I wait ten years! Can you believe?"

After that tragic dining experience with her brother (who thankfully did not remember the emaciated cokehead), she never thought she would see me again. She likes to remind me every so often, which really makes me think how fortunate I was to see the relationship through. Through all of the years after, six in the army, one on unemployment, one deleted from the memory files, I never threw her address away. It was scribbled on a torn piece of paper in the shape of a triangle in my desk drawer. Every so often, I would clean out the drawer and see this address with her name on it. *I wonder what happened to that girl?* I never threw it away, always thinking ... someday.

I was sitting on my mom's couch next to an unlit fireplace, perusing the Internet while watching television, when someday came. October 2010, more than eight years after that first kiss ... since that black cocktail dress, our lives intertwined again. Searching Facebook, I found this picture of a brunette standing on a seaside cliff. I sent a message, "Are you the Lilly from Ipanema?" She was. Thankfully, she remembered me. We communicated via Skype, viewing each other and each other's parents. She had recently broken up with her boyfriend and I was in between bar tramps. She was thrilled to see that I'd put on some weight and lost the jitters and constant sniffing.

Four months of Skype calls later, I was in Lisbon, Portugal, where she had been living, studying for her master's degree in marketing. She was an hour late picking me up from the airport and all I could think was, "Fuck! She stood me up!"

Then I saw that smile and it was as if the gap in our relationship had never happened. My two-week ticket to Portugal turned into a five-month vacation and love affair. Once my trip was over, we kept the Skype thing going until she came to North Carolina. It was Christmas time 2012 and my present was somewhere over the Atlantic. She's been here ever since.

When I think back to all of the shit that could have gone wrong in our relationship—and there was a bunch—I marvel that we ever got together. At least this man, who sat petrified on that Ipanema Beach ... at least this stupid man was smart enough to marry her.

