

# Forbidden Brazil

---

A Year Living In Organized Crime

Michelle de Abreu

Nour Amari Literature

The stories in this collection only came to fruition as a result of the author's awakened desire to understand her Brazilian heritage. By no means did this work stem from any anthropological study or social experiment, nor was it intended with the purpose of creating stories. Instead, the author approached these experiences through a humanitarian lens, with an emphasis on understanding racial and social injustices.

These stories were simply generated as a result of such experiences.

The events and conversations in this book have been recounted and recorded to the best of the author's ability, though some names and details have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals.

Copyright © 2023 by Nour Amari Literature

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or used in any manner without written permission of the copyright owner except for the use of quotations in a book review.

ISBN 979-8-9867315-0-6

An intimate collection  
of curiosity,  
of survival.  
A collection to respect the awakening  
and honor  
the sharing of perspective.

For before we are anything  
we are human.

Effervescent with passion,  
riddled with fear.  
Lavish your brain, your body, your entirety  
into these pages for here we meet  
opportunity to explore hidden direction.  
The self.

And the humans we exist amongst.

This is Forbidden Brazil.





# Contents

*Preface:* An Image Split

1. An Exhaling Memory
2. The South
3. Favelada
4. Studded Freedom
5. Larissa
6. Permission to Land
7. The Faction is Born

Comando Vermelho

Amigos dos Amigos

Terceiro Comando Puro

Primeiro Comando da Capital

8. Run
9. Jeitinho
10. Soli
11. Babilônia
12. Pacification
13. Sky on Fire

14. Reset
15. Chains
16. Deals
17. The Honey God
18. Exposed
19. When the Air Pops
20. Rocinha
21. Staying in the Lines
22. The Container
23. The Staircase of Unfamiliar Views
24. André
25. Coexisting
26. Disengagement from Truth
27. Weaving Humanity
28. Funk
29. Getting High
30. André
31. Lisandro's post
32. Confession
33. Hidden Messages
34. The Eye of the Storm
35. Running
36. In Tragic Loss, You Resist or You Yield
37. Hiss
38. Warping Colors
39. Answering the Call

## 40. Saudade

History of Brazil, *the Diaspora & Birth of the Favela*

Translations & Descriptions

Thank you, Reader

Acknowledgments

Sources

# An Image Split

People design things in their mind.  
Presumptions and expectations.  
It makes them feel safer.  
It makes them feel in control  
when they can categorize from the outside.  
Putting others into tiny boxes and reading them as labels.  
A mass overproduction as if we have lost integrity to the  
individuality of the soul.  
I have always been questioned in my American life,  
*“But where are you really from?”*  
*Really from*—words of fire in my ears.  
Their mouths would twist when I didn’t give them the answers  
they wanted.  
They would question me more.  
Prodding to fit me into their predesigned box by  
weird confidence verbalizing what they see in my body.

I am an image split from his.  
In female form.  
An hourglass wrapped in olive skin.  
Dark waving hair and an ass too thick to be real.  
The darkness of features  
contrast  
with the eyes of my mother. Hazel. Set two shades lighter.  
I could never be of her Irish descent,  
which has supported and raised my life,  
for I am an image split from his.  
And to some society  
my physicality must represent everything that I am.

So when I gave them the answers they wanted  
It turned them on.  
Oozing elation  
that my body represents this mystical place.  
*"Say something in Portuguese."*  
A language I never learned.  
*"I love Brazil, the people are amazing."*  
Dragging me through wonderful interactions, interactions I  
never had.  
*"What is it like there?"*  
Never hearing that I am born and raised in the US. Brazil . . . is  
not mine.

A firing world questioning me to tell me who I am.

For why would anyone remember,

*you don't know what goes on behind the door?*

And with every question I would get more questions  
about my parents.

No, about my Brazilian father.

Forced to mask tragedy in smile, I could never tell anyone what  
went on behind the door. About the abuse. About the last  
words he told me before he disappeared.

Every time I wrote my name,

Every time I met anyone,

Every time I looked in the mirror,

Estranged presence flaunted in front of me.

For twenty-eight years slapped me to remember

I

am part

him.

The stories in this book only happened because I arrived at a  
moment in my life of being tired of letting the trauma win. I was  
tired of being a stranger to myself. I was tired of feeling forced  
to wear a veil. I was tired of being tired.

I applied for a tourist visa to go to Brazil and found myself staring back at the embassy rep behind the glass, confused and upset that my application was immediately rejected.

“But I don’t understand,” I told her. “I’m a good person. I have no record,” I told her.

“It doesn’t matter,” she replied. “Citizens cannot be approved for a visa.”

What?

Before I knew what was happening, she was handing me a passport and a Brazilian birth certificate painted in Portuguese. I filled with disbelief, holding a photo of myself with a hologram of the Brazilian flag laminated across my face staring back at me.

When I left the embassy and walked down an impersonal concrete block in Manhattan, it all looked grey. Walking atop subway grates of white noise, between towering steel, I felt small. I anticipated someone running after me, telling me there had been a mistake. Telling me the documents aren’t actually mine; it’s all an error. I started to walk faster, shuffling my feet for blocks and blocks and blocks. Running from a shadow that never appeared.

When I booked a ticket to go to Brazil

I was twenty-eight.

I spent the year prior working three jobs to financially support

myself, to hiatus in Brazil and only focus on me.  
I did nothing to prepare.  
No research, no plan, but I knew one thing.  
I needed my mind, my being to be without expectation.  
Full of empty space  
Preconception erased  
Naked in raw perspective.  
To allow the place,  
the sounds,  
the ways of the people to say what it needed to say  
and to show me what Brazil really is.  
It must be about more than him.

I knew my father was somewhere in Brazil and I grappled with the decision of finding him. Finally, it was this: I am going for myself in the commitment that when you face the dark, you face it one hundred percent. I refuse to own doubt grown by fear and know that in this chance to understand my roots, nothing can be left unturned.

It wasn't my plan to spend a year in Rio de Janeiro, but that's what happened. There I worked through my childhood trauma to understand, release, and get free. The first draft of this book included the deep difficulty of meeting my father for the first time in thirteen years. It included meeting the depths and very ends of all the emotions I knew and didn't know I had. The first



copy of this book included so much that I feared traumatizing you, my dear reader.

So what I bring to you here in *Forbidden Brazil* is a collection of stories which happened alongside my healing. What I bring to you here is a collection built on the foundation of self-trust, and what happens when you leave the world that you know. This is a collection that details what may happen when you allow your brain to open. When you recognize the depths of *access*. What I bring to you here is a community that was planted inside of my heart, consumed the blood of my veins. What I bring to you here is a collection of stories pumped and poured out hot from the depths of my soul.

Now the story can begin.



# Chapter 1

---

## An Exhaling Memory

I had been here once before.  
When I was ten years old and the first time I had been so far from any secure protection. In the memory I watch the heat rise in waves to blur and question clarity.

I can feel the sun beating in wet stagnant air.  
Sounds of firecrackers drip falling from the sky.  
“To let the faction know that police are here,” my father’s words whispered by secret between my crouching shoulders and into my ears.

We stood by a sand-colored concrete wall,  
lined by peaks of blue and green jagged glass.

My head lifted to the sky, an endless blue  
at last

something familiar.

The sun soaked my soul.

Under its rays, through squinted vision,  
geometric shapes were born shimmying into the sky, dancing  
with my sun. He whispered again, "They use the *pipas* to fight  
each other."

*Pipa* is "kite" in Portuguese.

He too shifted his gaze above, absorbing the same light which  
took me in.

We watched a forest green diamond with a tail of yellow pick  
up,

Swoosh

Up

Swoosh

Up

Swoosh

Side to side

Growing like a cobra

Gaining strength,

power,

demand,

over that which lies below.

It paused.

To flaunt the yellow diamond tail which rode the waves of the  
wind and  
within a breath  
it darted  
downward.

Dashing side to side  
Cutting the air along a rigid edge of a knife,  
attack.

The colorless one below . . .  
was done.

Dead.

It just . . . floated.

“He is the champion,” my father said, as he pointed to the green  
with yellow tail. Without a moment of remorse, “Get in the  
car,” he told me.

I did what he asked because I always did what he asked.

My memory skips here,  
forwarding ahead to enter a hotel room.

I don’t remember anything but entering the hotel room.

A flooding sensation we were floating in the sky.

A sky gleaming so blue, I stood still in front of the window as  
part of the abyss.

From the inside of a postcard

hazy sun rays blurred the end of the sea

and the beginning of the sky.

Vibrant green rolled over the mountain curves and the tropical leaves glistened as they tumbled to fall onto white sand that glazed crystal water.

He drew his finger to the window,  
and called my attention to the closest mountain ridge.

Hugged in the floresta  
lined with tiny brown boxes,  
maybe millions of boxes,  
stacked one  
on top  
of the other.

They rolled down the edge of the green lush,  
drifting off to hide beneath the earth.

With his finger to the window,

“It is so dangerous, the police won’t neever go there.”

*Neever*. He had this way of combining words from his Portuguese to English. *Neever*. Maybe a blend of “never” and “ever.”

“The kids have guns and they fight over drugs. People can *neever* leave the house because of the shooting,” he explained, as he threw his hands to the air beside his head. “This country is so fucked up, Michelle.” He turned his back. He walked away.

I stayed.

The boxes should have had puffs of smoke exhaling above, like a war zone. How could they look so peaceful? How could I be staring at a whole mass of life where the street is so incompatible from the nature that engulfed it?

In that moment I had no idea. No idea that eighteen years would pass ahead of me as they did. No idea that eighteen years would bring me to overlook foggy memories. No idea that today, my forehead would be pressed to the portrait-sized window, watching life below emerge as pieces of a dollhouse. And now, at the end of sixteen hours, I begin to hope the plane would never arrive. It's been eighteen years and I *need* more time.

When I stood at that window questioning clarity as a child, I had no idea that in eighteen years I would be brought back to that very same favela. By accident.

# Chapter 2

---

## The South

The more our flight descends the deeper I feel my breath, expanding and sitting in the center of my chest, to make me a little more real.

We descend . . . descend . . . descend . . . and then there's God in the sky. Christ the Redeemer in my eyeline. An emblem for the country and city of Rio de Janeiro, he stands as a cross on the peak of Sugarloaf Mountain . . . infamously majestic and secretly striking as much unknown that the mountain he stands atop, post-abolition era, served as a natural divider between the rich and poor. Leveraged to intentionally exclude millions of people as the favelas were constructed. Now gliding so close, I could smash and reach through the window to wrap my hand around his waist.



Tiny toy buildings and cars get bigger . . . and bigger . . . and become real.

The airport is overly cold; people are everywhere, crossing in scattered directions, yet all I can hear is the sound of my suitcase wheels bumping over every single tile break. I hear my mother's voice in my mind: "The last thing you want to do is land somewhere and spend an hour waiting for a bag." She has told me this since I was young. While Brazil was always an off-limit discussion, she made the rest of the world a huge part of my life. "It's so big," she would tell me gleaming, holding the globe between us as we would spin and talk about the different countries and people. Prior to today I've lived in five different countries because . . . I wanted to. Never have I felt this extremity of vulnerability.

Customs has two hanging signs, Brazilians and everyone else. The line of "everyone else" snakes between nylon strips and I am the only individual passing to the Brazilian side. *This feels bizarre*. I exhale.

At the glass security window, I slide my passport onto the counter and hope I'm not going to be asked anything. The man in a blue-collared button-down t-shirt holds my opened passport with his thumb next to my face and says something to me. I have no idea what he said. He looks up and repeats himself.

Here we stare at each other for what seems like ten minutes as my mind tightens, *My God*, I think, *he's saying my name. That's my name?* How could such a beautiful sound ever belong to me? A lifetime of being asked to repeat the pronunciation for the combination of letters are so rare. It rolled from his tongue naturally, in a compilation of sounds I had never heard before. How could I have been saying it wrong for all these years, twenty-eight years, a name that has and has not belonged to me? Yet a stranger is more familiar with my name than I.

I snap out of my daze and smile and nod. He returns my passport and says something I don't understand. I take that as permission to continue floating somewhere on the realm in and out of consciousness.

Leaving the glass airport doors, hit by a humid wall of heat, my whole body is wrapped and enveloped in the embrace of the bright sun. *Okay, let this be good . . . one step done, let this be good*  
..

I nod to a taxi and pass the attendant a palm-sized ripped piece of paper with the guesthouse address. He puts up a five and makes a zero with his other hand; my thumbs-up seals the deal and I slide into his yellow with blue-striped car.

It's loud. The announcer on the radio is enthusiastic, speaking

from the gulf of his throat, dramatic with deep, dipping sounds, rolling and exuberant sounds, his words melodic as his tone grows.

Lines of palm trees zip by as we leave the airport.

“Where you from?” the driver asks me in English.

“The US. New York,” I reply.

“USA?” he says, and I see his eyes dart up to the rearview mirror looking back at me.

“But you look Latina,” he says.

“Yea . . . my father is Brazilian.”

“And your mother American?” he concludes.

“That’s right,” I say and feel uncertain, as if I am exposing too much of *my* information, my being. Experiencing again, the float between two worlds of a taunted inner soul, understanding that my physicality will always define who I am.

He looks into the rearview mirror again, his eyes gently squint.

“Welcome,” he says, “This is your home too.”

His response stops my breath.

How can he say that to me? In a foreign land, a welcome more generous than I’ve received in my own.

“Are you from here?” I ask the driver.

“Carioca da Gema.” He says energetically, looking up at me through the rearview mirror once again. “Carioca is someone

who lives in Rio for a long time. Carioca da Gema is a true blood, born in Rio.” Through his words I hear him gleaming. “How did you learn your English?” I ask him. “Ah tourism. I teach myself; I try to practice. Knowing English helps to make money here.” And then I hear his smile leave. The driver says in time to pass a line of blue and white police trucks, all with the narrow barrel guns leaning out the rolled down windows. “We’re the most rich country in the world, we have everything,” he says, “but you would never know it. The money goes to very few people.”

In a short time, the highway reminds us that we’re in a dense city. Three, four, five-stories-high stacked brick boxes rising above the car to hug the highway lane, they’re brown and brick. And then there’s partition. Plastic barriers line the highway sides to curtain the favela homes which lay behind them, though through their gaps, there are clotheslines.

The partitions were put up here for the 2014 World Cup. The government told the residents of the favela: *It is to minimize the sounds coming from the highway.* In truth, it was to hide the favela, which is seen as a problem. History—racial abuse and segregation—has laid it this way. Government policy concerning racial segregation has solidified the endless cycle of abuse and neglect; a population of people denied universal civil and human rights.

“The favelas here, they’re at war with each other,” the driver says. I imagine bullets flying over the eight lanes of rushing cars, while to my right, there are hidden boxes, to my left, an identical, mirroring frame on the other side of the highway.

It’s 2018 and Brazil’s Defense Ministry has called Rio de Janeiro “broken.” Organized faction (*gang*) crime has “nearly [taken] over the state of Rio de Janeiro . . .” to such a level it is beyond the capacity of the three branches of Brazil’s Police force: the Civil State Police, the Federal Police, the Military Police formed for special insurgency.<sup>1</sup>

Armed assault is common and is the face of breaking news stories. Intense looting and attacks on tourists during Carnaval 2018; the government responds by action. President Michel Temer criticizes the absence by Rio de Janeiro State Governor Luiz Fernando Pezão and Rio de Janeiro City Mayor Marcelo Crivella.

While police are notoriously corrupt and accept faction bribes to look the other way, the military is seen as a “correct” armed force, who hold true to their duties. Temer orders the military to control all security in the state of Rio de Janeiro.

Today, driving down the middle of the highway at the same pace

as traffic is an army green tank. Three pistols strike out of the top and it's moving by that conveyor belt wheel set.

"This is very common now," the driver says. "Especially during the sunset, they stay close to the beach, standing next to the sand in their army boots and their guns." He puffs air.

We woosh through a tunnel, and when we come out, we're driving straight toward water as if we could leave the concrete earth right there. Dense gray buildings on the right and sparkling water the left. We ride along the famous gray- and white-tiled Copacabana boardwalk, humming with people and scattered with vendors.

"This is very nice," the driver says, as he makes a right turn to go into the city. Buildings tall but not overwhelming, it's not New York where you get swallowed in. And in less than a moment, we left the city blocks and arrived at another coast—"Ipanema!" he says, "Do you know the song?" he asks and begins serenading our ride.

I smile to some sound effect, and I feel like I can breathe. Like this isn't so scary, it doesn't have to be scary, and as we ride down the coast, waves crash and there are three scattered islands in the distance. People walk on the street shirtless and in bikinis only. And every so often there are circular stands of a wrap-around

bar surrounded with scattered tables and chairs, and musicians sitting on stools with tall mics and various instruments.

We pull into a quiet neighborhood, with a broken concrete street with houses guarded by metal frames. There are few people walking the street in shorts and flip-flops and scattered shirtless men.

The driver counts the house numbers under his breath, and we come to a rolling stop. When I open the car door humidity floods my throat, and I look up; beneath the canopy, purple and white orchids drape from the tree, shadows glisten and dance on the street. The driver places my bag next to me, awakening me from this momentary dream. I pay him and he bows in response, dipping his head down gently, with his hand to his heart, “Go with God,” he says.

# Chapter 3

---

## Favelada

I buzz an electronic bell and wait outside the gate for maybe two minutes before, “Michelley!” an elated voice echoes from a short man with dark hair appearing from the building. “How was your flight? Ok?” he asks in this energetic tone, skipping the air and opening his arms to hug me in. “I am Paulo,” he says, “we are happy to have you.” His smile is warm. “Come, come,” he says, taking my bag and leading the way through a slate-tiled patio.

Inside the building I am hit with a pure white light, false brightness. One flight of stairs up, a beautiful carved wood door is ajar, coupled with an aroma lingering, proof that they have been cooking all day. Air steeped in a blend of garlicky spices.

Stepping in the space is blasted by color and blasted by things.



Walls cluttered with photos of landscapes next to portraits of Jesus. A glass coffee table covered in miniature trinkets of characters and boxes, some opened to expose glass flowers, each of which sits on its own white crocheted doily. A different kind of materialism I had seen before, where the things have things.

I follow Paulo through a short hallway. We pass several closed wooden doors, and then come to mine. Two small keys jingle in his hand, as he unlatches the creaking door. “Everything you could need, is here,” he says proudly, while stepping into a room with an oversized glass window beaming sunlight, exposing the gray building across the street. There’s a single sheet pulled over the bed and on a side table, an electric kettle, filters and a small funnel for pour-over coffee.

“We are hosting a lunch with our friends; will you join us?” His openness strikes me and it’s just moments before cheers of people echo the house as a celebration, a parade, and an announcement of presence.

I follow Paulo to the entryway; there are five others with glowing, beaming smiles and dressed perfectly in crisp button-down collared shirts and airy floral dresses. Everyone kisses my cheeks and hugs me in as if we have known each other for years. Nearly everyone sings, “Oh Americana!” *Oh she’s American!* as Paulo makes the introduction and begins to

ask me questions about where I am from, why Brazil, and what I have seen. “Come on, let’s sit, sit.” Paulo interjects, welcoming us to the table, perfectly dressed in a white tablecloth decorated with a pitcher of juice, white rice in what looks like a stone pot, and marinated chicken legs in a glass pan set upon potholders.

We all take a seat around the table, except Paulo who remains standing, pointing to each of the dishes decorating the table, explaining the ingredients. Black beans, which had been cooked in garlic water, and still sat in the liquid. Some people prefer more or less liquid to saturate the white rice which has been cooked with just enough salt to make each grain full and plump. Of course there is meat, because every lunch must have meat. There was a giant glass pan of chicken which had been coated in light mustard, garlic and spritzed with lime before it was rotated with chopped potatoes, onion, mixed with half a cup of mayonnaise and some olive oil to make it creamy.

“You see Michelley, I am the best at making this dish. It is very popular, but I am the best, you know why Michelley?” and Paulo pauses, I think without needing nor looking for an answer as he explains very simply, “Because I make it with love.”

Surely my grin is large here, for the adoration of his serious and intimate statement. I look around the table, there were only innocent smiles of grace. He continues, pointing to a platter of

salad with giant uncut green leaves, sliced tomatoes, and onion around the perimeter, along with hearts of palm—not white, not beige, but thick colorless circles that look soft about the size of a quarter. I’m passed a glass pitcher of neon yellow-orange juice which, just like the coffee table trinkets, has a white doily covering the top, weighted down by teardrop-shaped beads sewn to the edges.

“Maracuya,” Paulo says, noting there is no added sugar but it can be added if I would like. I’m glad I sipped before responding because this type of Brazilian passion fruit is only sweet, if anything, I needed water to cut it.

We begin to dig in and the conversation quickly moves in melody of various voices intertwining and then one voice rings over everyone. Our heads turn to her, managing to silence the other conversations. She begins to tell a story from the high school classroom where she teaches.

The scene brief. Two high schoolers, a boy staring off at a girl, perhaps in love.

The girl snaps, “What are you looking at?”

The boy looks away

... and looks back.

Increasingly agitated, the girl begins to raise her voice, “What are you looking at?”

The boy looks away

. . . and looks back.

The girl done with his game and puts him in his place, “You better stop or I’m going to come for you, and you’ll regret your life,” she says.

End scene.

“Que menina favelada.” *What a favelada girl.* The woman said this word like it is . . . physically dirty. As if it had particles of soil wrapped around it. And if you were to put it in your mouth, your jaw would drop, your tongue would roll out. Like the flavor had gone wrong and as it smacks your mouth the senses make sounds of rejection in a dropping pitch of disgust.

*Fa-ve-la-da*

Intentional.

“Favelada . . . What is favelada?” I ask.

“It means low, unintelligent people, Michelle,” she replies, with her hand up making a shooining motion to separate that kind of person and herself. “It’s the people from the favela.” Unapologetically demeaning, a confidence that she is the truth.

Silent and overwhelmed in thought, I am paralyzed. *Are you not one and the same by making an assumption of an entire population?* Using a word defined by a collection of judgments,

that's why there's division. For the formation of opinions of a life you haven't been living.

## Chapter 4

---

# Studded Freedom

D id you ever make drip castles at the beach as a kid?  
Squatting in the squish,  
knees wrap the outside of your shoulders,  
a fist full of wet sand  
melting through the cracks of tiny fingers  
drip . . .  
drip . . .  
drip droplets one  
on top  
of the other.  
The mound  
forms a cone  
of melded drops

The way they stack  
is like the structure  
of the favela.

One house  
on top  
of the other.

In brick and cement form  
Hugging mountainsides of the earth  
they could be stairs leading to the sky.  
Or descending from that above.

The heart of Ipanema is lined with shops that are shiny,  
illuminated with perfectly manicured windows . . . and even the  
people that pass by them shine. Perfectly manicured, you can  
smell wafts of their perfume and cologne as they pass . . . the  
scent of being clean that follows them along the sidewalks. This  
area is known for tourists—and the wealthy. And what sits on  
top of it, overlooking it all are the stacks of the favela.

A world laid in black and white, physical structure confirms the  
wealthy have the option to look forward, directly ahead, street  
level and only see the side of glamour. There's active choice to  
leave that realm to look up to the sky, to the brick boxed stacks  
towering above. Towering above, housing thousands of people  
who are considered a different type of person, race and class  
whose homes suspend over and down on the wealthy physically

beneath them, and inanimately above them.

What's shared though unspoken is this part in the road. The entryways of the favela mountainsides guarded by police with firearms draped across their chests, the barrels point in every direction alongside studs of blue and white police trucks. They remind us of keeping in our lines. Prescribed societal lines, paths, and levels, according to the status of birth. History progresses for some and not for others.

Police and military servicemen were among the original occupants of the favela in the late 1890s, as the government neglected to compensate them for their service. And still, the government has spouts of being unable to pay the police force, while tasking them to be the lips of a mouth to a road which extends up into an abyss of favela. Where crowds of people are composed of grandmothers carrying grocery bags in flowy floral skirts, women in pressed collared shirts and hair gel buns, walk alongside men carrying Styrofoam coolers wearing flip-flops and board shorts. Where everyone is a different shape and size and color. And when they pass that place in the road where the police are the lips of the mouth . . . they disappear.

A guarded, studded line where, from either side, life begins, ends, and starts again.



# Chapter 5

---

## Larissa

Her body totally chiseled, dripping wet in a neon green triangle string bikini. It looks painted on her body.

“Can I leave my keys with you? While I go for a swim?”

“Of course,” I tell her, and extend my palm.

The day is breezy, a beautiful crystal sky and under the palms you can hear them shimmy in the wind. Vendors saunter with towering umbrellas dripping with hundreds of bikinis tied to their shades, swaying through the sand, like a giant jellyfish on earth in material form. “Camarão, camarão,” another sells shrimps in a flat tone, on an exposed sheet pan baking in the sun. One passes, and then another, and their voices are similar. Coming from the back of their throat, “Camarão, camarão,” speaking, as if to say “take it if you want.”

Myriad shirtless men made of bronzed muscle carry trays

towering with tall glasses filled with colored drinks above their heads. Others have coolers draped over their shoulders, holding an oversized tin can-looking contraption with charred coals and smoke trailing behind them . . . to grill and melt a rectangle shape piece of cheese on a stick—*queijo coalho*. “Três por dez, três por dez!” *Three for ten, three for ten*, another says, making his own rhythm of music. He’s holding a sign for hamburgers and goes on to yell above the heads of the sea sitting on the sand, “It’s the best hamburger you’ve ever had! It’s natural, it’s healthy, it’s going to make you feel good. You’re hungry after swimming? It’s going to give you energy. Great source of protein! You need to eat more vegetables? It comes with tomato and lettuce! You’ll like it, your kids will like it, everyone in the family will like it! Três por dez, três por dez!” his voice drifts off as he moves down the beach.

The stranger whose keys I’m holding emerges from the water and takes her time walking toward me. Her body sparkles, covered in crystal water droplets. In her thong bikini she sits down towel-less, right in the sand, squaring off with me. Her effect is intensely dramatic as she stares at me with milk chocolate brown eyes . . . not so dark, not so light, just intense. She sits present, strong, full of assurance bodied by posture that she is Queen of the World. “I knew I could trust you,” she says, dressed in a judgmental tone. “You are foreign.” Her words bounce, “That means I can

trust you.”

She has me stunned for a moment, and unsure why I oddly feel offended. I stick out that much? I open my mouth to respond though she beats me to it—

“Larissa,” she says, extending her hand.

“Hey Larissa, I’m Michelle,” we shake. Probably sizing one another up and down for a moment.

“I’m from the *morro* there,” and she nods to the mountain sitting behind metal-storied buildings across the street.

“Nice,” I respond, “I’m from New York.”

“Ooh chicy” she responds again with her tone eyeing me up and down.

“So what’s it like there?” I ask her.

“You know how I could tell you are foreign?” she asks, completely ignoring my question, “From the way you are sitting. We don’t sit like this on the beach.”

I’m leaning back on my arms, and now I want to sit up, but I don’t want to succumb to her unacknowledged demand.

“You need to be ready,” she tells me, leaving minimal room for me to interact, “Sometimes they sweep the beach. The *moleques*. They come down from the favela and comb the beach.” Her tight curly hair moves in the wind, “You don’t even know until people start yelling. But by then they have already hit you, your neighbors and have moved on to the next.” She talks to me with outward confidence, about something intimidating though in the sound of peace of the ocean breaking behind

her. “Obviously this isn’t right. But I get it. Sometimes the kids are bored, but mostly they need help.” Landing her point and blasting my world. “It’s the cash, camera and things . . . they need help.”

From out of nowhere the air begins to get chopped, drawing our attention up to the sealine, a helicopter grazes the coast so low, you can perfectly see the three guards hanging out of the open door with their barrels pointed below. We watch it draw down the coast, and around the corner that phases from Copacabana to Ipanema.

I turn back to her, “So what’s it like there? In the favela?” I ask. She eyes me again, scoping for my intention maybe, and then she leans in.

“There are a lot of hard-working people there,” she begins, “and a lot of people who will spend their whole life doing everything right and getting nothing in return.”

Fuck. Someone tells you that . . . I don’t think there is any appropriate response but to listen.

“My mom raised me alone and would lock me at home while she went to work. So when I could go out on my own . . .” her voice lingers, “I just saw how people had things. You know there are so many tourists that come and . . . you can build a relationship with them. Make the men think that you need them, and then, you can start asking for things. Meals, a bus card. I know it’s not

good,” she continues, “and I don’t do it anymore. But when you have nothing, nothing and anything is possible.”

Intrigued and surprised she’s giving me all this information, “This city really lives in different worlds,” I say to Larissa. She looks at me twisted. I elaborate, “There’s this iconic perfect side, and the harsh segregated society which everyone knows exists but it can be avoided by some, like it’s hidden in shadow.” “A shadow like it dances with the sun, right?” She’s quick, poetic, and grins, “Like sometimes it’s revealed, sometimes it’s not.”

I’m struck and in awe. “So what do you do now?” I ask her. “I work in a hotel.” She’s smitten and smirks, “I’m saving to get my boobs done.” In her tall posture she lightly shimmies her shoulders.



Brazil is among the top five countries in the world for the most cosmetic procedures. Accessible to everyone—regardless of economic class because of payment plans, and putting the surgery on credit. While Rio is home to world-class surgeons, there are also cheaper surgical options performed by unqualified people, leaving the news to commonly reflect on lives lost on the

table.

Unlike Western cultures, no one is hiding that they've had work done, but instead, shout from the rooftops that they have. It's not just the infamous Brazilian Buttlift, but also rhinoplasty, eyelid surgery, liposuction and thigh implants. Surveys reflect that augmentation type varies by class. While upper and upper middle classes frequent European looks of thin definition, the broader population seeks a *gostosa* stereotype of thick thighs and voluptuous figure.

Historically Brazil is not foreign to the augmentation of people. Brazil became the last country to abolish slavery in all forms in 1888. Within one year, the Brazilian government encouraged intermixing between the different racial classes to absorb the blackness and Africanness of the country, the idea itself called *branqueamento*, or literally a “whitening” policy. In actuality, the policy introduced a rainbow of people considered the most beautiful in the world.

Today Brazilians observe *pride* as one of the highest standards to rank and observe beauty. In augmentation there's ownership in the body. Being able to augment the body by choice is a point of pride.



“I would like to go there,” I tell her. “To the favela.”

Her jaw drops. Her eyes get small as if trying to see through me.

“I am here to learn everything about this culture. The favela is part of that and until now, I’ve just heard theories about the favela from people who have never been, but talk about it like they know it,” I tell her. She stays silent, with eyelids gaping the whites of her eyes. *Oh shit, I hope I haven’t done something wrong.* “Is that rude? Inconsiderate?”

Her head pops back, “Nooo,” her pitch slides up as she replies.

Then the sides of her mouth curl down, “But the people who live there don’t even want to be there. I just think you’re crazy.”

## Chapter 6

---

# Permission to Land

The sun begins to paint the sky pink. “We go spear fishing off that rock over there,” she tells me, pointing off into the dimming distance. Surely I’m looking back at her with a dropped jaw.

“What, tell me more,” I request. Her response is casual. In a normalized tone she tells me about how she’s grown up spearfishing her whole life. She goes out on Sundays with her uncle.

“Is that why you have an octopus tattoo?” I ask her, nodding to the tentacle drawn over her shoulder.

“Yea,” she grins. “They’re annoying,” she puffs, rolling her eyes, making a motion over her shoulder as if to grab and pull one off her back. I laugh at her remark though she’s serious, “So you



really want to go to the favela, huh?” she brings us back to the point.

“Yea. I would like to go.” I tell her looking into her eyes, needing to prove my unwavering contact.

“What do you think about seeing people with guns?” Larissa asks me and looks away, silent, waiting for an answer.

“I mean . . . it’s different than the world that I know, but I know that world exists.”

She accepts my answer with nods. Her hands meet palm to palm at the center of her chest and she speaks quietly, intimately, more real as if I gained some other level of approval I didn’t know I was asking for. Flashing this wide white smile, “It’s a different kind of Brazil.” I can hear her palms rub together. “You will see.” She tells me, watching the sunset.

When we slide into a taxi, “Uhh . . . Cantagalo?” Larissa speaks softly. This strong, hard shell, powerful woman presents herself in a tone that is . . . uncertain. A tone that is a question for hope of acceptance. Many drivers won’t go to the favela. Many ride companies won’t even permit the trip for the liability of danger is too high. So when Larissa asked that question—it was a question. In that moment she is human. Maybe more human than I for the way she composed her dignity even when having to ask permission of another to be brought home. We drove through empty city blocks with sparkling spotlights hanging off buildings. When we turned to the mouth of the hill

. . . we passed the armed police sitting in their trucks dotting the entryway. When we cross the favela line the streetlights disappear.

The driver turns the inside car light on—a practice mandated by the faction because the gang should be able to see who is in the car, taking note of who is coming in, who is going out. The car slowed and we went up. A heavy incline drawing the sensation of a cart of a roller coaster.

Up

My spine melting more and more into the seat behind me.

Up

Discreetly looking for how much effort it would take to lean forward.

Up

I was only pushed back.

Nothing more than silence and circle headlights on the pavement.

The road gently winding . . . I keep thinking, *We're going to fall off this mountain, drive right off the side*. Then out of nowhere people begin to appear in the circles of headlights. They look like statues, as if there all along, born out of darkness. It started as two . . .

two more . . .

a group of four . . .

groups grew into crowds,

crowds of people walking away,  
away from where we were going.

Larissa makes a sound of clicking her tongue while sucking her teeth, and the driver stops. My arms press in full force to open the door, the weight of an elephant resisting as a last check to confirm my confidence to go on. I walk behind the car to meet Larissa on the other side and look back to the driver beginning a thirty-five-point turn on this slant of an incline. *Good luck*, I think. My eyes adjusting to the darkness, we start up steps, the kind that take three strides to climb to the next. We begin to pass shadows of people, energetic, full of life, amidst music bouncing filling the space.

Gulped in darkness  
Swallowed by sound

Sliding tones

Vibration pounds

Taking moments

to coat

the insides of your veins.

In a street full of people dancing in darkness two bare palms beat  
the skins of drums

We danced

The earth alive

Outrageous swells

blissful drown

We danced

Until 5:30 in the morning we danced.

Larissa invites me to her house. Inside it's dimly lit with few windows exposed to neighboring concrete. There's a table and wooden chairs, and an exposed mattress with a blanket pulled over it stamped with the logo of a hospital. There are four duffle bag-size blue plastic bags holding clothes.

"You live here alone?" I ask her.

"No. My mother lives here, but she is out," Larissa replies.

Under shelter, still sharing the street sounds. Outside energy, beaming to live on, to live in.

We drink coffee through the twilight hour, when the earth is yawning to set the tone. In that hour the sounds change too. The beat of music calms. . . and slowly disappears. Overruled by neighbors clanking dishes and people calling their kids. Muffled sounds of breath and shuffling feet graze the window. Still full of life. Just in different sound.

When Larissa walks me out the sun blazes the concrete world around us. All of it. The steps descending from her house split alleyways, lined by walls of red brick and gray concrete. Layers of buildings, stacked with just enough space for us to walk single file. Everything shifts to the same flat gray color. I look up to the blue sky painted above, a beaming cap, a lid to the box we walk inside.

Larissa behind me, explains it's a better place for protection. I walk confidently, but directionless. Another comes toward us, his face closed, firm to pounce. Larissa's voice makes an appearance, "Beleza." My side eye glances to the handgun strapped to the other's hip. "Beleza," we receive in response and walk on.

Descending the *morro* over Ipanema it feels like at any moment my balance will slip, and I'll be a child on a slide. I try to make my steps soft, descending and watching the buildings of Ipanema go from being small beneath us, to within range with our eyeline, and soon enough, bigger than us. We leave Cantagalo crossing that lifeline and walk toward the coast while watching shadows of capped helmet heads peeking out of armored military tanks roll by. Larissa sighs and shakes her head. I respond in silent gaze.

"Were you scared?" she asks, "By the guy with the gun?"

I pause to take my breath and think of the most conscious way to put this:

"Larissa . . . for me, seeing that was different. I haven't lived in a place where people have guns like that . . . but I realize a lot of people do. So when I saw him . . . all I could think about was how that is part of your home."

She doesn't acknowledge my answer fully and I probably didn't

satisfy her question. She goes on to tell me that she was friends with the other individual. In the past, they had gone to school together; they grew up side by side. Larissa was there when her friend started to hang out with the faction. Larissa saw her friend laugh at their jokes and drink soda they bought him.

Larissa watched her friend go bad.

“They make them feel like they are brothers,” she tells me, crossing her arms over her chest as if to give herself a hug. “The more time that passes, the more jokes are told, the more normal it becomes to ask for favors. *Watch my bag, hold this money . . .*”

She starts giving me examples. “So you do it because it’s your brother. But from the other side . . . it’s not a favor, it’s a test. A test of trust. With every test that is passed, there comes a new task, a new test. *Hold my gun, make this delivery . . .*”

“Do they really support each other like family?” I ask.

Larissa reacts quickly with a “tsk.” “When you are with the faction, you are a number. You are not a person, you are just a number, so when you die . . .” she continues, “it’s just another life of a *moleque*.”

I look to Larissa, “Did you ever hang out with the faction?”

Again, she reacts quickly, shaking her head. “There are horror stories of faction members seeing a woman who sparks their eye, and they take her, they take what they want. Maybe they will tell her before he does it—that he is going to keep her. The law is the faction, so . . . you know,” she explains.

A woman dating a trafficker can also be by choice. Some girls like it, prefer it . . . Being with a king of the hill, a man who has some power and some money. Women can also be leveraged in the business for the betterment of the faction. She may serve as a watch guard, hanging out by the house, letting them know who passes by. She may be used as a tool for intel.

Men cannot necessarily enter a favela which is not their own. This is changing a bit from before, but it depends on the *morro*. Generally when a man enters a favela which is not his own, he will be considered an inherent threat. He will be sought out, stopped, questioned by the faction. He may be asked for proof of identity. Proof that what he is saying is true and that he is innocent. He will be especially targeted if a man is in a favela run by a faction different than his home favela faction. Here is life-threatening. So where men of the faction have limitations of how far they can go outside of their own zone, women are used like cards to play in the game from hill to hill.

She may be asked to build a relationship with a man from another hill, run by a different faction. When she goes to that hill she'll take mental maps of navigation, the people, the situation. The questions she can ask are different. The way she can break into someone . . . is different.

"She's the Queen in the deck." Larissa grins in her analogy.

“Was it hard to not join them?” I ask.

“We have seen a lot of people die from the faction. My mom always yelled,” and her voice goes high to imitate her, “*“You want to end up like that dead kid on the street? Do you want that?”*” I never hung out with them. Dating a trafficker is complicated and not worth it.”

“And your friend, Larissa? When he went with them, what did you think?”

She shook her head in slow motion as if looking for words that didn’t exist. As if without relation to the story. “There was no bad blood, there was just nothing more to share.”



# Chapter 7

---

## The Faction is Born

There are three predominant factions in Rio de Janeiro:

Comando Vermelho

Amigos dos Amigos

Terceiro Comando Puro

For its strength and impact, we will discuss:

Primeiro Comando da Capital

---

# Comando Vermelho

***R***ed Command  
*also known as C.V.*

The prison system in Brazil is overcrowded and a breeding ground for organized crime. C.V. is Brazil's oldest crime group, born in the prison in 1970 and brought into the city by petty theft and robbery.

The game changes in 1980, when the Columbian Cartel sees the corrupt Brazilian government and weak, impoverished communities—the favelas—neglected by the city and state. The organization and structure of the faction make it a reliable source in obtaining and distributing large quantities of drugs. Armed by the cartel, C.V. begins to gain control over various favelas in Rio de Janeiro.

The faction grows by creating systems of leadership and providing means of employment to individuals ignored by Brazilian society. In 1990, C.V. has control of 90 percent of Rio's favelas and is funding communal parts of societies such as Samba schools and political campaigns. C.V. has since grown presence in other parts of Brazil, Paraguay and Bolivia.

---

# Amigos dos Amigos

***F****riends of Friends*  
*also known as ADA*

ADA forms between 1994–1998 by dissident members of C.V. To gain strength, ADA creates an alliance with current and former security members and with Terceiro Comando—another group founded by ex-C.V. members. Territory battles erupt in early 2000 throughout Rio de Janeiro as ADA gains control in North and West zones. In 2004, ADA takes over Rocinha, the largest favela in South America, in the South Zone of Rio de Janeiro.<sup>2</sup>

Where C.V. imposed rules through violence, ADA works to win society members by distributing handouts, providing medical and social services, and prohibiting minors from joining the faction.

In 2011, the leader of ADA, Nem, is the most wanted man in Brazil and is captured while attempting to escape from the Pacification Police in Rocinha. It is speculated that Nem continues to run ADA from prison. His second-in-command, Rogerio 157, forms ties with rival C.V., and with them attempts to take over the land and drug trade of Rocinha. Nem, aware of what's happening, sends three members to challenge Rogerio 157. The three men are killed. In response, Nem sends members from other favelas to Rocinha to combat Rogerio 157 and C.V.<sup>3</sup> War breaks out in Rocinha.

Community members pass endless days with their community on fire, under shootouts and grenades. The time becomes known as the War of Rocinha, and Brazilian military forces are deployed. The faction remaining is of C.V. At the time of this publication C.V. still maintains control of Rocinha whereas ADA maintains presence in the Northwestern zones of Rio de Janeiro.

---

# Terceiro Comando Puro

## ***P**ure Third Command also known as TCP*

To understand Terceiro Comando Puro, we must first understand the Terceiro Comando. In the late 1990s, Terceiro Comando emerged by ex-C.V. members. There is no sole leader, but instead a horizontal structure of exchange—a pact with ADA to strengthen the presence of Terceiro Comando. One leader, Facão, oversees the drug trafficking activities in Complexo da Maré, a favela in the North Zone of Rio de Janeiro. ADA increasingly encroaches on Facão's territory, and Facão grows frustrated of their infringement. In 2002, he splits from Terceiro Comando to create his own organization, later known as Terceiro Comando Puro, TCP. He brings hierarchy to his organization and declares war on ADA and C.V.

In the same year, ADA creates a hidden alliance with C.V. to wipe out the imprisoned leadership of Terceiro Comando. Terceiro Comando collapses and the remaining members defect to ADA or TCP.

TCP has since dominated control of the drug trade and extortion of local services in Northern and Western parts of Rio de Janeiro.<sup>4</sup>

---

# Primeiro Comando da Capital

***F****irst Command of the Capitol*  
*also known as PCC*

In 1992, security forces in São Paulo's Carandiru Prison kill 100 prisoners in response to a riot. Advocating for revolution and an improvement of prison conditions, eight prisoners form PCC in 1993 with a slogan: *Peace, Justice and Freedom*.

Offering a community and level of protection within the prison system, recruitment rises and is maintained through membership dues, which fund paying off security forces and lawyers.



In 1999, the group organizes a bank heist in São Paulo. This becomes the largest theft in history, with the group stealing US\$16 million (R\$ 32 million). In an attempt to disintegrate PCC, government forces separate PCC prison leaders by sending them to prison institutions in various locations. This supports PCC by creating stronger links with other crime groups and by opening recruitment in other Brazilian regions. PCC rapidly grows as one of the most powerful organized crime structures in South America.

With C.V. as inspiration, PCC operates in a franchise system. They hold presence in all Brazilian states, and nearly every country in Latin America with strongholds in Paraguay, Bolivia, Uruguay, and Columbia. Their international relations are tied in Asia and with the Italian Mafia group ‘Ndrangheta.<sup>5</sup>

# Chapter 8

---

## Run

We make plans to hear music at São Cristóvão, an enormous permanent fair with stalls of food and crafts and a whole strip of stalls with bands playing Forró, music from the Northeastern parts of Brazil. Larissa picks me up. “My Tio’s car,” she tells me, smiling as I get in.

She’s dressed differently this time. More conservative maybe, still in shorts, though longer than frayed booty cut-offs I’d previously seen her in, and what also seems to be part of the staple wardrobe in Rio. Tonight, her shorts have a clean trimmed hem paired with a bodysuit that exposes her collar bone and hugs her silhouette.

São Cristóvão is in the North Zone, located next to and partly under a highway. We park the car on a quiet street. There are

other parked cars, dark buildings tower on either side and the only lights illuminating the way are from the bar at the end of the block. In the darkness I feel energized, sparkling inside feeling upbeat, bouncy, light. São Cristóvão is an enormous fair that explores the Northeastern traditions of Brazil.

Bahia, is one of the states which makes up this region. Its capitol, Salvador, is where the Portuguese first arrived when they brought people from the Bantu regions of Africa's Atlantic coast, known today as Congo and Angola. People were also brought from Mozambique to build and extort the land. In this region, many African traditions have been preserved closer to their original forms than in the respective native African countries themselves. While traditions would evolve and change over time in these regions in Africa, individuals who were already taken from their native land had no way of knowing of this shift. And as a result, a great connection to African heritage has been deeply, and with a profound historical authenticity, preserved in Brazil.

Seven hundred stalls of handicrafts, drinks, food, and a lot of music. We were going to dance and eat *acarajé*, made from ground black-eyed pea dough, fried in palm oil, smothered with delicately diced tomatoes, onions, spicy peppers, and dried shrimp. It can be filled with *vatapá*, a typical Afro-Brazilian cuisine, made of cornmeal, coconut milk, peanuts, shrimp,

pepper, and palm oil. Unlike the Carioca preference of staying away from spicy food, these dishes are all about it.

As we make our way down the block, I turn to Larissa and—  
“Michelle” she puts her hand on my shoulder “Stop.” Her words slice with sharpened ends.

Confused and wide-eyed, my breath cuts.

“Turn around and walk quickly.” She’s firm. Precise.

She laces her hand in mine.

My body taken with her, leaving my soul to linger and wonder,

“*What ar—*”

“Faster,” she tells me.

All I can think is—

“Michelle, faster,” and again I do what she says because she is firm. Precise.

We keep moving, hand in hand but I can’t even feel her fingertips because—

“Michelle, run!”

The road draws into a hill, and all I know is our sprinting breath.

In, out, in, out.

“Go,” she says, under her breath

In, out, in, out.

In that moment *everything*  
goes to white noise.

I trusted Larissa. . . . but do I really?

I just met her at the beach.  
And why is she taking me to run away, away from the light?  
I look to her  
Time running out in slow thickness.  
My gaze is connected to her, and her . . .  
That's when the white zooms me out  
I hear breath again.  
In, out, in, out.  
But it's not mine, it's not hers.  
Someone inside of me starts to plead,  
*"God, I know I haven't believed in your entirety, but please be with  
me now."*  
We round a corner.  
"Filho da PUTA!" Under her breath she is firm, precise.  
The road is lined with gated apartments, we stop our running  
feet,  
"Hey! HEY!" Larissa yells with a dragon's breath, gripping  
onto the metal gate of the first apartment building. "Let us in!  
Please!" she cries.  
Through a glass door, maybe twelve yards away, a man in a  
white-collared shirt sits staring at us with his belly hanging over  
his pants.  
He shakes his head . . . confident.  
We sprint to the next building, death gripping the frame as  
imprisoned by the free outside, vibrating into the gate, "Please!"  
Larissa cries, "Please!"

Again, a dozen yards away a glass door. The white-collared shirt gatekeeper shakes his head . . . confident.

We continue to each gate, piercing the air with screams begging to be on the inside—whatever the inside is, away from the outside,

whatever the outside is becoming.

For the first time in my life, I don't know if I will get out of this. For the first time in my life, I don't have the ability to assume time, to assume life.

We ring into the third . . .

Fourth . . .

And the fifth gate, not until the fifth gate that opens just before our running sandals halt in smoke.

The doorman closes it behind us and locks it with a key.

We rush into the building and before one more moment passes, Larissa's arms wrap around me, melting her entire being with mine. I can feel her buzzing out of her skin, holding my soul as she gives me the bass of her pounding heart. She kisses me on the cheek, and we sway back and forth.

"I heard you screaming and saw him running behind you," the doorman interrupts our moment. Larissa cups her hands on either side of my head. Our eyes lock. "I didn't want to scare you. I had to get you to move quickly but calmly," she tells me solemnly.

She goes on to tell me how she saw the shadows of three men. Two of them were holding rifles the size of their bodies. Laying them along the horizon, drawing a line pointing to the shadow of the third pinned against a wall, right there on the side of the road. When Larissa saw them, they saw us. That's when one rifle adjusted its point to the sky, pointing to the same God I had asked for help . . . and he, too, started to run. Larissa took us around the corner as a way to duck. If we cut through traffic, there would be no benefit, no saving, no sure security. "Criminals hold up cars all the time here," she tells me. "Sometimes they make barricades, sometimes it's by surprise . . . many people don't drive at night because of it."

I can't imagine what would have happened if her perspective were no different than mine. "You okay?" she asks, her hands cupping my face again. "You're not saying anything." Honestly . . . I'm not panicked. I'm not scared. My heart isn't even beating. I'm just . . . there. Taking up space . . . unable to believe that this reality . . . is real. I can't imagine what would have happened if her perspective were no different than mine.

We wait for some time in a lobby of silence.

Shells of shivering souls.

When we thank the doorman and leave floating to the car, we

drive in silence, arriving to the Lagoa. The Lagoa, or lake, is shaped like a heart, in the center of Rio, with lush plants, trees . . . A place of peace, where from any point, the view is of the city skyline across the way.

We walk onto a dock cutting into the water heart. Lights from the buildings shimmy over the water. Still silent, we lay down with our hearts to the sky, melting breath on top of spines, dipping our heads off the edge, to soak in the dancing light. Upside down we gaze at the world across the way. The world that we had just come out of, the world that we are actively part of . . .

Larissa laces her hand in mine.

I hold on tighter.

We are nearly strangers.

Tonight . . . we are each other.



# Chapter 9

---

## Jeitinho

Several days later I meet Larissa again at the beach. She walks up with this this radiating confidence and a posture that says, *It doesn't matter what someone thinks of me, what matters is what I think of them.* I like this about her.

We catch up momentarily about our past experience together, “The thing is, Michelle, situations like that happen. And it’s by normal people, maybe those guys were with the faction, maybe they weren’t. The news plays this kind of story every single day. Many won’t be surprised by this story, but no Carioca will like it.”

“Has that happened to you before?” I ask her.

“No,” she tells me, with a tone of secure finality. “You know what, though, I really only felt scared when I got home, and had

time to think. In the moment, you have to be brave.”

We both pause to breathe into the crashing ocean waves. “But you’re doing okay?” she asks me.

“Yea. I’ve realized that the way you or maybe anyone from Rio, observes what’s happening on the street is different than the way I do. When I look around, it’s to take in scenery that’s new and different to me. But what I realized is that when you look around—“

“It’s for protection,” she interrupts, cutting me off.

I nod silently.

“We have to. We’re in Rio,” she adds, as she smirks and puts her palm on my back.

“Foda.” *Fuck*, I say, and it breaks the tension as she laughs.

“Even the way you curse is cute!” She remarks, “Your accent, it’s very cute.” She sighs and we find a spot of lay on the sand.

“Otherwise, how has your time been?” she asks.

I tell her about how I’ve been exploring the neighborhoods in Zona Sul. Going to a museum in Centro, a dance class in Botafogo, and how nice everyone has been. The people have this fearless outward energy and confidence—no, desire—to create conversation. They share beautiful uniqueness in the way they pump love at each other, free in complimenting one another, encouraging happiness and support in whatever the other individuals are saying. Quite an ironic difference from our story the other night.

“We’re really embracive right, it’s like a hug.” She smiles, crossing her arms in front of her chest . . . “But just because you’re friends with someone, doesn’t mean you can trust them,” she adds. A stop sign on fire lit by her words. “Yes, you can have friends, have fun together, go out, drink . . . but it doesn’t mean you can leave your purse with them.” She tells me with certitude as if this applies to humankind in general.

I try to organize what she’s saying; this concept seems outrageous to me, “So . . . why would you be friends if you can’t trust someone?” I ask in speculation. She walks me around an explanation, which really is just repeating what she had previously stated. “Why would anyone spend time with these kinds of friends?” I respond. Her eyebrow furrows, confused with me, like how could I be asking these questions.

She rewinds, “Michelle. Have you heard of the term *jeitinho*?”

I shake my head in silence, no.

“It is a way to take advantage of another. It’s not harmful,” her pitch slides up defensively. “It’s a way to be better than somebody. Because it’s satisfying to win,” she says with a smirk. My face scrunches and my head cocks back, “Win what?” I ask. “The situation,” she replies in a tone that it is obvious. “It is knowing that someone is better than the other because they trick the situation.”

This makes me frustrated. Angry, wary, skeptical . . . mad.

“But it’s innocent.” She explains, “You’re at the bar. And someone starts a conversation with you, and they ask you if you want to share a drink. You order, have some more conversation, and after some time they leave. When you go to leave, you realize they have left you with the bill. *Jeitinho*.”

“Why do people do this?” I ask. She takes it for a moment in contemplation.

“Maybe it’s because everyone does it. Maybe it’s because it’s been happening for so long it’s just part of us.”

“So how do you interact with that?” I ask, “How do you call someone out on that?”

“You don’t.” Her response is quick, “You play better.”

# Chapter 10

---

## Soli

There's six of us standing in a circle in the middle of a sidewalk, Monday night at Pedra do Sal. A part of *Little Africa* sacred with rich historical importance.

Recognized in 2005 as a *quilombo*, an area founded by fugitive slaves, an area of resistance and freedom for Afro-Brazilian descendants. This deeply important step of recognition for gaining rights to the land predates the period (1850–1920) when freedmen and freedwomen arrive in search of work, a sense of community, religion, and heritage.

Grounded in black ancestry, Pedra do Sal is the site where *chorinho*, a type of music that blends traditional African and European sounds originates, in addition to Samba Carioca. Music with great importance in Carnaval, another tradition

born here. If you want to know the real history of Brazil, listen to the lyrics of samba.

An intimate cross of alleyways, Pedra do Sal is calm during the day and flooded with life at night. Body to body, people move through currents of seas of people through a cobblestone alleyway; it feels like the entire city has come for the *Roda da Samba*. Played without microphones and only with instruments and natural voice, it echoes up the colorful colonial building walls. An intimate joy-filled concert lined with local food and drink vendors.

Yelling over the instruments, I'm here with new friends who all are so wonderful. Kind, offering to pick me up to ensure I would arrive safely, and checking in with me during conversations, to confirm I'm understanding everything, that they're not talking too fast and that I understand all the jokes.

A man approaches us, "Excuse me," he says bowing his head, and we make a gap for him in our circle. His name is Soli, a six-foot-seven oversized friendly giant gentleman. He tells us that he's the doorman at this bar and informs us of the specials of two-for-one Brahma beer, *bem gelada* "good and cold," he says, continuing that when we're ready, he'll seat us at the best table in the house.

We smile, thank him, and then he hones in on me, asking for my attention. From the other side of the circle, he extends his hand, and reintroduces himself, putting his free hand to his heart and bowing his head once again. I give him my name, and he responds,

“Michelle. It’s very much a pleasure. I would like to get to know you. Can I give you my phone number?”

Clearly, I’m on the spot and my eyes quickly scan the faces of my friends. They are all smiling in wide eyes, nodding up and down. I accept, and after I hit *save* and put my phone away, we say our goodbyes and our group begins to walk away.

The street lined by caipirinha vendor carts packed, “Michelle!” I hear booming on top of the crowd of heads. I turn around and see the friendly giant gentleman above the rest. His smile beaming white, with his hand to his heart, “It’s very much a pleasure,” he calls. I smile, and continue on in the sea of people.

Soli and I begin to meet in different places in the city to walk. Parks, markets, sharing beers, we exchange our cultures, music, and pass hours laughing at the way we imitated each other’s languages. He speaks English like an announcer. Deep and in exaggeration, louder than necessary, dragging out his words. As if each letter were part of a parade, making us wait in anticipation. “Yess-ah!” was a typical sound of agreement. It’s passion, he speaks in passion.

Soli is the one who teaches me Portuguese, to speak well, to speak eloquently, and how to respectfully contribute to conversation with integrity.

He tells me about how the only reason he was able to get an education was because of Lula. The most recent controversial president who was imprisoned for corruption. “But here’s the thing Michelle,” he says to me, sitting on a park bench, “he was taking some money, so what, what he was giving was much more.” Soli’s tone pleads.



Lula’s platform has been the inclusion of all Brazilians, and his laws and programs supported those who had never received support—those most in need. Under Lula, the most recognized (and controversial) Bolsa Família Program was created to unify funding programs of education and access to food. Between 2003–2016, Bolsa Família lifted 36 million Brazilians out of extreme poverty by providing monthly financial stipends.

When the program was launched, there were two concerns: the program could discourage entry into the labor market and



a possible increase in birth rates among beneficiaries. These concerns are openly discussed in various economic classes in Brazil. It's widely discussed that the program is abused, and those who are not in need are applying and receiving funds. Research has shown, though, an increase in the participation of beneficiaries in the labor market.<sup>6</sup> Further research did not find an increase in the birth rates of female beneficiaries in the country.<sup>7</sup>

In 2018 a federal judge ordered the arrest of Lula for money laundering by a civil servant.



Soli freely exposes the pride he has for his country. And how the poor must prevail.

“You know Soli,” I admit, “I have been thinking that I would like to leave my apartment and move into the favela.” To truly understand and connect with people and place, we cannot just come in and observe. Participation—continuous participation—is critical.

# Chapter 11

---

## Babilônia

His eyes are wide, and he's silent. The corner of his mouth draws to a beaming grin. We stare at one another in what seems like slow motion. Then Soli begins to speak, differently. More real, somehow. As if I had gained some other level of approval I didn't know I was asking for. "It's a different kind of Brazil," he tells me. "I can help you," he continues, flashing his wide white smile.

Two days pass, and I meet Soli on the coast in Leme. We're going to Babilônia, to the apartment of a friend looking for a tenant. Babilônia shares a hill with Chapéu Mangueira, two favela communities, which, until the past several weeks had been run by two different factions that have been in and out of turf war. It has been all over the news. . . Most recently, bloodied bodies floating in the sea between Urca and Leme.

We catch two moto taxis at the mouth of the hill. Soli is in front of me, and I can't help but think how the bike looks so small beneath his giant frame. We follow switchbacks and the road just . . . ends. Like the bulb of a plant with corridor alleyways of tiny roots drawing into hidden paths. We slip into a center corridor; the ground looks as if someone kicked a bucket of concrete and it spilled over the land.

The area has been taken with care though, the walkway painted in pale blue, along with the walls, it feels calm and serene and like I can take a deep breath and breathe. The buildings around us are short enough, two or three stories high and standing in the middle of this narrow corridor I feel tall.

We knock on a broken wooden paneled door and wait. "Ay!" A voice shines down as if God were talking from above. Up the wall there is a man in a red shirt, jean shorts and one bare leg swinging outside the window. With the back of our heads to our necks,

"Peace my brother!" Soli yells.

Red shirt is to the point, "What are you doing?" firm. Soli explains we are waiting for a friend, to enter the house . . . Red shirt brut in his response, "What is the name of your friend?"

"Tinho," Soli yells up the wall.

"Oooh!" Red shirt rejoices, relaxing back into the window

frame, “Tinho! You didn’t say hi to anyone here, I thought—“ and our conversation cut as Tinho answers the door.

Soli gives the introduction, and we shake hands. He welcomes me in first, traversing wooden plank steps, uneven in size and angle. Tinho’s voice is gentle as we ascend, “When you move, you will have to pass the first few days with me. So the people can see you, get to know your face, and know that they can trust you. If you walk alone . . . they will think you are a spy.”

I ask Tinho about how the situation is and he tells me about how the wind was studded by cracks of fire just ten days prior.

“But it’s calm now, it’s safe. TCP has won.”

“They were fighting C.V.?” I ask.

“Yea,” he sighs, “But now it is safe.” Tinho pushes open a dark wooden door to the house.

The space is gray concrete and the roof, sits maybe two feet above my head. There’s a humble entry way and a picnic bench table under a hanging yellow light. There’s an intimate kitchen with mismatching utensils, a bar counter, and a hammock in a corner reading nook. Colorless and dimly lit, past a doorway, it’s furnished with an open window adjacent to red shirt, who was still sitting in the windowsill and waving happily as we enter the room. We are so close, surely, we could both sit with our legs hanging out the window, holding hands from either side.

Everything would be included. Water, electricity, internet for 1,000 Brazilian reais. 1,000 reais. Expensive for one room in the favela, it should have been 600 reais, max. I defer to a polite way out— “Let me think about it, Tinho.”

“Yes, let us think about it and we will tell you,” Soli adds.

I look to Soli and back at Tinho, “He’s talking like we’re moving together.”

We laugh and Soli continues, “I am always around here, I feel like I am home.”

As we leave and descend the hill by foot on stone steps, we are slowed by three men in flip-flops, hunching forward and carrying construction sandbags larger than their frames at the nape of their necks.

“Honestly Soli,” I whisper to him, “it is expensive for an apartment in the favela.”

He’s without hesitation, “I can help.” He gives me this silent signal as if saying, *just wait a minute*.

We arrive to the bottom of the hill, walk twenty yards through a concrete wall alleyway and emerge on the beach in Leme. Sparkling blue, men and women in bikinis scatter the beach playing volleyball and futevôlei. We pause under a tree. “I can offset some cost by giving weed to Tinho,” Soli says to me, eye to eye. “I know he will buy it anyway, so it will save him money

because I will give him a good deal.” Soli had thought it all out. He tells me where he gets weed from in the North Zone, and that he does business with a friend of a friend of something else . . . “Let me talk to him. He knows me, he will say yes,” he says.

Then Larissa’s voice echoes in my mind, “*Just because you’re friends with someone, doesn’t mean you can trust them*,” I smile gently, put my hand on his shoulder as if all I can see is his generosity, “Thank you Soli, I will find another way.”

His brow furrows and lips pierce as we get into a taxi. I’m dropped off first, outside a very well-manicured gated home that makes me feel like Rapunzel in her tower.

That’s the last I hear of Soli.

# Chapter 12

---

## Pacification

“The gunfire went on for five hours non-stop, the electricity went out, we could hear grenades going off, plumes of smoke going up all over the favela.

It was like a war zone.”<sup>8</sup>

Pacification is introduced in Rio de Janeiro in 2008, with the objective of removing territorial occupation by the factions, and to bring social, health, and sanitation programs into the favelas.

The Pacification Police Units, known as UPP, are created by already trained and working police officers, who have been trained to understand that any person from or in the favela is

the enemy. They are retrained in community policing.

A handful of communities are identified to pilot the program. Residents are given notice of implementation, and faction members flee to avoid conflict with UPP. The drop in violence is (falsely) immediate, and as a result, the government determines Pacification is to roll out in every favela in Rio de Janeiro, addressing one favela per month until the 2014 World Cup and Olympic Games.

The initiation of social programs which gave hope to residents flatlines. Community centers are built but no one is hired to run them. Garbage collection, though planned, is sporadic and unreliable. Basic sanitation remains as the sources which community members have built themselves. The UPP quickly becomes underserved and understaffed. The factions return to their marked territories by bribing UPP force members who were left working for the government, without being paid sufficient living wages.

Government recognizes the continuance of faction presence, and a bonus program is implemented to award UPP members who kill suspected criminals. Bounty on heads results in an immeasurable number of mourning parents crying *“He was not a trafficker; he was a student.”*



UPP foot patrols continue, with stop-and-frisk searches exercised using means of harassment, exaction, and active shooting. The bonus policy later changes to reward based with the reduction of homicides and robberies.

The UPP creates posts in the favela, with their set of laws and hours of duty. At its side, community laws and regulations are dictated and upheld by the faction. This leaves residents in the middle of armed UPP force in addition to armed organized crime.

Pacification continues to develop without strategy of program evaluation or the monitoring of progress. Repeated problems continue to roll out to thousands of communities across Rio de Janeiro.

In 2013, Rio de Janeiro billionaire Eike Batista, who is funding the UPP material budget, goes bankrupt. Plummeting oil prices lead Brazil to economic crisis and security budgets are cut by 32 percent. UPP forces are getting paid months late, if at all. UPP force members have increasing invested interest to accept bribes. The vests and pistols are not equipped with intelligent services or weapon tracking, and they begin selling and trading on a black market operated and played by the factions.

What we see today is the UPP armed on one corner and

traffickers operating on the other side of the corner. When we see operations of conflict in the favela today, it is UPP members wanting something—money—from the faction. Shootouts spark, putting everyone in the community at risk.

As the state and forces weaken, the faction strengthens. Because the faction is consistently paying off the UPP members to leave the community at peace, residents of the favela cite a safer community when the faction is in control. While residents may say the favela is better now post-Pacification, the result of the program was largely ineffective for it did not deliver on its promises.

# Chapter 13

---

## Sky on Fire

Dumping rain beats the bus amplified, we are sardines in a tin can. Following the coastline, the bus cuts darkened streets now turned to rivers of Copacabana. Earlier today I moved to the favela, and as the bus passes the Rapunzel castle I have been living in, I think how strange it is, when somewhere we know can quickly become closed, cold, and foreign.

We emerge to the coast of Ipanema to view the monstrous sea of crashing waves. Thunder shakes into the windows, we continue up Avenida Niemeyer alongside the mountain range. There are no people to get on the bus, it hasn't stopped in a minute and there's maybe a dozen of us.

As we arrive to the mouth of the favela, usually full of life . . . it's desolate . . .

All but for lone towering streetlights amplifying diagonal dashes of water, thick as a school of fish cutting the air.

There's so much water, maybe too much water, the hill has turned into a scenic view of a rushing river pouring down the principal road, pooling at the base of the bus. I get up with the rest, standing in single file, waiting between blue plastic seats when a *zap* electrocutes the air. Collective gasp shocks our view out the window watching a tower of powerlines tip in slow motion.

It leans more,

more,

more,

and finally crashes into another

To blast the cords from connection

We watch them spark and flip in every direction setting the sky on fire

embellishing the night in orange sparks of light

Diving into the body of water beneath the bus

Then entire favela is caped in darkness

"Get off the bus! Get off the bus!" The driver alive, screaming to an army fighting back, "Drive, drive!"

I'm shocked and wordless and can only see his eyes in the rearview mirror, far down the aisle looking back to us. "The water is electrified!" people are yelling filling any gap of sound.

It takes the driver molasses minutes until he makes the next

move and pulls forward.

He stops in front of a hotel made for one-night stands,

“Get off!” he says.

The double doors slide open and people file out. As I stand on the final step it’s so dark, but I can still see dark liquid pouring beneath my feet and I jump, leaping one sandaled foot in front of the other to land on the concrete under the cracking sky.

I follow the others and run for cover.

There’s someone at the hotel in a tan colored shirt holding the door open and waving for us to come in. We are welcomed to a dark hallway, musty, with dim-colored chairs. “Let me see if I can make a call,” someone says. There is no way I can navigate my way home in the dark. Honestly, going alone . . . I don’t really want to.

“The only way up is by foot,” the same person on the phone explains. “My friend drives a kombi but he said that if he comes down the hill, he won’t be able to get up. The entire hill is flooded.”

“Imagine the rats that are in the water,” another adds.

“And the sewage and trash,” someone agrees.

A storm made to wash the hill.

We all pause in darkened silence. It’s nine, ten, eleven o’clock

and midnight passes with a teasing sky. The sound of water calms and rains harder in minutes. And we pass another hour, two hours listening to that rhythm. At this point I figure we're here until morning, and a mother with child adds to the sound, "Well when this is all over, you're all welcome to my house. Come say hello any time, I live across the street from the grocery—Pai e Filha—you know it? The house with the gate?" around that moment we're offered some reprieve, the hotel attendant called to us from the door—"There's a kombi there, on the other side of the corner." Like children on Christmas, we get up and dash. Back in open air maybe the rain has lightened—but I'm still soaking wet.

We pile into the white-framed van. Three rows of seats, we sit one on top of the other and pass crumpled wet Real to the driver. R\$ 3.50.

Dark and silent as I look around, noticing the outline of dropped jaws, a group of people in a collective moment of shock. As the van begins to drive, there's no visibility in the front window. The wipers quick beating side to side . . . it's not enough. You can feel the collective holding the breath. Here I realize, maybe we won't make it. Drawing up the hill, the van is slow and the incline is quickly steep.

"Open the door!" the driver yells back, "There are people, help

them!” Two men stand, hunching in the metal frame, one props open the door, and the other take a knee, extending his arm out of the moving van into the rain. “Come on!” he yells into muffled air. I watch two hands reach from the darkness, to grab his forearm. He pulls them in and throws a woman onto the lap of others. Then there’s one more, a taller man who’s thrown onto the floor. The van door slides and slams shut.

The woman speaks, “We were on a bus that flipped over by the beach,” her words petrified. “We lost our friend. It was too dark; we don’t know where she went.” How can this be real? “And there’s a mudslide down the hill, a house went with it,” she adds.

“The trees are spinning in circles!” Someone yells.

The driver yells “Largo, Largo” to indicate where we’re at and if anyone needs go get out—it’s my stop.

The two men are still kneeling and crouched by the door ready to help, I yell to the driver and everyone to be safe. The door slides open, the van keeps moving, I feel two hands wrap around my bicep, securing my step down into ankle deep rushing water. As I feel the hands release from my arms, “Obrigada!” I yell, uncertain if I’ve even made a sound. I hear the van door slide shut and I watch the taillights disappear under the darkened rain.

I'm standing in the middle of the road, surrounded by three-storied ghost buildings, the sky is enormous here. I feel greatly exposed, alone and engulfed in heavy shades of navy and dark blues. The street lifeless and consumed by awakened nature. I take another breath and dip into the corridor between darkened concrete stacks of box houses, I know people are inside—but it's so lifeless, eerily empty, *are people actually inside?*

I'm curled forward, beneath engorged bundled hives of hanging powerlines. Nobody pays for electricity in the favela—they connect more lines to same city power sources and dozens of fat powerlines zigzag above walkways from house to house. Tonight, their entirety hangs low weighted to grace my hairline.

I know I am to pass three corridor ally entryways descending to the right side, before I come to mine. Going as quickly as I can, I can barely see. Looking down, watching my pacing feet, *fuck me, I don't remember how many corridors I've counted.* How much time and distance has passed? I pause and look up for some marker. In the middle of dead structures, I am the only one left on earth.

I look left to right.

It all looks the fucking same, concrete walls in the dark. *Fuck me,* I slap my consciousness. Okay. I know there is a metal handrail



that juts into the corridor I need to take to get home. Look for the handrail. I go forward, forward, forward and nearly pass the rail until I doubletake and it makes me go back.

*Oh my God.*

I find the corridor blocked by concrete rubble taller than I, as my gaze continues to draw up, someone's second-story balcony crumbled right off the house.

There's a small gap enough to fit one limb through at a time. A gaping peep to Narnia. Over or under, I think, over or under, I think. My options weighed in moments. And really . . . it doesn't matter. I hold my blue canvas bag closer to my chest and gamble.

I step one leg through the gap  
and hold my breath  
hoping I will come out of this intact.

I step sideways, tapping my toes to find a landing on the other side.

I lay my heel down  
and give it a quick rock back and forth. It's steady.

Careful to not touch any edge,

I send my hips through,

pass my torso

and my head to the other side.

A strategic game of cheating limbo.

My weight transfers to step over with the other leg.

And I jump as far away as I can.

I come to the top of a case of eighty stairs, an infinite descent at eighty degrees. Still ankle deep in rushing water with swaying powerlines above my hair. There's nothing to hold onto but myself. The rain beats, leaving no space for my panting breath. I start speaking out loud just to check I am still alive, *You're going to make it, you're going to make it*, a parrot on repeat. My toes scrunch on my sandals beneath the water, hoping it will keep me standing.

I am alone looking right to left, checking to know the wooden panels of doors are ones I have seen before. When I get to the bottom and round the corner, *thank God*, I say out loud. There are just six steps of glory draw down to my house. Standing in water, next to palm leaves in front of a wooden door. My hand reaches into my purse, *Pen, gum, cardholder, come on . . .* Dipping in the pockets I pull my trembling fingers and the key ring flies from my grip diving underwater. *Is this real? Defeat, this can't be defeat.*

I hold my breath, dunk my hand beneath the rushing river, my flat palm pats bumpy steps, wincing and pleading, *please, don't let there be floating rats. Please, please* talking to myself *you're so close*. I'm about to kneel down in the water when I feel a ring, I pull my hand up and catch my own wrist with my free hand to

secure it in place. *Yes, Yes!* My hand itself an earthquake I slide the key in the door and let go of my wrist.

I open the door turned floodgate, watching all the water rush into this treehouse home open to the mountainside. I pass under the doorframe, still exposed to the mountain on an open ledge, in open air. The wind gusts chills on my skin—another sign that I’m alive.

A step up to the left is a massive open kitchen, soaked with and painted with mud and palm leaves bigger than I am. I trek through in slow motion, dazed in how this can be real. I push open a second deep wood door to a silent hallway closed to the rest of the apartment.

Stunned I step into the darkness.

I close the door behind me.

I drop my bag and I think it thuds.

And take off my shoes.

And pull my shirt over my head, stripping naked; I leave my clothes on the floor.

# Chapter 14

---

## Reset

With my cheek to the pillow is a view of Mother Earth. She's lush and full, brilliant with emerald vines. I'm sheltered in three white walls and one made of glass, engulfed and exposed in nature. It's so quiet, I could be the only one left.

I sit up, get out of bed and when I slide the glass door open, I'm hit by air thick and wet, moving heat by gentle breeze. Stepping down to the wooden balcony, hanging one with the trees, layers of shimmering canopies, leaves sway directing beams of shadows and bronzed light. A teasing show of the fireball sun. She's perfect in circular rim radiating hazy brushstrokes of orange and red, painting the whispering sky above the mass of the sea.

With the favela stacked behind and above my back, I'm on the

edge of the mountain cliff. Nature's orchestra hugs the space, tiny gray and white-faced mico monkeys jump from tree to tree watching the leaves shimmy and rustling their lyric. Crashing ocean waves can only be heard when sounds of the exhaust escape the winding road from the mountain range far below. Between here and that road is a path for C.V. It's jungle hidden. They use it to pass from one favela to the other. I've been told that there are nights when you can hear their breath. That they'll pause beneath the house, and they'll sit on a ledge. I imagine the guns in their laps.

How nature clashes to the mind, a world of people and place and how we entwine.

*Let me see what's happening on the street.* I get myself together and open the door to the house. It's so peaceful. The sky a perfect clear blue, enormous white birds soar circles flaunting paradise. The sun is so hot, everything has gone dry. I draw my gaze down the blue turns to gray concrete, and the steps up ahead of me lie streams of crumpled trash. Stagnant in place, forgotten by last night's rushing water. I climb, feeling my legs burn, and am just a drop out of breath when I turn the corner.

She's miniature, maybe three years old, barefoot in a pink fleece pajama dress with a white princess printed on the front. Spotting me, "Tia!" *Aunt!* she yells to me gleaming, throwing

her hands to the air, running with pitter patter feet stopping with her cheeks between my knees. She wraps her tiny arms around my shins. “Tia,” she sighs and settles in. This is the first time I have seen her, and her me.

*Who are you my tiny angel?* I think, falling in love. Then a second child appears, a boy, much smaller than her, with shorts so tiny they look like little blue squares holding up his brown baby belly. He squeals, throws his hands up in the same way as he scoots to us, stopping with his eyes beneath my knee. Both hug onto my legs, securing me in place like a statue wearing ski boots. I bend forward, placing a hand on their backs, rubbing up and down.

“Bom dia” *Good morning*, I say, adoring and baffled by the sweet love. I gaze up, assuming the next presence of an adult, but instead there is a third child. He is slightly taller, also shoeless. “Tia.” He says sternly, marching toward the three of us. “I am Clayton,” he tells me, without the sound of the letter “o” in his name.

“Hi Clayton. Is this your brother and sister?”

“Yes, I am the oldest,” he tells me. “I am the oldest,” he tells me again, pointing to the center of his chest.

“How old are you?” I ask.

He looks down at his fingers counting, and about a minute later he holds up a five and one thumb. “Tia,” he repeats, as if to get

my attention that he already had. “My pipa,” *my kite*, he tells me, “It is on the roof of your house.”

“Really?” I respond.

“Yes,” he says with stern emotion in his face. “It’s stuck on your house.”

“Well, we should look for it.”

The two tinys wrapped on my legs needed no more—they both throw their hands up in the most grand celebration, cheering as they run around the corner I just came from. Clayton marches past me with his elbows swinging by his sides on a mission.

“Clayton,” I say, “Go tell your parents that we are looking for your pipa.” It’s clear this tiny general doesn’t take orders from neighbors as he rounds the corner without looking back to acknowledge I had put words into the air. I question what I’ve done. I pause, popping my head around looking for an open door, an adult, a somebody. There is no one. *Alright*. I think. It will just be a moment.

The three of them are standing in a line, peering up at the front of my house. Funny that they know where it is. There must be chatter that there is a gringa who has recently moved in. When I open the door to my house, they run in and scatter like marbles. The two tinys cheering, still with their hands in the air, exploring every corner and bumping into every wall. I take two plastic bowls and spatulas out of the kitchen cabinets and

put them on the floor: “Here,” I call to them, “we have drums.” They sit down on the floor with wide eyes and start banging away.

“Clayton, come this way.” and I take him to the staircase which leads to the roof. He passes me up the stairs, pushing the door open to the second level of scattered debris and one giant blue cylinder bin—the water source for the house. We stand in the doorway, “Do you see it?” I ask him. He is silent. I look down to him and notice his eyes darting side to side, a hawk, with his brow furrowed and lips pierced forward in concentration.

Standing on the roof, we’re engulfed by the thick, humid air, the sun beating our skin raw, being one with the mountain skyline. We are small, standing in the middle of cement houses that ascend proudly above us, splaying along the mountainous coast, as their density rolls down the green lush, drifting off to hide beneath the earth of vibrant green tropical leaves glistening, tumbling, falling onto white sand that glazes crystal water so abundant and hazy, it’s hard to tell where the sea ends and the sky begins.

Far enough away to make an enormous building look small, appearing as a single grey rectangle standing on its side at the base of the foresta. One word in red letters streams across the top of the building, “Sheraton.”



*My god.*

And the inside of my eyes flash.

My world splits.

And I'm transported, watching myself, watching my film of the past.

Ten-years-old, peering up at a sky of pipas, I can see it on the inside of my eyelids.

The yellow tail flaunts and flirts with the wind,  
waving my memory to fast forward,  
warping my remembrance of walking into the hotel room,  
standing before the postcard window  
next to my father's finger pressed to the glass,  
the dense boxes

"the police won't *neever* go there," he told me  
and I . . .

. . . don't know if I'm breathing.

I'm struck frozen.

An image split.

. . . standing inside

. . . the very same favela

. . . I watched from afar

. . . eighteen years ago.

“Tia,” he breaks my bending mind. “Where is my pipa?” And I look at him with my mouth open and nothing coming out. As if I needed a moment to remember who he is.

“What color is it?”

No answer. His wide eyes look up at me, an innocence masked in stern intensity. “Maybe it’s on the street,” I offer. He’s wordless as we go back down the stairs.

Approaching the first level, the two tiny ones are out of sight, out of sound. *Oh my gosh, I lost them*, I think. In the mirroring moment, Clayton yells a sound, a call to order of sorts, and the tinys run out from two different hidden directions with beaming smiles. Their pitter-pattering feet dash past me and right out the door. Clayton marches after them, his elbows tucked into his sides; he climbs six steps before turning to where I stood in the doorway. He lifts his tiny finger and shakes it up and down. Eye to eye with me he says, “You see my pipa, you tell me.”

# Chapter 15

---

## Chains

When I leave the house again, the rubble that I had climbed through the night before is gone. As if it had never fallen to block the top of the alleyway. The tucked away *beco* is void of life. On the main road, energy abounds, with storefronts open and shopworkers standing at entryways, their arms crossed, protecting the dark spaces behind them. There's no electricity and people share a mutual feeling of intense, yet stoic, concern.

I stand on the corner and wait for a white kombi van to take me down the hill. The next one I see slows down when I put my hand up to hail and get in. I can feel my thighs stick to the seat as I slide in, body to body with neighbors. It's cooler outside than in, and immediately, I feel sweat drip down the side of my temple. Next to me are other women, with babies, bags, and a

few grandmothers in skirts. The motor bumbles the backseat, I can feel the vibration under my hips. It's a short time before the kombi stops again to let in a man with a hat and a thick gold chain studded with jewels. Dripping a more-than-usual flashy look for being on the hill. A look that would indicate he's someone who has connection to something . . .

The van is mostly silent until we pass an oversized, unmarked box truck. The back is open and there are two men in white t-shirts standing on the truck platform, above a pool of people on the ground are shaking their hands above their heads. There are chosen members in the pool who have caught a grocery bag and elbow their way from the crowd. Others catch the dropping grocery bags from the truck, and continue to pass it back, over their heads to reaching hands.

The man with the chain asks the van, "How many people do you think need it?" as he nods out the window. Without hesitation everyone speaks up— "It's not right," someone says in a disciplinary tone. "Taking when you're not in need," another adds tscking and shaking her head. "No, it's not right," comes from a third, balancing the chorus. "We need to leave it for the people who are really suffering," from a fourth. The remarks are accompanied by this van full of shaking heads. The man with the chain speaks again, "People accept the handout. It's not right."

A woman in the third, final row of the van speaks with calmness, “It’s too much.” The eight of us turn to look at her, “I have five kids,” she tells us, “and when Bolsa Família was initiated, I had friends who told me, *apply, you get free money, take it*, but this is the reality.” Her tone takes an elegant authority as she pauses her words, “It wasn’t my plan to have five kids. But I did so it’s my responsibility. I must put them in school, feed them . . . I never asked for money from the government. It is our responsibility as parents to provide. Some people abuse this. But it is not right.”

# Chapter 16

---

## Deals

**B**efore I went to the favela people told me, “You’ll just know” when you see someone with the faction. It left me dissatisfied, I wanted more, some kind of detail, something that would light my radar. The truth is though . . . You just know. Sometimes by the way they walk . . . Where they walk and where they stay. Maybe there’s the beep of a walkie-talkie or their gun is on display but . . . sometimes not.

Every faction has a type of hierarchy, some more pinnacle, some more flat. In general, there is:

**Patrão:** The highest position in the hierarchy—the boss. Only he will have word with foreign cartels. While he may call in others in the decision-making processes, his final word is obeyed.

**Subgerente:** A type of assistant manager who oversees activities including the handling of distribution at the *Boca de Fumo* or “Mouth of Smoke.”

**Boca de Fumo:** Specific unmarked locations in the favela operating like a revolving door to sell drugs and arms. Each Boca de Fumo operates as a separate entity within the faction. The Boca de Fumo will have success based on the quality of the product being sold—not by fighting with other factions for more territory. The product speaks for itself. There is zero marking, targeting, or promotion because it is not necessary—she / he / they who want the product will seek it out. Twenty-four-hour service, there can be four to seven(ish) intermediário’s selling in shifts.

**Intermediário:** The middleman at the Boca de Fumo. During the day, these individuals can be seen sitting on a wall, a plastic chair, on a stoop posted up, ready to sell to those who arrive to buy. Intermediários are paid by the faction in cash or by merchandise—depending on what he prefers. Yes, *he*. It is very rare to see a female in this position—not unheard of—but so rare it would seem out of place.

**Olheiro:** The eyes, watchdogs of faction protection. Olheiros post at various locations in or outside the favela, depending on what or who they are protecting. When they are protecting a person, (those highest in the ranks), typically they are stealth

and undercover. There can be 50–100 Olheiros surrounding this individual at any given time, and they will move with that individual regardless of location. There are other Olheiros with a duty to protect the Boca de Fumo and territory of the favela. They are often seen on the street at strategic and specific posts. Should the police or someone of suspicion begin to encroach on the favela, it is the role of the Olheiro to set off a firecracker in warning and walkie talkie radio notice to alert the rest of the faction that their territory is being pushed into. In any position, they are generally armed.



# Chapter 17

---

## The Honey God

“**W**hat’s your name?” he yells back to me, through the wind, over his bumbling moto as we fly up the hill. The sun is beginning to fall, and the street is alive. We zoom past cars, other motos and quick pops of life where people walking the hill look frozen in time.

“My name is Michelle,” I put the palm of my hand on the cap of his shoulder. “It’s a pleasure.” He tilts his head back, enough to keep his eyes on the road and his ear drawn enough to hear.

“Where are you from Michelle?” he asks.

“New York!” I yell to him, leaning forward just enough.

“New York?!” he responds, “but why are you in the favela? Don’t you know the dream is the other way around?” he asks, while putting his hand in the air making a twisting motion as if he could turn the cities in his palm.

“Are you from here?” I respond.

"I am," he nods his head as we zip between stacked houses.  
"Well thanks for having me in your home," I tell him. We  
approach the corner where I ask him to drop me off. I swing  
my leg over the bike and my hair over my shoulder. Adjusting  
the fray on my jean shorts, I pull R\$ 3.50, fifty American cents,  
from my pocket and thank him for the ride.  
"Vai com Deus" he says, *Go with God*.

Dripping in the bronze of the sun, everyone is golden.  
There are people crossing in every direction, teeny children  
with tiny blue backpacks holding hands. People coming home  
off motos and kombis with beaming white smiles yelling "*Boa  
Noite!*" to one another, waving with their arms in the air as  
if trying to touch the sky. There's music, and people gathered  
around the storefronts, sitting with tiny plastic cups of beer  
on white plastic tables set on the street, and through a sea of  
tadpoles and rainbow fish I look right  
to  
him.

In this world of honey dripping gold, he is crisp.  
His square jaw line drawing slightly forward  
Defined  
And as if we are both frozen  
His eyes lock to mine.  
His smile grows  
His hands in his red short pockets

standing with his legs just wider than his hips.

A whisper in the wind draws past my ear, *Who is that?*

He makes me want to get out of the savory light and escape with him.

*That. Is a man.*

I rest into a soft smile, and tilt my head in the direction of my corridor, nodding to put my words in his mind, *Are you coming?* and continue my steps, getting swallowed in concrete.

The street sounds muffle to silence. And I quickly accept making an exception to the deal I made with myself, of no dating on the hill. In a community that has lived here for generations, ties are complex and deep. It is my place to be conscious and respectful. I am a guest, *privileged* to be here. I shift my focus over my shoulder expecting to see him . . . The view is nothing but empty and narrow grey, pebble-embedded walls; there's no one behind me. *Really?* I think.

Around the next corner is a Boca de Fumo. I wonder if there will be any neighbors around, if today will be my day to make a stop. Weed in Brazil isn't legal, but smoking a joint while bronzing on the beach is nice, and common. I put a lot of thought into contemplating buying from the Boca de Fumo. While my purchase would be a mere R\$ 20 dent in their huge trade, it still would contribute to funding their activities which fuel a negative reputation of the *morro*—including of those

not involved with the faction. Brazilian friends had told me, “Don’t worry,” but I am a guest on the hill. I could buy my stash outside of the favela, from someone likely not associated with the faction, but at the end of the day, the product would still be coming from the Boca de Fumo.

Today as I get closer to the alleyway that dips to my home, and closer to the Boca de Fumo, it’s just me, and four members leaning up against the wall. “Tudo bom?” I greet them. And ask to buy. Expecting to receive some kind of comment or tease from the person selling to me, instead, I’m asked how much reais I want to spend; he looks me in the eye as he pulls a black backpack around to his chest to hand me three rectangle sticks of tightly packed, plastic-wrapped dull green weed. I roll it in my fingers examining what he handed me, taking more note of the black and red Commando Vermelho sticker that held the plastic together than what was actually inside. “Servi?” *Will it serve you?* He asks me, and it’s like buying a product from any other business in a shop. Ultimately that is what the Boca de Fumo is. That is what the faction is. A business providing a means to life.

My lips press together, I nod once making an “mhm” sound. My gaze drops, I open my purse, and when I look up . . .  
I am wrapped back in honey.  
My inhale stops in my throat.

His eyes locked in mine, he steps into me.  
Our bodies, breaths from one another, he swallows me in.  
I can feel the magnetism swirling between us,  
“Let me see you,” he says.  
In this mysteriously serious way, asking for and not needing  
permission. His voice deep and low as if telling me a secret in  
confidence of not caring who hears.  
I draw my eyes to his lips. Plush amongst the definition.  
Wordless.  
Taking the power to let him soak in my field.  
In slow motion I lift my eyes to meet his gaze.  
“Don’t see him,” the sound of someone else wrecks our  
forcefield.

When I look around, I realize we are standing in the middle  
of a ring of faction members. There are six around us, armed  
with pistols in their shorts and hands and all but one with their  
back to us to keep watch. I hand the R\$ 20 to the kid with  
the backpack and turn back to this Honey God, who without  
interruption, hadn’t moved his eyes from me. I smile. And I give  
him my name, “Michelle,” and greet him with a kiss on each  
cheek.  
“Michelle.” His energy steps closer, pressing into mine, “Let me  
see you.”

# Chapter 18

---

## Exposed

*K*eeep moving, act natural, the voice in my head fighting to be strong, *oh shit shit shit*.

I chase my running heart on a ninety-degree angle staircase between padlocked wooden doors and no way out. They're fifty steps below me, walking toward me, and my options race without time. My body unconsciously moves forward. *If I turn around it will seem suspicious. If I turn around I stay in front of them.* My eyes dart left-right-left-right—*please let there be some alleyway to escape into, please.* Left-right-left-right—*if I turn around, will they chase me too?* We're getting closer, *God, please, please, let me pass,* and closer, as I start to understand more and more of what's happening.

There are three men. One a hostage. His hands tied behind

his back. His head is dropped, rocking side to side with every escalating step, and I get an overwhelming impression of a pouting child caught misbehaving. Linked to his arm is a white kid with curly, fluffy black hair wearing a smirk and a white tee. The space of his palm is occupied by a pistol, pointing to the waist of the hostage. I watch the pistol rock with his loose grip, and there screams blood in my brain, piercing the inside of my ears, "*HOLD YOUR GUN LIKE A MAN!*" my mind yells as somehow that would make the situation more secure. The third behind them is an enormous man towering over the two in front, without emotion, assuming stoic backup.

*God, please let me move on.* My breath pins in my chest and all I can feel is the violent beat of my heart trying to break out from the inside of my skin.

Intimately approaching each other now, the sun is so bright there are no shadows between the concrete . . . "Boa tarde," the captor says to me like a pimp proud of his catch. He knows he's bringing home a sack of gold. "Boa tarde," I respond under my breath. We pass shoulder to shoulder, filling the entire space of the corridor. I can feel my waist pass the laser line barrel of his gun.

*Act normal, act normal,* and I count to five because somehow five is the right number of seconds to give myself permission to

walk faster. *Faster*, the voice in my head pleads. I pick up the pace, trying to appear without panic. *Faster*. There's a curve in the corridor, and I begin to run. Bouncing down more steps, the inside of my chest pressurized trying to rip open.

I know I am close to the city streets, there I'll be able to breath and as I round another blind corner I am no longer alone, but amidst a swarm of men. Some shirtless and cut in different shades of beautiful browns and blacks, seemingly my age, 20s, 30s, they're big, towering in their space, each with a different shape and size of firearm in their hand. There's nowhere for me to go. There's only one way out. I'm in their land.

Here I call to power. I push my tension into my clenching jaw, roll my shoulders back and tick my chin upward to grow my presence. My head forward, I go forward. My eyebrows just slightly lifted as if to say, *You will be the one to seek my approval*.

Maybe fifteen feet away, the closer I get, the more they give me their attention. Between grey corridor walls one by one, they create an isle of rippling silence, and physically stepping with their backs to the walls to part ways for me to walk through their sea. Entering their field of parallel lines, I feel their eyes following me. In a silence so quiet their salivation drips and sizzles on the concrete. I only keep my head forward and everything seems slow motion. Am I still confident between tempted tigers?



Several steps ahead there's one man in the middle and end of the aisle. His back to me in a black t-shirt, *please move*, I think, I don't want to have to make any sound. I don't want to ask for anything. My steps slow to give him more time and when my eyes are in line with the back of his hairline, he turns. His eyes are yellow with deep dark pools, we stand wordless staring at each other to the sound of his rubbing hands. Then, in over exaggeration he steps to the side and bows, drawing his arms, welcoming me to the other side.

Passing through and out of the obstacle of their lines, *how many guns are pointed at my back right now?* I feel magnetized points along my spine. I slip down the nearest staircase between structures four stories high and here it's out of the light. It's dim, temperature cool and ahead is the bright light at the end of the tunnel where the city street meets the alleyway of the hill. *Finally*, I think, *finally*, and I start to breathe when three policemen enter from the light. Slow in their steps, their AKs pointed to the floor. We, too, pass shoulder to shoulder in their single-file line, nodding to me, as I hold my silence knowing—they're walking into an anticipated war.

## Chapter 19

---

# When the Air Pops

I cross the street just before I hear rounds of fire go off. The sounds quick like a needle bobbing in a sewing machine. The street is full and pedestrian eyes dart to one another in recognition of the sounds. And life keeps moving. Traffic continues to pass. On the sidewalk, across the street from the favela towering to my left and to my right, is a railing breaking the dropping seacoast falling to luscious greens over the ocean massaging the earth. The air seems dusty, stagnant, like I am being absorbed on the inside of a sponge. I can't feel my legs, my feet, but I know I need to keep moving as my soul hovers on the outside of me. I am a walking matter of shock as I watch myself quickly pace my way along the coast, arriving to a different style of humanity on the beach in Leblon.

Everything around me is a hazy hallucination. The sand is surely too hot, burning beneath my sinking feet but . . . I can't even feel it. There are people around, but I can't see them as real. I lay my canga down—a piece of fabric that every Brazilian uses at the beach. I pull my shirt over my head and my shorts to my feet, wrapped in bikini strings and heat of the sun. I sit—no, lie down—and palm handfuls of sand as if it will keep me in place. Polar ends of amplified energy and stunned paralysis surge and pump my veins.

What is more confusing:  
what I just saw,  
not knowing how to react,  
or the potentiality that in the scenarios I walked through lies normalcy.

Gazing at the range of dreamy emerald mountain lush, it cradles the whispers and stories of the favela a quarter mile up. The leaves shake in pops of cracking air from the guns. Background to the music playing on the sand. Background to the endless chatters of bikini people, background to the vendors offering caipirinha and *camerão*. It's in the background, brought forward only by and with choice of attention.

The sun beats my body. Heat squeezing me like a lemon, my

thoughts drip out of my skin. Through my closed eyes rays of hot orange light shine through, and I begin to hear the ocean. Crashing its tide, remember you are small, it tells me. In that enormity—we are small. A tiny, tiny, pin of a mark moving on a huge rotating globe, no matter the grandiosity of our presence, we will always be small. While everyone's largest world, is their own . . .

Then there is a shade towering over me.

I cup my hands over squinting eyes, and this buffed shirtless shadow and everything but his surfboard is hard to identify . . . until he squats down. I'm soaked into his honey world.

"Michelle," his tone smooth . . . melty.

"Hi," I say to him stunned, questioning his reality.

"I'm happy to see you," he remarks. "I haven't stopped thinking about you since you left me on the street," he half laughs and smiles.

I move to make room for the both of us on my canga.

"My name is André," he offers. "I've been hoping to see you again."

"Sit down," I say to him with a soft smile, drawing on our Boca de Fumo encounter just days before. He looks up to the sun, and down to me before plunging his surfboard upright in the sand, creating a shadow over us and breaking the heat.

When we had met on the street, it didn't seem right giving him my information while in the center of a ring of the faction. It didn't seem right spending any more time there than the reason of a quick transaction for weed so after I paid. I kind of just walked away. Of course, I had thought, wondered, hoped, I would cross his path again. He had stopped and dragged my world through honey.

Still looking to find my balance back on earth, I'm shy looking down to the sand. "I like your English," I tell him. His posture perks proud "Thank you," flashing me a perfect white smile. "I started reading books and trying to talk with native people. I speak French, Spanish, Portuguese of course . . ."

I don't know how he knew that I speak English . . . but when in a tight knit community, people talk. And I assume that the foreign woman who just moved in buzzed some chatter. "Would you like to speak in Portuguese so you can practice?" he asks me. With his conscious courtesy, I melt in his honey world.

Overlooking the sparkling sea, he tells me he's from Rocinha. "It's different than the favela where you live. It's so big you can be inside Rocinha for days and never see anything else—just Rocinha." He pauses. I look to him watching his lips pierce and eyes squint. "It's not always so good, actually," he adds.

“What do you mean?” I ask.

And he kind of rocks his head side to side as if listening to a tug-of-war. His tone drops, “The other favelas in Zona Sul oversee the rich parts of life. You can see them from inside the favela. Other ways to live, it’s open. In Rocinha, it’s closed, we don’t have that. And when people leave and go to the communities outside the favela, they are looked at differently. Maybe for their skin color, the way they dress . . .” he slows, and I can see the beat of his heart. “It makes them feel uncomfortable,” he continues, “unwelcomed. So people stay inside the favela where they never have to leave, and never see any other way of life.”

“And you? How do you live your life?” I ask.

He begins to tell me about how most people from the favela have a story similar to his. “Not the same,” he clarifies, “but everyone from the favela has a story more or less like this.” Life in the way society has more or less predetermined. He keeps his head lifted when he talks. His chest open. “There are five of us. Three of us have different dads but they’ve all gone. For my mom . . . it was hard. I used to get angry at her. But she didn’t ask for life to be like this,” he says. He was six when he started selling bread from a basket. When it was gone, he would go home, gather more, and go back to the street. That was his duty. School wasn’t an option, so he would ask friends to pay attention and to teach him. He would sit and read their books and do their homework

when they went to play. That's how he learned to read and to write.

His gaze shifted to the sky, and I sat there watching his profile, without any emotion I could understand. Then he jolted, as if jumping from a dream, and his eyes locked to mine, "I don't know why I'm telling you this."

"I'm listening." I smile gently and wait for more.

He tells me about what it was like growing up.

Those memories from childhood . . . the hard ones that somehow still linger with us as part of our definition. Story after story of how life has tried to keep him down. When he talks there's an air about him. His shoulders broad, his posture prideful. In recounting hardship, he carries confidence. And all I can think is . . . this is another level of human.

The sun begins to dip behind the mountain coast, the brightness of the sky dims yet glows as we sit side by side watching. He tells me how he trains and teaches Jiu-Jitsu in the favela. He paints me his dreams, about how hard he will work to compete, and be awarded as a champion. His smile beaming, his tone drops in assurance, "I will be so successful." He tells me how he will come back to Rocinha for the kids. And in this elevated elated space his gaze drops, and the dreaming sobers. "There are some kids in there Michelle, they're on the street all day with nothing. They don't have food to eat and still every

night they arrive to train.” He nods in certainty, “We must lift them.” His eyes light up. Sparkling without the need of light. I begin to visualize seeing all of this, seeing every single detail play out.

“I can’t wait to see you there,” I tell him.

He looks to me quick and struck, “You believe in me?” his response stumped innocent curiosity.

“Of course,” I tell him thinking, *look at everything you have done, of course this will happen*. He collapses somewhat, bashfully shy, glowing a pure, nectar of sweet joy. I’m encapsulated. “Life really puts us to a test. Doesn’t it?” I say. He blows out air in acknowledgement and it rocks his head back in several nods.

He doesn’t ask me to share my stories with him . . . but I felt this deep urge in longing to. To reciprocate the intimacy. To reciprocate the presence. For the first time in my life, I unpack what I had been through with my estranged father; and how challenging it has been to come to Brazil. To someone who was a stranger an hour ago, I unpack what has kept me terrified, in all its rawness and how it led me here. How I needed to know Brazil to understand who I am.



# Chapter 20

---

## Rocinha

Watching the changing sky, tasting words from the other. We weave our beings together, exposing the experiences that have been kept hidden from the rest of the world. In all their ugliness, recounting the most challenging times in unapologetic, non-judgmental ways because there is nothing to lose. He repeats parts of my stories back to me, ensuring he got the details right. He asks me questions, for more details and about how I am feeling. When I trip up my words like rocks scattered along the path, he waits. Patiently. When I go silent in defeat, but before too much time passes, “*Pode falar*” *go ahead*, he says, in the most neutral tone of encouragement. He listens.

As we arrive to the ends of our roads we sit listening to the waves and the way the wind blows through the palms. “Michelle, do

you want to see Rocinha?” he asks. I pause, looking to him in silence and nod to respond.

We stand up and take a moment to hug. My arms wrap the top of his shoulders and I can feel his heart blossom into my chest. A sparkling, heated sensation, of one open soul to another. We step back, staring at one another. “Come on,” he says.

We arrive to the favela and are met with an intense commotion on the ground in front of us. At the base of the mountain are beeping cars and zooming buses pumping exhaust. We stand side by side and it all falls silent. The sky a glowing a sapphire blue, leaving just enough light to see the faint outline of the mountain ridge holding the people of Rocinha.

One by one, lights on the mountainside are born out of darkness, stars making their debut. One by one, shimmering lights collect as a net of glitter draped over the mountainside. “Do you think it’s beautiful?” I ask. Pressing his top lip into the bottom, holding his smile.

“Yea . . . I think it’s beautiful” he relaxes into it, and I can sense him feeling embraced, by watching his community illuminate.

“Do you?” he asks me.

In front of us the biggest favela in all of Latin America . . . is stunning.

Gulped in the Rocinha commotion of hustling street people we pass through an enormously intimate marketplace of maybe one hundred stall shops of clothes and clothes, and electronics and clothes, and shoes, and things and clothes. Knock-off brand names and sexy cut neon Lycra dresses and crop tops. White light illuminates between the stalls beneath sheet metal shelter. Popping with seas of moving people, negotiations and deals beat with music changing in every other stall, we continue through until we reach the other side back in open air, beneath the night sky. The flow of people steady and unchanged, passing food stands of crackling grills stacked with sticks of cut meat, hamburgers, people gathered around red plastic tables pouring crystallized beer and, “Are you hungry?” André stops in his tracks looking to me with endearing concern. I look to my left at a glass case of a large pizza Portuguesa with pepperoni, onions, diced tomato, green pepper, corn, and egg . . . “No thank you,” I tell him, and we keep going. The next turn opens up. Voice over voice, layered on the exhaust of motorcycle engines, laughing and the sound of high fives, music blasting from businesses, thousands of lives free at home.

“Come on, let me show you where I teach,” André says, and we duck into a narrow door. Leaving life outside, it seems so still. “Opa chefe,” André says, smacking hands with an older man as they pull one another in to hug, each of their heads resting on the shoulder of the other. They pause. Upon releasing they’re

still palm to palm shaking hands between them, ping ponging conversation under their breath, too low for me to understand. André stands taller here. Looking up at his boss, with his chest puffed in presence. André puts his free hand on the shoulder of his boss, and then angles to me.

“This is Michelle. She is from the US; she is also Brazilian. You can speak to her in Portuguese, she speaks well.”

“Michelle!” the boss says excitedly, “It’s such a pleasure!” and he too embraces me. Assumed family. André goes on to say how he wants to show me around the gym. “It’s her first time to Rocinha,” André notes.

“Well, be very welcome,” boss replies, “you have a home here too.” And he puts his hand on his heart; I repeat the motion in return, smiling, speechless.

André gestures to follow him up a narrow staircase. The space is gently dim as we climb. We pass a file of people descending, each taking their turn acknowledging André “opa” “boa” “tudo bem” every single person acknowledges him. We arrive to a landing and a large open studio. Across the way the corner of the building is made of oversized glass windows, with a view of the drastic darkness and glittering mountainside. A similar view we had from the street side but this time, we are floating with the mountain.

Spread around the room are different areas of focus, weights

and shirtless men doing pull-ups, a padded floor and twenty people in blue and white Jiu-Jitsu suits. “When I teach, it is here,” André says, and we begin walking to this padded area; the group of men begin to get rowdy, cheer, celebrate, as André is approaching. André begins shaking hands with a gleaming smile, and every time he greets someone, he turns to me and gives a full introduction. He makes me present with him. And I’m not sure if I’ve ever been in that type of position before. Where he didn’t just give someone my name, but he introduced me, and elaborated in the interests myself and the other individual have. We greet every participant there. Chatting longer with some than others. Then André puts his palm on my low back. “Have a good training,” he says to the group with one hand up. And we turn around and make our way back down the stairs.

*Who is this man*, I wonder. And as we get back onto the street full of sizzling pans of street vendors, smoke and dust rising in the dark from passing motos, endless people moving around . . . and his eyes on mine, I see this innocence. Nothing else exists around us, nothing else is real, but him. “Let’s go?” he says to me. And we begin to walk deeper into and up the mountainside of Rocinha. It gets increasingly steep, and I feel as though he’s running up the hill, moving quickly, my legs are burning it’s sadly difficult for me to keep up. I try to silently swallow and calm my panting breath, following him deeper into this huge

city. We continue through snaking alleyways hugged by stories upon stories of buildings around us. For sure I am completely lost. Without one clue of where I am. And somehow . . . that's okay.

We come to a gate, and he reaches into his pocket. "Houses in the favela always have two doors," André says, organizing his keys. "The first one is to enter from the street." The metal creaks as it opens. "It's also to protect the second," he says, closing the gate behind him and looking down to organize his keys again. "The second door," he says, passing me, reaching his hand for the knob and drawing his keys again, "is to enter the home." He draws the door open, welcoming me to step in first. There's darkness and steps from the door I can make the outline of a red loveseat. There's a kitchenette exposed to the space, and as I hear him close the door, I don't think about what will happen in the next moment . . . I don't let myself question what he and I could be or where this is going . . . I don't question the next day . . . or if he will call or not . . .

All I know is that the moments so deliciously good with him, my soul craves to savor them all . . . Every edge of every second. All I know is to relinquish myself to him. André steps into me. The same way on the street, I can feel the magnetic dome of energy around him meeting mine. He's still.

My breath deepens into all my nerve endings

Waiting.

He's looking down to me, and me up to him.

His fingertips begin to roll the sides of my t-shirt.

He does so without touching me, and he waits.

Moving through golden honey in the darkness I lift my arms  
above my head to guide the way.

He pulls my shirt up, past my eyes, and slows down.

My hair falls to my back cascading in slow motion.

He drops the shirt to the floor.

I hear him slow his breath.

He reaches his arm behind my back

and pulls the blue bikini string

between my shoulder blades.

I feel it drape.

Still without touching my skin

he reaches for the triangle fabric holding my breasts.

And he waits.

I nod.

He pulls it over my head and drops the top to the floor.

He treats me as crystal.

Delicate and gentle.

He is kind in the way he unbuttons my shorts . . . slowly . . .

pulling them downward, while I gently shift my hips so they  
slide over the curve of my waist, my ass, and onto the floor.

He stands back up and I hear him inhale again.

His finger loops in the string by my waist and dragging through

our honey,  
he pulls one bikini tie,  
and then the other.  
Still  
never making contact with my body.  
Fully exposed I stand present in him, I stand tall to show him  
my respect.  
He has already seen me raw . . .  
naked in the history of me  
I want him to see me more, to see all of me, completely.  
To see everything I am made of.  
To remove any barrier that can be left  
I want to be as exposed and as close to him as possible.  
He steps back out of our forcefield,  
I watch the outline of him pull his shirt over his head.  
He drops it by his side without a care, as if it is nothing.  
He unbuttons his shorts . . .  
and becomes more real with me too.  
He steps forward again  
our field on the edge of magnetic pulls.  
Without touching me,  
my lips hover in front of his collar bone.  
His head drops to the rim of my ear.  
“Be beneath the water with me,” he whispers.  
  
As he steps back, I step forward to stay in our field.



We wrap a corner with an open door and step into the tiled bathroom with one small square window providing enough shadow light. I see him a drop more clearly and watch his outline turn away from me only to turn the shower knob.

He steps into the shower,

I watch the water rain over him.

Pooling in the coils of his hair.

Dripping to his temples.

Crystals fall in different directions around the curves of his eyes, down the bridge of his nose.

I can see him close his jaw making the muscle bulge.

Shimmers of water tumble along the lines of his neck, down the V cut decorating the cap of his shoulders crystals split to wrap his biceps.

He lifts his hand to brush the side of his head

the side of his body defined by the meat between his ribs cut in six pack lines drawing down . . . to another V.

My gaze is drawn back up . . . he opens his arm to bring me in.

I accept his hand and step into the tile.

We meet

toe to toe.

Thigh to thigh.

Hip to hip.

My breasts naturally on him . . . enough to press my whole nipple to his chest.

I lift my arms to rest on his shoulders.

He cradles me with one arm around my waist,  
the other draws a diagonal line along my back.  
His fingers are spread wide as if it will give him more of me.  
I hold one hand cupped at the nape of his hairline.  
His head nods down to draw the side of his face to mine  
When his chest expands, filling with oxygen . . . I am there with  
him.  
And when we deflate from air  
he adjusts his arms to wrap me in more.  
We are silent and let the water fall over us.  
I listen to his breath  
and he listens to mine.

## Chapter 21

---

# Staying in the Lines

We're sideways on the bed and it's been silent for some time. He has one arm extended beneath my neck, my head rests on his shoulder. I look up to him and draw one finger down his jawline. "Can I ask you something?"

He responds without doubt, "Of course." A tone with a firm ending, one ready to assume responsibility. I recount the hostage story and what I had passed in the favela that day. "Fuck." Again landing in a tone of statement, "They're doing that during the day?" His tone is flat. A rhetorical question removed from any emotion.

The moment goes silent.

For such time that I actually question if there could be anything else to say, and then he adjusts his whole body. Rotating to look directly in my eyes, he responds, “Michelle, if you see something like this again, keep your eyes forward and don’t *see* anything. Move as if you don’t exist on the same street. If they ask you something—‘I didn’t see anything’ is always the answer. Don’t talk like this with a voice so sweet . . . Make it clear you are gringa. Make mistakes when you talk to them. They won’t want to deal with you because it will create problems for them.” Then he cups his hand to my face. “And if you see this again, you tell me. Because when they’re done there, they will come here next.”

Westerners think with the mind.  
The brain and logic are  
in an affair with time.  
Latins think with the heart.  
Which only knows the feeling of the soul.

# Chapter 22

---

## The Container

Over the chatter, waves of laughter and yells to one another, you can hear the skid of the soccer ball over the concrete. André's homegrown project to keep kids off the street, giving them a safe space and group of family inside the favela. Ages six to eighteen together in one program, they are encouraged to support one another, look out for the other, to respect everyone, and to commit to two things—friendship and training hard.

I'm kicking around with a thirteen-year-old blond, white girl. She tells me how much she likes making dance videos with her friends. She's sweet in a shiny lip gloss and gentle glitter sweeps her eye lids. It's when I'm commenting on her makeup that the air cracks. Her facial expression changes in slow motion. The whites of her eyes take over her face, her mouth draws to a large

oval, and I swear she was in this position before sound screamed from her mouth, “Shot!”

Eighteen children scream in murder running to a metal shipping container where the supplies are kept. Everyone files in, myself, then André, who closes the door behind him, leaving no crack for light.

Chatter echoes off the metal walls, we’re swimming in this vibrating sound. “HEY” André’s voice cuts the air pissed. “HEY!” he’s firm to silence their emotions. “You cannot yell when you hear a shot.” He ends his sentence with a dropping tone of heavy weight. Then I could tell he got lower too, squatting down, as his voice got lower, rising up to me from the ground. “If you yell you cannot hear where the shot is coming from. You need to keep quiet, to be able to hear if there are more,” he explains. Then he whispers under his breath, “Okay?” And eighteen tiny voices respond in the dark, “Okay.”

We wait in silence for some time before André cracks the door open. A beam of light sliced the darkness and he paused. The light so bright, we step out of the door as if stepping into heaven. Back on the court it’s empty and silent topped by a sky so crystal, that familiar perfect blue. André asks all the kids to stay together as we leave to walk them home.

Some mothers or fathers greet us at the door, some knew there was shooting happening, some not. We pass groups of armed faction members at their posts. What bizarro world watching seven-, eight-, nine-year-olds without question or doubt crossing circles of adults with pistols in their hands, the height of the children's heads. What bizarro world where I can be an adult to give protection, for a group of kids who know how to better navigate and protect themselves than I.

We weave around the mountainside and at the very last home, the boy turns and wraps his arms around André's waist, his head rests on his stomach. "Ei tamo junto," André says, patting his back. The boy looks up and gives the same words in return before passing the gate to his home.

André turns to me, his eyebrows raised when he sighs.

"Tamo junto?" I ask.

Resigning in the moment he looks to me as if he's dreaming.

"What does it mean?"

"Tamo junto, means *count on me*. Through all the shit you may go through . . . tamo junto. We'll go through together. Through all the good that comes . . . tamo junto. We'll embrace together. Tamo junto. Count on me. We're together."



## Chapter 23

---

# The Staircase of Unfamiliar Views

**B**etween stacked sand-colored walls, the confined corridor descends overlooking a never-ending glowing sea, a framed view to make you think the world has no end.

My neighbor sits tall on the ledge, resting each leg on two different steps, and a black cane rests between. He was born on that staircase. Eighty years of life. The neighbors are his family. Relation by blood. Relation by street. His head tilts back, soaking his face in the sun. He's husky, mostly bald head except the wiry grays.

From several steps away I say "hello," just to make sure he knows I'm approaching. "Oooh . . ." His tone hugs me, but his face

stays kissing the sky. As I get closer, he reaches his hand out looking for mine. Giving him my palm, he holds it flat between both of his hands, and begins to graze the top my hand with his other.

His fingers are thick, the shape of rectangles. Looking to him with his dark, square-framed sunglasses, he asks me how life is going. We are mostly strangers, but he still sits with calm care. Asking me what's it like where my family lives, and if I get to see them.

I feel sad in this moment that I'm far. That no one really knows where I am because . . . I never learned the address of my house here, I don't know if it works. But even if someone knew it, it doesn't mean that they understand where I am. I feel so far from my family, removed from anything I know and like I have to keep these baffling experiences I'm living to myself for this is typical life for all of the people around me.

I tell him about New York. How there is every single kind of person there. How you can walk on the street and hear different languages, how you can get lost and feel small in steel, and how people carry themselves with a certain type of attitude. A street attitude that isn't too far from the street pulse Cariocas hold—that unapologetic boldness.

Until now, so many people who have heard where I'm from ask me, "Why are you here? Don't you know the dream is the other way around?" and some part of me expects him to ask me: *Why this favela?*

But instead, he responds with this: "I know I am like this," and he draws a hand to his heart, "but if you need anything, you tell me. Maybe I know someone who can help. Just tell me." He smiles, patting his heart, and then patting my hand.

My eyes fill with hot tears. How can I think he is someone with nothing?

... What he has to give is everything.

# Chapter 24

---

## André

We got into this habit of meeting really late.  
1:00, 2:00 a.m. he walks in.

He walks in and we embrace like it was the first time  
and would be the last time all over again.

We pass time on the side of the mountain  
in the company of tranquility.

Engulfed by darkness.

On the balcony extending into the trees

The sound of the wind winding through the leaves

Swallowing in life

We slip into being the only two in the world.

Exchanging ideas for hours

Indulging in curiosity

Philosophy and social customs  
Literature and poetry  
Defining right  
Defining wrong  
What it is, what it should be  
We each have a way of putting ourselves behind the eyes of  
another  
Seeing the situation from that side,  
trying to understand  
and contemplate feeling from that space.  
We challenge each other.  
Lifting and rising as a result.

In that mountain of darkness we birth the world.  
Get insulated  
and lost.  
Completely aimlessly lost in our world which, really . . .  
For the first time in my life, where I'm going . . . doesn't matter.

He sits down on the only chair on that balcony.  
He parts his legs for me to step into him, wrapping his hands on  
either side of my hourglass.  
His head at the center of my breast, breathing my lifeline.  
We take moments like fuel.

"Michelle" with his chin to my breastbone, he looks up.

“Michelle, let’s make a sign. A sign so we can find each other in the next life.”

I slide my hips to sit down on his lap,  
bringing my hands to grace either side of that perfect jawline.  
My eye line, my world, in his,  
“Sweetheart. We aren’t even through this life; you want to make a plan to meet in the next?”

The side of his mouth curls up, as he reaches another reality.  
As if he has just awoken from an airy dream.

I kiss him.

I kiss him to give him myself forever.

He holds on as if I were the one pillar on the cliff.

He belongs nowhere else.

In him was the first time I heard another tone of my soul.

As if our bodies are merely vessels,  
the physical being that obeys the heart’s desire.

We are together because our souls asked us to.

Completely relinquishing control, only grounded to the earth  
because of the other.

It is him

who holds me with his everything. We let our beings get high off  
one another,

letting the other make us full, getting so consumed, forgetting  
to breathe.

Separating to come back to mortal reality, our chests panting up

and down,  
gazing at each other in silence of the night, locked in,  
taking oxygen  
and suffocating at the same time.  
Him as my lifeline and I as his,  
we needed  
more  
fill.

In silence I can hear him growl,  
hungry,  
ravished  
over every curve of me.  
His hands would glide up my sides . . .  
between my shoulder blades . . . slowly . . .  
effortlessly . . .  
with right.  
His palm owning the nape of my neck  
fingertips weave my hair  
to tug confidently gently  
shifting my gaze to the starry sky.

“You are perfect,” he would tell me in that dropped voice  
making me want to trace him.  
Fucking beg  
to let me trace him with my

mouth, watering over every groove, every crevice  
every  
single  
space  
of his body.

He slows down.

My shirt comes off . . . Bra unlatched  
Shorts slide around the curve of my booty . . .  
down my legs . . . to the floor.

Circling his gaze  
to draw around my nipples . . .  
and painting down my body in slow motion.  
Getting wet,  
making art.

Running my hands around the back of his neck,  
over the cut caps of his shoulders, down the cut of his biceps  
he reaches his fingertips around my thigh  
and holds on to slide my leg up the side of his body  
And just like it is his right, his responsibility . . .  
. . . he pushes my panties to the side.

I take him in and get addicted.

Completely addicted.

Magnetized addicted.

When I moan, it comes from fire.



Not a sound from my throat, not from my voice . . .

Though the heat from a flame  
of a color I didn't even know was burning.

"André" I want to drown in him.

He moves behind me,

With his palm in the center of my back  
to lean me forward over that wooden railing  
keeping us together at the edge of the earth.

I look back

seeing his reflection in the window . . .

watching him . . . .

. . . watching me.

His arm crosses the front of my torso,  
he turns me around, lifts my legs around his waist,  
and carries me inside.

Solid. Strong.

He holds me as his crystal  
and lays me down.

Lowering onto me  
we are back in our magnetic pool  
eye to eye,  
breath to breath.

His fingers dip into the center line groove of my spine.  
Making my back arch slightly, pressing my breasts into his chest.

He draws his lips down the side of my neck  
to design the soundtrack with my breath.  
Getting heavier, sighing deeper each time he moved.  
Making the inside of my skin sparkle warm.  
Melting in his strength,  
holding me in place,  
Slow  
Powerful  
Soothing  
We fuse together.  
His lips graze my ear under his breath,  
“Do you like it?” he asks me deep in confidence.  
The crown of my head tilts back.  
I throw one hand above me, met by the lacing of his.

There he lets me start at the top.  
Squeezing the tip of his dick with my pussy  
right . . . there . . .  
Stopping where all the nerve endings are.  
Slowly . . .  
Savoring for a moment.  
Letting him know I want to be at the beginning and the end  
of everything  
that intoxicates him.  
In stillness  
he’s throbbing.

I open my thighs  
tilting my pelvis back to me  
and surrender onto his shaft, gliding  
all  
the way  
down.

Grasping him a little tighter as I rise up  
“Isso” *This*, he tells me as if lost in a treasure.

I do it again.

“Foda” *Fuck*, his breath low.

I do it again.

He throws his head back,

“My God of the sky, this woman is going to kill me.”

He adjusts his hands around my waist,  
firm he holds me and gives me more . . .

“André”

more

“André”

more

“André”

Quenching thirst

He floods me

with *everything*

that is him.

His chest drops down to mine  
Forehead to forehead,  
nose to nose,  
lip to lip  
Inhale . . .  
He shifts  
Exhale . . .  
Side by side  
We stare at the ceiling.  
The sheets are white.  
His hand laces in mine.  
People fall into love here.

# Chapter 25

---

## Coexisting

“**A**ndré.” My hands on his shoulder, “André!” I say, shaking him. He swallows and moans. “You need to leave at 5:00 this morning?” I ask him. His hand to the small of my back, half asleep half awake, “Yea.”  
“That’s when there are shots.”

The crack of the barrel became a way to make space for the rising sun. “André,” I take to his side, my lips grazing his ear, one hand on his chest, “André, is it safe?”  
“Eh . . .” he sighs, hugging me into him, “depends on the person.” He feels me freeze. “Michelle, tranquilo.”

And I get caught up here . . . the external threat of the faction violence is bigger than an individual can control. André has this ability of assessing situations in seconds, making a firm decision

to his advantage, to carry radiating confidence forward. An exotic swiftness inconspicuously observing everything within a matter of seconds. An essential trait for navigating life.

So if all one has is oneself, why spend time worrying about the external? Is my fear of external threat amplified for I know aspects of life which are innately worry free?

In the capitalist world I come from, one built on materialism that's guarded by a police force that has power over everyone, and provides security for some. . . People feel confident, safe enough to walk down the street with their heads buried in cell phones, never seeing what's outside of them, what's around them because . . . they don't have to. But if a worry-free existence doesn't exist . . . every aspect of one's surroundings must be absorbed. It's the ultimate primal protection.

When 5:00 a.m. arrives, I kiss him at the door. "I'll see you later," he promises, and I watch him walk up the first flight of stairs, passing over every other step, carrying his life inside the palm of someone and something else.

I long to protect him. Protect the love we passed hours before. All I can do is watch him leave. Fear riddles me, feeling unnervingly empty without him. Closing the door, I pray to hear silence. He will be out of the faction-run corridor in eleven

minutes. Just eleven minutes. I count every minute that passes, breathing with his steps, envisioning him in blue board shorts arriving on the principal road where it's safe. There he will catch a van to go home, also safe. At 5:25 a.m., he will leave the van to climb his favela, walking into the same uncertainty once again, to go home and dress for work.

Safety permits the assumption of time.  
Only here one may live in the future.  
The future where people buy books to keep their  
commitments,  
make plans for their plans.

In a community where  
nothing can be assumed . . .  
Each moment is each moment.  
Cared for deliberately.  
In external threat, remains the reminder that  
nothing is secure.  
Only the present may be absorbed.

Yet somehow still  
in both of these societies,  
there is all the time in the world  
and none at all.  
Yet somehow still  
in both of these societies,  
life is uniquely and paradoxically free.



## Chapter 26

---

# Disengagement from Truth

“**W**hat do you think of the favela?” she asks me. She recently arrived from France, to rent a cheap room near the house where I’ve lived for the past seven months. I pause to ponder this grandiose question. “For the first time I’ve realized it’s possible to exist, no, to coexist in the same world but be in a different one,” I respond.

She looks perplexed. Her white-blond hair still framing her dropped jaw. Completely unprepared for my response. In slow motion her eyes widen. “What do you mean?” she asks. “I mean . . . you see situations happen, you’re watching it happen, though are not involved, will never be involved . . . and will never quite understand.”

Panic washes over her paling face, “What kind of situations?” Now I am dumbfounded. “Well . . . the favela is known for the violence and drug trafficking . . . things happen.”

Like a statue she waits, watching her world crumble. Then the words fell out of her mouth, “You’ve scared me now,” she admits.

“Why?” My tone accompanied by attitude in response to her charge.

Words continue spilling out of her mouth, “Well everyone says it’s safe here, it’s Pacified, there is no robbing, it’s Pacified,” she says.

I settle down. “Look. I live here—we live here. So yea, there is a level of safety. But at the end of the day, this side exists. You knew this before coming here, right? I mean, this isn’t new news . . .”

“Well, we’ve seen kids with guns and stuff, but,” she begins, before I cut her off—

“And do you see kids with guns on the street in France?”

“Well, no . . .”

“And that’s exactly what I’m talking about. That’s very real here. That’s someone’s kid, fighting for their life. It’s not a game, it’s not a situation to be taken lightly.”

A friend of hers emerges from the house and the blond woman begins speaking frantically in French. I take my cue to leave. Part of me feels like I was supposed to feel bad for being a

firm wake-up call. The other part of me wanted to smack her. Just because you're on vacation, doesn't mean the world is participating in your fantasy with you.

Aspects of the favela have been glamorized. The factions, the violent mystery. When we glamorize, though, we are at surface level. Blind to remembering those lives exist just as much as we do.

## Chapter 27

---

# Weaving Humanity

To arrive at a foreign locale and maintain distance as if the barrier is in fixed place, is actively standing on the side of difference and separation. To look at the favela through the lens of a glamourized, violent history and to go there to see violence in this sexy way, seeing it as cool or brave . . . is gravely missing the point. For this is the stance of viewing the favela without engaging in real reflection, and omitting mutual humanity of those who live there. This is the stance of playing with oppression, with segregation. Allowing barriers to be barriers fortifies inequality and varying levels of humanness.

An average of 50,000 tourists per year engages in favela tours in Rio de Janeiro. Thirty-five hundred people visit Rocinha

alone every month. Imagine a foreigner walking into your intimate home, and with them they have three things—a backpack, a camera lens, and staring eyes. They spend two hours discussing the disbelief of your way of living—comments instigated and inspired by deep-seated segregation and cyclical generational poverty. The individuals speak comfortably about the ghastly contrasts from the comfort of their ability to arrive and leave. Staying on the side of glass without authentic access to reality—only access to observe it. Here in this tour the outsider is untouchable, free in the omission that indeed they are the fish inside the bowl, not reversed.

There is a large population of locals who do not agree with favela tourism. Not only is it a reminder of treating people as a zoo, but it flaunts a corrupt Brazilian society versus others free to flourish. It is a tour of someone's home which has become infamous because of the struggle they have lived and continue to live. There are ways of interpreting favela tours as touring oppression.

As an outsider, posting drama-filled clickable titles showcasing the violence occurring in segregated communities, without providing the historical context or action / inaction on the part of the local government, serves to promote this cycle of segregation. Unfortunately, these videos are in abundance from various places around the world because the industry pumps

up social media likes and someone's reputation and attempt at building a career. In reality, when such videos are posted about the favela without credible educational explanation and proper context, they serve as yet another source of material that contributes to stereotyping and in essence, further supports the oppressors in their goal of keeping those who are segregated oppressed.

As an outsider, how is it possible to participate in favela tourism and showcase the experience online, and not make the connection to the colonial exhibits of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries? Popularized in Europe and the United States, colonial exhibits were often part of the World's Fairs and created with the intent of displaying people who had been captured from the farthest corners of the empire's territories. In what is now more appropriately termed "human zoos," these exhibits encouraged onlookers to gawk at the perceived "oddities," "peculiarities," "foreignness," of the types of "beings" that they had only ever heard of.

Innocent people, including children, were captured and subjected to voyeurism, public disdain, and even treated as animals—forced to perform on demand—for the pleasure of white attendees. Among the populations recreated in the "human zoos" included Congolese, Senegalese, Hindu rope dancers, Arabian camel herders, Zulu warriors, and entire

African and Filipino villages—all with the purpose of providing 1.4 billion people a glimpse of “primitive” living. This construct was an important tool in creating modern racism, built with intellectual awareness of creating a hierarchy between those who were superior and “the Other.” It was part of crystallizing the idea that there existed lesser and superior races—all to legitimize the eventual domination of the white West.<sup>6</sup>

When there are barriers of differences, we must overcome by respect of true integration.

Many socially upbuilding projects can be found in the favela: Projects to keep kids off the street by teaching music, English classes to grow opportunity, art to express and progress the mind. As part of the intrigue in going to the favela, consider connecting with a group to contribute to growth. Act not from pity nor as a savior, but rather, to contribute with the recognition that *we* are people and this is one way we can connect societies. Be open to enjoy the time with people who come from a different culture. Make eye contact, smile. Exchange stories, experiences, questions. Go to local salons and grocery stores, fund their businesses. Show appreciation of being in their home.

Sharing the same language is not always needed to

communicate. Participate in life and hurdle the barriers that tell us we are separate. Peer to peer, we may weave humanity.



“When you’re poor, people like you for you.  
There’s nothing to hide.”

- Larissa’s reflections

# Chapter 28

---

## Funk

Sounds inspired by Miami bass Funk emerges in the 1990s and blew up in the 2000s in Brazil and around the globe. Idolized. Vilified. Loved or hated often depending on one's view of the way we can talk about other people, and expose intimate scenarios which frequently—in many cultures – is not freely talked about.

The lyrics reflect abundantly enjoying the human body. What it's like to be struck by someone's beauty on the street. Of being mesmerized by the sexy women at the party. One's sexual desires, how they would be cheered on when riding that dick. The feeling of seeking out the *novinhas*, the young girls. Brazil's age of consent is fourteen. How the hot concrete feels when you live without shoes. The feeling when the stray bullet went through the window. What it's like to have a crush on someone

from a different economic class. And how a person of poverty will never be given the chance. How school was cancelled, because the faction and police are fighting. The faction and police are fighting. To be next to, to be part of the faction.

The lyrics are stories composed by life in the favela. Decried by many Brazilians, who consider this music course, provocative, ugly.

So does that imply music cannot be aggressive, but life can be? Is it acceptable that we allow the people to live in strife, while rejecting their reflection of life? How can there be criticism without true action, for we must be mindful, if life were to change, the songs too would change.

Funk artists aren't apologetic, they're prideful and real. By breaking open and exposing the culture through song, they're breaking the silence of being pushed and kept to the side. So much so, that Funk music has swept the country, and those who have nothing to do with the favela nor life of the favela community and culture, are entering the market to leverage and monetize the art of Funk.

As a result, root artists, singers and dancers born and raised in the favela, struggle to be the representation of the art born from their own communities.

Music video casting calls frequent selecting a cast which leaves out dancers from the favela. Funk attire of neon colors and creatively cut tops and bodysuits are marketed only on white models. People give Funk dance classes, who have never been to the favela. Yet they teach how to dance to songs about stray bullet zones. Songs that were first, and continued to be, danced by people who dance on the concrete to escape, and to feel freedom and pride in their reality.

They're watching and feeling their art being taken, by a large, commercialized industry that wants Funk, but not the people of Funk.

## Chapter 29

---

# Getting High

The night hot walking in midnight air. Larissa and I leave the house with caipirinhas in hand. The higher we get, the more people come to play with life. Sitting outside on the stoops of their homes, passing ideas, jokes, cups of caipirinhas and Selvagem Catuaba—an aphrodisiac sweet wine that has an erotic couple lusting on the label. Girls in neon-colored crop tops and jean cutoff shorts and men either shirtless or in oversized t-shirts and board shorts. Everyone is in flip flops. Neighbors greet us energetically, smiling as if we have known each other for years. Not one passes without an introduction, hugs, kisses and handshakes. It's the favela.

A short speaker pulsates Funk up the wall, music of the *morro*, you can't be anywhere—day or night, without hearing its rhythm flood from some speaker and pound the street. The

beat hits hard through vibration and the lyric. Leaning against the wall people beatbox and chant. Singing along to all the lyrics as if live in concert, yelling in the stands. The tones of the people chorus the hardships, the gunshots, the sex, desires, and dreams. Sexuality and the attraction to be seen. Looking at the women, the juicy parts of the human body, and the best feelings of the sensualized, relations to be had. Funk, while traditionally dominated by male artists, females have entered the scene including lyrics of empowerment and self love. Songs proudly real, that tell the world this is our life. We are alive.

There are two styles of dances frequently, though not always, seen danced by different genders . . .

When the men dance, they're upright.

Their backs stay straight,  
elbows bent by their sides, on their own ride.

Light on their toes they hover  
somewhere off the ground  
heels lifted, moving wildly from the waist down.

*Passinho*

Inspired by James Brown.

Swiveling their legs in zigzag lines, mesmerizing.

Women tease lust.

With their hips pushed back, bending forward their palms meet  
the insides of their knees.

There they move in various *quebradas*, *breaks*.  
Popping their pelvis to click the beat into place.  
When the rhythm picks up their hips will vibrate their booty to  
shake.  
Every movement so isolated in place,  
the sound drips down the shimmying fringes on their shorts.  
A foreigner would compare it to Twerk, though this general  
observation could be narrowed. Stylistically this way of dancing  
Brazilian Funk isolates the pelvis from the rest of the body  
which stays stagnant still. Twerk – a contraction of “twist”  
and “jerk” from New Orleans in the 1960s expands into the  
body where more exaggerated moves may be coming from the  
torso and legs. Funk belongs to the Favela, and can never be  
Twerk; though in origin, both dances are Afro-descendant and  
advocate for liberation in the body.

People hypersexualize this movement. Assume and speak for the  
dancer. Disregarding that maybe she dances and never thinks  
about sex. Maybe she dances and only thinks about sex. Many  
women will also be seen doing *passinho*. Either way is right, for  
ultimately, dance is movement of freedom in one’s body. When  
a person dances Funk, they are free.

We share songs, exchange numbers, more hugs and kisses before  
saying goodbye. Larissa and I look to get lost and get high. We  
explore upward, higher and higher, music rising like heat from

the corridor veins below.

In the middle of the street, we're stopped.

"Do you know the way?"

We pause in silence, questioning his intention.

"You're in bandido territory, this party is with the faction."

It was an answer that we already assumed.

We're at the top of the hill, it's where they live and occupy.

"That means that there will be *armas*." *Armas*—guns, they will be armed.

Larissa starts laughing, her head knocking back, she puts her hands up in mocking fright, "Ooooh, I'm so scared."

He looks to me and I back to him unemotional.

Accepting his forewarning, drawing forward the vein opens up.

A small bar lights the landing of a place that some might think of as heaven of the hill. Overlooking the layers of homes beneath us set in an opaque scene lined by the navy sea and sky. Far, far, far below is the thin coastline of pale sand illuminated under round spots of light in Leblon, Ipanema, Copacabana . . . It's small and storybook like from here . . .

Overlooking the wealthiest parts of Rio, way, way down below, a tiny, untouchable Lego world. The same city, but constructed of buildings and streets born of different roots, assigned different rules and roles upheld by the same government . . . A city below, with different rights than the one on the hill where



we dance . . . because up here, the law, the game, the permissions . . . are upheld by the faction. A permanent fixture of injustice, strife, and inequality that is upheld by a large segment of society unburdened by these concerns, and the government arm that has never intended to humanize or integrate the communities.

We walk to the bar, weaving through an intimate crowd of maybe twenty thirsty people. We are two of several women. There's a single stack of small, flimsy white plastic cups and coolers packed with glass forty-ounce Antarctica bottles. Beer is always served icy and shared in Brazil. When you're at a party with the faction, the faction provides the drinks.

Cup after cup we get filled. The music blasts. Rattling the windows of darkened, surrounding homes. The same Funk beats from below, but the lyrics different. *Funk Proibidão*, Prohibited Funk, specific to the faction. Funk that talks about their crime family, line after line, hailing the faction name, the *moleques* ready for war, the discipline, the vengeance, the women that they will fuck and train as they want. Reflections of life that aren't permitted to be played on radio stations or in public places—unless it's occupied by the faction.

Maybe twenty members have an AK slung over their shoulder. None of them have I seen before. Larissa and I stand at the edge of the party, closest to the cliff. Just a narrow hip height

metal railing separates us from tumbling below. “You do a pose and they come,” Larissa says, tossing her shoulders back, leaning her elbows on the rail behind us. “Look at them for just a second longer than what would be comfortable,” she says, and in seduction, they walk by in small groups. Three, four, five of them . . . Stop next to us, just outside of our bubble in front of us, waiting for an invitation . . . and an approval to approach.

We stretch in her game, looking at one, turning around to hold that railing and pop our hips . . . and looking back, maybe at him . . . maybe at someone else. Wordless invitations to dance. Holding the railing dipping low, a tantalizing show . . . It’s a game to make them hungry. It’s just to play. Soon enough there’s a small arch of men around us . . . holding their plastic cups of icy beer in one hand and their arms and pistols in the other. The Funk music picks up, with words praising the warriors of the faction. Around us, the men start dancing too, drinking in the words, holding on to their weapons, fist bumping their barrels to the sky, pounding the floor of higher power.

More and more people arrive to the party. More drinks are poured, and we’re encouraged to come off the railing and into the center platform with the crowd. “It’s safer!” Larissa yells to me. “Huh?” I question back, and we start to be encapsulated upon.

“To be inside their circle, it’s safer! If the police come, you don’t want to be on the outside of their guns. They’ll make a circle around us, to protect us!” She yells through the beat.

As I look around, I notice, just like a bracelet of beads, the members fist bumping their barrels to the sky have made a ring around us, fifty, sixty of us, dancing, laughing, sweating, cheering inside their protection.

# Chapter 30

---

## André

We sit in the sounds of the wind, on the edge of my apartment cliff when he begins to unravel. “Michelle, I’m drowning,” he says, in tall posture and looking up, high and forward. “I’m drowning. I can’t work enough to afford living life much longer. Every day I’m trying harder and harder . . . and nothing is changing.”

Hard in all the ways it is in the favela. Social systemic persecution threatens existence amongst violent threat of life. In all the ways it is of being a Black man in a city that assumes place in society by color. He’s running out of options; it shakes me sober realizing . . . Possibility is for the select. What luxury that falling can be learned from.

What happens when there’s nothing to fall into? When societies

are made of people falling around one another, without resources, without light to know there will be base?

“I know you don’t dream of the US . . . but things happen there,” I tell him. “Opportunity is real. I don’t have a lot of money, but I have enough to support us for a bit . . . until we have work. I have a car; we can go where we want.”

He stays silent.

“But think about this really, André. If it will fill your soul first. It can’t be for the relationship that we have, you have to feel that first you will be filled. Then we will focus on us.”

He falls into a sigh and puts his arm around me.

“Look amiga,  
everyone in the favela has a problem.  
There’s no time to baby anyone.  
Gotta fight for life like the rest of us.”

- Larissa’s reflections

# Chapter 31

---

## Lisandro's post

Sun beams make the skin shine over his shoulder blades and down his shirtless back. Gliding his feet along the pebbled concrete so waking neighbors can hear the drag of his sandals. He is just . . . strolling. As if he got out of bed and wondered to the street to ponder. Taking time. Swinging his arms holding a glock.

The truth is, I begin to feel more comfortable descending the hill by back faction-run alleyways moreso than descending by the principal road. The principal road holds so much commotion, exhaust, noise from open storefront shops and abundant staring eyes following me down the street. Sometimes the eyes yell comments, and it feels . . . exposed.

By the back ways though, are different. Quiet. Passing doors to

homes, sometimes a few other individuals and of course, passing the faction posts. The interactions are different here than on the principal road. On a calm day, often there's a gentle greeting and they stay at their post as I continue to pass with dignity. So seeing him move with his time and owning the alley . . . is common on this descending path.

Not far behind him, I hesitate, though without other direction to turn, I intentionally make sounds with my steps to let him know he's not alone. When he turns around, we both stop stunned.

Caramel skin, a scruffy goatee and full lips . . . He perks, "Bom dia!" Animated and enthusiastic. "Bom dia," I smile softly. He introduces himself in a non-traditional way of withholding extending a hand or cheek. "Nice to meet you, Lisandro," I respond, without giving him my name. There we stare in silence for a moment. The way he looks at me is soft. As though looking through a picket fence, longing but holding respect for the boundary.

I nod to signal if I could step to his side to pass and abruptly shifts his direction as if jolting awake. As I pass his side, he stammers for his words, and extends his arm and gun to the sky, commenting on the brightness of the sun. I smile and continue on.



The faction on this hill doesn't intimidate the community because they can, they look to protect it by upholding laws of no stealing or cheating fellow neighbors. They're armed to protect their jobs, not to bring violence against locals. This makes locals of the hill feel it's safer in the favela than outside of the favela in Rio.

I continue to prefer descending the back, faction-run alleyways, it's been safe and calm these days. The same members keep the same post schedules each day, and while they keep tabs on who walks by, it has become easy to keep tabs on them too.

Until 3:00 p.m. each day I know I can pass this way with Lisandro at post and it will be pleasant, gentle. Since our first encounter, I have never seen him shirtless or armed again. For certain he always has a gun on him, maybe it stays tucked into the back band of his shorts . . . Somewhere to leave him untaggable, less definable, out of the way so I can see . . . not just his gun, but see him. With every passing, his smile is soft, his eyes beam to mine, and he comments on the brightness of the sun, putting his hands up to the sky, as if reaching to embrace and pull down the sun as a gift.

Only what is in the hand can be controlled.

When the path turns  
life will play how it will play.

When the path grows uncertain,  
fear must not break into the foundation  
to pull and devour  
self-trust.

In the body of fear grows debilitation.  
It will sprout and advance with permission  
until there comes a moment  
when fear reminds you  
to lose fear.

So when they asked me,  
“*Aren't you scared?*”  
I've been too busy trusting my stability.

# Chapter 32

---

## Confession

The ride gets smooth with every switchback, the wind muffles the motor and it gets more and more desolate getting closer to the sky. Bustling storefronts turn to houses, we follow to where the road just . . . ends.

André is waiting at the end of the concrete with his hand out, he takes my balance as I swing my leg over the back of the moto. We both thank the driver. Then fall into each other. Reaching for my waist, he pulls me tight to him, taking his arms around my shoulders, it presses my ear to his chest. Resting his lips on my forehead, he rocks back and forth, “You are so beautiful.” Still grazing his lips on my skin. God I love meeting him.

He flinches to release me like a jolting shock, “Come on,” excited he takes my hand. We traverse planks and stairs with

plants and garbaged wood at our feet. House structures, though empty of people . . . a miniature ghost town. He takes me to a staircase and we climb up alongside a house. He pushes open a metal door, opening to a dimly lit hallway. We pass one closed door and at the end of the hallway he asks me to go first up a darkening staircase, the door is closed at the top and I turn to him, “Go ahead,” he tells me.

I pinch the single hook latch with my pointer finger and thumb, unlatch the hook and push open the metal sheet hinged as a knob-less door. It creaks and fills the staircase with blinding white light. Stepping forward to the top of a platform, my eyes adjust in the sun’s saturation. We are outside again. Stepping forward I realize there is nothing but sky to our left, and right. We’re standing on the roof of the highest house in the whole favela . . . floating in the sky.

The never-ending cloudless sky rolling out and fading into hazy schemes of light blues. Met by the gentle rim of the deep sea, crystallized by every beaming ray of sun. Emerald waves of mountain lush roll over the north and south coasts. With us as nature’s outlines on the last edge left on earth . . . Where the dopamine blasts are beyond brilliant . . . We’ve stepped into a painting.

He comes behind me, wrapping both arms over my shoulders,

pressing his chest to my back. The side of his chin on my forehead, “It’s amazing right?” Lost in wonder I am speechless.

The sounds from below rise . . . dogs barking, children in their play . . . unable to see their existence, their sounds grow from the ground evaporating into air riding a wave of the wind. André takes my hand to walk me to the opposite side of the roof.

He has a blanket laid out. He takes both of my palms in his and we kneel down together in front of each other. He pulls a small white cardboard box out of his pocket and hands it to me. It’s just big enough to fill the palm of my hand. I place my finger in one side to open it delicately. Inside a single sea green pointed oval stone hanging on a thin, black cord. I pick it up by the stone and run my thumb over the smooth surface.

When I look to him, he’s misty eyed with his head cocked to the side. He reaches through the inside collar of his shirt and pulls out the same sea green stone hanging from a thicker cord around his neck. “Michelle . . .” he let the stone drop and fall to the center of his chest. “Can I call you my love?”

Breathless. Just as he always left me, breathless.

I put the necklace back in the box . . . and the box between us. I sit up and cup my palms on either side of his jaw, my thumbs fall to the front of his ears and my fingers wrap around his hairline.

I lean forward to rest my forehead to his and I close my eyes.

Inhale . . .

Exhale . . .

He meets me there too.

I feel his hands wrap around my waist.

He lays his lips into mine.

Nose to nose, breath to breath  
sculptured lines mingling to float in the sky.

I take him in

And he takes me too.

“I don’t understand,” Larissa says to me.

When she’s with her attitude she does this stance of pouting her lips forward and shifting her head side to side. Staring at me with her arms crossed.

“Menina, *girl*, why are you even with this man? There are niiice men in Brazil. Branquinho, *white*, beautiful men. Why are you dating someone from the favela?”

- Larissa’s reflections

## Chapter 33

---

# Hidden Messages

André steps behind me draping his arm over my shoulder. The reversed triangle on the cap of his shoulder meeting my chin, his hand falls to rest on my opposing hip. Surrounding me, his spell is cast. Captivating my womanhood which has never trusted nor believed in men . . . He sends a tidal wave of turquoise crashing over me. Exposing a foreign part of my soul, overwhelmingly in love with being with him, being around him. I am the most honored person on the street . . . in this favela . . . in this city. Completely consumed.

We descend the slope without rush, bathing under the beating sun. Stepping together as one, deeper into the corridor we descend. Just him . . . just me. With both feet on the ground and on another planet. We're snapped into reality when his sandal breaks. Mid-step amidst trash and dog shit, he's unbothered as



if nothing happened. He steps out of the sandals, merely an accessory, and leaves the empty shoes behind us.

Turning the corner to Lisandro's post, I smile and feel the inside of André's arm press tighter against my body. A signal to stop. "Ei mano," *Hey man*, André tosses Lisandro a peace sign and extends his free hand. Our magnetic field breaks here . . . I step out of André's clasp and he turns away from me.

I watch as he turns his back, and exchanges hidden words with Lisandro. Then Lisandro leaves. André turns to me, and his palms reach to palm and own the small of my back. He looks down to me, and the crown of his head blocks the sun, beams glow and light his frame. "Let's wait here a minute," he tells me. *Next to the post of the faction?* I question.

This strong man who never smiles on the street leans his forehead down to connect with mine. Our lips hover exchanging swirling air. . . . "Ok?" he flashes a half smile with a question that has no choice. Rolling back his stone outside exposing luminous joy that no one but the most intimate would see in him. There he is . . . that's my favorite André. A sensitive, energetic, vulnerable man who freely melts into me. I give him the tip of my tongue, gliding just barely along the sensitive peak where the lip meets the skin. A lion hidden in the grass, he growls low from the inside base of his throat, "*mulherão*,"

humming under his breath.

The sound of dragging steps invade the concrete and our attention draws. It's Lisandro. Walking toward us, sandals in hand.

## Chapter 34

---

# The Eye of the Storm

Her wooden chair never moves from the outside of her open door. A windowless home of low ceilings and exposed pipes where her clothes hang over the bed. Her smile warm, and home to a single gold tooth. Fluffy white-gray hair with roller curls frame her face.

Every day she waves, “Good afternoon, dear!” Her voice arrives from the back of her throat. Every day she asks how I’m doing, and every day her response is the same; “Day by day dear. Day by day.” The chair is never without her.

Today is a perfect day under a radiating crystal sky. The sun kisses the back of my neck and sends warmth down my spine.

I take it in slowly, walking the incline to leave my house when silence puts me in question.

I'm the only one on the street, but that's not infrequent. Something is gone. There's no noise. Not a radio or clanking pots, no TV or Funk beats. Realignment my drifting gaze, her chair is empty. I had never seen the beaten wood of the seat before and more—a closed door. Could this be the eye of the tornado? Perfect and confusing.

When I turn the corner, my legs fold beneath me,  
I fall to the floor and all air escapes.  
At the center of my breastbone, in mercy I peer into the barrel of a shooter.

Armed in black, covered from helmet head to toe of the boot, unflinching, ready to shoot. He's backed by six more. *Get the fuck up Michelle.*

I stare into the eyes of the man and struggle for ground, my legs as a doe walking for the first time.

*Get the fuck up, get the fuck UP.*

I can feel the commotion from my waist down,

I'm trying so hard to move and nothing is happening.

The officer stares down to me, still with his barrel pointed at my chest, writing words with his mouth—*Stay calm. Don't worry.*

I see his look of concern. Of genuine remorse. *It's not you.* He says mouthing words, *it's not you.*

Does it really make a difference?  
Are we not all one in the same?  
In the moments of tensivity, uncertainty and danger  
are we not all sharing a destiny with the enemy?

I put my palm to the wall and use it to secure some balance to  
stand and move swiftly forward through their duel armed lines.  
The backups all drawn with their weapons are frozen in place.  
Statues. Men who don't flinch or draw one eyeball to see me.

At the end of their assembly, there a small food stop with two  
pillars and a single wall holding a roof over chairs, a bar and  
stove. Two women are cooking, staring down into steaming  
pots.

One man with his arms crossed, watching the TV hanging on  
the wall. And I'm unsure of what I'm seeing. A line of police  
in position to shoot, along a cluster of people carrying on with  
their lives as if neither one exists. I sit down next to the man  
watching TV; surely, he knows the safest angle to sit at, and  
immediately I stand back up. I move the chair to be farther from  
the police. I sit down again and stand back up. *I should make  
more barrier*, I think, looking around at empty and exposed  
space alongside armed guards.

From nowhere, “Oi menina!” *Hey girl!* An older gentleman, shorter than I with sparse grey hair, approaches. “Nervous huh?” he asks me, looking directly into my eyes giving a pat to my arm. “Don’t worry, it will be over soon.” His reassuring eyes are as blue as the sky. I am stunned, unable to collect words and I want to hug him and find somewhere to hide. *There is nowhere to hide.*

Without warning the air cracks.

One.

Our shoulders jump to our ears.

It snaps in half, breaking the atmosphere open.

Two.

Teeth gritting.

The sky is split by force.

Three.

We wait in silence as see the police run.

The gentleman turns to me again. “Wait five minutes, wait five minutes and it will be fine,” he says with one hand up, patting the air in front of him, as if his palm is giving peace. Beats of walkie talkies get closer and closer. Five minutes come and go, and the police turn to four faction members casually walk away from where the police just ran into.

*I need to move, I think, This is too exposed.* I’m not far from

the principal road where it should be safer because there's more movement. Less place for faction and police to hide. Ten more minutes go by. "Is it safe now?" I ask the gentleman. He smiles with his lips pierced and nods, "Go with God."

My breath is stuck to the inside of my chest scurrying the twenty feet to leave the alleyway. I right turn into another corridor road to take a shortcut down the hill. "Not that way," I hear a woman's voice behind me. When I turn to look at her, she continues her steps, wagging her finger. I reverse my steps to follow her to the principal road, where the corridor opens to the rest of the hill, and the sky does too. A clear view of the road which twists up the mountainside hugging cluttered, stacked boxes, a street always filled with commotion . . . is stopped.

No motos, no vans, no chatter, no moving.

Yet hundreds of people of all shades, sizes, heights and ages stand with their back to a building wall, stopped in silence. I freeze for a moment; dozens of heads turn to me. I go forward, in front of their line, making eye contact with people who pass restrained expressions of acknowledgement. I find my spot on the wall.

We stand together, and everyone's head tilts up the winding mountainside, watching in solemn silence. Two officers dressed in black, ascend the mountain road with their firearms pulled,

pointing side to side, ready to shoot. Cockroaches under a spotlight.



# Chapter 35

---

## Running

**I**t all happens so fast.

I meet André as the street returns to life; he grips my arm pulling me forward to walk faster. “Why?” my tone is annoyed, jolting my gaze up to him. Without looking anywhere but forward, stern, and on a mission, he drops my arm. “I’ll tell you when we get home.”

I look over my shoulder to glimpse a single police officer beating his baton against the body of another hitting the floor. I gasp in horror. André slides behind me, pressing half his body against my back, he walks faster pushing me with him.

A drumroll of thunder rumbles over us. Lighting cracks the sky open, few shrieks scatter the people, disappearing into darkened veins. The rain pours unapologetically drenching everything.

Here to wipe us out. André and I slip into a corridor.

Sounds of rushing water amplified by the four-story walls towering around us. Crossing a short bridge which is usually a gentle flow of sewage, the dumping rain has it full force waterfall. We continue to dip through zigging corridors, cutting horizontally along the hill, a better alignment to ascend directly by my house.

In darkened, emptied streets we take cover beneath an arch. We pause to peek around the corner, peering up an exaggerated staircase, turned white water river. André bends forward to bring his eyeline direct with mine. He's yelling, but all I hear is rushing water as I try to read his lips in darkness. He looks at that water, and back to me, "*Come on!*" I think he says, and he takes my hand. I wince, looking to my sandals knowing what is going to be in that water. The first step up, our poor naked legs shin deep in cascading flow.

The sky snaps, our heads crouch into our shoulders under the flash of light. Buckets and buckets dropping from above, mask everything in its motion. Trying to move hurriedly, stuck in caution, hoping to land on each disguised step, we squeeze our hands tightly together, bending our elbows, drawing close to balance one another.

We arrive to a landing, grip a narrow metal handrail to traverse to the next slope on the hill. We've made it one quarter of the way up; it feels like an enormous feat. The slant in the road thins the water. Here it glides rock, just meeting the rims of our shoes. Our steps turn to lunges, leaning forward, it's too hard to look up. Rain dropping as daggers shoot angry water in slanted directions by the blow of the wind. When I look up, it stabs knives in my eyes.

Then at some point there's proof of life.

A shining light spilling to brighten the street.

André drops my hand.

I look to my side, and he's gone.

I cup my hands over my eyes, turning 180

André is steps behind me,

his shoulders hunched up to his ears,

his hands cupped in front of his mouth

He's looks to me,

and into the light.

To me,

and into the light.

In a rush to hustle through the rain, time drips slow.

I follow his pattern to look to the light too,

and there stands a dozen of them.

Each with their own tall, black stool of magazines and AKs sitting in the seats.

A dozen of them.  
All staring back at us.

When I look back to André, he's looking at them with his head  
popped forward. His mouth is moving, opening wide, yelling.  
All I can hear is the echo of the rain.

I watch his pattern go again,  
looking to them and back to me,  
looking to them and back to me,  
looking to them, the faction with the light,  
and back to me, isolated . . . in darkness.

With my hands cupped over my squinting eyes, rain coating  
the strands of my hair, drenching my body, my being, it's there,  
under the falling sky, confirmed.

André has joined the faction.

“The woman opens the hand,  
but the man never does.  
A man will do what he wants to do,  
over what he needs to do.  
The woman will do what is accommodating,  
what she needs to do,  
even if it is not what she wants to do.”

- Larissa's reflections

## Chapter 36

---

# In Tragic Loss, You Resist or You Yield

**R**attling the midnight glass, everything is about to  
crumble to the ground.

**POUND**

Tucked under covers, exposed to building power

**Pound**

Outlined in my window, a human shadow with arms extended  
and pressed to the glass, one open hand and one fist

**Pound**

**Pound**

**Pound**

“Michelle.”

No fucking way. I roar up, slamming my fists into the mattress, blowing fury as fire “What the fuck are you doing?!” I scream every ounce of air from my lungs. It heats the glass and he stops.

He’s calm when he says “Michelle” again, knowing that he has succeeded in getting me to respond, passing the gates of level one. Under his breath, bowing to my dragon, “Please forgive me,” he pleads.

I yell to the other side of the earth, “Are you crazy?! Are you crazy?!” I yell. He’s tranquil. “Michelle, I’m sorry. Forgive me, forgive me, Michelle.”

I slam my body back like a frustrated child.

“Michelle,” he says through the glass window, “Michelle.”

Chiming every few moments.

Silent, I stare at the ceiling that was once ours. Surprised he’s here and not surprised at all. This man who works any situation to his benefit, of course he jumped the balcony, of course he did. There’s no escape when he wants something.

At some hour the chimes of my name changed to slapping the bugs eating his legs. I shift my body to see his outline in the night’s sky. He’s seated with both knees pulled to his chest and his head resting between his knees. I’m sad at the sight and too furious to do anything but lay there. *Is this wrong? To leave him out there? But he is in the wrong, I think, what do I owe him?* At

some point I drift into the realm of dreams.

When the sun touches the lids of my eyes, it's as if it's accompanied by an alarm, I sit upright unquestionably slashing the air. What I first see is his forehead pressed to the glass, with both arms crossed overhead, eye to eye with me. He's frowning and his eyes are dropped innocence.

Inside the apartment, protected and exposed, I'm the fish in a colorful bowl. His eyes follow me as I get out of bed and walk toward the glass. Even through glass I can feel him wash with hope, his lips begin to separate, and his eyebrows lift, following me with wet, enormously warm, brown eyes.

I stop in front in front of him on the other side. Where he stands on the balcony is a step lower than the room, and his gaze aligns with my breast line. There, as Queen in my castle, I look right over his shoulder as if he doesn't exist.

"Michelle." His tone echoes a sense of alarm as he tries to stand taller into my gaze. I swear in my purview I can see him rise on his tiptoes. "Michelle." He says a little bit louder, trying to wake me up. Without response, I shift. I begin to undress. Dropping my clothes to the floor. "Michelle." In stern panic. I turn my body and saunter into the bathroom, into the shower. *How will I escape?*



When I step out of the bathroom wrapped in a towel, he is in the same place. Still as a statue. I look out to the nature, too gorgeous to be in this game of hate. I let him watch me. I dry the water off my wet, naked body. Staring right past him as if he doesn't exist.

"Michelle." He watches me pull out two lace panties and decide which to put on. "Michelle." My name on repeat. He watches me make coffee in lace. "Michelle," he pleads, watching me play music and get dressed. I let him take me in, while every few moments looking to the window and beyond him just to remind him, that he doesn't exist. I gather my bag, "Michelle" open my apartment door, "MICHELLE" and look back to the nature one last time.

I slam the door behind me. "MICHELLE!" André yells my name from the other side of the house in emergency. And now so am I. Exposed to his game, I run.

Leaving the house, my heart beating faster than I, running ahead of me, escalating a dozen steps up the mountain, I move as quickly as I can, making millisecond decisions about the less likely turn he'll think I'll take. I spring along a ramp hugging the mountainside, looking down on the rooftops of houses below.

*Go, go, go*, I think under my panting breath. I arrive to a landing of brush and scattered trash overlooking the ocean.

I stop.

It all seems still while filling my lungs like balloons. Dazed on the inside, I'm rooted in place, and spinning out in every direction.

It takes no moments until I hear a rustling around me. My gaze darts to the right. I see snake eyes walking toward me. Him.

My spark ignites "No!" I scream shattering the peace. And just like the first night I met André, I let my body take me. Carry me away, my soul swirls pushing the inside of my skin. Gliding me onward. I don't feel my legs but they're running . . . beating the dirt path, thudding with each pass and floating. I don't notice my breath but I know that it's heavy, because I can hear it's weight breathe down.

Somehow a part of me levitates above,  
watching all of this happen.

Running up steps,  
skipping every other one,  
it burns the back of my legs and  
my brain tells my body, *I must be stronger than him*,

cheering myself on, *I must be strong.*

I watch the shadow of his shoulders just above mine.

When I feel his breath heat the back of my neck,

we emerge on an alleyway,

a place between two faction points,

finally flat.

I take off sprinting down the corridor.

“Michelle,” he’s aggressive sharpening his whisper,

“MICHELLE. You’re going to get us killed!” he stabs into my neck.

I stop dead in my tracks and whip all my fury in a wave of wind.

Breath to dying breath, our chests dipping and rising standing between concrete.

He steeples his fingertips together at the center of his chest, a signal somewhere between making a presentation and pleading,

“Michelle. Someone sees me running after you and they kill me. You can’t run in the favela.”

And he takes back all control.

# Chapter 37

---

## Hiss

“**Y**ou lied!” I grit through my teeth “You lied to my face!”  
“HEY,” snapping, he cuts me off and points his finger to the center of my chest, waving it up and down scolding me.  
“You have no idea what I’m going through,” he tells me.  
“What the fuck, André!?” I pierce the air screaming.

We are the only ones on the street, our yells, rattling into neighbor windows, playing a tennis match between Portuguese and English, because when your emotions explode in your roots it’s more real in your natural tongue.

“This is what you choose?! This is what you choose?!” I charge.

He tells me something about doing what he has to, to take care of business and I need to accept that.

“This is what you want with your life? To keep a gun, wander the street, deal drugs?”

“You have no fucking idea!” he yells in English because he knows it will hit me harder. “You don’t get it, you think this is what I want?!”

Pause.

“I don’t *need* you, Michelle. When I went to them, I wasn’t even thinking about you,” he tells me. He puts his hands up waving me off.

It feels like he just smacked me to the floor. “You know what, André,” I say to him fire-eyed. I pause and bring myself back down to street level. Calm, collected, my tone smooth. “There are a lot of people in this world,” I tell him. “This . . .” I look him up and down, “I don’t need.”

# Chapter 38

---

## Warping Colors

How many masks can someone have?  
I'm kneeling over two buckets of water, submerged in  
detergent, back on that balcony, twisting fabric between my  
hands . . .  
How can André and I go from oozing transporting love . . . to a  
game of nothing?  
Mico monkeys jump from the trees for casual strolls over my  
drying rack of clothes.  
How could he have the audacity?  
Their little gray bodies with white faces and hairy ears look back  
at me unimpressed.  
My mind gets on a merry-go-round.  
Spinning scenarios in my head.  
In the center of my breastbone  
My breath is stolen into coils, and coils,

how tight can it go.  
Air is sucked out of my fingertips and up from my toes  
dragging to my center  
It gets stuck—stuck behind concrete  
I collapse to the floor in loss of breath  
I'm on my hands and my knees  
the sun beating my back in fire  
My mouth is open trying to get saved but there is *nothing* to  
absorb.  
I flip my back to a wall and there  
A wrecking ball hits me  
To the center of my chest  
It hits me  
Trying to break everything that I am  
It hits me.  
The dent in my soul not yet big enough  
It hits me.  
Every time I see chain-links draw back and pause to prepare . . .  
Everything fuzzy  
I hear my consciousness whomping out of me.  
The sound robs the inside of my head  
Outside shades of blues and greens warp  
Expanding  
Enclosing me in this external brightness and internal depth of  
dark terror.  
The repetition used my shattered pieces to stab my shattered

self.

That pain, that pressure . . .

Exhaust drips out

From my eyes, from my skin . . .

Everything goes geometric.

Jagged shapes around me

And I can't get off this fucking ride.

That wrecking ball would continue to swing back and knock  
harder each time.

Breaking open a black hole

Exposing my crouching soul

Small and tight in fetal position.

That is when I let it take control.

My blood shaking.

One million peaks rise

Snow-capped spikes of white, icy glaciers line the inside of my  
skin.

*"Scream."* A whispering voice not my own tells me,

*"Do it."* It says,

*"Now."*

I reach for a shirt, stuff it inside of my mouth,

drenched it waterfalls down my chest.

*"Fucking yell,"* the foreign guide tells me,

The torch of fire inside screams blood all over everything.



It's the limit.

Standing at the edge

And alone on the floor

I surrender.

Weak.

Covered in tears and sweat.

I sparkle under the rays of the sun.

Looking up from the inside out . . . it all sparkles too.

## Chapter 39

---

# Answering the Call

We had passed so many nights together, doing our separate lives in silence. So many nights when I would realize his pause, and watch him collect his hands palm to palm, and repeat to the sky, “I won’t there, God, I can’t go there.” He would squeeze his eyelids together, pause, release his palms and return to what he was doing without speedbump in his trance.

I interpreted his words as a mantra of strength. Strength that he wasn’t going to fall into a black hole abyss. Blind to consider that maybe it was a plea.

I never asked because . . . it was his to share. As much as I may try to know how challenging his decisions have felt, if you don’t

live it, you don't feel it.

My job was to listen. When I told him, "*I know you don't dream of the US . . . but things happen there . . .*" It was put forth with pure intent.

Now sadly, I see beneath my words was a message—I have a key. A key so shiny it can be your lifeline, *I* can be your lifeline, because *I* know you need one. Use me to turn the key.

Built on the belief of progress in pursuit a unique and beautiful trait which makes Americans, American. This is part of our mental, social, emotional structure . . . it is the way we are trained. A culture creating answers to problems, which prizes work and the belief of results.

My response to André was unconscious. I heard a problem and participated in what I could do to fix it. In actuality, my response was deeply demeaning because I responded to the problem—not to him. Offering him a key to a better life unintentionally dehumanized him, disregarding his desires and belittling his current state, versus what *I* knew it could be.

My response to his disclosure of struggles recognized his fall without considering his emotional, physiological, or personal relationship to it.

Not all problems can be solved by taking someone out of the problem. It is wrong to assume so.

My job was to listen.

For in that moment, I had an incredible amount of power.

Power born from the ability to have options, and to assume.

Offering aid in assumption of what is best for the receiver displaces dignity. For it was not solely my offering of help but highlighting our differences and imposing my position.

I could have asked,

how he would have liked to see the outcome.

I could have asked,

what he would like to see change,

how he would like to get there.

I could have listened;

and thereby own the commitment to the integrity of  
coequality.

I've come from a world where life will progress. Hard work, dedication, perseverance . . . it is the natural order that life will progress. This world doesn't exist everywhere—including in the US. Someone can spend their whole life doing everything right; and the suppression and corruption will always keep that

person in the same place.

André made the decision he needed to make for the world he lives in.

I wanted more than anything for love with André to win.

I cycled over and over that a job is not a person, a job is not a person . . .

His decision wasn't just about the job, though . . . I had to learn to accept his decision for him, though not accept it for myself.

Here is the partition of worlds.

Born into opportunity, is a duty to exercise life to the highest and fullest potential.

# Chapter 40

---

## Saudade

When I think about you  
a plank lays across my chest.

... I wonder if you feel it too.

I have hated the way I miss you ...

A hole punched in the center of my soul  
my body collapses every time.

And I wonder if you feel it too?

I have hated the way I miss you.

I *love* the way I have loved you.

You are the ocean  
with sparkling waves ...

Which have engulfed me into the tumbles of your tide ...

Crashing to the earth we built and called our home  
constructed by our sweetest breaths of air ...

The world—our world

is now  
just  
a story.

I've tried so hard to understand.  
Replaying conversations, scenarios in my head.  
I've tried so *hard* to understand.  
My heart shattered . . .  
. . . that I don't have to.

So when we meet in the space of dreams . . .  
do you see me there too?  
Do you hear me when I talk to you?  
Because I would like to ask . . .  
now that it's ended in a crash,  
our memories pinned moments of time . . .  
Can I no longer love them?  
And I would like to ask,  
if I keep loving them, André . . .  
Is it betrayal?

You are the most remarkable individual  
whom I have had the honor of knowing.  
I have been proud to be by your side.  
I promise  
I will guard the good.

In this final letter of love, my love,  
I will say goodbye.



---

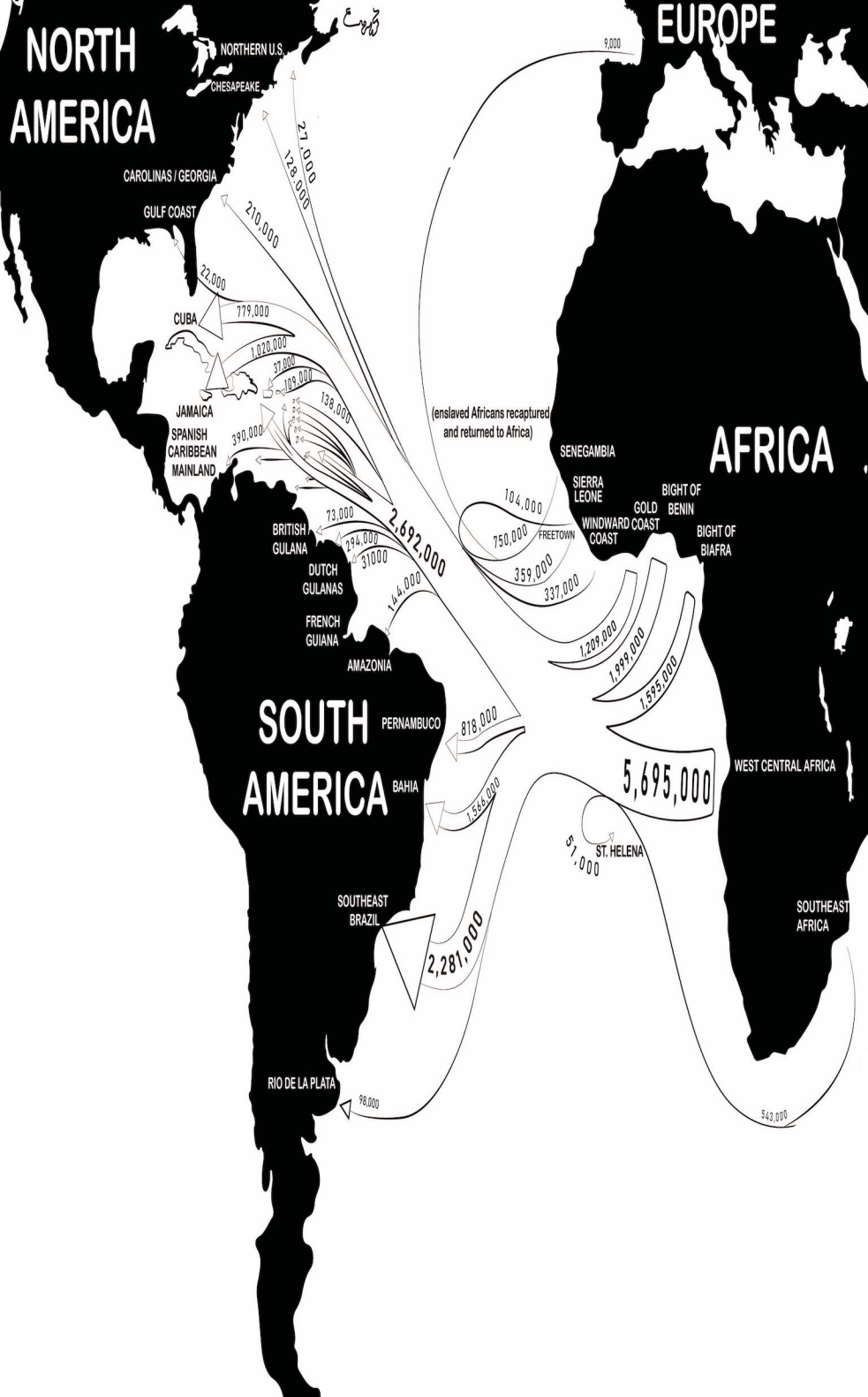
# History of Brazil

the Diaspora & Birth of  
the Favela

Historical texts, scholarly articles, professional journals, major news outlets and reviews by professional historians all play a crucial part in building this collection. It has been a challenge to fully entrust in the abyss of sources, though, as many hold varied information often contradicting one publication to another. The documentation of events often skims the surface and information is especially volatile researching in English versus Portuguese, further so upon accessing sources while within and outside of Brazil.

It is with consciousness that documented history is without emotional context. With grave recognition, resources do not identify the perspective of the Afro-Brazilians leading up to the twentieth century.

With much effort I have attempted to provide centuries of history in an (overly) simple manner, to expose the most impactful historical points, and lay the foundation of this deeply rooted, complex, and anything but simple history.





**Pre-1500** The Portuguese sought expeditions to Calicut, India where gold and spices were to be brought back and sold in Europe. The Ottoman Empire, controlling nearly all European trade, was charging high tax for ships to pass the ports. This led Portugal to seek other routes to India—setting sail down and around the coast of Africa, as first explored by Vasco da Gama.

**1500** Portuguese Diplomat Pedro Álvares Cabral led expedition from Lisbon to India departing down the Western coast of Africa. They arrive and dock in Cape Verde (previously discovered in 1456), which remains an influential landing point for the Portuguese throughout history.

Departing winds pull their fleet West through the Atlantic, and they arrive at the shore now known as Porto Seguro, likely between what is now Rio de Janeiro and Salvador.

The expedition's official scribe recounts details of Amerindians who greet them, noting they're a surprisingly trusting, naked hunter-gatherer population. They are the Tupinamba Indians, who celebrate the Portuguese by joyous dance.



**1501** The Portuguese name the country “Brazil,” because of the abundance of Brazilwood. They return to take advantage of the natural resources, dividing the coast to wealthy Portuguese to harvest plantations and make money in Europe. Settlement is never an intention.

Portuguese bribe the Indigenous with iron tools, and take them by gunpoint to work on the plantations. The Indigenous way of life, though, is communistic. Private property is non-existent, and their society is classless. The concept of producing solely for another man is absurd. Resources are in abundance, and Indigenous see little reason for overproduction.

**1530** Disease brought from Europe rapidly affects the Indigenous. With an average population of four million, it is halved within a matter of years. Many Indigenous peoples flee from the Portuguese into the hinterlands.

The Portuguese are already familiar with slavery, in Lisbon an estimated one in ten individuals is a free or enslaved person from North Africa. Seeking new and efficient means of labor, the first fleet of enslaved Africans arrive to Brazil.





*Until abolition passed in 1888, 4 million people from Mozambique, Congo, Angola, Nigeria, Benin, and Ghana are brought to Brazil, which receives the highest number of individuals from the African Diaspora.*

**1600** Continuous unearthing reveals an abundance of sugar, a value equal to gold in Europe. Excavation from the Northern coasts inland, now known as the state of Minas Gerais, reveals veins of emeralds, diamonds and gold.

With the growing amount of exports, the Portuguese treat African victims as an infinite resource. Life expectancy of African descendants was six to seven years, though potentially as little as three to five years, post arrival in Brazil. The small number of women are Indigenous or enslaved. African women are brought for plantation and field work, as well as domestic work and prostitution. Interracial offspring were born into slavery or taken into the home and raised as the landowner's child. Life expectancy for the enslaved is twenty years.

**1700** A very small number of elites rule the population in Brazil which is enslaved, illiterate, and prohibited from printing literature. Non-elites remained completely isolated from the outside world.



**1759** Arriving in 1549, the Jesuits are prolific in Brazil.

Through this time missions are established throughout the empire, even in the Amazon, where they created a standardized form of the Tupi language so they could provide spiritual education to the Indigenous populations with the intent of conversion. The Jesuits are expelled by the Portuguese, as they resisted Indigenous enslavement while making profit in commercial ventures.

**1776–1780** In the United States, Delaware (1776) and Virginia (1778) prohibit importation of African slaves. Vermont become the first of the Thirteen Colonies to abolish slavery (1777). Rhode Island prohibits taking slaves from the colony (1778). Pennsylvania begins gradual emancipation (1780).

**Until the 1800s, Brazil is not so different for the enslaved from when it was found in 1500.**

**1807** Portugal remains Britain's oldest ally in Europe. Britain's Royal Navy often uses the port in Lisbon for operations against France. Napoleon Bonaparte, emperor of France, aims to silence and weaken Britain and demands closure of Lisbon port activities. Portugal refuses. Napoleon sends forces, in alliance with Spain, to invade Portugal.



The House of Bragança, the ruling dynasty of Portugal, takes refuge in Brazil. Called the Partida de Lisboa, “Separation of Lisbon” brings 10,000 to 15,000 Portuguese nobles, police, cooks, and family members, to Rio de Janeiro. Arriving in 1808, by the protection of British ships, King Dom João VI establishes Rio de Janeiro as the de facto capital of Portugal. He creates a number of reforms, government ministries, a treasury, a Supreme Court, libraries, and universities in Brazil.

**1821** The move to Rio de Janeiro accentuated the economic, institutional, and social crisis in Portugal, which in the absence of the monarch, is administered by English commercial and military interests under William Beresford. Portuguese constitutionalists rise in revolution. King João VI returns to Portugal, leaving behind his fifteen-year-old son Prince Dom Pedro I to rule Brazil.

**1831** With pressure from British allies, Brazil agrees to phase out slave trade. It enacts law which gives judicial power to suppress the entry of Africans. This lacks effective repression by authorities and trafficking *grows* due to cheap slave trade costs and high demand for work on newly discovered coffee plantations. The law becomes known as the “Law for English to See.”



**1835** Various Brazilian state laws are enacted permitting education only for the free. It is prohibited to teach reading and writing to the enslaved.

**1845** English enact the Aberdeen Act of 1845, an effort to suppress slave trade by giving British authorities power to seize Brazilian vessels and accuse traffickers of piracy.

**1850** Lei Eusébio de Queiróz, a law which establishes repercussions of trafficking individuals from Africa, is enacted. Ships flying the Brazilian flag or port with the enslaved on board would require the reexportation of slaves. Where this is not possible, Africans will be employed by the Brazilian government, and in no case granted as service to private individuals. Unlike prior efforts, this law is upheld. Workarounds are created.

Interprovincial trade and sale of enslaved people remains legal and is encouraged to maximize labor. 100,000–200,000 enslaved from the Northeastern states, experiencing a decline in sugarcane, are brought to Southeastern provinces to work on booming coffee plantations.

**1854** Nabuco Araújo Law places sanctions on authorities who cover up the smuggling of enslaved people.





**1862** The United States identifies Brazil and other parts of Central America as ideal locations to export previously enslaved, now freed African Americans. Under the Lincoln presidency, James Watson Webb proposes the idea of using Brazil as the region of warm climate under the notion that it is “more comfortable” for Black blood and has legalized slave labor. Brazil rejects this proposal on the premise of restricting international access to Brazilian land.

**1867** Dom Pedro II asks lawmakers to draft legislation to gradually end slavery in Brazil. The Paraguayan War (1865–1870) prolongs discussions.

**1871** “Relations” between landowners and enslaved women can occur openly in the home or slave quarters. It is viewed that interracial relations minimizes the difference between the two racial and societal status.

Lei do Ventre Livre, *Law of Free Womb*, is enacted. Sanctioned by Princess Isabel, those born to women in slavery are born as “free” individuals. The mother’s master will have the obligation to raise the children until eight years of age, when the master will have three options: to receive compensation from the state of 600,000 reals, to use services of the minor until the age of twenty-one, to turn the child to the state, which would support the child until adulthood.



**1885** The Sexagenarian Law gives freedom for enslaved individuals over sixty years old. The majority of resources will say exactly this. Really though, this multi-layered law requires the individual to continue work for three more years, not exceeding age sixty-five. The individual can then be considered free in the same municipality. Should the individual desire to move elsewhere, a judge must approve.

**1888** Brazil becomes the last country to abolish slavery. The Golden Law, signed by Princess Isabel of Bragança, has two articles: (1) Slavery has been declared as extinct since the date of this law; (2) Provisions to the contrary are revoked. Over 700,000 people are freed. The law provides no path of integration.

**1889** The Republican coup against the monarchy. The Republican party consists of angry landowners who had to freed slaves without compensation. King Dom Pedro II does not want to call his allies to create civil war. The family leaves for Europe, expelled from Brazil.

**1890** Codio de Penal deems it illegal for the Black population to practice their culture portrayed in capoeira, music, and ritual. Education remains prohibited for the Black population.



**1891** Economist João Manuel Cardoso de Mello publishes: “Capitalism is incompatible with slavery. Slavery, is fixed capital, a lifetime advance of those enslaved. The wage-earner provides work without advance, without risk. Forced labor is more expensive than wage labor.”

For financial benefit and for whiteness, Brazil seeks to attract immigrants by guaranteeing and promoting religious freedom and abundant work. Through 1919 more than 2.6 million immigrants arrive, largely from Portugal, Spain, Italy, and Japan.

Unlike the United States, Brazil would not practice scientific racism in exclusion. Brazil would attempt to “de-Africanize” its population. It becomes known as a “racial laboratory” for *branqueamento*, or whitening. It is estimated that within three generations a new white Brazil will arise. Mestizos, those of mixed race, are viewed as superior to Black predecessors. Proponents argue that mestizos can be “good intellectuals.”

**1897** The first favela, Morro da Providência is born. Occupied by soldiers who fought the War of Canudos, an abolishment of an anarchist community in Bahia. When the soldiers returned to Rio, the government left them without payment. They begin to build shelter with wood from shipping crate on the hill amongst the favela plants.



**1904** Determined to redevelop and sanitize the city, the streets in Rio are widened, displacing the poor population living along the street. They move to the free land of the mountains, known as “the favela”. Now made up of poor, and previously enslaved blacks.

**1910** There are hundreds of favelas, growing at the rate of 12.53 percent per year. The population living outside of the favela grew by an average of 2 percent in four years.

**1934** Women and the Black population can vote.

**1968** Lei do Boi, Law of the Bull, is the first quota law in Brazil. It declares 50 percent of university spaces in agricultural schools be reserved for those who possess land. It is legal, though not feasible, for Blacks to purchase and possess land; it must be approved by a white man.

**1970** The pinnacle of drug trafficking in Colombia, whose business is in Central and North America. The United States trains maritime police to close the Caribbean gateway. Columbian Cartel go elsewhere, finding a corrupt Brazilian government. They see the favela is weak and disregarded. The Cartel infiltrates their drug trade with the factions birthed and organized in Brazil. Trafficking begins to dominate the favelas.





**1988** Racism is constitutionally recognized as crime.

**2008** Initiation of Pacification.

**2014** Preparation for the 2014 Olympic and World Cup games. As much as \$14.5 billion dollars is spent for preparations, largely allocated in hiding the poor. Approximately 77,200 people are displaced by force to present better aesthetics for spectators. Walls on the perimeters of the favelas are built to prevent view of the impoverished. Community members who live without sewage disposal, sanitation, or food on the table face disruption to their ways of life while being further rejected.

Bus routes connecting the North Zone, the poorest part of the city, to the South Zone, the wealthiest part of the city, are cut off.

Vila Autodromo, a favela built by 600 families who went there for its proximity to educational institutions and safety away from faction control can be seen from the Olympic Park. Families watch the homes that they constructed with their bare hands be torn to the ground. They are told to leave to another part of the city. Twenty families refute. The government strikes a deal—they can stay only if they accept the better-looking housing made for them.

---

# Translations & Descriptions

**Bandido** - *Bandit, thief*  
Armed faction member

**Beleza** - *Beauty*

Most often heard in Rio as response and exchange with “Tudo bem.”

**Boco do Fumo** - *Mouth of smoke*

Points where drugs are sold on the *morro*.

**Bom dia / boa tarde / boa noite** - *Good day/morning; good afternoon; good evening*

**Bolsa Família** - A financial support program which came into law under President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, a representative and founding member of the Workers’ Party.

Lula's presidency from 2003–2010 most represented the underserved, and created programs, such as Bolsa Família, to lift and give opportunities, which were previously non-existent, to the working class. As part of his anti-hunger program, he combined Bolsa Escola, financial support of education, and Bolsa Alimentação, financial support for food. The support he brought to people was wildly impactful—in both positive and corrupt ways.

Without the programs some Brazilians would have continued sinking without opportunity. Others took advantage of the program by applying for and receiving aid when they were not in need. Many believe Bolsa Família is a way for Brazilians to look the other way at a beautifully painted exterior and to distract from the amount of money stolen by government representatives.

**Caipirinha** - Brazil's drink: mulled lime, sugar, cachaça, shaken on ice.

**Carioca** - Locals in Rio de Janeiro

**Carioca da gema** - Natives born in Rio de Janeiro (who are very proud of their birth roots).

**Canga** - A large piece of textile used on the beach rather than a towel. They are colorful, sold everywhere and using anything

but a canga at the beach will clearly identify those as being foreign.

**Claro** - *Of course*

**Comunidade** - *Community*

Most simply put, a surface term for the favelas of Brazil.

It is a kinder reference used to elevate the stature of the favela and people from the favela. It was created as a sensitive, non-demeaning term, in contrast to favela. This term, however, is most used by those who are not from the favela. More and more people from the favela are taking pride in their background and the society they come from. “Favelado / Favelada” (gender specific terms) which refer to individuals from the favela, has historically been derogatory. In very recent years the millennial population has birthed pride in this term. Acknowledging their roots and pride of how life is lived amongst strife.

In the media it is frequently exercised in strategic ways. When reporting on good coming out of the favela, “comunidade” is often used in reference. Negative reporting on the favela, “favela” is used.

**Favela** - In the late 1890s, people from the north migrated to Rio looking for work. Also, while soldiers were waiting for the land grants and salaries their government had promised them

for fighting in the war, they set up make-shift shelters under the favela trees in the mountains of Rio.

Without money or shelter, the mountains of Rio were free range and people began building homes amongst the favela plants with scrap materials from cargo ships. The term “favela” is born.

As the city grew, more shanty towns developed though within the city at street level. Because of poverty and faction-run streets, the shanty towns on street level are called *Favela plano*, or “Flat Favela.”

**Facção** - *Faction*

A group of individuals who band together and are separated by others by opposition and violence.

**Fica tranquilo** - *Don't worry, stay calm*

**Foda** - *Fuck*

**Gingo/a** - *Anyone who is not from Brazil*

**Ladrão** - *Thief*

In reference to street crime, not necessarily connected with a faction.

**Mano** - *brother* (street slang)

**Menina** - *Girl*

**Moleque** - *Young boy*

Often associated with being from the favela.

**Morro** - *Hill*

Used to reference the mountainous land where the favelas are constructed.

**Moradores** - *Residents*

**Mulherão** - A woman of all women. A woman who is confident, strong, sure of herself, complemented by her levels of physical beauty.

**Pipa** - *Kite*

Known as a “poor man’s” game. Kites are flown with hundreds and hundreds of yards of line, wound up in a plastic wheel by the flyer’s side. The game is to cut another kite out of the sky. The line is bathed in materials such as iron or glass powder with glue or oxide to make the line sharp to cut, which also makes it a physical threat. Seen all over Brazil, the lines will fall out of the sky, get caught on other objects which, when in contact with people, causes serious harm, bodily damage, and even amputation. Some lines are so dangerous it is illegal to sell or fly them. For those who ride or cycle, it is recommended to have a tall rod on the handles / in front of the body so should a

(clear) line be of obstruction, the line will be caught by the rod, rather than the individual's body.

**Saudade** - A layer of love so profound the effects are physical. The gap in your being that can only be filled by the time once had with the other. The acceptance that the moment has passed, and the surrender into joy and appreciation of what once was.

**Sim Deus quiser** - *If God wants*

Many use this term in regard to making plans while recognizing things may change and it is in the hands of God.

**Tamo junto** - Count on me.

**Tudo bem / Tudo bom** - *All right / All okay*

Cordial greeting always exchanged with any encounter, regardless of the time, place, relationship.

**Você** - *You* (informal).

Formal: senhora (feminine) senhor (masculine)

**Quadrado** - *Little square*

Funk dance move where the hips isolate to pop into four corners drawing a square.

*Thank you*

for the time you invested in reading this work.  
I would love to hear your input. If you could please spare two  
minutes and leave a review, it would be greatly appreciated.



With sincere thanks and best wishes,

Michelle





# Acknowledgments

In profound gratitude, this book could not have been born without the support of so many.

To the book's editor, Holly Caldwell, whose dedication and expertise in Latin American history stretched the book to new levels. To the devoted and ever patient audiobook producer, Phillip de Abreu of Essential Studios. To the talented and detail-oriented book cover photographer, Ziyad Selbak. To Professor of Languages, Camila Cavalcanti Valadares Meireles, whose patience, open mind and expertise has helped edit the book in Portuguese. To the spectacular launch team, thank you for your dedication.

To my partner, there will never be enough words. You have changed and elevated my world. Thank you for your endless support. Thank you for being the person you are.

To Danielle, our relationship of unwavering trust, presence and support is the most precious gift. Thank you for all the ways you show up.

To Larry Sweeney, a man who balances analysis and whimsy to better understand the self and others. Thank you for creating the beautiful home and development project in the favela.

To my Brazilian family, who has taught me the art of patience and the meaning of love. Tia Ana Julia and Tio Tadeu, you embraced me in parental love in tumultuous times living this book. From my deepest heart, I am forever grateful.

To my mother Maureen, who instilled independence and strength in the core of my soul. Thank you for introducing me to the globe.

To my brother Phillip, who has reminded me, “You must do what you cannot ignore, it’s your unique gift.” Thank you.

## Bibliography

- Alves, Raoni. "Cerimônia Marca Fim da Intervenção federal no RJ: 'Cumprimos a missão,' Diz General." *Globo* G1. December 27, 2018. <https://g1.globo.com/rj/rio-de-janeiro/noticia/2018/12/27/cerimonia-encerra-intervencao-federal-na-seguranca-do-rj.ghtml>.
- Andremarinist. *Sunrise on the top of Dois Imaos mountain, Rio de Janeiro*. iStock, 2018.
- Arquivo Nacional: MAPA. n.d. "Lei de Terras." November 11, 2016. <http://mapa.an.gov.br/index.php/menu-de-categorias-2/279-lei-de-terras>.
- Arquivo Nacional: MAPA. n.d. "Lei Eusébio de Queirós." November 11, 2016. <http://mapa.an.gov.br/index.php/menu-de-categorias-2/288-lei-euzebio-de-queiroz>.
- Arquivo Nacional: MAPA. n.d. "Lei dos Sexagenários." November 11, 2016. <http://mapa.an.gov.br/index.php/menu-de-categorias-2/280-lei-dos-sexagenarios>.
- Bezerra, Juliana. "Revolta da Vacina: o que foi, resumo e causas." *Toda Matéria*. 2011. <https://www.todamateria.com.br/revolta-da-vacina/>.
- Britannica. n.d. "Brazil—Independence." 2022. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Brazil/Independence>.
- Carvalho, Janaina. "Conheça a história da 1a favela do Rio, criada há quase 120 anos." *Globo*. January 12, 2015. <http://g1.globo.com/rio-de-janeiro/rio-450-anos/noticia/2015/01/conheca-historia-da-1-favela-do-rio-criada-ha-quase-120-anos.html>.
- Cavendish, Richard. "Cabral Discovers Brazil." *History Today*. April 4, 2000. <https://www.historytoday.com/archive/months-past/cabral-discovers-brazil>.
- DMEPhotography. *Guy playing soccer at the beach at Rio at sunset*. iStock, 2016.
- Ernst, Daniel. *Love couple in arms on beach at sunset at Rio*. iStock, 2016.
- Ferreira, Alvaro. "Favelas no Rio de Janeiro: nascimento, expansão, remoção e, agora, exclusão através de muros." *Biblio 3W, Revista Bibliográfica de Geografía y Ciencias Sociales* XIV, no. 828, (25 de junio de 2009). <http://www.ub.es/geocrit/b3w-828.htm>.
- Forte, Jay. 2017. "War Rages in Rocinha, Rio de Janeiro's Largest Favela" *The Rio Times*, September 23, 2017. <https://riotimesonline.com/brazil-news/rio-politics/war-in-rages-yesterday-in-rocinha-rios-largest-favela>.
- F11photo. *View of Ipanema Beach in the evening, Brazil*. iStock, 2016.
- Grabsky, Phil. 2000. *Brazil: An Inconvenient History*. British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC).
- Haag, Carlos. "O dia em que o Brasil disse Não aos Estados Unidos." *Pesquisa*. February 2009. <https://revistapesquisa.fapesp.br/o-dia-em-que-o-brasil-disse-nao-aos-estados-unidos/>.
- HistoryNet. n.d. "The Abolitionist Movement: Fighting Slavery from the Colonial Era to 1865." Accessed June 01, 2020. <https://www.historynet.com/abolitionist-movement>.
- Hudson, R. A. "Amerindians." *Brazil: A Country Study*. US Library of Congress. 1997. <http://countrystudies.us/brazil>.
- InSight Crime. n.d. "Amigos dos Amigos." March 30, 2018. <https://www.insightcrime.org/brazil-organized-crime-news/amigos-dos-amigos/>.
- InSight Crime. n.d. "First Capital Command—PCC." March 9, 2020. <https://www.insightcrime.org/brazil-organized-crime-news/first-capital-command-pcc-profile/>.
- InSight Crime, n.d. "Pure Third Command." April 26, 2018. <https://insightcrime.org/brazil-organized-crime-news/pure-third-command/>.

Lindrik. *Slum*. iStock, 2016.

Marchello74. *Aerial panorama of Botafogo Bay, Rio De Janeiro*. iStock, 2016.

Maringoni, Gilberto "História—O destino dos negros após a Abolição." IPEA Desafios do Desenvolvimento. December 29, 2011. [https://www.ipea.gov.br/desafios/index.php?option=com\\_content&id=2673%3Acatid%3D28](https://www.ipea.gov.br/desafios/index.php?option=com_content&id=2673%3Acatid%3D28).

Migiro, Geoffrey. "Where is the African Diaspora?" WorldAtlas. May 24, 2018. Retrieved June 2, 2020. <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/where-is-the-african-diaspora.html>.

Moritz Schwarcz, Lilia. "Previsões são sempre traiçoeiras: João Baptista de Lacerda e seu Brasil branco." *História, Ciências, Saúde* 18, no. 1 (March 2011): 225–242. <https://www.scielo.br/j/hcsm/a/wRVg8H99n65JLwhF9BMBHpF/?format=pdf&lang=pt>.

Mundo Real. n.d "About Rocinha." Accessed July 01, 2020. <http://mundoreal.org/about/about-rocinha>.

National Archives and Records Administration. n.d. "13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution: Abolition of Slavery." September 8, 2016. <https://www.archives.gov/historical-docs/13th-amendment>.

Nolen, Stephanie. "How Brazil's big experiment in policing failed to make Rio safer for the Olympics." The Globe and Mail. August 2, 2016. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/how-brazils-big-policing-experiment-failed-to-make-rio-safer-for-theolympics/article3122945/>.

Pombo de Barros, Surya. "Escravos, libertos, filhos de africanos livres, não livres, pretos, ingênuos: negros nas legislações educacionais do XIX." *Educ. Pesqui.* 42, no. 3 (Jul–Sept 2016): 591–605.

RHJ. *Little monkey native to areas of Atlantic Forest seen on urban trail in the city of Rio de Janeiro*. iStock, 2020.

Rodrigues, Natália. "Bolsa Família." InfoEscola. Accessed August 01, 2020. <https://www.infoescola.com/sociedade/bolsa-familia/>.

Schofield, Hugh. "Human zoos: When real people were exhibits." BBC News. December 27, 2011. <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-16295827>.

Signorini, Bruna Atayde, and Bernardo Lanza Queiroz. "The Impact of Bolsa Família Program in the Beneficiary Fertility." (paper, Federal University of Minas Gerais, Belo Horizonte, August 2011).

Silverjohn. *Night view of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil*. iStock, 2016.

Silverjohn. *Toucan on the branch in tropical forest of Brazil*. iStock, 2016.

Simões, Patrícia, and Ricardo Brito Soares, "Efeitos do Programa Bolsa Família na fecundidade das beneficiárias." *Revista Brasileira de Economia* 66, no. 4 (Oct–Dec 2012): 533–56.

Simonapiliolla. *Portrait of beautiful black man athlete resting sitting down at the beach with sunset in background*. iStock, 2019.

SkyNext. *Black cute girl on an ocean cliff*. iStock, 2020.

Sousa, Alana. "De Antônio Francisco Bonfim Lopes Para Nem da Rocinha." *Aventuras na História*. October 27, 2019. <https://aventurasnahistoria.uol.com.br/noticias/reportagem/de-antonio-francisco-bonfim-lopes-para-nem-da-rocinha.phtml>.

Souza, Titta. *Ipanema Beach. View from Arpoador*. iStock, 2014.

Sullivan, John P., da Cruz, José de Arimatéia, and Robert J. Bunker. "Third generation gangs strategic note no. 10: Military takes control of policing in Rio de Janeiro." *Small Wars Journal*. February 24, 2018. <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/third-generation-gangs-strategic-note-no-10-military-takes-control-policing-rio-de-janeiro>.

Vecchi, Alessandro. *Colorful alley of a favela in Brazil*. iStock, 2018.

Wejsa, Shari, and Jeffrey Lesser. "Migration in Brazil: The Making of a Multicultural Society." *Migrationpolicy.org*. (March 29, 2018). <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/migration-brazil-making-multicultural-society>.

1. Bruna Atayde Signorini and Bernardo Lanza Queiroz, "The Impact of Bolsa Familia Program in the Beneficiary Fertility," (paper, Federal University of Minas Gerais, Belo Horizonte, August 2011).
2. "Amigos dos Amigos," InSight Crime, last modified March 30, 2018, <https://www.insightcrime.org/brazil-organized-crime-news/amigos-dos-amigos/>.
3. John P. Sullivan, José de Arimatéia da Cruz, and Robert J. Bunker, "Third generation gangs strategic note no. 10: Military takes control of policing in Rio de Janeiro," Small Wars Journal, last modified February 24, 2018, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/third-generation-gangs-strategic-note-no-10-military-takes-control-policing-rio-de-janeiro>.
4. Alana Sousa, "De Antônio Francisco Bonfim Lopes Para Nem da Rocinha," Aventuras na História, last modified October 27, 2019, <https://aventurasnahistoria.uol.com.br/noticias/reportagem/de-antonio-francisco-bonfim-lopes-para-nem-da-rocinha.phtml>.
5. "Pure Third Command," InSight Crime, last modified April 26, 2018, <https://insightcrime.org/brazil-organized-crime-news/pure-third-command/>.
6. Hugh Schofield, "Human zoos: When real people were exhibits," BBC News, last modified December 27, 2011, <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-16295827>.
7. Patrícia Simões and Ricardo Brito Soares, "Efeitos do Programa Bolsa Família na fecundidade das beneficiárias," *Revista Brasileira de Economia* 66, no. 4 (Oct–Dec 2012): 533–56, <https://doi.org/10.1590/S0034>.
8. "First Capital Command—PCC," InSight Crime, last modified March 9, 2020, <https://www.insightcrime.org/brazil-organized-crime-news/first-capital-command-pcc-profile/>.