

Desire and Sacrifice in Brazil

Standing on the balcony in my wrap-around bathrobe, naked underneath, I ponder jumping the 20 feet to the ground. I really am not liking this idea, because although I can't see in the tarry blackness of the new-moon night, I remember a flagstone patio somewhere around this end of the house. I might hit it like a pile driver and break both legs, and then I certainly wouldn't be able to escape. Even if I land on the grass—so lush and green here in Brazil during the rainy season—the movement would alert Denilda's four dogs and they would set off again. They'd kept us up all night barking at something two days prior until finally in desperation I climbed out from under my mosquito netting, went downstairs onto the deck and whacked Fiska with my flip-flop to shut her up.

Yes, the dogs...but now after being jolted awake only a few minutes ago my foggy brain stumbles onto the notion that the dogs are *not* barking, which is an impossibility considering all the commotion in the house. They must have killed them I realize. *If they killed the dogs, then these guys mean business.* She was talking to me now, the survival voice. I had no choice but to listen.

At this point the adrenalin kicks in and the brain starts thrumming like the pistons of a well-oiled machine because I realize another fact: the invaders know that the cook and her husband, who always sleep downstairs in their room by the laundry, left yesterday for their hometown. After all the madness of Carnival, Denilda had given the servants the weekend off and we are alone in the house...a fact the man in the black ski mask surely knows. *This is an inside job, and you are screwed.*

I try the French doors, the only exit off the balcony, but they're bolted from the inside. Perhaps the man will just get what he came for and leave, I consider. But this line of reasoning is cut short because at the other end of the balcony I see a flashlight beam swing an arc across the night air and come to rest a few inches from my bare feet. I flatten myself up against the house hoping he won't see me, my arms outstretched against the white stucco wall like Jesus crucified on the cross. The flashlight beam moves back inside, but now through the windows I can see it coming down the hall toward me, scanning the bedrooms. Any second he is going to open this door to the balcony and stare me in the face. Quickly I weigh the options of jumping to the ground versus being shot or possibly kidnapped....and who knows what horrors await me then. I determine that anything is better than having them take me, and this is when the voice tells me: *Hang from the balcony. In the darkness he won't be able to see you.*

I throw first one leg then the other over the railing, feeling the rough wood chafe against my naked thigh, then lower myself till my weight is suspended by my hands gripping the cool cement floor as I dangle above the ground. But once I'm underneath the balcony I spy a wooden pole holding it up, grab it, and shinny down. As soon as my feet hit the moist grass, I start running. I consider hiding in the jungle till they're gone. *Don't go there—remember the snakes.*

My trembling legs threatening to give way, I move onto that wretched dirt road, running down the mountain at midnight, over the rocks, the burrs, the branches, the cow manure squishing between my toes, expecting to hear shouting or gunshots any minute, for who knows if they have a lookout stationed at the entrance to the estate. I won't notice the damage to my bare feet until days later. But strangely, in that instant, another thought leaps to mind: *You came to Brazil to get a story. Well by God, you've got one. Now all you have to do is live to tell it.*

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This particular story had begun two years prior back in California. Trying to finish a biography I'd been struggling with for a decade, I informed my friend Scott that I'd decided as a carrot to motivate me, when I finished the book I'd give myself a trip to Latin America as a reward, because I desperately needed a long rest. Scott and I frequently laughed about our polar opposite approaches to life: he was financially conservative and a homebody and I

was always in debt and loved to travel. That there might be a coincidence between my two personality traits was not lost on me. Scott, ever the practical one, raised his eyebrows at this news and said, "Honey, how is this supposed to all work out? You're already broke and now we're adding Latin America into the mix?"

"I don't know—but it will," I shrugged. At 55 I'd learned my limitations with high finance, but I also knew I possessed an uncanny ability to draw to me what I desired.

The following week I found a brown paper package covered with foreign stamps stuffed into my mailbox. I opened it and hurriedly skimmed the letter, which invited me to come to Brazil to write the life story of a woman named Denilda dos Santos, all expenses paid. The pitch included a binder of photos of her estate on top of a mountain above Paraty, with breathtaking views of the Atlantic coast in the distance. This is where I'd be staying.

That evening I went over to Scott's place and shook the letter at him. "Take a look at this," I said grinning.

"Unbelievable! Just last week you said you were going to Latin America but you didn't know how." He glared at me as I started laughing. "If you use the word 'manifest' just one time...."

I began researching Denilda and the man who had sent me the package, Jiri Havrda, a documentary filmmaker; he had been friends with Deni for thirty

years. Like many of her acquaintances, he had long encouraged her to write the story of her life, one filled to the brim with outrageous incidents of fortune and mayhem. Jiri, experienced with organizing large projects as a producer, volunteered to bring together the elements to put the book project in motion, including finding an author and a translator since Deni spoke no English. Having read *Desert Flower*, a bestseller I'd written, Jiri determined I was the right girl for the job, and he'd composed a very professional pitch designed to lure me to South America.

Flattered though I was, I felt it wise to check out these people before I accepted their offer. I consulted my friends and researched the region, because although I'd circled the globe alone on assignment, including neighboring Argentina and Bolivia, this would be my first time in Brazil. Most of my cohorts are adventurous travelers and I was surprised by their universal reaction: "Don't go to Brazil, it's too dangerous." When I delved further, I discovered a statistic that got my attention: more people are killed every year in Brazil through intentional violence than anywhere else on the planet, including most of the world's war zones combined.

While I weighed my decision, my would-be collaborators sent me 200 pages of notes Denilda had put down—a record of her life's events. When they bought me a round-trip plane ticket, my desire for a relaxing Latin American escape felt within reach. After they wired \$10,000 into my bank account, I made the decision to ignore the naysayers and packed my bags.

When I landed in Rio de Janeiro, waiting for me was Deni, a tall muscular *negra brasileira* with a blinding white smile. Also waiting, with a look of nervous anticipation, was Fernanda, who would serve as our translator while I interviewed Deni. She was very pale, of Italian descent, and had the bulging, luminous black eyes and dramatic mannerisms of a telenovella star. They loaded my two bags into a hired car and the driver remained stoic and silent while the women chattered on like multilingual magpies. "Cachy..." Fernanda opened the questioning, demonstrating what I'd learn was Brazilians' common inability to pronounce Cathy. "We're *dying* to find out your zodiac sign!"

Four hours later we pulled into the UNESCO heritage site of Paraty, a picturesque colonial village of white stucco buildings and palm trees on the southern coast of Brazil, a resort town popular with Italian and French tourists. I later learned that before I arrived Denilda had been sauntering down Paraty's cobblestone streets bragging about the "famous American writer" who was coming to research her life story. In a town of 35,000 this type of news travels far and wide and fast.

A mud-splattered Toyota pickup pulled up next to us and I noticed with some alarm that our driver was now taking my red suitcases and tossing them in the back of the 4x4. Next he grabbed my backpack containing \$5000 worth of electronics equipment. "Wait!" I hollered just before he launched it onto the truck bed. "What are you doing?"

“Come on Cachy, we are getting into this vehicle,” said Fernanda.

“Buy why?”

She and Deni grinned. “You’ll see!”

A young white guy with crystalline blue eyes sat behind the wheel of the Toyota, his biceps bulging out of his t-shirt. He adjusted his baseball cap in the rearview mirror, then slid a hand down his jeans. I had no idea at this point in the journey that I would later be seeing him with these jeans off.

“This is Cellino, my white son,” Deni said. They both laughed at her little joke.

I sat in the back seat of the cab as we left the city. Soon we were chugging in low gear up a rutted dirt road the color of rust. My head bounced on my shoulders as we pitched in and out of gulleys, waded through streams, past waterfalls, whined over boulders, and circled around sleeping cattle.

The lurching stopped at the top of the mountain and I hopped out of the cab, caught my breath, and spun around to see the view: thick clumps of forest, blue ridges of distant mountain ranges, horses grazing on the green velvet hillsides, a gorge which fell away sharply hundreds of feet, and off in the distance sailboats bobbing in the harbor of Paraty. Beyond that the Atlantic Ocean. Overhead turkey vultures floated on thermals, their wings spread majestically. I twirled around—turning and turning and turning—taking it all in.

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This estate called Casinha Branca would be my home for the next couple of months; it was a somewhat homespun affair having been constructed by a local contractor who hauled the building materials up that awful road on the back of a mule. The design was based on a fantasy that had incubated within Denilda since her mother listened to a song called “Casinha Branca,” a tune expressing the desire to be in a green place, in a white house with a balcony, and watch the sunrise—which I did from the veranda of my suite overlooking the Atlantic.

I quickly settled into the idyllic rhythm of life in the wilderness, waking up early to be greeted by the fresh morning air coming through the open French doors of my room on the second floor. I’d walk out to the balcony and admire the view, the hillside sloping quickly down to Paraty and the sea beyond. About a half mile down the rusty ribbon of road in the distance I could see the little shack where Cellino, the caretaker, lived. There were no other houses around to disturb the tranquility, only the cacophony of tropical birds chattering, greeting the dawn.

I’d head downstairs where Benedetta, the cook, would have my breakfast set out, papayas or mangoes she’d just plucked from the trees outside, along with homemade bread, cheese, and tea. Fernanda lived in town so until she arrived I was alone here with Brazilians who understood no English. Deni communicated in a language her friends called *Denildese*—her mishmash of Portuguese, Italian, and Spanish. Embarrassingly monolingual, I

understood none of these but I noticed early on that Deni and I were able to communicate in an odd telepathic way...no words required.

After breakfast I'd go upstairs and sit at the desk in my room and write until I heard Deni calling, "Cachy! Almoço está pronto!" Then I'd go downstairs to find the twenty-five-foot-long table on the deck laden with a succulent spread of pork or chicken raised here on the farm and vegetables fresh from the garden. I'd shovel it in as if this were my last meal before being shot at sunrise while my companion chattered on in Denildese and I answered in English. When Fernanda arrived we'd get down to business with the interviewing so I could piece together Deni's life for the page.

One afternoon I was standing by the stairwell when I spotted an odd little doll hanging upside-down beneath the stairs. It was the figure of a man, with a bottle of cachaça strapped to his back and a tiny cigarette in his mouth. I froze, sensing that this was no mere child's toy. "Deni..." I pointed, "what is this?"

She smiled that infectious grin of hers and said something I couldn't understand. Fernanda explained: "Cachy, that's the magic charm she created to bring you to Brazil to write her story! Like all smokers, the doll desperately wants his cigarette, but she won't light it until her wish is fulfilled." Like Catholicism in Italy, Macumba—Brazilian voodoo—is an undercurrent running through the country's daily life. In São Paulo you can walk down the street and stumble upon a chicken slaughtered at the crossroads on the night of the

new moon—the proper time for sacrifices to attain your desires. The larger the desire, the bigger the sacrifice offered to the gods.

After a couple of hours of interviewing each day we'd stop and get down to the serious business of drinking caparinhis in the pool, then move on to my samba lessons—all orchestrated to the sexy rumbling voice of Seu Jorge which had now replaced birdsong as the dominant soundtrack of life at Casinha Branca. Some nights Deni would call Cellino on her cell phone and summon him to drive us into Paraty where we'd join the Europeans drinking beer at one of the beach cafes. Everyone seemed to know Denilda. Her estate was legendary—someplace up there on top of the mountain, the locals believed—though few had ever been there.

Our routine here at the house was interrupted when we began traveling to see the settings of Deni's life as research for the book. In this pursuit we ventured into the favelas of Rio, the green mountains of Minas Gerais, and drifted down the Amazon from Belem to Manaus. For our trips by car we had a driver who joined our entourage, Arturo, an American who lived in Paraty. Although he'd been in Brazil for years, the 6'4" ex-Marine hadn't lost any of his Staten Island accent, and I'd smile every time he opened his mouth.

When Carnival season arrives all day-to-day business in Brazil ceases like someone's thrown a circuit breaker. At Cashinha Branca the holiday

transformed the estate into a beehive of activity, starting with the arrival of Denilda's husband, Paolo, a psychiatrist who lives most of the year in his native Italy. Their bicontinental marriage was an endless source of curiosity, but I liked Paolo instantly, especially that he spoke some English. Two more visitors came from Italy and a German gal we'd met on the Amazon. For five days we indulged in the type of bacchanalia which has made Brazil famous—everything from dancing in the blocos of Paraty by the light of flaming torches, to watching the parades at the Sambadrome in Rio till 8 a.m., to rolling in the volcanic mud of Jabaquara Beach. But by the end of Carnival I was destroyed and so were the servants; when the guests left Deni gave them the weekend off. There were long good-byes and kisses on both cheeks—and promises that we would visit them soon to trace Denilda's past life in Italy; she'd fled there thirty years ago as a refugee after the Death Squads had killed her brother in Rio. When the military dictatorship and her fear of violence ended, Deni had returned to her homeland.

On the muggy Saturday night after Carnival ended, I bolted my door, climbed naked under the mosquito netting, and fell into a deep dreamless sleep.

"Cachy! Cachy wake up!" Denilda is screaming in English, followed by the splintering sound of knuckles pounding on my locked door. How long this has been going on I can't fathom because it's as if I'm swimming up from the

bottom of the ocean trying to regain consciousness. "Cachy wake up!" I hear the knob rattling. "Cachy! Cachy!"

I stumble over and, still nude, crack the door. All the lights are ablaze in the hallway and I see Deni with tears pouring down her black face. I'm still 98% asleep and trying to process what I'm seeing when I realize her husband is standing next to her with his large blue eyes open wide.

"Paolo, what's happening, what's going on?"

"Cathy, there's a man in the house and he wants you to come out."

"What?"

He repeats his line calmly, slowly, in his best psychiatrist's voice:

"There's a man in the house and he wants you to come out." About ten feet behind Paolo I see a figure dressed all in black, wearing a black ski mask. Inside the mask is a ghostly pale face and I note his brown eyes are open wide with an expression of terror, pupils dilated. His chest is heaving with rapid breaths. He has both arms outstretched holding a Magnum semi-automatic pointed at my head.

My first impulse is to laugh. This is a joke, right? They've gotten high and had one of their friends dress up like a robber. It's a scene we've witnessed hundreds of times in films—the costume, the pose—so that it has the illusion of unreality. This is the stuff of movies, it can't be real. I glance back at Denilda's tortured face and realize this is not a joke. My dazed brain

slogs through options until it lands on the only possible conclusion: *this is really happening so you better deal with it.*

“Okay, let me get my bathrobe.” I push the door shut, go back into my room and switch on the light to find my robe. It’s a cotton blue pinstripe, purchased especially for the tropical climate of my languid Latin American assignment. I wrap it around me and tie the belt.

Now a voice from inside me starts giving me orders. This instinct had steered me through dire consequences in the past, taking command of the situation. She left no room to argue: *They are going to kill all of you. But they’ll have to shoot you in the back because you’re going to make a run for it.*

With this I walk outside to the balcony where the hillside falls away 20 feet below. Around the corner of the building is another balcony with a sheer drop between the two. I scramble over to it and as I maneuver over the railings I fight the bathrobe twisting around my legs. Once I land safely on the other platform I run as far as I can until I reach the end, where I wait—hiding, hoping the man in the ski mask will get what he came for and then go away. I have a sickening feeling, however, that what he came for is *me*.

I’m now fully awake and realizing the circumstances, all evidence pointing to the fact that this is an inside job, someone who knows the layout of the estate. Someone who knows that Benedetta and her husband aren’t sleeping downstairs in their little twin bed tonight. When I see the black ski

mask peer around the side of the house looking for me, I know the time for debating my course of action is over. I'd rather risk breaking my neck than be taken hostage, so I shinny down the post supporting the balcony and begin to run.

I have no idea how many men are with the intruder or if they have a lookout or if they will soon stand on the balcony and shoot at the pale blue bathrobe streaking down the mountain road. Certainly there is no one around to hear the gunfire. I reach the large steel gate that Deni closes across the road at night. I try to open it but a chain with a padlock prevents that. Moving to the side of the gate I realize I'll have to climb over the barbed wire fence which comes up above my waist—which will be quite challenging barefoot in my robe. The possibility to do real damage to myself flits through my mind; I wince at straddling the barbed wire, feeling it rip into my genitals. I manage to get over it without damage, but as I turn to run one of the barbs pierces the cuff of my robe and I yank furiously to no avail. For a moment I consider taking off the bathrobe and leaving it hanging from the fence, but that means continuing on my escape totally nude. I give a last furious jerk and—free now—I run down the road to the caretaker's house and knock softly on his door.

Cellino opens the door a crack and I see that he's standing there nude with a small hand towel covering his private parts. "Let me in," I hiss.

“Por Cachy?” Only later do I think about how absurd all this must seem to him, a woman in a bathrobe showing up at his door in the middle of the night demanding to be let in. But at the time I was not interested in propriety. I press my way in and try to explain what’s happening.

“Homens com...” here I pause because I have no idea what the word for gun is in Portuguese. “Homens com guns at Casinha Branca.” I take my finger and point, thumb up, to my head. “Deni and Paolo.” I am anticipating he’ll leap into action to rescue his black mother. Instead he collapses onto a sofa; the little towel draped across his groin slips to the floor, and he goes into a trance. Then he begins softly whimpering and shaking his head as tears stream down his cheeks.

Across the room his young blonde wife wears a black slip; she’s watching this scene intently but does not speak. “Cellino, chame a polícia!” I cry. I take ahold of both his sweaty shoulders and shake him—trying to snap him out of it—but he continues in his trance, making noises like a mewling kitten. The thought pops into my head to slap him as hard as I can like I’ve seen in the movies. Perhaps the wife senses this is what I’m ready to do, understands in that way of women when violence is imminent.

“Cachy!” she calls out and holds up a Blackberry and begins to dial. As the woman thumbs the buttons of her phone I turn loose of her husband and for the first time look around the room. Their tiny house consists solely of that one room which is modestly furnished except for a lavish big screen TV.

They must have been watching a movie when I arrived because now I stare at the screen where a man is charging in and assuming the all-too-familiar stance: both arms rigid pointing a handgun straight into the camera—straight at me.

“Turn this thing off!”

“Por?”

I pantomime that we need to hear what’s happening up the hill at Casinha Branca, expecting the intruders have figured out by now that I’ve escaped and they’ll be out looking for me. They’re going to come tearing down the mountain like I did and kick in the door to Cellino’s little shack. I’m also listening for gunfire and screams, because I assume they’re up there killing Denilda and her husband; with this thought I whirl around and grab the remote control and shut off the TV. Now for the first time I hear a muffled squeaking noise and I’m motionless, knowing this is a sound I’ve heard before but I can’t place it. *Bats. This fucking house is full of bats. My God, what next?*

“What is happening?” I demand of the wife who is still punching buttons on her Blackberry. How many digits to dial the cops in this place? Is she calling Uranus?

She holds the phone out toward me and shrugs, indicating that it won’t work.

“We need to get dressed.”

“Por?” she frowns at me.

“Do you have some clothes I can wear?” She gives me a long-suffering look and shrugs again, then walks over to her closet where she slides one item at a time down the rod studying her wardrobe. At last she’s made a selection and hands me a hanger sporting a red sequin party dress. For a few seconds I stare at her, my gaze going back and forth from her emotionless face to the garment extended to me—no doubt her hottest outfit. “No. Pantalones. Sapatos.” At this moment the voice starts talking to me again: *These people are idiots and you are going to have to leave them and save yourself. You’ve got to take charge of this situation.* I push the petite blonde out of the way and grab some gym shorts and a tank top, both of which are about three sizes too small. Then I stick my feet into her tiny flip-flops.

I turn my attention back to Cellino now who has a cell phone of his own, the one I’ve seen him talk on dozens of times. He’s put on some shorts and a t-shirt and is finally trying to dial someone, but indicating the call won’t go through. In some of my travels in the past I’d experienced situations where the signal was too weak for a phone call but would transmit a text. “Text Arturo and tell him to go the police.” Cellino nods and punches the buttons of his phone. We wait, but there’s no reply.

The minutes drag on with both husband and wife trying to dial out but nothing happens. Then suddenly Cellino’s phone rings and he stares at it. “Denilda!” He says something in Portuguese which I take to mean: “Should I

answer it?" I nod thinking this is the stupid question of the year. He puts the phone to his ear then shrugs as if to say "No one was there."

At this point I freeze. For a half hour these two have been claiming they can't get a signal to call the police and now Cellino's phone rings, so clearly it's working. For the first time a horrible thought occurs to me, and the voice agrees. *Yeah, they're in on it. No one in the world knows where you are right now...they can kill you and drag you out into the jungle and in a couple of days those vultures will have devoured you. You'll be gone without a trace.*

I point back and forth between Cellino and myself. "Você e eu, moto para polícia." I pantomime holding onto the handlebars of his dirt bike and turning the throttle.

He shakes his head emphatically. "Ah não."

"That or I will walk," and here I wiggle my index and middle finger back and forth to mimic walking. *Really? Are you going to hike miles down this mountain on a new moon night—through the streams and waterfalls and snakes and masked bandits? In a pair of flip-flops?* The voice of survival was fierce, and she'd guided me through many a crisis in the past. This time though I answered her: *If I don't, those guys are going to kill Deni and Paolo, then I have to live with it for the rest of my life.*

Before this debate can go any further, we hear shouting outside. Cellino motions for us to stay put while he investigates. The wife and I lock the door

behind him and I press against it, my heart thudding inside my ribs. Then he calls for us to come out. I fling the door open and immediately a flashlight is in my face, blinding me. I see the outline of a man holding an assault rifle and there are other figures in the dark around him. My first thought is that I've walked into their trap and it's over.

"Are you okay?" says a deep resonate male voice in English.

"Yes, I'm okay," I reply weakly. He takes the flashlight away from my face and as my eyes become accustomed to the dark I scan his clothes: camo fatigues with no insignia, no badges. Are these the good guys or the bad guys? I have no idea. But he's movie star handsome and in that moment I fall in love with him in a way that's absolutely primal. That swooning when the Mounties rush in is not just for the melodramas.

"Good. We have to go up to the big house now and see what's happening up there." He turns away with a look of resignation that I will not forget in this lifetime. It says: "I may die in a few minutes." Now the nausea overtakes me, imagining Denilda and Paolo lying in a pool of blood. As the three men move away the last one in line runs his eyes over me, my breasts bulging out of the doll-sized tank top and several inches of bare ass hanging out of the shorts.

In a few minutes Deni and Paolo come running down the mountain—very much alive. The intruders had locked them in the laundry room then quickly cleaned out the house of cash and computers. They took all my

electronics, stowing them in a sack before running off into the jungle. We later learned that for days—as we danced around the pool and drank caparinhis—they'd been watching us with binoculars from their camp...waiting for their moment. The police believed that one of their motives was to kidnap the "famous American writer"—a popular money-making activity in South America amongst the criminal class. Listen up, illiterate kidnappers: "famous American writer" does not necessarily equal "rich American writer."

Later I discovered that Cellino was in on the plan because my computer was recovered from his uncle's house; Deni mailed it back to me in California. And yet the caretaker really did text Arturo—one of the many unsolved riddles surrounding this whole story. Arturo received the text then burst into the police station shouting: "There are robbers up at Casinha Branca."

"If they made it all the way up there then this is going to be a fucked-up job," they said as they began grabbing automatic weapons down off the rack and slamming in ammo clips. As they put on bulletproof vests they said to our driver, "You've got to go up there with us because we don't know how to get there."

"I can go, but give me a weapon. I was a U.S. Marine in Afghanistan."

With that they set off in a car, which promptly got stuck on the awful road. They abandoned it and hiked up several miles on foot, stopping at Cellino's house first.

The next morning after the gunmen invaded Casinha Branca, I tell Denilda: "You have two choices. Either we go to Italy and finish the book there, or I get on the first plane back to the States and that's the end of this project."

With that the entire entourage packs up and heads to Milan, where we begin tracing Deni's wild life throughout Italy. After she returns home to Brazil, I stay on alone, sleeping on a friend's couch in Rome where I lie awake each endless evening, reliving the whole incident, trying to sort out the mystery of it all. A recurring thought nags: Why couldn't I see anything when I was trying to jump off the balcony? It was so dark....

It was the night of the new moon, came the answer. The proper time for sacrifices to attain your desires.

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