

Brian Sousa

One Night in Salvador

The streets smell of fried food, of urine and unfiltered cigarette smoke. Packs cost three Real, about one US dollar, and are covered in peeling stickers that warn in Portuguese of disease, death, or worse, impotence. There are corresponding drawings, and the one I am most concerned with shows two cartoon figures embracing, but the man seems to be crying. He couldn't get it done, I guess.

I didn't even smoke before I came here.

John and I climb upwards, following the cracked streets away from our hostel. We are hungry, but not starving like the children who rise like ghosts from around the listless palm trees, running to us as we pass by. Shirtless, their brown legs scabbed and bone-thin, they clutch at our hands, fastening on like sea urchins.

We stroll down the main street, where enormous women sit behind carts laden with food and buzzing with flies. Their arms touch each other, expanding, their dresses flash in obscenely bright colors, exploding. Their skin is wet, gleaming black.

We shake our heads at them and their eyes prickle my red skin. I want to tear at it. I have been awash in skin rashes lately, not sure from what. I drink before I sleep at night so that I don't wake myself with dirty nails scratching skin until it bleeds. Smoking pot before I sleep helps me not to remember my dreams.

"Let's get something else, right?" John motions his head to the

woman who is now flicking a blue flyswatter slowly through the air. “There is no way she is going to hit it,” he smirks, shaking his head, “Fat bitch.”

John is Irish. We went to college together in the States. He wears his long hair pulled back in a ponytail and shiny faux-gold aviator sunglasses. I compare our complexions. My skin has burnt and peeled, but is now darker than it has ever been. My Italian mother would be proud. John’s arms are heavily freckled and so red they could burst into flame.

We cross the street that is host only to old, rusted Volkswagens and broken-down motorbikes that buzz hoarsely, blowing dust across the street. It is our last night here; tomorrow we will be on a bus to Natal or to one of the next towns down the coast. I can’t remember what we decided. Rio de Janeiro will come at the end, and I don’t want to admit it, but Rio shines. We lost our teaching jobs and were kicked out of our house a few months ago. We ended up homeless and close to broke, riding buses full of squawking chickens and sometimes hitchhiking from the South to the Eastern Coast.

We are in agreement to splurge. We scramble across the cobblestone streets in flip-flops—mine are now almost torn apart—and I picture steaming platters of fish, like fajitas at a hokey chain restaurant in the States, when they come out hot and spitting oil, burning your elbows. I want wine too, or at least something cold—not stale, warm beer from behind the desk at the hostel.

In the main plaza there are restaurants everywhere, tables and

chairs and clusters of people making it hard to walk on the sidewalk. Owners catch our eyes, point to our translucent skin.

“*Gringo*,” calls one man from his seat at a table. “*Gringo*.” I hear laughter crackling in the greasy sun. I catch my swinging foot on the chair of an old man who was seated right before me, and my big toe scrapes the pavement and begins to bleed immediately. The man jerks forward angrily. I can feel his eyes on my back as we keep walking.

We finally stop at a lone restaurant on a small plateau. Below us are the streets we have climbed to get here, stretching down past the hostels into the slums that border the marinas and the polluted, tepid ocean. The projects, where drugs wrapped in tin foil are pressed into sweaty hands, where I buy the marijuana that keeps me sane. I can see the tiny shacks flashing in the breeze, cardboard houses and rusted fences.

There isn't much of a horizon, just a stretch of dark clouds that glow orange through the cracks, like a Jack-O-Lantern. I think for a second of Halloween, but it is November now, and I have missed it. My life in the States feels tainted somehow. Sometimes I wonder if it even still runs on at all.

John stands before me. “This is the last place.”

His voice is haggard. This trip has brought us closer than I ever thought it would and then worn us way down, as if with sandpaper.

I watch a waiter wipe down a plastic table and realize that the sun has almost completely set behind him. The lights of the city, though few, begin to smolder in the distance.

Wine is being poured for a young Brazilian couple. I watch the man place his hand on the woman's bare thigh, studded with black stubble. Suddenly a sizzling seafood platter appears at another table. I notice that the waiters are all wearing bow ties and short-sleeve, white shirts that have wilted in the heat of the day. I recognize two German men I saw in the hostel a day or two ago. They clink beer glasses and nod at the lost sun.

"Here," I say. "This is the place."

We sigh together. Lately John and I have been doing things on the same tired cycle. I am worse off though, health-wise.

We slip our bags off of our backs, and as we sit at the empty table we put them down next to us, close enough to touch. A woman scrubs the table for us, and I can smell her as she reaches over me.

"*Disculpa*," she murmurs. *Sorry*. I breathe in, smell her sweat mixed with shampoo, and am almost aroused. Women here even smell raw and salty and rough, stronger than either of us, even with their skinny black arms jangling with colored bracelets.

Our waiter slides in on the dirty sidewalk. His shirt is crisp, his face covered in tiny budding hairs.

"*Hoy*," I say before he can speak, and for a brief second his face twitches with uncertainty.

"Americans, no?"

His name is Diego, and anything that we want, he will provide. We order two large platters of fish, steamed and fried, to start. We stumble with broken Spanish mixed with the Portuguese we have learned, but we

are used to the laughter, and we feign amusement. We want everything anyway, the strange vegetables and fruits they layer on top of the fish; rice and beans; even the fresh-squeezed juice. Beer and wine. Right now the *Real* is just a third of one US dollar, and this comforts me. In a few days we will be leaving Brazil, anyway. We just need to make it to the airport.

Diego's hand lingers for a moment on my sweating back, and then he whisks away, clapping at another waiter, a trail of Portuguese exhaling from his mouth. I can still feel the warm imprint of his hand.

"We deserve this," says John, laughing as if he knows it's not true, "We fucking deserve this." He leans back, taps a cigarette from the pack that we are sharing, and lights it with matches, absently lifting his shirt and tracing the brown, brittle scars on his stomach.

I look down and the dried blood that has streaked my toenail is dry and cracking. My armpits are still itchy and hot, covered in red bumps, but my arms and back are better now, so I don't worry quite as much.

Two beers are set on the table and our glasses meet immediately.

"*Salud*," says John, nodding.

At this moment, I am suddenly and completely content. The lights of the city blink below us. In the mountains behind us, I can hear the drums in the distance and, coming up through the cracks in the street, the imagined crash of the ocean.

We pile the small fish bones on an empty plate at the middle of the table. They are frail spider webs, all that is left. Diego winks at us, pats our shoulders, and refills our water, most of his teeth shining, the front one black.

On our third beer, our stomachs bulging, we linger. Perhaps we should go. The streets of Salvador grow dark and wet at night, and often a cool fog drifts in from the mountains and wraps around the city.

“Should we head?” I ask John. He nods slowly and looks away, his cigarette burning down to the filter. I watch him flick it away, a small pinwheel sailing into the street. John has spoken only of home since he was mugged. He has set his sights on the future—Christmas in Rhode Island with his family. When we are drunk now, he always plots how he can get back together with his ex-girlfriend, still clinging to the picture in his wallet.

Diego is suddenly before us. He seems tired now, his dark hands pressing the small of his back. I am sure it has been a hard day for him. The restaurant has cleared out, only a few drinkers linger over their bottles of *Skol* poured into short glasses, plastic cups filled with salted peanuts.

“It was lucky that you spoke English,” I say to Diego, “We are so *cansado*.” I shake my head, but he knows what I mean. I catch myself mixing English, Spanish, and Portuguese. I also think I might speak English with a different cadence now, a new rhythm. I’m sure it will disappear.

Diego grins and twirls an empty tray on his finger. “Tired of no speak Portuguese, no?” he says. “Better now, for you.”

I nod and light a cigarette with the small wax candle he has placed on the table. I am careful not to exhale in Diego's face as he leans over us expectantly.

"Want to get a *Caiço* and then go?" asks John. He grins a bit. I motion to Diego, who slaps at a fly on his arm and nods. The gold chain around his neck gleams.

A *Caiparinha* is grain alcohol mixed with ground-up lime and fresh sugar. We sit, feet propped on the table, chain smoking and taking large, burning sips. We watch the fog come in, and a siren echoes from the streets below.

"Remember the first night?" I say. We drank *Caiços* all night in the streets of Maringa, and by the time we got home, Marcello and I had to carry John into the house we shared with our boss, Ms. Laura Consuelo. Choking with muffled laughter, we dropped him and banged his head on the wooden steps.

He nods and rubs the back of his head, sliding his sunglasses over his eyes as he does every night when he is getting drunk.

"What about Fer?"

I shake my head, but now I am thinking of Fernanda's lithe body and stark tan lines, how it was impossible to tutor her. We used to lie in the burnt grass under *el Catedral* and watch the boys play soccer. Broken pieces of plastic for goals, the rubber ball making a little exhaling sound each time it was kicked, the games all sharp movements and ragged shadows in the silver sky.

"Bad decision, *gringo*," I mumble into my drink, but I know I

would do it again in a second. John would have too, if he could've. I think of the way he used to look at Fernanda out at the bar, half-drunk, licking his lips as she left the table. He hadn't fared as well as I had with the ladies. He ended up falling for a tiny, brown-skin girl named Felize, and I remember his rage when he saw her kissing someone else at the bar. I found him sitting in the parking lot, smoking, surrounded by brown shards of glass from the two bottles of *Skol* he had been drinking.

John stares at Diego quizzically as he suddenly appears at the table, sits between us, and sighs.

"California," Diego says proudly, pointing at the blue bubble letters on John's T-shirt.

"Diego," John says gruffly, drawing it out. "Diego."

Diego is staring hungrily at the picture of John's girlfriend, John flicks ice cubes into the open street, and we quietly listen as they shatter and skitter away into the night.

"I dream of America," Diego is saying.

"Me too," John says, "Your country is a bit much for me, you know?"

I kick at John under the table, but I think I can tell that Diego didn't really understand what he meant.

"Not me," I say slowly, my eyes on the waitress as she clears one of the last tables. "I think I might stay here a while longer."

"You like the women, no?" fires Diego. I stare at his one brown

tooth. I think immediately of Maria-Luiza, the last girl I slept with in Maringa. She hadn't told me she had a child until I was awakened in the morning by his hoarse, bleating cries. His crib was in the corner of her bedroom, but I had been so drunk at night I hadn't even noticed. In the morning, she brought him into bed with us, and he stopped crying and fit himself in between us.

"Yeah, this one's a real ladies' man, Diego," says John bitterly. I ignore him, trying to remember Maria Luiza's son's name. Santiago, I think it was.

Suddenly, Diego bolts from his chair into the street. He slaps hands with a group of men, one of whom drags a black pit bull on a leash made of rope.

"We should get going soon," John says. I watch Diego jabbing and pointing, his other hand splashing his drink.

"One more," I nod in agreement.

But it is too early to go back. Our hostel is a brick building with few windows. We call it *The Oven*. I sleep in a sticky film of sweat, usually swollen with beer and coughing from cigarette smoke. Cockroaches inch slowly from under our bunk bed at night and attempt to scatter when the sunlight comes.

Diego has brought his friends to meet us. Tables are joined together, chairs dragged over to sag under the weight of these thick sweaty men, who lean back and chuckle quietly to themselves. Diego is

in charge of introducing us, and hands are shaken, shoulders are tapped. They are big on the thumbs-up here. Two of the men are short and wiry and they look unclean. The other is large with a goatee. He is out of breath after all of the introductions, and he leans back and puts the loop of his rope leash under one leg of the chair.

He points behind him as I stare. "Marcel," he says, jabbing the air. "Marcel."

Marcel the dog is lying down, his body coiled like a spring.

The men seem happy to meet real Americans and it is how it usually is. We are a novelty. They buy us more drinks and we must have them.

I have a small joint in my pocket, enough for two. I go to the bathroom and inhale sharply three times, my lungs straining. I will offer the rest to John before I finish it. He doesn't like to smoke when he is too drunk, but I need to.

Back at the table, I might be noticing new things. There is some exaggeration. Diego is different now, in front of his friends. John doesn't seem to be listening as he smokes and stares up at the sky. But he catches me looking at him.

"Where'd you go?" he asks.

"To take a piss," I say across the table, and I quickly motion as if smoking, checking to see if anyone else is looking.

He sits up and glares at me. "That's both of ours," he snaps and

puts out his hand.

I glance around us. Diego and his friends are discussing something. They don't seem to be paying attention, so I offer the roach quietly. "Keep it down, go to the bathroom," I whisper.

But John leans back and kicks his feet onto the table, knocking over his glass of wine. His lighter clicks again and again, and Diego and his friends have stopped talking and are watching intently.

"There isn't any left," I try to say, but my voice feels thick and hoarse. But as the men watch John, they are growing excited and their voices scrape the warm air. Finally, Diego reaches out and snatches John's lighter, tosses it away, stands, and holds up his own. The flame leaps immediately.

"You want, you want?" Diego pokes my chest. I shake my head, but now John exhales and passes it, smirking at me. "*Si, Si*," he says to Diego and then turns to me, glaring. "Pay the man, pay the man. Let's get some for the whole table."

Diego motions to his friends, who murmur to each other. I shake my head again and again. "*Obrigado*," I stumble, "but we can't. We have nothing."

The roach makes it halfway around the table and then the fattest man sucks, spits, and throws it on the ground. They look expectantly at me and then at John, and then are quiet for a moment.

I look at John pleadingly. He appears to enjoy the attention. Finally, he holds up his hand. "No, no. Sorry, Diego, no more. Not tonight, *amigo*."

The table is quiet. Diego says something quickly to his friends, none of whom laughs, and motions to John.

“Oh, speak English, Diego, English!” exclaims John, pointing to the words on his T-shirt. He slouches back in his chair and looks to me for support, but I say nothing. “What?” he asks Diego. “What? What?”

The strap of my bag rests on one of the smaller men’s sandaled feet. Suddenly he swears at me and kicks at it. I reach down. “*Disculpa,*” I say. “Sorry.”

He snorts at me and then smirks, chomping on cubes of ice.

I stare at John, hoping we can leave soon. I could leave by myself, and for a second I watch myself walk, then jog, away down the darkened streets. No one would bother to follow me, I don’t think. I stare at John’s flushed face, watch him drink from the bottle of grappa and then close his eyes, reach down, raise his shirt, and trace his hands over the scars again.

He was mugged three weeks ago at knifepoint in Fortaleza. He had left me at the beach to get us some bottled water. Five barefoot children stoned him from all sides in an alley before he threw them his camera, film, and wallet with credit cards and eighty *Real*. Then one darted in and stabbed him twice with a pen knife before they ran, small feet slapping the cement.

We were sunburned and high from smoking on the beach, but

somehow he had managed to shove his passport in his ass as they cornered him. I wanted to ask why he didn't shove anything else up there, but I never could. He came back shaking and crying to find me dozing under the palms, swinging in my hammock. The weird thing is that I heard him crying as I lay there, blank and half-asleep, and I knew, but I didn't want to open my eyes, and I didn't until he touched my bare foot with his wet hands, kneeling beside me in the red sand.

That night I half-dragged and half-carried John through the dirt streets to the hospital, where they gave him ten stitches and some painkillers. I let him sleep on the bottom bunk that was originally mine, because he couldn't climb up. I listened to his uneven breaths, downed a warm beer and one of his pills and dreamed of being on a plane headed home, suspended in a cold white sky.

Diego has his arm around John, and he points as two waiters rush towards us. They are carrying large trays. "*Obrigado,*" says the fattest man as they begin to set down dishes and glasses.

Steaming platters of fish, beef, beans, and rice dripping from the sides, bottles of beer and wine, one of *grappa*. John shakes his head and taps his stomach as if to say that he is sorry he is full. He is close to tipping over in his chair. I think I see two of the men trading looks and rapid gestures behind his back.

"What is the matter, *Gringo?*" Diego winks his brown tooth at me and piles food on his plate, motioning for the wine.

The men ignore us, pulling their chairs tightly to the table, their mouths wet with saliva, spitting rice as they laugh. At night, stray dogs roam the streets, their fur sucked to their ribs, their rough footsteps just a light brush of the ground.

It is cooler out now. The table is bright and I am dizzy. I watch John pour himself a shot of *grappa* and stand unsteadily, shaking my head. I head to the bathroom through the small bar that glows in candlelight. I stand in the darkness for a while, listening to the trickle of water and the nervous rattle of conversation somewhere that I can't understand, and then wipe my face with water from the sink, my hand smelling of fish.

When I come out, there is an old woman in a black dress at the other end of the bar hunched over, mopping the floor. It is so quiet in here, even with the door open to the street, that I can hear the water dripping from the faucet.

John is coming towards me now, his mouth shut tight, his sunglasses on. He pushes me against the bar, and his hair is loose and sticking to the sides of his face.

"What's with the hair?" I say, but he pushes my chest roughly, staggering into me.

"Yo, they're saying that we need to pay, and they just ordered way more. They called you the ugly one and me the dumb one, I think." John's face is red and his breath is thick and smells sweet from the *grappa*. He is swaying from side to side. I can hear the dogs barking in the distance.

"Fuck that, I'm not paying," I say. "We're not paying. We can't, anyway."

I stare at the table and catch myself as I trip back a little, then lean weakly against the bar.

“Let’s just go then,” I say callously, because we aren’t screwing around with this anymore. I’m so tired, the Oven actually sounds good to me.

“No, I told them we couldn’t pay,” he said, “and I think they said they would sick the dog on us or something.”

We watch the table. I feel my armpits itching, and I shiver slightly.

John’s hand rests on my shoulder as he leans against me. I notice the sweat on his face now, the thin deep lines scrawled under his eyes. My credit card is maxed out from the plane tickets. John lost his in Fortaleza. We have about fifty Real each on us and three hundred more stashed in the room, taped under my mattress along with some dry pot and cigarettes.

I reach into my pocket and my hand folds around the shiny paper money, brightly colored and fragile enough to tear in two.

The woman behind the bar sings to herself, drumming the fingers of one hand on the counter in a dull rhythm. She stands at the sink with her back to us. The beat she taps is almost in unison with the dripping of the sink, but not quite.

John puts an unlit, crumpled cigarette into his mouth. I can see that it is torn, and some of the tobacco is hanging out. He flicks his lighter once, then twice, but nothing happens.

“Diego has a knife, too,” he says softly. “He just showed me.” He stretches his hands to show how big the knife is, and his fingers are just

barely trembling.

We stand very close to each other, watching the men roar in the gray fog. They slap the small table so hard that it shakes, laughing at a joke we never heard.