

The Cane Cutter's Daughter

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This story begins, as so many do, in high school – Pearl River High School in suburban New York City. In September 1967, on the first day of my senior year, I walked into the building and saw a large banner hanging from the library window. “Bomdia Anamaria,” it said. “Welcome exchange student from Brazil.” An odd name, I thought, but until then my main knowledge of Brazil came from the Walt Disney cartoon, *The Three Caballeros*, which starred Donald Duck as a traveler in South America. The other main character, a Brazilian parrot named José Carioca, guided Donald to the northeast Brazilian city of Salvador da Bahia. “Have you been to Bahia, Donald?” the parrot asked. “If you go, my friend, you will never go home.” Somehow that line had stuck in my mind long after I had forgotten everything else about the movie.

I soon found out that our exchange student was staying with the Sive family, on whose eldest daughter, Rebecca, I had a bit of a crush. I also learned that our Brazilian visitor’s name was not Bomdia Anamaria but that her first name was Anamaria, and “*Bom dia*” was Portuguese for “hel-

lo.” She went by the nickname “Anuska.” As we would come to find out, almost everyone in Brazil goes by a nickname.

Over the year, I saw a lot of Anuska at the Sives’ house when Rebecca and I began dating. She was from Brasília, the capital city, where her father was a government official, editor of the Brazilian equivalent of the *Congressional Record*. She didn’t talk much about Brazil, and in retrospect I was remarkably incurious about the country myself. But she had brought a record by an up-and-coming rock singer named Roberto Carlos, the title of which can be translated as “Everything Else Can Go to Hell.” I loved both the tune and the sentiment. For quite a while, it was my image of what Brazilian music was like.

Rebecca and I didn’t keep in close touch with Anuska after we graduated and she returned home. We went off to college, got married, and settled in Chicago, where we became deeply involved in the blues music scene. But in the back of our minds, the idea of a trip to Brazil simmered quietly without ever reaching a full boil.

Then one day in 1979, for reasons I cannot now remember, we decided to go. Those were the days when, if you bought an international air ticket to a far destination, you could make any number of intermediate stops for no extra cost. We bought tickets to Rio de Janeiro and planned an ambitious trip, with stops in Manaus and Brasília on the way down and in Salvador da Bahia, Recife, and Belém on the way back. We picked Manaus because it was on the Amazon River, about 1,000 miles inland. Brasília was for visiting Anuska. Rio was for the annual Carnaval, a season of parades, music, and indulgence leading up to Lent – the same idea as Mardi Gras in New Orleans, *Fasching* in Munich, or *Carnevale* in Venice. Bahia was, of course, because José Carioca had made it seem irresistible. Belém was because it was at the mouth of the Amazon. I can't now recall the reason why we chose to stop in Recife, except that it was between Bahia and Belém.

In Manaus, we took a wooden launch up the Amazon and its tributary, the Rio Negro. I felt we had stepped into the pages of the *National Geographic*. At one point, the boat pulled into a narrow inlet and came to a small village, where a man and his daughter stood by the water, holding a

fat anaconda. For a few cents, you could take their picture. For a few more cents, you could hold the anaconda yourself. We declined the latter pleasure.

Our next stop was Brasília, the capital city, built from 1956 to 1960 and principally designed by the internationally famous architect Oscar Niemeyer. It was an early example of a large city planned entirely from scratch in the middle of nowhere, and both its audacity and its architecture were a source of great national pride. Anuska had grown up there. Now nearly 30, she still lived there with her family.

We had not seen her in 11 years, and I didn't immediately recognize her when she picked us up at the airport. She seemed far more sober, much less fun-loving than we had remembered. And with good reason. In 1964, the popularly elected socialist-leaning president, João Goulart, had been deposed by the military, which established a dictatorship and significantly curtailed civil rights. By late 1968, when Anuska returned home from Pearl River, student protests had increased, and the government responded with more repression, including torture and assassination of dissident leaders.

Many dissidents simply disappeared. On December 13, 1968, the military implemented *Ato Institucional Número Cinco* – Institutional Act No. 5 – which, among other repressive measures, suspended *habeas corpus*, implemented wide-ranging censorship, and gave the military president wide powers to persecute dissidents. Many young people concluded that Brazil was no longer a safe place in which to live and went into European exile.

We knew little of that. Nor did we know that Anuska herself had been an exile in France for several years. Several of her best friends had disappeared. Though the government was still under military control, in 1978 enforcement of the Institutional Act had been relaxed, exiles were permitted to return without penalty, and most civil rights were restored. Though we were curious to know whether Anuska's status as the daughter of a government official had made things easier or harder for her, it seemed an impolite question to ask of someone we had not seen since high school.

Anuska was on her way to becoming a professor of sociology at the University of Brasília. Her time away had delayed her career, but it didn't prevent her from achieving her goal. Though there would not be a direct

presidential election for another ten years, there was enough political freedom to allow her to move ahead with her plan.

Before we left Brasília, Anuska asked us where we were planning to stay when we got to Rio. We had made no hotel reservation. Big mistake, Anuska told us. During Carnival, all the hotels would have been booked long ago. She told us she had cousins in Rio and offered to put us in touch with them.

Her cousins, the Carvalhos, generously offered to put us up in their large apartment near the Copacabana beach. They all spoke excellent English, but like many upper-middle-class Brazilians, they seemed to regard Carnival as an intrusion to be avoided. Unlike many others, they didn't leave town during Carnival, but they planned mostly to stay inside and avoid the crowds in the streets.

Earlier, I had told my friend Yasufumi Higurashi, who published a Japanese magazine called *The Blues*, that we were going to Brazil. "Will you hear some samba?" he asked me. Until that moment, I had given the matter no thought. To me, "samba" was a type of dance you could learn at Ar-

thur Murray's. Our planning for the trip to Brazil had not included music. But I knew Higurashi to be a perceptive and open-minded listener with excellent taste.

"I hope so," I told him, not knowing what that would mean but trying not to sound dumb.

Though Anuska's cousin Susana didn't know much about the samba, her friend Angela Loureiro was a modern dancer acquainted with many musicians. Angela explained that the Carnaval consisted largely of parades by groups called "samba schools," which were groups of up to 5,000 members who wore a variety of costumes, pulled huge decorated floats, played many types of drums, and sang a "*samba de enredo*," or "theme samba" composed especially for that year's parade. Though the samba schools had originated as neighborhood clubs in the 1920s, they were now big business and were usually under the direction of a *carnavalesco*, an outside professional who selected the theme, approved the music, designed the costumes, created the floats, and often recruited pop musicians or film stars to take part in the procession. The stakes were high because the parade

was actually a competition, and the samba school judged that year's champion could earn a lot of money from endorsements and performances.

As an introduction to the samba, Angela took Rebecca, me, and Susana one night to the headquarters of Mangueira, which she said was one of the oldest samba schools and remained the most traditional. The headquarters was a large patio on a hill, covered with a roof but open to the air. A band was playing, and several hundred dancers were packed tightly on the floor. The band consisted mostly of drums in various sizes, ranging from tambourines to a bass, accompanied by a small amplified string instrument that looked and sounded like a cross between a mandolin and a ukulele, known as a *cavaquinho*. Several singers took turns at the microphone.

The dancing was nothing like Arthur Murray's.

After several hours, we went outside for some fresh air and because I smelled the smoky aroma of barbeque. Several charcoal grills had been set up in the yard in front of the patio, with skewers of meat roasting on each. They hissed and sizzled as the meat dripped on the coals, sending plumes of steam and smoke into the night. I am a sucker for street food. Pulling

out a few *cruzeiros*, I asked one of the vendors how much a portion cost. Just as I was about to complete the transaction, Susana forcefully pulled my outstretched arm away. “That’s cat meat from the street!” she screamed. “You don’t want it.” I guess I didn’t. But I kept thinking I might have been so happy had she not told me what it was. For the people at Mangueira, eating cat meat was a delicacy or an act of desperation; I couldn’t tell which.

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Though we had stopped briefly in Recife on that first trip to Brazil in 1979, it had not made much of an impression, in large part because we had done no research and had no idea what the city had to offer. But in 1989, we decided to take a winter vacation in Brazil and studied the situation more carefully. Perhaps unfairly, we had bought the argument that the Carnaval in Rio had become overly commercialized. According to our reading, the northeast of Brazil, particularly the major cities of Salvador da Bahia and Recife, was a better place to find music and art that was free of show-biz influences.

We started our trip in Salvador, where we put up at a lovely hotel that had previously been a convent. The state of Bahia was the center of the sugar cane industry and the largest importer of African slaves. So today, it has the largest proportion of Afro-Brazilians and the greatest influence of African cultures. Among those influences is religion. Though most of Brazil is nominally Catholic, African religious beliefs and practices survive to this day. Among them is Candomblé, an amalgam of African religions that originated in Salvador but has spread across the country. According to French sociologist Roger Bastide, Candomblé is “a genuine bit of Africa transplanted” to Brazil. Though many details differ, Candomblé has a familial relationship to Haitian *Voudoun* and Cuban *Santería*. Music and dance are essential components of a Candomblé ceremony, and the Bahians who migrated to Rio incorporated those elements into what became the samba. Candomblé ceremonies are often staged for tourists in Salvador, but as with many such staged versions of fundamentally non-public events, you are always left wondering what has been omitted or cleaned up for tourist consumption.

One day while in Salvador, we visited an old Catholic church noted for its wood carvings. As we wandered about, a young man tapped me on the arm and asked, in Portuguese, whether we were interested in attending a “genuine” Candomblé ceremony. Of course we were, but the idea of going somewhere at night with a stranger in a strange city seemed somewhat unwise. Still, the opportunity, if real, was too good to miss. The young man told us what he would charge and said he would pick us up at our hotel that evening.

At the appointed time, our phone rang, and the concierge said a stranger was asking for us in the lobby. We came downstairs, and the concierge asked us who the young man was. We explained that we had hired him to take us to a Candomblé house. The concierge then took the young man aside and grilled him for ten minutes, accompanied by much arm waving and head shaking. Finally, the concierge told us he thought it was OK for us to go out with this young man.

He took us to a car in which two other young men were sitting. Their role was not clear to us. We drove for about half an hour through tunnels

and over hills. In the darkness, it was hard to see where we were going. Finally the car stopped. Our guide got out but waved to us that we should stay in the car. He began talking to a group of people, and soon it became obvious that he was lost. He came back to the car with a boy of about ten, who got in and began giving directions.

Once more we were off into the Bahian night, as the boy pointed right and left every time we needed to take a turn. After another fifteen minutes, the car stopped again. Our guide opened the door and motioned for us to get out. He closed the door behind us, and the car drove off.

He then led us onto a wooden-plank walkway above a mud path, past a jumble of tiny houses, many of which had no glass in their windows. Finally, we came to a more substantial house. He pulled the door open and gestured for us to go in.

We entered a large room surrounded by chairs but otherwise empty. After a while, some people emerged from a side door, put some dishes of food on the floor, and then disappeared.

As we sat waiting, our guide and I attempted some conversation. He told me he was studying tourism and hoped to become a travel agent. He didn't know much about Candomblé, but he was a pleasant and obviously enterprising young man trying to come up in the world.

After quite a while, a group came out again from the side door, including some drummers and a group of women dressed in long, wide skirts. Slowly the women began singing to the drum beats in a style that alternated harmony and dissonance. As they danced, they occasionally lifted the plates of food from the floor and then put them back down.

After our initial doubts and fears, it was clear our guide had actually brought us to the real thing. The music was powerfully rhythmic, with repetitively hypnotic choral singing. Under the right circumstances, I could see how it might induce a trance-like state.

As we were congratulating ourselves on our good luck, the main door suddenly flew open. A group of about twenty people speaking German was ushered in by a guide holding a pennant. I turned to our guide, who

simply shrugged his shoulders. The ceremony continued; the participants paid as little attention to the newcomers as they had to us.

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A bit chastened, we moved on to Recife, a port on the Atlantic at the confluence of three rivers, which divide the city into several island neighborhoods. With a population of 1.5 million, it is the capital of the state of Pernambuco and Brazil's fifth-largest city. A long white-sand beach on the ocean, called Boa Viagem, is reached by bridge over a tidal bay.

Boa Viagem presents a wall of high-rise apartment buildings and hotels fronting on the ocean. Some have barbed-wire fences and guard stations. The wide sand beach, however, was a vibrant marketplace. A constant flow of men, women, and children walked by, offering goods for sale, mostly food. Men with carts of pineapples would pull out a machete and, with expert strokes, remove the skin and core, carving the perfectly ripe fruit into bite-sized chunks. Others carried stainless steel pails of boiled shrimp or raw oysters, which they shucked to order and dressed with a squeeze of lime. Tempting as that might have been, the idea of eating raw

oysters from a pail exposed to the 90-degree sun was remarkably unappetizing. Other vendors pushed carts that held charcoal grills, on which they would cook fish to order. Vendors of bottled water, fruit juices, and beer walked by every minute or so.

Rarely would thirty seconds go by without someone approaching us with something for sale. In a way, of course, the constant stream of commerce interrupted our efforts at relaxing in the sun, but we didn't find it oppressive. In the United States, most cities would prohibit vendors from approaching vacationers in that way, because people would consider it an annoyance, because the food was not subject to inspection, and because the cash transactions were not readily subject to collection of sales taxes. Nor would there be many people willing to walk up and down a beach in sweltering weather carrying a heavy bucket of oysters with the hope of selling one or two here and there for a few cents each.

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We were interested in hearing *forró*, an accordion-based music that had originated in the northeast and resembles Louisiana zydeco in its driving

rhythms. We had bought several *forró* records, but so far we had found no live performances. Calvin Trillin once wrote that he was certain the best dishes in a Chinese restaurant were the ones whose names weren't translated into English. Every time he pointed to one and asked the waiter what it was, he got the same answer: "You no like." Which of course only strengthened his belief that the restaurateur was keeping the gourmet offerings from him.

It's the same way with live music in Brazil. The best places to hear it are never listed in the newspaper or the guidebooks. And whenever we asked our concierge about a place someone had mentioned or we had seen on a home-made sign, we got the same answer: "You don't want to go there." Which of course only strengthened our belief that it was exactly the place we wanted to go. We found one performance advertised on a poster, and when we showed it to the concierge to ask where the place was, he predictably told us not to go there. But we did anyway, and it was the only live *forró* we were able to hear.

On our next trip to Recife, in 1999, we stayed at a new high-rise hotel on the beach called the Atlante Plaza. On our previous trip, we had hired a driver named Rafael to take us into the countryside, and we still had his card. I gave it to the concierge and asked if he could arrange for Rafael to meet us there for a day trip. He told us Rafael was not to be found, but he said he knew a driver available for a day rate who would take us wherever we wanted to go.

The next day, the concierge introduced us to Paulo – Paulo Ildefonso de Sousa in full. When we got into his car, we realized immediately we were in luck. He pulled out a CD from a large stack in a neat bag. “Luiz Gonzaga,” he said – the king of *forró*, whose stature in his field was equal to Elvis’ or B.B. King’s or Hank Williams’ in theirs. He was born in the hinterlands of west of Recife in 1912 and learned to play the accordion from his father. He landed in Rio after finishing his army service and started his musical career playing popular music of the day, with limited success. But then he got the idea to begin performing the regional music of his homeland, which caught on with the northeasterners who had migrated to Rio.

By 1943, he began performing in the costume of a northeastern cowboy, with an elaborate leather hat that looked like a cross between an Indian headdress and the transverse *chapeau* Napoleon made famous.

In 1947, he recorded his best-known song, “*Asa Branca*,” or “White Wing,” a type of dove native to Pernambuco’s arid west, known as the *sertão*, which was in an almost permanent state of drought. The song, a hauntingly beautiful melody that seems to hover somewhere in a space between major and minor keys, captures the suffering the drought had caused:

When I saw the burning land
Like the bonfires of St. John’s Day
I asked god in heaven
“Why this great oppression?”

What an oven, what a furnace
There’s nothing left on the farm
For lack of water I lost my cattle
My chestnut horse died of thirst

Today I’m many miles away,
Sad and lonely,
I hope the rain will fall again
So I can return to my *sertão*

Gonzaga went on to make hundreds of records, many of them based on themes of life in the northeastern backlands, most of them set to melodies of haunting beauty. Though his popularity waned somewhat in the 1960s, during his last years he became a hero to younger singers who understood he was the real deal. In 2013, the Brazilian edition of *Rolling Stone* named “*Asa Branca*” the fourth-greatest Brazilian song ever recorded. “The Girl from Ipanema,” in case you’re interested, came in at number 27.

So when Paulo slipped the Gonzaga CD into his car stereo, we knew we had gotten off on the right foot. We had asked him to drive us to the city of Caruaru, about 90 miles west of Recife, which Gonzaga had made famous in a 1957 recording called “*A Feira de Caruaru*,” or “The Market of Caruaru.” The *feira* is a large open-air market, and Gonzaga’s song is a catalogue of everything for sale there – all the produce of the countryside. He sang of baked potatoes, raw eggs, bananas, oranges, sweet potatoes, mangoes, onions, tomatoes, cactus, sugar cane, cashews, chickens, ducks, turkeys, goats, mutton, pork, tobacco, baskets, rope, nets, wood, and ceramics.

As we drove the highway west of Recife, the land slowly rose to a high plateau. On either side, we were surrounded by lush green fields of sugarcane. At one time, sugar was the area's main source of wealth. Today, much of the crop goes into fuel-grade ethanol, of which Brazil is the world's second largest producer. Some of the crop also goes into ethanol for human consumption, usually in the form of *cachaça*, which resembles rum but often has a slightly tart flavor.

Not long after we left the city limits, we passed a distillery with a sign bearing a red crawfish as its symbol. We recognized the trademark for Pitú, one of the best-known national brands. I asked Paulo whether he liked Pitú or preferred some other kind of *cachaça*.

"I don't drink alcohol," he said. Though I would have thought it impolite to ask why, I must have raised my eyebrows involuntarily to ask the question anyhow. Paulo took his left hand off the wheel and showed me the back of his wrist. A large white scar cut across his tanned skin.

“Before I came to Recife, I cut cane in these fields,” he said. One day I had an accident and almost cut off my hand with my machete.” He said no more by way of an explanation.

On our way to Caruaru, we stopped in Bezerros, a town of about 60,000 people that is the home of famed woodcut artist José Francisco Borges, known professionally as “J. Borges.” Born in 1935, Borges is both a graphic artist and a poet. Best known for his woodcuts depicting scenes of life in the northeast, its characters, its dances, and its festivals, he also depicts devils, fantastic monsters, and other dreamy or nightmarish scenes. As a poet, he writes and publishes small pamphlets of verse on topical or humorous themes, such as “The Horse and the Macaques,” “The Example of the Woman Who Sold Her Hair and Went to Hell,” and “The War in the East, or Hell in Iraq,” in which the poet contrasts the poverty of the oppressed people with the opulent life of the oppressors:

In the capital of Iraq
They don't have water or food
They don't have light and they don't have peace
The people are suffering
Yet the same Bagdad
Is where Saddam lives
In luxurious rooms

These little pamphlets, printed on a hand press and typically about five by seven inches in size, are known as *literatura de cordel*, or “literature on a string,” because they used to be sold hanging from strings while the author often recited or sang them to attract attention. Though Borges has become internationally famous as a woodcut artist – his work is in the Metropolitan Museum of Art – he still writes and prints these little books, as well as those written by others.

We asked Paulo to pull over where a sign said “*Atelier J. Borges*” on the main road through town. If the place looked a bit like a former gas station, that's because it was a former gas station. Inside, hundreds of prints hung from clothesline strung across the old mechanics' bay, drying. An old printing press stood in a corner, with bundles of the little pamphlets piled alongside. The prints were ridiculously cheap – between \$5 and \$10 each

for prints called “The Woman Who Put the Devil in a Bottle,” “The Liar,” “The Carnaval in Bezerros,” and – most heartbreakingly of all – a picture of a family walking alongside a donkey piled with all their possessions, like Tom Joad’s Model T, titled “Because of Hunger and Thirst I Left My Northeast.”

Borges’ studio was a family affair. His brother, Amaro Francisco, also made prints in the same style, as did Borges’ adopted son, known as J. Miguel. Borges himself welcomed us to look around was ready to tote up our purchases. I pointed out to him that, although some of the prints were signed in pencil, others were not. No problem, he said, pulling out a pencil and signing his name to the ones he had made, and Amaro’s and Miguel’s names to theirs.

We spent the rest of the day in Caruaru and in Alto do Moura, a nearby town where everyone, it seemed, made little ceramic figures. Alto do Moura was the home of two towering personalities in the world of Brazilian ceramics, Vitalino Pereira dos Santos, who lived from 1909 to 1963 and was known as “Mestre Vitalino,” and José Antônio da Silva, who lived

from 1921 to 1973 and was known as “Zé Caboclo.” They pioneered a style of small red-clay figures representing the people and animals of the northeast, sometimes left as natural terra cotta and sometimes painted with colored enamels. Many of the figures were stock or iconic characters of the northeast, including people in Carnaval costumes, boys climbing a tree to escape a panther, Brahma bulls, families with all their belongings trekking to the city after losing their crops to the persistent drought, and the bandits Lampião and Maria Bonita, who in the 1920s and 30s rampaged with their gang through western Pernambuco like Bonnie and Clyde.

Lampião and Maria Bonita were notable *cangaçeiros*, violent thieves who robbed wealthy landowners and battled the police from about 1870 to 1940. Like Jesse James, they were eventually betrayed by a former gang member and were killed by the police in a gun battle. Their heads were cut off and put on public display.

While Lampião and Maria Bonita did not exactly rob the rich and give to the poor, they became folk heroes like many American gangsters for their bravery and ingenuity in opposing absentee landowners and governmental

authority, much of which was corrupt in any event. Lampião wore thick glasses, which became his trademark. Vitalino's and Zé Caboclo's figures of him are readily identified in that way, even if they otherwise did not resemble him at all.

Their work had originally been sold in open-air markets for pennies. Indeed, in Luiz Gonzaga's musical catalogue of the goods available at the *feira* in Caruaru, he mentions the figures of Vitalino which, he sings, "are even known in the south" – *i.e.*, in Rio and São Paulo. By the time of our visit, his work and Zé Caboclo's was mostly in museums. But in Alto Do Moura today, there are dozens of people making ceramics in their style.

Their ability differed widely. Some figures were quite crude, with faces barely pinched out of the clay. Others were more finely modeled, but given the figures' small size, it would have been difficult to make them too realistic.

As we made our way down the single main street of Alto do Moura, we were greeted by house after house displaying figures the owner had made. Several houses showed the work of Vitalino's descendants, though it

seemed to us that none of their work was especially remarkable. Farther down, we came to the house where Vitalino himself had lived, a small stone structure with a few closet-sized rooms and no obvious plumbing or electricity. In this bare home he had made the little figures now in the collections of the Louvre and other world museums.

The leading artist in Alto do Moura today is Zé Caboclo's daughter, Marliete Rodrigues da Silva, who was born in 1957. Her work is exquisitely modeled. The faces look remarkably realistic even though they are half the size of a cherry pit. Her subjects tend to be more naturalistic as well. Rather than replicate stock Carnaval figures or Lampião and Maria Bonita, she portrays real people in everyday activities: a woman feeding chickens, an elderly couple resting under the eaves of their house, a young couple watering some potted plants.

We found Marliete at home and were able to purchase a few of her exquisite figurines. Her prices were easily ten times higher than anyone else's. She knew the value of her work and was not afraid to charge accordingly. Her sister Socorro and her uncle Manuel Eudócio both made

work nearly as good. It seemed clear that Zé Caboclo's family had done much better than Mestre Vitalino's in the talent department.

As we headed back to Recife, Paulo popped in another CD. I took the opportunity to ask him if he knew of any places where we could hear *forró* performed live. He said he would let us know.

When Paulo dropped us back at the Atlante Plaza, he said he would call later about the live music. We waived goodbye, not knowing whether we would actually hear from him again.

But a little while later, the phone rang. When two people don't speak the same language, communication over the phone is much harder than it is in person, where gestures and props can sometimes aid mutual understanding. But I hung up the phone feeling quite sure Paulo had said he would pick us up at nine and take us somewhere.

At the appointed hour, Paulo pulled up in his cab. Sitting in the front seat with him was a woman he introduced as his wife, Edlamar. She smiled warmly and shook hands. "Edlamar also likes *forró*," Paulo said.

We drove in the dark through parts of Recife we had never seen before. Eventually, we came to a building from which we could hear live music. We entered through a small passageway, which led to an outdoor patio ringed with trees, looking something like a down-home version of the Moulin Rouge in a painting by Renoir. A small band, with an accordion, a bass drum, and an electric bass, was performing at one end, dressed in fancy leather cowboy hats like the ones Lampião and Luiz Gonzaga wore. Dozens of dancers were on the dirt floor.

Conversation over the din was difficult at best. Paulo stood up and held out his arm to Edlamar, moving toward the dance floor. He waved to us, suggesting we do the same, but the dance steps seemed rather intricate and beyond our powers of coordination. Paulo and Edlamar, however, were excellent dancers. The step required shifting from foot to foot in a pattern I couldn't count out, while the dancers intertwined their legs in a way that resembled zydeco dancing we had seen in Louisiana.

Given the night heat, I went through several beers, but Paulo and Edlamar stuck to carbonated mineral water. Every time the band played a song by Luiz Gonzaga, which was often, Paulo pointed it out.

The next night was the first Carnaval parade down town. Paulo insisted he would pick us up and take us there. When he arrived the next evening, Edlamar was again with him.

The Carnaval in Recife is quite different from the one in Rio. The bleacher seats are cheap. The parades include a wide variety of groups. Though there are a few samba schools, most of the Recife Carnaval parade consists of groups localized in the northeast, such as the *caboclinhos*, dancers dressed like Indians who created a rhythmical pattern with their bows and arrows; *maracatus de baque solto*, consisting of men dressed in sequined capes with backpacks from which several cowbells were hanging; the *maracatus nação*, consisting of men and women dressed like seventeenth-century nobles, including a king and queen, accompanied by drums, cowbells, and other rhythm instruments; the *frevos*, brass bands accompanying dancers carrying umbrellas who spin on one foot, giving an overall impres-

sion most like a New Orleans “second line”; and, most curious of all, the *urças*, small groups including someone in a bear suit followed by a man with a whip and a hunter with a toy rifle.

Paulo, Edlamar, Rebecca, and I settled into the bleachers to watch the parade. As at the beach, a constant stream of people passed though the bleachers, selling beer, mineral water, cashews, peanuts, and other enticements.

Most vendors were adults. After a while, we noticed a girl who could not have been more than ten with a large styrofoam cooler, which she carried from a strap around her shoulder. It had no cover. “*Agua! . . . agua!*” she yelled. Inside the cooler I could see little plastic baggies of cloudy water she had probably filled at a fountain or tap somewhere and now was trying to sell for a few cents each. It wasn’t clear to me how you would drink water from a baggie, and I didn’t see anyone buying from her. In my whole life, it was one of the saddest things I have ever seen.

On our last night in Recife, Paulo invited us home for dinner. I had just gotten over a bout of intestinal trouble, and I was not sure what I could eat.

But we couldn't turn Paulo's invitation down, both because he had been so helpful to us and because we really wanted to see where he and Edlamar lived.

Paulo picked us up and drove west to an area of high-rise apartments that outwardly resembled a housing project like Cabrini-Green or Robert Taylor Homes in Chicago. The exteriors were unpainted concrete. There was little grass around the buildings. When Paulo stopped the car we had to pick our way through construction rubble and a few mud puddles.

Paulo led us to his building. There was no glass in any of the windows, though given the climate that was perhaps not a big deal. Nor was there an elevator, so we walked up three floors to the apartment. When we came in, Edlamar was in the galley kitchen with a young woman who was apparently a maid – however poor Paulo and Edlamar were, there was someone even poorer whom they could afford to pay for help.

Two young girls, about eight and five, came into the room. Paulo introduced them as their daughters Edila Paula and Eloá. It was apparently their bed time, so after we said hello Paulo took them to their room.

Dinner made me a bit apprehensive. Because Paulo and Edlamar were T-totalers, they offered us fruit juice which, in the Brazilian fashion, was diluted with tap water. When Edlamar brought the plates to the table, they still had water drops from the sink. I saw myself lapsing back to intestinal distress. But the meal was very pleasant, consisting mostly of rice and vegetables accompanied by a *mouqueca*, the Bahian seafood stew flavored with coconut milk and palm oil.

I asked Paulo whether he picked up fares along the streets or only at the hotel. He said there were two types of cabs in Recife, the street cabs and the hotel cabs. The hotel cabs were required to have air conditioning and be maintained to a high standard. The street cabs were not permitted to wait at hotels. He had started as a street cabbie but was very proud to have become a hotel cabbie. I asked him to give us his address, which he wrote out in a slow but steady hand.

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One of the popular *frevo* songs at Carnaval is called “*Voltei Recife*,” or “I’m Returning, Recife.” Two years later, we decided to take that hint and

return ourselves. We wrote to Paulo to say we were coming and hoped to see him and his family. After we settled in at the Atlante Plaza, we asked the concierge if he knew Paulo and could contact him for us. Later he called up to our room and said Paulo was waiting downstairs. We had a happy reunion and spent much of the next week driving around Recife and the countryside with him.

On one of our trips, he told us he had to stop at his apartment first to get something. But he drove us to a new location on a tree-lined street. Clearly his situation had improved. We asked about his children, and he told us they were in Catholic school, which was expensive. I asked why he and Edlamar did not send the girls to public school. He looked at me quizzically and said there were no public elementary schools.

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After that trip, it was eight years before we went back. Though we knew we would return to Recife eventually, something else always came up to scuttle the plan. But finally in 2010 we decided it was time for another Carnaval.

Unfortunately, we had waited long enough that the Atlante Plaza was already booked up. The only hotel near the beach with any available rooms was, of all things, a Best Western.

After we settled in, we asked the concierge to call over to the Atlante Plaza and ask if Paulo was still there – a linguistic transaction I did not feel up to negotiating myself over the phone. The concierge made the call and was told that Paulo no longer worked at the hotel's cab stand.

Later that evening, we returned to our room from dinner and found a pink message slip under the door. It was from Paulo, with his phone number, asking “Mr. *Esteve*” to call.

I dialed the number on the pink paper. Paulo answered, and we greeted each other enthusiastically. He said he would come by our hotel the next day around 10 a.m.

At the appointed time, I walked Paulo, Edlamar, and Eloá, who was now 17. Paulo and Edlamar had hardly changed at all.

It was an emotional reunion. We sat in the lobby for quite a while, talking about what had happened since we had last been together. The big

news was that Paulo was no longer driving a cab. He had obtained an optician's license and owned an optical shop in a southern suburb called Cabo de Santo Agostinho. Edlamar had opened a clothing and gift shop next door. They were, in fact, on their way down there, but Paulo said he would come by the next day to drive us wherever we wanted to go. It seemed like quite an imposition, as he made clear he would be driving us as a friend and not for hire. But he insisted, and we made a plan to drive to Carpina, a town about 35 miles from Recife known for puppets and dolls.

Our trip to Carpina started as a bit of a wild-goose chase. We had already purchased several ventriloquists' dummies by an artist named Antônio Elias da Silva, known as Mestre Saúba. These dolls had heads made of roughly carved wood over which Saúba had put a layer of plaster to smooth them out. He then painted them in bright colors, gluing on cotton batting for the hair, moustaches, and eyebrows. To me, however, the most interesting part was the clothing, which Saúba sewed out of patterned cloth with many accurate details, such as notched lapels, neckties, and trousers.

A shop owner in Recife had told us Mestre Saúba lived somewhere in Carpina, so we photographed the dolls and thought we would show them around town in the hope someone would recognize them and tell us where Saúba lived.

When we got to Carpina, Paulo pulled into a gas station and showed the attendant our photo. The attendant gave him some directions, and soon we found ourselves at the house of Saúba's son, who made dolls in a similar style. We asked where Mestre Saúba lived. He started to give Paulo directions, but they seemed rather hard to follow. Eventually a young boy was recruited to jump in the car and show us the way, reminding us of our trip to the Candomblé in Salvador.

The route to Saúba's house led out of town over several dirt roads. Finally, we came to a small building on a hill that seemed to have only one room. Saúba stood outside, wearing nothing but shorts, carving some heads. He was about 60, a small wiry man whose own head resembled the ones he carved. He regretted he had no work for sale. Everything, he said, had been shipped to a gallery in São Paulo!

A few days later, Paulo called to say he wanted to show us his optical shop. He said Edlamar would pick us up at the hotel and take us there. They were now a two-car family.

When we arrived at Paulo's shop, *Otica Boa Vista*, or "Good View Optician," he was in the back working on a pair of glasses. He was dressed in a white lab coat and was surrounded by a variety of small screwdrivers and other tools. On the wall was a framed certificate stating he had passed the optician's exam and was licensed to practice the profession.

The shop itself looked like any optician's establishment might. Racks of frames lined the walls. Sunglasses perched on revolving stands. There were mirrors everywhere for the customers to see how they looked.

Paulo told me my glasses were dirty and offered to clean them for me. With his little screwdriver, he disassembled the frames and took out the lenses. He dipped them in some sort of solution, wiped them carefully with a soft cloth, and screwed them back into the frames. Handing them to me, he pointed out where the metal frames had become discolored. "It's because you sweat so much here," he said.

Edlamar then took us next door to her shop. It was a bit smaller than Paulo's, but it was packed with goods, such as communion dresses and a variety of religious gifts and books. I mentioned she had previously worked in an optician's shop herself. She said she had always wanted to have a dress shop and was glad to leave the eyeglasses to Paulo.

On our final Saturday, we went once again to Bezerros and Caruaru. Edlamar and Eloá came along. Paulo slipped a CD by Luiz Gonzaga into the car stereo, and we were off.

When we got to Bezerros and pulled over to the gas station where Borges' *atelier* had been, there was a new sign advertizing the work of Manasses Borges who, it turned out, was Borges' adopted son. We thought Borges might have died, but when we went inside and asked for him, Manasses told us he had moved to another studio on the edge of town. After we bought a few of Manasses' prints – which were very much in Borges' style – we drove to the place he had described. It was a large property with a yard surrounded by a white wooden fence painted with images from Bor-

ges' prints. The *atelier* itself was a fairly modern building much larger than the gas station.

The place was full of Borges' prints, his pamphlets, and even several books about him and his work. He also sold prints by his other family members, including his brother, his two nephews, and his two adopted sons. The large and prosperous establishment was quite an achievement from selling woodcut prints. Though his prices had increased somewhat, we still came away with an armful.

In Alto do Moura, we found an open-air restaurant where a *forró* band was playing. We sat down at a table, and Paulo began to chat up the waiter. We ordered lunch, which was some rather tough beef. When the band finished its set, Paulo called the leader over to our table and explained we were from Chicago and loved *forró*. Paulo playfully pulled the singer's leather cowboy hat from his head and put it on. Then he put it on me. The next thing I knew, Paulo was telling me the hat was mine to keep as a souvenir. I tried to pay the singer something for it, but Paulo kept pushing my money away and insisting it was a gift.

When we got back to Recife, Paulo said he wanted us to see their apartment. He drove up to a high-rise three blocks from the beach at Boa Viagem and entered a ramp for indoor parking. The apartment itself was large, nicely furnished with a large dining room table, and with glass in the windows.

On the table was Eloá's laptop. She opened it up and called us over to look at some pictures. In one of them, her sister Edila Paula was bundled up in winter clothes standing in the snow. In another, she was lying down making a snow angel. "I've never seen snow," Eloá said.

We asked where the pictures had been taken. Paulo told us Edila Paula was in Vancouver in a college English program. He came around beside me as we looked at the laptop screen. He held out his left hand and pointed to the scar on the back of his wrist.

"A filha do cortador do cana estuda inglês na Canada," he said. "The cane cutter's daughter is studying English in Canada."

The room was silent for a moment as we took his statement in. He and his family had truly come very far. He had come to Recife from the coun-

try with a plan, and he had executed it, in partnership with Edlamar but with no outside help. It seemed astonishing, but then I recalled that my grandfather, an uneducated tailor, had walked as a teenager from Russia to the port of Amsterdam and sailed to America. Thirty years later, his daughter – my mother – was the first in his family to go to college. These things happen. Or they used to happen. One gets the feeling they happen less often now.

That was our most recent visit to Recife. Edila Paula has graduated from college and works for the Brazilian affiliate of Federal Express. Eloá is about to graduate from college and is an intern with Kimberly-Clark. Rebecca keeps up with her on Facebook. We will go back.