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Brazil: Ten Ways

1. Pizza

When I miss the states the most, Joe takes me out for pizza. We are twenty-three, newly married, and teaching at an American School in Brasilia. There is a restaurant on our *bloco* that makes the best marguerite pizza in the world with fat chunks of buffalo mozzarella, sliced roma tomatoes, arugula and fresh basil. The basil grows in two yellow pots at the entrance to the restaurant; it perfumes the air with a spicy scent. They're generous with the cracked pepper here and they make their own marinara. It reminds me of my mother-in-law's sauce. The owner's son, who can't be more than eleven, is the only waiter. He likes to try out his English on us. *Hello. More? Tank You.* He brings us our pizza with packets of catsup and mayonnaise. We don't know why. Joe and I sit in plastic chairs on the street corner and watch people walking home from work. The *favela* maids are my favorite. They stand at the bus stop, stout as grandmothers though they aren't much older than I am, with their homemade skirts and tight shirts. Ripples of fat spill and squeeze from their cotton clothes. The *favela* maids ride the bus—two hours each way—to clean the upper middle class apartments and return to their slums at night. And yet, they laugh louder than anyone at the bus stop and they lean into each other like school girls. They joke about the steamy sex scenes on the *telenovellas* they watched while ironing shirts. They open their bags and admire the hand-me-downs and scraps from their employers. They are the queens of *fafoca*. Gossip girls, I call them. "Do you think the tomatoes are fully cooked?" I ask Joe. He just shrugs his shoulders. Even when we've been living in Brasilia for two years, I still ask. "*Agua con gas. Sem gelo, favor.*" Sparkling water. No ice, ever. They make it with local water. Joe plays with the catsup and mayonnaise packets. He pretends the packets are footballs, American footballs, and tosses one across the table at me. I go long but it slips through my fingers. On our first cab ride from the airport to our apartment the driver told us to survive in Brazil we must learn not to ask why. And so we don't and we eat.

2. Screeching Tires

I fall asleep to their sound. I incorporate them into my dreams. I wake up in my double platform bed, under scratchy cotton sheets, and hear the tires again. From my bed, through the many metal bars on the balcony, past my swinging hammock, I see cars. Cars. Cars. Brazilians walk slow, saunter really, while flirting. Always flirting. But in their cars, Brazilians speed like racecar drivers. One night riding home in a taxi from a party we see a car flipped over, still smoking from the crash, dead people hanging from their seatbelts, waiting for the police. We drive past seconds after the accident. Our driver pushes the gas pedal to the floor to escape. "But they were wearing their seatbelts," I stammer. My rules mean nothing here. The following week, one of the Brazilian high school students we teach is killed driving 80 mph in a brand new SUV at 4 a.m. on a residential street on a school night.

3. *Gente Boa* (Good People)

The first time our elevator broke, it stuck between the second floor and the third with the door open. It stayed that way for weeks. Feet walked by in front of our faces, then crouched down to check on us. "Ta bom, americanos?" our neighbor Luis asked. "Tudo bem" we replied. We could see the door to our apartment, so Joe hoisted me up and we climbed through the hole. Luis offered me his hand and carried my groceries into the kitchen. The guards called up to us: "Ta bom? Americanos?" We opened a window in our apartment, flashed a thumbs up, and called back down "Tudo bem." All is good. It took three days for a repairman to come. The elevator broke every week for two years, always on Tuesdays. No one was ever outraged and no one ever wrote a note to the landlord about the inconvenience. I never saw a sign cautioning the tenants and declaring a release from liability. Our guards would simply give us a thumbs down and shake their heads to discourage us from the elevator. Joe and I learned to take the stairs. Our minds ran on American time and the elevator ran on Brazilian time.

4. *Needles*

We found most of them in a trash pile behind the kitchen at the orphanage. Nobody bothered to hide them. There were more needles in the ditches by the entrance. Decomposing rats, rotting banana peels covered with flies, packages of rancid rice. Too many needles to count. Too many to make any sense. A dirt field strewn with empty aerosol cans. Anything to get you high. Anything to escape this hell. And here we had come, the American volunteers, to clean up this orphanage, in the middle of nowhere, abandoned by everyone. A dozen children or so, maybe two adults. They met us at the bus, kicking soccer balls around us in a swarm. *Bienvenidos!* shouted Eduardo, the director of the orphanage, climbing onto our bus to welcome us. He walked the rows shaking hands with everyone, rambling in Portuguese like this was a long-awaited social visit. Mike, the American teacher who had organized the project, stood and shoved the keyboard to a computer into Eduardo's open hands. The rest of the computer sat beside Mike in the seat, outdated hard drive, taped together mouse, dog-eared computer manuals in English only. "We brought something for you—a computer for the kids," Mike said. Eduardo looked at the plastic keyboard filling his hands. He traced the dangling cord connected to nothing. He glanced at the pile of computer refuse on the seat. Eduardo smiled and said, "For what?" We thought it would be a good community service project for our wealthy Brazilian students, who had never heard of community service nor seen an orphanage. But many of them refused to even get off the bus. They pretended illness or fatigue or simply became mute. They listened to music in their ears.

5. *Domitilia*

Domitilia, my teacher's aide, taught me how to properly pay a bribe. She showed me how to shout, how to feign ignorance, and when to finally fork over the money. Always American dollars. The most I ever paid was a hundred bucks, and Domitilia said I had no choice. She said it was bad and just to pay and to say a prayer. She said if I didn't the police would make us unload every bus, three of them, filled with the children of diplomats and the children of millionaires, a few armed body guards, and eight young American teachers, on our way home

from hiking the waterfalls, from making these children camp out under the Brazilian sky. She said it could get a lot worse. So I slipped her a crisp, one hundred dollar bill and she made them go away.

6. Bus

Joe and I were the Americans who didn't own a car. Everyone thought it was silly, really. We could afford one, but we fell in love with the buses. On Sundays, when the two main roads, L-2 and W-3, were closed, Joe and I rode the city buses. For hours. Just to watch. We'd see the parts of the city you couldn't see zipping by on the main roads. Miniature churches, open fields of trash, children playing soccer, fruit stands selling strawberries. We bought all the berries we could carry once from an old woman on an empty street corner. She took a long pull off her beer can, stubbed out her cigarette, and filled her last grocery bag with red ripeness. "Lavando," she said, handing us the bag. Wash them. "Lembrancas," I replied. I meant I will remember. The buses in our city were safe. Children didn't shove their hands through the window, begging, in Brasilia like they did in Goiania, an hour away. Children, high from sniffing glue, didn't pretend to surf on top of the moving buses in Brasilia. And in our mostly safe city, the people didn't have to look away while I watched.

7. Jeitinho

The rules don't stick in Brazil. The *jeitinho*, the way, makes me itch. The outcome is never certain. Brazilians love the flexibility of rules; they are proud of their creativity in eluding them. Americans are rule enforcers and rule followers. The two don't mix well. I tell my students it is unacceptable to cheat on their tests and copy each other's homework. They roll their eyes at me. They buy my final exam from the boy who makes our copies at school and they all earn a passing grade. I stand in line at a grocery store waiting to pay my bill and women walk past me, up to the check out counter, and pay theirs. "Hey! What about the line?" I want to shout. But I am the one out of place with my rules and lines and boundaries. When our work visas are revoked for no apparent reason, we are sent to Buenos Aires to wait. We wait for eight days for the *jeitinho*, the greasing of palms, the greasing of wheels, the way. We wait in the sunshine of La Boca, the multi-colored artist's district of Argentina, and watch painters and jugglers and mimes. We wait in Plaza de Mayo—with The Mothers who march every day begging to be reunited with their abducted children, the ones who disappeared during The Dirty War three decades before. The Mothers wear white bandanas with their babies' names embroidered. *Jose, Rosita, Guilherme* across their foreheads. Joe and I translate their signs with our pocket dictionary and picnic on Spanish olives, homemade bread, and red wine. And we wait.

8. Coconut Water

For one *real*, you can have a cup of fresh *agua de coca* on almost any street corner in Brazil. The stand is lime green with a yellow umbrella. The barefoot boy sleeping at the stand is so brown from the sun that his face is the color of the coconut. You simply hold up your fingers to tell him how many cups you want. He smashes the coconut down hard onto a plastic plunger and twists the cork and fresh *agua de coca* fills your cup. Bits of the shredded coconut float on milky

foam. He'll let you drink the whole cup down and ask for more before he ever asks for money. He smiles while you drink, as if he himself invented coconut water and not God. Or if you're really brave and really thirsty, you buy the whole coconut and the boy slices into the hard shell with his machete and puts in two straws. And you walk down the street holding a coconut between you, slurping the salty sweetness of heaven.

9. Piranha Fishing

They sound like a typewriter's keys clicking in mid-air. Click. Click. Click. Go the *piranha's* teeth as it bites away at a stick. Our guide, a silent, red native with a machete, pulls the *piranha* off my fishing pole and holds the stick in the fish's mouth to demonstrate. I am twelve inches away from the *piranha's* clicking in a canoe with three other strangers, *touristas* all of us, in the Amazon river. The *piranha* is only six inches long, with shiny, silver gills, but its mouth opens as large as its body. The water is brown and muddy; it reminds me of the Mississippi I grew up on. The water is choppy and strewn with trash; gasoline oil pools in bubbles on the surface. Our canoe wanders into a dense, weeded area and the tall grasses brush my knee. The sound from the bugs is deafening. Joe is in the canoe behind us, I think. The men in our group have been separated from the women. I'm afraid to turn around, look for Joe and threaten my balance on the plywood bench. We are seated single file, wearing blue ponchos with the name of our tour group stamped on our backs in white lettering: *Tours de Amazonia*. I seem to be a natural at *piranha* fishing. Every time I lift my bamboo pole from the water our guide grabs the line in mid-air with his bare hands and pulls off my *piranha*. He smiles at me like a proud father. He tosses it into the bucket between his legs. The *piranhas* protest and beat their bodies against the plastic. I want to look into the bucket, I can almost see them if I lean forward, but I'm afraid. *Piranhas* gasping for water, biting each other bloody. When the bucket is full, we canoe up to a dock with a small open-air shelter. A woman and a man grab the bows of our canoes and tie us to the side of the dock. The woman is wearing a dirty apron smeared with blood. They help us onto the land, hand us bottles of water, and motion to the benches where we are to wait. The *piranha* bucket is hoisted over the side. The woman strains under the weight and disappears into a makeshift kitchen. Coffee colored children, barefoot and almost naked, run around us, swiping at rocks and sand with their sticks. They smile and wave at us. They are beautiful. I can't stop taking their pictures, and they love it. We are called to the shelter, seated ceremoniously at a table set with dishes and linens, and the man and the woman stand beside our table watching, waiting. Our guides ladle out soup into our bowls for lunch, and just as I lift the broth to my mouth, the *piranha* head—teeth, skeleton, eye balls—floats to the top of the bowl.

10. Red Dust

It fills my shoes. I shake it from my hair at night. The cleaners at our school wipe the red dust from every surface. One month of rain, one month of red dust, and then ten months of cool breezes and mild temperatures. That's the weather in Brasilia. Years from now when I return to the states, I'll take Joe's dress shoes in to be repaired and the man behind the counter will pour out red sand in piles on the counter. I will want to ask him if I can keep it. I will want to scoop it up into a little glass jar and put it by my bed where I wake to silence under a down comforter and

200 thread count sheets. But I know how that would sound. He'll think I'm crazy. So I will just laugh, dismissively, and try to calm my heart, which pounds harder when I think of my red dust filling his trash can.