

THE CARNIVAL

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“Tall and tan and young and lovely, the girl from Ipanema goes walking, and when she passes, each one she passes goes aaah!” These are the opening lyrics of the most famous Bossa Nova number of all time. It was wildly popular when I was a teenager in Uruguay. I listened to Astrud Gilberto breathe those words into a microphone, felt the goosebumps ripple up the back of my neck, and knew that I had to go to Brazil for the carnival.

It was a three-day bus ride from Montevideo to Rio de Janeiro, and my stalwart traveling companion and I were somewhat the worse for wear by the time we arrived. Pale and wan and tired and dirty, we could hear the drummers in the *favelas*, the shantytown neighborhoods up in the hills. The air was moist and fragrant; the drumming was lazy and seductive and seemed to enter my bloodstream and my mind. It was the morning of the first day of the carnival.

We stayed with a friend of a friend who had an apartment not far from the notorious Copacabana beach. It wasn't long before we stood with our feet in the warm sand, gazing around the bay and up at the iconic *Cristo* statue standing high above the point, his arms widespread in welcome. It was still only mid-morning, too early for the jet set crowd who stayed up late partying and didn't emerge from their high-rise, beachfront hotels until a little after noon. These international sun worshipers came in pairs and groups to lie on the sand in the tiniest bathing suits I had ever seen—many

wearing nothing at all. My fellow-adolescent and I strolled nonchalantly along the water's edge, not-so-surreptitiously ogling everyone we passed, searching for our Girl from Ipanema.

That song was composed by Antonio Carlos Jobim, with original



Portuguese lyrics by Vinícius de Moraes, and English ones by Norman Gimbel. In 1963 Stan Getz, the American jazz virtuoso, wove his haunting, lyrical saxophone into the gentle rhythms of Joao Gilberto on guitar and Jobim on piano, while Joao's wife Astrud exhaled the vocals.

As night fell over the city we joined the throngs moving through the streets. There were carnival floats and other vehicles and tens of thousands of people shuffling, swaying, and dancing in a sort of massive impromptu conga line. We inched our way forward, wrapped in the hypnotic sound of the samba schools playing

their irresistible percussion for hour after hour after hour. The energy was infectious and everyone was cruising at some level of euphoria. Revelers were spraying a mixture of ether and perfume onto handkerchiefs and inhaling the fumes deeply. When I tried some it made me so happy I fell out of the back of the Jeep I was riding in at the time. But it was impossible to fall far in that shoulder-to-shoulder crowd, which was like a city-wide mosh pit, and I was carried along boisterously for a while. In the spirit of the carnival I bonded instantly with my rescuers, and remained with my new brothers and sisters for the rest of the night.

In the magical hour before dawn we all went back to the beach, stripped naked and ran into the ocean. Taking a deep breath, we sank beneath the surface, squatting on the sandy bottom, not moving a muscle. When the water around us had settled and was inky black again we lunged skyward, creating an explosion of phosphorescent drops that clung to our skin then scattered like fireworks as we waved our arms and crashed back down into the sparkling surf. As we walked out of the water, a dozen bodies gleaming wet in the moonlight with Rio silhouetted against the sky in front of us, another set of Astrud's lyrics were running through my mind: “Quiet nights of quiet stars, quiet chords from my guitar, floating on the silence that surrounds us...” We lay drying on the sand as the sun came up; it was the second day of the carnival, and the distant drumming drifted to us on the morning breeze. ★