



The Carnival

“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 Girl from Ipanema,” the most famous bossa nova number of all time. It was wildly popular when I was a teenager in Uruguay in the early 1960s. 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 *carnaval*.

It was a three-day bus ride from Montevideo to Rio de Janeiro, and my friend Keith and I were somewhat the worse for wear by the time we arrived. Pale and drawn and tired and dirty, we could hear the drummers in the *favelas*, the shantytowns 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 a flat not far from the famous 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 with his arms outspread in welcome. It was still only mid-morning, much too early for the jet set crowd that stayed up late partying and didn't emerge from their beachfront hotels until past noon. These international sun worshipers came to lie on the sand in the tiniest bathing suits I had ever seen—some wearing nothing at all. My fellow-adolescent and I strolled along the water's edge, not-so-surreptitiously ogling everyone we passed, searching for our girl from Ipanema, a nearby beach.

That classic song was composed by Antonio Carlos Jobim, with original Portuguese lyrics by Vinícius de Moraes and English words 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 extravagantly decorated floats and tens of thousands of people shuffling, swaying, and dancing in a sort of massive impromptu conga line. We inched our way forward, immersed in the hypnotic sound of the samba schools playing their irresistible percussion for hour after hour after hour. The mood was intoxicating, and everyone was cruising at some level of euphoria. Street vendors sold squirt bottles with a mixture of ether and perfume that revellers sprayed onto handkerchiefs, inhaling the fumes deeply for a quick jolt of energy. When I tried some, it made me so happy I rolled out of the back of the open 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 safely caught in friendly arms. 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 scattered like fireworks as we waved our arms and crashed back down into the sparkling surf. When we walked out of the water, a dozen bodies gleaming wet in the moonlight with Rio silhouetted against the sky, another set of Astrud's lyrics was 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 over us on the morning breeze