

## 16. Rocinha

Even in my terrible distress in the bell tower, it had not escaped my notice that the Central District was full of activity. I didn't remember downtown being so festive when our family visited thirty years ago. Samba music poured into the streets from every direction. The crowds of people I had seen at the airport and in the city before dawn had multiplied all day until by twilight, it wasn't just children inhabiting the area around the Candelaria Church. The streets were mobbed with people. Automobiles had a difficult time making headway from one block to the next.

The street children were too busy working the crowd to take any notice of me as I left the church and fell in amongst the throng. Almost immediately, I caught the scent of vampire and scanned around a little anxiously, wondering where the creature was. It was not feasible to track him (or her) through the glut of people, and because I knew it wasn't Victoria or Laurent, I didn't try. I didn't even try to avoid him, because obviously he wasn't in the middle of this human crowd to challenge me.

I could see where such a glut of humanity might attract vampires, but even so, I found it difficult to understand why they would want to live in this sunny climate. The necessity of hiding for half of every day both in Texas and in Rio was proving burdensome to me. I would have preferred to chase Victoria around Antarctica or the Yukon Territories in their respective winter seasons. The idleness required of me by daily sunshine left me drowning in a swamp of grief and memories and loss that I had to overcome every twilight in order to get myself going again. At least at night, I could use physical action to give my mind something besides my anguish to focus on.

I noticed a tourist map lying abandoned on the sidewalk and picked it up to review the layout of the city. The Central District is the easternmost zone next to the deep waters of the Atlantic Ocean. The famous beaches of Copacabana and Ipanema lie south and west of that. Granite mountains covered in jungle-green foliage rise sharply from the cityscape like spikes on a dinosaur's back.

Bounded by the sea and dotted with mountains, Rio de Janeiro sits among dramatic, immovable geographical features. Its business district and wealthier residential neighborhoods are built on the flatter, more accessible land between these features, while its poor citizens make their homes on the steeper flanks of the mountains. The latter neighborhoods were originally created by freed slaves and their descendants, but in recent decades have ballooned with country dwellers emigrating to the city to find work. With more people to house and less land to build on, shantytowns have mushroomed over the unstable mountainsides, creating urban slums unsupported by city services. The *favelas*, as

these neighborhoods are called, are Rio de Janeiro's version of the Texas *colonias*.

As I looked toward the mountains from downtown Rio, I saw above the bright lights of the city, the dimmer, softer lighting of the *favelas* spreading up and out across the slopes like blankets. These shantytowns have existed for so long that they are embraced as an essential part of an overcrowded city, with one in five citizens now living in the huge, urbanized ghettos.

I was guessing that when Victoria arrived in Rio she would migrate toward the *favelas* to feed. I couldn't know that with any certainty, but the notion suited my current mindset, which was to escape the crowded streets of downtown and move further afield. The only question now was which *favela* should I stalk? There were so many more of them than I had expected. They had multiplied in both number and size in the thirty years since I'd been to Rio.

I examined the city map in detail until I saw a name I recognized: *Favela Rocinha*. It is famous for being the largest *favela* in all of South America. I once saw an episode of *CSI: Miami* that had its heroes traveling to Rocinha in search of a villain. The *favela* was riddled with drug gangs, automatic weapons, and violence, and as far as I know, that depiction is true to life. Like the Italian mafia in old New York, a drug gang controls each *favela*, a situation that creates pervasive danger for the residents when territory wars or shootouts with the police break out. Street children are hired as drug runners or lookouts and are considered expendable when trouble comes. Often, they are the first ones killed in a skirmish.

Drug lords and gang warfare are human problems that don't trouble me as long as they're not in Forks. Getting shot would be less painful than what I was already going through and I was more than capable of defending myself, anyway. Rocinha it would be. I referred to the map and saw that it was located on the northwestern side of the city which suited me fine. I would give up the craziness of the Central District, no doubt substituting a different kind of craziness for it in the slums.

I pushed my way through the crowds that seemed to be filling the streets more solidly every minute. I had decided to follow the shoreline around to the south and west and then cut north overland. That way, I could always escape into the ocean if the excess of humans became too disturbing...or too tempting. How long had it been since I'd hunted? Probably a bit too long. It was hard to focus on keeping my thirst sated when another kind of pain tortured me so much more.

As I moved away from downtown and headed toward the southern beaches, I marveled at the distinctive traits that make Rio de Janeiro uniquely beautiful. The granite formations around and throughout the city give it a striking dimensionality, especially with nighttime illumination highlighting the contours of the odd formations.

Sugarloaf Mountain rose out of the water ahead of me, a tall, pointy hump of bare granite rising up behind a shorter and wider hump. I saw the aerial tram lines overhead and the cars passing back and forth, hauling tourists to the top of the dramatic peak.

I made my way down to Copacabana Beach, then turned around and looked back toward the city where Corcovado Mountain—another bare granite hump—rises dramatically ten miles inland. It is the tallest mountain in the city and on top of it stands the magnificent Christ the Redeemer statue, which overlooks Rio, arms outstretched. I remember when *Cristo Redentor* was constructed in the 1920s. It was to be the tallest statue of Christ in the world at that time and setting it on top of Corcovado Mountain with the landscape dropping off all around makes it appear that Jesus is standing above the entire world.

The evening lights on the beach created a beautiful setting for the dozens of beachgoers who remained on the sand, drinking alcohol and talking, or wading into the water, or knocking around a soccer ball. Street kids played among the other occupants, laughing and engaging with them, no doubt trying to charm money or trinkets from them, or perhaps trying to steal their watches or Blackberries. Behind the beach, high-rise hotels rose toward the sky.

Copacabana Beach curves in a half-moon shape facing southeast and ending in a sharp point of land. I crossed the point before it extended too far into the ocean and found myself on another half-moon-shaped beach, this one facing southwest. It was Ipanema, a beach made famous worldwide by the 1960s musical hit, “The Girl from Ipanema.”

More than once, I’ve heard Ipanema Beach described as the sexiest beach in the world. If one should measure sexiness by how little attractive individuals can wear in public without being considered naked, then Ipanema would no doubt win *any* sexiness contest, hands down. The beachgoers I saw there wore the skimpiest bathing costumes I’d ever seen by far.

“Sexy” is a relatively new concept for me, something that I didn’t fully understand in my first 104 years of existence. Perhaps I thought I did—like jealousy, it was something I had read about and seen depicted in films too many times to number, but it wasn’t until I met Bella that I truly *felt* what it meant. As I fell in love with her and my buried human side began to emerge, I altered my former definition of the word from “physically beautiful” to “physically desirable.”

I remember with pinpoint clarity when my curiosity about Bella blossomed into desire. It was the day that jealousy got the better of me and I let myself speak to Bella after having ignored her for a month. With her eyes shut, she had growled, “What do you *want*, Edward?” and though she was angry with me, I felt a rush of heat spread through me when she spoke my name. If I had been breathing freely, my breath would have quickened. Not just me, but my *body* suddenly had become aware of her.

That night, I crept into her bedroom and watched her sleep...the way her full, pink lips parted as she dreamed did something to me and my hand reached to touch them of its own accord. I yearned to stroke that delicate flesh and feel her warm breath on my fingers. I hungered to press my lips to hers, knowing her softness would yield under the slightest pressure. Breathing in her scent...

*Ahhhh!*

A fierce burn that had nothing to do with thirst ignited somewhere deep in me and spread through my torso. I felt the bitter, aching loss of an aspect of my humanity with which I had only recently become acquainted. Yes, I understood the meaning of “sexy.”

Trying to recover my composure, I gazed at the array of humanity ranged before me on the beach and observed the spectacle of both women and men garbed in small strips of cloth that cover much less of their bodies than seems necessary in a public place. While I can appreciate the beauty in a perfectly turned shoulder or the gentle cinching of a woman’s body from breasts to waist, I also recognize that the near-nudity of a beautiful stranger does not call to me like a single sideways glance of my beloved. I must conclude that for me, it is love that lends meaning to the vocabulary of sex. Considering how I am made, I know that there will be no one else for me. I will never desire another woman. Ipanema makes that fact—and that sadness, too—abundantly clear.

In my modest street clothes I stood out amidst the beachgoers like an Inuit at a tanning salon. I decided to retreat from the beach to the avenue behind it. As I attempted to do so, I was startled to discover that a crowd was blocking much of the roadway. Cars were coming to a stop and drivers were honking their horns either in glee or frustration, I couldn’t tell which. When I got close enough to observe what was going on, I saw that a miniature parade was making its way up the two-lane bicycle path paralleling the avenue on the beach side. Hordes of people were streaming from the hotels and bars across the street to watch forty or more ostentatious women marching along the bike path to the beat of energetic drumming.

The parading women were decked out in outrageous gowns and wearing elaborate headdresses or wigs, lots of feathers, and heavy makeup. Some of them were inexplicably traveling on roller skates. They were gorgeous, though, and appeared to be made up for a beauty pageant or competition.

The odd celebration made me curious and so I approached the bicycle path, slipping easily through the crowd. When I got close, I was surprised by the enormous size of the celebrants—they looked like Amazons of the first degree and many of them accentuated their large size by wearing shoes with exaggerated platforms and high heels. Everyone was ogling the women, laughing, and cheering and as I looked around the crowd, I saw that there were more men than women in the crowd. No wonder, with such extravagantly outfitted and overtly sexual individuals displaying their wares.

It was only when a particularly large woman with a handlebar moustache paraded by that I finally recognized what I was looking at. This was a group of transvestites! I was watching a “drag queen” parade! It was a first for me. At another time, I would have laughed at their suddenly obvious, tongue-in-cheek imitations of glamorous women, but of course, laughter was not within my capabilities. Feeling like an old stick-in-the-mud, I retreated a few blocks inland to escape the joyful celebration.

It was not difficult to keep my feet pointed in the right direction. At the opposite

end of Ipanema Beach from where I started rises a startling double-headed mountain whose pointed tops extend above the city skyline, providing a beacon to my destination. This iconic mountain is called *Dois Irmãos* (“Two Brothers”), according to my map. *Favelas* have sprung up all around its steep slopes and Rocinha, where I was headed, lies on its rear flanks. I kept moving in that direction, walking at a human pace, in no hurry to arrive. Where my body was truly made no difference to me. I was merely trying to maintain some semblance of a destination, a goal. If I didn’t, I was likely to lie down and never move again.

When I turned northward and began to travel upland, the terrain became sharply steeper. Concurrently, homes became smaller, closer together, and more makeshift. This land was not suitable for development, which is why it was available for poor squatters to claim and occupy. The shacks and shanties constructed on the steep hillsides are not set upon sturdy foundations. Just walking through the neighborhood, I could see where huge sections of topsoil had slid off the mountains in the past, presumably taking unstable shanty houses with it. Idly, I wondered how many people were buried beneath their collapsed homes every year.

The upside to this looming disaster was obvious as I proceeded higher up the flanks of *Dois Irmãos*. The view from every shack and precariously stacked concrete box was stunning. Million-dollar views...two million. I considered the irony of the poorest slum dwellers enjoying the most spectacular views I had seen in a long time. It was a modest compensation for their obvious hardship.

I knew when I had reached the edge of Rocinha. A busy thruway curved around *Dois Irmãos* at a point where the incline steepened again toward vertical. Amazingly, the homes seemed more jammed together the sheerer the mountain became, stacked one above another like stadium bleachers. Only one roadway was in evidence moving upward from the base of Rocinha, and it snaked back and forth as it rose to a higher part of the mountain. I saw motorcycles and small busses navigating the steep rise.

Narrow sets of stairs and shoulder-width alleys provide access to the homes on the mountainside. The individual structures are made of cheap bricking material glued together with concrete mortar. Many, if not most, of the homes’ windows had no glass in them and makeshift lumber often filled the space where a door might be. Tap points for electricity were few and far between, resulting in tangled nests of illegal wiring that hung dangerously low overhead. I noticed young men with automatic weapons sitting on steps or low walls here and there, presumably protecting their neighborhood from rivals or perhaps from the police.

I stalked the dark neighborhood, trying to avoid the children who swarmed around me, with little success. Unlike the street kids downtown, these children were not begging or stealing. They were simply curious about my fair skin and air of “foreignness” and were surprised when I spoke to them in their native Portuguese. I wished that I had candy or trinkets or something to give to them. Their faces were so open and happy in stark contrast

to my own, I'm sure.

Though Rocinha is exceedingly crowded, each house touching its neighbors, no crowds of people collected outside because there is nowhere for them to gather. The narrow stairways leading up and down the mountainside and the narrow pathways moving across it do not allow for loitering. The residents carry everything from water, to children, to propane tanks in their arms and nobody appreciates having their way blocked by either tourists or locals.

Though my intention in coming to Rocinha was to start looking for Victoria, I had no particular will to do so. I didn't want to expend unnecessary effort since I didn't know if she had come to Rio yet, or if she had come, where she would be. Though I was guessing she would feed in the *favelas*, that was only a guess, and there were a good many more *favelas* in Rio than I had realized. I decided to take a few days off.

It was not as easy to find a daytime hiding place in Rocinha as I had assumed it would be, though. Residents had built their homes in the cheapest manner possible without "extras" such as crawlspaces or attics. Most commonly, a piece of tin was laid over a home's exterior walls to serve as a ceiling for the top floor of the house, which might be enclosed, but often was left open as a covered patio. An attic would merely add cost to a home without providing usable living space.

As I prowled the alleys and stairways that serve as Rocinha's streets, I saw motorcycle taxis climbing the one road and observed residents riding up the steep mountain and then walking laterally along pathways and downward on stairs to reach their residences. Some of the homes were accessed using ladders much like the pueblos of the indigenous cliff dwellers of the American Southwest. In fact, that's exactly what Rocinha reminded me of—pueblos made of bricks and mortar in place of stone and clay.

I spent the rest of that night trying to find a suitable place to hide from the sun. What I eventually found was a one-room shack that appeared to be abandoned. It had one hole for a window and was full of junk and construction debris. I could discern no recent human scent attached to it. I glanced around to make sure nobody was nearby and then vaulted through the hole in the wall, landing on what appeared to be a bag of sand. If I kept my head away from the window, I would be unobservable.

I lay on my sandbag and listened to the sounds of the *favela* coming to life. Dawn was near enough that roosters had started to crow. I had seen no vacant spot of land where someone could raise chickens, so I assumed that they lived inside someone's home or on a rooftop. As the morning progressed, the noise of television sets and radios began to fill the air, but unusually, because of the single roadway, I heard almost no automobile noise.

Rocinha was not peaceful, though. The rat's nest of electrical lines buzzed at a pitch that was nearly intolerable to my sensitive ears. Maybe one in a hundred homes had official electrical service and everybody else tapped into the lines illegally. The situation was visually absurd and deadly for humans. It is fortunate that the majority of homes are made of concrete and brick; otherwise, fire could devastate the entire community, like the Great

Chicago Fire had leveled my city in 1871.

I heard a tour guide say—yes, visitors can tour the *favelas*—that 250,000 people live in the less-than-one square mile that constitutes Rocinha, though as in the *colonias*, estimates must be difficult to make. It was unbelievably crowded.

Each household consists of one or more rectangular boxes stacked up like a child's toy blocks. The boxes are typically twelve by fifteen feet, with each house having an average of three or four floors, though some have as many as eight or nine. Looking in a few windows, I saw that the interiors were relatively open inside, often with a tight spiraling staircase in one corner that rose through all the floors. The kitchen areas had sinks and water spigots fed by catchment basins on the roofs and cooking was accomplished by means of small propane tanks attached to tiny stoves.

As my first day in Rocinha wore on, I heard the sounds of music drifting up and around the neighborhood, sometimes drumming, sometimes instrumental. I had read in a brochure that samba—the music that practically defines the character of the Brazilian people—originated in the *favelas* and that the urban shantytowns still produce some of the best musicians in the city.

This day was not as tortured as my previous one, though it was painful enough. I was oddly more comfortable as a slum dweller than a church dweller, though I did not feel as safe from discovery in my abandoned shanty (or in the bell tower, for that matter) as I had when I buried myself in the earth.

When nighttime rolled around again, I heard new sounds. Police sirens blared from the bottom of the mountain and became louder as they advanced up Rocinha's roadway. I heard the opening of heavy doors and the rustling of bodies emptying from vehicles and spreading out into the neighborhood. Then automatic rifle fire.

The action was fairly close to my hideout, so I decided to leave it and see what was happening. I listened to identify the direction the noise was coming from before making my way towards it. As I neared the area of the skirmish, I saw citizens fleeing as best they could in the congested pathways where gunfire was being exchanged. I kept my distance and listened to both frantic and resigned conversations in Portuguese inside the windowless homes.

This was yet another battle between police and the members of a local gang, a common occurrence in Rocinha. Drug lords escape the law by disappearing into their *favelas* and groups of police follow them into the neighborhoods with guns drawn. Gang members confront the police directly. Frequently, innocent bystanders are injured or killed, but the police never succeed in wrenching control of the *favelas* away from the criminals. The fighting just goes on and on. I got the impression that the citizens are as disgusted with the police as they are with the gangs. Little regard is given to the safety of the slum dwellers and as I heard it in many minds: *At least the drug dealers provide us some services.*

As I crept around observing the showdown in the alleys and on the stairs, I caught

the scent of another vampire. Cautiously, I looked around, examining every window and rooftop until I saw a pair of unmistakably red eyes set in an alabaster face. He was peering from an open window about fifty yards across and ten yards above my location. He had seen me too, though if he noticed my strange eyes, undoubtedly he had more questions about me than I did about him. The color of our skin stood out equally brightly among the brown and black-skinned residents of Rocinha, but he had the black hair more common to the locals. It hung down his back in a thick braid. We stared at one another without moving as I focused on reading his mind.

*Well, well...another. Not the first, but a horse of a different color, this one!*

The vampire's thoughts came to him in Spanish—he was a visitor to the city too, I guessed. I could not detect where he was from, though. He could have been anyone from an indigenous Argentinian to a very old Spaniard. I had no way of knowing unless he thought about his origins, which admittedly, few of us ever did. His reason for being in Rocinha was obvious, though.

*If he does not disturb my feeding, I do not disturb his. More than enough blood for us both.*

With that, the stranger disappeared from the window and try as I might, I could not determine which way he had gone. I decided to adopt his attitude and leave well enough alone. It was clear that neither police nor drug dealers were entirely responsible for the high death rate in the *favelas*.

The visitor was wrong about one thing, though—there was not enough blood in Rocinha for me, at least not of the type Carlisle had taught me to prefer. Trash and sewage ran down many of the alleyways in equal, disgusting amounts and so, of course, rats were present in large numbers. But other than them and the odd stray dog or cat, birdcages hanging outside shanty windows contained the only non-human blood I smelled in Rocinha.

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Alice rang again the following day and I answered my cell phone. When she reminded me that it was Carnival season, I finally caught on to why the airport and the streets in the Central District had been so crowded and what the occasion was for the drag-queen parade in Ipanema. There must be Carnival activities going on all over the city, though I saw nothing particular in Rocinha, except for the samba music, which, for all I knew, was heard year around in the *favelas*.

Days passed and I continued to haunt Rocinha with no real goals or direction. I just existed as a ghostly presence in the neighborhood, listening to children at play, blaring TVs, and impromptu musical concerts during the day, and additionally at night, smelling the scent of marijuana in the air. I was a stranger in a strange land.

I scrounged up places to hide, though none as restful as Mother Earth herself. Rio

was altogether too crowded to find a safe patch of dirt for that purpose. Once in a while, I did locate an attic atop an “apartment building,” particular shanty-like buildings rented to newcomers while they constructed their own homes. They had varying numbers of “floors,” but were always narrow and of dubious quality. Some of them had attics of a more traditional form, with roof vents on either end of a triangular tin roof. Attics gave me more privacy than other hideaways, so I kept an eye out for them in my ramblings.

During long days of much too much awareness, I thought about Victoria...once in a while. I’d begun to accept that I was not going to find her in Rio de Janeiro. The city was simply too big and I had no clues to follow. I didn’t have to ask Alice to know that Victoria’s cell phone had gone quiet. More than likely, she had discarded it after being pursued so doggedly through Texas.

Sometimes when I felt guilty for giving up the hunt, I justified my lack of effort by imagining that Victoria would perform another public stunt or do another obvious killing. Then I would find her easily by following newspaper reports and listening to the thoughts of witnesses. In my deluded state of mind, all I had to do was wait and she would come to me. I was good at waiting, too, especially in my present condition, since idleness was easier to maintain than any kind of purpose.

On the nights that I bothered to rouse myself, which were getting rarer as time passed, I wandered. I read city and neighborhood newspapers and watched the television news once in a while in tourist bars down the mountain. In spite of my inertia, nighttime required me to exercise every iota of self-control I possessed to prevent myself from returning like an abandoned dog to Bella’s door—or rather, to her window—my only true sanctuary in all the world.

I spent the days (and increasingly, the nights) crouched in filthy, cramped spaces and did battle with myself. Each circuit of the sun became a separate skirmish in the war against my selfish desires. Alice may have been right. I didn’t know how much longer I could hold up under the pain...the anguish...the torture. It would never recede, never improve, and recently it had become compounded by bouts of directionless anxiety and rage, wondering whether Bella had found someone else. I couldn’t stand to think of it, but I couldn’t keep from thinking of it either.

I was a train wreck waiting to happen, a satellite ready to plummet, an absolute, unmitigated disaster. What was I going to do with myself?