

LOOKING FOR AMERICA

1985

The Varig 747, bound for JFK airport ten-hours away, accelerated down the dark runway and raced toward the full-moonlit sky. Amid the thunder of its engines and the jolts and clamor of cabin vibrations, the fuselage angled upward, a steep, nose-high tilt and the aircraft suddenly leapt into the air.

Luciene tensed at the stomach-lurching lift-off.

The landing gear retracted with a rumble and thump, accompanied by the whining complaint of wing flaps, loud enough to rise above the roar of the engines. The plane banked sharply, once, twice. Luciene's body shifted, first one way than the other.

Her disquiet grew, approaching the point of panic, the novice's fear of flying.

Pare de tremer. Such weakness. This is not me. Luciene rested her hands in her lap, the fingers loosely entwined, an attempt to halt the slight trembling. She inhaled deeply, slow, deliberate breaths, and glanced out the cabin window to calm a stirring claustrophobia.

Amazement shouldered aside her apprehension.

Below her, the glow of Galeão airport terminal, the faint outline of its blue-lit runways, paled in comparison with the blaze of Rio de Janeiro in the near distance, a sight capable of captivating any seasoned air-traveler with a heart still capable of wonder.

Along the shore, the shadowed silhouettes of cliffs plunged hundreds of meters to an ocean surface of rippled moonlight. Waves lapped at floodlight-lit crescent beaches, their sands golden bright blushes, kilometers long, bordered and guarded like sentinels by the dark, sheer precipices.

Necklaces of streetlights, hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, glistened like tangled pearls flung across the interior of a city streaked with gleaming ribbons of highways, hugging the coast and tapering off into the indistinguishable night-time horizon.

Luciene marveled at Rio's spectacle of lights and landscape, destined to slip away, to disappear within the expanding darkness of Guanabara Bay and the Atlantic Ocean. The aircraft banked sharply again and the inevitable occurred sooner than expected. The city rapidly slid downward out of view, sunk into the pitch black beyond her cabin window.

"*Tchau Brasil*", she whispered.

Unbidden, the thought of her *mommae's* face intruded, her mother's scowl when they had parted company that afternoon. The older woman's expression, a bitterness etched frown, had become a permanent fixture on her once beautiful face. The face Luciene longed for from her childhood.

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Luciene's brother Claudio maneuvered her suitcase into the cramped trunk of his much self-repaired, decades-old VW bug. She hoped the cheap, second-hand baggage, purchased from a vendor in the street market on Copacabana Beach, would survive the

trip to New York City.

Mommae waited by the curb. She made no effort to hide her resentment, her arms crossed like a glowering sentry. Luciene expected nothing less than the one, last verbal assault her mother unleashed.

"Now, you...", she spat then turned to include poor Claudio in her glare. "And you! My so-called children, now grown. And what do you do? Nè? Both of you, like your father, desert me". She scowled at Claudio. "First you...you marry some puta."

She refocused her full attention on Luciene.

"And you. Such a wonderful daughter, so smug and superior, to America, nè? When I am thrown into the street, do not concern yourself. You think your brother can help me, *querida*? He barely feeds himself, his own family, barely keeps THEM out of the favelas. All of us will find ourselves there someday. Just a matter of time and soon. Enjoy your good life in America."

Though Luciene's protest was pointless, she could not constrain herself. "That is why I am leaving Brasil, *mommae*. You will not starve. The money I earn...."

Giselda abruptly turned her back on them and hurried toward the apartment building, her arms still folded, her steps short and quick. She entered the tight space of the rundown lobby without a glance over her shoulder.

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A lurch of air turbulence broke Luciene's reverie. She swallowed to suppress the rising lump in her throat. She would not fail her family.

The aircraft continued its ascent toward the stars, her steadfast companions so often wished upon when a child. In Luciene's new world, in America, the Northern constellations differed from the Southern, their stars would be strangers among an entire city of strangers and even the season would change.

Despite the near-full capacity of the flight, a sense of isolation insinuated itself into her dream of escape, now seemingly fulfilled, her hope of a better life. A translucent reflection, her ghost-like image on the surface of the cabin window, stared back at her, tears gently trailing down its cheeks.

The gentle tap on her arm surprised Luciene. A tissue magically appeared before her, a woman's sympathetic voice accompanying the offer.

"Here, *querida*, take this. Please...do not worry! He still loves you. You will meet again. Do not worry."

Luciene thought, *how like a Brasileira*.

Despite her tears, she smiled inwardly, a wry smile, at the woman's assumption the cause of a woman's tears must be a man. She accepted the tissue and thanked her traveling companion, an older woman, perhaps, thirty-five, still trim and attractive.

In contrast to Luciene's well-worn jeans and sneakers, her simple long sleeved cotton blouse, the woman's outfit exhibited a discerning style, expensive, too. Typically *Brasileira*, she had unbuttoned her pale, salmon colored blouse more deeply than most *turistas Americanas* Luciene had encountered in Rio. The top edge of a soft, lace trimmed bra complimented the woman's petite cleavage and just above it, dangling at the end of a slender gold necklace, small diamonds floated like diminutive stars within

a fine mesh pendant. Her earrings matched the stars.

She was fair skinned by Brazilian standards. Her green-brown eyes implied a mostly Latin-European ancestry, less blended than Luciene's bloodline. The woman's raven-colored hair, clipped loosely atop her head, accented her fine features, contrasted by full lips.

"In truth, Senhora," Luciene replied. "My tears are not for a man. I would never allow any man to cause such tears!"

"*Claro*, an understandable wish, Senhorita. Please excuse my assumption. If only the rest of womankind were so certain of themselves."

She extended her hand. Luciene momentarily hesitated before reciprocating.

"I am Teresa and he...." She gestured toward the gentleman, somewhere in his mid-forties, seated at her other side. "He is my handsome husband, Joam.

Luciene silently agreed with her, though the husband was too heavysset for her taste. He leaned forward. A trim mustache flexed with the changing contour of his upper lip as he smiled.

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Senhorita, ahh...?"

"I am Luciene, thank you. It pleases me to meet you both, as well." She avoided the husband's very friendly stare and focused her attention on the wife.

Teresa admitted, "I was nervous, too, my first flight to America. My first flight anywhere. True for you, also, né?"

"Yes. Very surprised. The flying looks so smooth in the advertisements. But the noises, the sharp turns and turbulence, I had no idea. Rio at night, though...so beautiful from the air, né? So beautiful."

"The most beautiful of cities," Teresa agreed. Her expression turned serious. "Now, *querida*, don't be surprised if we experience more turbulence during the rest of the flight. The pilot will avoid what he can."

Luciene frowned at the news.

Teresa changed the topic. "Would you like something to drink? The crew has not begun cabin service but no problem for my Joam, He will charm a drink or two from them. What do you like? Nothing with alcohol, now. Later, they unlock the liquor cabinet."

"Please, I don't wish to bother...."

"No problem. My husband loves to practice his charm." She turned to Joam. "*Querido*, why don't you ask them for...uh, Luciene, would you like a cola?"

Luciene was not thirsty but Teresa's concern touched her.

"Cola is good. *Obrigado*."

Joam promised, "I shall return in victory." He unbuckled his seat belt. Once standing in the aisle, he wandered aft.

Luciene said, "You know much about the routines of flying, né?"

"Too much. I travel back and forth between New York and São Paulo for my business. Sometimes Rio, of course. Joam most always accompanies me for my Rio trips. He is *Carioca*, like you, born in Rio, né?"

"Yes, I am. How exciting...."

"Exciting? In the beginning, perhaps. Now, the best part, excluding visits to my family, is growing my business so I can reduce my business travels."

"Your own business? Wonderful. May I ask how many years you have lived in America?"

"Fifteen. My husband longer. We met in New York, at his restaurant on 46th Street. Little Brazil to 'New Yorkers'."

"Someday, Teresa, I hope to copy your success. But for now, my hope is to sleep on this flight before we land in *Nova York*."

"We should be able to sleep on-and-off during the flight. Your choice of a window seat was fortunate. It is more comfortable to sleep if you place the pillow against the cabin wall. And don't worry, after customs, your friends or family will see you well before you see them. At the International Arrivals Terminal, everyone stands behind barriers outside the exit. Every visitor sees every passenger whether you arrive looking like a Bella or a Beast!. And I intend to awake early enough before arrival to transform into a Bella."

Luciene commented, "You are a Bella at any time, Teresa."

Teresa smiled. "From a woman as beautiful as you, your compliment is much appreciated."

A curious stare replaced her traveling companion's smile when Luciene mentioned nothing about her arrival. Joam interrupted the awkward moment, a beverage in each hand, an attentive stewardess in tow. Why was Luciene not surprised?

He bowed and announced, "*Senhora, Senhorita*, I return in victory...your colas."

Luciene accepted the beverage and thanked Joam without engaging him in further conversation, instead addressing Teresa.

"After dinner, I will follow your suggestion and sleep as best I can. For now, I will begin the paperback novel my brother gave me."

"Use the eye shades, too," Teresa suggested. "Very helpful. They are in...."

Sitting in his seat again, Joam insisted, "Ladies, the night will still be young. There is time to read...."

Teresa interrupted him. The tone of her voice carried no trace of compromise, like a mother to an errant child.

"Luciene needs privacy, querido. Please, respect her wishes."

"I was simply trying...."

During the couple's exchange, Luciene retrieved the paperback from her shoulder bag stowed beneath the seat in front of her. She lowered the seat tray for her drink, and opened the book at random, feigning deep interest in the story.

Resigned, Joam removed the headphones from the pocket of the seat-back. He plugged in the set and lost himself in the music.

Teresa winked at Luciene before retrieving her own novel.

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Finished with Customs, Luciene entered the Concourse of the International Arrivals Building, a much more expansive space than anything at Galeão. Teresa's prediction was accurate, the crowd's size at 6:00 in the morning surprised her.

No awaited her arrival. She ignored the crowd's brief glances. From some of the men, not so brief.

An Information Desk caught her eye, the English and Spanish on its sign more or less equivalent to *português*. Luciene assumed the attendant was the middle-aged woman behind the desk, a darker mulata, like her mother.

She dragged her suitcase, one wheel now locked, to the desk and slipped her shoulder bag on to the counter top.

"*Fali português, Senhora?*" she asked.

"Excuse me, dear...*Habla usted Español, Señorita?*"

The woman's reply puzzled Luciene. *Does she think I speak Spanish?*

"*Não, Senhora, falo português. Seu Brasileira. Falamos português em Brasil.*"

A voice behind her called, "Luciene?"

She turned, saw Teresa, her expression a blend of uncertainty and concern. Joam was nowhere in sight.

"Please, I do not wish to pry but...may I translate? For the moment, né? My English is good, better than my husband's."

The surprising strength of Luciene's relief answered, "Oh, thank you, Teresa, Yes, yes, I do need help. The woman thinks I speak Spanish."

Teresa chuckled. "Most *Americanos* will think that. They cannot hear the difference! Strange, I know! Much will seem strange in New York."

"Yes, very much," Luciene replied. "Everything feels like in a dream, the everyday things do not feel so common. Everything demands your attention."

"*Ai*, yes, I was cross-eyed my first day. Uh...please, excuse me. No one has met you here, no family, no friends, né? Please be honest. Do you know anyone in New York?"

She frowned, glanced away.

Teresa answered for her, "I feared so. God bless, I thought I was a brave one coming to America."

Luciene's eyes glistened.

"No problem, *minha filha*. What do you wish to ask the attendant?"

The woman interrupted them. "Dear, if you have any questions, I can reach someone on the phone who speaks Portuguese, *se habla português...el teléfono.*"

"Thank you," Teresa answered in English. "That is no longer necessary. I will translate."

The cost of lodging shocked Luciene, the cost of transportation, too, and the cost of everything else. Her one-thousand-five-hundred American dollars, a substantial buffer in Rio, had dwindled to a child's pocket full of coins. One-thousand of the dollars was a loan, a major portion of her brother's life savings, she promised to repay as soon as possible.

Teresa translated every question and response, careful to make no unnecessary comments. Luciene's growing concern bordered on panic.

"Thank, you," she said to her new friend. "Please excuse me, now. I need a little time to think."

She wandered lost in thought a few meters from the booth, uncertain of her next move.

Teresa followed. "Please, allow me to make a proposal...."

Teresa finessed Luciene's objections to her offer a guest room in her condo by

insisting the stay would last a day or two, only until Luciene better oriented herself to America.

The day or two became a week or two, then a month or two.

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Luciene earned her keep. Brazilian husbands seldom displayed any inclination for household chores. She did whatever eased her new friend's burden, though her single attempt at cooking would never be repeated, a skill that held minimal interest for her.

She filled a void for the childless Teresa. Luciene learned she was in her mid-forties, several years older than Joam.

Cooler weather soon arrived, along with a hatcheck position at Joam's restaurant. Teresa encouraged him to offer Luciene the position. The money, in particular the tips from male customers, surprised her, though most American women tended to treat her more brusquely.

Strange people, the Americanas.

Not so strangely, Joam behaved more typically *Brasileiro* at the restaurant. His attention and charm assault complicated her life, though at home, he epitomized the perfect husband.

Teresa's refusal to accept payment for room and board allowed Luciene the opportunity to save more quickly for a roommate's opening from the remaining half of her income not wired back to her *mommae* in Rio. Two months rent was required for a down payment, plus a payout, much like the equity increase in a home, to the outgoing roommate. Finding a place could not happen fast enough.

Every night before sleep, her quiet prayer drifted heavenward. *Dear, God, please protect my family. Please increase my tips, I need to leave this apartment as soon as possible. Please keep Joam's pinto pointed at anybody else but me. Please, keep Teresa's heart from breaking. Amen*

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Tuesday was not Luciene's normal day off. She had sacrificed earnings to help Teresa organize for a business trip to Brazil the next day, the first such trip since Luciene's arrival as a quest.

Teresa insisted on cooking dinner for Joam, the starving husband from a restaurant staffed with chefs. Both women were prepping dinner in the kitchen when the phone rang. Luciene continued chopping onions.

"*Querido*, where are you?" Teresa asked. "Dinner will soon be...ah, yes, yes, I understand. When...?"

Joam obviously spoke at the other end of the line. *Querido* seldom failed to give his wife adequate notice about last minute changes in plan.

"Okay, no problem. Okay...always room for another...." Teresa ended the conversation with her usual, "*Tchau. Beijo, beijo,*" glanced toward Luciene and hung up. "*Ai, ai, ai,* two more...."

"Guests?" said Luciene.

"Não, não, one guest. Two half-breasts. I thawed four, two for us, two for Joam. Could you...."

"I'll leave now for the butcher."

The nuisance of a barely understood language would never discourage Luciene from helping a friend. She retrieved her winter coat, compliments of the Salvation Army, and paused at the entrance door to button it against the chill.

"*Olha, Teresa! What is the Inglês again, um...tusheeks en...en bresquedetch?*"

"No, no *querida... two chicken breast cutlets.' Say breast cutlets'. Do you understand? Say...*"

"Yes, yes, no problem. I will return soon. *Tchau!*"

She trotted the three blocks to the butcher, the collar of her coat turned up, pressed against her freezing ears. Late fall in New York City meant the return of the Ice Age for Luciene. If a woolly mammoth lumbered around the next corner, she would not be surprised.

The butcher, an immigrant from Trinidad twenty-years earlier, and was accustomed to dealing with the more recent, non-English speaking immigrants of the neighborhood.

Ali, Ali...tusheeks en bresquedetch!" Luciene struggled to point accurately at the specific piece of meat behind the high, curved surface of a glass case.

The butcher reached toward the pork cutlet next to the full chicken breasts.

Luciene surrendered to her frustration, "*Não, não, Senhor., não. Tusheeks... Ai, buceta! Olha, Senhor! Olha, olha me!*"

She tucked-in her arms, elbows out. Flapping her "wings," she mimicked her culture's chicken sounds. To assure no misunderstanding about the exact anatomical part, she unbuttoned her coat, cupped her hands around each breast, ample by any culture's standard, and raised each as high as nature allowed.

The butcher's laughter bent him at the waist and infected Luciene. Her laughter entwined with his. Their humorous antics were approaching the point of pain as a new customer entered the shop. He was puzzled him at first. Soon, unable to stop himself, laughter rushed past his widening smile.

Some minutes passed before a semblance of business decorum returned, interspersed by the butcher's chuckles and head shaking. He played dumb in the hope of a repeat performance. English or no English, Luciene's stern expression, as well as her index finger wagging back-and-forth, left much doubt his plan would succeed. A wise man, he abandoned the attempt, though his smile failed to fade until long after she paid him, blew a "thank you" *beijo* and departed, chicken breasts in hand.

Joam and his friend had arrived during Luciene's shopping trip/body language performance. The sudden eruption of laughter from the kitchen puzzled the two men, firmly entrenched in the living room and sipping a round of Makers Mark bourbon, the ice ringing the sides of their crystal glasses.

Luciene expected nothing more, though the scent of their cigar smoke was not an unpleasant aroma. Teresa had needed the bit of fun to lift her spirits. Luciene suspected her friend's business trip was more an escape from the stress of her workload in New York. Mr. Charming's surprise gifts, many quite expensive, and his velvet compliments

demanded a price.

The men appreciated the after-dinner tale of Luciene's adventure. Whenever one of them flapped his arms and clucked, a chorus of laughter resounded. She suspected the multiple bottles of wine may have helped to heighten everyone's appreciation. Throughout the evening, Joam stole glances at her more often than usual with Teresa present at home. Luciene intended to spend minimal time in the apartment during her friend's absence.

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An early season arrival of what began as large, wet flakes tumbled en masse onto streets and sidewalks. Fortunately for Teresa, her flight to Brazil departed well ahead of the cusp-of-the-evening, snow shower.

Much like Luciene's first view of Rio from the air, the snow captivated her. The gritty edges of reality, the mundane urban environment of parked cars, street lights and trash cans lined along the ragged topped, brick canyon of multistory apartment buildings, softened before her eyes.

The frozen crystals reminded Luciene of herself, each flake fleeing from a sad, gray sky to float down to an unknown fate. Their success had seemed uncertain at first. Most had melted on contact with the warmer sidewalks of concrete and the blacktop road. The scattered islands of snow accumulating on colder surfaces, the metal car bodies and manhole covers, the trash can lids held on until the frozen air of evening descended to rescue the survivors.

Then the mounds transformed the landscape.

Curious to feel the snow, to smell even taste the flakes, Luciene slid the patio door open and stepped into the chilled air of the balcony, despite the feeble protection of only a thin blue sweater,. The shock of cold raised the hairs on her arms.

The shock of a different chill raised the alarm of her sixth sense. She turned toward the apartment.

Wednesday was a busy day at Joam's restaurant. The day demanded his presence, the very reason Luciene chose Wednesday for her day off. However, with Teresa gone, Joam suddenly suffered a case of the flu. With Teresa present, sick or otherwise, he had not stayed once home during Luciene's two-months as a house guest.

When he never left his bedroom, her suspicion somewhat eased. She did reduce intended household chores, as well as make a last minute change of plan to visit a new friend, a *Brasileira*, she met at the restaurant. The young woman sometimes dined there three nights a week, an expensive habit. She lived only several stops away on the Number 7 train, an elevated line when it reached Astoria, Queens.

Luciene's delay to marvel at the snowfall offered Joam his opportunity. He crept from the bedroom to the head of the hallway to ogle her. How long he acted the part of a medieval gargoyle was her least concern. Joam had tossed all his chips on the table. The bottom edge of his T-shirt, the only clothing he wore, draped from the overhang of his middling-sized paunch.

He slowly stroked an erection swelled far beyond average size, what must have been his pride and joy. The oversized *pinto may* have accounted for part of Teresa's

attraction to the oaf. How she fit him in was beyond Luciene.

She glanced away, disgusted more than shocked, her mind racing through possible options. *Damn him, the idiot. My job...damn him. Now what? One quick fuck to keep my job, to satisfy the pig? For how long? Ai, Teresa, my friend, this sofado will break your heart. Must I, too?*

She forced herself to focus on him, the bare-ass blossom of his rounded hips and buttocks. *"Não, não, I will not do this, not to Teresa, not to myself! I will survive somehow. Somehow."*

For a *Brasileira*, Luciene was an Amazon. Barefoot, she could stare eye-level with Joam. His weight and mass were her primary problem, thirty-kilo worth of problem. Fear and anger opened her defensive floodgates; adrenaline surged through her bloodstream and sharpened the details and clarity of the space and objects around her.

To gain time, to think, to prepare, she cried-out, "Joam! *Qui merda*. What are you doing?"

Eyes half-closed, he moaned, *"Ai, querida!* I need you. I'll die if I don't...."

"Good, *filho do puta*, die then! Do your wife and me a favor. You think I would betray her for...?"

Five meters away, he rushed at her.

Luciene flicked the cigarette at him before positioning herself to keep the coffee table and the couch between them. She picked up the ceramic vase, dumped its contents. Flowers and water cascaded onto the table, the floor, her sweater. She held the vase like a warrior's shield in front of her. Fleeing from the brute never occurred to her, instinctively aware a run for the door would fail.

Think, think...his "pride and joy!"

He slowed his charge, more cautious now. Most women would have already attempted to escape. He stopped behind the couch separating the living room from the dining area.

"Come here, *puta*, you want it, I know you want it. You think I don't have eyes, né? I see how you dress to provoke, to excite me..."

Despite her ample breasts, Luciene seldom wore a bra, a contraption her detested father forced her to she wear as a budding teen. It was that or a beating, though she always removed it before arriving at school.

"The butcher, you made him a happy man, now make me one, too! Time to show your appreciation." Joam circled his hands in the air, working an invisible lasso. "Come here...come here. Now!"

Loathing drenched Luciene's laughter. "With that belly! Your pathetic, little dick does not stick out far enough. *Ai*, yes! I can't wait to have you flopping over me. Your belly so big, you fuck but can't kiss, kiss but can't fuck." She feigned a look of desire, pressed one palm against the other to pantomime a seesaw, one end up as the other went down. "Aiiii...piggy, come to me with your pathetic dick, your big belly."

A growl, a junkyard dog rattle erupted from the depths of Joam's throat.

Luciene braced herself.

He leaped, cleared the back of the sofa, a surprising maneuver for a man so out of shape and landed crouched, unsteady on the soft sofa cushions.

She backed toward the patio door, vase in hand.

Joam sprang over the coffee table. He landed flat-footed, tilted forward on the floor, arms up to protect his head from a thrown vase.

Luciene aimed the vase. It shattered on top of his bare feet.

In pain, holding one foot, balanced on the other, he shouted, "*Filia da puta.*"

She stepped forward, grasped his shoulders and pulled his body toward her. Alcohol saturated his breath. Luciene mustered every ounce of strength she possessed and slammed her knee into his groin, crushing his testicles.

The momentum of Joam's collapse bowled Luciene over. She scrambled from under him, regained her footing. He struggled to rise, oblivious to his surroundings. Unlike his traumatized genitalia, he managed a half-erect stance then doubled over in agony, his head toward the balcony and vomited.

Luciene stepped behind him, cocked her leg and pressed the soul of her sneaker against his buttocks and kicked-out. The effect was more forceful than she anticipated.

Transformed into a human cannonball, Joam soared over the threshold of the open balcony door. He slid face down across the narrow width of the snow covered concrete floor to collide headfirst into a steel support pole of the balcony fence. He lay sprawled on floor, his body motionless. Blood seeped into the snow, stained crimson near his scalp wound,.

Luciene stared, shocked. She dashed to lock the balcony door, thought better of it and shoved the coffee table aside to yank the throw rug beneath the table off the floor. Before locking the door, she tossed the rug, most of it landing atop Joam. She did not intend to cause his potential death due to freezing but the police were the last people a *Brasileira* with an expired tourist visa needed.

She compromised.

Luciene first rummaged through the kitchen to retrieve a garbage bag, large and heavy-duty enough to carry her few possessions. Next, she hurried to her bedroom, threw open drawers and stuffed the black plastic bag with their contents. She certainly did not forget the money hidden due to her distrust Joam.

From the closet near the entrance, she grabbed the heaviest winter apparel there, all part of her friend's wardrobe. Leaving payment behind for the items was futile, Joam would only steal the money. Dressed in a winter coat, she ran to the kitchen and phoned 911. She knew that much about America.

"911 operator. What is the nature of your emergency?"

"Uh...helpa, Uh...blohd, en haidch, " she linguistically fumbled. "*Necessito* Dohctor. Uh, I leev...eightch, tree, dasha, four niney, Cohllier Avenua, apartamentch tree gee."

"Excuse me, say that again, please, Miss. Where are you, what is your address?"

"*Qui?*"

The operator asked, "*Donde tu esta?*"

Luciene repeated the address in Spanish and hung up during the operator's mid-attempt to elicit more information. Remaining at the scene of the crime was not an option.

She scanned the balcony one last time. No change. Leaving the entrance door deliberately unlocked, she rushed out the apartment and charged down three flights of

stairs to the street. The nature of her job resignation, now officially tendered, brought a grin to her face. The image of a naked Joam cowering in the snow delighted her, too, though tears began to well at the thought of Teresa, the loss of their friendship.

Contacting Teresa was pointless. Joam would claim Luciene attacked him after he spurned the puta's advances. Most wives, like her mother, were desperate to hang onto their marriage, believed anything a husband fed them.

Luciene intended never to marry anyone under any circumstances. Ever.

The snowfall had increased, the flakes transformed into compact, frozen diamonds reflecting the streetlight and muting the background noises of the city, another of snow's magical effects. She lingered across the street from the condo. White blanketed everything, including her.

Soon, an EMS ambulance, lights flashing, appeared around the corner and slid to a halt in front of the main entrance of the condo building. Joam's head peered over the balcony railing, his cursing and pounding on the patio door, broadened her grin.

She turned toward the Number 7 line. Her footprints traced a path in the snow to the base of the El's steep, metal staircase. She climbed the steps, the plastic bag draped over her shoulder, just another immigrant in New York City.

Hola, America, I am here...like it or not.

A lioness prowled deeper into the heart of New York City, her family's survival dependent on her.

~~ The End ~~