

Rains in Rio

Cristhiano liked the rainy season. When the warm rain made the beaches empty in the middle of the day. He liked just after the rain stopped. How the storms cleaned the streets and the drying rain made *Pavao-Pavaozinho* seem new again, washed of people and concrete dust. He would listen to the sound the rain made in the favela, the splashes on the leaves, the drumming on the tin and the plastic rooftops. On his porch outside his room, Cristhiano watched the water coming down the mountain. Close to the bottom of the favela the rain had time to gather and form into streams and when the rain was strong the streams came down in a force that made solid rushes of water the circumferences and diameters the same as the poles that held up the wires. It was as entertaining as anything else and Cristhiano studied how the shapes of the water changed with the intensity. The slower streams were clear and agreeable. The heavier and fatter water was more insistent, its white edges impolite. At times the force of the water would dislodge something up the mountain and pieces of fresh trees and dead branches and the favela's garbage would go by, and the fast water would become brown with mud.

It was April and the rainy season in Rio de Janeiro was nearly over. Still, the worst rains, the damaging ones, happened often in April and Cristhiano had heard from his more accurate neighbors that a strong and long storm was coming. Everyone should clear the pathways that the fallen rain would take when it gathered and came down the mountain.

Violetta had not yet moved into her new apartment and when she was not staying with a friend or with a client, she was living in the middle section of the house her father had built with his friends in the favela *morro da Babilonia*. It reminded her of her father, she said, and she always liked the view. Cristhiano's mother had recently told Cristhiano that Violetta had been staying there less and less often. "She does stay sometimes," Carola assured her son. "All her things are here." Violetta had been so excited when she told him about her new apartment, an apartment she would acquire and have for the next two years. She just had to come up with a sum of money and then wait until the apartment became available in June. She had given up her old apartment to save money. Violetta had thanked Cristhiano for his offer to stay with him in Pavao-Pavaozinho. For his sake she had said, she said she would not.

With the rain, Cristhiano called Violetta. When she answered her voice was rushed and distracted and she told him she would call him back in a few minutes. She did not but she had done that before. An hour passed, and then another. The rain kept on. Now the streams were coming down the mountain in places Cristhiano had never seen before. With this much rain, the mud was general on the favela.

There were sounds the mountainside made only in a sustained rain and the residents of the favela could not help associating those sounds with the impending sliding of earth. Longtime residents would tell of times when the rains were so strong and sustained that it brought with it avalanches of mud capable of removing large pieces of the favela. Whole houses could go sliding by and end up in rubble at the bottom. It would take years for the residents to pick the useful things from the pile.

The flooding had begun in the proper streets of Rio. The cell phones did not work. Cristhiano could not reach his parents and he could not reach Violetta. The stream that he could see from his porch grew wider still than the poles that held up the wires, wider still than the trunk of any tree in the city. He could try to get to morro da Babilonia after the rain had stopped and make sure that everyone was okay. The only thing to do was to stay and wait out the rain. The only thing to do was to leave while he could still help.

Cristhiano needed to use his hands in the dark. The pedestrian walkway that crossed Pavao-Pavaozinho was always shadowy at night but now nearly all the lights were out. The transformers had shorted, and as the favela's *gato*, Cristhiano knew a fair number of those transformers he would need to repair later. Some people had generators and there were occasional lights from the motorcycle taxis busy carrying passengers trying to get home, less afraid to ride on the back of the motorcycles than to walk in the rain. The narrow walkway normally offered shelter but now there were too many spouts for Cristhiano to avoid. When he reached the long set of stairs down the center of Pavao-Pavaozinho he found the stairs empty. In such a downpour, the residents of the favela knew not to walk on them. There were

handrails at intermittent places and the ones that were still upright would collapse if too much weight was pressed against them. The first score of stairs offered no railings and Cristhiano stepped sideways with his feet, fearing his balance. People fall down these stairs in the driest of times, their tumbling taken over by the steepness of *morro do Cantagalo*. A tram line that had once worked ran alongside the stairway and rushing down the tram line was a torrent of water, the spray splashing the stairs from a direction other than the rain. The sound was that of a determined train, never arriving. With every step, Cristhiano planned where he might catch himself if he began to fall. Twice his only option was to sit on the stairs. Cristhiano kept on. The only relief would come at the bottom. At the bottom, the water was running down both sides of *Rua Saint Roman*, making a trail of mud and debris down the street's center and at its edges. Most of the botecos were shuttered tight from the rain but Cristhiano passed one occupied by a half dozen men drinking and laughing. They had placed a long wooden plank to get over the rushing water and now several of them were studying it, watching the water rising, surmising it would soon take the plank away. Their faces seemed the same faces Cristhiano had seen when he passed a larger boteco on the pedestrian walkway. The larger boteco also had men drinking and laughing but these men had brought with them their families. Their generator ran the lights and their propane the stoves and the people were making pots of food and keeping the children out of the rain. They could always go back and check on their houses later.

Cristhiano took the easier stairs from *Rua Saint Roman* down to *Rua Sa Ferreira*. He hoped the streets were better now that he was out of the favela. The metro was closed due to flooding. The three stops would have saved him nearly two kilometers in the rain. He walked toward *Av. Nossa Senhora de Copacabana* knowing the long avenue would eventually reach

where he could begin the rise to favela *morro da Babilonia*. The *Tunel Preteito Sa' Freire Aluim* would have kept him out of the rain for a while, but there could be flooding inside the tunnel.

It was a face, her specific expression, that Cristhaino had learned so early in his life. It was turned down a bit, Violetta's face, not too much but requiring her to look through the bottom of her lashes above her eyes, so green and so blue at the same time, like when you decide the ocean looks greener today than it does blue. It was a face that explained his hope, that defined his hope for him. When he was with her, he would wait until he could see it and sometimes, just this, his waiting, made an awkwardness between them.

But she would smile, and he would notice less her fine teeth, or how well her nearly black hair framed her features. Notice less how her cheekbones were puffy and her nose flatten only at the sides. It started with near visible flash that seemed to go back into her eyes, and after some pause, her face would relax and widen.

And her face would stay with him a long time.

Rio was drowning. Rain gathered from higher places crashed together in the streets. The water had pushed cars and buses and trucks into odd angles. Objects the water could not move it made against them unrelenting white walls of splashing. The rain entered the ground floors of buildings. Inside stores, merchandise scattered. In restaurants, tables and chairs floated and swirled. The lights of an ambulance made wet moving red glows reflecting in all the water and on the glass of the upper floors of the white buildings. Giant puddles collected over the seats of city benches. There were long stretches where no one was on the street but him, where

Cristhiano had walked many times before but could now not tell where he was. He needed to keep changing the sides of the different streets or walk down the middle or double back to go up side streets to reach another avenue that was not yet flooded. It was the only way to make it across Copacabana and he worried several times that he may get trapped. It was best to continue along the avenues closest to the side of the rise of the mountains, but it also meant it was where the water would be rushing with its greatest strength, and Cristhiano had to avoid these torrents for surely they would knock him to the ground. The hardest rain thus far fell when Cristhiano worked his way down the center of *Rua Barata Ribeiro*. The rain fell in diagonal patterns and made violent and fast-moving walls across the avenue, ranks and files, like the rapid advances of aggression, and the next advance, and the next. Nothing to do but stop. Nothing to do but to continue through it.

The mud thickened. It came over his feet to his ankles. The mud seemed a new consistency, lifeless but moving, and even in the strange light he could see it was a different color. The mud sucked off his left and then his right shoe, the right one taking a good deal of time for Cristhiano find it at the bottom. When Cristhiano approached morro da Babilonia he came upon the lights of emergency trucks and the lights made him wonder why such a modest part of Rio de Janeiro was receiving this much attention. He had earlier heard that the lagoon had flooded and near the lagoon lived all those rich people in Gavea and Ipanema and Leblon. The mud got deepest, nearly to his knees, where the streets began to rise up the slope of morro da Babilonia.

Looking up, Cristhiano could see a space where all the vegetation was gone, exposing the bright flesh of the mountain. Whole three-story structures of the favela were gone. Piles of

unstable debris were strewn across the streets of Leme at the bottom. Cristhiano had to climb with his hands to continue through the mud. Men in yellow rain suits were pulling people from the rubble, the bodies lifeless and wholly covered with mud. Civilians were helping. Cristhiano pretended he did not hear them calling to him. They might believe too loud was the rain.

Just passed all the activity were the stairs Cristhiano had always used to get up to his parents' house. The stairs were muddy, but still there. The stairs were not wide and Cristhiano squeezed passed a fair amount of people coming down them. Cristhiano was the only one going up. Unlike the stairs in Pavao-Pavaozinho, this set had railings on both sides, and without the railings there would be no way to get up the hill. From memory, and from whatever glow there was from the city below, Cristhiano found his way toward the house his father had built.

It was several months ago when Cristhiano had walked to the Balcony to watch Violetta. He told himself that he had not planned to watch her, just happened to be out on one of his walks, and that he had not seen her for some time. When he would call, she would tell him always that she was busy with something else, and she always sounded happy.

Cristhiano stood outside on the sidewalk, his body obscured by the tent the night club used to cover its tables, taking up a good portion of the wide sidewalk along Av. Atlantica. Violetta had told him she preferred to work in the bar, explaining that the tables under the tent were filled mostly with groups of tourists, having fun for sure, having money for sure, but they could at times get out of control. At the bar, it was more likely she would meet someone who had come by themselves.

Cristhiano watched Violetta walk in off *Rua Ronald de Carvalho* and into the bar. The bar was completely exposed to the Rio night and Cristhiano found a good angle to watch her. It was near eleven o'clock and he wondered if she had a customer earlier in the night. Perhaps not. She had walked in from the direction of her apartment. Cristhiano watched Violetta stroll slowly, surveying the area. The bar was busy and loud. The high-top tables a few feet away were calmer but still the men and ladies leaned closely when they spoke. Violetta stood by herself for a moment, watching the tables, looking pleasant, polite, not aggressive as some of the girls could be. She held a face she did not show Cristhiano.

As their different souls moved through the world, Cristhiano thought again that hers was moving much faster to some other place, a place with sharper lines, more in focus, better lit than was his own.

Her black dress fit her so nicely and it nearly matched the shade of her hair. Given the distance, perhaps it was in his mind's own eye that Cristhiano could see the brightness of Violetta's eyes. She had only to smile once until she was invited to sit at a table with a middle-aged man. In her profession, the quality of her smile would make her work so much easier. She had the ability to look happy anywhere, in circumstances tense and tedious, with people she did not yet know.

Cristhiano left while she was still talking and sipping her bright red drink the man had bought for her.

It was dark in the favela. Cristhiano could not help thinking of all the work the gatos had to do to get the lights back on. In the slow climb Cristhiano thought of the details of his work for

it helped manage his fear that the house would not be there, that the people that lived in the house would not be there. For the first time this evening, Cristhiano felt how tired he was. The climb gave him time to remember his effort to get here. He had often complained to his father that they had built the house so far up the hill. The climb was always exhausting. Now it was the house's place, its location on the steep hill, that gave him hope.

And the house was there.

When Cristhiano opened the door to his family's section he found it empty. It made his insides fall again until he heard something through the walls. Cristhiano found his mother and his father and two sisters in the middle section, Violetta's section, clustered together with Emilio and his family. They had concluded the middle section was probably the strongest.

"Has Pavao washed away?" Leandro asked his son.

"No. I don't think so."

"Why did you come here?"

"I wanted to make sure you are all okay," Cristhiano told him.

Even so wet, Carola came over and hugged her son for a long time.

"Yes, we are far enough up the mountain that the mud is below us. I was only worried there may be no way out."

"Why did you not go down earlier?"

"Where would we stay?"

Cristhiano nodded and looked around the room.

"Violetta is not here," Cristhiano's mother told him.

"Is she alright? Have you heard from her?"

“Yes, she called Emilio’s phone hours ago. She’s going to spend the night with someone she met.”

Cristhiano nodded again. Why had Violetta not called him? He thought about whether he should go back home. He held onto his face in the room but then he walked out the door to look at the rain.

“What are you doing?” His mother came outside after a time.

“I can’t get any wetter,” Cristhiano smiled at her.

The rain was loud on the trees and on the buildings.

From the favela, the city looked like what the favela looked like from the city; where there were lights the rain made them shimmer and blur. From here, Cristhiano could see the high break of the waves on the Atlantic Ocean, violent, like was the rain and the city.

Tomorrow the rain would stop, and he would look for Violetta. He would assess the damage to his city. He would determine that he and his city heal once again.

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