

The Little House

I kept my tiaras on hooks on the walls. Those walls were not reliable. Often the stucco crumbled. The tiaras were crocheted in cotton, strung with beads and sequins. They hung beside my bed, the top bunk of a bed I bought so that Chico would have a place to sleep below me. The night the rats invaded the house, my bed was the safest place to be.

This bedroom was in the front of the house which was barely a house at all. A very small house. We called it “the little house,” *casinha*, in Portuguese. My bedroom was the size of a walk-in closet. Rita occupied the bedroom behind mine. Hers was slightly nicer, decorated with her spare photography. A transparent white canopy hung over her bed. The bedrooms opened up onto the main room, big enough for several more people to sleep on cushions on the floor. Big enough for a refrigerator and a small stove attached to a propane tank. No other furniture. No table or chairs. The cement floor was painted the color of dried blood.

There was a concrete courtyard out back and an outhouse that doubled as a cold water shower. We heated water in a large pot on the stove and lugged it outside for sponge baths in cool weather. We soaked our jeans in a plastic basin, then stretched them out on the concrete and scrubbed them clean with coarse bristles.

In the summer, the louvered windows were shut tight to keep out the heat. When the sun fell below the horizon, darkness arrived heavy as velvet. We unbolted the windows, optimistic that a breeze might blow in. The jasmine air. The batucada beats from the valley below us. A single bulb swung from a cord attached to the ceiling. Sometimes we replaced its unflattering light with candles, after our supper of French bread toasted over an open burner and a mug of milky coffee, when the men brought out their guitars. Someone rolled a joint. Five of us lived there then. Me, Rita, Chico. Micau and Orlando. Rita, Chico, and Micau were from a family of twelve siblings, all of whom would pass through the little house at one time

or another but never all at the same time. Orlando was Micau's boyfriend. I had once been someone's girlfriend but that was over now.

There was an iron gate at the top of our street. It was unlocked. Our street was not a street at all. It was a staircase on the verge of disintegration that led down a hill past a handful of houses like ours and then drifted off, unfinished, into the brown grass. There was a dirt path in the distance that traveled further downwards to the place where the priests and priestesses of Candomblé performed their rituals and initiated their acolytes.

I left the little house and I returned. While I was away, I thought of the first night I slept there, when I was seventeen and in love. Ripe and raw and open to everything. When I returned, it was the top bunk, the mildewed sheets, a waning moon, the company of my notebook and the I Ching. It didn't seem right to wear the tiaras out in public anymore so I left them hanging.

When I left Bahia—for good, I thought at the time—I placed the heavy iron key on Rita's bed. It made an imprint on her white sheets. No one was home. A day's dust had settled on the floor. I would not live in the little house again although Rita stayed there awhile longer and other brothers and sisters and strangers from abroad came and went.

Decades later the grillwork gate is locked. A few times Rita and I have pressed our faces against up the bars and called out down the surviving stairs in hope that someone will let us in. But no one ever answers.