

Muito Perigoso

by **Jeremiah Bass**

When we got off the plane, the first thing I noticed was the smell. Every foreign country I've visited has its own odor. Brazil was no different. A mild hint of salty air reminded me of Jamaica, where Casie and I had been wed nearly eleven years earlier, but the lingering smell of unsanitary bathrooms reminded me of the Greyhound buses I'd frequented as an adventurous youth. The smell was just the first in a long line of surprises and potential hazards.

Side streets were shared with horses, mules, donkeys, goats, cows, sheep, and the occasional iguana. Healthy trees weren't cut down when roads were made, either. These mid-road diversions were spray painted white and orange so motorists didn't crash into them. The abrasions and bits of plastic and glass embedded in the bark indicated how well this tactic worked.

We arrived for our seven-month stay at the end of the rainy season and the thin layers of asphalt had washes and gullies that would have destroyed our 1980 VW Beetle had we been unfortunate enough to veer into one. To make drivers aware of these mid-street chasms, Brasileiros filled the holes with whatever broken bits of furniture they had lying around. One morning there was a bent, metal, fold-up chair sticking about six inches out of a hole big enough for a child-sized desk. A few mornings later, that same hole required a fold-up table to raise awareness.

While Casie worked at the university—a forty-minute drive one way—I taught English lessons at the university and to private clients near our vizinhança. My students were professors, children of professors, business managers, lawyers, doctors, and my favorite, Paolo, a middle-aged man who designed water slides for *Beach Park*—the home of the *Insano*, Brazil's tallest water slide.

Paolo and I spent many days walking up and down the beach in front of the apartment my wife and I were fortunate enough to stumble upon—a two-bedroom that

came fully furnished, including dishes, pots and pans, sheets, and a drying rack; all clothes were hand washed and air dried. In front of our apartment, there was a baía: a small bay that filled with high tide and emptied with low tide. “Muito perigoso!” Paolo told me on our first long stroll down the coast of the Atlantic. At first, I struggled to see the danger. Water went in, water went out. During high tide, from our balcony, I’d watched kite-surfers skim the waves of the too-blue water, their boards moving as fast as the sea birds they’d startle from the resting water. During low tide, fisherman would rush around the ankle-deep water netting stranded fish, crabs, and mussels. But then I recognized that between high and low tide, when water rushed through the bottleneck of the bay, no one, not even the boldest kite surfers, would skim through those vacuum-like rip currents.

After Paolo showed me the safest way to get from our apartment to the bay, I ventured there daily as part of my mental health regimen. Walk on the beach, yoga on the beach, meditate on the beach, then trudge back through the cacti and discarded coconut husks that lined the goat trail connecting our apartment to the seaside. I could have driven the two and a half kilometers from our apartment to the nearest road that wasn’t flooded or filled with livestock, but on most days, the walk to and from the beach was enlightening.

I’d come across multiple squatters in the scrub brush. They lived in a halfway finished apartment complex where construction had been suspended indefinitely since the complex’s proprietor didn’t actually own the land upon which he’d started building his multi-million-dollar luxury suites. Not only were these unfinished skeletons the only thing impeding our view of the bay, they were also a perfect home for unsavory types. There was constant access to fresh mango and cashew fruits in the scrub, but they also fished and crabbed. While these squatters didn’t have much money for luxury foods, rice and beans—staples of the Brazilian diet—were cheap. Recycling was one way to get enough money for these essentials, mugging was another. Helping people park and then guarding their car as they strolled the beach was easiest and therefore, most common labor for the squatters.

For fifty American cents, you could have one of these squatters stop traffic, direct you to the best parking spot, stop traffic again when you wanted to leave, and clean

your windows. Meeting them in the scrub between our apartment and the beach wasn't the same kind of interaction. If they thought you might have money, you could give them some, or they may try to take it—which is why I would walk to the beach in nothing but my bathing suit and a pair of worn out running shoes. My broad tattooed chest may have been my saving grace. Standing nearly a foot taller than the average Brasileiro may have helped too. Or perhaps it was just the odd luck that had followed me throughout Brazil. On more than one occasion, our VW died during the commute to or from the University. On every one of those occasions, within a three-minute walk—or ten minutes of pushing the Fusca—an able and inexpensive mechanic had us back on the road in minutes. Luck, it seemed, was on my side.

Near the entrance to the bay, there was a rock formation that had been shaped by eons of high and low tides. It was filled with holes that held water at low tide. Aquatic life like crabs, sea anemones, sea urchins, and things I can't begin to name in English or Portuguese lived in these holes. During low tide, the rock formations were about shoulder high on me. Casie and I would explore the holes, looking for whatever creatures we could find, daring one another to touch these unnamable entities.

At high tide, the rock formations lingered under mere inches of water like stony crocodiles. Throughout my life I've had a strange fear of things sticking out of dark water. As a young man, it was trees that hadn't been cut down during the creation of the many small lakes my family fished. The underwater moss that crept along the rotting bark of uncut trees sent shivers up my spine. The ten, twelve, or fifteen feet of dead tree that reached through the surface, standing in lakes like Devil's Kitchen, had the same spine-chilling effect. In Brazil, the rocks that were such a source of pleasure at low tide were an equal source of fear during high tide.

Most days I'd time my mental health walks and lessons with Paolo for low tide. Not only did this give me the chance to explore the rock formations, but it also offered an extra hundred yards of flat, packed sand to stroll down. Depending on the tide, the walk could be heavenly path or a scalding, shell-filled road of perdition.

On the weekends, Casie and I would hit the beach early, before the hordes of city dwellers overtook the sandy retreat. Often, we'd drive the two and a half kilometers to the nearest safe parking spot to avoid the potential mugging waiting for us in the

scrub. Down a one lane, cobblestone road—with only a few trees and pothole obstacles threatening harm—a narrow parking lot lay hidden.

After a breakfast of Pao de coco, eggs, and bananas we'd slip into our suits, start up the Beetle, and pilot the rust bucket down the cobblestones. All valuables were locked safely in the car, where our fifty-cent guardian would stand barefoot, scaring away would-be thieves.

On a normal Saturday morning, about four months into our stay, we woke up later than usual but still decided to drive to the beach in hopes for a spot among the crowds we knew we would find. We found the last parallel parking spot outside the parking lot. There were three cars behind us that would have to use the lot and pay for their day at the beach. As per our usual routine, we disrobed, sluffed off our sandals, and I tied the car keys to the inside of my swim suit.

The tide was higher than usual, but not "high." If we walked fast, we'd still be able to dig through the cavernous rock formations. The sun, already blisteringly hot, forced us to take a few time-consuming dips in the Atlantic, though typically we just walked along the edge of the water, skimming our feet in the waves.

The closer we got to the bay, the further back beachgoers seemed to be moving their gear. When we neared an old fishing shack a few dozen yards or from the bay, sunbathers had positioned themselves almost at the dunes—where the water broke during the highest of tides.

"Do you want to turn around," Casie asked.

I thought about it for a second, and replied, "Let's keep going." It was a beautiful, cloudless day, the breeze was cooling, the sound of the waves crashing against the beach drowned out all the noise of weekenders. A kite-surfer hit a high wave and took flight for a few seconds before another high wave caught the bottom of his board. It was a spectacular showing of control.

"Did you see that?" I asked. But Casie's attention wasn't on the kite-surfer. Where the bay met the ocean, a group of people stood shouting and pointing at the water. A few weeks before I'd seen a huge loggerhead in that very spot. I know that Casie, like I, hoped it was the cause of the excitement. We looked at one another and started running.

In the water, where ocean tide was rushing into the bay, there was a current strong enough to keep the kite-surfers away, a current that had ensnared a young Brasileiro.

“Ajudem-no! Ajudem-no!” “Help him!” The excited crowd shouted at no one in particular. Fifteen people stood around watching the boy sink, then struggle back up through the surface, then sink again. By the time we arrived, he was exhausted to the point that he couldn’t keep his head above the water.

Two men with life jackets stood waist deep in the rushing current trying to wade out to the boy. At the rate they were going, neither had a chance of getting him in time. A heavy Brasileiro threw the lid of his Styrofoam cooler, but the current pulled it away before the boy could grab hold. Panicked chants of, “Ajudem-no! Ajudem-no!” continued.

My heart raced. Casie squeezed my hand tightly. I looked at her, questioning. We both knew I could get to him before the waders could. I’d been trained as a lifeguard and knew how to grab the boy and swim him to safety, but Paolo’s caution echoed in my mind, “Muito perigoso!” “Muito perigoso!” “Muito perigoso!”

I took my sun glasses off, handed them to Casie, walked across the terrifying, cavernous rock formation, and dove in into the current. My feet scraped down a hidden edge of the rocks. A stinging burn shot up my leg as salt water debride the wound. I looked for the boy as I swam, but could not see him. The current pulled on me like the g-force in an accelerating car. Taking slow, heavy breaths, I pushed on.

When I got to where he should have been, the boy was gone. Fighting against the current, I looked for help from the crowd of shouting onlookers. It was like trying to get answers from a panicked, foreign language speaking audience of *The Price Is Right*. There wasn’t anything coherent at first, but the shouting made sense after a few slow-moving split seconds, the boy was under the water.

I dove.

I opened my eyes, salt water stinging them, my leg burning.

I dove deeper, fighting against the current.

When I finally saw him in the dark, sand-filled water, the unconscious boy spun, limp, like clothes in a washing machine. I grabbed him, locking my left arm around his

shoulder and head, and pulled toward the surface. When we emerged, we'd been pulled almost all the way to the other side of the bay's opening. Five strokes, from the edge, a cramp in my back, three, my body burned, two, I needed a rest, one ...

On shore, I let the boy go and realized that he wasn't as much a boy as a young man. A mouthful of water passed his mustachioed lips as he rolled onto his side, coughing. I shook a few thankful hands, gave modest, possibly incoherent responses to the onslaught of "Obrigado," checked to make sure young man was breathing regularly, caught my breath, and swam back through the settling water.

I've often wondered if Casie and I hadn't slept in that morning, or if we hadn't gotten the last parking spot, or if we hadn't walked the rest of the way to the bay, or if my fear had caused hesitation at the last second, what might have happened. I always tell Casie, "Someone would have saved him." She disagrees. But I wonder what forces of the universe put me in that place at that time, and helped me overcome my fear of what lay hidden in that murky water—a fear that has never returned. Maybe it was fate, maybe that young man is destined for great things, or maybe it was just the luck that followed me on our exotic journey...



Jeremiah Bass is an English Professor at the University of Wisconsin—Stout. He has written and published multiple short stories and poems and is currently searching for homes for his first two novels. Jeremiah lives on a small farm in Spring Valley, Wisconsin with his wife, dog, horse, and two ornery cats.