

## **“Romantic Getaway”**

**by Nicole Zimmerman**

“*Um beijinho*,” Paulo murmured. “One little kiss.” His lips brushed one cheek, then the other. We stood in the shallow waters of the Sauípe River, tucked between powdered sugar dunes in northeastern Brazil. The meandering stream enticed me into a warm embrace. My mind balked at the seduction while my body yielded.

After a week spent alone during a tropical winter, swaying in my hammock, I had grown restless. That morning I strolled three miles along crystalline coastline, but the only person I encountered was an old fisherman mending the cloth sail of his *jangada*, a traditional wooden raft. Eventually I stopped at the beachfront property of a hotel resort for wealthy vacationers who sipped *caipirinhas* from lounge chairs and purchased snacks from beach vendors. I wandered into an adjacent village. It formed one knot in a string of fishing towns bordered on one side by the Atlantic Ocean and on the other by a two-lane highway that connected them.

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The Coast of Coconut Palms was an easy escape from bustling Salvador da Bahia—the country’s third most populous city—where I studied Portuguese for a month while living with a local family that embraced me like one of their own. Born in São Paulo, I had moved to California with my North American parents and older brother before I turned three years old. Since then, Brazil occupied a place of mythic proportions in my psyche. Scalloped-edge photos and silent home movies blurred into memory remnants, like the crimson light of sunset reflected on painted boats in the bay. After more than three decades away, my longing for my birth country was as palpable as the pulse beating beneath my skin.

Among the locals who sat talking from the windowsills of painted brick homes, it was Paulo who offered to direct me to the bus stop. A necklace of seeds decorated his bare torso, his skin smooth as obsidian, his slender physique sculpted by the surf. Board shorts and Havaianas were his only attire.

“You like to swim?” he asked, grinning as we passed the last pastel house, which opened to a palm-fringed nature preserve. “I know a special place, just over there.”

I had only a few hours before the sun would set. But I was intrigued by the invitation as much as by the man who offered it. I followed him across the dunes. One kiss was all it took to succumb. The following day I returned to the stream, where a dense thicket shielded our entangled bodies on the sand.

Paulo suggested that we steal away together. He worked as an events manager at the resort and had a few days off from work. Traveling solo as a single woman, I was accustomed to weighing both the benefits and risks of road romance. Unlike most previous affairs, however, I knew nobody who could account for Paulo’s character. We shared an interest in photography, and he told me he volunteered to document trash that washed ashore from international ships in

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an effort to save the sea turtles that nested nearby. I was reluctant to trust a stranger yet I was hungry for the solace. His companionship, I reasoned, would be a welcome salve for my solitary wanderings. It was difficult to resist the allure.

“*Uma aventura nova!*” I finally replied, laughing nervously. A new adventure!

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Riding the bus further north, we disembarked and carried our duffel bags down streets splashed with mud from a recent downpour. Unfinished homes exposed brick and rebar, seemingly abandoned until a crying baby or blaring radio shattered the illusion. Women hung laundry on a line, their clothes sure to get a second rinse from the sky. They greeted *Bom Dia* as we passed by.

We peered into the dark lobby of a concrete building with glass doors that rattled in the wind. Two plastic saints, their tall shadows dancing in candlelight, stared back. The proprietor led us to a second story of vacant rooms along an open-air corridor and fumbled with a ring of keys. “*O Meu Deus!*” she supplicated to the thundering heavens then gestured toward a lumpy bed shoved between paint-chipped pink walls. A single bulb dangled above a tiny window, which offered a muted glimpse of the sea.

Together we took refuge from the rising storm. When raindrops pelted the roof, Paulo entertained me with a *berimbau*. The gourd-carved, single-string instrument accompanied the martial art of *capoeira*. He sang to the percussive rhythms of the *caxixi*, a woven rattle filled with the bright red seeds of trees. As water stains spread across the ceiling, he told me about his large family—one-hundred-sixty relatives who lived in the hamlet surrounded by acres of ancestral land. He described his mother’s delicious *moqueca*, a seafood stew made with *dendê* oil from palms transplanted, along with more than one million slaves, from Africa to Salvador.

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Gale-force winds blew water in from the hallway and puddled the floor.

“*Bonitinha,*” Paulo coaxed, showering me with diminutives still foreign to my ear. “I want to sleep in your arms every night.” Translated into English the sayings were trite, almost laughable; I could not have taken him seriously. But in Portuguese they were passionate poems.

One evening during dinner under a dripping gazebo, Paulo revealed how I had already marked his life. “*Meu coração,*” he crooned. “Come live with me in our house. *Nossa casa.*” Pulling me onto his lap, he continued, “I feel like I’ve known you all my life. *Toda a minha vida.*”

I had only known Paulo for three days. How could he be so idealistic, so naïve? Did he not comprehend the challenges of loving someone who spoke like a child in his language? Perhaps he was simply expressing *saudade*—a nostalgic yearning, like the lyrical notes of a bossa nova song. I countered with practicality. I explained that our time together, though adored, was only temporary. I would be leaving the country in another week, with no idea when I might return. I did not wish to be beholden to him. Nor did I want to dash his hopes. “No one knows the future,” I compromised.

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Awakening to sunlight the following morning, we raced to the beach. “Ah, the sea is so cleansing,” Paulo said, “like a baptism.” The whitecaps of the waves, illuminated by a watercolor sky, crashed around our frolicking. Kissing his salty lips, I admitted that I wasn’t ready to say good-bye. Paulo had to return to work, but he promised he’d meet me again soon.

As we packed, I furtively counted the money I withdrew the evening before. Separating each crisp bill, I discovered one of the six was unaccounted for. Surely I must have made a mistake. I was in the habit of maintaining meticulous records, but I couldn’t find my receipt. Had

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I looked through everything? I counted again. One hundred *reais*—gone.

Paulo tried to examine the evidence, but I shooed him away, embarrassed by how much cash I carried. The ATMs in Bahia rarely functioned and my bank at home charged high fees, so I was used to hoarding large sums. That money was meant to last the duration of my stay.

“Did you put it somewhere else?” he asked.

“No, I kept it all here in my bag.”

“Maybe you received less than that.”

Perhaps he was right, I thought, second-guessing myself.

“*Amor*, I know how you feel,” Paulo said, stroking my arm. “I get upset when I’ve lost just one *real*.”

So far, Paulo hadn’t paid for anything. The American dollar was twice as strong as the Brazilian currency. Besides, I rationalized, I would have spent nearly as much money traveling alone. I was surprised, however, when I gave Paulo cash to buy condoms and he kept the change for himself.

Reluctantly, under a heavy sky, we parted ways. I contemplated my options. I could return to the city to attend to loose ends: I had to secure my ticket home on a bankrupt airline that was stranding travelers daily with canceled flights; attempts to reach an agent from a pay phone had proved impossible. On the other hand, I could venture further, exploring the surroundings while I waited to see Paulo again.

Torn with indecision, I continued on to a neighboring town where I took up residence in another series of vacant rooms. Securing the broken shutters against the rain, I watched soap operas on television until the electrical cord shorted and sparked. Most of the beach *barracas*—bungalow bars offering tropical drinks in summer—were boarded up for the season, their stacked

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plastic chairs huddled against the wind. Walking in wet sand, I shirked the stares of a passing stranger and sulked. I longed for shared laughter with my lover and missed pouring Portuguese over my tongue.

The next day I boarded a bus back to the city. But when it stopped en route, I disembarked at a familiar cluster of blue booths and called Paulo. That evening, he met me on the porch of a colorful *pousada* where I swung from another hammock. Slowly he shook his head as if he couldn't believe his eyes.

“*Querida,*” he sighed, a hand to his heart, “I was afraid I wouldn't hear from you.” All of my previous doubt receded under Paulo's gaze, my confidence restored by his adoration. I was his pretty one, his apple, his little sweet.

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We spent five sun-drenched days vacationing on the coast. This time I splurged for a balcony with an ocean view. By day we drank from coconuts and sampled skewered shrimp. By night we dined under lantern light. I posed for Paulo's camera, sporting a Brazilian bikini or a red sundress that matched my burnt cheeks. When the rising sun made silhouettes of the fishermen dragging their rowboats at low tide, we strolled the beach hand-in-hand one last time.

“My heart has opened to you and it is breaking,” Paulo cried. “I feel so sensitive, so sentimental.”

We promised to keep in touch, made vows to remember. Finally Paulo's flip-flops tread a slow path back across the sand. Who would bless me with a multitude of endearments in my mother tongue? “*Saudade,*” I whispered while a breeze tickled the tears from my face.

Returning to our room, I packed my bags for my departure. Once again, I came up short of cash. Digging into the money pouch where I'd tucked away my debit card, I clutched it with

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relief. That’s when I noticed the slot right next to it where I’d placed a traveler’s check: Empty. Any suspicion I had suppressed under the guise of romance now resurfaced, no longer held at bay by sweet sentiments and caresses. This time, without a doubt, I knew I had been robbed.

When I stepped into a taxi Paulo had arranged, the driver handed me an envelope. Folded over a photo of Paulo kayaking in the ocean was a note, written in Portuguese: “*Quero você sempre . . . I want you forever . . . you are the woman of my life, the one I have dreamed of . . . the love that I feel for you is like the waves in the sea . . .*” It went on and on.

A love letter, or possibly a song, it ended with two final words: *Um beijo*. A kiss.

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