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“Nara’s World”

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Belém, Pará, Brazil

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Dear Peter,

I was mesmerized. The full moon cast pearly light onto the rippling Bay of Marajó. Next to me sat Nara Costa, our impromptu host for our first evening in Belém, in Pará State, in northern Brazil. Perhaps I was already under the spell of Amazônia. The mouth of the infamous Amazon river churned into the Atlantic just on the other side of *Ilha do Marajó* (Marajó Island), barely visible across the bay.

Flying into the city that afternoon I had felt disoriented by what I saw beneath me. Until then Brazil had been three things: rambling concrete cities, beaches, and endless stretches of parched land relieved by broad cuts of green agro-industrial plantations. Pressing against the window, I felt giddy at the sight of so much lush green and the silver slivers of rivers and creeks. Other than the coconut palms and mango trees, I didn't recognize the plants. I thought of snakes, fish and canoes gliding unseen below. It also made me nervous. I had been under the illusion that I was getting to know Brazil, and from the air I could tell Belém and the rest of the North would be quite another culture bath.

Nara was a bath all her own. She stood about five feet tall and a curvy 120 pounds. She was dressed in a glove-tight white sundress with bold splashes of red on the straps and the hem. From her neck hung strands of tiny black seeds. Tresses of thick purple-black hair, adorned with a thin tiara of bright red seeds, cascaded over her shoulders and fell to her waistline.

Nara is a social worker with the non-religious, non-governmental “*Movimento República de Emaús*” (Republic Movement of Emaús, the road to Jerusalem) an organization based in Belém that works with children and adolescents from working and lower-class families as well as street children. The organization and its founder, Padre Bruno, were instrumental in starting the MNMMR *Movimento Nacional de Meninos e Meninas de Rua* (MNMMR, National Movement of Boys and Girls in the Street) a non-governmental organization founded in 1985 and dedicated to defending children's rights. Until our first night in Belém, my husband Tyrone and I knew Nara only via phone conversations. A mutual friend had passed her name to Tyrone as a person who might be able to help him look at child labor in the charcoal fields of Pará.

As we walked down the streets of Belém with her, I was invisible for the first time since arriving in Brazil. No one looked curiously at my husband, Tyrone or at me. As long as Nara beside use, eyes turned to her.

Sitting at the *Estação das Docas* (Dock Station), a section of Belém's

waterfront recently renovated and converted into bars and restaurants, we talked as families strolled by and couples dined. A 12-foot-high wrought-iron fence enclosed the quarter-mile stretch of waterfront nightlife. To the north extended working loading docks and warehouses; to the south a pleasant waterfront plaza and then the famous "*Ver o peso*" (see the weight) market and fishermen's wharf. Nara glanced around cynically as she talked. She called the area "*Dom Docas*" (a derogatory nickname for idle women who worry themselves only with looking beautiful, shopping and socializing) in her worker-oriented, leftist sense of humor and her scorn for the middle-class crowd and the conservative politics of Governor Almir Gabriel, the force responsible for the renovation. Nara declared the *Docas* a *muralha*, or rampart, of decadence. Real people, including the leftist mayor, Edmilson Rodrigues, could be found only outside the walls.

But she seemed perfectly happy to absorb the scrutiny of passers-by and recount her version of life in Belém. As Nara talked neither Tyrone nor I could take our eyes off her. We didn't need to ask questions. Nara's quick mind and passion for her ideas and memories kept her soliloquy going. She was a one-woman show with a captive audience.

Nara called over a waiter and ordered a round of cashew juice. This made me a little nervous, since the

last time I had had cashew juice ended in a bit of panic. I had been in Brazil for three days and was wandering around the town of São José dos Campos, outside of São Paulo, when I came across a man with a tray of cashew fruits. The bell-pepper-shaped fruits were about three inches long, bright red, orange or yellow and capped by a cashew nut in its husk. I had never seen the fruit before and asked the man how to roast the husks and extract the nut. He told me how and suggested that I also quarter the fruit and blend it with water and sugar to make a delicious juice. I bought the fruit and ran home to try it.

I cut off the husks and put them in the oven to roast. I quartered all of the fruit and put it the blender with water. The liquid gave off a sharp but pleasant aroma. I decided to skip the sugar and poured myself a glass. The first sip was sour and made my mouth tingle. But decided I liked it and drained the rest of the glass. Within a minute my tongue swelled and I lost feeling in my lips, mouth and throat. I was sure I had poisoned myself. There was no phone in the apartment. I couldn't talk anyway. Since the rest of my body felt fine and I was clear-headed, I tried drinking water (most of which rolled down my face as if I'd just come from the dentist). Eventually, feeling returned. I learned later that one cashew fruit is enough to make a liter of juice. I had used six.

However, I was still leery of the fruit and sniffed the juice a little and took shy sips. Nara watched me out of the corner of her eye. I felt I was offending her and took a few hearty gulps. Nothing. All vital signs were Go. Everything was normal and the juice was delicious. I relaxed and listened to Nara talk.

I looked past the strolling couples to the bay. The river current flowed so strongly that it was hard to tell which way it was moving. It seemed to swell up and down as if breathing at a rapid pace. In the distance were tiny silhouettes of fishing boats. The staccato tut-tut-tut of their diesel engines broke into the voices calling from boat to boat. A warm, humid breeze stirred Nara's princess-hair.

Nara pointed northwest across the water and into the darkness to the *Ilha do Marajó* where she grew up. From Belém to Afuá, the closest town to her child-



hood home, it was a three-day boat ride. There were no roads to be used, only river-ways.

Nara began with the story of her family. She claimed to have one “*safado*” (damned) grandfather, and one “good” one. The good one, Nara’s indigenous great-grandfather, nicknamed “Guarani” (though no one knew for sure if he was a Guarani Indian) lived somewhere near what is the present-day border between the states of Amapá and Pará. He left his family to find work in Macapá and there fell in love with a Spanish-gypsy-turned-prostitute. When he returned to his community, Guarani’s family refused to accept his gypsy partner. He left and moved to Ilha do Marajó, where he and the gypsy had many children and where he had many more children with other women, thus starting his own clan. That was the familial side of Nara’s mother, Sophia.

Nara’s father’s family was descended from a wealthy Portuguese immigrant named Antônio. He arrived on the island sometime around the turn of the century and promptly set about becoming the area strongman. His interest was sugar. Though the commodity’s strength was already in decline, he persevered and succeeded by forcing other sugar colonels out of business and usurping more and more land. Some of the land into which he pushed belonged to Guarani, and the confrontations resulted in years of conflict and violence between the two families.

While Guarani’s descendants remained and built their lives on the island, living a primarily communal riverside lifestyle, though with a home or two in the region’s small towns, Antônio took great pains to send his children off the island for education in Belém. Today, the bulk of the Portuguese side of Nara’s family lives in Belém – though Nara has no contact with them because of her distaste for her great-grandfather’s abusive treatment of his many women and scorn for the indigenous culture of Marajó — hence the adjective “*safado*.” The only grandson to remain on Marajó was Nara’s father, Manuel, who during a vacation visit to the island, got Sophia pregnant. Nara’s grandfather forced Manuel to marry Sophia, and thus a family was started.

Nara glows when she talks about her mother’s family. Of particular pride to her is her full name, Naraguassu. The name was left for her by Guarani. He declared that should any woman in his clan have seven daughters, the seventh should be named Naraguassu. Nara believes that the first part of her name “Nara” comes from a Spanish word meaning “breeze of the wind” and “Guassu, a Tupi-Guarani word, meaning “large.” The name is Nara’s personal connection to her great-grandfather and grandmother, their romantic story and arrival at Marajó.

My stomach had been rumbling for a while. I asked Nara for a recommendation for a light dinner and she suggested *vatapá*. A few minutes later a waiter set two bowls made from dried, gourd-like pods known as *cuiás*

before me. The bowls were decorated on the outside with stylized etchings of water, flowers and graphic patterns. In one *cuiá* was fluffy white rice. In the other was *vatapá*, a bright yellow pudding topped by a few sprigs of a wilted green that resembled watercress.

In Salvador da Bahia where Tyrone and I are based, *vatapá* is sold by the *Baianas*, African-Brazilian women who dress in traditional white-lace blouses and vividly colored skirts worn over crinolines or hoops. They wrap their heads with swathes of bright cloth and wear strands of glass and plastic beads in the colors of the *Condomblé* saints present in their lives. Some make a living having their photos taken with tourists. Others set up sidewalk stands and sell food.

The most famous food sold by the *baianas* is the *acarajé*, a bean-curd dumpling deep-fried in the orange, spicy oil of the *dendê* palm. The *acarajé* looks like an oversized version of the hushpuppies served with seafood in the U.S. South.

Once fried, the *acarajé* is sliced open and stuffed with spiced shrimp (eaten with shells and tails!); *caruru* — a paste of okra, cashews, shrimp and cilantro; *vinagrete* — chopped green peppers, onions, and tomatoes with vinegar and salt; and *vatapá* a thick purée of dried shrimp, cashews, peanuts, breadcrumbs, ginger, coconut milk, *malagueta* peppers and *dendê* oil. It’s a heavyweight sandwich. In the evenings in Salvador, lines a block long form at the stands known for the best *acarajé*. They are habit-forming and dangerous to the waistline.

The bright yellow pudding didn’t look like the *vatapá* of Bahia. Nara explained that the difference was that in Bahia the binding ingredient was breadcrumbs, while in Belém, where the native influences were stronger, manioc flour was used, rendering *vatapá* slightly less dense. I spooned out some rice and the glowing *vatapá*. It was a pungency of dried shrimp and *dendê* oil tapered by the soft creamy taste of the nuts. The flavor was almost elusive.

I kept taking a few more bites to try to nail it down. I served a little more onto my plate and crunched into the green that Nara called *jambú*. My tongue was going numb. Of course I tried to look nonchalant, as if nothing were happening. But I was a little panicked. I thought it was a delayed reaction to the cashew juice. Nara saw the expression on my face and laughed at me, “The *jambú* makes the tongue dance a little, eh? It’s just a little venom, not enough to hurt anyone.” Indeed the tangy green was delicious and the strange vibration-tingle sort of fun. Still, I felt my armpits itching with the passing anxiety.

While I amused myself with tongue-numbing bites, Nara described her childhood. It was one in which the family lived close to each other. Uncles, aunts, cousins — everyone lived in river communities on collective land

that her grandfather had claimed. Their wooden houses were built on high stilts with room below for milk cows, hens and other animals. During the time of year when the waters would get very high the family would move to other homes. The animals followed of their own accord.

Men and women did work “according to their strength.” There was some division of labor along gender lines, but to Nara it was slight, “Domestic life in the city, for a woman, has nothing to do with life in the country. Houses were simple there. We had a big wooden table and two benches. Everyone sat around on the floor and slept in hammocks. Houses weren’t filled with all kinds of little junk. It was very simple. Everyone washed their own clothes — there weren’t any big piles of dirty clothing. In the country, so close to the equator, there isn’t a lot of clothing. What you have you just rinse out and hang on a branch. The idea of a ‘house’ was a city idea. There’s no comparing the interior to the city.

“Women did everything men did. They worked in the fields, they fished and they hunted. The only difference I remember was that when hunting required traveling far and staying away for many days, it was the men that went.” Nara looked around at the crowds at ‘*Dom Doces*.’ “Life there was very different. It was communal. No one worried about what they owned.”

Nara’s father liked to build and take apart the family houses. He was always thinking of a new way to build them. They moved from home to home with the seasons and her father’s whims. Most of their subsistence came directly from the land and rivers. To buy the supplies they lacked, Nara’s father would sell a cow or buffalo every once in a while. For that occasion the family kept houses in the town of Afuá on the western edge of the island.

Afuá is an old river town. Nara explained, “When the town needed a name the people thought they should called it ‘*Nossa Senhora de Conceição*’ (Our Lady of Conception) after the patron saint of Portugal. But there were a lot of *botos* (dolphins) in the bay. And since the *boto* always comes to the surface and says ‘*faaaa!*’ when he pushes air, they decided to name the town Afuá after the *boto*’s sound.

“My mother and father had gone to visit my [paternal] grandmother in Amapá. On the return, I was born in the boat. My mother says I was born eyes-open, alert and already trouble! When we arrived at home everyone was worried about me, but they already knew my name was Naraguassu.”

Nara’s house was on a small island between rivers, “In the interior our days accompanied the sun and the tide. Since we lived nearly on the equator the sun rose everyday and set every day at just about the same time — six in the morning and six in the evening.

“I thought that day happened because the sun was

passing above us, and night came when he was passing underneath the water. There the sun took a bath and cooled off — giving us night. I also used to think that the sun was the full moon’s lover.

“Since the moon appeared every night, I knew the sun was under the water. And looking into the water and seeing the moon, I thought that was the real moon and the one in the sky was a reflection. Our world was a reflection.

“I concluded that on the banks of the river was where the sun entered the water, and that if I could just get to the bank, I would be able to see the sun taking a bath. I really thought I would succeed in seeing the sun enter the water! And by morning he would come out of the water behind my house where there was another river. The idea was absolutely fixed in my head.” Nara made a scooping motion with her arm, “he would travel under us an appear on the other side.

“So I went there. I was about seven at the time. I convinced my mother that I was going to visit my grandmother. My sister and I left. We got to the edge of the river. The sun was still high, but I knew it had to come down. My sister got nervous and went home. I climbed a tree to wait.”

While Nara was staring intently at the sun, the tide rose and carried her canoe downstream. Not until the sounds of the forest at dusk started to scare her did Nara notice she was stranded. “I started to feel scared because I knew I was going to have to sleep in the trees with all of the critters making their noises around me. As for the sun, I was sure that I had not seen it dip into the water only because I hadn’t gone to the right river.

“Since our lives were on the river, many people saw my canoe float past. Someone went and got it and took it to my uncles. They knew it was mine. My mother had not even been worried because she thought I had gone to my grandmother’s house. My mother then went to the fields to call my father and my other uncles. It was already night.

“All the people were in their canoes looking for me. There, the practice was when a person was believed to have drowned, or died on the river, someone would grab a *cuiá*, place a lit candle in it and release it into the river.” Nara picked up my *cuiá* of *vatapá* and held it against the horizon as if it were bobbing in the water, “The *cuiá* would float with the current. Where it paused was where the body was. They lit candles. Everyone was searching and searching for me. They questioned my little sister and then crossed the river. They found me there in the trees.

“In the interior parents are very cautious about their children because it’s so easy to die. It’s easy to drown. One of the first things a child does is learn to swim. My mother was so scared she gave me a good spanking. My

uncles were nuts with anger, too. The first words my mother said were, 'You'll never take a canoe again! You'll never go swimming again!' Well, that's the worst punishment for a child living on the river. Life happens in the water.

"I didn't try to defend myself. We went back to the house. I kept my mouth shut. I knew no one was in the mood to hear my theories about the sun and the moon. They just wanted me to be quiet. For a long time after that my brothers and sisters would tease me about going and 'finding the sun'. I never did get to the sun, but I sure did get a good beating! My legs were burning, because in the interior beatings are given with a stick on the backs of the legs!"

Nara finished the story as we waited for her bus. She hopped on the first one that passed near her neighborhood and disappeared into the night traffic. From the hill where our hotel was located I could still see the river and the faint lights of night fishermen's lanterns. I imagined sad, tiny *cutias* floating down river.

The next morning Nara greeted us early and we walked together through the markets and fisherman's harbor. We climbed to the top level of an historic fort, built by the Portuguese to fend off French, Dutch, English and Spanish incursions into the Amazon in the 17th century. Nara bought a five-pound bag of tangerines for fifty cents and we sat in the shade of a tree and polished them off.

"In the interior we cultivated very little: manioc, rice, beans, squash, watermelon. Our food came from what the environment provided. Still we had a strong tie to the town of Afuá. We kept a house there. But time was relative to us. Time and space are different there. *Here* time is defined and property is demarcated. *There* time was determined by the sun — how far you had to go to hunt or fish, how many days on the river to visit family, how many times the tide changed or the height of the river [which marked the seasons].

"We had no title to our land that I know of. It was just ours, the community's. We spent our lives living together — the whole extended family. The idea of accumulation, of private property didn't exist. I think every 'space' and every 'time' has its moment. My childhood in the interior gave me a solid base for my adult life. I'm not sure I would return, but I wish every child could have a part of what I had.

"We also lacked things like health care and doctors. It wasn't always a great life. There were plenty of times

without food. That happens when you're living and depending on nature. It wasn't all marvelous. There were problems in families — fights, alcoholism, hard times. But I always had time to play, to be a child.

"It was a place of a lot of imagination and tradition. People believed then, and still believe now, that the *botos* are dangerous and mysterious.¹ Adults will kill them if they get close enough. It's said that when a girl gets pregnant, and doesn't say who the father is, a *boto* enchanted her and caused it. It's still a very strong belief." Listening to Nara, it seemed like the *botos* would also be convenient "outs" for men. And, they would save a young girl from the humiliation of having lost her virginity — instead she's become a victim of something she could not control.

"Once when I was swimming with my brothers and sisters we came across a group of young *botos*. I told my brothers and sisters we would play with them. We each chose a *boto* and gave it a name. They knew us, too. We would call them and they would come. We had to keep it a secret because if the adults knew they would have killed the *botos*. To this day my mother still doesn't know, and I will never tell her! She would be very upset.

"The *botos* were smart. They figured out where we lived. They came up the river to our house. They swam near the house and waited to play with us. My mother was cooking fish for dinner. We saw the *botos* and knew she would call my uncles to kill them. So we lied and told my mother that my auntie needed her. While she was gone we used the fish to lure the *botos* away from the house.

"When my mother came back she was angry that the fish were gone. I told her I had been clumsy and knocked the fish into the river. I had to quickly catch more fish for the family to eat. But the next time we saw the *botos* we swam away with them and then put garlic in the water so they would not follow us home. Garlic keeps the *botos* from returning. Everyday we would make a garlic infusion and pour it in the river around the house. When the adults asked us why we were doing it we replied, 'To protect us all from the *botos*!' and they thought we were doing a good thing."

Nara turned her attention to some teens sleeping in the shade of a building nearby. They were kids she worked with as a social worker with a local program for at-risk children and adolescents. She painted an image of a much less idealistic childhood. A few days later, I met several of the teenage girls with which she had been working over the last seven years. They were articulate

¹ The most common legends about dolphins in the river refer to *botos cor-de-rosa*, pink dolphins that are said to enchant women and impregnate them. One version of folklore explaining is that the *botos cor-de-rosa* were actually Dutch sailors. (The Dutch tried for many years to gain a foothold in the area now the states of Maranhão and Pará.) The sailors would have sexual relations (forced or consensual) with indigenous women who would often give birth to fair or even blond children. The complexions and hair color were blamed on the *boto*. Nara did not mention a color or the Dutch sailors.

and open about their experiences on the streets of Belém.

Once again I found myself hearing stories of the riverfront, only these were much dimmer. The girls talked about the need to work on the streets selling cleaning cloths and fruit to help their mothers and siblings. The police that patrolled the market for the safety of the tourists were the same ones who would “arrest” a child on trumped-up charges and release her only after coercing sex from her. One told me of a pretty “tourist lady” who told her there was plenty of work for people just over the border in Suriname. She went only to find she and a friend had been conned into a brothel. They had to escape in a cargo truck back across the Brazilian border.

On one of our last evenings in Belém, Tyrone and I met Nara in one of the big city parks. As we caught up on the day’s events we made our way to the side of the park that had small food stands. Street children, mostly young teens, approached Nara. She knew them all. And when they hit her up for money, she turned them down.

We arrived at a small soup stand and pulled three plastic chairs into a loose circle and talked as the vendor and her young son served us a large *cuia* of *tacacá*. *Tacacá* is the food for which Belém is best known. From mid-morning to late evening the city center smells faintly of the mouthwateringly sharp, sour broth. The base of *tacacá* is a salty, nearly-clear fish consommé served in a *cuia*. Just before serving the cook adds a spoonful of tapioca flour, a couple of dried shrimp, a few springs of *jambú* and a dose of *tucupí* sauce.

The last ingredient is what makes the soup so famous. *Tucupí* sauce is derived from the poisonous liquid pressed from the fibers of the manioc root, a Brazilian staple. The fiber is made into manioc flour and the juice is set aside to separate the way cream separates from milk. The most venomous part rises to the top and is scraped off. The remaining juice is then fermented into *tucupí*, which gives *tacacá* an almost citric edge.

The most wonderful part of *tacacá* is drinking it out of a *cuia* and passing it around during slow conversation. Everyone has a toothpick in hand to spear a little morsel of shrimp or *jambú* (my favorite tongue-tingler). Because the ingredients are combined at the last minute each part retains its unique flavor. As the soup level goes down the tapioca flour slips into the mouth in a simultaneously gritty, gummy goo flavored by bits of shrimp and salt. I was surprised by the texture the first time I sipped *tacacá*. When I got to the tapioca flour I was distrustful of the sandy texture and tapped it between my teeth, feeling the crunchiness give way to stickiness. It’s said that *tacacá* is an acquired taste. I acquired it in five minutes. And for the rest of our time in Belém, I felt my mouth water every time we passed a *tacacá* stand and took in a gulp of its sour aroma.

The same kids who had hustled Nara earlier passed

in a gaggle. I noticed one girl wearing scanty hot pants and a bikini top. She looked about 13 years old and six months pregnant. Nara sort of hid her face. She didn’t want them to see her eating after she had refused them money for food. But the kids were in their own world and passed by oblivious to us. The soup vendor had pulled her son close to her while the adolescents walked by and as she released him she sighed, “They’re only trouble.”

Nara looked at the woman but addressed her words to us. “They’re children. They shouldn’t be feared. What they know is they can survive only in a group on the street. No one survives alone. Groups intimidate people. They’re proud and arrogant because they know how to survive, they know how to do something to bring their families a little money or food. It’s really important to their self-esteem. When a poor child is younger, like this one,” she said pointing to the vendor’s son, “he can ask a stranger for a little money and the reaction is one of pity or even tenderness. People think he’s cute and smile at him. I know kids who go to the same traffic light everyday. They know the drivers. They’ve memorized the license plates. They have clients.

“The dangerous time for a child on the streets is the transition into adolescence when the public starts to see them as a nuisance or a danger. It gets harder for them to earn even spare change and home situations often worsen because they are not helping. Self-esteem plummets. Involvement in drugs, gangs and prostitution becomes more likely. It’s also the time when children choose to break from their families. And once the bond is broken the relationship is forever altered and re-defined even if the child returns home.” She likened the emotional transition to a precious vase shattered and glued back together — same form, but a different structure.

Nara lamented that the thing most lacking for the children she works with was the space to be a child and, “imagine, just go studying the world and working it out for yourself in safe environment. You need imagination.” The gaggle of street-teens passed again, “Today kids don’t have time to imagine. Life is much more direct. Of course a kid imagines something that is a fantasy, just learning to play.”

Nara chewed on some tapioca flour and passed me the *cuia*. I stabbed the last shrimp with my toothpick and sat back. Nara laughed at her own imagination as a child when she worked out her own version of the beginning of life, “One day the Earth and Water were playing and figured out how to mix and make clay. A monkey came along, and like monkeys are, he played in the clay. He even lay down in it. When he left, his form stayed in the clay. The Sun dried him and the Wind came and blew life into him. When the Water, Earth, Sun and Wind saw what they had accomplished they made another one — a girl!

And though children had responsibilities, “We had games for everything. We would have turtle races. Each

of us would mark a turtle with our name or a symbol. We'd take the turtles into the forest and leave them there. We'd walk home and wait to see whose turtle would win. Sometimes it took three, five, seven days. Sometimes they never came. My brother would always win — until we figured out he was painting many turtles!"

I laughed at the punch line and was immediately tossed into memories of my own childhood and adventures with my brother. I told Nara that I would love to travel to her home some day and meet her family and

experience the life she came from.

"You can't!" she replied. "That world ended when my grandfather died. The clan separated. My uncles and aunts left. My parents are separated now. The community is gone. And ten years ago when the region got television..." She gestured with her hands outward, palms up, and shrugged as if nothing could survive the arrival of television. The same street kids were huddled together on a rock, sharing a drink and laughing. "They just need the space to be children," said Nara.

