Chapter 09

The family gets lucky and we move to upscale Ipanema. This becomes one of Brazil’s most exiting neighbourhoods, taking centre stage in the emergence of many cultural and political trends.

Ipanema entered the world’s consciousness as a dream-like place in the mid-1960s when Frank Sinatra discovered Bossa Nova’s laid-back melodies. However, by the 1970s, Bossa Nova, Frank Sinatra and the positive outlook of the Brazilian society had become something of the past. Living under a dictatorship and recovering from the wounds of democracy’s failed resistance, Ipanema would now take centre-place in the country’s process of digesting the new reality. It would do this with a twist of rock ‘n’ roll. Although the neighborhood was the embodiment of the middle class comfort that the so-called “Brazilian economic miracle” had ushered; there was an awareness that the newfound wealth was for a privileged minority and that this status quo was backed by a harsh political clampdown. In the early days following the 1964 coup, Ipanema seemed like an independent republic, an island of critical thought where talented and comparatively wealthy, bohemian artists and intellectuals congregated. Their resistance to the military regime began early when, in 1969, a group of them launched a satirical weekly called O Pasquim. This seminal publication would land many of its contributors in prison for varying lengths of time, but would also
position them into the elite of the country’s intelligentsia.

O Pasquim was ahead of its days: not only did it firmly position itself against the military but it also lampooned the bourgeoisie and their values. There were groundbreaking interviews, many of them fuelled by bottles of whisky, with all sorts of football players, artists, politicians, actors and other celebrities. In a time of heavy censorship, they exposed these public figures from previously unexplored angles, encouraging them to talk about their private lives, their views on controversial subjects such as drugs and sex and to confess their sins. They also approached people who the mainstream media ran away from, such as Luiz Inácio ‘Lula’ da Silva – Brazil’s future president but in the 1970s just a rising leader of the “inconvenient” metalworkers’ union in the outskirts of São Paulo.

Battling the heavy hand of the government, O Pasquim was one of the very few remaining independent journalistic voices following the suppression of the mainstream media. Somehow, this publication succeeded in being both humorous and penetrating and the weekly sold solidly right across Brazil. Their contributors became household names throughout the country and had the effect of making Ipanema a synonym for a free, resistant and happy bohemian zone. This image would be a key to how Brazil would eventually handle its return to democracy.

On the other hand, if one was to leave aside the politi-
cal void during the early years of the 1970s, with double figure annual growth figures the middle class was by and large content, not only in Rio’s Zona Sul but throughout Brazil. As far as they were concerned, the economy was sailing along nicely and the new prosperity had a very clear impact on middle-class lifestyles. Sales of cars, televisions, Coca-Cola, records, contraceptive pills, electronic gadgets, music and surf magazines, and marijuana all rocketed in Rio.

As the new generations began to enjoy the fruits of prosperity, strange long haired and socially unclassifiable characters started appearing on the streets and, via television, right across the country’s living rooms. In Ipanema, the rock ‘n’ roll spirit was omnipresent and the youth embraced the new genre with conviction, making the neighborhood unique in relation to the rest of Brazil. Groups of hippy-like youngsters walked around with upper class girls who, in what was still mostly a conservative society, looked sexually available, their t-shirts and lack of bras turning heads wherever they passed. Something new was in the air: a feeling that was alive, menacing and with strong sexual overtones.

With Ipanema at the eye of the social hurricane, its teen boys discovered surfing and did what they could to emulate their southern Californian contemporaries. For local residents, something strange happened. There was an uneasy but very real blend of its political edge and a pioneering rock ‘n’ roll way of life. Life was an exciting adventure for young Ipanemenses; in the 1970s the Rio’s youth had not yet split itself up into “tribes”. It was possible to surf in the morning, go to an underground musician’s gig in the evening, then listen to a Led Zeppelin cassette in a car heading to a disco, and finally end the night in the Tijuca forest smoking a joint while listening to Pink Floyd or to an old Caetano Veloso cassette. In people’s minds, worlds, tastes and practices all crossed each other. You belonged to your particular circle of friends and no one ever thought about re-defining himself or herself because of a specific musical trend, or political or ideological movement. Life was like a box of chocolates full of novelties, so why not try all of them? These were circles of
privileged young people, a minority with a considerable trend-setting power, who liked to believe they rejected bourgeois values and were unsympathetic towards the military regime.

At the same time, with Copacabana becoming less socially desirable, a new wave of very wealthy people were moving into Ipanema. They would make its beachside promenade Avenida Vieira Souto the most expensive address in the entire country. Its main commercial strip, Avenida Visconde de Pirajá, absorbed the moment and had hippy-looking burger houses, pinball arcades, surf shops and boutiques selling flower-power inspired clothes. Meanwhile, old-style bars scattered along the side streets leading to the beach, attracted an older generation of bohemian left-wingers. With feelings of condescension, amusement and worry, the rich observed all this from the back seats of their chauffeur-driven luxury cars.

Long haired surfers wearing imported Hawaiian trunks and t-shirts took over street corners in this new Brazilian California. In order to look like their North American counterparts, those guys dyed their hair blond with surf wax or peroxide, and overall they seemed healthy, wealthy and wild. Although the intellectuality and the dogmatism of politics put them off, they believed they were resisting the system by doing whatever they felt like doing - mainly drugs, sex, rock and roll and surfing - and by looking the way they wanted to. Ipanema’s girls were part of the second generation to be liberated by the pill and displayed their tasty bodies on the surfers’ turf – the beach – giving birth to the tanga, or the Brazilian G-string bikini.
In 1973 there was a major stock market crash due to the sudden increase in the price of petrol internationally, and, as anywhere else in the world, people who had made easy fortunes suddenly lost everything from one day to another, leading to a major drop in real estate prices. Dad was either clever or lucky enough to have sold his shares just days before the collapse and for us this stroke was like winning the lottery. Having plenty of cash available, my parents were able to buy an apartment in Ipanema, and to move into Rua Nascimento Silva, only a few doors away from the home of Vinicius de Moraes, the acclaimed Bossa Nova poet.

The new address meant an upgrade not only in our social status but also in our lifestyle. Although the flat did not have a verandah as the rented one in Copacabana, the new home was much larger and, more importantly, it was ours. The previous owners had joined two small three bedroom flats into a single unit. At its centre was the kitchen, which separated my parents’ side of the flat from the one where Sarah and I moved into. Now, each of us had our own room with a privacy that was a dream for most kids.

Regardless of the hurricane of social change going on behind closed doors, with the exception of the beach front Avenida Vieira Souto, in terms of architecture and of environment, Ipanema felt like a luxury version of a typical Brazilian coastal city. The streets were calm, airy and lined with lush trees that almost hid the sky. Its buildings were newer than those in Copacabana but were lower and less ostentatious, giving the district a more residential, down to earth feel.
Our new home seemed to bring sudden changes to our lives. To begin with, in what was surely one of the coolest places to live in the entire planet, Sarah and I went from being children to being adolescents, both of us discovering the delights and setbacks of that period of life. In second place, my parents finally gave way and bought a television set, perhaps accepting that elegant society considered it strange for their aspirants not to have one. Our new TV immersed us even deeper into the wider Brazilian world. Like anybody else, now we could watch TV Globo’s four different novelas, or soap operas, Brazil’s main cultural product, five days a week. Although I soon got tired of them, in the beginning I was hooked: at six in the evening, there was a novela aimed at youngsters; at seven there was a pre-dinner comedy; at eight there was the big production for the entire family; and at ten, there was a more adult show. All were excellent: censorship had forced the best professionals in the field to work in them, as there was otherwise very little space for independent voices in the entertainment industry. This concentration of talent gave the genre an amazing quality that would help them be hits all over the world.

Due to my Mum’s complete disdain for the medium, she did not want our black-and-white television in the living room but instead it stayed in a spare room next to mine. Every evening at seven Dona Isabel, switched on the set to listen to the soap operas from the kitchen as she prepared dinner and this soundtrack only ceased when we went to bed. Apart from knowing what went on in the novelas, I could watch football games, sitcoms, films and imported TV series while on Saturday afternoons I could enjoy seeing the latest international bands on Sabado Som. Suddenly I was no longer a complete alien at school.

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Probably the reason why the previous owners had sold their Ipanema flat to my parents was that the neighbourhood’s main street gang used the building’s entrance as their base. Although they had a middle class background, they were the bad boys at the top of Ipanema’s food chain who ruled not only the streets, but also the waves with
their surfing skills in the hippest part of the beach, the Pier. Now long gone, the Pier was set up for the construction of an enormous pipe to funnel Ipanema’s sewage out into the deep ocean. Because its construction had altered the currents and the seabed, the waves there were amazing and the specialised press ranked that particular point as one of the best places to surf in Latin America. These circumstances would make the Pier produce many of Brazil’s first surf champions. Anyway, the gang’s constant presence in our entrance way brought the 1970s rebellion right to our doorstep. Mum and Dad felt besieged by a bunch of barbarians.

One of the gang members, Pepê, was to become a world champion surfer and hang-glider, and years later his popularity would help him be elected into the city council. His younger and less talented brother, Pipi, was shot after he jumped over the counter to attack the owner of the botequim, or bar, on our corner. One day I was coming home from school when I saw a peroxide-blond surfer sitting motionless on the pavement, waiting for an ambulance with his blood-soaked shirt stuck to his belly. The next morning as I was leaving for school, our building’s porter told me that Pipi had died in hospital.

Whenever there were no waves, the gang hung out on the other side of the street to skateboard on a garage ramp while blasting out Deep Purple, Alice Cooper, Led Zeppelin and The Rolling Stones from a cassette player. While none of them could understand the poignant lyrics, I could, which made me somehow participate in what was going on as I watched them from our living room’s window like a sick boy watching other children play from
a hospital ward. In those afternoons, the songs’ words, together with the smell of cannabis wafted into our flat. Seeing the cigar-sized joint passing from hand to hand among the suntanned surfers was like witnessing a bank robbery from a privileged position. This was the subversive crime that the authorities were warning everyone about on television now that the fear of left wing terrorism had died off.

Anytime I passed in front of that gang, I would hear them comment, “There goes that little wimp”. The most embarrassing moments were when we went by car to the club and the porter had to ask those surfers politely to move aside so that our car could exit the garage. As we left the building, inside was my middle-aged mum wearing a white mini-skirt tennis uniform and me with my skinny legs and my oversized football gear. Because of them, my parents ended up banning surfing at home but those guys pushed me to prove, if only to myself, I was not the wimpy kid they saw. I am still trying.

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