

Off

I'm in the heart of the city, on my own, for the first time. No Portuguese to my name. Riding the wave of "I got this". I'm travelling solo. One of many occasions. This is different. The period is unknown.

In search of newness, ironically, I thought I'd start my travel journey in Brasil. Where crime is high, wages are low and the level of homelessness is eye watering. It's a place where corrupt politicians actually go to jail.

I booked my first stop in Lapa. Unbeknownst to me, it's *the hood*: "A dodgy area; one of irreputable activity" [According to me]. The reality of being on my own, own weighs heavy on my person. Every time I read a blog, a travel book or something online, it's all about murder, kill, bandits, robbery, crime, crime, crime. I refused to go anywhere. It's been 3 days. Stuck in my luxury cell. All kinda thoughts somersaulting in my head. I said "Fuck this shit. I'm going out." Loud and clear so it rebounded and etched itself on my face.

I enjoyed a city walking tour. Took public transport wherever I needed, sightseed and enjoyed many parties. My stay in the hood was now up. I moved to the famous Copacabana, literally by the beach. Right in time for carnival. I'm excited. An informal Airbnb thingy. It works. Tiny, clean, affordable and in the best location. She speaks English, having travelled there to study. We exchange jokes about Tesco and Primark. The friend of friend is Brazilian born, but somewhat out of place. Outwardly, she looks Eastern European. She loves her country, but not in love with it. Averse to the heat, but enjoys the cold, hates carnival as she is a true rock fan. Being a local, she enforced the "be careful" theme tune, I was so tired of hearing on a daily basis. One would have to be under a rock to not be aware of the craziness that occurs in Rio. It's not that I was ignoring it, but at some point, I had to turn the volume down on that.

I'm not feeling well today, it baffles me that I can't put my finger on why. I take a walk down the high street, the one I walk down everyday, just because. I hadn't seen this crystal shop before. A remedy for today's random offness, a new crystal.

Approaching the shop, I see a Black man, walking in before me. I assume he's a delivery man. Didn't see any other reason why he would be going into

the shop, my ignorant assumption. Two females manage the place. “Boa tarde”, “Boa tarde” we exchange. The most I know in Portuguese. I browse. Stuff looks expensive. It’s Rio, everything is. My back is turned to the blonde lady. I hear the makings of a heated exchange between her and the man. It’s the four of us in the shop. Unsure of what’s going on, I turn to leave.

He beckons me, with his head, to the back of the shop, where the brown hair lady is. He’s telling me, without words, he has a gun. With speed, I look at the two women. Both are speaking but not speaking. A mantra is on repeat “What the fuck! This isn’t happening”. Memories of when I had to do what “he” said, pour over me like water and electrics. I can’t believe it. I did what he said.

I’m at the furthest corner of the shop. My back is turned to him and the blonde lady. I’m compelled to look at him from the side of the wall, bracing myself against it, like it’s protection. He demands *dinheiro*. She fills a bag.

The brown hair lady says it’s gonna be ok. “I’m not ok. I don’t speak Portuguese. I don’t know what’s going on.” Flies out of my mouth, realising he might hear my fear. Her English isn’t good. I understand her. I hear my heart. “We’re going to be ok”. I just wanna leave I tell her. I just wanna leave. Desperation brings tears. I want to break. I hold it. *“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for God is with me. Your rod and thy staff they comfort and protect me”*. I recite. He’s gone.

The ladies, check on one another, in Portuguese. Simultaneously phased and unphased. They ask if I’m ok. Me? I can’t feel myself. They’re gonna call the police. Waiting, talking, describing and reliving. NO! I can’t do that. I wrap my arms around myself. I’m leaving. “Wait” they ask, whilst on the phone. Sound struggles to leave my lips “I gotta go. I gotta go”.