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SEVERO

THREE UNSHELLED PEANUTS appeared on my table.

As swift as a butterfly landing on a peony, or a leopard frog leaping up out of nowhere, they arrived...blending in with the taupe tablecloth, and settling next to the salt and pepper shakers, quietly, inconspicuously, as if they had been there all along. I put my fork down and patted my chin with a napkin. I shouldn't have gone out to dinner by myself.

But what choice did I have? The White Queen Latifah could not get out of bed. With a towel wrapped around her head like a turban, she barricaded herself with pillows, and blew her nose in loud violent thrusts - one nostril at a time, three times each, repeat.

"Just go without me. Go," she kept saying between sneezing fits. "Rio is not that dangerous, it only looks scary in the movies. What can possibly happen to you?"

Three raw jumbo peanuts...In the evening light they looked like an underground stem of a small ginger plant. I wondered why someone would put them on my table.

My cousin Leona got her nickname Queen Latifah because of her uncanny resemblance to the famous rapper. When we walked down the street every black man considered it his duty to stop and holler at her - "hey baby girl, aye ma, sugar whatcha doin, mami let me open that boom box." Wherever we went, a flock of mesmerized men followed. So I was only too glad to let my cousin rest at the hotel, as I took the elevator to the lobby and ventured out into Rio de Janeiro, alone.

I strolled down Ipanema, watching street vendors set up tables with arts and handicrafts for the hippie night market. The happy well-dressed tourists were rushing into the disco club Legs, with a statue of lady legs can-can-ing at the entrance. The Sugarloaf Mountain and the Corcovado with its Christ the Redeemer towered in the distance, as white frothy waves licked the shore. Somewhere between Leblon and Copacabana, I found a quaint beachfront café, Manuela. I ordered a feijoada - the famous Brazilian stew of beef, pork and kidney beans. I was enjoying a leisurely dinner with a refreshing sea breeze and stunning views when the three peanuts made their grand entrance.

At first, I thought it was a complimentary dessert from the owner of the restaurant. A treat. On the house. But when I turned around the bored wait staff was loafing in the backyard, smoking and playing cards, oblivious to the few patrons at the place. And then from the corner of my eye, a short distance away, I saw him - a little wrinkled man in a panama hat with a cross body man purse, sauntering through the cafe, gliding between tables, placing peanuts in front of customers, almost invisible, like a street cat...like those men who walk the trains handing out Buddha cards that say forgiveness, awareness, or the more appealing I am deaf-mute.

I examined my table. Was there a peace card? No.

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I looked at the peanuts. Was I supposed to eat them? I didn't dare touch them.

The other customers, indifferent, shook their heads and went back to their conversations.

He gathered back his peanuts with silent dignity.

After everyone refused, I realized the little man was waiting on me now, hovering under a streetlamp, nail-biting, anxious, hopeful. I motioned for him to come over. He slid towards me, as if on rollerblades. He said something in Portuguese.

"No. No. English!" I winced. "What is this?" I cut to the chase.

"They are for sale, mami!" he screeched.

"For sale? Three peanuts?"

"Yai mami, only fifteen reals!"

"What?"

"Eh...five US dollars each...But if you take all three I give discount - twelve dollars!"

"That's crazy. I can get a pound at Whole Foods for \$2.99. An entire pound! Not just three peanuts," I shook my finger at him, ready to file a complaint with The Better Business Bureau.

"Thas' good price," he said, and gave me his business card. On a school graph paper folded three times and taped at the corners, I read the word Severo in capital letters, and a phone number.

"Severo - thas' me," he tapped himself on the chest. Looking at his leathery skin and missing teeth, the little man was somewhere between forty-five and seventy-two. I couldn't tell.

"Me - enterprene. I rent beach chairs, and sell them too, on the beach. Ipanema, Copacabana, Barra da Tijuca..." he recited, showcasing the many verticals of his booming business.

"You live on the beach?" I asked him.

"No. No. I live ofe there," he pointed to the hills in the distance.

Last night, the White Queen Latifah (before she collapsed with the flu) and I attended the "500 years of Brazil" show, where beautiful muscular dancers with feathers on their backs stomped their feet to the music of drums. On the way back to our hotel, the guide pointed to the hills and said favela. What's a favela? we asked. A slum...a shantytown, he explained. In those yellow and brown houses, in a 10-block radius, 60,000 people live with jerry-rigged plumbing and no electricity. What do they do all day? we asked. I don't know, he shrugged, steal cars, kill, rob, sell stuff to each other, and play soccer, of course. We can't go there, I looked over at my cousin, especially you, Latifah.

"Thas' excellent quality and best price," the man from the favela continued selling.

"Let me check the prices at Costco," I insisted, googling peanuts on my

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i-phone. "See, you can buy a bulk bag of Hampton Farms, 25 pounds for \$44.75. Peanuts to take to the ballgame. Ideal for those who like them un-roasted. High in protein and fiber," I read the product description aloud.

"My price good! Very cheap. You can't find cheaper in Ipanema," he furiously protested.

I was getting tired of arguing. A tourist is a tourist is a tourist...and can never win a dispute in a foreign country. "No," I finally declined. The man swept the peanuts off my table like crumbs, slipped them into his man purse, and headed in the direction of Legs.

"Goodbye, Severo," I waved after him, a little sad at our parting.

When I came back to our hotel room, The White Queen Latifah was in bed, pressing an ice pack to her nose and watching "Pretty Woman" in Portuguese. I told her about Severo and the three peanuts. She burst out laughing, "You silly! Those were not peanuts!"

"What do you mean "not peanuts"? I saw them up-close...What were they?"

"Drugs!" she exclaimed, all-knowingly. "Inside the shells."

I sat down on my bed, in slow motion. "What kind of drugs?"

"I don't know. Could be anything. Ecstasy, cannabis, cocaine," she yawned, staring at the TV screen. "What did he say, five dollars apiece? Yeah, that sounds about right for low grade E, I guess that's the going rate on Ipanema," she speculated like a drug market analyst.

"Have you ever been on E?" she asked and I shook my head no, innocent as a newborn babe. "It's like everything around you is beautiful, you are beautiful, your boyfriend is beautiful," and she extended her hand, examining it in the light, turning it back and forth, as if it was covered with diamond dust, "even your hand is beautiful!"

And all night long, I could hear the feverish White Queen Latifah, tossing and turning in her sleep, raving, delirious, spurting out, "E...E...where is the guy?...beautiful!"

And me...in the next bed over, somewhere between wakefulness and deep slumber, I saw Severo, returning to the favela to get some rest, and then back to his drug enterprise. I imagined it as an intimate manufacturing operation, a family-run business, a conveyor belt with everyone helping - the cousins, the children, even the grandchildren, an entire household in shantytown opening shells, inserting capsules, gluing them back together with dough paste, packaging the goods into Severo's man purse and sending him out into the world to do what he does best.

But the question that wouldn't let go, that tormented me throughout the night and into the wee hours of morning was - what did they do with the actual peanuts?