

New Carpet

by Andrew O. Dugas

The American stepped out into the tropical evening, muted traffic sounds coming through the trim foliage. *Está demorando. It's taking a long time.* How curious that the thought arrived first in Portuguese; perhaps, after so many years, he was finally becoming Brazilian.

He strolled around the garden, a patch of faux jungle fronting his apartment building. Big leafy plants, flowering shrubs, and tufts of bamboo surrounded a small patio with stone benches and a little fountain. He plucked a ripe blossom from a branch and held it close to his nose, drawing in the sweet perfume.

"*Senhor* Charles?" Antonio, the doorman, called in Portuguese from the main entrance. "Won't you be going up?" Antonio filled the doorway in his blue work shirt and carefully pressed pants, his thick arms crossed like a bouncer.

"No, Antonio. The carpet installers haven't finished yet. Even then it will be perhaps two or three days before the fumes from the glue..." — Charles searched for the right word — "dissipate."

"Why then is the *Senhor* waiting?" The respectful third person, somehow mocking. *Does he know?*

"They might steal something. You never can tell." Charles ambled back toward the entrance. Antonio's bulk blocked the way but after a moment he moved aside, letting Charles pass.

"And *dona* Rita?" Charles's young wife.

Charles looked back at him. "Have you seen *dona* Rita today?"

The doorman looked at him for a moment and shrugged. "I've only been here a short time."

"Of course. *Dona* Rita is traveling. Visiting her mother. As for myself, I've got reservations at the Hotel da Bahia." *Don't do too much explaining.*

The doorman nodded and sat back down at his desk. He glanced up at Charles then went back to leafing through a magazine.

Charles moved back toward the door. Antonio made no motion to press the buzzer, so he pressed it himself and stepped back outside.

Looking back at Antonio through the glass, Charles could glimpse the two strands of *candomble* beads around his neck, one red, the other white, signifying his patron saint, his *orixa*. Not really a saint but an African god from the religion brought over with the slaves and later camouflaged with Catholic counterparts, camouflage being the secret of survival.

Charles knew Antonio participated in the ceremonies in the *terreiro*, where priestesses, the *baianas* in their traditional white dresses, whirled themselves into ecstasies until the *orixas* descended into their bodies, speaking through them and puffing on cigars. Outside the temple, he had seen Antonio practicing *capoeira*, kicking and slashing at sparring partners while standing upside down on one arm. A martial art camouflaged as dancing, the dancers' bodies wrapped with muscle like steel cables.

He poked a finger into his own doughy belly and lit another cigarette. There were some things here he would never understand, but that only made him feel more Brazilian. Cheerfully accepting the incomprehensible was very Brazilian indeed.

But of course he wasn't Brazilian. He wasn't sure if he was even American anymore.

Twenty years before, he had come to Bahia to work for a British engineering firm. Everyone he knew, the foreigners anyway, were British, and he found Britishisms creeping into his speech, beginning sentences with *So* and ending them with *then*. *So it's all over then. So his wife's having an affair then. So let's have another drink then.*

During his last trip to the States, two years earlier for his mother's funeral, he'd found his English clumsy at times. People would give him a strange look when he said the simplest of things — ordering a drink in a restaurant — as if he were saying the right words but somehow not speaking quite correctly.

It was the same look his maid gave him when he spoke Portuguese.

He thought about her now: Maria, a chocolate-skinned girl with dark and penetrating eyes. She wore simple work clothes, but Charles always imagined her in traditional *baiana* dress, flowing white lace blouses and layered skirts, her head wrapped in a white scarf, bangles and gold earrings against her perfect brown skin.

In reality she was a simple girl from the interior with strange country ways, preferring a simple mattress on the floor to a real bed, cold showers to hot ones. She spoke an impenetrable dialect with the other maids and sang low hypnotic melodies while she worked.

He had given her the day off. Because of the carpet installers. Rita, *dona* Rita, had wanted to fire her. He remembered when she first brought it up. He didn't want to think about that day, but that was when everything started.

It was one of those brilliant days preluding summer. He was coming around by the lighthouse, taking the scenic drive home, when he spotted the red Volkswagen Gol, his present to his wife on her twenty-fifth birthday, just the month before. Inside the car he recognized the silhouette of her blow-dried black mane. In the passenger seat there was a second silhouette, a young man with dreadlocks. They were kissing.

Had that only been last week? It felt like centuries ago; it felt like this afternoon.

He had kept driving. He stopped for a quick beer at a sidewalk place, giving her time to get home. She was fighting with Maria about the laundry when he let himself in.

Later that night, Rita said she wanted to fire her. He argued that she was pleasant enough, that trustworthy maids were hard to come by. Rita snapped her fingers; she could find a better girl *like that* in her hometown in the interior. Wasn't that where she'd found Maria? And besides, she was overdue for a visit to her mother and sisters.

A week's trip. Just a week, amor. Her hand on his cheek.

He lit another cigarette. His holding pattern had brought him back inside the glass lobby. A distant radio playing reggae drums,

the flick-flick of Antonio turning the magazine pages. Charles caught a glimpse of the doorman's reflection in the glass partition; he was looking back at him, his expression blank... Wait, was he *smirking*?

Even the fucking doorman knows. Was she banging him, too?

No, he told himself, holding onto his self-control. He let the sudden wave of anger wash away. Maria had probably told him. These people had their own intelligence network.

Impenetrable.

The house phone on Antonio's desk buzzed and he answered.

"Senhor Charles, they are coming down now."

Charles walked down the ramp into the white fluorescent parking garage, nodding to the attendant as he passed. Two white VW vans were backed up to the service elevators. Blue-clad workers were closing the side doors.

Carlinhos, in a pressed white shirt and jeans, leaned against the driver's door of the closer van.

Charles waited for him to speak, but he said nothing. "Well?"

Carlinhos shrugged.

Charles gestured toward the back of the van. "Is... the carpet inside?"

Carlinhos nodded. "But of course, sir."

"And the other..." Charles searched for the term.

"In the other van."

"Was there any diff--"

Carlinhos silenced him with a raised palm. "Sir, please. Surely a gentleman so refined as yourself cannot be interested in the boring details of a simple carpet installation. A little glue, a little effort, and in a short time you'll have forgotten that there ever had been another carpet."

Charles wanted more. "I see, so then..."

Again the raised palm. "Please, you really must concern yourself with other matters. You are still healthy and can enjoy life; you certainly have the money to do so. You have a wonderful apartment with a beautiful view. Surely there are other things more demanding of your concern."

One of the assistants shouted something and slapped the top of the van. Carlinhos opened the door and hoisted himself into the driver's seat. "You are a very fortunate man. What a pity not everyone can appreciate their good fortune."

"Yes," Charles nodded. "Yes, what a pity indeed."

Carlinhos reached his hand out the window. It was freshly scrubbed and surrounded by a soapy haze. Charles moved to shake it.

"No, *senhor*. The keys."

Then he remembered. Of course. He handed Carlinhos the keys to the red VW Gol. "It's parked at Barra Shopping Center, on the roof level. The parking slip is in the glove compartment."

Carlinhos nodded and started up the van; a deafening sputter echoed off the concrete walls.

Charles set the crumpled flower on top of the van as it pulled away. He caught a glimpse of the old carpet inside, rolled up and bulging like a boa constrictor. He wondered which carpet was which, and almost giggled.

What if I set the flower on the wrong van?

Antonio looked up at him as he re-entered the lobby. "They are finished?"

Charles's eyes narrowed as they bore into Antonio's. "Yes, my friend. All finished."

The doorman's glance darted away; he nodded weakly. "And *dona* Rita?"

"My wife, my little Rita, is traveling, remember?" Again the eyes looking down and away. "If anyone needs me, tell them that I'm at the Hotel da Bahia, enjoying a whiskey while the smell... dissipates." *Maria should be there by now.*

"Yessir." Antonio tried to go back to the magazine, his hands shaking.

"Antonio!" Charles said sharply, his eyes hard.

The doorman buzzed the door open, rose to hold it for him.

The American stepped out into the tropical evening air, thinking he had finally, perhaps, become Brazilian.

Or maybe something else entirely.

