

Hotels (an excerpt)

by Joe Sullivan

The Brazilian Tour Group — Crowne Plaza, Natick, Mass., 1997

As June entered July during my summer as a bellman in Natick, we started to see massive tour buses of sixty or more people rolling up the driveway at the Crowne Plaza. The buses were chartered by large groups of tourists passing through the northeastern U.S. and Canada. It seemed like we had at least one of these groups every week I was there until the end of August.

The tour group would fly into Toronto or Montreal and get on the bus, making stops all the way down to New York, and either fly back home from there, I think, or loop back up into Canada on the bus to fly back after seeing more sites. I'm guessing they always stopped at Niagara Falls at some point. Every group, it seemed, was from Brazil.

Natick, Framingham, Boston, and other parts of Massachusetts had large Brazilian populations at the time. Most of Route 135 from Natick through Framingham into Ashland had neighborhoods along it that were made up of Brazilians. During the 1994 World Cup we saw celebrations in the streets whenever the Brazilian National Team won a game and advanced. It was in all the newspapers and on local TV—crowds of people chanting, honking car horns, waving their yellow-and-green Brazilian flags. When I was in high school a few years earlier, I had known a group of Brazilians on the varsity soccer team who were my teammates and friends. I had played volleyball against some of them, too, in the school's intramural tournament. Some of those guys didn't speak English yet and were in the English as a Second Language program at the high school.

The Brazilians who came to the Crowne Plaza in July and August weren't the same type of people. "Snobs," our head housekeeper Denise called them in her deep voice, while peering out from under her glasses at me. In Brazil, she had been a lawyer, but

she had to come to the U.S. to make money to send back to her family. Being a lawyer back home didn't pay as well as being a hotel housekeeper in the U.S., she had once told me when I dropped her off at home in Natick using the hotel's van.

The tour groups that came in were Brazil's wealthy. They wore fine clothes from designer brands and had gigantic pieces of luggage weighing seventy or eighty pounds, I would guess. These were huge pieces of plastic, meant to sustain transfers across flights, bus rides, car rides, continents. They were basically indestructible and a real pain in the ass for us bellmen.

When these tour groups were coming, the bellmen and the front desk people were warned ahead of time. I would be on duty with one other bellman, unless it was a smaller-than-usual group I could handle alone, and the whole night would be geared toward the group's arrival. It had to be a night when there were very few pickups or drop-offs in the van—a weeknight early in the week or midweek. It had to be after dinnertime, because a lot of guests who were business travelers liked to be picked up and dropped off at the restaurants near the malls on Route 9 to have dinner out. We got the most calls for the van between 6 and 9. Anyone who called when the tour group came in would have to wait for us to pick them up, or otherwise someone from the front desk would have to do the pickup.

The Brazilian groups usually came in on the chartered buses about two hours before our shifts ended. That would give us enough time—I think it was always me and the other bellman Luis, never Phil, who usually worked during the day—to unload all their bags from the underbelly of the bus, collect them and make sure the room numbers were tagged on the bags, and then deliver them to the guests' rooms. We were doing this in bulk and would leave them outside their doors after check-in, and they were told to look outside their doors for their bags. We wouldn't even knock or anything, because we had to keep moving. There was no time to take each guest individually up into the rooms. There were too many of them, and their bags were too heavy. We had to make multiple trips. I'd

say, in all, we might be delivering forty large pieces of luggage each to twenty or thirty guest rooms.

After one night of delivering the bags, Luis and I were at the front desk to collect our tips. I noticed his white shirt had pit stains from all the running around and the bags he'd lifted. We each got a lump sum in a white envelope, based on the number of guests and bags.

"Forty bucks," he said. "Not bad." He wasn't smiling.

"Yeah, not bad. Are you in tomorrow?" I said, not smiling, either.

"Wednesday."

"OK, I'll see you then."

He nodded and went down the hall to punch out. I was still on for another hour in case anyone needed anything. I scanned the lobby for debris to be disposed of at the lobby bar.

A few minutes later a couple of women from the tour group, a blonde and a brunette, came downstairs. They looked like they were my age, maybe around twenty. Maybe a little older. They were going outside to smoke. I watched them through the lobby's sliding-glass doors. Only the blonde was smoking. She was in a striped, yellow-and-black top that hugged her form. The brunette was in a white blouse that was looser. Both women were slender in jean shorts. They were talking about something, and I was wondering what it was. They had serious expressions on their faces, and the brunette was moving her hands as she spoke, describing something or someone.

They came inside to the lobby, and I was standing by the front desk not looking at them, about to fix some brochures haphazardly placed in their holder. The brunette said to me in good English: "Excuse me. Can you help us?"

I turned, and I could smell the cigarette smoke still fresh on the blonde. "Sure. What can I do for you?"

"We are looking for some ice," the brunette said. "Can you help us?"

“Sure, no problem. I'll come up to your room and use your ice bucket, if that's OK.”

“Yes. Thank you.” The brunette nodded.

The three of us got on the elevator to the seventh floor, and the two women broke into Portuguese while I stood silent. The air around them in the elevator smelled of a flowery sweet perfume mixed with tobacco. When the elevator door opened, I held it for them and let them walk ahead of me to their room.

The brunette opened the door with her plastic room key. The blonde entered and sat down at the circular table by the window. Then she took out an unlabeled plastic tube from her pocket and opened it to put lotion on her hands. The brunette sat on the bed, and I went to their sink to grab the ice bucket. “I'll be right back,” I said. I put the metal stopper in the door to keep it open and went down the hall to the ice machine. I pressed its round, red button, and ice rattled down its chute into the bucket.

When I came back, the two women were in the same places on the bed and seated at the table, having a conversation in Portuguese. The blonde was touching her hair as she spoke.

“I'll just leave this by the sink,” I said, holding the ice bucket.

“OK. Thank you,” the brunette answered. She stood up and said something to the blonde, then turned to me—I was thinking the brunette would tip me at that point and I could get going. Instead, she said, “One more question.”

“Sure, what do you need?” I said.

“We were wondering...do you have weed or know where to get some?”

I paused. I was thinking about who I should ask, but then it seemed like a trap question that could get me into trouble. “No. I'm sorry,” I said.

She turned back to the blonde and said something in Portuguese. The blonde answered, then she shrugged.

“Too bad,” the brunette answered. “Then, one more thing.” She smiled. “Do you give haircuts? Do you know how?” She

motioned to me with her index and middle fingers as if they were scissors.

Again, I paused. Was she serious? I wondered. I waited a second, and she gave no indication she wasn't serious. Finally I took a breath and said: "Ah, well, a little. I've cut my own."

"Good. That's good," she said. She turned back to the blonde and said something, and the blonde shrugged again. "She would like a quick trim. Could you do it? I don't cut hair, or I would do it myself."

"A trim?" I said. "Are you sure she wouldn't like to go to a professional? We could book someone for her and drive her over in the morning. There might even be somewhere open right now. I could have the front desk check for you."

"No, I don't think so. We are checking out tomorrow and leaving town. She says she needs it trimmed now. It's driving her crazy. Her hair is splitting at the ends. It's so humid. She needs it done now."

I looked at the blonde. She had thick hair, and it did seem frizzy. It occurred to me that she was being dramatic. This really didn't need to be done now. She was indoors in an air-conditioned room, and their bus, their whole trip, it seemed, was air-conditioned. If she just tied her hair back instead of letting it fall over her ears, she would have been fine. But I didn't say that. I weighed the idea of giving this woman a trim. It could mean a big tip, I thought to myself. I had about an hour left in my shift, which seemed like plenty of time to do it without messing up her hair too badly.

"OK. I can do it. You have scissors? Have her wash her hair, and I'll trim the ends," I said. "I have forty minutes, then I go home for the night."

She turned to the blonde and spoke again in Portuguese, and the blonde answered. Then the blonde looked at me, sort of smiled and got up to use the bathroom. About ten minutes later she emerged in a robe and was brushing her wet hair. She didn't smell like smoke anymore—the hotel shampoo/conditioner smell had overtaken it.

In the time the blonde had been in the shower, the brunette instructed me on the haircut. “Just the ends. Just a snip. Maybe this much.” She created a space of a half-inch between her index finger and thumb. She was bossy. I thought of Denise saying these people were snobs.

I tried to be stoic and professional despite the brunette's demands. I almost got up to leave. I was annoyed. But driven by the thought of a good tip. “I'll do my best,” I said. “You have the scissors?”

“Yes,” she said. She had them in a travel case with other things—nail clippers, etc.—for grooming. This was before 9/11, and you could carry hair clippers and other sharp objects on a plane without them being confiscated at the gate.

The blonde sat down by the window with her back to me, and I took the clippers and comb from the brunette. I combed the blonde's hair straight down her back, over the back of a white hotel towel she had around her neck above the robe with its Crowne Plaza logo. I took part of her hair between my fingers and snipped a small amount, which fell onto a towel the brunette had placed behind the chair. She watched from the bed a few feet away. I took another part of the blonde's hair and snipped again. I did the same thing a few more times, combing it down her back each time to make sure it was even. The women were chatting in Portuguese while I concentrated.

About twenty minutes had passed, and I had to go home. “Have a look in the mirror,” I said.

The brunette translated to the blonde, and she went to the mirror above the dresser to take a look. She put her hands through her hair. She shook it out. She put her hands through it again. She shook it out again. She looked again at herself in the mirror. Then she turned to me and gave me a thumbs-up. I gave her a slight smile, but I was not expressive. I was working. I gave her a thumbs-up back.

“She likes it,” the brunette said.

“Good,” I answered. “I'm sorry, but I have to go now.” It was then that I expected some kind of tip—for the haircut, the ice,

the time. At least ten bucks, I thought. Twenty would have been even more reasonable. Women's haircuts were expensive, and I knew from what Denise had said that this was a wealthy group.

The brunette said, "Thank you for everything." But no tip was coming. Maybe it wasn't the custom in Brazil. I left the room without earning any money or even having learned their names. Maybe they figured this type of service was included in what they had paid for the tour. I wasn't going to say anything—I had to punch out and go home. I wasn't supposed to be in a guest's room for as long as I had been.

* * *

The next evening I went back to work and I saw Denise. I asked her if it was customary in Brazil to not tip the help.

"They know to tip you here. They should know. They tell them to tip before they take the trip," she said. "Snobs. They don't pay for nothing. Daddy pays."

Their tour bus had rolled out that morning, but Craig at the front desk told me their driver had left his suitcase behind. "We'll have to ship it to Canada," he said. "The company says they'll pay for it. I just called them."

I went back behind the front desk where Craig unzipped the suitcase. Clothes, toiletries and a handle of vodka, half-drunk. "Not the booze," he said. He gave me a mischievous smile. "We keep the booze."

