

Lola of the Red Oil

by

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Lola of the Red Oil

Darkness was her friend, for it was at night that she felt like herself again. The tyranny of the relentless sun-anointed beauty belonging to her city, Salvador da Bahia, demanded that Mae Regina fall in line and perform a cheerfulness, a wholeness, that she did not feel inside. But now it was night and she just wanted to rest. She cleared away the cowrie shells, turned out all the lights, sat back down on her wooden stool and buried her head in her hands. She had just finished a reading for her neighbour, the plump, freckled and troubled mulatta, Dona Ribeira. The relieved laundress had hastily departed in order to prepare a loving dinner for her newly-innocent husband, and an even more relieved Mae Regina was finally free to attend to the patient chasm inside her.

It was then, in that moment, when she had fully relaxed into the sadness within, that the old *caboclo* chose to make his presence felt by a familiar warm tightness in her chest. Soon Mae Regina's entire body was humming, energised by a different force. He had not been invited in, but he was an old friend. He wasted no time today: *The African girl will come and she must help her. This Lola. He urged. Lola de Oxala. She, Mae Regina, must abandon her anger at pretty young black things and help this girl. She will need her full resources when she is forced back to her cold country. She will be too weak to cope as she is. She has a difficult time ahead.* A longing in Mae Regina's lungs and a faint buzzing on her lips reminded her that he enjoyed a smoke. She herself hated the smell and taste of cigars but nevertheless got up, crossed the terracotta tile floor of her small, spartan front room with her newly acquired limp, and opened the draw in the wooden chest where she kept her materials. There, underneath the candles, matches, Catholic saint statuettes and *buzios*, she would find the Cohiba's that he so enjoyed. Still standing by the chest, she struck a match and lit the juicy fat cigar and began to suck and puff, the smoke expanding into the darkness.

After some time, Mae Regina found herself limping through her smoky room towards the bottle of *cachaca* that stood by the front door. Grabbing it roughly, she let herself outside to her modest porch so they could enjoy the view. Her neighbourhood lay before her, illuminated only by lights coming from the houses, tiny bakeries and convenience stores. The local government had not got round to providing street lighting. It was a lively darkness: in a house further up the hill behind her, a radio blared tinny, bouncing samba-reggae; couples argued with passion and further down the hill she could hear the clatter of dishes being washed whilst bed-bound labourers negotiated the dark hilly pathways with relieved sighs and heavy footsteps. The moon was high and cars hummed in the far distance; a goat bleated softly nearby. The smoke curled around her fingers and up into the warm, sweet Bahian night. The *caboclo* wanted more *cachaca* and so Mae Regina poured a little more of the white spirit into the small dirty glass that was his favourite. *Saude* she whispered, raising the glass and knocking it back in one.



One week later...

Click

This was *not* what she wanted.

Click.

What was she really doing back here?

Click.

Again, just shots of people walking away from one another in indifferent direction. A void in the middle of

the frame. No tension. A nothing-y sort of photograph. Not even interesting in its nothingness. Where was her timing? Her concentration? Her eye?

Lola turned the camera on herself.

Click.

Flipping the camera around she inspected its findings. The white sky behind her face, the unevenness of her dark skin tone and her mournful, half-closed eyes shocked her. She thought the beauty of her surroundings would rub off on her. Shine through her. That traces of Him would be gone. But He was still there. Nothing but sadness shone through her eyes. His sadness mixed with hers. He was not going to be so easy to get rid of, this one.

It had been two weeks. Two weeks since she had found herself back in this magical city that had captured her completely. Possessed her really. Bahia. The word sounded like a song. A sigh. *Baeeyaah...* No hard consonants to ground you. This city held a large fragment of West Africa's soul, sweetened, and it was Lola's secret. She rarely recounted the events that had happened to her here, simply because nobody back in England would believe her. Their tolerant smiles would fade as she told her tales about the strangers that would come up to her on the street to tell her her innermost secrets. So she did not dare admit that she regularly woke up herself knowing what would pass that day or who should avoid going to Itapua beach that weekend and why. She avoided mentioning the bright red moon she had seen one night that had whispered a song into her heart, a song she had begun to sing in full in the shower the following morning, as if it were her own invention. No-one would quite trust or accept the near reckless acts of kindness from strangers, the lazy warmth and seduction in everybody's eyes. The way the men constantly murmured appreciation as she walked by.

On her very first trip, Lola had had an ecstatic and enthusiastic welcome. It was almost as if the spirit of the city - let us call this spirit *Exu* - had been an eager estate agent. Hosting her, showing her the sights, the glories, the magic of Bahia. A gleaming concierge in black and red, Exu despatched assistance in the form of lovers, helpers, beautiful rooms to stay in and work wherever she needed it. Filling her. Seducing her. Trapping her. And here she was again. Back in Salvador da Bahia, the city that, in just eight weeks, had changed her life and loaned her a new self. She was hoping the city would oblige once again and rid her of this man that consumed her, the one with the sad eyes, beautiful mouth and bored voice. The man with the difficult heart that made her forget who she was.

But this, her second trip, was not turning out as she expected. The photography project, for a start, was not working out. It was, in fact, a cover. She had just needed something to do. The camera was a wonderful way of having a reason to be there. To be a voyeur. To be among but not to belong. To participate but to have distance and, yes, to hide behind. There were many things to hide from. But something felt wrong about the whole exercise and this perturbed her. Even her arrival in Salvador had been more cautious and less beatific. The taxi driver on the way in from the airport had, with no warning, pulled the cab over at the beach and had asked her to get out.

"Why?" Lola had asked.

"To wet the feet," he'd replied. "*For good luck.*"

It was almost as if he could sense that she would need it. Silently they'd waded into the turquoise surf. He'd said a prayer for her to *Iemanja*, goddess of the sea, as they wet their faces too. A beautiful but ominous gesture, Lola had thought, as she and the cab driver got back into the car and continued the journey to her hotel, once again in silence. Installing herself quickly in her simple hotel room in the Santo Antonio neighbourhood (she packed very light this time), Lola decided to say a quiet hello to her city. She sonambulated through the hot, noisy cobbled streets in a mournful torpor, deciding, en route, to drop in on a friend who sold folkloric Bahiana dolls in the brightly-coloured tourist district of Pelourinho. This friend, she knew, would be pleased to see her. But as she entered his shop and drew towards him, he had just looked through her and said:

“Voce chegou. Mais voce nao chegou.”

Indeed. She had arrived. But she had not arrived. She was back in her beloved Bahia but she was drifting. No joy filled her heart this time. The glittering blue ocean of the bay did not make her heart leap as normal. She did not mingle freely with strangers or stop to take in the samba and afoxe rhythms that poured from the windows of the 16th century Portuguese buildings and vibrated out of buses and taxis. It was as if the blessed cacophony had been dimmed. Lola was not at home to take it all in. She did not know where she had put herself. Perhaps her soul was knocking on the door of the man back in North London that did not love her.



Lola felt hot, hungry and very lonely. She hated to admit it but she was even a little bored. She put her camera back in her bag and sank down onto the steps at the foot of the church she was standing outside. It was the Igreja de Nossa Senhora do Rosário dos Pretos. They say there's a church for every day of the year in Salvador. It was late afternoon and the height of tourist season. Everyone seemed so enchanted, so thrilled to be in this place. And even though it was touristy and somewhat choreographed, the historic Pelourinho neighbourhood had an incredible charm that eased all comers into the startling raw magic of Salvador City. Men wandered around selling the famous Bahian ribbon charms that both tourists and natives alike wore around their wrists till they became, thin, worn and simply fell off. At which point, it was said, the wearer's wish would come true. (Lola's wish would take much too long to come true in that case. She would not buy). Instead, she sat in a self-indulgent daze on the steps of the church in Pelourinho, consumed, if not overcome, by her dreadful luck in love. Lola had read in her guide that *Pelourinho* meant “whipping post” in Portuguese, and it is where African slaves (probably Nigerians, like Lola) were punished in centuries past. Here she was a real live Yoruba: gilded and free, yet also punished. Punished for allowing her body to be possessed by people and places much too easily.



Mae Regina, the Bahiana, was watching the sad-looking African girl that sat on the opposite side of the steps. She was waiting for her dende oil to heat up. It would be another two minutes. She didn't want the red oil to smoke. She would take her time. Regina Soares Tatiana dos Santos. She wore white lace. One of the city's many Bahianas, she was lucky enough to have a pitch in the heart of the tourist enclave of Pelourinho. When the oil is ready she will place the bean paste into the oil. The resulting acarajé will feed the tourists, shop keepers and Antonio, the charm vendor, who will get his for free. Some customers will take a little vatapá paste, others prefer caruru sauce inside their hot bean cake. The tourists tend not to touch the salad that is also available. As if she were unclean. What did these people know! How easy was it to sit there with the boiling, hissing red oil and keep her white laces so spotless? She readjusted her huge skirt and bent over to pick up the tub that contained the spiced bean paste. The oil was almost ready now.



The smell of the acarajé was making Lola hungry. It reminded her of summers spent in Nigeria. She remembered the dawn cries of the skinny young boy out in the already humid, tree-lined street: “Akara! Akara!” Sometimes the houseboy would rush to the gate and launch a hiss that always caught the attention of the very person at which it was directed, seemingly at any distance. The small boy would run over and you knew that breakfast that day would consist of akara - this very same fried bean cake - served with semolina, mixed with evaporated milk and cubes of sugar that she would observe disintegrate with a mix of sadness and anticipation. Lola's favourite breakfast when in Nigeria. This same akara was being prepared by the astonishing-looking woman at the foot of the steps of the church. But here in Bahia it was a savoury dish. Lola had always resisted trying it. Akara was supposed to be sweet and she couldn't get her head around the idea of this “acarajé” being eaten savoury.

But the smell of the food beckoned her. Gazing in the direction of the vapours, she soon became spellbound by the woman preparing it. She looked like something out of the eighteenth century. Her outfit, Lola had read during her last visit, was the outfit of a 'favoured' or 'well-to-do' slave. This woman wore a vast crinolined white lace skirt, topped with a white, short-sleeve, eyelet cotton top that fell off both her shoulders in a way that was both matronly and sexual. Her pink, brown and white necklaces hung low, practically to her waist, and her gold earrings and white turban completed the outfit. But it was not the costume-like clothing that made her extraordinary. These women, Bahianas, were to be found on street corners and beaches all over Salvador. They perfumed the streets with the smell of their shrimp, spices and hot dende oil (the red oil Lola knew as palm oil in Nigeria) and lent Bahia a totally unique form of exoticism. No, it wasn't the Bahiana's clothes. It was her demeanour. Her face.

Lola couldn't tell how old she was. The outfit most probably made her look older than she actually was. Lola guessed mid 40s at the very most. She had very dark brown skin - red black - and exaggeratedly high, almost pointed, cheekbones. A hooked nose added a witchy but regal air to her face (she certainly had some Amerindian blood mixed in there, thought Lola, leaning forwards and narrowing her eyes) but it was her eyes that were her most extraordinary feature. A light, bright hazel. Her lips were thin and severe. She wore no lipstick. Most Bahianas wore generous, red-painted smiles. Professional totems of pleasure, plenty, and matriarchal assurance. A spectre of Brazil's slave-owning past. But this Bahiana's beauty was fierce and intimidating. Her judgemental golden eyes inspected all those around her. She would make an arresting photo. Lola, forgetting her hunger and her troubles for one moment, wondered whether this extraordinarily sullen and fierce-looking woman would allow her to take a picture of her. Never taking her eyes off her, she walked over to Regina gingerly and when she was close said hello, automatically bowing her head in mild deference (these women commanded a certain respect). She was even more beautiful close up. Her eyes were yellow. Like a lion. Unreal, almost.

Regina glanced up at Lola, enough to take in her cargo pants and too-loose strapless top and asked whether she wanted *caruru*, *vatapá* or both in her acarajé. In halting Portuguese Lola smiled and said:

"Er, actually, I was wondering whether I might take a picture of you?"

Regina smirked mirthlessly, shook her head and went back to fussing unnecessarily over her display table. Lola stood in front of her feeling foolish. She wasn't expecting to be rebuffed. She had clearly lost the friendly insouciance that enabled her to take beautiful pictures like she had done whilst travelling around Venezuela. No-one had refused her there. Now that spirit of ease and lightness had left her. Yet another thing He had taken away from her. Regina looked up and said:

"Listen, my girl, do you want acarajé or not?"

"Um, no..." Lola replied staring at her, drinking in her image one last time, deeply disappointed at the missed opportunity. She turned around to leave.

Regina's eyes widened sharply and she spoke: *"Forget him. He is not yours. He belongs to someone else. Your future is not together. He has forgotten you already."*

"What?" Lola whipped round, feeling suddenly winded. She knew instinctively what the woman was referring to but didn't want to show it – or believe it. In as dismissive and derisive a manner as she could possibly muster, she scoffed: *"I don't know what you mean!"*

"That man," Regina said more loudly and with some irritation as she took out the cooked bobbing beancakes from the red oil. *"He will make you lose your pride. Move on. You are only embarrassing yourself. You are not what he is looking for."*

Lola grew hot. Tears announced themselves, creating a misty wall over her eyeballs that quivered and threatened to cascade. How *dare* she? Lola was used to the 'psychic ethernet' that seemed to operate in Bahia. Friends and strangers forever predicting things about her and each other; accurately identifying innermost thoughts over the phone and warning one another off dangers. But she was not used to this sort of bluntness. It wounded her. She woke up every single morning, with Him in her heart, like a sore. As

soon as her eyes fluttered open, whilst still under her duvet, she would summon the three occasions she had actually succeeded in capturing his imagination and he would be lying next to her, tracing her shoulder with his long fingers. She got dressed for Him; he liked well-scrubbed natural beauties so she wore very little make-up painting only her nails and eyelashes, even when he wasn't there to see. He liked calm, slightly distant, otherworldly girls. Lola affected nonchalance, but behind her glassy gaze she was imploring him for more. More of Him. But because Lola knew in her heart that the Bahiana's words were true, the tears streamed silently down her cheeks. She stood still, unable to move away from the woman whose yellow gaze was now fixed upon her.

Two blond-haired tourists, a man and a woman, both dressed in shapeless T-shirts and linen trousers, approached Regina. They looked the tearful black girl up and down with mild curiosity, then placed an order for acarajé from the Bahiana. They looked German but were actually Southern Brazilians whose ancestors may well have come from Germany. They spoke to Regina in perfect Portuguese. Two very different Brazils, Lola thought through her angry tears, now self-conscious because of the two customers that ruptured the unexpected intimacy between herself and the Bahiana.

Now she was the intruder in their transaction. An uninvited spectator of their shared history. This Brazil was an odd mix of Third World and First World, Lola thought as she watched the Southern Brazilians point at the vatapá and wag their fingers at the salad. Brazil wasn't a poor country with rich people in it, like Nigeria. It was a schizophrenic country with the two nations living side by side within it. First White Brazil was ashamed and uncomfortable with Third World Black Brazil. It thwarted its modern and European aspirations. Brazilian blacks, Lola had sadly noted, were overwhelmingly poor and uneducated. They weren't First World poor, they were Third World poor. Like the poor skinny children she saw all over the city, in their rags and bare feet. Back in London poor kids would still have worn trainers. They might even have been overweight. This yellow-eyed Bahiana was a mere pawn in this screwed up social order, Lola reflected. The presence of the white Brazilian customers only highlighted this. They treated the Bahiana like an exotic curiosity though they were all countrymen. They looked through Lola and her brown skin and black braids. A young Bahian native, no doubt. Regina heartily thanked the tourists with an uncharacteristic sunniness as they departed. Lola grew even angrier. Angry at this obliging token of black servility for talking to her so brutally. Did she not deserve any respect? This woman impersonating a slave? Lola cleared her throat:

"Are you proud of yourself, sitting here dressed like a negro slave?"

"It is not about slavery, it is my religion" replied Regina calmly, without hesitation. *"I am a daughter of the Orixá, Iansa. Many of us that sell acarajé on the streets are daughters of Iansa. Acarajé is her preferred food."*

Lola had hoped for a more defensive response. Or silence. She was immediately contrite. This Bahiana had so much poise. So unlike herself, knocked over sideways by any slightly creative yet distant male that withheld his affections. Before she could speak again, Regina wanted to know something:

"Why do you love this man?"

The question swirled around Lola. The neighbourhood around her faded. She snorted ruefully to herself as if recalling a bizarre and ridiculous incident. She then closed her eyes and shook her head as if blocking a thought that caused her pain. In all honesty, Lola relished having a legitimate excuse to talk about Him and was always ready to do so. Even now, she didn't mind tearing open her heart in front of the harsh stranger with the yellow eyes. She felt in possession of this man when she talked about Him. Where to begin?

Her eyes were knitted shut and her mouth now slightly smiling as she began to speak of the man with the sad eyes that she had not, at first, paid any attention to but who caught her unawares and insinuated himself into her affections. Mae Regina was listening intently even though she never stopped cooking. She grunted slightly in recognition. She had seen this type of possession many times before. When Lola finally stopped speaking, Mae Regina began her diagnosis:

“This man, he is a son of Oxossi, the hunter spirit. Oxossi is the son of Oxala and Iemanja. He lived in the forest and his sons have the psychological type of the intellectual artists.” Mae Regina stopped what she was doing and looked at Lola. Looked through her, Lola felt. *“He is inquisitive, a greatly penetrating observer. He is full of crazes, unstable in his love affairs, very susceptible and believed to be ‘complicated’. He is lonely, mysterious, discreet, introverted.”*

It was like the woman was actually seeing Him. The accuracy took her breath away. Lola was utterly intrigued. Mae Regina instructed Lola to do the following: take a lukewarm bath in arruda leaves which she could buy in Sao Joaquim market. Afterwards she should light a candle with some white string wrapped around it, then pour some honey at its base. She should add some white flowers and a small bottle of perfume to complete the shrine. Lola should then recite some words that Mae Regina proceeded to scrawl carefully on a paper napkin. Lola was ready to welcome any road map out of her emotional cul-de-sac. Any suggestion of an insight into this highly secretive man was like throwing a juicy bone at a starving dog. This idea of Him being an ‘Oxossi’ seemed to fit his personality. Of course the herbal ‘remedy’ was completely daft but she conceded that it might be of some symbolic value. She would consider trying it. Going shopping for the ingredients might give her an interesting experience at the very least. An activity to give her uncertain days here in Bahia some semblance of purpose.

Lola was aware of these Yoruba deities or “*Orishas*” as the Brazilians called them, but she hadn’t given them much thought. No, she wanted to know more about this Yoruba tradition which was hers but not hers. Orixás seemed like Zodiac signs. Regina talked about them as if they determined one’s personality. She wanted to know which Orixá she might be ‘a daughter of’. Lola had many, many questions and she and the Bahiana remained at the foot of the church for almost three hours dismantling her heart, beating through the virgin undergrowth and opening up new fields, pathways and caves in the African girl’s imaginative landscape.



From then on an unspoken arrangement was ushered into Lola’s daily routine. Lola would find herself passing by the church around 4pm everyday until sundown for the next three weeks to sit by Mae Regina and receive an education in Candomble. Often there was silence between the two women who were, truth be told, still unsure about one another. Nevertheless, sitting side-by-side, they looked out onto the colourful 16th century buildings of the Pelourinho and meditated on the hum of life as it wandered by them. Every so often, questions, insights and observations would rise up and punctuate their wordless dialogue. Lola never touched the acarajé and Mae Regina soon stopped offering.



3 weeks later...

Lola had grown a shade darker. She’d become fit and lithe from capoeira practise and weekend swims at Itapua beach. Her Portuguese was much better now, flowing almost instinctively. As for her body language, this too had become more languid, more ‘Brazilian’ having been massaged by daily murmured, cadenced compliments. The city’s rhythms danced around her ecstatic body and had worked their way in. The sensual Nigerian girl in over-size sunglasses reclined in her seat on a bus bound for a small village just outside Salvador City. She was on her way to attend a full-blown Candomblé ceremony at a proper *terreiro* - a word she thought sounded like ‘terror’ but actually meant ‘temple’. Lola’s travel partner was a newly-acquired Dutch anthropologist friend. Truth be told, she found the anthropologist somewhat vexing. The woman was obsessed with Lola’s Yoruba heritage and insisted on questioning her about obscure ceremonies even though Lola had told her time and time again that she had never really lived in Nigeria and did not speak the language. Besides, her family were Pentecostal Christians and didn’t go in for any form of ‘pagan devilry’. These were people who deemed her yoga classes ‘unchristian’. But this wasn’t good enough for the anthropologist, who found the Nigerian girl bizarre and frustrating. Lola turned and

faced the window. She marvelled at how sunny the speeding countryside looked, even with darkened lenses on. She also reasoned that she did, in fact, need to go to the ceremony with someone and that this strange-looking woman and her essentialist notions was better than nothing. Besides, the anthropologist knew the way as she had visited the place before. Maybe she'd give her the slip later. Mae Regina would also be there. It was her terreiro.

The two women took the bus to the very end of the line and disembarked. A surprising number of people got off there too. Most were poor, coffee-coloured Brazilians carrying heavy loads from the city. The terreiro was another 20-minute walk uphill to what looked like forest. The anthropologist led the way. The sun's brightness was almost menacing and colourful birds squawked in the trees as the baking hot sand-filled road swallowed their feet whole at every step. The two women pressed on in silence, consumed by their own thoughts, having quickly run out of things to say to each other. From among the trees, the gleaming concierge watched the black woman and the white woman trudge by. Lola looked up at the sky, momentarily transfixed by a majestic red and black bird flying over their heads into the treetops up in front. Her worldview was altering. Her imagination had been caught in a new cosmological web. She had known about Candomblé and was vaguely aware of its presence throughout the city, but since her meetings with Mae Regina she could see it everywhere. How could she have missed it? She'd been taking her lunch everyday in a seafood restaurant called *Restaurante Iemanja* - Iemanja was the goddess of the sea; she was staying in a white hotel with red shutters called *Casa Xango* - Xango was a warrior deity whose colours were, indeed, red and white; her favourite Brazilian songs were *Toda Menina Baiana* by Gilberto Gil and *Neide Candolina* by Caetano Veloso; songs about Bahian girls with Orixás; songs Lola liked to think had been written about her. Yes, she had known it, but she hadn't *known* it.

Candomblé was a mystical religion whose practise of spirit possession was still shrouded in secrecy, but it did not remain in the temples of worship. The religion had exploded out onto the streets and into the psyches of millions of Bahians and Brazilians. Its iconography, its practises and its mythology out there for all to see and consume in the most profane ways. A very public enigma, the mysteries lurked everywhere, permeating the city. It was, perhaps, the reason Salvador felt so magical to Lola.

Sweat was now streaming down her forehead. The sun was brutally hot and the uphill climb in the sand a real struggle. But they were, according to the anthropologist, nearing the terreiro and a knot of excitement began to form in Lola's stomach. Voodoo had always frightened her. She too had seen the movies set in Haiti with the zombies and the crazed implacable black people with their senseless demands for human sacrifice. But this Bahian voodoo was a different kind of theatre. The Orixás were depicted in vibrant colours and dazzling costumes and each one represented and exalted human personality traits like benevolence, belligerence, tolerance, vanity, intellectualism. If she had understood correctly, these deities were ancestors transformed into forces of nature. Consequently, forests, plants, rivers and the sea were revered. The religion also cherished women and homosexual life judging by all the bisexual Orixás Lola had been told about. Even better, there was no such thing as hell.

Candomblé seemed to have a more nuanced and sophisticated understanding of so-called 'evil' and Lola had always been sceptical about the idea of The Devil. This religious culture had, additionally, given black Bahians an identity and self-respect that was so necessary in a country like Brazil, a country that, despite all this celebration of African culture, fundamentally did not respect black people. Lola perceived this whenever she visited wealthier parts of Salvador where, if she dressed too simply, she would be mistaken for and treated like a servant, so few and far between were other black faces (and Salvador the most African city in Brazil). The sensitive and proud Lola found this treatment hard to accept but she drew succour from her true identity which shielded her and meant it was not really happening. A sour solace was derived in the knowledge that these white Baianos well understood that were they to step foot in the nations of Anglo Saxons they would cease to be white. And although people on a street level thought of Lola as beautiful, it was obvious how undesirable the nation officially found black people, seldom seen were they in fashion magazines, on TV, in government or even in shopping-malls and offices. Lola was beginning to understand why black and brown Brazilians were so obsessed with skin colour and hair texture. Why the kind woman at her corner store would berate her in the most loving manner for allowing herself to bake in the sunshine and become *preta*, "black" instead of *morena*, which meant "brown" like a mulatta. Lola was in no way mixed race, but *morena* was the name given to her as a compliment in Brazil. Black was not beautiful here. Fetishised, perhaps, but not desired in any real way. And yet the conscious and politically-

driven exultation of Afro-Brazilian religion saw to it that Brazilians of all colours (even foreigners) joined in the traditions. They became enchanted by Candomblé. Entranced. They became 'African'. Such were the paradoxes of Brazil. It was why Lola loved the country – and also why she hated it.



Just as the heat was becoming unbearable, the anthropologist led Lola off the unforgiving road. They turned down a tiny path that disappeared into the forest. Once under the protection of the branches, the air was cool and quiet and Lola's breath was free again. After a short time they came to a tall archway made out of beaten metal with symbols etched into it. This was the exterior of the terreiro. They had arrived.

Lola and the anthropologist passed through the archway and entered what appeared to be a colourful African village and began to wander around. In this large compound were several small houses hidden and protected by the surrounding forest which blocked the sun and bathed the compound in a soft light, creating an otherworldly atmosphere. The heat here felt soft. It hung comfortingly inside her body and rested happily on her skin. She felt a perfect, weighted peace. Each house was painted a different colour. Some had murals depicting Orixás, combs, axes and snakes. There were very few people in sight but the clang of pots and pans could be heard. Lola could hear women issuing instructions and the shuffle of flip-flops dragging across a floor. Music was coming from somewhere. Strange and morose-sounding. Not Brazilian at all. It grew louder as Lola walked towards a dark red house surrounded by banana trees dappled with soft light. She followed the sound round to the front of the building and soon found herself wishing that she might have remembered to bring her camera. An elderly Afro Brazilian woman with magogany skin, silver hair and half-closed, cat-like eyes was leaning out of a window. In the room behind her was an old record-player responsible for the scratchy 1930s bolero that haunted the compound. The woman was staring into space and rocking as if there was something on her back forcing her gently forwards and backwards. Lola stood right in front of the exhausted-looking woman who paid no attention to her. Perhaps she didn't see her. Moments later the anthropologist crept up behind Lola and whispered that the woman was in trance. She explained that the spirit would sometimes mount her for days at a time. She stared for a further minute or two before moving away, urging the Nigerian to follow. Lola trailed along absentmindedly but could not stop staring back at the old woman. She looked just like her Auntie Eburn.

This strange place was making Lola feel oddly at home. The smoke from the bonfire billowing out from behind one of the houses instantly transported her to her grandmother's compound where Lola would always sit much too close to the open stove, mesmerised by the embers. Her grandmother, Mama Ketu, would ask her to sit back a little before she prepared her favourite meal: ripe plantain fried in red palm oil. Wandering around, it dawned on Lola that it was Bahia's apparent exultation of all things African - all things Yoruba - that had been calling her to this place all along. In fact, Bahia attracted many visitors from all over the world, some of whom ended up extending their stay or even settling there permanently. Whether they thought they were here for the sunshine, the beaches, the food, music or the sex - it was Candomblé at work. Lola was sure of this. Candomblé underwrote everything. It gave Bahia its singularity. Nowhere else on earth did this culture take root and flower so seductively. Not in Cuba, Haiti or New Orleans. Not even in Nigeria which, to Lola's mind, displayed only a fraction of the charm of Bahia's utterly charismatic carnival of Yoruba religion.

The anthropologist was speaking with a very good-looking American standing topless inside the door of the smallest of the houses painted white with ocean-blue shutters.

"Lola, this is Carrrloth," the anthropologist said in an exaggerated Castillian accent. *"We met in the city a couple of months ago."*

"Prazer eu te conhece" Lola greeted Carlos in perfect Portuguese.

"How you doin'? Pleased to meet you too!" replied Carlos. *"Man, it feels good to speak English,"* he sighed. The man was beautiful: long, lean and tanned with smooth skin. Perfect lips. His head was shaved.

Lola liked shaved heads.

“*Carrroth is an iyawo*” the anthropologist announced proudly. “*He is in the process of being initiated into candomblé.*”

“*Why?*” Lola exclaimed in an unintentionally high-pitched voice, her eyes dancing suggestively. Carlos explained that although he was Cuban American, he had always felt called to Brazil and Candomblé. Since childhood he’d had dreams about people dressed in white, dancing in circles. Being Cuban and from Miami he was exposed to Santeria - the Cuban version of Candomblé - but had never got involved. As his eyes smouldered lazily and his hand gestured pointedly, it occurred to Lola that Carlos was, almost certainly, gay. She sighed.

“*...there was something hard and mercenary within the Santeria tradition that I just didn’t appreciate,*” Carlos drawled. “*Then I met a beautiful Brazilian living in Miami and he introduced me to his Mae de Santo and the rest is history. Bahia is the home of Africa in Brazil so it was the logical place to come and get the initiation done.*”

“*Lola’s from Nigeria,*” interjected the anthropologist eagerly.

Carlos’ chocolate eyes widened. “*Hey, are you a Yorooba?*”

“*No*” said Lola, not wanting to go down that road again. “*So what do you have to do to become initiated?*” The anthropologist frowned at Lola as Carlos began explaining the process whilst the sun faded and guests began to stream into the temple at the centre of the compound. He was going to be a son of Oxumare (an Orixá that had something to do with rainbows and snakes, Lola shuddered, recalling her conversations with Mae Regina). Initiations could take months and Carlos had just finished his twenty-one day confinement period in a *runko* or hut. During this time he’d had his head shaved and he’d learned how to care for his own Orixá. This included learning what his Orixá liked and disliked, which songs and dances ‘called’ him and other spirits down to the temple and how to arrange his altar and daily offerings.

Initiation was, apparently, a symbolic rebirth into an ‘improved’ existence but it was costing him thousands of dollars. He had to pay for flights, accommodation, the priest and the sacrifice of chickens and an assortment other animals. Lola wondered what was really motivating Carlos to put himself through such an ordeal. And to what end? As if to respond, the *batuque* drums began their otherworldly clattering in the near distance. It was time for her to go. As she bid Carlos farewell she wondered whether the spirits would ever call on her too. Lola and the anthropologist walked towards the growing crowd and the light inside the temple.



The drums were loud and commanding. Intrusive even. They invaded Lola’s heart and made it feel it would burst. A potent, smokey aroma hit Lola in the back of her head as she breathed it in, gently slowly dipping her head back as she inhaled. The anthropologist leaned into Lola conspiratorially and murmured, “*they say this temple has a lot of axe.*” *Axe* meant power. A good word, thought Lola. It looked like ‘axe’ written down – which seemed apt – but was pronounced “ashay”. As they fought their way to the front of the crowd a bizarre and almost heavenly sight greeted her. The interior of the temple was a dazzlingly bright and baroque display of white lace and pink flowers. The temple was really a simple room, much less grand than the simplest church hall but it did seem to possess a potent energy. On one side of the room was a shrine that featured Catholic figurines and pots of flowers. 15 different Bahian dishes including *bolo de aipim* (a sticky manioc cake), *coxinhas de Galinha* (breaded chicken croquettes) and, of course, *acaraje*, lay at the foot of a shrine reminding Lola of harvest festival. A brace of percussionists, lithe young men known collectively as the *bateria*, stood playing drums of different heights and shapes on the other side of the shrine. The floor of the temple was covered in green leaves and the walls were white, decorated with ribbons. It could be a wedding except there were eight brides lined up against another wall. They were the *filhas de santo* - some of whom worked as Bahianas in the city - and they were dressed in their white, lace,

hooped skirts that stopped short of their ankles and they sprinkled perfume onto the ground. Lola thought that rather than brides, the *filhas de santo* looked, perhaps, more like wedding cakes drenched in thick wads of beaded necklaces, waiting to be consumed.

These *filhas* came in all sorts of colours too. Some were caramel-coloured with green eyes, others were dark brown with dark eyes, and one was tall and white with red cheeks. Lola pointed her out and the anthropologist explained that the tall white woman was a German anthropologist called Angela. She had been studying candomble rites and then decided to become an initiate and ended up living permanently in Bahia. "*Occupational hazard,*" Lola joked. She was giggling when she caught sight of a familiar set of yellow eyes set in red-black skin. It was Mae Regina. Her hands were clasped behind her back and she was swinging from side to side staring into the middle distance. She did not see Lola.

Lola wanted to get closer to Mae Regina, to say hello but she would have to push through the excited crowd to get to her. There was a sense of voyeuristic anticipation in the room. This wasn't just because of the tourists that were there (some *terreiros* allowed tour groups to witness ceremonies - for a fee) this feeling prevailed even amongst the locals who must have witnessed spirit possession a thousand times. And yet, and yet, there was something in this place. An almost sexual tension as everybody stood around the edge of the room feeding off every one else's excitement, the prospect of spirit possession in the air. The drums continued to move the air with their rhythmic clatter. Everyone waited for the first sign of strange body movements. They did not have to wait long...

Pomba-Gora - the gypsy spirit - was in the house. Twin *Pomba-Giras*, in fact, and they announced their arrival with the high-pitched girly and sinister refrain: "*Pomba-Gira quer ver Gira! Pomba-Gira quer ver Gira!*" Like mocking birds. The spirits had entered two women who were bent over double with their arms behind their back. Lola thought they looked like chickens feeding as they lurched forward in rhythm to their refrain: "*Pomba-Gira quer ver Gira! Pomba-Gira quer ver Gira!*" Their eyes were closed and their mouths turned down at the ends. The crowd seemed surprised. Then in the corner a *caboclo* manifested himself in an old woman who began smoking a cigar and dancing a low, menacing dance with her legs set wide apart. The *caboclo* was a dirty old man with eyes that knew too much and saw right into you. As he, in the body of the old woman, wandered around the room, eyes ablaze, the crowd giggled and swayed out the way pretending to avoid the scathe of truth that the *caboclo* wielded like an angry drunk. The *caboclo* would sometimes stop and stand perpendicular to a member of the congregation that he intended to prophesize for. He would pretend not to be interested, facing straight ahead of himself but his eyeballs would fix themselves slyly at the corners of his eyes at his target. He would begin to insult them, telling filthy jokes then he would finally reveal the truth to them: that they should abandon a particular jealousy, persevere with their job or watch out for that slut of a sister-in-law. These were the *exus*, the messenger spirits that sometimes arrived before the higher orders - the *Orixás* - announced their presence in the body of an initiate. The initiates body would convulse and sometimes their eyes would roll to the top of their head at which point they would be led away to the back room to be dressed in the colour of the *Orixá* that had arrived to be honoured that day.

Almost imperceptibly, the drums began to usher in a different rhythm. There was, suddenly, a round of applause and an approving cheer. It was Mae Regina. It had begun. Her head was bowed low and her shoulders began shuddering. She then threw her head back and jumped up and down slightly, her beads and lace flying. *Iansa*, the warrior goddess of winds and storms, daughter of *Iemanjá* and *Oxala* and first wife of *Xango* had arrived. Two older initiates went up to her to ensure she was alright before ushering her into a back room. A man dressed in a pink and white Nigerian *agbada* outfit shook a golden bell and the drums stopped for a short time. He began to sing a modal, otherworldly refrain in Yoruba. Like a sung eucharist, the crowd bellowed a short refrain in response. The drums started up again. A slightly slower rhythm that seemed to goad. Almost like a slow clap. Full of intent. Then the rhythm slowly began to pick up speed. Through a crack in the door of the back room, Lola saw two women singing and dressing Mae Regina's quaking frame. They dressed her in pink satin ribbons, a pink skirt, decorative arm bands made of cowrie shells and a silver headdress with beads cascading down like rain obscuring her eyes and face. When she was ready one of the initiates pulled open the door for Mae Regina. When she emerged, dancing out of the room, Lola nearly burst into tears. She was so *beautiful*. Lola had never seen Mae Regina this dynamic. She had a livid energy and she whirled clockwise and anti-clockwise and shook and gyrated her ample hips in a way that made everyone bounce and clap and sing:

“*Emparrei! Emparrei! Emparrei!*”

The drummers were tireless: young men that must be possessed in some way themselves because they were able to play for up to six hours without stopping. They observed the ceremony almost dispassionately, as if their hands were not the very engines of the proceedings. The man in the patterned blue shirt playing the *agogo* bell made Lola want to dance. Mae Regina as *Iansa* charged at the drums, stopping only inches before them. The crowd gasped. Then she strode around the audience administering blessings. Some people got on their knees to receive a blessing in the form of a hug. One frail old lady that had been hugged became a powerful warrior dancer, swirling manically and throwing out her elbows. The crowd cheered. The drums clattered loudly. An energy passed through the room. Like a silent wind. People were falling. The atmosphere was electric. The air was alive. Actually alive. The drums were loud and strong. The Reverberation. Heady absolution. The noise cleaned the air. Cleared minds and spirits. It knocked the sense out of you. Replaced pain. The endless clatter seeking out the spirits. Catching our attention and binding it towards a new purpose. Drawing in our sensibilities, our psychological power, our gaze. The drums drew on everyone’s energy to create a portal for the spirits to enter. Did the spirits belong to the drums? Lola did not know. She could not hear anything apart from the *agogo* bell. A heat was rising in her and she felt heavy. It was the *agogo*. It was calling her...

Suddenly her right knee gave way. She swayed to the side. Then her left knee started to bend. Then her right again. Her knees felt warm, bendy and energetic, like magnets. The heat was still rising inside her, like an orgasm, and when it reached her heart she felt it burn. She could take it no longer. A small circle had formed around Lola and the anthropologist was staring at her wide-eyed: half-scared, half-excited. Lola was a ball of glowing energy and she wanted to dance.

She whirled into the centre of the room where the congregation’s gaze would be upon her. Lola’s body danced, seemingly, without her brain. No, her body *tutored* her brain. The energy lay in her belly, a form of anxiety that burned as it radiated out. She felt sated and peaceful only when she moved. She wanted the energy out, out. She threw her arm out to her left and to her right. Then both her arms rotated together round and round over her head as her feet performed dizzy steps. Her head threw itself back and forth. Then she stopped. Her hips were now the focus as they rotated suggestively. Her head was rolling too but in the opposite direction. Then she flung herself into an energetic move that required her to arch her back and thrust her chest out, then back, out, then back, in horrifyingly quick succession. The dance she was doing was nothing like the other dances she had seen. It was an African dance. She could feel it. This spirit was not one from Brazil. Lola had not totally submitted to the spirit. She was not ‘gone’. She merely happened to be hosting an energy. She was aware. She was therefore also aware of the frowns on people’s faces around her. All eyes, including those of the drummers, were on her. Arms of some of the men and young children were crossed. She was out of order. The order that had been created by a mix of Amerindian, Portuguese and African histories and beliefs, here in the crucible that was Bahia. A New World Orthodoxy.

In this place, Lola’s dance was not welcome. The spirit she hosted, some sort of foreigner. Lola suddenly found herself falling to the ground. Stiff as a broomstick she began to roll. She didn’t stop herself. Didn’t know if she could stop herself. She did not have the energy to try and stop. Mae Regina stood over her in her pink ribbons and silver mask. Lola felt her hands on her. She picked her up and guided Lola’s trembling body to the back room.



It was dark. The back room was strewn with silk material, a staff, flower pots and masks (‘backstage’, Lola thought dryly, despite her physical exhaustion). The exhausted Yoruba girl was being guided towards a seat. It was in this room that they splashed water on your face and explained what had happened to you. Mae Regina washed Lola’s face with strong wet hands in the same way as her mother did when she was a small child, without too much regard for the integrity of her nose, lips and eyelids.

“Lola, Lola,” she insisted. “*Tudo bem, Lola? Are you alright?*” Lola was too tired to speak. She just looked at Regina for some time then smiled weakly in response. She didn’t feel happy or sad. For the first time in her life she felt absolutely nothing at all.

“Lola,” Regina went on somberly, “*You know that you rolled on the floor. It means that the Orixá wants you. You are an iyawo, Lola. You understand?*”

Wanted her for what? Lola wondered. What was all of this for? Lola pondered this question whilst staring into the corner of the dark room. After some time - she didn’t know how long - another person was being led into the room by two older initiates. She recognised the person as being one of the tourists, a French woman in tight blue jeans. Some time later a young Bahian boy was being carried in from the infernal clatter. The poor child was sweating profusely and looked terrified. The tourist, by now seated, with her head lolling backwards over the chair back, had a strange twitch dancing on her smiling lips. Lola finally extracted herself from her absent meditation and turned to Mae Regina, who had been standing sentinel over her the entire time. In a croaky voice she asked:

“*Mae Regina, why did everyone look so angry?*”

“*Well they did not recognise the spirit that came,*” Regina said, almost ashamed.

“*I felt it was from Africa,*” said Lola. “*Can’t you people tell?*”

“*I could tell it was from Africa, Lola, but these people were not prepared.*”

Lola wondered whether the other ‘trances’ she had witnessed were real at all. How could these people really control who or what came down. And if they were so enamoured of Yoruba culture, why, when a real-life Yoruba in their midst manifested a spirit, did they reject it? Mae Regina continued to stand above Lola. The anthropologist had, by now, joined her. She was breathing heavily with her hands on her hips, looking wildly pleased with herself. Vindicated. Like she had known all along that Lola had it in her. She was a Yoruba after all. The spirit was within her.

The spirit *was* in Lola. It hadn’t come from outside. It was almost like an old self had been awoken within. It did not feel strange or even particularly scary. Her own personal genie had been let out of its bottle. She felt she knew this spirit better than anyone else did. In fact, the whole time it had been happening, part of Lola was completely cognizant. Many mediums that experience trance claim not to know what is happening when the spirit is working through them. But not Lola. She was always present and she never actually ‘lost’ herself. There was a spot at the back of her head where the neck met her skull and she instinctively understood that if she relinquished this part of her body, all would be lost. She would be consumed. But she would not allow the spirit to go there. Somehow she knew that this is where her Self lay. It was the brain’s knowledge. The brain’s secret. Separate from the now open secret her body had been hiding all these years. Lola wondered deliriously how many brains she actually had. She wondered about competing wills. Who was in charge? Who was *she*?

Mae Regina, who had been staring at Lola for sometime, repeated again that the Orixá wanted her as her daughter. This suddenly felt like a demand. A challenge to Lola. It was a sort of vanity, all this spirit possession business, she thought to herself. You were picked out as “special” by a “spirit” and then, like chosen children, you revelled in the attention. You then submitted your future to these outside forces. Lola knew immediately that she was not interested in this sort of bondage. She would have to stay at the terreiro for months, shave her head, learn how to please a spirit. She would become Carlos, waiting, waiting, waiting. And for what? She did not want to wait. She wanted to be free. She did not want to be like the old lady that had been possessed for three days. Doing the bidding of a ‘spirit’. She just wanted to be *free*.

Lola looked at Mae Regina in her pink satins and silver mask. Her yellow eyes visible beneath the silver beads that fell over them. She was an entirely new entity. The hooped pink skirt from Europe, her mask from Africa and her veins surely flowed with Indian blood. Lola realised that although she felt at home in Bahia, it was still a foreign land. She bowed her head for a moment and remembered something her grandmother always used to say: *One should not look for a white-clad person in the stall of palm-oil*

sellers. A Yoruba proverb which loosely translated as: *One should know the likely places to look for whatever one seeks*. Lola began to shudder. Mae Regina could not see her face. Lola was, in fact, laughing. The convulsions emanated from her belly and through her entire body for a full minute. A cleansing. A knowledge from another place asserting itself once more in her bones. When the laughing ceased, she sat up, stretched and asked politely for a cup of water.

She was suddenly very thirsty indeed.



In the next room, what felt like hours later, the drums finally and abruptly desisted. Lola felt released, like a weight had been lifted. She thanked Mae Regina who, unexpectedly, hugged her tightly. She got up carefully, holding on to the anthropologist for support. She was grateful for her presence now and was glad she had not voiced any irritation at her earlier. Lola didn't want to go home alone.

As she walked back into the bright light of the main temple, food was being shared, coffee and cake distributed. Just like tea and biscuits after a church service at home, Lola observed. She was feeling stronger already and did not need to lean on the anthropologist anymore. Lola and her friend stepped out into the night air. It was good to breathe. The temple had become so stuffy with all the exhalations, the energetic dancing, the clapping and, apparently, the spirits.

Outside the stars seemed much brighter than usual. There were a few people milling about drinking and laughing. A young boy and a girl kissing on his bike. Two dogs chased each other gleefully, in the near distance, barking for joy. She had no idea what time it was. There was a hum behind her in the temple as people chattered about the night's events. Many strange things had happened: *the arrival of the exus, the young boy, the strange girl doing the strange dance and the tourist! The way their guide tore out of the temple – not wanting to 'get caught' by the spirit. Hah! Now these gringos would know it was real. This religion was not a folkloric performance for their viewing pleasure.* Lola couldn't make out any individual conversations but the talk sounded gossipy. Everyone seemed exhilarated, buzzy and content, like they were emerging from a particularly involving piece of theatre. The anthropologist decided it was unwise to take a bus at this late hour. They would take a taxi back to Salvador.

Once in the car (an unusual, battered black vehicle with a red lightning bolt painted crudely down the side), Lola leaned her head against the window. She was troubled. She claimed to prize her freedom but it occurred to her that her so-called free will only ever led her to fall into unrequited love with men that ended up consuming her every waking thought, determining what sort of mood she was in, even what she wore. What kind of freedom was that? Who was actually free? Was Mae Regina free? Was Carlos? The window was open slightly and the night air tore noisily through the car. With her head still throbbing with the sound of the drums and swirling with ideas about freedom, white lace, red oil, pink flowers and the old black lady with the wild eyes, Lola fell into a deep sleep.



3 weeks later...

She was not avoiding her, but Lola had not gone back to see Mae Regina since the trip to her *terreiro*. New priorities had presented themselves in the days after the ceremony. Lola's possession had not scared her. Quite the contrary it was like saying hello to an old friend from an earlier existence, an existence before her parents. It was a similar feeling to the one she had when she danced to music she loved, the same feeling she felt when doing yoga – only intensified. The spirit was a primordial part of herself that had come out to play. No, in the days after the ceremony what *had* worried Lola was the response of the congregation. She had, subsequently, been doing some thinking about the Africa that existed for Lola and the Africa that was real to these Bahians.

Her Africa had flooded back into her when she phoned her parents back in London (something she was doing more frequently now). They had been worried. She had not called for three weeks. They couldn't understand what she was doing in Brazil instead of looking for a proper job like her younger brother who had just graduated. Her mother had been having strange dreams about Lola. She'd been praying for her and getting her friends to do the same at Wednesday prayer meeting. Listening to her mother fretting away and inspecting her fingernails at the same time, Lola felt calm and self-possessed. She pondered the fact that she was only able to travel in this way because of her parents' hard work: her father putting himself through university; her mother sitting down with her to do extra homework after school. Her inquisitiveness and her ability to make money was, partly, a gift from this education and it was not to be sniffed at or thrown away just because she had encountered a seductive form of magic in this beautiful quasi-African city. Lola wanted the same sort of empowerment she enjoyed for black people in Bahia, and it was then, whilst listening to her mother, she decided that in the same way that Brazil was giving her an education about Yoruba culture, she would return the favour.

Lola did not tell her parents about Mae Regina or the possession. There was no point, it was not about them but about her. Her own private, spiritual inheritance. The thing that made her Lola. This force was her own piece of God buried inside her. It had nothing to do with the people that had made her flesh. She did, however, long to speak to her maternal grandmother in the village. As someone who had enjoyed the Osun festival in Nigeria, as it rolled around every August, Lola could bet Mama Ketu would have an interesting take on things...



Lola was now working with young Bahian children and had been teaching them English for a week now. This was, after all, another aspect of Nigerian culture Bahians ought to be acquainted with: the insistence upon education. The work was giving her a new reality and drew her away from the self-annihilation that would take place whenever she would even just imagine Him. *Him*. He was an imaginative leap away. A universe away. His sad eyes were becoming an increasingly dull ache in her head. She knew if she fed him too much with her thoughts she could grow him. But for now he no longer kept her awake or defined her every waking moment. No. A new phase had indeed been ushered in.



Lola came across Mae Regina almost by accident. She had not visited Pelourinho for nearly three weeks. It was just too noisy and touristy and she had now moved from her hotel in Santo Antonio, which was right next door to Pelourinho, to live in an apartment in Rio Vermelho with an African-American girl she had recently met called Jenny. Rio Vermelho was a quiet and historic neighbourhood, right on the beach where the fishermen docked and where, apparently, Brazilian pop stars like Gilberto Gil and Maria Bethania owned houses, though no-one Lola asked had ever seen them. The festival of *Iemanjá* took place there every February 2nd and Lola could not wait to see it. Boats groaning with prayerful worshippers, wreaths of flowers and perfume would forge out ecstatically into the water. The glittering blue sea would be littered with these boats and the hum of prayer, the drone of the drums and the cry of birds would hang over the bay. On the curved beach there would be more drumming, chanting and dancing. People would be dressed in white, throwing flowers and perfume into the sea whilst spectators clung onto the rocks absorbing the sober, salty carnival. Many a photo opportunity to be had, Lola thought gleefully.

Lola had popped into Pelourinho to pick up a book at the Afro-Brazilian museum. She had got drawn into a philosophical debate with the woman that sold her the book and they had decided to continue their conversation at a local bar where they had made room at the table for a French tourist, travelling alone, that had been eavesdropping eagerly. Lola had eventually excused herself and said goodbye to her new friends, thinking that the two of them might end up in bed together that night. She tripped out onto the street, clutching her new book, when she came across Mae Regina, staring into space at the foot of her church.

“*Oh Mae!*” Lola said in greeting, smiling broadly, putting her book away in her bag. She was genuinely pleased to see Regina who looked the same but seemed older and more fragile, somehow. Maybe she was in her mid-fifties rather than mid-forties?

“*Ai minha filha*” responded Regina, suddenly present, warm and maternal. Regina was not expecting to see the smiling young woman walking towards her. Her hair was in a high ponytail. She was wearing a pretty white dress. A white ribbon round her wrist. She looked very nice, Regina thought.

“*Have you spoken to your mother and father? Are they well?*” asked the Bahiana. Lola chuckled to herself. Regina had never asked about her family before. How did Bahians always *know* what she had been up to? Lola reported that they were fine, as if Regina were an old friend of her parents. She then talked to Regina about her grandmother, Mama Ketu. For once, Mae Regina was being taught by Lola. She soaked up the words about Lola’s Nigeria. Lola’s okra soup which was their *caruru*, Lola’s palm oil which was their *dende*. She also learnt how one of the other mae de santos, Dona Celia, looked just like Lola’s Auntie Egun. This Nigeria! She had heard some bad things about the place. But how bad could the home of the Orixás be? Lola, for her money, doubted Regina would like Nigeria as much as Brazil despite the Bahiana’s keen interest. She also doubted Regina would ever get the opportunity to leave Brazil.

“*And what is your grandmother’s name?*”

Regina often asked about people’s names. Lola could never understand why. She asked this as if the answer unlocked the key to a person’s essence.

“*My grandmother is called Olawunmi Ketu*” Lola said fondly, thinking of the hilarious old lady.

“*Olawunmi Ketu...*” Regina tried the name out, repeating it again and again very softly, looking into the distance for a moment. “*A very energetic woman*” she said looking back at Lola as if she had actually seen something and was reporting back to her. Regina fell silent again for a moment then said:

“*And you, Lola. What is your name?*”

Lola looked into the Lion Lady’s eyes that were fixed on her. She suddenly felt a strong presence between herself and The Bahiana. The neighbourhood seemed to go quiet. It was as if she was being asked something else, by someone else.

“*My name is Olufunmilola Abioye Folasade*” she said, her voice heavy and calm, drawing up straight as she spoke. The way Yoruba names unfolded and announced themselves was majestic. Mysterious almost.

“*Beleza...*” the Bahiana marvelled quietly, visibly impressed and nodding her head slowly like she had suspected something all along. *Beleza* meant ‘beautiful’. Regina’s heart went out to this young woman who, in just three months, would find out why her spiritual restitution was so vital. Mae Regina smiled and held out a freshly-prepared bean cake. She said simply:

“*Akara.*”

“*Obrigada Mae Regina.*” Lola thanked the Bahiana and took the hot bean cake from her very carefully. It was stuffed to the point of overflowing with caruru, vatapá, shrimp and salad. Regina would not take her money. Lola sniffed the spicy hot acarajé and closed her eyes. She felt her heart swoop. She could hear the blessed cacophony in all its elements. This Bahia was like a song. A sigh.

It was time to head back to her apartment. Lola bid Regina goodbye. She was about to turn right but had the feeling she should, instead, turn left and take Avenida de Oxala to catch the bus back home from there. The gleaming concierge followed the African girl down the street. Her white dress swung as she sauntered down the avenue, her flip-flops hot from the baked cobbled road. And as Lola bites into the bean cake, red oil drips onto her white dress.



*“Lola of the Red Oil, look up at me this night”
whispered Exu into Lola’s swelling heart
for he would be the red moon in the black sky, for Her
“Lola de Oxala”
he murmured*

The End

Glossary:

Bahia

Bahia literally means ‘bay’ in Portuguese. It is a state in the North East of Brazil, North of Rio. Its capital is Salvador da Bahia which is referred to as simply ‘Salvador’ or just ‘Bahia’. Salvador sits on a bluff by the sea and was not only the capital of Brazil for two centuries but also the religious, political and economic centre of the South Atlantic. Rudyard Kipling called her “*the hearth of all that flaming energy when Brazil was being born.*” Salvador da Bahia is also the most African city in the New World with a huge black population.

Búzios

Cowrie shells of African origin used for divination. And sometimes jewelery.

Caboclo

A caboclo is a type of spirit found in the Candomble tradition. Caboclos are, in fact, Northern Brazilian cowboy-types that are a mix between Portuguese and Indian Brazilians but they form part of the pantheon of Afro-Brazilian deities.

Cachaca

A fierce liquor made from sugar cane. A Brazilian white spirit, so to speak...

Exu

Exu (pronounced eh-shu) is an Afro-Brazilian spirit, originating from the Yoruba tribe of Nigeria. Exu is the owner of the roads and doors in this world and stands at the crossroads of the human and the divine, a child-like messenger between the two worlds. He owns the keys to all doors, to evil as well as good. He seems to take pleasure in creating compromising situations and trouble between humans. But his actions are always justified though he alone knows the true meaning of justice and sees things which are hidden from humanity as well as other Orixás (Yoruba deities). Exu can be equally cruel and generous; treacherous, dangerous and capricious – like fate itself. He is known as The Divine Trickster. His colours are red and black.

Filhas de santo

Literally “daughters of the saint”. Filhas de santo are female initiates to the Candomble religion.

Iemanjá

Iemanjá [pronounced ‘yay-man-zha’] is an Orixá [pronounced ‘Ori-sha’] or Afro-Brazilian deity originating from the Yoruba tribe of Nigeria. She is the goddess of the sea. Her colours are blue and white.

Mae

Pronounced “My” and means “Mother”. Female initiates of the Candomble religion have their first name prefaced by “Mae”. Mother Regina in this case. Bit like a nun.

Oxala

Pronounced “Osh-ala”, this is one of the oldest orixas/deities. God, if you will. Oxala represents clarity, spiritual purity and the “light” of consciousness. He is sometimes referred to as the Orixá of the white cloth. For white is his colour.

Xango

Pronounced “Shan-go” . He is the warrior deity/orixá. God of thunder, iron and war. His colours are white and red.