

The Royal Road

At the end of the 17th century, after nearly 200 years of hacking through the brush and forests of the interior of Brazil, Portuguese adventurers found what they were looking for: gold. They also found emeralds, diamonds, aquamarines, tourmalines, amethyst, and just about every other gem known to man. The most productive mines were in Vila Rica — Rich Town — in the mountains of the region known as Minas Gerais, or General Mines. Three years later, in 1697, the Portuguese Crown ordered that the path from the port of Paraty, just south of Rio de Janeiro, to Vila Rica be widened into a road that could handle a two-way traffic of mule trains.

The Estrada Real, or Royal Road, made it possible to transport gold from Vila Rica — later known as Ouro Preto — to the sea in 70 to 90 days, depending on weight, weather, Indians, bandits, and mosquitos. It followed the wandering route of the first explorers, who were taking directions from Indians who didn't know Portuguese or anything about gold. Three months was too long to leave gold on the backs of mules, so in 1701, the Crown ordered the building of a new road— the Caminho Novo — a rational and projected road from Rio de Janeiro, which was still known as Miners' Beach, to Ouro Preto. A high-speed mule train could then make the trip in 25 days. When diamonds were discovered further north in Minas Gerais, the Estrada Real was extended to Diamantina.

The Estrada Real connected some of the world's most miserable people to some of the world's wealthiest — the slaves in the mines of Minas Gerais to the Portuguese

Crown, the ultimate beneficiaries of everything that could be stripped from the land of the brassy-colored *brasa* wood, the source of the name of Brazil.

Traveling through Minas Gerais has been likened to navigating a choppy sea. The geography of the region seems a solidified series of waves, swells, and troughs. The Estrada Real, rarely level, winds around the sides of mountains, dips into valleys of lush semi-tropical forest, rises over passes so high that the tallest trees are no taller than a man on a mule. When mule trains passed each other, their pilots drew close to exchange information. When they came to a farm or way station, they stopped in for food and shelter, often as not dropping off goods from the other side of the world. Many of the earliest churches along the route, built by the sea-faring Portuguese, are narrower at the floor than at the ceiling, designed with the infrastructure of wooden ships.

The Estrada Real was to restrict as much as facilitate transportation into the interior. The Crown did not want Brazil to develop industrial capacity. By royal policy, the vast colony was to depend on tiny Portugal for food, metals, tools, nails, ammunition, equipment, and supplies. The Brazilian economy was to be based almost exclusively on the export of gems and gold. The Estrada Real, therefore, was to facilitate the inward delivery of manufactured goods to the interior while speeding the outward flow of mineral riches. The Estrada was also to remain the only route of transportation, making it possible for Portugal to control development and exploitation.

The Estrada Real was travelled by adventurers willing to risk everything for the chance to become wealthy beyond anyone's capacity to spend. The flow of wealth inevitably led to the traffic of smugglers. Military squads watched for them. African and Native American slaves, either marching to the mines or hauling goods and people through the hills, also populated the road. The world's bolder merchants led mule trains of goods from town to town. But it was not a road of settlers. European women

and children rarely came inland from Rio. It was a business route, bereft of beauty, warmth, joy, and licit procreation.

In a certain sense, the history of the Estrada Real is the history of Latin America. Unlike the settlers who came to North America from industrial nations, the colonizers of Latin America came from feudal lands. They came neither to build nor to stay. In Portuguese, the verb *explorar* means both explore and exploit. The language has no other word for either activity. As if by linguistic necessity, the Portuguese did both at the same time, exploring a region so vast that even today it has not yet been fully mapped, exploiting the land and ungodly number of native and imported people. Once the gold and jewels were gone, the people who remained were left with magnificent churches and abandoned mines but no infrastructure for any but an agrarian economy.

That situation hasn't changed much. At the beginning of the 21st century, the Estrada Real of the 17th century is still there. Most of the road is dirt, dust, or mud, though it becomes cobblestone as it passes through towns and villages. Many of the villages have a toehold on the 20th century — undependable electricity, a single phone, two television channels, itinerant doctors who stay in town for only a few hours — but the lives of the people there haven't changed much since the 17th century. They still cook on open wood stoves, and they travel by horse, mule and foot. They treat their ills with roots and herbs, and they pray for rain. They live in houses built by their grandfathers and sing in churches built by slaves. They still have no infrastructure for any but an agrarian economy.

This is the cradle of Brazilian culture. It all started here, in the mountains of Minas Gerais. As urban Brazil struggles into modern times and the global economy, its slow, quiet past still lives along its first road. How has it survived? How long can it survive? *Should* it survive? What, if anything, can save it? The search for the answers — a walk down the road — turns up the seeds of an odd revolution. People who have yet

to benefit from the global economy are already struggling against it. Some, poor as dirt, ignorant of the world, are satisfied with the happiness they've found in God. Others, more aware, appreciate the wealth of their ancient culture. And some, of course, want to trade their antiquated ways for the glittery commerce and industry that bring the money that buys the stuff that promises to make life better.

This book is about the people, culture and history of the Estrada Real. The people are changing, some by resisting change, some by embracing it. The road departs from Brazil's flashier attractions — beaches, bossa nova, Carnaval, and soccer — as it leads to a quieter economy based on history, culture, cuisine, and ecology. All are in the balance, the culture under insidious attack from corporate values, the cuisine threatened by fast food and foreign dishes, the ecology cringing with the approach of open pit mines, dirt bikes, pavement, litter, and automobiles. Deep history is there, too, immutable and unfinished.

Chapter One

Bento Rodrigues: A Good Night in the Good House of a Good Man

I begin my journey on the Estrada Real in Mariana, Minas Gerais, for two reasons. One is that once upon a time I lived here, trying my hand at banana farming. I never knew that from my front porch I could see the oldest road in the Western Hemisphere rising over a hill to the east and north. The other reason is that there is no map of the entire Estrada Real, no guide book, no signs along the way. There is, however, a rough and often erroneous guide for the road from Mariana to its northernmost point, Diamantina.

So, after 15 years away from the place, I return, look up an old friend, Lázaro, tell him my plan, and spend the night at his house.

My brother-in-law, a highly domesticated apartment dweller in the state capital, Belo Horizonte, calls my plan a *programa de indio*, an Indian plan, by which I think he means a plan that is not especially well thought out, more an idea than a plan. But what kind of planning can you do when you're going to place that has no map? I load my knapsack, the same one I used on Boy Scout hikes 35 years ago, with toilet paper, a change of clothes, a sleeping bag, an umbrella, a bottle of water, a few other essentials, and a little duct tape just in case of disaster. Lázaro takes me into town to buy a straw hat. The spring sun is hotter than usual, he says, and the rains have yet to arrive.

But they arrive that very night, a ripper of a thunderstorm, an inauspicious introduction to a long hike. I awake when the neighborhood roosters start to crow, which must have been about 3:00 a.m.. I roll around in bed in unquenchable anxiety, imagining the many ways in which I might be bushwhacked on the Estrada Real. Everyone, without exception, has warned me not to go walking alone in the outback. The crime rate in Belo Horizonte has risen 94 percent in the past year, and the daily newspaper, the *Estado de Minas*, always features a story of a purposeless murder. I think they have a special page reserved for reports of homicides and daring robberies. The rural areas are not subject to the same type of urban crime, but the Estrada Real does run through a region still relatively rich in gold. That's exactly why the road's there. The gold's in scant supply these days, but prospecting is still a last resort for men who can't find jobs. They muck around in the streams, panning for infinitesimal specks. Long-term investment in infrastructure is the last thing on their minds. To survive, they need gold, and if they don't find enough — and no one at any time in history has ever found enough — they are perfectly willing to steal gold from anyone else who has been lucky enough to find some. And of course the gold miner's code of ethics is silent on the issue

of robbing tourists on a road far from town. Even a grubby, tattered backpack is worth more than the air in their pockets. Or so I have been warned by those who know.

I have a lot of faith in humanity, especially in Brazilian humanity, but I also know that all it takes is one bad apple — and Brazil has no shortage of those — to ruin a trip and leave a gringo dead in a ditch for buzzards to eat. Buzzards hold a strong presence in my pre-dawn fears, and they are also waiting at the place where the dirt road of the Estrada Real meets the paved road that goes out of Mariana toward the Timbopeba and Samarco hematite mines. If I were writing a work of fiction about a trip down this road, I would never dare have the protagonist begin his trip under the gaze of a dozen *urubus* that are standing on rocks and fence posts, enjoying the stench of something dead. They look like glum funeral directors who have been interrupted in the middle of a meal. They stare at Lázaro and me as we shake hands and slap each other on the back. He takes my picture, then drives away with a toot and a wave out the window, I swing my pack up to my shoulders. The *urubus* watch me as swing my pack to my back and trudge toward points north. I can say with authority that the gaze of a buzzard is palpable on the spine.

It takes me all of ten minutes to forget about being murdered. The tight weight of the pack is as welcome as a fatherly embrace. Birds chatter in the low, dry brush on the hills on both sides of the road. The only other sound is the crunch of my feet on the quartz gravel of the road. The road climbs through a series of switchbacks, then tips through a pass that looks over a wide view to the east. The downhill side of the road is dense with old eucalyptus and, farther down, the general *mata* of natural forest. Way down there, monkeys hoot up a mad orgy of excitement that suddenly quiets down, then rises into a another frenzy.

At the highest point I stop to take a few notes that might improve the SENAC guide book. It's already apparent that its author wasn't a very intelligent person and

may well have been inebriated as he described the route. He refers to things that weren't there, such as the Fazenda Gualuxo and the bridge over the Rio Gualuxo do Norte. He is inconsistent in references to such landmarks entrances to farms, sometimes noting them, sometimes not. He writes little paragraphs such as "Turn left. Go straight. Keep right," without reliable reference as to where these turns might be made. Often "turn right" seems to mean "don't turn left." In most cases, "Stay on the main road for the next ten miles" would suffice, and that's exactly what I do. Still, a little confirmation now and then would be comforting.

I soon give up trying to correct the guide book. I also give up trying to describe the scenery. I can generally describe the road as winding along the side of hills. The view to one side is usually a vista of ten or twenty miles over hills of varying shades of green that gradually blend into hazy purple. The other side of the road is the mountain I am walking around, usually a moderately steep incline with lots of rock, dried grass, low brush. Sometimes, though never for long, second-growth forest crowds in from both sides. By ten o'clock in the morning, cicadas crank up their whine. The road surface varies from red clay to white sand to brown gravel. On this first stretch of road, from Mariana to Camargos, half a dozen cars go by in four or five hours, raising dust in their wake. The passengers seem to be Mariana people on their way to picnics or the little farms, called *sítios*, that Brazilians often keep just outside of town. I wave at them all, and they all wave back. A couple slow down and offer a ride by holding an up-pointed thumb out the window, but I wave them off with a wag of my forefinger.

Coming into Camargos, some ten or fifteen kilometers from Mariana (the guidebooks says 22, but I'm sure it's wrong) the road forks. I choose the one that doesn't go uphill. Camargos is just a hamlet of a few dozen houses, a town without sound. I soon come to a man who was fooling around with a bucket at a public spigot. A church, large but simple, stands atop a hill on the other side of the road. I ask the man where

one could eat a meal in Camargos. He said there is nowhere. We talk a bit. His name is Fernando. He tells me Camargos was the first district of Mariana making it one of the oldest towns in the state. The church, Nossa Senhora da Conceição, is over 300 years old. It's locked until the priest comes, which won't be that day. Still wary of thieves, I haul my pack up the long, steep stairs to the church, poke around, then come back down and continue on my way. I soon come to Fernando again, now with another man. He expresses his regret that the town has nowhere to eat, but he says he has some coffee, if I want some. Hungry and weak, needing the sugar, I accept and step into his house, which is flush up against the road. It's a simple and immaculate place many decades old. The floors are of a hardwood that no longer exists, at least not in the width of his floorboards. His living room walls have pictures of a saint, a cross, a prayer in a frame. Fernando explains that he gets his lunch from his "companheira," and therefore he has no cooked food in the house. He pours me a generous dose of hot, sweet, strong coffee from a thermos and insists that I take at least three crackers from a pack. We chat a bit about the wealth of the United States. And then off I go.

I soon come to a sign that says "Honey for Sale." Being a beekeeper, I want to go see. Honey for lunch is better than no lunch. I poke around a little lane that winds through the grass along a brook. A dump truck stands at the brook, its motor running, apparently there for the water. I ask a kid if he knows about the honey. He doesn't, but I see another sign that points over a pair of logs that cross the brook. I go across and head toward the only possible place with honey, a kind of shack next to a kind of corral under a kind of roof, a functional, slap-dash kind of place. I clap and call out, but no one appears until a few seconds after I turn around to leave. It's a tall, bearded man, dirty with work in the sun, his arms thick from the kind of work that might well include the cutting of trees, the pounding in of fence posts, lifting of calves.

"Do you have honey for sale?" I ask.

"I have."

"You're the beekeeper?"

"I am."

"I'm a beekeeper, too."

That gets me a big smile and a strong, gentle handshake of apiary brotherhood. His name is Fernando. He says, "Come on!"

He opens a barbed wire gate, takes me back to his little shack, along the way asking, "You had lunch?"

As a matter of fact, I hadn't. I smell wood smoke. His shack doesn't quite qualify as a shack. I guess it's more like a hut, just some corrugated asbestos planks over a frame of poles, some plastic and sheet metal and cardboard around the sides. In one corner he has a jury-rigged, waist-high wood stove of sheet metal that once served for something else, a functional mess, a lot of stuff not out of place but hung and stacked wherever it goddam well belongs. His bee hat and veil are on top of a stack of stuff too vague to identify. His pots and pans are upside down on a plank of wood outside, black on the outside, shiny on the inside.

Lunch is a *mexido* of rice, beans, okra and herbs all mixed up in a pot, a delicious expediency typical of Minas Gerais. The first Portuguese *bandeirante* adventurers who came here carried shovels and muskets but no food or plows. They had come for gold. They had no time to plant. They learned about living off the land from the Indians, a people without alimentary taboos. They ate fruits they'd never heard of — *pitanga*, *araticum*, *bacupari*, *jatobá*, *guava*, *pequi*, *cagaita*. They ate fiddlehead ferns, wild squash, bamboo shoots, gooseberry leaves. They ate *tanajura* ants and *bicho-da-taquara* larva. They ate fish wrapped in leaves. They ate their corn raw, ground, boiled, baked, or roasted. They hunted alligator, monkey, quail, rabbit, dove, deer, armadillo, paca, wild pigs, snakes, lizards. They ate manioc root baked, roasted, boiled, sweetened, ground,

souped. From the urucum seeds they made medicine, colored foods, decorated their bodies and defended themselves against bug bites. Of all these foods, only the *bicho-da-taquara* larva have fallen from the mineiro menu, though it was once a delicacy. They were mashed and boiled, their fat skimmed off for a tasty butter. As they were an ocean away from their women, the men suffered insomnia caused by “excesses of love.” To get a good night’s sleep, they ate dried larva with the intestines intact but without the head. The meal gave them wonderful dreams of brilliant forests where they ate delicious fruits.

Mineiro food, famous throughout Brazil, was born of hunger, first of the *bandeirantes*, then of the slaves. The slaves ate leftovers, the hooves and ears of the pig, the guts of the cow, the collards that grew in easy abundance, the corn mash that the horses didn’t finish, and spices that came from the woods. Hunger necessitated invention, and the African women were culinary geniuses. The best foods on the contemporary Brazilian menu were concocted in miserable kitchens of slave quarters.

Fernando’s *mexido* is manifest proof of the flexibility of *mineiro* food. He assures me that the pot is dirty on the outside but clean on the inside. I can help myself, have all I want. He rinses off a plate at a spigot fed by a tank up on the hill. It’s good, hearty stuff, truly delicious. I’ve never tasted the herb that’s in it, and the cook doesn’t know what it’s called.

Fernando lives in Mariana but comes out here on the weekends. He once wanted to build a house here, but his family doesn’t like the place, so he comes here to be alone and is happy here, happy as a pig in mud, a man in his place. He used to work with a company messing in some way with environmental issues, but he lost the job, and now, it being hard to find another job, he spends his time on his little plot of land in Camargos, messing with a few cows, some bee hives, an organic garden. “*Sou homen do mato mesmo,*” he said - a man really of the woods. He loves his grubby little place. I can’t

say it's dirty though I'm eating thirty feet from a corral with a cow in it. The big box of fine soil beside my foot, I'm told, is full of worms. But worms are not dirty, and I'll take cow-dirt over diesel fumes any day.

Suddenly I remember a beekeeper I used to know, an old guy named *Ciro* who sold his honey at the Saturday market in Mariana 15 years ago. *Ciro* surprised me by speaking English when I complimented him on his honey. He was Brazilian but had worked for GM in Michigan for many years. Then he raised bees in a hamlet an hour outside of a town that was two hours from a state capital that no one outside of Brazil has heard of — *Camargos*, the place I have just walked through. Now *Fernando* tells me that *Ciro* died a few years ago. He praises *Ciro* very highly as an intelligent man who did things right. With deep nods over his plate of *mexido*, he emphasized how *Ciro* was good and smart.

Before he fetches some honey, *Fernando* rinses off a ladle and brings out a pot of milk still warm from his cows. It's good milk, creamy and earthy and warm. The only honey he has is a plastic container of one kilo, about four times the weight I want to carry. I pay him five reais, which is cheap. As we discussed earlier, raising bees isn't easy, and honey cannot be too expensive. Like all beekeepers in Brazil, *Fernando* raises killer bees. I've had that pleasure, too, and therefore know that five reais – two and a half bucks - really is too little for a kilo of honey. Any amount is too little.

Fernando tells me there's no hotel in the next town, *Bento Rodrigues*, but there's a little restaurant run by a guy named *Juca*. *Juca* is a fine fellow and will see to it that I don't have to sleep in the *mato*.

And off I go. Within a hundred yards I come to the most delightful little cascade, clean water pouring over rocks worn smooth. I change into trunks and wade into the main flow, which bounces horizontally through a sluice in the rock. I let the water

pound down on my shoulders, which feels mighty good. Over to the side a lower flow sends a flood of bubbles swirling around under a pummel of water.

Along comes a young man with a very pretty young lady on his back. She strips to a tiny bikini and enjoys the water. He invites me to a place a few yards upstream, where they and some friends are cooking meat and drinking Cuba libres from an aluminum cup. With ice. They insist I sip a little. The coldness of it is very fine. They give me some chunks of chicken shaved from a spit. That is fine, too. The girls slide down a sluice in the rock, slowly, giggling, ignoring all orders and advice from the guys who are attending to the meat and the rum.

Then I take what I later find out was the long road to the village of Bento Rodriquez, a hot and winding road that curls high around a sierra. It's too high for tall trees, which means nice views but no shade. Much of the road surface is fine, white sand, which reflects the early afternoon sun up into my rapidly toasting face. What a glorious feeling it is to come around a bend and see Bento Rodrigues at the far end of a deep valley, still far away but within sight. With the Igreja São Bento at the center of town and fields all around, it's just as cute as can be, a place for Hobbits or fairy tale people. My feet hurt as I plod into town. At this late moment it occurs to me that I haven't walked this far in one day since adolescence some 35 years ago. Teetering with exhaustion and thirst, I pull up to the first bar and order a Skol before I even take off my pack. Then I sit down and drink it. It is good. I watch as rowdy a group plays pool and pretends not to notice me.

I inquire about Juca and am directed up the street to a bar that is just a small room that is filled to capacity by about ten guys playing a boisterous game of cards. At the crucial moments of laying cards on the table or transferring funds or resolving a dispute they're loud to the point of hurting my ears. They rather effectively pretend not to notice that a stranger has just walked in. At the little counter in back I introduce

myself to Juca, make the connection with Fernando and in that instant obviously gain Juca's favor. When I ask him if he has beer, he gives me an answer that I've often heard and always thought would be a good line in a commercial for Antarctica beer: "We only have Brahma."

Brahma's the exact same thing as Antarctica, Skol, Kaiser, Bohemia and every Bud, Busch and Miller made in the U.S.A. — a light, hop-free, rice-based beer that is very, very good if too cold to taste on a day too hot to tolerate. Beer's a rich man's drink in the interior of Brazil. The guys playing cards are drinking cachaça, a drink so cheap that it rhymes with *de graça*, which means "free." It also with *desgraça* — misfortune with implications of disgrace. Rich guy that I am, and hot and thirsty, I opt for the Brahma and take a seat on a bench just outside the front door. I am sitting there, writing notes and resting my poor feet and wondering how to go about asking where a person can sleep around there, when along came an old, skinny black man with eyes that obviously can't see much and a knot of mutilated teeth at the front of his black and ragged gums. He asks if I am a "gringo" and offers his hand, which wavers about eight inches off course. He is not only half blind but three-quarters drunk. I shake it. In his garbled, gummy peon lingo, he asks if I'd buy him a cachaça. I cannot say no to a man who looks so poor and miserable. He should be have every drop of cachaça he can hold. I tell him to tell Juca I'll pay for a dose. He goes in and tells Juca. Juca comes out to confirm. He has a game leg that isn't good for much except as a prop to keep him from falling over. To walk he has to swing it around with one hand. I tell him I'll pay for the drink if he wants to sell it to the guy; it's up to him. So he goes and gets a half a glass of it — a good four or five ounces - but he holds the glass out into the street so the guy has to physically leave if he wants to drink it. The guy downs it in one gulp, thanks me and, to my relief, leaves.

I then use Fernando's reference to ask Juca where a person can sleep in Bento Rodriguez, strongly implying that Fernando has passed this responsibility on to him. He indicates a Manoel Muniz, who lives down a grassy lane that runs beside the church. My weak and shaky legs stagger me on over there, arriving just as Manoel is coming through his gate with four plastic milk pails. A certain semi-mute I had seen in the first bar, who talks by huffing and squeaking and waving his arms around, is there with Manoel, apparently advising him of my imminent arrival. Manoel eyes me up and down a, I explain myself and my mission and give Juca as my reference, strongly implying that I am here at Juca's request and recommendation. I recognize Manoel as a good man, the type with Christian love in his eyes, an older guy who still gets to do things with milk pails.

Manoel is a little concerned that he'll have to feed me. I say I'll eat at Juca's. He asks if I'm alone. Yes, I am. He asks how long I want to stay. I say I'd be out of there by dawn. I tell him I only need a little space on the floor. I just don't want to have to sleep in the *mato*. And in case he can't tell, I also need a shower, though I can certainly wait until he gets back from his milk business.

Well, he reckons he can put me up, so he takes me through the gate and around to the back of his house to where his wife is pushing coagulated milk into round cheese molds with her fingers, making the famous *queijo mineiro* - cheese Minas-style, a soft, salty cheese that can be anywhere from dripping wet to grainy dry. She is old and heavy and coughing and waving flies off her cheese. She shows no reaction to my presence. Manoel takes me to a bedroom, then leads me to the bathroom, a rather convoluted trail through the living room, kitchen and dining room. He shows me where all the light switches are, in case I have to get up at night. He explains that the hot water comes from a *serpentina*, a pipe that runs through the grill of the *fogão de lenha* wood stove, then up to a tank over the ceiling. The boiling water circulates itself up to the tank while

drawing water down from the same tank. He doesn't need to explain that the supply of hot water, therefore, was limited but would be plenty hot. He also didn't need to tell me that the toilet might need an extra flush or two to really do its job. I can tell by looking at it.

It's a nice, clean, *casa mineira* with tile roof and blue trim around the doors and windows. The windows have no glass, just heavy shutters to swing shut at night. In this house, they swing into the room to open. In some houses, they swing out. The living room furniture is cheap and simple, just a leatherette couch a chair, and a coffee table with a big Bible on it. The walls sport pictures of Nossa Senhora da Conceição and Santo Gabriel, a battery-operated clock in antique style, five starfish, a heavy-duty, oversized, only-for-show rosary, a picture of Jesus with arms held out to a nice lake, and the inevitable old photos of a husband and wife. I think just about every house in the interior of Minas Gerais has one of these pairs of photos in an oval frame. They are strange photos from deep in the past, often with formal clothes painted below the photo of the face. Someone told me that the photos are blown-up prints made from tiny contact prints. The rosiness in the cheeks is water color. Manoel tells me the photos are of him and his wife, taken fifty years ago, just after they were married. By the looks of the wife, she's been in a bad mood since day one.

Not just a bad mood, it turns out. Manoel tells me she's got mental problems.

It turns out I'm not the first foreigner to stay in this house. A guy from Germany, a backpacker who looked a little like me, was here not long ago, and a couple from Europe somewhere, and a whole busload of people from São Paulo who called beforehand and arranged to rent his whole house and *quintal*, where they slept and camped. They were friendly, peaceful people, members of a church. They had their pictures taken beside him beside his flowers, his chickens, his house and the little cow barn.

Manoel has a great *quintal*, a word for which there is no translation besides, inadequately, backyard. The *quintal* of a rural house in Minas Gerais is a lush area planted with food and flowers. In Manoel's case, it includes not only bananas, jabuticaba, lemons, limes, oranges, pitanga berries, mulberries, tangerines, and a lot of flowers but five dairy cows, three pigs, and twenty-one piglets that have been timed to reach table-size by Christmas. The jabuticabas are ripe, an event that takes place once a year for about two weeks and only in a rather narrow area of Brazil (though I hear they have the same fruit in Australia). These odd, black-purple berries grow right from the trunks of the many-stemmed tree, and a given tree produces far more than a family can consume. They can't be frozen or stored, though they can be made into a liqueur or jam. You have to eat them when they're ripe. They're an good fruit for eating outdoors because they involve a lot of spitting. You take each berry, which is a little larger than a marble, bite it hard enough to break the skin, then suck out the insides. You squeeze it to get the pit and pulp out, suck the pulp off the pit, then spit the pit out. There's probably a delicate way to do this, and I suppose it could be done indoors with a bowl on a table, but it's far more efficient and satisfying to project the pit into the great outdoors. As if the taste were not enough, the guilt of having a tree full of jabuticaba drives everyone to eat as many as possible. As with potato chips, it's hard to eat just one, or even just a pound, though as you binge toward a kilo, a certain limit is reached, usually all of a sudden. After two weeks of this, everyone's glad the season is over.

Manoel is seventy-six years old. He has a head of hair thick and black. One lens of his black-frame glasses is dirty and spotted with what seems to be white paint. He lives in a house with a roof that's a hundred years old, the house where his father was born. He's a fine fellow who loves his wife, his fruit trees, the chickens and ducks that peck around his sandaled feet in the quintal as he flicks corn scooped up in a blue plastic hard hat. He loves the piglets he will sell come Christmas. He loves Fernando of

Camargos; he loved *Ciro*, the smart beekeeper who died, as I now learn, of a heart attack at the gate of his farm as he was about to leave for Mariana. Manoel loves his twenty-one grandchildren and the great-grandson who just turned one, at which point he had his little existence confirmed and glorified in a laminated card the size of a post card with the young cad bright-eyed and optimistic, looking for all the world like someone destined to become the mayor of a place with pavement.

We sit at Manoel's big dining room table, eating crackers and his wife's *requeijão*, a *queijo mineiro* that comes out soft and almost spreadable because at some point in its making it has been boiled. We also eat creamy *doce de leite* caramel that originated in his own cows. He gives me some manioc soup that had been warmed all day on his wood stove. We drink coffee which I believe he thinned down with water so there's be enough for both of us. His wife, suffering from a fever, keeps to her bedroom.

Ever-so-sore from my long hike, I sleep in exquisite soreness, window wide open, barely aware of the chilly fog that wafts in. It takes four hours of cock-a-doodle-doo, starting long before dawn, to get me up. For breakfast, Manoel makes me strong coffee — much stronger than that of the night before — with cheese and *requeijão* and store-bought cookies. It's good. He also boils me two eggs, serving them in a state barely beyond raw, which is the way I like them. One of the eggs had a greenish shell, the other a splotchy tan, both typical of the *ovos caipiris*, the eggs of truly free-range chickens who live off not chicken feed but whatever they can scratch up in the *quintal*. I contribute some of Fernando's honey, but it turns out Manoel has honey from a grandson who messes with bees. He has a vial of store-bought propolis, too, for medicinal purposes.

Before I leave, I ask if I can fill my two-liter plastic *guaraná* bottle. (*Guaraná* is a popular soft drink made either from a certain root or from an artificial version of it. It's the only drink in Brazil that outsells Coca-Cola, though the Coca-Cola company has

now come out with a *guaraná* drink of its own.) Of course Manoel is glad to provide me with water. In fact, he chills it for me by bringing from his freezer a block of ice in a war-torn aluminum pot. He draws water from his clay *filtro* tank and lets it cool over the ice before he pours it into my bottle. We fill the bottle in two batches, but that isn't enough. He uses a hammer and a lot of thumping to get the block of ice out of the pot. Then he cracks it into slivers that he slips into the mouth of the bottle. Presto! Cold water for my journey.

Then I ask him what I owed. Well, really, he says, nothing. If I write a book and bring more tourists to Bento Rodriguez, maybe some great-grandchild of his might someday open a little hotel in his house. It would be a great thing if that happened.

But I insist, and he finally says that any little thing would be fine. I slap him around the shoulders and tell him what other foreigners — the German, the Europeans, the church people in the bus — have told him: He knows how to work but he doesn't know how to charge. I give him ten reais — about five dollars — and he says it's too much and won't take it so I press it to the granite of his kitchen counter and tell him that's how much he gets.

And off I went with five pounds of cold water and the comfort of knowing I have to walk only nine kilometers to Santa Rita Durão. It's mostly uphill, however, and before I am a tenth of the way, I stop, dump my pack to the ground and drink as much of the extra weight as I can. A man comes up the road from behind me, a scythe and axe over his shoulder. I offer him water. He says he's hard put to swallow water. Just can't do it. I joke that *cachaça* is better, but he tells me he used to drink too much of it. A little dose (three or four ounces) in a glass wasn't enough. He needed a full glass, to the top. But then he decided to become a man again. He said that if you drink too much, you trade your friends for *cachaça*. So he stopped, and now he's going up the road to cut some firewood.

Chapter Two

Santa Rita Durão: The Superlative of Tough

The walk becomes agonizingly long. I'm still tired and sore from the day before. Most of the trip is uphill, curving around a mountain, and then the extended decline is just as painful. I'm still tired and sore from the day before. Most of the trip is uphill, curving around a mountain, and then the extended decline is just as painful. Most of the walk is through a forest of eucalyptus that has been planted for use as charcoal. The road of wide, smooth dirt passes no houses. Every half hour or so a truck stacked with logs goes by. I'm walking toward the imposing range of the Serra do Caraça, a massif of semi-naked rock stretched into a series of vegetated peaks. Near a mine of the Vale do Rio Doce company I pick up dusty asphalt that goes into Santa Rita Durão. I pass the Igreja do Rosário, the church built for slaves in the 18th century, then the Igreja da Nossa Senhora Nazaré, where the white people worshipped. Not far beyond is a little restaurant, the Restbalanche Restaurant, so named because, the owner, Sr. Edval, tells me, it used to be a *restaurante*, *bar* and *lanchonete*. But the bar part was creating too much

trouble, and the luncheonette wasn't worth the effort of offering snacks all day, so the place now just serves one meal to anyone who walks in.

The meal this day meal includes a formidable amount of food served on individual stainless steel platters: rice, beans, beef, spaghetti, collards, stir-fried cabbage, a fried banana, a few leaves of wet lettuce with two slices of a tomato that seems to have led a long, sad life in a town whose last name is the superlative of "tough." That, with a dose of cachaça and a beer, costs me \$2.15. I chat up the waitress, a solid *mulatta* with wide hips, love in her eyes, and a warm smile that reveals her need of dental work. She, it turns out, is the wife of Sr. Evald himself. I ask her where in town a person can sleep. She says there really isn't anywhere, though just up the street a certain Dona Cota used to take in boarders, though the place is of dubious living condition. Worst case, she says, if necessary, I can sleep on the floor of the restaurant after they close.

Hoping to decline that offer, I leave my pack in the restaurant and go look for Dona Cota. Her house, a humble two-story building on the Nossa Senhora Nazaré, is run down to the point of seeming uninhabited. Steps in front lead up to the second floor, but the doors and windows look like they haven't been opened in years. I poke around the side and find the ratty remains of a door so full of holes that I can see it leads to a dim place in serious degradation, a place a lot like an old basement. I bang on the door — carefully — and soon a shy but smiling little girl creaks it open. She's wearing a school uniform that's the same deep blue as the trim on most of the houses in town. She says her mother's working, won't be back 'til around five o'clock. I ask if her father's home, and the answer is as I expected. She has no father.

So I wait around all day for Dona Cota to come home from work. Back at the Restbalanche, a nice guy named Inhô (I think), offers to take me up to the Igreja do Rosário to see if it's open. The carved altars there, he says, are the most beautiful in all of Brazil. We go, but the church is closed. Deathly sore, I need to lie down, so I go around

to the back of the church to lie in the shade of the eave of the roof. I try to make my muscles sleep. Meanwhile, people are arriving and climbing over the wall behind the church to pick jabuticaba berries from several tall trees in somebody's yard. They climb back over with a lot of chatter to the effect of hold this/let go/ now the other leg/ leave me alone, I can do it. I ask a lady for some jabuticaba, and before I can stop her, she just about fills my straw hat. She doesn't want money — after all, she's basically stolen them. But her labor was worth something, and getting her stout body over the wall had surely cost her something, so I press a couple of coins into her hand. She says God will pay me.

I eat too many of the addictive little fruits, a process of cracking the purple skin with my teeth, sucking out the pulp and pit, and spitting the pit as far as it will go. I make quite a mess. Then I teeter my aching bones back to Cota's. She's still not home, so I retire to a shady patch of grass beside a tricky fountain in front of the church, which is surrounded by barbed wire and with a sign that says "Entry Prohibited." A mangy horse and some mangy dogs keep me company. The horse looks pretty bored, but the dogs are engaged in complex and mysterious canine politics. There I lie in stuporous anguish for as long as I can stand the tickle of ants that apparently were waiting for somebody to come along and lie down on the ground. I reflect on the apparent fact that in Santa Rita Durão there is not one book, magazine or newspaper for sale anywhere. Not one piece of writing is for sale. No one in this town reads.

The town also has only brand of cigarette, Broadway, which I've never seen anywhere else. And it has just one beer (Skol), just one place to eat, and one place to sleep, maybe. There's one bar with one pool table, and another bar that has nothing but a concrete counter to lean against as you down a cachaça, of which there are several kinds, none with lables. One is flavored with health-inducing herbs, twelve cents for all you can take in one gulp.

All afternoon I keep checking back for Dona Cota. I really need to take a bath and lie down on something soft. Each time, the little girl tells me not yet. I ask where Dona Cota works. The little girl tells me, "*lá no mato,*" out there in the woods. As the day wears on, I feel sorrier and sorrier for the poor woman. I wonder what she does out in the woods.

I drag on over to the bar with a pool table to get a cold Skol to help me feel sorry for poor Cota. I notice how everyone here needs to chatter all the time, like the flocks of parrots that swoop around town to raid jaboticaba trees. Such simple lives they have, yet they have so much to tell each other! From the bar I watch six or eight people chattering as they pack themselves into a VW bus, on their way to a 4:00-12:00 shift at one of the mines. No doubt they do this same thing every day, yet it takes an unbelievable amount of talking and shouting, passing bags in and out, people trading places, deciding to go or not to go, dashing across the plaza to resolve an issue with someone peripherally involved in the trip. Then they finally drive off, their huffy VW engine whistling into the distance, their tires raising more dust than you'd expect to come off asphalt.

Darkness seeps into Santa Rita Durão. I go back to the Restbalanche to maintain my relationship there, the one which might win me a spot on the floor if things don't pan out with Dona Cota. I have dinner, another overkill of six or seven dishes, twice what I need. The evening *novella* — a soap opera that lasts for months — comes on the TV. It seems to be counterposing life in the jungle with life in the urban upper-middle class. The scenes alternate. Now it's people arguing in a house with a swimmingpool. Now it's a couple of hunky guys in loin cloths chasing a buxom woman in a wet t-shirt through Amazonia, with an occasional comic intervention by a fat Indian chief and a pair of Indian maidens in grass skirts and no shirts, their modesty saved only by their long hair. The novella is called "Uga-Uga."

Just up the street, the minuscule one-room Igreja do Evangelho Quadrangular, has cranked up a mid-week celebration of its personal version of God. The door's wide open. Inside, a dozen people clap a regular beat and sing the glories of Jesus and the certainty of peace hereafter. The preacher, short, black, clean-cut, in a tie, leads from up front. Three little girls in dresses help him. As I pass, I smell soap. The Church of the Quadrangular Evangelism is the sweetest smelling place in town.

Cota arrives while I'm sitting on the doorstep of the Restbalanche. I'm sure it's her. She carries a stack of long logs on her head, balanced with one hand as she moves forward at a slow, onerous plod. She's barely five feet tall, stocky in the way of peasant women. I watch her to see if she goes into her house. She doesn't seem to, but when I show up a while later, the logs are leaning beside her door.

She doesn't seem too pleased at the possibility of a guest. The place is dirty and unarranged, she says. She really isn't in the business anymore. People kept staying there, then leaving without paying. They stole the blankets and mattresses. I'm not one to insist, but I plead my case with a certain desperation. It's hard to hold her attention because she's trying to hold a five-year-old still enough to dump some medicine down his throat. He whines and runs away. She chases him and drag him back. She finally asks how long I'd be staying, warning me again that the place hasn't been cleaned. Giving up on the sick kid, she takes up a thermos and shakes it. It's empty. "Sure would be nice if I came home and had some coffee waiting for me," she says. "Everything's on my shoulders, the firewood, the rice, the sugar, it's all on me." She slams the thermos down. I offer to get her a coffee from the bar across the street, but she won't hear of it. She and two kids take me outside and up the stairs to the second floor to the former dormitory. It is indeed grubby. It was grubby long before it got to the state of needing cleaning. The wooden floor is thickly littered with dead bugs and flecks of paint from the woven *taquara* bamboo ceiling, which is frayed with age, stained with roof water,

and sagging with the weight of antiquity or dead rats. The two beds in the biggest room look like cadavers. One has a foam mattress in the late stages of disintegration. It makes the other one look good. Cota and the kids take the clean mattress downstairs to beat the dust out of it.

Cota has pretty much given up on trying to run a *dormitório*. The last time she had people here, two men, they ran up a big bill, then left without paying. Whenever she made a little money, she always had to spend it on something of more pressing importance than the business. Now the place is run down just about as far as a place can run. The roof leaks. The big concrete sink in the back is all globbed up with some kind of compound. The brass faucet is stuck into a PVC pipe and secured there only by a string that's about to rot through. A section of garden hose leads from the faucet to the faucet of the twin basin, where a complex arrangement of rags and plastic and an old stainless steel tea tray minimize drips and feed what escapes into the other basin, no doubt because the plumbing below also leaks. The feeder hose comes in through a window from a PVC pipe that wends its way down to a lean-to kitchen on the back of the building, where the pipe trickles constantly, filling a big, old five-liter cooking oil can on a counter next to the wood-burning cook-stove.

The electrical system is just as precarious, with wire of extension cord quality strung expediently from point to point by the shortest route possible, even if only neck high across the center of a room. Its insulation is cracked and graced with dusty cobweb, and the wire itself is just twisted around connection points without benefit of insulation, joining a light bulb socket to a wall switch and then up a wall to snake through the ceiling over to the next room.

The electric shower head is part of this jury rig and itself has been stripped to a minimum, the housing over the electrical part having no doubt been stolen by the same guys who took the blankets and mattresses. The wires connected to the heating element

are exposed, and the little brass knob that turns the water on and off is layered with a thick wad of electrical tape, probably because the shower is grounded to the plumbing. Which means that if I get a little too exuberant in the washing of an armpit, I could electrocute myself and die in the slime of guys who swipe blankets and don't pay their bills.

I feel so sorry for Cota. She works harder than anyone I know, gets ripped off by her few customers, and has three young kids, one with a wicked cough. When I tell her she should fix the place up, she says her husband always said, "You need to have money to make money."

Cota and a couple of kids sit on the bed with the rotten mattress while she tells me these problems. I egg her on, hoping to find out what had happened to her husband, though in all likelihood he just ran off and probably hadn't even been the kind of husband who is actually married. Before I get to ask, the lights go out. The whole town goes dark. Cota says it's strange because there are no thunderstorms around. She fetches a candle from downstairs, though by the time she returns, I've got my own lit and melted into place on the windowsill. In a globe of yellow light, at a pace slow enough not to blow out a candle, she shows me around the *dormitório*. There really isn't much to show — some empty rooms, the odd deployment of light switches, the grimy bathroom. With a yank of the string, she flushes the toilet, though it really doesn't need it. It's just a gesture, all she can do on such short notice.

As soon as she's gone, I light a mosquito coil and collapse on the bed. All night long I keep rolling over, groaning as I adjust my bones. The smoke of the mosquito coil, undoubtedly carcinogenic, makes the inside of my lungs itch. Morning takes a long time to come.

Next day, I meet Inhô at the little restaurant. I'm not sure how to spell his name, but neither is he, and besides, his real name is Raimundo. The poor guy has very bad teeth. The few that remain, protruding from isolated places in his gums, are tilted and black. He offers to take me up the mountain that stands above the east side of town. There's a tunnel up there, he says, dug by slaves in the search for gold. He can take me to see it. Despite my sore muscles, I agree to go. We walk out of town and uphill for as far as I care to go, following a path of packed graphite bordered by hardscrabble grass and weeds. Inhô points out a gulch two or three hundred meters long slashed straight up a cliff of rock. The bottom of it ends at a swampy stream. The tunnel, he says, cuts diagonally up to the top of the gash like *this* — he holds his arm at a 45 degree angle. The slaves dug out the tunnel and dumped the rock down the gulch into the stream. There the rock was crushed, washed and separated from the gold.

Just above the swamp, we probe into a dense little jungle of trees, vines, spider webs and brush. After a few false forays, we find it, a rather perfectly carved door-shaped opening in the rock, an oval as tall as a slumping slave and wide enough for two of them to pass each other. It's too dark inside to go more than a few meters, the floor strewn with fallen rubble. Inhô tells me it's blocked. Disappointed, I figure that's the end of it, but Inhô leads me up a narrow path across the side of the cliff. It rises at the same angle as the tunnel inside. My legs are wobbly, so I cling cautiously to every tuft of grass and knob of rock I can reach. Soon we come to a gash in the rock that reaches in to the tunnel. The opening is 50 feet wide, six feet high or so, its ceiling supported by quartzite pillars that the slaves chiseled around. The tunnel passes at the bottom of the gash, too far in to see. Inhô heaves a rock into the gash. We listen as it tumbles into the darkness. Inhô marks the thumps with his hand while his eyes tell me to listen. Each thump seems to be the last, but then there's another...and another...and ...another. It's a deep gash, but Inhô's been down there. Vale do Rio Doce, which owns several mines in

the region, hired him to accompany some geologists into the mountain. They were assessing the site for gold. Their painted marks on the walls and pillars still remain. Inhô rappelled into the mountain with them. They poked into every nook and crack, mapped the whole thing. He knows the mountain inside out. He shows me three types of rock that make up the mountain: very hard quartzite, something soft and red, and sandstone. The gold is in the quartzite.

The mountain holds a lot more gold, Inhô is sure. The Portuguese dug one tunnel and cut out a few slices that lead into it. But it's a big mountain. They got only a little of it.

CVRD did not treat Inhô well. Once he cracked open a piece of quartzite and showed a certain golden chunk to the geologists. They said it wasn't gold, but they put the rock into their pouch, and that was the last he saw of it. When he asked a geologist about it, the geologist said that he shouldn't ask questions like that. If he'd asked anyone else, the geologist said, he'd have been fired on the spot. Asking questions hinted that the peon might be interested in doing a little mining himself. Inhô didn't like that attitude. He figured the geologists should have taught him geology so he could help more.

One time he found a big, wine-red rock. The geologists said it was nothing, but they put it in their pouch. He was sure if they'd cracked it open, they'd find a topaz inside, worth a lot of money. He's sure the geologists sold it.

As soon as the geologists were done with their survey Inhô got laid off. He thought that was pretty rotten. He'd worked well, taken risks, and offered expertise that few others had.

He takes me farther up the cliff. My legs get wobblier as we go. A slip to my right would send me tumbling a hundred feet almost straight down, at best slowing myself by grabbing grass or digging my fingernails into rock. We stop at more gashes. At some

points we can see the tunnel below. We toss in more rocks, hear them tumble down, down, down.

I say, "Imagine how many slaves died in there."

A lot, Inhô says, his face crushed with seriousness. "*Muitos.*"

We squat on the path, look out and down across the unending green waves of hills of the state of Minas Gerais. Smoke rises from a broad area three or four hills away — a charcoal operation turning eucalyptus trees into fuel for steel mills.

Inhô tells me that his great-grandfather, who might have been alive not long after slavery was outlawed in 1888, told him how the Portuguese disposed of slaves who didn't work well. Down in the tunnel they unchained them and brought them up to where we are now squatting. There, as Inhô demonstrates, they put a foot on the slave's back and pushed him over the cliff. Down below, other slaves received their dead and buried him somewhere out in the *mato*. Inhô sweeps his hand over a vast area to show me where thousands of unmarked graves lie. It's the slow, broad gesture of a priest blessing a congregation.

Farther up the path, we come under a rock from which hangs a strange, white substance the size and shape of a large pillow. Quartz? No, Inhô whispers — bees. The white stuff is honeycomb, and the dark stuff killer bees. He cautions me to walk and speak softly.

"*Muito africanizados,*" he says. "*E bravos.*" Very Africanized, and mean.

All wild bees in Brazil are, to some extent, Africanized. NonAfricanized bees would be the relatively docile Italian bees that are raised, and wild, in North America. But in 19--, a laboratory assistant in São Paulo mistakenly released an African queen bee, thinking that it was just a pest that had wandered into the lab. It was the only African queen bee in the Americas and was being studied for its unique characteristics. Among those characteristics are stamina, aggressiveness, and a tendency to attack en

masse. The African bees are stronger, so when an Italian queen is in heat, it is inevitably an African that catches her in her mating flight. He's sorry, of course, because it is his genitalia that get ripped out once he's filled her spermatheca, but his offspring are half African, and theirs will inevitably be three-quarters African, and as the generations purify toward the African, they get just as mean as can be. I once raised these bees in Brazil, and I know how they can be quite docile one day, but another day, maybe due to internal politics we can never know, they don't want you anywhere near their hive. Every once in a while somebody gets killed, often not by the stings but by their desperate attempt to flee. In this particular case, on the side of this particular cliff, the escape route is either over the cliff and down to the swamp, or into the gash in the mountain to hide in the darkness, where bees will not go. Or one can whisper and walk softly. Thanks to the sweat and blood of a thousand slaves, we are able to get around the hive by going through a hole that has been carved through an outcrop.

During this hike up the mountain and back down, Inhô keeps stopping to talk. He tells me things several times, and he acts a lot of it out as if in charade. This is good because he's hard to understand. In quick, Mineiro peasant dialect, he rattles his words fast, smearing the vowels and using peasant slang that I often don't understand. He talks a lot about the rotten deal he and everyone else got from working with the CVRD mining company. They really worked hard. They went down into these gashes, hauled up bags of sample rock on their backs, slipped along the path when it was raining, got paid little and only for temporary, contracted work, without benefits, and had his undoubtedly valuable rocks stolen by the geologists. He suspects he got fired for inquiring about his topaz. He recently became entitled to retirement payments from the government, but he's been waiting for his check for five months. He leads me into the same conclusion I'd thought of earlier, one which I didn't think he'd figure out: that

slavery has not ended. Maybe they don't push you off a cliff when they're done with you, but destitution is basically the same thing.

He also talks a lot about his desperate financial situation. He has five kids, all of them sick with a flu of the chest, no doubt the same one I've been feeling for the past three days. Sometimes he doesn't have food for them. Crying, they ask for food, but he has to explain that he doesn't have any, not 'til his retirement check comes in.

But he won't steal! *Não senhor!* he wags his leathery finger at me and raises his chin with pride. His father on his death bed told him not to steal, that something stolen never leads to anything good.

Inhô is priming me, of course, for a generous payment for his services, and of course I'm glad to make my contribution. Halfway down the mountain, he points across Santa Rita Durão, over to the section on the other side of the river, where the little houses are hard to see under the trees. A van from CEMIG, the electric company, is parked next to a utility pole, and there's a guy in a yellow hardhat up there doing something.

"They're here to shut off my lights," Inhô says. "I got my last warning yesterday."

We have lunch at the Restbalanche, and then I go looking for some nice sponges. I need them to pad the shoulder straps of my pack. The straps appear to have had padding back when I was a boy scout, but the last 35 years have turned it to something with the consistency of mushy sand. The years haven't been much kinder to my shoulders, and the 20-mile hike into Santa Rita has rubbed them raw. They feel bruised. So my plan is to tape some sponges to the straps. But just try to find a decent sponge in a town like this! There's just one store, and its sponges are only a quarter-inch thick. The store has a few fruits and vegetables, however, so I inquire about limes. I want to make

a caipirinha with the little Coke bottle of cachaça somebody gave me at the Restbalanche, the product of his father, made from a recipe that goes back at least three generations. It is indeed very good, with a secret ingredient, possibly jabuticaba. The conversation associated with the transfer of this fine stuff circled in on the likelihood of that ingredient being jabuticaba. There are no limes in evidence, however, so I ask. Limes, it seems, have just gone out of season, but the store owner thinks he may have one or two on his tree at home. He dispatches a small boy to lead me there, just up the street and around the corner. An older boy at the house leads me into the *quintal*, where we shake a tree for the last of its limes, just three or four that have blackened on the outside but not rotted on the inside. They are an orange kind with a flavor that is good but have the flavor of neither a lime nor a lemon nor an orange. The store owner refuses to accept payment for them.

Back at Cota's I borrow a glass. She takes a long time to find one that is worthy of her guest. Before I go up to bed, I ask her how much I owe. I plan to leave for Catas Altas as early as possible the next morning so I can arrive there before the heat of noon. Dona Cota has no idea how much to charge. She really doesn't want anything. I get her to tell me how much people used to pay, or would have paid if they hadn't skipped out. She tells me it varied, depending on whether it was CVRD or the individual guest that was paying. She vaguely remembered something around the equivalent of four or five dollars a day, depending. So I pay her twice that, figuring her kid's got a cough and that it sure won't break me. I wish someone would give me the job of walking down the Estrada Real and handing out spare change to people who need it, except of course that's everybody, and if I ever finished that project, there'd always be Bombay and Ouagadougou needing it just as much.

In my room, I set up shop at a little table that's about a meter square. I squeeze the lime into the glass, add a couple ounces of cachaça and a big spoon of Fernando's

honey and mix it up. It's warm and littered with little seeds but tastes and feels very good. I like it because the cachaça has a secret ingredient and no brand name, the lime did not come from a store, the honey came from a guy who gave me lunch, and I'm drinking this fine stuff from a jelly jar.

I like my little office-of-the-day, too, my little table and the section of log on which I sit, and the single unfrosted light bulb that hangs by a wire from the ceiling. The table has a history of labor spread across it — a field of old white paint with some areas of light green and some intriguing blotches of red that isn't paint. It has been scratched with knifework and general use. It's a bit sticky where I sliced my lime. The top is of two wide boards, one of which has split. The nails are old and rusty. Maybe it's the cachaça, but I think that if you hung this tabletop in a nice museum, people would have a hard time telling it from art. And if we can assume for the moment that it is indeed art, placed here in Dona Cota's Museum of the Unstolen, we would nod slowly and call it beautiful.