

# ICWA LETTERS

Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young professionals to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. An exempt operating foundation endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.

## TRUSTEES

Bryn Barnard  
Carole Beaulieu  
Mary Lynne Bird  
William F. Foote  
Peter Geithner  
Pramila Jayapal  
Peter Bird Martin  
Judith Mayer  
Dorothy S. Patterson  
Paul A. Rahe  
Carol Rose  
John Spencer  
Edmund Sutton  
Dirk J. Vandewalle  
Sally Wriggins

## HONORARY TRUSTEES

David Elliot  
David Haggood  
Pat M. Holt  
Edwin S. Munger  
Richard H. Nolte  
Albert Ravenholt  
Phillips Talbot

Institute of Current World Affairs  
The Crane-Rogers Foundation  
Four West Wheelock Street  
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755 U.S.A.

SLS-10  
THE AMERICAS

*Susan Sterner is a Fellow of the Institute writing and photographing the lives and status of Brazilian women.*

## “Street Mothers”

January 29, 2000  
Recife, Brazil

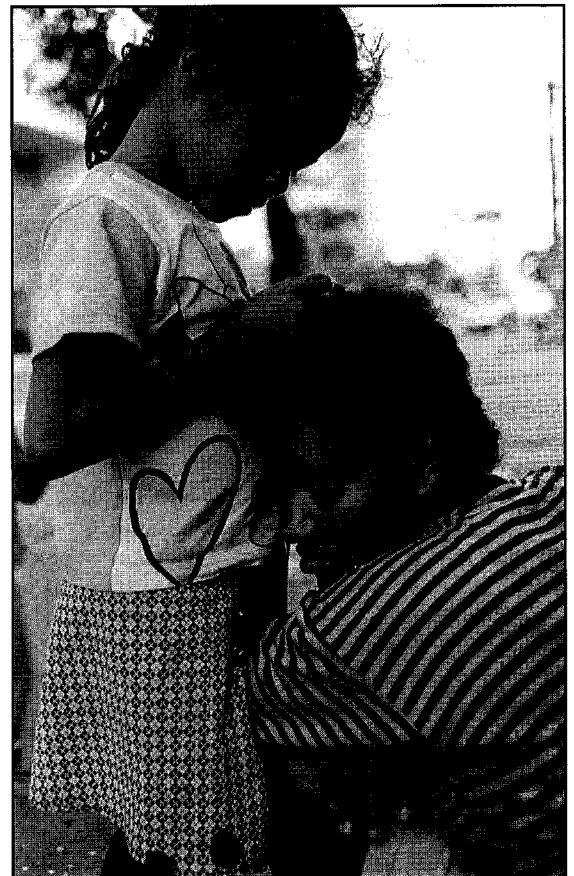
Peter Bird Martin  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
Four West Wheelock Road  
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755

Dear Peter,

Maria smiled as she scanned the street. Her children had grown up here over the last year, complete with skinned knees, new teeth and potty training. This was her slice of sidewalk, her home during the day. She had learned to tolerate the rude stares and harsh words of passing strangers. It was part of her life of relying on random generosity to feed and clothe her children.

Maria had chosen that location because it was a few blocks from the beach, so tourists and well-off locals passed by with frequency. Traffic was constant, but not so quick-moving that her children were in danger as they moved between the cars. And best of all, no other families or beggars were working the area. She brought seven of her ten children to the street on a daily basis. Their ages ranged from 14 months to 10 years. Three more were at home, ages 14, 16, and 20 — the latter with a pregnant common-law wife.

Unbeknownst to me, the first afternoon I spent with Maria was the Catholic (and Condomble) feast day of the twin saints, Cosme and Damião, who represent children and the need to care for them. All day the kids kept eyes peeled to the street. About every 15 minutes a carload of elderly ladies would do a drive-by handout of candies, broken toys and used clothing. The kids jumped



*Tired after a day on the street corner in the Boa Viagem section of Recife, Pernambuco, Severina, right, sits in the shade as her daughter Mônica plays with her hair.*



*Daily life for Severina and her children for the last year has played out on a public sidewalk a few blocks from Boa Viagem beach and in the shadows of high-end businesses and apartment buildings.*

and yelled with every arrival. Their enthusiastic responses gratified the women.

After every take the children ran to their mother's knees and sifted through the booty of gooey candies and puffed corn treats. Vanessa, 6, a skinny little thing with teeth so rotten she had the premature smile of a second-grader's Halloween-pumpkin grin, stuffed absolutely everything she could into her mouth. Hour after hour the candy kept coming and she kept stuffing.

Maria tolerated my questions and cameras for a few hours, but then seemed to either tire, or grow weary of me. Sunburned and dehydrated, I said goodbye and turned toward home. I promised to return the next day thinking to myself that perhaps I could cajole her into letting me hang around long enough to learn her story. Maria seemed doubtful that I would re-appear.

I had been interested in learning about what it was like to raise a family in the streets. I'd seen a lot of mothers and children working traffic lights, but few that seemed to spend as much time in one place as Maria did. Another person who had caught my eye was a pregnant girl who hung around the Boa Viagem plaza near our apartment building. I had tried to talk with her twice, but she was always very distracted and tense. Still, every time I passed the plaza I looked for her in the crowd of hangers-about that clustered around the fetid public toi-

let. She was always there, bumming cigarettes, cocking her head coquettishly and playing flirtatious games of tag with scary-looking guys. Then she just stopped coming around.

A few months passed and one day Tyrone, my husband, came in from helping a social organization photograph street kids for identity cards in the plaza. "Hey, that pregnant girl is back — she has her baby now." Maybe she was calmer after time away from the gang, I thought. Walking home after my first visit with Maria I made a loop around the plaza and found Andrea laughing with a friend, a petite chubby blonde known as "Galega." I asked to see the baby and was led to the overhang of a bank across the street from the toilet.

There, on a moldy mattress Andrea had carefully covered with a sheet of plastic and two baby blankets, lay a baby girl, Tais (tah-EEZ), three months old and weighing less than seven pounds. She was a tiny, disoriented thing with blank eyes and her skin covered with a rash. Andrea had left Tais in the care of five-year-old Felipe, a junior street-tough fascinated by the baby. Andrea shooed him away.

"Here, Tia," she said lifting the sweaty bundle into my arms and using the word "Aunt" to address me, a respectful but familiar means of addressing a woman, particularly if you can't remember her name or you want

her to give you money. "Isn't my baby pretty, *Tia*? But she needs formula, *Tia*. She's hungry and needs medicine, *Tia*."

I gently gave up Tais to Galega's arms. Galega cooed over the baby and settled on the mattress to play with her. I looked back at Andrea.

"Where do you live, Andrea?"

"I live with my father over there behind the airport"

"Then why are you here? Shouldn't the baby be off the streets?"

"I have eight brothers and sisters, *Tia*. My father is sick. He sells popcorn and that doesn't do for such a big family."

"And your mother?"

"She's dead. She died when I was eight. Please, *Tia*, just give me money for baby formula and rice meal."

"I don't have any money with me," I patted my pockets to prove my point. The fact was, I had left all of my money at home. I did not want to become a money source for either Maria or Andrea. My goal was to get them to share their lives and let me photograph them because they wanted to, not because I would be paying them. I wasn't too sure Maria would agree, but Andrea seemed to grasp the idea once I spelled it out to her.

When I had concluded she looked at me hard,

"You're not going to give me money?"

"No. That would change how we view each other. You'll regard me as just another *gringa* with a camera. I would be a client (*freguesa*) of yours. You'd see me coming and think, 'Oh! *Tia* is going to solve my problems.' I can't do that because I want to learn how you solve your own problems. Are you understanding?"

"I think so, *Tia*."

"Call me Susana."

"Yes, Susana. You can take my pictures. But you'll give me some, right? I'll have souvenirs (*lembranças*) of this, too?"

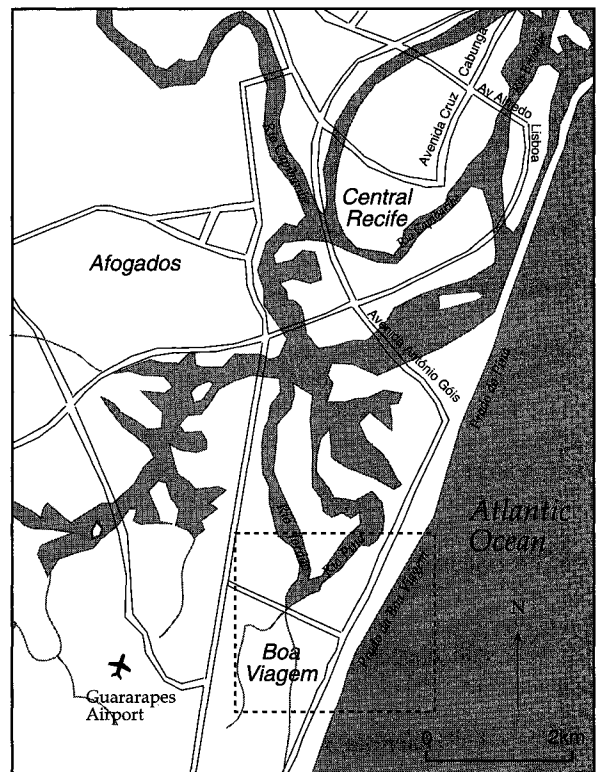
"Every mother needs pictures of her baby. But I'll give them to you after we're done working together. O.K.?"

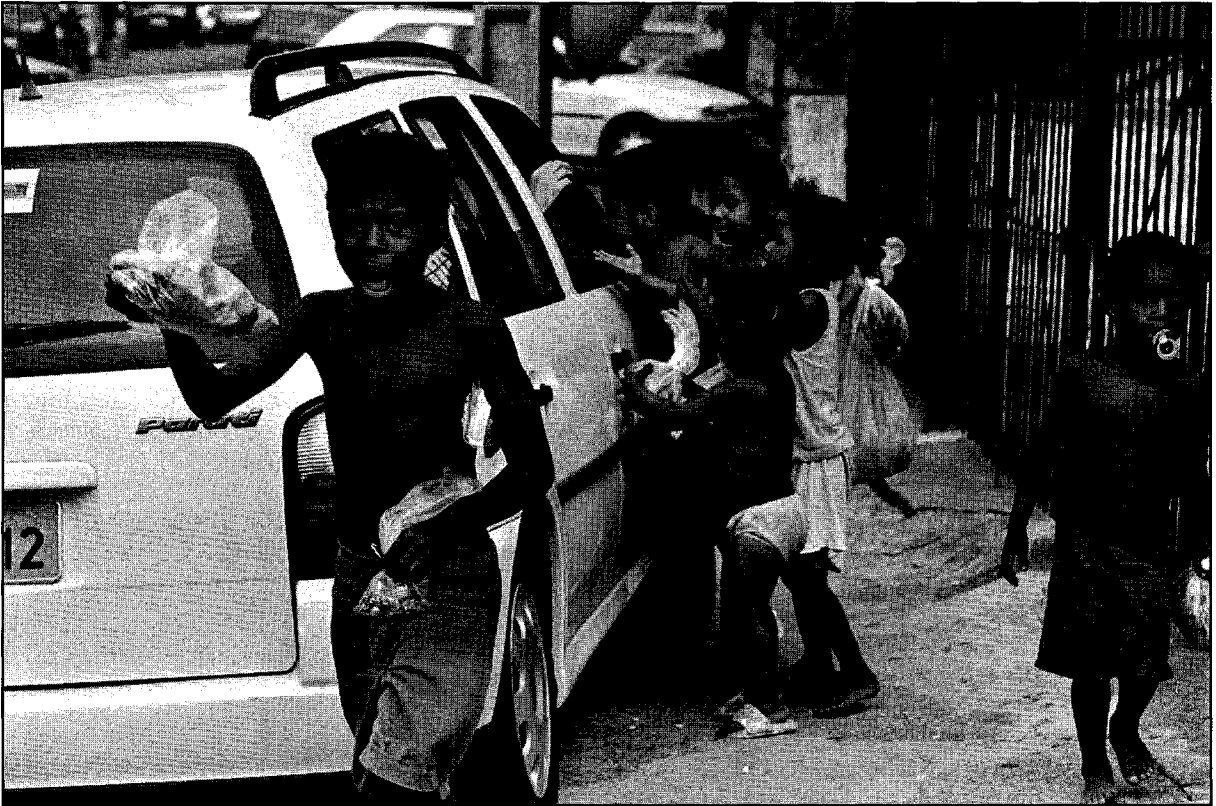
"O.K., *Tia* Susana."

"Just 'Susana'"

"O.K., Susana."

While we were talking, strung-out glue addicts and hustlers circled around us yelling to Andrea that I was there to exploit her. I would take her pictures and sell them. I would have her baby taken away. I would get rich. She should ask me for 1,000 *reais* just to talk with her! When they started pointing to my gear, caressing my arms and talking in creepy, belligerent tones I took it as my cue to slip out of the plaza and go home to scribble





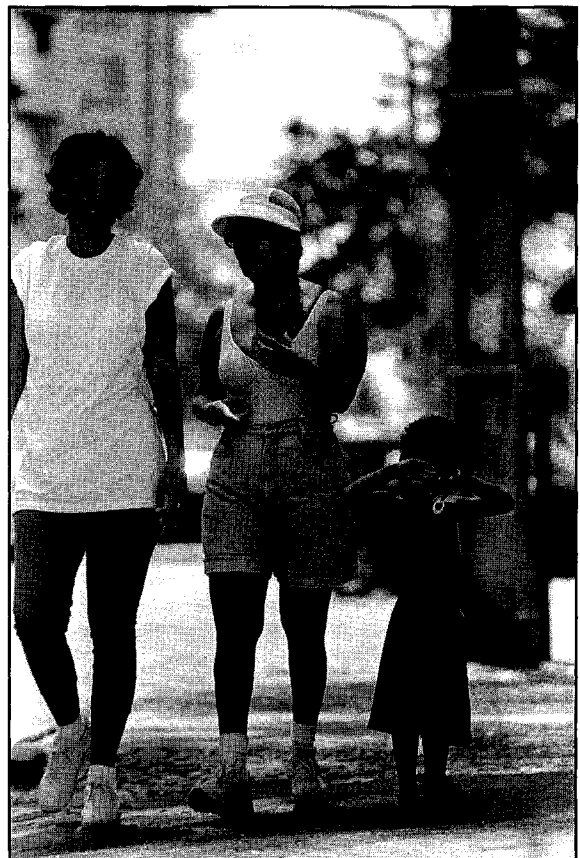
*(Above) Edivaldo runs back to his mother with bags of sweets donated by passing motorists while his brothers and sisters clamor for their own share of the take. Many times the only food the family consumed during the day was the junk food and sweets tossed to the kids. (Below) Rodrigo cries and rubs his eyes after an argument and subsequent temper-tantrum in the middle of the sidewalk as pedestrians pass by on the return from their morning walk on the boardwalk.*

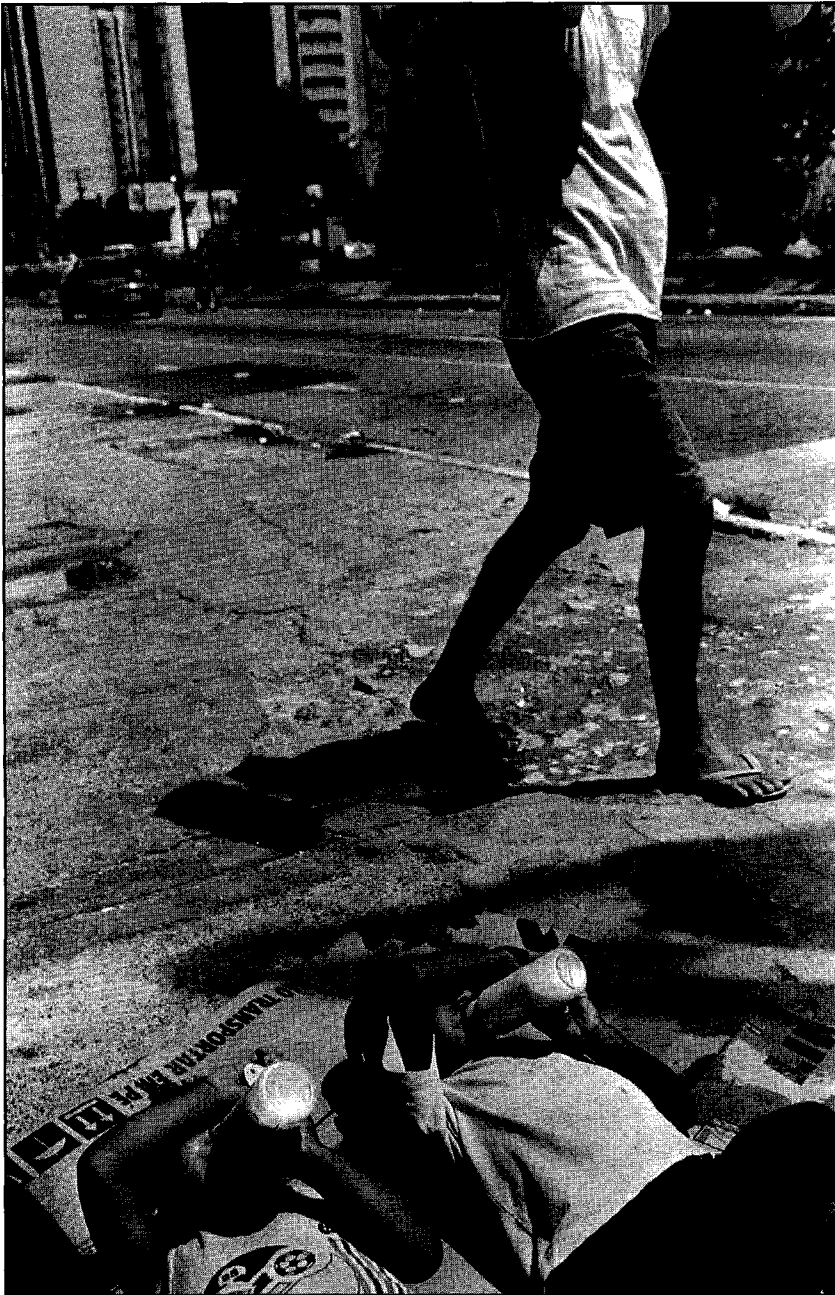
everything down and listen to my tapes.

I started a routine of visiting with Maria in the mornings and Andrea in the afternoons. Sometimes I'd beat Maria to her spot, but she would eventually appear, walking slowly through the busy streets carrying Isabel, 14 months, holding Marcelo, 3, by the hand and with Rodrigo, 4, and Vanessa clutching her T-shirt for security. Edivaldo, 10, Erivan, 9, and Monica, 8, would run ahead like puppies, wandering into little alleys or playing games along the way. Finally Maria would arrive on "her street" and settle herself about 15 yards from the traffic light.

Maria was 34. Her mother raised her and brothers in a rural area long since swallowed by Recife's expanding suburbs. Though she had attended school until the age of 10, Maria was barely literate. She recalled that one day a woman summoned her to work. It was an opportunity not to be refused. Her mother pulled her out of school. For two years Maria cooked, cleaned and cared for a family of five. She earned the equivalent of \$48 a month. At 13 she left her job to marry, and a year later had her first son. When Maria spoke about her first husband her face lit up. She said they had been poor but good together. Hunger had not ruled her life then.

Since a civil marriage in Brazil can be a bureaucratic undertaking requiring cash and patience (sometimes up





*Rodrigo, right, and Marcelo stretch out on cardboard scraps and drink their morning bottles of rice meal and powdered milk on the sidewalk of Severina's "alternative" corner, an intersection slightly closer to Severina's favela that she frequents when she is too tired to herd everyone across town.*

to six months) many at the lower end of the economic spectrum skip the legalities and appropriate the vocabulary. Consequently, eight years later when her husband was killed in the crossfire of a barroom gunfight, Maria had no claim to any survivor's benefits and was left to fend for four children. Luckily, her mother had helped her buy a tiny plot of land in a relatively new *favela*. Maria scraped together food and clothing for her children by begging, picking through garbage for re-salable items and relying on sporadic State milk-for-mothers programs.

It was during one of her garbage-hunting mornings

that she met her second husband, Valdo. Valdo was a *carroceiro*, a cart puller, living on the very edge of poverty himself. He too would dig through garbage to collect cardboard, load it on his wooden wagon and sell it to recycling middlemen at 2 cents per kilo. Maria told me this story as we sat sweltering on the sidewalk in the noon sun. Her face, already contorted into a one-eyed, Popeye-like grimace against the glare, tightened even more as she told the story of Valdo's heavy drinking, violence and eventual abandonment of her and the children. She had been alone for nearly a year.

"When I came here Isabel was just learning to walk. I was still carrying Marcelo. This is where my children are growing up." She shrugged, "It's better than sitting in my wooden shack, [which is] almost falling down. At least here [the children] can play outside. They have sunshine and sometimes we get enough to buy food. I don't know what else to do."

Maria's voice trailed off into mumbling. I decided to leave more questions for another day. I stood up and dusted off my pants, "Well Maria, I should be going. Do you mind if I spend the whole day with you tomorrow?"

"Maria! Maria!" the kids guffawed and pointed at me. "Maria! That's not her name!"

The woman I called Maria swatted at her children playfully and laughed along with them. She had invented an alias because I had made her nervous, "You came here asking questions about my children, taking pictures. You asked me if I knew

about Caroline's House [a city orphanage that I had heard was a few blocks away] and I thought you were going to take them from me."

I apologized over and over. Severina, formerly Maria, laughed, "I know you're good people. You won't hurt me. But a person has to be careful. It's said that the police take children. Many foreigners want Brazilian babies. But it's all good now, *Tia*. Come back tomorrow. Don't forget us."

In the weeks to come I learned about Severina's life



*(Above) Severina holds 14-month-old Isabel on her lap as the boys play at the edge of the sidewalk. (Right) Severina, center, jokes with other women that work the "alternative" corner.*

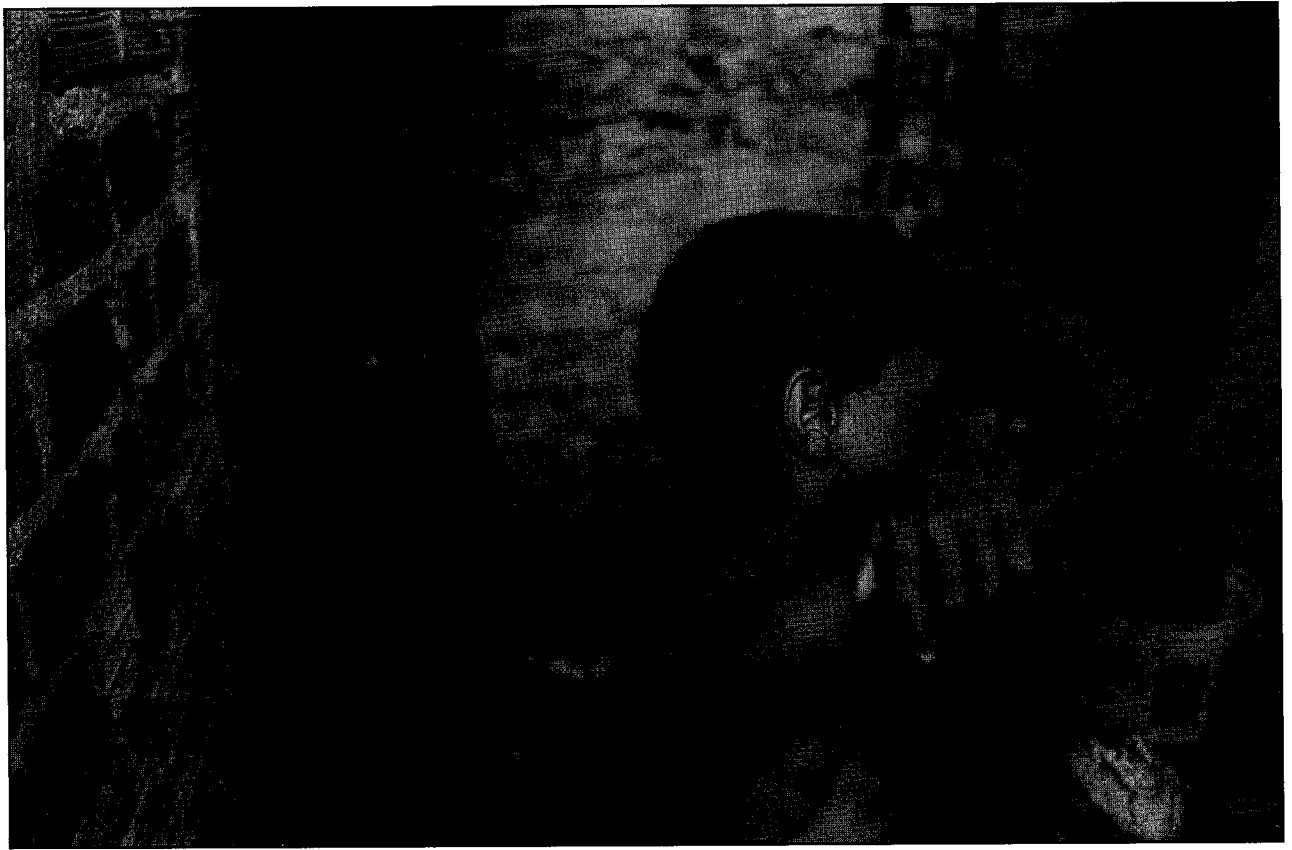


in much the same blundering ways: by accident, awkward questioning and primarily by keeping quiet and listening. With this first lesson on Severina's survival tactics, I headed down the street. At the sound of the kids yelling, "Tia! Tia!" I turned to see a giggling jumble of dusty limbs and worn clothing. "Don't forget us, Tia!"

I had agreed to meet Andrea at the plaza and walk with her to her father's house. It was her idea, and one I welcomed. She wanted me to meet her father and see that he was a good man. But for several afternoons I would arrive at the plaza and wait until sunset. Usually, as I was getting up to leave, one of the glue-sniffing kids

who had been staring at me for hours from across the street would shuffle over and announce that Andrea had left a message: she would not be coming today, but please meet her there tomorrow. I fell for that routine three days in a row. On the fourth day I decided to skip the plaza and head for home. That's exactly when Andrea appeared.

I approached her and let her know that I was annoyed by her lack of consideration and respect. She was both apologetic and surprised that I had bothered to show up every afternoon. It changed the way she looked at me in both positive and negative ways. She trusted me implic-



*(Above) Edivaldo, 10, sulks in the kitchen after being reprimanded by Severina. Since the return of Severina's second husband (Edivaldo's stepfather) the behavior of Edivaldo and Severina's three other children from her first marriage had become rebellious and recalcitrant. (Left) On the day of his return after a year-long absence, Valdo, left, Severina's second husband and the father of six of her children (five shown in photo) accuses Severina of humiliating him by taking his children to the street to beg. Severina initially refused to speak with Valdo because he had abandoned the family and left her with no other option.*



itly. While it was nice to have her so suddenly relaxed and open, it also meant she was prone to using me. Several times that afternoon she turned to me and said she'd "be right back" and skipped across the street or around the corner. I would be left awkwardly with Tais bundled on the dirty mattress under the bank's windows. From my baby-sitting position I watched as Andrea interacted with the rough crowd around the toilets, washed dirty diapers in a bucket and hustled pedestrians for small change — the exact aspects of her life

I wanted to start photographing. I was livid at being used but could not walk away from Tais and risk her being harmed.

The third time Andrea was about to dart away, I grabbed her by the arm and said we needed to talk before she pursued another free cigarette. I stressed that she needed to think of herself and Tais as if I weren't there. I was not there to make her life either easier or more difficult. So the next time she had to leave she needed to

think about Tais and not assume that I would mind the baby.

Andrea looked at me and interpreted my words to her liking, "You don't know anything about babies either, do you, Tia?"

I shook my head, "no."

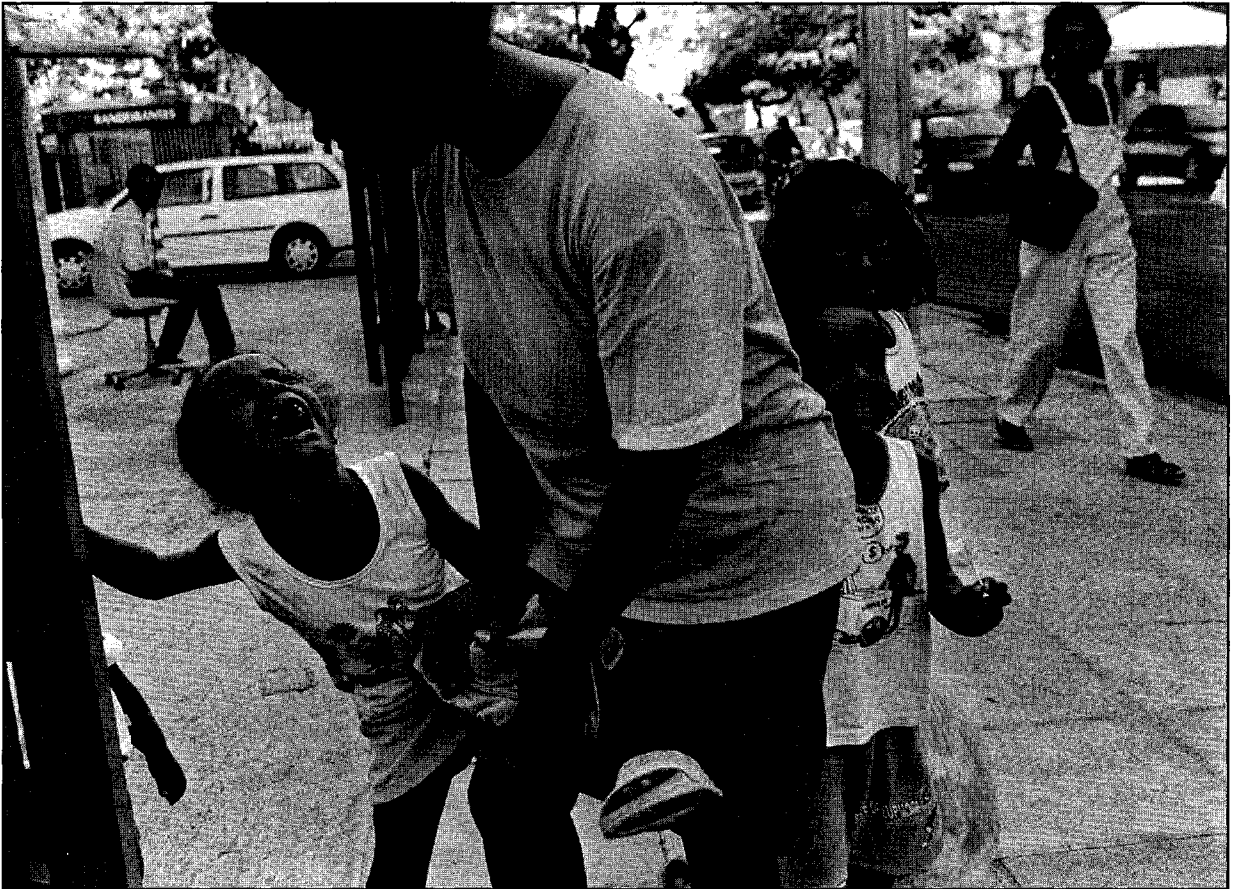
I had set limits and she accepted them. I wondered how many times that had happened: a person showing interest in her life, and challenging her to be responsible

for her actions. But Andrea was already on to something else. She glanced over my shoulder and spotted a potential target, a young man she knew frequented the bank.

She darted into action, "Hey Uncle, spare me a little change. Just ten cents for my baby. She's so small."

Her prey shook his head and swung his leg over his motorcycle.

"Well, Uncle, at least let me finish your smoke. You know how it is to be without a cigarette when you need



(Above) Vanessa screams in pain after cutting open her knee on a stone as Mônica and Rodrigo eye a familiar passerby with anticipation of a hand-out. The bulk of the offerings the kids received come from individuals who pass the corner routinely and give them used clothing, food, bottles of water and occasional spare change. (Right) The kids beg from passing rush-hour city buses. Occasionally, passenger tosses out pennies and dimes. Severina insists that she never forced her children to beg, but relies on the sight of a family of seven to tug at the consciences of strangers.





one, eh?" The young man chuckled and passed her the remains of his cigarette.

Andrea pulled Tais and the mattress away from the sun and started to change her diaper. The baby was suffering from dehydration and nearly constant diarrhea. Her heat rash had worsened. As Andrea tried to clean Tais, people stopped and peered over her shoulder. They "cluck-clucked" at the baby and asked Andrea questions. She answered the queries with respect (even when the questions were disrespectful) and listened attentively to advice offered. It was as if the passersby felt they had the right to know her story — to get the gritty details firsthand. Not a few took the opportunity to tell Andrea that she was a plague on society; she should be sterilized; she should take charge of her life for the sake of her baby. But when Andrea swore she was trying to be a good mother and followed up with a plea for help of any kind: a job, some formula, clothing or change, she was nearly always refused. The curious and righteous alike would beg off and wave goodbye. A few would make promises to bring food or disposable diapers the following day and Andrea would beam with relief.

When there was a promise made, Andrea never failed to show up. In a sense it was her particular business ethic. She considered a promise a contract (at least when made by another person to her). She knew she needed to be there if a *tia* had promised something. She would spend the afternoon pacing the length of the bank, begging from others, but with a vigilant eye scanning for the promised help. In time, even I was able to recognize the various people who passed the corner and quickly realized that many of those who said they would help Andrea had not forgotten her as she feared, but rather changed the streets they walked down.

Bit by bit I learned that Andrea, like Severina, had lied during the first days of our acquaintanceship. While her father did live out by the airport, and she did have many brothers and sisters, Andrea rarely visited and never lived with them. Instead, she and Tais were sleeping in a lean-to behind her boyfriend's mother's shack in a *favela* on the north side of town. Andrea was secretive about where she slept because the father of Tais and her new boyfriend hated each other. Since Tais' father never came around I failed to see the need for secrecy, but it mattered to Andrea.

She had many ghosts in her closet. To start with, she was not 23 as she first claimed, but only 19. She had another daughter who was four years old and whom she had given up to the city orphanage.

"Natalia was only five months old. She was always sick. I had no money and no place to take care of her. I did not know about babies. I took her to Caroline's House [the orphanage] and asked them to take care of her until I had a house. She's still there. I can see her every Tuesday. Next week I'll take Tais there and you can take a picture of them together, *Tia*. That will be nice," she said

optimistically. But by then I knew Andrea spoke in terms of wishes and desires rarely tied to reality.

"My boyfriend wants to adopt Tais as his own. We're going to get married *Tia*. He has a job parking cars [which means motioning to drivers as they park and then bumming spare change when they leave.]

I had to think quickly to sort out the half-truths and deceptions. Since she wasn't really spending every Sunday with her sick father, what did she do? She and her boyfriend and "mother-in-law" would get drunk on cheap grain alcohol. Tais would be forgotten until she cried. And when it came to Natalia, well, Andrea admitted she wasn't always very good about visiting her daughter. She had not been to Caroline's House in months.

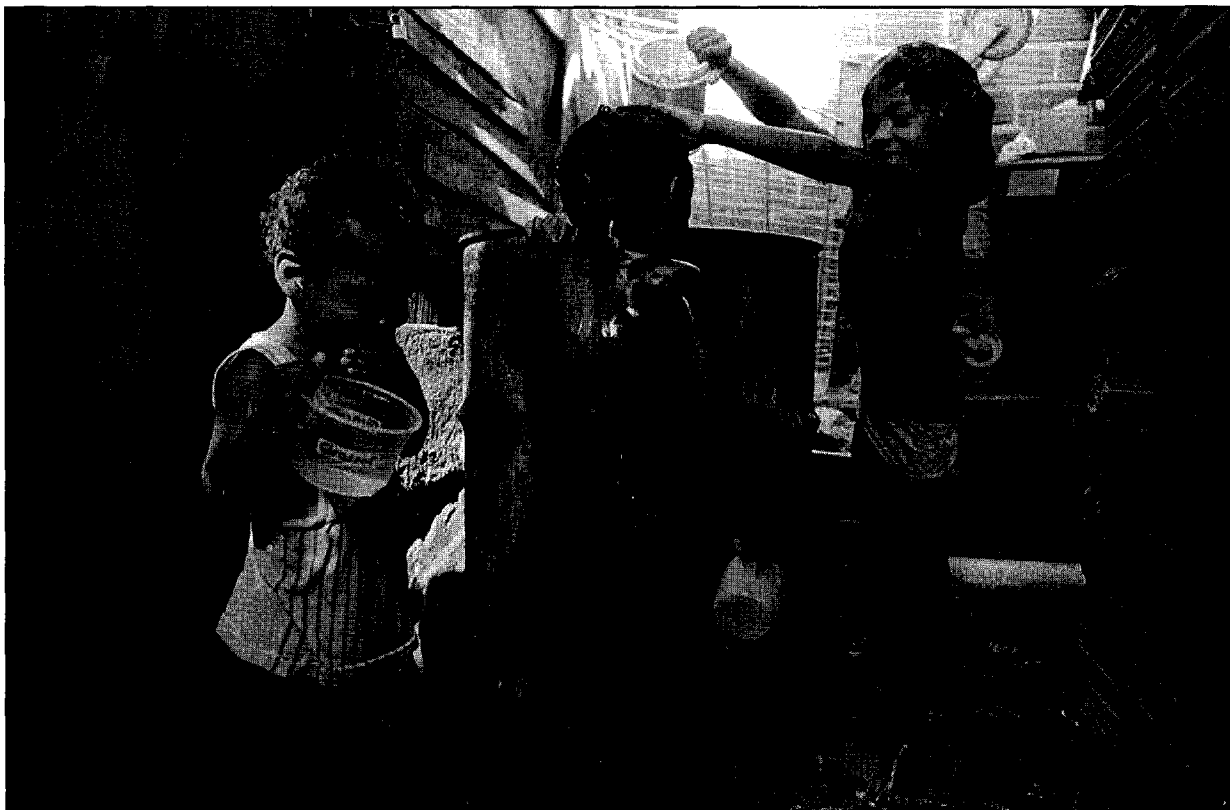
"Tais is sick, *Tia*. I did not want another baby. I tried to get rid of her. I made tea out of *quebra pedra* ["break rock", a very common toxic weed] and drank it many times to cause an abortion. I even went to the pharmacy and told them I needed an injection because I had the flu and they gave it to me. [Pharmacies in Brazil administer injections prescribed by doctors] I tried to end the pregnancy. That's why she's sick, *Tia*. Now I have to take care of her.

"And *Tia*, I need to tell you something." Andrea lowered her voice and looked sideways around us. "*Tia*, I think I'm pregnant. Look at my belly. It went down after the baby but now it's coming up again." She swore me to secrecy because of fear of a violent reaction by Tais' father and the other girls in the plaza who had not been able to conceive. "They're all jealous of me, *Tia*."

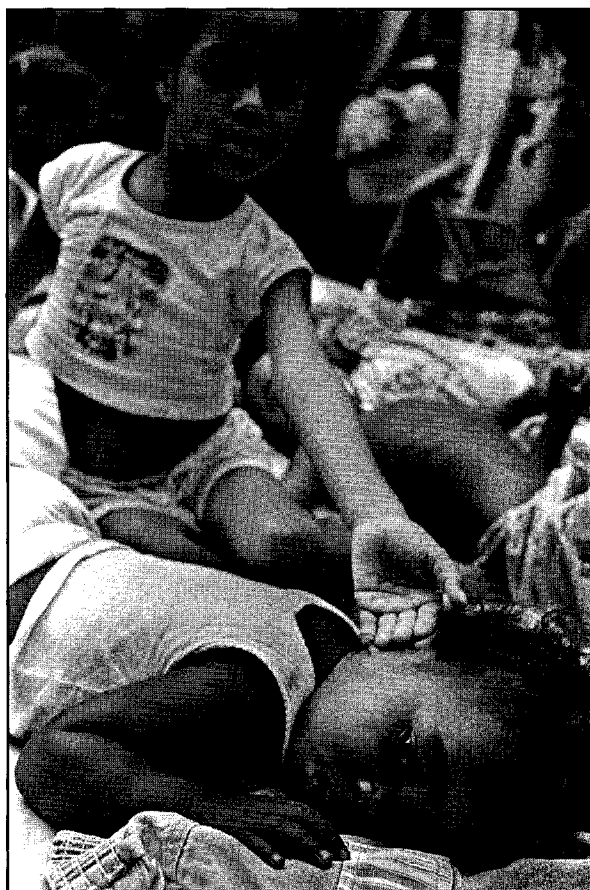
Andrea was in over her head with one daughter lost to the orphanage, another barely hanging on in the streets and a possible third on the way. She had arrived at this point with no real example of parenthood or family. Though she claimed she took to the streets because her mother died and her father had too many children to care for, she intimated that violence and *peessoas ruins* (bad people) had made the street the best option.

Andrea had spent the past 11 years surviving the streets. Her community consisted of other kids and young adults who lived on the streets to escape family poverty or violence. She had come up through the various stages of the street economy: begging at traffic lights, washing car windows, earning odd change by helping people carry groceries. But it was clear her main source of security had been abusive boyfriends and men to whom she prostituted herself. Her body continued to be a survival tool. With it she had secured a place to sleep for her and her baby. She gained odd favors from Tais' father by holding out the promise of reuniting, and begged for diapers and milk dressed as sexily as possible on an income of nothing.

Andrea lifted her shirt to show me a vertical scar running from her sternum to just below her bellybutton. It



*(Above) Mônica, 8, takes charge of bath time by dumping containers of water onto her brother Rodrigo in the cramped, muddy alleyway in front of the family shack in a Recife, Pernambuco favela. The family lives with no running water or sewerage. Water is turned on in the neighborhood every nine days and a neighbor lets Severina use her hose to fill an old oil drum. (Right) Mônica checks her baby sister Isabel for a fever in the early morning. Poor sanitary conditions compounded by a hearty rat population means the children are frequently ill with intestinal infections, worms or rat bites. The children sleep several to a mattress, all of which are rotting, wet and filled with rat urine and feces. (Below) Severina's children enjoy hard boiled eggs sold by a passing lunch vendor who lets Severina buy on credit.*





*(Above) Severina, in Betty Boop shirt, stands in line with four of her children to wait for vaccination shots at a local public clinic. The vaccination day was part of a national campaign to vaccinate children, which Severina learned about through city health workers who visited her favela. (Right) Severina digs through piles of clean clothing to find outfits for the children to wear to the vaccination clinic. All of the family's clothing are donations from the street.*



was a jagged, shiny line marring the pretty skin of her chocolate-colored belly. That, she said, was why did she not “go with any men” any more. A rendezvous at the airport had turned drunken and nearly deadly and landed Andrea in the hospital for several weeks.

Anytime I was at Andrea’s corner the characters from across the street would constantly watch us. When they wandered over to harass her or hustle me for change Andrea would yell at them to get away from her. Her fear was that if friends from her old life spent time around her the authorities would declare her negli-

gent and take Tais. She wanted to change her life but seemed incapable of breaking away from the plaza and the habits of the street — precisely because she had not left the street. She could not see other options.

But she was trying. One afternoon I came across Andrea at the grocery store puzzling over medicines a doctor at the free clinic had told her to buy for Tais. After a few minutes of squinting at the boxes, Andrea admitted she could not read and asked me to help her with the dosage directions. We walked to the corner where she had left Tais in the care of Galega. We read the instruc-

tions together and Andrea filled the various droppers.

It was a big moment for Andrea. Initially, she had resisted going to the clinic and acted as if going there would be the same as turning herself into the police. I pushed her to go and her response was that I should take Tais to the clinic. A baby would get better treatment if she had a white mother, she insisted. I had been close to exasperation about the situation and wondered if I needed to step in and do something for Tais. That's when I saw Andrea buying the medicine.

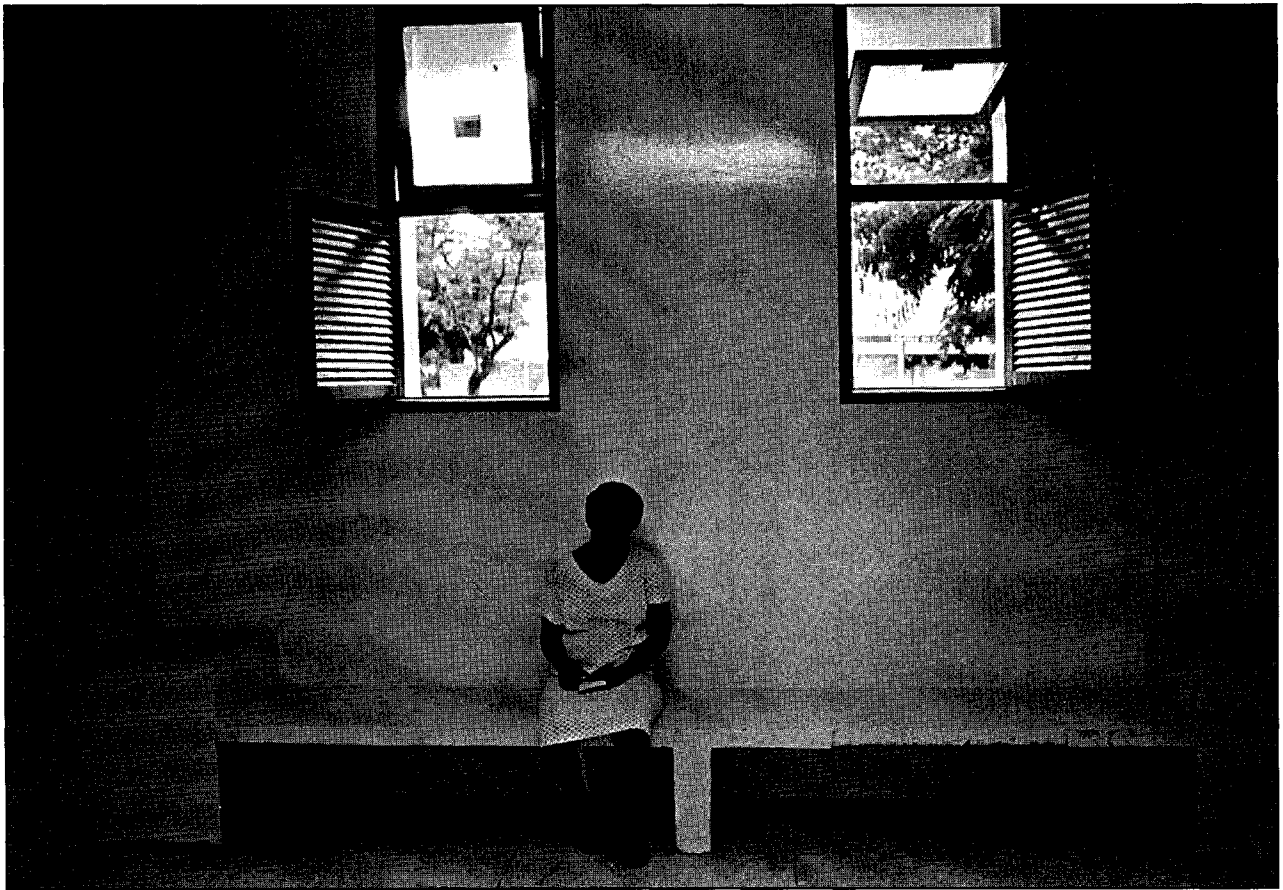
Andrea told me that earlier that day, she had awakened early and bathed herself and the baby in the women's bathroom. She had sat in the clinic waiting room with other mothers. To her surprise the doctor treated

her with respect, gave her advice and a list of medicines and sent her on her way. Andrea then "worked" very hard to scrounge up the money for antibiotics, Tylenol and vitamin drops (a total of about \$9.00). She was very pleased with herself as she parroted the cautions of the nurses: babies need a lot of sleep, always use clean water, etc. Andrea held Tais and for the first time sounded like a mother. She had glimpsed another world through the responsibility she was trying to accept.

Over the next few weeks Andrea came to the plaza less frequently. Since she did not admit to anyone where she lived I was unable to track her down and learn about the changes in her life. I became obsessed with finding her and would circle the edges of the plaza to catch a glimpse of her or Galega. I spent one rainy Saturday,

*(Below) Severina wakes up surrounded by five of her ten children. (Right) Erivan carries a bag of bottles and water as the family walks the two kilometers to their usual begging corner.*





*In a burst of initiative Severina decided to request updated copies of her documents in order to file for birth certificates for her six youngest children which would thereby enable her to enroll them in school. After two days of waiting in vain at the local police precinct for the document official to show up during his posted office hours, she gave up.*

Andrea's "most lucrative" day, hovering against the wall of a café nursing tea after tea and waiting to see if she would show up. Instead, the group of dealers, addicts and prostitutes she was trying to break away from invaded her usual space, set up cardboard beds and played cards. In the days that followed I kept passing by on the odd chance of seeing her.

At the same time, I continued my visits with Severina and her children. I think she thought I was a little nuts when she'd spot me sitting in the shade a few blocks away from her corner. I'd see her round a building — seven children in tow — and try to snap a few frames before the kids spotted me and began jumping up and down. She'd settle into her spot and begin the day. Edivaldo was always the one she would send up over the wall surrounding the empty lot. There she stored an old broom and would clean up the area a bit before sitting down.

Severina's network included a few women who passed regularly with food and toys. One elderly woman stopped by every few weeks with new dresses for the girls and shorts for the boys. I kept prodding Severina to learn if she had a family-support network or neighbors who chipped in beyond giving her water. I could not imagine that she lived solely off what she collected at the

corner. I asked if she was receiving any food or milk aid from the city or state. Nothing. Was an area church working in the neighborhood? Not one.

The kids, in their own right, knew they could work the public. Sometimes they liked to do it, sometimes not. Some days they just wanted to play and goof around — oblivious to their hunger or the notion that at day's end there would be nothing to eat. At other times it felt like they, especially Monica and Erivan, really wanted to alleviate their mother's worry. They would get upset if too much time passed without any handouts.

It was evident that Severina's mode of operation was to let the kids do the providing. Often the kids just hung around in the rare slices of shade trying to survive the heat. Many times their antics of turning an old box or a stick into an intricate game were enough to call the attention of passersby. Motorists and passengers would motion the children over to vehicle windows and hand out partially eaten lunches, spare change or, on rare occasions, bags of clothing and dry milk.

Severina counted on the sight of one mother with seven children to spur strangers to help. She swore to me that she did not insist that children beg, but I couldn't



*(Above) Andrea, 19 years old and homeless, begs for food and money for her 3-month-old daughter, Tais. Andrea had her first daughter at 15 and gave her up to the local state orphanage. With Tais, Andrea wanted to be a better mother; however, after 11 years of life on the streets motherhood was proving to be an overwhelming responsibility. (Left) Andrea tries to comfort a feverish Tais.*



*Failing to cajole spare change from a passerby, Andrea bums the remainder of his cigarette.*

imagine that she had not passed a few desperate days when the spare change they could hustle made a big difference. I assumed that her insistence on this point was a lingering effect of her initial mistrust of me — she did not want me to think she was exploiting her children.

The days passed. Isabel cut more teeth and learned to run. Marcelo and Rodrigo fought over anything that could be a toy. Monica and Erivan hustled cars mostly out of boredom and sibling competition, though Monica enjoyed the game of charming change out of pockets. She would run back to Severina and ask her to count the day's total. Vanessa tried to emulate her sister's behavior but tired easily and often spent hours lying on the hot sidewalk with her head in Severina's lap. Edivaldo floated between begging and wandering off on his own mini-adventures, which consisted mainly of kicking and throwing rocks. Day after day the routine was the same. Severina confessed that on some days they existed on watered-down coffee and sweets tossed to the children.

One day Erivan and Edivaldo showed up with a bottle of dirty water and old window squeegees with hollow handles that held soap. The boys had found them tossed in the garbage and cajoled Severina into buying liquid soap so they could wash car windows. "They feel they are too old to beg and people [in the cars] give more to young children." Said Severina. She pulled out a box of gum packets, "They're going to sell gum, too, but yesterday they just ate the gum and didn't sell anything."

The boys had become workers and Severina pushed

them to wash windows and sell gum because she had risked spending money on the supplies. Within a few days the squeegees had been broken and the gum chewed. The boys went back to just begging and goofing around.

A week after we met, Severina invited me to visit her house. The following morning I stood in the shade of a gas station and waited, and waited, and waited. Just as I was giving up, Edivaldo and Erivan appeared on the horizon, one pedaling and the other riding the handlebars of an old bike. They wove recklessly through traffic. We tied the bags of eggs, bread, cheese, ham and yogurt I had brought to the handlebars of the bike and set off for home. Home was about two kilometers away, longer than I had expected them to be permitted to ride alone.

Many of my ideas about the fragility of childhood have been challenged in the last year, as have notions of motherhood springing from innate knowledge. Concepts of who is the caretaker in a family have been turned on their heads. There is a certain level of poverty, such as Andrea's and Severina's, that skews the parent-child relationship well off the idea of the norm of the United States. Not realizing this can make it very easy to condemn parents and claim child exploitation.

In the poorer families I've met here everyone has to work, children included. In some cases this may mean that the eldest girl is pulled from school (or never sent) in order to care for the younger children, cook and clean the house while the parents earn what they can outside



the home. In other families the children may attend school, but spend hours every day selling gum or polishing shoes. In families such as Severina's, the kids are the only income generators. This situation arises for a variety of reasons, which in the minds of the parents, many of whom are often illiterate and without job skills, boil down to no other option.

This need for the children to work, to assume responsibility, also urges them on to early independence. They become caretakers themselves at very young ages. They still exhibit childlike responses like fighting over nothing, getting easily offended and running to adults for arbitration and defense. But they are also adept at haggling with vendors, capable of wandering cities, streets and unfamiliar areas alone and running a household — right down to wiping runny noses and meting out punishments to younger siblings.

An overly romanticized view of their lives would look like the Adventures of Tom Sawyer — adventuring and inventing, turning everyday hustle and bustle into games. To a certain extent these kids do what they want and often relish the freedom their "work" gives them.



*(Top) Andrea's begging often elicited unwanted lectures from complete strangers. She would politely tolerate the lectures, often humiliating, in hopes of a few cents or a promise of help for her baby. (Above) Andrea holds Tais in the shade of the bank building. Since the age of eight, Andrea has made her way alone on the streets, surviving through odd jobs, begging and prostitution near the Plaza of Boa Viagem. With the arrival of Tais she tried to distance herself from her old life but moved only as far away as the bank across the street.*





*(Above) Andrea drags Tais and the moldy mattress into the shade of the bank overhang. (Right) Andrea drops liquid vitamins into Tais's mouth after finally taking the sick baby to the neighborhood clinic next door to the bank. Her fears that the doctors would proclaim her an unfit mother and confiscate Tais were soothed when she was treated with understanding and respect.*

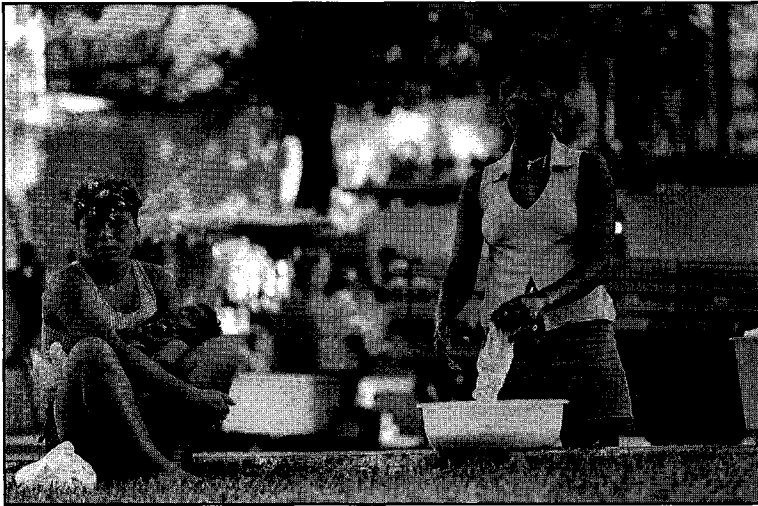


But the price they pay is ridiculously high. By the time kids reach the early teens, they've cloaked themselves in a streetwise view of the world and a false bravado that camouflages the absence of a sense of security, a healthy family life and education. By their late teens many are already parents themselves, and raise their children according to the model of their own youth.

Walking along with Erivan and Edivaldo I watched them switch from children to young adults. Much more streetwise than I, they could point out undercover police, hustlers and places to get good deals on food. But they also delighted in silly "knock-knock" jokes I trans-

lated, and bickered over who got to ride the bike.

I was expecting Severina's house to be like other *favela* homes I had visited: simple, wooden with rickety windows and dirt floors. As we turned down a pathway I noticed most of the homes were brick and mortar. Judged by the standards of a *favela* economy, it seemed a fairly prosperous neighborhood. The first five houses we passed had people outside loading up fruit-and-vegetable wagons, and stacking dry goods into display pyramids in the windows of living-room stores. We walked farther back to a courtyard enclosed with a fire-engine-red metal gate and covered with corrugated fiberglass. Three front



*(Above) A friendly woman from neighborhood plays with Tais as Andrea dresses her. Andrea was able to secure sporadic food and diapers for her baby from women who lived in the surrounding middle-class area and knew Tais and Andrea by sight. (Left) Galega, left, holds Tais as Andrea washes dirty diapers in a bucket on the sidewalk near the bank.*

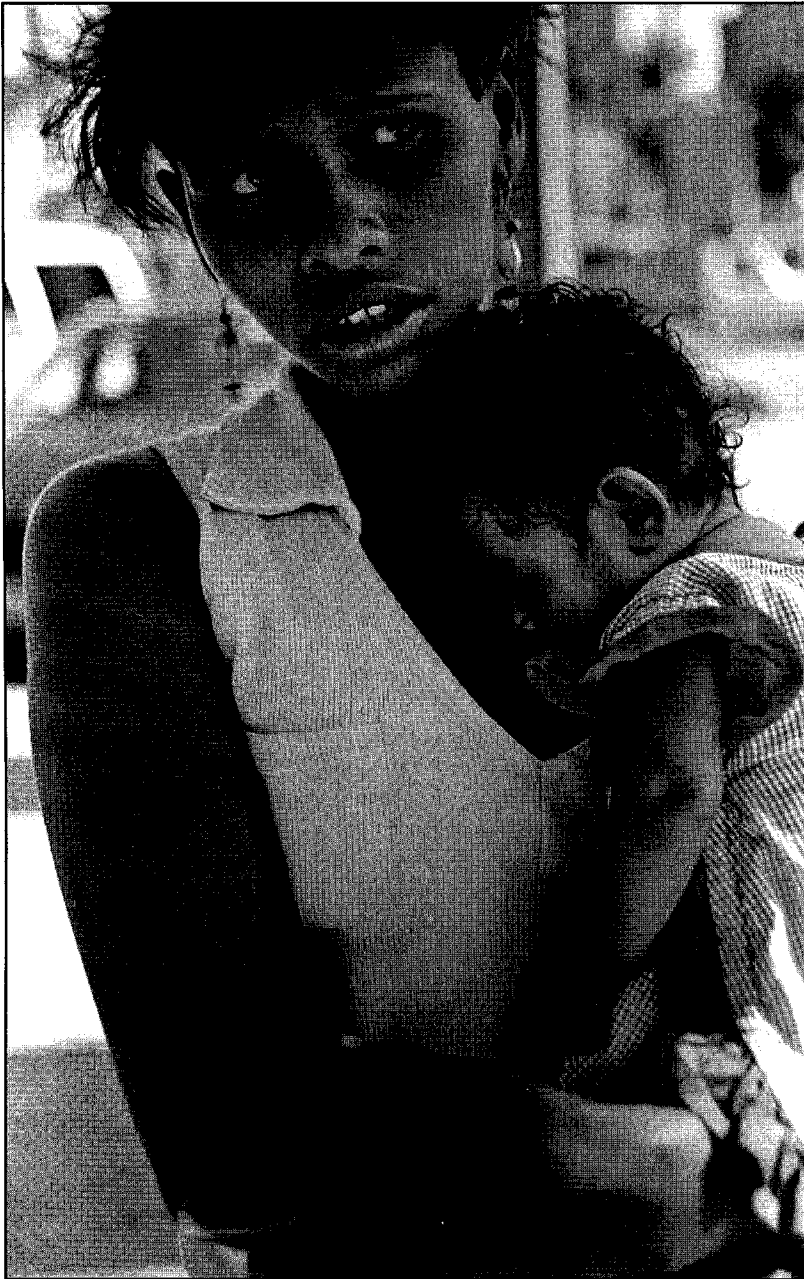
doors opened from shadowy interiors into the common courtyard. I thought one of these might be Severina's but the boys wiggled their way through a cluster of coffee-sipping men, nursing mothers and groggy toddlers and rounded the corner to the left. I followed them along a shoulder-wide alley strung with empty clotheslines and sloping slightly downhill. The end of the pathway was crammed with an old oil drum holding slimy water, bits of construction material and a shopping cart filled with dirty laundry.

Erivan and Edivaldo slipped between the oil drum and a jagged brick wall. They disappeared. I found myself staring at three low doorways of a shack pieced together out of scrap wood, strips of metal and thick plas-

tic. Severina emerged from the far-left door.

"Enter, Susana, Enter!" she smiled and pawed the air with her palm down in the Brazilian sign of beckoning. She stepped back into darkness. I ducked my head and followed her. The first room was a tiny makeshift kitchen with soot-covered walls and a rusty vegetable rack improvised into a wood stove propped in the corner. A pot of gummy coffee bubbled away. The heat seared the sweat off my face and the smoke stung my eyes. In the darkness of the room I nearly tripped over Vanessa who was spying on me from the edge of the next door.

Behind the kitchen was a room barely the size of a double mattress on the floor, with boards rigged above it



*Panicked because she had not "earned" any change, food or diapers that day for Tais, Andrea paced the length of the bank with the sick baby in her arms. A few days later bank employees called the police and social services when Andrea got into a violent argument with other street kids. Police arrived and took possession of Tais and put her in the care of the juvenile judge who placed her indefinitely in the local orphanage Andrea's elder daughter has been for the past four years.*

to form a twin bed. A boy was sleeping there that I had never seen before. I guessed it was 14-year-old Ademar. On the corner of the mattress was a black-and-white television glowing a snowy, blurry picture. Erivan and Edivaldo had plopped down inches away from the screen to watch cartoons.

Vanessa took my hand and pulled me down a corridor so narrow I could pass only by walking sideways. At the end it opened to a windowless room piled high with

old clothing, discarded boxes and plastic bags. In one corner Monica, Marcelo and Rodrigo lay sleeping on a moldy piece of foam. Isabel stood on another bed. She smiled and giggled at me as Severina tugged a sweaty shirt over her head and replaced it with a cotton dress. Severina then rummaged through plastic bags and came out with a pair of little white sandals she fastened to Isabel's feet. Isabel delighted in her shoes and lay back with her feet in the air, clicking her heels together and laughing.

"Are you seeing how we live?" she asked over her shoulder. "This is everything in the world that is mine."

I nodded and tried to hide my shock by turning my gaze to a little shelf that held a broken clock radio and a broken imitation-Hummel figurine of a boy playing with a puppy. Because of Severina's upbeat personality and resilience I had not expected her living conditions to be so horrid. My eye followed the wires up to the single light bulb lighting the room and to the roof filled with holes. "Does the rain come in here?" I asked, just to say something.

"It comes in, but the worst is the water that runs from my neighbors' houses into mine. The water fills the house. It comes up to here" — she made a chopping motion to just below her knee — "Higher than Isabel!"

I looked down at the floor. It was filled with garbage, broken toys, crushed cookies and rat turds.

"Rats? Severina? You have a big problem with rats?"

"They're everywhere. The children are afraid at night because they get bitten while they sleep."

I had taken all that I could. While talking with Severina I was overwhelmed by the stench of raw sewage and the rot of something long-since dead. I had tried to ignore it because she did. But I had reached my limit and excused myself. Vanessa followed me outside hovering shyly against the walls and smiling at me. I asked her where she played. She shrugged. I understood why Severina preferred to take the kids to the streets.

Severina's house has no plumbing. Every nine to ten

days city water flows, and a neighbor on the other side of the brick wall shoves a hose through a little hole for Severina to fill up the oil drum. From the drum Severina takes the water she needs to wash clothing and the dirty diapers she stores in plastic bags. The kids bathe by dumping cups of water over their heads. Severina is more discreet and bathes in her clothes, pouring cups of water into her shirt and pants.

There is no toilet. And because the house is hemmed in on all sides by neighboring brick walls, the kids pee in the dirt area between the oil drum and the kitchen door. Those out of diapers defecate on scraps of paper and toss them into the alleyway or, if there's one around, into a plastic bag to be tossed into a designated garbage area the city collects from daily.

It was hard to understand why the family was so reckless about their own living space. It seemed to me that throwing feces, garbage and old food on the ground made living there worse. They could control that part of their lives, at least. I had puzzled over the destructive tendencies of the kids, their wastefulness and Severina's complacency about their behavior. It was as if they had achieved a life of immaterial values: things and physical surroundings did not matter. What value are things if you have none? Whether on the streets or at home, if the kids were handed a roll of cookies or a bag of chips it

was seen as much something to play with as to eat.

When Severina let the kids get a lunch from a man who passed every afternoon on a bicycle laden with coolers of sandwiches, sodas and boiled eggs, more than half the food ended up tossed aside, squished into amusing globs by little fingers or thrown in food fights. Severina never seemed agitated by this, though her tab with the vendor kept mounting.

In the time I was visiting Severina's family, several kittens and puppies showed up. The kids, particularly the five younger ones, would play with and harass the animals to exhaustion. There were no limits to what they could do to the critters. It was as if they could not understand that the kittens and puppies were beings, too. I tried sitting with them and explaining that a kitten was a baby and very fragile and could not take being tossed in the air and stepped on. They stared at me in silence and when I set the shivering kitten by the stove they left it alone only out of fear of my response. The next day the kitten was dead and gone. They went through three more kittens and two puppies in the subsequent three months.

The point was that the kids had nothing — no toys, no food. In some respects Severina spoiled her kids. I never heard her lose her temper or raise her voice with them outside of settling arguments. She seemed to in-



*Rosa screams and clutches her ears against the confusion of playtime at Criança Feliz, a non-profit program designed to give children in one of Recife's most violent neighborhoods constructive and safe playtime during non-school hours.*



*Two boys in the 4-7-year-old morning session use free-play time to imitate the behavior of police, gang members and drug dealers in their neighborhood. The violent version of “cops and robbers” was the children’s favorite pastime in the first few weeks of Criança Feliz’ program. The kids demonstrated an uncanny ability to turn any toy into an imitation weapon.*

dulge the children perhaps out of a sense knowing they had nothing else.

Or was it that she did not know how to discipline and control them? I could never tell. She had a lot of patience and certainly enjoyed their antics. She enjoyed being a mother. Aside from her shack, her children were all she had. In a certain sense, Severina was of the same mentality as her children. The idea was to enjoy the moment and not worry about the next day. Trying to change things was overwhelming. Just as a little old lady handed them a chicken and new underwear today, another would pass by tomorrow.

The kids seemed most vulnerable one morning when I arrived and the neighborhood was abuzz about a little girl who had died the afternoon before. The girl was a friend of Erivan and Edivaldo’s. They had shared their bike with her on occasion. The girl had argued with her drunken mother and darted away to escape a beating. The mother pursued, and in one evasive move, the girl strayed too far from the dirt path and was hit by a car. She died instantly. Witnesses said the mother turned away from the body saying, “Good. One less to feed.” Neighbors had to pull the girl’s body from the street.

Severina’s children were affected by the death. They

thought the mother was wrong — wrong to beat the girl, wrong to chase her, wrong to leave her body in the street and wrong to be glad to be rid of her own daughter. It was hard to watch the kids dealing with the death of their friend, but reassuring to know they valued life and had limits to their own random destructiveness.

One morning as I was walking with Severina to her usual site we rounded the corner and nearly plowed into a wiry, dark man carrying two plastic bags. Severina pulled up short. They exchanged a few sharp words. The kids looked a little confused. But then we kept walking. I asked Severina who he was.

“My husband, Valdo” she snarled.

“Your husband? Their father?”

“Yes. But I don’t want him back. I don’t want him in the house. Life worsens when he’s around, drunk.”

We kept walking. At the next intersection Valdo reappeared. They argued about what was whose fault. I watched the kids watching their parents. Their eyes were glued to Valdo, but they hovered around Severina. I kept making pictures and Valdo turned his irritation on me. Severina defended me and told Valdo to get lost. We con-



*(Above) Unable to interact peacefully and without physical violence, 8-year-old Tati retreats to a corner of the Criança Feliz play area and covers herself with cardboard. (Left) Tati wrenches the head of a classmate as a little boy watches with a “hands-off” attitude. Tati’s violence was a continual disturbance to the morning session and one of the primary challenges to the staff. In the initial weeks of the program the children showed signs of being incapable of resolving even the smallest of issues without violence.*

tinued down the street. Valdo skulked behind us.

At her corner, Severina settled in as usual. Valdo approached and told her she was a big embarrassment to him — bringing his children to a street corner to beg! At that point Severina lit into him saying he was a good-for-nothing drunk, an abuser who had abandoned her with nine children to feed. (She included her Ademar, 14, and Valdette, 16 in the count, but left out Marconi, 20.) “What did you want me to do? Wait for you to bring home money and food? That was months ago! You’ve been living with your mother and forgetting your own children! Get out of here!”

But Valdo sat on the curb and pulled Rodrigo into his arms. The kids were glad to have him back, I think. The exception was Edivaldo who apparently had no ten-

der feelings for his stepfather and disappeared around the corner. The afternoon progressed with Severina and Valdo seated six feet from one another hurling verbal barbs over the heads of the children, who lounged from lap to lap.

A few days later I packed up leftovers and some fresh fruit and bread and trekked over to Severina’s to see how she was doing. It had been several days since she had shown up at the corner, and I was worried. When I rounded the corner to head down her alley everything was different. Things had been rearranged so there was more space. Clean, wet laundry hung everywhere. The oil drum was filled with relatively clear water. All three wooden doors were open, revealing first the tiny room lived in by Marconi and his expectant wife, Juliana, and a second little room with a mattress and the television.

The kids were slouched on the mattress watching a morning children's show.

Inside the kitchen a fire blazed with a big pot of eggs frying on top. The floors were swept clean. I peeked around the corner and called out to Severina. She called back for me to enter.

I found her in the rear bedroom combing out Monica and Vanessa's hair as Valdo shifted piles of clothing from wall to wall. I commented that the place looked good and earned a dirty look from Severina. Valdo responded that it was a good thing he had returned to clean up Severina's mess. They started arguing and I slipped out to the front.

Severina followed me, commenting that life was better when Valdo wasn't around, drinking and fighting with her and the children from her first marriage. She wanted him to leave but couldn't force him since he was the children's father. She sighed and said he'd joined an evan-

gelical church, and at least for the moment was off alcohol and pulling in a little money with odd jobs. Valdo glared at her from the kitchen doorway.

Severina's biggest concern was that since Valdo's return Ademar, 14, and Valeria, 16, had not returned home. Ademar preferred to sleep in the streets rather than be around his stepfather. Valeria lived with a friend during the week "working on the beach" (a common euphemism for prostitution) and returning on weekends to sleep and bring her mother a little money. With Valdo in the house she did not return at all. To boot, Marconi, Severina's eldest, had lost his job watching cars at night for a local business because of "people who wanted to hurt him." Severina had a sense, and rightly so, that she was losing her three oldest children to the same streets she used to survive.

While all of these events and actions upset her, Severina remained passive. Everybody did their own thing and Severina kept to her routine of taking the chil-

*(Below) An important part of the daily routine at Crainça Feliz is teaching kids how to relax, deal with their feelings and talk about their surroundings. Here the afternoon-session older kids stretch out together on the floor and listen to calming music. (Right) One of the educators gently massages the temples of one of the kids during the relaxation session.*



dren out to the corner. The only real change brought about by Valdo's return was that he would agree to baby-sit while she went to do errands. One morning Severina announced that she would be going to get a new copy of her national-identity card in order to go to the various public hospitals her children had been born in and request copies of their birth certificates. Birth certificates in hand would enable Severina to enroll the children in elementary school and community programs. She motioned me to the back bedroom and crawled onto the foam bed and pulled a roll of plastic bags from the rafters. She peeled away layers of plastic to reveal a wad of old documents that she handed to me and asked me to tell her which one had her name on it.

We walked to the local police district headquarters. There we were directed to wait in a cinderblock room. We waited for three hours before the same lady who had told us to wait announced that the identity-card service would not open that day, and would we kindly leave so they could use the room for something else? Severina was deflated but resolved to return the next day. Again she waited for hours only to be told the man who ran the office "was detained on business." She gave up.

But when a city health worker came by to urge everyone to get their children's vaccines updated Severina paid attention and agreed to go. Vaccine day arrived and I found Severina rushing around and ripping through bags to find clean clothing. When the turmoil was over Monica, Vanessa, Rodrigo, Marcelo and Isabel were spit-shined and in their best clothing. Down the street we tromped, Severina clutching vaccination records she could not read. Outside the clinic Severina asked me if I would take the kids through, since I could read which name went with which child. She did not want to be humiliated by the nurses in front of others. Instead, I drew little cartoons of each child on their records and pushed her into line.

What struck me was how eagerly Severina took initiative when a little help was extended to her. It was no different when people on the street showed kindness. She glowed and talked with them, answering any question asked. She would remember names and ask after family members. Standing with Isabel on her hip and chatting with passersby, Severina seemed like any other mother. But then the visitor would move on and Severina would hunker back down on her scrap of cardboard.

Equally impressive was Severina's inability to think and act beyond the daily limits of her life. Her children, her poverty, her lack of a real support network or interaction with social services combined with the history of her life to create a black hole from which she could not see. Instead, her strategy was to protect what she had.

Indeed, Severina put up with a lot to gain the little she had. My presence did not help matters. I was a lightning rod for those who wanted to get something off their

chest. At first I was caught off-guard by the sudden yelling and finger wagging. I would turn around to see a face contorted in indignation declaring that I was "ruining Brazil's reputation abroad by taking pictures of such filth!" As in the case of Andrea in the plaza, Severina was warned that I would take her picture and become a millionaire off it — only in this case it wasn't druggies and prostitutes doing the warning, but sour-faced ladies.

Still others would approach me and begin speaking as if we were just picking up the thread of an old conversation, assuming I agreed with them, "It really is humiliating to have these people in the streets," said one. "They just don't know how to control themselves. Seven children! She should stop having babies and get a job."

Severina would sit silently, absorbing the bitter invectives and staring in the opposite direction. When I tried to get people to talk to her directly, they would wave their hand in disgust and walk away. It was an embarrassing situation for both of us. I felt hurt for Severina every time she was treated like an inanimate object and labeled a problem. And, I was angered at being painted as a journalist-profiteer, or co-opted into a racist and elitist line of thought.

A third group was represented most vividly by a man who in his urgency to talk with me nearly ran over Marcelo and Isabel with his Volkswagen. He jumped out and introduced himself as the coordinator of a major church organization that mobilized neighborhoods to help poor families with shelter, food and employment issues. Would I, being from the well-endowed United States, like to work for his organization? Surely I would bring mountains of money into the operation? Would not my organization's money be better spent on charitable donations than having me wasting film in the streets? I declined but introduced him to Severina, gave a brief description of her situation and asked him to help her. He nodded said he would do everything in his power to help her and then drove off, never to be seen again.

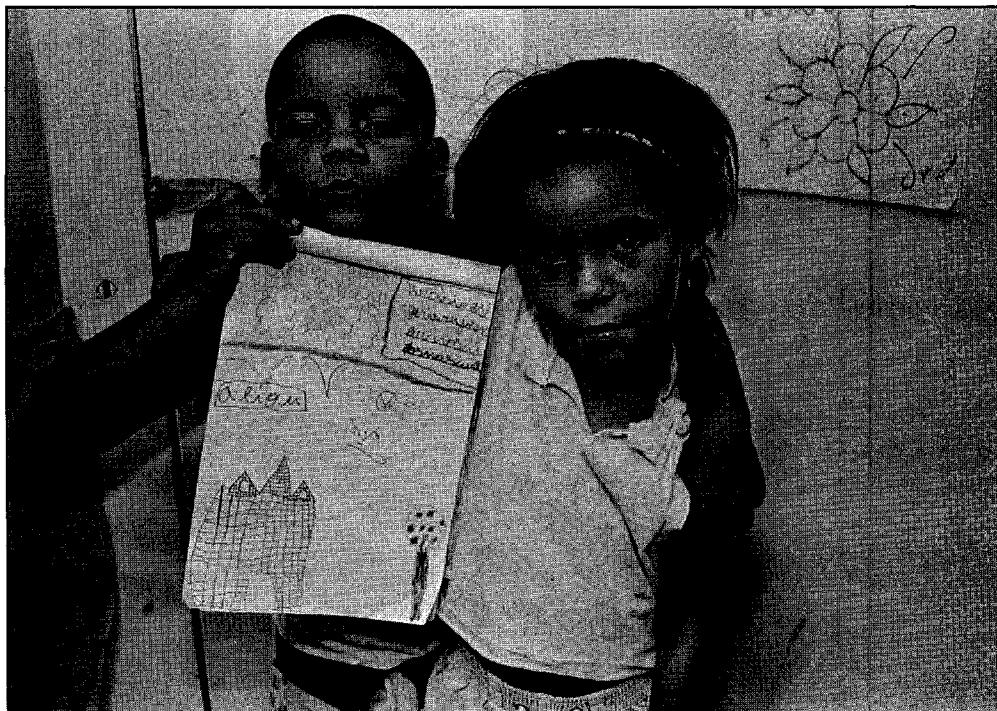
It was clear that my presence in the streets with Severina and Andrea was touching raw nerves. I was tapping into what I've come to regard as a collective guilt Brazilians feel about those with less. My photography threatened to create another portrait of Brazilian inequity. I would embarrass a country that wanted badly to be accepted as "first-world." And worse, I was a challenge to those who made empty promises to help and then disappeared. How could they, in front of a *gringa*, no less, not respond to the dire needs of a fellow Brazilian? Sadly, I think many hollow promises were made for the benefit of my ears, or out of a sense of guilt.

\* \* \*

I had unexpectedly backed into looking at the lives of mothers and children on the streets through visits to a program designed to relieve family economic pressure



(Right) A youngster embraces his sister as he proudly displays the dream castle he plans to build for his mother when he grows up. Art therapy, theater, dance and singing were some of the techniques used to get the children talking about their lives and dreams. (Below) Several months in to the program the children had adapted to new rules and learned new behaviors. They had learned to play hard, but fair. Once-rare vocabulary terms such as "please" and "I'm sorry" had become habit.



and get kids off the streets and into a learning environment. The program, *Criança Feliz* (Happy Child) was run under the umbrella organization of the *Coletivo Mulher Vida* (Women's Life Collective), one of the first organizations with which I made contact in Recife. I checked out the program mainly because it was only 20 minutes from our apartment and I still had an open calendar.

It turned out that my first day of visiting was only the second day of the program. I arrived to see 30 hyperactive four-to-ten-year-olds running around the covered patio of the program house. Four social workers and the cook were trying in vain to get the children to stop throwing things at each other. Chairs were flying. Fights broke out in every corner. It was overload. The kids looked both terrified and euphoric. I kept close to one wall and watched in amazement at the brutality in their actions.

Later it was explained that these children were from

families (mostly single-parent) that lived in the *favela* neighborhood of Coque (coke, the mineral). Coque crowds against the Capibaribe River and spreads to the highway overpass and subway/bus station. It's known as the "hottest" part of town and dangerous to all — resident or visitor. The goal of the program was to target mothers living so close to the edge that the only option they had was to take their children to street corners to "work."

To get into the five-day-a-week program the mothers had to promise not to take their children to work in the streets. In return the children received two meals a day and four hours of "class," which consisted of art workshops, reading tutorials, dance classes and one-on-one counseling with a psychologist. Once a month the mothers received 25 *reais* for children under ten and 50 *reais* for children 10-16. Since the younger children attended school in the afternoons, they came for the program in the mornings. The older children had the opposite routine. The goal was to occupy the day with as many constructive hours as possible and thereby keep the kids off the streets.

The most striking quality of the children those first weeks was the level of violence they acted out toward each other and their compulsion to either destroy or hoard everything with which they came in contact. The social workers and volunteers spent most of their time breaking up fights, sending the recalcitrant off to corners and consoling the wounded. Two things dawned on me: 1) The children did not know how to interact with each other; 2) They did not know how to deal with emotions without violence. Anything and everything merited the same violent response — a broken cookie, a stolen piece of playdough, ridicule, a push, not getting attention when

they wanted it. These were all dealt with by punching, hair pulling, screaming or slamming the offender into the wall. An impressive string of descriptive profanities was always thrown in, too.

Children are survivors, remarked one social worker. They adapt and learn the unspoken rules very quickly. And, if they are living in an environment in which nothing is valued — not cleanliness, education, tenderness or even life — then they act accordingly. And these children had learned that in their violent, drug-overrun neighborhoods the most valued quality one could have was to be a fighter and to fight at every chance. Those that did not have the personality to be aggressive learned to manipulate circumstances in other ways such as crying, hiding or refusing to speak.

After just two weeks there was a marked improvement in the comportment of the children, both toward each other and toward the educators. I returned again for visits six weeks into the program and found another world. The children had learned to raise their hands, to say please and thank you and to apologize to each other. When art supplies and games were brought out the children still grabbed and pushed, but not with the same panicked roughness. Playtime continued to disintegrate easily into confrontation, but the children themselves had learned to break-up fights and calm each other.

The children had painted sections of the once-white walls with their names and designs of their choice. A list of house rules drawn up by the kids was posted opposite the entrance. *Criança Feliz* had provided a safe space that allowed the children room to learn new behaviors.

I wondered how these idyllic mornings for the kids affected their lives at home and their relationships to their mothers. Several months later, when *Criança Feliz* finally began holding required monthly workshops for the mothers, I asked to attend. There I sought out the mothers of a few of the children I had photographed most often. I talked about the photographs and asked if I might visit their homes to continue the project. Two agreed, Clarice and Yvone. Clarice was the mother of three children in the program: two little boys, Edgar and Robson, and their older sister, Tati. All three attended the morning sessions and while Edgar and Robson needed some play-skill improvement, it was Tati who single handedly terrorized the entire class with her profanity and physical violence. Yvone had two daughters in the morning program, Gina, who was quiet and clingy and Rosa who was outgoing but edgy.<sup>1</sup>

I looked forward to seeing the other side of the kids' lives and getting to know the mothers' situations. Unfortunately, the meeting I attended was held to announce that the mothers would not receive money for each child enrolled, but rather a monthly food basket per child.

Yvone was indignant and withdrew her daughters the next day. Clarice pulled her children out because she had been relocated by the city; her house was in the way of a new clinic.

My project had fallen apart rather quickly. What stayed with me was the rate at which the behavior of the children had improved. They had blossomed in an environment in which respect and kindness were priorities. Thinking of Severina and Andrea in this light, I wondered how much or how little it would take to improve their lives and the lives of their children. Andrea was still a child herself. She had grown up on the streets far from any adult intervention. Unlike many of her street friends, she had never passed even a night in the state youth reformatory. She had no real model of parenthood and was at a complete loss when it came to caring for her daughters.

Severina, on the other hand, had grown up in a household with parents and a yard and even pets. She had gone to school for a few years at least. She was an attentive if not doting mother to her children and did what she could for them with the resources she had. But what were her resources? She was absolutely caught between having children to care for and having to work. From her point of view, even if she found a job, she would never make enough money to pay for childcare and live. She had gone to work at the age of ten and it had not hurt her. In fact she thought she was doing a little better by at least keeping her family together and watching over her children as they played and begged in the streets. But in her children I saw echoes of the behavior of the *Criança Feliz* children. Their environment was teaching them they were of little value and had few options. In real terms, their poor health and lack of education would carve these lessons in stone.

And what of Andrea? The same Saturday I accompanied Severina to the vaccination clinic Andrea got into a scuffle with one of the kids from the plaza. The argument got out of hand and the bank guard intervened. Shortly afterward police arrived and took Tais into custody, claiming Andrea was a drug-addict, homeless and an unfit mother.

Galega told me the story through whimpers and hand-wringing. Andrea had been to the plaza only one afternoon since Tais was taken from her, and had asked for me. She left a message through Galega that she wanted some of the pictures I had taken of her and Tais to prove she was a good mother. I thought Andrea's idea touchingly naive. While I doubted my pictures of Andrea would condemn her as unfit, I knew they would be of no help in reclaiming her baby. I agreed to bring photos to the plaza the next afternoon and arrived with a benign selection of Andrea embracing Tais. I waited with Galega but Andrea never appeared. Finally I passed the photos to Galega and told her to give them

<sup>1</sup> The names of the children participating in the *Criança Feliz* program have been changed.

to Andrea should she ever surface.

I knew that in her very mixed-up way, Andrea had tried to be a better mother to Tais than she had been to Natalia. But better than negligent was not much. Tais was the victim of Andrea's actions. When Galega asked me if I planned on helping Andrea get her baby back I was honest and said no. I explained that I thought being a baby in a state orphanage was better than being a sick baby on the streets with a mother that did not know how to care for her. Galega nodded that she understood, but said she would miss the baby.

Weeks passed; Andrea never appeared. I kept visiting with Severina and documenting her life. I also paid a visit to Caroline's House, one of the state's orphanages for young children, since it had played a part in Severina's life and was the current home of Andrea's girls. To both women as well as others, the orphanage was the big bogey-man that could swoop down and declare them unfit and take their children away.

Once Severina got over her initial suspicion of me, she tolerated my questions about Caroline's House. She confided that once when she and her first husband hit hard times they had actually left their four children there while they hunted work. After a few days they had found enough employment to get back on their feet. They went to the orphanage, reclaimed the kids and took them home.

Andrea's experience was different. At 15 she was overwhelmed by the responsibility of caring for Natalia and asked for help. The orphanage took her in but when Andrea went to reclaim her daughter she was refused. Custody of Natalia had been put in the hands of a juvenile judge.

I asked the director, Lourdes Ramalho, what the difference between the two cases would have been. The answer was simple: a home. Though Severina lived in a mud-floored shack with little food and no water, she provided her children with shelter. Andrea had nothing to offer her daughters. Andrea was a known commodity to the staff. They knew her as the drug-addicted prostitute who had her stomach cut open by a john at the airport. Andrea's daughter, Natalia, they said, was flourishing. She had been there for three years. She knew her baby sister had arrived, but they had spent little time together since Tais was ill.

It was unlikely from the staff's point of view that Andrea would ever regain custody of her children. In the three years that Natalia had been there Andrea had visited just a handful of times. Since the day Tais had been taken in, Andrea had not been seen. Said Ramalho, "Parents know their child is here and still they don't come.

Or they visit, bring cookies and cry when it's time to leave. But they do nothing to improve their lives and get their children back. They prefer to live on the street, sleeping, begging and drinking."

I suggested that myths travel both ways and that perhaps a means to improve the lives of the children and reunite families would be to work with the parents of the sheltered children and get them linked to other social services. I gave Severina (under a different name) as an example of a mother who wanted more for her children but was completely cut off from social services due to illiteracy, poor information dissemination and the sheer effort of surviving everyday. Ramalho shrugged, "That's outside our area. They can go to the *Conselho Titular* and get help."

I wondered aloud what person living on the edge knows they can just 'go to the *Conselho Titular*' and have their lives fixed.

She shrugged again, "The parents need to take responsibility."

The woman was driving me nuts. I wondered to myself if she had ever really spent time with or seen the insurmountable conditions some parents battled. How do they learn to take responsibility if they have never had a good example, or want to be better parents but have no resources?

The question went unanswered.

I thanked them and asked to visit with Tais. I was led through a brightly tiled courtyard with child-sized sinks and little mirrors lining the walls. Off in another courtyard I could see games of chase and toys cars being zoomed with zest. The staff person led me to a quiet nursery.

I looked into a crib and hardly recognized Tais. She had gained at least four pounds. Her hair was shiny and the various rashes gone. I lifted her to my shoulders and was surprised when she squawked in protest. She had always been so passive. After a few minutes she calmed down as I gave her an afternoon bottle. I sat with her in a sunny room and she guzzled down the liquid. Her eyes still failed to focus on anything, and the attendants said she could be a little sluggish, but she was well beyond the precarious condition she was in when she arrived.

All the best,

