

ICWA LETTERS

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THE AMERICAS

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

“Neta’s Gringa”

RECIFE, Brazil

July 5, 1999

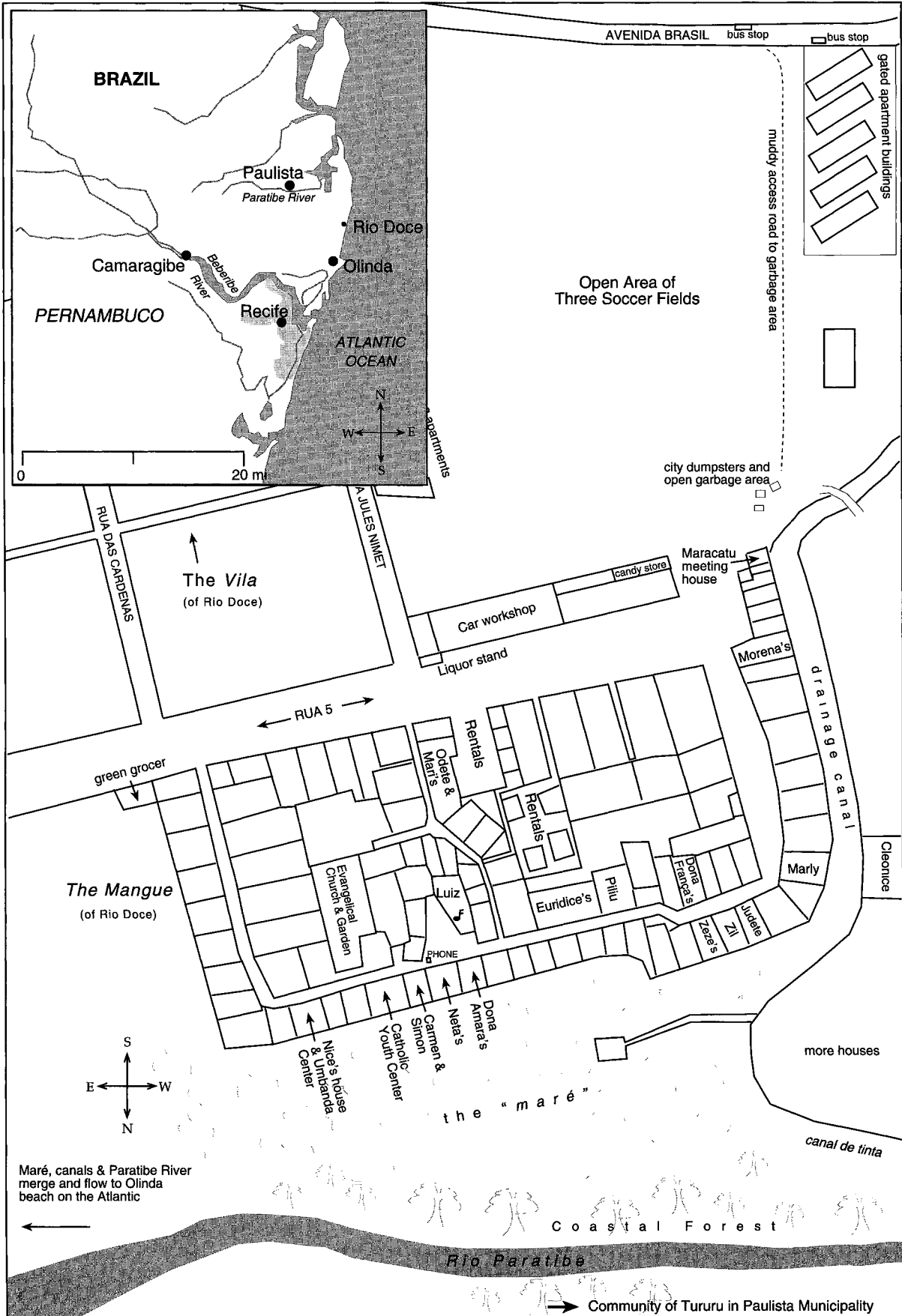
Mr. Peter B. Martin
Executive Director
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4 West Wheelock Street
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Dear Peter,

Over the last several months Neta da Silva has been my link to the lives of lower-income Brazilian women in the Recife-Olinda area. A 40-year-old mother of three and veteran of a sometimes-violent 21-year marriage, Neta’s road has been as long and hard as that of the women she brings together in her work as a community leader. As I attended meetings and became friends with her through conversations on long walks and bus rides, both my admiration for her and my curiosity about her life increased. Following a wonderful Sunday afternoon barbecue with Neta’s family I resolved to ask if I could live with her for a short period. My idea was to jump-start my relationship with the community by spending time under her roof. What follows are highlights of my week with Neta tempered by insights I’ve gained in subsequent



Neta da Silva, 40, with the hands of her sons, Peu, Lucas, and Teco. Neta is the center of her family and much of the Rio Doce Mangue community. Both informally and through her work with the Coletivo Mulher Vida, Neta is the voice of reason, consolation and strength for those around her.





A young boy keeps after straggling goats as he crosses the soccer fields on the edge of the Mangue. He tends the herd five mornings a week to earn enough money for his family to pay rent and buy food. In the background of the image is the main avenue into the area. The cement apartment buildings were once public housing projects but are now privately owned.

visits to the Rio Doce *favela* that has been her home for the last 14 years.

* * *

Olinda (population 350,000) is a city within the metropolitan area of greater Recife. The Beberibe (bey-beh-REE-bee) river separates Olinda from Recife, while the Paratibe (par-ah-TEE-bee) river draws a rough line between Olinda and Paulista to the north. The historic heart of Olinda, the *varadouro*, overlooks the Atlantic Ocean from a hillside steeped in the charming decay of colonial churches and tiled homes. Rimming the base of the hill is a mixture of swampy *favelas*, a collection of both restored and crumbling buildings, paved plazas and an old market stocked with groceries for the locals and crafts for the tourists. Neta lives another 30 city-bus-minutes north, well into urban sprawl in an area dubbed Rio Doce (Sweet River) that straddles the cities of Olinda and Paulista.

Neta's neighborhood does not appear on any maps available in local stores or from Olinda's City Hall. But Neta, her family, and about 1,800 other households (according to a 1996 survey taken by a local clinic) live in what is called the *Mangue*. Translated literally, "*mangue*" means mangrove, but it also refers to the swampy tidal area along the river where the mangrove bushes grow (which I refer to as *mangue* with a small "m"), as well as a collection of residences built over the filled-in swamp area (*Mangue* with a big "M").

About 35 years ago the local housing authority coordinated the construction of a neighborhood known as the *Vila*. Craftsmen and odd-jobbers flowed from the interior of Pernambuco to work on the project. They threw up straw and wooden shanties along the edge of the *mangue*. Eventually their families followed, creating an

"invasion," plot-by-plot, as bucket after bucket of orange clay filled in the marsh.

Neta and Elias' piece of the *Mangue*-dream sits right up against a 30-yard-wide wash cutting through the marsh. The water flowing through the wash has no name other than the *maré*, or tide, because the water rises and falls with the ocean. Thus *maré* is both the place where the water passes and the action of rising and falling. Sorting all of this out, I have learned that both people and crabs live in the *mangue* and that the *maré* is ever-present, but comes and goes daily.

Neta and Elias moved to Rio Doce 14 years ago. Today, their neighborhood is a cramped area of about 80 homes lining clay pathways just behind the *Vila*. Within the *Mangue*, homes can be found made of everything: straw and sticks, scrap wood, cinderblock finished-off with stucco — and every combination in between. Construction is a process of creativity and financial improvisation.

The *Mangue* is home to bus drivers, masons, construction foremen, City Hall functionaries, cooks, maintenance workers, security guards, maids and nannies, who rise early and earn their minimal salaries in other parts of the city. A small economy of barter and low-priced goods and services hums within the *Mangue* itself. Residents scrape to earn income as bakers, manicurists, seamstress and barkeeps. Meager amounts make a difference: a dime for a pastry, a dollar for a prepared lunch; a trade of a manicure for a new dishcloth. There is even a man who raises tropical fish for sale.

Commerce flows between the *Vila* and the *Mangue*. *Mangue* residents spend their money in the *Vila* stores and vendors from the *Vila* pass through the *Mangue* hawking hot bread, cheap furniture, fruit and sweets. Some women,



Teenaged girls earn a little money for their families by collecting garbage from the nearby working class Vila neighborhood and hauling it to an improvised dump on the edge of the soccer field. Locals find many uses for the garbage — recycling, used objects and clothing, food leftovers and grazing for goats.

like Neta, wash clothing for *Vila* families.

Even garbage generates interaction. Men and children from the *Mangue* charge *Vila* residents twenty-five cents to collect their garbage in hand-drawn or donkey-pulled carts. The garbage is then hauled to the corner of the soccer fields, just before the bridge into Rio Doce, Paulista, and dumped *near* three empty dumpsters. Locals arrive from the *Mangue* and sift through the refuse for recyclables to sell, used objects, discarded food, and the raw materials to make kites and other toys. Once a week the city sends out front-end loaders to scrape the decay into one stinking heap and shovel it into garbage trucks. It's then hauled out to an even bigger dump, where even poorer people pick through it again.

Social lines are blurred through employer-employee contact, flirting adolescents, street-side stand-up bars, children sharing schools, families (actually mostly women) in common churches, competition on the soccer fields and the boisterous weekend markets. But the *Vila* and the *Mangue* remain separate worlds. The *Mangue* is seen as a dangerous, poor, dirty place and the *Vila*, a solid working-class neighborhood by U.S. standards, is where those who have steady jobs and money live. Likewise *Mangue* neighborhoods distinguish themselves from one another. Insiders consider where Neta lives a tranquil

family community. However, just across the drainage canal, the Rio Doce *Mangue* of Paulista, or *lá atrás* (behind) as it is called, has a reputation as one of the most violent areas of Olinda, filled with drugs and loitering young-adult men.

But I didn't know any of this the day the bus stopped in front of the soccer fields on the edge of the *Mangue*.

WELCOME

I crunched my way across the clay soccer fields under sun so strong I felt like an ant beneath a magnifying glass. As sweat trickled in itchy, burning streams into my eyes, I apologized to all the bugs I had burned on long summer afternoons as a kid. My shirt stuck to me and my backpack became a giant sponge. It was high noon.

As always I felt apprehensive as I approached the *Mangue*. Some piece of horrible news always greeted me: a child suffering from *dengue* fever, a husband gone, sons sent to jail, guns pulled in a fight. Sometimes I would arrive to hear of bodies awaiting collection by the city morgue. It was always something hard and sad.

They live the collective life of Job, I thought. What

would it be this time? But as I entered the path to Neta's house I was impressed by the quiet of the neighborhood. I took off my sunglasses and slid them into my hip pack. It was a futile attempt to blend, in since everything about me set me off as different: hair too blonde, shorts too long, shirt too loose-fitting. My backpack was another oddity all together. I stuck out like a sore thumb, albeit a friendly thumb.

Residents along the path knew me, most by name and all by sight. They waved and called out greetings as I passed. I was "a gringa de Neta" (Neta's foreigner). Some were members of the women's group and I stopped and chatted with them. They inquired about my family *lá* ("there," in the United States), implying that they were becoming my family and community "here," and hinting that I belonged to Rio Doce in some measure.

I arrived at Neta's. The gate to the front porch was locked. I walked around to the back door. I found Neta talking with a friend, Piliu. "Oh, Susana! You don't know how crazy it's been here!" Neta motioned to me. "Come in. Put your bag in the boys' room. That is where you will sleep." She showed me to the room shared by her sons Peu, 16, Lucas, 14, Teco, 12, and a cousin, Sergio, 16.

I flopped down in a chair. I looked at Cassia, the daughter of Neta's neighbor Carmen, and thought she just might be the saddest little girl I had ever seen.

Neta moaned in an exhausted voice, "Ai, Susana. I'm very tired. I worked hard this weekend. Yesterday we cleaned the whole house. [No doubt for my benefit.] I was ready to sleep last night. But Carmen and her husband were drinking. They started fighting. We closed the

back door but it was still too loud. We heard everything. Then Carmen screamed. Then he screamed. Then I heard Carmen at the door. She was drunk and holding her left arm. There was blood everywhere. She asked me for help bandaging it. There was blood all over my kitchen. She said she broke a bottle and stabbed her husband and then he sliced open her arm with a big kitchen knife. I said, 'Carmen, I can't help you. Go to the hospital, Girl.' She went and I helped Simone, her sister, care for the children. Between them they have four children. They've always had problems. Just like their mother, they drink. There can be a lot of fighting in that house."

Neta looked over at Cassia who stared back with wide eyes and bored into her lip with tiny buckteeth. "Cassia! What will we do? What will we do with this crazy world?" Cassia shrugged a shoulder and made herself a little smaller. Neta leaned back against her sofa, closed her eyes and folded her arms across her chest. "Are you sure you want to live in this house, Susana?"

For the rest of the day Carmen was the talk of the *Mangue* with Neta's kitchen serving as Information Central. More than 30 women streamed through her house as we cooked and ate a lunch of rice, beans, marinated salads, fried chicken and french fries. Although Carmen lives next door everyone came to Neta for the lowdown. Carmen's marital skirmish had even made the morning tabloid talk show "*Cardeno*" on FM103. *Cardeno's* reporters got most of the details wrong, which only added to the animated rehashing of events.

Although violence as experienced by Carmen was not always so obvious on a day-to-day basis, I was soon



Carmen, Neta's neighbor, shows me the 7-inch gash and crude stitches she earned from a drunken brawl with her husband the night before I arrived for my week-long stay in the Mangue.



Cassia, Carmen's daughter, wearing a discarded dance costume, stands with her cousin Edivaldo, right, and little brother, Josinildo, baby, at the doorway of their house.

to learn that the role of Neta's kitchen table in the daily life of the *Mangue* was critical. There problems were solved, broken hearts soothed, marriages dissected and wisdom shared. Day after day, Neta rose early to begin cooking for her family, first breakfast, then a huge mid-day meal. Invariably visitors began to arrive when the first pot of coffee was ready. Throughout the day I would hear people calling out, "Neta! Neta!" As they made their way to the back door. Neta's escape was her work every afternoon with the women's *Coletivo*. Only on Sundays, when her husband Elias was home, was there a chance of a modest change in the routine. Sometimes the family would walk out for a pizza or have a back yard barbecue.

* * *

Lunch over and the boys sworn not to get into trouble, Neta and I headed off to her Monday-afternoon community meeting in *Beira Rio* (River's Edge). Until two months before I had met Neta, she had led the meetings as a joint effort with a social worker from the *Coletivo Mulher Vida*. Funding cuts forced layoffs of the social workers. Neta bemoaned the fact that she was being sent out to do the job of a social worker without the benefit of training. My presence made her feel more confident and legitimate in front of women she considered her peers.

A few hours later, the meeting over and our bellies

filled with soda and marshmallow cake, Neta and I picked our way out of *Beira Rio*, passing first through shoulder-wide paths between wooden shacks and then up through a sandy hill to the main road. This was the second reason Neta enjoyed my company. The path across the hillside was dark and filled with long shadows cast by the security lights of a private college on the top of the hill. I asked Neta if she walked there alone, knowing I would not. I think she was too nervous to answer. Not until weeks later did she tell me of walking down the path with one of the other *Coletivo* members who lived across the road. A man with a gun in his hand appeared on the path. He swung his arm behind his back to hide the gun, and as Neta passed he spit on her dress. Neta said she was so startled and scared she could do nothing but stare straight ahead. She kept going, without looking back, afraid the man would think she was challenging him.

By 6:30 we were home. The sun had been down for over an hour and a cool breeze was moving through the *mangue*. Neta steamed corn *cuzcuz* (similar to wheat couscous) and warmed up beans and left them on the stove for anyone who was hungry. Sergio and Peu came through the door, grunted hellos and flopped down in the common room to cruise TV channels — perhaps a universal behavior of teens.

Across the pathway Luiz, an older man with a gentle

reputation, tinkered with an accordion at his workbench. After a few hours he had the pieces back in place and began quiet renditions of ballads and then more rowdy *forró* music. The cool air and dark night had lured everyone outside. A group of little girls played hopscotch until they grew frustrated at losing rocks in the shadows and switched to jumping rope. Teco hung upside down from a tree and taunted them.

A little later, we went into the kitchen and Neta prepared coffee and yelled at the boys to eat something. They trickled in and within a few minutes others followed. I worked away at the ever-present stack of dishes. I was very tired and not really paying attention to anything as the water trickled over my hands from a PVC pipe. I realized the room was nearly silent. I turned and to see Neta, her kids and a handful of visitors staring at me.

“What is it?” I asked

Neta slapped the table, “Susana I never thought I would have an American friend! I never thought there



Teco, the youngest of Neta and Elias' three sons, brushes his teeth in the tap behind the house before heading off to an early morning soccer game.

would be an American in my house! And, My God in Heaven, I never imagined I would have an American friend, in my house, washing my dishes!” Her gravelly voice led an outburst of laughter.

By midnight I could barely keep my eyes open. The boys were riveted to a dubbed version of “Mortal Kombat” — bad in any language. I figured it was safe enough for me to sleep without missing anything exciting. I crawled to my bed, slipped under the mosquito netting and fell asleep.

A short while later I was awakened as the movie watchers scrambled into their beds and fussed with fans and nets. As I lay thinking about the day and reviewing the slang I had picked up, I heard light drops of rain pattering the corrugated metal roof. The rat-a-tat increased like an approaching drum corps until it was deafening.

I knew Neta and other women in the *Mangue* were lying in bed with their eyes wide open, alert to every nuance. Rain scares Neta. She stays awake and listens to make sure the house is stable and the *maré* stays at bay. Fourteen years before, winter rains washed away her hillside home in *Agua Compridas* (Long Waters) as she fled to drier ground with Peú in her arms. She and Elias lost everything and started over in a straw hut on the flat banks of the *maré* a few yards from where their current house stands. Even now in a house made of brick, back from the water's edge, Neta worries.

THREE LITTLE PIGS AND HOW A CHEATING HUSBAND BECAME A SAINT

I opened my eyes and looked into the dimly lit room. The boys slept despite the crowing of a rooster perched above my right ear. I looked up at the tin roof. Sunlight burned through a four-inch gap between the top of the wall and the roof, making the edges of the room glow like a scene from a space-alien movie. But I was the only alien around.

I crept out of the netting and went into the living room. Galego, Neta's cat and “fourth son,” was curled up on the sofa under the window. He murmured a greeting at me and jumped down.

I looked around the room and saw clear evidence of fear. The inner shutters of the window over the couch were shut tightly with an old t-shirt wedged around the frame. It was so tight I couldn't pull it open. I turned to the front door. A chair had been wedged under the door-knob and a padlock looped through the latch. I knew that beyond that a grilled-metal door was locked and barred passage to the porch. The outer grilled doors of the porch would be locked, too. There were two locks on that set and then the garden gate before hitting the path. I pulled the chair away and tried the lock. Nothing

budged. I looked around the television area for a set of keys but came up empty. Galego grew impatient with me. Apparently he entered the house through the gap in the ceiling, but expected the doors to be opened for his parting. I suggested the back door.

In the kitchen a cloud of mosquitoes hovered over the sink and table. A chair was propped against the back door, too, although it did little good since it was a simple plank door without a doorknob. I moved the chair and pulled open the door. Sunlight and heat poured into the room. I looked up at a giant wrist-watch clock nailed to the kitchen wall: 11:30.

I went into the living room and looked at the Alpine-Scene clock: 9:40. That was probably closer, but not too helpful. I turned and noticed a little blue digital clock on the VCR: 5:10am.

Eager to start the day, I picked up my camera bag and notebook and thought I would wander around in the beautiful early-morning light. I reached the back door with Galego hot on my heels and pushed at the grilled-metal door. Locked! I hadn't noticed two more padlocks on the side of the door. I was trapped.

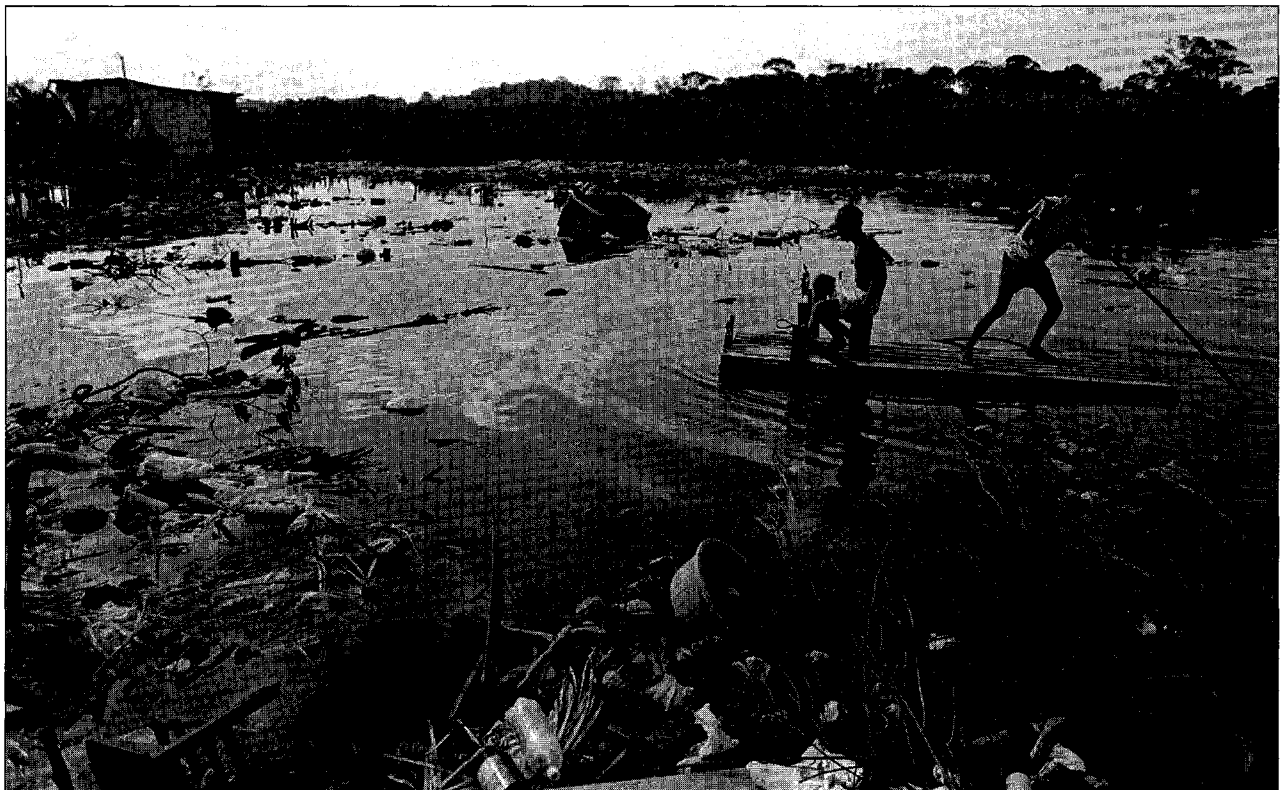
Defeated, I pulled a chair up to the back door and opened my notebook to do some writing. It dawned on

me that I was slapping much less at mosquitoes. In fact the cloud over the table had disappeared. In its place were dozens of black flies, hopping around the dishes, dirty cups and crumbs from the night before. Sunlight had brought a changing of the insect guard. I would be misery-free until sunset in 12 hours.

It was low tide. At the edge of Neta's lot, old furniture, plastic, garbage and sewage extended for dozens of yards in either direction. I could hear the trickle of receding water but I could not see any as it flowed under the refuse. From my tower window I watched three pigs root and grub through the garbage. As they upended the rotting piles with their snouts, chickens and roosters clucked behind them, picking up the leftovers. A flock of vultures collected stoically on the high points of garbage.

Teco appeared behind me. Keys in one hand and a toothbrush in the other, he stepped over me and opened the padlocks to brush his teeth under the spigot outside. A few minutes later Lucas appeared. They ate some crackers and headed off to the soccer fields for a game before the day heated up.

I was alone again, but at least the door was open. I walked outside and found Carmen sitting with Cassia and her nephew Edivaldo. Her arm was clumsily bandaged and she was working to untie it. The cloth fell away



Lucas, right, Neta's second son, and a cousin, Silvio, play on a broken fishing raft in the maré directly behind Neta's house. The maré, or tide, serves as a garbage dump and drain for sewage in the favela. Behind the boys are mangrove, or mangrove bushes, which give the swampy area its name.

to reveal a seven-inch gash held closed with a dozen crude stitches. Edivaldo craned to see the wound.

"It looks deep," I said.

"Deep, yes. But it doesn't hurt as much now," she replied, lightly fingering the wound.

"Where is your husband?" I asked.

"*La em frente* (out front)," she replied, meaning at the edge the *Mangue* neighborhood.

"Are you afraid?"

"No, I'm not afraid, no. We fight a lot. That's just how we are."

I heard the radio switch on in Neta's kitchen and her voice calling for Teco. I stepped inside. Knowing that time alone with Neta was scarce I asked her to tell me a little about her life. In one long sigh she countered that her life was not so interesting as to be a story, and then began to talk. She was born in 1959 in Camaragibe (cah-mar-ah-GHEE-bee), one of the towns making up greater Recife. She was the oldest of three girls and watched her mother struggle to earn independence and a little spending money by selling homemade candies and snacks from their house. Her father controlled every penny he earned. He did all of the marketing and made the clothing purchases. Her mother had nothing of her own.

At 18, Neta met Elias, handsome and dashing, fell in love and got pregnant. They married on a Friday afternoon 21 years ago. That weekend Elias left her at home and went out with his friends and other girls. Neta sat in her parents' home and cried and had anxiety attacks over her marriage. The following Sunday she miscarried, but it was too late, as she put it; she was already locked into the marriage.

Eventually they moved out of her parents' home and rented a small wooden shack in Aguas Compridas. For five years Neta tolerated her husband's philandering while at the same time trying to get pregnant with him. She thought having a baby would make him face the responsibilities of a family. As it was, she was taking in laundry to keep a roof over their heads. Elias worked as a mason, but little of his money came into the household.

A wrench was thrown into Neta's plan to tame Elias. After two ectopic pregnancies, a doctor told her she would never conceive safely. An opportunity arose to adopt an infant son of Elias' sister who had fallen on hard times. After five years of trying to get pregnant, Neta became a mother over a handshake.

With Peu, Neta felt her life had focus and motivation. The baby made it easier to tolerate Elias' philander-

ing. Two years later, defying the doctors, Neta gave birth to Lucas and in 1987 to Teco. Still, Elias did not become the father she had envisioned. "He never changed, Susana," she said, speaking of Elias. "I was very alone in everything."

I asked Neta where she got her support during that time. "The church was not a help to me. There a woman is second to man just like in the rest of Brazilian life. I was part of the *Club das Mães* [Mother's Club, a non-church organization that helps mothers with infants and toddlers] and the Residents' Association. I learned there.

"The church thought even the mother's group was craziness. The church feared we would learn to do things against the Bible. They kept teaching: Women must obey men. Man is the brain of the church; Woman is the body; [she] can not be strong on her own, [she] has to be submissive. The church did not want me to work for the community, with the Residents' Association. They said, 'Stay to yourself.' "

Elias continued to live the life of a ladies' man returning home only for the occasional meal and to have his clothing washed. Neta explained her tolerance of Elias' behavior with the adage, "Bad with him, Worse without him," (*Ruim com ele, pior sem ele*), and said she did not see many alternatives for herself until she reached a breaking point: "He had promised another girl he would marry her. I was pregnant with [Teco]. We had been married for nine years. I was very depressed. I worked non-stop. At one point I was taking in laundry for 13 families [at least 65 hours of work per week]. I was very thin. I was not eating enough. I think I was trying to kill myself with work. All of the women who come to my table were feeding me then: Dona Franca, Zil, Mari.

Swallowing all of her pride Neta went to the house of Elias' girlfriend to tell him never to return home. There she learned Elias had denied being married and the father of three young sons.

"Well, the girl's mother saw what kind of a man he was and kicked him out of there. I didn't know this. I had gone home crying. I was humiliated and threw everything of his in one big pile. I wanted him to leave my life.

"He came home and said he wanted to live with me again. I knew he had no other place to go but I didn't want him. I picked up a big kitchen knife. I was ready to stab him but just as I raised my arm Peu began to cry and Elias picked him up. He sat there with Peu and Lucas. They were his shields.

"So he stayed. But he slept in another room. Not with me.

"Then one day he grabbed onto being a believer. One

night he walked through the door. I said, 'Where's your cigarette?' He always had a cigarette in his mouth. He said, 'I don't smoke. I'm a believer.'

Eventually Elias convinced Neta to become a member of the Assembly of God Church he had joined. "We never walked to church together. No. He went earlier to be with his buddies and in his man's world. He wanted to go alone. I came later with Peu, Lucas [then only two] and a new baby in my arms. Carrying everything I needed. We didn't sit together in church. It was worse there for my freedom, but I stayed because he began to change a little.

"We fought constantly. I criticized him a lot. I was still mad at him. The church is *machista*. Men dominate and give the 'yes' and the 'no' to the woman. Women are for work. Women are for being submissive — just for sex. The church teaches that I have to serve my husband. If I don't feel like having sex I have to have sex anyway. This is how they think of women.

"To this day I don't trust him. I've forgiven many things, many times. At the *Coletivo* I learned what to tolerate, and what I don't have to tolerate anymore."

* * *

Again that night, a few hours after sunset, the *Mangue* buzzed with activity. Shuttered windows opened to the cool night air. Even the fetid smell of the *mangue* seemed to have receded, or least to have been suffocated by high tide. Walking down a path from the *Vila* with the evening bread, I passed children playing, neighbors gossiping and clusters of men sipping rum and cold beer. I tossed the warm bread on the table and stepped back outside to join Neta. It seemed crazy to be inside when the sun was down.

I found her holding court with a group of young mothers under the mango tree. Perched on the three-legged remains of a chair she recounted a slice of her life to console and prod the others — upset over drinking, womanizing husbands. She stressed the importance of standing up for herself and finding support.

It was if she had picked up from our earlier conversation, "Elias had left the church. I left too. He started going out with other women. He would be gone all night. Lucas would scream 'I want my father! Where's my father? *Papãe, Papãe! Papãe! Vem cá!*' (Daddy! Daddy! Daddy! Come here!) The whole neighborhood knew what was going on. It was horrible. It was terrible. I was sick with embarrassment. I was sick.

"Then my mother died. I think that was the worst time of my life. Everything got worse after she died. I had nervous diarrhea and depression for two years."

A timid discussion about trust began. Just then we

heard a light "crack" from above. I looked up as a mango clunked onto my forehead. Sap dribbled down the side of my face. It takes just one well-placed mango to disrupt a conversation. The children giggled and screeched as they acted out my surprised face and re-told the event in blow-by-blow commentary. That was it for profound gab sessions. Carmen pulled out her dominos board and a round of good-natured games ensued: moms versus kids.

As we closed up the house later that night, I asked Neta why, if Elias made her so miserable, did she refer to him as "*meu santo marido*" (my sainted husband)? "He's gotten so much better, Susana. He respects me now." She explained that she thinks their relationship has gotten healthier. They are partners. And, she added, if Elias continues to have girlfriends (perhaps while away during the week) at least he does not flaunt it in front of her. There's a part of Neta that wants to trust Elias completely, but the past and a belief that it is a man's nature "to wander" undermine her desire.

"He spends time with our sons. He brings me flowers. It all started a few years ago when I went to Rio de Janeiro for a month. I think he thought I was escaping and leaving them behind. When I called home he would beg me not to leave him. I laughed. I was in Rio because it was my dream to see that city. I even flew on an airplane.

"We share the expenses of the home. Elias gives me \$R400 (U.S. \$230) a month for the gas, lights, water, food, vegetables. I spend about \$R350 (U.S. \$200) every month. I'm not the kind of woman to ask him for a *real* here, ten *reais* there. But if I need something and he sees that, he gives me the money. I think he knows I have my independence now."

There was another turning point Neta mentioned. During the time she and Elias were fighting constantly and coming and going in the church, Elias' boss challenged him to take a test that would qualify him to be a construction foreman for both residential and commercial projects. He arrived home one evening despondent. He told Neta he didn't think he could do it. "Even though I was mad at him, I knew he could. His boss told him *medo emalha* (fear entraps). I said that was true. So every night we cleared the kitchen table and worked together. He had to plan how he would construct a building if he were in charge. I learned a lot. I knew he could do it. I had confidence in his boss, too. He was the man who lent us the money to buy this land and the straw hut on it when the waters took our house in *Aguas*." Elias passed the test and is today an independent construction manager.

So what, I asked, are the most important lessons she can teach her sons? "I always tell them to be an individual and to have humility. With those two things they can accomplish whatever they decide, good things." And if she were the mother to a young girl? "I would be more

careful [than my mother was with me and my sisters]. I would not raise her to be just a good wife and cook. I'd make her study and make her find work that is her own. [And tell her] don't marry for [financial] support. Marriage is only to have a companion."

STARVING ONE SON TO FEED ANOTHER

Different morning, same rooster: I looked up at the rim lighting and around the room and at the boys slumbering like butterflies wrapped in net cocoons. The air in the room was still cool from the night. I closed my eyes and drifted. But the rooster was having none of that. He seemed to bother only me. I tied the mosquito netting in a clumsy knot above the bed, grabbed my towel and headed for the bathroom.

Neta's house is a little more upscale than her neighbors due mostly to Elias' handiwork. The bathroom is tiled and sports a cold-water shower, or more exactly, a cold-water trickle. The house has had some form of running water since eight years ago when Neta was part of a group that pooled their money, bought PVC [PolyVinylChloride] pipe and paid some boys to dig a trench to a city water pipe. Late one night they patched into the city system. The result was enough water to wash dishes, but not for a toilet or shower. That came later with

a second furtive effort to tap illegally into the city's supply. Before either of these efforts Neta hauled water into the *Mangue* from a public tap in the *Vila*, a pretty cumbersome process for someone who earned her living washing clothing.

Soon after this second venture the water company caught on to what was happening and installed water pipes and a billing system. So few residents bothered to pay the bills that the utility gave up collecting and now lets the water run for free. Most homes have at least some running water. However, this does not mean that it always flows in abundance or that there is a corresponding waste-disposal system. Sewerage remains basic. Those that don't have toilets use outhouses perched over the water. Those that do have the luxury of a toilet run pipes straight from the house into the *maré*. Everything ends up in the *maré*.

The *Mangue's* battle for electricity happened similarly about nine years ago. After failing to be heard by local politicians, residents formed a group and presented the president of their residents' association with a demand for the right to have lights — a fairly convoluted way of gaining his complicity and tacit approval from the general community for an essentially illegal act. A handful of residents bought and erected poles. Another group ran



Neta, right, Zezé, center, Lourdes, second left, Zil, bottom left, and Joana, baby on the table, talk away the morning hours as they do everyday while Neta prepares breakfast and then the midday meal. Neta's kitchen is "information central" and one of the key socializing points for women in the Mangue.

wire from house to house. When everything was set they hooked into an existing line in the *Vila*.

The electric company was quick to note the extra energy consumption and the potential of new customers. With the cost of running lines taken care of by the residents, the power company came through and installed meters on every house and shack. Unlike the water utility, electric bills are collected regularly.

* * *

When I thought about staying with Neta I never assumed I would ever 'blend in,' but I as the days passed I was a little surprised by my celebrity. The novelty of my presence was slow to wear off. Sometimes it led to funny exchanges, other times it meant I had to confront tiresome assumptions and stereotypes. This particular morning the kitchen stayed quiet until 8:30 when Zil, her daughter-in-law Lourdes and granddaughter Joana arrived on the pretense of copping a little laundry soap from Neta's stash. After a few minutes it was apparent that Zil was there to check me out and catch up on a little gossip. Zil plopped Joana in the center of the table.

"Oh Neta, give me a cup and saucer. I need to have some coffee," sighed Zil.

"Hey, Woman, there's a glass right in front of you. Use that." replied Neta.

"No, no I want to use the cup and saucer like your white American friend here," she countered sarcastically.

"No, Zil. A glass will do for you." scolded Neta. She reached to the edge of the table where an amber-colored cup and saucer had been placed and scooped them away into a cabinet.

"I know, Neta, I'm just a poor black. You don't want me to dirty your house!" Zil laughed as she poured coffee from the thermos and spooned an equal amount of sugar into the glass.

"You know what everyone is saying, Neta? Now you have Xuxa [SHU-sha, a reference to a very popular, rich, blonde children's-show hostess in Brazil] sleeping in your house and you're too proud to talk to us, too proud for this place!" Zil looked at me to gauge my reaction. I just smiled.

"Oh they're always talking about somebody. Today it is me. I don't have time for this. They know who I am." She said as she kept chopping vegetables for a salad.

I knew Neta was weary of being the center of gossip and jealousy. Just two weeks earlier the *Mangue* had been in turmoil over the public phone that stands outside her house. A woman living a half-dozen houses away from

Neta called the phone company and the police to allege that Neta, Carmen and Simone, were blocking access to the phone to people they didn't like and charging 50 cents for messages. She demanded the phone be moved to the front of her house.

The police took a routine complaint against Neta and questioned her about the allegations. The phone company advised the woman to write down her charges and get signatures from everyone in the neighborhood who used the phone. This upset Neta not only because the charges were false and she had to waste her time pulling together a counter-petition, but also because the phone company threatened to pull the phone out of the *Mangue* completely if the residents did not resolve the conflict.

"This is where jealousies and arguments get us," said Neta during a Friday afternoon Rio Doce *Coletivo* meeting. Because this woman is angry with Simone she starts spreading rumors about me, calls the police and nearly makes us lose our phone. She is forgetting what it was like to walk all the way to the pharmacy [about 1/2 mile away] to call an ambulance, or check on family. She's forgetting this." The rest of the group meeting was dedicated to learning to deal with anger.

Neta knew everything she said would spread through the *Mangue* as soon as Zil stepped outside. The conversation skipped from topic to topic with the arrival and departures of women and children, like birds to a birdfeeder. Nice, Dona França, Euridice, Carmen, Mari, Zulede, Piliu all flowed in and out of the house. But the tone of the day took an abrupt turn when Zezé walked through the back door, slumped into a chair and put her head in her hands.

I usually remained skeptical about Zezé's dilemmas. It seemed every conversation I had with her concluded with a desperate tale of how just "x" amount of money would cure her life, could I please give her the money? Or if I did not have the money, how about a phone card (like phone tokens) or the spare change in my pocket? I felt like Zezé looked at me and saw a big green dollar symbol. She was very melodramatic around me, and for that reason I was slow to warm up to her. I was tired of being her target; however, if roles were reversed I would probably hit her up for money, too. The fact that she had a 10-year-old son at home meant I would give in on occasion and slip her money for medicine, food or transportation. She would get absolutely giddy when I gave her anything. Her attitude was that it cost me nothing to give away money. I started carrying only enough money for my bus fares.

But this time Zezé seemed really distraught. On Wednesdays and Sundays the families of men held at Aníbal Bruno prison are allowed to visit and bring food. Zezé's 21-year-old son, Damião, jailed the 15th of April for petty theft, was still locked up seven weeks later. He

A depressed and forlorn Zezé stares into the camera as Neta burns garbage in the background. Zezé had become increasingly weak and upset over the imprisonment of her son, Damião, and sought Neta's near constant companionship and advice.



had yet to be charged with a crime, but had already offered a confession. Despite this, Damião had no idea when he would actually appear before a judge. It could be weeks or months.

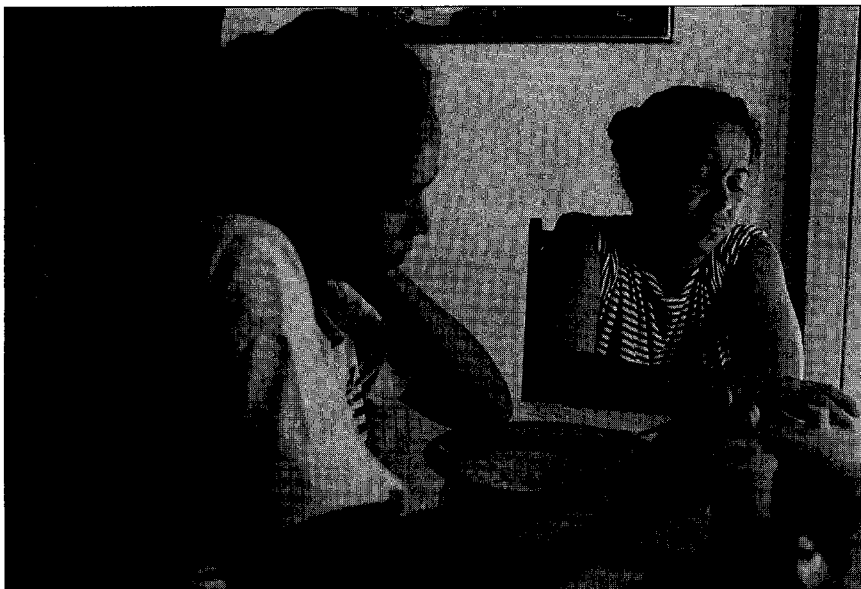
Aníbal Bruno prison is infamous for over-crowding, poor food and miserable health conditions. To supplement her son's diet Zezé said she had been starving herself, buying only enough food for her 10-year-old, Leo, in order to send dried goods, milk, cooking oil and a few prepared meals to Damião. After each visit Zezé returned more despondent and depressed.

She sat crumpled and silent at the table. Neta watched her for a few minutes and then ladled *munguzá*, a sweet corn porridge, into a bowl and set it in front of

Zezé. "Eat, Zezé, you're too weak. You can't even think anymore. Eat."

Zezé shook her head. Neta pushed the bowl closer. Zezé leaned her chin on her hand and listlessly dragged the spoon through the bowl, sighing. Neta made a glass of warm milk mixed with salt and sugar and handed it to Zezé then pulled a chair near and encouraged her to eat and talk. Zezé was afraid Damião would fall ill in prison and Leo would get weak at home. She was overwhelmed and she was sick.

Neta offered to cook for Damião and pack it up for Zezé to send to the prison. Zezé brightened a little and sent Leo to the home of her daughter Luciana to ask if she would deliver the food. Neta went into overdrive and



Neta, right, tries to get Zezé to eat a little corn porridge and talk about possible solutions to her son's imprisonment.

began pulling the food she had from her refrigerator. I was commandeered to chop vegetables, post haste. In short time we had a half-dozen plastic containers filled with salad, rice, beans and fried chicken.

Neta pulled out a valise and loaded the containers one by one as Zezé watched. Luciana took the bag and listened to her mother's instructions and headed to the bus stop. The visit would take her most of the day.

Later that afternoon, while Neta was attending meetings at the *Coletivo*, I decided to walk around the *Mangue* and visit the other women I knew. I grabbed my camera and tattered, chicken-grease-smearred notebook and walked down the alley. I tapped lightly on Zezé's door. Her son, Leo, opened it and told me Zezé was resting — a good sign. I turned to leave and Leo asked where I was going. "Just for a walk," I replied. Looking very concerned he said, "You shouldn't go alone. I'll go with you." He slipped on flip-flops and closed the door behind him.

As we walked along the path I looked down at my escort. He seemed so earnest and quiet. I wondered how the turmoil with his mother and other siblings was affecting him. I teased, "So Leo, you are such a fine and handsome young boy, you must have many admirers. Do you have a girlfriend?"

Leo stopped dead in his tracks and turned to face me. His look was stern and his voice matched the steel of his eyes, "*Senhora*," he said giving a formal weight to his words, "My only love is my pencil, my pen, and my notebook. I am a student." With that he turned and continued ahead of me. Phew!

We walked along in silence. Clearly Leo had a lot on

his mind and could not be disturbed by idle chitter-chat. His relationship with Zezé was inverted. He was the caretaker, cooking simple lunches and making sure his mother took naps. After a while I asked him about his studies. A bold smile came to his face as he ran through his favorite classes.

We crossed over the drainage canal and walked to the home of Cleonice and her daughter Ana. Cleonice was ready for us. She ushered me past a dirt porch and into the first room of her wooden shack. The room could not have been bigger than five by five feet, with doorways cut into all but one wall. Ana, Cleonice's disabled daughter, sat propped in an old armchair to the right of the entrance. Across from her was a table holding a big color television. Ana's listless legs jutted out into the room. A remote control rested on the arm of the chair.

Leo took a seat in a little wooden chair and I took another near the TV. Cleonice brought in a fourth and we sat with our knees nearly touching as she insisted we drink orange soda and eat a roll of chocolate cookies. It was a sad little visit with Cleonice telling me the story of how her husband went to work one day and never returned, leaving her with five children to raise alone. When it looked like Leo could not bear it any longer or swallow another cookie I suggested we move on. Cleonice was distraught; there was still so much orange soda.

TAKE THREE AMBULANCES AND CALL ME IN THE MORNING

I knew I was becoming part of the community when one morning I slept right through the rooster. I awoke utterly exhausted. Dominoes, dancing and late-night gossip had lasted well into the early morning hours. Neta



A boy carries sandlewood branches to the Rio Doce market.



Mangue residents Valdson, right, and his grandmother, "Nega," stop by Neta's kitchen to "borrow" vegetables and get the latest news on Dona Amara's collapse.

was already chopping onions and tuned into the 103FM crime report. The doors were wide-open. It was 7:30. After a walk on the beach with Neta's cousin, Mari, we ate plates of *cuzcuz* under the coconut trees. I got up to wash the dishes — still a source of amusement for Neta and her friends.

I was standing at the sink when a great racket of yelling and running about erupted suddenly. Lucas ran through the kitchen looking for a screwdriver and yelling that his mother's cousin was dying!

Neta's family had gathered in the courtyard of the house to the right of Neta's, a very tidy house with a garden full of flowering plants. Turns out it was the home of Neta's cousin, Dona Amara, to whom Neta doesn't speak because of some long-forgotten family argument.

I watched over Neta's shoulder as Erivan smashed open two padlocks on the gate to the enclosed porch, then two more on the grilled-metal door, and finally pried open the bolt on the front door. Everyone flowed into the living room. To the left was Dona Amara's bedroom. She was crumpled in a corner of the floor naked, soiled and suffering from light convulsions. Mari draped a sheet over her. Neta ran to call for an ambulance. Neta's Aunt Odete and I searched for clean clothing and her identity papers.

With some effort we sat up Dona Amara and slipped a shirt over her head and wiggled pants up over her hips.

Feverish and embarrassed by all of the attention, she waved us away saying she just needed to rest. We all stayed. Neta questioned her about how she felt and whether she had been eating. Odete fussed around the room, tsk-tsking at anything out of order and gathering sheets and towels to take to the hospital. Mari went home to change clothing and get her papers. She would accompany Dona Amara.

The path entering the *Mangue* from the soccer fields narrows and dips too much for a car to pass. But from the other direction, from "*lá em frente*" (out front) where the *Mangue* meets the *Vila* and paved streets, it is possible for a skillful driver to squeeze through to the front of Neta's house. Finally an ambulance arrived, backing its way toward us. It was a white station wagon with a red bubble-gum light, a siren and big red crosses on the windows. When the driver opened up the back door there was not much to see, just a long stretcher and some white sheets. Nothing else.

Several neighborhood men loaded Dona Amara into the ambulance. Mari jumped into the passenger's seat and they bounced and jerked out of the *Mangue*. The crowd of neighbors lingered for a while to speculate and reminisce over other illnesses. Neta disappeared for a while and when she returned and she told me the ambulance had broken down by the bakery just on the edge of the *Vila*. Mari had run back to call another one. When the second ambulance arrived and the drivers began trans-



Little girls playing with a broken umbrella are startled to meet me on the pathway to Neta's.

ferring her, Dona Amara went into convulsions.

That night we learned the second ambulance had broken down on an isolated stretch of road. The driver walked to the nearest phone and called a buddy who arrived in a Volkswagon minivan. Once again Dona Amara was shifted. This time Mari had to hold her up in the back seat of the van.

By nightfall Dona Amara had returned, re-hydrated but in not much better condition. Neta and I boiled water and bathed Dona Amara as Mari held her up. In fresh, clean clothing and resting in dry sheets, Dona Amara looked up at the women surrounding her bed.

"Thank you. I have been a problem today," she whispered.

The others hushed her but she continued, "Thank you, Neta." This was a big deal since the two rarely spoke. Neta waved her hand as if to say anyone would have done the same.

WASH DAY AND SPECIAL EVENTS

To do laundry Neta pulls out two three-foot-wide sturdy aluminum pans with tapered edges. She fills them with water, pours bleach in one and dissolved detergent in the other. Clothing needing extra cleaning soaks in the

first tub; others go directly to the second. After things soak for a while Neta pulls out the pieces one by one and scrubs them in a free-standing laundry tub. She then tosses them into a plastic bucket with water running through it.

When the laundry has rinsed enough Neta tosses it into a fourth tub filled with clean water where it soaks until she needs to stand up straight. Then she wrings everything out and hangs it on barbed-wire clotheslines stretched across the back yard. (The barbed wire saves the repeated expense of clothespins.) When everything is dry, Neta irons it and delivers it. It takes Neta an average of five backbreaking, sweaty hours to do one family's laundry on a weekly basis. For this she earns \$118 a month, while her 20-hour-per-week job with *Coletivo* brings in only one minimum salary of \$80 for the same period.

Neta's work week at the *Coletivo* had been a draining one. She was frustrated with the direction the *Coletivo* was taking. A group of women who work with other social programs had visited the *Coletivo* to learn about the programs offered. Neta had been invited to participate in an open discussion with the visitors. She became angry when the conversation omitted adult women and focused only on adolescent girls. Neta recounted the exchange.

"We sat down to talk about women's lives but that's

not the direction it took. They asked all kinds of questions about young girls and adolescents, but they were talking to us, the ones who work with the women. I felt angry because I think the *Coletivo* is beginning to think of only girls and forget the women. So I said, 'I am not a young girl, but I suffer violence in my life, too.' That's how I took control for a minute to let them know that we are important. Maybe we are old. They don't think to invest in us anymore. But we are the mothers of the young girls they worry about!"

Neta's sense that she was being abandoned made her work harder to make the women in her community groups feel like they had something special in their weekly encounters. The day before had been the birthday of Carmelita a big, brash, outspoken member of the Tururu group. Tururu was all-a-titter about the party.

We arrived just before 3p.m., the normal meeting time. Neta drew a big tree on a piece of poster board and hung it on the wall where Carmelita would see it as she entered. As the other women drifted in, many carrying plates of food or bottles of soda or beer, Neta handed them each a small blue card. When everyone had assembled Neta asked each person to write her birthday wish on the card. Those that could not write dictated their messages.

When Carmelita finally arrived around 4p.m. her entrance was as dramatic as a Hollywood premiere. Her hair and been fluffed and sprayed and her face done up in heavy make-up. This was her moment, and she claimed it as she sashayed into the 90-degree heat of the meeting room wearing a silky white shirt, a long, purple-velvet skirt and spiked heels.

Neta prompted the women to begin reading their "wishes" to Carmelita. One by one the women rose and stood before Carmelita and said: "I wish you respect," "I wish you happiness and the Grace of God," or "I wish you peace." They then taped their wishes to the tree, making it a "tree of the fruit of hopes." It was a simple birthday in a cinderblock meeting house, in a neighborhood of mud roads and meager means.

Friday afternoon promised to be a big event for the women attending the Rio Doce *Coletivo* meeting. Although Mother's Day had passed, they had decided to have a small celebration honoring the day and each other. The theme was along the lines of, "If you don't have a mother, adopt one for a day. If you don't have a child adopt one for a day." Within the group everyone was to bring a little food or drink for the party and a present for a "secret mother" costing no more than one *real* (U.S.58 cents)

I corralled Teco into going to the market with me and offered to find something for Neta at the "R\$.99 Institute of Current World Affairs

Store." Like a little bodyguard, Teco confronted every vendor with whom I dealt. I would negotiate what I thought was a fabulous price of 57 cents for three pineapples and Teco would come behind me and get the price lowered 45 cents, with a taste-test thrown in. "You don't even have to open your mouth, Susana. They see you coming and know they're going to make money."

I was clearly losing face in front of my 12-year-old companion. Loaded down with bags of fruit we zig-zagged through the traffic to the discount store. I found an acrylic picture frame and a set of dish cloths for 75 cents each. Our last stop was the bakery, where Teco chose a chocolate and *goiaba* cake.

When everyone had been fed and the boys herded off to school. Neta gathered everything and we walked to the *Maracatu* center. Neta wrote names on pieces of paper and put them in a bag. But as she started to draw them out, a few women protested, saying they could not participate because they had not had the money to buy a present.

Neta suggested a compromise. Each person would draw a name and those that did not have a present to give would bring one by the end of the month. The women found that reasonable. One by one we drew names and handed out gifts. There were great exclamations of surprise and "This is exactly what I needed!" as they unwrapped plastic colanders, juice pitchers, and "tupperware." As the cake and fruit salad made the rounds the party got pretty close to rowdy. Cleonice poured rounds of orange soda.

As the sun set, the women headed back to their houses laughing and carrying their presents and leftover cake. I hugged Neta, slung my backpack onto my shoulders and headed to the bus stop, carrying a little glass bowl Judete had given me. The bus was sardine-packed and it was with some effort that I wiggled my way to a handrail I could lean against as I dozed on the way south to Recife.

I had a hard time sleeping that night. It was too quiet.

THE CIRCLE TIGHTENS

Over the next month, I was in and out of the *Mangue*. As before, nearly every visit greeted me with bad news. I arrived after a week-long absence to learn Zeze's "heart had weakened" and she was interned in a local hospital for an undetermined period. Neta was not sure which relations had taken in Leo, but thought it might be her daughter Luciana, who, by the way, had suffered a 'mental crisis' because of the stress of her mother's illness and her husband's increasingly brutal behavior.

Another visit revealed that Euridice's husband, who

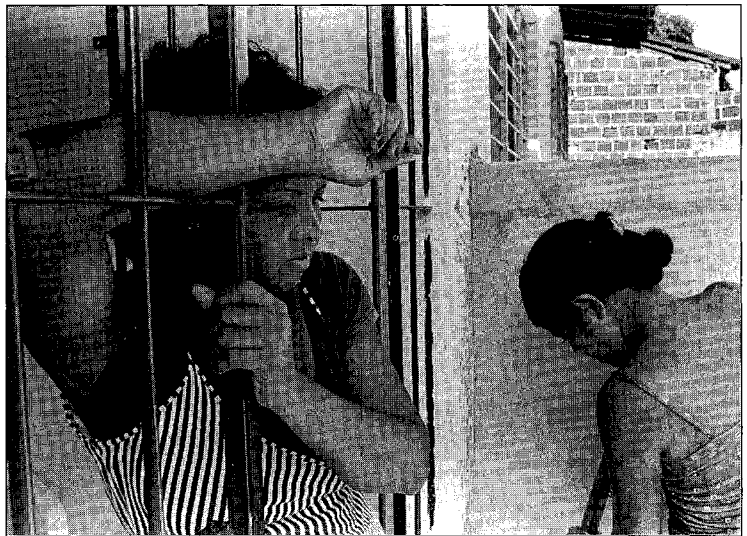


Zezé is overwhelmed and depressed as she sits alone under drying laundry in Neta's back yard. Less than a week later Zezé collapsed with heart and blood pressure problems and was hospitalized.

had been given to all-night jags of crying in the bathroom, had suddenly dried his tears and moved out — into the home of another woman. He announced that he thought it would be fair if Euridice and her daughter kept the house, two chairs and the bed, and he would take everything else to his new girlfriend. Euridice responded by selling the house and moving to Manaus.

June 29th is the feast day of *São Pedro* (Saint Peter), a regional holiday and Neta's 40th birthday. My husband Tyrone and I wrapped up a few small gifts and rode to her house early that morning. We found her alone in the kitchen preparing a huge midday meal. Neta was happy to see us but after a few minutes she sighed. "I'm very sad today, Susana. Piliu's brother, Geraldo, was shot and killed last night." Geraldo, 18, is the boyfriend of Nice's (NEE-see) eldest daughter, Mima. He had spent the evening talking with her at Nice's home and left around 11pm by way of the *Vila*. Some men got out of an unfamiliar car and fired at Geraldo. One bullet went into the air, the other through the back of his head, killing him instantly. The car sped away.

According to Neta, this was the first incidence of fa-



Euridice talks about leaving Rio Doce and returning to Manaus with her daughter Ericka, right, after learning that her husband had decided to move in with another woman.

tal violence in their neighborhood in her 14 years there. While she was telling us this Piliu appeared, eyes red and puffy. Radio 103 had just reported on the incident and had embellished everything; implying a love triangle and saying the body was riddled with bullets. This only added to Piliu's anguish. She was in the process of bundling up her baby and heading to her mother's house.

The morgue had released her brother's body. She needed bus money.

After Piliu left, Neta sounded fragile. She talked about how it was always an uncertain thing to raise three teenaged sons in the *Mangue* and was thankful that her kids' primary interests were still soccer and television.

That was three weeks ago. Since then, five other young men have been fatally shot in the part of the *mangue* across the drainage canal, the area to which Neta refers as *lá atrás*. The soccer fields, once empty at noon, are now frequented by young men no one recognizes. Neta and her neighbors, though confident that crime will not come into their little neighborhood, have nonetheless changed their behavior. No one crosses the soccer fields at night anymore. Every time an unknown car passes people scatter, expecting gunfire. Neta says she's losing sleep and feeling very tense. And much to the dismay of her sons,

she's gotten very strict about when, and where, they can go out.

Neta is sure that one of these days I'll arrive to learn that something has happened to one of her boys, her *santo marido*, or someone else in her family. Violence insinuates its way into *Mangue* life. And for those who live in repressive marriages, violence happens on both sides of a locked door.

Thirty kilometers to the south I've taken to tuning into Radio 103's *Cardeno morning* show just to be certain none of my friends have died.

Until next time,



16 August 1999

Neta just called. Her words knocked the wind out of me.

Zezé's son Damião was released from prison two weeks ago. On Saturday night four men arrived in front of Zezé's house. Two served as lookouts and two entered the living room. Five shots were fired at Damião, killing him instantly. A sixth shot was fired at Leo hitting him in the right side of his chest. Zezé tried to intervene but was pushed away. She ran screaming to Neta's house. They ran after her — but only after pausing to turn off the lights. The delay gave Zezé the edge and she hid behind Neta's house then ran into Simone's begging her to go look and see if Leo was still alive. She knew Damião was dead.

Leo, disoriented and in shock, also ran to Neta's house. But finding the front doors closed he tottered across the pathway to Luiz-the-accordion-player's house. Luiz scraped him up and carried him to the main road to call an ambulance. Leo is in the hospital. His right lung collapsed.

Neta took Zezé, hysterical and fainting to another emergency room. Only after seeing Zezé hooked up to monitors and sedated did Neta realize what had happened. She began to cry and could not stop. "Susan, I cried because I was afraid. I felt it in my heart and I could not stop crying. I could not think. I could not concentrate. I realized then that I was saved because I had gone to [my nephew's] birthday party. But any other Saturday at that time I would have been home. My sons would have been home. Zezé would have run in here with

the gunmen following her. They needed to kill her because she was a witness. Then they would have killed me, my sons— more witnesses."

My heart is racing. I can hear blood pounding in my ears. I feel useless, paralyzed and overwhelmed. How much more violence can they take? Zezé will never recover from the trauma of seeing one son killed and another (if he survives) wounded in front of her. And what of Leo, my earnest scholarly friend — damaged, scared by the very life he lives. Will he ever get beyond this or is he now an old man in a boy's body? Will he ever have another secure, child-like moment of absolute joy? (This begs the question: Has he ever?)

I have the overwhelming impulse to sweep them away. To collect them all and take them somewhere safe where they have enough to eat, good health and security. I want to take Leo somewhere peaceful. I see visions of adopting him if Zezé collapses. But the truth is I have nowhere to take them. Who would I take? Who would I leave behind?

I find myself angry with Damião, a dead man I never met. Surely he knew he was "hot." He knowingly brought danger into Zezé's house and destroyed her life and Leo's. If Leo does not pull through I doubt Zezé will make it. She's sedated right now — not even stable enough to go to the hospital and see Leo. She refuses to enter her house.

My worst fear has come true. The circle of violence kept tightening around this little Rio Doce neighborhood huddled against the *mangue*. It's fully



Zezé's son Leo, 10, holds his mother's hand as he rests on a hospital bed two days after being shot in an ambush that left his brother, Damião dead.

present now — permanently warping their lives and leaving me with a hopeless sadness.

17 August

Yesterday was Zezé's 50th birthday and knowing that her favorite thing in the world is codfish, I picked up a kilo of *bacalhau* for her and one for Neta. I couldn't bear showing up empty-handed. Walking through the door with dried fish didn't seem strange to anyone. It was something, a distraction.

No one was hanging around the pathways when we arrived. It was ghost town.

But Neta's backyard bustled with activity. Peu and Lucas emptied wheelbarrows of sand into the backyard as a friend carried bags of cement through the kitchen to store near the bathroom. "I am afraid, Susan. I'm building a wall around my house. It will be more than two meters high. I'll put glass shards on top," said Neta.

We left the fish with Neta and headed to the hospital to visit Leo. Zezé was there with him. Standing in line outside the hospital I felt nauseated and as if I were choking. Since Neta's phone call I had been liv-

ing with the image of Leo whirling about, bewildered, blood flowing from his chest and calling out for help. I wasn't sure I wanted to see him, but positive I had to — to stop the images.

I climbed four floors and found Leo's room, a sparse affair with a mixture of a dozen cribs and beds, all of them full. Leo lay curled shrimp-like on a black vinyl bed. I embraced Zezé and felt tears welling up under the sad force of her hug but Leo's eye caught mine and warned me not to cry.

"Don't cry, Mom. It's not worth it. Don't cry." Leo's eyes were large and bright as he spoke. He was the one holding his mother together.

Leo held up his hand and showed me where pieces of flesh were missing from his ring and pinkie fingers. He had held up his hand to protect himself but insisted, "They didn't mean to kill me, Susana. I am not afraid. The bullet was for my brother. I am not going to die." He paused, panting from the effort to talk and the pain of breathing with a drainage tube in his lung. He looked at me for a few seconds, eyes sharp and knowing. Then glanced at his mother to make sure she was out of range, "I don't want to go back. I don't want to stay there. They'll come back."