

## **Planning Your Trip**

Don't believe my lies. This is not a travel book. You will not find a section on language or the latest currency exchange rates. If you care to check the facts you will find they are inaccurate. If you try to use this book as a guide you will end up totally lost. Which is what happened to me. Lost in South America. Trapped in a web of my own lies and deceit. This is what happened to me. Don't believe a word of it.

I love Sarah. That much is true. She's why I'm on a flight to Rio. She's why I quit my job, my friends, my life. She's why I breathe.

I don't want you to get the wrong idea. It's not like we're a couple. I just adore her. It's an unrequited infatuation at the moment, but I believe it can, and will, be more. All I have to do is talk to her.

We have spoken, but only ever small talk and mainly about work. Even then I felt my tongue gripped by panic, unable to form proper sentences. How was she supposed to love me back when I couldn't even talk to her? But all that is going to change. I understand her now, better than I really should. I'll have to be careful about that. When I find her.

You see, I have a unique insight into her thoughts. That's why I know she's staying at The New Copacabana Hostel in Rio. At least I know she was there three days ago - the last time she emailed her parents.

It really wasn't my fault. When Sarah left work I didn't ask to be moved to her desk. If they hadn't done that I never would have used her computer to check my emails. Her workstation was still cluttered with mementos of her time at the company. There were post-it notes stuck to the edge of her monitor reminding her of tasks destined to remain unfinished, and her top drawer still contained the peel from her last mid-morning orange.

On her computer she had left an even greater digital footprint. You can tell a lot about a person from their computer. Like how trusting they are. Personally, before clearing my desk I had wiped all trace of my presence from my old hard disk. Sarah hadn't even changed her wallpaper - a shot of her pet cat at Christmas time. I didn't go through her web history though. Not immediately. All I did was direct the web browser to my email provider. I had no idea she used the same service as me.

Her email and password were still filled in.

I suppose it was wrong to sign into her account, but my motives were good. All I wanted was to gain an insight into the beautiful stranger who had unknowingly captivated my heart as she sat three desks away from me for the past six months. It was an instinctive reaction, and I don't think I should be blamed for it. Reading all of her emails and continuing to sign into her account on a regular basis, however? That, I probably can be blamed for.

I just couldn't help myself. Instant access to her correspondence as she prepared for the trip of a lifetime allowed me to get close to her in a way I'd only achieved in daydreams. I read her cheerful goodbyes to old school mates, and the endearing admission of last minute nerves to her best

friend, Tammy. Going back further, I re-lived a protracted break-up with her uncommunicative and unadventurous boyfriend, Johnny. He wouldn't come with her, refusing to "fall a year behind his peers" - whatever that meant.

Johnny used to lie to her when he wanted to go out with his mates. She hated his dishonesty the most. She tried so hard to make it work, but how was she supposed to maintain a long-distance relationship with a guy who couldn't even be bothered to reply to her thoughtful and detailed emails? Obviously I was ecstatic that they'd split, but it just killed me to read her final email to him, pleading to still be friends and maybe see how they felt on her return. He didn't reply, or if he did it was deleted. I knew then that I'd be prepared to do anything to be with her.

The idea of going after her first came to me as I was reading an email she had sent to Tammy six months ago, on the very day I'd started at the G&P Building Society.

Date: Monday 12<sup>th</sup> July  
To: tamster2000@freemail.co.uk  
Subject: I HATE MONDAYS!!!!

Hey Tam,

Start of anutha boring week at G&P. I can't wait to get out of this place!!!  
1 gud thing tho - new guy started today and he's kinda cute! Quiet but prob just shy.

After J's asshole behaviour Fri nite, mebbe I'll have to flirt!!! ;-)

Sar xoxox

Maybe she did flirt! I remember her smiling at me on that first day. I'll never forget it. It was the only thing that made the

prospect of a future processing mortgage applications even vaguely tolerable. Tammy's reply wasn't helpful.

Date: Monday 12<sup>th</sup> July  
To: sezrahadley@usernet.com  
Subject: Re: I HATE MONDAYS!!!!

Arrghhh!! Late again!! Boss is goin nutz. Don't worry bout J, was just drunk n showing off. Mebbe u set me up with new guy??

Txxx

That was it. Two mentions as 'new guy'. I was never referred to again, but it didn't matter. I was 'kinda cute'. If I'd really believed for one moment that Sarah thought I was cute I would've found the courage to tell her how I felt. I'm sure of it. She deserved to be with a guy who appreciated her, not some idiot like Johnny who only cared about himself. The more I read, the more I believed that I could be everything she needed. But now she was gone, flown to the other side of the world, forever to remain ignorant of the shy-but-cute new guy's feelings. Unless I did something drastic.

I hated working at G&P. There wasn't much I didn't hate about my whole life, in fact. They were talking about making me a permanent staff member. I could see my future stretching out ahead of me, and I couldn't stand it. At first I just toyed with the idea. Fantasised about the possibility. Checked the availability of flights online, proceeding as far as the payment screen before closing down. I took my dad's old canvas backpack out of the attic, just to see how it looked. I wasn't really serious. That is until she sent her first email home.

Date: Friday 12<sup>th</sup> January  
To: frankandgeraldine@btopenworld.com  
Subject: Arrived safe

Dear Mum & Dad,

Rio is brilliant!!! Landed safe this morn and already having a fantastic time hanging out on the beach soaking up the rays! Don't worry, I'm using plenty of factor fifty as promised. I'm getting a tan already tho!!! Staying at a lovely homely hostel called The New Copacabana which was recommended in the guide book.

Feels so weird being away from home alone but I've already made friends with some Aussie boys who are staying in the same place so I'm not lonely.

They are taking me to a samba club tonite!

Love and miss you guys (and Candy!)

Sarah xxx

Something clicked in my brain. The information I needed was right there. A quick internet search told me the address of the hostel she was staying at. Imagine her surprise when I turned up. I'd tell her that she'd inspired me to travel as well, and what a coincidence that we'd ended up in the same place. What a story it would make to tell the grandkids.

And so I started to spend the inheritance money I had promised not to waste. I booked myself a one-way ticket to Rio on the next available flight, just two days later. I packed my dad's old bag and explained to my mum and brother that this was something that I had to do. They were shocked and confused by my haste, but they understood. Mum even said that Dad would have been proud.

I didn't even tell work. I just didn't turn up today. Instead I took a bus to Heathrow, boarded a plane and left everything behind. Heading for South America. For Rio. For Sarah.

## Chapter One: What to Pack

So, I'm not your regular backpacker. I can tell this as I eye up a couple in the queue for taxis at Rio International Airport. He has more head hair than her, and she has more body hair than him. Their loose and scanty clothing is faded and dirty, and standing behind them I can smell the sour stench of their body odour. It surprises me that people are allowed to enter a country in this state. I like to think that the UK customs would turn them away on principle.

I'll have to be careful though, or soon I'll be joining them in the ranks of the Great Unwashed. Already I'm starting to regret my choice of jeans and a long-sleeved shirt. The temperature outside is a few degrees above sweltering, and even in the air-conditioned terminal I can feel my shirt sticking to my back with sweat where Dad's pack is pressed against me. I envy this malodorous pair their vests, shorts and hi-tech backpacks, complete with adjustable weight compensation straps and compression chambers. They look at ease, in their element.

Dad's bag is reliable, if not exactly comfortable. He took it all over the world with him on his numerous buying trips. I never once heard him complain about the coarse fabric chafing his shoulders or the thin straps digging into his skin. He worked as a buyer for a rare artifacts catalogue, sourcing local artisans from the countries he visited and arranging bulk purchases of their more marketable wares. Every time he came home from an adventure he would bring a new carved wooden statue or intricate piece of wrought metal for our already heaving shelves.

Finally I reach the front of the taxi queue. I hand Dad's bag to a driver and he buckles under its weight, heaving it into the boot with a grunt. When Dad travelled his bag was always loose with space to spare, but now it is full to bursting. I didn't have a lot of time to pack my stuff and didn't want to leave anything behind, so I've packed a few luxury items that your regular backpacker probably does without. For example I have a full suit. When I meet Sarah I would like to take her for dinner in the smartest restaurant I can find, and I want to be able to dress appropriately. Most travellers seem to think that mobility is an excuse for poor hygiene, but I'm not some smelly student dodging soap and work for a year - I'm a man on a mission.

So yes, I've packed a few cosmetic products. My pale skin burns easily in the sun, so I have a range of suncreams to help me adjust to the heat. My dark hair can be unruly with a tendency to curl, so I have wax, gel and a comb to maintain my neat side parting. I also hate not to be clean-shaven. My sensitive skin requires shaving oil, foam and a fresh razor. And I like to moisturise. I don't see why I should suffer from chapped and prematurely wrinkled skin just because a few macho idiots deem it effeminate.

When I see Sarah I want to look my best, even if it means my bag is heaving at the seams. I'm the kind of guy who's prepared to suffer a little discomfort to look good, and I hope Sarah is the kind of girl who will appreciate that. I'm sure she is. With her chocolate brown hair and flawlessly smooth skin, she always looked perfect to me. Even towards the end of a tough day in the office when her fringe used to fall into her face. I used to love watching the way she always blew it ineffectively away when she was losing, but pushed it behind her ear when she

was making a sale. I could tell if she'd sold a mortgage before she could.

I get in the back of the cab and tell the driver to take me to The New Copacabana Hostel. Fortunately he seems to understand English. I haven't even had time to learn the most basic Spanish yet. I meant to try on the plane, but couldn't make myself open the pocket phrasebook I bought at Heathrow. I also wanted to go to the doctor to get some immunisations before I left, but there just wasn't time. I was worried they would stop me at the border and demand a certificate or something, but they didn't say a word. I'm just going to do my best to avoid any potentially dangerous or unsanitary situations. Hopefully England will let me back in when I return.

As we pull away, a blessed burst of air-con fills the taxi and chills the sweat on my back. I'm looking forward to checking into a hotel. Hopefully Sarah's place will be nice enough, although I wonder if I shouldn't find somewhere else. I don't want to create too big a coincidence, although she's got a three day head start on me and I can't afford to lose any more time.

I take out my MP3 player and allow Sarah to choose some 'arrival in Rio' music. This was another piece of her digital footprint, and my second great violation of her privacy. On her computer she left an extensive library of her favourite songs. Before I left I downloaded all of her music directly onto my player. I've even got her playlists, including 'most played' so I can learn exactly what she likes listening to, and which tracks she plays the most.

When we meet I can guarantee we will have at least one thing in common. We'll have exactly the same taste in music. She has a really wide and eclectic collection, including lots of

bands that I like, but sadly she doesn't seem to listen to most of it very often. In fact there are about twenty songs she listens to on repeat, and very little else. I recognise some of them, but most are unknown to me. For this ride I go for her third most listened to track: 'I Want You to Want Me' by a band called Cheaptrick. It's not bad, although I don't know if I could listen to it forty times as Sarah has. At least the sentiment is apt.

It's strange to think I'm actually in South America. It was just so easy. I remember being afraid every time Dad left on one of his trips. Mum would let me sit up and watch his flight on teletext, checking to make sure they had taken off okay, and then landed - sometimes the next morning. When I was younger, if he was flying overnight I would have nightmares. I was convinced that flying in a plane, just like everything he did, was incredibly dangerous. As the driver brakes suddenly for a red light, it turns out that this cab ride is more frightening than the whole transatlantic flight.

Our home was never the same when Dad was away. Lights shone less brightly and colours faded to grey. Mum tried to keep things going, but she needed his energy to power our existence. Without him we were just ordinary people living mundane lives. It was always a relief when he crashed back in through the door, filling the place with stories of his adventures. Until the one time he didn't.

There was a late night phone call on the day he was due home. I'd stayed up late to make sure his plane landed. It had, but he wasn't on it. With tears in her eyes, Mum took Martin and I up to their normally out-of-bounds room. We sat down on the bed, and waited for her to tell us the news I already knew was coming.

Dad had been in an accident. He had been driving a rented jeep along a dirt road to Dar-es-Salaam airport in Tanzania, when it had hit a pothole and overturned. He had been killed instantly. Mum's voice cracked and she shook uncontrollably as she told us. It was as if she didn't believe the words she was saying. I could. I had been waiting for these words for as long as I could remember. It was the fulfillment of my greatest fear. When she was finished speaking, she pulled the covers aside and lay down onto the bed. We thought she'd never get up.

You could say I've had a pretty healthy hatred for travelling all my life. I knew the trips that took Dad away from me would eventually take him forever. That's what makes it so strange for me to be in South America. It feels surreal and yet so normal. So real. I grew up listening to Dad's stories, and now I'm in one of my own. Part of me expects to wake up back at my desk. But I'm not going to. I'm in Brazil, racing through the streets of Rio, and I feel more alive than ever.

The taxi pulls up outside the hostel. I get out and retrieve my pack, tipping the guy one of the larger colourful notes from my wallet. I don't need to live on a shoestring. That was part of my father's farewell package. With a job like his he was heavily insured. Mum insisted that the money be divided between Martin and me. She didn't need it and didn't want it. Problem was, neither did I. I didn't want any good to come from his death. None. I felt guilty for even putting it into a high interest account. For the past year it has grown in interest like some sort of malignant tumour. Martin was more pragmatic, telling me to be grateful for the chance to fulfill my ambitions. I had none.

I took the job at G&P just to kill time. Since Dad died I'd drifted along in a trance for a year, deferring and then dropping out of the university course I was enrolled in. Somehow geology had lost its appeal. Besides, I'd messed up my 'A' levels so badly they probably wouldn't have let me in anyway. Eventually Mum insisted that I find a job, but nothing interested me - until I saw Sarah. She was the only thing that had made the last six months bearable.

I thought my decision to travel would upset Mum, but she was just glad to get me out of the house. She made me promise to stay in regular contact, be safe and keep out of trouble, but she was happy I'd finally found something to live for.

## Chapter Two: Where to Stay

The New Copacabana is a hole.

At first I can't see a hostel at all, so I ask the taxi driver if we're in the right place. He nods his head in confirmation, and points at a wrought iron gate that leads off the main street. The gate swings open at my touch, and I proceed down a dark alleyway that opens into a small residential plaza. There is nothing here that looks like a hotel, but I can see that many of the terraced houses have small signs, alarmingly home-made, revealing them to be hostels. I pass The New Rio, The New Rio II, The Copacabana and then reach The New Copacabana.

There is nothing new-looking about it.

Like the rest it is simply a terraced house, white paint peeling from its ageing façade and a cracked set of concrete steps leading into what I can only assume is the lobby. So far I see none of the evidence of the 'homeliness' of which Sarah wrote, except that it very probably used to be someone's home. The door is slightly ajar, so I push it open and enter reluctantly. Considering Rio's reputation for crime, the hoteliers seem to be remarkably lax about security.

'Hello?' I call into a communal area that looks very much like a living room. 'Hola?' There doesn't seem to be anyone around.

'Hey man,' croaks a voice from one of the sofas. A shirtless Brazilian stretches out his dark, tattooed body and yawns.

'Hola, Señor,' I reply.

'Oh-ee. You want a bed?' he asks, grinning at me widely. He is about my age, maybe slightly older.

'Um, do you work here?' I ask.

'Yeah man, this is my place. I'm ----.' He tells me his name, but I can't understand it at all.

'Oh. Well I'm looking for someone.'

'Sure chico. Come drop your stuff.' With that he heads up the stairs, beckoning me to follow.

'She's a guest at this... place,' I say as I stumble up the narrow staircase.

'Right. In here.' He pushes open the door to a small room, cramped with three bunk beds. The bottom bunk of one is occupied. I can see some dreadlocks, like thick spider legs, trailing down to the floor. A light snore courses through the room.

'I don't think you understand,' I say, but the Brazilian shushes me and manhandles the bag from my back, chucking it onto a vacant top bunk. I can see that the other two bunks are in use from the personal effects strewn across them, although they are currently unoccupied. This is not what I had in mind. I go to speak again, but the Brazilian puts his finger to his lips and gestures for me to leave the room. I don't want to leave my bag in this room with a stranger, but I don't really have a choice. I'll come and get it as soon as I've got some information.

'First time in Rio?' The Brazilian pulls the door shut, leaving my possessions inside with the unknown snorer.

'Yes.'

'You gonna love it.'

Downstairs the Brazilian digs around in a large pile of papers, then flourishes a battered old exercise book triumphantly.

'Passport?' he asks.

'What?'

'I need your passport. Check you in.'

'Oh, right.' My passport is still in my pocket from the airport, so I hand it to him.

'How long you stay?'

'I'm not sure. I'm looking for someone you see.'

'Sure you are. I'll just leave it blank.'

'Uh, how much?'

'Thirty hey-ice a day. Free breakfast eight 'til ten, free internet all day.' He points to an old PC in the corner of the room.

'Right. Do I pay now?'

'Whenever, chico.'

The Brazilian chucks my passport back at me and I fumble it to the floor. He shuts up the exercise book and climbs back onto the sofa.

'Do I get a key for the room?'

'Don't worry. This place twenty-four hour.'

'Oh,' I nod. Twenty-four hour. That's a relief. As soon as I find a decent hotel I'm out of here. First I've got to get some information out of this guy, although it looks as if he has gone back to sleep already.

'Excuse me?' He opens one eye. 'Do you know if there is a girl called Sarah staying here?'

'Que?'

'Sarah. Sarah Hadley. Dark hair, really pretty?'

'Man, a lot of pretty chicas stay here. Sarah... maybe. I tell you one thing Mozart, if she's here, she'll be at the beach.'

'Oh. Right.'

'Turn left on the main road, walk two blocks. You can't miss it.'

'Thanks. Um...'

He says his name again, but I still can't understand it.

'Thanks. How'd you know my name?'

'Your passport, man.'

'Oh. Of course.'

I leave the hostel and head out to the main street. Sarah must be down at the beach. I'm feeling pretty tired after a restless night and then the flight all day today, and my body clock has lost all track of time. Hopefully there will be lots of nice beachfront hotels for me to choose from. Walking down the busy, sun-baked street I realise I should probably get changed, or at least look in a mirror before I try to find Sarah. I've brought some smart clothes to wear when I see her, but they are back in the hostel with the snorer, and I don't fancy getting changed with a stranger in the room. I catch my reflection in a shop window. It doesn't look too bad. I can always get changed before taking her out for dinner or something. First I've got to find her though. And she's less than a block away.

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Copacabana beach is a vast strip of neatly tended yellow sand that crests Rio's sticky warm metropolis. Joggers, skaters and cyclists make their way along the beachfront whilst men in tight trunks work their muscles on rudimentary gym equipment. Footballers execute elaborate bicycle kicks and bathers scream at the power of the Atlantic Ocean. From its vantage point high

above the city, the gigantic statue of Christ the Redeemer keeps a watchful eye over the citizens.

I stare at the women.

Everywhere I look bikinis disappear up beautifully tanned and rounded backsides. Breasts heave against tiny triangles of brightly coloured lycra and flesh jiggles mesmerically. Sun-seeking bodies pack the sand in either direction almost as far as the eye can see. There must be thousands of them. How the hell am I supposed to find Sarah?

In my shirt and jeans I am not just overdressed, I am positively Victorian. I walk along the beachfront, sweat running from my pores, feeling like a pervert. There is literally nowhere for me to look that isn't directly at a near naked woman. Or man. The place oozes sex and sensuality, and I am a creature from another planet.

As I approach a cluster of parasols, a guy ushers me into a plastic seat under the shade and hands me a cold can of beer. I don't really understand why he has done this, but it seems like a bloody good idea. I drink the beer quickly, enjoying its cooling effect. There is a tugging on my sleeve, and a small child is staring up at me. He points to the can and looks hopeful, so I down the rest and hand it to him. He diligently crushes it and places it in a plastic sack full of empties. I guess he's about six years old.

The world suddenly seems like a very large place. A wave of doubt crashes over me. I am not going to find Sarah in this melting pot. I need sleep. I need air-conditioning. As I get up to leave, the beer guy says something I don't understand. He must want money for the beer, so I pull out my wallet and hand him a note. He looks at it distrustfully and shakes his head. I offer a second note, but he just laughs, jabbars at me again and

then walks away. Looking at the second note I realise I've given him a fifty. The guy has disappeared. I glance about the beach but there is no way I could recognise him. Besides, all I can see are butt-cheeks.

Thankfully he soon returns, clutching a handful of colourful notes and coins. He just didn't have change. I take the money gratefully and stick it in my pocket. I've got to figure out how much things cost here. I've got to learn more Spanish. I've got to get some sleep.

But Rio is built in blocks, a neat grid of identical streets, and I can't find the road I came from. Everything looks the same, nothing is familiar. I don't even know the street name. I ask someone for directions, but they don't speak my language. Why would they? I try heading down a likely street, but after two blocks I can't see the gate anywhere. Marching back to the beach I start to panic. I'm not even sure if it's left or right, and my head is pounding.

It's probably only ten minutes of desperate searching before I recognise a pizza place and manage to make my way back to the hostel, but it feels a lot longer. Shattered and disoriented, I stumble up the stairs. Unchecked by their twenty-four hour security policy, I walk right into the dorm room and pull my bag from the bed. I could be anyone right now. I'd rather be anyone right now. The arachno-headed snorer is still at it as I strip to my boxers and climb into the top bunk. The bed is hard, the snores are loud and I am unbearably hot. Somehow I fall asleep within moments.

When I awake, the room is dark and deserted. I have been dreaming but I can't hold onto the details. The bed sheets are twisted around me and I feel sweaty and unclean. My watch reads midnight, but I never set it to Brazilian time. I wind it back two hours, and realise I missed dinner.

The shared bathroom across the hall only has cold water and no mirror, but I feel better for a quick shower and change of clothes. Even at ten pm the air temperature is still unpleasantly oppressive. Pulling on my lightest pair of slacks and a fresh shirt I begin to gain a better understanding for the minimal fabric of the standard backpacker's garb. Still, the lightweight M&S cotton feels good against my skin and I head downstairs feeling much more human.

The hostel has come alive. Rhythmic percussion-driven music is playing from a radio. There's a poker game going on, and a queue for the computer. As I look around the Brazilian from earlier hails me from his seat at the game.

'Andrew, Yo!'

'Hola,' I say, walking over to where he sits with three surly and stubble-ridden guys.

'You play?' he asks, motioning to a spare seat.

'Sure, but I need to go get some food.'

'Yeah man, me too. Play a few hands first? I got chips.' A half eaten bag sits on the table. 'Oh yeah, and I think I remembered your chica.'

I sit down at the table.

'This is Jean, Oli and...'

'Sacha,' grunts one of the other players.

'Of course, Sacha. They are French.'

'Hola, I'm Andrew,' I say, shaking hands with the three guys.

'Bonsoir, Andrew,' says Jean, 'we are French, not Spanish.'

'Right, but you know, when in Brazil and all that...'

'We speak Portuguese, not Spanish,' says the Brazilian.

'Oh. So how do I say hello?'

'Oe, amigo. O-E. Or just hello. Texas hold-em, Five hey-ice to be in.'

'There are three of those to the pound, right?'

'Two to the Euro,' says one of the French guys.

I throw in a five note.

'How come it says 'Reals' on the money?'

'That is just how it is spelt, man. We say hey-ice.'

'You really just got off the plane, huh?' asks Sacha.

'Yep, just today.'

'Welcome to South America.' They all raise their beers in a toast. The Brazilian hands me a can and I crack it open.

'To South America.'

'Hey Andrew, tell these guys your last name.'

'Why?' I ask, but I know why. My name has been amusing people in England for the first twenty years of my life. There's no reason it shouldn't entertain people in Brazil too.

'It's cool.' The Brazilian smiles and nods reassuringly. He might think it's cool. He should try having it in a British comprehensive school.

'Mozart,' I mumble.

'No way!' says Jean.

'Zut!' says Oli. Sacha spits a bit of beer back into his can to allow a burst of laughter to escape.

'That is too cool, hombre,' says the Brazilian. Jean says something in French which makes Oli and Sacha laugh even harder. I don't need to speak their language to know they are taking the piss.

'Your bet, Mozart.'

All my life I have been plagued by my last name. At school I was called 'Music-boy' and 'Pianist-head', sometimes confusingly 'Frenchie' and, most often, 'Moz-fart'. My school was full of cretins. In the corridors people would sing opera at me or shout at me to write them a tune. I don't have a musical bone in my body, but that didn't stop Mr. Pocky, my boss at G&P, christening me 'The Composer' on my very first day. He used to make the same joke about me being good on the keyboard at least once a week. Arsehole.

I put on my well practiced grin of good humour and raise the bet.

'So, you know Sarah?' I ask.

'Sure. I mean I think so.' He stops to consider the raise. 'Sarah. Beautiful, nice big.. smile.' The French guys snicker.

'So she's here?' The blood rushes in my ears. The Brazilian folds.

'No. She left a couple of days ago.'

'Oh.'

'Yeah. Last time I saw her she was hooked up with some guys. I booked them a taxi to the bus station. I'm sorry, man.'

'Where were they going?' I demand.

'Easy Andrew. I don't know, they just went to the station.'

This is unbelievable. She couldn't hang around in Rio for a week? And 'hooked up with some guys' - no doubt these were the Australians she mentioned in her email.

'Don't worry. I got an idea who might know where she's gone.'

'Really?'

'Yeah. Ali will know. I'll send her a text, see if she wants to meet for some food.' He takes out his phone. 'So what is she, a girlfriend?'

'Sort of.'

'You come here for her? Must be some chica.'

'She is.'

The queue for the internet has grown even longer, so I sit and play poker for a while. I've played online a bit, but I'm too distracted and hungry to wait for decent cards. I end up losing most of my stack to one of Frenchmen on a bluff.

'You play badly for a musician,' he says, and they all laugh again.

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The Brazilian's name is Vinicius. He has to write it down for me before I can repeat it. He arranges to meet Ali at a restaurant a couple of blocks from the hostel, which he assures me does the best chicken in Rio. We arrive first, take a table next to the window and order a pitcher of beer. We're halfway through it before Ali arrives. She blusters in wearing a full flowing skirt and floral headscarf, a traumatised expression on her face.

'Oh, did you see that?' she asks, dropping her head to her hands and pointing outside. 'That young child, begging there. I had to give him something, he was so young!' She's English, and judging by accent pretty well-to-do.

'You shouldn't Ali,' says Vinicius

'I know, I know, but he just broke my heart.'

'They all do. But they work for gangmasters, I've told you.'

'Yes. Yes, I know,' Ali wipes her brow dramatically and turns to me with a pained smile, 'but it's so hard isn't it? You must be Andrew, so pleased to meet you.' She holds out her hand to me, palm down. I clasp her fingers and shake them awkwardly.

'Hello,' I say.

'So, you're Saz's friend?' she asks, sitting down. Saz?

'Yes, we worked together. How do you know her?' I ask.

'Well, as I'm sure Vinnie has told you, I come down to the hostel every now and then to teach a bit of Portuguese and Spanish to you gringos. Ha hah!' she laughs at her own joke.

'Anyway, Sarah had a little lesson and we ended up firm friends.'

'When was this?'

'I don't know. Saturday, I think. Why do you want to know?' Ali's eyes are small, deep set and piercing. If I was being unkind I'd call them piggy. I've taken an instant dislike to her, and I don't really even need to talk to her. I could just wait for Sarah to email home, but the sooner I find out where she has gone the sooner I can catch up with her.

'I'm trying to find her. Do you know where she has gone?'

'Of course. But I'm not sure I should tell just anyone. Who are you again?'

The waiter arrives with a second pitcher of beer and a plate of Nando's style chicken, giving me a moment to prepare a response. I can feel the beer boosting my confidence.

'For all I know you could be some crazy stalker.'

'I'm not. Look, I'll tell you the truth. It's a bit embarrassing but I don't care.' Ali clasps her hands together in anticipation of scandal. 'I'm her boyfriend. Or at least I was, and I'd like to be again.'

'So you are a stalker!' she gasps.

'No, just a hopeless romantic.'

Vinicius smiles at this and raises his glass to me.

'Wait... I thought you said you worked together?'

'Let me tell you the whole story.'

'It had better be good.' She folds her meaty arms across her ample bosom.

'We worked in the same office, and we started going out. We split just before she came out here. I'm surprised she didn't mention me, what with you being so close and all.' This is risky.

'Well yes, she did mention you actually. She did say something about a boyfriend who was a boring berk.' Guess she didn't mention his name then. I accidentally let out a little blurt of laughter.

'What's so funny?'

'Nothing, just - that's so Saz, you know?'

'I know.'

'Anyway, I realised that I can't be without her, and I'm here to prove her wrong. To show her that I can take risks.'

'Why don't you just email her then, tell her you're here?'

'I want to surprise her. I'm trying to win her back.'

'And you think stalking her is the way to do that?'

I look at Ali and muster all the sincerity I can. Hopefully she will fall for it.

'I love her,' I say.

She stares back, her eyes widen and I swear her lip begins to wobble.

'Sao Paolo!' she blurts. 'She headed to Sao Paolo with two Australians, Brett and Brad, I think.'

'Thank you Ali. You are a good person.'

'You need to watch out,' she says. 'I think they're after her.'

I bet they are. Already my mind is filled with thoughts of Sarah, my Sarah, with Brad at one end and Brett at the other.

'So are you gonna go?' asks Vinicius.

'Hell yes!' We high five. 'Tomorrow!'

'Tomorrow? Man you just got here! You haven't even been up to see Christ yet!'

'Fuck Christ!' I shout.

The patrons at the surrounding tables stare at me. An old lady crosses herself. Vinicius winces.

'Sorry, sorry,' I say.

'Desculpe,' says Ali, frowning.

'Yeah, Mea Culpa. But I'm on a mission!' Vinicius high fives me again.

'A mission of love!'

Want to read more? The Liar's Guide to South America is available as an ebook from Amazon priced £2.05. If you can't afford it email me at [info@michaeldelwiche.co.uk](mailto:info@michaeldelwiche.co.uk) quoting the code P£NNILESSARTIST and I'll send it to you for free.