

Belém

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“Can we begin?” she asked, staring up at him with big pleading eyes. She was the most beautiful girl in the room, the kind of girl you catch yourself looking at involuntarily, because even looking is such a thrill. And this he had done, for some time, until her gay friend came over and told him “My friend thinks you’re beautiful.”

She spoke barely a word of English and he hardly spoke more Portuguese, so her gay friend translated between them. “She says you are very beautiful,” the translator would say, and he, not knowing how to react, would ask her name. “She says she wants to be your girlfriend,” the translator would say, and, not knowing how much was embellished, he would ask what she did. And so it went for what seemed like an hour.

“She says, ‘Can we begin?’” the translator finally said.

“Uhh...,” he replied.

“In Brazil,” he explained, “it is traditional for the man to go first.”

“Ohh...,” he replied.

And then they made out.

Belém is like that.

It is a city that can only be described as *laid back*, a sprawl of falling buildings and faded billboards, a distinctively Latin American city, where men wander around with their shirts off and adults sit in chairs by the side of the road. No one is ever in a hurry.

Kids roam the streets, couples hand-in-hand, with no adults in sight. Two teens stand necking on the sidewalk. Something interesting is always going on.

The first night we walked a block and got swept into a student opera about the Amazon. We ducked out only to find a wrestling match staged by clowns in drag. A few blocks away, passing three outdoor bands, we found the waterfront, along which were a dozen shops and restaurants, and another couple bands.

When we couldn’t find a table, a couple invited us to join theirs. When I couldn’t speak Portuguese, they just gave the universal thumbs-up and grinned,

then offered me a drink. They copied down the address of the bar they were heading to and tried to discuss Fergie of the Black-Eyed Peas.

Parks are everywhere. And bars are close behind. So we went hopping from one to another, drinking and talking long into the night.

The next morning the empty metal shells surrounding the park had been filled in to form a bustling marketplace. The streets were full of life and shirtless kids hauled carts on their shoulders.

The World Social Forum was already being dismantled by the time we got there, but it was still inspiring in its scope. 200,000 activists came to this city, each hoping for something bigger than themselves. They filled up all the planes in and out and took over both universities, and used it all to build a giant party.

Signs and arrows pointed every direction, each former classroom commandeered for a discussion on some new topic. Kids posed for tourist photos by the welcome sign featuring the Forum's slogan: "Another world is possible." Possible, but not present. Everywhere were tables selling books, food, trinkets, shirts. Vendors lined the sidewalks hawking bottled water and packaged candies. Litter lined the streets.

The rain falls in spurts. First a trickle, then a flood, then right back to a trickle. A rent-a-cop pats a girl's head. The streets curve, and wind, and turn back into themselves. The water here is brown, like sludge. When I first saw it from the sky I mistook it for a strange kind of land. I made the same mistake again when I saw it on the map.

A bus goes from one university to the other. The seats quickly fill and kids pack into the aisle, three-deep. It ambles down a tiny narrow road, surrounded by ramshackle *favela* houses. Kids chase each other past the buildings. The bus passes through quickly.

The other university is packed and sprawling. A crowd stands with umbrellas in the mud, listening to a man chant slogans from a stage. The road continues down into the Amazon, past tent cities and soccer fields and gardens and exhibitions. Cars share the street peacefully with crowds of people. A boombox on the sidewalk; dancing in the streets. The path always lined with vendors and litter.

We dead-end in a forest. A man invites us all into his truck. Watch crowds part through the windshield. Passengers become friends and exchange email addresses.

Discussions of tactics and theory stretch long into the night, across rooms and cars and hotels and restaurants. And then there are the parties.

An airplane hanger, filled with kids, all dancing. Row upon row of them, covered in sweat and caked with mud, still carrying their bags, moving with abandon.

They stretch for what seems like forever. And at the end is a huge stage, with dancing girls, a rocking band, and lights so powerful that when they rotate forward they illuminate the entire crowd. As the set ends, it feels like the whole building is about to explode.

The crowd spills out into the street, filling the surrounding blocks, as each person goes their separate way, back to the world that already exists.