Young, Down, and Out

For poor Brazilian children like Luciana, life is a game of survival.

Luciana looks up at me and puts on a frown. She has been interrupted while playing with her friends in a large plaza in downtown Rio de Janeiro. Her eyes narrow. She's thinking, is this a boi, a cow in Portuguese and street slang for an easy mark for a mugging?

Maybe it's sangue bom, “good blood,” meaning a friend or an ally. But hang on, it just might be a tira, a cop. On the streets of Rio, the presence of an unknown adult can mean many things, and sizing up a newcomer quickly is a matter of survival.

Luciana is thirteen years old, but could easily pass for eight. Her small frame and mischievous eyes belie an experience that goes way beyond her years. A ten-inch scar makes an ugly seam down her left thigh, the result of an old “accident,” when the driver of a bus she was clinging to swiped her off on a passing car, just as a horse might shake a fly. A swollen mound on her left foot marks the spot where a .22-caliber bullet sits, the result of a gang fight. Talk to Luciana for a little while and you'll learn a treasure of details about street life: where to sleep without getting bullied by cops, how to pick a pocket and melt away in the night, and where to buy cocaine.

Our hotel was on the Copacabana, where most of the children hang out, for there the wealthy tourists congregate. Anyone who owns a home, a complete set of clothes, who has access to hot running water, and eats regularly falls into the rich category for these children, who feel, quite naturally, that to take money, jewelry, or cameras from such people is no great hardship for them, for such things the rich can easily replace.

—Elizabeth Hillman, “Some Hope for Brazil’s Abandoned Children,” Contemporary Review
cities, especially Rio, sucking children into the drug trade. To children of the shantytowns and poor areas, “nothing besides football players is so attractive as the drug lord,” said anthropologist Alba Zaluar. “They are the ones with money, new cars, pretty girls, and authority.”

The youngest children begin as lookouts, or “airplanes,” tipping off the drug bosses when strangers, an enemy gangman, or the cops approach. Some may “graduate” to become security guards or partners in trafficking, peddling small quantities for the drug overlords. Many end up addicted or dead. Authorities say that involvement in drug trafficking accounts for at least half the child murders.

In 1988, legislators rewrote the constitution and drafted what is widely recognized as the world’s most advanced child protection statute. But injustice persists throughout the society. Brazil has one of the widest income gaps in the world, with a handful of very wealthy people and a huge class of poor. Only ten percent of the nation’s children even complete elementary school. With an entire generation lost to the streets, the future of Brazil itself is in danger. As Brazil’s former president, Itamar Franco, said in his first speech to the nation in 1991: “In unjust societies like our own, the only thing distributed with equity is fear.”

The stark contrast between rich and poor can be seen every night on Rio’s Cinelandia (literally, “Cinema Land”), a broad boulevard named for its elegant movie houses. As night falls here, the Rio upper class files by Luciana and her friends, up the marble steps to the stately Teatro Municipal, modeled after the Paris Opera House.

Like most street kids, Luciana has a home of sorts. To get there you literally walk through a hole in the wall, up a dirt path to a row of wooden shanties, separated by an open sewage ditch. The shanties, made of tin, plywood, and plasterboard, sprout up on any unclaimed plot of city land, sometimes clinging impossibly to sheer slopes or standing on stilts above sewer water. Often they collapse under torrential rains or landslides.

Luciana’s family moved to one of these shanties a little over a year ago, when the rent got too steep in Queimadas, a rural village not far from Rio. Once in a while, Luciana comes home from the street for a visit or a meal.

Unlike many of her street friends, she was not beaten or molested by her parents or relatives. Her mother, who is 48 and single, simply could not afford to support four children and a grandchild on the meager wage she earned sweeping up at a city hospital. Luciana first left home at age six, when she got tired of handing over to her mother the day’s take from selling oranges and sweets in downtown Rio. One day she just pocketed the money. She has never looked back.

“The street is better,” she says. “I have a lot of friends here. There are fights, but I’m friends with everybody.” Now and then, her mother comes by Cinelandia to try to persuade her to come home. But Luciana doesn’t stay long. “All she wants is to be on the street,” her mother says, shaking her head sadly. “Nobody can hold her back anymore. She’s going to die on the street someday.”

Dangerous as it is, Luciana thinks of the street as a place of adventure, even of freedom. She is tenaciously independent and allergic to anything that smacks of authority. The day after she left the hospital, where she was being treated for the bullet wound in her foot, she defied doctor’s orders to rest and hobbled onto a bus to Cinelandia. There, she showed off her new white cast. The next day she took a hammer and freed herself from the bulky plaster. When an older street “brother” announced he was taking her back to the hospital to replace the cast, she stormed off as fast as her bum foot would allow.

Weeks later, the cops ousted Luciana and the rest of the street kids from the broad steps of the municipal assembly building, where the children met nightly. I eventually found her in a half-lit, urine-soaked alleyway behind Cinelandia.

Luciana recognized me, and having already sized me up, turned on her charms. A smile and an outstretched hand quickly won her a Coke and a plate of chicken and rice. Satisfied, she leaned over to whisper a secret. She wanted a bicycle, a walkie-talkie, a trip to
the amusement park, and, to top it off, a trip, say, around the world. She laughed at her own wish list, then limped away to her friends and the dark, dank alley that was her newest home.

Months later, I went back to Rio’s rough downtown to find out about Luciana. I learned that she had tired of the street and the constant police raids, and finally retreated to the São Martinho shelter for kids, which offers warm food, a mattress, and a series of vocational courses for street kids. With new commitments from the government and aid from the United Nations, institutions like São Martinho are reclaiming dozens of street kids from the dangers of Rio.

But not Luciana. “She just didn’t fit into our program,” a social worker there told me. “We couldn’t keep her here.”

By the new year, she was back on the street again.

Mac Margolis also contributed “Patience, Patience” in Part II.

* *

Yesterday I saw a man walking on his knees. His lower legs seemed to trail uselessly behind him like withered branches where no life flowed. He moved himself along by swinging his body between his hands, which acted as crutches. He was so inured to his plight that his naked knees had no protection and had hardened themselves, just as had the toughened bare feet of the poor. So his knees were now his feet, carrying him along the pavement, his view being the legs of the other walkers. He made his way along the rich, store-lined Avenue Copacabana, bobbing between the feet and dodging the traffic, and nobody took much notice, as if it was a familiar and tolerable sight, something you endure and even condone. Poor man should be a lesson in how sinful it is to be so poor and wretched. Somehow it was the man’s fault. Nobody seemed horrified or to give him a second glance.

Rio’s biggest symbol is the figure of Christ that holds out his stiff, concrete arms to the world beneath him. Never was a symbol more meaningless. Never did his words mean so little to those below. Never in my life have I seen so little charity or compassion in any city where extreme wealth and unendurable poverty lie side by side. I have seen no equivalent here to the War on Poverty or Oxfam—or any organization that could tap some of the enormous wealth rotting in banks. The man on his knees was an adequate symbol of Brazil. This is the figure that should be atop the giant hill and on all the postcards.

—Steven Berkoff, A Prisoner in Rio