



Brooklyn, NY to Bocaiúva, Brazil: A Peace Corps Love Story

Franklin D. Rothman

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Brooklyn, NY to Bocaiúva, Brazil: A Peace Corps Love Story tells the story of the unlikely chain of circumstances, in the United States and Brazil, which lead Frank and Lena to meet and fall in love. The author traces these circumstances all the way back to his childhood in the East New York neighborhood of Brooklyn, where he experiences the closeness of his extended Jewish family and the warmth of Puerto Ricans with whom his father comes into contact. A homestay with a family in Mexico in 1964 as part of his undergraduate major in Spanish, heightens his fascination with Latin American culture. Frank tells in a lighthearted manner of his adventures and attempts to overcome timidity with girls while traveling in Mexico and in Europe and as grad student and then part-time hippie in Berkeley, California in 1966 and early 1967. When his student deferment ends, Frank risks being drafted and sent to Vietnam, while living the moment of California Dreaming and free love. Finally, in May, 1967, Frank is obligated to take the physical exam for military service. Just in time, Frank receives an invitation from the Peace Corps to serve in Brazil. Arriving in Carandaí, Brazil during the rainy season, Frank has to deal with culture shock and loneliness at night and then sleeping with bedbugs in the "Vulture's Palace". The rains end, but he can only reach out to rural communities by bicycle or on horseback. In 1968 he struggles to organize school garden projects; but a school construction project and his discovery of life-threatening problems of internal parasites, motivate him to mobilize rural communities and town leaders. However the news of the assassination of Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy and the tensions of political turbulence in the context of the Vietnam War and Brazil's military dictatorship leave Frank shocked, angry and alone. Frank works hard on his projects to overcome these frustrations. Then, in early 1969, unusual circumstances lead to Frank's meeting Lena while waiting in line at a James Bond movie. Frank feels it's love at first sight, but Lena's Catholic religion, anti-Americanism and the distance of her hometown could be major obstacles to a serious relationship. Nevertheless, Frank asks Lena to marry him just twelve days after they meet and they are married just three months later. The young couple moves to New York, where Lena first meets Frank's Jewish family. Immediately, they must cope with the stress of Lena's culture shock and the nightmare that Frank could still be drafted and sent to Vietnam. In 1970 the family moves to Massachusetts and Frank begins work with the Federal government's regional anti-poverty agency in Boston. The young couple begins to raise a family. In early 1980, circumstances in the United States and Brazil lead Frank to abandon the security of his government career and move back to Brazil. The Rothman family faces new challenges in yet another chapter of their life in two countries and two cultures.

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