

THE CHRISTMAS SWEET

He only knew that his wife used to break the eggs and separate the whites from the yolks. She would then add sugar to the whites and beat them into a uniform texture. That done, she would return to the yolks and stir them until they were completely liquefied. Next came the coconut flour, bought fresh earlier that morning. She would pour it from the bag into the yolks, slowly and gently, as if she were a chemist, systematically seeing that each portion falling into the bowl would eventually be covered by the yellow egg liquid, losing its own whiteness in the process.

He never knew how she regulated the amounts. All he knew was that at Christmas she normally used a dozen eggs, a half kilo of coconut flour and loads of sugar.

He also knew that after the coconut flour had been made into a paste, it would then be mixed thoroughly into the bowl holding the separated sugary whites. The resulting batter would then be poured into a rectangular pan, covering its surface approximately one inch from the bottom. She would then place the pan into a warm oven for fifteen minutes. She never used a timer, relying on instinct that would tell her when that part of her work was done. She would then remove the pan from the oven and, after covering it with a light clot, set it in a darker part of the house, letting its contents cool slowly and naturally in the warm tropical Rio Novo air. A lot of work for a sweet without an official name.

Friends and neighbors used to rave about his wife's "quindim". He would take the raving in a combination of pride and humility, reminding the praise givers that the sweet was not "quindim", and that what they were eating was just something put together by someone who never knew how to imitate Bahian cooking. The "patroa" was from the South, a mix of Italian, German, and Portuguese - not a drop of black blood in her veins - and what did those people ever know about sweets? On the other hand he never hesitated to refer to the desert by its adopted name. There had even been times when he would tell her that, if she really wanted "quindim" at Christmas, she would do better to buy it at most places around the city, where the real stuff was sold and where it was made the way that God and Bahians had intended it. She never listened. In turn, he never refused his wife's creation.

He opened the refrigerator and reached for the carton of eggs. He had already prepared the bowls and heated the oven. For a moment he hesitated as if waiting for his wife to appear and proceed with the next step. He looked around, and briefly stared out the open kitchen window into the dark night. The lights in the apartment across the courtyard were on and he could see a human figure moving about behind the draperies that waved gently in the light, warm, breeze. He paid no attention and returned to his task. It was Christmas Night, and he had to make "quindim".

Through the open window he could hear the sounds of samba drums and the voices of teenagers enjoying themselves. Christmas in Novo Rio had

never been a time to meditate. Christmas was for noise - in fact, to many locals it was the start of the Carnival season. If church bells rang they generally weren't heard, at least not in areas that, because of the development of urban sprawl, had no space for churches. Occasionally he would hear a passing bus down on Eustacio Avenue, its engines roaring and horns blaring as if every moment of its journey were of imminent crisis. The teenagers would shout at the noisy bus in words he could not recognize. Laughter would follow the shouting.

A dog barked in the courtyard. The man looked from his task towards the electric clock on the otherwise bare kitchen wall. It was exactly midnight. For a moment it seemed as if the other noises outside had stopped, only to return to their previous level. By now all the items were mixed and poured. He opened the oven door and placed the pan gently on the same spot his wife had always used. He closed the door and looked up and around the room in a somewhat purposeless way, yet wondering if he had forgotten anything. His eyes glanced once again at the open window and out into the courtyard.

The lights in the apartment across the way had been turned off.

When he felt the "quindim" was ready he opened the oven door and pulled out the pan. He looked at his creation and paused momentarily wondering if it had come out right. The top was a golden color showing a slight bubbling. He knew that, as the pan cooled, the bubbles would subside into the top layer and adopt a look of small, underdeveloped pimples. He covered the pan, as he had often seen his wife do, and placed it on the same spot she had used for the same purpose.

He sat down and waited. The outside noises had subsided as if Christmas morning had told the young people they'd had enough, that it was time to rest. He turned on the radio and heard the announcer repeat the story he had heard many times before. He changed stations, only to hear a minister with a combination American and Brazilian accent explain the birth of the Christ child as if no one had ever told it previously. He felt bored and stopped listening while the voice from the small box on the kitchen table rambled on.

"Shit!" He uttered in disgust. "So that's all there is." He looked up into space. His eyes were dry, yet he wanted to cry. He rose slowly from his chair and walked towards the open window. He looked outside into the now lifeless courtyard. He had been living at the Benjamin Constant Development for ten years. It was the closest he could come to living within the city and still have an apartment of his own he could afford. Unlike the more expensive areas of Rio Novo, where the better buildings have their own doorkeepers and other forms of protection against intruders, the Benjamin Constant offered no such amenities. On the other hand it offered sufficient space in between buildings to permit young people to gather and become acquainted and to develop the sense of community sadly lacking in the more sophisticated areas. Granted that occasionally some apartment or other would be broken into without the violator ever being caught. On the whole, however, the residents felt relatively safe walking out into the large grassy and almond-tree-lined courtyard at any hour of the day or night without fear of being assaulted.

The man decided to go for a walk. As he headed towards the door he suddenly realized that he had made more "quindim" than he would be able to eat for sometime. His wife had always made more than they would need, but somehow had always managed to share it with others. He looked towards the covered pan and reached for it. It was still warm as he picked it up and carried it out, closing the apartment door behind him. He headed towards the stairway and walked down two flights. He paused as he reached the open building door wondering whether to go to the left towards the Avenue, and from there towards to nearest all-night bar where he would share his goods with anyone he met, or stay within the courtyard area. He was still undecided when he noticed that someone was sitting alone on a bench near the children's playground. Although he did not know who it was, he headed in the person's direction. As he approached the bench he noticed a middle-aged woman holding a small package. He halted briefly trying to focus through the darkness and the courtyard lights on who she was. He did not recognize her, even as he came closer.

"Excuse me," he finally said, still a few feet away. "I live over in that building. That one, Number 17. It's Christmas Night and I decided to make a sweet my "patroa" used to make when she was still alive. I thought I'd share it with someone."

The woman did not reply immediately as she sat looking at him. He wondered if he had done the correct thing.

"Strange," she finally said. "I live across the way. Building 18. My husband had always liked sweet cheese bread on Christmas. I baked it this evening out of habit, and then realized I had no one to share it."

Away, in the distance, bells rang gently.

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