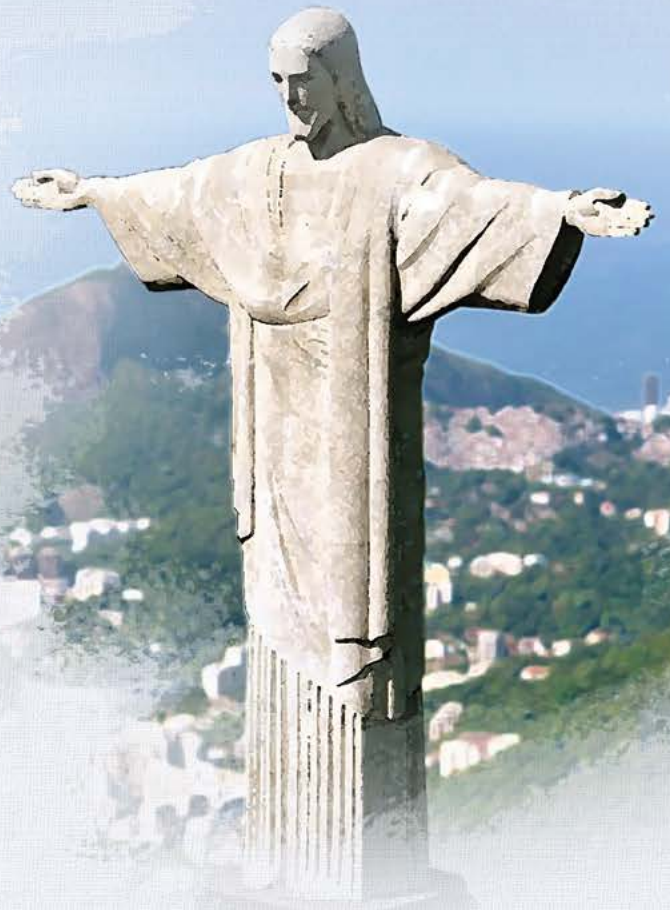




The Miracle in Rio

— By Dwayne Buhler —



The frying pan spat microscopic bombs of olive oil as the smell of garlic and onions filled the air. Ana Paula added a cup of uncooked rice and stirred the contents, browning the grains before she would add water. Black beans simmered on the other burner of her simple gas stove. Each and every day she made *arroz e feijão* – beans and rice – for her family, but today would be different. She wanted the Christmas celebration to be perfect.

Ana Paula opened the single cloth drape to her kitchen window, looking over *Santa Teresinha*, one of Rio de Janeiro's mountainside *favelas*. The slum was in the shadow of *Cristo Redentor*, the iconic statue of Jesus with arms open for a welcoming embrace. She closed her eyes and for an instant remembered a Christmas Eve from her past. She looked up towards the sky and said a prayer for a miracle from God.

It's been fifteen years, she thought. She wondered if she would ever be able to forget, or to forgive herself. *Fifteen years of trying to envision where he was, who he was with, and how he was doing. Just once she would like to be able to give him a Christmas gift or send a card.*

But there were too many things to get done before everyone would arrive. She needed to collect the clothes hanging on the roof, do one last sweep of her home, and go to the *paderia*. The tiny bread store would be closed on Christmas day and she needed to get *pãozinhos*, little French rolls baked fresh every day, for the morning's breakfast.

In a matter of hours the small three-room house would be transformed and filled with joy. Daniela and João, Ana Paula's 11-year-old twins, were at the neighbourhood Assemblies of God Church, putting the final preparations together for the evening's Sunday school presentation. Daniela was Mary. João was a shepherd. They looked forward to singing, reading the Bible and telling the Christmas story for their family and friends.

Ana Paula's husband Roberto was at work. He'd be home later in the evening to drop off a package and meet them at the church. He worked at a hotel on Ipanema Beach serving rich tourists. Each year employees were given a special Christmas hamper complete with a small turkey, a pineapple, some mangos, and *panettone*, the delicious

fruit-speckled Italian Christmas bread. Ana Paula prepared beans, rice and *farofa* – a dish made of golden, gritty yucca flour, raisins, and pieces of bacon. It was a feast to be shared with family and friends.

As gratitude flooded the house and a sense that this Christmas celebration would be memorable came over Ana Paula, she let her mind wander, going back to her childhood.

Life in *Santa Teresinha* was difficult, and most young girls didn't go to school beyond the fourth or fifth grade. Her mother made her go to work in a restaurant in the business district, cleaning dishes in the kitchen. She worked hard and was forced to turn her money over to her father, who drank more than he worked. At fourteen she ran away from home and lived on the street.

Ana Paula joined a gang of a dozen kids who taught her about the dark side of life. They claimed a corner of an abandoned factory building as their own. Cardboard was collected and piled to make a mattress. Food came from scraps and garbage bins. The boys in the gang learned to pickpocket unsuspecting tourists, gathered at the beaches or at the *Cristo Redentor* train station. The girls washed car windows on street corners, begging for a few coins for their service. Some of the group sniffed glue, while others scraped together enough money to buy drugs from older street kids. Ana Paula had to hide some coins to buy food for her and her closest friends.

After less than a year on the street, Ana Paula was pregnant, expecting a child with one of the leaders of the gang. She was told to either get an abortion, or leave. She argued and fought with her boyfriend and was ready to abandon the gang when one of the boys told them about a man who offered to pay five hundred dollars for newborn babies. They would be adopted by wealthy foreigners and live a life of luxury. None of the gang members had ever seen that amount of cash, and so it was decided that Ana Paula did not have to leave.

Only once did Ana Paula meet the man who took her baby. He met with her two weeks before the baby was born, asking her to sign documents. When the time came, the man sent a taxi and she went to a small clinic on the outskirts of the city. The nurses were mean and upset with her, as it looked like they would miss their family Christmas celebrations. A baby boy was born on the afternoon of the 24th of December. She never got to hold the baby and left the clinic with the same taxi driver. She never saw a penny of the money paid for her child.

Upset with her boyfriend, Ana Paula left the gang and began to look for a place to stay. She heard about a youth centre where street kids could spend the afternoon and sleep if they had no other place to go. The *Lar Esperança* – Home of Hope – became her safe haven from the cold reality of living on the street. Pastor Jaime was the first person she met when she walked through the doors. Her life began to change.

Two years after Ana Paula entered the home for street kids, she met Roberto, another resident of the home. They both accepted Jesus and were part of the church youth group. They were off drugs, leading Bible studies for groups of kids who came from the street, and living a life with purpose and direction. They were married on New Year's Eve and moved into a small rented house in *Santa Teresinha*.



“Mãe! Mãe! Mãe!” João sprinted through the metal door into the tiny courtyard. Daniela was close behind, frustrated at losing the race to her brother. “The lady missionary from the Central Church came looking for you! She says you must come to meet someone.”

Daniela appeared at the door, catching her breath before she added, “It’s very urgent, she says. There is a person who wants to meet you.”

Ana Paula tried to settle her children. “Wait, wait. Who wants to meet me?”

Both children began to speak at once, but Daniela insisted on talking first. “Pastor Jaime brought the lady missionary to the church. She met an Americano who found your name on a piece of paper. She says she has to talk to you!”

Ana Paula turned the stove off. The rice could simmer and she would prepare the *farofa* when she got back. “You kids need to stay here. I will come back as soon as I can.”



Pastor Jaime sat on a wooden bench, talking to his missionary colleague. He held a folder in his hand. They both looked up as Ana Paula entered the sanctuary.

“Sister, how good of you to come! Do you know Carolina? She is a pastor at Central Church.” The women greeted each other, offering two quick kisses on each cheek.

“My sister,” Carolina began in Portuguese. “It is a joy to meet you. Pastor Jaime told me something of your story, and your children were a delight to meet.”

Ana Paula nodded her head. “Yes, thank you.”

Jamie took a document from the file folder and handed it to Ana Paula. She froze when she saw the title, then her teenage signature at the bottom of the page. She began to sob and both missionaries held her in a warm embrace.

“Where did you get this? I don’t understand.” Ana Paula wiped tears from her eyes.

Pastor Jaime was the first to speak. “A lawyer from the United States contacted Sister Carolina and asked her if she knew anyone who lived in Rio de Janeiro that worked with street kids 15 years ago. The lawyer represents a family that wants to find a young girl – someone who gave up a baby for adoption. Sister Carolina told him about our work and our church but didn’t make any promises. The chances would be far too small to actually find this person. It would be a miracle to find her in a city as large as Rio.”

“The lawyer sent me this copy of the birth certificate and I talked to Pastor Jaime this morning. We both couldn’t believe it when Pastor Jaime read your name.” Carolina smiled from ear to ear.

“Where is he? Where is this family?” Ana Paula still could not believe what she was hearing. “Do they know about me?”

“The family lives in Ohio, in the United States. They do not know about you. Not yet. We wanted to talk to you first.” Pastor Jaime took out another piece of paper from the file, with a picture of a beautiful family. A tall young boy stood in the middle. He was darker than the others, with tight curly hair.

“Is that him? What’s his name?”

“His adopted parents called him Daniel – a name that is the same in English or Portuguese.” Carolina showed her another document in English.

Ana Paula paused, collected her thoughts, and chewed her lower lip. “Can he ever forgive me for what I did? I was – I am – the boy’s mother. How can he ever forgive me?”

“There is only one way to find out,” said Pastor Jaime. “Would you like me to phone the lawyer in the United States?”

Ana Paula nodded her head. “Yes. Please tell them that you have found the mother of their son Daniel.”



The evening service went late into the night. The Sunday school presentation was flawless, with each child remembering their lines and each song blasted at the



top of the choir's collective lungs. Daniela beamed in her role as Mary. João bolted out his line, "Let's go see this thing that the angel has told us about!" The church was filled with visitors and families from the neighbourhood, excited to celebrate together.

Pastor Jaime spoke about the miracle of Christmas: that a child was given to be the saviour of the world. The birth of a little child born in Bethlehem was the hope of all those who would call on his name and look to him for salvation. "Jesus is still doing miracles today" was the one line that Ana Paula cherished the most.

Roberto and Ana Paula sat in the front row, waiting to be called forward at the end of the service to give a special testimony.

"Brothers and sisters," started Roberto. "Many of you know our story. We were much like many of the children that still roam our city, abandoned and hopeless. We did things that displeased God, our Father. But we found Jesus." Ana Paula corrected him. "No, when he found us. We were like the child born in a stable, with no place to call home."

Ana Paula stepped up to the microphone. "As kids on the street, we saw things that no child should ever see and did things that today we are not proud of. Some people here know my story, so I won't tell you everything, except that one Christmas, fifteen years ago, I . . . I was all alone. I gave birth to a baby boy that was sold to a man who took the child to a family in the United States for adoption. I had no idea what became of that child but – by a miracle from God – we spoke to him this afternoon." People in the congregation were visibly moved, tears coming to the eyes of many.

"All these years I've prayed for him, hoping to one day find out what happened to him. Was he well? Did he go to a good family? I prayed that one day he would find Jesus. I thought that if we couldn't be together on this earth, we could be together in heaven." Now Ana Paula was crying.

Roberto stepped up to the microphone. "His name is Daniel. We spoke to his adopted parents this afternoon. He is a teenager, and he and his family are Christians. They want to come and visit us as soon as possible. God willing, in the New Year they will be here with us and stand before you to testify to the goodness of God."

"This is the second greatest gift that I could ever receive," added Ana Paula. "The first greatest gift was to know Jesus and receive the gift of his forgiveness. The second greatest gift is for all my family – even a lost son – to know Jesus, too!"

Pastor Jaime invited people to come to the front of the church to offer their lives as a gift to God. "At Christmas we often talk about the gift of Jesus, that God sent his son into the world. But, this Christmas, we can give our lives to him as the only gift that really matters; we can give him our hearts."



Ana Paula, Roberto and their children walked back to their home, exhausted and exhilarated at the same time. They would gather around their simple kitchen table and eat a midnight supper that could only be described as luxurious. The small turkey was decorated with mango and orange slices, smothered in a rich fruity sauce. One of Roberto's aunts left earlier in the evening to have everything ready for the family when they came home from church.

Music and firecrackers battled for the family's attention as they turned a corner and started up a steep set of stairs leading to their house. In the distance they could see the statue of *Cristo Redentor* lit brightly against the black tropical sky. There were no words for the gratitude that Ana Paula felt in her heart, only a song that sprang up from within: "For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given."

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