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Mothers' Day weekend, 2006, São Paulo: a weekend I won't forget in a hurry.

On the Friday afternoon, reports of trouble across the city were shared by staff at the international school where I worked. Though the nature of the trouble wasn't clear, there was city-wide disruption. Ex-pat teachers speculated it was terrorism, or an insurrection; the Brazilians were simply worried.

As a precaution, we were all told to go home early.

The drive home along the Marginal – one of São Paulo's traffic arteries – was eerily quiet. I spotted two buses parked and empty at the side of the road. Further away, I could see smoke.

I spent Saturday and Sunday behind my condominium gates, playing tennis and drinking beer with middle-aged men who had lived their whole lives in São Paulo – a restaurateur, an ex-cop, a businessman, a Formula One TV sports personality – and who were not going to let a little thing like this get in the way of their weekend.

This is what happened:

The PCC crime syndicate – the 'First Capital Command' – is one of the biggest criminal gangs in Brazil. Its leaders run São Paulo from prisons dotted across the state.

It's 2006, of course, and they want to watch the World Cup on wide-screen television sets in their cells. Alongside this request: more frequent conjugal visits. Both denied.

As a consequence, for three days São Paulo experiences PCC-brand chaos.

Gangsters attack the police. They hijack buses. They evacuate them. They set them on fire and leave them on major highways. There are stories of raids on public buildings. Over a hundred and fifty people are killed – police, gang members, and the inevitable bystanders: the stray bullets flying about in poor areas, the city's *favelas*.

Using the cover of the chaos, scores are settled between Military police and gang members. The violence intensifies.

The authorities throw in the towel on Sunday evening. The PCC leaders get their TVs and their conjugal visits.

The Chief of Police's son studied at the international school where I worked. The officers who were shot at over the weekend were receiving danger money, substantial pay outs. Trauma and whatnot, he told the headmaster.

Hearing about this, a number of officers had been shooting at their own police stations and vehicles, using the bullet holes as proof they'd been attacked.

They too, the chief of police said, were claiming danger money.

This is only one story from that lawless weekend; the causes and consequences are very murky indeed. And it wasn't just the bad guys that were acting lawlessly.

The weekend is a key part of the first half of my novel *Brazilian Psycho*. It wasn't simply a shoot-out between corrupt Military police and drug dealers, but a major political scandal.

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The beloved Brazilian musician Tim Maia once said: 'Brasil is the only country where – in addition to whores cumming, pimps being jealous, and drug dealers being addicted – poor people vote for the right-wing.'

Close to the international school where I worked, a bank was robbed and the two thieves at large in the neighbourhood. One of them was shot dead by a student's private bodyguard. Most people I told shrugged and said:

'Ah, menos um, ne?'

'Oh well, that's one less crook.'

Bolsonaro's popularity in the 2018 election was, in part, based on a hard-line approach to crime and criminals. Bolsonaro made crime, undoubtedly a problem, into *the* problem.

The question at the heart of *Brazilian Psycho*: how did the country change over the sixteen years from Lula's election to Bolsonaro's. São Paulo's real-life crime landscape offered a way in.