

*The yellow bus station book*

**Vanessa Barbara**

Translated by Zoe Perry



## 1. Arrival

The Tietê bus station is a city of lost things. “The slot machine's been here two years,” stated the attendant, displaying a list that included forgotten rifles (two), motorcycles (two), the backseat of a VW bus, a tile saw, beds, crutches, motorcycle engines, tires, dentures, and a mechanical hand. “Sometimes people come here looking for missing friends. They'll show a picture and ask if they've been located,” says Andréia, who works at the Lost and Found. In fact, many folks from other states, like Pernambuco, Bahia, or Minas de Gerais—or even Peru—have gone astray in São Paulo and are still displaced years later, stifling each day their desire to go back home (*maybe in ten years, when the kids are grown and we can tap into our social security*). They have names like Augusta, Ivonete, Cláudio, Gileno, José, Edilene; they roam the city alongside the forgotten umbrellas, the buttons that have fallen off, the false teeth, and all those other things we no longer know where to find.

The bus station is a city of people who walk around with a giant piece of thread stuck to their feet, people who spill their coffee on the ground, and toss toilet paper outside the wastebasket. Girls who demand phone cards and curse from above their sunglasses. It's a city of men who fill out suggestion cards just to complain, who light candles in the left-luggage lockers, and mutter that everybody there is incompetent. People who suggest air conditioning be installed urgently, because in Europe...

A city where you have to request permission to speak to the staff; where it's forbidden to take pictures of the buses, and security guards follow orders from the assistant managing director, the owner of a roomy office and a bushy mustache. At the bus station, thousands of people jostle in a queue to buy tickets, some walk from place to place or start trouble, others shove staff on the arrivals platform or threaten to punch them—but suggestions, sir, must be completed in all capital letters on this specific form, numbered and labeled, so that we may...

It's a city where grateful passengers from Holambra offer employees flowers and a place to stay; where the clerk gets a hot *pão de queijo* and a wave from the young woman who didn't know how to get to Santo Amaro. It's a town square where the cleaning lady chats with a grandmother of three: this place is so big, isn't it? it takes me two hours to get home (and for me, thirty-seven), but I only get off at ten o'clock.

Inside the station halls, 100,000 cups of coffee and 12 tons of *pão de queijo* are consumed every month, 300 kg of chewing gum gets unstuck from the floor with every big clean-up, and 60,000 passengers come and go, each day. Every month, 1.4 million phone credits are consumed in the payphones, the equivalent to 46,000 hours of conversation, or 84

million “hellos” repeated ad nauseum. There are 63 stores and eleven kiosks, 650 kilowatts of energy consumed per hour, nine million liters of water per month, and a thousand kilometers of toilet paper (both inside and outside the wastebasket). In all, 1806 employees work across three shifts: 445 in the management offices, 346 in the stores, four young ladies at the information desk, and Rosângela, the philosophical attendant who hates it when people won't look at her and spew orders, numbers, or nonsense queries.

For many, the bus station is a giant shopping mall, seen through the eyes of an accountant: numerical masses and sterile statistics. But perhaps it's a place where girls climb onto buses without looking back, men cross the ticketed passenger line to hug relatives, and an old man dozes quietly on his cane. In the terminal, customers can get their shoes shined on electric machines (VIP lounge) or skid on Chipola cheese snacks (platform 82). They can buy gold swans at the tobacconist, or fish aluminum cans from the garbage. At Tietê bus station, it's normal to put stuffed toy tigers on your head, dance in a Conga line, greet shopkeepers every day at seven AM sharp, carry around maggoty beef jerky, or sit on one of the twelve hundred seats in the waiting area and slip off your shoes (relief). You can dance with a Maria cookie in your hand or show your diaper to passers-by. You can go to Piracanjuba or Morro do Chapéu, you can come back from Buenos Aires and then take a shower, leaving a ten real deposit for the towel. It's also possible to weigh your luggage at Viação São Geraldo, ask for help from the porters in yellow—and if you're a nun and you really, really need to, you can take your surfboard on board without major issues.

In the halls of Tietê, some people speed up for no particular reason and cry out, asking where the Cometa ticket window is. But you're also allowed to pause and just hang out in some corner, chatting with Santa Claus or a lady in a wool blouse who says (suddenly) that the British Navy is coming for her.

Tietê bus station is a city of unattended chewing gum, people in a hurry, and lost things.

## 2. Information Desk

“Forty-nine,” a gentleman blurts out as he approaches Cíntia.

She doesn't even have to think about it. She looks at him and, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, simply retorts:

“First row on the left, at the end.”

“Ah. Thanks.”

It's always good to know how to respond when someone suddenly appears and says, “forty-nine”. Jot down the answer: first row on the left. It could happen at any time. And anywhere.

The information desk is a circular area equipped with four chairs, two computers, and a water cooler. There are some potted plants, road maps, phone books, advertising leaflets, and manuals of all kinds. The women who work there—like Cíntia—have to know the city's every detail. And every corner of the bus station: the man just wanted to know where platform 49 was, and she needed barely three seconds to tell him.

Just eight months on the job, Cíntia is an automatic answer-generating machine.

“Where's the bus from Atibaia?”

“End of the row, on the right.”

“Where's the 1001 ticket window?”

“On the right, second row.”

“Where can I get the bus to D shopping mall?”

“Down there to the left, there's a free shuttle.”

“How do I get to Center Norte?”

“Walk out of the terminal, keep following the green railing, about ten minutes straight ahead.”

One, two, three answers in a row. And it's not just Cíntia who can “think fast”: all her other friends at the information desk know about things the human mind could never hazard to guess. Right on the tip of their tongues.

“How do I get to Santo Amaro?”

“You have to get off at Anhangabaú, go to Bandeiras terminal and take the bus.”

“Where do they sell tickets for Uruguay?”

“Second row on the left.”

“Sweetheart... Pássaro Marrom?”

“On the right, second row.”

“Which bus do I take to the town of Tietê?”

“It's only from the Barra Funda terminal; take the subway towards Jabaquara, change at Sé, then take it towards Barra Funda.”

Cíntia and her friends are almanacs who wear buns in their hair, navy blue uniforms and official Socicam-logo handkerchiefs. “You have to have an in-depth knowledge of São Paulo,” they say elegantly, their eyelids coated in white eyeshadow. “You have to know, no matter. People are impatient and if you hesitate, they get angry,” says Cíntia.

People often see the “Information” sign and think they can ask about anything, anything at all, like what's the square root of thirty-two, the meaning of life. “Where can I buy peppercorns?” a man asked Silvana, one of the attendants. “They think we have the answer to everything.” Like the day a little old lady appeared and asked:

“Miss, where do I sign up to go to Iraq?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“To Iraq. I want to go to war, get my son.”

“Umm... we don't offer that kind of service, ma'am.”

And the woman left, fuming at the staff's incompetence. Balderdash! What do you mean, you can't answer the question? It's written right there on the sign: i-n-f-o-r-m-a-t-i-o-n.

Disoriented, passengers go in circles after they get off their buses. If they can find the information desk, they're likely to kneel down and thank their lucky stars. It seems incredible that in a city like São Paulo there are people willing to listen to what others have to say and to try to help them, all with great interest. Even if it's something unsolvable.

“Can you let my aunt know I'm here?”

“Come again?”

“My aunt. Odete. I came from Piranhas and I didn't tell her I've arrived.”

“Do you want me to announce your aunt's name on the loudspeaker?”

“No, no, she's at home.”

“But didn't you tell her you were coming?”

“Uh, no.”

“Do you have her phone number? Address?”

“No. But you know my aunt, don't you?”

No, no one understands how, in a metropolis of 17 million inhabitants, they don't know Odete, from the greengrocer, Décio, from the pharmacy, Edevaldo, Tião's buddy. For the girls at the information desk, it's normal for someone to come asking for Francisco (electrician, long hair, you know him?), Dona Maria, Josefa from the watch shop, and so on

and so forth. One day, a middle-aged man in a cap with a sunburned face asked them to announce his friend's name on the PA.

“And what is his name, sir?”

“Pelé.”

“... Pelé?”

“Yeah.”

“Is that really his name? And his last name?”

“Oh, I don't know his name, but his nickname is Pelé. Nobody knows his name. I don't think even he does.”

The girl hesitates and asks her friend what to do: “Rosângela, are we allowed to announce nicknames?” The other attendant laughs, shrugs. A few minutes later, the loudspeakers announce: “Mr. Pelé. Mr. Pelé. Please come to the information desk on the upper level.”

Some time goes by—five, maybe ten minutes—and the young man is still sitting there. Suddenly, the girls at the counter spot a man, loaded down with suitcases, approaching. The guy who's been waiting stands up and shouts:

“Missssss! Miss! Thanks a bunch!”

The girls just glance at each other, a little baffled.

“Take a look at this guy!” he shouts and slaps his friend Pelé on the back, who waves to them delightedly.

They both seem so happy about the reunion that they don't even realize they're shouting. The guy named Pelé beams from ear to ear; “If he smiled much more, the ends of his mouth might meet behind,” as Lewis Carroll's Alice would say. “And then I don't know what would happen to his head. I'm afraid it would come off.”

Then the friend stops short, his expression of joy fades for a moment and he asks, half concerned, half curious:

“By the way, what's your name again?”

The other man replies: “Edson. You know. Like Pelé.”

And off they go, carefree, swinging their arms around like two kids in movies.

### ***Rodeo***

João Vítor comes running up, leans against the counter and, face-to-face with the attendant, Rosângela, asks, flustered:

“Excuse me, which bus goes to Jaguariúna?”

She is startled (“so rowdy!”) and looks for the information among the sheets of paper in a folder.

“Gontijo, second row on the right.”

“OK, thanks!”

And he runs off. Minutes later, the young man returns, sneaking up softly.

“Sorry... but I don't think I heard you right. You said Gontijo?”

“Right.” And she checks the information in the black folder.

“But they said they didn't sell tickets to there.”

“Oh! I'm sorry! I looked at it wrong. You're right. For Jaguariúna it's Cometa or Cristália.”

He runs off again and disappears into the crowd. A few more minutes pass, and the young man is back again. He approaches Rosângela, smiles, and then, for no reason, strikes up a conversation. João Vitor, 23, was waiting for his cousin to go to the rodeo later that Saturday night. He was wearing cowboy boots, a belt with a giant buckle, and was holding a hat. He had big blue eyes, and said he had to be back to São Paulo by six in the morning on Sunday to take a civil service exam.

“Oooh, you good-for-nothing,” exclaims Rosângela, now the boy's friend. “Aren't you even going to study just a little bit before the test?”

“Nope.”

“You do look a little like a party animal...”

“You callin' me a playboy?”

“Yeah.”

“Unemployed playboy, then.” He sighs, shifting his weight to his other foot, striking a dramatic pose.

“Now you're gonna start complaining? If you want, there's room in my dog house.”

As soon as Rosângela finishes the sentence he leans against the counter and flashes a smile.

“Whoa now! Was that a pick-up line?”

“What do you mean? I told you to go live in the doghouse!” she says, indignant but charmed.

“Oh, I know how this goes... it starts out that way... then it gets cold and I go inside, then before you know it I'm between your sheets!”

Rosângela laughs. What a lippy kid. They chatted away, but customers always came up with questions and interrupted the conversation. Or rather: João Vitor tried to intrude and help out, as arrogantly as they come.

“Good evening, where are the pay phones?” asks a girl, and before Rosângela can reply, he loses his temper:

“Look at the sign over there, big girl!”

Rosângela casts an exasperated look but ignores the comment, telling the young woman precisely where the payphones are—right at the end of this corridor, ma'am—and then scolds João Vitor.

“A little more of that and we're both out of a job! You'll be in for it if anybody complains about me, OK?”

He chuckles, finding it all very amusing. A teenager walks up and asks how to get to Rua Embu Natal. Rosângela picks up the address guide and begins to search for the street intently. João Vitor takes the book from her hands and says he'll find it in no time. He looks and looks, but doesn't find it.

“It doesn't exist, lady. You sure you got the right address?”

“That's it, Embu Natal.”

“Well, it doesn't exist. Nope, it ain't in here.”

He tosses the book down and leans back against the counter, satisfied. Rosângela begins to thumb through the catalog again and finds the address. “Look, here it is!” He makes a face like he doesn't believe her. Liar. Rosângela points to the name of the street—“see?”—and he lowers his head. “Yeah, boy, I think the doghouse will do you good!” The two girls laugh and laugh, and he starts to sulk. He asks if Rosângela has a cell phone he could borrow, because she needs to call his cousin (“collect, right”).

João Vitor returns the phone and, a few minutes later, sees a guy coming towards him. He tells him off with some very unbecoming words (but apologizes to the girls at the counter, with a wry smile) and gives his cousin a hug with big, echoing slaps on the back. “Finally, man! I've been waiting here for ages!” He gives Rosângela a peck and says goodbye, asking:

“I remember. Cometa or Cristal, right?”

“Cristália, man, Cris-tá-lia!”

“Yeah, yeah. Same thing.”

They leave, pleased, and disappear into the crowd. Silently, Rosângela follows the pair and, when they disappear, turns to her friend and declares: “Now THAT doesn't happen every day at the bus station!”



She chuckles, settles back into her chair and says: “The jackass even managed to get my phone number.”

### *Coatings Fair*

More than two thousand pieces of information are provided every day by the information desk staff (117 per hour, almost two per minute). Answers to all sorts of questions by the most unusual people and in any language. “Have you heard of that theory that human beings are able to communicate anywhere?” is what Rosângela replies when asked if she can speak English. No, neither of them know a foreign language, know sign language, or have memorized the L volume of the encyclopedia, but that seems to make no difference.

“lajararoadesugodenaranjagrandullóndivertimientocortázarayudame...?”

“Look ... if you speak Spanish reeeeeaaaal slow, I'll understand.”

“lajararoadesugodenaranjagrandullóndivertimientoflorindaIlhabela...”

“Oh! You want to go to Ilhabela? Is that it? Wait just a sec.”

Rosângela grabbed a piece paper and began to lay out instructions for the tourist, step by step. They managed to understand each other after all. He was pleased, smiled, and gave her a thumbs-up. A kind of universal A-OK.

On another occasion, a young man from Curitiba asked the way to the Coatings Fair. Coatings Fair! Somehow Rosângela found out, took a piece of paper, jotted down some notes and explained: he should take the subway and go to such-and-such place, transfer and take bus X, get off at Y street, and so on. When her song and dance came to an end, the man stood there motionless and mumbled:

“Hmm ... OK. Now tell me something: How do I take the subway?”

She gazes back at him with a funny look, crumples up the paper, and sighs.

“Yeesh... I think we better start over.”

She wrote down all the instructions once more. Now in minute detail. “Go to such-and-such ramp, buy a full-fare ticket, get on the subway to...” He left with the little paper outstretched in his palm, as if it were a compass. At the end of the day, before returning home, the man stopped by the counter, thanked her for the information and bought Rosângela a pão de queijo.

There was even the time when a woman in a faded dress and flip-flops asked how she could ride “on that thing”. “That thing” was the subway.

The young woman had to go to a neighborhood on the outskirts of the city, where some of her relatives lived. She was carrying a child. She had come from the countryside and didn't seem to understand much. Rosângela explained things to her as best she could, but the woman didn't have the courage to board. She just sat there nervously, filled with doubt. The attendant advised her to leave as soon as possible because it was starting to get dark. But it was no use, she was still scared.

Then along came a timid old lady who asked how she could get to a particular place on the subway. She was frightened, too. So Rosângela called over the girl and suggested they go together, since part of the way was the same.

And off they went.

### *Image*

Rosângela talks to the faceless people of the bus station. She looks into each one's eyes and listens closely to what they have to say. She remembers many of them, she knows their names and their stories. She sets an example for public relations even for the higher-ups at Socicam. "I'm here to help the customer. Anything I can do for them, I'll do," says the young woman, seriously. "Like I told my boss: it's the person before everything else, I don't care about profits, the company's image, that kind of stuff. If I take care of them, and they're pleased, that's my job. Then comes all the rest."

She says she loves looking into the eyes of each customer who comes to the counter. There's just one thing she doesn't like: "I can't stand it when someone just rolls up, all rude, cuts in front of everybody and shouts: "Miss! Where's the...?", and demands immediate attention. As soon as she finishes the sentence, a tall, well-dressed woman in sunglasses tosses a ten-real bill on the counter and orders them to give her a phone card. Rosângela just points to the right, to the card sales windows.

"See? That's what I mean. The person won't even look at you. I don't know how somebody can live like that," she objects. She says she used to act the same way and only realized how horrible that kind of behavior was when, one day, she was eating her dinner at the station and an old man walked up.

"Good afternoon Miss!"

"Uh-huh."

"Gooooood af-ter-noon, Miss!"

“Yeah, good afternoon,” Rosângela mumbled dismissively without even looking up from her plate.

“Listen. Do they forbid all of you to smile?” asked the man softly.

Embarrassed, Rosângela looked up, apologized and realized that you can improve another person's life by being considerate. “If you greet people in a kind way, they're unlikely to argue with you, lash back, or get upset. The care we offer someone can transform a lot of things, not only for the person but for you as well.”

She knows what she's talking about: a customer she met right there at the information desk even went to see her with a marriage proposal. “Hey Rosângela, there's a Kenyan guy here at the door with a bouquet of flowers for you,” her sister told her over the phone one day, finding it all very strange. “Oh, the people you meet at the bus station, let me tell you.”

There are passengers who always look for her, who wave from afar and chat with the girls at the counter every day before boarding. Others are jealous of their friendship with the employees there—“Hey baby, if I get a hold on you, I'll turn you white!” Rosângela joked with her friend Marcos, a black man who works admin, to the astonishment of one customer.

But it's time to go home and, as she gathers her things, Rosângela philosophically concludes: “There's people here at Tietê who really leave their mark.” Still smiling, she adds: “Unlike a lot of other people who just race by and ask where the Cometa window is.”