

Returning to La Paz

14th February 1985. Valentine's Day.

As the plane descended through the clouds towards "El Alto," at 4,016 meters in altitude the world's highest airport, Los Andes laid out its immaculate, white-crystalline welcome mat. Like the Conquistadors before me, I had come to Bolivia to get rich. In my case, by putting my business into other people's noses and I wasn't arriving on horseback but a half-empty Aero Lloyd Boliviano 727. The flight to La Paz had been a nervy four-hour journey from Rio. There before me was the first hurdle on this steeplechase, I needed to slide into the country unobserved.

But I am getting ahead of myself; first I had to get in alive. I had chosen my plane seat in Rio only after inspecting the rear toilet facilities thoroughly and with good reason. Aero Lloyd's safety record had recently hit a deadly speed bump. Last month, one of their 727's was blown up by terrorist flying from La Paz to Santa Cruz. Narco-terrorists had planted dynamite in the rear toilet. A one-off or the start of something? Perhaps I was about to find out?

As the ground rushed to welcome me back, my heart raced. The pilot was fighting crosswinds which put the wind up me. I wasn't just being paranoid. Not only was there last month's incident in Santa Cruz. The year before, an Eastern Airlines flight had hit Mount Illimani, killing twenty-nine passengers. Maybe those killers on horseback knew something I didn't about safe travel. As I slid across to the window seat to enjoy the sights, I crossed the fingers of my sweaty hands and hoped not to become one of those sights. To force my racing mind back into the moment I indulged myself in some people watching, whilst reminding myself that I was hidden in plain sight here.

Many of my fellow passengers were indigenous Bolivians, dressed in traditional outfits made of natural fibres whose colours that owed nothing to modern chemistry. I could easily distinguish the two distinct groups of indigenous Bolivians, and applied myself to solving the puzzle what made them different?

The Aymara were shorter and rounder-featured than their angular Quechua cousins, who were often mistaken for Incas, with their Roman noses, haughty demeanour, and permanent look of disdain. The Quechua were sullen faced and probably had been so since the Spanish had marched into their kingdom uninvited. The Aymara's rounder faces were rippled with laughter lines, in tribute to a more forgiving nature. Neither group with distinctive copper complexions could be confused for Europeans or African descendants. The third more numerous group were the Mestizos, a melting pot of indigenous people and Spaniards in western dress unlike their compatriots. This third group were shorter than the buff tanned Brazilians I'd grown used to, with their Farah Fawcett hairdos and shoulder pads. In the coming months I would become adept at distinguishing the three main population groups, learn their history a little, and be privileged to become friends with these people from a distant land, so different from my native Essex.

Right then I was just grateful for the diversion.

The few Caucasian faces on the flight belonged mainly to backpackers—kids clad in Levi's and cagoules, hauling sprawling green and brown rucksacks, their long greasy hair puddling on their Sony Walkman's. I stuck out like a sore thumb.

It was hard to believe I had left La Paz a mere six weeks before. In those hectic weeks, I'd shifted more than \$100K worth of Bolivia's finest Cocaine in Europe, partied in Rotterdam with my Dutch buddies, and changed all the dosh into \$100 bills with Steve, my new partner.

The plane hit the ground hard, and so did I—I was the man with the plan and a job to do.

I joined the throng of eager travellers pushing their way along the aluminium tube that had transported us from the bustling modern city of Rio De Janeiro to La Paz, a South American backwater a twentieth of Rio's size.

A little old lady struggled to reach her bags from the overhead locker while people jostled her to get past. Dressed in the full-blown Aymara outfit with a crinoline skirt over a dozen petticoats, she, like so many of the Aymara matrons, reminded me of Queen Victoria. Her brown bowler hat sat perilously on long jet-black plaits and was in danger of being knocked off its perch by the locker door.

I'd blocked the aisle and reached over the hat to rescue her two recycled rice bags with their USAID logos and placed them on the seat beside her. A gentle squeeze of my hand and shy ivory and gold smile was my reward; it was a good omen for the coming fray. I'd escaped one disaster and was bracing for my next challenge.

Being six-foot-five comes with its benefits. I'd paid for them. I'd always been bigger than my years, as a three-year-old, strangers treated me as a five-year-old simpleton, Much to my mum's annoyance.

Back at school, I had always been on the headmaster's list for any scuffles or high jinks.

Adults might not have known my name, but they couldn't have missed my height. Teachers were the same, calling: *here lofty pick that up; you the long streak of piss, come here?* As the

tall lad I was always nearest, however far away. It could have been worse. I could have been ginger like my dad. Little kids threw the stones, but the lanky kid caught the blame.

This led to me learning an important life lesson at six years of age. Playing with my mates Jo and Kevin at a neighbour's farm, a shed window got smashed. The lesson whispered itself to me: *Do not point out it wasn't you and name the guilty party.*

'It wasn't me, it was him.' I'd said pointing at my mate. I was only telling the truth. My aim was poor; I'd missed the window, but Kevin had scored a direct hit.

My mates shunned me for weeks, and my dad gave me a short lecture on throwing stones, and a long one on grassing up mates. I never got over what being a grass felt like, and it took me more than thirty years to forgive the six-year-old version of myself for cowardice. "Look Simon, this is too big for us not to bring in a body, someone is going to jail, it doesn't have to be you, but too many people are involved from our end." I looked the cop right in the eye and replied. "Well, that's me then." The cop looked at me sure I had misunderstood so explained again. "No Simon not you, someone else perhaps your partner Motta or Vicky." The cops all nodded enthusiastically in agreement at Vicky's name, she had pissed them off, no surprise there then.

I stuck to my guns "Senhor, you are the boss of your team right.?" I looked around me at the group of ruffians and thugs who had just extorted cash property vehicles from me worth the best part of a million dollars. The concept of honour was as foreign to them as wearing a kimono. The cop nodded. "Excuse me Senhor but when you go into the favelas on an operation who goes out in front? You are a man, so it's you out in front of course." The lying bastard nodded again, on these deadly operations he was probably on the radio back in the armoured truck or his office. "Excuse me Sir but I too am a man. My team, my problem, I take the bullet." The money had been a huge help, but this was the moment that the deal was

done, everyone but me went free. It was also the day I finally made peace with that scared little six-year-old boy who told on his mates.

As I clambered down the plane's stairs and onto the concourse, the heady smell of dry earth, hot exhaust fumes and aviation fuel took my breath away. My skin was clammy, my throat dry from the air-conditioning. I'd felt as grubby as the air I was breathing.

How this adventure would go, I had no way of knowing, 'Hope for the best, plan for the worst, and you'll be fine, love.' Was Gail's sage advice when in a weak moment I had expressed foreboding about the coming trip and leaving the luxury of her loving arms in Ealing. My mind wandered to what might happen, taking Gail's advice.

The departures lounge had now almost filled up. Then on walked the stars of the show—two delightful little black and white Cavalier King Charles spaniels. Tails wagging, mouths open in laughter. One waited patiently at the exit while the other ran amongst us. Suddenly he stopped in front of the bag beside me. He snuffled his way around it, then sat looking up hopefully at his handler.

My neighbour looked like there was somewhere he would rather be.

The handler was joined by a cop who had been waiting in the wings, the atmosphere electric.

"Excuse me, sir, is this your bag?"

The question was directed at me.

"Would you please bring your bag and accompany me?"

I pushed the image out of my head before it took hold. Having chosen to sit at the back of the plane, I was starting from behind. My stride had easily outmatched all but the long-haired travellers. They, in turn, were handicapped by rucksacks, sleeping bags, and

tents. Like snails, they dangled their homes on their backs. Anyway, *it was uncool to rush anywhere, man.*

Helen, my wife was right; I wasn't a hippy.

Immigration is the first hurdle that begins and ends every international journey. I ducked and dived my way through the crowd towards Passport control. With the prize in sight, blocking my progress was, a portly bearded forties-something Mennonite who was wearing black trousers held up with red braces over a white cotton shirt. He urged his wife, an exhausted-looking wraith wearing a light blue cotton pinafore dress and white bonnet, to 'watch little Paddy.' Apparently, this was the boy who was *literally* stealing candy from the screaming baby in a pushchair as his mum struggled to manoeuvre the stroller around Paddy's two little brothers. Each had a black canvas bag almost as big as themselves strapped to their backs; they staggered forward under the weight of their burden like prematurely old men inclining against a gale-force wind.

The father hauled a colossal rucksack on his back while carrying a reluctant toddler. From the kid's yelling and kicking, it seemed that she was not happy being held. A lucky shot from the wild toddler sent his straw boater flying off like a frisbee to the right. As her dad lurched to save it, my heart went out, as my feet skated nimbly around them.

It was plain sailing from thereon, striding past the stream of ant-like passengers dragging their wheelie bags and struggling with less conventional hand luggage.

I'd streaked in from behind, on the last straight, arriving almost at the front of the immigration line without breaking a sweat.

In front, there were fifteen or so, business-class passengers.

As always, it was a rigged game. At three times my bucket-shop ticket price, business-class flights were a luxury I couldn't afford: yet.

The next hour was crucial, my nerves jangling. I had to pass through this obstacle course unnoticed. Suddenly a diminutive *cholita* nudged me aside, knocking the rucksack strap off my shoulder and took my place in the column. She stood knee-high to a Bolivian grasshopper but was all muscle and petticoats. I hadn't argued.

At the immigration kiosk in front of me, a woman in an olive military uniform scrutinised the documents of a suited-and-booted Mestizo. Sweat dripped from his forehead into his opened briefcase. The temperature was fifteen degrees Celsius, but he was getting the first degree. Better him than me, I thought.

Immigration should be a breeze, I reminded myself. It was customs where it could all turn to shit.

I hadn't flown into La Paz before. Flying out of here had been a serious matter, but I had coke in my bags then. I had felt sure my return would be straightforward. At that moment though I wasn't feeling so good. My hands were clammy, and my mouth was dry. My bowels were churning as though I needed a shit. Increasingly urgently I rifled through my pockets and then dove into the backpack. *Fuck*. I must have left my sherbet lemons on the plane. A careless mistake. I had moved seats to watch us land and must have left the pack in one of the pockets across the row.

On these occasions, I always had something to suck on to avoid a dry mouth—a huge giveaway that's bloody uncomfortable to boot.

My body told me what my mind didn't want to hear. Things could all go wrong, right there, right then.

In an ideal world, I would have done a dry run. I began to question, what had I walked into? Had I been careless? Fear inhabited the unknown, along with its companion foolish mistakes. I put my hand in my inside jacket pocket and felt a reassuring tile of cash—\$5,000

for eventualities. My mind switched into gear too late. *What idiot would take a \$5,000 bribe to overlook \$80,000?* The tile of hundreds suddenly lost its magic.

Two white GI-Joe types materialised on the side-lines. Their crew cuts and aviator shades hissed D.E.A. A dribble of paranoid thoughts began to run down my throat and turn my stomach. Had I raised any red flags on my travels, these guys were the ones who would be on to me. Rudi, my local connection, hadn't gotten back to me in days. Had he encountered a problem? Paranoia comes with the job. I told myself to stop imagining stuff. Not for the first time, I wondered if this was the job for me.

I told myself I had no choice. We owed money to Helen's mum and would never be free until I'd paid that debt. I didn't even know if I wanted to be free, well, not of Helen. I loved Helen, had done for half my life, still did. The truth was it was a convenient trap I made for myself. Instead of being here, I could have paid her mum. I chose not to.

In my head and heart, love was confused with lust, rejection with loyalty, betrayal with unquestioning support, joy with dread, laughter and tears mingled with sexual ecstasy and gut-wrenching guilt. If infidelity was such a sin how come Gail's caresses felt so good? If my marriage was over, why did I miss Helen so much? Either way, that debt was still a noose, and as long as I kept moving, I would continue to duck making a decision.

Forcing myself not to make eye contact with the GI Joes—a strategy effective with plod and rottweilers—I dropped my rucksack to the floor. Another uniform waddled towards an adjoining booth.

Queen-Victoria-in-the-bowler-hat lunged across the aisle, grabbing me by the arm as she did like we were in a crowded supermarket. It was the quick and the dead. There were so

many women in the same Aymara uniform I hadn't realised it was my locker buddy I grabbed one of her rice sacks as we crossed the aisle.

Five people beat us to the new queue, not one of them a gringo. Glancing back, I noticed the family of Mennon was satisfactorily way behind the man from Mammon.

Inexorably, the queue shuffled forward. My hands were sopping wet. I dried them on the lining of my pockets repeatedly. My bowler-hatted buddy was through immigration wordlessly in a trice. Now it was my turn. As I handed over my passport, I could see my wet prints on its cover.

I bit the side of my mouth; the resulting droplets of saliva liberated my dry tongue from its roof. There was a sour scent in the air. The passport officer looked the job. Stocky from his sedentary life, he had just finished his lunch, and the bits that had missed his moustached mouth decorated his grubby shirt and half-opened military jacket. He opened my blue book. The cacophony of the immigration hall went silent; the crowd disappeared. It was just the two of us.

"De Donde Vienes?" came his falsetto voice in interrogation.

I took half a step back. I'd expected a baritone, and here was a falsetto. Off-balance I replied hesitantly, "I'm sorry. No Habla Espanol."

"Okay, Okay, where you from?"

"Rio de Janeiro."

"No, where from?"

"Oh, England. I'm English."

He had my sticky British passport in his hand and was examining it as if it was the first one he'd ever seen. A young woman in olive green, carrying a rifle nearly as big as her, appeared at the booth. She edged nearer and listened intently.

The noise from the hall returned like a rushing wave, almost knocking me off-piste as my awareness returned.

The stocky immigration officer continued his Mickey Mouse impression.

"Why you here?"

"Tourism," I answered, adding weakly. "And to meet a friend and visit Lake Titicaca."

"Where you stay?"

"Hotel Sheraton."

"How long?"

"One month."

I was having difficulty with that voice. Every time it squeaked at me, I had to stifle a giggle. A nervous laugh is never a good look. All this formality was taking an eternity.

The girl leaned into the booth, stared intently at the computer screen, wrote a note on his pad, and pocketed it. She then whispered something to the official.

My bowels wriggled.

My falsetto friend grudgingly chose himself a clean page and stamped it with a resounding thud. Slamming the passport shut, he shoved it at me as if a parking fine, his mannerisms butcher than his voice. I couldn't even thank him for fear he would reply. Another exchange and I knew I would have collapsed in a fit of giggles.

With my passport finally back in my hand, I crumpled onto one knee to hide the nervous wobble in my legs. Then I twisted slightly to pick up my rucksack from the floor while quickly scanning for the missing Yankee-DEA goons. The girl with the gun was no longer by the booths either.

I was worried by her intervention. Had she just told 'Mickey Mouse' to get a move on, or was it more sinister? Sweat trickled down my back. I resisted the urge to scratch it.

Reloading the rucksack on my shoulder, my mouth still Sahara-dry, I made my way towards the baggage hall. My nerves were on fire, but my gait, I hoped, was nonchalant.

The cavernous, corrugated iron baggage shed was a melee as porters clambered over the luggage pile, no conveyor belt, just an eclectic stack of people's belongings mixing on the airport floor. People were shouting and gesticulating, clambering over their own and others bags a Hogarthian vision of disorder. Suitcases, bags, and sacks were being launched from a small pickup truck by two sturdy baggage handlers. Some of the bags had burst open as they hit the ground, bleeding underwear, blouses, and shoes onto the floor beneath them. It was a bewildering sight. I knew my cases were overstuffed. If one had broken open, there would be a lot of explaining to do. I scanned the pile for my bright blue Globe-Trotters. They stood out amongst this rabble of luggage. I beamed as I saw them, unscathed, stood to attention, straight out of the Raj and tough as a sergeant major's hide.

"Your baggage, Mr.—?"

Battered blue overalls and ancient scuffed boots appeared to be holding up the scrawny copper-skinned old man wearing them. He stared up at me and offered a huge smile. I clutched at his friendliness. My mood leapt; I was no longer alone. I had my 'Passepartout.' I had been feeling mighty lonely and exposed since Helen had left me at the airport this morning.

I indicated my two identical cases in the pile. The porter waded in and grabbed them, launching both towards me simultaneously. A trolley appeared from nowhere, and I pointed at it.

"How much?"

He shrugged. "Good price."

This wasn't a moment to haggle.

"What's your name?"

"Jose."

"Okay, okay, let's go, Jose."

Masterfully, he stripped my rucksack off my shoulder and placed the cases on the trolley. In front of us was customs, the next hurdle in the Formalities Steeplechase.

As a rule, locals smuggle stuff back, more than tourists smuggle stuff into the country. I reckoned it gave me an edge.

I was an exception to the not smuggling rule. I had eight tiles of \$100 bills, a Buchner filter, a hotbox for testing cocaine purity, a selection of heat-shrink bottle caps, rolls of plumbers' tape, a butler's corkscrew, a heat gun, and a selection of rubber tubes and bungs all neatly packed in my two cases. I'd even slipped in a disguised copy of the *cocaine Users Handbook*—I had to bring it all through customs without anybody noticing and asking why.

The army of customs agents were all there, wading through the of baggage. Jose stripped my customs declaration from my hand and assaulted the bench without fear nor favour.

One of the agents waved his victim away. Suddenly we stood in front of him. Short and stocky, his unshaven jowls made him look like a pug. With heartening disinterest, he pointed at my rucksack. Jose placed it on the bench, and the uniform began to rifle through it.

Suddenly the customs guy stopped dead in his tracks and gestured me to one side.

"You have whisky?"

I shook my head. "Wait, please."

Oh, thank God he's a baritone my first reaction, concern my second. Wait for what, for whom, why?

My customs guy stalked off behind the row of rummagers to speak to the boss, you could tell he was the boss; he had the X-ray machine and a comfy chair. The two men chatted conspiratorially for what seemed an eternity, not even glancing in my direction, while I wrestled with my bowels.

I took a nonchalant scan of the hall, no sign of cropped-haired GI Joes. The little girl with the big gun was nowhere to be seen either. That was a plus. I placed my hand in my inside jacket pocket. The half tile of 100's was still intact. I shot Jose a querulous glance, and he grinned back. Illogically it helped.

On my left, my cholita was getting the once over, bags spread across the bench as a pair of olive-drab women tore them apart.

I wondered how weird all that kit in my bags would look in an x-ray machine and started going over my excuses.

Looking my best bored, I managed a yawn unaware then it was a tell, luckily no-one noticed.

After an eternal five minutes, the uniformed pug came back to face me.

"Where from?"

"Rio."

"How much money you bring?"

"Five Thousand."

"Nothing to declare? Electricals? Whisky?"

"No."

The official grunted.

"Next time you bring Whiskey, it's quicker."

Adding my customs form to the pile behind him, he pointed to the door without glancing at it and moved on. The bastard had just been taking the piss.

I hid my huge smile safely inside. Jose was already through the door by the time I had gathered up my rucksack. I glanced back at my cholita. Our eyes met momentarily, and I gave her a conspiratorial shrug. She had been my companion throughout this obstacle race. My good luck charm: it would be nice if I were hers.

Formalities is a sprint, not a relay. I couldn't take her baton and run with it even if I wanted to. I wasn't even at the finish line myself yet.

The electric doors swished open as Jose hit them with the trolley. We were out.

"Taxi, Señor. Hotel, change money. Taxi Señor, hotel best in La Paz. Taxi Señor, change money, Good rate."

The choir assaulted me while Jose resolutely secured our exit, clearing the way for me. As we exited the building, the clouds of cigarette smoke coming from small groups of travellers almost suffocated me. I shot back to those long car journeys I'd spent with my mum and dad as they puffed away when I was a kid successfully putting both my sister and I off smoking tobacco for life. I happily followed Jose through the crowd towards a yellow and white Pontiac Bonneville on the other side of the road. At that moment, I would have happily followed Jose anywhere.

Relief flowed over me like a cool breeze on a hot and humid day. The air was crisp, and the sunlight brilliant. All was well in my world.

As Jose proceeded to load my baggage into the Bonneville's boot, the girl from immigration suddenly materialised by the car.

A cold sweat replaced the cool breeze.

"Hotel Sheraton," Jose ordered.

I woke up.

"Hey, hold on, Jose, how do you know where I am going, and who told you to pick this taxi?"

Jose looked insulted, then shot me his best smile and pointed at the girl with the gun. "My daughter, she says Hotel Sheraton one month. Good customer been Sheraton again last month."

He then walked over to the taxi driver, who stood at least a foot taller and a couple of feet wider than him and threw his arm over his shoulder in a Laurel and Hardy impression. Grinning with pride, he declared, "This my son, Raymundo. He owns taxi. For you, good price—fifty dollars for him, twenty for me."

I was right; the guy was a comedian. Six weeks earlier, it had cost me twenty-five dollars to get to the airport.

I handed Jose a twenty-dollar note. It was a ridiculous price, but I figured I owed him. I'm a sucker for a smile.

The journey down to the city of La Paz was uneventful. We whizzed through the roadblock on the way past El Alto township.

The traffic was light, and I recognised sights, the place almost familiar. A huge involuntary sigh slid through my lips as I slumped back into the enormous leather seat and allowed myself to climb down. I'd really have to stop getting so wound up. Next time, the unknown would be known, and I have a spare bottle of whiskey with me.

Jose's son tried to sell me tours, arrange pickups and do other helpful chores, but I was noncommittal. I did, however, take his phone number. The sister might be useful.

I was happy to be out of Brazil and back in La Paz.

Helen, my long-suffering wife, had brought me to the airport this morning after a less than perfect week's R&R at our house in Rio. When I'd arrived the week before, the pool had been

a bilious green. The car had been playing up. Helen was lonely and bored. The first thing I had done as I unpacked was shove ten grand in her hand. That hadn't even raised a smile, which set the tone for the week. The garden boy had the pool bright blue just in time for me to leave.

I had bought my tickets to La Paz at a travel agent in Barra Shopping: Bolivia's national airline was half the price of the competition. I boasted about my bargain over lunch at our local restaurant Gepetto's. A Rancho style place that sold steaks and sausages delivered on a quarter-inch sizzling plate of steel set in a wooden tray, alongside rice and beans, creamed potato, chips or fried yucca and salad. Simple and mouth-wateringly delicious.

Aloisio, my landlord and neighbour, had nearly choked on his steak.

"You booked a ticket with L.A.B.? Are you crazy? Didn't you hear what happened last month in Sta Cruz?"

Of course, I hadn't.

"I was in Europe. What happened? Did they have another crash or what?"

Aloisio ignored my question, intent on summoning Francisco the restaurant owner, and Varig pilot —Brazil's national carrier, to the table. In rapid-fire Portuguese, he told Francisco my news. Again, the look of shock layered over concern, followed by pity and a shaking head. I was losing my appetite.

Helen and Marisa, our landlady, who had been gossiping away happily, suddenly went silent. I looked around, five serious faces stared back at me, and I was the only one who didn't know why.

"What's wrong? What'd I do? I only bought a ticket. It can't be that bad."

I'd scanned their worried faces urgently. Francisco, the aviation expert, had pulled up a seat beside me, placed his sweaty and avuncular arm across my shoulder, and grimaced.

"Well, Simon, I am sure it will be fine."

Never a good start, then there was the long pause followed by the inevitable follow-up.

"*But...*" he continued as if talking to a child, "last month, one of their 727's was blown up by terrorists. It was flying from La Paz. They put dynamite in the rear toilet."

"Oops, does that happen often?" I asked, looking casual for Helen's sake.

It seemed not to; it was probably a narco thing, a one-off, hopefully.

In the discussion that followed, I took the opportunity to wax forth on the evil drugs trade and psychopathic trafficante's. There is hypocrisy, and then there is self-protection. A gringo spending a lot of time in Bolivia better nail his flag to the pole, even if it's a false one.

Pablo Escobar was blowing up stuff all over the place in Colombia at the time. In November that year, he would fund M19 to blow up Colombia's palace of justice. Great way to clean up his criminal record. Not everyone was happy just getting other people high. Pablo had wanted to run the country.

That evening, once again, Helen begged me like a cracked record *to give up this whole crazy business*.

"Simon darling, this is all madness. It's alright for you, but what would I do if you got busted—or worse still, killed. It's just not worth it. We can both get jobs and pay Mum back slowly. You're a great salesman. Anyone would be lucky to employ you. I can get work as a secretary. I couldn't stand it if you ended up in some South American hell hole."

I noted Helen's idea of 'alright for me' differed somewhat from mine.

I'd stopped shaving off my beard for a second.

"Well, you sure as hell wouldn't visit, eh."

"Oh, Simon, that's so unfair. You told me not to."

"Yeah, but you could have if you wanted to."

It was an old wound. A few years back, I'd had an adventure holiday at 'Her Majesty's Request' well, insistence really. I got three months in an open prison for forgetting I had six keys of Lebanese hash in the back of my car on the way home from Holland. Helen had not visited. On the night before my sentencing, she had turned out the light and gone right off to sleep. I'd made my own way to the court.

I had made two trips to Africa and brought two suitcases of weed back while on bail for a year, to make sure Helen had cash. Having spent a year on remand, my lawyer told me to expect '18 months to two years. It's a the tariff Simon.' I got eight months, four suspended. As Peter my lawyer put it so well, I was a "lucky bastard" and you can't beat a lucky player.

Both times I'd told her I was in London on business, both times she believed me. We'd been married ten years, and I had never lied to her, before the business went broke, that is.

I continued shaving. It was a low blow. It was true I had told Helen not to visit.

I was leaving in a couple of days and didn't want a fight. My stomach churned as I watched tears fill her eyes. There had been way too many tears recently, most of my making. I told myself I would do anything for her not to cry.

Anything that is, apart from giving up my mistress, Gail, or smuggling cocaine. So, I was a bastard, and I wouldn't give up much.

As for getting a job, I'd run my own business since I was twenty. I didn't want to work for someone else. J.O.B. is an acronym for Just Over Broke. I had no plans for being just over broke. I planned to get Helen's mum's money off my back as soon as possible.

"I fucking hate shaving. It's such a faff. That's why I have a beard, cause I'm too lazy to shave."

That, and shaving one off is the easiest way to change a man's appearance.

Helen nodded.

"I know."

I turned to her and grimaced, patting my naked paunch as I spoke.

"Oh, I'm sorry, darling. What are you doing with a balding, paunchy, ageing hippy, who mistreats you?"

Helen turned on her heels and stalked from the bathroom.

"You're not a hippy," was her parting shot.

It took two days to convince Helen that I didn't have to buy a different ticket. It had been a crap week. I was happy to be out of it and back in La Paz.

We pulled into the Sheraton, and Ray passed my bags to a smartly uniformed porter who waved me urgently forward to the reception.

I lingered; the baggage was not dispensable. It had cost me sweat and tears to get it as far as these hotel doors. I wasn't going to let them fall at the last fence.

Once the Globe-Trotters passed through the portal, I walked to the reception desk, still watching my cases out of the corner of my eye as the porter rolled them towards the lifts.

"Good afternoon, Sir. How may I help?"

My attention shifted to the girl behind the desk. She was taller than the local average—maybe 5'8" and her uniform accentuated ample curves. She had the exotic looks of a 'Camba', the girls from Sta Cruz lowland tropics and the regal bearing of a 'Pacena' with its Incan queens. Long jet-black hair glistened right down to her narrow waist. Her sensuous smile was bright red, revealing immaculate white teeth that complimented her sun-kissed complexion. She was stunning and not unaware of it—her voice as soft and sensual as her

smile. A reincarnated Incan princess, I named her after Quilla, Incan goddess of the moon and defender of women. Way out of my league, or so years of marriage had taught me. Gail was beginning to change my thinking. I was like an adolescent testing my boundaries, 32 going on 17.

I clocked my baggage as it rolled on its trolley to safety.

"My Name is Mc Coy. I have a reservation."

Quilla consulted her computer and grinned.

"Ah yes, Mr Mc Coy. It's so nice to see you again."

If she had seen me before, I hadn't seen her. I would have remembered.

"You are in 1208. Is Mr Stevens with you?"

"No, he will be here tomorrow. I am all alone tonight."

I did my best to look lonely and forlorn, but she wasn't having any of that bollocks.

"Would you like to leave a deposit, Mr Mc Coy?"

I pulled out my half tile of hundreds and peeled off thirty notes.

"Will this be enough to start with?"

The Sheraton, one of the best hotels in La Paz, was not cheap, but it was secure.

Again, Quilla smiled, and my knees wobbled for the second time that day. Softly, she reached forward and removed the notes from my hand. Her lashes hid and then revealed a Vicuna's almond eyes. Quilla pressed a key card and some papers gently into my hand.

"Would you like to see your room now?"

"If you would like to show me my room, I would be delighted," I said, clumsily trying to flirt.

She paused as if considering the idea while putting the notes into the till then turned to her male colleague.

There was an urgent repetitive and insistent vibration in my groin. I reached into my trouser pocket for the pager.

"You there, mate? All good? Getting on the plane."

It was Steve, my new business partner. He knew just when to interrupt.

I typed a cryptic *Yeah, all good* and returned to the lost opportunity at hand. I turned hopefully to Princess Quilla, but her male colleague was already around the reception desk and hustling me towards the elevator.

I stared wistfully at Quilla and then anxiously at the bags.

"My baggage," I mumbled to no one in particular as I strode off in its direction.

"It's alright, Mr Mc Coy. The porter will bring your bags up shortly," my guide reassured me.

I forced myself to relax and let it go. Stressing about the luggage would red flag it. Like I say, *if you don't tell 'em, they don't know*.

The room was American style, as in huge. I had booked adjoining rooms by phone from Rio. It's always good to have an existing reservation if Formalities questioned my location. The rooms were on the 12th floor below the bar and restaurant, with its expansive views of the Cordillera. I could see the Andes in all their glory, even from my room. An hour or so ago, I had watched them from the heavens. Now they were my horizon. It was good to be on solid ground, albeit twelve stories up.

Having shown me how to work the T.V. and the air conditioner, and given me the safe code, the receptionist slid out of the door with a \$10 note in his fist, just as my baggage arrived.

Another \$5 for the porter, and I was alone at last. It's important to be the nice man in 1208, rather than another tightwad gringo on the top floor. You might need a favour someday.

Once alone, I called Rudi, my connection. A lot was riding on this. After ringing him all week from Rio, he still hadn't come back to me. It was already past a joke. Rudi knew I was due back this week. Without a reliable connection, I had nothing but a good project. The coke world is full of good schemes.

Helen's mum had labelled me "Walter Mitty," upon our first meeting. We all know them, the guy who works in accountancy but fantasizes about being James Bond. I was aching to watch her eat those words. If the 82 crash hadn't blown me off course, she already would have had a slice of word pie.

The phone droned on for five minutes. Steve was arriving tomorrow; not connecting with Rudi wasn't the news I wanted to give him when he arrived. I had talked Rudi up as the 'man'. The kit certainly merited respect. That my connection was as reliable as a chocolate teapot had not been part of my pitch.

My paranoia from the airport wormed its way back into my brain. What if Rudi had experienced a problem? After all, he wasn't a bank clerk, and I wasn't his only punter.

If he wasn't in town for some reason, it could be weeks for all I knew. If I didn't get him by the weekend, I would have to trace Geordie, who'd introduced us, in Brazil. But that, too, could take weeks.

Cursing, I abandoned the phone in disgust.

I hefted the cases onto the bed, pulled out the case keys from the rucksack, tripped the locks, and snapped them open.

Yes! My thumbs involuntarily rose above-clenched fists. The bags were exactly as I had packed them.

Carefully removing the top layer of shirts and wash bag, I pulled out a pair of jeans, slid my hand into the front pocket, and found a soft parcel. The sock felt nice and bulky. I removed the tile of \$100 notes with the bank's paper band intact.

Five minutes later, there were eight of them in a pile. Plus, the \$1,860 in my pocket and fifteen days' hotel bill paid upfront.

It was all I had in the world. Eighty grand was not much, but it was a start. I took a deep breath. At four thousand metres, the air is thin, and many people find breathing difficult. Some even require oxygen. Fortunately, the altitude and I were okay with each other. At six foot five, I was used to heights.

It was already dark outside. I watched the city's lights sparkle below me. Here I was in La Paz, everything but supplier in place. I'd been away six weeks. In that time, I had developed my plan, made the seed money to fund it, proven the processes to continue producing cash in volume and convinced partners to help me realise it, Rudi was vital to that plan, and he was AWOL. I tried his number again. It's hard to hold a phone with all your fingers crossed, and it doesn't work. My angry mind muttered 'Kraut bastard' as he remained stubbornly silent.

My mood dropped further as I considered how close I had come to losing the whole lot to some lucky customs guy today. If I'd got the once over my cholita, buddy was getting when I last saw her. My plan would have died on the spot. Instead of this mountain view, I'd have been staring at bars and negotiating for my freedom. It didn't bear thinking about.

The old school gibe of *could do better if he paid attention* rang in my ears.

I had lost the business I had built over eight years in the crash of '82. I had watched Helen, distraught as the bank took our home. I'll not forget the look of horror on her face as bailiffs knocked on our door. Never once during that dreadful period did she reproach me, but losing our home broke something that I could never mend. I blamed myself for both of us.

Well, I was paying attention now, and this time it was no holds barred. It was late, and I was dog tired. Negativity was creeping in. So, I lay down in bed and focussed on the future.

In front of us were Mountains of 'Angel's Dandruff Pearly white iridescent Bolivian cocaine, unpressed, uncut, and unrushed. The cook had allowed the crystals to grow slowly out of the ether and acetone without pushing hydrochloric acid at it too quickly. Picking up a fist-sized chunk, I examined it as a jeweller would examine a fine opal. I gently crumbled the rock in my open fist. Tiny rainbows danced across the surface of fragile fingernail sized flakes of iridescent delight as they fluttered slowly back onto the pile of snow.

That was the best future I could hope for.