

Chapter XII- Entertaining in the Bathroom

If it were not for John and Joe I might still be in Santa Marta, content to stay on the beach near cheap cocaine. They reminded me that all of us were there to explore. John, in particular, wanted to get going. John was a smart guy with a plan - the perfect travel mate for me. His Spanish was strong as well. He had a vision, and he knew where to go, so I jumped in with his next move which was to bus over to the Old Spanish seaside city of Cartagena. We all checked out of the hotel and headed out to catch a bus at the Santa Marta market. I realized on the way, sitting in that packed bus, that traveling here was for the sole purpose of going with a bare minimum plan. My curiosity was about the journey, not Cartagena. I had no knowledge about the Caribbean city and was happy to just pronounce the name right. Just to keep moving is okay with me. There is something about *not knowing what next that fascinates me*. There is no doubt that a Gypsy lives inside me. It seems so easy for me just to go, leave for the unknown and forget all my yesterdays. Fifty years later I'm still the boy that wandered around a mental institution alone in search of magic. My curiosity is my weakness and I'm not sure it makes me a gypsy, or the gypsy makes me wildly curious.

If you could even catch one, traveling by bus in South America back then was nothing like Greyhound. You are lucky if you got a real seat. The coaches make accommodations for livestock so the sides of the buses I rode in were cut out and the seats removed to make it easy to load goats, chickens, or pigs in with humans and various cargos. The buses carried about anything. The mountainous road system was dirt with short stretches of a paved highway near the major cities. Most travel carried me over remote territory and was hit and miss, with anything from war activity or washed-out roads stopping you for days at a time. Between the poor roads, unsafe vehicles and rebellions it was somewhat dangerous to travel by bus or anything for that matter.

Although Cartagena was an old, walled, port city, founded by the Spanish in the 16th century. Historically prosperous, it was frequently raided by pirates. The city's prominent features were the vintage Spanish architecture and its many narrow cobblestone streets. It is now a cruise ship stop so the tourist commerce was well developed. The food was excellent and getting a room was easy but relatively pricey. It was not the architecture that was most memorable for me, it was what happened there. We got restless fast, and John was not happy

with the availability of cocaine. Cartagena was not what I wanted to do either, but we stayed for two nights. John decided to head south to Medellin and that was good enough for me. We took off to another marketplace bus terminal.

The Cartagena central bus depot was a grim sight. The complex was a battered bunch of small buildings and muddy parking lots holding buses and trucks. Conditions were harsh, nothing looked clean, and the light was at a minimum. Finding the right ticket for the right bus was largely a guess. The Army, which served as the police, had a dark presence and were well-armed with pistols or rifles. They worked in teams of two, stopping people at will, searching them, and sometimes taking individuals away. It created a heavy-handed atmosphere. So, I was not surprised when two rifle-bearing soldiers stopped me and asked me to step outside into a sparsely populated parking lot. We exchanged barely a single word. They slowly took everything out of my backpack. Skillfully placing each item on the ground like a kid separating food on his dinner plate. It surprised me how slowly and carefully they did this. The search was so well organized it had to be part of their training. It was too deliberate. By the time they emptied my backpack their work looked like an asymmetric retail display on the ground, with my pack as the featured product.

While this was going on I suddenly started to get sick. It was that food poisoning rush of intense nausea, the early signs of the runs and non-stop vomiting. It all came to me fast. Sick was now my focus, not the two soldiers and not the lovely care my meager property was receiving.

In my backpack, I had three books. One was the first part of the "Illuminatus" trilogy. Inside this far out three-part conspiracy novel is where I hid the chunk of black hash, pressed between two pages and forgotten about. As deliberate as they took them out, the soldiers placed my belongings back into the backpack. My books were the last items they picked up, and of course, the chunk of hash fell out. The soldiers were happy about this. With a big smile, one told me in broken English "You have a big problem". Using a hand signal for money, rubbing my thumb and index finger together, I answered, "sure, how much money do you want?" To me, my police problem was only a matter of negotiating the amount of the bribe. But, my bigger problem was how sick I was getting. I had to vomit at the very moment they found the hash. Speed dickering, while heading for the bathroom as fast as possible, breaking into a near run. In my best Spanish I tried to explain I was sick and needed the bathroom

pronto. A small crowd started to gather to watch the gringo get frisked by the two soldiers. With my back to the soldiers and thinking they knew I was heading to the bathroom, I accelerated my pace, trying not to puke in public. As it turned out, the Soldiers figured I was running away.

A growing and rowdy crowd of locals hurried after the soldiers as they pursued me to the bathroom. I'm not concerned that this group is following me all the way to the toilet, I'm only concerned about

, barely making it to the latrine in time for the first barf. It was loud and hard, one that turns your intestines inside-out. Just as I started the second round, one of the soldiers grabbed me by the collar and spun me around. The vomit followed me spraying the floor right in front of them. One was yelling at me as he checked my mouth for drugs. It turned out they thought I was stuffing drugs down my throat. It was only the relentless vomiting that convinced them of my sickness.

Typical of the third world, someone else's pain is funny. Like I was doing stand-up comedy, an audience of laughing onlookers also got in on the vomit show. *Look the gringo is puking, how funny!* My response was a big "fuck you" with a middle finger for emphasis. It pissed me off so much I bent over and pointed to my American ass for a kiss. After the gut heave had provided some temporary relief, I negotiated a \$35 bribe right in front of the crowd. Bribing the soldiers felt like the only rational thing that happened that afternoon. When a public police bribe seems reasonable you know you are in the Third World. After the bribe had been paid, they gave me back the piece of hash which I at once threw across the parking lot in a most lively way, to make sure everyone knew it was no longer in my possession.

After several visits to the toilet to deposit my insides, a middle-aged man pulls up in a car right in front of me. A foot away from my feet he peered out the window, he smiled while telling me in good English "you have a problem." He showed me his immigration officer identification. He proceeded to tell me that he knew about my hash bust and I had to leave

the country. He took my passport and visa. My immediate response was “how much do you want.” Another smile came with instructions to get into his car.

He told me he was driving me to the airport to deport me, but I could buy lunch before that. I again blurted out “What the fuck! Why should I buy you lunch?” He gave me no answer and made small talk all the way to the airport. Once at the airport, we went directly to an excellent businessman's steakhouse right in the airport. He told me it was the best steak in town because the American businesspeople all eat there. Our lunch turned into a negotiation on how much I would have to pay him. We agreed that I would pick up the lunch tab and pay \$40 cash for gas money. He made it clear that this was not a bribe. At the end of his meal of beefy stuff he took my passport and visa out of his briefcase and canceled my 30-day visa with a hand stamp. He then took out another stamp and gave me a more extended visa for sixty days. He was a funny guy and charming. He had a little Kojak going on, all he needed was the lollipop. His body shape, suit, and size matched Kojak's. He drove me back to the bus depot all the while I was describing to him America's most famous TV cop.

At the front of the terminal, the two soldiers that busted me were standing there looking for their next mark. They waved right at Kojak. When the two soldiers came over and started small talk with Kojak, I knew my afternoon of bribing officials was all part of a plan to trap guys like me. Something they did regularly. In an instant I got out of the car and lined the three of them up for a group photo which they happily did. We all laughed and left calling each other “amigo.” Offering bribery came second nature for me. To my thinking, this is better than the USA. In the USA I would be jailed. Here, I entertained a bunch of Colombians in the bathroom with some vomit comedy, bribed three officials, bought Kojak lunch, and stayed out of jail. Overall, a good deal and a hell of a crazy story.

It was one of Cali's cousins that instructed me that anyplace in South America, bribe the first police officer that catches you. It is the fastest and cheapest way out of trouble. It was a simple equation, the more people that know, the more people you bribe. The whole affair was efficient, and I was never scared. To put the money in perspective, US\$35 is two months' pay for the soldiers, and American cash was worth more to them than the equivalent in Colombian pesos. The Kojak lunch cost US\$40, the check they presented was US\$90 and I skipped eating. The bribe was buried in the bill. The waiter in on it. On most days down there,

I ate for less than two dollars. All this bribing of officials turned out to be good practice for navigating my way south. What is next? Who cares?