

# TODO CAMBIA: A BOLIVIAN JOURNAL, 2001

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*The greatest distance between people is not space but culture.*

--Jamake Highwater

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In Bolivia, substance dissolves. The veil between worlds is thin. Scenes change as quickly as sets on a rotating stage--dynamic interplay of subatomic particles in a cosmic dance.

My husband, John, and I have decided to visit Bolivia after Christmas. A professor of American Politics and Public Policy, my work has focused on the domestic underbelly of America's arrogance and prosperity: its working and welfare poor; the failed challenge of its rainbow possibilities. I have known Latin America over the years only obliquely--always as witness to someone else's *historia*: through the passion and poetry of friends caught up in the tragic dramaturgy of Mexico's and Central America's wars; through brief encounters with the silence of Salvadoran refugees, the pleading voices, the generous hospitality of Nicaraguan peasants; through tours led by the scruffy representatives of revolutionary governments around the dingy, bullet-pocked streets of national capitals; through pilgrimages to national monuments--sad little towns studded with rows of wooden crosses, earth heaped in fresh mounds; and to the sites of national shrines--crude hand-painted signs bearing witness to poets whose voices will sing only in collective memory, and occasionally in the chapbooks of *gringo* publishers.

But most of all, I have met Latin America only through the postcards and letters and email messages from my wandering daughters, but especially my first-born. Written from places I had once visited as a tourist: Havana, Santiago de Cuba; Matanzas; from places I would one day visit because my daughter was there: San José, Limón, Manuel Antonio; Managua, Leon, Rio Blanco, Bocana de Paiwas; Quito, Otavalo, Cuenca; from places I had never visited: Brasilia, Salvador de Bahia; Guayaquil; from places I had never heard of: Rama, Cama, Blue Fields, El Bluff, Pôrto Alegre, Curitiba; and from places my unpracticed tongue could barely pronounce: El Salar de Uyuni; Foz de Iguacú.

And now we are here in La Paz--nervous, excited--led by our daughter to yet another planet in this immense galaxy of suffering and praise. Jennifer has been in Bolivia for the past four months on a Fulbright grant conducting part of the research for her doctoral dissertation--on the Indigenous political movements that in the last few years have become significant forces in Ecuador and Bolivia. Bolivia is a supplemental study to her main concentration, the Indigenous movement in Ecuador where she had worked for four years before entering graduate school. But between the time we decided to make the trip and our departure for home, substance dissolved. We had come as tourists, we would leave, at last, as fetuses, attached to the vast umbilical cord of Latin America's mystery and its anguish.

We had left New York at night reaching Bolivia at dawn. Our plane descends through a mist as dense as cooked oatmeal, shifting imperceptibly to reveal a sea of dull red adobe buildings, a Lego set laid out on a grid of mud stretching out to the horizon. In the background, through breaks in the drifting cloudbank, the rugged snow-capped peaks of the *Cordillera Real* thrust themselves into the space between earth and heaven. This is the rainy season and though the peaks are not always visible, one senses their ghostly presence everywhere we go--magnificent markers of the insignificance of human endeavor.

We land. Terra firma; but a few steps and we are floating. It is a sensation we will experience for the rest of our stay, for we have stepped out onto the Altiplano, the 4,200-plus meter high Andean plateau that stretches from the Peruvian border north of Lake Titicaca southward to the Argentine border. La Paz, at 3,600 meters (11,800 feet) is the highest capital city in the world. After getting our bags and passing through customs, we enter the main waiting room, catching sight of Jennifer's bright blue eyes and dark blonde hair above the small dark crowd. She sees us, her infectious smile and wave lighting our hearts. I notice she is thinner and prettier than when I last saw her. Behind her is a stranger--a handsome raven-haired and bearded, dimpled-cheeked man with eyes the color of moist coal--our future son-in-law, Juan Domingo Giménez. We have arrived.

## **EL ALTO**

We settle, awestruck, into the small taxi, our eyes fixed on the back of this handsome stranger's head. We had waited a long time for the moment we could pronounce the word, "son-in-law," and now it had crept upon us without warning. Jennifer chatters away, switching easily from English to Spanish. We older gringos are literally tongue-tied. We speak *muy poco* Spanish. Juan speaks even less English.

The taxi takes us along the highway that runs through the center of "El Alto." Once, merely a suburb of La Paz, El Alto has spread amoeba-like into a sprawling slum of grim adobe buildings and mud streets that is home to some 700,000 Aymara and Quechua Indians, rivaling in size, if not in wealth, its near neighbor, the one-million-plus La Paz. It is 6:00 A.M. and El Alto is preparing for work. Our ride takes us past block upon block of tawdry auto repair and scrap yard signs, past men wheeling heavy metal machinery on makeshift wagons, past women setting up their stalls on pieces of plastic wrapping spread over the oozing mud, past dilapidated trucks bulging with human cargo, past skinny curs searching for scraps in the sewage at the side of the road, past ruination and the bustle of surviving.

El Alto sits on the rim of the vast elliptical bowl (nearly five kilometers from rim to rim) that is La Paz. Each day thousands descend from El Alto in trucks and buses and taxis into the bowl to eke out a living. They work in factories and office buildings, in restaurants or as maids and street vendors. Our taxi follows this vast human river into the depths of the canyon, past belching factories and warehouses and auto showrooms.

## LA PAZ

After a dizzying ride, we are in the heart of downtown La Paz. The terrain has changed from horizontal to vertical. Grey and brown are shot with flashes of green. A jumble of modern skyscrapers and gracious colonial and 19<sup>th</sup> century buildings fill the bowl. Past and present meet in no particular order. Here, colorful outdoor markets are cheek-by-jowl with McDonalds and cybercafes; men and women in Armani suits share narrow sidewalks with beggars and hawkers, con men and prostitutes. La Paz's major avenue threads its way along the bottom of the bowl, changing its name several times from top to bottom. This is the center of the country's financial, industrial and commercial life. The wide avenue, divided by attractive parks and cut at several points by roundabouts follows the canyon of the *Rio Choqueyapu*, which at this point is underground, but emerges into the open on the city's southern outskirts. Nicknamed, *El Choke*, this river, which once drew the greed of Spaniards to its gold, is now a stinking sewer, receiving annually some 500,000 liters of urine, 200,000 tons of human excrement, and millions of tons of garbage, animal carcasses and industrial toxins. There are no laws against such dumping in Bolivia. Jennifer laughingly tells us of hiking with friends the day before we arrived. They had had to cross El Choke, and Sonia fell in. They can laugh. They are young.

On all sides of the bowl streets shoot straight up the sides of the canyon, as neighborhoods turn from "working class" to poverty stricken. Streets turn from cobblestone to dirt, to rutted lanes and then to steps and footpaths. From below, the carpet of red adobe buildings seem to be suspended on the slopes through some inexplicable levitation process until they give up at the base of vertical cliffs rising to the bowl's rim. Jennifer describes La Paz as a giant anthill. The guidebook says that on a clear night from the Altiplano above, La Paz looks like the mirrored reflection of the glittering night sky.

Our destination is the southern part of the city, the embassy and hotel district where Jennifer has found a room for us in a "bed and breakfast" La Paz style--an immaculately kept, large hotel-modern apartment in a round skyscraper with picture windows overlooking the busy streets and parks below. On the living room wall, a kitsch scene of a shepherd and his goats in the Swiss Alps. Our landlady, Carmen, a once beautiful, but now wan blonde woman who seems to live in her nightgown, owns the apartment with her daughter, Pamela, a lovely young woman who appears to be in her twenties. Carmen had been a seamstress but is recovering from some debilitating environmental illness and needs the money she gets from renting out rooms. We sleep for a few hours, overcome by our all-night plane ride and the altitude, grateful that in this harsh climate and poverty-stricken country there are pockets of first-world comfort to be found! But upon awakening, we are brought up against the reality that we are still in the Third World. There is no central heating in Bolivia and even indoors the rainy season, at 12,000 feet, eats into the very marrow of the bones. Toilet paper must never be flushed down the modern toilet, and one must be careful to drink only bottled water and fruit that can be peeled.

After our nap, Jennifer and Juan meet us and we head out for a leisurely day of sightseeing. It is important in arriving in La Paz to take the first two or three days to get acclimatized. "I walked into the Third World in a way that was new for me," John writes in his journal. "I have slept on concrete floors in campesino homes in Nicaragua, pastored inner-city churches and walked the tenements and night streets of East Harlem and the Bronx, but this was different. For one thing, it literally took my breath away. At 12,000 feet, a flight of stairs or a steep street leaves me winded. So we walk slowly, and instead of my moving through the world (in my car, a plane or just walking briskly) suddenly I am watching the world pass by."

And what a world! Bolivia is one of the poorest countries in Latin America, ranking 112<sup>th</sup> out of 174 (the lowest) on the U.N.'s "Human Development Index." Some 66%-70% percent of the population live below the poverty line. One estimate of unemployment puts it at about 30 percent, and underemployment is much greater. The social services that we take for-granted in the North are almost non-existent. Resourcefulness, perseverance and resignation alternate as the culture's defining characteristics.

Bolivia is a work in progress. Along the Prado (one of the several names for La Paz's main thoroughfare) Indigenous women set up shop (56-70% of the nation's population is of pure Indigenous stock). In tiny stalls, sometimes with babies lying on mats by their side or school-age children playing nearby, they sit like Buddhas, only their heads and torsos visible above the stacked cartons of candy and biscuits, bottled water and trinkets displayed in front of them. From morning til late in the evening, in rain and shine they keep their vigil in their jauntily perched bowler hats, swathed in thick, layered skirts and shawls, their jet braids framing mahogany faces. I am amazed to learn from the guidebook that the traditional dress of Indigenous women was actually imposed on them by the Spanish king, right down to the center parting of their hair. Those who aren't ensconced in stalls are carrying heavy loads on their backs, the older among them bent double from years of wearying toil.

Everything in Bolivia is sold on the street--fine leather handbags and chewing gum, hardware and cosmetics, flashlights, suitcases, compact disks, Kleenex, candy, bottled water, reading glasses, leather jackets, housewares, fruits and vegetables, large plastic bags of popped grain, cheap plastic toys and fake plaster fossils that are passed off to gullible gringos by furtive men who appear unexpectedly by your side and disappear just as suddenly into the crowd like secret agents in a John le Carré novel. Everywhere, there are children working--an estimated 500,000, from the ubiquitous shoeshine boys to those who lean out of *micros* (the sputtering, pollution-spewing multipassenger mini-buses) shouting out the names of the destinations for those who need a cheap taxi. These are the lucky ones, the nine out of ten who have made it past infancy.

DAY TWO: Carmen leaves us a breakfast of toast, jam and coca leaf tea, a staple of the Bolivian diet. Coca tea helps with altitude sickness and, it is said, chewing the leaves helps to stave off the gnawing hunger in the pit of the stomach. To the Aymara and Quechua it is also considered a sacred gift, useful for driving off evil forces. Mama

Coca is the daughter of Pachamama, the earth mother. The Indigenous use the leaves for healing and exorcising rituals, as sacrifices when planting or mining, and sometimes as money. Men carry coca leaf pouches around their necks, and tourists can buy beautifully woven pouches in the *artesanía* shops to use as exotic wall hangings back home. A certain amount of coca production is allowed by the government; the rest is considered subversive.

Today we take a taxi to a place where the streets get steeper and narrower looking for a number of museums that the guidebook says should be open. We find only one, an old colonial mansion. The others are unaccountably closed--typical, says Juan, of the Bolivian government's lack of concern for its tourist industry. Juan moved to Bolivia eight months ago from Argentina to set up an ecotourism business. His business manufacturing outdoor equipment in Argentina failed when the government adopted the neoliberal economic reforms dictated by the United States, the World Bank and the IMF, causing cheaper Chinese imports to flood the market. Juan says that the field for ecotourism in Bolivia is wide open. As we are soon to learn, it will be ecotourism only for the most adventurous!

Unable to do the museums, we wander over to the beautiful, indented Plaza Murillo, festive with balloon sellers, ice cream carts and pigeons. Ringed with gracious government buildings and the national cathedral, the setting belies the sordid political history of the country. Jennifer points out the *Palacio Quemado*, "Burnt Palace," which got its name from repeated infernos. Early mortality and a high rate of corruption and venality have accompanied political office in Bolivia. It is a history of nearly 200 coups and counter-coups. The country seems to have been cursed by a series of eccentric buffoons straight out of the pages of Gabriel Garcia Marquez. The bizarre, cruel General Mariano Melgarejo, for example, once set off in a drunken haze with his army on an overland march to the aid of France at the outset of the Franco-Prussian War. A sudden downpour sobered him up and the project was abandoned. Melgarejo is also credited with squandering the nation's reserves on his mistresses and alcohol habit, ceding territory to Brazil in exchange for a white horse, tying the British ambassador naked to the back of a mule and banishing him for failing to drink enough beer. This last outrage led Queen Victoria to declare that Bolivia did not exist and that henceforth, it would be wiped off the British maps. As recently as 1946, "distraught widows" publicly hanged the then president of Bolivia in the Plaza.

The current president, Hugo Banzer, is a former military strongman who ruled with brutal repression during the 1970s but was elected by Congress in 1997 to head a coalition government after winning 22% of the vote. His regime now wears a "democratic" face, joining the neoliberal stampede that has shifted direct repression by military dictatorships in Latin America into its more subtle cousins: "capitalization," "structural reform," "dollarization" or "drug eradication," the last, of course, conducted under the watchful eye of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, the Drug Enforcement Administration and the military, with the generous support of the U.S. taxpayers. Bolivia is the world's third largest supplier of cocaine for the illicit drug market. Fortunately for us, the drug eradication program with its aerial spraying of people and

food crops as well as coca takes place mostly in the tropical Chapare region, which the U.S. State Department warns foreign tourists against entering because of the frequent violence, kidnappings and campesino uprisings that seem to accompany the program.

After lunch in a downtown restaurant, we wander over to the *Museo de Arte Contemporaneo* which Jennifer had determined was open when we passed it earlier. Housed on the main avenue in an elegant, but down-at-the-heels turn-of-the-century mansion in the French style (the French architect, Eiffel, of tower fame designed the roof and stained-glass windows) this museum of contemporary art, the curator tells us, has only been open for about a year. Though lacking the money to show the works of art to their best advantage, the museum houses some interesting contemporary works--metal and plaster sculpture, landscapes, portraits, abstracts and surrealist paintings. Most of the works are done in earth colors--yellow ochre, burnt sienna, brown and grey--reflective of the colors of the Andean landscape and many express that strange sense of the phantasmagoric so characteristic of this Indigenous culture.

DAY THREE: Today we decide to visit the *Calle Sagarnaga*, street of the *artesanias*, where the nation's handicrafts are sold. At the corner of this steep street sits the *Iglesia de San Francisco*, a large cathedral to which hundreds of worshippers are flocking. On the plaza outside the church, as in medieval Europe, stands one of the city's major markets. Everyone who enters the church seems to be cradling a cardboard box. On closer inspection we see that they are carrying hundreds of replicas of the baby Jesus. Some of the babies are dressed in satin robes and wear crowns, others are in swaddling cloths lying in fake straw. It is Three Kings Day and the worshippers have brought the babies (that have, until now, rested in the elaborate crèches that are part of every Bolivian home at Christmas) to be blessed by the priest. Inside, the dim cavernous church is filled to capacity, with hundreds of worshippers standing in the aisles. Incense wafts through the twilight air and song lifts to the stone heights. When the faithful return home, they expect that the blessed baby Jesus will bring them good fortune for the rest of the year. One such worshipper, a thin woman who wears despair as a garment, is not waiting for fortune to work its will, however. In an importunate pleading that I can only barely make out, she tells a sad tale of an afflicted son and no money to care for him.

Outside again the light is brilliant but beginning to cloud over. We wander up the street to look in the shops, hoping to buy some gifts to take back to family and friends. They are filled to overflowing with the most exquisite handicrafts: hand-knit llama, alpaca and sheep's wool sweaters, hats, jackets, scarves, mittens and bags; woven and appliqued wall hangings; modern and antique rainbow-hued *aguayos* the brilliant woven rectangles that are used to carry everything on the Indians' backs, from children to merchandise and that are now made also as tablecloths; terra cotta, wood and straw figurines; cloth dolls dressed in Indigenous costumes; traditional musical instruments--the ukele-like *charango*, the haunting *quena* and *zampoña* or Andean reed flutes; the percussive *huankara* and *caja*; hand-painted boxes; silver and gold filigreed earrings, bracelets and necklaces; fantastical masks and brilliant costumes used in the traditional Indian festivals. One entire street is given over to these elaborate creations. We marvel at how such beauty and creativity can flow from a people so apparently impoverished and

wretched. If beauty and usefulness, instead of speed and waste, were the coin of the realm, I think, the Indigenous peoples of the world would be its rulers.

We eat a leisurely *almuerzo* (lunch, but really the largest meal of the day) in charming old colonial, Hotel Torino, in the central part of the city, sitting in a large open courtyard surrounded by a colonnaded balcony, ringed with potted palms. Over spicy traditional soup, *chairo* filled with half corncobs, chicken drumsticks, potatoes and cheese, we listen to a band of leathery-faced old men play Argentine tangos. The tables next to ours are filled with similar men--with wonderful gnarled faces, like those in a Brueghel painting. They seem to be spending the entire afternoon drinking and gossiping, and toasting one another. At another table, an Indian family is celebrating a wedding. The plump matriarch in her bowler and fringed shawl surrounded by daughters and sons-in-law, who appear to have abandoned the traditional Aymara dress, disappearing into the modern mestizo culture, except for the giveaway mahogany skin, high cheekbones and the slight slant of their eyes.

After lunch we climb higher into a warren of human settlements, stopping in front of a drab, three-story adobe apartment building in what Jennifer calls a "working class neighborhood." In the United States, it would be described as a slum. This is Jennifer's building. She has forgotten her keys and so rings a bell in a corrugated iron door. A window on the second floor opens and a face appears. A smiling man and little boy let us in. Her landlords are Aymara, the sister and brother-in-law of a Bolivian friend who is now a university professor in California. She has been given his room for the four months she is spending in Bolivia. We walk slowly up three flights on railing-less concrete stairs, pausing on each step to catch our breath. On the rooftop we encounter Adela, the family's "maid," a pretty, shy young Aymara woman from the Altiplano, who is washing the family's clothing in a concrete washtub. (In the Third World, even the "working class" has maids.) Jennifer tells us that Adela was operated on recently over the opposition of her traditional family. Western medicine, they assumed, was the work of the devil--didn't everything else from the West all but destroy them? But after suffering for months in great pain, her employers convinced her to have the gallstone removed and she is now able to smile again for the photo that Jennifer has promised to take of her to send back to her family. It is a beautiful, innocent smile. From the rooftop, one can see out over the whole city which, in the growing dusk, is beginning to light up with a thousand jewels. Off in the distance, the now darkening ring of the majestic *Cordillera*.

Farther up the street lies one of the main commercial centers for this part of the city. People everywhere--fewer light skins, children, a few with faces smeared with dirt and clothes that look like they haven't been washed in a year, playing in the cobbled streets, shoppers looking for the ingredients of their evening meal, mangy dogs. We pass scores of open-air markets filled with colorful fruits, vegetables, seeds, grains, legumes and grotesque carcasses hanging from the hooks of stalls, the entrails of the unfortunate animals piled on dirty tables. Smoke and the aroma of sizzling fat and garlic fill the air. On one stretch of the block men line up with their tool kits marked "electrician," "plumber," "carpenter"--Bolivia's version of the union hiring hall. Jennifer tells us that

when her toilet was plugged she ascended to this street to find a plumber who removed the toilet, recemented it in place, and charged her the equivalent of \$10.

This evening the four of us have dinner at a local Italian restaurant with Roberto and Sonia. Roberto is another Fulbrighter (from the University of Texas). Tall, thin and blonde, looking as if he just stepped out of a Nebraska wheatfield, Roberto makes a striking counterpoint to the squat, dark Indigenous culture he is studying. He is doing his dissertation on a historical miners' movement in Oruro, a city on the southern Altiplano about three hours by bus from La Paz. He speaks about Oruro with great enthusiasm. His young wife, a Chicana, jokes about how she hates Oruro and if she has to go back to that godforsaken city she may divorce him. Oruro, she says, is a bleak, poverty-stricken outpost of some 150,000-170,000 people with nothing at all to recommend it to outsiders except Roberto's passion for his research topic. The guidebook, however, says that the city is rich in folkloric tradition and visitors are rarely indifferent to it: they either love it or hate it. Roberto and Sonia typify the range of reactions to Oruro. The Oruro region is best known for *La Diablada* (Dance of the Devils), a festival that is held during Lent. It is a mixture of Christian and Indigenous fables, deities and traditions that goes on for three days. In it, the dancers wear fantastical devil masks whose design and creation, has become an art form in Oruro. I remember a letter from Jennifer in which she had described a somewhat similar festival, the *Inca Relato*, that she had observed in the Oruro region. It reenacts the Spanish Conquest and the death of Atahualpa, the Incan king. At the time I received it, the place name meant nothing to me.

There are Inca characters who speak in Quechua and Spanish characters that speak in Spanish," she wrote. "There is a Christopher Columbus character, Pizarro, Almagro, and Reina Isabela, who was played by a young woman who didn't say anything, even though I think she is supposed to have lines. Then there is Atahualpa, Huascar, the Ñustas (Atahualpa's wives) and various Inca characters. Ah, and there are even Moors, but I am not sure what they say or do, or what their significance is. The interesting thing about the version of this festival that they do in Caracollo, is that at the end, instead of the Incas being incredibly defeated and sad, Atahualpa is resurrected from the dead!

I think of the oral traditions that exist in Indigenous pockets all over the world. Of how so many have predicted the calamities that once were--the great flood--or the ones we are now witnessing but refuse to see--the disappearance of the polar ice caps, the loss of thousands of species each year. When the electronic circuits that carry our digitized lettering all over the world go dead, I wonder if Atahualpa may not yet be resurrected.

The day after our dinner, Sonia and Roberto return to Oruro.

DAY FOUR: I am awakened by the high pitched, cries of the *micro* destination callers below our window. The noise, like a cantata for many voices, goes on from early morning until late in the evening. Every great city has a distinctive voice. I remember the *muezzins* calling the faithful to prayer that awakened us at dawn in Istanbul, marking off the day in even intervals to God. Gershwin caught the lyric voice of Paris exactly in



his tone composition. The voice of New York City is a Tower of Babel, reaching as high as the radio antennae on top of the World Trade Center.

John has decided to stay in the room and rest for the morning. Every time he tried to fall asleep last night he was awakened with the sensation that he couldn't breathe. Was it his heart, or just his reaction to the altitude? With every passing hour, his anxiety grows. Blessedly, the morning has turned out to be uncharacteristically sunny for the rainy season. Juan and Jennifer pick me up in a small jeep we have rented. Bidding farewell to John, we head this morning toward the southern part of the city, *La Zona Sur*, where the canyon drops off into a deeper valley and the temperature increases by at least 10 degrees. Here, in a cacophony of ugly modern buildings behind high walls, many of them topped with iron spikes or shards of glass, live the city's wealthy inhabitants and foreign embassy officials. At the rim of this second canyon, before it drops several thousand feet further, Jennifer and Juan point out the building that they hope will become their home--a small, modern brick apartment building that is in its final stages of construction. The apartment they plan to buy has tall windows that look out over the *Zona Sur* and beyond to the strange rock formations known as the *Valle de la Luna* (Valley of the Moon). Passing through *La Zona Sur*, we head out toward the Moon Valley. Not a valley at all, but rather a hill, it looks exactly like its appellation--a surrealistic sea of dry, jagged, pockmarked rock formations. From the crest of the Valley of the Moon one looks back at the tiny anthill of La Paz, nestled in the bosom of its giant benefactress, the enveloping *Cordillera Real*. Beyond the moon valley, the sky is a brilliant cerulean and the *Cordillera* stand out in magnificent formation, much as they must look during Bolivia's winter when the skies are brisk and translucent. After exploring the Valley of the Moon on foot, we head still farther below to a series of rolling green valleys dotted by farms and small villages until at last the road peters out in a dirt rut and we are forced to turn around. After a stop for beer at a little oasis--a hole in the wall behind which is a lovely green garden--we head back to La Paz to pick up John.

We find him utterly panicked. He hasn't been able to sleep all morning and with no sleep the night before and very little on the plane the night before, he is in a state of extreme agitation. Jennifer and Juan both think it is simply a bad reaction to the altitude, but we had better get him to a doctor. Jennifer calls a clinic in the *Zona Sur* and gets an immediate appointment. A young doctor examines him, tests his heart and lungs (to make sure no liquid is building up in them) and determines that enough oxygen is getting to his extremities. There is absolutely nothing wrong with you, he assures John, but a bad reaction to the altitude. He gives him a prescription for some pills that should help. This afternoon we are scheduled to go on a four-day trip, part of it on the Altiplano, several hundred feet higher than La Paz. John's anxiety is not assuaged.

## **THE ROAD TO SORATA**

Our next adventure will be a trip to the lovely colonial mountain town of Sorata. The guidebook says that it is located in the most beautiful setting in all of Bolivia. This was our second choice. Jennifer had at first recommended Coroico, another charming old town with wonderful restaurants; but after reading in the guidebook that it is approachable only via the most dangerous road in the world (28 vehicles a year go over

the cliffs!) we decided to claim our advancing age as an excuse. Jennifer, who is absolutely fearless, had already been to Coroico twice. And why not? As a young college graduate she had lived in and traveled all over the war zones of Nicaragua, gathering testimony of human rights abuses from victims of the U.S.-sponsored "Contra war" against the poor to send back to an indifferent U.S. media and Congress. The drive to Coroico along precipitous cliffs with no guard rail is peanuts next to traveling on roads that could be ambushed or land mined at any time.

To get to Sorata, you have to go up onto the Altiplano again, past the airport, through El Alto and then head toward Lake Titicaca, the highest navigable lake in the world. The road ahead is a straight ribbon of concrete (thank God for that, as the guidebook has said that there are a lot of drunken drivers on Bolivia's roads), but it is dotted with potholes. Beyond the miserable outskirts of El Alto, the Altiplano stretches desolate and flat for mile upon mile, its grey, rock-strewn monotony broken only during the rainy season by occasional patches of bright green and yellow and by fields of pale golden *puna*, the high open grassland characteristic of the plateau. Incredible as it seems, the Altiplano is the most densely populated region in Bolivia, though you can go for miles seeing only a few specs on the horizon you know to be humans because of their upright posture. Even in this cruel landscape the Indigenous have cultivated fields of soybeans, quinoa and potatoes. One sees them as they must have existed for the last thousand years, plowing the ground with horse-drawn plows or sometimes with crude hand picks, their colorful *aguayos* a tiny splash of bright paint against the vast slate canvas.

All along the side of the road are stones and boulders of various sizes--signs of the recent campesino uprising, only the latest of several Indigenous revolts, at first against the Spanish conquistadors, and now against the succession of corrupt modern governments that seem to disdain human rights and social welfare. Jennifer is studying this latest manifestation of Indian militancy and we are to pass through the town of Achacachi, center of the largest campesino movement. Last fall several worker and peasant movements blockaded every road connecting the largest cities of La Paz, Cochabamba and Santa Cruz with such stones, and the national teachers' union led a three-week strike. They were demanding wage increases, the end of Bolivia's coca eradication program, land and water reform and Banzer's resignation. Nothing moved and the capital was brought to a halt. After an initial round of brutal military repression, in which 21 people were killed and over 150 injured, Goliath agreed to some concessions; but even as we traveled, there was word that a second blockade was being planned four days after we were to leave the country and the picture of "El Mallcu," the Indian leader of the uprising was on the front pages.

After traveling for at least two hours, we discover we are almost out of gas, and no gas station in sight! Juan says he has heard that in the next town there may be some gas. Upon reaching it, we leave the highway and turn into a deeply rutted dirt road that takes us into the center of the village. (Every road leading off the main road is an obstacle course for cars). It is Sunday and the streets are almost deserted. A group of drunken men head across the town square for a nearby hall and Juan asks where gas

might be found. One man points farther down the street. Our jeep bumps along through wandering dogs and more drunken men until we arrive at a closed door that reads: *se vende gasolina*. Juan knocks and the door opens. But he is told that this is an evangelical establishment and no gas is sold on Sundays! We bump through the town and out onto the highway again, stopping farther on at what looks like a gas station and store out of a Western movie set in the U.S. In the yard a few mangy sheep, goats and more dogs. It is a gas station *sin gasolina*. Shortly before we are to run out, we come, miraculously upon a working gas station. Our trip will be like this--a seemingly endless succession of things that don't work--at least at the level of manuals, guidebooks and Western expectations of efficiency--but in the end work in some kind of informal, underground way. Such is the reality of life in the Third World.

Eventually, we reach the town of Achacachi. The main street (the only paved one in town) is barricaded, so we poke our way through rutted, mud-filled, rubble-strewn streets to reach the other side of town. This place is a kind of living memorial to their relationship. Juan and Jennifer had met unexpectedly two months before, when Jennifer was in the midst of a disastrous relationship with another Latin American male. Juan had come to Achacachi to do a documentary film on the campesino uprising and Jennifer had come here with a group from the university in La Paz. I ask Juan what had attracted him to Jennifer, as their romance has been a case of love at first sight. "I just found her so intelligent," he says in his broken English.

Achacachi is the ugliest spot I have ever seen! The dull grey adobe is unrelieved by any softening of the hard realities of wrenching poverty. Indigenous women in skimpy shoes trudge through the newly watered mud, children on their backs or in tow. Some spread their blankets on the side of the road to sell their meager wares. On the outskirts of town we come across a group of women washing clothes in the mud puddles left from the recent rain. It is dark beneath the clouds and the dampness is unrelieved. Somehow, poverty in the tropical countryside is different, offset by the beauty of growing things. In Mexico, even the most wretched adobe huts are brightened by geranium pots and sprays of bougainvillea. Rural Nicaragua, even in war, was somehow softer.

We have missed the cutoff for Sorata and drive several miles out of our way. There are no road signs in Bolivia to tell the traveler where to go. In the distance, Lake Titicaca can now be seen, a shimmering pale blue line sitting on the horizon. We are now several hours from La Paz and there have been no bathrooms along the way. It is time to find a ditch. But where to find privacy under the great grey canopy of the Altiplano? There are no trees and the scrub brush is ankle high. For the men, it is no problem. Jennifer and I spy a ravine by the side of the road. If we can get down into it we will be out of sight of the cars passing along the highway. We scramble down. Thank god, there is no one in sight. Other people must have had the same idea, as there are pieces of wet Kleenex strewn around the ravine bottom. But just as we are pulling up our clothes, we see above us a lone man, hooded in the traditional *chullo*, standing like a sentry in full sight of the bottom of the ravine. Ah well, they have seen it all before! I scramble up the ravine a little too fast and find myself getting nauseous and light-headed.

I measure my steps more slowly and, reaching the jeep, sink down in the back seat, hoping the altitude sickness will dissipate fast. Thankfully, it does.

It is time to find the road to Sorata. Everything, it seems here, is done by word of mouth. We turn around and head back to Achacachi, stopping to ask some farmers by the side of the road where the turnoff for Sorata is. They tell us it is by the army station we had passed several miles earlier. Juan had heard that after the last campesino action, the army had fled its post on the Altiplano, but this appears to have been a mistaken assumption. Turning the corner at the army station, we come across dozens of sullen, men in camouflage uniforms, bearing rifles and machine guns milling around and looking bored. On the other side of the road an abandoned cluster of army quonset huts painted up in camouflage, call ironic attention to themselves against the monochromatic landscape. We check with the soldiers to make sure this is the road to Sorata and, learning that it is, head off toward the dark ridge that lies before us. Juan curses the Bolivian government: "One of the country's best tourist attractions, and there is not even a road sign indicating how to get there!" The route through several villages is even worse than before. We bump and grind over grapefruit-sized boulders. It is a wonder the tires are not in shreds. We will not see another paved road for the next two days.

The road to Sorata may not be the "most dangerous road in the world" but it is a close second. In order to get there, one has to ascend a ridge even higher than the Altiplano before descending into the valley. Going up over the mountains, we lose the visibility that had been available on the Altiplano and soon find ourselves among the clouds. The narrow dirt road, made muddy by the light rain that is now descending, snakes in hairpin turns first up and then down the steep mountainside. Only the edge of the road and about 30 feet in front of us is visible. Occasionally, the curtain lifts to reveal a ghostly tableau: an Aymara or Quechua woman tending her sheep, or a couple leading a donkey laden with reeds or sacks of potatoes. Everything seems to move slowly up here as if the weight of gravity has grown exponentially. Where do these people live, we wonder, with nothing around them but the shifting mists and the stark Andean vastness.

I try hard not to reveal my anxiety, but my hands are gripping the sides of the jeep as if holding onto something solid will keep me from falling over the edge, the lack of seatbelts only stoking my fear. All too often out in this godforsaken wilderness the narrow road becomes narrower as we meet, coming up from below, a truck or bus full of people their bags and boxes strapped to the top, swaying precariously as it hits an unexpected bump or sinks into a mud hole. The rules of the road require those descending to move to the outside edge. In some places the road surface is a kind of clay and I feel the tires of the jeep slipping. Only a foot and we could be tumbling down a two-thousand-foot drop! I keep telling myself, we are safe with Juan driving. After all, a man who has survived the Argentine military dictatorship, who has sailed alone around Cape Horn and climbed the highest Andean peaks must be able to get us to Sorata and back in one piece. The two Johns carry on a bantering dialogue that helps to keep the atmosphere inside the car light. I am beginning to like this Juan, who is able to take away

my fear with laughter. The mist seems to hold us in for what feels like hours. Around every turn I keep hoping to see the town that will be our safe haven for the next two days.

At last! The clouds break open and there before us an entirely different landscape, the steep mountain valleys dotted with small farms and footpaths, red-roofed concrete houses, cattle grazing on the precipitous slopes and corn growing on terraced hillsides in place of the ubiquitous potatoes. Villages appear clinging to distant mountainsides, accessible only by donkey trail. Across valleys sliced by rivers that boil thousands of feet below us rise 3000-foot mountainsides gashed by vast prehistoric avalanches now covered with a mantle of lush green. Looking across the valleys, we begin to see towering above all this the breathtaking snow-capped peaks of *Illampu*, "the giver of water" and *Ancohumá*. We get out of the car to take some pictures and see off in the distance a red-roofed, whitewashed town. Sorata! But, no, it is not Sorata. It will be another hour and several more harrowing hairpin turns before our jeep turns a corner, we discover another valley, see it disappear again, round another ridge and then see the whitewashed town and church tower still in the distance. After fording a rushing stream and straddling a creaking wooden bridge over a deep ravine, we enter the outskirts of Sorata. It is now almost dark.

## **SORATA**

It is black as pitch when we reach the center of town. There are few lights in Sorata, except from inside the open-faced stores and restaurants that surround the main plaza, spilling their pools of egg-yolk yellow onto the cobblestones. As our jeep circles the plaza, we pass on one side a row of cubicles lit by a single bare lightbulb hanging from the ceiling. Framed in the middle of each cubicle in front of a brilliant turquoise background like some richly hued medieval icons are identical Indigenous women, their long braids covered by little white skullcaps, their burnt sienna skins glowing in the lemony pool of light. They are dishing up chicken, rice, hot soups, ice cream and candy to the shadowy supplicants milling around the square. A tableau out of some syncretistic liturgy.

At the far corner of the plaza sits the barney old hacienda, *Residencial Sorata*, our home for the next two days. It is a large, whitewashed, two-story building with an interior veranda surrounding a lush tropical garden. Nothing has changed here since the Victorian Age, when the building was home to a German rubber baron. It is a veritable "House of the Spirits." Our room, a cavernous, high-ceilinged affair with a tiny balcony that opens onto the narrow street outside and a door that opens onto the veranda that encircles the courtyard garden contains a high iron four-poster bed and two smaller ones each with sway-backed mattresses that look as if they still bore the imprints of the fat rubber baron and his wife. The walls are adorned with Victorian nymphs surrounded by garlands of flowers. We are safe!

After a lovely pasta dinner in nearby *Casa de Papaco*, run, says the guidebook, by a "gentleman from Bologna," we retire for the night. Though the street outside is pulsing with children's voices and blaring music, my stress spills out in restful sleep. Even John sleeps tonight now that we are at a slightly lower elevation.

DAY FIVE: The next morning we breakfast on the hotel's covered patio overlooking the garden. Two parrots sit on their perches, picking at their feathers and cawing to nobody. A little boy of no more than seven brings us the best fried eggs I have ever tasted and a *jugo* of guava and yogurt that is like ice cream. The English couple next to us has been traveling around the world for the past two years, mostly on foot and by bicycle. They appear to be in their late fifties, lean, fit and full of stories. The young couple next to them, an Australian and an American, met when both were working on development projects in Central America. They now make their home in Australia.

After breakfast, we wander out to look at the town into which we had arrived under cover of darkness. The *Residencial Sorata* sits kitty-corner to the town's crown jewel, an exquisite little square, with fountains, a bandstand, benches, flowers and varicolored tile walks that criss-cross its center. It is ringed by lofty date palms and pine trees, graced on one side by a simple but elegant whitewashed church with green trimming and a bell tower. It is about 2 PM when we start out for *La Gruta San Pedro*, a large cave about six miles from Sorata, which seems to be the region's main attraction. The day, thank goodness, is sunny and the twelve-mile walk, with only one real up and down, will be mostly flat, Juan tells us. It is a cinch we tell ourselves. John and I have walked many of Britain's long-distance paths that included steeper climbs and longer distances than this, including one walk of almost 200 miles across the island.

At a walking pace, we have time to take in the magnificent scenery: the roaring cataracts, the tiny villages, the overwhelming Andean peaks. About halfway along the route the rains descend, and we take shelter under the roof of the concrete home of an family to drink our water and eat our bananas. The house is perched on the edge of a 1000-foot drop. As the rain dissipates, we head out again passing farmers tending sheep, women chasing cows with big sticks and trucks full of people that chug and puff and bounce along this narrow mountain road. Finally, we reach San Pedro, a village of about a half dozen houses and a regional school that sits on a cultivated terrace at the edge of a deep valley. We stop again at a local store, really a hole in the wall, for cokes and crackers. A number of children drop by to stare at and flirt with these gringos and a pack of dogs surrounds us yapping.

Ahead a few hundred yards and up a steep scramble is *La Gruta* and in front of it the tiny concrete shack at which we must buy our tickets. A pretty young American woman is already waiting for other customers to arrive before the caretaker will crank up the generator. She is the daughter of a Rutgers (NJ) university professor and has been traveling on her own around South America for several months--"to learn about the continent and to become more fluent in Spanish she tells us." "Do you find it difficult or dangerous traveling around by yourself in South America?" I ask. "Not really," she replies. "There have been a few scary moments, but nothing serious." I ask her where she has been and where she will go next. "Oh, I don't know," she admits. Her itinerary is never planned from one day to the next. She seems to go where her whims direct her. She has traveled by bus throughout Argentina and Chile and Peru. I marvel at how

cosmopolitan this current generation of young people from the North is compared to the girl I was at her age. Yet I wonder just what this young woman is learning about Latin America, staying only a few days in any one place before moving on, meeting people and then having to leave them. I think about my own daughters, both of whom have lived and worked and traveled all over the South American continent but have stayed in places long enough to make lasting friendships, so that their range of friends now span the continents. With what different eyes we generations see the world!

When we are all assembled the man cranks up a little generator and we descend into the maw of the mountain. The giant vault is dimly illuminated by a succession of light bulbs--sharks' teeth-- strung along a line extending about a quarter mile into the cave to the edge of a lake that extends farther into the blackness. Juan, a specialist in the life of caves we now learn, points out high up on the cave wall hundreds of roosting bats. He then goes into an extended disquisition about the geological formation of the rocks that we are looking at and points out the almost microscopic life that can be found even in such subterranean environments. He tells us that he discovered a species of spider that lives only in a certain cave, each form of life adapting to its own ecosystem.

But we have spent too long surfing the Juan. The operator of the generator is getting frustrated. Suddenly, the lights go out and we realize we have left our flashlights back in La Paz! Panic slices into me as my worst childhood nightmares come flooding back. The time, at the age of four in Toronto when, after coaxing me out of the bathroom where I had fled in terror, the doctor who was to take out my tonsils strapped me to the kitchen table, put an ether mask over my mouth and I felt the darkness closing over me. We will die here! But thankfully, it is only a warning. The lights come on and we hurry to reach the entrance before the operator has another fit of pique and leaves us stranded in my nightmare.

The walk back is a bit harder and we have not counted on the 9000-foot altitude. While the road is relatively flat, we hadn't realized that for several miles we had been going slowly downhill, so that the only way to get back is to walk slowly uphill. Moreover, we have left too late in the afternoon and the sun will be disappearing behind the mountains soon. We could be out here on the edge of an abyss with no lights! I fight to keep back another panic attack. Fortunately, the light holds until we reach the outskirts of Sorata, but the last mile or so has to be fought against the pitch dark, punctuated only by the distant lights of the town that twinkle like brilliant jewels through the silhouetted trees but provide no way to see where we are going. The road is getting muddier and the holes deeper the nearer we approach the town, and there is no way to avoid walking into the puddles. By the time we reach the edge of town, John is exhausted and starting to panic again. He can't get his breath. Juan offers to get the jeep and return for us, but we are determined to show our future son-in-law that we are not a couple of soft old gringos. At the edge of town a rickety bench provides a respite for John to catch his breath, and after a short rest, we trudge up the street to the main square and into the blessed hotel. By this time, John is convinced he is dying. "Go get me the pills," he bellows at me as he collapses in the hotel lounge. I run to the room and start to take off my shoes that are now totally caked with mud before going back to him, certain

that he is only experiencing a panic attack; but before I get one shoe off, he has come to the room to bellow again that my delay could cause his death. He disappears down the hall and I run after him, one shoe off and the other muddy shoe leaving a telltale trail along the hall. Juan and Jennifer laugh. The altitude does strange things to one's judgement.

It is now after 9 PM and we haven't eaten a meal since breakfast. At the nearby restaurant, John has a bowl of soup and then decides to go to bed, while Jennifer and Juan and I order a full meal. After a few bites I feel suddenly exhausted and strangely full. I decide to leave the restaurant to the two lovers and go back to get into bed. In the middle of the night I awaken with the realization that I have the dreaded *tourista*. It flows from both ends, all night long. The dying man in the bed next to me sleeps soundly through my wrenching over the toilet bowl.

DAY SIX: Morning, and the man who was dying is up bright and early, ready for a full breakfast. Thank goodness we have an extra day here before we are to leave, as I am still sick. Fortunately, a heavy dose of immodium turns my diarrhea into constipation and by the end of the day I am up again and, with a clean set of clothes washed by the hotel help, ready for our next adventure. We try another restaurant tonight for *la cena*. It is run by an exotically beautiful Bolivian woman and her Polish husband. Their teenage son serves the meals.

It rains all night. A torrent. We are to leave in the morning. I lie awake for hours listening to the rat-a-tat-tat of the rain on the tin roof. How can we possibly get out of this valley with the mud that is sure to have accumulated on the roads? We were slipping as we came down, but that was only a light rain.

DAY SEVEN: By morning, the rain has lightened to a trickle. We meet Juan and Jennifer on the terrace for breakfast. As sudden as God's mercy the garden is illuminated in a golden, halo, the wet foliage sparkling like the first morning in the Garden of Eden. The parrot is jabbering and the small boy delivers our piping hot *café con leche*, fresh rolls and homemade jam. John is jovial. I say a silent prayer of thanksgiving to the great Pachamama. We decide to take our time relaxing this morning and to head back up to the Altiplano around noon.

## **COPACABANA**

The trip back up is uneventful. We have been through this before. We know what to expect. Upon reaching the main highway, we turn right and head in the direction of Lake Titicaca. The sky overhead today is less grey, at times taking on that shimmering translucence that gives the lake area its ethereal quality. Early on, Titicaca was associated with mystical events. The pre-Inca peoples of the Altiplano believed that both the sun and their bearded, white leader/deity, Viracocha, had risen out of its mysterious depths. The Inca considered it the birthplace of their civilization. At least one researcher believes that it may be the site of the mythical sunken city of Atlantis.



As we approach Titicaca the evidence of tourism becomes visible. A few run-down hotels, restaurants and more villages dot the lakeside. Eventually we arrive at San Pedro, the point of disembarkation for our next destination. It is from here that we will take a launch across the *Estrecho* (strait) *de Tiquina* to reach a mountainous peninsula on which the town of Copacabana is situated. Copacabana is the religious center for all of Bolivia dating from the time of the Inca. Nearby is the mysterious *Isla del Sol*, said by the Inca to be the birthplace of the sun. The Aymara dominate the region of Copacabana and their most prominent deities included the sun and moon (who were considered husband and wife), the earth mother Pachamama, and the ambient spirits known as *achachilas* and *apus*. Once the Aymara had been subsumed into the Inca empire, Emperor Tupac Yupanqui founded the settlement of Copacabana as a wayside rest for pilgrims visiting the *huaca* or shrine. This site of human sacrifice was at the rock known as Titicaca (Rock of the Puma) at the northern end of *Isla del Sol*. According to the guidebook, before the arrival of the Spanish Dominican and Augustinian priests in the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century, the Incas had divided local inhabitants into two distinct groups. Those faithful to the empire were known as *Haransaya* and were assigned positions of power. Those who resisted, the *Hurinsaya*, were relegated to manual labor. This was contrary to the community-oriented Aymara culture, and the floods and crop failures that befell them in the 1570s were attributed to this. The result was the rejection of the Inca religion and the partial adoption of Christianity and the establishment of the syncretistic *Santuario de Copacabana*.

We park our car at the quay by the strait and get out. Juan will ride with the jeep on the flat barges that carry the vehicles, while we will ride in a passenger launch. We watch the vehicles on their way over, buses and trucks swaying on the choppy waters like corks in a storm. They look as if they are about to topple over. The barges are rickety, wood contraptions with only a narrow lip on the edges. On some of them the floorboards seem to be separating. Each is propelled by a little outboard motor run by a single man and a boy who appears no older than ten. Juan rails at the Bolivian government that has only recently been separating the passengers from their vehicles after a loaded bus toppled over into the water drowning 28 passengers. Life is cheap in the Third World. After buying our tickets, we are helped onto the launch by the Bolivian navy, dressed in camouflage uniforms. In 1874, Bolivia's dictator of the moment, the semi-literate Hilarión Daza lost the country's outlet to the sea to Chile because he was more interested in celebrating Carnival than in paying attention to foreign policy. Consequently, the Bolivian navy's only purpose seems to be handing out flimsy life jackets to passengers crossing the strait. Maintaining the fantasy of being a maritime nation, Bolivia defines its western frontier as the Pacific Ocean--despite the fact that it actually ends in the Andes! It celebrates an annual "Day of the Sea," and sometimes lists in government documents a department "littoral," which exists only on paper. The Bolivian airforce, with only one plane, appears no better prepared to serve its country.

Safely at San Pablo on the other side, we board the jeep and head up over the mountains to Copacabana. It is in the cathedral of Copacabana that the Virgin of Candelaria, *La Virgen Morena del Lago* (the black virgin of the Lake) is housed. The statue was carved in 1582 by Francisco Tito Yupanqui, a grandson of the Inca emperor.

Soon after it was installed in the adobe church, miraculous healings began to happen, and Copacabana quickly developed into a pilgrimage site. Today, cars, trucks and buses festooned with ribbons and flower garlands make an annual pilgrimage to the cathedral to be blessed with holy water. It is supposed to bring good luck for the rest of the year. After being in this country for seven days, we realize at what a premium good luck is bought! The strait here is a veritable highway of barges and launches moving back and forth between the two shores.

For a town that is the center of the country's religious life and the destination for thousands of pilgrims and tourists, Copacabana is surprisingly underdeveloped; but perhaps this is not so surprising. This is Bolivia, after all. As everywhere, outside the main center, the streets are rutted dirt lanes some filled with rubble and broken paving blocks. It is getting dark and starting to rain again as we make our way down to the edge of the lake past streets crowded with shoppers and stores filled with religious paraphernalia to the beautiful new *Hotel Rosario del Lago* that we have found in the guidebooks. We enter and marvel at the luxury of modern accommodations. They even have an electric heater in each room! We will sleep soundly tonight we assure each other. But John's anxiety returns the minute he hits the bed for a short nap. We are back at 13,000 feet and the air is thin. After a supper of delicious *trucha criolla*-- salmon trout from the lake, a local specialty--we head for our rooms and a game of hearts with Jennifer and Juan. It helps to ease John's anxiety, and though he sleeps fitfully, he knows now that he is just having a bad reaction to the altitude. We can last another day.

DAY EIGHT: After a wonderful buffet of fresh melon, yogurt and sweet rolls, Juan, Jennifer and I explore the central plaza in front of the handsome Moorish cathedral, while John rests in the jeep. We watch in fascination as vehicles pull up at the cathedral. Their owners get out, purchase holy water that the priest sprinkles on the vehicle and then circle their vehicles dousing them with champagne and shooting off firecrackers. In front of the cathedral sits a market where pilgrims can buy miniature replicas of various makes of cars (Toyotas, Volkswagens, Mitsubishis) toy stores, complete with tiny packages of food and a blonde doll behind the counter, little houses and apartment buildings that look like architects' renderings of the buildings one would see in an upscale real estate ad in New England. The idea is if you buy the miniature you are sure to get the real thing in the next year or two.

After browsing in the market, Juan and Jennifer and I decide to take a tour of the religious museum that is housed in the cathedral grounds. We enter the cathedral through a richly carved oak door and step into the lavish, gilt Spanish baroque interior, past emaciated Indigenous women begging in barely audible voices for a few bolivianos. Above the altar upstairs, says the guidebook, is the *Virgen de Candelaria* in whose honor all of this wealth has been accumulated. We pay a few bolivianos at a ticket booth and ascend the stairs with other pilgrims to view the *Virgen* in her glass case, but when we arrive, the case is empty. Where is the *Virgen* that everyone is climbing the stairs to see? Who knows? No explanations are given. Descending the stairs again, we locate the guide who will take us through the rest of the museum. Chattering at bullet pace, she leads us through room after room past gold and silver vases and artifacts, the gifts of past

rulers and kings and pilgrims; past richly embroidered satin and velvet liturgical vestments, past exquisite hand-painted porcelain pottery, past life-size statues of the Virgin, the Christ, and various saints, past agonized Christs on crucifixes, realistic-looking drops of blood leaking from the body, and finally into the room where the robes of the *Virgen* are housed. This is apparently what all the rest has been setting us up to see, the prologue to the play. There are mountains of lavishly embroidered satin and velvet robes on display--hundreds of them. Every three months, our guide tells us, the *Virgen* is given a new robe to wear and she must never wear the same robe again. (She talks about the *Virgen* as if she were a living person.) In the shelves in front of us are all the robes she has ever worn, marked with the dates on which they were used, and on the display table in front of us lie all the robes she will wear up to the year 2025. The *Virgen*, we are told must never leave the church. Once, when she was carried out in procession, the waters of the lake began to rise, threatening to flood the island. It is feared they will do so again, if she is disturbed. (If so, perhaps we should be worried, as the *Virgen* was not in her glass case when we looked!). I suddenly feel my head going light. Is it the lack of oxygen in these closed apartments? I rush into the room we have just left, to breathe deeply below a high window I had seen when we passed through. Or perhaps it is the constriction I feel in my heart, seeing all this wealth spent on a statue, with so much misery waiting outside to be healed. But then again, what is faith? Is our faith in the safety of nuclear power, the protectiveness of anti-ballistic missiles, or the benevolence of an overinflated stock market any less irrational?

At last, we are out in the air and I can breathe again! In the courtyard, Jennifer gets into a long conversation with a small, wiry Argentinian woman who was in our tour group. The conversation in rapid Spanish goes on and on in an animation that can only be called infectious. I pick up threads with my threadbare Spanish. She is a lawyer practicing family law in Buenos Aires. I understand her to say that she had spent some time in the United States--in Los Angeles and Phoenix--but that she hadn't liked it very much--life was too fast paced. People didn't have time for relationships. The two women seem to be telling their complete life stories to one another, laughing and exclaiming as if they are old friends--and they have only just met! What is it about Latin America, I wonder, that draws my daughter into such intimate conversations with perfect strangers? I remember an email she had sent us earlier about the plumber who had fixed her toilet.

The plumber [whom she had hired off the street] was a very nice man. After he finished working I offered him some coke and bread and we talked for a while. He is really a jack of all trades. Not only is he a plumber, but an electrician, a carpenter, he refinishes furniture, cooks and I don't know what else! He also told me that he likes to read and tries to continue learning as much as he can. Last night I met another lovely individual, a taxi driver who took me home last night. He also loves to read and was telling me that he is part of a group that studies together, they read things and then come together to discuss them. This is one of the things that I have found both here as well as in Ecuador: I have had some really wonderful conversations with people that I have had to interact with for some mundane purpose. I guess this can happen anywhere, but I really have met a lot of special people under these circumstances during this past year. Like the

taxi driver last night was telling me that recently he has been reading a lot of theology and he is really into that, and he said that reading these things and learning these new ideas helps you respect other people, also teaches you to love yourself, to respect yourself, etc. I'll tell you, I have had some definitely profound conversations with taxi drivers in Latin America! Not all of them, mind you . . . but every so often you meet a gem of a person this way!

Finally, the women kiss goodbye and we head back for the car. John has left the windows shut and he is now thoroughly scared again, gasping for breath. Well, no wonder. The sun has come out and has turned the car into an oven. High altitudes do strange things to one's judgement. We quickly bundle him out of the car and into the fresh air. Near the cathedral is a hill, *Cerro Calvario*, that rises straight up for about 500 feet. It is covered with Stations of the Cross, a must for pilgrims. Jennifer says that there are usually traditionally dressed Aymara medicine men arrayed along the hill selling syncretistic indulgences to the faithful. During Holy Week pilgrims who have traveled by foot from La Paz, 158 kilometers away, do penance at the Stations of the Cross. Once on the summit, they light incense and purchase the miniatures we saw being sold in front of the cathedral. Today, however, only a few straggling pilgrims make the climb.

On the way out of town Juan announces that we are out of gas again, but not to worry. There is a gas station on the outskirts of town--the only gas station, as a matter of fact, before the strait. We arrive at the station and find it closed. No explanation, no "out to lunch sign." What to do? Juan seems to know instinctively that there is gas to be found somewhere if we have the perseverance. So once again he turns the jeep around and we head back to town, stopping at the first group of people on the street to ask if they know where we might purchase *gasolina*. They point farther down the street, a rocky, rubble-strewn washboard. Sure enough, there is a sign, *se vende gasolina*. He knocks at the door, but it remains shut. We bounce on further down the street and stop to ask another pedestrian if he knows where we might purchase *gasolina*. Again, he points farther down the street and makes a sign that we are to turn a corner. About five stops and several queries later, only a few steps from the hotel where we had spent the night, Juan disappears into a doorway and comes out with a can of gas! We are on our way.

We haven't gone too far, however, before we come to a roadblock. Funny, it wasn't here when we drove along this road the day before. Juan explains that it is one of the many ways the police or army or whoever they are try to make a little underground money. Military pay doesn't go very far in Bolivia. Juan goes over to the men who are trying to collect, informing them that he knows the minister in La Paz personally and that he will report them. (In fact, he has been making a film for the Ministry of Tourism). They probably saw a couple of gringos and thought they had an easy catch, but they hadn't counted on Juan. We get off without having to pay the bribe.

By the time we reach the strait it is very choppy and I am beginning to think about that *Virgen* story. A galeforce wind whips straight down this 100-mile long lake and whistles through the narrow channel. It is becoming dangerous; and it is also starting to rain. We have no choice, however, as we must get back to La Paz today. So we board

the boats with a bit more trepidation than when we crossed the first time. Just as Jennifer is stepping into the well of the launch, she disappears. I turn around, and John is pulling her dripping from the lake. The casing which covers the outboard motor had been pulled back by the careless boatman before all the passengers had finished entering the boat. She had stepped backward and had fallen through the hole and into the lake, right next to the outboard motor! Life is cheap in the Third World.

On the other side, Jennifer asks where there is a bathroom so she can change her pants. We are directed to the side of a building to a hole in the wall containing two broken toilets. There is no flush mechanism, the doors have long since been broken, the toilet seats have disappeared, and the floors are filthy. A man in a cubicle takes our *bolivianos* and hands us a tiny wad of toilet paper. After we have finished a little boy enters and throws a bucket of water into the bowl. This is obviously no place for Jennifer to try to change her clothes. We meet Juan who has just arrived on his barge with the jeep. When he hears the story about Jennifer he again, he curses the Bolivian government for their lack of attention to safety. Jennifer goes over to the navy installation to ask if there is any place to change her clothes and is given permission to change in one of their offices.

On the road back to La Paz we stop at the lakeside community of *Huatajata*, headquarters of the Bolivian yacht club where the Nazis who had fled to Bolivia after World War II once hung out. It is here, next to the Yacht Club (really little more than a small marina among the reeds of the lake) in the yard of a local Aymara fisherman that Juan is housing the two boats--a sailboat and a launch-- that he has built and brought from Argentina--a 14 hour journey over the mountains. He plans to finish constructing the boats and to take tourists out on the lake in them. They will be the safest boats on the lake, he tells us, proudly. Many of the other commercial launches, he explains, are poorly constructed and one recently capsized, drowning its passengers. His friend, the fisherman, takes us out to Juan's sailboat, which is moored offshore where we admire the workmanship and then for a short ride to a building farther south on the lakeshore where we get out. Here, in a nondescript building that also serves as a small restaurant, is the headquarters and workshop of the Aymara family that makes the famous *tortora* reed boats that Thor Heyerdahl used on his RA II expedition from North Africa. Using these boats, scientists are still trying to trace the ancient sea voyages of pre-Columbian peoples almost all the way across the Pacific. Juan locates the master craftsman who provides us with a full half-hour of his time, explaining how the ancient boats are constructed and showing us various models. On the wall are photos of the master craftsman and his son in a *tortora* boat on Lake Michigan the Chicago skyline in the background as well as articles by famous scientists who are tracing the journeys of these ancient peoples. Sitting on the floor is a gigantic intricately woven reed head of an Aymara god or monster that is lashed to the prow of the boats. We marvel at the craftsmanship and the humbleness of this man out in the middle of nowhere special. We have so much to learn.

The trip back to La Paz provides us with a constantly changing palette. The unending grey of our first journey has given way to patches of sun which illuminate the cultivated fields and reveal the *Cordillera*, row upon row of magnificent snow-covered

peaks against a brilliant cerulean backdrop. Another stop on the way back to La Paz is in the wretched little market town of Huarina where Juan first asked Jennifer to have dinner with him. It is in the almost deserted town square, while John and Jennifer have gone off to find an unattended wall to pee by, that Juan confesses in his halting English, "I am so proud of Jennifer. I love her so much! My life has not been easy since my youth," he explains, "and I have been alone for most of it. Now I want to be in a family. You may think me a bit romantic, but Jennifer is the country I now want to live in, the ocean I want to traverse, and the most beautiful mountain I want to climb." I feel all of my defenses melting, and I embrace my new future son-in-law for I have fallen in love with him too.

At last we are back in La Paz and it almost feels like coming home. The city streets with their bustle and syncopation only slightly more foreign than New York's. The next day we will go back to the market to do more shopping, to see Jennifer's humble apartment and maybe even to visit some of the museums we missed on the first day. At night we will eat dinner, *empanadas* and *arroz con pollo*, with Juan's friend, a Bolivian musician who teaches at the conservatory of music and his pretty Nicaraguan wife. As a young man, Alvaro had worked in the cultural ministry of the ill-fated Sandinista government in Nicaragua. It was a time of so much hopefulness, he says wistfully. "We were so young, so full of excitement about creating a new culture, a new poetry, a new music." We reminisce together about our various experiences in that sad land that had once been a beacon of hope to so many--to the poor of Central America, to the youth from the middle classes for whom the early literacy crusade was a mission of holy revelation, and to the gringos like us who had hoped somehow to find redemption from the sins of our fathers through our solidarity with the wretched of the earth.

DAY NINE: We celebrate our last night in La Paz and toast our daughter's engagement at Old Vienna, an elegant restaurant of mahogany, gladioli and Strauss waltzes. It appears to be the restaurant of choice for embassy types and the Bolivian business elite. Over wiener schnitzel and wurst and fine wine, we have fun trying to figure out who the stony man with the crewcut is who sits in a painful two-hour silence with his wife at a nearby table. Definitely a military type. CIA perhaps? And who is the heavy-set older American man who ushers to his table a group of handsome Bolivian men and women? An embassy official, or businessman?

DAY TEN: At five A.M. we leave for El Alto and the airport. After a long wait to check in and a breakfast together, we hug Juan and Jennifer goodbye and head for home. Several airline delays later, we reach New York near midnight. Terra firma! Toilets that flush their refuse down the drain. Lettuce and tomatoes that one can eat. Cars that require seat belts. Signs that tell us where to go!