

Ricardo Beintigoitia remembered perfectly that January morning in 1952. His best friend, Fat Fassell, had borrowed his father's black Chevrolet to take him to Central Station, where he would catch the train bound for Chile. The sun was shining and the sky was a deep blue, but you could still feel the morning chill. Fat Fassell opened the car's trunk, handed the suitcase to Ricardo, and lit an Astoria cigarette.

They entered the station and paused on the platform. Throngs of people were moving about: travelers, family members, newspaper and candy vendors, indigenous porters, policemen, and the odd vagrant who had come to watch the train pull away. Ricardo repeated the same ritual at the end of every school year. He had been traveling regularly to Arica since he was ten, usually in the company of his parents. This time, as Ricardo had just graduated from high school, his father had given him permission to enjoy a few days with his close friends, whom, after a few months' vacation, he might not see again for several years. Ricardo wanted to attend a university on the Old Continent. The previous night, members of his social club had organized a farewell party for him at the house of a wealthy friend, Judith, in Sopocachi. The boys drank until 3 in the morning and then hired a few taxis to take them to the Caiconi district. A gale-force wind pushed them toward a cluster of rustic bordellos and into the arms of call girls wasted from a long night of debauchery. At daybreak, accompanied by Fat Fassell, Ricardo headed to his house in San Jorge to pick up his luggage.

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The locomotive sounded its first whistle, announcing that the slow, painful climb to El Alto would begin in twenty minutes. Fat Fassell exhaled a generous cloud of smoke from his Astoria, which had the effect of making everyone around him dizzy.

"I envy you, brother," Fassell said. "I'd give anything to see the ocean again."

"You'll be in Tubingen soon enough," Ricardo reminded him.

Fassell took another deep puff and scanned the horizon with a look of resignation.

"My ancestors, the Germans, are a pain in the ass. I would love to be a Bolivian until the day I die. After that I can be a German."

Fassell grabbed the suitcase and Ricardo followed him. The sleeping car was located at the very back of the train. A nervous-looking Indian boy, standing less than five feet tall and weighing no more than ninety pounds, approached and offered to help with the bag. The kid smiled, baring a set of teeth that resembled a weathered picket fence. After heaving the bag onto his back, he started jogging as if he were on a mountain trail. He stopped next to the car and placed the suitcase on the metal steps leading into the train.

A steward led the boys to the last cabin. He punched the ticket and asked, "Which one of you is traveling?"

"I am," Ricardo said.

"They're separating us. They know I'm bad news, a German jokester," Fassell said.

The steward declined Fassell's offer of an Astoria and explained that Ricardo would be sharing a cabin with a Franciscan priest. Sporting a gray uniform and a cap, his sterile appearance and diligent manner identified him as a prototypical Bolivian Railway employee. After knocking on the door to the cabin, the steward, apparently afraid of

the priest, waited a few seconds before peering inside. With a seraphic smile, the priest let them in.

"Señor Beintigoitia will be joining you," the steward announced.

"I'll take the bottom bunk, if you don't mind," the priest said.

"It's all the same to me," Ricardo replied, placing his suitcase on the upper bunk.

They returned to the hallway. The steward looked at Ricardo with solicitous eyes. Ricardo took twenty pesos out of his pants pocket and placed them in the palm of his hand.

"Salvador Aldaviri, at your service," the man said. "The dining car will open as soon as we depart for El Alto."

Ricardo and Fat Fassell headed back to the platform. A half-breed woman wrapped in a heap of flowing skirts was selling sweets, and a shoeshine boy, dressed La Paz-style in a short vest and a cap, started to polish one of Fassell's boots without even asking.

"If I had a chick who could rub my balls like that, I'd be the happiest Teuton alive," Fassell said.

"I'll be back in two weeks," Ricardo said, ignoring his friend's comment. "Let's make plans to meet up in Europe."

"My dad wants to emigrate to Brazil," Fassell said. "He doesn't like what's happening in Bolivia. If it turns into anything like Argentina, we're screwed. Perón's a fascist and a populist, and he's trying to help the MNR take power. My dad wants to buy a ranch in São Paulo."

Fassell hugged Ricardo emphatically and left. Ricardo followed him with his eyes; his corpulence stood out amid the bustling crowd of silent, diminutive people dressed in black.

Ricardo reboarded the train. In the dining car, the waiters were busy cleaning tables, setting out tablecloths and glasses, arranging flower

vases, and cleaning the windows with soap and water. The cooks could be seen lighting chunks of charcoal in army-size stoves and rinsing out gigantic metal pots. Next to the dining car were the second-class cars, crammed with poor people, nearly all of whom were smuggling crates of beer into Chile. At one end of the second car, a guy who looked like trouble, leaning against a wooden stool, watched Ricardo as he passed by. He looked about thirty years old and half his face was wrapped in a black scarf, revealing only his eyes, which were framed by thick brows and drooping lashes. Ricardo noticed that the man was holding a painter's easel.

Ricardo stepped off the train and walked past the freight cars, which had large, steel-clad interiors. Sweating indigenous freight handlers shouted at each other as they heaved large sacks of flour. A little man caked in white powder ordered them around. Ricardo recognized the engineer of the solid and shining English locomotive, which exhaled steam out its sides like an enormous bull gearing up for battle. It was Macario Quispe. An old-timer from Oruro, he was a veteran of that route, which climbed into the clouds before descending to the coast. His face, worn by the wind and the high-altitude sun, was a mask of bronze. Ricardo greeted him and the engineer responded with a slight nod. A couple of young coal men fed the train's belly.

"This engine is a Garrat," Ricardo said. "The English used them in India. No terrain is too much for them."

"The English know what a good locomotive is worth," Quispe responded.

Ricardo stroked the hot flank of the locomotive. He remembered the Uyuni train yard and the cold nights that he used to spend watching the trains coming and going. They hypnotized him and made him dream. They would transport him to distant, hos-

tile lands, traversing snowy peaks perforated by countless tunnels in which magical colors suddenly appeared, making him tremble with delight. The vivid images from his childhood were so real he could almost touch them.

He retraced his steps and reentered the train. The late-arriving passengers boarded hastily, causing an uproar in the station. People could be heard shouting at the luggage boys to hurry up and nagging the indigenous porters, who were carrying gigantic loads on their backs and shoving them awkwardly through the windows. Ricardo glanced at the station clock: fifteen minutes until the train's departure. He recognized his uncle, Felipe Tréllez, harassing a tiny porter who was flattened under the weight of a huge trunk, and called to him.

"Hello," Tréllez said. "Are you done celebrating?"

"You only graduate from high school once."

"Which cabin are you in?"

"Number six. I'm sharing it with a Franciscan priest."

With a studied movement, Tréllez hopped onto the train. He was wearing a beige jacket, light gray pants, and, as usual, a felt hat. He was pushing forty, but looked younger. This may have been because he was thin and no more than 5'3", not to mention the splendid effect of the creams which softened his somewhat pale, wrinkle-free skin. His lean face and mocking expression made him look like a French colonist out of a Hollywood movie. A musketeer-style mustache lent him a frivolous air.

Moments later, Ricardo noticed the pompous figure of Alfredo Miranda, who was best known by his nickname, the Marquis. Miranda was the owner of the Tabarís, a popular cabaret. He had introduced full nudity to La Paz's dull strip clubs, bringing him renown and a tidy fortune, which he invested in hiring new girls from Chile. His 1930s

Don Juan silhouette was always on display at the Tabarís amid clouds of smoke, leaning against the bar, keeping an eye on the drunks, greeting the distinguished politicians, signaling to the waiters with a raise of the eyebrows, and tracking the movements of the girls as they entertained the clients. He was a pimp *sui generis*, a cross between Buenos Aires sleaze and La Paz affectation. Likable and snooty, he was famous for bedding all of the hostesses who worked in his bar.

Upon seeing Ricardo, the Marquis furrowed his speckled eyebrows and tried to recall some nocturnal encounter. At his side, a female companion followed him obediently. Like most passengers in the sleeping car, she had hired an indigenous porter, who was carrying a pair of leather suitcases which looked like they had been purchased from the shop of Gringo Freudenthal, a Jew who had escaped the Nazis.

Ricardo moved along to the tail end of the train. Next to the station gate, an autumnal elegant lady stood gazing at the platform. Behind her, a young woman wearing a red and blue plaid skirt and a white wool sweater walked slowly and half-heartedly.

"Tell your husband to hurry up," the older woman said loudly, putting exaggerated stress on the word "husband."

"Okay, okay," the young woman answered.

A dark-skinned, short-legged, paunchy man with graying hair blithely chased behind the young woman who was ordering her luggage boy to undo the rope that held together an impeccable set of American-style suitcases. Ricardo's eyes met those of the girl, his with a look of surprise and hers uneasy and embarrassed. The trio approached the sleeping car and ascended single file. Ricardo thought he had seen the young woman before, but he was unable to place her. As he transported himself to the past, someone raised the wooden blinds covering the window where he was standing. It was she, smiling at him

uninhibitedly. When the dark-skinned man appeared at her side, her smile disappeared.

The final boarding call sounded and the second-class passengers made a mad dash for their respective cars. The train advanced a couple of yards and jerked abruptly, warning of its imminent departure.

Seconds later, the train began to roll. As Ricardo made his way back to his cabin, he saw a man rushing frantically, tripping over himself, struggling with a large bag. Curiously, the new arrival, although he was a relatively young fellow, was unable to grasp the handrail to climb up to the train. Ricardo grabbed him by the arm and boosted him up the metal staircase in a swift motion. Panting, the man let the bag fall to the floor.

"You could have slipped and fallen under the wheels," Ricardo said.

"Thanks," the man replied. "The taxi I was riding in got a flat tire. I almost didn't make it." He then pointed at Ricardo with his index finger. "I know you. You always travel at this time of year. My name is Lalo Ruiz."

"Ruiz," Ricardo repeated without conviction.

"The poker player."

"Now I remember."

"You've grown a lot," Ruiz said.

"A few centimeters. Must be the swimming . . ."

Ruiz extended a sweaty hand. "Have you seen the other passengers?"

"Only a few of them. Why?"

"I'm looking for some fledglings to pluck. I'm not rich enough for vacations on the coast. I'm on this train to earn a few pesos."

"You have a long ride ahead of you. You're sure to find someone."

"Are you traveling with your parents?"

"No. They're waiting for me in Arica."

"Who are you rooming with?"

"A Franciscan priest."

"That's bad luck."

"I think the owner of the Tabarís is traveling with his wife."

"Wife? That guy is single. His wife left him in Valparaíso."

"I hardly know him."

"The Marquis is a nice guy but it's impossible to put one over on him. He's an old fox." Ruiz smiled. His yellow teeth had the ochre hue of nicotine. His eyes were slightly bloodshot. "I'll buy you a beer as soon as they open the dining car."

A steward led them down the corridor and knocked on the door of cabin two. A guy in short sleeves appeared. He was short and bald and his pants were held up with ratty suspenders. He was smoking a cigar.

"You are my roommate?" he asked.

Ruiz smirked, unamused by the encounter. He gave a miserly tip to the steward and said, "I'd like to introduce my friend Petko, a Russian loan shark who spends the entire day at the Club de La Paz café."

"Shit," the man exclaimed. "Of all people, is you. If I know, I take other train."

Ruiz fanned the cigar smoke with one hand and entered the cabin.

"I'm screwed," he said. "I'm gonna choke from that damn smoke."

"Tobacco, highest quality," mumbled Petko through his teeth. "I am screwed to listen to talk of bitter poker player."

Ruiz turned toward Ricardo. "What's your last name?"

"Beintigoitia."

"My friend, young Beintigoitia, whom I have had the pleasure of knowing for many years."

"You teach him to play poker?"

"He's a good kid. Not a degenerate like you."

Petko chewed on the end of his cigar with apparent satisfaction. Ricardo guessed that he was a little bit older than Ruiz. When he spoke Spanish, one could detect a marked Eastern European accent along with atrocious grammar. His facial features were not those of the typical Slavs whom Ricardo would see from time to time in Soviet films. He was beardless, he had no eyelashes or eyebrows, and his head was totally bald. He didn't seem to have ever possessed a single hair. He shone like a hardboiled egg coated with butter. Everything about him was small, except maybe his nose, which was not very big but stood out enough to lend his face a touch of extravagance.

"My name is Petko Danilov. I was born in city called Novgorod. Those communist bastards rename it Gorki. Do you know who is Gorki?"

"No idea."

"Boring novelist. Socialist realism. Writes about working class."

"I don't know much about Soviet literature."

"Good," Petko said. "I am Jewish, you know. In Bolivia some people are anti-Semites."

"I'm an anti-Semite," Ruiz said.

"Bull! You are nothing. Unlucky poker player. And bad loser too. Remember last time we played at Círculo Italiano? You almost start to cry."

Petko blew smoke in his face. Ruiz opened the window.

"I'll let you smoke until 5 in the afternoon. I don't want to die on the train."

Ricardo coughed.

"You see," Ruiz said, "your cigars are poisonous."

"That rich miner got on train," said Petko.

"Who?"

"He just married Carletti girl."

"Nazario Alderete?" asked Ruiz.

"Yes, yes, who else?"

Ruiz rubbed his hands. "He cheated me in a card game and made off with a piece of land I used to own in Achachicala."

"He is a card sharp," Petko said. "Now you can get your revenge."

Ricardo couldn't believe what he had just heard. He assumed it was a joke. After all, Jews were known for their sense of humor.

"That old guy I saw board the train is married to the girl with the plaid skirt?"

Petko sat down on the lower bunk. He took a handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped his forehead. "Heat in altitude unbearable," he said. "Yes . . . girl, daughter of late Carletti. I knew her father. He played bocce at *Círculo Italiano*. He knew how to cook pasta. He died when he lost mine in Potosí. They say that bastard take his money."

"How do you know all this?" Ruiz asked.

"At Club de La Paz you hear life and miracles of high society."

"That guy isn't high society. He just has money," Ruiz said.

"Money . . . and money rules."

"Not with a girl like that," Ricardo asserted.

"You are young; you do not know power of money." Petko drew a figure in the air as if to suggest something, but it wasn't clear what.

Ruiz was dressed in black; he looked like an undertaker. He took off his jacket, white shirt, and black tie and remained standing in his undershirt. Ricardo said he'd see them later.