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The Amnesia Clinic

James Scudamore

ONE

Sometimes great storytellers die before their time. It's only right that great stories should be told about them in return. I will do my best.

On the 8th of September 1995, less than a year before the death of my friend Fabián, an anthropologist named Johan Reinhard and a mountain guide named Miguel Zárate discovered the frozen body of an Inca princess near the summit of a Peruvian volcano. Aware of the importance of what they had found, Reinhard brought the corpse down from the mountain, wrapping it for insulation inside his foam sleeping mat.

The find was not universally welcomed: the mule driver who met the climbers at the foot of the mountain blindfolded his animal to stop it bolting at the prospect of carrying a dead body, and the proprietor of the hostel where they'd been staying sent them away, fearing bad luck. Eventually, however, Reinhard and Zárate made it to the town of Arequipa, storing the body there in Zárate's freezer until the proper authorities could be alerted.

The likelihood was that Juanita - or the 'Ice Princess', as she was dubbed on subsequent international tours - had been clubbed to death in a ceremony of sacrifice for the god of the mountain. She had been preserved in the ice for five hundred years and was in near perfect condition, apart from a pretty severe head wound.

Six months later, a feature on the Ice Princess appeared in an Ecuadorian national newspaper, and my friend Fabián Morales marched into our classroom at the Quito International School waving a copy of it in front of him.

'Anti! You have to see this,' he said. 'They found some five-hundred-year-old Inca girl up a volcano in Peru.'

My name is Anthony but, as a child, I could never pronounce it. I called myself Anti, and so Anti is what I became. Just one example of how a perfectly innocent mistake can stay with you for ever.

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'Listen to this,' said Fabián. 'Before being sacrificed, it is likely that the Ice Maiden was made to fast, and to participate in rituals involving the consumption of hallucinogenic drugs and strong drink. Sex, too, I bet - and it says here she was only fifteen. Verena, you'll do. What do you say we take you up a mountain, get you high and show you a good time? We may have to kill you, but you'll be immortal, baby!'

'You wouldn't get me alone up a mountain, you disgusting pervert.'

'No problem. How about just getting to it right here? Mamacita! Just give me your hand, baby. I'll be as quick as I can.'

'You'll go to hell for saying that, Fabián.'

Verena Hermes wore three earrings in her left ear, tinted her hair and doused herself daily in cheap perfume. She was one of our most treasured wet dreams, but Verena's taste was for older men - or so she boasted - and contrary to what we told each other, neither Fabián nor I had ever elicited more from her than crushing words. Unchecked, the discussion might have carried on degenerating for some time. But for now it would have to wait. Our teacher, draped in the regulation corduroy of the British expat, ambled through the doorway, came to rest behind his desk, and exhaled just vocally enough to communicate his wish to bring us to order.

Juanita the Ice Princess was, for the moment, forgotten.

Later that day, as we sat by a basketball court waiting to be fetched from school, Fabián and I considered the discovery more seriously. A pair of snow-capped volcanoes - our own local mountain gods - loomed behind the boxy constructions of the New Town: Cotopaxi, peaking coyly over a scarf of cloud and pollution, and Cayambe, tonight refracting a violet splinter of sunset.

'We've got to get out there,' said Fabián. He practised a few listless conjuring moves, palming a Zippo in his left hand whilst misdirecting with his right, before pocketing the lighter tersely and sighing. 'Everything's being discovered too quickly. If we wait any longer, there'll be nothing left to find.'

'We can't go to Peru,' I said. 'Weren't we at war with Peru only a few months ago?'

We - by which I meant Ecuador - had been. Although the border dispute had been effectively deadlocked since 1942, tensions between the two countries periodically rose. According to my father, who was cynical in such matters, this tended to happen around election time as a way to score political points, but a series of border skirmishes the previous year had proved more serious than usual, eventually claiming over one hundred lives. At fifteen, we were not yet of an age to take the deaths seriously, but had both enjoyed the melodrama that went with being A Country At War: electricity rationing, anti-Peruvian sloganeering and even the possibility (however far-fetched) of an actual invasion.

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'Stop pricking around,' said Fabián. His English was perfect, but he had a distinctive habit of swearing by improvising on half-remembered expressions that he'd picked up from cable TV, which sometimes resulted in bizarre, untried constructions. It was something of a trademark for him. 'I'm not saying we should go to Peru. The Ice Princess has already been found. That's what I mean: everything will have been done soon if we're not careful. At the very least, I want to discover a new species before this year is out. Or something.'

'We went to the Galápagos last year,' I said. 'That was pretty cool. That's probably where you should start looking.'

'I know that. Don't fuck me around with your holiday snaps. We need to make our name. All the magic's going out of this place, and being put in museums. I want a piece of it before it's all gone.'

'Something will come up. Here's Byron - let's go.'

Byron was the man who chauffeured Fabián's uncle, although he had, in a former career, been a policeman. Fabián told me that his uncle hadn't known this until they arrived back at the house one day to find a burglary in progress. Byron told Uncle Suarez to remain in the car, retrieved from the glove compartment a gun that Suarez didn't even know he owned, and shot both the burglars in the back as they ran away. That's what Fabián told me, anyway. There had been no opportunity for independent verification, as he said his uncle didn't like to talk about it, and I certainly wouldn't have asked Byron, who, though jocular enough, terrified me. My parents had told me horror stories about kidnappings taking place at gunpoint in the backs of cars. I became secretly uneasy whenever Byron's hand strayed too far from the gear stick, and I never held his gaze when his bloodshot eyes swivelled towards us in the rearview mirror.

In spite of this, I loved going to stay with Fabián and his uncle. Even the journey was fun, and not just because we were picked up by an armed chauffeur in a black Mercedes. Byron's wife Eulalia would leave us sandwiches on the back seat for the ride back, and there was a particular set of traffic lights on the journey where a mestizo on crutches sold packets of multicoloured chewing gum that were a perfect antidote to the cloying effects of peanut-butter mouth. On one celebrated occasion, following a poorly-supervised school excursion to the Equator during which Fabián and I had managed to consume half a litre of filthy aguardiente between us, we'd initiated a game on the journey home, the object of which was to chew a packet of gum and consume an entire sandwich simultaneously. Reeking of booze, and feeling very clever, we sat in the back of the car tipping handfuls of lurid pellets into faces already crammed with sandwich, allowing the artificial fruit flavours to detonate inside wedges of white bread and peanut butter and then munching away, digesting the sandwiches piece by piece until only the wad of gum remained. Swallowing one thing and retaining another would have been difficult enough had we been sober, and it wasn't long before things backfired. Having accidentally bolted everything in his mouth, Fabián screamed at Byron to pull over and vomited a flamboyant mixture of cane alcohol, peanut butter and fruit gum into the gutter. Byron

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found the episode hilarious and, even now, continued to glance hopefully over his shoulder whenever he picked us up for evidence of more drinking on the sly.

Quito is not one city but two: the New Town and the Old Town lie at opposite ends of a long, thin valley running from the north to the south. At the northern end is a bland sprawl of glass and concrete boxes: apartment blocks, shopping centres and offices. The business district. A city of tethered Alsatians, lawn sprinklers and air-con. It was here in New Quito that I lived with my family, in a block of flats devised for the purpose of formal entertainment. Arranged on strata of open-plan, polished surfaces, the place was a veritable gallery of picture windows, each one of which provided spectacular views over the city and the volcanoes beyond. The vantage point allowed you to watch incoming aeroplanes as they hurled themselves down between buildings and on to the floor of the valley, where the airport was situated. It also meant that if you took a pair of binoculars and followed the city as it curved away to the south-west, you could make out, buried away at the opposite end like a dirty secret, the whitewashed walls, crumbling churches and narrow streets of the Old Town.

The story went something like this: once upon a time, high in the Andes, among the volcanoes, the Incas built a city in the clouds. But when word came of the approach of the conquistadores from the south, General Rumiñahui, whom the great Atahualpa had left in charge of the city, destroyed the place himself rather than let it fall to the enemy. Not one stone of the great Inca city remained. What we referred to as the Old Town was the colonial city that had been built on top of the Inca one, whose arched balconies and terracotta roofs were now in disarray themselves, repossessed in some cases by indígenas, but rotting all the same. And so, while the New Town continued to unpack itself to the north, like prefabricated furniture, the Old Town sat still, slowly settling on top of its predecessor, like compost. Like geology.

Today, thanks to various international protection orders and heritage schemes, I read that this process of decay has been arrested, that the Old Town has been sanitised, and that all those derelict whitewashed buildings, reclaimed by the rich, gleam once more. That collapsed mouth full of bad teeth is now, apparently, capped and sparkling. I find this impossible to imagine. Perhaps it was the manifest poverty of the place, or perhaps it was the thrill I associated with any forbidden location, but to me Old Quito, or El Centro as it was widely known, always stood for life in its most concentrated form. It crawled with the stuff. You couldn't set foot there, it seemed, without having to fight your way through the billow of steam from a mobile soup stall, fend off a market trader trying to press you into a hat or a frilly blouse, or intercept some urchin trying to tickle your wallet. Then there was the intoxicating, head-spinning cocktail of smells, exacerbated by the high altitude: diesel fumes, rotting fruit, stale urine. And, during festivals, cane alcohol, and the charred flesh of guinea pigs grilled over coals.

Only once had I been let loose in the Old Town alone, and the experience had merely served to whet my appetite. Due to its proximity to the Equator, the weather in Quito is schizophrenic at the best of times - at any time, the

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most tedious cloud formation might suddenly admit an impossible rainbow or dump a preposterous hailstorm - but, being in the Old Town, this particular episode stuck in my mind. I was out with my father and, to save time, he had sent me to get a key cut while he bought something at a market stall. I was thirteen at the time, and welcomed this opportunity for solo exploration. Hearing the ripple of thunder in the distance, I stopped in the street beneath a terracotta awning and looked behind me towards the peak of Cotopaxi to see the flash of a jaundiced, smoky fissure in the sky. The Indian ahead of me geed up his mule by tapping its back with his stick. Stallholders stowed their wares beneath plastic sheeting. Then, with only a couple of warning droplets beforehand, the rain arrived. Walls became vertical rivers. Brown torrents foamed down the streets and frothed into holes in the ground. The pavements felt greasy underfoot with drenched pollution. Dogs gazed out from under tables, waiting for it to pass, and for about ten minutes, I watched as the storm drains choked, gulping down the weather as best they could. Afterwards, it was as if nothing had happened: the blue canvas of the market stalls quietly dripped dry, and their proprietors tapped out their pipes to do business once again.

Perhaps the storm would have been equally impressive had I been on a playing field at school, or sitting on the balcony of our apartment in the New Town, but at the time I believed that it was the fact of where I was that had made it so striking, that such freak weather was particular to Old Quito, and that everything, rain included, was more interesting there.

As someone who had spent all of his life nearby, Fabián's attitude to the Old Town when we talked about it was one of complacency, as if he knew it well and could no longer be surprised by it. In spite of this, I knew that he too had never spent much time exploring it on his own and longed to do so almost as much as I did.

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