Detour

James Siegel

Prologue

It's an old saying. An adage. A reassuring word to the wise. Or actually, to the scared. It's meant to mollify, to calm, to show one the utter silliness of their thinking.

You say it when someone's frightened to do something.

To travel, for instance.

To ride the rails. Hop a plane. Charter a boat.

To scuba dive. Jet-ski. Rollerblade. Balloon.

They're frightened a terrible something will befall them, that they'll set out to experience an enjoyable afternoon, a day, a vacation, a life, but instead, they'll end up dead.

And what do you say to them?

There's more chance you'll get hit by a bus while crossing the street.

Because how often does that happen, huh?

He kept a secret file in his bottom drawer, buried beneath his myriad charts, pulled out and dusted off for special occasions, as a kind of reminder.

J. Boksi, thirty-eight, about to be engaged. He was walking out of the jewelers, admiring the sparkling oval-cut two-carat ring set in filigreed white gold.

S. Lewes, twenty-two, newly earned MBA in business administration from Bucknell University. She was coming from her first job interview and staring up at the grandest buildings she'd ever seen.

T. Noonan, seventy, doting grandfather. He was taking a walk with his four-year-old grandson and explaining why Batman could not beat Superman in a fair fight, never ever, not on your life.

E. Riskin, sixty.

C. Meismer, seventy-eight.

R. Vaz, thirty-three.

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L. Parkins, eleven.

J. Barbagallo, thirty-five.

R. and S. Parks, eighteen-year-old twins.

They'd all been hit by a bus while crossing the street.

Every single one of them.

They were all dead.

It reminded him that despite what you think, it can happen.

It can.

It can even happen to you.

The Insurance Actuary calculates the tipping point between risk and probability, thereby hoping to reduce the likelihood of undesirable events.

– The Actuary Handbook

Chances are, your chances are, pretty good.

– Johnny Mathis

one

Buenas tardes.

When they got to Bogotá, the first thing Paul and Joanna saw was a man with no head.

A picture of the man in question, apparently once the deputy mayor of Medellín, was plastered across various table-sized posters stuck to the walls in El Dorado Airport, all of them advertising different Bogotá newspapers. The man was carelessly sprawled in the middle of the street, as if he were just taking a much-needed rest. Except his shirt was stained with dried blood, and he was clearly missing something important. It had been blown off by a car bomb, which had been set by either the leftist FARC or the rightest USDF – depending on which theory you chose to believe.

Paul thought it was a hell of a welcome. But all in all, he still felt like saying thanks.

Glad to be here.

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That's because flight 31 from JFK to Colombia had lasted eighteen hours, which was eleven hours longer than it was supposed to. There'd been a five-hour delay in Kennedy and an unscheduled stop in Washington, D.C., to pick up baggage belonging to a Colombian diplomat who'd remained nameless.

They'd sat on a broiling Washington tarmac for hours – with no Bloody Marys or gin and tonics to cut the boredom or beat the heat. Serving alcohol during ground delays was apparently an FAA no-no. That was probably a good idea. The general disposition on board had grown angry and mutinous – with the possible exception of Joanna and the passenger to Paul's right, who calmly stared straight ahead into the seat back in front of him.

He was an amateur ornithologist, he volunteered.

He was used to waiting. He was off to the jungles of northern Colombia to hunt for the yellow-breasted toucan.

Paul kept looking at his wristwatch and wondering why it wasn't moving.

Joanna, mostly a bastion of calm, had reminded him that they'd waited five years. Ten hours, more or less, wouldn't kill them.

She was right, of course.

The New York delay, the eight-hour Washington layover, the increasingly fetid cabin, wouldn't kill him. He knew what would kill people and what wouldn't. After all, he was an actuary for a major insurance company, whose logo – a pair of paternal cradling hands – appeared regularly on sickly-sweet commercials twenty times a day. He could spin the risk ratios on all sorts of everyday activities, recite the percentages of accident and death chapter and verse.

He knew that the odds of dying in a plane, for example, were exactly 1 in 354,319 – even with the recent small bump due to men whose first name was Al and last name was Qaeda. A delay in takeoff would be in actuary-speak: statistically insignificant.

Plane delays couldn't kill you.

Car bombs could.

Speaking of which.

The sight of the headless man admittedly threw them just a little. As they walked from the gate in the general direction of baggage claim, Joanna noticed the first gruesome poster and immediately turned away, while Paul felt the first vague prickling of fear.

Worming their way through customs under the sullen eyes of soldiers with shouldered AK-47s didn't exactly help. When they finally made it through baggage, they were approached by a stooped white-haired man holding a crude hand-lettered

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sign over his head.

Breidbard, Paul, it said. Their last name was misspelled.

'I guess I'm considered luggage,' Joanna whispered to him.

The old man introduced himself as Pablo and timidly shook Paul's hand. He picked up all three of their suitcases in one swift motion. When Paul tried to wrest at least one bag back from this man who, after all, had to be thirty years older than he was, Pablo politely refused.

'Is fine,' he said, smiling. 'Please follow...'

Pablo had been hired through the local Santa Regina Orphanage. He would be their man in Bogotá, he explained. He'd drive for them, shop for them, and help guide them through the entire process. He'd accompany them everywhere, he told them.

It was reassuring to hear.

Pablo led them through the unruly and suffocating crowd. All airports were experiments in barely managed chaos, but El Dorado was worse. The crowd seemed like soccer fans who'd lost – loud, milling, and dangerous. Paul, who'd done a little boning up on his Spanish, forgot the word for excuse me and had to resort to a primitive form of sign language in an effort to get people to move out of the way. Most simply ignored him, or looked at him as if he were touched in the head. He eventually relied on out-and-out shoving to navigate their way out.

Getting through the crowd was just one of their problems.

The other was keeping up with Speedy Gonzalez, a.k.a. Pablo.

He seemed remarkably spry for a man who had to be pushing seventy. Even while carrying three bulging suitcases.

'Think he's chewing coca or something?' Joanna asked. Joanna ran three mornings a week and could do a good hour and a half on the StairMaster, but even she was having trouble keeping pace.

'Pablo!' Paul had to shout his name once, twice, three times, before Pablo finally turned around and noticed that the two people whom he was supposed to stick to like glue were out of breath and falling dangerously behind.

'Sorry,' he said almost sheepishly. 'I'm used to...how you say...giddyap.' He smiled.

'That's okay,' Paul said. 'We just don't want to lose you.'

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They'd made it through the sliding front doors and were on the outskirts of a vast parking lot directly adjacent to the terminal. A sea of cars, dotted with small eddies of slowly strolling passengers, seemed to stretch endlessly in all directions.

'What's that odor?' Joanna asked.

Paul sniffed the air; motor oil and diesel fuel, he was about to say. But Joanna possessed an uncannily accurate sense of smell, more an olfactory intuition, so he kept quiet.

'Ahh...,' Pablo said. 'Wait.' He gently placed the suitcases on the cracked pavement, then walked a good twenty feet to what appeared, at least at this distance, to be some kind of ticket booth.

It wasn't. He returned holding two tightly wrapped packages trailing tiny plumes of steam.

'Empanadas,' he said, handing them to Paul and Joanna. 'Pollo.'

'Chicken,' Paul whispered in Joanna's ear.

'Thanks,' Joanna whispered back, 'I've eaten at Taco Bell too.' Then she asked Pablo, 'How much do we owe you?'

Pablo shook his head. 'Nada.'

'Thank you, Pablo – that's very generous of you.' Joanna took a bite of her empanada, then was forced to lick a dollop of red sauce which had trickled down past her lower lip. 'Mmmmm – it's really good.'

Pablo grinned. Paul thought that his face looked tender and tough at the same time – or, at the least, weathered.

'Wait here, I go for the car,' Pablo said out of deference to their obviously inferior constitutions.

'He's sweet, isn't he?' Joanna said after Pablo had disappeared into a row of Volkswagens, Renaults, and Mini Coopers.

'Yes, maybe we should adopt him,' Paul answered. He took her free hand and squeezed – it was sticky with perspiration. 'Excited?'

She nodded. 'Oh yeah.'

'On a scale of one to ten?'

'Six hundred and eleven.'

'That's all, huh?'

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Two minutes later Pablo reappeared behind the wheel of a vintage blue Peugeot.

two

Their lawyer had booked them into a hotel with a French name, an American-style ambience, and an upscale Bogotá location. The area was called Calle 93, crammed with fashionable boutiques, high-rise hotels, and hip-looking restaurants with blue-tinted windows.

Their hotel was L'Esplanade, a name reeking of French chic, but its lobby coffee shop had Texas steerburgers and Philly fries on the menu.

Their tenth-floor suite had an unimpeded view of the surrounding green mountains. When Joanna pulled up the shades and made Paul look at them, he couldn't help wondering if armed insurgents were looking back. He decided not to share those feelings with his wife.

They'd been dutifully warned about coming to Colombia, of course.

Their original lawyer had urged them to try somewhere else.

Anywhere else.

Korea, he'd suggested. Hungary. How do you feel about China? Colombia, he'd insisted, was too volatile. The sale of bulletproof glass was a national growth industry, he'd added.

But Korea or Hungary or China could take up to four years.

In Colombia it was two months. Max.

After waiting five long and agonizing years to become parents, four more years had seemed intolerable. Desperation arm-wrestled prudence and won hands down.

They were promptly steered to another lawyer, who specialized in Latin America.

His name was Miles Goldstein, and what he actually seemed to specialize in was enthusiasm. He was warmly effusive, seemingly indefatigable, and unabashedly committed. In this particular case, to bringing two dispossessed and suffering factions together. There were babies out there who needed homes; there were couples out there who needed babies. His mission was to make both parties happy. A handwoven sampler hung on the wall directly above his desk.

He who saves one child saves the world.

It was hard not to like a lawyer who subscribed to that kind of thinking.

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Miles assured them that while Colombia wasn't an oasis of peace, the capital city was pretty much no problem. The struggle between leftists and rightists had been going on for thirty years – it had become just another feature of the landscape. But that landscape was mostly north, mountainous, and far away from Bogotá. In fact, according to a recent survey in Destinations magazine, a photocopy of which Miles produced from his desk drawer and handed to them, Bogotá was safer than Switzerland.

You've really got to watch your back in Zurich, Miles said.

PABLO HAD BEEN TRUE TO HIS WORD.

He'd driven them up to the doorstep, then flew inside with their luggage, forgoing the proffered help from an obviously pissed-off bellboy. When Paul and Joanna followed Pablo into the loud Art Deco lobby, a fawning concierge with dyed-blond hair and a slight lisp was waiting to show them to their room.

Pablo promised to return in three hours to take them to the orphanage.

After he had left, Paul laid himself out on the generously sized bed and said, 'I wish I could fall asleep, but I can't.'

Two hours later he woke up and said, 'What time is it?'

Joanna was over by the window reading the latest issue of Mother & Baby magazine. Paul couldn't help remembering that she'd begun her subscription over four years ago.

'Sorry you couldn't sleep, honey,' she said.

'I guess it caught up with me.'

'I guess.'

'Did you nap?'

'Uh-uh. Too jazzed.'

'What time is it?'

'One hour till Pablo comes back.'

'One hour. Well...'

Joanna put the magazine facedown and smiled at him. The cover was a startling close-up of a newborn's eyes: baby blue. 'It's surreal, isn't it?' Joanna said.

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'Surreal's a good word.'

'I mean, in one hour we're going to meet her.'

'Yeah. Shouldn't I be pacing or something?'

'Or something.'

'Well, I would pace. But there's not enough room. Consider me mentally pacing.'

'Paul?'

'Yeah?'

'I'm so happy. I think.'

'Why just think?'

'Because I'm so scared.'

It wasn't like Joanna to be scared of anything – that was his department. It was enough to get him off the bed and over to her chair, where he shook off the pins and needles in his legs and leaned down to hug her. She put her head back on his shoulder and he smelled equal parts shampoo, Chanel No. 5, and, yes, the slightly acrid odor of fear.

'You're going to be great,' Paul said. 'Wonderful.'

'How do you know?'

'Because you've been babying me for ten years, and I don't have any complaints. Because I say so.'

'Oh well, if you say so...'

She lifted her head and he kissed her full on the lips. Nice lips, he thought. Beautiful lips. She was one of those women who look good falling out of bed – maybe better, since makeup seemed to cover up her features rather than do anything to enhance them. Pale, lightly freckled skin, with powder-blue eyes – the kind they hand-paint on delicate porcelain dolls. Delicate, however, wouldn't necessarily be one of the adjectives he'd use to describe Joanna. Strong, smart, focused, was more like it. On certain occasions he'd been known to refer to her as Xena, warrior princess – always affectionately, of course, and usually under his breath. She'd be thirty-seven in less than two weeks, but she still looked, well, twenty-seven. From time to time he wondered if she'd always look that way to him, if generally happy couples tend to see each other the way they were back when, till they suddenly wake up around sixty or so and wonder who that middle-aged person is sleeping next to them.

'What if I'm completely incompetent?' she said. 'I don't have a degree in this.'

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'I'm told it comes naturally.'

'You evidently haven't read Mother & Baby.'

'That's okay. You have,' he said.

'Fine. I'll stop panicking.'

'Great. Next time I panic and you reassure.'

'Deal.'

'I'm going to take a shower. I feel like I've been on a plane for two days.'

'You have been on a plane for two days.'

'See, I knew there was a reason.'

* * *

PABLO CAME TWENTY MINUTES EARLY. APPARENTLY, THAT WHOLE mañana thing was an ethnic stereotype without merit.

He knocked on their door, then politely waited outside, even after Joanna had virtually begged him to come inside and sit down.

Paul, who was only half dressed, had to hastily scramble into the rest of his clothes. Black linen pants and a slightly rumpled white shirt he'd neglected to take out of his suitcase. He took quick stock of himself in the mirror and saw pretty much what he expected: a face stuck somewhere between boyishness and creeping middle age, someone who was clearly the sum of his parts, none of which would've stood out in a crowd. Well, clothes make the man. He topped off his outfit with his red-striped power tie. After all, he was preparing for the most important meeting of his life.

The Peugeot was softly idling in front of the hotel.

Paul noticed the hotel doorman whisper something in Pablo's ear as he bent over to usher them into the backseat. A kind of rumba was playing on the radio.

'What did he say?' Paul asked Pablo after he had pulled away from the curb.

'He wished you Many Blessings.'

'Oh. You told him where we're going?'

'Yes.'

'Do you do this a lot, Pablo?' Joanna asked. 'With many couples?'

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Pablo nodded. ‘Happy job, no?’

‘Sure,’ Joanna said. ‘I think so.’

They passed a convoy of soldiers hunched together in an open made-in-Detroit Jeep. Paul couldn’t help remembering the phalanx of armed sentries at the airport.

‘Lots of soldiers around, huh?’ Paul said.

‘Soldiers? Sí.’

‘How have things been?’ Paul asked, a little hesitant to ask a question he might not like the answer to.

‘Things?’

‘The rebels? FARC?’ It sounded like a curse, Paul thought. He imagined that to the vast majority of Colombians, it was. The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia. The leftist guerrillas already holding much of the north, and most likely the group responsible for blowing the deputy mayor of Medellín to kingdom come.

Of course, there was always the chance the car bomb had been perpetrated by the right. FARC was embroiled in a long dirty war against the United Self-Defense Forces, or USDF, a rightist paramilitary organization of singular brutality.

On the way out of the airport, they’d passed a wall covered in red graffiti, which looked uncomfortably like fresh arterial spray, as if it had been written in blood.

Libre Manuel Riojas. Manuel Riojas was the reputed USDF commander, currently residing in an American prison for drug transgressions.

Pablo shook his head. ‘I don’t listen...No politics.’

‘Yes. That’s probably wise.’

‘Sí.’

‘Still, it must be scary sometimes?’

‘Scary.’ Pablo derisively waved a hand. ‘I mind my business. Don’t read the papers. It’s all bad.’

Before departing, Paul had sent away for a video titled The Colombian Way of Life. After he’d watched the first five minutes, it was painfully obvious it had been created for schoolkids under the age of twelve. The video followed two teenagers, Mauricio and Paula, walking around sunny Bogotá, their intent being to show that there’s more to this modern South American city than coffee, cocaine, and guerrilla violence – or so stated the back blurb.

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Pablo was driving them past a street of sprawling mansions. At least Paul assumed there were mansions back there somewhere – you couldn't actually see them. An unbroken ten-foot-high stucco wall was in the way. Electronic gates periodically announced the demarcation of each new property, their names spelled out in tile mosaics embedded into the wall.

Casa de Flora.

Casa de Playa.

They passed a spotted dog with its ribs showing, urinating against the burnt-orange wall of the Casa de Fuego.

Something was unnerving about the scene. It took Paul a while to understand what it was.

Yes. The lack of people.

Except for several beggars, emaciated-looking women listlessly cradling babies in their laps, there was absolutely no one in view. Not in this neighborhood. They were all tucked out of sight, hidden behind a modern wall of Jericho.

La Calera, Pablo told them when Paul asked what the neighborhood was called.

Then, thankfully, their surroundings began to change.

Some scattered electronic and appliance stores, then small cafeterías advertising empanadas, patatas, and huevos, followed by a glut of news vendors, lotería shops, supermercados, various bustling places of commerce – the whole enchilada. A cacophony of smells wafted in through the half-cracked windows: bus exhaust, flowers, raw fish, newsprint – Paul was tempted to ask Joanna for a full rundown. They were clearly in the midst of the completely normal life of a capital city, just as Miles had promised. And Paul wondered if there was a kind of conscious denial at work here – if there had to be an ostrichlike mentality in a country where deputy mayors had their heads blown off on a regular basis. If Colombians were able to wall off pieces of their conscious mind from the ongoing war, much as they carefully walled off poverty from the upper classes in the La Calera district.

He stopped musing; there was a sign just ahead tucked into a small grove of trees.

Santa Regina Orfanato.

'Here,' Pablo whispered. He pulled into a hidden driveway and stopped the car. A locked gate; a black buzzer set in brass.

Pablo turned off the ignition, got out, and pushed the button. 'Pablo,' he said, 'Señor y Señora Breidbart.'

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The gate swung open ten seconds later. Pablo got back in and methodically started up the car. He drove into an inner courtyard shaded by tall, spindly pines.

'Come on,' Señor Breidbart said when the car stopped again. 'Let's go meet our daughter.'

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