
Nights in the Yungas

We were friends immediately and for the next five nights it was impossible not to get drunk with them. It was my first day in the Yungas, I was battered and gasping from the crazy plunge down the mountain from La Paz: four hours in the back of a truck, waterfalls spilling liquid ice on our spines from cliffs overhanging the single-lane track wrapped against the mountain-face; there was a woman who shrieked and curled herself around her baby like a snail's shell each time we rattled towards a waterfall. The one moment I dared to look down, the dark green void below was unmarred except for a gouged path that stopped short at the scarred skeleton of a truck.

"How did you travel down here?" they asked me. I told them. They wrinkled their brows and shook their heads. Roberto said: "Twenty-six trucks crash this year, four buses. The bus is better."

I could scarcely believe this was Bolivia: the bright colours, the heat, the view from this hilltop town. The long vertebrae of the mountains, their dense green lofting white mist above them, stretched towards me from the distant wall of the valley.

After weeks of denuded altiplano, thin air and chill drizzle, I had descended into paradise. I sat in a chair on the balcony of the hotel, looking out over the broken, drooping leaves of the coffee plants, wafts of polyglot conversation settling on me from the balcony above, where travellers of various nationalities were chewing coca leaves and discussing the effects as their gums and jaws turned numb. Out on the street that evening I met the musicians.

They were playing in an open doorway off the central plaza. I joined the crowd that had gathered to listen to them. The group consisted of five young men: none looked more than eighteen. They played the Andean flute, the guitar, two *rondadores*, or sets of panpipes, and a *charango* — a small guitar whose armadillo-shell body was ruffled into glossy, liver-coloured scales. Their music was keening, monotonous, compelling; but perhaps because I was no longer in the highlands, the tunes they played sounded less morose than other Andean music I had heard. The flautist and the two youths who puffed on the *rondadores* were dead serious, but the guitarist cavorted for the crowd and the *charango* player, the group's leader, a strong-faced, sleek-haired youth named Roberto, would interrupt his playing to tap his fingers on the pleated belly of his *charango*.

We started to talk during one of the breaks in their performance and by the end of the evening I was their devoted follower. Three or four nights a week they would trail around the town, stopping into hotels and restaurants, their brave, haunted music piping fiercely. If the owner requested it, they would stay for the evening to entertain the customers. The price they charged for their labour was a generous and unbroken supply of hard liquor. The instant the restaurant owner or hotel manager nodded his approval of their music they would lower their instruments and erupt into a spate of bargaining. What was there to drink? Rum? Aguardiente? Vodka? Offers and reactions would volley back and forth. When the musicians received an

offer they considered acceptable they would all look at Roberto and Roberto would nod. The waiter would scurry into the back of the restaurant and return carrying a pitcher of potent spirits. The musicians would seat themselves around a table, the waiter would pour the first round of drinks and the music would begin.

They could play for hours. The hollow pumping of the *rondadores*, the almost metallic plucking of Roberto's *charango*, the silkier chord-changes of the wooden guitar and thin trill of the flute would weave together, the flowing give-and-take among them almost imperceptible. Whenever the music seemed to be on the verge of sinking into monotony one of the musicians would strike out on his own, and the others would respond to the changed course, following it, resisting it or mocking it with bursts of sound and sidelong glances. Drink took no observable toll on their playing. As I had become their friend, I was supplied with a glass at the beginning of the evening and was offered a fill-up at every round. At the rate of one glass of aguardiente or vodka to every two or three of theirs, I was reeling by the end of the performance. Muddled recollections come to me of dragging myself arm over arm up the wooden outdoor staircase of my hotel, weaving across the balcony to my room, laughing giddily at the twitching tropical night, and waking to the morning glare with a head scoured as clear as crystal. I never got a hangover from those nights. Perhaps I was spared because I did not usually drink; or perhaps it was the influence of the sad, supple, resilient music.

The musicians asked me what I did in my country. I began to list some of the jobs I had held. Roberto interrupted me. "Are you an artist?" he asked.

"Yes," I replied, on the strength of a few adolescent poems. "Of course." Well, why not? Wasn't I as much an artist as they were?

Roberto strummed a chord on his *charango* and the piping symphony died away. "The goal of any artist," Roberto said, without pretension or anxiety, "is to be heard among the people, to make himself known among the people."

"Like Víctor Jara," said the guitarist. "Compañero Víctor, playing to keep up the people's spirits in the stadiums in Chile, until the military cut off his hands."

As if moved by Jara's ghost, the musicians slipped as one man into a sombre rendering of half a dozen of Jara's songs. It was two o'clock in the morning and the restaurant was nearly empty. The customers had left and the waiters and kitchen staff, sipping *aguardiente* at the back of the dining room, constituted the musicians' only audience. They leaned back in their chairs, watching and listening. A sea of empty tables stood between us and them. The sea swayed in time with the music. I was very drunk.

It was my last night in the Yungas. We had spent the evening in a restaurant on the outskirts of town, down the hill from the centre, where the streets were deep trenches of loose dust and the stone sidewalks flanked the trenches like knee-high causeways. When the musicians had completed their rendition of Jara's songs we drained our glasses and careered into the street. I toiled uphill. At the edge of the central plaza the streets turned to tightly locked cobbles, the sidewalks sank. The walls of the plaza were plastered with faded beige posters proclaiming the virtues of General Torrelio, Bolivia's current dictator. The photograph in the centre of each poster showed a heavy mustache, a peaked military cap, braided epaulettes.

The plaza was deserted; the streetlights cast a wan light. Roberto danced to the wall of the plaza, insinuating the neck of his *charango* under the dog-eared fringe of a poster of Torrelio. He dragged the end of the instrument across the rough stucco, ripping the general's face from ear to ear on three identical

posters plastered side by side. The tattered posters gaped in the night shadow. Roberto examined the neck of his *charango*, caressing with his palm the tip that had scraped across the stucco. "No damage," he announced, and smiled. He looked at the shredded posters and said: "The artist makes himself known among the people."

I felt myself breaking into laughter. I laughed and laughed. The musicians howled. Their laughter fed mine and I said goodbye to them with an effusiveness they seemed not to have expected from a gringo. They embraced me firmly. "*Artista!*" cried Roberto.

Before catching the bus to La Paz the next morning I steeled myself for the terrifying mountain trail with a hot breakfast in the small restaurant beneath the hotel. A teenage boy was taking orders; he stood behind a counter, listening to music from a tapedeck. As I sipped coffee and ate a warm bun it came to me through the haze (for the first time my drinking had made me groggy) that I had heard the song before. I caught the boy's attention, pointed at the tapedeck and said: "A song by Víctor Jara, no?"

The boy's brow wrinkled.

"The music," I said. "It's Víctor Jara, right?"

"I know of no such person, *señor*."

I apologized, embarrassed that either my Spanish or my tin ear for music had failed me. A tall German who had been staying in the room beside mine entered the restaurant, sat down at my table and ordered breakfast. The boy disappeared into the kitchen. The music continued to flow from the tapedeck. The cassette cover lay face-down on the edge of the counter. Curious, I bent forward, closed my fingers around the plastic cover and turned it over. The cassette had been bought blank and used to tape a record. An unformed hand had scrawled a single word across the cardboard liner: *Víctor*.

“Do you understand this music?” the German said.

Jara’s voice broke into *Recuerdo Amanda*, a song I recognized from the night before. “I remember Amanda,” I translated, returning to my seat. “It’s about remembering someone.”

That afternoon, during the long climb, waterfalls beat a sombre tune on the roof of the bus. The musicians’ notes poured through me all the way back up to the chill, bleak altiplano.