

FATE'S
INSTRUMENTS



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✧ No Safeguards 2—Paul's Story ✧



H. Nigel Thomas



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*For Alice Agatha Richards (Tant Alice)
whose home provided the warmth, affection
and nurture I needed at age 17*



*With the farming of a verse
Make a vineyard of the curse.*

—W.H. AUDEN



COME AWAKE stretched out on the couch. Realize I'd dozed off. My bladder is full to bursting. On the radio Mozart's *Requiem* is playing. I recognize it easily. It was one of Grama's favourite pieces.

First the bathroom. I smell, then see the overflowing dirty-linen hamper. I turn the fan on. I shake my head. Not today. Yesterday I said I would do the laundry today. In the mirror I stare at the bags under my eyes, the double chin. I should increase my time at the gym. Can't ignore my appearance. Not now. Certainly not now.

Next the kitchen. 15:41 the stove clock says. I've slept for more than two hours. I'm hungry. I open the fridge. It's almost empty. I pick up the milk carton and sniff it. Sour. The carcass of a barbecue chicken with pretty well all the meat gone and two dinner rolls are all that's edible in the fridge. I put the rolls in the toaster oven, grab a fork from among the dirty dishes in the sink, and rake off whatever meat I can from the carcass of the chicken.

I feel relaxed. The nap has helped. At 5:14, when I got out of bed, I thought of walking down to the gym at the Forum, but couldn't work up the energy. Today I'd intended to write, but a nightmare woke me up around 3 a.m., and left me awake and in a stupor all morning.

I'm in a prison cell in Antigua, Guatemala, in the corner where the slop pail is. Flies are landing everywhere on my body. I can't lift my hand to prevent them from alighting on my face. Juan Pablo and Lencho get up and are coming toward me. I try to scream but no sound comes.

I dream about this prison a couple times each year. Never this harrowing though. Usually it's some variant of my mother and Madam

J paying the bribe the Antigua police wanted and forcing me to say I'd give my heart to their Lord. Madam J usually has a yellow purse holding the knife she'll use to cut out my heart to give to her Lord.

The real arrest happened six years ago. I was nineteen. I excluded the prison details from the story I told Jay. He knows I got busted for buying weed and it was why I hadn't contacted him and Ma for more than a year. He suspects too that I haven't told him the full story. That boy knows me a little too well. If I'd thought about it I'd have told Bill about my prison experience. Maybe it wouldn't be haunting me still. He'd have understood and wouldn't have flapped his mouth about it. My more usual nightmare—happens once, sometimes twice, every couple of weeks—is that I have some important place to get to but can't begin the journey. Or if I begin, I get to dead ends and have to turn back until I can no longer move in any direction.

✧ Jay hasn't called to update me on his condition. That foolish boy. I have to call Carlos and Rosa in Guatemala to find out how the funeral went.

I should write down last night's nightmare, keep track of my dreams for future reference. Maybe I should tell Jay the full story. Wonder how he'd react. Might shrug and say he doesn't see why I had to withhold it. After all I'm no novice when it comes to dealing with the police. In my teens I was taken to the Côte-des-Neiges precinct more times than I care to remember.

I get my journal from the bedroom, sit at the dining table, and record the nightmare: those nineteen hours I spent in a Guatemalan slammer, the part I hid from Jay. Trimmed it too from the confession I made to Carlos the day I found out about Ma's death and risked arrest coming home.

Wished *Lonely Planet* had info about cops posing as pushers. Not sure it would have made a difference. I'd already bought grass freely in Belize, Honduras, Costa Rica, and Nicaragua from taxi drivers or their contacts. Guess my luck had to run out at some time. At the police station the *chontes* were firm. Probably felt if they were going to be corrupt it should be worth every quetzal. Then again, the

salary those guys earn—somewhere around \$600 per month—and their standard of living: supporting children in private schools, stay-at-home wives, maybe a mistress or two on the side, sometimes widowed mothers, plus owning cars, they have to find—extort—extra income, and the source is obvious. *Prensa Libre* carried a long piece on it. These wanted \$1,000. Not a penny less. I'd offered \$500, and they suggested I could get the other \$500 from my credit card. I didn't have a credit card. The older cop picked up my wallet from the counter, took out the cards, and examined them one by one, finally settling on my debit card. He held it up. “¿Y esa?”

I shook my head. I had just over \$800 in my account and the equivalent of about \$100 in quetzals in my wallet.

They knew what they were doing and were certain they'd be paid—one way or the other. I didn't know that. The older cop went on to explain that I could contact my family and get the money from them. He scribbled something onto the back of a form, pulled his cellphone from his pocket, and handed it and the paper to me. The paper had a Western Union address. The last thing I wanted was for Ma to find out that I was in police custody in Guatemala. If I could reach Jay, I would lie to him and get him to send me the money. But if I called and Ma answered I would have to hang up the phone, and the cops would have a record of the number. My hands sweaty and trembling, I deliberately dialled a wrong number. A recording said there was no service for the number I'd dialled. Their eyes were riveted on me. Even the station captain's from his desk a couple metres away.

“There's a problem: *algo técnico, pienso*,” I said, trying to sound casual.

The young cop stretched his hand for the phone. He pressed redial and listened. He gave the phone to his colleague, who bared his teeth. He glanced at my handcuffs, said something that I didn't understand, and began heading toward the back. With a toss of his chin and his beckoning thumb, he signalled me to follow him. The other cop walked behind me. We exited onto a small parking lot with three police trucks. They shoved me into the passenger seat of the nearest one. The young officer took the steering wheel; the other sat on my right. They drove a

short distance, to the prison I passed every day on my way to Spanish classes: a vast structure with destroyed upper floors of half-standing walls. All but the first floor was in ruins. The first time I saw it I feared for the prisoners inside should there be an earthquake. The older cop pulled me out roughly and pushed me, past the women selling snacks on the sidewalk, toward a gate of vertical steel bars. Two boyish-looking guards in grey uniforms stood with semi-automatics inside the gate. One opened it. The hinges grated. I got goose bumps and froze. The older cop pushed me forward. A large noisy fan rotated just inside the door. There was a strong urine-and-feces smell.

About two metres in from the door, a bespectacled man with a full-moon face sat hunched behind a bare desk in a steel cage. The older cop went to him and spoke. The man picked up a phone and spoke into it. The young cop remained at my side. A couple of minutes later, a burly man in a grey uniform came from the interior end of the corridor. At his right hip a bundle of keys jangled. His beady eyes peered out at me from his jowly face and stared at every part of me. Then he said, “*Venga*,” beckoned with his thumb, and began walking towards the interior. With a head toss, the young cop gestured that I was to follow this man. The young cop walked behind me. The odour was now a mixture of feces, urine, and mildew, but there was some natural light at the far end of the corridor we were walking down. I heard commingled voices too. The man with the keys turned left, went a little way, and stopped in front of a door. He opened it, held it open, and motioned for the cop and me to enter. The cop unlocked the handcuffs, then left. Now the buzz of voices was more distinct. Sounds of a ball being kicked. Shouts. Prisoners playing soccer outside.

The jailer asked me if I understood Spanish. I told him a little. He ordered me to empty my pockets and put the contents onto the desk. The cops had kept my wallet. He picked up my puffer, turned it around in his hand, and frowned. He sprayed his left wrist, lifted it to his nostrils, and sniffed. I told him that it was in case I had an asthma attack—“*Es medicina para controlar mi asma*.” He put it down. Next he examined my EpiPen and shook his head. Holding it up, he stared at me, shook his head, waved a forefinger and said: “*Éste*

no puedes. No can keep.” What he said next, I didn’t understand. He pointed to his slacks and shirt, gestured unbuttoning them and throwing them onto the floor. He unbuckled his belt, pointed to his underpants and said: “You no take off. You keep. ¿Comprendes?” I nodded. He pulled out a bottom drawer from a narrow floor-length cupboard to the right of his desk, took a grey canvas bag from it, and with gestures told me to pick up my clothes and put them in it. When it was done, he reached for the bag and threw my EpiPen into it. From a middle drawer of his desk, he took a safety pin, a stamp and a stamp pad, and a pad of yellow post-its. He fiddled with the stamp, then stamped two pieces of paper; one piece he pinned to the canvas bag, the other he gave me with a warning. “*No lo pierdes*. Keep. No lose.” On the paper was written: *Sábado 39: DT1-04*. I stuck it into the waistband of my underpants. Suddenly the noise of the prisoners outside broke into my consciousness

“*Vámonos*,” the jailer said and got up. Three or so metres from his office, he stopped in front of a steel cage with bars from ceiling to floor on two sides, everything inside visible from the corridor. There was a solid wall on two sides. In the wall opposite the corridor was a space about half a metre square that opened to the outside. There were four vertical steel bars in it. The noise of the players, daylight, and a slight breeze came in through it. The jailer opened the door of the cell, motioned for me to enter, then slammed the door shut and locked it. Three men were in it: two of them, in their underwear, sat on a slab of about two-and-a-half metres: the length of the room; the third man—toothless, completely naked, emaciated, his ribs visible—sat on the floor talking to himself.

In a corner opposite the sitting men was a blue pail. The buzzing flies and the stench coming from it told me what it was. I turned to see the eyes of the two sitting men focused on me. To my right I heard the footsteps and shouts of the prisoners coming in from outside.

My mind raced. How was I going to get out of here? Now Ma’s finding out about my being in police custody didn’t seem to be such a big deal. I knew what went on in prisons. Back in Montreal, in high school, an ex-prisoner had lectured us about the perils of prison life.

That talk and the fear of my boss's rivals offing me had pushed me to give up drug trafficking. I didn't want to be anyone's wife. My body felt cold. My teeth chattered.

"*Venga, Chavo, Amigo, venga. Sienta vos. No es tan malo.* (Come, amigo. Sit down. It's not so bad)," one of the seated inmates said to me. He indicated the space to his left. The other shifted to the right to create more space on the slab. I took a couple of hesitant steps and stared at the speaker. He seemed in his early thirties, had a slender body, dark eyes, black hair, an oval kind-looking face, a large Adam's apple, and buck teeth. I sat as close to the edge as I could.

"*Estaba descuidado, hombre! ¿Por qué está aquí?* (You were careless, man. Why're you here?)" the fellow continued. While I tried to put an explanation together, he spoke again, this time in English. "I'm Juan Pablo."

"Paul," I said. "*Mucho gusto.*" He reached over and we bumped fists.

He looked at the other guy and said: "He's Lencho. *Es Guanaco.* Understand?"

"*Salvadoreño,*" I said.

"*Bueno!*"

Lencho slapped me on the thigh—a stinging blow—and grinned. Some of his molars were missing. He seemed to be in his forties, had very thick eyebrows that came together above his nose, heavy jowls, deltoids like cannon balls, a bulging gut, and a hairy body. His bare arm hung loosely. A tattoo of a snake on it. His head and mine reached to about the same level. Juan Pablo towered more than a full head above us.

"Lemme figure this out," Juan Pablo said. "Tell me if I'm right. They busted you for drugs, and you didn't cough up. Huh?"

I nodded.

"Where you from, *mano?*"

"Canada."

"Not sure how *chontes* deal with Canadians. If you'd o' been a *Gringo*, the American embassy would leave you swing in the wind for couple days, then come pay and carry you. Unnerstand, *mano?*"

I nodded.

“*Mano, chontes* fake the paperwork. Ain’t nutten to that shit they pretend to write down. Ain’t worth a rat’s fart. Get my drift, *mano*? Now if you’d o’ been from Europe, you wouldn’ be even here. *Chontes* would o’ know who to call for *plata*.” He rubbed his thumb and middle finger, his eyes a lustrous black, and nodded. “And somebody’d o’ come to the precinct, pay off the *lapas*, and take you away, and when you back in your country you pay ‘em back. ¿*Comprende*? A *mano* from *Alemania* told me so.”

He said he’d lived in San Diego for five years *indocumentado*. One night the cops raided the flat he shared with a Mexican and found a gram of grass in the apartment and charged him with drug possession. The grass belonged to his roommate, who was out at the time. He spent a month in the slammer and was deported straight from prison. Today he was behind bars because he’d encroached onto someone’s turf. Lencho, himself a deportee from the US, was his sidekick. (No doubt providing *la galleta*—intimidating force—that Juan Pablo lacked.) Their boss was working out their release with the *mero-mero*. He winked. They expected to be out by supper time. “Amigo, when the *chontes* bring you supper, tell them you want contact Canadian embassy. You no want stay in here. After two days they put you with others. Know what that means?” His eyebrows arched, his stare intense.

I didn’t answer.

Lencho laughed.

“Man, they’ll line up to fuck you. They’ll turn your asshole into a *pusa*. If the guards fancy you, they’ll have a go at you too. You’ll be lucky if you leave here without HIV. Let your embassy get you to fuck outta here, man. In Guatemala you ain’t human when you in prison. Do what you have to do to get out of here.”

“*Chaquetear. Culebrear. Mamar. No importa. Lo importante es salir de aquí*,” Lencho said, speaking for the first time.

Juan Pablo translated. “Lick ass. Brown-nose. Suck off the guards ... Whatever will get you out of here without a busted arse and HIV.”

My breath choked. My hand shook as I took a blast from my

puffer. Juan Pablo watched me trying to regain my breath and said that back in San Diego a prisoner that the guards hated had died because they hadn't replaced his puffer. "*Mano*, some of 'em ain't human. *Son brutos. Joden con sus madres. ¿Comprende?*" He made thrusting movements with his fist and laughed. "With their mothers, man." Then he fell silent.

The language school I was attending was closed for the weekend. In any event the contact information for it and Señora Garcia, my landlady, was in my wallet. By Monday if I didn't show up, she would contact the school, if only because the school paid her. I wondered how long I'd be here. With Lencho and Juan Pablo I felt safe, even with El Cholco, Juan Pablo's name for the man sitting on the floor.

The noise in the back was replaced by an indistinct hum of voices and the occasional shout. I suspected there were locked steel gates everywhere. If this place caught fire we'd all perish. It happened quite frequently in Latin America. Ditto if an earthquake struck.

Lencho got up and went to pee. He was even shorter than me. His back looked like a shag rug. There too his muscles bulged. He stepped over the man now lying on the floor in a foetal position. At the first frothy sound Juan Pablo held his nose and turned his head to the wall. I followed suit. The smell was intense and seemed to be coating my throat. The disturbed flies buzzed around for a while. I covered my face with my hands and wriggled to dislodge those that had landed on my back.

Lencho returned to sit on the slab. After a while Juan Pablo dozed. Lencho too, his body leaning into Juan Pablo's. Intermittent noises came from the prisoners on the right. I sat there, thinking, thinking what a fool I'd made of myself. Would I make it out of there alive, undamaged? Ma and Madam J would be so triumphant when they got the news. I envisaged Madam J, gesturing wildly, sanctimoniously saying: "Sister Anna, I did know it. Ain't I did tell you so? That bwoy heading down the path o' destruction. With bruck-neck speed." Next it would be their pastor praying before the entire congregation that Anna's boy would turn from the path of evil.

I looked at my sleeping cellmates. They seemed quite comfortable.

The cell felt colder and damper, and mosquitoes were now buzzing at my ears. Something bit me, quite likely a flea.

Suddenly the man on the floor sat up and began to scream. The two other prisoners came awake. Lencho shouted at him in a language I didn't understand and made a cutthroat sign. Juan Pablo laughed. El Cholco began to tremble and fell silent.

Now I wanted to pee. I couldn't hold it any longer. I went to the pail. The flies hit me, but the worst part was the splattering on my legs. I felt ashamed and didn't want to return to sit on the slab. I heard commotion to the right of me, the prisoners becoming louder than usual.

"*Cena*," Juan Pablo said, yawned, and stretched. He looked at Lencho, and they pounded fists.

Within seconds the turnkey came and beckoned to Juan Pablo and Lencho. They got up and followed him. At the door they turned to look at me, shook their crossed fingers, and said: "*Buena suerte, mano*."

In my mind I rehearsed what I would say to whoever brought my supper. Now there was a veritable uproar to my right: the sound of fists pounding on tables and screams of "*¡Mierda. Es pura mierda esta comida!*" —prisoners calling the food shit. The man on the floor became alert, his head turned to the sounds coming from the right. My stomach was roiling and my saliva tasted bitter. I hadn't eaten since around 8 a.m.

A youngish, short, pot-bellied fellow, in a grey uniform brought two Styrofoam plates, each with a scoop of pureed beans and two tortillas. There was no cutlery. I told the fellow who brought the food that I wanted to contact the Canadian embassy. He said he would relay the message. When he came back to collect the plates, he said that it couldn't be done before Monday. I said that in that case I would like to contact the police officers who'd brought me here. For a while, he looked away, but said nothing.

Someone I hadn't seen before came to the cell about half an hour later. By now it was dark outside and the only light that came into the cell was from a weak bulb in the corridor. He did not beat around

the bush. He said, smirking: “*Tenés que pagar. ¿Cuánto dinero tenés? Hay una factura.* (That will cost you. How much money do you have? There’s a fee.)”

“None. The police kept my wallet.”

He left without further comment.

What with anxiety, slapping mosquitoes, brushing off bedbugs and fleas, and itching, I didn’t sleep that night. El Cholco shouted frantically in short bursts at times and at one point began pacing the cell and screaming: “*Déjeme libre, hijos de puta! Déjeme libre!* (Let me go, you sons-o-bitches!)”

“*¡Cálmate! ¡Cállate! ¡Silencio, por favor!*” prisoners from the other side shouted. But El Cholco continued until he was tired; then he lay on the floor, fell asleep, and snored like a tractor.

Sometime after dawn a guard brought more beans and tortillas and a cup of dark water that might have been coffee. He said I would be having visitors and he would come back to get me in fifteen minutes.

A turnkey, not the one from the day before, came with my clothes, and led me to a shower. It was cold water. It was early October: the rainy season. Already the morning temperatures in Antigua were between seven and ten degrees Celsius. In the bathroom light I could see the swellings all over my body where mosquitoes, fleas, and bedbugs had feasted. It was a good twenty minutes before the turnkey returned and found me shivering. He took me to the front of the building, to where the man in the cage had made the telephone call the day before. Beside the cage stood Señor Leal, the director of the language school: a willowy man, in his late sixties or early seventies, who looked at you with beady eyes and a permanent squint. A metre away was the young police officer in civilian clothes. I remembered then that a cell phone number was on the business card the school had given me.

Leal asked me how I was. I told him okay. He put his arm around me and led me a short distance away from the cage. He told me that I should find the money however I could to pay off these guys, that going to prison in Guatemala was no joke. I said that I could pay them \$500 and would try to get the remaining \$500 from my brother and give it to them when it came. He said to stay where I was and went

to speak to the young cop. I watched them talking, Leal's gesticulation showing that he was bargaining; then he looked at me, winked, and beckoned.

Outside the prison, the cop gave me my wallet, and we walked to an ATM fronting the Eastern side of Central Park, across from where the cops had posed as pushers the day before and arrested me. He waited for me on the sidewalk. I saw that five one-hundred quetzal notes along with several smaller bills were still in my wallet. The various cards as well. I took out four of the one-hundred quetzal notes and my Medicare card and put them in my pocket. After withdrawing the money, I slipped my bank card into my pocket. Outside, the cop reached for the money and asked for my wallet as well. He took a cursory look inside, before pocketing it. He said I had to come with him to the police station. A couple metres from the station, he stopped walking and said that they knew my home address and phone number; that if I didn't honour my agreement, all calls to my number and all letters to or from me would be intercepted, and posters put out for my arrest, and if I dared to leave Guatemala I would be arrested. Grinning and slowly shaking his head, he said: "*Está atrapado, hombre. Tiene que pagar. Otra solución no hay.*"

He resumed walking and said he was taking me to Señora García to collect my passport. I told him it was in school's vault but that a photocopy of the data page was in my wallet. He stopped walking and pulled out his cellphone. His lips pursed and his eyes squinted. I held my breath until he put the phone back into his pocket. Next he pulled out my wallet, removed the data page and contemplated it. He put the page back in the wallet and shoved it into a side pocket. Warning me that they had to have the money before 5 p.m. the next day, he said I was free to go.

Suddenly, it became important again for Ma not to know about my plight, and I wasn't going to pay these cops any more money — not one dime! My passport was in my room. I left a note on my bed for Señora García, absconded, and remained incommunicado with everyone for thirteen months.

My impulsiveness. Wanting to win at any cost. It's how Jay sees it.



"*LA MORT DE Jack Layton ...*" I jump up from the table, pick up the remote from the floor in front of the couch, and put the TV on *News-world*. A reporter is giving a man-on-the-street reaction to Jack's death. There's room for one more news item: the imminent fall of Gaddafi. The clip says two of Gaddafi's sons are in rebel custody. Old news. A clip I heard from VPR at 6 a.m. said Mohamed had escaped custody.

August 22, 2011. Jack Layton's dead. Jay admires him. Death. Death. Carlos and Rosa are home now. The funeral was at 10:30, 12:30 Montreal time. I have to call them. 10 p.m. should be all right. In summer Guatemalan time is two hours behind ours. Here I am still caught up in a Morales family drama. I promised to cut loose after Carlos left me. They were good to me in Guatemala. Can't deny that. Even Rosa. In spite of her bitterness and bigotry. They were my family for almost thirteen months.

Rosa had wanted to know if I was coming for the funeral, forgetting that I've been barred from re-entering Guatemala. Give her a chance tonight and she'll try to get Carlos and me back together.

→ I need to talk to somebody. Gina is visiting her Haitian cousins in Boston. Times like these, I miss Bill. Jay, why haven't you called to let me know how you're doing? Paying me back for what I did five years ago—is that it? The fucking phone number you gave me isn't working. Whatever you do, just don't go and die in the Congo. Don't. And I have bad news for you. There's been a flood in your condo.

How could you be so fucking stupid to go and catch malaria? After the warning I gave you! Then again, you're like so damn polite. If you were here, I'd grab your collar and shake some sense into you. Why haven't you been taking your anti-malaria pills? I warned you. Told you about that bout I had in Copán Ruinas and still you ignored my warning.

I was naïve too. Thought Deet would keep the frigging mosquitoes away. Didn't want any more poisons in my body. Enough anti-asthma drugs in me, thank you.

Señor Vargas, the hotel manager—eyes like pop-out emeralds—came to see me three times during the night Saturday and Sunday and got the handyman to drive me to the doctor's office first thing Monday morning. A mere hundred metres away but I couldn't have walked it.

Vulture of a doctor stared at me shivering and sweating and envisaged gold, platinum even.

“¿Habla español?”

I shook my head. Then my Spanish was less than elementary. I'd spent three weeks studying the sounds and vocabulary from a Living Language CD.

“I no speak *mucho* inglés. *Es malaria*. ¿Comprende? Malaria. Pills? You no bring?”

I shook my head.

He said something to his nurse.

The office was on the second floor of a two-storey building in a block off the central square. A room no more than five square metres. The nurse's desk, about the size of a pupil's, was just inside the door. Two metres behind it was a folding screen that hid the doctor's desk. Overhead a creaking fan slowed, sped up, and sometimes paused. I don't remember seeing a window, but there had to be one: I could hear the vendors and traffic in the street below.

Dr. Francisco Aguilar. Bespectacled, round copper-coloured face, double chins, brown eyes in mounds of blubber; round-bellied, stooped shoulders, a cm or two taller than me, somewhere in his fifties; in a white unbuttoned lab coat embroidered with his name over his grey

slacks, white shirt, and blue tie. He said something to his nurse: a top-heavy woman in a too-tight white uniform, skin lighter than his, bleached hair dyed blond in a single plait dangling at her back, her open mouth a sunset of gold-encased teeth. She got up from her desk, opened the door of a set of white melamine cupboards on the left beside the door, took down a mason jar of white pills, emptied two into her hands, walked to a 40-litre bottle of water on a stand in one corner, filled a paper cup, and approached me. She opened her mouth wide and pointed to it, then to my mouth. She tossed the pills into my mouth and held the paper cup to my lips while I drank.

“I give you pills *más*? *Le doy comprimidas*.” Aguilar pointed to the jar of pills on the nurse’s desk. “*Comprende? Usted— you— me da dinero*.” He pointed to me. “Morney.” He pointed to himself. “I no give you pills. *No le doy nada*.” He shook his head. “I give *papel*”—he picked up his prescription pad and pointed to it. “You go *farmacia*. You *compra*.” He pointed outside. “What want?”

I must have looked puzzled. He repeated what he’d said. The nurse took over. “You go *farmacia*. You buy pills. You no go *farmacia*. *Nosotros*”—she indicated herself and Dr. Aguilar with a sweep of the hand—“sell you pills. You buy? Yes? No?”

I nodded. She went off to put the pills into an envelope.

Dr. Aguilar looked at me, belched, excused himself, then with accompanying gestures: two fingers, eating sounds, etc., said: “You eat *desayuno*. You *toma mientras*.”

“Breakfast, two,” the nurse said, gesturing two fingers. “*Comprende? Two, lunch, two supper, two sleep*.”

“Por seven días,” Aguilar resumed. I didn’t understand what he said next. The nurse took over. This time she wrote down what I was to do. After seven days I was to take a pill every Sunday and every Wednesday for the next three months, and for now I should remain in bed for the next seven days.

“One hundred *dólares*,” Aguilar said and gave me a piercing stare.

I was too weak and didn’t have the language to argue with him.

I wonder if the hotel manager got a commission. It was one of those fleabag backpacking hotels: \$15 per night, \$23 if breakfast

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