

THE GREAT UNKNOWN

by Tony Beckwith © 2002

“And this was really the way that my whole road experience began, and the things that were to come are too fantastic not to tell.”

—Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*

NOTHING WAS EVER THE SAME after a friend in a black turtleneck lent me a copy of Jack Kerouac’s book. I stayed up all night reading about those wild people who seemed to embody the freedom I yearned for. Free to do anything and go anywhere, whenever they wanted. Free to be themselves, whatever that meant, unrestrained by space or time or convention, driving across the country with the sweet night air blowing in the windows, their minds attuned to a fine madness and music pouring from the radio. By morning I knew that I had to leave home soon. I was already nineteen, and precious time was wasting.

The first leg of my journey took me west from Buenos Aires, across the pampas of Argentina and over the Andes to Chile, on the Pacific coast. From there I took the road heading north.

The bus left at dawn and by the time it lurched out of the terminal every seat was taken, with everyone’s luggage strapped on top. Two drivers would take turns at the wheel. The bus had a bathroom in the rear, which was just as well. We’d eat at a roadhouse when we stopped for gas three times a day, and be on the bus the rest of the time, mile after mile, day after day, for seven days and nights. It was the cheapest ride I could find.

The road ran north between the coastline and the foothills of the towering cordillera, and before long we were in the Atacama Desert. Since the bus had neither heating nor air conditioning we kept the windows open during the day. The desert air blasted through the cabin like a dragon’s breath

and the metal windowsills were too hot to lean on. We sprawled in our seats, with handkerchiefs covering nose and mouth, drenched in sweat. In the evening, as the sun dipped into the ocean, the deep blue shadow of the bus stretched out farther and farther across the desert floor until it finally melted into the gathering darkness and disappeared. The temperature dropped like a stone and we all scrambled to close the windows and put on warmer clothes.

Night driving was the best part of the trip. It was sometimes so cold I couldn’t sleep, so I’d stand on the bottom step by the door at the front of the bus, leaning over the railing and peering through the windshield. The meager headlights made the night seem darker. To left and right the land was inky-black, but above us the sky was magnificent. The great chandelier of stars shimmered brilliantly over the desert and my mind drifted in a distant galaxy. “*Lo desconocido*,” the driver suddenly said, and brought me back to earth. I turned and looked at the man, his eyes smiling in the soft green glow of the dashboard. “Beyond the headlights,” he said, nodding towards them. “Out there, in the darkness, the great unknown.” I nodded, suddenly glad not to be alone.

On the seventh day we crossed the border into Peru. We drove all day near the coast, and in the late afternoon came to a crossroads a few miles from the little town of Nazca. The bus was going on to Lima, but I was hoping to hitch a ride east, to Cuzco. After a week of living together

on the road it took a little while to say goodbye to all my fellow travelers, but I finally stepped down and stood back and waved. I watched as the bus

gradually disappeared into the distance, and then I was utterly alone. I was also without a plan. There were no buildings, no billboards, only the ribbon of roads intersecting in the vast emptiness of the desert as the sun sank in the west. The words “the great unknown” echoed in my mind and I wondered what would happen when darkness came and swallowed me whole. The shadows slowly surrounded me and when the cool night air brushed my neck I didn’t know which way to turn. I thought about the freedom that lay somewhere far ahead, and weighed it against the memory of home, so comforting yet so far behind. I waited in the gathering dusk, just a tiny dot on the landscape, struggling to keep a precarious hold on my courage, trying not to panic.

And then, miraculously, a rundown old pickup truck came wheezing out of nowhere, and it was heading east! The driver asked where I was going. “Cuzco!” I said, almost weeping with relief, and he told me to hop in. The three tired men in the back looked me over with very little curiosity, and we drove on in silence as night fell and the sky filled with stars. ★

