



BACK IN TIME

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The Great Unknown

“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.”

On the Road, by Jack Kerouac.

Nothing was ever the same after a friend in a black turtleneck sweater 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 I had to leave my home in Montevideo soon and go in search of that excitement. It was 1965, I was already twenty, and precious time was wasting.

The first leg of my journey took me to Buenos Aires, then west across the Argentine pampas and over the Andes to Chile. From there I took the road heading north. The bus left Santiago 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. We’d eat at roadhouses when we stopped for gas three or four times a day, and be on board 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 coast and the foothills of the towering cordillera, and before long we were in the Atacama Desert. The bus had neither heating nor air conditioning, so 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 down 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, bringing me back to Earth. I turned and looked at the man, his eyes smiling in the soft green glow from the dashboard. “Beyond the headlights,” he said, nodding towards them. “Out there, in the darkness, the 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 town of Nazca. The bus was going on to Lima, but I was hoping to hitch a ride east, to Cuzco and Machu Picchu. 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, nothing but the ribbon of roads intersecting in the vast emptiness of the desert as the sun sank in the west. The words ‘the 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 the back of my neck, I didn’t know which way to turn. I thought about the freedom and the new life 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, heading east. The driver asked where I was going. “Cuzco!” I said, almost weeping with relief when 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.

