

Stepa flew into Peru with only one thing on his mind. Cocaine.

He dutifully informed, his mother, Masha and wife, Luba, that he had at last decided to deal with his asthma, and Peru's mountains with their crisp, clean air were known to have a restorative effect. Stepa had also managed to convince his employer to give him a new project, something to help his waning motivation. Unfortunately, Stepa's company already had business in Latin American countries and so, on New Year's Eve Stepa found himself in Lima. Three more waste-of-space co-workers tagged along. One from his office and two more just for the sake of an adventure. Their mission was the same. Simply to have a good time.

In their thirties, a lot of previously good boys finally want to give it a try, find out what it feels like to go off the rails. It would be better if their mothers had taught them that you should go from bad to good, not the other way around. But that's beside the point.

His colleagues arrived, managed to get all their work done in a hurry and one evening decided to walk on the wild side (as much as they understood what that meant), which translated get some powder, hole themselves up in their hotel room and do something with it. Exactly what they didn't know except what they'd seen in movies. Also, from flicks, they knew about drug lords, who gunned down everybody at the drop of a hat. The rare Peruvians born and raised in Lima lived in a state of terror.

Stepa made friends with one of those natives, Carlos.

A tall, thin boy, about twenty-five, who played all parts - tour guide, translator, driver, and sherpa. Carlos was...well, there's no better way to say it: a jack ass. Straight up, bumbler. The only redeeming thing was his kindness, he was kind to everyone. And he also stuttered, but not all the time. He was very shy about it which made him even more pathetic. Stepa was moved by kind people and despite himself always trusted them. When the question came up where to get cocaine, the three office jerks looked to Stepa.

"Step, you began it, so you lead the way. Everybody says, you can get it anywhere here"

Stepa, who didn't want these a-holes anywhere near him, admonished:

"Here, everyone's got a gun. Here, you can get fucked. Here, they keep a close watch on tourists, frame them and lock them away. They don't care about anything except the ransom. Luba is not going to put up anything for me. She'd rather pay to keep me inside. We need somebody we can totally trust."

"Do you have anybody?"

There were zero trustworthy people in Stepa's life. Luba and his own parents didn't count. Reliable people were frightened that Stepa's lax ways would rub off on them.

"I do."

The conversation with Carlos took place in the hotel lobby, mano a mano, clear but coded. "Carlos... I want to talk with you. I want to buy, what everybody comes here for."

Carlos blinked. Twice.

"And w-what everybody c-comes here for?"

"Come on, the white substance usually associated with the late, great Mr. Escobar, may he rest in peace.

Carlos was shocked.

"Are you s-serious?"

Stepa immediately turned into Vito Corleone on steroids. Important detail: back in Russia, on the side he sold homemade chocolates and occasionally borrowed money from his grandmother. But the thought of cocaine up your nose works miracles. Stepa's voice registered lower than a MiG-29.

"In Russia, we don't make many jokes. Don't you get it? Here, it's a lot cheaper and much higher quality."

Carlos went silent, bit his top lip and then suddenly came out with;

"I can.... How much?"

Stepa looked around and held up five fingers.

"That's why we don't want to get it on the street, only from people we know. If you help me, I'll be forever in your debt."

"Well... I can take you, but you r-realize that if something goes wrong, we will all be... d-d... It's going to be b-bad. Really b-bad."

"No worries. I get it, I've been around. Promise, it's going to be cool. I've got the cash. Get there, buy it, vamoose.

Stepa came across like a real mafioso.

That evening, Carlos picked Stepa up. He had a non-descript bag with him. Carlos was curious. Stepa explained with a faint smile.

“I was going to get some fruit on the way back.”

Carlos blinked. Again.

“It’s in the country. About a f-forty-minute drive, might take an hour”

“Not a problem, you checked our tail? Stepa couldn’t stop playing the part.

“Huh?”

“Well, what if somebody is following us? Could have overheard our conversation.

“I don’t think anybody was listening. You brought the money, right?”

The Peruvian nodded towards the bag.

“Of course.” Stepa was still looking in the side mirror to see if anybody was on their tail.

They left the city for a dark, two-lane dirt road

“We are going to see M-Mado. He’s an Indian. A man of very few words. Main deal, t-tell him the truth. He can k-kill for lie....

Stepa sensed Carlos’ fear for the first time. He understood right away that this trip was going to be a test of his manhood. And his honesty.

They walked into a strange house. A large empty room, a lightbulb, a table. On it a mountain of cocaine and packages of all different sizes. At the table sat Mado.

He was over fifty. Big-bellied but strong. Bearlike palms, soft, almost delicate. But his eyes. The pupils burned like lasers on a dance floor. Mado stood up and Stepa felt like he was backed up against the wall. Those eyes. Mado spoke very slowly and began with small talk, which reminded Stepa of a bad movie.

“Well, hello Gringo”

“Hello. Thank you, for...”

Stepa wasn’t sure why he had said thank you, but he had been taught well and always to be polite.

“I’m very happy to meet you.”

Mado stared at him. “Why are you happy to meet me?”

Mado spoke broken English but it was understandable and scared the crap out of Stepa. A snake wrapped itself around Stepa’s neck. He had a tough time breathing. Perhaps another asthma attack was on its way because of his nerves. He was glad his inhaler was in his pocket. Mado continued:

“You don’t need be polite. Better if you answer question. How is cocaine transport to Russia? I don’t need details, just how?”

Stepa swallowed hard, his throat was dry.

“I am not going to transport it to Russia. What do you mean?”

“And what are you going to do with it?”

“My friends and I just want to have a g-good time.” Stepa started to stutter like Carlos.

“And how many friends do you have?” Something resembling a smile flashed in Mado’s snakelike eyes.

“Four”

“And how long are you planning to have a good time?”

“Three days before we head back.”

Mado got way too close.

Stepa felt like no air was getting to his lungs.

“You have been warned that you don’t need to lie to me, or people get hurt ?”

Stepa’s head hurt just from the voice. He defended himself:

“Of course, I’m telling you the truth.”

“Truth? Can I meet friends?”

Stepa replied: “Of course, anytime, but why?”

“I want to see people, who want five kilos of cocaine for three days.”

Instantly, Stepa was a damp sponge.

“I need five grams. I don’t need five kilograms.”

Mado looked at Carlos, looked at the table, then again at Carlos. The messenger was white, as white as any Latin American can be. His bottom jaw was dangerously low.

“Did Carlos know this? Exactly what you say to him? Remember, your life and Carlos’ life depend on this.

Stepa remembered it syllable by syllable.

“He asked how much I wanted, I showed him five with my fingers. We obviously didn’t understand each other.

“How often people do not understand each other...”

Stepa saw a huge drop of sweat sliding down Carlos' neck.

"Carlos, is this the truth?"

Carlos nodded. Quickly.

"Well, Gringo. You, go. You will be driven so you can't find us later, then walk. Take stick with you, there are many bad people at night."

"And Carlos?" asked Stepa anxiously. Mado replied indifferently.

"Carlos is done. You won't see Carlos anymore. It is time for him to talk to the spirits.

Carlos lowered his head and started shivering. Stepa was escorted out by two guys who he assumed worked for Mado. He was tightly taken by both arms and moved towards a car. Shoved into the back seat, he... started suffocating. Asthma. The last time this happened, was a few years back, it was never this bad. He started wheezing and then reached for his inhaler.

He was taught always to carry it with him, but Stepa's hands were not behaving and he couldn't get the damn thing out of his pocket. In a panic, he crawled out of the car, gulped some night air, felt the comforting plastic against his lips, nearly swallowed it whole and dropped to the ground. Stepa gasped for oxygen, sucked it in with his whole body, slowly came back to life, and then, he felt like a cold knife stabbed him in the chest. Carlos! Right at this moment, he was possibly being killed. Because of him, because of his stupid fingers. Stepa imagined Mado snapping Carlos' thin, wet neck, and understood that it was now, or never. But, Stepa was a coward. His entire childhood was spent being beaten at school. He used to hide in the little boy's room and cry. And because he was basically a pussy, he had been beaten even more. So, he was afraid of everything in this life. And now it was Mado.

But sometimes you're not given a choice. Stepa pushed away both dealers, sprinted towards the house, kicked the door open, burst into Mado's room and screamed.

"Stop!"

\*Mado had Carlos by his neck and was whispering something in Spanish. When he saw Stepa, he calmly asked.

"What Gringo?"

"I will buy the five kilograms"

\*Mado let Carlos go and looked at Stepa keenly.

"Do you have the money?"

"How much is it?"

“60,000 dollars. Do you have that much on you?”

This was more than Stepa had imagined but he kept it together.

“No, I don’t have that much...I’ll go into town with one of your men, take out everything that’s on my card...it’s around... 8,000. I’ll get you the rest in three days. You can hold my passport, I won’t take the package either. You won’t be risking anything!!”

“What you mean you won’t take the package?”

“I don’t need that much. Just please, don’t kill Carlos. It’s not his fault. If I buy all five kilos will you let him go? Please, it’s my mistake, mine!”

“What if you can’t get the money, what then?”

Stepa felt paralyzed, but managed to keep going.

“Then I will stay here until they send it over from Russia.”

Mado wasn’t playing.

“What if they don’t send the money?”

It occurred to Stepa that there might be several reasons why: not enough time, they wouldn’t be able to get that large an amount, or who knows what else might get in the way.

Carlos started saying something in Spanish, but Mado cut him off.

“Gringo, what happens if we don’t get the money?”

Stepa didn’t say anything. To his surprise, every second that passed he was getting less afraid. Bravery finally erupted from the bullied child.

“We can talk about the slim chance that you don’t get it. But there’s no way I’m leaving without Carlos!”

Once it came out, Stepa lost every ounce of courage he had mustered, the meaning of his words finally hit him. For a second he thought he could make a run for it, but then the huge Indian approached Stepa, was silent for a while, and then said:

“Gringo, I have lived long time, I know the answers to all questions, but this I don’t...tell me...why...why does everybody love Carlos...? Why? My parents, my children, my sister, she married him, even I love him. But all this can be explained. Family. But you? Why you? You were ready to give so much money for this loser...?!”

Stepa seemed not to have heard him.

“Carlos is related to you?”

“Sadly, yes.”

“And you were going to kill him anyway?!”

Finally, Mado got angry. The last time this happened to him was before Carlos and Stepa were born.

“What made you think I was going to kill him?!...I rarely kill people, and only if they steal from me, but you cannot kill a man, if spirits have already stolen his mind.”

Why wouldn’t I see him again??”

“What for? He would have been around until you left. Kill Carlos! Gringo, you watch too many American movies. But you surprise me. Tell me, why you want to save Carlos?” - Mado once again became like an anaconda, but this time a gentler, kinder one.

Stepa didn't know what to say, so he told the truth, which had come to him while he was suffocating.

“I wouldn't be able to live if Carlos was killed because of me.” Stepa was on the edge of tears, his nerves were completely gone but he was not about to sell out the always kind Carlos.

He was now brave enough to look into Mado's eyes and ask.

“Would you have abandoned your friend?”

Mado didn't reply. He studied Stepa's face for a long time. Stepa felt a thousand eyes looking at him. The red man's bear palm felt like an anvil on Stepa's shoulder. Mado deliberated and arrived at his verdict.

“You are a good man Gringo. Try not to become bad.”

Stepa's heart tightened then burst. He had his doubts. Here was the most important judgement he could face. Honestly, he didn't have many other achievements that he could crow about. But, was he a good person?

“How do you know that I am a good person?”

“I don't know, I see.” Mado returned to the table.

“Gringo, tell me, have you ever tried cocaine before?”

“No, I wanted to...”

“Why?”

“Well, it's like visiting Russia without having some caviar and vodka.”

“What is caviar?”

Stepa explained as best he could.

“Ah, heard about it. Is it nice?”

“Very”

“Can it kill you?”

“No, it's delicious.”

“But cocaine will kill you. You will die. You will become a bad person, and then die anyway. Not saying anything against... Why do you think I sell it? There is nothing else. We had gold, but the Spanish stole it. We have nothing else. Bad, but you have to live with it.”

“I'm not judging you...”

Stepa realized, that he wanted to see Mado again, look into his thousand eyes. There were so many things, things he had been looking for. He became a boy once again.

“Listen, you should come to Russia. I will buy some black caviar, the best. We can buy five kilos!

“Thank you, gringo, but I’m afraid, Mado smiled sadly... I’m afraid not. I have no time left.

“Are you sick?” Stepa asked compassionately.

“No, just my time has come.”

“How do you know?”

“I don’t know, I see.” You should return here. I will introduce you to spirits. I think you should talk to them. Perhaps you will believe you are good person. But, come back quick.

Stepa felt a tug way down deep. He had heard how in Latin America they talk to spirits, so he was confused.

“But you are against drugs.”

“Do not mix up cocaine and talking with spirits. Will you come?”

“I will. For sure.”

“That’s good. Carlos drive you, I talk to him tomorrow, I think he learn something from you. And when time comes for him to choose which man to become, bad or good, he remember you, and you help him and I think happen very soon. Carlos, you hear me, right?”

Carlos nodded.

On the way back to the hotel they didn’t say a word. When they were making their goodbyes, Carlos hugged Stepa and wouldn’t let go.

“T-t-t-thank you, Stepa. I would n-n-n-nev...Carlos began to cry.

Stepa often remembered Mado, sometimes phoned Carlos, and asked him to convey his regards, but he wasn’t able to return to Lima. Obviously, he told everything to Luba, when he got back. Especially the part about being a good person. He was so pleased to pass Mado’s test, but Luba...Luba, he thought didn’t get it. Especially the part about being a good person. Sometimes, the person closest to you doesn’t understand something you feel is beyond important. This person doesn’t stop being your partner or closest friend, you just need to give them some time. At some point they come around. Or you eventually decide that the person really isn’t all that close. Luba told him that he was a sucker and that if he had actually paid the 60,000 non-existent dollars, she would



have had to divorce him. So, going back to Peru was not a high priority. Still, Stepa frequently thought about Mado. The Indian, fell somewhere between Santa Claus and Confucius. Stepa often imagined what their reunion would be like, how he would shake Mado's beefy palm, hug him, and then they would start wolfing down caviar together and talk to the spirits. This would confirm everything Mado had said before. He imagined the spirits were like Mado only made out of smoke. And one night he had this dream: Mado comes to Russia, for some reason looking like a Comanche in a Soviet cowboy movie. They drink vodka and down caviar served from a barrel. Mado stands at the head of a receiving line, greeting guests, looking into their eyes and evaluating them. When Luba gets to the front of the line, Mado also tells her that she is a good person, and she finally understands what it means. And then everyone gets invited to the closing of the Olympiad in 80, although Stepa was born in 82. They watch the competitions, and then the organizers release a gigantic Misha balloon, Russia's Olympic Bear into the sky, and Mado asks incredulously:

"Which spirits do people talk to after they have seen bears like this...?"

When Stepa woke up he decided to call Carlos, recount his dream and say hello to Mado.

"Carlos, hi! How are you?"

"Hi. Bad."

The voice was so cold and emotionless, that Stepa was on high alert.

"Carlos...Mado? Is he alive?! Is he, all right?!"

"No. Mado was killed."- said Carlos calmly and without stuttering.

A lump like a tumor took up all the space in his throat. Killed, Mado... Stepa needed an explanation and mechanically asked:

"Because of the drugs?"

"No. nothing like that. He went to a nearby town, got in a fight with two douchebags and was beaten with sticks right in the street." Carlos said this without any emotion in his voice. Nothing.

Torn, Stepa sensed a new feeling way down deep. It had never come to him before, never, but now his organs felt like a black wave was flooding over them, numbing them. Hatred, unlimited, absolute, all-consuming hatred. He knew, that he could tear Mado's killers apart, that he could rip out their throats with just his hands. Stepa quietly but intensely demanded.

"Have they been caught?"

"The next day."

"You didn't turn them over to the police, did you?"

With a faint laugh, Carlos replied: "No, we dealt with them ourselves."

Suddenly, Stepa had a very satisfying feeling. He knew, that the answer to his next question was going to make him happy. And the more inhuman, the happier he would be.

“Please tell me, how you did it?”

He said the word how with such ecstasy, that Stepa frightened himself.

“Stepa, are you sure you want to know? Are you really ready to hear this? Carlos was obviously a different person now, ruthless, cruel and unforgiving. The young Peruvian had learned to hate and murder. Kind, shy, stuttering Carlos died with Mado and those two thugs, to be more precise, the old Carlos disappeared with the death of the two guys who beat Mado to death. But Stepa liked the new Carlos much more. Back in his early school days, he wanted to be like that. He remembered every one of the bullies. All of them. And their names. This is why he had no doubts.

“Yes, I am, tell me.”

“We didn’t kill them. We just buried them next to Mado. In roomy coffins. Even gave them pillows. And something else, so they wouldn’t get bored” - again this devilish, faint laugh.

Stepa was now obsessed.

“Cocaine?”

“No, too easy”

A pause. Stepa waited. The muscles in his legs twitched.

“What?! Tell me what you put in the coffins - suddenly he realized, what, it was. So simple, how could he not have figured it out! Carlos, c’mon, tell me, that it was oxygen! Tell me that you gave them oxygen!!!” Stepa was getting delirious.

“Yes. Oxygen. I knew you would like my idea. It was enough for about two hours. I sat and listened. We didn’t dig deep. I think there was some scratching. It was the best thing I ever heard!!! Stepa do you understand, THE BEST.

From this feeling of absolute, all-consuming happiness Stepa stopped breathing. When he tried to inhale, he couldn’t.

Seizure. Asthma.

Stepa’s lungs started to burn, he fought for breath but nothing worked, all he heard was the new, ice-cold voice of Carlos echoing: Oxygen...oxygen...oxygen.

The lights started to go out, his chest was pounding, he saw Mado, his house in the country, Mado was sad, he was disappointed in Stepa.

Another impossible breath. “Inhaler?! Fuck! Inhaler!” There was one in the glove compartment of the car. There wasn’t another one in his parents’ house. It was the night of their monthly dinner together. Luba had just left; the ambulance wouldn’t get there in time. His legs didn’t work. Stepa realized that he was going to die. In his headphones, he heard Carlos’s voice.

“So, the pricks had time to think. You should come Stepa, we will visit his grave, he left you a talisman by the way, says it’s for talking to spirits, some kind of weird bear. Stepa? Stepa? Are you there?”

A weird bear... his eyes flooded with tears, they washed over everything. The cloudy window, was getting clearer and clearer, hatred, revenge, bullies drifted away like houses in a tsunami. Mado was standing at the exit from his room – outside was some kind of garden. Stepa wanted to go there, took a step, but Mado shook his head and closed the door in front of him. Stepa tried to open it, but some force pulled him back.

A sharp slap on the face made Stepa wake up, his wife Luba was leaning over him with an inhaler. Somebody had let the air out of her tire, so she had to come back. In her purse, Luba always carried an inhaler for Stepa. She knew that it would come in handy at some point.

The next day Stepa bought a ticket to Peru. His mission: to restore Carlos to his previous self, before it was too late.

Luba convinced him he had to go, her only question was whether he really was a good man. It turned out that Luba understood.

But, just in case, she withdrew every penny from her husband’s account.

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