

Every few months, Bernie drove the 382 kilometres to LaPaz by winding roads both asphalt and dirt in order to scour the shops for trinkets for Catalina and the few native children she was teaching, and to arrange for the supplies she needed for her work. Sometimes Ray came with her and they'd enjoy a weekend there together, visiting the shops and the small cabarets that seemed always to be filled with people who had the money to spend on a pisco sour or a local brew of cerveza. They'd rent a hotel room, take hot showers, have a civilized dinner with wine and dessert and make love throughout the night on comfortable beds.

She still knew a few people in La Paz who kept her informed of the local politics, those who lived within the diplomatic corps, some who remembered her parents from years before: English, Americans and Bolivian officials. Early in the year, she made the trip alone. Ray had gone back to the States for a month's vacation, after having served over two years with the Peace Corps. It was on this trip that she ran into Norwelia.

After Punta del Este, they had gone their separate ways. Norwelia, still smitten with the idealistic persona of Che, had returned to Cuba through his intercession, apparently kept safe from any reprisals against her rebel newspaper father and stuck it out there during Che's reforms.

Che had parted with Castro, but was still regarded a hero in Cuba. He was rumored to be in Germany, in the U. S. and back in his native Argentina. It was said that he was in Africa. It was reported that he was in Moscow. No one knew where he was but everyone speculated. Rumors of his whereabouts had been the focus of conversations within the diplomatic community for at least a year. When Norwelia walked into El Gallo de Oro, it confirmed in Bernie's mind what had until then been rampant speculation—that Bolivia was a prime target for the Cuban supported guerilla campaign to convert the peasants to Communism. Bernie knew that the Communist Party was active in Bolivia. On an earlier trip to La Paz, she'd been introduced to a guy by the name of Mario Monjé Molina, their party chief, at a masquerade ball thrown by her mother's dearest friend from Cochabamba, Mama Ortega. She wondered if Norwelia had developed a contact there.

Norwelia's eyes found Bernie's almost immediately. She had lost the soft, tawny luster to her skin; her face looked gray, with the muscles of her jaw clenching spasmodically. Bernie was struck with the wild, caged look that seemed to dominate her face. Yet she was flooded with an irrepressible excitement that she could not define and for a moment she wished fervently that she could re-live the past few years, bringing her to this moment of danger and intrigue in which she now found her friend.

She became exhilaratingly cautious. Her breath came quickly as she excused herself from the bar where she had been seated with friends and joking with the British bartender, Ned. She ordered dos cervezas from the rattan bar, blew Ned a kiss and led Norwelia as unobtrusively as possible to a small round table at the back of the cabaret.

Bernie had many questions she desperately wanted to ask Norwelia, but she managed to control her curiosity and her voice.

"Are you looking for work?" Her heart pounded with anticipation.

"I have a job for you now, Bernicita," Norwelia answered. Her hands were shaking so badly, she clasped them tightly on top of the small table.

"Really? Here in La Paz?"

"Si. I have a work permit. A newspaper job here in La Paz. And I clerk in that shop where they sell souvenirs, on El Prado." She spoke in English and Spanish, her Spanish softer, more like the Spanish of the Argentine.

Bernie leaned forward, her mouth open, her lips raised in a calculated smile. Norwelia whispered something with a slight lisp that Bernie could not understand. She leaned forward again, motioning with two fingers for her friend to do the same.

"I said," Norwelia continued in a husky whisper. She glanced from side to side and back to Bernie "... that I am here under Argentinean passport."

Bernie straightened in her chair quickly, trying to think. The smile she had been forcing on her lips froze.

"My God, Norwelia."

"Por favor!" It is Rosa-Suarez." Norwelia whispered. She wet her lips and began again in a shaky, trembling hiss. "Please be careful with how you call me. You must try to forget what I just told you, Bernicita." Norwelia touched the bottle to her lips, but she did not drink. Her eyes locked in to Bernie's. There was palpable fear there. Bernie felt sick. Norwelia went on, having gained some control, in a more natural voice, describing her reasons for coming. She had obtained Bolivian residency and a job because she needed the money, she said, but she was just a tourist really, wanting to get some local color, intrigued by the history and the tradition of the country. She had gotten bored with her life, she told Bernie. She remembered how Bernie had talked of Bolivia when they were kids together in Miami. It was a spiel designed for any eavesdroppers in the *bôte*. She wasn't stupid. She surely knew that Bernie had figured it out. Certainly the passport was the clincher, and she would not have told Bernie about it, if she had not wanted her to know. Unless, Bernie thought, she wasn't thinking clearly, out of fear, out of nerves. Because of Cuba's revolution, the rumors about Che, and the general edginess of Bolivian officials, a Cuban passport might have been subjected to serious scrutiny. Argentina would be considered merely a sister state, a neighbor with the same fears and concerns about an imported revolution as Bolivia.

They talked of family. Norwelia asked about Nicholas of course and then after thirty minutes of trivialities, they stood and touched each other's hands and tried to smile for the benefit of the other customers. Norwelia's trembling fingers were thin and cold, her large chocolate eyes were streaked with red. There was still a heavy curtain of reserve between them, but suddenly, as though on some unspoken cue, they both leaned forward, touching cheek to cheek. Bernie hugged Norwelia to her, patting her shoulder and trying not to cry. It was a gesture that indicated a more intimate friendship than they had been trying to portray and she hoped it went unobserved.

"Hermanita," she whispered. "Vaya con Díos."

Norwelia pulled away tentatively, her chestnut brown hair intruding on the suggestion of a smile, her eyes wide but steady.

"A díos, amiga."