

PAUL KEANY WITH JEFF FARRELL

**THE
COCAINE
DIARIES**

A VENEZUELAN PRISON NIGHTMARE

**AN UNFORGETTABLE COCKTAIL
OF DRUGS, RIOTS, RAPE, BEATINGS,
MURDERS AND KIDNAPPINGS**



About the Authors

Paul Keany was born in Oxford, England, to Irish parents. In his late teens he joined the Royal Navy as an apprentice electrical engineer. After three years of dull toil on dry land he went AWOL and followed his parents to Dublin, where they had retired. He never left and has called it home for the past 30 years. In his last career he ran a one-man plumbing business till it hit the rocks in the recession. What he did to try to clear his debts can be found in the pages of this book. An aspiring novelist, he hopes it'll be the first book of many. He has two children – Katie and Daniel – from a previous marriage.

Jeff Farrell is an independent journalist. He spent three years working as a stringer in South America reporting across the region for media including *The Guardian*, the *Daily Telegraph*, the *Miami Herald* and Irish national broadcaster RTÉ. He first interviewed Paul Keany in the notorious Los Teques prison, Venezuela – and Farrell is glad he got his story and made it out alive. For now he has returned to his home city of Dublin, where he craves a new adventure after months chained to his laptop writing Keany's story. He is a former staff journalist with Independent News and Media plc. He holds an MA in Journalism and is a member of the International Federation of Journalists. This is his first book. <http://jefffarrelljournalism.com/>

THE COCAINE DIARIES

A Venezuelan Prison Nightmare

Paul Keany with Jeff Farrell



MAINSTREAM
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To my family, especially my children, Katie and Daniel, and friends. Thanks to you all for standing by me. Also to Father Pat and Viviana: I owe you my life. To anyone thinking of smuggling coke for 'easy' money – don't do it. You might end up dead.

Paul Keany

To the many great people I met during my travels in Venezuela: the horrors in this story show the tragic side of your country, not your strength in spirit and wonderful hospitality. *Que la verdad les haga libres.*

Jeff Farrell

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Paul Keany

I WOULD LIKE TO THANK FATHER PAT FOR HIS HELP IN CLINCHING THE interview with Paul Keany inside Los Teques, a meeting that sowed the seeds for this book; to Rory Carroll of *The Guardian* for a roof over my head in Caracas, and endless journalistic advice – I owe you a big one; to Paul Keany for always being at my beck and call for interviews; to Dermot Deely for a place to write in Dublin; to my mother, Noeleen, for getting the manuscript to the publisher and always having positive words; to all my family – hopefully this time I have something to show for yet another epic adventure abroad – the ‘real job’ awaits!; to Donal Allman for feedback on an early draft; to Ciara Cassidy of RTÉ’s *Documentary on One* for last-minute editing on the radio version of the story to ensure it was sanitised enough for a daytime audience, and overall excellent production work; to my book editor Karyn Millar; to the universe for the ‘coincidence’ of myself and Keany being on the same flight home – without it this book wouldn’t exist; and to everyone else there’s no space for mention.

Jeff Farrell

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

BECAUSE OF THE SENSITIVE NATURE OF THE REVELATIONS AND ISSUES IN this book almost all names have been changed. Some of the inmates featured in the book, for example, are still in the Venezuelan prison system. Others involved in the welfare of prisoners want to be able to continue to visit inmates to give them support in any way they can. They have asked not to be named, fearing they would not be allowed to enter the jails again. The Venezuelan government is highly sensitive to criticisms of the deplorable and dangerous conditions in its prisons.

At times I have taken liberties with dialogue, putting quote marks around speech when it was recalled from Paul Keany's memory, so it therefore might not be totally accurate. That said, much of it is faithful and is taken from Keany's extensive diaries, which he kept on a daily basis to record his life and events inside Los Teques prison.

Jeff Farre

PREFACE

THE PRISON COP SAT ON A CHAIR IN THE PASSAGEWAY, HIS EYES RISING UP from the floor to the gringo visitor walking towards him. ‘Maxima,’ I said. He stood up slowly, not bothering to answer, and took a truncheon from the holster on his navy uniform. He rapped it three times against the steel door to my right. A hatch slid back in the centre of the door and two eyeballs peeped out. A boy slid back. The door eased open slowly. In front of me stood a teenager, no older than 18 or 19, dressed in white tracksuit bottoms. My eyes dropped down to the long metal object dangling from his hand. It was a shotgun. It didn’t make sense. Why was this prison guard not in uniform?

‘*Visita,*’ I said. The gun-toting teenager stood aside. I stepped past him into a hallway in the Maxima wing. It was visit day and full of life. A tall, lean guy wearing jeans and a wine-coloured shirt walked up to me.

‘*A quien buscas?*’ (‘Who are you looking for?’) he asked. My eyes dropped down to his hand, which was casually holding a black revolver in front of his chest. Strange, I thought again. Another guard, also with no uniform. My eyes rose back up to his face.

‘Paul,’ I said. He nodded and walked off. After months of trying to get into Los Teques jail to interview a cocaine smuggler of Irish-British nationality, I was finally getting to talk to him. While I waited, I looked around. There were men, women and children sitting around on stools, chatting. Salacious music blared from a stereo in the corner, next to a Christmas tree with twinkling lights. It was Sunday and visit day was in full swing in the prison on the outskirts of Caracas.

The minutes passed and my thoughts went back to wondering why armed prison guards would wear street clothes. Minutes earlier I had been searched at the jail gate by soldiers brandishing machine guns and my passport ID was checked. All seemed normal in a prison. I then looked back at the teenager with the shotgun. He was dancing salsa steps along to the music from the stereo, his weapon swinging back and forth. No one batted an eyelid as to why a prison cop would act so casually. Then I finally accepted the obvious: he wasn’t a cop – he was an inmate, and armed.

Paul Keany stepped into the passageway. Through round-rimmed glasses he gave me a questioning look that said, ‘Who are you?’ I told him I was a journalist, and that Father Patrick, a Caracas-based Irish priest who visited him, had told me how to get into the jail to talk to him and hear his story. I left out the word ‘interview’ so he wouldn’t run off. ‘Father Pat!’ Keany said, smiling now.

We sat down on a bench and started to talk. Keany was forty-five and was in the early months of an eight-year sentence for cocaine smuggling. He was arrested in Maiquetía airport attempting to board a Dublin-bound flight with a stop-off in Paris. The cops had found almost six kilos of cocaine in his suitcase. His story, he told me, wasn’t original. More than 200 other gringo drug mules locked up in Los Teques had the same tale to tell. ‘Almost everybody gets caught.’

‘But the prisoners here,’ I said, changing the subject, ‘they have guns?’

He laughed, explaining that inmate *jefes*, or bosses, and their foot soldiers ran the cell blocks. He had to pay them a *causa*, protection money, every week. ‘Without them I’d be dead. There’s inmates here who’d shoot me up just for being a gringo.’

It was all baffling. We continued to talk, and I wanted to know more. Who had Keany bought the coke from? How much had he been paid? And so on. He was easy to chat with, explaining that he had been offered 10,000 euro by ‘people’ in Dublin to travel to Venezuela and carry drugs home. It would

clear the debts he'd built up after his plumbing business went bust in the recession. Then he went on the more fascinating side of the story: the jail.

Just a few nights before, he said, he had had to listen to a man being slowly knifed to death in neighbouring wing, whimpering as his life bled away. Another day he had seen a woman's face shot off by her husband, an inmate off his head on crack. Keany shook his head as he told me this and went on to tell me how the whole prison was effectively in the hands of cell-block bosses. They were armed to the teeth with Uzis, revolvers, shotguns and even grenades. Shoot-outs and random killings were rife. Keany also said that visitors were often held up in the passageways by cell-block outcasts armed with knives. The whole prison was one big killing zone. 'I could end up coming out of here in a box,' said Keany. So could I, I thought. A few days earlier I had been robbed in Caracas with a gun held to my head. I was still shaken from it. This place was the last thing I needed. I handed Keany two bags of food I had brought for him, made my excuses and left.

It had taken months to chase down an interview with the *irlandés* in Los Teques. I knew there was a fellow Paddy locked up there from looking at statistics of Irish nationals locked up in the region. But as for who he was or his exact story, I had had no idea. First I followed the usual approach, which other foreign correspondents had told me about, and wrote to the Ministerio de Justicia requesting a formal press visit. I said I wanted to interview the *irlandés* and show the world how 'foolish' it was for gringos to smuggle cocaine through Venezuela. They didn't buy it and never replied, despite repeated emails, telephone calls and even doorstepping their press office in downtown Caracas.

I refused to give up. I started putting out calls to Irish priests I tracked down in Venezuela. They had been there decades and were always helpful in lining up contacts and friends for stories I was researching. I got a hold of the details for one priest, Father Pat, and telephoned him. '*El padre no se encuentra,*' ('The Father isn't here') said his housemaid, adding that he was in Los Teques prison. My ears pricked up. There was my key to the story. I was sure he was in visiting the Irishman I knew was locked up there, and when I later got hold of Father Pat he confirmed that was where he had been. I told him of my frustration in trying to get into the prison through the authorities. 'Go as a visitor,' he said. 'Get there on Sunday morning, bring your passport and ask for Paul Keany.' I was sure the authorities wouldn't let a gringo past the front gate. Father Pat said they would, and they did.

But now, after the visit, I wondered how much of Keany's story was really true. Yes, I'd seen the inmates armed with guns through my own eyes – but random killings? A woman's face shot off by her husband? Inmates paying protection money to stay alive?

I made a call to the Venezuelan Prison Observatory, a prisoners' campaign group. They said *sí*, and the stories were real, and life in Los Teques was the same in all of the country's 30-odd jails. More than 400 people were killed every year in riots and random shootings, according to their statistics. The biggest body counts happened during prison riots when cell-block bosses fought it out, usually for the control of the supply and sale of coke, or over some other strife. Up to 20 and 30 were killed at a time. To prove it, the Observatory sent me pictures of the aftermath of a riot the year before in Santa Ana, a jail in the south-west of Venezuela, where a reported 19 were killed.

Later I opened the photos, which had been sent in email attachments. I nearly vomited over my laptop. The pictures didn't just show dead bodies shot up. One man hung from a goalpost in the prison yard, the rope tied under his arms and around his chest – his head had been cut off. Other bodies had their legs cut off and their insides ripped out. I was horrified that human beings could do this to each other. It didn't seem possible. But it was, and it happened a lot, the Observatory said. The government did little to tackle it.

So I had my 'big story'. I had the human-interest angle with Keany and independent comment

support his claims of a prison system run by the inmates themselves, lobbing grenades at each other when they fell out. I set about furiously pitching the story to the newsdesks of the Irish and British newspapers. One tabloid got back to me quickly; they wanted to run the story and needed a photo of Keany. I rang him in the jail on a mobile number for another inmate in his wing. 'No,' he said, 'no way.' He wouldn't go with a picture. The tabloid pulled out. Ditto for two other newspapers that wanted to run the piece. No photo, no story.

In the end I salvaged the report and filed a short audio story to Irish national broadcaster RTÉ talking about Keany and the horrors inside Los Teques and prisons across Venezuela. The three-minute piece went out at about 8 a.m. on a Saturday. It came and passed without comment. Nine newsdesks beat their way to my door for more stories. No fanfare. Nothing.

I threw in the towel. Another 'scoop' had got away. I stayed on in Venezuela for a few more months, then left. I continued with my adventure across the region as a backpacker journalist, which lasted three years, with lengthy stays in Bolivia and Argentina.

On the last leg of my trip, in Colombia, I was burned out. It was time to go. I boarded a flight from Bogotá to Dublin in December 2010 to get home for Christmas. Later, in Dublin airport, I stood in the immigration line. I heard a familiar accent from a passenger in the queue next to me: broad English mixed with Dublin's northside. He was talking to an immigration official, getting grilled over why he had an emergency passport. 'It was robbed in Colombia.'

The man walked on, and I was still waiting in line. Then it sank in. That accent and that the guy's passport had been robbed. Seemed like a suspect story. A tale that an inmate on the run from Venezuela might use . . . It couldn't be. The seconds passed slowly. Finally I flashed my passport at the official and bolted through the airport. I spotted the same man at the baggage carousel and ran over.

'How ya doing?' I said. 'We met in Venezuela.' I was sure it was Keany now. The face was familiar but gaunt. I remembered him having fuller features. He studied me for a moment.

'You came in to see me in Los Teques.' He smiled. 'The reporter.'

I said I was. I then did the maths in my head. I had last seen him two years ago in jail and he had had at least another seven years of his sentence left then. 'We did a runner,' he said, 'got out on parole and bussed it to Colombia.' He introduced me to a man in his mid 20s standing next to him, who had also been locked up in Los Teques and had fled from Venezuela with him.

In later weeks, Keany and I met up as agreed. We both joked that it was mind-boggling we ended up on the same flight home from South America. What were the chances? Paul said he wanted to tell the world his story and asked if I would help him write it. You bet I would. Over the following months I spent countless hours hearing tales from a twisted world that swirled around in a cocktail of drug violence, death and squalor, all recalled with the aid of extensive diaries Keany had kept.

Of course I knew he was no angel. He was a convicted cocaine smuggler. But had I judged him I couldn't have written this story. So I put my journalist hat on and sat on the fence – a challenge I faced many times. Still, Keany put his hands up from the word go and admitted he was guilty and what he did was wrong. And no matter what he'd done, he didn't deserve to be sexually assaulted by anti-drugs cops. No one deserves that. And that act is proof that the line between criminals and law-enforcement officers in Venezuela is blurred at best.

In the following pages you will read about Keany's fight for survival in a dark and violent place. Yet there are light moments, where you will laugh out loud at some incredible and humorous tales. Above all, you will know the truth – the truth of what happens behind the bars in Venezuela's jails, as told by Keany with courage and honesty: his tale from a dark world where every day could have been

his last. This is his story.

PROLOGUE

IT WON'T HAPPEN TO ME. THAT'S WHAT I THOUGHT WHEN I GOT ON THE PLANE to Venezuela. But it did – I got caught. It's funny, before I embarked on that ill-fated trip I used to watch the *Banged Up Abroad* series on the telly. Tales of Western drug mules locked up in fleapit prisons in the tropics. All had the same story – went on a 'holiday' to everywhere from Jamaica to Thailand and bring back a few kilos of coke or heroin in their suitcase or swallowed in capsules. A few thousand quid for their troubles. All 'easy' money. Then the cops nab them at the airport.

Looking back, I don't know why it didn't sink in that it could happen to me – it just didn't. I was forty-five with two teenage kids – I should have known better. For a payment of ten thousand euros I went to Venezuela to bring back to Dublin a suitcase packed with almost six kilos of cocaine. I didn't even know where the country was. I had to look it up on a map on the Internet before I left. The whole idea was stupid, but I needed the money. My plumbing business went bust at the beginning of the recession. I had a small bank loan and a new work van on finance and couldn't make the payments on either. My daughter was also living with me, and I wanted to keep her going too. The ten grand would have sorted me out.

In the end, I got to Caracas fine and picked up the 'goods'. On the way out at the airport, the cops moved in on me. I ended up in my own *Banged Up Abroad*. I was convicted for drug smuggling and sentenced to eight years in Los Teques jail.

I deserved it, you say. Drugs are bad, and anyone involved with them should be locked up and have to suffer. I accept that. I had no problem doing the time. But I was locked up in a cruel, violent world where I was abused, dehumanised, stabbed, had to dodge bullets and nearly lost my life. No one deserves that, I say.

And if the purpose of prison was to punish me for smuggling drugs and reform me, that didn't work either. I quickly went from a drug mule to a dealer inside Los Teques. It was the only way I could survive, the only way I could buy basics, such as a floor cushion to sleep on and a plate and mug to eat and drink with. Nothing was 'on the house'. I then went from dealing cocaine to becoming psychologically addicted to it. I needed a few lines to get through the day and night. All in all, I was sentenced for smuggling cocaine, then sent into a world where there was more coke than in all the streets of Ireland and Britain. No reform there.

Walking through the gates of Los Teques was like walking through a time warp. It was like going back 100 years into a Victorian jail. I had to sleep on the floor of a toilet for months and was later 'promoted' to a spot on the floor in the wing yard. Only after about a year did I get a bed – and only after paying about 150 euro to a cell-block inmate boss for the privilege. I had to share a toilet with up to 200 men and often ended up going in a bag when my bowels couldn't wait for the queues to empty. The Venezuelans fought back at the authorities the only way they knew how – by kidnapping the visitors and hunger striking to have their demands for better conditions met. They rarely were, and the cycle went on. For some, the conditions and daily mental and physical torture became too much and they escaped – by cutting their own throats.

In Los Teques the cell-block bosses, or jefes, ran the show. They were inmates who ran their wings with their elected 'army councils'. They upheld the rule of law armed to the teeth with Uzis and grenades. They decided who lived or died and how much *causa*, or protection money, the prisoners

their wings had to pay them. Rows that erupted between rival cell blocks left scores dead and injured and made headlines around the world.

The National Guard troops, who police the jails, had a hands-off approach to what went on inside the prison. Their job was to count heads and lock gates. They let the jefes run the show inside, while they sat back and profited from selling coke and arms to them – guns they would seize in ‘random’ searches and which miraculously ended up back in the hands of the inmate bosses. If I had been locked up for being a criminal, I often wondered which side of the bars I should be on. Even most of the lawyers and prison cops were bent – always on the take, offering to get us out for money. Yet few did. It was all one big rotten cesspit. An upside-down world. Surreal. I often expected the walls to open up and to see Steven Spielberg with a load of cameras.

From day one, my goal was to get out as quick as I could. I aimed for parole after 18 months inside and got it, thanks to a great lawyer. I was supposed to stay in Caracas for the next five years on parole. But after just a few days in the city I knew I had to get out of Venezuela altogether. I had a family to get back to. With my wits and some money, I fled across to neighbouring Colombia and then home.

I’m writing this story because I have to. It helps me deal with my demons. It is a tale of a stupid drug mule locked up in an evil world, and if it stops just one person from doing what I did, it will be worth it.

Chapter 1

GROUNDED

I HEAR A NAME CALLED OUT OVER THE AIRPORT'S PA SYSTEM: 'PASSENGER Keany Paul.' Jesus, it can't be. I think I'm hearing things. 'Passenger Keany, Paul.' Again. No doubting it. My stomach knots. I hear it again, but this time among a dozen or so other passenger names. I begin to relax. Must be just some formality.

I'm leaning against a wall at a crowded boarding gate. I'm looking out at a twin-engine Airbus A320 parked on the airport apron outside, its nose pointing towards the departures. I walk up to the A320 France boarding gate. I join a queue with the other travellers called to step forward. I'm at the back. Two air stewardesses are checking passports. We step forwards one by one. I presume – or hope – we're being called to file onto the back of the plane. I know I'm seated there. The hostess glances at my passport and gives me a smile. 'Enjoy your flight, sir.' I nod and walk on. I'm a respectable businessman, of course, standing there in a suit – a sharp jacket, Ralph Lauren shirt and a tie, dark blue slacks and black dress shoes.

Another stewardess ushers the group into the tunnel that leads to the aircraft – my lift home. A door suddenly opens to the left. A gust of hot air whooshes in. A male flight attendant waves us out through the door. I step through and squint in the blinding midday sun. Below, I see two cops standing at the bottom of a concrete staircase. They're wearing bulletproof jackets. '*Policía*' is emblazoned across the front. Their hands hover near their pistols.

Oh my God. Alarm bells go off in my head. This looks like it's going wrong.

I follow the others. We file down the steps onto the tarmac below. The two policemen call us forward – a mixed bunch, mainly young backpacker types dressed in shorts and T-shirts. I hover at the back of the group and we walk under the terminal. The cops walk close behind me. They lead us over to an area into the bowels of the airport. Awaiting us are about 20 security personnel: airport police, cops and the Venezuelan National Guard. Then I see it: the '*Antidrogas*' emblem on one of the officer's uniforms.

My heart sinks. I panic. What have I done? What about my family at home? How will I tell them? My son and daughter, how will I break it to them? This was just supposed to be a free holiday in the sun. A few quid for carrying a suitcase home.

Two Guardia Nacional (National Guard) troops in olive-green uniforms each stand next to a suitcase. The passengers I see are all travelling alone – like me. The guards, armed with Kalashnikovs, call them over to their luggage. I also step forward. The cop beside me puts his arm out and stops me. '*Tú, no,*' ('Not you') he says.

It's over. I can feel it. I want to vomit.

The troops busy themselves opening the suitcases next to a machine that looks like an X-ray scanner. Cartons of cigarettes are pulled out. The boxes are ripped and thrown on the ground. There are also bottles of Venezuelan rum. The cops open them and sniff inside. 'No, no,' shout the French

passengers. Their protests fall on deaf ears. The cops continue the search.

~~Now the check of their bags is over and they start to file off. One by one I watch them leave. I watch the last one walk away, wanting to run after him. I want to scream, 'It's him, it's him you're after. But I don't.~~

Out of the corner of my eye I spot my suitcase, wrapped in the cellophane I thought would provide extra security. I paid about five euro in the departures halls for the shrink-wrap service.

All the guards and airport police are watching me now. I feel their eyes burning into me. I feel my life slipping away. The search of the other passengers was all just a decoy to get me – the big fish. I know it now. Keep your cool, I tell myself. It's not over yet.

I hear the footsteps of one cop behind me coming closer. He stops. More officials are everywhere now: customs, police, the drug squad, army, about 30 of them. The cop waves me forward. He babbles in Spanish something about a *maleta* (suitcase). I shrug; I haven't a clue what he's saying. But I know what's going on. I'm sweating now. I look around. Nowhere to run. One of the soldiers walks away. All the cops seem to be waiting for someone. Minutes tick away like hours.

Now an older officer in his 40s arrives and steps in front of me. 'This your case?' he says in English interpreting for another cop. His face is stiff. No expression.

'It looks like mine, but I'm not 100 per cent,' I say, looking at my name scrawled in my handwriting on a tag hanging off the handle.

'Sí,' he tells the other guards, not bothering to interpret my false doubt. 'We have reason to believe you have *contrabanda* inside,' he says.

My eyes drop down and I see that the handle is sticking out, not sitting right. I want to puke. I can't believe it. Bollocks. This has got to be ten years minimum. Fuck. The boys back at the hotel must have got greedy and messed up packing the case. Fuckers – they should be here, not me.

The guard now cuts off the plastic wrapping around the case, like a metaphor for my life peeling away in front of me. Three tiny black darts are poking out of the side of the case, a technique they must use to find coke packed into luggage. Small white circles of powder have formed around the arrow tips.

The boys in green move in closer. A skinny guard opens my case and rummages through my belongings. He pulls out the fake designer clothes I was bringing home as presents for my son and daughter, and others in my family: a Hugo Boss T-shirt and Ralph Lauren shorts, a polo shirt. Now he pulls out plastic bags and scrunched-up newspapers packed in to fill out the case. The officers know the score. They easily spot the telltale signs of a mule's luggage. The troops and cops gather round forming a circle. Their smiles widen. My tie feels tighter.

The guard leans over the black Wilson suitcase. He pulls out a small knife and rips the lining inside the case. At the bottom I can see a layer of black plastic, which is carbon paper meant to fool X-ray scanners. So much for that. He cuts the material again. The cops behind me move in closer. Others are standing on tables to get a better look. The guard cuts again. This time there's a layer of clear plastic revealing white, densely packed powder. I slowly shake my head. This can't be happening. The circle of cops moves in closer again and starts to crowd me. I can see one guard, his hand resting on the barrel of his pistol. Others train their mobile-phone cameras on me.

Saturday, 11 October 2008. I was about to be a star.

* * *

Earlier, I'd stepped out of a taxi at the departures. The cab was a beat-up '70s sedan from the US.

flagged it in the centre of Caracas, where the cab inched through the city's grinding traffic jams while motorcycles whizzed in and out between the cars. Outside the urban sprawl of the city we reached a motorway. The traffic eased and fanned out across about six lanes. I watched the city pass by, soon leaving behind the hazy fog of fumes, the grim buildings of the urban centre giving way to the shantytowns of little red-bricked houses clinging to the hills around the valley walls looking down onto the motorway. The crudely built homes with tin roofs are where the poor live in Caracas, Venezuela's teeming capital city of some three million people.

I rolled down the window a bit. Hot air rushed in at me, but it was a fresh breeze blowing in from the Caribbean. I ran through the events of the last couple of weeks in my head.

I followed orders, arrived in Caracas and checked into a hotel to wait for the call. 'There's been a delay. Get yourself a hooker or something to pass the time.'

That I didn't do. Instead I passed my days in a bar in Sabana Grande, a shopping area for cheap designer goods in Caracas. By night it was deserted – even the rats didn't seem to venture out amid the hundreds of bags of rubbish that clogged up the streets. I drank my time away in the pub, sipping beer while writing a crime book set in Dublin. Other than that I watched a bit of football, catching the occasional Manchester United game. At night I had a meal, drank a bottle of rum and headed back to my cheap hotel.

Then the second call came.

'The bar on the corner. Five minutes.' A Dublin accent. Had to be him.

Damo sat in a booth. He was a tough-looking guy, stocky with a bald head. It was the first time we'd met. I slipped in beside him.

'Paul, sorry. You're getting on OK?' He seemed distant.

'OK.'

'There's been a change of plan,' he said, drumming his fingers on the neck of a bottle of beer. 'We need you to stay a bit longer. We haven't got the stuff yet. Can you change your flights and stay another week? We'll give you the money for it.'

'I don't know,' I said. I was thinking of my plumbing business back home and my teenage daughter who was living with me, and the story I'd told everyone about going away for two weeks, not three.

'Look, I know you've a business back home and I understand if you have to go.' He was giving me the way out, which surprised me, for a drug smuggler. I thought for a minute. Another week, I can swing it.

'Yeah, it's all right, I can do it.' It was a decision I would regret for a long time.

The next day, on Damo's advice, I moved to Altamira, the banking district of Caracas. It was an upmarket area: lots of tall glass buildings; wide, leafy avenues lined with palm trees; four-by-four jeeps cruising into the drive-thrus of McDonald's and Wendy's. Little Miami. This was where the other half lived. It was the place to be, Damo said. 'The cops won't hassle you down there.' And they didn't. In Sabana Grande the police stopped me for a shakedown three times. I was pushed against a wall, spread-eagled and patted down. The sight of a gringo there was like waving a red flag to a bull. The cops knew what many were up to. But I never had anything on me.

* * *

I was in my hotel room, crashed out on the bed watching the TV. The only thing in English was the CNN news. The local stations in Spanish all seemed to show the same thing every evening. Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez dressed in a red shirt and beret and endlessly talking about

revolución.

~~Three dull thuds banged out on my hotel door. I sat up with a jolt. I stood up and slowly eased the door open. I saw Damo's baldy head.~~

~~'We're in the hotel in another room. Number 443. Come on up.'~~

~~A dark-skinned Venezuelan guy was in the room gathering up plastic bags on the floor. He looked up at me but didn't bother saying anything. 'It's all tidied up,' said Damo, on his knees leaning over a suitcase on the ground. 'Everything will be grand,' he said, now rolling up old newspapers to fill out the inside of it.~~

~~The room was clean and unused. Two single beds were still made up. Two bars of soap were propped on fluffed-up pillows. No other luggage. The lads weren't sticking around.~~

~~Damo stood up. 'There's the case, good luck,' he said, passing me the handle so I could wheel it. He looked relaxed. A normal day's work for him, I supposed. 'Be cool when you get to the airport. Nice and *tranquilo*. When you land in Dublin, call the lads. Somebody will meet you. Give them the case and you'll be sitting pretty, ten grand richer.'~~

~~I thought there should be more to explain. There wasn't.~~

* * *

The guard cuts into the plastic and takes out a sample of the white powder, balancing it on the knife blade. He puts it onto a piece of paper, opens the lid of a bottle and pours on a chemical. The National Guard and the airport cops are laughing now, jostling each other. My hands form fists. I know the test is a formality, but I want the gods to be on my side. Please let it be a bag of talcum powder.

The white powder fizzles orangey-red, then blue. '*Es positivo*,' he says. It's the real thing. Gamble over.

'*Muy bueno, gringo! Muy bueno*,' ('Very good') roar the soldiers and police standing around me, laughing and cheering. I can't believe it all. Cameras flash. Snap. Bit early for the press, I think. The guard tilts the case up so they can get clear photos of the booty. With a further probe with his knife the cop rips the lining on the other side of the case and finds another stash of cocaine packed across the entire side. Now several of the soldiers take turns putting their arms around me and posing for pictures, like holiday snaps. Another gringo mule bites the dust. More cheers, louder this time. 'Heeeyyyy.' Hands clap. The soldiers step in for more photos with their catch. It must have been several months since they caught their last drug runner. I wonder how many mantelpieces around Venezuela will be decorated with my mug shot.

'We're arresting you for the transportation of illegal drugs,' says the interpreter, cool as a cucumber. Just another day's work catching a mule. The guard standing behind me slips handcuffs on me that bite into my wrists. Two soldiers lead me away.

* * *

Simón Bolívar International Airport, Maiquetía: 30 minutes' drive north of Caracas, set amid gentle hills covered in lush vegetation that seem to spill into the sea below. A runway peppered with weeds poking out from worn tarmac. Jets take off and soar over the sea a few minutes north. Waves wash up on the Caribbean shoreline there that stretches west to Colombia and east towards the islands of Trinidad and Tobago, a short hop off the mainland.

Venezuela is a major route for smuggling cocaine from neighbouring Colombia, mostly to Europe. Some 200 tonnes of the drug pass through its borders every year, US anti-drug chiefs say. The

Venezuelan government fires back by saying there wouldn't be this problem if gringos didn't want to shove it up their noses. The oil-rich country shares a frontier with Colombia – the world's biggest producer of cocaine after Peru – stretching more than 2,200 km along Venezuela's western border. Much of the frontier is porous, made up of mountains, jungles and even a desert to the north, making it impossible to entirely secure. The Venezuelan authorities have a mostly deserved reputation of being crooked, which doesn't help seal the borders to tonnes of cocaine in the multibillion-dollar global business. Much of it is smuggled out in freight containers or aboard private planes, most bound for rogue West African states, where it is processed and shipped to Spain and the rest of Europe. Smaller hauls of single-digit kilos also form part of the coke business, swallowed in condoms or hidden in suitcases on commercial airline flights. The people behind it are drug mules – people like me.

* * *

Earlier, I'd walked into the airport. It was no Heathrow – just a couple of badly lit poky halls with yellowed walls. The law was everywhere. Police busied about checking IDs. National Guard troops armed with machine guns roamed. I wasn't bothered; I was sure all would go well.

In the departures area I saw a worker in a red jumpsuit wrapping cases in cling film. I paid him a few euro to do mine; I liked the extra security. I walked over to the Air France check-in desk. The stewardess was a typical Venezuelan beauty with sallow skin and perfect sheen hair.

'*Inglés?*' I asked.

'Yes,' she said with a warm smile.

I handed over the black suitcase. She checked it in. No problem. I watched it disappear behind a plastic curtain. That was it. Down the chute. Home and dry. All was going to plan. I could already see my debts at home disappearing off my bank statement. And I felt OK; I was sure the case was packed well. Only a proper search would suss it out.

I went through a few formalities, queuing up to pay a departure tax. I fished out a few scrunched-up notes of the local currency – bolívares fuertes – from my pocket. I then passed through immigration and flashed my passport at an official. He curtly nodded, his eyes barely looking at me. Not a hitch. It was all plain sailing.

I had a couple of hours to go until my 2 p.m. flight to Charles de Gaulle. I walked around the duty-free shop. The usual cheap cigarettes and booze, mostly locally brewed rum and Scottish whisky which upper-class Venezuelans are fond of. On the short walk down to the terminal I stopped at one of the bars. It was busy enough, but I saw there was room for one more at the bar and eased myself onto a stool. I ordered a steak sandwich and a local Polar beer. It was good and hit the nail on the head. I opened up the only book I'd found in English in a shop in Caracas: Snoop Dogg's autobiography.

* * *

The officers led me away from the baggage area. I was brought to the main building of the airport where the drug squad had its office. I was seated at a table in a room with an antique-looking printer and a filing cabinet. It looked like a spare room rather than an interrogation room. I was left alone. The officers only popped their heads in now and again. Some security. A couple of cops appeared at the door along with the interpreter, who was around when anything important was happening. They were there to strip search me, he explained. First I had to empty all my belongings out on the table. I had a bunch of cash in my wallet in a mix of currencies: 500 euro, 200 dollars and 100 sterling. And

course my mobile phone. All in all, the tools of an international trader – or drug mule, in my case, then whipped off my shirt and slacks and threw the tie on the ground. So much for my formal dress, throwing the drug squad off the scent. I was told to lower my boxer shorts as well. I had to bend over and spread my cheeks.

‘Have you swallowed any drugs?’ said the interpreter.

‘Don’t you think there’s enough in the case?’

He laughed.

I put my clothes back on but left the tie on the ground. No use for it now.

The other guard sorted through my belongings on the table and scribbled a report. I knew I’d never see the cash or the phone again – and I didn’t.

‘Can I make a call home?’ I asked the interpreter. He gave me my mobile phone back, warning me I couldn’t ring any drug-smuggler friends. ‘Family,’ I said.

‘Two minutes only,’ he said, still holding a poker face.

I scrolled through the contacts. Mick, my nephew’s name, came up. I knew I could rely on him to break the news to the rest of the family without giving them a heart attack. At 19, he was young but had a good head on his shoulders. I dialled the number. After a few rings he answered. I was relieved. I knew it might be another ten years before I could talk to anyone from home again. It’d be a phone call neither of us would forget in a hurry. ‘Mick, listen, this is your Uncle Paul.’

‘Ah, Paul, where are you? Can I pick you up or anything?’ said Mick, thinking I wanted a lift from the airport in Dublin. I kept in mind that I’d told everyone I was off sunning myself in Spain on a working holiday, helping a mate in his nightclub.

‘No, Mick, just shut up and listen. Right, I’ve got two minutes to say what I have to say.’

‘Why, what’s wrong? What?’

‘Mick, just shut up. You know the way I’m supposed to be in Spain on a working holiday?’

‘Yeah, yeah.’

‘Well, I’m not. I’m in a country in South America called Venezuela and I’ve just been arrested at the airport on drug-trafficking charges and I’m looking at about ten years in jail.’

‘No, Paul, you’re joking,’ he said, but with a serious voice.

‘Mick, I’m not joking. Now listen: I want you to tell all that I’ve said to your mother and of course Nana and Granddad.’ I knew he could drop in to them because my mother and father lived just over the road.

‘What the fuck am I going to say to them? Jesus Christ!’ His voice started breaking up.

‘Just tell the truth, it’s the only way. And tell them I love them and I’m sorry.’

‘OK, Paul, look . . .’

‘I have to go, Mick. Goodbye.’ The two minutes was almost gone. I had to hang up. I was close to tears, and I could tell Mick was too. I had a lump in my throat. All I could think of was my daughter Katie, and my son, Daniel. How would they take it? Those thoughts were tearing me apart.

The cop took the phone off me and put it down on the table. Forms were pulled out that I had to sign. I was prompted to stick my thumb in a sponge soaked with black ink and plant it beside my signature. One of the guards brought in a set of flat weighing scales to check the haul and prove to me they weren’t cheating with the amount they were writing down. They plonked the two large bags of flat-packed cocaine in front of me.

‘Six kilos,’ said the interpreter. I shrugged. What did they think I was going to do – deny it and say I’d only three? Anyway, the sentence would have been the same, I’d learn.

I sat in that chair and watched the next few years rush past my eyes. This was a big seizure

contraband. The pricks who'd hired me had told me it was one or two kilos. Six fucking kilos . . . knew I'd pay a heavy price for this: there'd be no three-year suspended sentence and a slap on the wrist. Not in South America. Ten to fifteen years I might get, and raped by the prison 'daddy'. I was 45; I might get out when I was 60. I felt as sick as a dog.

The two guards walked out of the room, one of them carrying the scales. Oddly, the cops left me alone with the bags of cocaine lying on the table in front of me. They had a street value of over 500,000 euro back in Ireland and the UK. A bit of this would be a nice currency in prison. Just before the guards had walked into the room with the scales, they had brought in some stuff for me: a spare shirt and a toiletry bag. Apart from a toothbrush, it contained a large bottle of talcum powder. The irony – someone must have been having a joke.

I realised the dire straits I was in, sitting here facing ten years locked up in a fleapit prison in the tropics. I decided to make the best of a bad situation with the coke sitting in front of me. I got on my feet and pulled off the top of the talc bottle on the floor. It came off easily, no simple feat given I was handcuffed, albeit at the front. I emptied the talc into a wastepaper bin. The cocaine on the table was mostly a fine powder, so I scooped it up into the talc bottle. It had spilled out of one of the thin, fragile plastic bags the guards had accidentally ripped when they roughly lifted it onto the scales. I brushed the cocaine into the talc bottle, filling it up. On the side it said the volume was 300 g – that would do. I put the top back on. I heard noises outside. Feet shuffling. Gotta hurry. I put the bottle back into the toiletry bag. I sat back down, sweating.

I waited for the guards to come back and do the next round of red tape with forms and the like. I noticed a dusty coat of fine coke powder on the table – probably from where I had spilt it filling up the talc bottle. Shit. I picked up a piece of paper off the floor and, using it like a credit card, I formed lines with the coke. I leaned over and sniffed up two, which was probably too much, because in no time I was out of my fucking mind. My mouth and head were numb. It was pure, unadulterated coke; the high purity was full throttle. I'm not big into coke, I never really liked it, but facing ten years bang up in a Latin American prison puts a different perspective on things.

The door opened. A drug-squad cop stepped in. I sat there buzzing. He lifted up the two wide bags. He saw a small bit of coke had come out on to the table, like a salt cellar had spilled over. I panicked. I was found out. But the guard just brushed it off the table with the palm of his hand, then walked away with the haul. I can only imagine what would have happened had I been caught.

I was left to sit there alone and stew a bit more. The door opened and another officer popped his head in and, with gestures, offered me food – the leftovers of a fast-food chicken meal in a box he held in his hand. I said no. Between the coke and a jail term hanging over me, I was too wound-up to have an appetite.

A new bunch of cops came in, more National Guard troops. They weren't as lax as the guards who had been dealing with me so far – they were serious-looking guys with frowning faces. One of the guards slipped off my handcuffs and handed me over to them. It was time for me to go. I got an idea that I was their catch – the trophy prisoner. I stood up and the three guards marched me upstairs and back into the airport, carrying the plastic bag with the toothbrush, the talcum-powder bottle of cologne and the shirt. The airport was almost deserted – just a few cleaners pushing mops. No one paid me any attention. A gringo in handcuffs – no big deal.

We walked through the main entrance, a guard on either side of me. I was still off my head on the coke and didn't really care where we were going. My eyes darted back and forth. My body was numb. My mind was flying. I'd no idea what time it was; all I knew was that hours had passed since I arrived at the airport at about midday. It was dusk now.

The guards loaded me into the back of a white jeep with the 'Antidrogas' logo in black on the side. ~~One of the troopers, a skinny guy in his late 20s, jumped into the back, while the other sat up front next to the driver.~~ There were only a few cars around, a couple of taxis. The military vehicle sped on through the airport, past a billboard showing President Hugo Chávez in a red beret and smiling. I felt like he was laughing at me.

The jeep sped along the coast. I sat handcuffed in the back, looking out the window. The guards spoke rapid-fire Spanish. It blew over my head. I looked outside to the left at high-rise hotels. Dirty whitewashed walls next to houses with neat Spanish-colonial fronts, tin shacks and *pescadería* fish restaurants, every few minutes giving way to a gap through which I caught glimpses of a calm sea.

Chapter 2

INSIDE I'M CRYING

WE PULLED UP AT A SECURITY CHECKPOINT AT A DOCKYARD. MASSES OF RED, orange and yellow rusty containers were stacked two and three high. A sentry waved out of a security checkpoint and a barrier rose up. We passed through an open gate next to a yard ringed with a high fence. On the right, a wide road on a steep incline led to what looked like a car-ferry terminal above where a few vehicles were parked. I thought we were going up the ramp, but the jeep then jerked left and came to a stop in the yard. I could make out from a sign on a wall that this was the drug squad headquarters: *Comando Antidrogas* of the Guardia Nacional in Vargas state. Not that I cared where I was, really. I was still buzzing.

The guard escorted me out of the back of the jeep and marched me to a large hangar-style gate like a giant accordion. Inside, the guards spoke to other national troops dressed in the same olive-green military uniforms. I was led to a steel staircase and was sat down a few steps from the bottom. The guard cuffed my hands to a metal banister. I sat there taking in my surroundings as the guards busied themselves about. I was seated on one of two steel staircases that rose up both sides of this tall, airy building. In front of me there was a guard at a table writing in a notebook. There were a few offices behind him and anti-drug troops passing back and forth.

The hours ticked away into the night, and I watched guards walk in and out with an array of weapons from one of the rooms, which was obviously an armoury. Kalashnikovs, rifles, pistols and shotguns – they signed them out with the officer at the table and disappeared outside, presumably going for shoot-outs with the small-time drug gangs that ruled over the *barrios* at night. In the yard outside I heard engines rev up.

Some of the guards spoke to me. I didn't understand much Spanish but could make out 'gringo', 'drogas' and 'ocho años' ('eight years'). They walked away howling with laughter, knowing the typical sentence handed down to drug mules. Others just asked, '*Gringo, cuánta droga?*' ('How much of the drug?'). 'Six,' I answered, holding up the same number of fingers. Another walked up to me with a revolver and pushed out the chamber, showing me there were no bullets. He popped the chamber back in, pointed the barrel at my head and slowly started pulling the trigger. I buried my head into my forearms, which were cuffed to the banisters. My body tensed with fear. *Click*. More howls and laughter. All the guards did it to me at times, but the main culprit was a little guy with a moustache named him El Diablo, or the Devil. I could see there were no bullets in the chambers, but they didn't look like well-trained cops and I was afraid they could easily have left a round in by mistake and blown my head off. I shouted 'wankers' at them while they kept playing Venezuelan roulette with my head.

Shortly after the target-practice session with my skull, a guard emerged from the blue doors of a room where I think there was a small kitchen. The cop, an older guy, put a paper cup of water down next to me. He spoke in a friendly voice. The Spanish went over my head. He seemed like the on-

guard who was a decent human being, though, so I said, 'Bed, bed, sleep,' tilting my head onto my hand to get the message across. 'No,' he shrugged. I was exhausted now and was sure a cell awaited me with a bed – or even just a floor to sleep on. I was wrong.

My ass was grinding into the metal staircase, but I was thankful the guards had now uncuffed one of my hands from the banister. Whiling the hours away, my mind went off into dark thoughts. I was bored, paranoid and still buzzing from the coke, which didn't help. How could I have been so stupid to do this for ten grand? I wanted to be at home, having a pint down in the local pub with my mates. There was my family. What would they be thinking? Had Mick broken the news to my parents, that I had been caught drug smuggling? They were old, both my mother and father in their 70s. I wondered whether they would die while I spent years rotting in a cesspit prison in Latin America. And what would my son and daughter, Dano and Katie, think?

It was well into the night now, and I started to drift in and out of sleep, drowsy from the sticky air. The main body of troops had gone now. There was only the guard seated at the desk in front, a chubby guy with curly hair and a moustache. In what I thought was a mess room behind him I could hear other cops: the clink of glasses, their boisterous voices drifting out, getting rowdier as the night went on. Still, I dozed off.

A nudge woke me up from a groggy sleep. It was dark now, the only dim light from a bare bulb over one of the offices. The guard had stood up from the table and was in front of me. He was fatter than I'd thought, with a belly hanging out over his waistband. He had a cigarette dangling from his lip, red embers glowing. He spoke in whispers to another guard standing beside him. I didn't understand. The building was quiet now. I thought the whispers were to avoid waking the other cops, who I presumed were sleeping.

They uncuffed me from the banister. I stood up and the guard cuffed my hands behind my back. My legs and ass were sore and stiff. I was sure the staircase on the other side of the building led up to a network of prisons and cells. There I'd finally get a bed – or at least a floor to stretch out on.

But no – the two guards led me to a shower area in a room to the right. It was a tiny space with a toilet cubicle at one side and a pipe sticking out of the wall that served as a shower. More whispers. I then saw two other guards waiting inside the door – younger guys. What's going on here? I must be getting a wash – hosed and scrubbed down like you see in the prison movies. The guards started laughing. More whispers. Giggles.

I was led forward and they made me face one of the walls. Two of the guards suddenly grabbed me at my waist. Fear jolted through me like a bolt of electricity. This was no wash. Jesus, what were they going to do to me?

I was pushed forward, my face shoved into the corner, touching the wall now. I heard the door close. The laughter grew louder.

Oh my God. What were they doing to me? If I screamed, would anyone come?

My upper body was pushed over so it was parallel with the floor. I started shouting, 'What's the story? What's the story?' My heart was racing. I knew this was bad. A hand reached around my waist. I was shifting back and forth, struggling against the strength of the three or four men who were now grabbing at my shoulders. I kicked back at them with my hard shoes on. A stick or some hard object lashed out against my legs. I felt short, sharp pains. I started to shout again, 'What's the story?' Hands grabbed my shoulders to still me. More laughter and giggles. A hand with some kind of material wrapped around it groped my face. I tried to bite the finger. A fist ploughed into the back of my neck. A rag was shoved into my mouth. I was breathing fast and heavily, gagging. My nostrils flared. I felt my belt open. My slacks dropped down. I instinctively knew what was going to happen, but I couldn't

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