

What He Lost Round the Mountain

by Mike Todaro

WHAT HE LOST ROUND THE MOUNTAIN

Mike Todaro, March 19, 2007

He cuts power. We're descending, final approach. We're descending over the Caribbean, over the jungle, over the reefs, lagoons, Belize, then out over azure water again, over Puerto Cortez, the famous tireless whores of Puerto Cortez (port whores, Navy whores, they peg out the Stemp Meter, them being hardest, the fastest, "*me love you long time - tiempo/longtemps/lang zeit/*") down to the flat lands, over the quilt.

The land is a quilt work of random patterns of endless greens and repetitive browns, of corduroys, of plaids plus dots, of angles cutting over angles, of round irrigation patterns, of bananas growing new beside those just harvested, of sugar cane green beside fields just burned black, over the small towns and farms, over the sun baked cattle, a river curves widely and runs quick down a valley, all the crops are along it, I know when you get on the ground, there is litter, there is garbage, there are people everywhere, there are old buses, and dead dogs and random police stops, and road side markets, and at the toll booth the hawkers of cashew nuts, and bags swollen tight with ice cold blue liquid of some sort, and chips, and holders for your cell phone and cords for your battery and cheap shirts and junk of every kind.

The plane passes the runway, dips sharply, its shadow straight down below, too cold in the cabin, the sun hitting your arm like a machete below, it is 94, the humidity too, it has just rained for 3 days, it never rains this time of year, it will be hard to breath out there.

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(landing at night once, I saw the famous giant Coca Cola sign of San Pedro Sula. The flats are where the airport is. The town is hard backed into the mountains and behind the town are mountains and more mountains. They rise up suddenly, instantly for what seems miles high. Part way up the middle one is the Coke sign. It blinks white, then red and white, then red, then solid red. It is on top of his Dad's house. His Dad made his money in food.)

Even in the sun, you see the Coke sign. It is your beacon. But now it is afternoon and everything is green and brown, rising quickly up to my window as I lay fascinated against it staring straight down vertical.

(the gate to the switch back road up to the house that the Coke sign sits on is guarded. The guard raises the gate. You drive through jungle foliage. You climb back and forth and do this forever. It is the road of rich people. His Dad's house is close to the last one. It is on the mountainside. The lot is carved out like a Navaho cliff, straight up in back and straight down from the edge in front, a narrow ledge of land. The lot is over 200 feet long and never 50 feet wide. It is covered by a canopy of leaves on long thick low hanging limbs. The house is nothing to look at. The view you can not stop looking at. It is like you are in a plane. You can see the sea 30 miles away)

At the airport, you are hit first by the useless man who points you to the immigration agent who obviously just became open and then the bureaucrats at immigration who hate your guts then the customs guy who manhandles your contents without gloves, then through the door where the heat blasts you like a blow torch, then through the money changers, then the taxi hawkers, and the drivers holding up signs (one of them for me) then the poor, the cacophony of arrivals and of children and of the more common third world people who really in a way are all children too.

I see people I know in the airport, randomly, suddenly. We shake hands, We high five. We smile that fake uncertain but happy I-can-not-quite-remember-what-happened-last-time-we-saw-one-another smile. I have come here too much. I am starting to have a pattern. This is not good.

Things grow here. They grow like crazy. Plants you've never seen on top of others you've never seen in fields of things you've never seen. Things we pay for at home are weeds here.

(his Dad's fourth wife wanted a water fall. He built one. You hit the switch. A few seconds later you hear this loud gurgling sound. Then it starts to fall, it falls in large volumes, it is expensive, it cost a fortune, it was exactly what she wanted, she wanted the wild orchids too, there are many dozens of them in the trees, she wanted the bushes, she wanted the view. But mostly she wanted the waterfall. There was a water fall here with Hurricane Mitch too. It washed 6,000 people from here past the airport out to sea 30 miles away. (what killed them? Was it the water or the wind? Ask State Farm. (Finca del Estado in Spanish I think) They had a tsunami come from the mountains, not the sea, the dam being so mismanaged and all) The water mark is 5 feet high in the airport even today).

The plane dips sharply. We look straight down. Our shadow rushes through banana groves, we shoot over sugar cane, we blast across streams, we slip instant over the road, we scare the cows, straighten out, hit good, hit the brakes, snap then blast the reversers, slip past the airport, we stop at the end, the peasants are running down the aisles, the attendants are shouting them back, it is no use, they are home, they will rush full speed past us, down the steps, through the agricultural bath for your shoes into the immigration line where like the rest of us they will stand for nearly an hour barely moving, in the sharp veterinary smell of the agricultural wash, gringos asking if their phones work which of course they do for voice, not for email, everyone friends all of a sudden, staring off the side of the sinking

Titanic taking you inexorably to your doom facing a foreign immigration officer who has no use for you whatsoever.

(he hosted parties every Friday. You have to come he said. They started at 6 or 7 or 8, I don't remember and they went to 4 he said, not me but them. They were at the Chilera (an abandoned hot sauce factory). I had this image of a factory, not the covered concrete open air band stand it really was, dark, humid, fluorescent lights, bottles hung by strings, a place teenagers could design, wild dogs you tossed your rib bones to (they would snap off your arm otherwise) and if you petted them, you could not wash the result off for a week. But one day he got fired and the party ended for him. It was a surprise. Now he is helpless. (As it turns out, he never recovered) He is lost. All is lost. He is not rich anymore. Here now he is nothing. The Families have spoken. When the Families speak here, you may as well wash out to sea. Too bad because you could really see his Dad's Coke sign from the Chilera.)

Mountains and then more mountains. Straight up. You take this road to Tegucigalpa, the other to Copan, through the coffee plantations and forests of Eucalyptus, over good winding roads through denuded hills, ever south to the ruins at Copan and if you are brave even onto El Salvador. Always in the mountains, covered by every imaginable kind of cloud.

I'm driven through ancient lands, the sun cutting my arm like a machete, men walking with machetes along the roads, they can take a tree down with enough machetes, they can mow a yard with a machete, I have seen this. And on this very road too I have seen a man walking down it with a machete swinging in its sheath from his belt followed silently by a line, their heads down, reverent, sad, the line being his mother and his wife and children, his arm up over his head holding a small casket wrapped in green cloth on his shoulder.

Some lose jobs, others lose babies. Some walk past fake waterfalls, others pass near real ones in the out-of-site-out-of-mind campo. Both

walk past real mountains though. I think these mountains go on forever.

I think they go right down to Patagonia. I think these mountains go from Alaska all the way down to Patagonia right through this place where here for sure, all these mountains bend their spine down this continent, and right there is this one specific mountain, the one you can see from the airport, the one you can see from the Chilera and even from the sky, the one

you can see as you pass this way, see it until you round the mountain and then, when you look back behind yourself, you are surprised to not see it,

to see you have lost sight of the red Coca Cola sign is to see you have lost your way

(as children, they had this secret spot up river where the water had washed the bank away and shreds of pottery dropped down onto the sandy bank. They went up there often and gathered these pieces for years. They filled 250 orange crates with these pieces, giving them to the museum. They tried to put all the pieces back together again but seldom succeeded. He and his brother came close once though, with an enormous pottery. Save for one piece, they had put it all back together again. 10 or 12 years later, downstream, a piece caught his eye, he brought it home, and setting it down he wondered if maybejustmaybe.....(it was as he was packing to leave forever).....this was it so he went in there, bent over to study the hole, saw the chance it might just fit, eased the piece in to make it whole, stood back looking then continued to grieve)

He applies power and we ascend, I lean right, press against the window, watching as we pass over quilts, away from mountains and toward the sea.....

