



Tales

of

Bolivia

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TALES OF BOLIVIA

Father Valverde, my son can talk to the animals!

It could have been a miserable turn of events for Evo Morales and his community had not he been blessed with the spontaneity of an insight. Trudging out of the pit with hundreds of others, he took his place in the file of a defeated army, waiting to punch in his hours of hard labour. The miners said little amongst themselves. Instead, with the insertion of each time card, a battalion of machines made audible *clicks* - as if conversing between themselves in the dialect of insects. The irony was not lost on Evo. Lately he felt more a member of a colony of ants than a man in the fraternity of other men. He inserted his card: *click*. His commitment to the shareholders of the mine was over for another day. Evo Morales along with his band of brothers should have been free at this point to disperse to their families. But today's exodus was blocked off by a stage draped with the flags of their nation. On either side of the platform, black towers blared out the national anthem. Taking the podium with a folio of papers in his hands, the manager of the corporate mine addressed his work force as if they were disposable riffraff. His voice boomed above their hard hats and pit lamps, amplified by the decibels of the PA system.

To their disbelief the miners were told that due to the falling price of tin on the world market, the mine would have to close unless they accepted a drastic cut in their wages. A howl of disapproval arose with the announcement. But the towers shouted back at them with a list of cruel and incontestable statistics from the New York Stock Exchange. “Alright,” shouted the manager, “if you don’t want to take a cut in wages then we will have to increase our production to make up for the shortfall in assets - or face closure. Which do you fools want?”

This was the trap that had been set for the miners. They were faced with the proposition of a smaller workforce reduced by a devastating layoff of 20% of their comrades; and longer hours of work for those who were fortunate enough to remain working in the mine. Even before the news had spread through the crowd like a plague of cholera the manager was gone, spirited away in his Mercedes. In his place armed guards with tight Aztec looking features appeared along the edge of the stage, staring down at the miners, looking for the slightest excuse to open fire on them. So, that decided the issue. The miners filed out in silence with their eyes either downcast or looking back to the orifice in the earth that had consumed so much of their lives. Their debasement was far from over with this change in policy.

Evo trudged the mile or so back to his shanty on the outskirts of Punata. The world around him had grown as dark as the mile deep shaft he went down each day in a

cage, leaving behind memory of the sun and stars. He was not as bad off as some of the miners though, those who had spawned one child after another after marrying at sixteen. Any layoffs would leave them heavily in debt to the hospital and mine commissary. Without articulating his opinion, he blamed the politicians and clergy in his country who preached miracles not contraception and family planning. Pausing at the door of his tin roofed shanty, he was a man consumed with anxiety for his three children and a wife who was still pretty and somewhat of a flirt amongst the town's people. As soon as he had hung up his dirty outer garments, Francesca sensed something had gone wrong and asked: "What is it?"

Nothing," he replied, too proud to share his burden, "just the usual."

But to himself he asked *Why does a man's life have to be such an open wound?* With no answer from heaven and before sitting down to mumble through Grace at the head of the table, Evo went outside to scrub the grime from his forearms and face. In the back yard, amongst piles of old tires and scrap metal, his youngest was strutting in circles, flapping his arms and making foolish noises with his voice.

Evo grew furious but controlled his temper, saying in a stern voice,

"Carlos, that is stupid. What are you doing?"

And that was when Carlos told his father he was talking to the chicken scratching the earth near himself.

“Oh,” said his father, “that’s very amusing. And what does that skinny buzzard have to say for herself?”

Carlos squatted down like a woman giving birth and replied, “She says she is going to lay the biggest most fertile egg of her short life.”

And then the old hen who was overdue for the stew pot did in fact let out a cluck and squatting down, she produced the largest brown egg of the whole flock. Overcome by disbelief, Evo turned and ran back through the shanty to the front door. Composing himself before entering the narrow streets, he knew enough not to attract the attention of gossip. Up two cobbled lanes and over to the left and back up the steep hillside, he finally arrived at the rectory. Catching his breath before he addressed the new priest from La Paz, he said with the utmost candour and respect:

“Father Valverde, my son can read the thoughts of the animals!”

“Interesting,” said the priest.

“Yes, it’s true,” repeated Evo.

“And what do the animals have to say to us,” asked the priest, “except that we treat them worse than we do our own kind.”

“I saw it with my own eyes,” confided Evo, describing how his five year old had just communicated with a useless old hen.

“Coincidence,” said the priest. “We don’t believe in superstition only in our *Saviour*.”

Evo crossed himself and said, “But Saint Francis spoke with the animals too and he was a saint, no?”

The priest considered the situation carefully, reflecting on the nearly empty pews which were endemic all over the parish and asked:

“How old did you say this little seraph of yours is?”

“He’s only five, my youngest. He has fair skin, Father, and does not look at all like the rest of us.”

Father was contemptuous. He examined his grimy parishioner and was about to make a quip about certain religious orders who profess to recognize the *dahlia lama* amongst newborns, like those who purport to find water with a forked stick. But before he articulated his verdict, Evo flipped up his trump card.

“I’ll cut you in to the 10% of the profits,” he said, smiling at the priest like he knew a wise man when he saw one.

Father Valverde snorted at the offer.

“More like you’ll give 95% of the earnings to the Church and keep a small amount back to feed your family.”

“Well,” said Evo, “how about 25%?”

“Agreed,” said the priest, and they shook hands on the arrangement. “Now, bring this boy to me, alright?”

“After dinner,” replied Evo.

“No,” said the priest, “I said now.”

So it was settled. Evo ran home at a fast clip and spirited the boy back to the church. In a short time Francesca was seen running after the two of them with the shawl wrapped around her long hair and her face distorted with concern. The housekeeper ushered Evo and his boy in to the dining

room where the priest had seated himself to commence with his evening meal. When they entered Father Valverde pushed the plate aside and examined the pale looking boy, asking finally and to the point:

“Your father tells us you can talk to chickens?”

“Yes, Father,” the child replied in a tiny voice.

“And what do the chickens tell you?” asked the priest.

“The hens say they wish the rooster who mounts them would die and leave them in peace,” replied the boy.

Evo broke in to a laugh but the priest silenced him with a glance. He examined the child for a few moments and said, “Lets go outside.”

And to his father, the priest said, “You stay here.”

The church had a large courtyard surrounded by a stone wall. A small bare tree stood near a stone bird bath. Father Valverde spotted a mountain wren resting on a limb of the tree and said, “Okay, boy - go see if you and that sparrow can exchange anything of value.”

The five year old walked in to the courtyard and stood for the longest time with his back to the priest, staring up at the wren before it flitted away over the wall.

“Well?” asked the priest.

Carlos looked up at the priest’s face for the longest time in silence.

“Have your parents ever had you tested for glasses?” the priest asked.

Finally the little boy said:

“It’s flown down from the road leading over the mountains. It said the bus has broken down and needs to have someone drive up and rescue the passengers before they freeze to death.”

The priest guffawed.

“That’s what your little parrot told you, is it?” Father Valverde asked.

“Yes,” said the boy.

The priest extended his hand and took the boy back to his parents. Carlos’ mother reached and embraced the boy when he was returned safely.

“Will you be coming to mass this Sunday, with the boy and your family?”

“Yes,” replied Seniority Morales.

“And you too?” he asked of Evo.

“Yes, Father,” replied the miner.

“Good,” said the priest. “And before you take communion I want to hear your confession, correct?”

The suggestion was humiliating. For whatever reason the priest had uncovered his ruse and exposed the boy as his accomplice. Evo’s expectations were vanquished. He saw himself shuffling back with hundreds of others to the open maw of the mine as if consigned to purgatory or worse. Yet he had no alternative but to bow submissively to the priest.

“You have a sweet family,” the priest said to Francesca, patting the boy on the shoulder as they were ushered out. Behind them, the rectory door was locked with definitive

intent.

“What happened at the mine today,” his wife demanded when they were alone again, “that you have lost your senses?”

“If I’ve made a mistake,” Evo said, “I’ll ask the Virgin to forgive me.”

“In the confessional?” asked his wife. “In front of Father Valverde?”

“That too,” he promised.

Sunday mass was celebrated a few days later. After asking his parishioners to pray for the souls of the ten who had perished in the bus that Thursday in the mountains, Father Valverde called for Carlos to come forward to the altar rail. To the amazement of the faithful, Father had the boy turn and face them. With his hands spread open over the boy’s head, he announced that little Carlos Morales had special powers. The priest presented the five year old as the new Saint Francis of Punata, Bolivia. In closing he reminded the congregation that with their prayers of supplication the boy’s gift would increase to include the thoughts of the faithful. After mass with the altar boys carrying the golden cross overhead down the aisle, Father proceeded behind them holding on to Carlos’ hand while the people in the pews stared at the young clairvoyant as if he was already canonized.

News of the presence of a child necromancer spread like a wild fire through the slum and beyond, up the hills to the

mansions of the wealthy. At first all Carlos could do was converse with a few birds and then the street dogs but in time his powers matured. Just as Father Valverde predicted, the boy's ability grew to include a reply to almost any question that was put forward.

“Is my son in heaven?” pleaded the mother of the teenager who had been in an accident.

“Yes,” Carlos would reply without hesitation. “And he says he loves you and is waiting for you when the time comes. Live a good life and the reward will astound you.”

At the same time money came pouring in to the coffers of the family. As he had anticipated, Evo was able to end his slow death, ceasing to go down the shaft each day. Even the manager of the mine appeared one evening in his Mercedes and asked for a private audience with the boy. Evo stepped aside and let the manager enter the room set aside for his son's audiences. Their voices were barely audible as they whispered in privacy. Afterwards, pushing aside the curtain that served as the door to the room, the manager appeared to be overwhelmed with emotion. He stood and held Evo Morales his former employee to his breast and wept silently. It was the most moving moment in Evo's entire life. After the manager had left with his armed guards, Evo was incredulous.

“He's just a man,” he said, “like the rest of us! With feelings and sorrows.”

“Yes,” replied Francesca, “just a man.”

The paranormal insights of their son had a domino effect for the entire province, like an earthquake with aftershocks. The attendance at *Our Lady of the Annunciation* swelled to the point where the faithful were seen standing outside in the rain with umbrellas as the donation plate was passed around. Father Valverde looked ten years younger, standing at the altar like a John the Baptist, calling on his flock to believe that their prayers would be heard and answered. And always he was careful to mention his protégé, the young *Tin Boy*, as the local media had taken to calling Carlos Morales.

By the time the boy was twelve years of age, his reputation had spread across the Andes, spirited it seemed by some ancient runner bearing edicts from *the Sun King*. Then as if by grave mischance the news leapt across the chasm at Panama and continued northward. In the matter of a few weeks, the CIA sent word to their counter insurgents they considered this *Tin Boy* a suspicious character. Several informants were sent to ferret out his opinion on key issues like the nationalization of the mines owned and controlled by multinationals. Young Carlos however seemed gifted at detection or - as the confidential reports stated - *deflecting the question(s)*. The response of course was not the least bit satisfactory to those who meet in secrecy. These adjuncts of King Herod had the ways and means at their disposal to quash upstarts in third world countries. A decision was made and forwarded as *Top Secret*. Young Carlos Morales of Bolivia would be brought to the USA as a celebrity. His arrival would be preceded by a profusion of carefully fashioned media hypes, proclaiming him the next

Edgar Cayce or John Lennon. As planned, his picture was pasted all over the media outlets until he was as easily recognized as a Michael Jackson or Justin Beaver. People began lining up to get tickets to venues that had not even been announced.

Word of this development soon reached Father Valverde who had wisely invested his earnings in several race horses. America, he realized, wanted to get their filthy hands on his golden boy. Father realized too that if Carlos ever did go to America he would never again return to Punata, let alone to *Our Lady of the Annunciation*. So he tried to dissuade Evo in several of their weekly meetings with their accountants and board of directors. His arguments were in vain. The magnetism of money and fame was irresistible. Father, being a prudent man, resigned himself to the draft of an agreement that left his percentage intact no matter where or under what conditions Carlos earned more money. That settled the matter. Two airline tickets appeared as if by magic. Carlos and his father (now listed as his manager for 99 years) were scheduled to fly out of La Paz that following weekend. Father Valverde agreed to accompany them to the big city and stood waving with a broken heart from behind a chain link fence as the 747 lifted its nose off the runway and was airborne for America.

The danger was that while the *Tin Boy* was being flown out of the area of the world where his gift originated, he might lose that same gift. Carlos, it was feared, would become just as dimensionless as everyone else in the world. His

gift to see inside of the thoughts of animals and people might well disappear as they flew out of the magnetic field of the southern hemisphere. His father sitting in the seat next to him in the jet that was taking them to the anglicized part of the New World was, in a word, terrified. Neither Carlos nor Evo could speak anything but faltering English and Evo was apprehensive lest the Philistines debunked his son with trick questions. It had happened to Jesus in the Bible so why not to his own son in that evil place known as America?

After a long flight the jet touched down in Los Angeles. The terminal was enormous and hectic. Soon enough Evo found a Spanish speaking stewardess who guided them through a maze of signs and metal detectors to the next boarding venue. In short order, they were again on their way to *the Big Apple* (New York) and Carlos' very first appearance on a late night talk show. Landing at the Kennedy International, a man in a chauffeur uniform was at the luggage carousel, holding up a sign *TIN BOY* so that they made their connection without any issues. A limousine spirited them away in luxury and comfort, slipping like a white fish through miles of turnpikes and overpasses. Evo remained apprehensive, asking as the boy stared out the window of the vehicle, "How is my son doing?"

And Carlos answered, "This is marvellous, father."

The limo left them on the steps of a high rise hotel that was so tall Evo strained his neck trying to see to the top of the building. Bellhops were summoned to carry their luggage

to their room on the 48th floor. Before leaving, the bellhops ventured to ask Carlos not for a tip but for his autograph since they recognized him as the famous *Tin Boy*. Left in peace finally, they found the hotel room was huge with king size beds in separate rooms and floor-to-ceiling windows looking down canyons to the traffic crawling like toys in the streets. His father suggested they use the elevator to find a vendor for a street meal but a phone rang and a voice on the other end of the connection informed Evo that his son was scheduled to appear on *The Johnny Beano Talk Show* later that same evening. Evo tried to insist that they were both very tired and had to delay the appearance but the voice on the end of the phone got pushy. A limousine was waiting for the two of them at the hotel entrance. There was simply no choice in the matter. They were under contract and were compelled to cancel any other plans. Evo said, "Alright, alright," and hung up the phone. In any case it looked pretty dangerous down on those dark city streets.

At the studio they were ushered in to a waiting room with a collection of weirdoes who were milling about before being called on stage for an interview with Johnny Beano. The same neurotic people who had been standing around talking to themselves appeared on the closed circuit TV looking calm and collected, even making jokes, when interviewed in front of millions of fellow Americans. Then the call came for his son to appear. Evo stepped forward but was blocked by several security guards. Only the *Tin Boy* (no one else) was to be allowed to go on stage. "Oh my God," groaned Evo. But he had no choice but to say "Adios" to

his son and hope for the best. In a few moments, staring up at the closed circuit, an announcement was made that the *Tin Boy* was the next guest on *The Johnny Beano Show*. An audience of a thousand strong rose cheering to their feet, applauding as the young Bolivian appeared on stage for the first time in his life. The orchestra attached to the talk show broke in to an upbeat interpretation of *Born Free*.

Carlos, at age twelve, was incredibly poised. Before taking his seat next to the moderator's desk, he managed to wave to the audience as if he was *El Presidente* or at the very least a celebrity of great merit. After rising to shake hands, Johnny Beano scanned the boy's resume that lay before him on his large desk.

"They say," asked Mr. Beano once his audience had calmed down, "you can see in to people's thoughts. Is that correct?"

"Only in a good way," replied the boy.

"Can you see in to my thoughts then?"

"Do you have good thoughts?" asked the boy.

"I asked you first," said the commentator, so the *Tin Boy* conceded, "Yes I can read your thoughts."

"Alright," said Beano who prided himself on spotting a charlatan from a mile away, "what am I thinking now?"

"About your breakfast," came the reply. The technicians in the studio laughed, acutely aware of the talk show host's eating disorder. For a split second, Beano (who was inherently paranoid) thought perhaps the Latino kid was a

plant, a setup by his network. He'd have to carry off this interview with dispassion.

“Indeed,” said Beano. “And what did I have for breakfast?”

“Blueberry waffles,” replied Carlos with conviction.

The revelation of the commentator's *freedom of choice* at the breakfast table caused him to deflect his misgivings for the moment. As a media personality, his style was impeccable, his high ratings a result of the habit he had perfected of making confidential asides to the audience.

“Hey, this kid is good!” he said, addressing a thousand strangers in the audience as personal confidants. There was applause.

Refocusing, Beano probed yet deeper.

“And did I have any topping on my waffles? Did I have espresso or fresh squeezed orange juice?”

Carlos was having a ball, producing a beatific smile that was panned across the world to millions of late night viewers.

“You avoid caffeine in all forms and prefer dream whip for a topping.”

Beano pretended to have had his breath taken away and collapsed at his desk; reactions which were meant to infer that this *Tin Boy* was indeed authentic. The audience was back on its feet, giving the Latino boy a standing ovation.

“Hey,” Beano shouted to the audience, “this kid has what it takes!”

Spontaneous cheering and whistling replaced the applause. The cameras strafed a thousand faces. People looked up with surprise, waving when they saw their own images on a huge stage screen, allowing them to indulge for a few seconds in an hour of public exhibitionism.

“How the heck do you know this stuff?” Beano demanded as if galvanized.

“Its easy,” replied the miner’s son. “It’s a gift. It comes naturally.”

“Well, well, ain’t that something,” conceded Beano - who was condescending for a valid reason: the network had already taken the necessary steps to deface this hoax on public TV. At the briefing, Beano had told his employers he wanted to keep his hands clean and would have washed his fingers in a bowl if they would have allowed him to do so. He insisted on the façade of impartiality. His strategy was to appear benign no matter what the kid said in response to a series of absurd questions. It would be left to his next guest, Ruddy Mac, to discredit the *Tin Boy* in front of millions of viewers.

Ruddy was the most famous of the adult pornography stars and was reputed to have compromised every aspiring starlet in Hollywood. His performances were recorded as live entertainment on late night paid TV, racking up 1.4 billion in box office revenues on last count. So in saunters Ruddy Mac as Johnny Beano’s next guest: the usurper whose one and only purpose on the show was to deface a twelve year psychic from South America. Ruddy by the way had bragged to Evo in the waiting room that his son was “toast”

from this point onwards.

Beano introduced his next guest as “someone who needs no introduction”. Scenes of Ruddy Mac in the embrace of beautiful women flashed for seconds on the overhead. The audience was again on its feet, cheering wildly as Ruddy strutted his six foot four inch stature across the stage along with a wicked grin which was open to interpretation. Just as Carlos had done, Ruddy waved back to an adoring fan base.

Once seated and after an exchange of light banter, Ruddy focussed on the young boy and openly questioned his credibility. Confined to the waiting room, Evo’s worst nightmare of America was coming true. He tried to rush on stage but the guards pinned him back by each arm. “Okay, okay,” he choked as they released him and he was left to sit in a chair and watch his son get discredited in public. The porn star was adlibbing from a very carefully constructed script. Beano made not attempt to intervene.

“You call yourself a clairvoyant?” Ruddy Mac rankled. “Coming up here from no-where-ville to tell Mr. Beano what he had for breakfast! That takes the cake, kid. I have to hand it to you.”

The camera panned Carlos’ stunned expression. Ruddy’s mouth searched about for words he dared not pronounce in public. He continued:

“How much money have you and your handlers made from those poor buggers down in Boliva? Five million, ten? Next you’ll want the government to nationalize the industry just so your father and his buddies can live off the blood, sweat, and tears of the wretched of the earth. Kid, you think you’re fooling us? Not for a bloody second!”

Young Carlos spoke up in a faltering tone.

“No...it’s not my intention to fool anyone...least of all a man like you.”

“I don’t think so,” Ruddy Mac snapped back. “And don’t bullshit us with that nice-kid/cover-up nonsense. Anyone who flies up here on a hoax like yours shouldn’t have the right to associate with decent god fearing Americans.”

The audience began to respond to the change of tone in the interview.

People who a moment earlier had applauded the arrival of the *Tin Boy* were now hissing and booing him. Several million viewers watching the late night talk show were shaking their heads. On the bottom of the screen beneath the boy’s face, messages scrolling along an electronic by-line pronounced the kid a Marxist agitator. Meanwhile Evo was in the reception area with his face in his hands. Finally Carlos spoke up in his own defence.

“I can read your thoughts too, if you give me a chance.” He stared intently and without guile. The profile of Ruddy swallowing uncomfortably was flicked away for another image. The men in the control room were running out of options.

Beano saved the day by saying to the *Tin Boy*, “Okay, kid, go ahead. Read this guy’s mind but keep it clean, alright?”

The audience laughed at the innuendo and the camera panned back for a broad view of the theatre. Technicians packing cameras on their shoulders were shown moving surreptitiously in the wings of the film set, exploring every possible close-up while at the same time keeping themselves as hidden as possible.

“I need your Rolex,” said the *Tin Boy* to the porn star. There was hesitation for a moment but since the whole interview was complicit, only those in the control room were allowed to see Beano nod that Ruddy should consent to the request. Ruddy of course was incapable of thinking for himself. He complied, flipping off his watch, saying, “Don’t pawn the damn thing”.

Carlos lowered his head in concentration as he held the watch in full view of the audience, the cameras, Ruddy and Beano, the men who had plotted the death of Guevara in Bolivia, and millions of viewers across North America. With a smile he then handed the watch back to Ruddy Mac

but said nothing. Beano was nervous about his ratings and the time allotted until the next commercial for his *Built Like A Rock* pickup trucks. He insisted that the *Tin Boy* speak up - which Carlos did, saying to Ruddy:

“Your watch told me your mother was working as a prostitute in a house of ill repute in New Orleans on the day she conceived you. She had sex that day with five different clients. One was a Chinese delivery man; one a black recording artist. One was a lonely French man; another was a Polynesian of white and native ancestry. The last client of the day was a Cuban refugee”.

Then turning to look Ruddy fully in the face, the twelve year old Bolivian said: “With such a background, you - sir - can claim to be the biggest bastard in all of America!”

There was a moment of silent panic in the theatre. No one had anticipated this turn of events and least of all from a child impostor from a two bit mining town in Bolivia. Suddenly Ruddy laughed uproariously and said, “Well, damn if this kid isn’t the greatest!”

All rose to give the *Tin Boy* the standing ovation he fully deserved. You had to hand it to him, the kid had guts. Beano too had risen from his chair and was applauding Carlos who remained seated, his hands folded in prayer at his face while he bowed in humble supplication like some maharishi.

A howl of laughter rose too in the conference room of the Special Forces assigned to monitor the activities of the *Tin Boy* on closed circuit TV. A pensive silence followed as the leader of their group looked around the table. Then he passed judgement, saying, "It's too bad." Everyone in the room understood. More time passed before he spoke in confidence to his trained provocateurs, "The kid's too smart for his own good." Then his eyes passed around the faces in the room until he made a choice.

"You think you can handle this assignment?" he asked an agent.

"Why not?" the man said in response. "He's no different than anyone else, as far as I'm concerned."

"What about the father?" another asked.

"Yes, both of them. We don't want him going back to Bolivia with a chip on his shoulder. That's all we need is a wildcat strike that pushes up the price of tin."

END