

Chapter 1: Departure

Heaving lines and swelling tides of restless travellers greet Emilio Winters and Karl Deadshore as they walk through the giant silver and glass automatic doors into terminal four of New York City's JFK airport.

'This is it, Karl! We're actually on our way!' Emilio announces with pride, as he turns to look at his ever-present companion.

'Emilio, why exactly have I been lugging your suitcase around for the last hour?' Karl responds wearily.

'God dammit, Karl, do you ever listen? I told you, I sprained my wrist feeling up Sophie Atkins 40 DD's.' Shaking his head, Emilio gazes up towards the enormous bright blue departures and arrivals monitor. Every listed flight has been delayed, except flights to Lima, Peru.

'Great, you see this Karl? It must be our lucky day.'

Emilio lowers his Ray Ban sunglasses and glances at his chubby friend, shaking his head slightly at the combination of flip flops, bright yellow Bermuda shorts and gray and white striped T-shirt.

'Looks like we have time to kill. I need a soda.' Karl struggles to keep up as Emilio darts through the crowds. The companions stand together watching the passing mad parade of pedestrians as they cough up four dollars each for an ice cold Pepsi. Just before they start guzzling the drinks, Emilio notices a pretty blonde at the other end of the magazine stand. The girl is absorbed by her potential purchases. Emilio looks over at Karl in dastardly thought and challenges him.

"Hey Karl, the last one to down their drink has to go and ask that girl over there for her number."

Karl reckons he can down his drink faster than Emilio anyway, so he agrees, although he knows the penalty would prove challenging for him.

"Ok Emilio on 3. 1, 2, 3!"

Emilio tilts his bottle and twists it slightly, allowing the carbonated drink to sink quicker, finishing before his overweight friend.

"Ha! Looks like you gotta try your luck, Karl. You better get over there before she walks off, oh, and take one of these!"

Emilio holds out a stick of peppermint gum.

"Go on Karl, take it, trust me, you need it!"

"Damn you, E, my breath doesn't stink, and anyway, how the hell did you finish that drink quicker than me!"

"It's all about technique Karl, it's all in the wrist!"

“You said your wrist was sprained!” Karl responds in annoyance.

“My other wrist Karl! I have two, if you hadn’t noticed. Now quick, get your ass over there.”

Taking a deep breath, Karl reluctantly walks up to the blonde, who is even prettier close up than he had first thought. Karl walks up beside the girl, unseen, and looks back at Emilio gesturing with his hands 'what do I do?' Emilio just waves him on and takes his camera phone out to film his friend's antics. Emilio predicts he will capture a spectacular rejection. Karl picks up a magazine without looking at it and pretends to be reading, before smiling at the girl, trying to get her attention. She notices Karl looking in her direction and turns to address him with a wry smile.

“Are you ok?” She asks.

“Oh yeah, fine, I'm fine, you know, cool. So, you like magazines?”

The girl smiles and replies sarcastically.

“Yeah, I like reading. So you’re into women’s health, it seems!”

Karl hasn’t a clue what she’s talking about until he notices he has picked up a copy of a Woman’s World Weekly magazine.

“Oh this, this isn’t for me, it’s for my aunt, she loves this magazine, it’s her favourite. No, I’m more into fast cars, you know, that kind of thing.”

“Oh, so where’s your aunt and what car do you drive?” Says the blonde playfully, realizing he’s lying through his teeth.

Karl pauses, racking his brain, with a blank expression on his face.

“My aunt’s at home and I have a Porsche!”

“So, you’re going to take your aunt’s magazine on holiday with you! Nice! Wow, and you have a Porsche! You must be rich, do have any pictures of it on your phone?”

“You know what, I think I do!”

Karl is panicking and pats down his outfit in an attempt to pretend to find his phone, which is in his back pocket.

“Damn, you know what, I think I left my phone at home! It’s a really cool car though!”

The blonde finds Karl sweet, but she doesn’t believe the lost phone routine, so she makes an excuse to escape the situation, which is becoming increasingly uncomfortable.

“Ok, well, nice meeting you. I gotta catch a plane.”

Realizing she’s about to leave, and desperate to complete his mission, Karl blurts out, “Could I get your number and maybe call you sometime?”

She looks at him for a moment, and takes pity on him, figuring he will never remember it anyway.

“Ok, it’s 555 98431. Nice meeting you! Bye!”

Karl stares after her as she walks away, repeating the number, trying desperately not to forget it.

“555 98431, 555 98431”

Emilio waltzes over, still filming, having captured the entire catastrophe from a distance.

“So what was that number again, Karl!”

“It was 555 89131 I think, no wait, 555 98113. No, that’s not it, darn, I’ve lost it!”

“Ha, you lose buddy! Man, this is some hilarious footage! I have to upload it to the internet dude! Woman’s World Weekly, classic!”

“Hey, she gave me her number, Emilio! You saw that!”

“Forgetting a number is as bad as not getting one at all! And Karl, your phone’s in your back pocket, buddy. Wait, I’ll call the girl back so you can show her your Porsche!”

Emilio is cracking up, and shouts out to the young blonde who’s walking away.

“Yo lady! Come back! I’ve found his phone!”

The girl turns back toward Emilio, but is too far away to understand what he is shouting, and keeps walking, eager to get away.

Karl is frustrated, while Emilio basks in his friend’s pathetic attempt.

“Yeah, well, she smiled at me at least!”

“She was probably pushing a fart out, Karl. Anyway, you lose, stupid! Come on, let’s go to the departure lounge and grab a seat.”

Emilio walks off and Karl picks up their luggage and drags it, dropping Emilio’s suitcase on purpose and kicking it a few times. They enter the busy departure lounge, which is fizzing with people, eventually managing to find a couple of seats free and make themselves comfortable. Karl shuffles around nervously in his seat, unable to get comfortable.

“So Emilio, how long’s this flight going to take?”

“Karl, that’s the third time you’ve asked me the same question!” Sighs Emilio.

“Sorry, there have been a lot of things to remember today!”

“I got us direct tickets to Lima. The flight is eight hours!” Emilio replies abruptly.

“Whoa, eight hours, we should have gone to Europe, it would have been quicker!”

Karl begins to tap his fingernails against the plastic sides of the grey chair. His erratic and annoying behaviour starts to get on Emilio’s nerves.

“Can you stop tapping, Karl? I’ll be honest, it’s starting to piss me off.”

“Oh yeah, sorry buddy, my bad!”

Karl starts playing with his phone, which eventually leads him onto a search engine. He looks around his surroundings for inspiration before entering JFK international airport into the web portal. He clicks on one of the many search results. After a few minutes of reading he slowly becomes frantic.

“Holy mother of God! I’m sorry, Emilio, but you’re flying to Peru on your own, buddy!”

Emilio rolls his eyes and folds his arms waiting for the outlandish reason Karl is about to come up with.

“Listen to this! As recently as 2001 a flight from JFK en route to the Dominican Republic crashed, killing all 260 people on board! Can you believe it, as recently as 2001, that’s like yesterday, brother!”

Emilio, unsure of what to make of Karl’s find, has a flash of inspiration.

“Karl, are you scared of flying?”

“I’m not scared, bro, but look at the facts!”

“You are! You’re terrified of flying! Yeah, that’s it, I wondered why you were making so many excuses when I put the idea of travelling to you, it just never occurred to me. Why didn’t you just tell me at the time!”

Karl doesn’t want to signal any weaknesses in front of his competitive friend.

“I’m not terrified of anything except my mother! Ok?”

“Your mum’s a saint, Karl.”

“Alright, so I’m a little bit nervous about flying! Big deal!”

“Nervous! You’re practically peeing in your pants!”

“Look, it’s just not natural. I mean, look at the size of the damn things for a start, it’s beyond me how they even get off the ground!”

“It’s basic aerodynamics. It’s safe, Karl. In fact, statistics say you’re more likely to get killed driving to the airport than you are on the plane journey itself.”

“Yeah, I know, I’ve heard that one, it just doesn’t make it any easier.”

“And 2001 was like a million years ago! Technology has progressed so much, flying is safer now than it’s ever been before. Anyway, you shouldn’t be scared of dying! The way I see it, before we were born we didn’t exist forever right! So we’ve already not been alive forever and it wasn’t so bad the first time around was it!”

“You’ve totally lost me, buddy!”

“There’s nowhere to get lost, it’s simple”

Karl sits there trying to work out what he’s just been told and for the time being isn’t worrying about the flight as he struggles to get his head around the concept of eternity. Three quarters of an hour passes, with the boys sitting in silence, watching people from all over the world, both wondering

where everyone is headed, and what they all do with their lives. After a while Emilio notices two South American men out of the corner of his eye, standing about ten feet away. They seem to keep glancing in the boys' direction. Emilio nudges Karl to bring the men to his attention. Karl blatantly stares straight at them. One of the men has a large, deep scar shaped like a vagina below his left eye. It looks almost as if someone has tried to slice his eye out with a blunt blade. He is tall, with slick black hair and two protruding front teeth covered slightly by a thick moustache. The other has a black dragon tattoo on the back of his neck, he is short and appears bald, through shaving his head closely. Emilio mutters under his breath to Karl.

'One of them looks a bit like Robert Lopera.'

'Go on, Emilio, enlighten me. Who is Robert Lopera? Karl asks nervously, as he wipes perspiration from his brow.

'You know. It was right here at JFK. Officials stopped him, and opened his bags up, and there were these chocolate truffles and pistachio nuts. Well, you see, these truffles were chocolate covered cocaine balls. Even the pistachio shells were filled with the stuff. I think they seized like five hundred thousand dollars worth of drugs.'

Karl is intrigued and genuinely fascinated by the story. The two men start walking straight towards them.

'Holy crap, Emilio, they're headed right for us. These guys look dodgy.'

'Relax, we're in an airport, there's CCTV everywhere.'

The boys watch with panicky eyes as the two men walk straight past them and up to three half dressed American women who have been sitting three rows behind them the whole time. Emilio looks at Karl and cracks up with laughter.

'Your face, man, you should have seen your face, it looks so pale right now'.

Karl smiles as he reflects on how ridiculously paranoid he was being. Emilio notices their flight is boarding in twenty minutes.

"Come on, Karl, we gotta go check our luggage in."

The boys gather their luggage and head towards the walk through metal detectors before the main departure gate. As Karl reflects on the humorous situation he was just in, his mood is temporarily lifted.

'You know what, Emilio? This trip is going to be fun. I can't wait to get to Peru, the beach parties, and the surf. It's going to be wild. I'm going to be chilling, checking the ladies, drinking my ass off while you're there with your head down boring the crap out of yourself with your stupid notepad, doing your research on whatever the hell it is'.

'Exotic plant species, Karl.'

'Yeah, exotic plants, that's it. Man, it was good of your folks to go halves on my ticket. I don't think I could have raised the full six hundred otherwise. I guess your dad's rolling in it, working for Harrison and Whatsitsname.'

"Harrison & Warner Investments, and it's not all plain sailing, Karl, my dad's had to work hard to get into the position he's in. He's sacrificed a lot, including time with his own family".

Emilio stands, bright-eyed, waiting to go through security. Beside him Karl is starting to get nervous again, and reaches into his baggy shorts, pulling out an energy bar in an attempt to rid his mind of thoughts of flying. As he's eating, he starts staring out of the huge window beside them. At first, he stares at his own greasy reflection on the mirrored surface of the window, checking his skin for blemishes and adjusting his hair, before staring out onto the runway, seeing rippling waves of heat rise into the air.

'Check out that funky looking plane, Emilio.'

'Yeah, that's Continental Airlines' new Boeing 737- 900ER Jumbo Jet, painted in a retro livery to commemorate the airline's 75th anniversary.

'Retro watery?'

'Livery. It's plane paint.'

Karl smiles with a genuine appreciation of his friend's seemingly endless knowledge. Ahead, an alarm screams out across the airport, triggered by someone trying to pass through the metal detector. Karl struggles to see the commotion as directly in front of him a grossly overweight guy is blocking his view. Slightly taller than Karl, Emilio manages to sneak a glimpse.

'Well, I'll be damned if it isn't old scarface himself.'

Unseen until now, two guards, one round, one tall, suddenly break through a line of nosey rubbernecks gathered to the left of the metal detector and apprehend scarface. Round frisks him and draws a stainless steel hip flask from his back pocket.

'Why didn't you declare this at the back of the queue, would have saved the embarrassment.'

Scarface looks the guard up and down in disgust before muttering a profanity under his breath in a foreign language, whilst readjusting his clothes from the scuffle.

The guard tries to be professional, reeling off the rules of procedure to justify his actions while checking the contents of the hip flask, which is empty. He hands it back to scarface before pointing his finger in the air and circling it to signal the recommencement of the security checks, which paused for the incident.

Karl, who has been transfixed by the commotion, but unable to see exactly what the guards have found, raises his eyebrows at Emilio. They check in with their hand luggage, and head down the departure tunnel to board the plane.

As they board, a young air hostess greets them. She parades a manufactured smile over an orange face plied with masses of red lipstick, which seem to have been applied with a trowel. Emilio hands over both tickets.

"That's row E, seats 38 and 39, located on the left hand side in the middle of the cabin." She smiles with artificial enthusiasm, revealing lipstick stained teeth.

Emilio and Karl battle their way through the busy cabin, past the rows of white and blue checkered seats, until they come to their row. The boys' chairs are on the far left of the cabin beside an oval window.

"Which seat you want, Karl?"

"You can sit by the window, brother!"

Emilio takes the window seat while Karl struggles to put their hand luggage in the overhead compartment.

"Don't offer to help then, Emilio!" Says Karl sarcastically.

"Ok then, buddy! I won't, that's very kind of you!" Emilio pulls a stupid face.

As Karl struggles to push his bulky rucksack into the medium sized compartment he clumsily loses his footing, causing the heavy bag to fall back towards him. The momentum pushes Karl into the lap of an old gentleman. Looking up at the gentleman in despair, he opens his mouth to apologize, but the gentleman beats him with the first words.

"What the bloody hell do you think you are doing, boy? Can't even put your luggage away safely without messing everything up?"

"Sorry sir, it was an accident!"

"Excuses, that's all I bloody hear from you young people these days. We never made any excuses in my day! Now get off me, unless you're planning on sitting there the rest of the flight!"

Emilio is creasing up in the corner at the gentleman's reaction. Karl gets up, apologizing profusely, and then focuses on putting his hand luggage away properly before assuming his seat next to Emilio and breathing a sigh of relief. A few minutes later, just as the boys are getting themselves settled, a dark haired, hourglass figured, extremely good-looking lady walks up, checks her ticket and takes the seat next to Karl. The lady is well travelled, friendly and full of self-confidence. She immediately makes contact with the boys and greets them with a smile as she takes her seat.

“Alright boys, nice to meet you. My name’s Crystal. Well, it looks like this is my seat, so just let me know when you need to get out. Or if you need me to get you anything!”

The boys’ are taken aback by her self-confidence. They both say hello enthusiastically at the same time. Emilio then leans straight across Karl and offers his hand.

“Hi, nice to meet you. I’m Emilio, and this is Karl. Karl snores like a mule and drools like a dog so watch out for that!”

Karl looks out in front of himself with his mouth open in shock.

“Emilio, please tell me you did not just say that!”

Crystal grins mischievously, realizing Emilio is poking fun at his friend’s expense and addresses Karl directly.

“Don’t worry about it, I snore too, so it’s no big deal, just don’t drool on me!”

Crystal looks directly at Karl, smiling. Karl warms to her instantly. The doors to the cabin are locked, and the remaining passengers take their seats. The air hostess starts her polished pre flight routine. As she rattles through the safety procedure should anything go wrong, Karl closes his eyes and tries to imagine sitting on a bus. Reality kicks in and starts getting the better of him and he begins to feel nauseous, taking deep breaths, in through his nose and out through his mouth. Emilio realizes Karl is struggling and can’t help but quickly take off one of his trainers, which he’s been walking around in for hours. Pulling his smelly sock from his sweaty foot, he places the sock under Karl’s nose, trying his best not to laugh in the process. Karl draws a deep breath through his nostrils with his eyelids firmly shut. His throat fills up with a sour vinegar stench, which makes him feel like vomiting. He opens his eyes as he exhales, nearly vomiting into Emilio’s lap. Emilio creases up watching Karl turn blue in the face.

“Emilio, you bastard! Man, I don’t feel so good. I think I’m going to be sick! Emilio, I gotta get to the bathroom, pronto!”

“Well, it’s too late, look!”

Emilio points to the seat belt sign that’s lit up in front of them.

“You can’t go now, we’re about to take off, so buckle up and get a grip!” Emilio struggles to contain his laughter.

Crystal, overhearing all this, can’t resist but try and help in some way. She also doesn’t like the idea of Karl being sick over her so she gets the emergency sick bag from under her seat, then rifles through her bag and pulls out a pill bottle containing Meclizine, an over the counter drug.

“Here, I don’t like flying much either; they’re mild, they just help take the edge off!”

Karl hesitantly accepts and passes the pill bottle over to Emilio to inspect for approval to reassure him it's ok.

"Yeah, Karl, they're mild, you'll be fine!"

Karl takes the pill bottle and has trouble undoing the cap.

"Great, it's broken!"

"Give it here! You have to push the cap down and then twist, it's to stop children like you swallowing tablets!" Emilio says sarcastically.

Karl grabs the pill bottle from Emilio angrily.

"Yeah, I knew that, I just forgot!"

"Try the controlled breathing again, this time with your eyes open."

Suggests Crystal, trying not to laugh.

Karl tries the technique again.

"It doesn't work, guys! It just makes it harder to breath!"

"Just keep at it, it'll get easier!" Replies Crystal.

As Karl is trying to concentrate on his breathing, he doesn't notice the plane slowly gathering momentum and lifting off the ground. The plane reaches its summit and then levels out, calmly stabilizing in full flight.

"How you feel there, buddy?" Checks Emilio.

"I feel a lot better thanks to Crystal".

Karl's speech starts to become sloppy, and comes across as if he's been drinking for a couple of hours.

"Hey Crystal, you're great you know! You're so helpful and caring, and like really nice. When you first sat down I knew you'd be cool. You're one of the nicest people I've ever met. And I've only known you a short while."

"Karl, for someone so heavy your such a lightweight! Seriously, this guy gets drunk off one beer, I'm not kidding!"

"Hey, that's not true!" Says Karl drowsily.

He starts to fall into a deep sleep. Crystal puts her hand up for a high five, and Emilio responds, slapping her hand in relief, as he doesn't want to listen to Karl's plane anxiety the whole journey.

"So, how long have you guys been friends then?" Asks Crystal, trying to make light conversation.

"Well, Karl and I met about five years ago now, and became friends after we found out we had a few things in common."

"What's that? What did you have in common?" Asks Crystal, intrigued.

"Well, we discovered that we're both only children, and that we both grew up in England, before our parents moved to New York. You know I don't think our accents have changed that much since we've been here!"

"Oh wow! That's unusual, it's almost like you guys were always destined to meet! What part of England are you guys from?"

“I grew up in Essex. We had a big house, nothing like the kind of houses you get out here, though. Houses in the States are massive in comparison. And Karl grew up in Weymouth, on the south coast of England.”

“I’d love to visit England one day, it’s such a historical place, isn’t it? So why did your parents move to New York, anyway?”

“Well, my dad is a stockbroker and the firm he was working for in London had its headquarters in the New York, and he was travelling back and forth all the time. He’d take my mum and me over with him and we would stay during the school holidays. Dad was working his way up in the company and needed to spend more and more time there. He suggested we all give it a go living there. I don’t remember having much say in the decision at the time, I didn’t really want to leave my friends all that much, but it was so exciting once we were there that I quickly adjusted. I think it was a lot harder for Karl to adjust at first.”

“So why did Karl’s parents move to New York, then?”

“Yeah, that’s a different story altogether. You see, Karl’s dad didn’t stick around when he was a kid. So he grew up with his mum on a council estate. She ended up doing everything for him, like any good mum would, I guess. Perhaps a bit too much though, in my opinion. Anyway, his mum would always spend her spare time sat on the computer talking to people in various chat rooms and forums. And on one occasion she got talking to a guy called Paul who said he had his own business in New York. They hit it off, talking to each other on the computer every night, and soon he invited her over to New York. He was so infatuated with her that he saved up the money to send air tickets to England for Karl and his mum to visit. He turned out to be a great guy, although his doughnut making business wasn’t as glamorous or profitable as he made out it was. They got hitched and Karl got dragged along for the ride. Luckily, Paul turned out to be a decent father figure for Karl. They go and watch Knicks games together all the time, they seem to get on quite well.”

“That’s fascinating. Sorry, but you’ll have to excuse me, I need the bathroom.”

“That’s cool, I’m gonna kick back and listen to some tunes on my phone, I’m beat.”

Chapter 2: Arrival

In the stifling heat, beneath the mid-afternoon sun, traffic is bustling in Lima. A yellow cab pulls up outside the menacing beauty of Lima's central bank. The driver steps cumbersomely out of the taxi and onto the kerb. Tall, middle aged and overweight, he sports a leather waistcoat and cap, which he pulls over his eyes as he walks slowly through the revolving doors and into the bank lobby. Once inside, the mammoth-man looks at the long queue in front of the five busy counters. He cracks a half smile and starts slowly barging his way through the queue of people, oblivious and unaffected by the protests resonating around him. The people surrounding him are frustrated, but relieved once the stale smelling mammoth has passed them. Walking up to a perplexed cashier, he slams a debit card onto the counter, along with a passport for validation.

“I want 84,000 Peruvian Nuevo Sols” he slurs.

The tanned woman looks at him with disgust, as he doesn't appear to have washed for days. She turns toward her manager and signals for assistance, because the amount to be dispensed is unusually high. Her manager, whose head is buried in a desk a few feet behind her looks up eagerly, and walks over to investigate the issue. He looks at the passport photo and then places the man's debit card into a keypad terminal.

“Could you enter your pin number, please, for security purposes.” The prim and proper bank manager forces a smile, which lies parallel to his pencil moustache. The mammoth-man grunts and enters the four-digit number. The pin is verified and the manager checks the screen in front of him. He sees a payment for 84,000 Peruvian sole, from a company called Vipercom Pharmaceuticals. He looks back slowly again at the man and checks his mug against his passport photo one final time, before turning swiftly to the young cashier and giving her a surprised nod of approval. The cash is counted out meticulously, sorted into bundles, bound, placed in a paper bag and pushed toward the mammoth-man, who cockily stashes the cash bundle on the inside of his sweaty waistcoat and triumphantly walks out of the bank. Once outside in the warm smog the man sees his cab has been clamped. Instead of airing discontent, he merely laughs. He walks to the side of the humid street and beckons an approaching taxi. Stooping down to the cab window, he stares at the driver.

“The Hotel Tropicana!” The Mammoth demands.

The driver turns down his radio, which is blaring pop music.

“I know it well, I hear the drinks are free!”

The Mammoth looks somewhat confused as he climbs into the back seat of the taxi. The driver looks at his rear view mirror and struggles to contain his exuberance and inquisitiveness as he begins to negotiate the manic streets.

“Hey, I know you, don’t I?” He asks.

The Mammoth cracks yet another lazy couldn’t-give-a-damn smile.

“Yeah, I picked you up a couple of days ago from that strip club! Hey, did you win the lottery? The Tropicana isn’t cheap, you know.”

The Mammoth shakes his head and looks out of the window, as if to shut himself off from a further interaction. The driver relents, realizing he’s not getting anywhere, and turns his radio back up, muttering to himself.

“I gotta start playing the lotto!”

Emilio and Karl appear through the arrivals gate of Jorge Chavez International Airport in Lima. They stand chatting at the luggage terminal. Karl is calmed by the immaculate cleanliness and professional calm of Lima’s award winning international airport.

“Hey, this is a smart airport, Emilio, real slick!”

“Of course it is, Karl, what did you expect?”

“I thought it would be like going back to the dark ages, because you kept talking about how Peru is one of the oldest civilizations in the world.”

Emilio’s mind locks in on the subject.

“Well, it is, Karl, but obviously they’ve advanced a fair bit in the last so-many thousand years. You know, humans have been on this earth for millions of years now. And then about five thousand years ago civilizations started to pop up out of nowhere, and the Peruvians are one of the oldest of them. They were among the first civilizations to start doing things like mathematics, writing, pottery making and metallurgy!”

“What’s metallurgy?” Karl scratches his head.

“It’s means creating and manipulating metals, in layman’s terms!”

“What are layman’s terms?”

Emilio starts getting frustrated by the constant questions.

“Layman’s terms mean explaining a complex subject to someone like you in a way in which you can understand!” Emilio replies, with a hint of venom.

Karl looks down at his sneakers, trying to ignore the ridicule he senses. His stomach feels fragile from vomiting on the plane. Emilio is keen to move on and enjoy his time in Peru. He is elated, massively inspired by his surrounds, and excited by the prospect of his plans beginning to unfold. He pushes his earphones in, and selects a Rolling Stones song from his phone. The euphoric track Jumping Jack Flash kicks in, and Emilio begins to jolt and

punch the air in rhythmic ecstasy. His imagination is ignited as he begins to cavort through a scattered sea of foreign bodies. He is blissfully unfazed, with unrepentant disregard for how any of the people around perceive him. Karl walks behind, laughing at his friend's bravado and show of elation, which remedies the sour moment between the two only seconds before. Karl holds his phone up to Emilio's showmanship and catches the improvised performance on film. Emilio jumps around, miming to the song, occasionally walking up to strangers and dancing inoffensively in front of them. Passersby see the two boys filming and dancing, most of them smiling and grinning as they pass the scene. The song fades out, and Emilio walks in provocative slow motion towards Karl's rolling camera. Karl puts his phone away shaking his head, grinning ear to ear.

"That's some great footage, bro! You crack me up sometimes. So, where we are staying then, Emilio!"

"Karl seriously, you never listen to a word I say, do you! It's called the Hotel Tropicana"

"Hotel Tropicana! Sounds like the title to that crappy song". Replies Karl sarcastically.

"You're thinking of the Copacabana, Karl, and loads of people love that song, including me!"

"What is with you and your old music, Emilio? I just don't get it!"

"I'm a connoisseur, Karl. Fine wine, art, music, women."

"Since when did you start collecting art and drinking fine wine, and what's a connoisseur anyway?"

"I have drunk one hundred dollar bottles of wine, Karl! Come to think of it, so have you! Do you remember that little house party I threw when my parents went on that Caribbean cruise and you threw up on Emily Saunders?"

"I wasn't sick on her, Emilio, I just sneezed and blew a few chunks out by accident, that's all."

"Who are you kidding, Karl, you completely vomited all over the poor girl's head. She had to wash her hair five times just to get rid of the smell of your guts! It tainted her forever, Karl. I swear she used to be this sweet innocent blonde. After one evening hanging around with you she became a purple haired pot head."

"Emily was talking about dying her hair a different colour anyway, Emilio."

Emilio doesn't reply as he notices their luggage travelling down to them on the sloped conveyer belt.

“Come on, Karl, let’s get our stuff and get on our way.” Seizing his luggage from the conveyer belt Emilio sees an opportunity to educate his companion.

“Getting back to the connoisseur thing, Karl. It’s an old French expression. It means someone who has a lot of knowledge of a fine art or cuisine, an expert in the matters of taste, to put it another way. Also, coincidentally and unfortunately for your delicate mind, it sounds a lot like Cono Sur. Which is a province in the south of Lima. You see Cono Sur is one of the six areas that make up the Lima metropolitan area. It is located in the southern part of the metropolis. The area is popular for its awesome beaches. But we're staying in the area where the beaches are generally used for surfing rather than bathing.” Emilio parrots the Peru information pamphlet he read on the flight over.

“Awesome beaches, we have to visit some of those! You know this Cono Sur thing is starting to sound really cool.”

“Are you for real, Karl?” Says Emilio with a half-baked gaze. Karl picks up his luggage and stands up straight, looks directly at Emilio and replies.

“Connoisseur. I get it. So, for example, I’m a connoisseur of beautiful ladies. And the beaches in Cono Sur are full of attractive women!” Bursting with laughter Emilio puts his arm around Karl and escorts him out of the airport.

“Jesus, Karl, I think I just taught you something! You know what buddy, maybe you’re not such a dumb ass after all.”

Chapter 3: Casino Tropicana

The cyan glass panels of Lima airport reflect the clouds, hanging heavy in the humid atmosphere. Between the sky and the surrounding mountains the city's pollution problem is held perfectly in place. Four wide roads stretch away from the airport, carrying passengers to and from the flight centre. Emilio and Karl have hardly placed their suitcases on the tarmac before a yellow taxi springs from nowhere, as if it were preying on the morsels of life that spill from the thriving airport. Through a cloud of fumes the head of the driver appears, beaming.

“Gentlemen, greatest taxi in all of Peru here to help!”

Emilio looks at Karl, with ‘what a character’ written onto his face, and instantly makes friendly contact.

“That’s great, do you know the Hotel Tropicana?”

“Ahh yes, I know it well! I hear the drinks are free!” Quotes the driver, hoping for a reaction.

“Oh yeah! Fun and sunshine, apparently there’s enough for everyone!”

Says Emilio jovially, realizing the song lyrics.

The driver jumps out, opens the boot and throws their luggage in, without a thought for any valuable items that could be inside. The boys tumble onto the uncomfortable worn rear seat of the taxi, and the driver cautiously starts to navigate them toward their destination. Turning to glance at the boys in the back, he proudly presents his customized taxi information card from his messy dashboard. He hands the card to the boys via a letterbox cut-out in the cheap plexiglass partition.

“Now listen! You boys are new here, and I can tell we’re best friends already, so! Here is my personal number, you need to go anywhere you call Carlos and I will be there before you blink. I know Lima like the back of my hand! I have lived here all my life. I know the good from the very bad. I am the only taxi driver you can trust.”

Emilio reaches out with a friendly smile to take the card and then turns his attention to the otherworldly surroundings, which Karl is already fixated with. The streets of Lima are a constant eye opener for Emilio, who is shocked to see dangerously unmaintained buses and cars. The chaotic traffic they have slipped amongst seems to have no lane sense, but despite all the unruly vehicles, the streets have some of the best traffic lights and road markings he has ever seen. Drifting back to what Carlos was saying Emilio gives his delayed response.

“That’s great Carlos, we don’t know much about this place, it’s really good of you to offer your services like that.”

Karl is gripping the internal door handle tightly. The jerky, disjointed motion of the cab swerving through uncoordinated traffic makes him feel on edge and uneasy. Emilio is excited and thrilled by the same experience. He is almost disappointed as they pull up outside their destination from the sheer eye-opening delight of the journey. Carlos lets out a fake cough into his fist as he prepares to ask for his fee.

“That will be 25 sole please, kind men! You have arrived safe, as promised”

“Here you go Carlos buddy, keep the change.”

Emilio passes 50 sole through the scratched Perspex window, double the fare: a generous and spontaneous gesture, born out of the excitement of the moment. As Carlos receives the offering he reacts with unrestrained delight.

“Yes! Yes! If you need anything, anything at all, you call Carlos! All other taxi driver’s rip you off! I tell you what, as extra special service I will base myself around here for a while just to make sure you get best possible taxi.”

Emilio hauls himself off the back seat, and leans in through the front window, smiling.

“It’s a gesture of good will, Carlos.”

“Of course, of course, kind gentleman.”

Carlos fetches their luggage and bids them farewell, bowing several times, before heading off to find more seemingly rich tourists. They boys stand at the bottom of a steep flight of stone steps, which are draped in a deep red carpet. They look up with jaws gaping at the scale of the mile-high skyscraper. The Hotel and Casino Tropicana sign is lit up in bright red italics. The sign stands regally above tinted black glass revolving doors.

“This place is epic.” Gasps Karl.

“Yeah, my dad has stayed here a few times, he booked it for us. I must admit I didn’t realize it would be quite so upmarket.”

“It reminds me of the time I went to Las Vegas and partied hard.”

“Karl, you went with your mum and stepdad! And knowing your mum, she wouldn’t have let you out of her sight.”

“You’re just jealous because you’ve never been.”

“No, I’m just looking out for you buddy. I don’t want to see you walking around under this veil of delusion your whole life. Come on, Karl, come and join me in reality. Let’s go and check this place out.”

They grab their luggage and walk up the steps. Emilio playfully spins around in the revolving doors three times, before continuing on into the white marble of the grand Art Deco foyer. Awestruck, they step past perfect, lush-green indoor palms. As the boys approach the reception desk they are

addressed graciously by a beautiful brunette, dressed in a smart dark gray suit with a gold name badge, spelling Carina. She smiles widely.

“Welcome to the Hotel and Casino Tropicana, do you have a reservation?”

Karl’s jaw drops to another level as he is instantly smitten, and can only muster a faint mutter from under his breath

“I have no reservations about you.”

Carina looks puzzled.

“Did you say you have no reservation?”

Emilio displays his annoyance by nudging Karl firmly with the outside of his forearm, the nudge doubling as a signal, warning Karl to keep his trap shut and act cool.

“Ignore him, he’s got sunstroke. We have a reservation under the name Winters.”

Carina delicately taps the name into the unseen computer behind the desk.

“Ah yes, I think this is it. I just need some form of I.D and a valid credit card.”

Emilio hands over an American Express card and both passports.

“Excellent. You are staying in room 157, the deluxe suite, two single beds have been set up as requested”.

“Wait a minute, one room, two beds, what happened to all that talk of our own rooms, Emilio?”

Emilio sighs, realizing his dad’s intervention.

“Look, dad’s paying for all this on one condition - his rules. He just wants us to stick together, that’s all. We’re also not supposed to deviate from the tourist excursions, but what he doesn’t know won’t hurt him. Come on Karl, lighten up, we could never afford this on our own, we should think ourselves lucky, especially you, Karl. Didn’t your mum once sell her dog to get your dad’s car fixed?”

Frustrated and embarrassed, Karl picks up his luggage and storms off, shouting “That’s not true Emilio, why do you always have to bring that up? I’m getting sick of it.”

Carina hands over the room key and casino ID cards with a smile, trying to remain professional and not laugh at the outburst.

“Here’s your keys and your casino ID’s. You’ll need these to buy drinks and play at the casino tables. At the back of the casino are the elevators that will take you up to your room. You can’t miss them.”

Emilio takes the items, thanks Carina and casually walks off after Karl. He quickly catches up with his friend, who stands in the archway at the entrance of the casino. The boys look on, impressed at the detail of the distinguished

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