

HOW MY SON GOT HIS NAME

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Naming a child, especially your first-born, is a sensitive undertaking, fraught with obligations, traditions and hurt feelings. Should you name the child after a grandparent? After the richest or most prominent relative? After a politician or artist? Or pick a name that's in vogue? It's not a trivial matter. When properly chosen, a name can be an augury of future success, which is why I named my first child after a cocaine dealer I met while crossing Lake Titicaca.

And therein lies a story, but before delving into how my son got his name, let's talk about "Titicaca." Tee-tee-kah-kah. With its child-speak allusions to breasts and bowel movements, I've been fascinated by it ever since I first read about it in the Funk & Wagnalls Encyclopedia my parents bought me when I was 10. I'd spend hours reading it and squirreling away, in the recesses of my brain, geographical world records: the largest, the highest, the longest. And yes, Lake Titicaca, with its delightful name, was one of those: at an altitude of 12,500 feet – 3800 meters – it's the world's highest navigable body of water. The lake is deep and calm and huge, covering twice as much area as the state of Maryland, where I grew up.

Twenty years after first reading about Titicaca, I was on a small passenger vessel that crossed the lake once a week. The ship left at night from Puno, Peru and was scheduled to arrive the next day at a Bolivian town called, oddly enough, Copacabana.

It was cold that night on the lake, and I went down to the ship's engine room, telling the crew I was a seaman, like them. I showed them my able seaman document with my photo on it. In the picture I'm fully bearded and obviously stoned, but it was issued by the U.S. Coast Guard, officially stamped and signed, so they nodded gravely and gave me a quick tour.

The ship's engine was a massive ovoid cylinder rising up from the bilge, spewing steam and radiating heat, and its outer part bore a polished brass plaque that

said the engine and ship were built in 1915. *1915?* This engine still looked new. Of course, they'd maintained it well, but engines on the ocean-going ships I'd worked on looked worn and ragged after a few years.

"It's the lake's fresh water, that's what keeps the engine looking like this," the engineer said. "Salt water – ocean water – causes metal to rust. It destroys iron and steel." He pointed to the engine's casing. "On this ship we're always in fresh water, so there is no rust."

No rust. Imagine that. Is that all we need to maintain a rust-free life—no salt water battering this human hull we call our skin, or seeping into the engine we call our heart?

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Later that night I was on deck, staring at the lake. Moonlight shimmered steadily off the still water, so different from the jagged light that reflects off the choppy oceans I was used to. It was chilly and the only wind was from the 10-knot forward movement of the ship, so I wrapped myself in my sleeping bag, reached into my backpack and pulled out a wooden flute. I didn't know how to play it, but I enjoyed making squeaky sounds, discordant notes floating out into the darkness, which – to a generous ear – might have sounded like freestyle jazz.

I played the flute, eyes closed, when suddenly I heard another wooden flute, and it was answering me. I played a riff... the other flute responded. Then the other flute played a few random notes... and I answered back. We went on this way, two flutes jamming in the dark, each one offering disembodied trills without sense or rhythm but somehow connecting. After a half-hour, we stopped playing and walked toward each other.

Rafael was my age, 30, my height, five-foot-ten, but we were different. I was muscular, wearing raggedy clothing, while Rafael was androgynously handsome and well-dressed: slim arms, with dark almond eyes and features that seemed at once chiseled and vulnerable. At first we spoke Spanish, but when we realized we were both Americans, we switched to English. He asked what I'd been doing in Peru.

“The tourist route: you know, Cuzco, Machu Picchu. Started in Mexico two months ago, hitch-hiking mostly. Gonna be spending a year, maybe longer, in Latin America. No real plans. Just making it up as I go along.”

“Ni-i-ice. So, what do you do? You know, when you have to make some money?”

“I work on ships. U.S. merchant ships. I’m a deck-hand.”

“Yeah?”

“Cargo ships, ammo ships, oil tankers, India runs, intercoastal runs, all kinds of vessels.”

“That’s really cool.”

“What I do is, you know, I work at sea for a few months, then travel ‘til my money runs out, then catch a job on a ship, get my trip back to the U.S. Takes a few weeks or a couple of months at sea, but that way I get back to the States and get paid regular union wages.”

“Sweet deal,” Rafael said. “It’s like you’re unattached. Floating on top of the planet.”

I grabbed a heaving line hanging from a stanchion and quickly tied a bowline. “On ships, mostly we use *this*, a bowline. The thing about it is, you can pull on it, the knot will never come loose.” I pulled. Hard. “In fact, the more you pull on it, the tighter it gets. It’ll never come loose. But... but here’s the thing. Once you’re finished using it, you can always pry it loose.”

With my thumb, I pushed back in the rear part of the knot. It came undone easily.

Rafael looked at me, sizing me up, smiling, aware that I wasn’t really talking about knots.

“*Mira*, I live outside La Paz. Why don’t you stay at my place? I think you’ll enjoy it.”

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Rafael's car was parked at the dock, and we drove for hours, stopping along the way for meals, coffee, or bathroom breaks, or to take in the landscape. The road was in poor condition, and we had to slow down often for bullock carts. The Andes were forbidding, snow-covered, and the altitude seemed to have stunted or killed most vegetation. The landscape was brown and bare.

Rafael said he grew up in Manhattan—his mother was from Bolivia, his father, American.

“My dad was a priest,” he said. “He was young when the church sent him here... He was a Maryknoll priest, you know, Liberation theology, trying to help the poor, that sort of thing. But he was young and full of piss and vinegar in spite of his vows of celibacy, so... he fell in love with my mom... left the priesthood and married her. They always claimed he left the church first, then fell in love with her, I guess they didn't want to make mom feel that she was responsible for his fall from grace, but I'm a romantic, I guess, so I choose to believe he fell in love with her, renounced his vows, and took her in his arms. Whatever the truth is, they moved to New York and had a bunch of kids—I'm the oldest. He always told me if I came down here to visit my relatives, I'd fall in love, and damn if he wasn't right, you know?”

Just before sunset we arrived at a large house with a view of La Paz. Rafael's wife, Maria Magdalena – a slight, lovely woman with Inca and European features – greeted me warmly and casually, as if used to this, clearly not the first time he'd invited someone home.

Rafael and I sat in a room that was den and library: there was a record player, hundreds of albums along the walls, and many books in bookcases. He put on a Thelonious Monk record.

I went over to the bookcases, which reached close to the ceiling, and touched the books' spines, noticing many of the same authors I and my friends read: Henry Miller, J. D. Salinger, Robert Heinlein, Ernest Hemingway... it's as if these volumes, lined up vertically in bookcases and inside our brains, were sentinels of shared identity.

A few minutes later, a male servant brought *yerba mate* that we drank in the local manner: pouring boiled water from a kettle into a metal-rimmed gourd stuffed

with dried *yerba* tealeaves. We sipped from the same metal straw, handing the gourd back and forth, a gurgling noise, when sipping from the straw, alerting us when it was time to add more hot water. Drinking yerba mate felt like an act of bonding, like sharing a joint, which we also did.

I looked around: large colorful paintings on the walls – original artwork, not reproductions – glass cabinets displaying sculpture, large tight-weave carpets covering a handsome tiled floor, a coffee table made of thick burl lacquered to a fare-thee-well. The house was big and well made, its contents expensive and in good taste. Rafael had either inherited a fortune, or...

“I have a cocaine factory,” he said, reading my thoughts. “That’s how I make a living. We bring in the coca leaf harvest from different plantations; the people that work for me turn it into powdered cocaine. Dealers fly in and buy it wholesale, so they smuggle it across borders. They have their mules, their ships, you know. What happens after I sell it isn’t any of my business.”

“No risk for you?”

“I pay off the locals, including police chief, judges, mayor, and the underlings. I provide income for lots of people. It helps that I married a woman who’s from here. Oh, and I throw parties and they all come with their wives and girlfriends – sometimes with both – and drink my expensive booze. I have a shindig like that coming up this weekend. You’ll be here for that, right?”

I nodded, pursing my lips downward, congratulating him on his enterprising spirit.

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For the next few days, during work-hours, I accompanied Rafael to his *fábrica*. I expected an American-style factory with workers wearing gloves and surgical masks, but it was rough and rugged. The factory was housed in a large Quonset hut, like an immense barn, and at every step of the process there were crude methods of heating water and other liquids, musty corners with chemicals being poured and measured. It

looked like a large version of an Ozark whisky-still, except that Rafael apparently did not have to hide his operation from the revenooers.

Though cocaine was all around, I didn't use any during those days in the factory, didn't even try coca leaves, which Rafael's employees constantly chewed: he said it gave them the same mild jolt as coffee. While he was working the phone or greeting dealers who'd flown in on private planes, I took long walks. The factory was far from La Paz's central area, so the only people I saw were peasant women wearing colorful wide skirts and bowler hats. When I crossed paths with them, I'd tip an imaginary bowler and they'd laugh. Occasionally, a woman would squat on the side of a dirt road, her broad skirt forming a protective cloth nimbus around her. After getting up, she'd leave a small puddle of urine and go on her way.

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On Saturday night, locals showed up at Rafael's house to drink and party: politicians, police, other important people. He got drunk, clearly a way of ingratiating himself with the locals. His delicate arm around my shoulders, Rafael introduced me as "*mi hermano perdido*," which means "my long-lost brother." That was true: during that week we *did* become like brothers.

But *mi hermano perdido* could also mean: "my brother who's lost." My parents – who were deeply disappointed at my life choices – were sure I'd lost my way.

After a week in La Paz, it was time to move on. I gave Rafael a little package with tabs of LSD, a parting gift for his hospitality and friendship, and told him he could write me care of American Express in Rio and Buenos Aires, the two cities where I intended to spend at least the next six months, if not longer.

Rafael took me to the main La Paz train station. Just before the train took off toward the east, we hugged warmly, both aware, as this world goes, that we'd never see one another again.

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After three idyllic months in Rio, I moved on to Buenos Aires and stayed with my photographer cousin Edi and his girlfriend, Loreta, who lived near Corrientes and Callao.

Two days after I arrived, Edi's friend Beti came to the apartment. She was in her late 20s, five feet tall, straight dark hair past her shoulders, a perfect face untouched by plastic surgery, which is Argentina's third most popular contact sport, right after soccer and psychoanalysis.

Also untouched by surgery were Beti's breasts, which were out of proportion, as if bulging mammary glands had been glommed on to a young woman with a tiny body. She tried – unsuccessfully – to hide them with clothes that minimized her curves.

She had a ready laugh laced with sarcasm, and a sharp wit strewn with foul language. Her favorite phrase was *hincha pelotas*. Literally, it means scrotum expander, and Argentines use it to mean incredibly annoying. *No seas hincha pelotas!* Don't be a pain in the ass!

I learned from Beti that you didn't even have to say *hincha pelotas*, all you had to do was gesture: arms down, palms up, fingers facing one another, you moved your drawn-together fingers up and down. Performed by men and women at all levels of society, it meant you were so annoyed that your scrotum had blown up like a balloon and was about to drag on the floor.

I know the exact moment I fell in love and it had to do both with her breasts and her salty language. Edi was sitting and Beti was standing behind him. Edi and Loreta were laughing about an *hincha pelotas* gesture Beti had made about a local stage actor. Beti then underscored her point by placing her arms around Edi, pushing her breasts onto his back, then holding herself there for a few seconds. It was sexy and motherly, freewheeling and generous, and my one wish at that moment was that someday – soon – she'd hug *me* like that. No, it wasn't a wish, it was a certainty: someday she'll hug *me* the same way.

Beti and I arranged to spend the next day together, and the next, and the next, and we quickly became a couple. Since Beti lived by herself, taking care of an

apartment for a friend, a gay architect working in Venezuela, she asked me to move in with her. Or maybe she didn't ask, maybe it just happened as a matter of natural evolution, without anyone having to decide.

At first, we didn't connect. We spoke only Spanish, a language I knew well, but not perfectly, so sometimes I missed the subtler jabs of her humor. For another, she was scientific, teaching physics and math, while I had a mystical worldview she scoffed at. I felt that if people could see clearly enough, they'd realize there are no accidents, that things happen as they are *meant* to happen. To Beti, this was hippie-dippie nonsense.

But there was a deeper gap. I'd been formed by the if-it-feels-good-do-it culture, while Beti was a Marxist who'd been to revolutionary gatherings which included weapons training, so she had little sympathy for my self-indulgent do-your-thing-ism. I asked how she intended to help the people I dismissively called "your Bolivian miners."

"I'm going to proletarianize myself."

"*What?*"

"I want to *be* a proletarian. I'll work in a factory and talk to them about how they can improve their status. Help them organize. Make changes in society from the ground up. Like in Cuba."

"Yeah, well, good luck with that. I've worked with seamen, proletarian as you can get, and they're fascist to the core. They never identify with their own labor union or other workers."

"That's why we have to integrate ourselves in their world, so we can educate them." I rolled my eyes. She went on, "What do you think is going to change the world? You, wearing those funny striped pants and taking magic mushrooms? Or me talking to the workers about how to start going after what they deserve? Don't you want to create a more just society? *I do!*"

"The seamen I worked with couldn't care less about a just society. They have no resentment against the ship-owners who exploit them. They want to *be* the exploiters!"

Frustrated at not being able to get through to me, Beti made an *hincha pelotas* gesture and topped it off with “*No tenemos nada que ver!* We have nothing in common. *Nada!*”

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In spite of this, there was love between us, and passion, and a hint of shared future. We hitch-hiked through Patagonia to Tierra del Fuego, down to the Beagle Channel, where we camped out and lived off brown rice I always carried with me and mussels we pried off the rocks. When rain kept us confined to our pup tent, we read aloud a Spanish translation of *Walden* I had picked up at a Buenos Aires bookstore.

When we left Tierra del Fuego, hitch-hiking north, we made it, slowly, to the Andean glacier region where, a week later, near the town of Calafate, with a mountain-sized slab of blue-tinted ice opposite, we climbed up a precipice that looked more dangerous than it really was.

Beti was not an outdoorsy person, but she climbed up with me until, quite suddenly, she refused to go on.

What was the problem? I inched up to where she was and saw she was looking down at a crevice. It was just a small step to get past it, not much more difficult or dangerous than stepping over broken concrete on a city street, but she was spooked, unable to take that small step over the narrow, but deep, fissure.

Whatever it was that caused her paralysis – whether it was fear of falling, or whether the abyss touched a deeper concern about her own life – she simply couldn't move. So, there we stayed for what seemed a long time, in the middle of a rocky escarpment. In the background, we heard large chunks of ice breaking off and splashing into the lake. Little by little, I lost patience.

“This is what it will *always* be like with me,” I said. “*No hay vida sin riesgo.* There's no life without risk. With me there'll always be danger and the possibility of disaster. So come on!”

“You're being an asshole!” she hissed. “An arrogant macho asshole.”

She was right. I could feel the smugness of what I'd said: that anyone who wanted to share my life would have to put up with constant insecurity or find a different dance partner, and I realized I'd placed an enormous burden on that next step of hers. If she took it, if she got past that fissure, she'd be agreeing to share her future with someone who had no career, no money, who'd leave her periodically to work on ships, and who –like her – despised bourgeois restrictions. I understood how much was at stake for her, and that I'd been too strident.

I held out an arm. “Look, it's okay, it really is. Come on. Step across. The universe will take care of us. It will. So... come on.”

Beti exploded “*La puta que te parió!* The universe will *not* take care of us! You always say that. All that mystical shit. It's up to *us!* We have to do it ourselves.”

Ignoring my outstretched arm, her anger carried her across the crevice. Once she was by my side, she simply nodded, not making eye contact. Without defining it or carving it in stone, it felt – to me, at least – as if that small step was as solid and certain as a wedding vow. There was no doubt in my mind we were destined to be life-partners.

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Once back in Buenos Aires, I caught a job as a deck hand on a U.S. merchant ship, which meant leaving Beti in Buenos Aires. I could tell she wasn't sure I'd come back, but I knew I would, and did.

A few months later, I flew back to Buenos Aires, and for the next two years, Beti shared my nomadic existence. In Spain, at an Ibiza rooming house, we met a Danish dooper who said we could get through the winter as kibbutz volunteers. A couple of months later, in Athens, we counted our pennies and realized we had enough to get to Israel. After landing in Haifa with \$20 between us, we went to a kibbutz in the Valley of Elah and became volunteers.

For the next twelve months we were a couple but were separated, for long stretches, by my ship work and by Beti's father's sudden death, which required her to

fly back to Argentina to be with her mother, to comfort her and help run the small underwear factory they owned. A few weeks after Beti went back to Argentina, I flew to Buenos Aires to be with her.

That first night back together, in her mother's twelfth-floor apartment, Beti and I made love. I mention this because a few weeks later she realized her period was late, and a medical check-up confirmed she was pregnant –a child conceived my first night back in Argentina. My mind, reared on literature, saw a connection: Beti's father's death and her pregnancy were connected, like the rhymes "womb" and "tomb," death and life intertwined and inseparable.

The next day was a Saturday in February. Beti and her mom walked to the factory while I remained in the twelfth-floor apartment alone. I smoked a joint, then took the elevator down.

People were hawking all sorts of things in open-air markets, and shop owners were trying desperately to lure customers. It was noisy and busy: oranges here, jewelry there, boutique shops, second-hand goods. I drifted on the periphery, watching others, observing it all.

This was what I'd been doing for years, gliding on the slippery outer skin of the planet, standing outside the human drama, watching others live their lives, observing but not being a part of it. Unbidden, a Spanish word started repeating in my head, *Metete*. It had the Argentine pronunciation, with the accent on the middle syllable *meh-TEH-teh*.

Metete.

Get in there. Get involved. Do it. Do it now.

Metete.

Beti and I had now been together for more than two years, but I was still roving, still working on ships, leaving her behind, traveling, having adventures, then later reconnecting with her.

She'd never complained about that, but now the situation had changed.

Metete.

A fetus had been tossed into the mix. A fetus that would grow into a baby, then into a child who'd need a father. Could I be that father and attend to that child's needs?

Metete.

The repetition of that word, with its pa-PAM-pa rhythm, as sinewy as an acid trip, as life-changing as brain damage or falling in love, had a potent effect. It left me breathless. Literally. I was gulping for air, reminding myself how to breathe.

And that was the moment I knew I wanted to be a father, wanted to make a future with Beti. I knew that everything that came after this decision would be different from everything that came before. But I felt ready for the change. I was. I was ready.

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On my way back to the apartment, I stopped at the American Express office to see if there was mail. The clerk asked me to spell my last name, as if he'd seen it before but couldn't remember where, and told me to wait, which I did, ten minutes, before he returned with a letter that had arrived a long time ago. They'd kept it on the off-chance that someday someone would come and ask for it. In the space where there should have been a return address, there was the single word: Rafael

Rafael. The cocaine wholesaler I'd met years earlier. I opened it. It was handwritten.

Dear Mystic Knight of the Sea:

I hope you're well.

I'm writing to let you know that I'm launching a business venture and you'd be perfect for it. I've bought a motor boat that can go really fast.

It's being fitted out with special equipment.

I'm looking for a crew. I need a professional, someone I can trust, someone who's used to spending long stretches at sea. And someone who

knows how to keep his mouth shut in a pinch, I'm sure you're good at that as well. It might be risky, but taking risks never stopped you before, right? Anyway, if all goes well, a big payoff is in store. You can keep drifting for the rest of your life without any money worries. If you're up for it, let me know. I didn't put my address on the envelope, or in the letter, but if you still have it, you can write me there. If not, send it care of American Express, La Paz.

*Tu hermano perdido,
Rafael*

So, Rafael wanted me to work as a deck hand on a boat carrying... cocaine? From South America to where? California? I'd never carried contraband, but I'd worked on ships carrying napalm, so really, it wasn't a big leap to dope-runner. I liked the idea of shared risk, like a platoon in wartime, and I also liked the possibility of getting together with Rafael again.

Beti could get along without me. Sure, I'll send a note to Rafael, telling him...

No. Can't do that.

So, what do I tell him?

The truth? That I'd decided, only minutes before reading his letter, to be a father? To raise a child and be there for him or her? That I was embarking on a different kind of adventure, one that was at least as risky as dope-smuggling?

In the end, I sent him a note thanking him, without mentioning Beti, telling him I was no longer available for that kind of work. As I walked back to the apartment, my mind was churning:

Is this, then, how a life gets its permanent form? You carve out a life for yourself, spend years wandering, then one day you get stoned, go out, walk around, watch the flow of humanity, and you say, well, okay, I'm going to do *this* from now on and not *that*. I've been a drifter and now I'll be father and husband. Is that how we decide what becomes of us?

So it's all a series of random events, like atoms smashing against one another, then smashing into other atoms. It's endless, the randomness of it, the arbitrariness of it. Like two flutes answering one another in the dark, on a rust-free steamboat crossing Lake Titicaca.

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While she was pregnant, Beti and I went back to Israel and became members of the kibbutz where we'd been volunteers. On a November afternoon, in a modern hospital in Jerusalem, I squeezed Beti's shoulders and, miraculously, a baby emerged. A boy! Hours later that newborn was in Beti's arms, breast-feeding, while we talked about what name to give him.

Beti's late father bore the Hungarian name Bela, as in Bartok or Lugosi. Beti lobbied for her father's Hebrew name Benjamin.

"That's a good *middle* name," I said, "but what about the first name?"

"What do *you* think?"

What did I think? One thing was sure: my years of drifting and working on ships were over. And Beti, surely, would no longer be a revolutionary trying to proletarianize herself. As parents, whether we chose to remain in Israel or go back to Argentina or the US to live, both of us would surely become more and more bourgeois.

Was there a name we could give our son that would remind us that we were once *not* bourgeois?

"Rafael," I said, "what if we name him... Rafael?"

Had the cocaine wholesaler made *that* much of an impression on me? Did I have a stronger connection to Rafael than I'd acknowledged?

"Rafael," Beti said. "Good name. Hebrew name. It mean, what, God is my healer?"

"Something like that."

"And it's a name you find in Spanish-speaking or English-speaking places."

"True," I said. "Who knows where the fates will take him?"

“If he grows up here in Israel, he’ll be called Rafi, right?”

“Right,” I said. “Right. In Argentina, he’d be Rafaelito, in Spain, Rafa. In the Arab world, Rafik. In a Litvak shtetl, Rafooshnik. In Japan, Rafikuchi. In the Caucasus, Rafushvilli.”

Beti laughed. “Enough, enough! Rafael Benjamin.” She squeezed my hand, as if to say, We did it! We’ve given birth to a child, and he has everything a human being should have.

Including a good name.

END

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Roberto Loiederman was born in Argentina, and learned English at age seven. Based in L.A., he lived more than 20 years in Latin America and the Middle East. He’s a journalist and television scriptwriter, has had more than 100 articles published in L.A. Times, Washington Post, etc., was twice nominated for the Pushcart Prize, and is co-author of *The Eagle Mutiny*, about the only mutiny on a U.S. ship in modern times.