“Compelling, imaginative, and altogether brilliant.”—Jay McInerney

The Fruit Palace sells only juice. But it happens to be located in Santa Marta, the town that is to Colombia's cocaine trade what Lourdes is to holy water. It is also where Charles Nicholl got his first taste of the “white business” that occupies Colombians from street hustlers to cabinet ministers. And that taste launched Nicholl on a fanatical quest for “The Great Cocaine Story,” which he relates with madcap energy and vividness in this classic travel book.

Charles Nicholl careens from shantytowns and waterfront barrios to steamy jungle villages and slaughterhouses. He survives fever, earthquake, and discovery by a dealer who threatens to “check his oil” with a knife. And he emerges with a tour de force that is a triumph of intrepid reporting and suspense.

“A traveler's tale of the highest order.”—The New Yorker

“Sometimes comic, sometimes adventurous, always entertaining, The Fruit Palace is a terrific read.”—Newsday

$12.00

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## CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Foreword to the Vintage Edition</td>
<td>xiii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preface</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 At the Fruit Palace</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 A Night with Captain Cocaine</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 The Assignment</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 The Flying Scotsman</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Welcome to the Crow's Nest</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Who's Who</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Snow White</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Rosalita</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 The Best Cook on Caracas Avenue</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 The Rapidero's Return</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 Tensa Valley</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Rikki Sings</td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 One Arroba over the Top</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 Medellín</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 Into the Chocó</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 The Shit Creek Special</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 Terremoto!</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 Back at the Fruit Palace</td>
<td>194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 Chilean Packages</td>
<td>202</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Contents

20 Waldino Can Get It 214
21 Sea Breeze Farm 228
22 A Friend in Riohacha 243
23 Bad Moves 256
24 Pick-up at Wharf Three 267
25 Indian Country 281
26 Nebusimague 291
27 Sierra Medicine 300

Author's Note 308

Approximate currency exchange rates at the time of the author's trip to Colombia in 1983:

U.S. $1.00 = 60 pesos
1,000 pesos = U.S. $16.00
FOREWORD

to the Vintage Edition

It is now ten years since I wrote The Fruit Palace. As an account of the Colombian cocaine business, it is past history: the tonnages seem tame, the prices are wrong, the capos of the day mostly dead or behind bars. I have made no effort to update those aspects of "straight" journalism in this book. But most of The Fruit Palace is another kind of book entirely—crooked journalism?—which continues to be relevant, I hope, for the traveller to Colombia today.

The Fruit Palace is also past history in a more personal sense, a book that belongs to another time in my life. And, as is the way with one's past life, I am slightly alarmed by the book. At the time I was living through the events narrated here, I thought: You must be crazy to be doing this. Now I tend to think: You must be crazy to be telling everybody about it. The book is candid in a first-person-singular form that I don't think I would attempt now. It is about someone behaving in a decidedly daft, frequently illegal, and sometimes downright sordid manner, and that someone appears to be me.

As the reader will learn, this book was, in itself, something of a nostalgia piece. I was not just journeying through Colombia on a particular assignment, I was also returning to Colombia: thus the telescope extends back another decade.

The heart of the book lies over twenty years back, in my first goggle-eyed encounter with South America, my first gulp of Andean monoxide in Bogotá, my first immersion in the indolent
charms of Santa Marta. I was twenty-three years old, on my first visit to what we used to call the Third World. I fell in love with Colombia—or, as a columnist in El Espectador used to call it, “Locombia”. Samuel Beckett once described his short stories as “bottled climates”. I claim no kinship with Beckett in style or stature, but hope that in the uncorking of this book the reader will recover something of the savour of Colombia, the grace of its people, the disreputable poetry of the side streets.

There were dangers involved in getting this story, lines to be crossed. But in certain parts of the country, criminality was the norm, the daily landscape. A writer was by no means welcome, but he was much less of a threat than one might think. (I did not, of course, work on this principle at the time.) No one was “exposed” in this book—all names are changed—though some people might feel they were used.

The true danger lies elsewhere. I have been back to South America since, I am drawn back, and I always have that same sense of its seductiveness. You could lose your moorings here, drift down the river like Rimbaud in his drunken boat, forget what you once knew and who you once were. In some hard-to-define psychological sense—though shading from time to time towards the actual—you could disappear here. This book is, in a sense, the chronicle of one such brief “disappearance”.

I suppose I should say a word about the drugs. The chief chemical constituent of the book is undoubtedly adrenaline, but there are others. Here, too, The Fruit Palace is essentially nostalgic, harking back to those earlier days when it was considered de rigueur—even culturally heroic—to smoke, sniff, or swallow more or less anything that got you high. This notion was already out of date when the book came out, deep in the era of Nancy Reagan’s “Just Say No to Drugs” campaign. Traffickers—even those small-time operators I hung around with—had become Public Enemy # 1. I now have a seventeen-year-old son, and would prefer that he said “No”, certainly to the drug that features most prominently here. The book is perhaps too light-hearted about the “drug problem”, a bit of an old hippie caper, but anyone reading it as pro-drug propaganda, some kind of recommendation, needs his head examined.

The question people most commonly ask me about the book is
one that begins “Did you really . . .?” To which I answer that yes, I really met those people; and yes, I really visited those places; and yes, those smugglers at Finca las Brisas really did have two boats, one for fishing, which was called El Problema, and one for running drugs, which was called La Solución. But I also remind them that if someone turns up at the end of a four-month cocaine jag in Colombia and starts babbling out their “story”, you might think yourself a fool if you believed every word they told you.

All journeys are like a dream: you snap awake at the end, wild-eyed and dusty, and try to carry the memory of it into your life, into your book.

—Charles Nicholl
Spring 1994
At the Fruit Palace

If these things have a beginning I suppose this began at the Fruit Palace, some twelve years ago now. The Fruit Palace was a small, whitewashed café, much like thousands of others in Colombia. It stood a couple of blocks up from the waterfront in Santa Marta, a hot, scruffy sea-port on the northern coast. The wooden sign outside read, 'EL PALACIO DE LAS FRUTAS, Cafetería Refresquería Residencias', the letters painted in bright, naïve colours, with a small study in fruit—oranges, mangoes, a half-sliced pineapple—in the bottom corner. The speciality of the house was the jugo, or tropical fruit juice, but you could also get the usual range of cheap meals, liquor, provisions, and of course the ubiquitous tinto, the small cup of black coffee that fuels the nation.

The Fruit Palace was always open and never crowded. People drifted in off the street, to trade a bit of gossip and rest from the weight of the sun. In the evenings a few dock-workers might come in for a game of veinti-una, with much shouting and slapping down of cards and tossing back of rum. I think Julio, who owned and ran the Fruit Palace, actually preferred business slow. He had dreams of getting rich, he had complex schemes for getting rich, but they were quite divorced from his day-to-day life. Whisking jugos was something to do while he waited for the big one to turn up. ‘With a little bit of sweet and a little bit of sour,’ he said, ‘a man is happy.’

His favourite getting-rich dream at that time was focused, though none too clearly, on selling insurance. Ever since he
had heard of the Sistema No Claims Bonus, he had been sure that this was his true niche. ‘It’s marvellous,’ he said. ‘It’s like I sell you a five-peso jugo, and then I say: If you don’t drink it, I’ll only charge you four.’

Julio was in his mid-thirties, but he looked older. He was not a Samario, as the natives of Santa Marta are known, but one of the town’s floating population. Santa Marta is a honey-trap for hopeful prospectors from the interior, drawn by the promise of the good life by the Caribbean Sea, and of the rich pickings to be had from the town’s various forms of contraband, mainly — but by no means exclusively — drugs. Julio was from Boyacá, 500 miles south in the Eastern Cordillera of the Andes. With his black stubble, bad teeth, sideburns and faded check shirts, he had the typical look of the Colombian criollo, the mixed Spanish-Indian type that forms the majority of the country’s people. But he had something else — a certain finesse, a dapperness of manner and philosophy. His pointed nose and thick, slightly twirled moustache gave him an oddly belle époque air, a minor French dandy somehow adrift down a South American back-street.

Julio’s contribution to Santa Marta’s black economy was a little modest dealing in emeralds. His father had been an esmeraldero, first an emerald miner at Coscuez and then a small-time dealer. Some people have a way with animals: Julio had a way with emeralds. He always had a small consignment on the go, and whenever a new gringo face turned up at the Fruit Palace, it was not long before the talk was steered round to the fabulous virtues of the Colombian gem emerald, la más famosa en el mundo. Out would come the little fold of tissue paper, with a pair of Muzo stones or a thimbleful of uncut canutillos winking inside. He would rock a stone gently in his palm, like a tiny dice. ‘Mire, mire, el fuego verde!’ Look at the green fire in it. His prices were always good, even by black market standards. I wondered if he sometimes sold fakes — he certainly spoke expertly about counterfeiting: rock candy, vanadium, doublets and triplets, and so on — but it wouldn’t have done to ask him.

Also living at the Fruit Palace was a girl called Miriam, who did the cooking and the cleaning. Julio had a wife and a little daughter, but they were somewhere else for a while — the vagueness was Julio’s — and in the meantime he was sharing
his bed with Miriam. She was a plump, moody Caquetana girl in her twenties. She wore tight skirts and a man's wristwatch. As she worked she rendered current hit songs in a tuneless, hissing kind of whistle – her favourite was a tearjerker entitled 'Volver Volver Volver'. She was no great beauty, but like Lily in the song she had that certain flash every time she smiled. She flirted slyly with all the gringos. She visited me in my dreams, her breasts syncopating softly as they did when she danced to the songs on the radio. The quiet glint of machismo in Julio's eye was enough to keep it at that.

There was a small back room behind the café which Julio rented out – this was the residencias advertised on the sign outside. I had stumbled into the café one day for a beer, straight off the train from Barrancabermeja, a fifteen-hour haul across the Magdalena plains. The room was vacant. Too tired to look for a hotel, I took it for the night. The profound nonchalance of Santa Marta stole over me, and I was still there three months later. The bed had once belonged to Julio's grandmother and had a carved cedarwood headboard of which he was very proud, but it was bone-hard to lie on, and after a while I slept in the hammock out in the yard. When the tiny rent Julio charged for the room grew too onerous, I actually rented the hammock off him for something like 10 pesos a night. I kept my belongings in a large, rusty parrot-cage, procured by Julio for this purpose. I shared the yard with a small contingent of animals. Down at the end by the kitchen lived the hen, immured by night in its miniature shack of old fruit boxes. There was a guard dog pacing on the neighbour's roof, there were rats beneath the concrete walkway, and there was the cockroach – one of many, but definitely the cockroach, sleek and fat and shiny brown as a conker.

Julio was delighted with this new arrangement. It had the magic smack of something for nothing. I paid less, he got more, the back room now being free for other gringos – or possibly even gringitas – to fill. There were always gringos in town, North Americans mostly, also French Canadians, Italians, the occasional Brit. The better class of tourist stayed at the sea-front hotels, or out at Rodadero, the modern hotel development hidden round the headland. They certainly didn't stay down on 10th Street, where the Fruit Palace stood. This was really the last of the 'safe' streets. After that you were on
your own, in the shanty-town *barrio* of San Martín which sprawled up the dusty hills above the docks. Only the more dubious, low-rent travellers, or those who had special reasons for being near the docks, sought their lodgings here. In those days there were plenty who fell into one or both of those categories, and Julio's back room was seldom vacant for long.

When I think now of the Fruit Palace I remember especially the sweet-scented nights. Julio always bought his fruit overripe. This was both cheaper and better for making *jugos*, yet another instance of those secret financial harmonies he loved to observe. The musk of sweating tropical fruit pervaded the café. By day it had to compete with the oily aromas of Miriam's cuisine, but at night, swaying in my hammock in the yard, the sweet smell of corruption lay over me like a blanket.

The nights were filled with noises, accordions duelling down in the dockside bars, dogs barking across the low roofs, trucks gunning their engines ready for the long haul south. The dockland seemed to buzz right around the yard walls, delicious and dangerous, a faint periphery of menace like in the nights of childhood. Even in the dead of night, after all the jacks were in their boxes and even the animals were asleep, I would sometimes be woken by a strange concert of groans and squeaks. It was the sound of the sea wind swinging the wooden signboards of the cafés and flophouses down 10th Street. That sudden north-easterly wind, rising off the Caribbean after hours or sometimes days of stillness, was called 'La Loca', the madwoman.

* * *

It was at the Fruit Palace that I had my first taste of the Colombian drug trade. Illegal drugs were, and still are, the economic and cultural heartbeat of Santa Marta. In the early 1970s, when I was there, this still primarily meant marijuana. Marijuana – known locally as *bareta*, *marimba* or *mota* – was local produce. The fertile lower slopes of the Sierra Nevada, lying to the south-east of the town, produced hundreds of tons of grass a year. Nowadays it is thousands of tons. Fiercely hot, plentifully watered, full of hidden cul-de-sac valleys, and mostly impassable to any vehicle larger than a mule, the *macizo* is ideal marijuana territory. Colombian grass is considered by
many connoisseurs to be the finest in the world, and nine
times out of ten this means one of the Sierra Nevada strains –
Santa Marta Gold, Blue Sky Blonde, Red Dot, etc. These are
pale, tan-coloured grasses, instantly distinguishable from the
darker, moister, greenish-black strains – Mango Viche, La
Negra – grown in the south of Colombia. A handful of
flowering tops of Santa Marta Gold, muños de oro, looks like
an exotic kind of rough-cut blond tobacco. The general rule
is, the paler the gold, the stronger the grass. The palest weed
is grown at the lowest range of the optimum growing altitude,
around 500 metres above sea level, where the sun is hottest
(any lower and the humidity saps the vital resins in the plant).
The drug-lore further has it that these lower plantations run a
greater risk of being discovered, and that the potency of the
marimba derives from the daring and panache of the marimbero,
the marijuana planter. Probably most potent of all is Punto
Rojo, or Red Dot, so-called for its tiny splashes of red on the
gold buds. The legendary Panama Red is the same strain from
a neighbouring country.

In those days the vast marijuana market in the United States
was mainly supplied by Mexican grass. It wasn’t until the later
1970s, after a massive US herbicide campaign had wiped out
many Mexican plantations – and what didn’t get destroyed
quickly lost its market value as smokers started turning up in
casualty wards with Paraquat poisoning – that Colombian
marijuana reigned supreme. The profits were big, but they
weren’t yet in the mega-buck units they talk in nowa-
days. And so the resourceful Samario contrabandista was
becoming increasingly involved in another illicit chemical:
cocaine.

Santa Marta’s involvement in the cocaine trade is a simple
and vital matter of geography. The town stands precisely
placed between the major producers and the major consumers
of cocaine, between the coca fields of Peru and Bolivia where the
coca plant is intensively cultivated, and the United States
where the refined end-product is snorted up by the truckload.
There are plenty of side-doors along the way, but the basic
route, then and now, is for the drug to be funnelled up north
across the mainland as far as it can go, to the Caribbean coast
of Colombia, and from there to be shipped or flown to the
United States and Europe. In the phrase of a former president
of Colombia, Santa Marta is 'a victim of its privileged geographic position'.

These were still the early days of the great cocaine boom. In America and Europe coke was the chic new chemical toy, the rock star's tipple, Ziggy's Stardust. Down in Colombia the big smuggling syndicates were just beginning to emerge and the two main contrabandista syndicates in Santa Marta – the Cárdenas and Valdeblancoz clans – were already battling for control of this hugely lucrative new market. But there was still plenty of room for independent operations, for the local cowboys and the gringo casuals and the small-time dealers. The Colombian press carried regular reports of some gringo caught at customs with a false heel full of flake. For every one who got pulled there were nine who got through.

So, what with the dope and the coke, this part of the Colombian coast, and three towns in particular – the industrial port city of Barranquilla to the west, Santa Marta in the middle, and Riohacha out on the Guajira peninsula – were fast becoming one of the world centres for drug smuggling. In Santa Marta everyone one met, whether gringo, Samario or drifting prospector, seemed to have a finger in the pie, some form of rake-off from some form of drug deal. There was even a missionary who discovered that the sacks of maize flour that the campesino farmers gave him to truck down to town were actually stuffed full of Punto Rojo grass. He came to an amicable agreement, whereby a portion of the profits was donated to the mission. In Santa Marta even God gets cut in on the deal.

The town had the feel of a tropical smugglers' den. It was a rakish, seedy, avaricious little place, but somehow exhilarating in the way it lived according to its own laws. The whole thing felt like a game. It was hard to imagine Santa Marta as the world centre for anything. But often at night, lying in my hammock, I would hear the sound of freight trucks back-firing, and I would hold my breath because sometimes there followed a kind of shock-wave, a pattern of silence and shouts, that meant it was gunfire.

A few of the gringos who stayed at the Fruit Palace were putting together small deals of some sort. The coolest of these was Nancy. She was a swan-necked girl from Toronto, who always wore sunglasses. She had me fooled all the way. She was a regular client at the ranch, where she was always busy with her saddle and her horse. She was a good rider, and she was good at making friends, and she was good at making it known that she was good at making friends. She was a good type, and I liked her.
was supposedly on the coast to buy and export some pre-
Columbian gold pieces. She spent a lot of time with a big man
called Luis, who seemed to have a bottomless supply of golden
figurines and pendants, no doubt illegally looted from Tairona
burial sites in the Sierra. This is another of Santa Marta’s
stocks-in-trade.

Nancy came and went a lot, but she kept the room paid up
even when she wasn’t there. Julio was transfixed by her. This
exquisite *gringita*, paying twenty-eight days in advance, was
like a holy vision to him. One day Nancy said she was going
to Cartagena on business, would I perhaps like to meet up
with her there in a week or so? My mouth dropped open with
delight. She was a beautiful girl, and Cartagena was a beautiful
town. Of course I'd like to meet up with her.

A few days later a telegram arrived for me at the Fruit
Palace. It was from Nancy. Through a veil of misprints
the message read, 'PLEASE FIND OUT PRICE AND
CONDITION OF LUIS’S GOLD FROGS DISCREETLY
LET ME KNOW WHEN YOU COME ROOM 32'. I
dutifully sought out Luis. 'Tell her I’ve got ten frogs, ready
to go,' he said. He named a price per frog.

'Is that in pesos or dollars?'

'She’ll know.'

I took the bus to Cartagena, tingling with hopes of romance
in the old white city. When I got there she seemed more
interested in Luis’s figures than in me, and to my disappoint-
ment she left the hotel early that evening and didn’t return.
The next I saw of her was two weeks later at the Fruit Palace.
It was only then that she told me. I never learned the details,
but I learned that the gold ‘frogs’ had really been kilos of Santa
Marta Gold, and that I had unwittingly courièréd information
for a drug-run out of Cartagena, now successfully completed.

I was aghast. How could she use me like that? *Why* had she
used me like that? She shrugged. ‘Timing. Security. I often
use guys like you, places like this. It’s like they say – innocence
is the best cover.’

Thanks a bunch, Nancy. Her name wasn’t really Nancy,
either. She had another name in a hotel down on the sea-front,
and probably a third name in Cartagena. I don’t think I ever
did see her without her sunglasses on.

I still have the telegram she sent me, a souvenir of
something, I don't quite know what. You would think I might have learned my lesson, but just a few weeks later I found myself mixed up in yet another drug move. It was cocaine this time, where the stakes are higher, the people crazier, and the comebacks nastier. From this night of folly I have no souvenirs, except the occasional flashback when my nerves are bad.

It was a flashback to a night back roaming the Pan-American tourist area. It was a brief rave of a night made from some Pan-American Saturday Night dance squatting on the street.

As I walked away, I already knew the town. I raced the tall front of the select group.

The group is white to the bone. The conditions of the night of our visit was Bruno's. He is an old druggie who licks some sweet stuff and consists of an energy soaked black in.