Three days before I was arrested and ordered to leave the Republic of Bolivia, guards at San Pedro prison in La Paz caught me with several micro-cassettes hidden down my pants. I was on my way out of the main gates when they conducted the search. They were looking for cocaine, which is what most visitors smuggled out of San Pedro, and were slightly confused by what they found in its stead.

At the time, I believed I had got away with it by convincing the guards that the cassettes were the latest in Western music technology. However, three days later I was arrested on an unrelated charge. To this day, I do not know whether the police had found out about the book I was writing for Thomas McFadden, the prison's most famous inmate, or whether they thought I was a spy of some description. Either way, they were extremely suspicious as to why a foreign lawyer on a tourist visa had been staying voluntarily in Bolivia's main penitentiary facility for three months.

During the first month of my stay in the prison I had told the guards at the gate that I was Thomas's cousin. For the second month, the guards probably assumed I was there in order to do drugs, like the other Western tourists who arrived at San Pedro carrying their guidebooks and departed wearing their sunglasses. By the third month, the guards let me in and out without question. Provided I paid them enough money, they believed whatever I told them.

Then they arrested me. Ironically, the arresting officer chose bribery as the pretext. He was the same major I had been bribing every week since I had been there. I slipped him the customary twenty bolivianos as we shook hands on my way in, but on that occasion he looked at me as if we had never met before.

'Give me your passport,' he said, glaring incredulously at the folded note that had appeared in his hand. I did as I was told. 'Now follow me.'

It was a Saturday morning when they arrested me. They placed me in the police holding cells to stew for a while. Monday was a public holiday. The tourist police would not be able to process my crime until Tuesday, they said. I would have to wait for three days. No, I could not leave my passport as collateral and come back on Tuesday. No, I could not have any food – I was under investigation. No, I could not make a phone call – this was not a Hollywood movie.

Having spent three months in the prison, I wasn't particularly rattled by any of this. I had been listening to Thomas's stories about the Bolivian police for long enough to know that it would end up in a bribe. When they asked which hotel I was staying at and hinted that they would search my room and find drugs, I gave them a phoney address. When they left me alone in the cell, I went through my wallet and found the card of the hostel where one of my traveller friends was staying. They would not have needed to plant anything there; he had smuggled ten grams of cocaine out of the prison in a book the day before. I ripped the hostel card to shreds and then chewed it into a soggy ball, just like Thomas had done nearly five years earlier after he was busted at La Paz's airport with five kilos of cocaine concealed in his luggage.

Four hours later, I heard the police coming for me. I thought about my dead cat in order to induce some tears and continued to pretend not to speak much Spanish. Now that he had 'cracked' me, the captain at the police station offered me a deal.

'You have fallen badly, *señor gringo*. Bribery is a very serious crime in this country. You will have to pay.' I nodded solemnly. My tears of 'fear' mixed with tears of gratitude and irony, but I tried not to smile.

I managed to bargain the captain down by emptying my pockets and showing him all the money I had on me. The rest of my money was hidden in my socks in three rolls. I knew how much was in each roll in the event that the negotiation skills I had developed while in San Pedro required greater reserves. The captain had one more condition before he would make my charge sheet disappear: I had to agree to leave the country and never return. That would mean the end of work on the book that Thomas and I were writing.

'If I see you in San Pedro prison again,' the captain threatened, 'I'll send you to jail. *¿Comprende?*'

I nodded. Despite its paradoxical phraseology, I knew this threat was serious. The police wanted to scare me off from whatever it was I was doing with the micro-cassettes. I left immediately for the dirty town of Desaguadero, on the Peruvian border. As soon as I arrived, I got stamps in my passport as proof to show the captain that I had at least obeyed the first part of his instructions. Peruvian immigration laws prevented me from officially leaving the country on the same day as I entered it, but that did not stop me from walking back across the border to get a hotel for the night on the Bolivian side, which was cheaper.

I rang Thomas in prison. I had to call his mobile phone, since the inmates in the four-star section of San Pedro where Thomas had his apartment were not allowed land lines. I had not told him about the guards finding the micro-cassettes, which we were using to record our interviews, because I knew he would have been angry.

'This isn't a game, Rusty,' he had lectured me on numerous occasions. 'This is my *life* you're playing with here. These people are not joking, man.'

When he answered the phone, Thomas was unsympathetic.

'Where were you, man? I waited all day.'

I told him I'd been arrested.

'Thanks a lot, man. You ruined my life,' he said, before hanging up on me.

I knew he would want me to call again, so I waited half an hour before buying another phone card. I didn't even need to say who was calling.

'You is a stupid kid, Rusty,' Thomas said, as soon as he picked up the phone. I could tell by his voice that he had taken a few lines of coke. 'I told you this would happen if you wasn't careful.' The coke seemed to have calmed him down a little.

'So, what am I going to do?' I asked him.

'We have to bribe them again. We'll have to call the governor of the whole prison. That's going to be an expensive bribe, man.'

When Thomas said 'we' in reference to spending money, he always meant that it would be *my* money we would spend.

I got my Peruvian exit stamp the following morning and then returned to San Pedro prison. Thomas had already arranged for me to bribe the governor. It cost us one hundred US dollars. I continued to make flippant remarks until a week later when the police tortured

Thomas's friend Samir to death, then left him hanging in his prison cell by a bed sheet in order to make it look like suicide. Samir had been threatening to write a letter to parliament exposing high-level corruption in the police force. Imagine if they knew what Thomas and I were doing. I had not taken the danger seriously until then.

The story of Samir's death was front-page news. When I showed the article to Thomas, he didn't look at it.

'I told you these people are not joking, man. You didn't believe me.'

𝍸

I had heard about Thomas McFadden long before I met him. A group of Israelis I met while trekking to the ancient Incan ruins of Machu Picchu had spoken of him with reverence. An Australian couple had told me about him during an Amazon jungle tour out of Rurrenabaque. Indeed, his fame had spread all the way along the South American backpacking circuit affectionately dubbed by travellers 'the *gringo* trail', which extends from Tierra del Fuego in Argentina up to Santa Marta in Colombia.

The jail in which Thomas was housed was even more famous than he was. I had heard of it as far back as Mexico, even before I'd heard of Thomas.

'When you're in Bolivia, you have to visit the prison,' a blonde Canadian traveller had advised me in all seriousness.

'What for?' I asked.

'It's unbelievable. The inmates have jacuzzis and the Internet, and they grow marijuana on the rooftop.'

When I looked at him quizzically, he added, 'It's listed in all the guidebooks. Look it up.'

As soon as no one was watching, I pulled out my *Lonely Planet* guidebook from the bottom of my backpack where it was wrapped in a T-shirt along with my moisturising cream. 'The prison' was el Penal de San Pedro; by all accounts, the world's craziest penitentiary system – where wealthy inmates lived in luxury apartments with their wives and children and ate at restaurants inside the prison. And, as I later learned, Thomas McFadden was its tour guide.

As I approached the city of La Paz, talk of Thomas and San Pedro intensified. There were flyers on the noticeboards in the Hostal Austria and Hotel Torino advertising prison tours. The foreign travellers I met talked of almost nothing else. Among their ranks, the best informed

was Uri, a German backpacker with an unkempt beard who had made the dilapidated El Carretero hostel his new home.

Uri was an expert on anything to do with South America. His attire was an eclectic assortment of local apparel picked up during his travels: a scarf from Chile, a Peruvian poncho, an imitation Ché Guevara beret and necklaces made from rainforest seeds sold by Brazilian street hippies. He was too tall and skinny for any of it to look right, but somehow he carried it off. The truth was, all these fashion accessories lent him a certain kudos among the other travellers.

When I talked to Uri, the basis of Thomas's fame became more apparent: not only was he the prison's tour guide, he was also its resident cocaine dealer.

'The best coke in the world comes from Bolivia,' Uri informed me, sitting up on his stained dormitory mattress in order to light his second joint of the morning. He deliberately directed a stream of smoke my way.

'And the best coke in Bolivia comes from inside San Pedro prison. The inmates manufacture it in laboratories inside.'

The fact that convicted drug traffickers could continue their trade from prison would have struck me as ironical in any other country. In Bolivia, it didn't warrant comment.

'So, you know this guy Thomas who does the tours, then?' I asked.

'Of course. He's my main supplier. Why? How much coke do you need?'

I liked the way Uri said *need* instead of *want*. 'So, how do I get to the prison?' I asked, ignoring his offer. 'And how do I find Thomas?'

'Just catch a taxi,' he answered, making his way towards the door that hung tentatively by its remaining hinge. 'But don't worry about finding Thomas. He'll find you.'

𝍸

I set out that very afternoon. Chilly air blanketed the city of La Paz even though the day was beautifully clear and the sun abnormally brilliant. At three thousand, six hundred metres above sea level, the thinner atmosphere imbued the light with a slightly surreal quality. The sky emanated a rarefied, crystalline blue, and everything looked sharper and more in focus. Above the city basin, the snow-capped peaks of Mount Illimani loomed unrealistically close.

According to the map, the prison was within walking distance, but I hailed a taxi so as to make no mistake.

'To San Pedro prison,' I ordered the driver in my best Spanish.

'*Sí, señor*.' He nodded nonchalantly and headed off into the chaotic La Paz traffic with the obligatory dangling plaster statuette of Jesus swinging erratically from his rearview mirror. I wondered whether I had pronounced the destination correctly. Did he not think it a trifle odd that a foreigner would want to visit the prison?

We crossed the Prado and, almost immediately, found ourselves hemmed in by traffic. My gaze roamed aimlessly out the window and over the scenes in the street where hawkers threaded through rows of cars, offering bananas, cigarettes and fake leather mobile phone covers to motorists. A stout old woman sat on an upturned box beside her hotplate that milked its power from an illegal cable running down a nearby electricity pole. A young indigenous girl was slowly making her way up the steep hill carrying a baby on her back wrapped in colourful cloth. In her arms she held a heavy bundle of potatoes. She was stooped forward with their weight, but didn't stop to catch her breath. If she lost her momentum, I sensed it might be forever.

Through the other window I saw a malnourished young boy, dressed in dirty jeans and rubber sandals made from old tyres, weaving his way lazily around the maze of traffic, half-heartedly offering to wash windscreens. The drivers ignored him, but before the lights changed, he had tipped dirty detergent water on someone's window and begun wiping it without being asked. The driver must have felt guilty and started to search for a few coins just as the lights turned green. A dark-skinned policeman blew his whistle, trying to advance the cars, but none of them could move because the front driver was busy looking for coins for the boy. The policeman kept blowing his whistle and commanding the cars forward. Still, nothing happened. By the time the driver had found some coins, the lights were red again. My driver breathed heavily through his nose.

We continued through the traffic. Only a block further up the hill, we rounded a plaza and the driver braked suddenly, interrupting my reverie.

'*Aquí no más*,' he said, pointing to a large metal gate set in a high, yellow wall. It did not look at all like a prison. We were still in the middle of town. There were no bars, no barbed wire and no signs.

'Are you sure?' I frowned.

'*Sí, seguro*,' he replied, pointing once more at the building and then holding out his hand to receive payment. 'Fifteen bolivianos, please.' It seemed he now spoke English. I shook my head and smiled to show I had been in the country long enough to know the cost of a taxi ride.

'Six.'

'OK. Thirteen.' Eventually, he dropped his price a further two bolivianos, but he couldn't go any lower than that. Cost cutting in Bolivian schools has resulted in generations of taxi drivers who do not know the numbers one to ten. They learn to count from eleven upwards. I paid him the correct fare and he laughed good-naturedly and then drove off.

I was still dubious about whether this was the right place. Apart from two uniformed policemen leaning idly against a metal railing, there was no indication that there was a jail behind those walls. Besides, many buildings in La Paz, even apartment blocks and private businesses, could afford to have state-paid policemen stationed outside. As it turned out, the driver was correct; this *was* the prison.

It was inexplicably situated on prime real estate, occupying an entire block in the city centre and fronting on to the beautiful San Pedro Plaza. As I looked up at the enormous walls again, deliberating on my next move, one of the policemen appeared beside me.

'Tour, yes? You Eengleesh. You American. Prison tour?' He motioned that I should approach the gates. It seemed I was in the right place. However, I baulked until he said something that caught my attention:

'*¿Necesita a Thomas?*'

'*Sí*, Thomas,' I confirmed, still at a safe distance. He became even more excited and beckoned frantically for me to accompany him.

'*Sí.* Thomas! No cameras, *señor*! *No fotos*,' he advised, leading me inside.

The outer gateway opened up into a high-ceilinged, spacious passageway and there, directly in front of me, was another set of gates, this one consisting of vertical bars. On my side of the divide was a wooden table manned by several indolent guards in green uniforms. On the other side, pressed tightly against the metal gate, jostling each other and vying for optimal viewing positions, was a sea of expectant Bolivian prisoners.

Scarcely had I time to take in this initial spectacle, before my appearance generated a clamorous uproar. Voices bellowed from all directions:

'Tours!'

'Mister. Hey mister!'

'*¡Señor!*'

'Cocaine?'

'Marijuana?'

'Tour!'

'*Una moneda.*'

Prisoners also called out from the wings that branched out to the left and right of this main chamber. They were like frenzied monkeys, screeching and rattling their cages and clambering over the top of one another to capture my attention. Hands gripped the bars and others extended through them, waving and offering drugs or appealing for coins. I stared back at them. At the same time, my policeman was tugging at my sleeve with *his* hand out. As I gave him some coins, I heard someone call the name 'Thomas.'

The speaker this time was a diminutive inmate with dark skin and a shock of white hair at the front. I nodded to him and the din subsided instantly. The other prisoners resumed their intense vigil over the entrance, waiting for the next visitor, while the prisoner who had spoken yelled excitedly, '*Thomas! Thomas. ¿Quiere que le traiga a Thomas?*' When he smiled, I saw that he was missing a tooth.

I nodded again and he whispered something to one of the officers through the bars. The officer stood up, opened the gate using a set of keys chained to his belt and nodded for me to go through. It was the gateway into the strangest place I have ever visited.

A group of about five or six Westerners was already waiting just inside the gate. A young man of medium height, dressed in a freshly ironed designer shirt and cream-coloured jeans, noticed me looking around uncertainly.

'Hi. I'm Thomas.' He smiled warmly, extending his hand to shake mine. He had a chubby face with intelligent eyes that engaged my attention immediately. 'What's your name, man?'

'Rusty,' I answered hesitantly.

'*Rusty*,' he said, still clasping my hand between both of his. 'That is nice name, man. I like a lot. Strong name.'

This was not at all the Thomas I had expected.

First, he was black. Uri had told me Thomas was from England, so I had expected him to be white. Second, he was charming and courteous in a way that I would not have expected of a prisoner. When four more tourists arrived, he shook hands with each of them in turn, looking them squarely in the eyes and repeating their names. Over the next hour and a half, he didn't get a single name wrong.

Thomas had a strange accent for an Englishman. He called everyone 'man' and sometimes mixed up his words and tenses. But that didn't matter. Thomas had a magical way of drawing you right in. He had an energy I have encountered in very few people in the world. There were nine of us in the tour group, but I never doubted for a moment that Thomas was speaking only to me. The tour itself was fascinating, but it did not end there. When the other visitors left, Thomas invited me back to his 'cell', which was more like a student room in a fraternity house. He had cable television, a refrigerator and said he had once owned a computer.

Without another word, Thomas produced a small wrap of cocaine and started chopping its contents into lines on a CD case. I looked at the door, which he had locked. Thomas sensed what I was thinking.

'My prison cell is the safest place in the world to take cocaine,' he assured me, laughing to himself. 'I won't get busted, man. I can have the police fired if they give me any trouble.'

He sniffed a line, slid the CD case over to me and then started talking. Soon, I did not want him to stop.

It is impossible to convey adequately the way in which Thomas related the events of his life to me. He did not simply narrate them; he acted them out as if he were reliving the entire experience. From the moment he started talking, I did not shift from my chair. Thomas, on the other hand, stood or moved around almost the entire time. As new people entered the story, he played their various roles. He imitated their voices, their mannerisms – even their facial expressions. He used objects and furniture in order to tell his stories. He even tapped himself on the shoulder when describing how two policemen had approached him in the customs queue at La Paz's airport four-and-a-half years earlier.

Thomas's experiences in San Pedro and his life beforehand were the

stuff of books – the types of true stories that are so bizarre they seem like fiction – and when he finally paused for breath, I told him so. He said that it had always been his intention to write a book, but he was yet to find someone to whom he could entrust the telling of his life story. He did another line of cocaine and then continued his narrative.

I was completely mesmerised for another hour until a bell sounded. All visitors were now supposed to leave. However, there was something the official guidebooks had failed to mention: for a small bribe, tourists could also spend the night in San Pedro.

That evening, Thomas took me into the dangerous sections deep inside the prison. Some of the things I saw there made me cry with laughter; others utterly repulsed me. I saw a side of life that I had never seen before. Many of the inmates were addicted to drugs – some so severely that they cut themselves deliberately in order to come down or because they were paranoid. I even made the acquaintance of a cat that was addicted to smoking cocaine. It was the craziest night of my life and the most fascinating. I do not know what possessed me to take the risks I did. I think it was Thomas. In the few hours since I had met him at the gate, I had come to trust him almost completely. As long as he was there, I felt certain that no harm would come to me in San Pedro.

By the end of the night, I understood why Thomas McFadden was so famous. With Thomas holding court, the entire evening was bathed in magic. It was also powdered with cocaine. However, that was only part of the experience. The coke he dispensed that night was of the quality that Uri, the German backpacker, had boasted, but it was used in the same manner as the furniture and other objects in his room; it was merely another prop to help him narrate. His life story was also as fascinating as the Israelis on the Inca trail had described. But it was not that, either. It was Thomas himself. I had never met anyone like him in my life, and I doubt I ever will again.

Something clicked between us that night. We talked non-stop until daybreak and then I decided to stay another night. Around four o'clock in the morning of the following day, it was decided: I was going to write his book for him. We hugged and Thomas told me I was his white brother. He bought a dozen bottles of beer to celebrate.

The next day I had a hangover and a vague recollection of having made a very serious pact. I was now Thomas's brother and I had to

stick to our agreement. It would be a risky undertaking; if the prison administration or other prisoners were to discover our intention of exposing the corruption in San Pedro, there would be grave repercussions. There was also a catch that Thomas had neglected to mention: I would have to live in San Pedro with him. Otherwise, I would never genuinely understand what it was like to be a prisoner there.

'The tourists only see the easy side of prison life for an hour when they do a tour,' he told me. 'But there is a lot of suffering here, man. A *lot* of suffering.'

I went back to Australia for six months in order to work and save up money, before returning to Bolivia. For the next four months, I spent time with Thomas in San Pedro every day. It was not long before I discovered that Thomas was right – it seemed like a relaxed place for a prison, but it was a prison nonetheless. Fortunately, he had obtained permission in writing for me to come and go as I pleased. Unlike the real prisoners, I could take a cheap room in a hotel on the outside for the night whenever things became too much.

In taking on this project, I knew from the outset that Thomas McFadden was no angel. Very few foreigners end up in prison in South America for no reason. Thomas was a convicted cocaine trafficker, but he was also one the most magnetic people I have ever met. However, I will allow you to discover that for yourself.

This is Thomas McFadden's story.