

David Mercy

"Berserk"

BERSERK IN THE ANTARCTIC

sailing to the world's most uninhabitable continent

BERSERK IN THE ANTARCTIC

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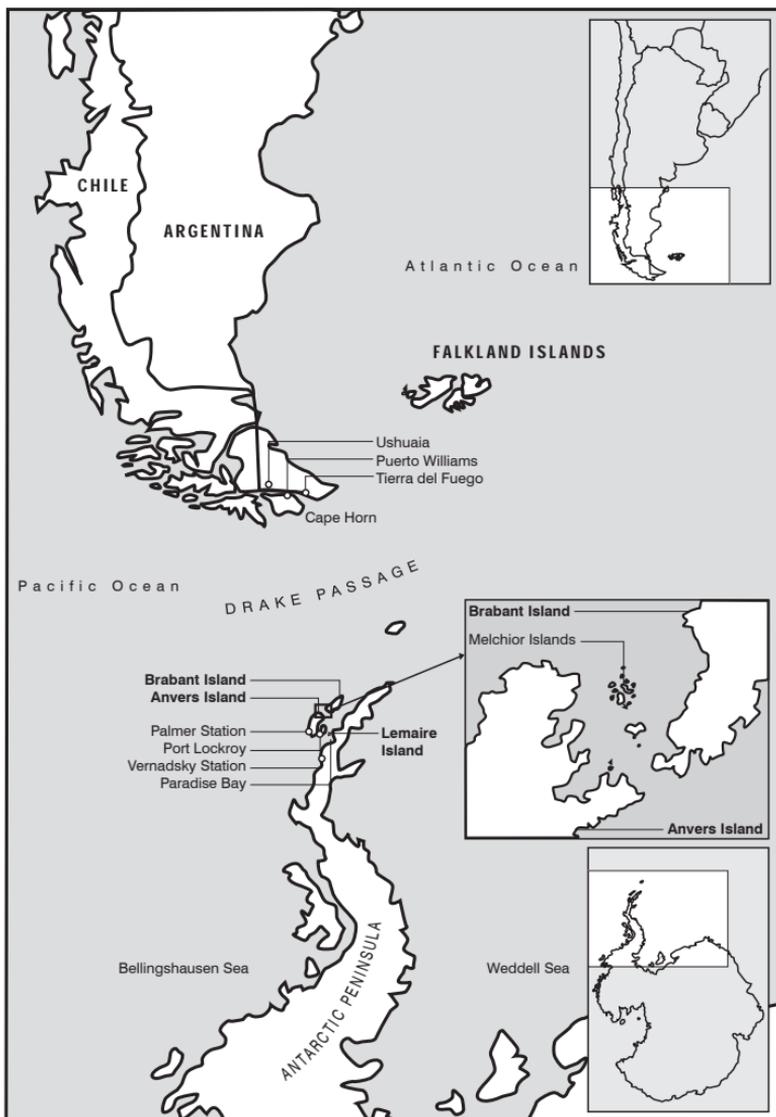
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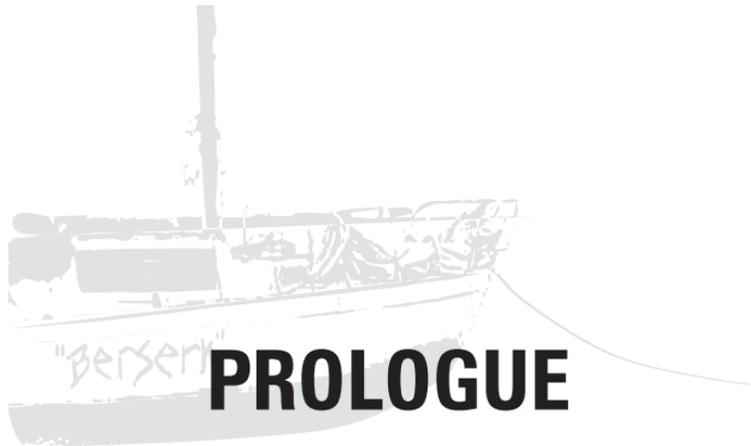
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for my father



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PROLOGUE

‘This is suicide!’ Manuel screamed frantically. ‘We’ve got to go back before it’s too late!’

He grabs me by the collar with both hands balled into fists like a madman and shakes wildly. Though he is shouting right in my face, the wind blows so fiercely, so loudly, I can barely hear him. We are in the middle of a hurricane, riding it out on the swamped decks of a tiny sailing boat, a speck in a sea of madness. A week earlier, none of us had ever met before – and now we are reliant upon each other, and upon this fragile, dilapidated boat, for our lives.

Maybe he is right. Maybe we are going to die. We are being smacked flush in the face by a major hurricane-strength storm just south of Cape Horn, like we have walked into the ring against the heavyweight champion of the world and are getting punched right in the nose before having a chance to lift a glove. We are on our way to Antarctica in a 27-foot fibreglass sailing boat our 21-year-old Norwegian captain named *Berserk*. It’s our first day out at sea, the first time Manuel and I have really sailed, and the seas are enormous. The waves tower high over the mast and break down upon us constantly, tossing the boat over on its side. We’re always one wave away from capsizing.

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We've reached a point beyond fear. No longer do I fight Death – I have accepted it. I just don't want to die with Manuel screaming in my ear, that's all. I met him ten minutes before we got on board – ten minutes before we met Jarle. We're three strangers out here at sea doing battle with the worst possible conditions in the world, but for some odd reason, I'm still happy. The question is: why?

Manuel gets right up in my face and shouts again. 'We're going to fucking die!' His eyes look like overweight Marine recruit Private Pyle's in the Stanley Kubrick film *Full Metal Jacket* right before he blows his drill sergeant to oblivion.

He loosens his grip but his eyes remain the same. 'Jarle, we've got to go back!' he shouts up to the captain. He frantically bounces around the inside of the cabin like a cockroach, grabbing onto anything he can hold in the storm.

He tries to reason with me. 'David, he's just a boy. He's only a boy,' he explains quietly and calmly. 'He's only twenty-one. Remember all the mistakes you made at that age?' He speaks with reason and assuredness that are not called for during such a harrowing scene, in such a difficult moment. It is almost eerie, a moment of quiet in the middle of raging, deafening violence – as unnatural and disconcerting as the panicked shouting.

Manuel doesn't let up. 'He didn't listen to the report,' he shrieks. 'He knew we were heading out into a storm.' Manuel thinks he's crazy. Is that true? No way. As Jarle likes to say: 'Crazy, but not stupid.' He would never intentionally head out into this. No right-thinking human would.

But Manuel would argue that Jarle – the 'crazy Viking' I had heard about – is indeed not a right-thinking human. That is his point. Jarle's original statement – that once we left for Antarctica, there would be no turning back, no matter what, that our next port of call would be South Africa – should be abrogated immediately.

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‘He’s making all the wrong decisions!’ he screams again, almost irrational. ‘We’ve got to turn back before it’s too late!! While we still have a chance!! Jarle – we’ve got to go back!!’ His face turns plum red.

‘Jarle, you’re not Shackleton!’ he shrieks. It is a slap in the face, aimed directly at the young captain’s beloved idol. Jarle’s goal in leaving Antarctica would be to retrace the famed explorer’s life-saving sail to South Georgia, and he has mentioned this often with pride.

I undress, stripping myself of my wet clothes, listening and thinking about what Manuel said. Maybe he is right. Maybe we should turn back now, while we still have a chance. After all, we are only 12 hours or so from the safety of shore. Another wave crashes into our side, tossing the *Berserk* like a wet napkin. I say nothing. There is nothing to say.

‘Jarle, you fucking asshole! I want to go back!’ Manuel wails. It is becoming like one of his oft-performed yoga mantras.

Up on deck, the captain breaks his long silence. ‘This is a democracy. There are three of us. If two of us vote to go back, we’ll let the majority decide.’

He is putting the onus squarely on me.

Manuel runs up to me, again grabbing me by the collar of my sweater. ‘David, tell him! Before it’s too late!’

I think for a moment. Earlier on deck I had seen my death arriving quickly. Now I silently weigh the state of affairs, sitting on the edge of a bunk. We are still within striking distance of getting back. Manuel is already at the end of his frayed nerves, on the first day of the voyage. It is still uncertain whether the boat can handle the pounding of both the storm and the waters of the fierce Drake Passage. Hell, we aren’t really even into the heart of the Drake yet! What more could possibly be waiting for us further out there?! We have already lost a wind pilot, a sea anchor and 20 litres of

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gas in winds so strong they had blown my colourful Peruvian llama wool cap right off my head in a blink.

And then, in the distance, I hear it on the wind. Like a lone oboe slowly rising to a crescendo. My dear father's voice, echoing. 'David,' it calls to me, 'don't be a hero... hero... hero...'

'Jarle!' I yell up. 'I think we should go back.'

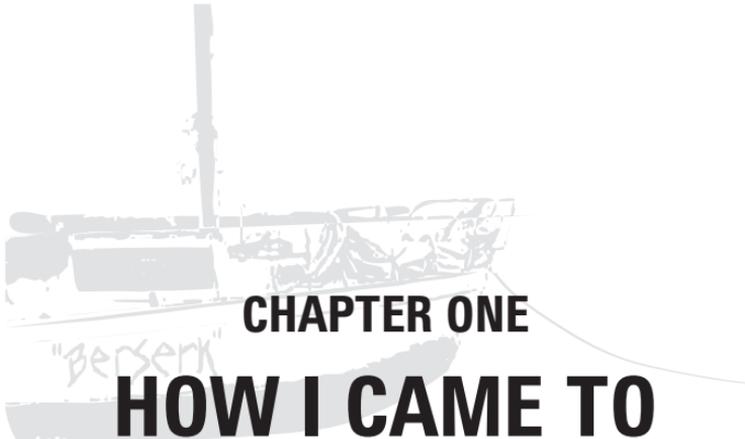
'What?' the disbelieving captain yells down.

'I think we should go back and regroup.'

There is a long moment of silence as Manuel smugly nods his head up and down, close-mouthed in I-told-you-so satisfaction.

'Skull,' Jarle shouts back down, calling me by my chosen pirate name. 'Get dressed and come back up here.'

There was no way I could know it at the time, but the next decision I made would be the turning point in my life. With each monstrous wave, a door was opening wider and wider... and like it or not, I was about to step through.



CHAPTER ONE

HOW I CAME TO THE *BERSERK*

When I stepped onto the *Berserk* to set sail for Antarctica on 1 January 1999, I had no idea that it would be a life-altering – and ultimately life-affirming – experience. I just thought it would be a good way to see Antarctica.

I had already travelled to the other six continents of the world: fought my way through the heart of the African jungle via canoe on the Congo; driven into a raging river during a flash flood in the Australian outback; beheld with wonder the mysteries of ancient Tibetan sky burials while trekking across China to India; carved salmon on a floating fish processor in the Bering Sea; and sojourned in tarantula-infested teak forest ruins with the Mayans of the Yucatan.

But I had my heart dead-set on seeing all seven continents – and now there was only one left. The hard one. Antarctica. Many people joked that I would swim to Antarctica if that's what it took, and they weren't far off.

The bus pulled into Ushuaia, the southernmost city in the world, on New Year's Eve shortly after 9.30 p.m. local time.

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Ushuaia, a beautiful coastal city nestled gently beneath the verdant mountains of Tierra del Fuego, lies at the southernmost tip of Argentina and South America.

I had been on the road since September, on ‘the hippy trail’ of wayward backpackers from around the world, slowly making my way south amongst the other lost souls banding together in search of fun, frolic, the meaning of life, and of course a good time. To understand the road, you must first understand the nature of the hippy trail. Like formations in a lava lamp, travellers meet, mix, join, separate, and move along – only to reconfigure somewhere else down the road. You never know where you will run into someone that you have seen earlier on the trail; ordinarily it is unexpected in both time and place, but generally always welcome.

It is difficult in this day and age to make one’s escape from Modern Life, and my escape was no exception. The older you get, the harder it is. With all the contraptions and gizmos to pay for in one’s monthly nut – from mobile phones to access lines to car payments to rent – to simply walk away for a month or two, to disappear, to drop right out of the middle of one’s life without a care or worry and leave no trace, requires some planning.

Except in a case like mine: no job, no wife, no kids, no pets, no car – only a garage, where I had lived for 12 years beneath a splendid, sprawling avocado tree whose twisted, gnarled branches sheltered me from reality ever since my days as a film student at UCLA. For me it was easy: simply lock the door to the garage, toss a few things in a backpack, and head south to write my novel, with no itinerary, heading wherever the wind would take me for as long as the cash would last, collecting experiences like butterflies along the way. When I hit the road, I figured the cash I had painstakingly stowed away would last about three months in South America before the well dried up and I was forced to return home and deal with reality.

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My first stop was Lima, Peru. After a bleary all-night flight, I took a cab at 5 a.m. to a crowded backpacker's hostel and collapsed immediately in a dorm room filled with snoozing students – only to wake up a few hours later to the sounds of a major morning protest taking place in front of the nearby Peruvian government building, complete with tanks, armoured personnel carriers, riot police, soldiers, and screaming, marching peasant masses. I stepped out onto the veranda, smelling the hot, sticky city, and smiled. I had arrived in South America.

In the span of a few short weeks I had made my way to Machu Picchu and hiked enough of the Inca Trail to watch the magical kingdom appear out of the mists in the early morning dawn, understanding instantly the mystique of the place and how it had remained undiscovered for centuries. I worked my way slowly south, moving along to Lake Titicaca, to the Isle of the Sun, the birthplace of the Incan religion, which unexpectedly turned out to be so exceptionally beautiful and peaceful I did not want to leave. Finally, after about a week, I managed to rip myself away from this paradise and move on into Bolivia proper and La Paz, a bustling neon bowl of a city etched right out of the sandy earth near the foothills of the Andes.

Rumour had it that the guards at Santa Cruz prison in La Paz accepted small donations to allow travellers to 'visit' the prison for a time during the day on 'humanitarian missions' to save souls. I went down to the prison with a fellow American woman named Erin and Stuart, a British student whom I had met on the Isle of the Sun and who was now stuck in La Paz for a couple of weeks enduring a series of free rabies shots because he had been bitten by a stray dog a few days after we had split up.

We were met outside the entrance to the prison by the shouts and screams of the inmates within, who were hawking

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their 'wares' at the tourists outside, namely, us. Finally, the three of us handed over our passports to the guard at the front desk and went inside, led by one of the prisoners, who stood out because he had a long pink scar running across his cheek and a fresh blue-black eye.

This prisoner, who called himself Joe, explained that he had been wrongly sentenced to prison time because he had been set-up by corrupt cops who had brazenly tossed two kilos of pure coke onto his hotel room floor while his hands were unceremoniously cuffed behind his back. The indignity of it all! Now, he was leading these tours because the only way out for him was to purchase a new two-thousand-dollar oak desk for the judge who sentenced him. Luckily, he had almost saved enough to buy his way out.

As he led us to his spacious cell in the wealthiest part of the prison complex, a cell block affectionately known as Beverly Hills, he explained that this was 'easy time' compared to the stint he had done for dealing drugs in Sing-Sing in upstate New York. He had spent a great deal of time in the States (wasn't that wonderful to know); he was half-American and therefore, due to his fluent English, was considered the best of the prison tour guides, which were rotated every three months.

The cell was a two-storey pad bigger than my garage and was attended by a short, squat, young prisoner who acted as Joe's 'butler'. We crawled up a ladder through the hole in the ceiling to his spacious, luxurious bedroom, complete with colour television and stereo, and sat down on his plush couch. Outside, the prison itself was more like a debtors' prison in Victorian England than a penitentiary found in the States. The inmates are given free rein during the day; at night, they are locked into their cells and cell blocks. Joe explained that for a complete tour of the facilities, it would cost us 40 Bolivianos (the equivalent of eight US dollars and quite an exorbitant sum). Erin, wearing shorts, felt

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immediately uncomfortable, being a woman in a prison filled with miscreants, reprobates, and common criminals, even though Joe reassured her that he was king of the prison and no harm would come to her as long as she was in his company. She couldn't get out of there soon enough. Stuart, too, balked at the rather pricey cost of the tour (we had entered having heard that the grand tour cost only 14 Bolivianos, not 40). I wanted very much to participate – but was uncertain enough of the prospect of taking the tour alone that I joined them in declining Joe's offer. Joe explained that the high price was needed so that the guards would get their share, but the others weren't biting. We were escorted back out through the gates with the admonition: once you leave for the day, you won't be let back in.

We quickly exited the prison and gathered for a huddle in the park across the street. I still very much wanted to go back inside, but was wary of doing so alone. Just as we were ready to call it a day and head out for a beer, we were approached by two other tourists, a tall, blond-haired Brit and his tattooed girlfriend. There is only one reason a tourist comes to that part of town; quickly I asked if anyone wanted to go inside for the tour with me. The Brit was easily convinced, and in we went.

Once again we were led to the cell by Joe, who had been eagerly waiting by the entrance. He sat us down in his cell once again and this time collected our money, which by now we had bargained down to 35 Bolivianos. (I had left the bulk of my cash with Erin, who waited across the street in the park with Stuart.) The Brit looked around at all the fancy equipment and remarked, 'This stuff must've cost a lot – where did you get all the money?' Joe replied, 'Well, I run a little side business here inside the prison – a pharmacy.' He smiled. I thought the whole thing was a joke. Then Joe asked, 'So, are you guys here for the tour, or are you shopping?' I chuckled. 'The tour,' I mumbled.

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‘Shopping,’ the Brit added, after a brief pause. I turned my head in super slow motion and stared at my fellow tourist in disbelief. You have got to be kidding me, I thought to myself. Joe stepped forward and explained that he had pure Bolivian cocaine for four US dollars a gram and bounteous amounts of marijuana at seven Bolivianos a gram. The Brit said that he was interested in buying two grams of the herbs and handed over 14 Bolivianos to Joe. We walked downstairs and Joe called over his little butler. He handed over the cash to his young flunky and the youngster scampered off, disappearing into the prison population. ‘OK, let’s start the tour,’ Joe said.

I was utterly horrified. I wasn’t sure about anything that was going on, and certainly wasn’t happy about being an American in a Bolivian prison where a drug deal was going down. The guards were corrupt and the prisoners were killers, my passport had been secreted away by the slimy guard at the front door, and American policy in Bolivia had been viewed with mixed results by the indigenous population, who had been growing and using the coca plant for years but were now under attack by the American DEA and all the monetary and political pressure they could apply. I had visions of the guards swooping down on us at any moment and applying their own strong-arm tactics, squeezing out of me every cent they could before tossing me to the wolves, either inside the prison or outside in the political arena.

I began to sweat as Joe led us through the first courtyard to another wing of the prison, explaining the intricacies of the place as he went along. He explained that where he lived, in Beverly Hills, they were able to bolt the doors at either end of the cell block at night to protect themselves from the other prisoners, the toothless ones in ‘A Block’ on the ground floor, who got wild on *aguardiente* or *pisco* (the local moonshine) and tried to break down those doors, pounding and howling each and every night to get to the massive amounts of pure cocaine stored inside.

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He then led us up to a second-tier balcony, from where we could look down on the courtyard. ‘This is where we play soccer during the day,’ he told us, ‘and at night, this is where the beatings and the stabbings take place.’ He smiled and led us around the prison via the upper tier; at every intersection to a new area, he mumbled in local dialect to another flunky, who then scampered off. ‘This is where the elders play cards during the day,’ he pointed out, ‘and at night, this is where the beatings and the stabbings take place.’ He bragged to us how he had won his five-thousand-dollar cell in a card game when one of the elders put it up as collateral in a bet; cells in Beverly Hills were hard to come by.

We walked on. ‘This is where we eat lunch during the day, and at night, where the beatings and the stabbings take place.’ I began to sense a pattern. Sweat began to roll down my face even more, the palpable aura of paranoia intense. ‘Ah, you don’t have to worry about it during the day,’ he boasted. ‘They wouldn’t dare try anything against me. I run the prison.’ I asked him how he got his black eye. ‘We had a cultural dancing competition between the cell blocks, and things got a little out of hand.’ He smiled.

We walked back downstairs and headed for the exit. Along the way, Joe’s little butler showed up and they slapped hands. Joe pointed out five tin drums of rubbish, buzzing with flies and waiting for collection. ‘There’s this week’s rubbish,’ he said. ‘A guy’s been missing over on Cell Block C. He’s probably chopped up in there somewhere.’

He led us to the front gate, within earshot of the guards. Time to say goodbye. He stuck out his hand to shake the Brit’s, and slapped the two grams of dope into his palm. I nervously retrieved my passport from the grinning, clean-cut guard and walked out into the fresh air and sunshine, safely outside the prison walls.

I didn’t look back but could still hear the shouting and the hoopla as I rejoined the others in the park across the

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street. The Brit and his tattooed woman headed off happily to smoke their dope, while I told my companions the tale of intrigue over a beer in a dingy joint across the square. They were equally horrified at my predicament. What a crazy place, where a person goes inside a prison to score the best drugs and the guards themselves run the trade in cahoots with the prisoners. Then, suddenly, it dawned on me, and I smiled at my own foolishness: Joe had been pulling my leg. There really hadn't been a cultural dancing competition at all.

I made my way through the glorious Andes and down into the high reaches of the Amazon basin before hitching a ride out of the jungle on a Bolivian cattle barge. I had hiked out into the bush underneath a blazing sun to a small village on the shore of some nameless river, told to go there by the Bolivian Navy (yes, there really is such a thing) and wait for a cattle barge that would pass by the following morning at the crack of dawn. As I strung up my brand new, market-purchased hammock in an abandoned shack now doubling as a chicken coop, a local villager came running up, panting, to tell me that the barge had arrived early. I quickly packed up my things and ran with the villager down the muddy banks to the water's edge, where we were met by a boatsman in a canoe with a small outboard engine. We whizzed across to the other side of the river, where the barge was tying up against the far shore. Excitedly I asked the eager, young captain if he would take me with them. He smiled and assured me they would – but first they were going to go back to the village to grab a bite to eat. They left me there alone for over two hours with nothing to do but watch another beautiful orange-red Amazonian sunset and listen to the cattle shuffle across the wood planks and moo before finally the delighted crew returned, and upriver we went into the jungle darkness, guided only by a spotlight on a swivel that illuminated the inky water every time the captain yanked on its joystick.

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Travelling on board the barge along with me through the jungle were the smiling Bolivian captain, his precocious young family, three crewmembers oddly reminiscent of the characters who accompanied Dorothy through the Land of Oz, and 156 head of stinking, shuffling longhorn steer. Each night the friendly Scarecrow and I gazed out and up in awe at miraculous meteor showers while reclining on a series of wood planks strategically placed two feet above the shuffling cattle's horns. They stank to high heaven, a mixture of all that a beast entails, uncured hide and acrid urine. Five days later the cattle were driven off the barge with extreme and shocking brutality by the crewmember who reminded me of the Cowardly Lion, who then proudly butchered before my eyes one of the poor sick beasts to provide a month's worth of food for the crew.

I meandered my way down through the Andean silver mines of Potosi and through the salt flats toward the mountains of Chile. Though I had no itinerary planned, I knew in my heart that I wanted to get to Antarctica. Now that I was slowly making my way through South America, Antarctica was the only continent left that I had not visited. As a writer and a filmmaker it was my obligation, duty and desire to see all corners of the world. Antarctica marked the last step in that journey – and I knew it would be the most difficult step to achieve.

But along the way I was certainly enjoying Life. Every day brought a new adventure. Proud to have escaped from the vicious cycle of modern living, though one of the oldest people backpacking along the hippy trail, I felt oddly successful. Before leaving LA, I had been seated before the highest-paid screenwriter in cinema history, who advised me that an opportunity was presenting itself at that time, that I should stay and take advantage of the opportunity to write another screenplay, that the jungle and South America

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would be waiting for me next year, wouldn't it? I didn't take the advice lightly, respecting this writer as both a friend and an artist.

But I felt something drawing me inexorably down there and could not properly explain it. It seemed that Destiny was calling out to me. One night before the finals of the soccer World Cup, I had a dream that I was lying on the couch and watching the game between France and Brazil. In my dream France scored a goal with less than two minutes to go in the first half and went into the locker room leading the heavily-favoured Brazilians by a score of 2–0. I told a close friend and he mocked me mercilessly.

We watched the game together. The French shockingly scored the first goal but as the half wound down it looked like that would be all they would score. My friend began to rub it in my face. The clock ticked down to zero, but two minutes of extra injury time were added. Suddenly, the French scored again – and my friend finally shut up. The vague dream had proven eerily prescient.

Following in the wake of that dream I mysteriously had another. This one was even more nebulous and vague, communicating more of a feeling than a specific thought. The dream conveyed to me that I would find some answers on this voyage regarding my Destiny. It beckoned me to go, strong as an undertow; there I would find my Fate. I felt it more than I was able to elucidate.

Was I being led inexorably by Fate toward my death? Or was I about to embark on a voyage of discovery that would somehow change my life? I wasn't sure. But whatever it was, the answer was down there – in South America.

The streets of Chile were erupting in chaos as piles of burning rubbish were met by squadrons of riot police when I entered the country across the arid mountainous border with several Brits, who were nervous at the political climate.