

## Carry on

As suitcases snaked by in varying hues of black and gray with the occasional pop of color, the guide recalled the last time he waited at this terminal many years ago. He had sat on this exact same bench, accompanied by a colorful cast of retirees, overworked executives, twenty-something backpackers with nothing to lose, all of whom were looking for an escape from the predictable. After fifteen years of struggling to make ends meet, the guide's independent tourism business had exploded in bookings with the recent popularity of social media. Through online advertisements and positive word-of-mouth, the guide had established himself as the premier tour guide of Central and South America.

The guide was startled out of his rumination by a disheveled-looking man running toward the bench. He was dressed in an ill-fitting suit with his tie askew. In his hands he clutched a shabby looking brown leather suitcase. The man glanced around him then took a seat next to the guide, sweaty and panting. The guide, trying not to stare, pulled out a book and tried to ignore him.

After the guide's wild success in the tourism industry, the small fortune he amassed afforded him great luxuries in his home country. He had established a reputation for himself as a wild risk-taker and frivolous spender with his daily excursions to the casino. Even when he was abroad working, the guide always made time to visit the nearest dive after walking the crowded streets of Buenos Aires or paddling the Amazon. Winning was thrilling, but not nearly as innervating as the allure of the next win. The fear of the unknown had been chopped, stirred, and broiled to an unrecognizable degree into a commercialized dopamine factory that the guide was all too eager to participate in. And it wasn't entirely his fault. Years of exotic travel, drinking, and shameless sexual exploits had tuned his life to

such a high octave that he was left feeling empty when he could no longer keep up. Gambling was the only activity that could cure his anhedonia.

The guide looked up and saw that the man was still staring at him. The man gestured toward the suitcase.

"Here, take it, please. I sure as hell don't want it."

"Wait, what are you--" The guide began, but the man had already gotten up and was hurrying toward the next gate.

The ratty leather suitcase was sitting right where the man had sat. The guide took the handle and lifted it, surprised by its weightiness. He stood and was about to take it to the security desk when a morbid curiosity gripped him. He sat back down, unzipped the brass zipper on the suitcase, and slowly raised the lid. He peered inside and immediately snapped it shut. U.S. bank notes, a lot of them. It was hard to be certain just how much it was. Judging by the top layer of one hundred dollar bills, the case probably contained several million dollars.

The guide slumped back on the bench, trying to think. He saw his own luggage gliding toward him on the conveyor belt and hoisted it over his shoulder. His own duffle and the brown leather suitcase in tow, he made for the exit. A slurred fog hung heavy in the air as he came through the automatic doors and out to the street. Airport shuttles and taxis came and went. The guide hailed a taxi and got in the back, cradling the brown leather suitcase in his lap.

As if in a dream, he heard himself repeat the address he knew by heart to the driver, and they drove off into the gloom. Body and mind in a catatonic state, he felt an unconscious desire previously tucked away slowly unravel.

He remembered the final conversation he and his wife had had. It was an insulated Saturday morning in late May. He was sipping his coffee and reading and revising his latest travel brochure design when his wife walked into the kitchen holding a rather official-looking document. She held it up to him wordlessly; her complexion had taken on the same hue as her apricot sweater. The guide adjusted his glasses and peered at the header: *Final Notice of Intent to Levy and Notice of Your Right to a Hearing*.

“Mind explaining why we just received this from the Ministry of Economics and Finances?” His wife seethed. “You told me you would take care of the taxes back in February.”

The guide said nothing, but in his head he cursed himself for being so careless. It was true, he had agreed to do their taxes for the year himself, but only so he could conceal the massive gambling losses from her. After completing all the necessary forms, he realized in alarm that the massive debts he had incurred made it nearly impossible for him to pay what he owed. So he did what he had to and inflated his reported winnings so he could write off proportionally more losses. Evidently this had failed, and earlier in the month he had begun to receive a stream of letters from the MES. He did his best to keep them from his wife, but today she had clearly beaten him to the mail.

His wife reached into her back pocket and produced a stack of envelopes marked with the official MES seal and slammed them down onto the coffee table, causing the guide’s beverage to rattle.

“I found these tucked under our mattress. Explain. Now.” she commanded.

The guide swallowed hard. “Look dear, I was going to tell you eventually. I just got so caught up in work that I--”

“Tell me what, about your gambling problem? I already knew about that” the wife snapped.

“But I didn’t realize you were also a tax-dodger and a liar. What is wrong with you?”

She burst into tears. The guide stood with his mouth agape, unable to produce any words.

“Why wouldn’t you tell me?” she choked. “We could have done something about this, together”

“I know, I know” the guide heard himself echo.

The guide stared intently at the taxi’s windshield wipers, transfixed by their persistent rhythm. For a second he remembered what the man had said, and thought for a moment about heading to the police station. But an object in motion stays in motion, and the guide’s inertia carried him all the way to the lobby of The Crown Casino El Panama.

He lugged the suitcase toward a concierge at the front desk reading a newspaper and purchased a large number of chips. He walked away and sat down at a card table where a dealer and several others were preparing to start a new game.

“You want in sir? We’re just starting a new round.”

“Deal me in.” The guide echoed hollowly.

The dealer shuffled the deck and began passing out cards. When his action came, the guide stood.

“No, no, no. I can’t do this to myself. I’m back right where I started.” He looked around at the other tables who had stopped their games to stare.

“Can’t you see,” he said to no one in particular, “I’ve been granted a second chance by god. He absolved me of my past sins, and I’ve come crawling right back into the devil’s maw.”

"I can make a change now," he continued, "I can really start over this time. I'll build a new life for myself." The people sitting at his table and other tables continued to stare open-mouthed. The guide coolly grabbed the suitcase handle and turned to leave. He stopped dead in his tracks as he heard the metallic click of a revolver.

"Where'd you get that suitcase?" He heard the dealer say.

The guide turned slowly to find the barrel of a six shooter being leveled at his head. The casino floor was absolutely silent, as though a vacuum had extracted the usual hum and energy of the place. The silence was deafening. All eyes were fearfully fixated on the two men.

"I don't know where or how you got it, but you should not have taken that suitcase."

A single shot pierced the air, and the silence was broken like the wind rushing through the window of a fast-moving car. The guide heard nothing. He fell to the ground soundlessly as the life drained from his form. The brown leather suitcase fell in front of him, bank notes splaying everywhere.