



Chellis  
Glendinning

## A Madcap Comedy of Garbage and Government

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Here at the top of Calle Dalence just down from the Recoleta, I shelled out the bucks to buy a house--an antique job on a 23-degree cobblestone incline boasting two-foot thick adobe walls, a stone courtyard, and the obligatory assignment of ridding the sidewalk out front of candy wrappers. As a new property holder in the land of labyrinthine bureaucracies equal to (and, given Bolivia's Cold War dilemma, most probably inspired by) those of the USSR, I set out to normalize the papers—and quicker than a llama jumping over *k'oa* coals, I was drawn back to Lawrence Durrell's *Bitter Lemons*. In this luscious chronicle of the Cyprus uprising in the 1950's, the Brit writer regales us with hard-knocks hilarity the story of purchasing a house in a Greek village. It's a tale that has caused me, even in the dead of a lonely night, to spit tears and shriek out loud.

Getting my name on the utility accounts turned out to be a slender slice of *torta de coca*. Of course, unlike you folks who simply punch a few keys on the trusty Smartphone while clutching a vertical rock slab of El Capitán, I had to trek to the offices of said public entities that were scattered about the city, but then, no complaint, that was expected. I will admit, though, that with each success--gas, electricity, water--I felt a rush of triumph. Perhaps the sensation was not unlike what John Lennon underwent upon baking his first loaf of bread. "I was overjoyed, you know. I couldn't believe it," he crowed. "It was like an album coming out of the oven!" But also perhaps it was a bit like the comedown that followed. "... as I watched the bread being eaten," he then muttered, "I thought, well Jesus, don't I get a gold record or be knighted or nothing?"

Garbage pick-up presented the first test. I understood that the truck would come by maybe the 9<sup>th</sup> or perhaps the 10<sup>th</sup> of the month sometime between uh 8 a.m. and possibly noon. Since the dogs in the *barrio* ran in aggregated packs

demonstrating exactly zero concern for humanity other than their putting out of household refuse, I calculated that I would have to manifest attentiveness for at least eight hours in anticipation of the coveted event. Since I had just moved in, I had a flaming heap of garbage rotting in the garage, and it was for this reason that I tossed and turned in my bed the night of the 8<sup>th</sup>. Oh my God! They only come every 30 garbage-filled days! Would I have to sit by the front stoop for 48 hours in wait? What would I do if I failed to wave them down? What if they did come and I stressed their patience hauling out my Illimani-sized mound bag-by-bag?

As dawn lazily gazed upon the Andean sun pushing upwards like a *choclo* stalk, I arose looking a tad like Che Guevara on his last day on Earth. I guzzled down too much *yerba mate* and began to pace.

9:15 a.m. My first inkling that the truck was on the verge of descending was the rev of a mammoth engine at the top of the hill. Then suddenly, peddle to the floor as if at the starting line of Dakar, the truck lunged forward, and its enormous hunk of metal *cum* refuse charged onto the cobbled surface and down the hill at a flaming 50 miles per hour, plastic bags and half-chewed *empanadas* spewing out the back like flatulence from a dragon's asshole. In a panic I leapt down the stone steps to the front door, but alas! I arrived only in time to see its hefty backside disappear into the distant neighborhoods below. For all my mislaid sleep, for all the deodorant I had sloshed on my underarms, for all the care I had given to crowding my sacks right by the front door—I stood alone surrounded by 30-something bags of putrefying refuse.

It was only then that I learned that, little known or even revealed detail, the garbage truck swings by every single night after 9 p.m.

The Easter gathering of *campesinos* in the plaza in front of el Monasterio de la Recoleta provided a second encounter with the vagaries of homeownership and unwanted items. Like most sacred days in Bolivia, the autumnal celebration provides a perfect excuse for getting plastered. The *campesinos* poured in from the countryside carting nothing more than an *aguayo* to sleep on and a thermos of *chicha* corn-liquor, and they proceeded to toast the glories of Jesus' ascension together with the miraculous blossoming of springtime in the northern hemisphere. The thing that I could not explain was the perfect line-up spaced every 15 inches of hundreds of bowel movements on the sidewalk descending from the Recoleta all the way down Calle Dalance to my front stoop.

Local left-wing journalist Weimar Arandia had made a study of said phenomenon. While bouncing along the cobblestone on the back of his motorcycle through a cloud of urine-noted air, he filled me in. "You squat with one foot to either side of the target and do the deed," he shouted through the

mouthpiece of his helmet. "Logic has it that the next person isn't going to put his foot in your poop, and ergo you get this symmetrical spacing."

Being an activist, my Monday-morning task was to do something about the blight that had landed upon our 'hood. I had long halted my daily clean-up of the candy-bar wrappers in front of the house as they were now mingled with strips of *papel higiénico* stained with brownish streaks; plus a light rain the night before had pushed scatterings of the evidence in a downward direction, and a urinary tributary was gurgling along the curb like a gentle brook in a Wordsworth sonnet. I had long since given up on driving my Jeep to protect the tires from embellishment by the poop adhered to the cobblestones and subsequent slathering of the floor of the garage in a paste of microorganisms. Weimar said to go to the Environmental Department.

He was wrong.

Said department told me to "write a letter to the *jefe*" and gave me his address. I thought it a good idea, but somehow felt that the foremost mission was rather distinctly "of the moment."

Weimar then recalled that his sister not only worked for city hall but had a child attending the school next to the monastery. He called her. And so it was that I awoke Tuesday morning, as always flipped on Radio 2000--to hear, of all things, testimony regarding said public-health disaster at a special session of the city council! Everyone was up in arms. Dignitaries who did not even bother to ascend to the Recoleta to see for themselves were enraged. It was a disgrace. Weimar's sister spoke with tears in her eyes for the children--and the entire event was followed by a foaming-at-the-mouth tirade by the owner of Radio 2000 himself.

I edged to the front door. One can never expect things to actually *happen* in the manner to which we of the north are accustomed, so it is necessary to prepare one's self for *cualquier cosa*—wild success, debasing failure, halfway-wild success, or worse, halfway-debasing failure. And so, taking deep breaths—one... two... three--I opened the door. It was a promising morning, the sky a patchwork quilt of ominous clouds and deep blue possibility, and lo and behold! the sidewalk across the street appeared as clean and smooth as a newborn babe's buns while... ah-*HEM*...the sidewalk on *my* side was festooned with a pile of fecal material in a tidy line-up every 15 inches, some sculpted into the shape of a snake coiled for action, others messy conglomerations more on the order (and color) of dog vomit.

Now I was mad.

Sociologist-friend Betty Trujillo and I called Sanitation. She has a way of overlooking the customary "*Buen dia. ¿Cómo está?*" and like a *chirimoya* custard pie hurled at a bureaucrat's mug, getting right to the point. "You mopped up one

side of Dalence but not the other!" she snarled. "There's shit all over the sidewalk! It was your responsibility to provide bathrooms for the *campesinos* in the first place! Whaaaaa? You want us to send you a photo? We don't have a camera or internet—so get your people up here right now!"

At that very moment the mottled sky cracked open like a walnut under a nutcracker, and a hard rain began to fall. I am certain that many citizens thought such an event a good thing for those of us entrapped at the heart of the municipal disgrace zone, but Betty and I quickly realized that the falling water would only muck up the works and send its new squishy consistency the way of gravity. Weimar was called into action a second time, and as it goes in this world, nepotism won the day. On Wednesday morning, save a few smudge stains of a brownish hue, all evidence of the environmental disaster had vanished, and I was left with my nightly date with the garbage truck, my newly acquired mission of picking up candy wrappers--and one kick-ass antique house.