

Immigration

by Matthew Zathe Daniels

They make a special hell for businessmen as conniving as Jim Barton. Jim was a restless entrepreneur who had more money than he knew what to do with. His three adult children never talked to him and his ex-wife hated him more than any human being alive. It didn't stop her, however, from living off his money and fancying herself to be "his girl." Jim had set up and closed hundreds of illicit business deals throughout a dozen Latin American countries over the course of a career, but was starting to lose his edge.

Toward the end of his last deal, in San Ramon, he wasn't even sure how he had made it out alive. Only a few details of that three month stretch of his life were clear to him. He had been in San Ramon, had been back in New York, and was now in Montevideo, but not sure of much else. He was getting out of the game, disappearing into a South American landscape where stability was the order of the day. As he sat in the Uruguayan immigration office with his "modified" papers, he hoped the fog would soon lift, giving him back those missing months of his life.

He remembered only that the stress of the work had been wearing on him. He never really understood the crooked smiles and mutual glances of his "partners" in San Ramon. The constant vigilance and the nagging insecurity of this fact had driven Jim to more and more late nights in the greasy hotel lounge, nursing his whisky and watching international news on a small TV in languages he never understood. That was when it had happened. *At the hotel in San Ramon.* Was he paranoid? No. That had really happened.

He fumbled the waiting line number in his hand and tried to piece things together. Then how did he get *out* of San Ramon? He remembered that he had been drinking again, and finally wandered up to his hotel room just in time to see a dark figure turn the corner and slip down the back stairway. Accustomed to seeing this type of thing, he paid it only a little attention. He stumbled into his room and found it ransacked. He made a quick search and confirmed that his briefcase, with his passport, tickets, remaining cash, and his list of phone contacts, had been fished out of its hiding place. He swore and fell back on his bed, more exhausted than angry. It was time to call it quits. Find someplace a bit safer and spend the rest of his life walking the streets of a sleepy beach town, where no one really cared just where the foreigner was from.

He called the only remaining number he had, a pencil scratching on a matchbook given to him earlier today by a guy who knew "Miguel." "Eef eet all goes down bahd," the

guy had told him, “Miguel can get you out. But it will cost you.” He would pay. Out on the street, with three too many whiskies swimming around in his head, he called Miguel, just as Miguel knew he would. The police were not an option. His growing distrust of his local partner kept him from ever taking a position of weakness. The consulate would fry him. It was Miguel.

But the moment the car arrived outside, his nightmare went from bad to worse. What had happened? He remembered the hotel. The car. His last minute decision to cut and run, and the guy that pushed him in the car. That was July, this was December. It was impossible to live three months in a fog, to have gone home, and to be back on his feet doing it again in another country and to have remembered so little.

The summer sun was heating the smoke-filled lobby of the immigration office. Jim wiped his brow, shifted in his seat, and listened as the clerk called out the next number. Ten more to go. He shivered as he reached back for more details. He had a clouded picture of the return trip home. He couldn't think of what he had been doing while back in the states before making his next trip. He could see himself arriving in Uruguay, but everything before then was lost in the recesses of his mind. He had done this so long and so often, he guessed that he had set the whole move up on auto-pilot.

He sensed he had called his wife and his kids, out of a new appreciation for being alive, and actually had a desire to say good-bye to all of them before this last trip. His assistant and only true friend Johann had made all the arrangements, and Jim more or less just woke up here. As long as Johann hadn't known that Jim had no intention of staying in the game, he was a great partner. “When you get zere, get a furnished flat, and take zee month off. Wait patiently. You will be treated kindly. If you are not getting it together, Barton, vee vill have no Jim Barton, and have no bizzness left.”

It was hell coming into those offices, and he felt like he would never get done. He sat in the the same seat of the same unstable row of multi-colored, molded plastic chairs for the third time in as many days and curse this backward bureaucracy. He would miss the appointment to drive out the coast. Settling in to this new land was taking its toll, and lately he had begun to wonder if Argentina would not have been a better option after all.

Large corporations had entire logistics departments to handle the immigration process for their ex-pat employees. Diplomats never blinked an eye and within a week, their Ethan Allen dining furniture miraculously appeared in their cushy first world apartment in their closely surveyed upscale neighborhoods. Jim, however, was on his own. He had chosen this path, and this was the result.

His first visit to Immigration had been on a Monday in early Spring. The Friday before he had had an early morning meeting a block away and he noticed the line which was two blocks long. He prided himself on his administrative efficiency and made a mental note to go at ten o'clock instead of 7:30. When he arrived, the outside queue was indeed gone, but the inside seats were full. But after two hours of waiting and several attempts at clarifying with the guard on duty, Jim realized he had been seated in the wrong section.

He'd finished the day off at a bar across the street. He'd come back the next day *earlier* than the rest and be in and out before his morning coffee cooled. The inefficiency tested his resolve.

The next day, at 6:30 am, Jim had been first in line. He took out his paper and began to read. At 7:00, he was surprised that no one else was standing there. Fifteen minutes later, when two Russians stumbled up, Jim noticed a note on the door. "*Horario de verano. De las 13:30 horas hasta las 19:00 horas*". Never before had he heard of an official government office having seasonal operating hours.

The following day the lines had been so long that Jim didn't even try. He went back again on Thursday, but had failed to learn that it was a national holiday. He called it a week and decided to go back on Monday, only to learn on his arrival that the public employees were on strike. When he finally was able to talk to someone a week later, he was given a list of all the prerequisites needed before they would even open a file for him. Jim felt like a man under a curse.

And so it had gone over the next two months. With every visit he found the place hotter and more dismal as the summer sun burned down on the city. Knowing that any attempts to get things done during the holiday season would be fruitless, Jim rented a little *ranchito* in a small town out on the coast. A little foretaste of the life to come would surely strengthen his resolve.

The Tuesday after *Reyes*, Jim resumed his efforts. At 1:30 that afternoon, the lines were shorter than usual. It was his lucky day. He waited dutifully for an hour to get in the door, and then pulled a number, J14, that gave him the right to wait for a number which would allow him to get his file reviewed.

Of the three partitions where clerks sat processing residencies of immigrants from all over the world, only one was really working. Miguelina Vazquez, or so the name plate read, was turned 60 degrees away from the restless bunch of number holders, attempting to look preoccupied with a business call. The infrequent outbursts of laughter and the high-smiling

cheekbones suggested, however, that her lover was on the other end of the phone arranging a lunch time rendezvous four blocks away.

Joaquín Nuñez was busy with an elderly Japanese couple that spoke very little English and absolutely no Spanish. The husband murmured stoically while the wife prattled away. Through their and Joaquín's broken English, and constant interruptions of the only clerk actually getting people processed, they were creeping along at a snail's pace in order to add two more residents to this tiny Latin American nation.

A door opened on the wall to his right and a distinguished gentleman in a dark suit emerged. Jim could tell just by looking that *that* was the man he had needed to talk to. The man who decided who got processed and who sat and waited. He stood to approach him, but the man called out in a decisive voice, "*Señor Martinelli.*" A man with all the appearance of a 1930's mafia gangster stood up and shook hands with the director. The director placed his arm across his back and ushered him through the door. Angered by the injustice of it all, Jim gave up and headed across the street.

The staid elderly owner of the bar greeted Jim like an old friend. "*Todavía nada, eh?*" "Yeah, still nothing, Jorge," Jim replied back. Jorge poured Jim a scotch and set it on the table in front of him, gesturing as if to say, "What else can you expect?" Jim's mind turned to the puzzle of his recent past in San Ramon, to being pushed into the car outside the hotel. He had been unable to reach his gun before he had been stripped of it and had been clubbed in the back of the head. Jorge saw his glass empty and poured him another. And it began to unfold.

The long ride in the first car through the mountains led to another, tied up in the back of a truck, with a whole pack of toothless *campesinos* smiling down at him. Weeks tied in a dark room... He remembered now. He had tried to escape... Jim was soaked with sweat. His mind poured forth more information than he would have cared to know. The hospital. The collapsed lung. He was suffocating in the ditch when the little girl came upon him and called her parents. The gunshot wound. That government clinic. He finished his second, left a hundred pesos on the table and stumbled out on to the street in a daze.

Jim focused on the impenetrable wall of red tape that lay before him. Getting his residency could be nothing compared to what he had gone through before getting here, although he had begun to discover heights of the sophisticated art of bureaucracy he hitherto thought impossible. Were it not for the hope of getting back out to coast permanently and finding some *señorita* to spend the rest of his days with, he would have given up a long time ago.

As summer turned to autumn, and as each subsequent visit to the immigration office turned up some *other* piece of information that he needed and that he found nearly impossible to come up with, Jim, began to lose control. All his bribing and pumping local sources for information had not turned up what he needed to know to get through *the* door. This day would be different.

Jim sat dutifully in the plastic chair until Miguelina called his number. “*Cero-Seis?*” Jim walked toward the desk. “Oh, hello, Mr. Barton.” Jim wasted no time and demanded to see the director. He wanted to see the tall man in the suit. He wanted to go through the door. For six months he had been in this process. For six months he had lived in the infested hotel rooms rented anonymously in the *Ciudad Vieja* and he knew every single one of the artificial, plastic-faced clerks with whom he came in contact. He had seen the pictures of their kids, of their spouses, and of their lovers. He knew all their shallow hopes and shallow pleasures, and he was beginning to suspect that they were all fictions that didn’t exist. “I will make a note of your request, Mr. Barton.”

“That’s not good enough.”

“Excuse me, Mr. Barton?”

“I want to see the Director. Today!”

The clerk spoke back to him in labored English. “I am sorry sir, but the Director sees no one. We will seek to arrange an interview with the Assistant Vice Sub-director, but it will not be today. I will have to kindly ask you to wait for your appointment, which will be scheduled for you in the order in which you have arrived on the list. If you return on Thursday, it looks as though he may be able to attend you.”

Jim started to argue the point, but decided a visit to Jorge would be a better way to finish the day.

On Thursday afternoon he finally lost his head. When he got to the end of the line for taking a number and saw the sign which said, “No more numbers will be given today,” he had had enough. Rage welled up slowly within him and he found himself jumping up and down and screaming at the top of his lungs in English that they could take the whole immigration process and do you know what with it. The discomfort in the room was palpable, and Jim was greeted by gasps and stares.

Calmly and quietly, a slim, young, attractive woman with pulled-back hair emerged from the door. *That* door. The one the Italian had gone through, as well as so many others. They were all men and women with Armani suits and Gucci shoes. They were men and women whose sheer aura said that clout, power, and money gain special assistance from the

directorship of immigration. It was the secretary to the Deputy Assistant Vice Sub-director who approached Jim and said, “Mr. Barton. Mr. Barton, I have to so expressly apologize a thousand times over for all the logistical errors and repeated mistakes we have made with your file since the day you have arrived. I myself have been looking over your file all morning and afternoon, and have decided to take your case and treat it personally, if you will come with me into the reception area outside my office.”

It was about time. He was finally going to be treated as he deserved. The cynic inside told him that he should probably expect more of the same. But then, he had never seen those who entered return to wait again, so he figured that he was getting somewhere. His three-year-old temper tantrum had opened doors.

He entered through the first door, where the small antechamber had the same appearance of the rest of the building. Humidity and water-stained walls, dingy tiled floors, ceilings stained yellow with a hundred years of tobacco smoke. But as he passed into the next room, he knew he had arrived. From here on he was as good as done. Within an hour, he would be a legal resident of Uruguay, and his past would be gone forever. Better to give a man what he wants than let him be a public embarrassment.

The room was as posh and nicely decorated as any lower Manhattan office building. Copies of the Wall Street Journal and Fortune 500 lay on the side tables. CNN International, *in English*, came across a 30 inch flat-screen television hanging on the wall. A gentleman appeared out of another door and offered Jim a Scotch. He accepted and settled in to check his stocks, occasionally glancing up to watch the latest international fiascos riddling across the globe on TV.

Jim looked around at the power represented in this room. He wondered if the rest of these people were legitimate or if they were mere criminals like him. Oddly, he seemed to be one of the few that carried a triumphant, powerful attitude. The rest varied across a spectrum of bored to slightly frustrated. The frustration was a bit more sophisticated than that of those in the common waiting area, but in essence it was the same.

After thirty minutes passed, Jim was over the initial euphoria of privileged treatment. He looked over at the secretary in the far corner. While the break from the Third World was nice, he still wanted to get his paperwork done. On occasion she would lift her phone and mumble a few words, each time in a different language, and call on one of the people waiting to enter the door marked “Deputy Assistant Vice Sub-Director.” The most desperate of those in the waiting room would usually slam down his glass, gather up his things with a

huff, and storm through the door as the secretary scratched through his name. It was the last time *she* would have to see him and she was more than happy.

Jim stretched his neck, asked the secretary where he fell in the order, and she kindly thanked him for his patience, remarked that even in *this* department they were unusually busy, and would he kindly wait just a bit longer and surely he would see the Deputy Assistant Vice Sub-director at any moment.

His number was finally up, and he was ushered by another assistant down a long hallway which curved around just inside the outer wall of the building. Fine granite walls, a bright marble floor, and soft-recessed lighting in the dark carpeted ceiling led the way to several offices, among which was the one which contained the person he wanted to see.

As they walked together down the corridor, the assistant updated him. “Your file seems to be in order, Mr. Barton, though your frequent travels in our part of the world and questionable reasons for the length of residence in several of our sister nations give rise to some concern on the part of the Assistant Vice Sub-Director, and he has asked to see you, but I feel positive about your case. You won’t mind kindly waiting over here, will you?”

She ushered Jim into a side chamber which was almost as nice as the room he just left, minus some of the amenities. The room was charged with important people tired of being jerked around. A sign on the door, in labored English, said, “Kindly please wait here, you will be treated in the number in which you have arrived.” He began to realize that he was on the same old ride, except that this time, he couldn’t just throw up his hands, storm out of the building, and blow off the rest of the afternoon in the corner bar nursing a whisky with the rest of the aging divorcees. Every door he passed through carried with it a greater sense of finality. From here, regardless of the wait, it was get the paperwork done, or be asked to leave the country. Coming back tomorrow was not an option.

Everyone else in the room was no different from him. The last sense of being in charge and finally getting treated as they deserved had begun to fade off their faces, and they were divided between those fearful and those angry. It was one thing to be treated as nicely as you liked, and quite another to be treated as nicely as you liked and be unable to leave. Though they occasionally glanced at one another, they were all essentially alone, wrapped tightly in their indignation, unable to cross the barriers and share a common plight.

He saw an echo of himself from earlier that afternoon as the most haggard-looking, sweaty, unshaven of the room begin to scream and pound on the door that lead to the Assistant Vice Sub-Director. And even here the method seemed to work, as young, sleekly dressed, administrative assistant, nearly identical to the first, peered out the door. With a

gentle and calmly patronizing tone in her voice, she said, “Mr. Timmons, right this way please.” As she opened the door wider for Mr. Timmons to walk through, what Jim saw amazed and disgusted him. Another hallway, winding around further, lead downward to another such similar office, a little higher up the ladder, a little closer to getting finished, and yet infinitely that much further away, or so it seemed.

Every door he entered, the faces looked more haggard and tired. He knew this building from the outside, and knew there was no way it had this much space. Each waiting room opened up into a curved hallway and led down to the next. He wasn’t going further *back* into the building. He was spiraling downward. It seemed the best offices with the most important people waited further below.

All sense of time began to fade. There were no windows, only the same soft incandescent light in the hallways and in the waiting rooms. He knew it had to be the same day, though it felt like he had been there for days, if not weeks. His *compañeros* wouldn’t really miss him, and his favorite *señorita* over at the club would certainly find herself some other ex-patriate businessman to go out with that night. He began to realize that he wasn’t that important at all.

Still the process of being processed continued. Jim was admirably resigned up until now. Not defeated, just resigned. He noticed that he was left alone in the last waiting room with only two other people. One cowered in the corner, nervously biting his nails and trying to read through a two month old edition of *The Economist*. Jim could tell this man was severely wound up and would need extensive therapy after completing the tedious residency process. He tried, but was unable to shut out the sound of the nail biting and the murmuring of what sounded like nursery rhymes coming from man in the corner.

The woman, on the other hand, began to protest. She was determined to get the paperwork done or leave. She was frantically calling the various telephone numbers she had for her legal representation in the country and kept receiving a message that the numbers were out of service. She began yelling that there would be hell to pay once she got in touch with her Consulate. She pulled on the door with all her might to leave. The magnetic lock was still on, and the receptionist outside the door had left, leaving no one to buzz her out.

Enraged, she grabbed a plant and threw it at the door. It smashed into pieces, scattering soil, leaves, and shards of stoneware about the room, but to no avail. Jim ducked for cover as she began to smash pictures on the wall and continued to destroy the rest of the plants. Every item she smashed caused the man in the corner to get tied up tighter in his fear and anxiety.

A soft voice, that of the assistant who had first helped him, came over the speaker. “*Continue to wait patiently, you will be treated kindly in the order in which you have arrived.*” The fear of the man in the corner and the anger of the tirading woman wove their way into Jim’s tired soul and pushed him to despair. Sitting on his front porch watching the sun rise over the Atlantic seemed like a dream he would never reach.

Both the frightened man and the angry woman were called in due time, leaving Jim alone in a spacious, but ramshackle, waiting area. He couldn’t shake the images he had just seen. He was overwhelmed and felt an uncontrollable darkness welling up in his soul. It was neither the fear of the man nor the anger of the woman, though it contained elements of them both.

“*Continue to wait patiently, you will be treated kindly in the order in which you have arrived.*”

Each time he heard it, it was like a drop of water on his forehead. He fought the despair coming from the voice on the outside, and fought the darkness welling up from the inside, distracting himself with thoughts of all his various successes over the past ten years. Bogotá, Quito, Panama City. Caracas, Valparaiso, La Paz. Latin America has been his for the picking. But San Ramon had been different. San Ramon had a successful thief and it had “Miguel.” He now saw the connection between the two. More pieces began to emerge from somewhere in the recesses of his memory.

The last thing he had remembered up until then was the shot which thankfully had not killed him, the night in the ditch in the slum neighborhood, the officials, the white lights of the hospital, and then later seeing his family.

He walked through one more time, slowly. It was all clearing. For the first time, Jim was able to take inventory of all that had happened in those intervening months, and he sat amazed. He saw the officials from the consulate making arrangements to have him medically evacuated to the U.S. He saw his adult children visiting him over a period of two months as he slipped in and out of the coma. His ex-wife, weeping at his bedside, not because she wanted a new start, but because she *was saying goodbye*.

Jim felt the fear. Yes, but how did he get here??? How was it that he was now sitting in this golden dungeon of an immigration office here in Montevideo if he never made it out of the hospital in New York City?

Johann! Johann had been faithfully at his side and had nursed him back to health. He distinctly remembered the conversation with Johann. Rent a flat and get some rest. That’s

what he did. He got here, rented a flat, and took time off before starting the immigration process, didn't he?

But what else was it that Johann had said to him? What were his words? If he could figure this out, he could untangle everything. "When you get there, lay low?" No. "When you get there, just wait around for awhile, and it will all come together"? That was closer, but it didn't seem to make much sense.

The voice came over the intercom and sent a chill down his spine. "*Continue to wait patiently, and you will be treated kindly in the order in which you have arrived.*" He tensed.

Where was he? Johann, yes, Johann. But... who the hell was Johann? For the first time, it dawned on him. He *never* had a friend name Johann. He didn't even know anyone named Johann. In fact, what kind of a stupid medieval name was Johann?

"If you are not getting it together, Barton, vee vill have no Jim Barton, and have no bizzness left."

No Jim Barton left. There was not only no longer any Johann.

There was no Jim Barton.

Jim fought against the reality that crept down over him. His jaw dropped. His children had said *goodbye*. His wife had paid her last respects. There was no Johann. Only that voice. That voice. "*When you arrive, please wait patiently, and you will be treated...*" His past and present were blurring together.

He sat outside the door, the door marked "Sub-director's Reception Area," and shuddered in fear. After his medical evacuation, he had never left the States again. He had never even left the *hospital*.

He heard footsteps approaching the door from the other side. The same gentle, sophisticated clicking of heels on the floor that he had heard walking up every other spiraling hallway behind every other door he'd passed through until now. He backed against the wall, seeking to put off the inevitable. If he heard the voice again... If he heard it one more time, it would be his undoing. He'd demand to be let go. He'd go to prison. He'd come clear on everything. They couldn't hold him. They'd let him go. He just couldn't bear to hear the voice gain.

The door opened, and the same lovely assistant appeared. She greeted Jim with a smile and held his file in her hand. "Mr. Barton, would you kindly come this way and wait patiently here in the next room, and you will be kindly treated in the order in which you have arrived..."

Jim Barton slumped in his chair, dropped his head and wept like a lost child.