

Prologue

Don Silvio and I sit across from each other at a small wooden table in my office above the call center. The table, scarred with rings of Nescafé, has one short leg and tilts when either of us leans in. Nacho sits in a chair to my left; Don Silvio's associate, a dark unsmiling man whose name I didn't catch, sits to his right. Traffic noise and the cries of vendors slip through the open window overlooking Avenida Honduras. Diesel exhaust mixes with the smell of toasting wheat and wafts up from the sidewalk below.

The man across the table, Silvio Mamani, is the president of the trade federation representing the street vendors of Cochabamba. He wears a beaten brown fedora bearing the stains of many years selling juice on the streets of the city. Beneath it his hair is receding and wiry, not straight, full, and shiny black like that of most Bolivians. It is a contrast to his face, which is a caricature of the classically Andean: rich brown skin, sharply angled brow, hooked nose, protruding chin. Don Silvio speaks through clenched teeth, his lower jaw deviating from the line of his face, as though it had once been broken and never properly reset. He wears a blue denim shirt, black pleated pants, and battered black half-boots with a zipper down the side. Don Silvio walks with a limp, dragging his bad leg behind him as he pushes his little juice cart through the market. He looks like a man with deep damage, like a case of fruit tossed from the back of a delivery truck. But there must be iron in Don Silvio as well for him to have attained the position he now holds.

I have invited Don Silvio here to my little office to talk about the possibility of doing ethnographic research with his organization, the *federación* of ambulant street vendors, or *ambulantes*. My work as a cultural anthropologist is based on establishing close, trusting relationships with the people whose lives I study, to understand their perspectives and experiences. I hope to discuss my research plan with Don Silvio, to get his blessing on the project, and to ask for his help in meeting his constituents.

The *ambulantes* who sell in Cochabamba's enormous outdoor market, the Cancha, are notoriously reluctant to talk to outsiders (figure F.1). This is not surprising. *Ambulantes* like Don Silvio can count themselves among the poorest people in Bolivia, Latin America's poorest country. The *ambulantes* of Cochabamba's sidewalks earn even less than the average Bolivian, who brings home a meager \$500 a year. As street vendors, the *ambulantes* work in daily violation of municipal law, which prohibits selling on the street. So they are constantly harassed—chased from sidewalk to street corner by the police, insulted and abused by motorists and pedestrians, preyed on by shoplifters and muggers, and threatened with violence by other vendors who have established, legal venues. Yet with no better way to make a living in Bolivia's perpetually weak economy, they continue to work on the streets. If the *ambulantes* are mistrustful and closed, they have good reason to be.

I hope to study how market vendors survive amid the many perils they face on the city's streets, through work in what is often called the “informal” economy—the underground system of buying and selling that parallels the official economy. I am especially interested in the relationship between informality and illegality and with the ways in which informality and insecurity correlate in the marginal spaces of the Latin American city. In a post-9/11 world obsessed with security and with controlling threats to it, how do the urban poor, facing unrelenting insecurity, create and maintain personal safety and economic stability through informality? What is the relationship of the state to the informal economy and to the people whose livelihoods depend on it? What role does informality play in the operations of the state itself? These questions frame my research plan.

I explain to Don Silvio that I want to write a book about the lives of the *ambulantes*, and he eyes me, calculating, across the rickety wooden table. Don Silvio is no fool: he is a market vendor, a shrewd capitalist who understands the value of commodities, including information. He is also,

without contradiction, a committed socialist who knows that struggles for social justice are best accomplished through solidarity, a concern for the common good, and the strategic deployment of collective resources. Don Silvio knows that he can grant me access to the ambulantes, and he has something to ask of me in return.

Don Silvio leans in closer, causing the table to tilt in his direction, and tells me his dream: to build a market for the ambulantes. His stony countenance softens as he talks, his flat black eyes kindled by an inner light. The market will be the ambulantes' to administer, he says, and stalls within it will be distributed equitably to members of the ambulantes' federation. "We will run the market ourselves," Don Silvio says. "It will be *our* market."¹ The market will have two stories—"It has to have two stories, *carajo!*"—with cement floors and a good roof to block the punishing sun and the seasonal downpours. The entrances and exits will be gated, to control access and to ensure that any delinquent who wanders in will have a hard time getting out again with stolen property. In that market, Don Silvio believes, the ambulantes will be transformed from roving street vendors, poor, dirty, and despised, into citizens with rights, able to earn a decent, reliable living. It will be like alchemy.

The other man, Don Silvio's brooding associate, offers some context. He says that Don Silvio and his colleagues in the federation's leadership have only just begun talking about a market. For years they and their constituents have been selling on the streets of Cochabamba, and a market of their own has never seemed an idea worth entertaining. Too remote, too impossible. But now they are getting organized. For the first time, the ambulantes have formed their own federation, with their own elected leaders. For the first time they are out from under the control of the *comerciantes de puesto fijo*, the vendors with fixed market stalls who are their direct competitors in the Cancha but who historically have controlled the federations to which they, the ambulantes, have always belonged. With their own federation, and with Don Silvio as their president, the ambulantes can set their own agenda. People are beginning to think big. "A market of our own," the brooding man says, smiling now. "Just imagine!"

We are silent, Nacho and I and our visitors, all of us contemplating the enormity of this fantasy. I, for one, am skeptical. The likelihood of the ambulantes' getting their own market is infinitesimal. The costs would be too high, the real estate too scarce, the political pressures against it too great

for such a thing ever to come to pass. But in the faces of Don Silvio and his *compañero* I can see the light of true believers. They clutch at this idea with the ferocity of men clinging to a life raft, and they are not going to let go of it easily.

“Bueno,” Don Silvio says to me, returning to the business at hand. “How can you help?”