

The Cocaine Fishermen Of Tasbapauni

By Carsten Stormer

This is a story of a village in the Caribbean, where cocaine has made poor fishermen rich. They call the substance "white lobster" or "white luck". Some of them disapprove and believe the drug is destroying the village community. When Alfredo Carlos Garcia climbs into his boat he brings his night time dreams along with him. It's five o'clock in the morning and the air hangs heavy and damp over the Laguna de Perlas. The mosquitoes are biting. There is no wind, only a smell of sea, shrimps and mouldering wood. The mangroves rustle, and a cormorant observes the small boat with curiosity. A new day is about to begin; hopefully it will be better than the previous one. It's the shrimping season, but for days the crustaceans have been digging themselves into the mud of the lagoon. No shrimps means no food and no produce to sell. Alfredo's life resembles the sea: the level of his luck rises and falls like a tide. Alfredo sticks a cigarette between his lips and rolls it from one corner of his mouth to the other. Then he starts the motor. Alfredo isn't alone. Dozens of boats are quivering in the first light of day, with one half naked paddler in the prow, another in the stern. Friends, acquaintances, families - all of them fisherfolk like himself. Alfredo Carlos Garcia is 48 years old and has five children by various wives; he also has a handshake like a fairground boxer's. His calloused hands reek of shrimps and the Atlantic ocean. Like everyone else here he has but one dream, which is about wealth and prosperity floating up to him in a white plastic bag containing, tightly sealed in one kilogram portions ... cocaine. They call the drug "white lobster", "white luck" or simply "white stuff". The substance is their ticket to a life where they no longer need to fish in order to survive. It's a dream complete with TV sets, fridges, brick houses, motorbikes. A great promise is floating out there in the sea. Alfredo Carlos Garcia is the president of the fishermen's cooperative of Tasbapauni, a small village in the deadlands of Nicaragua's Atlantic coast, eighty kilometres, or two hours in a speedboat, from civilization. On the way there, only an occasional corrugated iron hut peeps out from the lush vegetation, a dab of colour in the endless green of mangroves, palms and grass. Two thousand people are thought to live here, but nobody is entirely sure. The village boasts eight churches, one school, one doctor, a baseball pitch and one telephone. It is sandwiched between the Laguna de Perlas and the Caribbean, on a strip of land never more than 150 metres wide. The people here live off the sea - and this is obvious looking at the village: nets hang between palm trees ready to be repaired, turtle shells and shrimps dry in the sun on palmleaf mats. The weatherboard huts have been bent crooked by the wind. There are no roads here, nor is there any running water. Electricity only reached the village five years ago; even now it's only available for ten hours a day, from midday to 10 pm. The three small general stores open when needed. At first sight Tasbapauni is just like any other village on the shores of the Caribbean, yet some odd things are noticeable: many of the villagers have golden front teeth, and walk around sporting their "bling" - heavy rings and watches of pure gold. Most live in fine brick houses with the outside painted in pastel colours. There are satellite dishes fixed to the rooftops. But it hasn't always been so. The Caribbean coast of Nicaragua is the most thinly populated and poorest part of that already desperately poor central American country. Miskito Indians and the descendants of slaves and mutineers have settled here. The people don't expect much from life, and still less from the government in Managua, on the other side of the country facing the Pacific. They put their trust in the Almighty, and He - so they believe - has heard their prayers. As long as anyone can remember it's always been the rule that whatever the sea throws up belongs to the person who finds it - whether it's a bottle of rum or a tin can, planks of wood or cocaine. The flotsam of civilization belongs to everyone. The Nicaraguan government has a rather different point of view, but "that doesn't really bother anyone in Tasbapauni," says Alfredo. The capital Managua

is as far removed from the Atlantic coast as the dark side of the moon - and as popular as a rat in your dining room. Three years ago Alfredo Garcia saw his future afloat on the waves. He casts his net into the shallow water of the Laguna de Perlas and begins his story. That morning he had gone to sea as usual with seven others, to fish for turtles and lobsters. "I was as poor as a church mouse. I lived with my parents and didn't even have a boat of my own. Nobody took me seriously," he says, glancing at the sky and rapidly crossing himself. All that was to change that morning, for the thing that looked like a turtle's back gleaming out there a little distance away turned out to be a bag filled with cocaine, 45 kilograms of it. The fishermen yelled with joy and hugged each other. Alfredo knew he would soon be able to build a house of his own. The middlemen of the drug cartel were ready waiting in the village, and Carlos sold his haul to them for 150,000 dollars. When the fishermen had divided the spoils among them that still left 20,000 dollars for Alfredo. With this money he bought himself a boat and a motor, and built himself a little house on the shore. "This white stuff is the only way for us to free ourselves from poverty," says Alfredo. If it wasn't for "white lobster" he wouldn't be a respectable yeoman of the village, he wouldn't have a boat or a house. Tasbapauni used to have no electricity, no baseball pitch, no doctor, and it used to be impossible to make a phone call. "The government does nothing to help us," and as for the gringos, the Americans who patrol off the coast with their helicopters and frigates, he hasn't a good word to say for them. Nowadays it's rare for packets of cocaine to be drifting in the sea: because of all the surveillance at sea, the smugglers are increasingly making use of new overland routes through the interior. Not all that has been cast up on the Atlantic coast of Nicaragua in the course of the centuries has benefited the people who lived there. The advance of time has been painful. The history of the area reads like a gangster story. First there was Christopher Columbus, then the Spaniards. Their ships disgorged nothing but conquerors with a lust for gold and Catholic priests. They were later followed by Moravian missionaries, pirates, slave ships and finally civil wars. Today this coast is a theatre in that other great war being waged by the Americans, the war against drugs. Tasbapauni lies on the "Narcoroute", along which Colombian, Venezuelan and Mexican drug syndicates smuggle cocaine into the USA, the world's biggest drug market, aboard 800 HP speedboats. The Americans want to put a stop to that, and are pumping dozens of millions of dollars into Central American governments for them to clamp down on the smuggling. US frigates cruise in Nicaraguan waters, while helicopters, reconnaissance planes and unmanned drones fly all over the sky looking for suspicious boats. If smugglers are caught in the web of patrol boats, or simply lose their nerve, they chuck their cargo overboard. For them the loss is temporary and easy to bear. Currents carry the buoyant packets straight towards the coast, where the local fishermen pick them up and then sell the stuff to the middlemen of the drug syndicates. The smugglers pay up to four thousand dollars a kilo to buy back their stock - a risible price compared with what pure cocaine fetches on the world market. But for the fisherfolk a few thousand dollars represent unimaginable wealth. A pact with the devil, indeed. Some people in Tasbapauni believe the village has sold its soul. One of these doubters is Father Abel Dessler, 53, a Pentacostal priest in Tasbapauni. This preacher is a small, melancholy man who talks so quietly it seems he wants to withdraw himself from the world - except during the services he holds twice a day for his small flock. A dilapidated structure made of wooden planks serves as his church. "God did not call on us to be financially well off, but to be rich in faith," he thunders at his faithful followers, his eyes blazing like cannon fire. Twelve women and young girls are dancing themselves into a trance, singing hoarsely and gazing wide-eyed into vacancy. They stretch their arms upwards like drowning people. "Be strong!" cries the priest. "Amen!" "Resist temptation!" "Gloria Dios!" "Jesus will come! Don't squander your time getting rich, aspire to the riches of Heaven!" "Gloria Dios! Amen!" "The white stuff is destroying our faith!" "Amen! Amen! Amen!" It sounds like a battle-cry. No, he will not put up with people trying to bribe God. "I don't accept donations from people who have become rich from white stuff. The root of evil is lust for money," says Father Dessler after the service. He is sitting on a stool on a terrace outside his

hut, which is the most wretched one in Tasbapauni. While talking he gets all worked up, like the sea in a tempest. Nobody in Tasbapauni can remember exactly when the cocaine craze began. It must have been in the early nineties. Pablo Escobar was running his drug empire in Colombia when the first packets of cocaine drifted towards the coast - to Puerto Cabezas, Sandy Bay, the Corn Islands and Tasbapauni itself. At first people thought the white substance was baking powder and threw it away or took no notice at all of it. For nobody here knew about cocaine and its effects. Only when foreigners turned up asking questions, and were prepared to pay incalculable amounts for the bags, only then did everything change. Ten years ago there were only three churches in Tasbapauni. However, along with the drugs came ever more agents of God, hoping to net sinners and, more particularly, monetary donations. Now the cocaine fishermen can purify their souls in any of eight churches. They all make copious donations while laughing in their Lord's face. They pray to Him to heal the sick and to guarantee full nets all year round. "Hypocrites! God doesn't want these donations. It's money earned by dishonest means," says Father Dessler. **The devil has come to Tasbapauni,** of that he is convinced - and people have welcomed him with open arms. He has given them the things they longed for, and in return they have given him their souls. Father Abel Dessler fears that simultaneously the village community will break up, and sin and idleness will bar entry to paradise. **"Nobody is willing to work hard any more. Instead of fishing honestly, everyone pins their hopes on a bag of cocaine. The men are drinking, gambling, whoring and deserting their families."** But the family and the village community are Tasbapauni's social security. They take care of the weak, the old, the sick and the vulnerable. The first ones in danger of falling out of this safety net are the old folk. Loisa Marita Forbes is 73 years old and recovering from her third stroke. Her left side is paralysed, tufts of grey hair are sprouting from her ears, and when she breathes in there is a rattling sound in her chest. A baseball match between Bluefields and Puerto Cabeza is being broadcast on the radio, a young Elvis Presley is staring down at her from the wall, and on her bedside table lie the New Testament and some small phials of analgesic pills. "The white stuff is destroying the village community," she says. One day Loisa's husband put out to sea in a storm, never to return. She has no children, and thus no one to help her. From time to time someone from the Anglican church drops by, washes her, empties the bedpan and brings her a meal. Otherwise she's all alone. A clock is ticking on the wall, but time won't pass for her. A few steps away lives 92 year old Anita Willis. Over the years she has become bent and almost deaf. Her forehead is a welter of creases, her emaciated arms hang slackly in her lap. **Previously, she says, the community used to take care of her; it was like a kind of insurance against old age. "Nowadays people have no time. They just want to get rich quick."** White stuff has made many people rich, but at the same time traditional values have been lost, she says. Who cares for the sick and the elderly now? How often do people go to church together? Previously, if someone had nothing to eat the neighbours would come to the rescue and bring them some shrimps, lobster or turtle meat. That's how it used to be. Hardship bonded people in a fellowship of poverty. "That's all over and done with! It's everyone for himself now." Miss Loisa raises a finger and lowers her voice: "Last year a girl was raped here." Two murders also took place. Although Tasbapauni was notoriously flooded with drugs, the village itself doesn't really have a drugs problem. The young people gather on the beach after sunset, perform rap or sing reggae songs, Bob Marley or Lucky Dube, maybe smoke a bit of pot at the same time. On Saturdays the whole village gets together, chatting and drinking itself into a euphoria that will last till dawn. As for addiction or procurement related crime, hardly any exists. Just a handful have gone to the dogs - like **Michael Gill,** one of Tasbapauni's crackheads, an emaciated young man of 22 with dreadlocks and eyes like watery milk. Crack is both the cause and the solution of his problems - he is one of the few unlucky ones who have never fished up any "white lobster". To haul shrimps or lobsters from the sea instead is too much trouble for him. Sitting in his mother's kitchen, he pulls on his glass pipe, drawing the smoke deep into his lungs and holding it there. This goes on every day. If he needs money he sells coconuts. A quick fix costs 25 cordobas, the equivalent of

1.20 euros. His father, worn out by decades on the sea and plagued by Alzheimer's, sits silently in the back room watching over a puppy and two hens. Altogether hundreds of tons of cocaine must have been washed up on the east coast of Nicaragua in the course of the past ten years. The largest number of packets have always come at Christmas time, when lonely people in Europe and the USA are trying to snuff out the blues, and demand is higher than usual. A white Christmas in the Caribbean! In Tasbapauni there are no end of stories about men who set out to sea in the morning and came back enormously rich in the afternoon. Take for example Oswaldo Lewan, nicknamed Bambi. He is sitting in a clapboard hut with his mate Errol, smoking Jamaican marijuana, which they call "Alaska" here. Errol, a cheerful lad sporting dreadlocks, rolls one joint after another and, grinning so as to expose his golden front teeth, sings "By the Rivers of Babylon". Oswaldo the lucky one, Bambi the loser. He is 25 years old, and up till now nothing in his life has gone according to plan. Seven years ago he lost his right arm in an accident. He was going to fetch some illegally harvested mahogany from the jungle when one sleeve of his jacket got entangled in the outboard motor, he explains, waving his stump and smiling rather ruefully. From that day on his longings have been limited to what little he has - two meals a day, his small transistor radio which keeps him in touch with the outside world, and some friends who play dominoes with him. And a feeling of happiness while he walks for hours along the shore. Life only smiled at him once, and then unfortunately only very briefly. On one of his walks he found two bags of cocaine, seventy kilos in all. The jackpot! He thought everything would get better from then on. Oh boy! He hid one bag in the mangroves, out of the way of envious eyes and busy fingers, and dragged the other back home. When he returned to get the first one, it had disappeared. "Shit, someone's swiped it, man!" he said in his creole drawl. Still, he thought, even half of this bounty would get him more money than he could spend in a lifetime. He was wrong. "First of all I had my front teeth covered in gold." Then he bought his mother "a proper brick house with a fridge, a TV and all the rest." Next he made the biggest mistake in his life: he went off to Bluefields with all its casinos, brothels and bars. For three months he let himself go - broads, rum, gambling ... in his excitement he once even chartered a plane and flew to Managua. Next thing, he was stony broke. Bambi has put up with his lot. No thoughts about the future, no regrets about the disastrous past. "I had some great times, and nobody can take that away from me." Now he dosses his days away, working as helmsman for a crustacean fisher and getting his wages in shrimps. He would love to have a girlfriend, but nothing ruins a fellow's chances more than being branded as a loser, particularly one with only one arm. He still goes for a walk on the shore every evening, and scans the surface of the sea - for one never knows! Other people have got things better organized. "Everyone's better off these days," says Barbara Rodriguez Waggon, a heavily built woman of 46. She is sitting in a wicker armchair in the spacious veranda of her villa, with blue curlers in her hair and a bejewelled gold ornament in her ear. A huge gold ring shaped like a horseshoe glints on her ring finger. It's not as if they were producing cocaine or dealing in it, she emphasises. "We're simply getting a kind of reward for finding it. And because of that our children can now go to university, and we have an electricity supply. White lobster is what paid for the generator," she says. "Now you can even find engineers, doctors and lawyers who come from Tasbapauni." Waggon is one of four agents in Tasbapauni. She has contacts among the smugglers and handles the commercial side of things for the fishermen. If anyone finds a packet it's her they come to first. She receives a sort of commission from the smugglers, normally between three and five hundred dollars per kilo. This has made her quite well off, and it shows: she has a giant deep freeze cabinet, a television set, Johnny Walker Blue Label in her glass-fronted cupboard. She doesn't wish to disclose any details of her business, but she will say this much: eight years ago her husband found four packets on the beach, and two days later he disappeared off the map with another woman, leaving her on her own with two growing boys. All she could find was a chit with some phone numbers of drug barons. These were to win her more than just maintenance payments. Her elder son is now studying hotel management in Bluefields and hopes to enlist on

a cruise ship in due course. A few doors further down lives Barbara's friend **Yamileth McDonalds**. Her husband likewise vanished after bringing home a consignment of cocaine instead of lobsters. Nowadays Yamileth is **Vice Mayoress of Tasbapauni** and the first woman politician the village has produced. **She runs a small hotel for the tourists who never appear, and owns the only telephone in the village.** The toast of the village, however, is **Ted Heyman**, the most successful cocaine fisherman in Tasbapauni. He it was who had a baseball pitch made for young people. He runs a **general store** and lives in a two storeyed palace made of mahogany and imitation marble. Sometimes he donates a shipload of rum and beer to Tasbapauni. How Yamileth and Ted acquired their wealth is something they don't want to talk about. If you ask the neighbours they just smile significantly in reply. The natural enemy of the whole village community is **Peter Mayorga**, a lieutenant in the Nicaraguan army, who for the past six months has been the head of anti-drug operations in Tasbapauni. There's not much he can do, he says, with his four soldiers and two police officers. His men can be seen patrolling the shore morning and night, and when, twice a week, the motorboat speeds over from Tasbapauni to Bluefields, the soldiers search the travellers' baggage. So far they haven't impounded anything other than some turtle meat. Sometimes Mayorga receives a tip-off from jealous neighbours or from an informer, and goes with his men to search a house. **Possession of and dealing in drugs carry a prison sentence, but in Tasbapauni attempts at prosecution usually founder in the face of opposition from the villagers.** If the chief of police wants to arrest anyone he has to face the wrath of everybody in the village, from old men to babes in arms. His office remains under siege until he releases his suspect. Mayorga smiles. Well, to tell the truth, "the people here aren't really criminals." No unnecessary excitement, please! In Tasbapauni nothing is urgent. Today is all that matters; tomorrow will be the same as today. Alfredo is casting his nets, Bambi is dragging at his third joint, Errol is strumming his guitar and old Anita is thinking about the good old days on her terrace, when suddenly reconnaissance helicopters start circling over Tasbapauni. Life comes to a halt. Necks crane skywards, the baseball team interrupts its training, there is a general commotion. Is it possible ...? That can only mean ... Didn't someone say that yesterday in Laguna de Perlas the police detained two youths with seven kilos of cocaine and seventy thousand dollars in their underpants, only a few kilometres away as the crow flies? No harm in watching. So the entire village strolls along the shoreline, checking out the bushes and mangroves to see if there isn't a bag lying there somewhere. People laugh and joke, as if they were on their way to a fair. At six o'clock darkness falls. Four hours later, Tasbapauni is asleep - and 72 year old Orlando Brown switches off the generator.

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