

## Flashback

# Paulo Coelho remembers the call of the hippie trail, 1970



Paulo Coelho on the streets of Amsterdam – or possibly Rome – in 1970

THIS PICTURE WAS taken in 1970 – I'm not 100 per cent sure whether it's Amsterdam or Rome, and I've no idea who took it. I'd travelled from my home in Rio de Janeiro to Rome. I was 22, a young hippie just setting out on an adventure, excited and not knowing what was going to happen, but fearful because I was very far away from my country. In a way I was escaping what happened to me in Brazil.

At that time, the country was ruled by a military junta, and I'd been arrested with my girlfriend by the secret police and tortured. We'd been travelling in Bolivia, where Che Guevara died: there was revolution in the air, so there was a lot of paranoia. And that kind of regime, they have to maintain a very expensive apparatus of repression. So even if they did not find any true revolutionaries, they will try to put the blame on someone else, just to justify their existence.

In that situation, every day feels like a year. [Coelho was tortured with electric-shock treatment and incarcerated in 'the refrigerator', a black hole, 6ft by 6ft.] Let's say the worst days were the first ones, but then you get somehow used to it, which is bizarre, but it's how it is. But you don't know what's going on. Why you? Why

her? We weren't guerrillas, you know? We had not had the preparation that people who were fighting would have had. They were prepared for the possibility of being arrested and tortured; they were somehow expecting it. But for us, it was completely out of the blue. You think, 'Oh this will last two hours, three hours,' then three hours becomes one day, one week, four weeks.

So coming to Europe, there was peace of mind because you knew you had nothing to fear; you didn't need to look to your right or left, to check if someone was following you. The first thing I did in Rome was buy the *Little Red Book* of Mao Tse-tung, not because I was interested in reading it, but just because I could walk the streets with this book and nobody would arrest me.

At that time, there was an explosion of something more than optimism – we had hope that things would change. We had a different way of seeing life, searching for the spiritual meaning.

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You could say that unapologetically, we chose love. And we had fantastic music, of course. I'm not in a position to judge the music of today, but then it was something spectacular. And then it was the Yuppie era. Chase money, and no need to think about anything else because it's just a dream – utopia. When John Lennon said, in his song *God*, 'The dream is over,' I felt betrayed. We used to dream with such enormous force – and then we stopped. And if you don't have a dream, then you have nothing to fight for.

From Amsterdam, I took the Magic Bus to Istanbul, where I stayed for a year, studying Sufism. My plan was to write a book about that journey, but I never did. Perhaps my new book is the final realisation of that. It was much later, after many, many years of trying to be normal, or live as people expected me to, that finally I said, 'OK, this is enough. My dream is to be a writer.' Then I did this pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela, and I started rescuing my soul that was lost.

I finally wrote my first book when I was 40. If you have a dream, you must follow it. No matter where it leads, or how long it takes.

— Interview by Mick Brown. *Hippie*, by Paulo Coelho (Hutchinson, £14.99), is out now